

Prisoner Reentry in Perspective

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Executive Summary

The massive increase in incarceration in the United States that occurred during the past 20 years has now turned public attention toward the consequences of releasing large numbers of prisoners back into society. Prisoner reentry has raised questions about public safety, about how corrections systems should manage the volume of releases, and about how communities can absorb and reintegrate the returning prisoners. Very little is known about these matters, yet speculation is rife that the volume of returning prisoners will result in more crime and in more challenges for supervision, and that it will reduce the capacity of communities to absorb ex-prisoners.

In this report, data are presented on changes in characteristics of persons released from prison and of persons on parole, but these measures beg the question of whether reentry involves only those recently released, those under supervision, or the entire volume of persons who have previously been in prison. If the latter group is considered, then the scope of reentry expands to include the several million people who have spent time in prison.

The limited data reviewed herein identify several of the complexities associated with prisoner reentry. For example, the volume of offenders released from prison increased dramatically from 1980 to 2000, from about 170,000 to 585,000, but the rate of increase has slowed during the 1990s while the prison population continued to expand. This prison expansion occurred largely through the increase in length of stay in prison. But, as the data in this report show, longer stays in prison are associated with declining frequency of contact with family members, and contact with family members is believed to facilitate reintegration into the community. Moreover, participation in programs in prison decreased during this prison expansion, so a larger number of released prisoners reenter society not having participated in educational, vocational, or pre-release programs.

The increase in the volume of released offenders raises concerns about public safety. Yet, throughout the 1990s, as the annual number of offenders released from prison increased, the aggregate crime

rate actually decreased. Public safety concerns are also raised in relation to the increasing number of offenders released from prison with no conditions of supervision, or unconditionally. On the one hand, the absence of a parole officer can be a detriment to reentry, as parole officers can offer minimal help to ex-prisoners in locating resources. On the other hand, little is known about the actual experiences of offenders released unconditionally. And while concerns are raised that unconditional releases may be among the most serious offenders, data from some states suggest that they return to prison at lower rates than those released with supervision.

The experiences with returning prisoners over the past decade suggest further that there has been an increase in the number who churn or recycle through prison and parole. Comparatively few (20 percent) of those who have had a previous experience on parole successfully complete their subsequent term of parole. By contrast, the majority of offenders (75 percent) who are released onto parole for the first time do successfully complete parole. As first and subsequent discharges from parole each account for about half of those completing parole, these parole outcomes suggest that the pool of churners is increasing more rapidly than it is being retired.

The number of persons who enter prison for the first time in their life has increased in recent years. Many, perhaps most, do not return to prison. All of this suggests that these reentry populations are diverse and that planning for reentry requires addressing the complexities of the population. Recent experiences with returning prisoners suggest that some may require more supervision than others and that some may require none.

From the community perspective, released prisoners are concentrated in a few large states and, within these states, are increasingly concentrated in the core counties that contain the central cities of metropolitan areas. Limited data on releases into cities further suggest that, within cities, releases are concentrated within a comparatively few areas or communities. However, these limited data also raise questions about the assumption that the concentra-

tions are limited to the poorest neighborhoods in central cities. Data from Cleveland suggest that a number of the areas with high incarceration (and eventually release) rates are located in or near working-class neighborhoods. Such a geographic dispersion of incarceration and releases is consistent with the thesis about the spread of drug trafficking throughout metropolitan areas. And, such a geographic dispersion also raises questions about the impacts of incarceration and reentry on these more stable neighborhoods. If, as research shows, incarceration is related to lower levels of employment and earnings, then the removal and return of large volumes of ex-prisoners to working-class communities can have potentially negative consequences for these communities.

In sum, this paper shows that the size of the returning prisoner and parole populations has increased, but that funding for supervision has not kept pace. It shows that there have been marginal changes in the composition of the population of reentering inmates that can make reentry more difficult than it has been, but at the same time, we have yet to observe in the aggregate data many of the adverse consequences predicted. So while inmates reentering society now are more likely (1) to have failed at parole previously; (2) not to have participated in educational and vocational programs in prison; and (3) to have served longer sentences, which attenuates ties to families, it may also be the case that large numbers of persons who enter prison for the first time in their lives do not return to prison. And, while returns from prison are concentrated in a comparatively small number of urban communities, these communities may be fairly diverse and include both areas of concentrated poverty as well as working-class communities. Finally, within the metropolitan areas to which ex-prisoners are returning, access to jobs and competition with welfare leavers for skill-appropriate jobs may impose further constraints on the capacity of communities to reintegrate ex-prisoners.

Prisoner Reentry in Perspective

INTRODUCTION

During the past 20 years, the United States experienced a massive increase in incarceration. The prison population increased fourfold, from 330,000 in 1980 to nearly 1.4 million in 1999, and the incarceration rate increased from about 140 to about 476 per 100,000 resident population. Recently, attention has turned toward some of the impacts of this massive increase in incarceration and specifically prisoner reentry—the return of inmates back to society. Increases in the volume of releases from prison from about 170,000 in 1980 to 585,000 in 2000 have led policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to ask questions about how the flow of ex-prisoners back into communities affects public safety, how corrections systems can or should manage their release, and what communities can do to absorb and reintegrate the returning prisoners.

Opinions about the appropriate policy responses to prisoner reentry vary widely. Some have suggested that more community involvement in supervising ex-prisoners may be worth exploring (Petersilia 2000) or that reentry courts be developed as mechanisms for managing the transition back to the community (Travis 2000). In contrast, a prominent former corrections official urges that expectations about corrections systems responsibilities for reentry be scaled back and that the major responsibility be placed on individual ex-prisoners (Horn 2000). Still others have proposed a mixed strategy of selective reentry that would increase supervision for the small number of high-risk inmates and sharply reduce the supervision periods for the majority of offenders who pose minimal risks (Austin 2000). New supervision strategies such as the broken windows model, originally adopted in community policing and proposed for probation (Reinventing Probation Council 2000), also have been proposed as a way to accommodate reentry.

The choice from among these new policy alternatives should be guided by information on the nature of the reentry problem and, specifically, how absorbing the larger number of released prisoners is different from accommodating the return of smaller groups in the past. Increases in the number returning prisoners are not in and of themselves grounds for new policy initiatives. As returning prisoners are not an undifferentiated mass, changes in the composition of reentering prisoners may be more important than the size of the reentry pool alone. If the inmates returning now are different from those returning previously in ways that facilitate or complicate

reentry or if they are entering a society or a particular community that is more or less able to absorb them than communities in the past then this could constitute new opportunities and problems that could require new responses. The data presented in this report can be useful as a guide to policy formation by specifying what some of these differences are.

The interest in and debates about prisoner reentry have encouraged research that can guide policy development. For example, the question of whether to increase post-release supervision turns on the issue of whether it prevents former inmates from committing new crimes or whether it simply operates as a mechanism to reincarcerate offenders through the use of technical violations (or violations of conditions of supervision). Data from the federal criminal justice system suggest that intensive post-prison supervision results in a higher rate of return to federal prison for reasons of technical violations (Sabol and McGready 1999). These data do not address the related question of whether increasing the use of technical violations also prevented additional crimes.

Other research, largely under the leadership of the Russell Sage Foundation, is being done on the effects of incarceration on the employment and earnings of ex-prisoners. Previous research on this issue suggests that prison may have at least short-run effects that reduce earnings (e.g., Grogger 1995; Kling 1999). The new research will measure the length of time to employment and the effects of imprisonment on earnings and will suggest conditions that can facilitate renewed participation in the labor force by released inmates. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) is completing a large recidivism study that tracked a sample of prisoners released in 1994 from 15 states for a period of three years. This study should shed some light on the question of the risk of criminal victimization posed by returning inmates. Finally, research is being done to understand the effects of high concentrations of ex-prisoners in small geographic areas, specifically, on the capacities of communities to absorb and reintegrate ex-prisoners.

This paper contributes to this research in-progress by reviewing currently available data on changes in characteristics of prisoner releases, correctional responses, and community capacity to absorb returning prisoners. The paper uses national data on offender movements and populations coupled with some local data on the geography of incarceration.

CHANGES IN REENTRY POPULATIONS

There are many ways to define and measure the size of the reentry population depending, in large part, on one's assumptions about the duration of adjustment to the world outside of prison. One approach uses the number of offenders released from prison in a given year. This assumes that the reentry process is of relatively short duration. Another approach defines the reentry population as the number of offenders under post-incarceration supervision at a given point in time. This essentially equates the duration of bureaucratic responsibility with the length of the adjustment to nonprison society. A third approach uses the number of ex-prisoners who are in society but are not currently under supervision. This could include anyone who has experienced incarceration at any point in his or her life. This third number is more difficult to estimate than the first two, and work is currently under way to try to estimate it (e.g., Uggen and Bushway 2001). In the meantime, a sense of the size of this population can be derived from Bonczar and Beck's (1997) estimates of the lifetime likelihood of imprisonment. They estimate that 28.5 percent of black males born in 1991 can expect to enter state or federal prison during their lifetime. For white men, the lifetime likelihood is 4.4 percent. These estimates would yield a population of more than several million persons who had been in prison.

This analysis concentrates on the two measures of the size of the reentry population that are most readily and reliably available—the number of prisoners released each year and the number of persons under some form of post-incarceration supervision—and includes both state and federal prisoners¹ (unless otherwise noted). Policy differences between the state and federal systems are distinguished where appropriate.

ANNUAL RELEASES AS THE REENTRY POPULATION

The size and composition of released prisoner populations have emerged as important aspects of the debate about prisoner reentry. While describing the size of annual releases from prisons is relatively simple, there are many ways to depict changes in the composition of the reentry population. Here, they are described according to attributes that can complicate the adjustment to the society outside of prison. Some of these attributes, such

as the admission offense or prior failure on supervision, indicate the risk that the reentering inmates pose to society. Sentence length, participation in prison programs (including prerelease programs), and contact with family during incarceration can all affect the ability of an ex-prisoner to reintegrate into the society outside of prison.

The number of prisoners released each year has increased, but the rate of increase has declined

Between 1985 and 1999, the number of offenders released from prison increased from 260,000 to 566,000. This is a more than threefold increase over the past two decades. The increase was uneven throughout the period, however, and the rate of increase slowed around 1991. As indicated by the solid line on figure 1, after 1991 the number of releases increased more slowly than the increase prior to 1991. So while the number of releases increased by more than 150 percent from 1980 to 1991, between 1991 and 1999, the number of releases increased by 30 percent.²

The impact of increases in the volume of prison releases is important for several reasons. First, a large change in volume may suggest that the contemporary reentry phenomenon is different from what occurred previously. Certainly the volume of releases at the end of the 1990s is larger than in previous decades, and this would suggest that reentry has changed. Throughout the 1990s, however, the volume of releases increased more slowly than the increase that occurred during the 1980s. In this case, if rapid change is an indication of a new problem, reentry was more of a problem a decade ago than it is today.

Second, an increase in volume in and of itself is not necessarily an indication of a new problem. Rather, the changes in volume need to be compared with the changes in resources. One resource that can help with reentry is prison programs. For example, Gaes, Flanagan, Motiuk, and Stewart (1999) show that participation in selected prison programs leads to lower recidivism. The BJS reports data on corrections expenditures in 1996 that show the amounts spent on prison programs; however, no comparable figures are available for previous years. Hence it is not possible to determine whether the amount spent nationally on prison programs has increased or decreased. This same BJS report shows that nonprison corrections expenditures, primarily expenditures for parole supervision,³ more than doubled from 1985 to 1996, from \$3.1 billion to \$6.4 billion (Stephan 1999). During this

same time, the parole population tripled. This suggests that while supervision resources increased overall, on a per-parolee basis they did not keep pace. Nonprison corrections expenditures declined during the early 1990s but increased from 1993 to 1996, so that by 1996, per-parolee nonprison corrections expenditures exceeded their level in 1990.

Third, changes in the volume of releases also raise questions for public safety. For example, studies based on prisoners released during the early 1980s report that about 62 percent of prisoners released from (selected) state prisons were rearrested within three years of release and about 40 percent were returned to incarceration (prison or jail) within that same three-year period. These recidivism results suggest that a larger volume of returning prisoners could impact the crime rate. Yet, the aggregate relationship between the number of inmates released from prison and the crime rate has gone in the opposite direction from the direction expected by the concerns that an increase in the number of released prisoners presents huge risks for public safety. During the 1990s, as the number of releases from prison increased, the crime rate decreased (figure 2), suggesting that the public safety dimensions of reentry are not simple or fully understood.

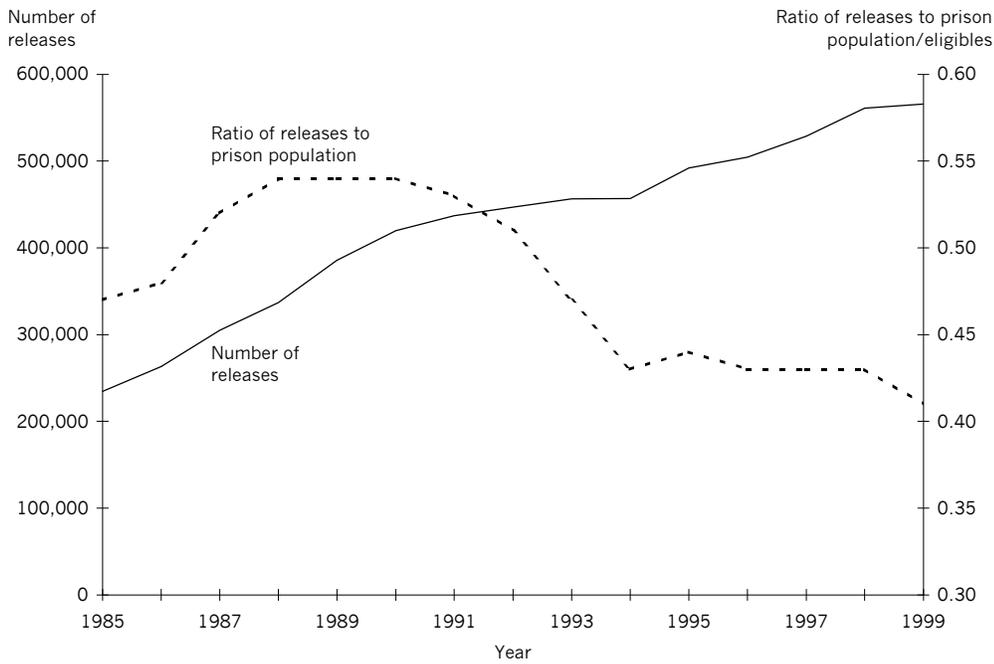
The aggregate relationship between releases and crime rates masks many complex relationships (as well as excludes data on drug crimes), but it suggests that the public safety questions surrounding prisoner reentry need to focus on and target the offenders that pose risks, rather than to simply assume that more releases must mean more crime.

In short, looking at the volume of releases, the resource response, and public safety considerations suggests that the contemporary reentry phenomenon may be more complicated than expected. The data below suggest that complexity.

The number of prison releases has increased more slowly than the prison population has increased

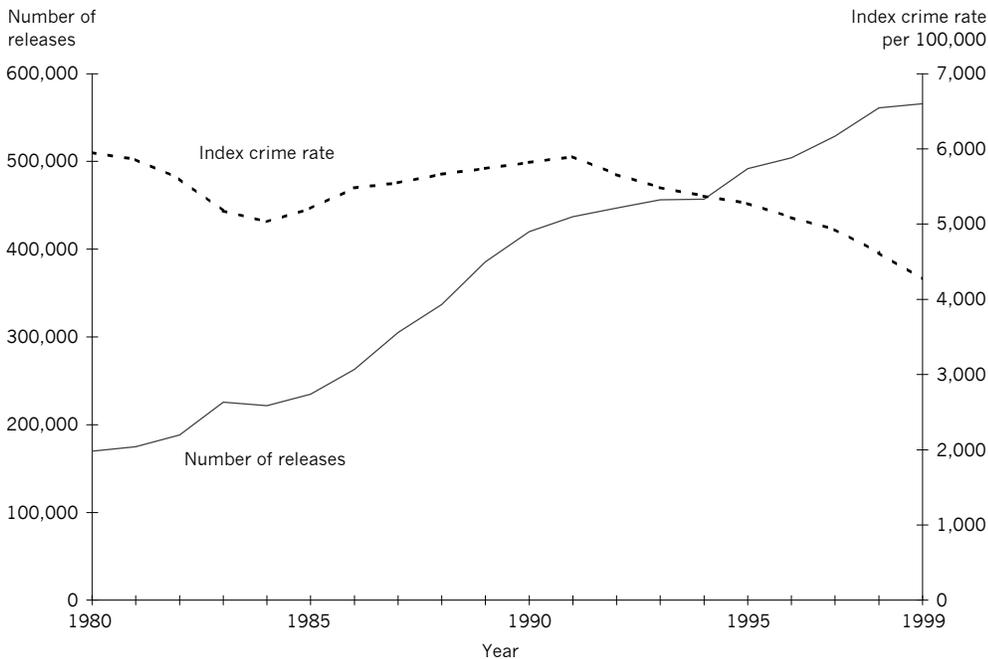
In contrast to the absolute increase in the number of released prisoners, the number of offenders released from prison relative to the increase in the size of prison population has decreased. This relative decrease in the size of the released prisoner pool occurred as time served in prison increased. Between 1985 and 1991, both the number released from prison increased and the size of the released prisoner pool in relation to the size of the prison population increased, as indicated by the dotted line on figure 1.⁴ Between 1991 and 1999, however, the

Figure 1.
 Number of offenders released from state and federal prison,
 and ratio of the number of releases to the number in prison, 1985 1999



Source: Lynch/Sabol analysis of Bureau of Justice Statistics *Correctional Populations in the United States, 1985 99*.

Figure 2.
 Crime rate and releases from state and federal prisons, 1980 1999



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics *Correctional Populations in the United States, 1980 99* and Federal Bureau of Investigation *Uniform Crime Reports, 1980 99*.

size of the released prisoner pool decreased in relation to the size of the prison population.

The decrease in the relative size of the released prisoner pool implies that time served in prison has been increasing. For example, the BJS *National Corrections Reporting Program* data show that the median time served to first release from prison increased from 12 to 18 months between 1993 and 1998, and the mean time served increased from 21 to 28 months during the same period.

Moreover, a larger percentage of released offenders have served longer terms. For example, based on the BJS inmate survey data, in 1991 13 percent of soon-to-be-released offenders reported that they would have served more than five years by the time of their release, but, by 1997, 21 percent of this group reported that they would have served more than five years (figure 3).⁵ Conversely, the proportion of the soon-to-be-released cohort serving one year or less has decreased from 33 percent in 1991 to 17 percent in 1997.⁶

The overall increases in time served occurred largely as a result of increases in time served within offense categories rather than as a result of changes in the composition of offenses. For example, drug offenders accounted for 20.7 percent of prisoners in 1997, as compared with 21.7 percent in 1991 (Beck 1999). Similarly, 47.2 percent of persons in state prison in 1997 were convicted of a violent offense (Blumstein and Beck 1999); this is a slight increase from the 45.8 percent of prisoners convicted of a violent offense in 1990.

Longer stays in prison are important to consider both for public safety and for reintegration of ex-prisoners. From a public safety perspective, longer stays are associated with reductions in crime through both incapacitation (Blumstein and Beck 1999) and general deterrence (Levitt 1996). To the extent that serious crime rates are lower because longer sentences have incapacitated violent or repeat offenders, or because they have deterred others, additional public safety benefits may accrue by keeping serious offenders out of the released prisoner pool for longer periods of time. Alternatively, offenders who present minimal risk of recidivism could be released from prison sooner. Moreover, as serving longer terms in prison can have negative consequences for reintegration of offenders, shortening the length of stay for those offenders who pose less risk of recidivism makes sense both because it poses little risk to public safety and because it increases the chances that low-risk offenders will be able to reintegrate successfully. This is because longer prison terms may lessen post-prison employment and earnings

and are associated with detachment from families and community institutions (see discussion later in this document). Both these effects can complicate reintegration of ex-prisoners.

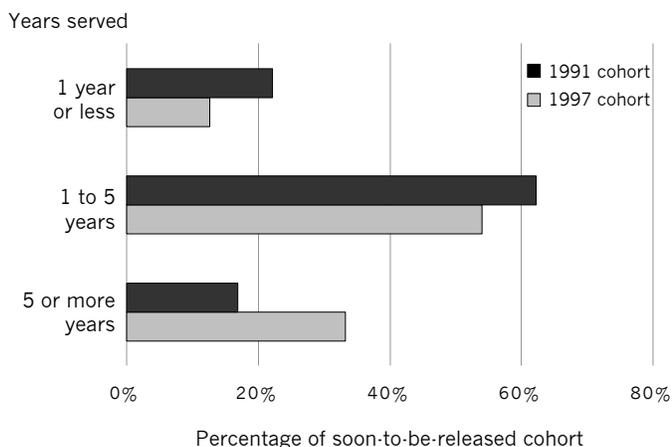
The proportion of released prisoners who are violent offenders has remained stable, while drug offenders account for a larger proportion of released prisoners

In 1998, 25 percent of released offenders were convicted of violent offenses; this is up very slightly from 24 percent of releases in 1990 (table 1). Drug offenders, however, who accounted for 26 percent of releases in 1990, increased to 32 percent in 1998. An increase in drug offenders, many of whom may be addicts, can impose costs on society in terms of drug treatment and create risks in terms of crime for society, particularly if addicted offenders relapse and commit crimes to obtain drugs. The percentage of released prisoners who were property offenders decreased during this period.

The conviction offense provides one blunt indicator of the degree to which released prisoner pools include offenders who committed more serious crimes and, therefore, offenders who may pose larger public safety risks. The criminal history of released prisoners is another such indicator, but national-level data on the criminal history of released offenders is not readily available. The relative contribution of violent offenders to the released prisoner pools has increased only slightly, from 24 percent in 1990 to 25 percent in 1998. This slight change in composition masks the absolute increase in the number of violent offenders leaving prison. As table 1 shows, there were 141,000 violent offenders among 1998 releases; this number is 41,000 more than the 100,000 violent offenders released in 1990. And, as shown by the dashed line in figure 4, in each year from 1991 to 1998, the number of violent offenders released from prison increased.

Thus, while the relative offense severity of released prisoner pools has not increased dramatically during the 1990s, the absolute number of violent offenders released has increased. Moreover, the gap between the number of violent offenders admitted (the solid line in figure 4) and the number of violent offenders released (the dotted line in figure 4) suggests that violent offenders will continue to increase in number in future-release cohorts. This suggests that, at least for several years, future-release cohorts are likely to include more violent offenders.

Figure 3.
Offenders to be released in the next 12 months: Estimated distribution of expected time served until release, 1991 and 1997



Source: Lynch/Sabot analysis of Bureau of Justice Statistics *Survey of Inmates of State Correctional Facilities, 1991 and 1997*.

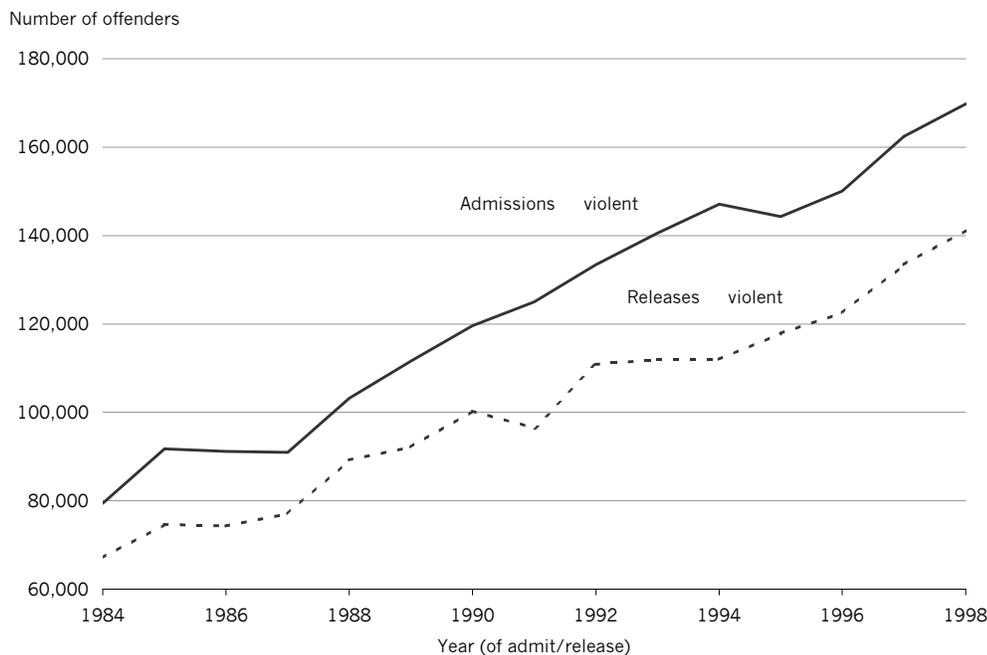
Table 1.
Offense distribution of offenders released from prison, 1990 and 1998

Offense	Offenders released			
	during 1990		during 1998	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
All releases	419,783	100.0%	561,020	100.0%
Violent	100,331	23.9	141,205	25.2
Property	150,760	35.9	180,360	32.1
Drug*	108,178	25.8	181,727	32.4
Trafficking	54,611	13.0	100,568	17.9
Possession	53,566	12.8	48,867	8.7
Public order	38,593	9.2	54,679	9.7
Other	21,921	5.2	3,049	0.5

*Trafficking and possession do not add up to the total drug category, as the total includes other drug offenses and drug offenses for which the type could not be distinguished.

Source: Lynch/Sabot analysis of Bureau of Justice Statistics *Corrections Populations in the United States and National Corrections Reporting Program data, 1990 and 1998*.

Figure 4.
Estimated number of violent offenders admitted into and release from state and federal prison, 1984 1998



Source: Lynch/Sabot analysis of Bureau of Justice Statistics *Correctional Populations in the United States, 1984 98 and National Corrections Reporting Program data, 1984 98*.

The released prisoner pool consists of more churners

The process of churning describes the experience of offenders who are committed to prison, released on parole, returned to prison for either a technical violation of parole or for a new crime, and subsequently re-released from prison on the original sentence. In 1998, an estimated 36 percent of releases from prison were prisoners who were released from a subsequent prison term on an original sentence. Similarly, in 1998, 34 percent of prison commitments consisted of subsequent admissions on an original sentence.

Churners accounted for more prison admissions per year in recent years than they did in the early 1990s. As shown in column 7 of table 2, there were 847,000 subsequent commitments during the five years from 1990 to 1994 (about 169,000 per year) and there were about 841,000 during the four years from 1995 to 1998 (about 210,000 per year). Subsequent commitments also appear to be spending more time in prison in recent years than they did in earlier years. This is shown by the deficit of 52,000 subsequent admissions to subsequent releases during the 1990 to 1994 period (column 9 of table 2) as compared with the surplus of more than 118,000 subsequent admissions over releases during the 1994 to 1998 period. In short, offenders recommitted to prison on an original sentence are increasing among commitments and serving more time in prison.

This also means that churners accounted for a larger share of the increase in the prison population in recent years, compared with the early part of the 1990s. Between 1990 and 1994, the prison population increased by about 291,000 persons (column 3 of table 2). Of this increase, new court commitments accounted for a surplus of 343,000 admissions over releases (column 6 of table 2), while subsequent commitments had contributed a decrease of 52,000 offenders to the prison population. But during the 1995 to 1998 period, churners contributed more than half of the 217,000 increase in the size of the prison population, as there was a surplus of 118,000 subsequent commitments over subsequent releases. As the number of subsequent commitments was about equal during these two periods (of unequal length), the contribution of churners to the prison population was due to the increase in the length of time they spent in prison.

Churning poses challenges for reentry, as churners are a group of offenders that have proven to be difficult to reintegrate. While churning is a function both of technical violations and new crimes committed by ex-offenders, churning also represents a failure to reintegrate. If

churners are increasing more rapidly than they are successfully completing parole, then a growing number of churners can potentially consume more supervision resources and affect the successful reintegration of offenders who are discharged onto parole for the first time.

The expansion of incarceration has increased the number of persons released from prison for the first time in their lives

Paradoxically, while the number of churners is increasing, so too has the number of offenders released from prison for the first time in their lives. The first-time prisoners accounted for an estimated 44 percent of the soon-to-be-released cohort in 1997, up from an estimated 39 percent of the soon-to-be-released cohort in 1991.⁷ By definition, persons released from prison for the first time in their lives must have been committed into prison on a new court commitment. Assuming stability in the flow into and out of prison, the increase in the release of first-time prisoners implies that there has been an increase in the contribution to new court commitments of first-time prisoners, and this suggests that the prevalence of incarceration throughout society has increased.

The large volume of first-time commitments also implies that a large number of people—perhaps a majority—do not return to prison after their first incarceration experience. In the 1997 prison population, about 46 percent experienced the first incarceration of their lives. About 21 percent of the 1997 prison population experienced their second incarceration. Using the ratio of the number of second to the number of first incarceration experiences as a proxy for the transition from a first-time commitment to a returning offender, about 46 percent of first-time prisoners return to prison.⁸ This implies that more than half of the first-time commitments are not expected to return to prison, or that most offenders pose little or no risk of returning to prison. Admittedly, these cross-section estimates are preliminary and, as they do not track offenders, provide only a limited measure of the degree to which new people return to prison, but they also provide a glimpse at the conversion from first-time to repeat prisoner.⁹

Additionally, the release of a comparatively large number of first-time commitments means that a large part of prisoner reentry deals with the consequences of the expansion of incarceration throughout society. Policies and programs aimed at keeping released prisoners from returning to prison can do nothing to address the expan-

Table 2.

Change in prison population, admissions and releases, by type of admission, and contribution of new court commitments and parole violators to the change (in thousands), 1990-1998

Period	All admits and releases			New court commits and first releases			Parole violators and others and subsequent releases		
	Number admitted (1)	Number released (2)	Change in prison population (3)	Number admitted (4)	Number released (5)	Change in prison population (6)	Number admitted (7)	Number released (8)	Change in prison population (9)
1990-1994	2,507.9	2,217.2	290.7	1,661.4	1,318.8	342.6	846.6	898.5	51.9
1995-1998	2,303.4	2,086.0	217.4	1,462.1	1,362.9	99.2	841.3	723.1	118.2

Source: Lynch/Sabol analysis of Bureau of Justice Statistics data: *Correctional Populations in the United States, 1990-98* and *National Corrections Reporting Program, 1990-98*.

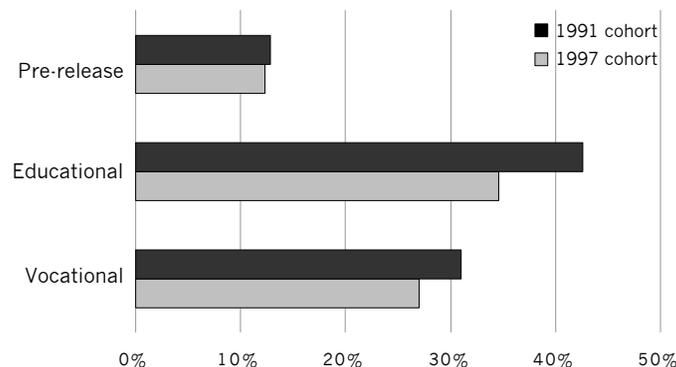
sion of incarceration by the introduction of new people into the prison and corrections systems.

Yet, the expansion of incarceration poses challenges for reintegrating first-time prisoners. Given that prison expansion has not been evenly distributed among racial groups—a much larger portion of black men than white men have been incarcerated—the reintegration of first-time prisoners occurs in communities that contain large numbers of previously incarcerated offenders. Very little is known about the reintegration of offenders as it occurs in communities that have comparatively large portions of residents who have experienced incarceration. Much of what passes for knowledge of the effects is speculative, although Rose and Clear (1998) show from surveys that people who were exposed to incarceration, either by their own experience or by knowing someone who was incarcerated, had lower opinions about the formal institutions of social control. If negative attitudes toward corrections agencies increase with the prevalence of incarceration, then the capacity of corrections institutions to manage reentry may be undermined.

Recently released prisoners are less likely to have participated in prison programs than they were in the past

Most prisoners do not participate in prison programs, such as education and vocational programs, and the rate of participation has dropped over the past decade. Presumably, program participation is an asset upon release from prison. Having completed a degree or voca-

Figure 5. Prisoners to be released in the next 12 months: Percentage participating in prison programs, 1991 and 1997



Source: Lynch/Sabol analysis of Bureau of Justice Statistics *Survey of Inmates of State Correctional Facilities, 1991 and 1997*.

tional training should enhance the chances of finding employment after release, all else being equal. In 1997, 27 percent of the soon-to-be-released inmates reported that they participated in vocational programs and 35 percent that they participated in educational programs; these are down from 31 percent and 43 percent, respectively, in 1991 (figure 5).¹⁰ In addition, only about 13 percent of the soon-to-be-released cohorts in both 1991 and 1997 reported participating in prerelease programs.

The effect of the decreases in the participation rates is that more offenders are released without having participated in programs. For example, in 1991, 437,000 offenders were released from prison, while in 1997, 529,000 were released. Applying the four-percentage point decrease in vocational program participation to the increase in the number of releases results in an additional 85,000 prisoner releases in 1997 who did not participate in vocational programs; this is on the base of more than 300,000 prisoner releases who did not participate in vocational programs in 1991.

Recapping the changes in releases from prison

In sum, while the number of offenders released from prison increased dramatically from 1980 to 1998, the rate of increase has slowed during the 1990s, even as the number released has approached 600,000 per year. The number of released prisoners increased rapidly during the late 1980s, coinciding with the height of the prosecution of drug crimes. The increase in the number of releases has occurred during a time when the prison population increased even more rapidly. Consequently, recently released prisoners serve more time in prison than those released even a decade ago. The increases in length of stay in prison may have some public safety benefits, particularly if serious and habitual offenders have been incapacitated. Certainly, increases in the number of releases have not been accompanied by increases in the aggregate crime rate. In fact, without fully understanding the reasons for the underlying relationship, the increase in the number of releases during the 1990s has occurred at the same time that the aggregate crime rate (for index crimes) has decreased.

The large increase in the size of the pool of former prisoners in society is associated with an increase in the number of offenders who churn or cycle through prison and parole. Such churners are more apt to be former drug or property offenders and, in recent years (1995 to 1998), will have served more time in prison on their subsequent admission than they did in the early 1990s. By definition, churners are offenders who have failed on reentry, as they are released from prison for a subsequent commitment on an original sentence. An expanding pool of churners raises questions about parole supervision: how it is working, who is committing technical violations, and whether the increased number of technical violations is increasing public safety.

At the same time that churners have increased as a source of growth of the prison population, the prevalence

of incarceration has spread throughout society so that the number of new persons entering prison for the first time in their lives has increased. The increase has been large enough to increase the percentage of new court commitments that were released from their first lifetime experiences with prison from 39 percent in 1991 to 44 percent in 1997. For reentry, this means there is an expanding pool of people who have to deal with making the transition back to the community after they serve their sentences. Additionally, the prevalence of incarceration has not been equally distributed among racial groups; black men—especially black men who do not complete high school—are much more likely to experience prison than other groups. The spread of incarceration throughout black communities poses new challenges for reentry (see discussion later in this document).

Finally, while these changes have been occurring, time served in prison has been increasing overall and across offense groups, and the participation rates of offenders in educational and vocational programs have decreased.

THE PAROLE POPULATION AS THE REENTRY POPULATION

The size of the parole population has increased, but the growth of the population is slowing

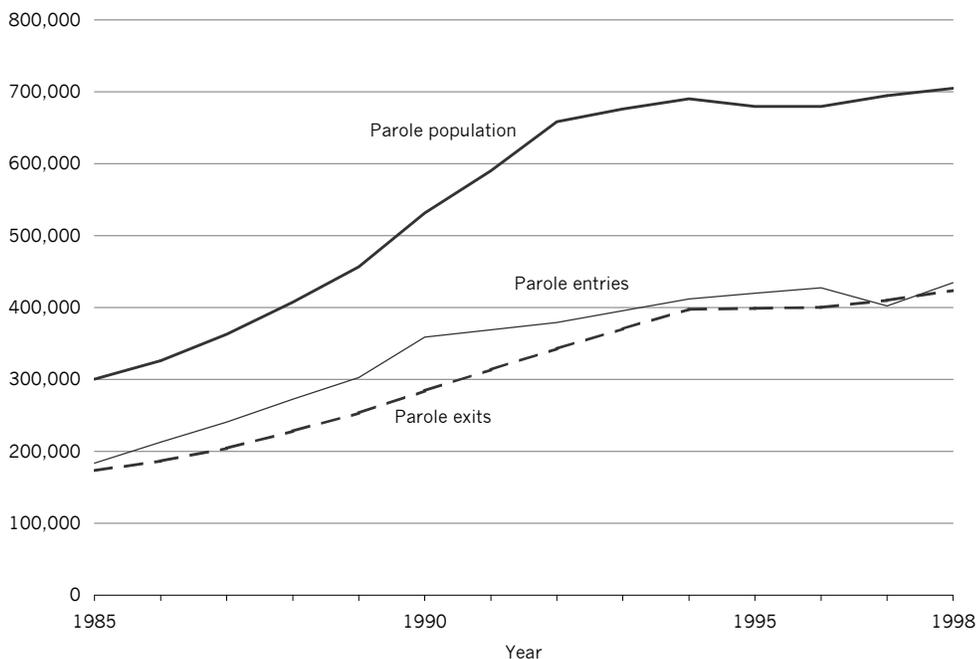
Turning to the second measure of reentry—the number of offenders under post-incarceration supervision—the number of offenders on parole¹¹ more than tripled between 1980 and 1999, from 222,000 to 713,000. The majority of this increase occurred between 1980 and 1992, as the number of parolees increased from 222,000 to 659,000 persons. As figure 6 shows, the increase in the parole population from 1992 to 1998 slowed by comparison to the previous years, growing by only 50,000 persons.

The slowing of growth in the parole population is associated with a decrease in parole entries, which is due in part to an increase in the number of offenders released from prison unconditionally. It is also associated with a decrease in the length of time served on parole by subsequent parole discharges.

Unconditional releases have contributed to the slowing of the growth of the parole population

One factor affecting the leveling off in parole population growth is an increase in the number of prisoners

Figure 6.
Number of persons on parole at year-end and, during each year,
number of parole entries and number of parole exits, 1985–1998



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics *Correctional Populations in the United States, 1985–98*.

released with no post-prison supervision, such as parole. The number of offenders released unconditionally has increased recently, from about 55,000 releases in 1990 (about 13 percent of releases in that year) to 126,000 releases in 1998 (about 23 percent of releases). This is reflected in figure 6 in the declining rate of growth of parole entries.

It is not known whether unconditional releases are more likely to successfully reintegrate into society or whether they pose greater risks for public safety than offenders released onto some form of post-incarceration supervision. While they cannot be returned to prison for technical violations, it also is not known whether they return to prison for new crimes at higher rates than offenders who are on parole. At least some offenders are released unconditionally based on either a sentencing decision or an assessment after entering prison that supervision is not warranted. For example, in the federal system, offenders released unconditionally typically have been sentenced for less serious crimes, and a judge has made a decision not to impose a term of post-incarcera-

tion supervision.¹² In Ohio, offenders are assessed upon entering prison for post-release control. Further complicating the issue, in other states such as Massachusetts, some offenders are given the choice of trading a few additional months in prison for a longer term on parole. A recent recidivism study by the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections provided data on returns to prison for a new conviction. These data show that offenders released unconditionally upon completion of their sentence returned to prison for new convictions at lower rates than did offenders released onto parole. Of the offenders released unconditionally between 1994 and 1997, within 1 year of release 3.4 percent returned to prison for a new conviction and within 3 years 12.2 percent did. By comparison, within 1 year of release, 5.6 percent of offenders released onto parole returned to prison for a new conviction, and within 3 years 16.1 percent did (Pennsylvania Department of Corrections 2001).¹³

Each of these examples supports the view that unconditional releases may pose less risk than conditional releases. In the first two cases, a sentencing or correc-

tions official makes a decision; in the Massachusetts case, self-selection operates. In the case of Texas, experience suggests that unconditional releases may pose less risk than commonly believed. Still, little is known about the experiences of unconditional releases from these systems. Moreover, these four examples do not represent the practices among the 50 states and the District of Columbia, as the release of offenders unconditionally varies widely among states (Travis, Solomon, Waul 2001).

The decrease in overall time served on parole has contributed to the slowing of the growth of the parole population

A second major factor contributing to a slowing of the growth of the parole population is a decrease in the length of time served on parole. Time on parole for all parolees decreased slightly, by about one-and-a-half months, from about 21 months in 1993 to just under 20 months in 1998. At the same time, time served on parole by first discharges from prison increased over this period from about 19 months to 22 months.¹⁴ Thus, the source of the decrease in overall time served on parole is among subsequent discharges from prison onto parole. In 1998, subsequent discharges served fewer than 16 months on parole on average. Hence, time on parole for various subgroups appears to be moving in different directions.

Churners on parole are being created at a faster rate than they are successfully completing parole

The chances of successfully completing parole differ markedly between offenders first discharged from parole and those subsequently discharged. A first discharge from parole occurs when an offender, released from prison for the first time on a sentence, is discharged from parole, either successfully or unsuccessfully. A subsequent discharge from parole occurs when an offender who previously served time on parole was returned to prison for a technical violation, was released from prison for a second time on the original sentence, and subsequently is discharged from parole, either successfully or unsuccessfully.

In 1996, about 48 percent of all discharges from parole were subsequent discharges; this represents an increase from 40 percent in 1986. Of offenders subsequently discharged from parole in 1996, only 20 percent successfully completed parole, while 80 percent were unsuccessful (Beck 1999, table 18). By contrast, of offenders discharged from parole for the first time in 1996,

75 percent completed parole successfully, while 25 percent were unsuccessful. To the extent that failures on first parole result in subsequent parole, the comparatively low 25 percent failure rate, when compared with the very low 20 percent success rate of subsequent parolees, implies that churners are being created at a faster rate than they are successfully completing parole.

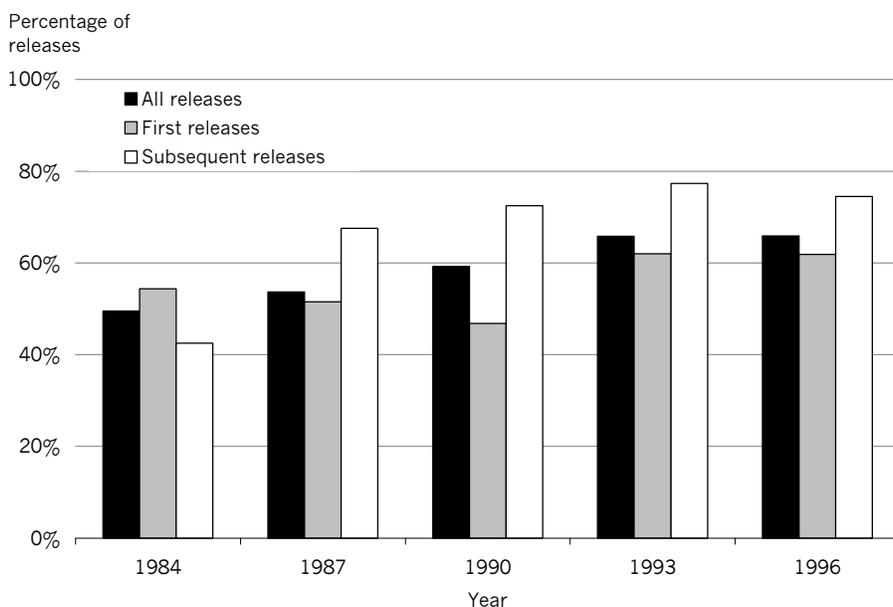
The parole outcomes suggest that a key to successful reentry is successful completion of parole *the first time an offender is released from prison onto parole*. Failure on parole is more likely to occur as a result of a technical violation than a return for a new crime. For example, of persons who left parole unsuccessfully during 1998 and who were returned to prison, 53 percent were returned because of technical violations while 24 percent were returned for new crimes.¹⁵ Thus, while the use of technical violations is associated with the creation of churners, their use also may contribute to reductions in new crimes. The implications of technical violations for reentry deserve more attention.

RETURNING TO COMMUNITIES

For communities, the return of released prisoners potentially poses problems for public safety and challenges for reintegrating people into society. The changes in the composition of returning prisoners outlined above suggest that there is not a single type of reintegration problem. There are more violent offenders returning to communities, more offenders coming back from their first experience with incarceration, and more offenders returning after a churning experience. Offenders have been out of the community for longer periods, and they are less likely to have participated in education and training programs. Communities, therefore, face a complicated set of problems related to reintegrating offenders.

Discussions about the return and reintegration of ex-prisoners into communities often occur under the presumption that communities want to accept and reintegrate ex-prisoners. This may be a viable assumption; however, surveys of residents in local neighborhoods also show that public safety is their top concern (e.g., Anderson and Milligan 2001). And, given that many offenders who were removed from communities committed serious violent crimes, it is not immediately obvious that communities would want all offenders to return to the places they lived before their incarceration. If the presumptions of programs

Figure 7.
Estimated percentage of offenders released into core counties,
by type of release, 1984–1996



Source: Lynch/Sabol analysis of Bureau of Justice Statistics *National Corrections Reporting Program* data, 1984–96.

based on the “Weed and Seed” model are correct—that the “weeding out” of offenders must occur prior to “seeding” prevention efforts—then the return of violent offenders may be like “sowing weeds” back into communities.

While communities may not necessarily want ex-prisoners to return to them, the presumption that communities want to accept all returning prisoners is one that needs to be verified. Because little, if anything, is known about the attitudes of community residents toward returning offenders, in general, and toward the return of specific offenders, it makes sense to presume that communities may not want all offenders back. At least this is a testable assumption, the results of which can help develop new approaches to reintegrating difficult or unwanted offenders, while at the same time help to preserve public safety.

The geographic concentrations of returning prisoners

Cohorts of returning prisoners are concentrated in a few large states. Of prisoners released in 1998, five states

accounted for just under half of the 531,000 offenders released. California alone accounted for 24 percent of the state prison releases (but only 12 percent of the U.S. resident population). The top 16 states (in terms of the volume of releases) collectively accounted for 75 percent of the releases, but the bottom 24 states collectively accounted for only 10 percent of state prison releases. Among these relatively low-frequency release states, the number released ranged from about 4,500 in Mississippi to about 600 in Maine.

Within states, returning prisoners are increasingly concentrated in “core counties.” A core county is one that contains the central city of a metropolitan area. The estimated percentage of state prison releases in core counties of metropolitan areas rose from 50 percent in 1984 to 66 percent in 1996 (figure 7). In other words, about half of the 220,000 releases in 1984 were to core counties, while about two-thirds of the 500,000 releases in 1996 were to core counties. Thus, both the volume and concentration of returns to core counties have increased over time.

Concentrations within core counties the Cuyahoga County case

Within core counties, the concentrations may be even more pronounced because releases are likely to be concentrated in a relatively few neighborhoods within the central cities of the core counties. Research by Rose and Clear (1998) documents the concentrations of released offenders within a few Tallahassee, Florida, neighborhoods. Recent data from Ohio also highlight the extreme concentrations of offenders within neighborhoods.

The Ohio data are of persons in prison on July 1, 2000, and who resided in Cuyahoga County—the core county containing the city of Cleveland. Of all offenders in Ohio prisons, 20 percent of them resided in Cuyahoga County (which accounts for 12 percent of the state's population) before they were incarcerated. Of those who resided in the county, an estimated 75 percent resided in the city of Cleveland before their incarceration.

Using census block groups¹⁶ arbitrarily to define a neighborhood or community, 50 block groups out of 1,539 such block groups in the county accounted for about one-fifth of all prisoners, or, in other words, 3 percent of the county's block groups accounted for about 20 percent of the state's prisoners. Forty-eight of these block groups were within the city of Cleveland.

One-day incarceration rates were computed for all block groups in the County. High-rate block groups were defined as those with a calculated one-day incarceration rate of more than 0.75 percent of the resident population.¹⁷ Within the high-rate block groups, the estimated one-day incarceration rate averaged about 1.5 percent of the population; for black men between the ages of 18 and 29, the estimated one-day incarceration rate was between 8 and 15 percent.

Finally, assuming the data on admissions and time served for the entire state of Ohio apply to the data for the high-rate block groups,¹⁸ an estimate can be derived of the number of offenders that can be expected to return to the 48 high-rate block groups in Cleveland. That is, between 350 and 700 offenders per year.

The location of the high-rate block groups within the city raises questions about the presumption that returning prisoners are concentrated in the poorest neighborhoods. While many of the high-rate and moderate-rate block groups are located in or near some of the poorest areas of Cleveland, a large number are not. Rather, high-rate areas are located in or near working-class neighborhoods. For example, in the southeast section of Cleveland, there are many working-class neighborhoods that, during the late 1990s, received large numbers of con-

ventional loans for purchase and renovation of homes. In and around these same neighborhoods are many high-incarceration rate block groups. Additionally, a well-known drug trafficking corridor runs through this area.

These neighborhoods may be affected by the dispersion of the drug trafficking trade throughout the metropolitan area (Blumstein 1995). Accordingly, many of the incarcerated residents dealt drugs, but they did so along the corridor or in areas outside of their neighborhoods of residence. Certainly, much more research needs to be done to identify the communities within which large numbers of offenders are returning and research is also needed on how their return will affect the communities.

Churners are returning to core counties in higher concentrations than previously

As shown previously, offenders who have failed on parole are at higher risk of failing again. These offenders are increasingly concentrated in core counties. In 1984, an estimated 42 percent of subsequent releases—offenders released for at least the second time on an original sentence—returned to a core county. By 1996, this increased to an estimated 75 percent (figure 7).

Currently, churners are primarily drug and property offenders rather than violent offenders. The proportion of drug offenders admitted to prison with a prior prison history increased from 22 percent in the period 1985 to 1989 to 37 percent in the period 1995 to 1998. The increase for property crime was less extreme—34 percent to 41 percent. In contrast, the proportion of violent offenders with a prior prison history changed little across the periods.

Social and familial attachments of soon-to-be-released offenders

Returning prisoners' attachments to society, such as employment and family relationships, are relatively weak but did not change substantially during the 1990s. Prior to the 1990s, there were changes in the social and familial attachments of prisoners, largely because of the increased incarceration of drug offenders (Lynch and Sabol 1997). The comparison of four measures of social integration among a cohort of soon-to-be-released offenders for 1991 and 1997, shown in table 3, shows minimal change in reported marital status, education, employment, and children:

- About one-quarter of the offenders were divorced and nearly 60 percent had never married.

Table 3.
Offenders to be released in the next 12 months,
by measure of social integration and year, 1991 and 1997

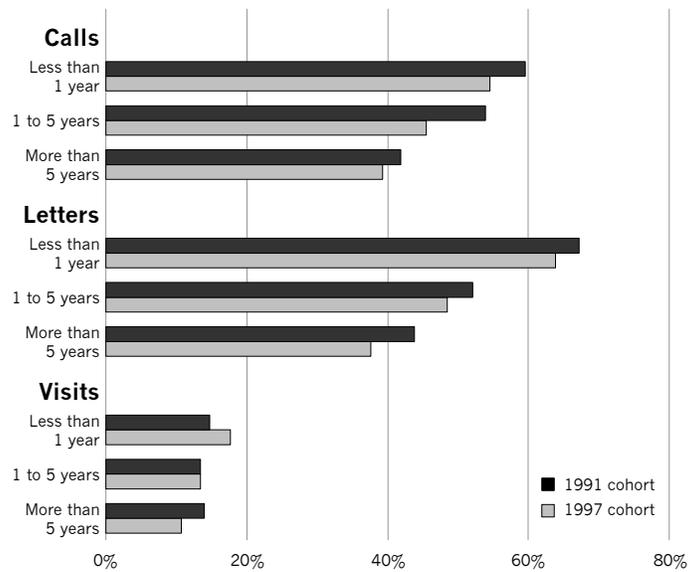
	1991	1997
Children		
Yes	63.7%	66.7%
No	36.3	33.3
Working		
Yes	65.5%	66.5%
No	34.5	33.5
Education		
8 years or less	18.9%	17.1%
8-11 years	47.1	50.4
12 years	22.3	21.7
College plus	11.8	10.9
Marital Status		
Married	17.8%	15.9%
Formerly married	24.9	25.4
Never married	57.3	58.8

Source: Lynch/Sabol analysis of Bureau of Justice Statistics
Survey of Inmates of State Correctional Facilities, 1991 and 1997.

- About two-thirds of the offenders had children.
- About one-third of the offenders were unemployed prior to prison entry.
- About two-thirds of the offenders had not completed high school.

As shown previously, however, time served by offenders released from prison has increased over time. Here, increasing time served in prison is negatively related to maintaining attachments to family members. Specifically, the frequency of contact with children decreases as the length of time served in prison increases (figure 8). For soon-to-be-released offenders in 1997, for example, among inmates who ever had contact with their children, 54 percent of those expecting release after serving one year or less reported at least weekly calls from their children. This decreases to 45 percent among those

Figure 8.
Offenders to be released in the next 12 months: Percentage with weekly contact with children, by method and length of stay, 1991 and 1997



Source: Lynch/Sabol analysis of Bureau of Justice Statistics *Survey of Inmates of State Correctional Facilities, 1991 and 1997.*

to be released after serving one to five years, and to 39 percent among those to be released after serving five or more years.¹⁹ The same pattern is observed for receiving letters and visits from children.

Changes in family contacts with inmates reflect both self-selection and access to prisoners. It is not known whether contacts decrease because offenders or families choose not to continue to contact each other, or because prison policies limit access. For example, if offenders are incarcerated in facilities that are far away from their residences, or if telephone or other privileges are restricted, then prison policies can affect access. To the extent that contacts with families facilitate reintegration—a relationship about which we know little—then policies should attempt to minimize the disruption of these contacts.

Additionally, the likelihood of being divorced increases with time served. For soon-to-be-released offend-

ers in 1997, 16 percent of those expecting release after serving one year or less reported being divorced. This increases to 17 percent among those to be released after serving one to five years, and to 20 percent among those to be released after serving five or more years.²⁰

Macroeconomic matters

The pre-prison employment experiences and education levels of ex-offenders are low relative to the nonincarcerated population. The largest share of prisoners released into urban areas is black, and the joint effects of race and a prison sentence as they relate to employer discrimination of ex-prisoners are not fully known (Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991) but may not portend well for black ex-prisoners.

Further complicating post-prison employment are several macroeconomic matters. For example, there may be a spatial mismatch between the residence of ex-prisoners and the location of skill-appropriate jobs. The data to measure offenders' access to jobs are not readily available; hence, this discussion is somewhat speculative. However, if, as it appears, there is a spatial mismatch between the residences of returning offenders and the location of skill-appropriate jobs, this mismatch could compound the considerable problem of ex-prisoner employment.

Returning offenders are increasingly concentrated within core counties and, to the extent that Tallahassee and Cleveland represent patterns in other urban areas, are increasingly within the central cities of core counties. During the past decade, central cities, despite job growth in some, have lost labor market share relative to the suburbs (Brennan and Hill 1999). For example, in the Cleveland area, between 1975 and the mid-1990s employment within the city of Cleveland grew by less than 2 percent while employment in the suburbs grew by 121 percent. At the same time, employment in manufacturing—a comparatively low-skill but high-wage sector declined from 30 percent of all employment to 15 percent (Bania, Coulton, Leete 2000).

Returning prisoners may be competing with those leaving welfare for the same low-skill jobs. While metropolitan labor markets have generally been able to absorb the large volume of welfare leavers (Lerman and Ratcliffe 2000), reductions in welfare caseloads have been lower in core counties than in surrounding suburbs. These are the same areas with large concentrations of returning prisoners. Moreover, the jobs available to either group, welfare leavers or returning prisoners, may not provide

the wages needed to raise families above the poverty level. For example, among recent welfare leavers in Cuyahoga County, about half had continuous employment during the first six months after leaving welfare, but half of these did not earn enough to raise a family of three above the poverty level. Finally, economic downturns can affect employment prospects (Coulton, et al. 2000). The skill-appropriate jobs for ex-prisoners tend to be the same type of low-wage/low-skill jobs that are most likely to be adversely affected by economic downturns (Smith and Woodbury 1999).

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The current interest in reentry and the call for new policy attention are based on the implicit assumption that the absorption of former inmates into society is different now than it has been. One purpose of this paper was to assess how the current problem of reentry may differ from that of the past. The other purpose of this paper was to suggest what more we would want to know about reentry to guide the search for an appropriate response.

Stability and change in reentry

Over the past two decades, the reentry phenomenon has changed in some respects and remained stable in others. The number of prisoners released each year and the size of the parole population have grown, but their growth rates are declining. Parole resources have not kept pace with increases in the parole population, although in recent years they may be catching up. Parolees, especially subsequent parolees, are less likely to successfully complete parole than in the past.

The rates of successful completion of parole between prisoners released for the first time as opposed to those released after previous failures while on parole have become very different over time. The successful completion rate for subsequent releases is much lower than for those initially released to supervision. The increasingly prominent role of technical violations in the successful completion of parole is also noteworthy. It is not clear whether this is due to changes in the nature of the release cohort—for example, greater proportions of drug charges or drug addiction—or to changes in supervision policy—for example, revocation as a response to increases in caseloads and the absence of alternatives.

Current release cohorts have lower rates of participation in prison programs than in the past. To the extent that participation in education, vocation, and drug treatment programs improves post-prison outcomes, declining participation is a concern that needs to be addressed. Studies of participation in treatment by federal offenders find, for example, lower-recidivism rates than comparable nonparticipating offenders (Gaes, Flanagan, Motiuk, and Stewart 1999; Saylor and Gaes 1997).

Increases in the length of time served are associated with decreases in the attachments of reentering prisoners to families. Maintaining offenders' attachments to families while in prison is *believed* to facilitate reintegration upon release from prison. The data reviewed here show that longer time spent in prison makes maintaining these ties more difficult. Because time served in prison has increased over time, we would expect that the attenuation of these attachments will be greater among the current group of reentering inmates than in the past. The extent to which the maintenance of ties is due to choices by families and inmates versus corrections practices needs to be better understood.

There has been an increase in the number of inmates released from prison unconditionally with no community supervision. We know very little about the post-prison experiences of these unconditional releases. Speculations vary as to whether they are mostly serious offenders who have maxed out on their terms or whether in some jurisdictions their unconditional release is based on some form of review—either at sentencing or in prison. Thus, learning more about how and why offenders are released unconditionally and how well they succeed at not committing new crimes can provide a basis for developing the selective reentry strategy mentioned at the outset of this paper.

All these factors suggest that the increasing numbers of offenders returning from prison could pose greater risks for public safety. Yet, aggregate crime rates have been declining throughout the 1990s, at the same time that the number of releases has been increasing. Exactly why these trends are moving in opposing directions is not known. Perhaps the release cohorts of the 1990s have comprised offenders that pose comparatively small public safety risks, and the more serious offenders have been incapacitated for longer periods. Perhaps criminal involvement differs dramatically between recently released offenders and persons who have never been incarcerated or those who have been out of prison for some time. This could result in the same aggregate relationships observed

between releases and crime, but the decline in crime would be due to the decline in criminal involvement by nonreturning prisoners. Until we do learn the reasons for this relationship, we should not sound the public safety alarms.

The reentry problem facing communities is different from the past. Larger numbers of offenders are returning to selected neighborhoods, most within core counties and presumably within central city neighborhoods. It is unclear whether these high-rate neighborhoods are the poor, high-crime areas they are assumed to be or whether they are located in or near working-class areas. There is reason to believe that the increased geographic concentrations put the burden of reentry disproportionately on a relatively small number of urban areas that may have limited resources. Some evidence suggests that access to jobs and services in reentry neighborhoods may be limited. And there may be competition between returning prisoners and welfare leavers for jobs. Additionally, the available, low-skill jobs do not pay very well; studies of welfare leavers who worked at least part-time have suggested that earnings from low-skill jobs are insufficient to raise families above the poverty level. The low pay of these jobs enhances the possibility that involvement in illegitimate, income-producing activities will increase. However, the trend of increased concentration of returning prisoners could be seen as an opportunity for communities and corrections agencies to focus reentry efforts on selected areas.

There is limited information to suggest that in addition to the spatial mismatch between the location of jobs and the location of ex-prisoners' residences, there also may be a mismatch between the location of ex-prisoners' residences and the location of supervision services. Rose, Clear, and Ryder (2000), for example, document this mismatch for some neighborhoods in Tallahassee. Correcting a mismatch between supervision services and residences of ex-prisoners is also consistent with the community supervision approach advocated by the Reinventing Probation Council (Reinventing Probation Council 2000).

Communities must also contend with the new phenomenon of churners, or individuals who cycle in and out of prison. Churners are disproportionately drug offenders and are more likely to return to neighborhoods within core counties. We do not know what effect the churning of individuals (release and return cycles) has on neighborhoods. Moreover, we know very little about the effects of removal and return on social relations and

social networks in communities (Lynch and Sabol 2000). Understanding how patterns of interaction among residents and how residents' attachments to their neighborhoods are affected by high rates of prisoner return requires study. This knowledge also needs to be incorporated into thinking about reentry policies. For example, to the extent that communities don't want large numbers of ex-prisoners (especially violent offenders), novel approaches, such as scattered site reentry may need to be considered.

Corrections systems alone cannot address reentry. First, it is not uniformly accepted that corrections departments should have the major role in reentry (Horn 2000). Second, corrections departments have little control over the flow of offenders coming out. This is especially true in relation to the large share of prison admissions that are first-time prisoners. Third, external considerations such as crime rates, sentencing policy, and state budgets affect the corrections system and reentry but are not in the control of corrections agencies. Fourth, to the extent that reentry involves attaching to labor markets, families, and other institutions of social integration, corrections agencies have limited influence in affecting the opportunities created by these institutions. More important, considering extending the influence of corrections agencies into these private spheres of life raises the fundamental questions about the boundaries and limitations of formal social control in a free society.

There is some evidence, then, that the problem of reentry is different now than it has been up until now. The size of the reentering population has increased and funding for supervision has not kept pace. There are marginal changes in the composition of the population of reentering inmates that will make reentry more difficult than it has been. Specifically, inmates reentering society now are more likely (1) to be violent offenders; (2) to have failed at parole previously; (3) to have not participated in prison programs designed to facilitate reentry; and (4) to have served longer sentences, which will attenuate ties to families and other legitimate groups. Finally, the impact of reentry falls more heavily upon a small number of urban communities than it previously has. This, in combination with other social changes—for example, changes in the economy and welfare system—will make these communities less able to absorb their returning residents. While reentry may not be a problem for the society at large, it is a substantial problem for these few areas and the people who live there.

What more we need to know about reentry

The debates about the importance of reentry and policy response to it can be summarized in a few questions. First, can the disruption attendant to the removal and return of inmates to society be reduced without increasing the risk of criminal victimization for communities? Second, if the response to this first question is yes, then how can we best reduce the removal and return from correctional institutions?

The preceding questions do not say much about the impact of reentry on the risk of criminal victimization in society, yet these will be the first questions asked in response to proposals to increase or decrease post-release supervision. Do the removal of offenders from and the return of inmates to communities increase the safety of persons and families in those communities or does it increase their risk? If it increases their safety, does it exact other social costs? Recidivism studies of the type undertaken by BJS will be helpful in answering these questions, but the BJS study needs to be complemented by research in specific community areas where the impact of removal and return is likely to be more detectable. These more-focused studies would permit the use of victimization surveys and other methodologies that would be better able to detect intrafamilial violence than would police and other official records used in the BJS data collection. These community-specific analyses would also provide the opportunity for assessing the reintegration of inmates rather than just recidivism, and they would also permit the assessment of the disruption of families and communities, other than victimization, that might result from both removal and reentry.

Some of the discussion suggests areas to explore to reduce the problem of reentry. Clearly, the best way to reduce the problem of reentry is to reduce entry into correctional institutions, as long as the reduction in admissions does not adversely affect public safety. A second, more limited, strategy for reducing reentry might come from closer scrutiny of the role of parole revocation and, specifically, technical violations in increasing correctional populations and in generating reentry cohorts. If the increased number of technical violations over time is due to policy changes or reductions in alternatives to revocation, then steps can be taken to reverse those policies. If increases in technical violations are the result of changes in the behavior of released prisoners, then other steps should be taken. It would be useful to sort these processes out. Similar scrutiny should be given to churners or repeat revocations of the same inmates.

Finally, special attention should be given to those few communities in major metropolitan areas that receive a massively disproportionate share of the reentry population. Efforts should be made to understand the interrelationship between these communities and the correctional institutions, including supervision. Special attention should be given to changes in correctional policies—for example, not concentrating reentering inmates in a small number of communities—or to efforts to bolster community organization so that these communities could better absorb these inmates upon their release.

ENDNOTES

1. Throughout this report, references to the number of offenders admitted into or released from prison generally refer to offenders who were sentenced to one year or more of incarceration. Where this definition does not apply the difference is noted.
2. Estimates of releases are derived from the National Prisoner Statistics (NPS) and the National Correction Reporting Program (NCRP) data collected by the Bureau of Justice Statistics unless otherwise noted. These data are not based upon a probability sample, so no significance tests are performed on the estimates from these data.
3. Nonprison corrections expenditures include expenditures for parole supervision as well as expenditures for probation and other activities that are administered by state agencies. Because of noncomparability among the states that reported expenditure data, the Bureau of Justice Statistics' expenditure data in Stephan (1999) cannot be broken down into these refined categories.
4. The relative size of the number of releases from prison is measured as the ratio of the number of releases to the number in prison.
5. The BJS Survey of Inmates of State Correctional Facilities is conducted about every five years; it provides self-report survey data for a nationally representative sample of persons in prison. The "soon-to-be-released" cohort is created from the cross-section data in the survey by identifying persons who report that they expect to be released within the next year.
6. These differences in proportions are statistically significant with $p < 0.05$. The tests employed took account of the complexity of the survey samples.
7. The BJS Inmate Survey provides information about the prior experiences of incarceration. First-time prisoners are defined as those prisoners who have had no prior reported prison commitments. The difference in these proportions is statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.
8. Lynch/Sabol analysis of the BJS Inmate Survey data for 1997.
9. The Bureau of Justice Statistics recidivism study, mentioned at the outset of this paper, will track offenders released from prison and could provide information on the rate at which first-time offenders return to prison.
10. These differences in proportions are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.
11. Here, the term parole is used to include all forms of post-incarceration supervision, including those that do not follow from a parole release decision. For example, federal offenders may be sentenced to a term of supervised release after they serve a prison sentence of a determinate length.
12. Federal offenders released unconditionally account for about one-fifth of all offenders released unconditionally.
13. Based on Lynch/Sabol calculations of return rates from original data in the Department of Corrections report.
14. Time served for all discharges is estimated as a stock-flow ratio; time served for first discharges is based on actual time served by first discharges. According to Beck (1999, table 22), time served by all first discharges successful and unsuccessful has increased from 20 to 23 months between 1986 and 1996 for successful first discharges and from 17 to 21 months for unsuccessful first discharges.
15. Derived from Bonczar and Glaze (1999), table 6.
16. Census block groups are aggregated to create census tracts; the block groups in this analysis had 1990 populations of roughly between 1,000 and 3,000 persons.
17. The calculations were based on the number of offenders whose block group information was available. For about 40 percent of the sample of prisoners who were convicted in Cuyahoga County courts, the block group of residence was missing. Hence, the calculations of one-day incarceration rates will generally underestimate the actual one-day rates.
18. Projections based on data from Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections on prison admissions and time served.
19. The differences in these proportions are significant at $p < 0.05$.
20. The difference between persons serving less than one year and more than five years are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$, but the difference between those serving one year and those serving one to five years is not statistically significant.

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