

Summary of Focus Group with Ex-Prisoners in the District: Ingredients for Successful Reintegration

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Introduction

Purpose of the Meeting

In October 2001, the Urban Institute and the Alliance of Concerned Men conducted a focus group with individuals who had successfully made the transition from prison to the community. The goal of the focus group was to explore "ingredients for success" as perceived by the focus group participants, and to seek their advice as to ways that the District of Columbia government and non-profit agencies could better support reentry and reintegration for prisoners returning to the District.

The Participants

There were 14 focus group participants, 13 males and one female.¹ They ranged in age from 26 to 58 years old (average age was 47 years old). Individuals in the group had spent between three and 37 years behind bars (average time in prison was 13 years). Some had been out for as many as 30 years; others were released as recently as one year ago (average amount of time since release was ten years). All focus group participants lived in the District.

As pre-determined by our selection criteria, all individuals in this group were "successful." All were employed, in jobs ranging from tailors to counselors. Many in fact were working in service organizations helping ex-offenders or at-risk youth. Most were married and living with their families. And they were not in trouble with the law.

The Facilitators and Format

Caterina Gouvis, Research Associate at the Urban Institute, and Tyrone Parker, Executive Director of the Alliance of Concerned Men, co-facilitated the focus group. The meeting was held from 6:00 to 8:00pm on October 11, 2001 at American University. The meeting was audio taped and transcribed by Urban Institute staff, in accordance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) rules, regulations, and prior approval.

The following questions provided the basis for the focus group discussion:

- In your view, what are the most pressing issues for returning prisoners? What did you experience? Describe the "typical" problems you've encountered.
- Of the issues raised, which were the most difficult issues you confronted on your return to the community?
- What or who helped you when you returned to the community? If you could pinpoint just one thing, person or organization that helped you what would it be?
- What are some possible ways the community, organizations or the government can help to assist prisoners on their return? Which of these possibilities seem realistic given the current environment?
- What advice would you give to other returning prisoners?

¹ Of the 14 participants, 12 filled out questionnaires before leaving. Descriptions in this section were taken from the 12 individuals who completed the form.

Summary of Findings

The focus group participants, like most ex-prisoners, faced enormous obstacles when they were released from prison. Sobriety, stable employment, housing, family responsibility, and integration with a positive support network proved significant challenges following years behind bars. But each of these individuals successfully navigated their transition and has achieved stability in most or all of these areas since their release. Such success is not common. Historically, most ex-prisoners face cycles of relapse and re-arrest. Many remain unemployed and underemployed, homeless, and cannot reunite or create positive relationships with family and peers.

The purpose of the focus group was to explore the factors that were most helpful in supporting participants' successful transition from prison. Their overwhelming message was that something had to happen *within* each individual — an awakening, a moment of clarity, a resolve to change — before they could take advantage of services, jobs, programs, and people that could help them move to more stable ground. Almost every participant had experienced some version of this epiphany, seemingly motivated by one of four factors: hitting rock bottom; getting older and tired of a life of crime and incarceration; finding faith; or, in one case, being challenged and supported by an external program.

After this "awakening," individuals described the need for availability of and access to jobs and support services. Specifically, they identified a need for jobs and job training, education and treatment in prison and upon release, better attention to realistic pre-release planning, help with individual case plans, and preparation for the actual transition from prison. The group also discussed the importance of connecting to positive peer networks and support systems, and the powerful role of faith in helping find meaning and rebuilding their lives. Importantly, they raised the issue of discrimination that extended beyond their time on parole supervision and served to isolate them and inhibit their involvement in the community. Finally, they discussed the role that successful ex-offenders can play as a resource to help the newly released.

In this brief report, we rely heavily on the words of the focus group participants, as taken directly from the transcript of the meeting. Their statements do a far better job than the authors could of characterizing the challenges faced by ex-prisoners and the ways they overcame them. We have grouped a sampling of participants' statements around common themes. We hope this focus group summary will contribute to our collective understanding of the reentry experience and strategies aimed to improving outcomes for returning prisoners, their families and communities.

■ **Getting Ready for Release: Lack of Formal Pre-Release Planning**

Nationally, most prisoners have substance abuse problems, low literacy levels, and spotty work histories. Prisons in most states devote relatively few resources to address these deficiencies. Less than 20 percent of returning prisoners who need treatment receive it before release. Just over a quarter receive vocational training, and only a third receive educational programming.² Even smaller shares of returning prisoners receive treatment and programming upon release, and training and placement programs that focus on employment in the real job market are rarer still. Further, most prisoners do not participate in any kind of pre-release planning that prepares them for their actual transition (getting home, securing identification, etc.), and even fewer develop individual case plans that prepare them for successful navigation of those critical first hours, days, and weeks after release.

² See J. P. Lynch and W. J. Sabol, *Prisoner Reentry in Perspective*, available at www.urban.org/pdfs/410213_reentry.pdf

TREATMENT

...See here's the thing. The DC government did a survey and what they discovered is that they had over 70,000 addicts in the District of Columbia and only 7,000 have slots for treatment. There is no treatment for the balance of that number. It seems to me if you are expected to engage in some stability, employment, education, and all of these other things you first have to free yourself from that demon. I think that substance abuse intervention has got to be at the top of that list...

...Those who are getting ready to reenter need counseling. They need counsel and need to understand that you can't lie to yourself. And if you realize who you are and where you been and what you have done, you can seek counsel pertaining to that information. If you can't do that, you wind up doing the same all over again because you're not changing. Anytime you change something and you take away a negative, there's a vacuum there, you have to replace it with something positive. Some thing that makes you feel more energetic...

...Mandatory treatment does [work]. It's a kind of thing that when people come home they need to be told what to do, they don't need to be asked, 'what is it you want to do?' If you are looking at guys that have substance abuse problems, never worked before, broken home and all of that, you need to tell them to do things and then they need to be able to accept the fact that they have to crawl before they walk. A lot of us get caught up on the ideology that we are going to get this too fast, too quick, too soon and we wind up missing the whole gap of the substance that will keep us in consistency. Therefore, we just fall back to the wayside...

JOB TRAINING AND PLACEMENT

...A person coming from Lorton or anywhere in this world, they need to be able to feed their family. That is important. I don't care if you a dope fiend, I don't care who you are, you are going to hustle. You need somebody to be there for you. The opportunities are not available for a person coming home. Inside the institutions they are not preparing them if they are still doing license plates or computers. How can the jail hook up with the business community? If I am teaching computers in jail I can have this job lined up for my man or woman when I get out there...

...Everybody talking about a job, what kind of job can anybody get if they don't have a skill or trade? The industry jobs that they had at Lorton, they weren't designed to help anybody after release...

...Well, the plan is something that is so based in a fairy tale. I've been out for 10 years and if I lose my job there are lots of things that I am going to do to get a job. Having it all based in reality and being able to connect a starting point, that is all we can do. My program trains for certification in Microsoft Word, start getting them certificates of completion, give them tangible, marketable skills or something that you can take to the bank with you. I don't think that any of this is new... Now it's just a matter of actually doing it and doing it in a way that sends a person out with a plan that they can follow and then the rest ...

▪ **Returning Home: Most are Unprepared for the Challenges**

Most prisoners fail to successfully transition to community life.³ They are ill prepared to reintegrate in several ways. The challenge of changing habits learned on the street and reinforced in the institution looms large. In addition, they are not primed for successful transition to the community while in prison. Historically, some two-thirds of prisoners are rearrested within three years of release, and more than 40 percent are reincarcerated. Many cut their ties and burned their bridges while in prison, making return to family, friends, and jobs a difficult challenge.

...All of that time is like a dash, there's nothing that you do to create the experience to know how to do it on the outside because you are not outside, you're inside. You learn to do the things on the inside. Everybody knows that when you are in there are certain rules and regulations that go along with being in that don't apply when you come out...

...Basically for me I was the kind of guy who got caught up in a lifestyle. Growing up in the city wanting to be fast, wanting to be slick, wanting this and that without working for it. As I started to evolve upon that kind of attitude I wound up being locked up 27 times for everything from petty larceny to armed robbery. I'm a chronic dope fiend. I wanted to steal, rob and even robbed my mother one time...

...It's crazy for a man to say this, but jail protected me... I knew that I could lay down for 18 months, 27 months, and come back out and while I was there I was always physical, run the yard and doing sit ups and talk about how I was not going to mess with that foolishness. Once I got out of those doors seems like something just came over me, a spirit or something that led me right back where I had left...

...I am the guy who burned every bridge that he ever crossed. I have been classified as institutionalized, incorrigible... My last bit that gave me 15 to 45 years for one bag of herb. What happened, I finally made parole and because of me burning all of my bridges, I made parole but had no where to go. I had no where to go — my sister, my daughters, no body wanted me because of my past...

...You talk about coming out of the jail, I came out of jail with nothing and no body because I'd turned my back on everything...

...Now mind you I didn't want to come out and do the right thing, I wanted to come out, find a better way of doing the thing that I like without getting caught...

▪ **Resolve to Change: Most Come to that Moment in their own Time**

Most of the focus group was dominated by individual testimonials of men recalling that distinct moment when they decided that they were not going back to a life of crime, drugs, and incarceration. The facilitators probed — what prompted that "moment?" For some, it was hitting bottom. For others, they got tired of the life of crime, perhaps "aging out" in some cases. Others, many in fact, were moved by faith. And for just one, an external program seemed to play a role in readying him for change.

³ For documentation of the dimensions of prisoner reentry, see J. Travis, A. L. Solomon and M. Waul, *From Prison to Home: The Dimensions and Consequences of Prisoner Reentry*, available at www.urban.org/pdfs/from_prison_to_home.pdf.

ROCK BOTTOM

...It is like a time bomb, every bomb goes off differently. The bomb went off for that person, mine went off too. Some people have to get a terrible, terrible, terrible whooping. Others just got to get a terrible whooping. The bomb is going to go off, people react to it because they are tired of getting whooped on this side, so they'd rather take their whooping on the other side... In recovery that is called rock bottom... Rock bottom is different for everybody...

READINESS TO CHANGE / AGING OUT

...When I came out of jail I was 33 years old, never had worked before, had no skills, no education and I tend to want to blame everybody. So I had to look at myself...

...Allow other people to help you... I'm 44 years old and I just started listening to somebody else...

...I never wanted anything, never had anything, so then I started to want something. I went back to school and got my GED and I went college, I gained some skills. I got certified as an addiction counselor, I got certified as health educator, I got certified in a lot of areas...

...My contribution was simply this, if the program doesn't exist within inside you, what happens when a fire burns down the building where that program exists, does that mean you stop treating yourself? Too many people rely on the treatment that comes from the morgue and not the one that comes from internally where it has to be. If you don't develop a sense of who you are and then no program in the world is going to help...

...Too often something has to happen to us before we even turn to those intangible kinds of things as faith, religion, or what have you... I had the belief and the desire and a need to change. I had an environment that was conducive to me doing that with a support base that was constantly saying no to the foolishness, yes if you want to change here we are...

FAITH

...God did for me what I couldn't do for myself...

...I just used my faith, my discipline, and perseverance and it worked for me...

...I got to the place and something said, man this is the time for you to take advantage that is being afforded to you. What I did right then, I surrendered. My advice to anybody is for you to be successful, ex convicts or whatever, you have got to surrender. I threw my hands up. From where I come, surrendering was a no-no. Today, I don't care if you call me a punk, I threw my hands up. And by me throwing my hands up, it allowed some things to come into my life and gave me an opportunity to do the things that I wanted to do...

...Jeremiah said that when the Lord shakes your foundation, he will grab you and you will be afraid of a little baby and if you listen to him, he will put you on top of the

grass. That is what the Lord did to me. I was a career criminal, my whole existence was that I wanted to be the best crook... The Lord has destroyed my foundation, he burned my house down, December 7, 1987. I [was] so scared that I was afraid of a baby. Anybody that knows me I wasn't afraid of anything...

EXTERNAL PROGRAM

...I realized through networking, through Concerned Fathers, a group in Lorton, I realized that I had to drop the old person that I was and become the person that my mother named me... Not to be looked at as that person who came from the street and not concerned about what people thought about me. I walked through that facility and guys told me, "Man, you fake," as I was going to the chapel. That humiliated me but I was determined within me, say what you want, but I knew that when they let me out, I had made up in my mind that I was staying out...

▪ **Services Need to be in Place When an Individual is "Ready"**

Once focus group participants made a decision to turn their lives around, they discussed the need for jobs, services and supports that would allow them to beat their demons and build their skills. They said that if supports are not in place when someone is ready, they may fail because they cannot do it all on their own.

... the most important thing that I did when I stood before that judge for my last sentence, I asked him for some help. I used some con, I told the judge that you all sent me to Vietnam where I became a cold-blooded dope fiend and I think ya'll should unravel by sending me to treatment somewhere. And I was standing there waiting to be sentenced and they gave me an opportunity. I took that opportunity and went into treatment and I haven't looked back. The bottom line is that I had to want something, I knew that my next stop was the graveyard. I didn't want to die at an early age...

...It is talking about making a decision at the crossroad that you either are going to be man or be a gopher... Throughout that process treatment has to be there, support services have to be there, opportunities have to be there...

▪ **Peer Networks and Support Systems**

Nationally, inmates spend an average of 28 months in prison before release — up significantly from years past. There are also more people released now having spent longer periods behind bars (more than five years). One result is that prisoners are more disconnected from their family and peer networks than in the past. The group discussed the need to both rely on positive networks and avoid negative networks.

POSITIVE

...I didn't burn up my family and friends so I had a real strong support base which was real key, and I know that you will hear that from anybody who comes out...

...I haven't looked back and I still don't look back, I am very selective about who I associate with...

...What men need and what they are missing is embracing. Brothers, sisters, when they come home they need someone to [say] you can come sit at my table and eat; they need somebody to show them love and to hug them...

NEGATIVE

...if you go home and your wife, girlfriend, or family members are using, you don't want to go home to them. If you go home to someone who is using, the chances are that you will end up using too...

...All I knew was people doing wrong. I didn't know anybody that was saying let's go to church... They were talking about 'you want some money, here it is.' I had to tell them 'man I am through with that, if I have to be a bum.' So I had to isolate myself, I was lonely. I didn't have nobody and eventually I had some goals. And like the brother said over there, when people are hustling and beating up people and robbing, there is a lot of anxiety and anger. You can start off just because no one paid you attention, next thing you are doing drugs. So the piece that I made up in my mind was that I was going to school and I was going to be somebody...

...I knew I was good, I was a con artist, I know how to rob, steal, and sell but I wanted to change, so education was the main thing, I stayed away from trouble. I stayed away from people, didn't go to the pool hall, I didn't go on the corner...

■ Discrimination as a Barrier to Reintegration

The group spoke passionately about ways that society keeps ex-prisoners "locked out" even after they have served their debt to society.⁴ They talked about being looked at with suspicion (in the post-September 11th environment, as well as generally), being barred from jobs and decision-making in the community.

...Ex-offenders are always at the top of the list when things go wrong. No question about that...

...All of us are suspects right now, all of us in here are suspects – males, the black males....

...When a person does his time and comes home, he's locked out. Just [as T.] says, we the first to be looked at...

... Many offenders have been excluded from the economy, social systems, from political systems, If you are going to put yourself in touch with all of those components, you have to reintegrate yourself into those things. I think that people or the agencies that play the most prominent roles and have to modify and eliminate those inequalities are the DC government, the federal government, and the community...

⁴ For discussion of the collateral consequences of a felony convictions, see J. Travis, "Invisible Punishment: An Instrument of Social Exclusion," in Invisible Punishment: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment, M. Chesney-Lind and M. Mauer, eds., forthcoming, 2002.

...We are being discriminated against. [We need to] be at the table where policies and procedures are developed. If we are not at that table — the jobs, the housing — [we can not] make the rules that pertain to us...

▪ **Role of Faith Institutions upon Return to the Community**

There was significant discussion about the role of religion and a higher power in transforming individual lives (as discussed above). There was also discussion of an additional needed role that churches as community institutions could play — taking people in when they return home, connecting them with mentors, role models, and a community of faith.

...I would say that [returning prisoners] need spiritual advisors...

...I want to identify the church that this person is going to be in and give me the name of the person that is going to come and get them when they are released. That is not a hard piece... [but] some say the churches are not doing enough....

▪ **Successful Ex-offenders as Role Models**

There was substantial discussion about the role that successful ex-prisoners can play in helping newly released prisoners, noting the credibility that ex-offenders have in mentoring other ex-offenders. And most at the table seemed willing to volunteer for such a role. However, it was noted that they should not necessarily have to volunteer. Many worked or wanted to work in the service field, and stated that funders should support grass-roots organizations that actually have the power to change lives.

...In the penitentiary we learn how to perpetrate a fraud real good, so it takes one who has that eye, who can see the perpetrator and the behavior. We can counteract and say 'no, my brother, that is the wrong way to go'....

...The fact of the matter is when you are crazy you need to be able to have someone to talk to you. That's why the Alliance [of Concerned Men] and these people right here can go and talk to people that don't nobody else want to talk to. We know how to reach them, we never forgot where we came from...

...Men who go back and help that community from which they come from, they can go and start pulling the other brothers up, so that they can see what is happening. We need to keep this thing going... if you have no experience in going through the transition, then you can never elaborate properly...

...It is important to recognize that people do excellent work when they get themselves together and help people who are still caught up in that system. What we got to do is be a lot more proficient at making certain that they get the tools to do it with...

Conclusion

These individuals, their statements, and this meeting, do not, of course, represent the universe of individuals who are leaving prison and facing reintegration to their communities. However, their words do begin to characterize factors that should be considered by government and non-profit organizations, prisons, families, faith institutions, and others who aim to improve reentry and reintegration.

In addition, the content of this focus group raises important questions that warrant further exploration:

- Is there a way to identify those who are "ready," so that resources can most efficiently be targeted to those prepared to take advantage of them?
- How can the prisons and DC agencies best plan for prisoner release and deliver services to those who will benefit most from them?
- And perhaps most importantly, are there ways, programmatic and otherwise, to accelerate prisoners' readiness for change?

There is much to be gained in addressing these questions and improving our approach to reentry in terms of public safety, public health, family stability, and community well-being. Success will of course be felt most acutely in the lives of the released individuals:

...and now I have a two-year baby, I'm a late bloomer. I feel good because I have another lead on life and I'm glad...

...I haven't been locked in over 20 years. I've been clean and I seek counsel and the support that I need in order to generate that enthusiasm that I have for wanting to live...

...My brother said actions speak louder than words. My actions got my people back in my life, you understand? It got them back. I wasn't talking, I was doing. Right now, my grandkids flock to me. They don't say 'there's Granddaddy, hide the pocket books.' They greet me with open arms...

...I never had a job, I never had a social security card, driver's license, I didn't need those things to do what I wanted to do. I have all that today. I do a lot of things that I don't want to do today but things that I do will keep me from going back to jail. That is where I'm at...

...And he who's soul is set free is free indeed. I am glad to be free...