Research Brief

Community re-entry challenges daunt ex-offenders quest for a fresh start

Half of the 36,000 ex-offenders annually released from Illinois prisons return to the greater Chicago metropolitan area, according to a 2003 study on prisoner re-entry. Within three years, 9,000 of these former inmates–40 percent–will face rearrest and return to prison. Of these, the majority will be back behind bars

within the first two years after their release.

The many factors contributing to this high recidivism rate are examined in a research study, "Community Reintegration Trajectories: A Qualitative Comparative Study of Gang-Affiliated and Non-Gang-Affiliated Ex-Offenders."

Researchers conducted six in-depth interviews bimonthly over the course of a calendar year with 39 ex-offenders who recently were released from an Illinois penal facility. Their study concentrated on numeric and qualitative data acquired in baseline and final interviews of participants, separated by about 10 months.

As they struggled to reintegrate themselves into their communities, ex-offenders were questioned about their experiences and attitudes.

According to the study, re-entry has taken on a new significance as more prisoners, who have spent longer terms behind bars and are less prepared for life on the outside, are returning home to socially and economically disadvantaged communities.

Methods and participant characteristics

Ninety percent of this country's prison population of more than two million individuals return home when they are released. Many find the challenges they face to reintegration into society overwhelming. Challenges faced by study participants included:

• Difficulty finding a job in the receiving community.

• Lack of an influential male role model in the receiving household.

• Double minority status, racially and as an ex-convict.

• Issues with parole officers.

• Non-utilization of community social services.

• Contact with the criminal justice system.

• Gang involvement.

Interviewees for the study ranged in age between 21 and 52 years old, with an average age of 36. Most were returning to a poverty-stricken, mainly black community. After 10 months of participation in the project, only 16 remained in the study.

Of the original group, 29 were black, six Latino, and four white. They had served an average of 2.65 prison sentences. The average length of their most recent incarceration was two years.

While 28 percent of participants had no gang involvement, 69 percent either had been involved with or were currently involved with a gang, and 3 percent were unknown. Two participants were married and 22 had at least one child. Ten had either a high school diploma or had obtained a G.E.D.

Interviews covered a wide range of ethnographic topics, including living situation, relationships with family and friends, employment, education, crime, police contact, gang activity, and personal goals and objectives.

Preparing for release

Through a mandatory pre-release "Pre-Start" program, the Illinois

Figure 1
Inmate evaluation of re-entry assistance resources by category
(N=39)
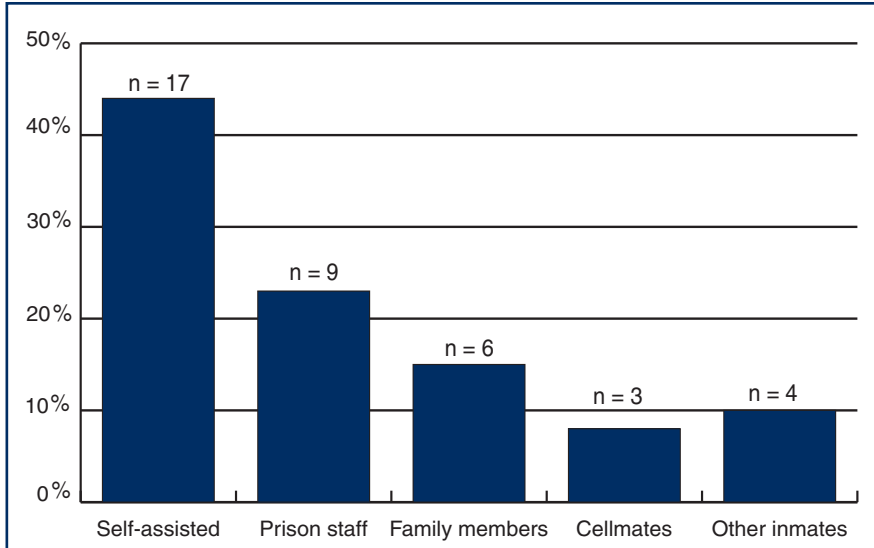
Department of Corrections (IDOC) helps prisoners prepare for difficulties they will face when they leave prison. Inmates may be charged up to $50 to participate in the program. But although 68 percent of the participants were in Pre-Start prior to release, none mentioned it as having helped them prepare to leave prison *(Figure 1)*.

When asked who helped them prepare for re-entry, 44 percent of the participants indicated they had relied only on themselves. Others listed prison staff (23 percent), family members (15 percent), cellmates (8 percent), and other prisoners (10 percent), as having helped prepare them for re-entry.

Getting out: The receiving community
About 40 percent of study participants returned to the neighborhood they left prior to imprisonment. Sixty percent settled in new communities because their families had moved, or because they were placed in halfway housing.

Participants reported that during their first month out of prison, impoverishment and the inability to find work brought them embarrassment and humiliation. The study indicated that scholars and policy makers may overlook everyday hurdles and setbacks ex-offenders encounter on release, when reality and anxieties set in.

Eighteen respondents (49 percent) identified financial difficulty as the worst part of their immediate experiences. Money was needed for such items as food, shelter, personal effects or toiletries, transportation, and personal identification.

One participant trying to apply for college said he felt humiliated when told he had to prove he had been in prison to be eligible for financial aid.

Receiving household: The female influence
Upon release from prison, ex-offenders in the study noted they entered a female-dominated world. Only seven participants identified an influential male in their lives, and nearly all participants reported that their primary, or only, source of money each month came from their mothers and sisters.

When released from prison, the majority of study participants returned to a private residence, typically one headed by or under the authority of a female. Nearly 80 percent reported staying at their mother's house, while the rest stayed with a girlfriend or wife, or at a shelter or halfway house where IDOC had placed them.

The study determined that ex-offenders received stability through material, financial, and moral support from the females in their lives. When responding to questions about who had helped them the most in their return to society, 64 percent identified a woman, usually a mother or sister.

Issues with parole officers
Most study participants (82 percent) were released to the supervision of a parole officer, Of those, 41 percent reported a negative experience, attributed to the officer's "onerous" caseloads; 10 participants (31 percent) expressed ambivalence toward their parole officer due to caseload size and lack of attention; and 28 percent indicated a positive experience due to positive attention paid them, and to feeling respected *(Figure 2)*.

An analysis of negative experience reports suggested they stemmed from three causes. The most often cited cause was the large caseload assignments parole officers handle that limit an officer's ability to interact with a parolee.

In addition, some ex-offenders described their perception that an officer "disrespected" them. Finally, some ex-offenders felt officers were hyper-aggressive in their surveillance of them.

Community attachment
Upon return to the community, ex-offenders were more interested in renewing family and friendship ties to achieve personal and professional goals than they were in soliciting help from individuals or organizations outside of their communities. Only 1 percent of study participants indicated they utilized the services of community-based organizations to secure social welfare assistance or find work.

Research suggests that community attachment and involvement is needed to steer individuals away from crime. Ex-offenders who get involved with community organizations, church or civic associations, or volunteer groups outside their neighborhood can receive additional benefits. These benefits include obtaining knowledge, skills, social cohesion, and job connections that will increase their chances of becoming productive members of society.

Falling through the cracks of assistance

Although some ex-offenders benefit from a strong relationship with their parole officers and the support of loved ones and friends, they generally lack awareness of specific programs that could assist them in securing a stable future.

Friends, post-prison program advocates, and parole officers informed participants of various community resources that could aid ex-offenders. Many study participants, however, reported that they were found ineligible for much-needed assistance.

Reasons given them for denial of aid included having a felony record, being employed, and not having a drug problem. Eligibility requirements for the latter two categories automatically eliminated certain applicants.

Contact with the criminal justice system

In the year following their release from prison, about 40 percent of study participants were arrested for parole violations or low-level offenses such as public intoxication, retail theft, or simple drug possession.

In three separate incidents, three different participants, while driving legally, reported being stopped by police for license plate checks and being held for some time for questioning before being released. During one of these instances a participant was also handcuffed.

Another participant described how he and other shelter residents were, without notice or warning, taken to a police station for questioning, drug testing, fingerprinting, and photographing.

Researchers indicated that incidents of this kind add to feelings of distrust of police and of programs designed to help ex-inmates, and discourage ex-offenders from partaking of opportunities available in the larger society.

Being a double minority

Bearing the double stigma of being a minority and an ex-convict compelled the majority of respondents to find

Figure 2
Experiences on parole (N=32)
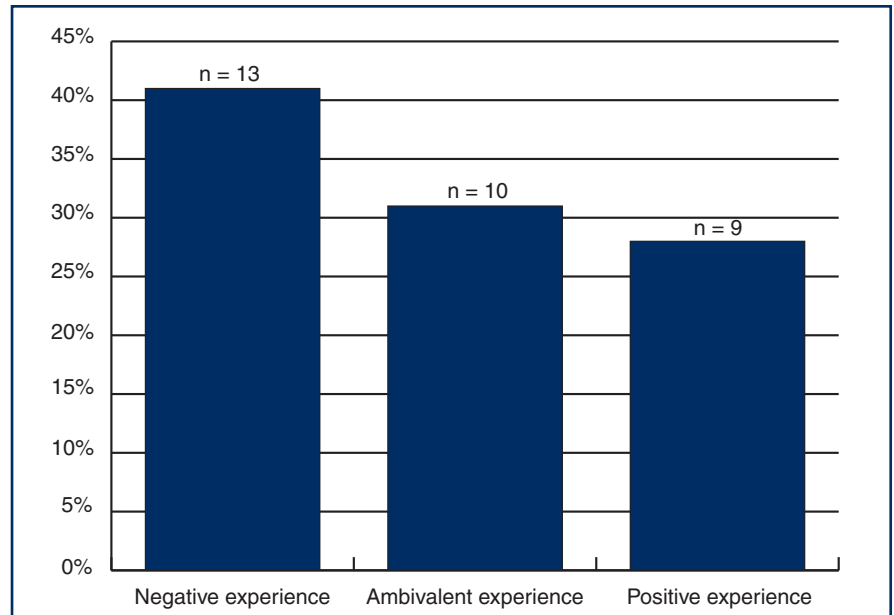
solace and financial assistance in their small networks of family and friends. Recently released inmates spoke about the constant possibility of returning to prison, and of feeling they were under surveillance by their own family members in addition to police.

Making money, achieving status

Researchers noted that achieving and communicating status of various kinds and degrees was one of the central concerns of the ex-offenders. Conspicuous consumption of material goods was seen as one of the many ways they could convey their self-worth to the outside world, and prove it to themselves.

Ex-offenders felt that being able to buy and showcase wares promoted an image of respectability, and "greased the wheels" of their membership in the social world. They wanted association, affiliation, inclusion, and purpose.[1]

Ex-offenders who returned to the same communities they left before prison confronted the same economic conditions generally existing prior to their incarceration. Participants who had a strong desire to secure legitimate employment often had to choose between low-paying full-time employment and being eligible to receive food stamps, medical cards, and housing.

At the start of the study, 38 percent of participants supplemented their income from legitimate work, family contributions, and/or government assistance, with street hustles–legally questionable forms of employment such as selling pirated CDs and DVDs, stolen merchandise, cigarettes, and drugs. Pimping and gambling were other moneymaking ventures.

Despite the likelihood of rejection, most respondents said getting an initial job interview would allow them to explain their situation, giving them a better chance of being hired. However, most were never called for a second interview.

Gang involvement and criminal activity

Research indicates members of gangs commit a disproportionately high share of delinquent and criminal offenses, that they commit more serious offenses than non-gang members, and that they are over-represented in penal facilities.

Gang involvement increases the chances that ex-prisoners will commit offending behavior, and impedes the re-entry process. However, researchers have concluded that the source of much offending behavior stems from a simple need to survive.

Most ex-offenders get money by working at a job, whether it is legiti-

mate, illegitimate, or both. Ex-offenders struggle with the problem of seeking and securing legitimate employment that pays enough to support their livelihood. Most feel they are forced to supplement their legitimate income through illegitimate means.

Studies have shown that unemployment frequently occurs among repeat offenders because incarceration erodes employability, negatively affects legitimate earnings, and causes vocational setbacks that tend to compound over time.[2]

Some ex-offenders turned to street gang involvement dealing drugs as a short-term solution to their poverty. Study participants who joined gangs initially saw them as a viable response to the problems of poverty, institutionalized racism, and their own perceived lack of ability and skills.

This initial view changed as participants came to realize they had joined a group as exploitative as the mainstream institutions of their host community. In the long term, street gang involvement produced effects that worsened problems.

Once they came to realize this, participants' universal response was to adopt an entrepreneurial, aggressively individualist posture within the gang, which only served to exacerbate the problems it was intended to solve.

Gang involvement: Perceived pros and cons

Gang affiliation initially offered ex-offenders emotional stimulation, excitement, and material gain, and gave them a feeling of importance and control over their lives.

The research study outlined several characteristics of street gangs:

• The street gang is both a result and a cause of inequality in inner city areas.

• A gang forms as a response to oppression, but ultimately acts to further oppress its members directly and its host community indirectly.

• Gang members are more likely to be shot or beaten up by members of their own gang rather than by an enemy.

• Gangs foster a climate of inequality and victimization that negatively affects the community they inhabit.

• The "gang" may be more of an imagined community than a material one, as the reasons for gang formation have changed over time.

A noted gang leader interviewed for the research study, said gangs today are based on greed. He indicated that in the '50s and '60s a gang attracted members because it provided them with a sense of belonging they could not find elsewhere. He compared a gang to a fraternity, possessing "an ethical way," and being an "honorable institution."

The gang leader said gang bosses today exploit their new members. He blamed drugs for causing the decay in moral fiber of gang members, charging that drug dealing supplied money for guns, fostered violence, and drove the cycle of greed and exploitation that now characterizes gang membership.

Many study participants said they knew that within a month of leaving prison they could rely on a gang to provide them with employment. They could depend on working for the gang as security, lookouts, transporters of drugs, or drug sellers. This would give them enough money for food, clothing, and shelter.

Ex-offenders also initially thought selling drugs offered them the chance to make a lot of money quickly. But this idea proved illusory: the study determined that most low-level drug dealers made not more than $80 a day for eight to 10 hours of work.

Study participants said eventually they realized that gang membership exploited them, subjected them to violent victimization, handicapped their chances of future employability, spoiled their ties to family, isolated them from friends, and presented them with an increased probability of arrest. They perceived that gang leaders looked down on them, treating them as low-level employees.

Participants became aware of the self-defeating down-side of gang membership, and came to recognize that a working gang thrives on the creation and perpetuation of inequality in its ranks.

Conclusion

This study examined common difficulties ex-offenders face in attempting to reintegrate themselves into their communities. Research indicates that failure to overcome these challenges appears to be a factor in recidivism.

Findings also indicate that ex-offenders initially responded to their criminal history and limited social and economic prospects by placing themselves in tight-knit insular networks of family and close friends. In the short term, this insularity provided them with both material and non-material benefits essential to daily life.

But in the long term, it reinforced their disenfranchisement from community life and the labor market, key domains in a successful re-entry trajectory.

Research has shown that successful re-entry requires ex-offenders to seek help from individuals and organizations that have the capacity to provide assistance and/or employment opportunities. Such resources are usually external to the ex-offenders immediate insular network.

Most ex-offenders chose close ties to family, friends, or gangs above loose ties to people and organizations that had the capacity to mobilize resources on which the ex-offender could capitalize.

In one way or another, ex-offenders in this study expressed the desire "to live more honestly," and to completely overhaul themselves, their lives, their kinship ties, and their views on the world.

Notes

[1] Twitchell, James M. (1999) Lead Us into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism. New York: Columbia University Press.

[2] Fagan, Jeffrey. (1989) "The Social Organization of Drug Use and Drug Dealing Among Urban Gangs," Criminology 27:633-669.