

# Community Residents' Perceptions of Prisoner Reentry in Selected Cleveland Neighborhoods

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*research for safer communities*



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# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	1
Background.....	2
Selection of Neighborhoods .....	2
Central .....	3
Hough .....	3
Mt. Pleasant .....	4
Recruiting .....	5
Procedures .....	6
Participants .....	6
Focus Group Findings .....	8
Returning Prisoners' Experiences of Transition.....	8
Family Support .....	9
Community Support .....	11
Prisoners' Preparedness for Reentry.....	11
Neighborhood Change.....	13
Impact of Returning Prisoners on the Community .....	14
Community Awareness and Local Leadership .....	15
Roles and Responsibilities.....	16
Returning Prisoners Then and Now.....	19
Ideas for Improving Prisoner Reentry .....	20
Conclusion .....	22
References .....	24

# Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In 2004, the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC) released 28,177 prisoners from prisons across the state (ODRC 005), nearly six times the number of prisoners released in 1980.<sup>2</sup> Ohio has the seventh largest prison population in the country (Harrison and Beck 2005) and 22 percent of its released prisoners return to Cuyahoga County, with 79 percent of those returning to Cleveland (La Vigne and Thomson 2003). The sheer number of prisoners being released annually, along with a growing appreciation for the substantial challenges that ex-prisoners face as they reenter society and the social and fiscal consequences of unsuccessful reintegration, has brought prisoner reentry—both in Ohio and nationwide—to the forefront of the public agenda.

To help inform the next generation of reentry policy and practice, the Urban Institute launched *Returning Home: Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry*, a multi-state research project in Maryland, Illinois, Ohio, and Texas. The purpose of *Returning Home* is to develop a deeper understanding of the reentry experiences of returning prisoners, their families, and their communities. This research project involves interviews with prisoners before and after their release from state correctional facilities, focus groups with residents of neighborhoods to which many prisoners return, and interviews with reentry policymakers and practitioners. State laws and policies are also reviewed to provide overall policy context.

This report presents findings from community focus group discussions in three Cleveland neighborhoods that are home to a large number of returning prisoners. We begin with a profile of each neighborhood, then discuss the focus group selection process and provide a description of the focus group participants. We then present the findings, which cover a range of topics including the transition process, preparation for reentry, family and community support, the impact of reentry on the community, neighborhood transition, community awareness, and residents' suggestions for removing barriers to reentry.

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<sup>1</sup> This report is part of a larger research effort at the Urban Institute called *Returning Home*, a study of prisoner reentry in Ohio in general and Cleveland in particular directed by Christy Visher.

<sup>2</sup> This statistic is based on a Bureau of Justice Statistics estimate that 630,000 prisoners were released from federal and state prisons in 2002 (Harrison and Karberg 2003).

# Background

## SELECTION OF NEIGHBORHOODS

Our goal in conducting community focus groups was to solicit the opinions and perspectives of residents—in their own words—who live in neighborhoods to which a large number of men and women return after serving time in prison. To ensure that we captured Cleveland residents’ diverse perspectives, we specifically selected communities that, in addition to being home to many recently released prisoners, possess variation along several dimensions of neighborhood well-being, such as poverty, unemployment, social service availability, crime, and other socioeconomic indicators.

Within the city of Cleveland, the highest concentrations of released prisoners are located in a few neighborhoods. A recent profile of prisoner reentry in Ohio (La Vigne and Thomson 2003) shows that 5 of 36 Cleveland communities were home to 28 percent of prisoners that returned to the city in 2001 (Table 1).

**Table 1. Prisoners Returning to Cleveland Communities, 2001**

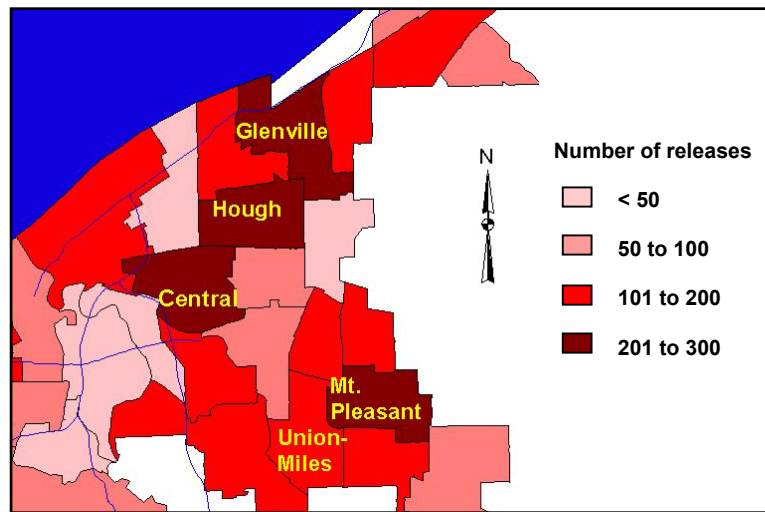
Community	Number of returning prisoners	Rate per 1,000 residents	Percent of Cleveland releasees
Central	262	21.6	6.2
Glenville	225	9.6	5.3
Hough	283	17.3	6.7
Mt. Pleasant	225	9.7	5.3
Union-Miles	189	12.2	4.5

*Source:* La Vigne and Thomson (2003).

Of these five neighborhoods, three were selected as sites for community focus groups. These three neighborhoods—Central, Hough, and Mt. Pleasant—were home to 18 percent of prisoners released in 2001 who returned to Cleveland neighborhoods. Central and Hough are adjacent neighborhoods and are in close proximity to downtown Cleveland. Mt Pleasant is located farther from the city’s center, creating some geographic diversity among the focus group participants (Figure 1).

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**Figure 1. Cleveland Prisoner Releases, 2001**



Source: La Vigne and Thomson (2003).

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These three neighborhoods are diverse in several important neighborhood characteristics, including geography, concentration of services, crime rates, and socioeconomic characteristics such as education, unemployment, and poverty rates (Table 2).

### **Central**

Central is the most impoverished of the three communities: 65 percent of the residents in Central live below the poverty level, the community has a 33 percent unemployment rate, and female-headed families with children account for 88 percent of the households in this area. The community is characterized by 18 percent vacant housing and by 92 percent renter-occupied housing. Fifty-five percent of its residents are high school graduates. Of the three communities, Central has the highest percentage of white (5.7 percent) and Hispanic (1.3 percent) residents. Central also has the highest rate for both Part I crimes (109.1 per 1,000 residents) and drug arrests (51.9 per 1,000 residents).<sup>3</sup>

### **Hough**

Hough has levels of renter-occupied housing (73 percent), poverty (41 percent), unemployment (18.1 percent), and female-headed families with children (69 percent) that are higher than Mt. Pleasant's and lower than those of Central. It is home to a higher percentage of high school graduates (59 percent) than Central. Of the three selected neighborhoods, Hough has the highest rate of vacant housing. With regard to crime, Hough's Part I crime rate is 10 percent higher than the city average at 83.3 crimes per 1,000

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<sup>3</sup> Part I crimes, as defined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), include violent crimes (murder, aggravated assault, rape, robbery) and property crimes (larceny, burglary, auto theft, and arson. Drug arrests include arrests for possession and for distribution.

residents. The drug arrest rate in Hough is 23.8 arrests per 1,000 residents, 35 percent higher than the citywide average.

## Mt. Pleasant

Relative to Central and Hough, Mt. Pleasant has low rates of vacant housing (13.4 percent), renter-occupied housing (51 percent), unemployment (13.4 percent), and persons living below the poverty level (25 percent) and a high rate of high school graduation (69 percent). The percentage of female-headed families with children in Mt. Pleasant, at 64 percent, is significantly higher than the citywide average. Mt. Pleasant is the most racially homogenous of the three communities, with a black population of nearly 99 percent. Mt. Pleasant's Part I crime rate, at 55.2 per 1,000 residents, is 25 percent lower than the citywide average; however, its drug arrest rate (29.2 per 1,000 residents) is higher than the citywide average, second only to Central.

**Table 2. Demographic, Socioeconomic, and Crime Indicators in Hough, Central, and Mt. Pleasant**

	Vacant housing, 2000 (%)	Renter-occupied housing, 2000 (%)	High school graduates, 2000 (%)	Unemployment rate, 2000 (%)	White, 2000 (%)	Black, 2000 (%)	Hispanic, 2000 (%)	Female-headed families with children, 2000 (%)	Persons below poverty level, 1999 (%)	Part I crime rate (per 1,000 residents), 2001	Drug arrest rate (per 1,000 residents), 2001
Central	18.4	91.8	54.8	32.5	5.7	93.3	1.3	87.7	65.1	109.1	51.9
Hough	21.0	73.0	59.2	18.1	2.5	96.8	1.0	69.3	40.9	83.3	23.8
Mt. Pleasant	13.4	51.0	68.7	13.4	1.1	98.5	0.6	64.4	24.6	55.2	29.2
City average	11.7	51.5	69.0	11.2	43.2	51.5	7.3	49.9	26.3	73.8	17.6

Source: NEO CANDO system, Center on Urban Poverty and Social Change, MSASS, Case Western Reserve University (<http://neocando.case.edu>)

These three communities also differ on the number of social service providers located within their neighborhood boundaries. While the Central community appears to be the most disadvantaged of the three when assessing socioeconomic measures of neighborhood well-being, it is host to the greatest number of providers offering a range of programs and services (Table 3). Mt. Pleasant, in contrast, has very little available in the way of social services.



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**Table 3. Social Service Providers in Hough, Central and Mt. Pleasant, 2001**

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Community	Number of social service providers	Type of social service
Hough	10	Comprehensive (3), substance abuse treatment (3), other (2), housing (1), and counseling/mentoring (1)
Central	19	Comprehensive (5), other (5), employment (4), housing (2), counseling/mentoring (1), housing/employment (1), and substance abuse treatment (1)
Mt. Pleasant	1	Housing/employment (1)

*Source:* La Vigne and Thomson (2003).

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## RECRUITING

The Urban Institute enlisted the services of experienced field interviewers to recruit focus group participants in the three Cleveland neighborhoods. The primary method used for recruiting was posting flyers in various public places, such as community information billboards. Recruiters also spoke with residents and distributed flyers at local supermarkets and other areas that residents frequent.

Field interviewers also enlisted the help of local service providers and community organizations, asking them to post flyers and provide information to their clients. The field recruiters found a handful of agencies that were willing to post flyers, including several public housing complexes and two community centers. The community centers also served as the locations for two of the focus group sessions. The flyers invited residents to participate in a two-hour meeting, for which they would receive \$25. It also listed a toll-free phone number at the Urban Institute that interested residents could call for more information.

Potential participants were screened to determine whether their home address fell within the neighborhood boundaries, whether they were at least 18 years of age, and whether they had lived in the neighborhood for at least three years. Potential participants were also screened to determine whether they had been released from prison within the past five years. Those that had been were excluded from participation.<sup>4</sup>

The initial recruiting target number was 15 confirmed attendees, which was expected to yield 8 to 10 participants. The first two groups, in Hough, had an unexpectedly high attendance rate. The two sessions were attended by 13 and 14 participants. This was judged to be too large, so efforts were made to reduce the size of subsequent groups. For the Mt. Pleasant and Central groups, we recruited 12 participants. Three groups had 10 participants and one had a turnout of 12.

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<sup>4</sup> In past *Returning Home* focus groups, the presence of recent ex-offenders was found to inhibit participants' ability to speak freely. For these focus groups, the decision was made not to exclude ex-offenders, but to screen out those who had been released from prison within the past five years.

## PROCEDURES

Six focus groups were conducted over a one-week period in June 2005. In each of the three neighborhoods, two sessions were scheduled on the same day with 30 minutes between each focus group. The two Hough sessions were held on a Saturday at the Famicos Foundation Community Services Center. The Mt. Pleasant groups were conducted on a Friday evening at the Murtis H. Taylor Multi-Service Center. The Central groups were held on a Saturday at the Addison Branch Public Library.

In all three locations, the meeting rooms were comfortable, private, and quiet. Participants were offered a light meal before the discussion began. The facilitator explained the purpose of the meeting and asked participants to read and sign a consent form. Participants were also asked to complete a brief questionnaire on personal characteristics such as age, income and educational attainment. The results are summarized in Table 4. Focus group discussions were taped, with participants' signed permission. Incentive payments of \$25 were distributed after the conclusion of the meeting.

## PARTICIPANTS

The groups ranged in size from 10 to 14 participants. The six groups included 50 women and 19 men. Of the 69 participants, 94 percent were African American, 3 percent were white, and 3 percent were Native American. None of the participants was Hispanic or Latino.

While participants ranged in age from 18 to 67, the median age was 49. Only 18 percent of participants were between the ages of 18 and 39, while 64 percent were in their 40s and 50s, and 18 percent were over age 60. Two participants did not report their ages.

All participants had at least a tenth grade education. Of these, 29 percent had not graduated from high school, 20 percent had graduated from high school or obtained a GED (general equivalency diploma), 41 percent had completed some college, and 10 percent were college graduates.

**Table 4. Characteristics of Hough, Central, and Mt. Pleasant Focus Group Participants**

	Number	Men (%)	Women (%)	Median age in years	Median annual income in thousands (\$)	Highest education level attained (%)			
						No diploma	High school diploma /GED	Some college	College graduate
Central	20	35	65	46	20.3	30	10	50	10
Hough	27	33	66	49	22.3	30	30	37	4
Mt. Pleasant	22	14	86	51	8.2	27	18	36	18
Total	69	28	72	49	17.5	29	20	41	10

GED = general equivalency diploma

Note: Numbers may not total 100% due to rounding.

When asked about their current income level, 18 percent of participants did not respond. Of those who did respond, 71 percent were employed. The 29 percent who indicated that they were unemployed included several who relied on Social Security or disability. The annual median reported income was \$17,500.

Though participants were not asked explicitly about their personal connections to prisoners returning to the community, many focus group participants volunteered this information. In each group, at least three participants spoke of close friends or family members who had served time in prison. In four of the groups, at least one of the participants had served time in prison.

### **On Focus Groups**

Focus groups are a time-tested qualitative data collection method. They are an excellent method by which to explore ideas and gain insight from the experiences of individuals in an interactive group setting. It should be noted, however, that the qualitative data collected through focus groups is subjective and specific to the participants. Due to the size of the groups in this study, and the sampling method used, the findings presented in this report should not be considered as representative of all members of the target communities. The opinions expressed by focus groups participants may appear inconsistent and some assertions may be inaccurate. However, through these focus group discussions, we learn a great deal from the residents of specific neighborhoods that can help inform policy and service planning in these and other communities.

## Focus Group Findings

The facilitator began each session by describing the purpose of the study and explaining the expectations for participation in the focus group discussion. Participants were asked to introduce themselves and to tell the group how long they had lived in the neighborhood.<sup>5</sup> The facilitator used a protocol developed by the Urban Institute to guide the group discussions.

In the following sections, we discuss findings from the six focus groups. Participants' reflections on prisoner reentry in their communities are organized into topics that correspond to thematic areas discussed during the focus groups. These include participants' experiences with returning prisoners; their perceptions of what it is like to return to the community as a former prisoner; the impact of returning prisoners on the community; the role of the community in the reintegration of former prisoners; and changes in the neighborhood over time. Participants were also asked to share their ideas about how to facilitate the reintegration of former prisoners into the community.

### RETURNING PRISONERS' EXPERIENCES OF TRANSITION

In every focus group session, members cited the inability to obtain employment and housing as the top challenges facing the prisoners returning to their community. Community residents recognized that most returning prisoners have few job skills and little education and the added disadvantage of a felony record.

*There is nothing there. The things that they did to make a living being under the age of 21 was in the streets. They've got police records now. I try to talk them up to keep them—I'm saying, well, take a trade, you know, learn something. One of them did get his GED. . . . But getting to know them as people they have no skills. They have nothing to offer to come back to the neighborhood. But again, they have no place else to go. —Central resident*

Without any source of income, returning prisoners have no resources to secure basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter. They are often prohibited from living in public housing. Those with families struggle to provide for them. While some participants described former prisoners returning to illegal activities out of anger, frustration, impatience with the difficult process of transition, or peer influence, many explained recidivism in economic terms. Some claimed that former prisoners are seduced by the promise of a lifestyle more glamorous than low-wage work will support. Most, however, described men and women with few prospects for employment returning to illegal activity to make ends meet. One Hough resident said of her son:

*Now he'll go to the little places and make a little money, like area temps and stuff. But when the Pampers run out, the first [thing] he does is run back to the street, to make that quick dollar.*

Another participant described an encounter with a recently released inmate that illustrates the compounding effects of peer influence, economic pressures, and drug and alcohol addiction:

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<sup>5</sup> Participants were informed that they could use a pseudonym during the group, both when introducing themselves and on their name cards. While some did use pseudonyms, others chose to use their real names.

*She was talking about coming home, how many people wanted to put her back on and give her drugs to get started again, and she doesn't want to do that. But she is struggling to find a job that she can support herself and pay rent. She is taking dead-end jobs that are not really going to sustain her and her family. So, I think the transition is probably hard for a lot of people coming home. —Mt. Pleasant resident*

While most participants acknowledged the challenges faced by returning prisoners, many also felt that the returning prisoner's choice to desist from criminal behavior was critical. In discussing the factors that contributed to successful reintegration, some participants put a great deal of emphasis on personal motivation and focus.

*What a person has to do is get focused. They got to stay focused with the ups and downs. —Central resident*

*I am interested in intrinsic motivation. If these people do not have a specific goal or realistic goal then we are like any ship that is sailing on any shore without a destination. . . . How can you mentally or emotionally focus on something if you don't know what it is? —Hough resident*

Participants often noted a link between the length of incarceration and successful reintegration into community life; however, there was no consensus on whether prisoners were more likely to be successful after a short or long prison term. Some believed that those serving short sentences returned to illegal activities with little interruption, while the lives of those incarcerated for long periods were more seriously impacted. Others claimed that inmates serving long sentences were more likely to be “institutionalized” and suffer psychologically from the experience. Most agreed that offenders who had cycled in and out of the system had eventually given up any attempt to lead crime-free lives. Several participants claimed to know people who viewed jail or prison as a safety net, and who returned there on a regular basis.

*Some of them just really don't care because they kind of figure “if I go back then I've got a roof over my head, I've got three square meals a day, and I come out and I'm going to continue to do the same thing.” —Mt. Pleasant resident*

## **FAMILY SUPPORT**

Nearly all participants said that returning prisoners' families were an important source of support. Some even said that they were the only reliable source of support for individuals recently released from prison. Many also agreed, however, that supporting a recently returned prisoner was a significant burden and often placed a great deal of strain on the family.

*We love them. Every dollar you've got is already budgeted to take care of the four of you. It doesn't include a fifth one, and a grown person at that. —Central resident*

For many families of returning prisoners, the financial and emotional stress of caring for a family member in transition is only a continuation of the difficulties that began when that family member was incarcerated. One focus group participant described the stress of trying to maintain a relationship with a loved one in prison:

*It's really hurting us to look at them and know there is nothing really we can do for them [but] love them, and just be there for them. Why do they have to send them out of town? It's a hardship when you don't have money to go and visit your boys that are in the joint. —Central resident*

It is not only the financial burden that makes it difficult for families to support former prisoners in transition. Many focus group participants described strained relationships between returned prisoners and their families. According to some participants, the weeks and months following release can be particularly frustrating for everyone involved when adults come home after being incarcerated throughout much of their adolescence or early adulthood.

*When they come back from the penitentiary they are coming under your roof. You are telling them you've got to live by my rules but they say, "I'm grown, I've done time in jail. I can stay out and come in when I get ready." No, no, 11:00 I'm going to lock my door. If you are not in here by then you stay on the other side until I get up and open it up. I'm not having you walking in and out. They can't abide by it. Then, they are in the street again. —Central resident*

While many of the community residents in the focus groups felt that family was the most important resource for returning prisoners, many also felt that family could have a negative influence. Participants described behavior that could be harmful in two ways. First, several observed that former prisoners often return to households where intergenerational patterns of crime, domestic violence, and substance abuse within the family create an unhealthy environment.

*I got a family over there where the grandmother [is] 84 years old [and] on crack. [So are] all of the kids—every one of them, even all the way down to the granddaughter just 23 years old. —Mt. Pleasant resident*

*You know, like you have generations of families who are locked into the system of being on welfare. You have that same system with domestic violence, that same system with child abuse. The same system with sex abuse. It's a cycle and if nobody in that family can open up their mouth and say "stop it right here," break the silence and say that elephant in that living room got to go, then the cycle just continues on, and nobody has the courage to stand up and say, "I don't want to take this no more." —Mt. Pleasant resident*

Community residents also expressed the feeling that many parents are too permissive, and that providing for the material needs of returning prisoners—while failing to confront or discipline them—enables them to continue illegal activity in the community.

*He's been in and out of jail and continues to use drugs. The last time. . .we did everything for him. We got him a place for three months. I sent him \$200. The baby sister gave him a car. A man that we knew gave him a job. So, he was set to go. That went on probably until the rent ended in three months and then he committed a crime to go back again. He has been out this time for six months. I told my mom, I said, "just give up on him." But you know how mommas are. They tend to hold out hope for their children. —Mt. Pleasant resident*

## COMMUNITY SUPPORT

There were diverging views among residents of the three neighborhoods with regard to the level of community support that prisoners receive when returning to these neighborhoods. Some participants also drew a distinction between individual acts of support, as opposed to support from community institutions. When they were asked whether their community was supportive of returning prisoners, most participants in the Mt. Pleasant focus groups said that they were. One participant offered the following illustration:

*I want to tell you on my mom's street there is a gentleman who returned. He happened to be a sexual offender. Do you know what? My mother's street embraced him mainly because of our street club. His brother, who he came home to, was in the street club. He basically went to a street club meeting and he talked about it. His brother had been away 23 years, and he talked about his brother. He talked about bringing his brother home. Everybody just embraced him to come back into the community. —Mt. Pleasant resident*

Another member of the group, however, questioned how welcoming members of his community had been toward returning prisoners.

*I am kind of surprised [people] at this table seem real embracing and welcome home and everything is good. I think a lot of times when I talk to my neighbors or talk to people that live close to me, their thinking is that "I don't want ex-offenders in my neighborhood. Let them go to somebody else's neighborhood. It doesn't help my neighborhood." —Mt. Pleasant resident*

Among Hough and Central residents, there was general agreement that the community was not supportive of returning prisoners. In saying this, many made a distinction between welcoming a returning prisoner back into the community and providing meaningful support during the transition. According to the participants, members of the community were hesitant to get involved and had little confidence that offenders would not return to crime. One described how this attitude affected returning prisoners.

*If society isn't giving them a chance they are going to go back to what they [were] doing. So, the hell with it. That is the way they look at it. Nobody has no faith in them. —Central resident*

The majority of focus group participants did not believe that individuals in the community were supportive of returning prisoners. As we discuss in the next section, however, many residents asserted that organizations such as community service agencies and churches were important resources for prisoners returning to their community.

## PRISONERS' PREPAREDNESS FOR REENTRY

When asked about returning prisoners' level of preparation, the services available, and the services needed, responses were fairly consistent across all three communities. Participants generally agreed that prisoners did not get necessary help through current efforts to target returning prisoners—such as prerelease programs or reentry services in the community. When asked what types of assistance returning prisoners needed, responses included a wide range of social services including education, vocational training, job readiness, parenting, mentoring, family reunification, mental health services, housing assistance, health care, and drug treatment.

When we explored the issue of health care availability, most participants reported that free or low-cost health care was generally available, though it was not always high quality, and reductions in Medicaid coverage made accessing health care more difficult. The consensus among participants was that medical services were available, but many residents did not have the necessary information or persistence to use them.

*You've got a few places you can go to get treatment. But you wouldn't get it as though you went to Cleveland Clinic. —Hough resident*

*Though they say that [medical service] is based on your income. . .they will only carry you for so long. What they do is they do what they call a rating system. You go in. You tell them if you don't have any income. They'll tell you to write a letter. You get the letter notarized. They'll rate you what they call a six, which means for six months they will carry [you]. —Mt. Pleasant resident*

In each of the three communities, participants reported that there were agencies providing many of the services that would be useful to recently released prisoners. Most agreed, however, that these services were not being accessed by these men and women. Many believed that returning prisoners typically are not aware of services available in the community they return to, and that above all, “They need information.”

*They don't even know how to get involved in anything. If halfway houses were available, how do they get this information? Are there advocates that are going to the penitentiary giving them this information? What is close to you? Where can you go get food? Where can you go get clothing? How can we get this information to them? —Central resident*

While many participants felt that lack of information was a key obstacle to receiving help from community agencies, several observed that programs targeting former prisoners did not have the capacity to meet the need in their communities. Despite a lack of consensus about the reason most ex-offenders do not access community programs, most members agreed that returning prisoners must be highly motivated to benefit from the services that are available. Most participants also had serious doubts about the effectiveness of programs that are available and were particularly critical of programs geared toward job training and placement.

*I have a nephew. He's been into the councilman's office, he went into city hall, all over. . . . He's been to all of those programs, and they talk a big talk. “Oh we're going to help you. You just come in.” Ain't nobody helped him. He tried, and tried, and tried and he can't get a job. —Hough resident*

A frequent criticism of employment-based programs in the community was that they are not tailored to the needs of former prisoners. Community residents recognized that many returning prisoners have very little legitimate work history and often require assistance beyond job placement and referrals. Many also described placement services that did not sufficiently address the issue of a felony conviction and were therefore not useful. Many focus group participants held the opinion that prisoners do not receive the vocational training and employment preparation they should while they are in prison, and that their employment prospects after release are severely limited.



*I have a friend, one of the two that was recently released. The only job that he could get so far is working at the car wash. It's like they don't look at your record. They are looking at the manpower behind you, what you can do. But you want some marketable skill. I would like to see the institutions put something in place there to give these guys some marketable skills. —Central resident*

Given the pressures and frustrations of transition to the community, most focus group participants seemed to believe that returning prisoners were not mentally prepared for the challenges of reintegration. As described by focus group participants, it requires an unusual level of determination to get beyond many of the barriers to reentry. Participants felt that most returning prisoners were not likely to succeed without guidance and support.

*I've had clients who have come home and they really wanted to do it, but they thought all of the obstacles in their way were insurmountable. You have to keep telling them. Some people just get frustrated and they stop. I go back to service providers. That might put a lot of weight on everybody but to me it goes back to service providers. . . . You have to be an encourager. When somebody is ready to stop that is when you have to get behind them and let them know you can't stop. —Mt. Pleasant resident*

While there appear to be community service providers that may be useful resources for returning prisoners, participants indicated that there is a lack of services specifically designed to address the needs of ex-offenders. Residents indicated a need in their communities for more transitional services such as correctional halfway houses and intensive case management.

## **NEIGHBORHOOD CHANGE**

When asked to describe how their neighborhood has changed in the last 20 to 30 years, participants in all three communities described a gradual transformation. Focus group members indicated that the economy was failing, and that they have witnessed the disappearance of retail and service businesses from once thriving communities. Some members of the Mt. Pleasant group observed that the amount of drug trade activity has increased in recent years. Others pointed to the changing demographic of drug dealers as evidence that the problem has become more severe.

*Nowadays you've got these little kids out here selling the stuff. It wasn't like that 30 years ago. [Community members would] see you out there 30 years ago on the corner [and say], "I'm going to tell your momma." Nowadays [kids respond], "I'm your momma and who are you going to tell?" Things have changed. —Mt. Pleasant resident*

While reports of increased crime were not consistent across communities, participants from all three neighborhoods believed that community values have changed drastically over the years. They said their communities have become less unified, with less trust among neighbors and less collective responsibility for raising children, and that parents have less control over their kids.

*Family support is not there at all, because it's a lack of parenting, and a lot of grandparents are raising their grandchildren and they can't grab a hold of these young children. —Mt. Pleasant resident*

When asked about the causes of this change, participants named increased drug use, violence, and single teenage parenting, as well as decreased spirituality and restrictions on parents' abilities to discipline children. As one Central resident explained, the community began to dissolve "When they took the rod out of the parent's hand."

Residents in all three neighborhoods described recent community revitalization efforts that were either planned or under way, though employment prospects remained poor and abandoned housing was a problem. While some viewed development efforts in a positive light, many were disappointed that new construction had not provided jobs for fellow community residents. Participants from the Hough neighborhood indicated that there might be some gentrification taking place, with the development of new middle-income housing. One resident expressed frustration that long-term residents did not have access to much of the new housing being developed in the community, saying "if you want to get one of those houses, they've got the price so high that you can't afford it." While many participants shared this sentiment, and many agreed that the community was growing, they did not believe that long-term residents were being displaced.

## **IMPACT OF RETURNING PRISONERS ON THE COMMUNITY**

When asked about the impact of returning prisoners on their communities, participants most often identified positive impacts of prisoners' return home, such as their potential to mentor youth who are in danger of entering the system, or to provide guidance to other prisoners. Many felt that an ex-offender who is successful and productive in the community can be a powerful role model.

*One of the positive things about people returning is that they decided to commit their lives to making sure that the younger children don't follow the same path, so they start volunteering in the community, and volunteering for different programs. —Hough resident*

Participants in nearly every group discussion gave examples of former prisoners who had started programs, become leaders, or otherwise made positive contributions to the community. Participants also saw family reunification as a positive impact of prisoners' return home.

Very few participants discussed the negative impact of prisoners' return home. Some observed that their imprisonment and subsequent return placed a burden on their families—particularly those left to care for the children of prisoners. Sex offenders returning to the community, however, were a concern for many members of the focus groups. In nearly every group, participants brought up the subject of sex offenders living in their communities. Many expressed frustration that they were not notified by the authorities when a sex offender moved into their neighborhood. Though few residents had firsthand knowledge of sex offenders living in their communities, their comments revealed a great deal of fear and anxiety.

*I've got two boys, nine and six. I have never received a flyer and I got one that stays right across the street from me. I could be in the house cleaning and my boys are outside. I'm back and forth to the door every five minutes because I want to know [where my children are]. I don't have anything against him because I don't even know him. But I've got to watch mine. —Mt. Pleasant resident*

Though sex offenders were often a topic of discussion, most participants were aware that violent and sex offenders were not common among those returning to their neighborhoods. Participants generally observed that most former prisoners returning to their communities were typically low-level offenders who had served relatively short sentences, though many of these offenders had been in and out of prison numerous times.

*We are talking about sex offenders and we are talking about people that are doing 15- and 20-year bids, but in reality what I see just in my job and being in this community is that most people going to jail, in this community, are doing 18 months. —Mt. Pleasant resident*

## COMMUNITY AWARENESS AND LOCAL LEADERSHIP

When asked if there were a disproportionate number of prisoners returning to their communities, most residents of Central indicated that there were not. Members of the Hough groups gave differing responses, some saying that Hough was home to a higher number of returning prisoners than other communities, and others saying that it was a common misconception that Hough residents committed more crimes than those of other communities.

*Hough is one of the largest and oldest communities. So, I would say it has to be more because of the size of the community. Plus they've got two places where the guys are coming to on 55th, two or three for pre-release or whatever they call it. —Hough resident*

*It's probably not the most, we are pretty close to others as far as the ex-offenders coming back. —Hough resident*

*Most people don't think that people out in the suburbs be going to jail and everything. . . . But there are people like that in suburbs. There are people that are going to come from out of there too. —Hough resident*

Many participants from Mt. Pleasant said that their neighborhood received a disproportionate number of returning prisoners, not because a disproportionate number of returning prisoners are from Mt. Pleasant, but because there are several halfway houses in the neighborhood.

*We are not only getting ours back, we are getting some that didn't come from this area too. Do we deserve that? —Mt. Pleasant resident*

Some said that transitional housing and supervision were an asset. Others felt that placement in their community was unfair to them and unproductive for the returning prisoners.

*That puts the released prisoners back into an environment that is depressed. There are no jobs. What do they do? You are setting them up to fail. —Mt. Pleasant resident*

According to most focus group participants, returning prisoners are a frequent topic of discussion in their neighborhoods. As described by focus group participants, friends and neighbors do not discuss “prisoner reentry” as a mass phenomenon or a public safety issue, but they are aware of individuals who come back to the community. According to focus group participants from all three neighborhoods, prisoners’ returning home is a normal occurrence, and is part of life in the community.

*You have a tendency to discuss the recidivism too. You know, God, Donnie just got home and is already back. . . . You know, that kind of thing. Or if you don't see somebody for a while and then you see them about 6 months or 12 months later, you ask, "where you've been?" "Out of town. On vacation." So, you know where. So, that is basically the kind of conversation we all have about the recidivism. This guy just got out a month ago or whatever and he's back again. — Hough resident*

According to residents from all three groups, members of their communities are aware of the large numbers of returning prisoners, and they are concerned about high rates of recidivism among this population. At the same time, residents claimed that few local leaders were outspoken on the topic of reentry, and fewer were taking steps to address the issues of returning prisoners. Several residents described city council members who were involved in reentry initiatives or who were known to be advocates for returning prisoners. Many focus group participants also felt that local church leaders had demonstrated a commitment to helping former prisoners and their families.

*A lot of pastors in the community right now are embracing the idea of community reentry. You have a lot of the council people who are involved in some of those issues. —Mt. Pleasant resident*

*The higher-ups, the ones that want to see this transition go smoothly, should go to the clergy more, make more things available, help the clergy to know what to tell them, because they basically are the ones that are really helping these people that are coming home. More so than your councilmen and people like that, I believe. —Mt. Pleasant resident*

For the most part, however, participants expressed the belief that elected officials were not genuinely concerned about prisoner reentry. According to residents, many politicians pay lip service to the issue, but very few have demonstrated any commitment. Some residents doubted that politicians were even aware of the challenges that their communities face. One Mt. Pleasant resident voiced frustration with politicians who are out of touch, asserting that, "They don't even know these ex-offenders are here." Participants' claims that local leaders had not done enough to address the issue of prisoner reentry seemed to be symptomatic of a general lack of confidence in elected officials. Generally, residents seemed disappointed by what they perceived as disinterest on the part of elected politicians. Residents voiced more frustration, however, at the failure of many local officials to follow through on their promises. According to one Hough resident, "You go to them, they don't do nothing. They talk a good talk."

## **ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

When asked who was responsible for doing something to facilitate prisoner reentry, the most common response in all three communities was that returning prisoners were responsible for themselves. Many also placed the responsibility with families, not only for assisting prisoners in transition, but for teaching values and exercising discipline. Several asserted that the state and federal governments were responsible for providing rehabilitative programming in prison and for providing services in the community. Very few participants identified the community as having direct responsibility, though several suggested that members of the community could hold the government accountable through collective action.

*I'm talking about the citizens. We're responsible for changing the law because some of us are just learning that they are working for us. . . . I am saying that to say we as people can change. . . .*

*Not just the government, us as individuals are responsible for saying, “look, we are tired of this,” on a large scale, and trying to get something done. —Hough resident*

Most members felt that the state was not fulfilling its duty to provide rehabilitative programming in prisons. While some believed that this was due to cutbacks in funding for programs and education in recent years, others suggested that the state had no interest in rehabilitating prisoners. Some pointed to prison industries as evidence that the state has an economic interest in keeping people in the system. Others suggested that state and local government bureaucracy and difficulty accessing services in the community were to blame for high recidivism rates.

When asked about law enforcement and community corrections, most participants said that these officials could play an important role in the reentry process, though their approval of police involvement differed slightly by community. Participants from Hough and Mt. Pleasant were generally positive in their assessment of the police. Though they had a range of experiences with law enforcement, they considered the police to be responsive and service oriented. Participants were sympathetic toward the police and appreciated the difficulty of their job. With regard to returning prisoners, some suggested that police could be made aware of their return to the community, so that they could monitor their activities.

*I think the police should know what prisoners have been released. I know it’s going to be hard with the amount of police on the street now, you know, not very many. But I think they should know who the ex-offenders are and kind of keep a watchful eye on them. —Mt. Pleasant resident*

According to residents of the Central neighborhood, police are very much aware of returning prisoners. Participants in these focus groups had a less favorable view of the police. Many regarded the police with fear and distrust and believed that members of their community—particularly known ex-prisoners—were unfairly targeted by officers looking for an easy bust. Several also claimed that people in their neighborhoods were disproportionately subjected to police surveillance and stops.

To better serve ex-prisoners and the community in general, participants suggested that police take a more community-oriented approach, for example, by walking a beat and getting to know members of the community. Several long-term residents said that relations with police had been different in the past and believed that when police were more involved in the community, they commanded respect, made an impression on young people, and were more effective at keeping order. This contributed to safer neighborhoods and helped to steer youth away from illegal activity.

Community residents generally had high expectations for parole officers. Many suggested that parole officers should fill the role of case managers, providing individual attention and services such as referrals, making connections with employers, and generally providing support, as opposed to just monitoring.

*If I were a parole officer here is what I would do. I would go [into] the community where each one of my inmates lives. I’d [go] to the merchants and see if they’ve got any work for them. I [would] set them up with some mental health [services]. I’d get them some medical help. Get them some clothes, find housing for them. —Central resident*

Residents thought that at the very least, parole should serve as a clearinghouse for information on services and programs available in the community, but they also believed that this required more of a social work

orientation than parole officers tend to have. Though many participants said that they would like to see parole officers do more, many also indicated that this was unrealistic due to their heavy caseloads.

*You have got to be able to go above and beyond to help that person. If you care about people, that won't be a problem. But [parole officers] sit and wait for somebody to screw up so [they] can send you straight back to jail. —Mt. Pleasant resident*

*I think most of the parole officers have an overload. —Central resident*

*If they've got 300 clients, how are you going to keep up with 300 people? —Mt. Pleasant resident*

*That's why they lock you up. They ain't got time for you. —Central resident*

When asked about the role of the community in reentry, most residents felt that the primary role of community members was to provide support, encouragement, and guidance to returning prisoners.

*Like you said, to each his own. . .but for the most part try to support them, in my opinion. Try to give them that guiding light. Try to show them a different way. Try to explain to them there could be other opportunities, that everybody has it hard, that you are going to need to overcome the obstacles. That verbal support, emotional support, I think that goes a long way. With a lot of disenfranchised households and families when a prisoner comes home and doesn't get that support that can bring psychological and emotional issues. Now you need prescriptions because of your depression. I think the support is the best thing that somebody [from the community] can offer. —Mt. Pleasant resident*

Some participants also suggested that the community as a whole could provide stability and assume more collective responsibility for instilling values in youth and for keeping the neighborhood free of crime and disorder. For the role that individuals could play, many suggested that it was important to pass on information about services and opportunities that could benefit a person in transition. Some even gave examples of reaching out to recently returned prisoners in their communities.

*A lot of them feel like other people are just unapproachable. Like a guy that lives down the street from me, he is an ex-offender. I know he doesn't have a job. So, when the weather started breaking, I went down and knocked on his door [and said], "can you come down here and help me and my kids clean up the yard and I'll pay you?" And he jumped at the chance. Now every other week he comes and he cuts my grass. If I need my basement cleaned out, because there is not a man in my household. Clean out my garage. Wash my car. Whatever I can do to help keep him busy and put a little change in his pocket at the same time, that is what I do. —Mt. Pleasant resident*

## RETURNING PRISONERS THEN AND NOW

When asked about the differences between prisoners returning to the community now and those who returned in the past—for example, 20 to 30 years ago, most residents said that the number of returning prisoners now is far greater, and that more of them are addicted to drugs. Some noted the increased number of women returning from prison. Many also observed that the types of crimes committed by most felons has changed. In the past, there were people who cycled in and out of the system, but they were not considered a threat to public safety.

*You could bust a move on the corner because hustling was a lot different than it is now. Let's face it, a lot of our communities [were] full of hustlers but they weren't killing each other. There were things you could do. People [who] went to jail for numbers came back out booking numbers. — Mt. Pleasant resident*

In one group, nearly all members agreed with one participant who said that the attitude of returning prisoners had changed over the years, that they were no longer embarrassed or ashamed of having served time in prison. Based on comments by focus group participants, it appears that the social stigma associated with being incarcerated has dissipated, and that a changed attitude among returning prisoners may be part of a larger shift in the way the community regards criminal offenders.

*When they came home a long time ago, they were ashamed. They had shamed their families. They tried to do good to show people that they were sorry for what they did. They don't have that in them now. It's not like that anymore. —Hough resident*

*Now they're considered heroes amongst their peers. —Hough resident*

*Everybody is doing the same thing. It ain't nothing for Bob to go to jail. It ain't nothing for Joe to come home. —Hough resident*

Aside from the increased number of returning prisoners in recent years, the most frequently observed difference between now and 20 years ago was the changed character of the communities to which they return. According to participants, the last 20 years had seen a change in the structure of families and communities. They frequently noted that families are less supportive and communities are more disorganized than they were 20 to 30 years ago. Residents named welfare reform, teenage parenting, single-parent households, and substance abuse as causes underlying the weakening of families and dissolution of communities.

*Thirty years ago. . .there was more togetherness and families helped each other. The family structure fell apart. So, you don't have that togetherness anymore. —Mt. Pleasant resident*

Residents also noted that changes in the economy had made it more difficult for former prisoners to find gainful legal employment. In the past, a criminal record was not the barrier to employment that it is today, especially when manufacturing jobs were plentiful and background checks were uncommon. Changes in the economy have made even low-wage jobs more scarce, and the rising cost of living has made it more difficult to subsist on such employment.

*You could go straight to the factories, and a factory [would] hire you. You [could] go there without your high school diploma and work there for 30 years even though you had a number, in the '60s. —Mt. Pleasant resident*

*Twenty years ago you could get a minimum-paying job and survive and you can't do that today. —Mt. Pleasant resident*

## **IDEAS FOR IMPROVING PRISONER REENTRY**

To conclude the group discussions, we asked participants to imagine that they were in the position of a local, state, or federal policymaker. We then asked them what they would do to improve the situation for returning prisoners. In nearly every group, the respondents said that providing housing, jobs, and vocational training would be their top priorities. Other needs that they would address included health care, counseling, and education. Many said that transitional programming should begin before their release and continue in the community.

*I think education and training inside of the institution before you come out. I think it would be beneficial for every prisoner, especially long-termers, to be taught some kind of training, and have some kind of education before they came out in society. —Mt. Pleasant resident*

*I think they need help with housing, jobs, and training before and after they get out. Let them be able to stand on their own two feet. —Mt. Pleasant resident*

Several group members said that reentry planning should take place from the onset of a prison term, and that discharge planning should include community agencies, connecting former prisoners with specific service providers.

*I think they need to be more connected with the communities that they are releasing these prisoners into. I think that they should start training and connection with the housing and all of that inside, and then have some type of outpatient [services]. Just something besides parole. Something that is going to help them make their transition smoother, you know, dealing with mental [health], dealing with jobs, dealing with housing, it's just all of their issues need to be dealt with. —Mt. Pleasant resident*

*Make sure that they have some housing, at least for six months. Make sure that they have skills to get a job, or to start their own businesses, and make sure that the business owners in the community—I'm not talking about the little small mom and pops, I'm talking about the corporations—make sure that they hire them. —Hough resident*

Community residents had several suggestions for reentry programs. Many felt that mentoring was important. A few felt that more halfway houses and residential substance abuse treatment programs were needed. Some suggested providing transportation to work. A few participants said that they would not only increase the availability of reentry programs in the institutional and community settings, they would also make participation in these programs mandatory for returning prisoners.



Several residents gave suggestions about how the state and local governments could increase employment opportunities through job creation or by providing economic incentives to employers who hire returning prisoners.

*My tenure would be based upon giving tax abatements to businesses that hire, giving tax abatements to businesses that train people in a meaningful way. That is about what I would concentrate on, because without these jobs—and this again is a community problem. Cleveland itself just does not have a lot of jobs. —Hough resident*

A few participants suggested developing programs that would give former prisoners the opportunity to assist recently released prisoners in transition, through mentoring and by providing a forum for them to discuss their experiences and give advice. One suggestion included helping returning prisoners to establish networks with ex-offenders and others in the community who may be supportive.

*You know as soon as a person gets out of the penitentiary they give them a parole officer. Why can't they give them a support group? Somebody that you could go to, people that had been there, knowing what they did and how they are doing. A lot of people are afraid to pick you up and take you to look for a job. A lot of people are afraid to tell somebody that they can't read or write. —Mt. Pleasant resident*

Several residents suggested programming and services focused on family and community. One member suggested working with community members to help them accept and support reentering ex-prisoners. Another felt that programming should be focused on promoting a former prisoner's spirituality and connection to the community.

*I would put flyers out to inform the people to go to a meeting at some kind of community center. Then maybe some of the community members [would be] there, and some of the ex-offenders [would be] there. I would let them talk and I would let them [provide] input and let them get out information as to what they want to see changed. —Central resident*

## Conclusion

The findings indicate that community residents participating in our focus groups perceive former prisoners' inability to secure work and housing and to provide for their basic needs as key obstacles to successful reentry. According to participants, many returning prisoners lacked skills, education, and resources prior to incarceration, and most have few legal means for achieving self-sufficiency after being released.

Community residents indicated that family is the most important and reliable source of support for former prisoners in transition. A prisoner's return, however, often places a financial burden on his family and can be a source of emotional strain that may complicate the reentry process. Participants viewed community support as unreliable and often nonexistent. While participants had mixed feelings about the impact of returning prisoners on their communities, they generally agreed that there should be more rehabilitative services available in prisons and in the communities to which they return.

Residents of each community believed that prisoners were most in need of programs to prepare them for legal employment. Such services may include education, vocational training, job readiness training, and job placement. While some of these are already available in the three focus group communities, participants suggested that local providers lacked the capacity and specialized focus to effectively meet the needs of returning prisoners. More important, community residents felt that failing to provide a link between prison-based programs and community-based agencies has led to low use of existing services due to prisoners' lack of awareness.

Many focus group participants felt that the dissolution of the family unit, erosion of community values, failing economy, and the burgeoning drug trade have all contributed to an unhealthy community environment. This makes reentry increasingly challenging for the ever-increasing number of prisoners that return to these communities. Participants were confident, however, that prisoners who are successful on the outside have the potential to serve as role models for youth and for other returning prisoners and can be an asset to the community.

Community residents had low expectations for the potential contributions of politicians and other local leaders. While they expressed disappointment in elected officials' inattention to returning prisoners, participants did not expect policymakers to take more responsibility for removing the barriers to reentry. Participants did, however, have high expectations for corrections and law enforcement officials, particularly prison officials and parole officers. While participants understood the resource constraints of these agencies, they believed that these officials were in the best position to provide meaningful assistance. Participants generally viewed the community's role as indirect, primarily providing support, encouragement and a stable environment conducive to successful reintegration. While many felt that success depends on the individual, most acknowledged that the availability of support and guidance are key factors in facilitating successful reintegration.

Participants' suggestions for facilitating prisoner reentry involved not only providing services such as education, job training, and housing, but also providing these services in more effective ways—for example, instituting earlier reentry planning in prisons, increasing the collaboration between prison

programs and community agencies, making program participation mandatory, providing economic incentives to employers that hire former prisoners, and involving families and community members in reentry programming.

The community focus groups in Central, Hough, and Mt. Pleasant are part of a larger effort to develop a deeper understanding of the reentry experiences of returning prisoners, their families, and their communities. In our post-release interviews with men returning to the Cleveland area, we will explore in more depth the specific challenges they face and the factors that help them to reintegrate successfully. From our discussions with community residents, we have learned that most prisoners returning to these communities do not receive adequate support. There is evidence, however, that many of the key resources for meeting the needs of men and women returning from prison exist within these communities but are underutilized. Community residents communicated a need for increased support—to strengthen resources within the families of returning prisoners and to build the capacity of agencies that provide services and supervision. Participants believed this could be accomplished if community members, providers, and policymakers take a more thoughtful and focused approach to addressing the unique challenges facing former prisoners during their transition back to the communities they call home.

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