

THE FIRST MONTH OUT
Post-Incarceration Experiences
In New York City

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Executive Summary

People are being released from prison and jail into New York City in record numbers. The New York State Department of Correctional Services (DOCS) releases approximately 25,000 people a year to the city, and the New York City jails release almost 100,000. Given these large numbers, policy makers and researchers have begun to ask critical questions: Are those leaving prison ready for what they are about to encounter? Do they have the skills to navigate a world without bars, where drugs are plentiful, where they will have to compete for jobs, and where their families may not be willing to support them? The stakes are high: the greatest percentage of re-arrests occurs within three months of release, right after the shock of re-entry.

This study sought answers to these questions by following a group of 49 people released from New York State prisons and New York City jails for thirty days to learn what actually happened to them. Vera Institute of Justice staff asked them about their expectations, the release experience itself, reunions with family, attempts to find work, encounters with old friends and neighborhoods, parole supervision, and exposure to drugs and illegal activity. The goal was to gather a wealth of details and impressions about their lives that might reveal patterns in tackling the major challenges of this period—patterns that could suggest future strategies to ensure successful reintegration.

The researchers did find patterns in several areas of the participants' lives. Most of those who landed jobs were either re-hired by former employers or had help from family or friends. Relatively few found new jobs on their own, often because they did not know how to conduct a job search or find employers who would hire ex-offenders. Many were stymied in their attempts to work or apply for public assistance because they lacked basic identification. Many experienced delays in getting drug treatment, because they did not have Medicaid. The majority of people lived with their families and were welcome to stay there indefinitely; those who went to shelters were three times as likely to abscond from parole. Indeed, supportive families were an indicator of success across the board, correlating with lower drug use, greater likelihood of finding jobs, and less criminal activity. For those with some income or family support, parole supervision served as an important external check on substance use and criminal behavior; most people appreciated being monitored.

The authors found that, while the time after release is fraught with problems, it also offers an opportunity to capitalize on most people's strong desire to turn their lives around. But to take advantage of this considerable momentum, people need to be better prepared *before* release. They start the process of connecting with employers who will hire ex-offenders; get the identification they will need to find a job or cash a check; sign up for Medicaid coverage so they can enroll in drug treatment; and assessed and referred for mental health services. Further, their family members could be encouraged and trained to provide crucial support. These pre-release preparations, coupled with the positive effect of monitoring by parole, could greatly improve people's chances of success after they leave prison or jail.

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Introduction

Cal was released from Queensboro Correctional Facility in July 1999, three and a half years after he began a prison term for selling drugs and violating the conditions of his parole from a previous drug conviction.¹

Cal returned to the same neighborhood he came from—one he describes as drug infested. He moved back in with his fiancée and their seven-year-old daughter, as well as his stepdaughter and her son. Finances were already tight: his fiancée is on public assistance, and the family spent four days without electricity because they could not pay the bill. Even the food he had always eaten with his family sat heavy in his stomach after a prison diet.

Despite the hardships, Cal felt fortunate to be with his loved ones again. None of his family members are on drugs, and he considers them a good influence on him. “I missed them a lot,” he said. “And I owe them a lot. They need support.”

Determined to get a job, he immediately started following up on a list of potential employers he had received in his pre-release class in an upstate prison. These were places that supposedly hired ex-offenders. But he worked his way down the list with no success: either the places did not exist or they did not accept parolees. Cal was discouraged but not defeated. He started pounding the pavement every day, sometimes walking long distances because he could not afford the transportation fare. “You gotta look,” he said. “A lot of people expect the jobs to come to them.”

One morning he got up at 6:00, arrived at the unemployment office at 8:30, walked 25 blocks to a hotel that had posted a listing, and was turned down for a job cleaning toilets when he told them he was on parole. Dejected, he went home, cleaned his apartment, and cooked dinner for his family.

His third week out, Cal asked the moving company across the street from his apartment if they had any openings. He did not mention that he was on parole, and they hired him on the spot. His parole officer was thrilled for him and asked only to see pay stubs as evidence of his work. At the end of his first month out, Cal was working two to four days a week, in shifts that could last 16 hours. The work was hard—“I’m tired, it’s a lot of lifting”—but he was trying to log as many hours as possible to qualify for union benefits. He was less worried about the stability of this job once he told his boss about his parole status and discovered that his boss had been on parole too. “I feel good, real good,” he said about having work.

Cal was less sanguine about staying off drugs. Some old friends he still saw were using drugs, and he worried that he would be picked up in the drug sweeps that go on in his neighborhood. He coped with temptation by staying inside with his family as much as he could. Unfortunately, he was not able to get an appointment to be assessed for drug treatment until a month and a half after he got out. His parole officer

¹ All names have been changed to protect participants’ identities.

extended his curfew to 11 p.m. so that, after he is assessed, he can attend evening treatment sessions.

Cal was guardedly optimistic about his future. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 meaning “least likely,” he rated as 2 the possibility that he would end up back in prison. “I’m going to do my best not to go back.”

Cal’s story raises many of the issues that confront the approximately 350 people who are released from prison and jail to New York City daily. His search for work, his reunion with his family, his attempts to stay away from drugs, his return to the same neighborhood and to the same friends with whom he used to associate: these scenarios are played out every day in neighborhoods throughout the city. And there are more dramas than can be contained in any one story. Cal found work by the end of thirty days out; a majority do not. Cal stayed clean through at least thirty days; some do not. Cal’s family gave him crucial support; some families do not. But mining the details of his life during this period lends a texture to the discussion of the problems people face when they get out, and the possible solutions, that no purely statistical survey can convey.

Researchers at the Vera Institute of Justice set out to collect and analyze such detail in the summer of 1999, commissioned by the New York State Task Force on Parole and with support from the Open Society Institute’s Center on Crime, Communities and Culture. By studying a relatively small group of people just released from prison, 49 in all, we hoped to learn not only whether they got jobs, stayed away from criminal activity and drugs, and obeyed the conditions of their parole, but how they did so. Indeed, reviewing the details of 49 stories, we were able to identify patterns of success and failure in finding jobs, feeling satisfied and dissatisfied with parole services, staying clean and relapsing, and staying straight and returning to criminal activity. Some patterns were more clear-cut than others. Where a pattern did not emerge, we noted that too.

The following report is an account, issue by issue, of what we learned from participants about life in the first thirty days after getting out of prison or jail. While there is no magic in looking only at the first month after release, those first days and weeks appear to be critical, with arrest rates for released prisoners highest soon after release and declining over time.² The study showed that the first month is not only a period of difficulties, but also a period of opportunities to get people started on the path to employment, abstinence from drugs, good family relations, and crime-free living.

² See, for example, Allen J. Beck, *Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report: Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1983* (U.S. Department of Justice, 1989).

Description of the Study

The Sample

In consultation with the study's funders, we chose eight incarcerated populations from which to draw participants. We chose these populations because they represented a variety of pre-release experiences and post-release supervision. We then asked the New York City Department of Correction and the New York State Department of Correctional Services (DOCS) to provide lists of inmates from each population who were scheduled to be released in July 1999. From these lists, we selected names at random, except in cases where there were not enough names to do so.

The initial number of participants in each category and the facilities from which they came are as follows:

- 29 felony offenders in general confinement at Albion, Bedford Hills, Queensboro, and Sing-Sing correctional facilities who were released on parole or conditional release
- 11 graduates from Lakeview Shock Incarceration Correctional Facility
- 10 people on work-release at Fulton, Lincoln, and Parkside facilities
- 10 parole violators from the Willard Drug Treatment Campus
- 7 people judicially sentenced to the Willard Drug Treatment Campus
- 7 people serving a sentence of less than a year in New York City jails on Rikers Island
- 4 people serving a sentence of less than a year in New York City jails and who were released on probation (split sentenced)
- 10 people from the High-Impact Incarceration Program (HIIP) for parole violators on Rikers Island.

Forty-nine of the 88 people selected, or 56 percent, completed the study. General felony offenders, people from work release facilities, shock graduates, and women were most likely to remain in the study. Despite this trend, the initial and final samples are virtually identical in terms of the length of time people were incarcerated as well as their average age, gender, and the crimes they committed. (The average length of time in both prison and jail for the state-sentenced participants was two and a half years. The average length of stay on Rikers Island was four months, with the exception of the HIIP people who all served two months.)

| | Original Participants | | Final Participants | |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------|----|--------------------|----|
| Average age | 35 years | | 34 years | |
| Sex | M | F | M | F |
| | 65 | 23 | 33 | 16 |
| Drug sale | 43 (49%) | | 26 (53%) | |
| Drug possession | 17 (19%) | | 11 (22%) | |
| Property crime (burglary, larceny) | 17 (19%) | | 5 (11%) | |
| Robbery | 3 (3.5%) | | 3 (6%) | |
| Assault | 2 (2.5%) | | 2 (4%) | |
| Weapons possession | 2 (2.5%) | | 0 | |
| YO ³ drug offenses | 2 (2.5%) | | 0 | |
| YO assault | 1 (1%) | | 1 (2%) | |
| Contempt | 1 (1%) | | 1 (2%) | |
| TOTAL | 88 | | 49 | |

Process

Those who completed the study—and whose experiences form the basis of this report—were each interviewed seven times. The first interview took place in the jail or prison where the person was incarcerated about two weeks before his or her release date. Each person, with the exception of the Rikers inmates and the HIIP participants, had been told in advance by prison officials what the survey was about and had agreed to meet with an interviewer to hear more. This initial interview lasted about an hour and covered personal history, pre-release planning, and expectations for the future. A copy of this questionnaire and the six others used during the study are attached as an appendix.

The second interview occurred at the moment of release—for many participants, when they got off a bus in New York City—and lasted about ten minutes. The questions focused on where people were going, how much money they had, and what their expectations were.

The third interview took place 24 to 48 hours after release. It was the first in a series of four nearly identical weekly interviews. The questions addressed job searching, sources of income, relations with family, housing, substance use and illegal activity, and visits with parole officers. At the end of each interview, we asked people to describe what they did the day before and on the previous Saturday. These interviews lasted about 45 minutes.

The final interview occurred between 30 and 35 days after release. In addition to the questions in the previous weekly interviews, this one included several forward-looking questions

³ The defendant had “youthful offender” status.

about what life would be like in the next month and whether the person expected to remain in the community or return to prison. Afterwards, participants were paid \$140 (\$20 per interview) and given a copy of *Connections*, a free guide to resources for ex-offenders returning to New York City published by the New York Public Library.

With few exceptions, the same person conducted all the interviews with a given participant. People were interviewed in settings that were comfortable and convenient for them—their homes, local restaurants, parks, and occasionally at their parole office, drug treatment program, workplace, or the Vera Institute.

Information in this report is based entirely on what people told us about their activities. We did not verify any of their answers. Interviewers made judgments about people’s honesty based on sustained contact with them in a variety of settings. There were only a few instances in which interviewers suspected participants were not telling the truth.

In addition to the 49 participants from New York City, Vera researchers conducted one focus group with parolees in Rochester, and one with parolees in Albany. The purpose of these groups was to see if the experiences of people released from prison elsewhere in New York State varied in obvious and important ways from the experiences of people returning to New York City. Significant differences are noted in the report.

The Moment of Release

The bus from Lakeview Shock Incarceration Facility pulled into the Port Authority Terminal shortly after midnight. Upon arriving, Joelle told her platoon-mate Natalie she had “some business to take care of uptown.” Natalie tried to convince her friend to give herself a chance—to hold-off getting high until after tomorrow’s meeting with her parole officer—but Joelle seemed unswayed as she got into a cab alone and Natalie went home with her parents. Natalie did not see Joelle at the parole office the following day. They did not meet again for ten days, when Joelle stopped Natalie on the street to ask for money.

As this brief sketch illustrates, the moment of release presents mixed opportunities: it can be an occasion for a joyful family reunion—perhaps the first step toward becoming part of family life again—or a first chance to resume old habits. Ultimately, each person must choose among competing courses of action, but the release process itself can influence those decisions.

A clear way to influence people is to intervene immediately and directly, to actually meet them as they step off the bus or exit a facility. Yet we found that most people leaving prison and jail—fifty out of the 66 we interviewed on release—re-enter the community alone. Among those

who were met, 11 connected with family members, one with a friend, and four were met by representatives of social service programs.

These immediate connections with family, friends, or community-based organizations relieve some of the fear, loneliness, and confusion many people feel when they emerge from prison and jail. For example, a woman in our study who had been incarcerated for several years and who had no one to meet her described her embarrassment when a bus driver snatched her farecard out of her hand and swiped it for her because she did not know how to use it. Many programs in New York City can help ex-offenders adjust to life in the community, but they usually wait for people to contact them. A representative from the Minority Task Force on AIDS who met an inmate in our study acknowledged the benefits of greeting people as they are released. “Those who go home first, I never see them. But those who come with me straight to the office, we keep.”

Unfortunately, release procedures at some facilities work against making these connections. When people return to the city late at night, for example, relatives and program representatives are less likely to meet them. Parents like Natalie’s who go to Port Authority at 12:30 a.m. are the exception, not the rule. It is a long trip from the Lakeview Shock Incarceration facility near Lake Erie to New York City. If people leave in the afternoon, as the bus did on the day we scheduled our interviews, they arrive late at night. Inmates from upstate prisons who return to the city on commercial buses and trains may also arrive late at night. People leaving Albion, for example, can arrive in the city at 6 p.m., but only if they catch a series of buses. Otherwise, as we observed one night, they arrive at Port Authority at 1 a.m. Transporting the people going to New York City from far-away prisons at night—so they arrive in the city early the next morning—is one possible solution.

Releasing people at night also postpones their access to parole and public services that take clients only during the day. One woman we interviewed described her concern about getting emergency cash and food stamps immediately. Because she returned to the city during working hours, she was able to go straight to the welfare office. Heroin addicts who receive methadone in jail need quick access to a clinic when they are released. We interviewed one man who left a Rikers Island facility at 3 a.m. and had to wait several hours to get methadone. He told us he planned to “hang out” until the clinic opened. We never found him again. Maybe Joelle would have made a different choice if she had been able to visit her parole officer as soon as she got off the bus. She might have found out about treatment options, and she would have met a representative from the Center for Employment Opportunities, a supported work and job development agency that enrolls every shock graduate.

Men leaving New York City-run jails are routinely released at night. Even though participants of the High Impact Incarceration Program on Rikers Island graduate early in the afternoon, they were not released until 10:30 on the night we interviewed them. Most of the families who had attended the graduation ceremony did not wait for their relative to be released. Men released after serving a sentence on Rikers Island are dropped at Queens Plaza between 2 a.m. and 4 a.m. Although the plaza is a major transportation hub—subway lines lead to most parts of the city—at night prostitutes, pimps, and drug dealers frequent the street and two nearby

doughnut shops. Most of the inmates we observed headed for a 24-hour store that sells cigarettes and beer, or to one of the doughnut shops.

Unknown or unpredictable arrival times and destinations also make it more difficult for families and others to connect with people as they leave a facility or enter the city. The bus from Willard Drug Treatment Campus left at 6 a.m. and arrived in the city around 2 p.m. on the days we planned to interview people released from that facility, but because it made several unscheduled stops in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and the Bronx, we had trouble connecting with people. (We have been told that the bus from Willard now stops only at the parole office in Manhattan.) Families and program representatives who were hoping to meet people must have been equally confused. Similarly, while female inmates are released from the Rose M. Singer facility on Rikers Island during working hours, it may be difficult for some families and program representatives to meet them because they are told that people will be released any time between 7 a.m. and 2 p.m.—although on the days we interviewed people from this facility everyone was released between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m.

Our focus on problems associated with nighttime and unpredictable releases does not mean they are the norm, at least among state facilities. The state prisons located in New York City from which we drew survey participants —Queensboro, Lincoln, Fulton, and Parkside— released people at set times in the late morning. Two of the 14 inmates from Queensboro whom we interviewed were met by program representatives who had been told when and where these people would be released. Prisons outside but closer to the city release inmates in time for them to arrive at Grand Central Station during working hours. Men leaving Sing Sing are taken by van to the local train station and arrive in New York City by early afternoon. Bedford Hills, a women’s facility, also releases people in the morning, in time for them to catch an early train to Grand Central Station.

Family and Friends

Families

After leaving Queensboro Correctional Facility, Wes went to live with his godmother and his sister Charmane. At first his family was distant yet watchful, even suspicious. Wes realized he had to regain their trust. After weeks of sharing a small apartment, Wes and his sister became closer. He spent most of his time with Charmane and her children, either at home or skating in the park. By the end of the study, they had begun making plans to move out of their godmother's apartment and into their own place.

For the vast majority of people we interviewed, families play a large role in their lives during the first thirty days after they leave prison or jail. Families provide critical material support—housing, food, and, to a lesser extent, income—and some also offer emotional support, in the form of acceptance and encouragement. Their support is strongly correlated with a person's success in the month after release.

Housing

Two days after release, most people we interviewed—40 out of 49—were living with a relative or with their spouse or partner. And few of them—only five—viewed their living arrangement as temporary or uncertain. Although many people talked about establishing their own home eventually, when asked how long they could stay with their families, most people replied, “as long as I want,” or words to that effect. In fact, only two people moved out of their family homes during the study. One man was able to move into his own home because he belonged to a union and found high-paying work right away. Another left his sister's crowded apartment with help from the Minority Task Force on AIDS. He established a connection with this nonprofit agency while he was incarcerated at Queensboro Correctional Facility.

Where People Are Living Two Days After Release

| | |
|-------------------------------|-----------|
| With Family | 40 |
| With Friends | 1 |
| On their Own | 2 |
| In a Shelter | 5 |
| In Residential Drug Treatment | 1 |
| TOTAL | 49 |

Not everyone had a home to return to or could stay with relatives or friends. Among the 49 people who completed the study, five were living in shelters when we interviewed them two days

after release. Resuming life in the community was more difficult for them. Presumably, they have few or no natural supports; otherwise, they would be living with family or friends. Also, the shelter environment is not conducive to staying away from drugs.

Emmett said the shelter he lived in was “disgusting. The bathrooms don’t work. Half the people aren’t registered there. They climb in through the window at night and deal and use drugs.” He shared a room with 19 people who had agreed to keep their area separate: they cleaned their room and did not use drugs. Finding permanent housing was the hardest thing for him. “To get housing, I learned you gotta have a lot of money or be on public assistance, and the second way takes forever...I can go live places, but either there are alcohol and drugs there, or the rent is astronomical.” At the end of the study, Emmett was still waiting for public housing and expected to be at the shelter for at least two more months.

It takes someone like Emmett with a great deal of resolve to resist such an environment while living in it. Fortunately, the other four people who were in shelters were able to move out of them and into more stable housing during the month. Two moved into the transitional housing with the help of the Women’s Prison Association and an unidentified social service program; one found her own place, also through the Women’s Prison Association; and one moved in with her family. A quick look at all the people who expected to go directly from jail or prison to a shelter suggests that most of those who do not get out of shelters quickly succumb to the environment. During the pre-release interviews, 13 people said they expected to live in a shelter. Eight of them dropped out of the study, most within a week. And they were more than seven times more likely to abscond from parole during the month.⁴

Beyond Shelter

Individuals who lived with their families also typically ate with them. People regularly described these shared meals and included them in accounts of their daily activities. For example, one woman described an afternoon spent grocery shopping with her mother, returning home to put away the food, and then preparing the evening meal. After dinner, she stayed home to watch television and spend time with her family.

About half the people living with relatives also received some financial support from them. These contributions remained stable, even while income from other sources—savings from a prison job and income from recent employment—rose and fell.⁵ Other families were not able to

⁴ Five out of the 13 people (38 percent) who reported, prior to release, that they were going to a shelter absconded from parole supervision, compared with only 4 of the 75 (5 percent) who did not report going to a shelter.

⁵ Eight people reported income from prison employment two days after release. By the end of the month, only one person had savings remaining from these jobs. By contrast, over time more people reported income from other sources, particularly new jobs (see next section on employment). Family contributions

give money to relatives returning from jail or prison. One person told us his mother turned to *him* for support when he got out. Several people said their families withheld or severely rationed “walking-around money” because they were afraid the person would spend it on drugs.

For some families, support also meant actively encouraging abstinence from drugs. Two people told us that family members accompanied them to Narcotics Anonymous meetings. One of these families also dispatched various younger family members to accompany the person whenever he left the house—another way to discourage temptation to use drugs. For Hugo, a disapproving look from his uncle one evening was enough to curb his appetite for drugs.

They were sitting on the building stoop, playing dominoes with men from the neighborhood. People were sharing beers and then someone passed around a joint. When it came to Hugo, he put it to his lips without thinking. In the same moment, he saw his uncle look directly at him and shake his head. Without smoking it, Hugo passed the joint on to the next guy.

Families with connections often helped people find work. Even before Marc got out of prison, he had received ten job offers—the result of active networking by his family and his own solid skills as a mechanic. The job he accepted paid \$400 a week. Chris’s family gave him a job paying \$450 a week in their own auto repair shop. Antonio’s cousin helped him land a job renovating a house nearby.

To further investigate how families influence people’s lives, we developed two scales to measure and then correlate family strength and individual success. At each interview, we asked people to rate the level of family support—as they defined it—on a scale from 1 to 5. On one occasion, we also asked them to answer several questions designed to reveal degrees of family cohesion, and to say whether or not any family members use drugs and whether or not the family accepted phone calls from the person while he or she was in prison. Higher scores on our Family Strength Index indicate stronger and more active family relationships. Our other scale, the Individual Success Index, measures success using the following criteria: having a job, staying away from illegal activity and drug use, making new friends, and securing stable housing (where stable means the person expects to stay there six months or longer).

We found that total family strength scores correlate strongly with total individual success scores.⁶ In other words, people with strong, supportive families are more likely to succeed than those with weak or no family support. By separately analyzing aspects of each scale, we also found that self-defined family support was the strongest predictor of individual success, although drug use in the family and communication during incarceration also influenced a person’s success.

may have remained steady despite increasing employment rates because participants were working only sporadically or because the steady jobs they landed were low paying and/or part-time.

⁶ The R-squared = .240 and the p-value is .0003.

These rough analyses back up what people told us: that once they have their family's acceptance, they feel confident enough to develop new relationships and begin planning for the future. Indeed, judging from the stories we heard, acceptance may be the most valuable contribution a family can make. The people who found jobs, stayed away from drugs, made new friends, and felt optimistic about the future were the ones who talked most about their family's acceptance of them.

Of course not every family welcomes their relative home with open arms. Some people, including nineteen-year-old Reggie, told us that their families could not get past a feeling of deep disappointment—at least during the first month.

Reggie planned to move in with his parents and had told them when he would be released. He certainly expected them to be home that day, although perhaps asleep since his bus would arrive after midnight. He was surprised and hurt to find their house locked and apparently empty. He later found out they had gone to Disneyland. Reggie slept on their doorstep that night because he was afraid his parole officer would come by to check on him. In the morning, he went to visit his grandmother, who let him in but refused to hug him. When he started to cry, she said, "You did this to yourself." After his family returned from their vacation, they let Reggie stay in their house but by the end of the month still had not given him a key.

Most people without strong and supportive families need more than food and shelter to succeed. They need replacements for the healthy, supportive families they lack, people who will accept and encourage them.

Friends

Amos spent three months in Willard for dealing and using drugs. When he returned to his neighborhood, he began hanging out with old friends. None of them dealt drugs but they all smoked marijuana. Although Amos was worried about rekindling these friendships, he was also afraid of being alone—the only alternative in his mind. He was surprised and relieved when his friends respected his desire to stay clean. They never offered him marijuana and did not smoke when he was around. He was occasionally tempted—just knowing drugs were within reach—but felt confident his friends would not allow him to risk violating his parole by failing a drug test.

Antonio began smoking marijuana again on his birthday. He and an old friend celebrated by sharing a forty-ounce bottle of malt liquor and a blunt. He told us it was “just like old times.”

Reuniting with old friends, particularly people with whom drugs were shared and other crimes committed, may, as it did for Antonio, prompt a return to old habits. Parole officers routinely discourage or even prohibit such relationships precisely to prevent relapse.

Whether old friends bring people down or, as Amos’s did, respect new behavior, most people in our study—34 of the 49—met up with them when they went home.

Fifteen people chose to avoid these friends. Some completely ignored them; others told us they would say hello and keep walking. A little over half of them reported feeling lonely and isolated as a result. Prison and jail inmates are constantly surrounded by people. Even if they resent the lack of privacy, to leave the facility and be totally alone is a shock, one that many find hard to handle.

Curtis avoided his old friends and had no new friends. When he was not working, Curtis went alone to a park or to the beach. On weekends he had meals with his family but often reported feeling lonely. Toward the end of the month, Curtis was between jobs and low on money but said that he could not ask his family or anyone else for help. Shortly after the study ended, Curtis was re-arrested for shoplifting.

It is important to note that not all old friends represent drug use and crime. For Kyle and Emmett, associating with some people they knew before being incarcerated carried advantages.

Kyle’s neighborhood is filled with people who knew him and looked out for him. Whenever the interviewer met Kyle in the local park, several older men and women came up to him and asked how he was doing. Two of them ended up hiring him as the chef at their family barbecues—his only jobs that month.

Since Emmett lived in a shelter, it was difficult for prospective employers to reach him—and he might not have wanted them to know where he lived. His friend June let Emmett give out her number and then took messages for him. Emmett also spent a lot of time with June and her husband at their house, which got him out of the shelter and relieved some of his loneliness.

By the end of the month, 17 people who saw old friends reported receiving valuable material or emotional support from them, while 12 said their friends were unhelpful. The other five people who saw old friends either would not make a judgment or would not answer the question.

Many people—30 out of the 49 who completed the study—reported making at least one new friend during the past month, many through their jobs. While the effort to establish new relationships is a good sign, we know very little about how these associations influenced people. But based on the information we did collect, it would be a mistake to view new friends as saviors. For example, three out of five people who admitted drinking alcohol during the month did so in order to “fit in” with new friends.

Employment

Finding Jobs

“Staying employed keeps me from trouble. I cope by working, staying out of trouble, and leading a life.” –Jerry

The number-one concern for most of the people in the study was landing a job. Throughout the month, people consistently were more preoccupied with finding work than avoiding drugs and other illegal activity or staying in good health, for example.⁷ By the end of the month, more than a third (18 of the 49) had found full or part-time jobs in the mainstream labor market.

Three people worked as messengers. Three did renovation and construction. Two worked as auto mechanics. And one person held each of the following jobs: telemarketer, stockroom clerk, part-time mover, unionized welder, painter, part-time department store cashier, factory worker, cashier at Au Bon Pain, night manager at McDonald’s, part-time housecleaner.⁸

In addition to those who found regular jobs, six people reported odd jobs, for which they were paid small amounts of money off the books. One man set up and cooked at two neighborhood barbecues. Another man occasionally fixed cars. One found a few plumbing and custodial jobs in his neighborhood. One reported unloading a truck once. And one person worked twice as a carpenter. All of these reports seemed credible, with the exception of the man who said he was paid to unload a truck. His story seemed suspicious because the interviewer suspected he was dealing drugs again.

⁷ During each interview, participants were asked to rate their concern about several issues on a scale from 1 to 5, ranging from “not at all concerned” to “extremely concerned.” Finding a job had a 2.9 rating across the surveys, the highest of any concern.

⁸ Because the focus of this section is on searching for work, people on Center for Employment Opportunity (CEO) work crews are not included in the numbers we report. Five of the 49 participants were on CEO work crews at the end of 30 days. Everyone enrolled in CEO gets paid, transitional work immediately. They work four days a week and on the fifth day look for independent, permanent employment with help from a CEO job developer. Placement on CEO crews provides people with constructive work and teaches good work habits--certainly no less than any job we did report. CEO and similar programs provide a valuable path to employment, as discussed later in the report.

There are some differences between people who got regular jobs and those who did not. Everyone who found a job had prior work experience, and seven of them were employed when they were arrested. All were under 40, and they reported significantly stronger family support than those who did not find jobs—further evidence that strong families positively influence people coming out of jail and prison.⁹ People with some college education were also more likely to get jobs. Eight of the 49 people who completed the study had taken at least one college-level course, and all but one of them landed a job during the month. Having a high school diploma, however, was not positively correlated with getting a job.

Aside from these demographic indicators, we identified two paths to employment in the first month. These patterns may be more useful from a policy perspective than demographics because they suggest useful job search strategies that can be taught, preferably before people are released.

The Quick Route: Getting the Old Job Back or Using Friends

Within roughly two weeks after release, nearly three-quarters (12 out of 18) of those who got jobs during the month had already been hired. Of the 12, eight took a job they had held in the past.¹⁰ That their employers were willing to rehire them—despite a criminal record—suggests they were good employees. The jobs may not be the best they could get, but like Larry, who went back to his old messenger job, many of them decided that any job is better than being unemployed.

“I can definitely get a better job. I’ve got skills, I can type. But there’s no point in trying to get one now, there’s no stability....I have got to have patience. I have to realize I’m coming from prison. I know not everyone has a job. Even if I’m stuck on stupid, I’m able to buy shoes, treat myself, pay rent. I’ve never done these things before.”

The other four people who found jobs quickly did so through family and friends. People did not necessarily view these as perfect jobs either but as something to hold on to until they could look for a better position.

Maggie got a job in her second week out. Friends from her building approached her and asked her if she wanted a job cleaning apartments in the building one day a week. The hours were few but regular. Near the end of the month, Maggie had heard about a midtown hotel that was hiring cleaning staff. Figuring that she knew how to do the job, she applied. When the study ended, she had not received a final response from the hotel.

⁹ Those with jobs had a mean response of 4.6 on a 1-to-5 scale of perceived family helpfulness, while those without jobs had a mean response of 3.8. The difference between these means is statistically significant at the .05; the p-value is .0190.

¹⁰ The eight includes two work-release participants who continued their jobs after leaving prison. The other five work-release participants in the study were not able to keep their jobs.

The Slower Route: Searching Alone or with Help from Employment Programs

After two weeks out, the pace of finding jobs slowed down dramatically. Only six people were hired during the second half of the month. They all found new jobs, a few of them through personal connections. Three searched somewhat randomly on their own; the other three used employment programs that specialize in helping ex-offenders.

Job searching with little or no assistance takes time, effort, and perseverance. In addition to Cal, whose story introduces this report, two other people pounded the pavement for weeks, then finally found work. Althea hoped to get help through a welfare-to-work program and the New York City Training, Assessment, and Placement program, commonly called TAP, but when she saw that she was “much more qualified than the people around me,” she decided to strike out on her own. She answered classified ads and approached local stores and restaurants. She finally got a job as a department store cashier, after passing a math test and a drug test. Emmett found his job as a night manager at McDonald’s in much the same way.

For people with few or no connections, partnering with a specialized employment agency can make the search much easier. These agencies help people assess their skills and organize the process, and they refer people to employers who are willing to hire ex-offenders. The Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) and Wildcat Services Corporation, two New York City nonprofits that serve ex-offenders, helped the other three people get jobs. Two of these people got their jobs at the end of the month. This is because working with an agency takes time. Everyone has to go through an orientation and skills assessment before a search can begin.

Some approaches to pounding the pavement are sensible and productive, while others are haphazard at best. Helping people assess their skills, plan a search strategy, and learn how to approach and follow up with employers before they are released would expedite the process for many and boost their confidence. Study participants said making connections with businesses that employ parolees would be most helpful. (One well-respected program in another state begins linking employers with inmates shortly before they are released.) Everyone would not need such services. Some have strong connections or know how to find a job quickly, and other people will not be interested.

Still Unemployed

The demographic traits of the 31 people who finished the study but did not find jobs are dramatically different from those who did. They were older (37 compared with 30).¹¹ The majority (23 of 31) were unemployed at the time of arrest, and about half of these people (13) had not worked in a long time, if ever. The 13 long-term unemployed are men and women over 40, many of whom also have long-standing substance abuse problems and conveyed little confidence in their ability to find a job.

¹¹ The difference in the mean ages is statistically significant—at the .01 level, a strong number. The p-value is .0087.

When asked to describe her employment history, a 45-year-old woman said “In my twenties I worked. Then I was a housewife. Then I was on SSI.” Another woman, nearly fifty, had last worked ten years ago in a bra factory. A fifty-year-old man had no work for twenty years and had never held a job longer than six months. Another man worked at Chemical Bank long ago but had been on public assistance most of his life. We identified three patterns among those who were still unemployed at the end of the study: looking without success, postponing the search, and not looking.

Looking Without Success

Five unemployed people did try to find a job, although most of them were conducting uninformed searches. One woman with clerical skills went to countless offices and could not find any employers willing to hire an ex-offender. Another applied at several places and went on some interviews, to no avail. One man who started off strong, applying for several jobs quickly, sank into inertia when none of these employers called him back. Another was waiting for his parole officer to find him something, and when he realized that was not the officer’s job, he began applying at various lumber yards in a haphazard way. Another filed applications once a week but never followed up. Near the end of the month, he mentioned a job training program but did not know whether or even how to enroll.

Ignorance about how to find or use a job training program is typical. Fifteen participants said they had heard about job training or job development programs but, aside from the people required to enroll in CEO, only four actually used them.

None of the people in the study who were looking for work identified lack of transportation as a barrier to employment. But based on comments we heard during the focus groups we held with ex-offenders in Rochester and Albany, people returning to smaller cities will likely confront the issue. In Rochester, and to a lesser extent in Albany, jobs for low-skilled or unskilled workers were located in areas either not accessible by public transportation or accessible only during the day and early evening. And many parolees with access to cars are not allowed to drive.

Postponing the Search

Many participants in our survey told us they could not even think about beginning a job search until they “got their life together.” They wanted to take care of what they viewed as more fundamental problems. Some people had to open cases at the Division of AIDS Services; some had to find a place to live; one 19-year-old who had been in school at Rikers wanted to complete his GED; one man was in residential drug treatment and would be for several months. Some wanted to complete their applications for public assistance, including Medicaid, which required repeated visits to the welfare offices. Many in this group were HIV positive and were concerned about getting insurance and medical attention. Two women spent a fair amount of time in family court, trying to regain custody of their children. While they did not reject the idea of work, it was not their priority at the time. As they began to settle other issues, they started talking about jobs.

Living in a shelter with no source of income and recently diagnosed HIV positive, Tonya could not think about getting a job. She wanted to find stable housing and deal with health care first. She was running low on medication and needed to figure out how to get her prescriptions refilled. She also wanted to work on a résumé, and assess her skills to know what type of job to look for. Only then could she begin an active job search. One by one, Tonya completed these tasks. When the study ended, she had moved into transitional housing, was nearly finished with her welfare application, and had replenished her medication. Two weeks later, after the study ended, Tonya called to say, “I just wanted you to know, I’ve found a job.”

Two women claimed they wanted to work, but could not because they were attending drug treatment programs several hours a day for several days a week.

Just Not Interested

Twelve people had fewer treatment sessions to attend and less entanglement in social service systems, yet still were not looking for work. Many, like Charlie and Maya, said they were too busy to look, but accounts of their days do not support their claims. They may have been lazy, distracted, or afraid. Whatever the reason, they gave no indication that they planned to look for work any time soon.

Charlie told his interviewer he had “too many appointments” to look for work, but then described the previous day’s activities as follows: “Woke up at 6:30 a.m., did push-ups, took medication, watched TV, then went outside to look at girls all day. Went to sleep 11 p.m.”

Maya claimed that she was too busy with her mandated programs to look for a job. Yet her daily logs indicate that after moving from a shelter to a private room, she spent most of her days walking around near Chelsea Piers, where she took in free concerts and people-watched.

No single portrait fits all the people who appeared uninterested in working. Charlie and Maya are among the over-forty, long-term unemployed people mentioned earlier (another portion of that group was going to drug treatment and dealing with social services). Other older people had recent job experience that would have helped them get a new job. Several younger people had no interest in looking for work, one because he was concentrating on recording a rap album that he hoped would propel him to stardom.

A few people said they were not looking because if a parolee is offered a job at all it will be a very low-paying, undesirable position, which they would not accept. Gerald described a long job search the last time he came home from prison. Because he found nothing, he went back to drug

dealing. This time around he is not even looking, and suggested he might be too proud to get a job:

“Some people tell you ‘Something’s better than nothing.’ OK for them maybe. New York is the only place I have trouble getting a job. There should be more seven- and eight-dollar-an-hour jobs, not this bullshit \$150 a week.”

Like others in our study, Gerald was used to making hundreds to thousands of dollars a week selling drugs. The shift in lifestyle is jarring. But most participants, unlike Gerald, were struggling to accept the change.

Substance Abuse and Other Illegal Activity

Alcohol and Drug Abuse

Nearly all the people who completed the study—46 out of 49— told us they had abused alcohol or used illicit drugs the year before they were incarcerated. A minority, about one out of every five who had used drugs, described their habit as “no problem.” At the other extreme, fully half of the group said they had used drugs more than once a day and labeled their habit “an extremely serious problem.”

Staying Clean

Returning to the outside world and facing situations that used to trigger drug use makes relapse very tempting. Moreover, many people feel anxious and stressed out—feelings they used to quell by getting high. Despite these pressures, the vast majority of former drug users in our study told us they managed to stay clean during their first month out. While we made no attempts to confirm their stories, they were nearly always consistent with what we observed over the course of several lengthy interviews.

Many people could identify clear reasons for staying clean. One woman wanted to maintain her relationship with her fiancé, who does not use drugs. Two others did it for their children. Some people who are HIV positive wanted to protect their health. One woman just does not like the way she acts when she is high. Several people mentioned the pressure of regular drug tests by parole.

“Heroin is very physical. Your body wants it. Your stomach is turning. But then the P.O. comes in my mind, and he might take a drug test.” – Hugo

Unfortunately, the strategies many people used to stay clean cannot be sustained for very long.

Kim spent most of her time inside smoking cigarettes and watching movies. Whenever she got money, she immediately spent it to avoid having cash on hand that she could use to buy drugs. She even window-shopped in advance, to pick out what she would buy.

Perhaps, Kim's instincts, not the tricks she plays on herself, will help her in the long run. Once Kim had such a strong urge to use that she went to see a friend she knew was getting high. When she saw her friend high, Kim was so disgusted she left. Another woman described a similar experience. Her sister was using drugs. When she saw how terrible her sister looked, the woman realized that was how she used to look and it strengthened her resolve to stay clean.

Relapsing

Seven former substance abusers who completed the study reported relapsing: four used drugs and three drank alcohol. Although other people reported drinking alcohol recreationally, only those who were identified as problem drinkers were considered to have relapsed. In addition, we know of four people who dropped out of the study and who then relapsed. While there may be others, serious substance abusers were not more likely to leave the study than anyone else. The pre-incarceration drug habits of the initial sample and the group who completed the study were nearly identical.

The seven people who relapsed have little in common, but one indicator stands out: weak family bonds. Most of the people who relapsed (five out of seven) had lower overall scores on the Family Support Index compared with those who stayed clean. They scored particularly low on the togetherness and support components of the index, which suggests that spending time with family and receiving emotional support can help keep people away from drugs and alcohol, at least shortly after release.

One man had no family at all and his friends were drug users who did not support his attempts to stay clean. Four others, including Curtis, maintained distant relationships with their families—although their families provided housing, food, and/or cash at some point during the month.

Curtis's sister let him stay with her after he was released, but he never felt comfortable there and moved out a week later. Over the month, he saw his father and brother but he did not get along with either of them. He never connected with his mother—even though she lived in the city—and was out of touch with his son, who is in high school. By the end of the month, his new girlfriend was breaking up with him for being too possessive—he has a history of domestic violence—and he was drinking every day.

The two youngest people who relapsed—both men in their twenties who started smoking marijuana again—were in a somewhat different situation. Both reported being part of a close-knit family. However, their families apparently had little influence over what they did.

For five out of the seven, relapse did not prevent them from getting a job. One might argue that their focus on work instead of recovery facilitated their relapse, but they did not suggest that working directly interfered with treatment. They simply were not interested in attending treatment sessions. The other two people who relapsed—who were also the most serious drug users and the oldest of the seven—were not working.

Getting Treatment

Thirty-five people reported attending at least one treatment session by the end of the study. Most had been required to attend treatment, although some went voluntarily. The reactions to mandated treatment among those who enrolled during the study varied considerably. A few people, including Emmett, found treatment extremely helpful.

Emmett, a recovering heroin addict, was enrolled in three different treatment programs. He never missed a meeting, even though he worked at night. Emmett used treatment to fill up his free time, and he made new friends through each program. "I'm content because it's given me my life back. It's made me better myself and get my self-esteem back."

More people, however, found little value in treatment. Those who were heavy users before they were incarcerated said that sitting in a classroom with other addicts and talking about how good it feels to get high only stimulated their appetite for drugs.

"I don't want to be in no N.A. room, reciting stories, hearing other people talking about it. That's like playing a videotape in my mind. Rewind, rewind. Sometimes you need guidance, but I don't always want to talk about it. You start thinking, 'That was a beautiful high, I want to try a bag, just half a bag.' I try to block that." – Kyle

A few felt that they did not have a problem and did not need to spend time in treatment.

Tim used to smoke marijuana recreationally but says he has not missed it since he went to prison. He was required to attend a treatment program. Although he did not mind listening to the stories the recovering addicts told and giving them advice, he did not want to go every week. He worked long hours and the drug program was an hour and a half away from his home.

Although people’s assessment of the value of mandated drug treatment programs is mixed, it is interesting to note that most of the people who relapsed were not getting consistent treatment. Five of the seven people who relapsed were required to be in a program but did not go regularly. Most were not particularly interested in treatment and seemed to accept their drug use—with two exceptions. By the end of the month, a woman who was not mandated to treatment and had started to use heroin regularly planned to enroll in a program. Larry, an alcoholic, also wanted to stop.

“I’ve been taking a serious look at drinking alcohol. It’s okay for normal people, but I’m not a normal person, I’m an addict. Now I’m drinking to spice up my life, but when I drink, I see signs of self-destruction.”

Whether or not people wanted treatment, many had to overcome obstacles to enroll in and attend these programs—and some did not get in before the study ended. Getting Medicaid was the biggest barrier for people who needed health insurance to cover the cost. Over half the people who completed the study (28 out of 49) were applying for Medicaid. They began the application process after they were released and then had to wait for their coverage to become effective.

Getting Medicaid was important to many of them for reasons other than enrolling in a drug treatment program. Fifteen people reported a chronic medical condition and two reported psychological problems. Seven people are HIV positive.¹² Some people told us they were worried about running out of medication, and a few reported skipping doses to make their medication last longer, hopefully until they were covered. Neighborhood clinics and hospital programs provided medication and care to some people who had no other options. By the end of the month, 31 people were covered by some type of health insurance, including Medicaid, ADAP, and private carriers.

Delays in getting Medicaid meant that many people who were required to attend a treatment program could not enroll immediately, which put them at risk of relapsing and of violating parole. Many people told us their parole officer understood their dilemma and suspended their treatment requirement until they got Medicaid.

Many people who did not need insurance also faced delays. Some were waiting for an appointment with ACCESS, an interagency program operated by the New York State Division of Parole and the Office of Alcohol and Substance Abuse Services, which assesses and refers people to treatment programs. This is the situation Cal faced, when he had a six-week wait for an ACCESS appointment.

Some people claimed that they did not attend sessions regularly because of the cost of getting from home or work to a treatment center. One man told us he skipped some sessions because he could not afford carfare, and he is afraid of being violated because of these absences. Another

¹² Prison inmates who are HIV positive or have AIDS get help applying for ADAP (AIDS Drug Assistance Program) funds. ADAP is a state-run program that pays for medication for people with HIV/AIDS who are not eligible for Medicaid.

man who said he had no money and many appointments to go to -- drug treatment among them -- jumped a turnstile.

Other Illegal Activity

Based on what people in the study told us, as well as information provided by the New York State Division of Parole and the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, eight of the 88 people we interviewed prior to release engaged in criminal activity at some point during the month. Of the people released from state facilities, four committed crimes: one stole (and was arrested), one sold her food stamps for money, one shoplifted, and one jumped a turnstile. Of the people released from city jails, three stole, and one sold drugs. All four were arrested. We do not know the stories behind these last four criminal acts since the offenders dropped out of the study after the second interview.¹³

Four people is a small proportion of the entire sample; nevertheless, some themes emerge from the stories we do know.

Tonya was a drug user and seller who discovered she was HIV positive in prison. Rather than use her release money to get high as she had before, she went straight to a private shelter. Tonya did not know of any public resources for people living with HIV, and would not contact her relatives in New York because they were drug users. Determined to “make it work,” she spent the first two weeks in her room at the shelter, emerging only to report to parole and to try to apply for public assistance. She had no money and sometimes went hungry. She was also running low on her HIV medication and her psychiatric drugs. She started skipping doses to stretch out the pills because she did not know of a clinic that would refill her prescription and anyway, she would not have been able to afford transportation there.

In her third week out, she overheard someone at the shelter mention the Women’s Prison Association. She went there and met a social worker, who had actually spoken to her prison counselor at Albion and was supposed to work with Tonya after she was released. The social worker found Tonya a room in Providence House, a transitional living facility; located a clinic that could replenish her medication; and helped her apply for emergency public assistance. Yet on the day she moved, Tonya did not have any money. She did have food stamps and exchanged them for cash. She never mentioned selling food stamps again.

¹³ In addition, two people were arrested for absconding from parole, and one person released from Lakeview told us he was charged with violating city property (staying in a public park after hours) and was sentenced to three days community service.

When Evan was released, someone from the Staten Island AIDS Task Force met him and immediately brought him to an apartment in Queens he would share with six roommates. Evan rarely left his apartment—“it costs too much to move around” —even though some of his roommates were using drugs and he was trying not to relapse. Although he received food stamps and emergency cash, he was quickly running out of money. “I don’t have TV, radio, ain’t got a phone to call nobody. Ain’t got carfare.”

After becoming belligerent outside a Division of AIDS Services office—he had waited all day without being called—Evan was hospitalized for a psychiatric evaluation. He was interviewed before he left the hospital, and said he was most concerned about paying back his family the forty dollars they loaned him because they were pressuring him. He was also eager to get his welfare case started and receive Medicaid. One day he jumped a turnstile in the subway because he said he did not have enough money to travel to his social service appointments.

There are two strong similarities in these stories. Neither Tonya nor Evan had money when they needed it. And both lacked family support. Tonya had no family in New York City who did not use drugs. Evan’s family avoided him and he lived with strangers who used drugs. They felt isolated, helpless, and desperate. Their crimes were very ill-considered responses to their desperate situations, and, as far as we were told, were not repeated.

By contrast, Zoë and Winston’s repeated crimes fall into a lifelong pattern of criminal behavior that was part of a lifestyle.

Winston prided himself on being a talented thief, but when he started using drugs a few years ago, he began to get caught. After leaving Willard, he returned to his apartment to find all the furniture gone because his drug-addicted girlfriend had sold it all to get high. Winston reported that his parole officer told him not to work and to concentrate instead on resolving his drug problem in treatment. He and his girlfriend lived off her public assistance check while he waited for a payment from his Veterans Administration pension fund.

After being out for two weeks, Winston began stealing, beginning with stolen sneakers, a case of socks, and fifty watches from street vendors. He did it, he told his interviewer, in order to bring in income. But once he started, he found he could not stop. He boasted to his interviewer about his various heists. He started drinking heavily, such that the interviewer noticed he was slightly drunk at their interviews. He continued to steal merchandise and to drink alcohol more and more often until he was arrested some time the following week.

Zoë was a drug user and “professional” shoplifter. On her first day out, she met up with an old user friend and got high. But after that, Zoë tried to stay away from people and places that triggered drug use and crime. Zoë was living with a sister she was not close to, so she spent her free time with her daughter and grandchildren, who did not have the resources to take her in.

As Zoë became less and less welcome in her sister’s home, she began to have urges to shoplift and take drugs. She avoided big department stores, her old haunts, in an attempt to control her urge to steal, but by the fourth week she had begun to steal and resell merchandise. Her biggest concern was going back to jail. But she did not feel ready for a job and in her last interview said she was using drugs and stealing regularly and expected to be re-arrested soon.

Winston and Zoë had a history of stealing and both took pride in their skill. When things became difficult for them, in terms of family relationships or financial support, they returned to their old patterns. Heavy substance use made it that much more difficult for them to control their criminal behavior.

Parole Supervision

Of the 49 people who completed the study, 46 were on parole. Their participation in our study provided a rare opportunity to observe how a group of parolees was supervised over the first thirty days after release, based on their own reports. Most said their parole supervision was useful because it helped them stay away from drugs and crime.

Everyone reported going to all their required visits, which occurred once a week for most of the sample.¹⁴ In the last week of the survey, some of those with jobs had their reporting frequency reduced to once every other week. Some people said their parole officers visited them at home, but our surveys did not specifically address home visits.

The reported length of a visit with a parole officer (excluding waiting time) varied dramatically across the survey. For example, at one week out, responses ranged from five minutes to an hour and a half. The variations occurred more frequently across the participants as a group than within any single parolee's report. That is, someone who reported a short initial visit tended to report short visits throughout the month; someone who reported an initial thirty-minute meeting tended to report the same for later visits. Once they established a pattern, they tended to stay with it.

Shorter meetings, however were more common. Some parolees are satisfied with this length; it is the sort of minimalist relationship they want.

“At my meetings, the P.O. just gives the rules. He says ‘You’re close to maxing out, stay out of trouble.’ He’s cool. He doesn’t stress me.” – Antonio

But some parolees eventually need more time with their parole officers. If they start off with brisk, no-nonsense meetings, they may have trouble shifting gears.

Natalie stayed straight by the end of the 30 days, but was having a hard time of it. She had no job, and barely went to substance abuse treatment. She said that parole had not helped her, but admitted she had not asked for help. She and her parole officer fell into a perfunctory relationship that barely figured in her life. Yet she was close to the edge, and her parole officer probably did not know it.

Regardless of the length of the meeting, all of the people in our survey reported having to wait a long time to see their parole officers, a few as long as two to three hours. This may be an unavoidable by-product of a very crowded system. But since more time in a parole office means more time with other parolees, supervisors might want to minimize time spent in the waiting room. People in Rochester and Albany reported shorter waiting times of 15 to 20 minutes.

¹⁴ Nine of the original sample of 76 parolees absconded from parole supervision during the first thirty days out. None of them remained in our final sample.

Once the meetings begin, people report a variety of experiences, but they all had the baseline experience of being monitored. They are asked about where they have been and whom they have seen. They all take urine tests, although everyone is not tested every week.

With very few exceptions, people appreciate the monitoring. As one person said, “I need the supervision. It keeps me intimidated, keeps me walking a straight line. I’m grateful for it.” Another said, “parole will help me stay out of trouble because it is watching me. I was in prison for two years, and I’m used to having people being on me.”

Some people reported that their parole officers offered advice on a variety of matters, including strategies that will help them lead a “straight” life, something that many people do not know how to do. A few officers go farther, working actively with people who are making steps toward success.¹⁵ For example, these officers may acknowledge that a parolee has forged strong personal ties by approving a change of residence, perhaps from a family home to a place with a long-term partner. They may change curfews to fit working hours or reward someone who is doing well. They may arrange for a drug treatment program that will accommodate a work schedule, or the schedule of someone who is seriously looking for work. These officers seemed to be doing this as a regular part of their job, without spending extra resources, and only a little more time.

Larry was having problems with time management. He was working, and finding it very hard to get from his job in downtown Manhattan to dinner at his mother’s in Brooklyn and then home to the Bronx without violating his 9 p.m. curfew. When he explained his frustration to his parole officer, the officer suggested that Larry develop a different schedule, and perhaps visit his mother less often during the week. He also extended Larry’s curfew to 11 p.m.

Immediately after release, Jamal found a job through a friend. He loved making money the old-fashioned way and coming home after a hard day of work with the guys. Jamal did not love drug treatment, however, and used his work as an excuse to skip most of the sessions of his mandated program, which occurred during the day. When his parole officer asked why he was not attending his program, Jamal said it was because of his job. “Fine,” said his P.O. “I’ll change your assignment to a program that only meets two times a week, instead of every day. Since your job keeps you out past your old curfew, I’ll remove the top half of your curfew.”

Jamal was pleased with this change, but again skipped several drug treatment sessions. Then, his P.O. called. “I cut you a break, and now you have to work with me. If you’re not in the drug program next meeting, I’ll bust you. I’ll send you back to jail.” And Jamal couldn’t argue. He hated the concept of

¹⁵ Lakeview graduates consistently described their parole officers as very helpful in addition to the monitoring they provided. Similar trends among the rest of the sample were not evident.

parole, but he had to admit that his parole officer seemed to be working with him to help him move forward. So he went to drug treatment.

People reported a great diversity in their parole officers' personal styles. Each style had its advantages. For example, one officer started off by being very harsh and confrontational. This approach had a great impact on the parolee. Every time he would think of using drugs, he would see his P.O.'s face and stop himself. Over time, the officer eased up, scheduling meetings farther apart. On the other hand, this style would backfire with someone like Larry, who is very needy and sensitive to what others think of him. Larry's officer made sure to praise him when he found a job and an apartment with a friend.

Women (with the exception of the shock parolees) reported meeting their parole officers only in the context of group sessions with other female parolees. These sessions covered such topics as relationships and sexuality, budgeting, and drugs. While most women liked the groups, a few resented spending their time in a room full of other people instead of having a one-on-one session with their parole officer. Whether these women could ask for private time with their parole officer was not clear from our surveys.

Study participants' most consistent criticism of the parole function in the first thirty days out is that parole officers did not help them find jobs. No parole officer found a participant a job, and a very few provided referrals. We are not stating that this was, or necessarily should be, part of parole officers' jobs. Yet most of our participants expected, or at least wanted, their parole officers to perform this function, and were disappointed when their officers did not do so. This clash between peoples' expectations and parole officers' actions led some parolees to conclude that parole would not help them in any way. For example, after one person asked his officer for help finding a job and did not get it, he remarked that parole supervision was "no help at all." Or as another person put it: "I don't see what parole does. It would be okay if they helped you find a job. But only to find out what you're doing? Anyone can do that." At least one participant wasted several weeks of potential job searching waiting for his parole officer to help him.

To eliminate this confusion, people should learn—preferably before their release—that parole officers are not expected to help them with job searches. But given how frequently people ask for this kind of help, perhaps it should be provided by another means.

Predictions

At the end of the last survey, we asked participants to predict their likelihood of going back to prison and to evaluate their prospects for future success. These conversations revealed a great deal about how these participants see their place in the world and how much they feel they can control their behavior and their environment.

A few people understood what it takes to stay straight and believed they had enough control over their own behavior to make it happen. They felt they had the discipline to refrain from violating parole or committing new crimes.

Emmett had been to jail several times for drug offenses and had just finished his first prison sentence. He was doggedly optimistic about not going back: “I’m doing my best not to go back. I know how to do things the right way, and there are so many doors open for me. I am going to use them to my advantage.”

Tim, a first-time, low-level offender, said, “I know what it takes to go to prison, it doesn’t just happen.” He explained his earlier offense by saying that he had gotten in with the wrong crowd, and made bad choices. At the end of the study, Tim had a good job, looked forward to studying for his GED in the upcoming months, had a girlfriend he wanted to settle down with, and a very large, close-knit family. He thought his life was on the right track.

Far more common than this confidence was a feeling of powerlessness in the face of the criminal justice system and their environment. A few people said they could only imagine going back to prison if they were convicted of something they did not do. Hugo has stayed clean and found steady work, yet he still felt that he could be picked up in a sweep any day.

Some people did not want to return to crime, but could not say they never would, and suggested that circumstances, not willpower, dictated their actions. Ramon said this about going back: “You never know what can happen. Circumstances are beyond my control.”

Antonio refused to consider whether he would return to prison, except to say, “I can’t tell you. I could be home today and I step out tomorrow and get into an altercation and bust someone’s head. Today I’m here with you. Tomorrow, you don’t know.”

These people need to develop a greater sense of control over their own actions—coming, perhaps, from successes that they can attribute to themselves—before they will feel that the decision to avoid prison is in their hands.

Many people could not articulate a plan for staying out of prison. They “wouldn’t wish prison on my worst enemy,” as one put it, but their desire to stay out does not mean they will not go

back. One man rated going back to prison as extremely unlikely, but just because he was going to church and had “a lady friend.” Another said he would not go back because, “I don’t want to go back,” as if he had wanted to go to prison in the past. A female, first-time offender said she would not go back because she never repeated experiences. Once she finished a drug, she never went back to it, and it would be the same with jail.

It is striking that the participants who felt they had the most control over the decision to go back were those who, by any objective standard, were already doing well. Emmett and Tim had jobs and friends and were staying clean. Perhaps these objective indicators of “making it” allowed them to think of themselves in positive terms. This self-confidence, in turn, may have helped them shape their lives in positive ways. Most people do not emerge from prison or jail with much confidence about their future success, nor are they returning to circumstances that inspire confidence.

Preparation for Release

Most people were offered some kind of pre-release planning where they were incarcerated. Only five people in general confinement, four at HIIP, and ten from Rikers said they were not offered any. But the nature of these programs and people’s satisfaction with them differed greatly.

We asked people during the pre-release interview how useful they found this planning, on a scale of 1 (“not at all useful”) to 5 (“extremely useful”). The average for the eight populations, except shock, was slightly below 3. Shock participants gave consistently high ratings. But the averages do not tell the whole story, since individual ratings of helpfulness varied widely among the 29 people in general confinement who received pre-release planning from facilities all over New York State.

While people expressed diverse views of pre-release services, they were consistent in what they believed would make a difference in their preparation for release. Even more interesting, their suggestions were echoed by parole officers with whom we spoke. Both felt that by concentrating on the following areas, pre-release planning could make a difference in the lives of people after they leave prison:

Job Assistance. As noted in the section on employment, helping people assess their job skills, develop networks, and make connections with employers who are willing to hire ex-offenders could happen before release, which would give people a boost in their job search. Indeed, people mentioned wanting help finding a job more than any other pre-release service. They wanted to be steered toward particular employers who would hire ex-offenders. As one person said, “I need job leads. Everything else they talk about is useless.”

Basic Documentation: Birth Certificate, Social Security Card and Photo ID. In order to legally work in the United States, people are required to show proof of identity and employment

eligibility. They must also show proof of identity to apply for Medicaid, which many need to pay for substance abuse treatment. People would have liked to have had these documents when they left prison or jail so they could begin jobs or treatment right away. Unfortunately, only 32 of the initial sample of 88 obtained birth certificates. Many people also reported having to secure their own social security card after release.

Photo identification is also required for many daily transactions, such as cashing checks. Lack of photo identification is a concern because inmates are supposed to surrender their prison ID upon release. Given these problems, study participants suggested that preparation for release include acquiring documentation required for work, as well as government-issued photo identification, such as a non-driver's ID.

Making Necessary Links with the Health and Mental Health Care Systems. Most people in the study were required to enter drug treatment upon release. To pay for these programs, however, many needed Medicaid. They could not apply until after they were released and obtained identification—and then they had to wait up to 45 days for this coverage to be effective. Study participants—both in New York City and upstate—believe this process should be completed before release.

Two people were required by parole to get mental health treatment, yet neither of them left their facility with a current mental health evaluation. Their treatment had not begun by the end of the thirty days because they still had not been assessed. Conducting mandated mental health evaluations as part of the preparation for release would make the treatment process more efficient.

Connections with Community Service Providers. Five people reported making connections while in prison to a community or nonprofit service organization. In four cases, these early contacts led to concrete assistance that eased the transition to life outside prison or jail. (The fifth person, who said she would be going to a program for mentally ill, chemically addicted people run by Catholic Charities, dropped out of the survey.)

One person found the Minority Task Force on AIDS through its presentations at Queensboro. The group helped him find an apartment, and he attended a substance abuse program it operates. Another Queensboro inmate hooked up with the Staten Island Task Force on AIDS, which placed him in a group home. One woman learned about the Women's Prison Association when a representative came to Parkside Correctional Facility. The group helped her get a room of her own so she could move out of a shelter. Finally, a woman from Bedford Hills connected with a MICA program in Brooklyn just before she was released. A social worker from the program met her at Grand Central Station on the day she returned to the city. The program also helped her find a bed in a transitional home and provided her with a caseworker.

Making these early connections—to mental health providers, drug treatment programs, and other services—more often would mean that more people would be met upon release and swiftly integrated into the programs.

Looking Forward

These suggestions for improved, systematic preparation for release could be accomplished in a few facilities functioning as “pre-release centers,” where inmates could receive the following:

- Documentation for work and a photo ID
- Job assistance, including search tips and referrals to potential employers
- Help applying for Medicaid, which would be activated immediately upon release
- Mental health assessment and connections with clinics
- Connections to representatives from community-based programs, who might be able to meet inmates on the day they are released
- Help involving their families so they are prepared to provide the support their relative will need upon release. (Families would also have an opportunity to ask questions about their relatives’ parole requirements.)

The Queensboro Correctional Facility provides some insight into how a pre-release center might operate. Queensboro is already a funnel for inmates from a variety of state facilities who will soon return to New York City. The facility invites community groups to make presentations and attempts to interest inmates in these programs. Two inmates in our study benefited greatly from the involvement of these organizations. But Queensboro does not appear to provide any other kind of pre-release planning. Enhancement and institutionalization of its current practices, joined with the elements outlined above, could be the core of a new, comprehensive method of preparing inmates for release.