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Christy A. Visher¹ and Jeremy Travis²

Abstract

With record-high incarceration rates, unprecedented extension of state supervision over individuals leaving prison, and a complex maze of legal barriers to reintegration, more people than ever before are returning home after serving time in prison. These individuals face daunting barriers to successful reintegration. Successful reentry requires strong community support networks and comprehensive services, both of which are lacking in urban areas to which most former prisoners return. Interventions that reflect these principles may hold the greatest promise for success. Yet reentry policies are still quite primitive; researchers are just now beginning to develop an approach to reentry based on evidence of best practices. At this moment, it is critically important that the federal government invest in the development and testing of new ideas and rigorous evaluations to determine which interventions are effective at promoting public safety and prisoner reintegration.

Keywords

reentry, reintegration, reentry strategy evaluation, evidence-based policies

Eddie has spent most of his adult life cycling in and out of prison. He would come home, determined not to go back, and hoping to get a job, only to be told that there were no jobs for him. He says that the “ex-offender” label has been

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hard to shake, especially with so many other people looking for jobs. After his most recent release, he picked up some “under the table” work here and there but could not find a stable job. He is living with his mom and sister who were initially supporting him and his young son after his release, giving him money for clothes and transportation. But it didn’t take long for them to ask him when he was going to buy groceries and put gas in the car. After a few months of looking for work, he returned to his former neighborhood “friends” and former job: selling drugs. He missed a couple of appointments with his parole officer and then started using drugs again. Less than a year after his release, he is back in prison for violating the conditions of his release.

Sherrie took the bus from prison to a city shelter for women, using bus fare the warden had given her. Wearing prison-issued sweats, she had no money, no home, and no identification. During her 2 years in prison for grand larceny, no one visited her. Not her boyfriend, brother, mother, or her 10-year-old daughter. Sherrie’s mother took custody of her granddaughter when Sherrie was arrested, but it is not clear whether her mother will let her live there because she thinks Sherrie is a bad influence. Sherrie used to be a medical secretary, but her drug problems got her fired, which led to the grand larceny arrest when she needed money for drugs. Now, she is having trouble getting a job because of her criminal record. She also struggles with depression. The shelter will allow her to stay for 30 days. After that, she faces an uncertain future.

These stories of Eddie and Sherrie are fictitious but are based on the characteristics and situations facing actual people who were released from prison in 2010. Today, more people than ever before are making similar journeys from prison to home. According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, during calendar year 2008, state and federal correctional authorities admitted 733,009 prisoners and released only slightly fewer, 698,459 (Sabol & Couture, 2009). Thirty years ago, fewer than 200,000 made this journey home.

Why has the prisoner reentry population increased? There is a simple explanation: More people are coming home because more people are sent to prison. Over the past generation, the rate of incarceration in America has more than quadrupled (see Figure 1), and in 2010, more than 2.3 million Americans are behind bars, equaling 1 in every 100 adults. There is a very simple and immutable “iron law of imprisonment” (Travis, 2005): Except for those who die in prison, everyone who goes to prison ultimately returns home (Petersilia, 2003).

The net effect of these realities is profound: Every year, a large number of individuals, 90% of them men, are removed from their families and communities, held in prisons and jails, and then returned home facing substantial barriers to reintegration. In the United States, a majority of these individuals come

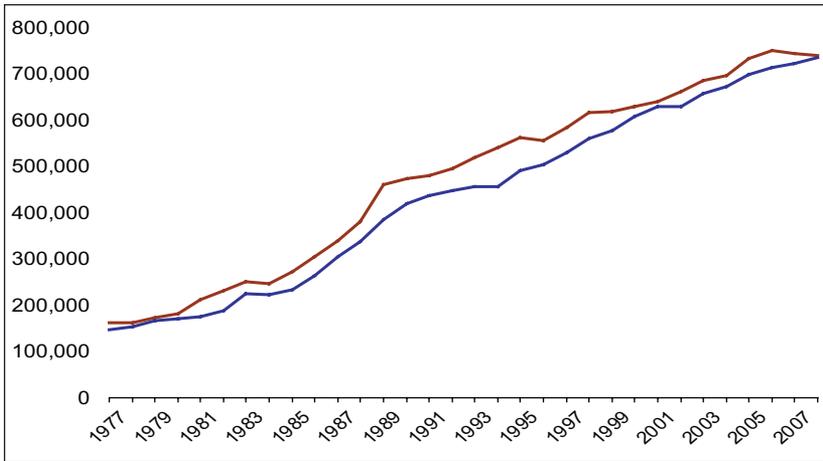


Figure 1. Sentenced prisoners admitted and released from federal and state prison, 1977-2008

Source: The Urban Institute, 2010. Based on data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Prisoner Statistics series.

from a small number of urban communities. These communities, already struggling with poor schools, poor health care, and weak labor markets, are now shouldering the burden of reintegrating record numbers of former prisoners. Not surprisingly, men and women reentering society from prison have difficulty finding a job, a place to live, reliable transportation, and affordable health care. Most of these exiting prisoners need transitional and supportive services such as job training, substance abuse treatment, housing assistance, and mental health counseling that are unavailable in the disadvantaged communities to which many of them return (Travis & Visher, 2005; Visher & Travis, 2003).

In the last decade, “prisoner reentry” has emerged as a critical issue affecting families, communities, state and local governments, and social service providers. Given the magnitude of the prisoner reentry phenomenon, it has captured local, state, and federal attention for several reasons. First and foremost is the public safety dimension. Nearly two thirds of released prisoners will be rearrested and more than half will be reincarcerated within 3 years of release. The recidivism rate has remained virtually unchanged for the past decade or more (Langan & Levin, 2002). More parolees are returning to prison than ever before: One third of all prison admissions are parole violators who are being returned to

prison for new crimes or technical violations (Blumstein & Beck, 2005). Such high recidivism rates translate into thousands of new instances of victimization each year as former prisoners may account for 15% to 20% of all adult arrests (Rosenfeld, Wallman, & Fornango, 2005). The incarceration and release of thousands of individuals each year also profoundly affects other aspects of communities, including public health, homelessness, declines in civic participation, and lost connections among families and within communities. Finally, there are fiscal implications. Significant portions of state budgets are now invested in the criminal justice system. A recent report from the Vera Institute of Justice revealed that state spending on corrections has quadrupled in the past two decades: We spend about US\$50 billion a year—1 in every 15 general fund dollars—on corrections (Vera Institute of Justice, 2009). And these figures do not include the cost of the arrest and sentencing processes, nor do they take into account the cost to victims of crimes committed by released prisoners.

This article presents a snapshot of what we have learned in the past decade about exiting prisoners and summarizes the research on what works to improve the chances of former prisoners being successful. It includes findings from the first multisite study in the United States undertaken to gather information about the men and women who are released from prison and their experiences as they return to their families and communities. It also presents results from recent evaluations of reentry initiatives. In these new studies, multiple in-depth interviews with former prisoners during their first year out of prison have yielded rich insight into these individuals and important policy lessons are beginning to emerge about the pathways to successful reintegration.

Characteristics and Needs of Prisoners Returning Home

As recently as 2000, there were no national data describing the characteristics of former prisoners, what they did in the first few weeks and months after their release from prison, and how they confront the transition from prison to the community. The governmental agency responsible for statistics on the U.S. justice system, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, regularly surveys inmates in state prisons and jails and collects other statistics on state prison admissions and releases. However, those who are released from prison are not necessarily a representative group of those who are currently in prison. For example, on any given day, those who are released are typically serving shorter sentences than those who remain in prison and are likely to differ on other characteristics as well.

Other data on former prisoners were from studies of unrepresentative samples (e.g., women with children) or journalistic accounts of the experiences of former prisoners. In the 1960s, a longitudinal study of men released from prison was carried out in Canada (Waller, 1964), but the results of that project were based on a time and place that were quite different from the contemporary reentry experiences of U.S. men and women. A study of the experiences of 50 individuals during their first month after release in New York in 1999 was circulated among researchers but was not formally released because the findings were considered controversial at the time (Nelson, Deess, & Allen, 1999). Other studies have restricted their samples to those who were not successful after release and were returned to prison (Zamble & Quinsey, 1997).

To fill this knowledge gap and gather data on prisoners nearing release, their return to the community, and their reintegration experiences, in 2001, a team of researchers at the Urban Institute designed a multistate longitudinal study that interviewed men and women prior to their release and several times in the year after their release (Visser, 2007; Visser, La Vigne, & Castro, 2003). The Returning Home project explored the experiences of prisoners' reentry in four states, including a pilot study in Maryland and full research studies in Illinois, Ohio, and Texas. Returning Home was not intended as an outcome evaluation of a particular programmatic effort or an evaluation of a specific policy. It was a longitudinal study of the multiple and often complex challenges prisoners face upon release and as they reintegrate into society. The perspective on the experience of reentry from this project is both distinctive, because it is richer than official data, and representative, because it tells the story of all prisoners returning to free society, rather than just those who avail themselves of social services or who are rearrested. In each state, the study identified soon-to-be-released prisoners within 30 to 60 days of release who were returning to the specific communities of Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland, and Houston.

Another important source of available data on the characteristics of prisoners returning home is the recently completed Multi-Site Evaluation of the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI). Launched in 2003, SVORI was an unprecedented federal initiative to provide states with funds to develop, enhance, or expand programs to facilitate the reentry of adults and juveniles to communities from prisons or juvenile detention facilities. As part of the evaluation of the initiative, men and women enrolled in SVORI and a comparison group were interviewed prior to release and 3 times after release (Lattimore & Visser, 2009). These interviews gathered detailed information on the self-reported needs and experiences of individuals as they left prison and returned to the cities and neighborhoods they had left years earlier.

Understanding the Challenges of Returning Home

Until recently, answering the question, “Who is returning home?,” produced a wide range of answers. Partly, this was not only due to a lack of data as described earlier but also due to the fact that the experience of reentry was often told through the eyes of service providers or parole officers. Utilizing data from self-reports of prisoners reveals that prisoners’ perspectives of the reentry experience differ in important respects from the assumptions shared by many practitioners, policy makers, and researchers. It is also likely that some commonly held views of prisoners are shaped by the experience of working with certain groups rather than with all those who return to society. For example, former prisoners who appear at shelters, soup kitchens, or community mental health clinics are likely to have different needs and characteristics than ex-prisoners who do not need shelters, donated food, or mental health treatment.

In addition, former prisoners are not a homogeneous group and they do not have identical experiences in their transition from prison to the community. Although the majority have extensive criminal careers, about one in five had just completed their first prison term (Petersilia, 2005; Piehl & LuBuglio, 2005). The average prisoner in the United States serves about 28 months, though 1 in 5 has served a sentence of 5 years or more (Lynch & Sabol, 2001). The average age of men leaving state prison is about 35 years—older than many realize—and those in their 30s will likely have different needs than those in their 20s (Petersilia, 2005; Visher, Yahner, & La Vigne, 2010).

Nonetheless, numerous social and economic disadvantages characterize the vast majority of individuals who are released from prison, including poor educational attainment and employment histories, poor physical and mental health, and alcohol and other drug misuse. Prior to incarceration, almost half of former prisoners (48 %) had not completed high school or obtained a GED (Petersilia, 2005; Visher, Debus, & Yahner, 2008). A small group of prisoners are able to obtain a GED while incarcerated, but such opportunities depend on the availability of education programs and inmate eligibility for those programs. Although about two thirds of prisoners nationwide had worked before incarceration (Petersilia, 2005), among Returning Home respondents, only half had ever held a permanent job and 32% were unemployed in the 6 months before incarceration (Visher et al., 2008).

It is well known that a majority of prisoners have extensive substance use histories. Two thirds (64 %) of Returning Home respondents used drugs or drank alcohol to intoxication at least weekly prior to prison (Visher et al., 2010).

In Maryland, 41% reported *daily* heroin use, and in Texas, 57% reported *daily* cocaine use (Solomon, Visher, La Vigne, & Osborne, 2006). Given high rates of substance use, it is not surprising that exiting prisoners are also likely to suffer from health problems and mental illness (see Greifinger, Bick, & Goldenson, 2007; Petersilia, 2005). The majority of men exiting prison (54 %) had a chronic physical or mental health condition, with the most common conditions including depression, asthma, hepatitis, and high blood pressure (Visher & Mallik-Kane, 2007).

Family members provide critical support to men and women after their release from prison. Research has found that strengthening the family network and maintaining supportive family contact can improve outcomes after prisoners are released (Shapiro & Schwartz, 2001; Sullivan, Mino, Nelson, & Pope, 2002). Most prisoners (88%) in the Returning Home study reported that they had at least one close family member, and 45% had 4 or more close family members (Visher, 2007). Moreover, the majority of returning prisoners live with family members and/or intimate partners immediately after release (Visher et al., 2010). Two months after release, 85% of Returning Home respondents were living with a family member, typically their mother or sister (50%-60%) or intimate partner (about 20%). However, these living arrangements are only temporary for many. Seven months after release, 35% of former prisoners had lived at more than one address, and 52% believed that their housing situation was temporary or that they would not be staying in their current neighborhood for long (Visher et al., 2010).

This portrait of former prisoners reveals the formidable challenges in their personal lives as they leave prison and return to the community. Not surprisingly, the self-reported needs of exiting prisoners mirror these challenges. As revealed in interviews as part of the evaluation of the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative, the needs of former prisoners range from general needs such as more education to specific needs such as photo identification or driver's license (Lattimore, Visher, & Steffey, 2009).

In interviews conducted about 30 days before release, respondents were asked to identify the extent to which they needed 28 different types of services (Lattimore et al., 2009). Among men, the levels of expressed need are highest for education, job training, and employment, followed by the need for various transitional and health-related services (see Figure 2). Almost all soon-to-be-released prisoners report needing more education (94%), job training (82%), and a job (80%), and the need for a driver's license (83%) ranked higher than the need for employment. Substantial proportions of exiting prisoners need basic transitional services such as housing (49%), access to clothing and food (60%), and transportation (72%). More than half of prisoners need medical

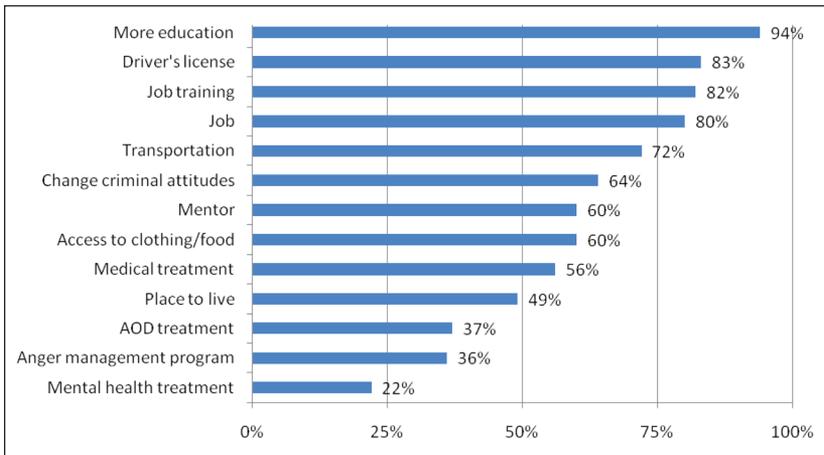


Figure 2. Self-reported need for specific services among soon-to-be-released male prisoners

Source: Compiled from data on male respondents ($n = 1,697$) presented in Lattimore, Visher, and Steffy (2009).

treatment (56%), and treatment for substance use and mental health issues is also a significant need for about one third of prisoners who are close to release. Exiting prisoners also recognize a need for services that will help them change their past behavior patterns as they return to the community, such as mentoring (60%), services to help change criminal attitudes (64%), and anger management classes (36%). Finally, men with children need a variety of child-related services, including parenting skills (60%), help with child support payments (45%), and even child care assistance after release (39%).

Female prisoners express greater needs for services than men do (Lattimore & Visher 2009; Lindquist, Barrick, Lattimore, & Visher, 2009). Women had significantly higher needs than men did for 19 of 28 identified services. In comparison with the men, women most commonly report needing education (95%), employment (83%), a mentor (83%), a driver's license (82%), and access to clothing and food (77%; see Figure 3). Moreover, women need more health services than men, with 55% needing mental health treatment and about two thirds needing substance use treatment. About one third requested access to support groups for abuse victims. Not surprisingly, need for child-related services among exiting female prisoners is high with 90% of women with children needing some type of child-related service.

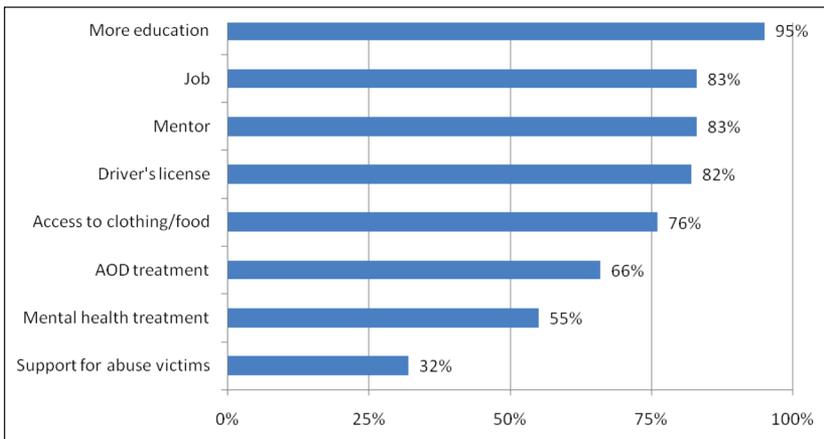


Figure 3. Self-reported need for specific services among soon-to-be-released female prisoners

Source: Compiled from data on female respondents ($n = 357$) presented in Lindquist, Barrick, Lattimore, & Visher (2009).

In the months after release from prison, men and women continue to report needs for a variety of services. Women had higher needs than men, particularly for health- and family-related services. Gender differences decreased over time in other service areas. In the later interviews at 9 and 15 months, men reported higher levels of need for employment and education than women did (Lattimore & Visher, 2009; Lindquist et al., 2009). At 15 months after release, men needed about 40% to 45% of all the services compared to 54% of services just prior to release. Women needed about 45% to 50% of all the services after release, compared with 64% of services prior to release (Lattimore & Visher, 2009). The highest continued needs for both men and women were more education, financial assistance, and health care insurance.

Thus, men and women returning to the community are a population with extremely high needs, which remain high up to 15 months after release from prison. In addition to these recognized needs for assistance and support, former prisoners may experience collateral effects of both the prison experience and a criminal record that create additional obstacles to a successful transition from prison back to the community. These collateral effects (sometimes called “invisible punishments”) may include exclusions from certain professions (e.g., realtor or health care), access to public benefits (e.g., student loans, public housing, or food stamps), as well as loss of parental rights (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999;

Petersilia, 2003; Travis, 2002). These realities, in conjunction with conditions imposed on their release (e.g., employment, in-person reporting, payment of restitution, fees, and fines), and the need for state-approved identification and transportation, make the first few weeks and months after release especially difficult.

What Works? Effective Reentry Programs and Policies

Jesse, a 33-year-old male with a long rap sheet of drug and property crimes, was released from prison for the third time over a year ago. Prior to his incarceration, Jesse's relationships with his family were strained due to his continuing drug addiction and periods of incarceration. His wife of 3 years had separated from him, and he was living with friends when he was arrested. While incarcerated he had the good fortune to become involved in an intensive substance abuse treatment program that enabled him to come to terms with his addiction, and his job on the grounds crew provided him with a workable skill. Over the course of his sentence he reconnected with his wife and family through a family reconciliation program offered to prisoners with records of good behavior. His wife and family agreed to help support him after his release under the condition that he continue his recovery in a treatment program in the community. His community supervision officer put him in touch with potential employers who were willing to hire former prisoners, provided that the officer would vouch that Jesse was drug free and highly motivated to hold a conventional job. Two years after release, he is an active member in a local Narcotics Anonymous group and is working for a landscaping company. He and his wife have their own apartment and they are expecting a child.

Jesse's example of successful reentry requires strong community support networks and comprehensive services for individuals with criminal records, both of which are lacking in urban areas to which most former prisoners return. Interventions that reflect these principles may hold the greatest promise for success. Yet our reentry policies are still quite primitive; we are just now beginning to develop an approach to reentry based on evidence of best practices. Given the explosion of new federal, state, and local policy and practice related to prisoner reentry, it is not surprising that existing research on effective reentry programs and policies has not captured these recent innovations. Moreover, many of the reentry innovations being implemented at the state and local levels have not been formally evaluated. At this moment, it is critically important that the federal government invest in the development and testing of new

ideas and rigorous evaluations to tell us which interventions are effective at promoting public safety and prisoner reintegration.

Nonetheless, researchers have developed an impressive body of studies that underscore the modest effectiveness of a variety of interventions. Recent reviews and meta-analyses of evaluations of rehabilitative programming (Aos, Miller, & Drake, 2006; Lipsey & Cullen 2007; MacKenzie, 2006; National Research Council, 2007; Petersilia, 2004; Seiter & Kadela, 2003) indicate recidivism can be reduced by 10% to 20% (depending on program design and implementation integrity). The more successful programs include in-prison and jail drug treatment (i.e., therapeutic communities), especially with a community component, cognitive behavioral therapy, vocational education and training programs, employment training and job assistance, and adult basic education. In particular, there is growing consensus that practices focusing on individual-level change, including cognitive change, education, and drug treatment, are likely to be more effective than other strategies, such as programs that increase opportunities for work, reunite families, and provide housing (Andrews & Bonta, 2006; MacKenzie, 2006).

The design of reentry programs is also important. Recent recommendations suggest that programs (a) focus on behavioral outcomes, targeting criminogenic factors and using positive reinforcements; (b) target high-risk offenders; (c) use risk assessment instruments; (d) begin treatment in prison and provide continuity in the community; and (e) provide intensive interventions for at least 6 months (Andrews & Bonta, 2006; Solomon et al., 2008). Thus, the most effective strategies focus on dynamic criminogenic factors, are skill oriented, are based on cognitive/behavioral models, and treat multiple offender deficits simultaneously. Approaches with the largest impact on recidivism, possibly 20% or greater, are likely to require a combination of intensive supervision in the community with mandatory treatment programs tailored to individual needs (Aos et al., 2006; MacKenzie, 2006; Petersilia, 2004; Smith, Gendreau, & Swartz, 2009).

Evaluations also point to what interventions do *not* work. The evidence has been very consistent in establishing that contact-driven supervision, surveillance, and enforcement of supervision conditions have a limited ability to change offender behavior or to reduce the likelihood of recidivism (Aos et al., 2006; MacKenzie, 2006). Individuals placed on parole supervision after prison are no less likely to be rearrested than individuals released with no supervision (Solomon, Kachnowski, & Bhati, 2005). Other programs that have no impact on recidivism include boot camps, some types of sex offender treatment, electronic monitoring, and life skills education (MacKenzie, 2006).

Adding to this body of literature on rehabilitation and reentry programs for reducing recidivism are the results of large prisoner reentry demonstration projects such as the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI). Each SVORI program was locally designed along a variety of dimensions, including the types of services offered, the focus on pre- and post-release components, and the types of individuals to be served (Lattimore & Visher, 2009). Programs varied in terms of what was being provided, when, and to whom. Thus, the SVORI grants provided an opportunity to evaluate the impact of a diversity of reentry programming efforts across the nation. The multisite SVORI evaluation conducted by RTI International and the Urban Institute was the largest examination of prisoner reentry programs ever conducted in the United States. The evaluation collected data on subject characteristics and needs, service receipt, and outcomes with a sample of 2,391 adult and juvenile males and adult females from 12 programs in 14 sites (Lattimore & Visher, 2009).

The SVORI evaluation showed that (a) states could indeed increase services for individuals nearing release, and (b) these service increases were linked to modest improvements in a broad array of postrelease outcomes such as housing, employment, self-reported criminal behavior, and drug use (Lattimore & Visher, 2009). Yet recidivism outcomes (based on official measures) were not significantly improved for adult male SVORI participants. Rearrest rates were high for both SVORI participants and comparison respondents: At 12 months after release, half of both groups had been rearrested (49% of SVORI, 51% of comparisons). And at 12 months 25% of both groups had been reincarcerated (Lattimore, Steffey, & Visher, 2009). It is surprising that the official recidivism results are at odds with improvements in services received and the intermediate outcomes that would be expected to reduce recidivism. Among the possible explanations is that levels of services delivered to the SVORI participants were insufficient, given levels of need.

In all sites, adults participating in SVORI programs received more services and programming, including programs to prepare for release, meeting with a case manager, and receiving a needs assessment than non-SVORI comparisons. However, similar to other studies of reentry programs, SVORI participants experienced considerable "treatment dilution." Adult SVORI participants reported levels of service receipt that were far short of 100%, were substantially lower than their levels of expressed need, and declined substantially after release (Lattimore et al., 2009). For example, having a reentry plan could be considered a core requirement for successful reintegration and a necessary component of any reentry program. At the first interview, conducted 30 days prior to release, 57% of the adult male SVORI program participants reported

having developed a reentry plan—in comparison to 24% of the non-SVORI respondents. Similarly, 73% of adult females in SVORI programs reported having a reentry plan in comparison to 19% of those who were not in a SVORI program (Lattimore, Visser, & Steffey, 2010). The discrepancies in service delivery between what was intended and what was actually provided by the programs, and what was needed and what was actually received by individuals, suggests that programs were not fully implemented. Moreover, service receipt for both SVORI and non-SVORI respondents was highest during incarceration, despite growing knowledge that exiting prisoners are at highest risk for recidivism immediately after release and could benefit from intensive services during that period (National Research Council, 2007; Solomon et al., 2008).

The SVORI evaluation results suggest that a properly and fully implemented program may generate improvements in intermediate outcomes, but the impacts on recidivism may be minimal. Other reentry experts have expressed similar views that poor implementation may explain why criminal justice interventions often fail to produce positive impacts on recidivism (Andrews, 2006; Lowenkamp, Latessa, & Smith, 2006; Rhine, Mawhorr, & Parks, 2006; White, 2007; Wilson & Davis, 2006). Some of the most common implementation problems include ineffective delivery of services, poor matching of individual needs to program content, and failure to incorporate established principles for effective rehabilitative programming. The timing and dosage of service delivery may also be important (Bourgon & Armstrong, 2005; National Research Council, 2007). Thus, greater reductions in recidivism from prisoner reentry programs may only be achieved through attention to implementation issues.

Conclusion

Men and women returning home from prison face formidable and simultaneous challenges, including finding a job and a place to live, locating health services and substance abuse treatment, arranging transportation, rejoining their families, and developing prosocial relationships. Through hundreds of personal interviews conducted in the past decade, we have learned about the experience of leaving prison—the attitudes of returning prisoners, their needs and expectations, and the role of family and community networks in providing support or posing obstacles to their successful reintegration. We have learned about the first weeks and months following release, and the unstable, often chaotic, lives of returning prisoners as they move from home to home, sometimes community to community, as they seek stability. These experiences of the

individuals who leave our prisons should inform our approaches to the development of interventions designed to improve reentry outcomes.

Our knowledge about what works for successful reintegration has also increased dramatically. According to best estimates of the research community, if we could implement effective programs for all returning prisoners with all the resources needed, we could expect recidivism reductions on the order of 15% to 20%; greater reductions may be possible with targeted, community-based strategies. However, the literature is still characterized by methodologically weak evaluations, and many promising interventions have not yet been evaluated, especially those that combine individual- and community-based approaches.

State responses to prisoner reentry have expanded dramatically in the past decade and are embracing promising strategies that create coalitions of community organizations to support returning prisoners (Lattimore, 2007; Visher & Travis, 2011). The federal government needs to continue to support research and evaluation of these promising reentry strategies so that we can move toward policies supporting evidence-based programming. The goal is for state and local practitioners and policy makers to be able to assess their prison- and community-based programs to determine whether they comport to research-based principles of program effectiveness. This shift toward evidence-based policies will be facilitated and accelerated by the creation of the Reentry Resource Center as envisioned by the Second Chance Act (see, <http://www.nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/>).

These improvements in the state of knowledge, and the emerging commitment to evidence-based practices, set the stage for a new era of accountability in which the entities involved in reentry management—public and private agencies alike—can and should be held to standards of recidivism reduction. We can also state with confidence that these programs would be cost-effective—they would pay for themselves by reducing future criminal justice and corrections costs. Finally, the emergence of new models of community-based reentry interventions that mobilize the resources of family, community, and positive networks of formerly incarcerated individuals, in addition to traditional service delivery systems and criminal justice agencies, holds the promise for even greater reductions in new crimes. However, most prisoners in reentry programs receive a low-to-moderate level of services to meet their needs before release from prison. Moreover, the services available in the community are rarely adequate to meet the needs of these individuals in the high-risk period after release. The organizational challenge in implementing this agenda is daunting, as the public and its elected officials must hold coalitions of public and private agencies responsible for increasing the odds of successful reentry by developing effective programs that can meet the needs of former prisoners.

These advances in research knowledge present enormous challenges to the nation. We can now state with considerable confidence that we can intervene in the lives of former prisoners and reduce their failure rates, particularly their rearrest rates. Seen from one perspective, the potential for improvement is modest—perhaps on the order of 20% reductions in recidivism in the cohort leaving prison. But this improvement would represent the prevention of hundreds of thousands of crimes each year. More important, progress on this agenda would help restore to full and productive citizenship hundreds of thousands of men and women who return home to live in free society after paying their debt to society for the crimes they have committed. In a powerful sense, this progress would represent a fuller realization of the ideals of justice.

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