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Reentry Roundtable

**Prisoner Reentry and the Institutions of Civil Society:  
Bridges and Barriers to Successful Reintegration**

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**THE REVOLVING DOOR: EXPLORING PUBLIC  
ATTITUDES TOWARD PRISONER REENTRY**

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## Introduction

A typical day of TV programming offers a wide selection of news and entertainment programs focusing on crime, police work, arrests, trials, and incarceration. The depictions may not be accurate, but the overall process is constantly in the public eye. On that same day, however, approximately 1,600 inmates (mostly men) will come out of prison to find their way back into society, typically with little planning, counsel, or support.<sup>1</sup> Yet compared with other aspects of the criminal justice system, there is almost no public discussion of prisoner reentry. The availability of public opinion research follows precisely the same pattern; there is considerable survey data on crime and punishment overall, but virtually none on prisoner reentry.

To gain a better perspective on public attitudes about this issue, The Urban Institute's Reentry Roundtable asked Public Agenda, a nonprofit organization dedicated to nonpartisan public opinion research, to develop a small-scale pilot project. In addition to support from The Urban Institute and Public Agenda itself, funding was provided by Open Society Institute, The George Gund Foundation, and Arthur White.

## Focus groups in suburban and urban areas

Designed to raise questions, stimulate discussion, and provide hypotheses for further research, the pilot project consisted of three focus groups conducted in March 2002 in the Philadelphia area. To offer some insight on how Americans in different demographic groups might think about prisoner reentry, Public Agenda organized the focus groups to reflect different population segments.

- One focus group consisted of residents of the Philadelphia suburb of Bensalem. The group was racially mixed, and respondents' incomes ranged from less than \$25,000 to more than \$60,000. The group included an advertising sales representative, a retiree, and an employee at Wal-Mart.

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<sup>1</sup> Travis, Jeremy. *Prisoner Reentry Seen Through a Community Lens*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 2001.

- A second focus group consisted of residents of Philadelphia’s inner city, primarily from the West Philadelphia area. The group was entirely African American or Hispanic, and respondents included a legal assistant, a truck driver, and a cook.
- The third focus group consisted of affluent Philadelphia residents. The group was racially mixed, and all earned more than \$30,000. Respondents included the owner of an art gallery, a retired attorney currently doing charitable work, and a therapist.

### **Limitations of the research**

The responses captured in the Public Agenda focus groups are intriguing, but it is vital to underscore the limitations of this research. Focus groups can be useful tools for observing how people talk about issues and for generating hypotheses for further research. However, they are not reliable predictors of how many people hold a particular viewpoint, or even whether the majority of Americans actually share views that predominate in a focus group discussion. What’s more, this particular project includes a small number of focus groups confined to a limited geographic location. It is possible, and perhaps even likely, that the same research conducted among suburban, inner-city, and upscale residents in Atlanta, Miami, Phoenix, Dallas, or Portland, for example, could produce different results.

Nevertheless, some characteristic patterns of thinking seemed to emerge in all three of the focus groups we conducted, and many echo themes that are prevalent in the public’s overall thinking about crime and punishment. In some instances, we are able to cite existing survey data to confirm—or at least buttress—the observations we report from the focus groups. We rely particularly on Public Agenda research from a series of studies on prison overcrowding and alternatives to incarceration conducted for the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation.<sup>2</sup> And because Public Agenda has conducted dozens of public opinion studies on diverse public issues, and because we have devoted more than two decades of work to understanding how citizens typically learn about public issues, we have applied our own judgment and experience in interpreting the results.

In the three sessions, we focused specifically on these topics:

- Public awareness of prisoner reentry issues

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<sup>2</sup> Farkas, Steve, and Ethan Gutmann. *Punishing Criminals: Pennsylvanians Consider the Options*. New York: Public Agenda, 1993; Doble, John, Stephen Immerwahr, and Amy Richardson. *Punishing Criminals: The People of Delaware Consider the Options*. New York: Public Agenda, 1991; Doble, John, and Josh Klein. *Punishing Criminals: The Public’s View. An Alabama Survey*. New York: Public Agenda, 1989.

- Perceptions of what happens to prisoners after release from prison
- Potential public support for programs to help former prisoners make the transition from prison to society
- Reactions to “barriers” regarding employment, housing, voting, etc. that former prisoners face in many states
- Potential concerns and conflicts about reentry programs
- Future directions for research

### **How important is this to most people?**

Opinion researchers often look at two factors to determine how important and meaningful an issue is for the general public. One is whether people bring up an issue spontaneously or whether they only talk about it after it has been raised by researchers. The second is whether they appear to understand an issue when it is introduced or whether they need repeated explanations and clarifications in order to think about it. The answers to these two questions have vital implications for leaders who need to launch public discussion about an important issue and for journalists who need to cover it.

In many Public Agenda projects, for example, moderators open focus group sessions by giving respondents a clean slate and asking them to list their top community or national concerns. Typically, people bring up issues that have been on their minds and that they have already thought, read, and talked about. Issues that people bring up spontaneously have an immediacy and urgency that places them at the very top of the public’s agenda. Issues that must be raised by the researchers are less salient to them.

It is also important to learn if an issue is easily grasped once it is introduced. It is just a fact of public policy life that some problems are easy for people to understand, while others—although they may be equally or even more important to the country’s future—are abstract and difficult for people to wrap their minds around. Several years ago, Public Agenda conducted an in-depth study on “restructuring public schools”—a topic that attracts significant attention among experts and political leadership. The study explored public thinking about proposals such as vouchers, charter schools, and school privatization, but the focus groups proved to be rough sailing. Only a handful of participants spontaneously mentioned these topics or anything related to them. Virtually none understood how they would work, and the respondents’ puzzlement continued even after moderators passed out printed sheets attempting to clarify the proposals. This is not to suggest that these ideas are necessarily bad or unworkable, but they are difficult for most people to get a handle on. Consequently, they present a complex communications challenge for leaders and advocates.

## **Rarely talked about but easily understood**

Based on this series of focus groups on prisoner reentry, this is an issue that people rarely raise spontaneously, but it is one that most seem to understand readily once it is introduced. In each session, we asked our respondents to tell us about some of the main issues or problems in their neighborhoods. Many people spoke of schools, sprawl, taxes, housing prices, and a variety of other issues. Not surprisingly, several people spontaneously mentioned crime and drugs, but their concerns seemed to focus more on broad social issues facing the neighborhood rather than the explicitly personal fears of crime so prevalent in focus groups a decade ago. Respondents in these groups reflect what national polls have shown for the last several years; the public's fear of crime has declined, and most Americans name issues such as education and health care as higher priorities for national government.<sup>3</sup>

In this project, some suburban respondents talked about drugs and vandalism among local teens. Urban residents voiced concerns about people hanging out near convenience stores where, the respondents believed, they bought and sold drugs. Several inner-city residents spoke bitterly about open drug selling, and the disastrous effects of drugs on their communities. One upscale urban man put it this way:

The neighborhood popped up in my mind. Basically, in my neighborhood right now there's a lot of drug activity going on compared to when I was growing up. I'm only 25 now, and the kids that are in high school now are going out there now, and there's drugs on every street corner now. That bothers me a lot, and there's nothing being done about it. They do it right in the open. You're driving down the street, and you actually see them handing each other money and drugs.

### **“Just throwing them out . . .”**

Even when the discussion turned to crime directly—including some fairly extended conversations about courts, sentencing, and the local police—none of the respondents specifically mentioned problems that society or their community might face concerning recently released prisoners, nor did they spontaneously voice concerns about how returning prisoners were treated or whether they would be able to rebuild their lives.

However, as soon we asked about the topic directly, we saw that nearly everyone in the groups understood the issue and its possible implications. Most immediately had some concrete

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<sup>3</sup> Gallup Organization Poll, a survey of 1,011 adults surveyed by telephone between Oct. 11-14-, 2001. The public's perception of whether there was more crime in the United States than there was the year prior dropped from 89 percent in 1992 to 41 percent in 2001; Princeton Survey Research Associates Poll, sponsored by the Pew Center for People and the Press, a survey of 1,202 adults surveyed telephone between - April 18-22, 2001. 47 percent 55 percent of the respondents said they would increase spending used to combat crime, while 76 percent said they would increase spending on education and 71 percent said they would increase spending on Health Care.

observations to make about it. A suburban man responded this way: “What we’re saying is, [there are] people that have done their time and want to better themselves, [and there should be programs to help them reenter society] instead of just throwing them out there with no kind of guide rope or no kind of help. . . .”

### **Daunting obstacles, ineffective programs**

As we discovered, although most respondents had not thought much about prisoner reentry specifically, most were aware that prisoners face daunting obstacles returning to the community and establishing a noncriminal lifestyle. Among the urban respondents especially—both inner-city and upscale—there was a virtually instantaneous ability to understand the situation a former prisoner is likely to face—no job, minimal education, few marketable skills, no particular place to go, and very little support or monitoring.

In all three groups, respondents had fairly consistent views about the experience a prisoner has both in prison and upon release. While some of our respondents mentioned hearing about some programs in prisons designed to help people change and lead a better life after prison, virtually no one believed these programs were widespread or particularly effective.

Many thought that an individual might, as a result of being sent to prison, reform himself or herself, but almost all tended to think of this as an individual achievement—not the result of prison programs and policies. Those who become stronger, people seem to be saying, do so in spite of what they find in prison, not because of it. Nearly all the respondents saw the efforts of prisons to rehabilitate and educate people as poorly designed, poorly executed, and ineffective. One upscale urban woman said

There are not job opportunities; you’re not taught trades. I think we can make license plates or some menial types of things. But I don’t believe there [are] programs that help with education and help somebody make better of themselves while they’re in for X number of years. So if someone comes in with really low self-esteem and a lot of social problems, they’re not going to get any stronger and feel better about themselves while they’re in jail for three to six years.

Another man commented:

They used to have some educational programs in prison. I think up until about three to four years ago they took them out, and that's been the problem. I don't know if it was because of funding and stuff like that. That's why, when prisoners come out now, they have nothing. They have nothing education-wise. . . . So I think that's the problem. If they start putting some programs back in there, that will probably alleviate the situation of people coming back out and recommitting the crimes.

### **Creating criminals**

The respondents also believed that while prisoners had very little chance to learn useful skills in prison, they have ample opportunity to acquire and reinforce negative behaviors. Several commented on the wide availability of drugs in the prison (often, they believed, supplied by the guards themselves), and others stressed the degree to which prison can be a “school for crime.” One suburban male said

I think prison creates criminals too. If you send a kid [who] stole a car maybe six or seven times and he was just joyriding with his friends but other than that he wasn't a bad kid. Then he goes in the system. If he goes to a major prison you are going to turn that kid into a career criminal if you leave him in there long enough and don't give him any help.

So what did our respondents think happens to prisoners once they are released? We found very little confidence in or respect for the supervision that released prisoners receive from the parole system. Several respondents said that parole officers have huge caseloads and do very little follow-up, while others merely regarded them as lackadaisical and gullible. One suburban woman said

I don't think they're really on them, parole officers. You meet them once a month, every two months. You get a urine test; you have stuff to clean your system out if you're doing drugs. . . . Some people hook them up and say they're working for them, but they're not really not. They're not really on them, parole officers. They don't check and find out. People lie and say they live at this place and don't really live at that place. But they know they have to meet their parole officer [so] at a certain time they go the house and act like they've been there and lived there and stuff like that. That's how it really is.

### **Jobs at Chuck E. Cheese**

The respondents' negative views about prisons and the parole system echo precisely what

Public Agenda found in its earlier work on prison overcrowding and alternatives to incarceration. These studies—conducted in Alabama, Delaware, and Pennsylvania—revealed deep skepticism about the ability of the prison system to rehabilitate and the ability of parole boards to monitor those under their supervision. National surveys have routinely shown low levels of confidence in the justice system overall. In 2000, the Gallup Organization reported that just 24 percent of Americans said they had “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the criminal justice system.<sup>4</sup>

Nearly everyone in the focus groups believed that released prisoners face enormous obstacles, especially in finding meaningful work. One man from Philadelphia’s inner city said

And if they do get a job it’s like Chuck E. Cheese or McDonald’s, nothing they can put time or effort into trying to better themselves. Even then you still won’t be able to get a job because there’s 100,000 people that went to college and came straight out and did what they were supposed to do. They get the job, not the convicted felon. He’s going to have to sit home and wait or work at Chuck E. Cheese or McDonald’s and make a \$250 check every two weeks and then go out and decide to go sell drugs again and get locked up. That’s how it goes.

And for nearly all the focus group respondents—whether they were in the suburban, inner-city, or upscale group—the picture was as predictable as it was distressing. Prisoners leave prison with few new positive or marketable skills and many bad habits. They have little supervision and have a hard time finding a job. As a result, they fall back into the same behavior patterns that sent them to prison the first place. All of this, most our respondents believed, leads to high rates of recidivism and a virtual revolving door, with people going back into prison almost as fast as they leave it. Here is a sampling of what respondents had to say on this score:

They go in there and get whatever they do, go to school or whatever, but they still come out, and then they can’t get no job because of what they did. Then they see other people; there’s fast money, so they want to do the same thing again. Then they’re back in there, they may still sit a little longer, but they still come out doing the same thing.

Suburban female

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<sup>4</sup>Gallup Organization Poll, a survey of 1,021 adults surveyed by telephone between June 22 and 25, 2000. “I am going to read you a list of institutions in American society. Please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in each one—a great deal, quite a lot, some, or very little. . . . The criminal justice system.” A great deal, 8 percent; Quite a lot, 16 percent; Some, 42 percent; Very little, 30 percent; None (vol.), 3 percent; No opinion, 1 percent. Working Discussion Paper for the Urban Institute’s Reentry Roundtable: The Revolving Door: Exploring Public Attitudes Toward Prisoner Reentry J. Immerwahr and J. Johnson



But the perception is if 100 come out, 80 go back. Eighty got out and maybe 60 of those 80 go back in. Percentage shrinks, but it's still not a successful program. They're not even batting .500.

Suburban male

### **Not aware of many barriers**

The focus groups also suggested that even though nearly all the respondents had a negative view of what happens (or does not happen) to prisoners when they are released into the community, many were surprised, even dumbfounded, to learn about some of the barriers and constraints existing in some states. Most of our respondents, for example, seemed surprised to learn that many prisoners cannot vote, and very few saw any point to this kind of limitation. Others thought provisions that bar former prisoners from driving (given the importance of driving to many jobs) or from entering a field such as hairdressing were both foolish and counterproductive. Here's what some of the respondents had to say:

I feel you're taking a person's right away now. They did the time for the crime. Why should you take their right to vote? You're taking their freedom away.

Upscale urban male

You should give them a driver's license, I believe they should have one.

Inner-city male

[You should be allowed to vote from jail] because you're still a citizen whether you get locked up or not. You still are a registered voter. So I don't understand why you can't vote from prison. I just don't understand it.

Inner-city female

They should vote; it's America. They're going to be living in the community."

Suburban male

They can't get a job with a felony conviction. You put on there, "Yes, I've been convicted." You're not going to get an answer to that, not unless they want you in the basement somewhere.

Inner-city male

## Support for possible solutions

Given this rather bleak perception of the problems both prisoners and communities face in this situation, it is not surprising that most respondents were receptive to a variety of solutions. Many responded very favorably to the idea of post-release planning while people are still in prison, as well as for more effective supervision and support after a prisoner is released.

A suburban male commented, “I think [post-release planning should begin] close to the beginning [of the prison term] because it creates an atmosphere of at least constant recognition [that] you are going to get out and what are you going to do.” There was also substantial support for ideas such as halfway houses, where prisoners could have additional supervision while they actually start to work on a job. One inner city woman said it this way: “Put him in a halfway house for two years, let him get back into society and try to work and get a job. That’s what the houses are for. . . . When he gets out meet him halfway. We’re going to put you in a halfway setting to see how you make it from here.”

## The preeminent value of work

For nearly all the respondents, whether they were in the suburban, inner-city, or upscale group, helping former prisoners find meaningful work was the most crucial and urgent step. Respondents seem convinced that getting former prisoners into solid jobs would both help them as individuals and protect the community from crime.

The strong emphasis on jobs and work is not surprising. The value of work to the American public has emerged strongly in opinion research about welfare and poverty, education, and even the central values of the country itself. One Public Agenda study looked at what U.S.- and foreign-born parents believe public schools should teach children about American values. Roughly seven in ten of those surveyed said that an essential part of what make the United States a special place is that people are expected to work hard and earn their living, not rely on government.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Farkas, Steve, Jean Johnson, Ann Duffett, and Joanna McHugh. *A Lot to Be Thankful For: What Parents Want Children to Learn about America*. New York: Public Agenda, 1998. A survey of 801 parents of public school students by telephone between Sept. 3 and 16, 1998. Additional interviews of 200 foreign-born, 203 Hispanic, and 198 African-American parents were also conducted. “Now I’m going to read you a list of American ideals. For each, please tell me if it is absolutely essential to you personally, important but not essential, or not that important. . . . People should work and earn their living—they should not rely on the government.” Percentage responding “absolutely essential”: Parents overall, 76 percent; White parents, 80 percent; African-American parents, 69 percent; Hispanic parents, 70 percent; Foreign-born parents, 70 percent.

For most Americans, work offers a number of important benefits. It provides income, of course, but it also provides structure, meaning, identity, and self-esteem. For many Americans, work is actually seen as redemptive. Our focus group respondents applied this same line of thinking to the issue of released prisoners trying to establish new lives after leaving prison. One woman said it this way:

I support helping them find jobs and training. Everyone needs money to survive in this world, and it would get them on track. If you set them up with a job, hopefully they'd have a mentor or some sort of manager that would sort of keep them in line, who would give them the work and give them the structure they need. They need somewhere to be during the day, instead of being on the streets or whatever.

Suburban female

They can't get jobs. You put programs out there or funding for programs or even funding for companies to hire these guys when they get out or provide some training to them, it will keep them out and maybe some of them will become productive members of society. Meanwhile you can always apply for grants and scholarships for college.

Inner-city female

The focus group respondents also supported other programs such as counseling and drug rehabilitation, but they often appeared to assign these a lower priority than anything related to preparing for or holding a job. The general view is that other programs are useful enough if a person is ready for them, but they rarely work unless a person is truly motivated and persistent, and often, they too can often be "revolving doors." One man said

No one is going to take treatment if they don't want it; treatment isn't going to be no big help. The big thing, when you do go to jail for drugs, you have to stop. Drugs are in there, too. But what I'm saying, there's a lot of people who stopped in prison cold turkey compared to where you go to a treatment center where, if you're not going to want to stop, you're going to wind up doing it again anyway.

Upscale urban male

I think they've got a real good program now called Treatment Corps Program, like say you get locked up for drug possession or something like that, they put you in a treatment program for a year and half, 18 months. They monitor your urine and you have to go in two or three times a week. My brother was on that and that took him like right out of the state that he was in and he got himself together.

### **How to divide a dollar**

Most respondents in the focus groups indicated that spending more money on these kinds of programs would be useful, and we used their preferences about spending to gauge the relative importance they assigned to the different ideas under discussion. We asked our respondents to allocate an imaginary dollar of state revenue and tell us how much of it should be spent on prison versus how much should be spent on post-release programs. Even though many of our respondents had already described existing prisons as overcrowded and lacking in good rehabilitation programs, many wanted to spend most of the money (often 80 percent) on post-release programs.

As we suggest below, this does not necessarily mean that voters will readily agree to pay more for prisoner reentry programs, or that the majority of citizens will automatically support shorter sentences for many crimes. Nor does it mean, in any literal sense, that funding could easily be taken from other criminal justice purposes and devoted to this cause. In real life, that would likely require considerable consensus building. What it does suggest is that most of our respondents saw prisoner reentry programs as meeting an important need. And many seemed to think that these programs—compared to prison—might offer a better way to help prisoners and protect communities from crime.

### **Concerns and limitations**

The views expressed by most respondents in this series of focus groups should be heartening to criminal justice professionals who see prisoner reentry as a weak link in the system and for advocates working to enhance services for prisoners returning to the community. Most respondents seemed to believe that this issue is important and deserves attention. Most seem to consider the ideas we discussed as sound, practical ways to help prisoners and community residents alike. Indeed, many respondents appeared to think that not having such programs is just a recipe for more crime. And finally, very few of the respondents seemed ready to write off all prisoners as hopeless causes, or to believe that it is really possible to “lock them up and throw away the key.”

Still, almost all respondents in all three groups voiced some doubts and reservations about what kinds of prisoners we were talking about, how well the programs would be run, how

effective they would be in helping prisoners stay out of trouble, and exactly what kinds of services prisoners would be eligible for. Here are the most important caveats, questions, and reservations we heard during the discussions.

## 1. The belief in punishment

In the focus groups for this project, nearly all the respondents reacted favorably to the idea of helping former prisoners get back on track. Yet, based on what we observed, this interest in prisoner reentry did not seem to be part and parcel of a broader indictment of the criminal justice system overall. Many professionals and experts working on prisoner reentry also raise important questions about whether American society places too much emphasis on punishment, whether far too many people are incarcerated, and whether the “get tough on crime” political movement of the 1980s and 1990s was misguided—damaging communities and often devastating families and individual lives. Many question whether “getting tough on crime” has actually reduced crime at all, or whether falling crime rates are instead attributable to a better economy, more jobs, and changing demographics.

But in the three focus groups conducted for this project, virtually no one spontaneously voiced these kinds of concerns. A number of respondents did object to what they saw as an ineffective use of prison space—putting low-level offenders in prison and at the same time releasing much more dangerous people into the community—and many raised questions about drug sentencing in particular. Still, no one seemed especially outraged about the numbers of people being sent to prison. No one complained that the general trends in the criminal justice system over the past few decades have been particularly unfair. National surveys have shown a declining fear of crime, and there is some evidence from polling that Americans are more open to approaches such as prevention and rehabilitation than they were a decade ago.<sup>6</sup> Responses in these focus groups and survey data suggest that a number of Americans also have questions about current drug sentencing practices. Yet surveys also show very high levels of public support for long prison sentences for those convicted of violent crimes. A 2002 survey by ABC News, for example, found 82 percent of Americans favoring a law requiring mandatory life imprisonment for anyone convicted of a third violent felony.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. The suburban perspective

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<sup>6</sup> Peter D. Hart Research Associates Poll, sponsored by the Open Society Institute, a survey of 1,056 adults surveyed by telephone between Sept. 6 and 17, 2001. “Preferred approach to crime: We need a tougher approach to crime with an emphasis on stricter sentencing, capital punishment for more crimes, and fewer paroles for convicted felons or we need a tougher approach to dealing with the causes of crime with an emphasis on improving job and vocational training, providing family counseling, and increasing the number of neighborhood activity centers for young people.” Stricter punishment, 32 percent; Deal with causes of crime, 65 percent. In 1994, the findings were: Stricter punishment, 42 percent; Deal with causes of crime, 48 percent.

<sup>7</sup> ABCNews.com Poll, a survey of 1,025 adults surveyed by telephone between Feb. 27 and March 3, 2002. “Would you favor or oppose a law requiring mandatory life imprisonment for anyone convicted of a violent felony for the third time?” Favor, 82 percent; Oppose, 14 percent; No opinion, 4 percent. The ABC survey did find much lower levels of support (17 percent) for applying “three strikes” provisions to those convicted of non-violent crimes. However, this suggests that while Americans might support modifications in the way these laws are applied, they have not backed away from the concept entirely.

In these three focus groups, we saw a pronounced difference between the views expressed by suburban respondents and what we heard from either of the urban groups. Given the topic of prisons and released prisoners, it is perhaps not surprising that suburban residents typically spoke about what they had heard from the media rather than what they had learned from their own circle of acquaintances. In contrast, a number of respondents in the inner-city group had family members or acquaintances that had been in prison, and they spoke from this more personal perspective. The upscale urbanites did not mention any first-hand knowledge, but they were well read, and most seemed fairly liberal in outlook. Reflecting perhaps the political makeup of the urban northeast, every one of the upscale Philadelphia respondents told us (by confidential note) that they had voted for Vice President Al Gore in the 2000 presidential election.

Generally, the suburbanites voiced much less sympathy for the plight of prisoners, and they seemed more likely to support a tough “law and order” view of crime and punishment. A number of these respondents talked about prisoners as being “coddled” while they are in prison. As one suburban man said, prison is an easy lifestyle: “three hots and a cot.” In contrast to the urban residents who reflected an awareness that more people are serving longer sentences, the suburban residents tended to stress the idea that people weren’t spending enough time in prison. One of our suburban respondents complained about prisoners who got out of prison too soon, and several other members voiced complaints about lack of “truth in sentencing”:

I think that the thing that gets frustrating is the judge hands down a sentence; you have five years in prison. In 14 months that person is out. Four or five years should be four or five years, and then you let them [out]. They should do the time.

Suburban female

Several suburban residents also spontaneously said that they wanted to see prisoners doing more work while they were in prison, in the “road gang” tradition:

I think they should be out more. . .cleaning up the highways or the trains. I take the train every day down to the city, and along the tracks, it’s disgusting, especially when you go up to New York, like the New Jersey side of it, it’s horrible. Meanwhile, the prisoners are probably rotting away in prison.

Suburban male

Although the suburban group voiced enthusiasm for redirecting efforts toward prisoner reentry programs, nearly all of their comments conveyed a much harsher attitude toward criminals and prisons. For example, most of our respondents—urban and suburban—supported halfway houses. The urban respondents, however, seemed more likely to believe that halfway house should be substituted for some jail time. The suburbanites seemed more likely to believe that the halfway house time should be added to the sentence, as part of the transition back into society, rather than substitute for some of the sentence.

The question, of course, arising from this pilot project is how widespread this harder-edged take on this issue is. National polling data over a number of years suggest that the public tends to support a mix of what might be considered “liberal” and “conservative” approaches to crime. As we mentioned earlier, recent surveys suggest that more Americans are more open to prevention and rehabilitation strategies than they have been in the past. But the data also continue to show low confidence in the criminal justice system, very high support for mandatory life sentences for repeated violent crimes, and majority support for the death penalty.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Don't reward prisoners

The most striking reservation—and the one voiced with the most vehemence—was a concern about fairness to those who have not violated the law. Although our respondents agreed that it made sense to help released prisoners find their way back into a productive role, it was definitely not appropriate, in their view, to give these individuals advantages over law-abiding citizens. One of the clearest examples concerned whether prisoners and released prisoners should receive financial support to get a college education. Our respondents appeared to agree that most meaningful jobs today require more than a GED. But as soon as we discussed the idea of helping prisoners get college courses, we heard a strong negative reaction from a number of our respondents. One of our suburban respondents was outraged when someone in the group mentioned that the University of Pennsylvania was teaching classes in one of the prisons.

It's terrible because Penn is a great school that is recognized. Most people can't afford to go there or aren't smart enough to go there. But people that hurt people or stole from people can go there? That doesn't go with me. Community college, somewhere that anyone can go, fine. . . . But to get Penn credits? No, I think that's terrible.

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<sup>8</sup> Gallup Organization, a survey of 1,021 adults surveyed by telephone between June 22 and 25, 2000. “I am going to read you a list of institutions in American society. Please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in each one—a great deal, quite a lot, some, or very little. . . . The criminal justice system.” A great deal, 8 percent; Quite a lot, 16 percent; Some, 42 percent; Very little, 30 percent; None (vol.), 3 percent; No opinion, 1 percent. ABCNews.com Poll, a survey of 1,025 adults surveyed by telephone between Feb. 27 and March 3, 2002. “Would you favor or oppose a law requiring mandatory life imprisonment for anyone convicted of a violent felony for the third time?” Favor, 82 percent; Oppose, 14 percent; No opinion, 4 percent. ABC News poll, sponsored by the *Washington Post*, a survey of 1,003 adults surveyed by telephone between April 20 and 24, 2001. “Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?” Favor, 63 percent; Oppose, 28 percent; No opinion, 9 percent.



Suburban female

We heard much the same response from some of our urban respondents:

I'm not so thrilled about that idea of a college education. It almost sounds like you're rewarding him. If a prisoner is getting something that a youngster who tows the line and behaves himself and can't afford. . . . We're giving special [privileges]. . . .

Upscale urban male

You're working hard for your money to send your kids to college. Here you have a person just coming out of prison for whatever type of crime, and all of a sudden they can get free education for four years when you're struggling, trying to put your kids through college and getting scholarships and everything.

Upscale urban male

A few respondents also voiced similar reservations about helping prisoners get a really desirable job, suggesting that some job programs for former prisoners might be vulnerable, especially when jobs are scarce or particularly desirable:

I think it sucks that people out here trying to get a better job, and then there are these guys coming out of prison who say, "yes, I'm going to be a lawyer, cool." You know? Send me for four years to college, make me a lawyer.

Suburban male

Clearly these respondents are making a distinction that is very important to them. They support the idea of helping prisoners get meaningful post-release work. At the same time, they react negatively to the idea that a released prisoner will have an easier time than someone who has not violated the law.

#### **4. Violent vs. nonviolent crimes**

Criminal justice professionals involved in sentencing, probation, and parole often wrestle with questions about which individuals pose a danger to society, which crimes are violent or nonviolent and which crimes could be considered victimless since they only affect individuals that chose to participate by buying drugs or sexual favors for example. Yet there is one important caveat from this series of preliminary focus groups: If our respondents are representative of the population at large, many Americans may be using somewhat different definitions of what constitutes violence or a danger to the community.

In these focus groups, we asked respondents to define what they meant by violent versus nonviolent crimes, and many tended to talk about the potential for violence or damage to people's lives, rather than outright violence. Many, for example, talked about drug crimes as violent, even if no one was explicitly hurt. One upscale urban male said, "Drugs kill people, too, just like guns do." Others saw drugs in terms of the violent lifestyle that goes with them: "If he is selling drugs, he probably has a gun, and he has probably used it." A woman from the inner city said the following about the connection between drug use and crime: "I'm just about sure two years ago when I was robbed in my apartment, somebody feeding for drugs probably broke in. I always feel like somewhere along the line drugs have some underlying criminal issue that just keeps on going."

Our respondents were particularly concerned about crimes that were sexual or that dealt with children. For several respondents, the very first association to the thought of a released prisoner was "Megan's law." Some representative quotes:

Depends on what the crime is. I don't want a [halfway] house full of rapists and child pedophiles. But a couple of kids that were on drugs, robbery, whatever, and they kind of rehabilitated them, that's different. See, that's where the community comes in differently. America goes nuts if you mess with kids or rape. They just hate that. I wouldn't want that in my community, period.

Suburban male

I don't know if easing him back into society really works for rapists. It's a crime of anger against women. . . . But when you can pound some woman like that, you have a problem with dealing with women. You can't talk to women to get what you want; you have to hurt her, almost forever. I have a real problem with that.

Inner-city male

If I found out my neighbor went to jail for beating his wife, yes, I'd be a little leery of getting him upset and getting too close to him. But if he went because when he was 21, he walked in and stole something from the store, you chalk it up to "he served the time, and hopefully he's a better person now." . . . I think it really depends on what it is.

Suburban female

#### **4. Not at the expense of other good purposes**

We have mentioned that many respondents said that they thought it might be a good idea to reallocate criminal justice funding away from increased spending on prisons toward increased spending on release programs. But in the groups, we also asked respondents how

they would feel about taking money from other social programs, such as welfare, child care, or higher education, and directing it to providing better programs for prisoner reentry. We found very little support for this idea, even among the respondents most interested in addressing prisoner reentry problems.

The respondents readily conceded that released prisoners are a high-risk group, and that intervention might pay off in reduced crime. But they simply did not leap from this premise to the notion that the public good might be served by spending the money here rather than in other areas. Many simply did not want society to focus on this at the expense of other social priorities. Just as many respondents were adamant that they didn't want to reward prisoners by giving them better treatment or advantages not available to other groups, people in the focus groups seemed very reluctant to penalize "non-criminal" groups by taking "their" funding to spend it on former prisoners. As we noted earlier, asked to divide a hypothetical dollar between investing more in prison versus doing more on prisoner reentry, respondents would immediately say they wanted 70 percent or 80 percent to go for released prisoners. Yet asked to divide the dollar between prisoner reentry and more child care for people trying to get off welfare, most respondents immediately wanted the lion's share of the money to go to child care.

### **Conflicting patterns of thought**

When our respondents talked about these issues, they often voiced ideas and opinions that were in conflict with one another in important ways. In part, this may reflect some unfamiliarity with this issue and a lack of time to wrestle with the complexities involved. Public Agenda has often observed that when people have thought a lot about an issue and discussed and debated it with their friends and families, their views tend to become more internally consistent and stable. Typically, if people have a firm grasp of an issue and have thought about it for some time, they will "stick to their guns" even when survey questions are asked in different ways or when trade-offs are posed. Prisoner reentry is, as we have said already, not one of those issues. People may be immediately attracted to many aspects of it, but they have not spent much time thinking about it.

On the other hand, not all conflicts in public thinking resolve themselves with added exposure and deliberation. In some cases, people actually have two ideas in mind that are equally important to them, and they will continually attempt to balance and accommodate both principles as they think about a problem. This is not dissimilar to the problem judges and constitutional thinkers face attempting to balance, for example, protecting the rights of the accused with protecting the rights of a free press. It's never actually resolved; it's a delicate balance.

On this issue, we observed several interesting patterns of conflicted thinking, and it is not clear from this limited research exactly how widespread these are. Regardless of whether these conflicts occur in the thinking of many Americans or only a few, or whether they turn out to be short-lived or persistent, professionals and advocates working on prisoner reentry in the field are very likely to run into them.

**A. The desire to help vs. the belief in punishment.** There was, as we have noted, a genuine desire on the part of many of our respondents to provide more support for reentering prisoners. As we saw in our earlier work on alternatives to incarceration, many Americans believe that people can change their lives, and that they deserve a chance to do so. At the same time, most of our respondents also expressed a strong conviction that prisoners have violated basic social norms and deserve to be punished. These two views sometimes, as we have seen, came into conflict, as for example, when people stressed that prisoners should be aided in getting meaningful jobs while, at the same time, expressing concern that prisoners should not receive advantages that those who have not violated the law do not get.

**B. A belief that people can change vs. a desire to limit risk to the community.** As we note above, most of the respondents believed that many prisoners have the capacity to become constructive, law-abiding citizens even after they have gone astray, and they often voiced a seemingly sincere desire to help those who are trying to choose the right path. At the same time, there was also wide recognition that if a former prisoner is *not* successful in turning his or her life around, it is the community and “innocent people” who are likely to pay the price. This tension between giving people a chance and protecting the community from danger emerged in these focus groups and in our earlier work on alternatives to incarceration. For many respondents, drug crimes seemed to offer a particularly troubling case in point.

**C. Awareness of the difficulties prisoners face vs. little tolerance for failure.** In these focus groups, respondents noted how difficult a task it is for people to “go straight” after being in prison. Many talked particularly about the tough challenge prisoners may face to give up the drug or alcohol habits that often propelled them into their current circumstances. Experts in rehabilitation often see failure as a customary phase in a person’s attempt to move away from drug and alcohol abuse. Still, Public Agenda’s earlier work on alternatives to incarceration, along with national polling on sentencing for drug offenders, suggests that the public’s tolerance for failure is quite limited. An ABC News poll shows that while less

than one in 10 people approve of jail time for a first-time drug offender, almost seven in 10 support jail time for repeat users.<sup>9</sup>

**D. The desire for case-by-case decisions vs. skepticism about the judgment of criminal justice professionals.** Repeatedly in the focus groups, respondents resisted the idea of blanket solutions to reentry issues. Most clearly wanted released prisoners to be treated on a case-by-case basis, and they were particularly concerned about the nature of the crime. On the one hand, we heard clearly that not all criminals should be treated the same. When we asked our respondents how they felt about a convicted criminal not being allowed to become a hairdresser, to become a security guard, or even to carry a gun, respondents immediately pressed us for more details about the individuals. These judgments, they seemed to feel, should be made on a case-by-case basis. At the same time, many of the respondents voiced relatively little confidence that criminal justice professionals adequately supervise prisoners or actually make valid predictions about their behavior.

### **What else do we need to know?**

For public opinion researchers, focus groups are typically the first step in a more detailed survey project that confirms, disproves, amplifies, and quantifies observations from the sessions. As we noted earlier, focus groups are notoriously poor predictors of precisely how many people hold particular points of view, and they generally provide limited guidance on how different demographic groups can be expected to respond. Focus groups can help seasoned researchers make educated guesses, and they provide a remarkable window on how people learn and think about issues, but they are generally considered formative, not conclusive, research.

So, in this closing section, we offer some ideas about subsequent research steps and comment briefly on their benefits and possible uses.

### **More focus groups**

A natural next step would be to conduct similar rounds of focus groups in different parts of the country. Replicating these discussions would provide added confidence that the

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<sup>9</sup> ABCNews.com Poll, a survey of 1,025 adults surveyed by telephone between Feb. 27 and March 3, 2002. “When a person is convicted for using drugs there can be a choice between sending them to jail or having them go to a drug treatment program instead. What do you think is the best way to deal with a drug user convicted for the first time—jail or treatment?” Jail, 8 percent; Treatment, 89 percent; Depends (vol.), 2 percent; No opinion, 1 percent. “What do you think is the best way to deal with a drug user convicted several times—jail or treatment?” Jail, 66 percent; Treatment, 24 percent; Depends (vol.), 9 percent; No opinion, 1 percent.

educated guesses we make in this paper are worth pursuing. Conducting focus groups in different parts of the country could suggest whether regional differences and local political culture are particularly pivotal for prisoner reentry issues. One particular advantage of focus groups is that they can be observed by professionals and advocates now working on plans and programs, giving them a first-hand feel for how community residents talk and think about this issue. However—and we underscore this caveat strongly—even dozens of additional focus groups across the country will not provide the quantitative results that can withstand scrutiny from the press and political leaders. Additional focus groups will not provide results that can be projected with confidence to the American public as a whole.

### **A national random sample telephone survey**

In pragmatic terms, the random sample national telephone survey is the “gold standard” for determining what Americans nationwide think about an issue. A national survey provides reliable predictions of how many Americans hold particular points of view and how various demographic categories differ in their thinking about a topic. A well-done survey can attract the attention of press and elected officials, and surveys are a methodology that most find believable and useful. In short, a well-done national telephone survey can help move an issue onto the national agenda. For professionals and advocates working in the field, having good, reliable survey data available can be extraordinarily useful in countering those who sometimes “take the public’s name in vain.” Public discussions on controversial topics are frequently derailed or distorted by those who claim that “Americans will never accept . . .” or that “the public demands such and such” without really having the facts in hand.

### **Panel studies to “pretest” different plans and approaches**

The focus group research completed here suggests that most people can readily understand many questions about prisoner reentry, and consequently we are confident that the issue can be addressed quite well in a survey format. However, there may be specific plans or sets of programs that—because they require explanation—would be difficult to test through a telephone survey. Public Agenda and other research organizations sometimes use panel studies for this kind of research. Panels of respondents are gathered in various locations. They complete a pretest gauging their views on a given issue, and then they watch a videotape or read over specially designed written materials that give more information and set out various options for them to consider. Then, panel respondents are retested to determine how they respond to the ideas that are presented and to see if their views shift as they receive new information. Public Agenda used the panel methodology in its research on alternatives to incarceration because we believed that we needed the chance to explain how

various alternatives work in some detail. In this case, respondents saw a short videotape that described six different alternatives to incarceration including restitution, intensive parole, and community service. Panels can help policymakers predict how communities will respond to specific sets of ideas and programs, and they can help them fine-tune the planning process to achieve broader community buy-in.

### **Communication research**

Advertisers, advocates, and candidates for elective office often benefit from research designed specifically to help them present their ideas in the most persuasive and compelling fashion. The research itself might include both focus group and survey components, but the distinctive quality to communications research is that it focuses on just what it says—how to communicate effectively. Communications research often tests alternative messages to determine which are most attention-getting and compelling; it often tests the reliability and persuasiveness of different messengers or advocates. Sometimes communications research attempts to identify specific segments of the population that are likely to be supportive and, therefore, should be considered the first target in efforts to build a local or national movement. This kind of research is typically conducted by commercial firms on a proprietary basis.

### **Public engagement and dialogue**

Conducting formal opinion research is costly and it takes time. A carefully designed, well-executed focus group and survey project could easily take nine months to complete, not counting the time needed to secure funding for it. It is quite likely that some of those working on prisoner reentry at the grassroots level need some way to reach out to communities and the broader public in a quicker time frame. One way to move forward might be to use public engagement or “dialogue” techniques to stimulate local discussion. While public engagement is research-based—that is, the approach and materials are designed expressly to address the public’s starting point—it is not research. It is essentially designed to help with consensus building, and it is particularly useful when communities must grapple with issues that are unfamiliar or that are threatening or controversial. Public engagement uses discussion techniques originally developed by Daniel Yankelovich and pretested by Public Agenda and other organizations on issues ranging from health care to nuclear arms to public education. While we do not have a full, quantitative understanding of where Americans now stand on prisoner reentry, the focus groups conducted for this pilot project do offer a good prediction of the themes and concerns that would need to be addressed in public engagement efforts. Our sense is that it would be possible to design an effective, credible public engagement effort with only a modest amount of additional research.