Navigating Reentry:
The experiences and perceptions of ex-offenders seeking employment

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The bus ride from Lincoln Correctional Facility was long—175 miles. Livey watched the sun set over the farms and fields of Central Illinois and wondered what it would have been like to grow up in a small rural town. The littered sidewalks, empty storefronts, cramped apartments, and her biggest fear, drug dealers, belonged to a different universe from these long stretches of space. Livey tried to think through some plans for starting a new life, but feared what she was coming home to and how she could avoid the pitfalls of the streets.

The first time she was arrested, Livey had served six months for possession. This time, she got three years for violating conditions of her parole and for drug possession. Livey said prison "saved my life." It was "time out" from the pressures of family, drugs, and a life of constant struggle. In prison, she got her GED, which she did not think she would have done if she were still on the streets.

Livey had jobs before she was arrested and she desperately wanted to work again. But she also knew she had "an 'X' on my back now" and it was going to be even harder to get a job. But, on this day, she repeated the phrases she learned in PreStart, Illinois' discharge planning program: "I've made some mistakes, and I've paid for them. Being in prison has turned my life around. I'm going to work harder for you than anyone else you could hire." Livey hoped these would work and were true, though she was not sure she believed it. Or that employers would. "Why should anyone hire a felon if there's some straight guy waiting for a job?"

When Livey arrived at the Greyhound station in Chicago, it was almost midnight. She received $50—"gate money"—from the prison because she had no money at all in savings. Starting her life wasn't going to be easy. "It's like they get you both ways—put you away, then when you get out, hand you a nickel and tell you to change your life." She was used to being told what to do, what to wear, what to eat, when to sleep and get up, and where to go. She had to reassure herself that she could make good decisions.

Livey was told her parole officer would contact her within 24 hours of release, but once she got home, Livey waited three days in her sister's apartment for him. She was upset when her sister invited a couple of her old friends over. They had some blunts with them, and she was afraid that she was going to get caught and get sent back to prison. "They're not building prisons just to look at them." She felt she was "walking on eggshells." No drug use, keep a job, random urine tests, get searched, don't hang out with the wrong people. How was she to avoid all these people when they were living all around her? She was 30 now. Could she get a good job though she had almost no work experience? Would her relations with her family and children—badly strained since she'd gone to jail—get better? Could she stay away from the drugs? Could she make it this time?

"Livey's" story is a composite of the many we heard and it exemplifies the hopes, fears and uncertainty people face as they leave prison and start to rebuild their lives.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary

Introduction

Part I: Overview of the Reentry Population and the Sample Study

Characteristics of People Leaving Prison and the Sample Study

In-Prison Experiences

Part II: Findings

Coming Home—Unmarked Pathways and Unexpected Obstacles

Navigating the World of Work

Part III: Discussion of Findings and Recommendations

Discussion of Findings

Recommendations

Appendices

Appendix A: Methodology

Appendix B: Sources

Appendix C: Advisory Group Members

Endnotes

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The goal of this report is to deepen understanding of ex-offender reentry, particularly as it relates to work. It brings to light the immediate accounts of ex-offenders who are seeking jobs using data from focus groups and individual interviews with 72 ex-offenders with felony convictions. The report presents their experiences and perceptions during the 18 months after release from prison, a period that often determines whether an ex-offender will make it on the outside or return to prison, a period that often determines whether an ex-offender will make it on the outside or return to prison. The data, though not intended to be predictive, is rich. The analysis suggests future policy and program strategies to help the many people leaving prison successfully reconnect with society and with work.

Overview of the Reentry Population and Study Sample

The research respondents who took part in this study were primarily African-American (88%) and included both men (68%) and women (32%). The vast majority were poor before they went to prison. Most were only marginally attached to the mainstream labor market prior to their incarceration.

Self-reported conviction of crimes included drug possession and delivery (35%); theft, burglary and robbery (36%) and sexual assault, murder and attempted murder (20%). Eighty-one percent were on parole. The majority (62%) had more than one felony conviction and had previously spent time in prison.

About 60% of women and 40% of men in the sample were employed at the time of their arrest. This employment was often at the margins and unsteady. Some respondents had worked for relatives and friends. Most described piecing together part-time, low-wage jobs with illegal activities that generated additional income.

Key Findings:

- There was a general feeling among respondents that, if given a realistic opportunity to “live straight,” they could change their lives. Yet, many found themselves in much the same situation as the ones they were before going to prison. Struggling to find someone who would give them a chance to succeed, they were becoming more and more depressed about their inability to do so.

- Those who had a seamless transition from prison to a program and who had strong family support were more optimistic about the future.

- Peer networks — those who were in the same situation and former prisoners who have made a successful reentry — played a critical role in the reentry process for those who had access to such support.

- The majority of respondents left prison without enough savings to weather a job search and had little prospects for employment. Few even have a place to live if their family is unwilling to accept them back. Mental and physical health issues were exacerbated in prison and many respondents were suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome from experiences in prison or before arrest. Old peer groups were often quick to support an ex-offender’s choice to resume criminal habits and drug and alcohol abuse. This was the case particularly for male respondents aged 34 and younger.

- Female respondents were much more likely to report family stress after their release, as well as an immediate focus on regaining custody or reestablishing relationships with their children. This finding was consistent with the observation of many advocates that the hope of reuniting with their children is the most powerful incentive for many women prisoners to strive to address their addiction.
complete parole, and find gainful employment. When parole whose children are removed from their custody or who permanently lose custody of their children through court termination of their parental rights are often so devastated that they soon relapse into drug use and resume a downward spiral of self-destructive behavior.

- The lack of job skills and work experience prior to prison—along with gaps in employment history due to time out of the labor market while in prison and the stigma of a felony conviction—greatly compounded ex-offenders’ struggles to find employment.

In-prison education, training, and other programs clearly helped, at least temporarily, to increase the self-esteem of respondents in the study, but access to these programs is not universal, and the programs vary in quality. Very little coordination exists between in-prison programs and real-world labor market demand for ex-offenders. Respondents were discouraged to find the programs and jobs they had completed in prison had little meaning to employers on the outside. Most did not get jobs traceable to the training they received in prison.

The majority of respondents believe that revealing their felony conviction on a job application will automatically lead to rejection. Respondents would rather take the risk of being fired later, when and if an employer discovers that they left their record off their job applications. Many reported they could not find a positive way to talk about their criminal record to a prospective employer. This was particularly true for those who committed murder and other violent offenses.

- Respondents were unsure how to overcome employers’ negative perceptions of people with criminal records. Conflicting views of the validity of employers’ fears about hiring ex-offenders appeared in almost every focus group, with contradictory perceptions often coming from the same person. Every respondent assumed that employers were afraid to hire men and women who had been to prison, even if that knowledge distressed them. Almost everyone also agreed that employers generally had good reason to worry. At the same time most believed that blanket policies against hiring them were unjustified. Some respondents, especially males, were very angry about employer refusal to hire people with a criminal record.

- Ex-offenders in the sample want to differentiate themselves from other ex-offenders in employers’ eyes. They believe that other ex-offenders commonly exhibit work habits, giving all ex-offenders a bad name. Respondents hoped their inner commitment to change would convince employers to take a chance on them.

- Only 26% of respondents in the sample were working at the time of their interview. Of those who were working, their jobs were most often temporary or contingent in nature. One unexpected finding was the large number of respondents who talked about prison “saving my life” in that it provided “time out,” it “scared straight,” and it offered opportunities for education and training—though it had its own dangers and debilitating effects.

Surprisingly large numbers of respondents claimed to see prison as “saving my life” in that it provided “time out” from chaos and danger in the “free world,” “scared [them] straight,” and even offered opportunities for education and training. Respondents also reported, however, that the incarceration experience has its own dangers and debilitating effects. The general sense of their comments, moreover, was that prison’s potential as a time for transformation and rehabilitation was being wasted because of the absence of clearly marked and functional pathways back to workplace and community.

Discussion of Findings

To a large extent, ex-offenders’ difficulties are traceable to more fundamental social problems than merely the failing of “corrections,” “reentry” programs, and other services and programs related to ex-offenders’ experience. The findings sometimes contradicted themselves as they reflect the remarkable and intertwined complexity of both the individual ex-offender’s lives and the many social, economic, political, and cultural factors that generate urban poverty, crime, and mass incarceration.

Significantly, the majority of the sample viewed the moment of release as a potential turning point and the majority were motivated never to return. In the absence of an integrated set of strategies and programs to enable successful reentry, however, the possibilities for growth and redirection engendered at the moment of release from prison may be lost once people are back in their old
environments. When respondents are unable to find the way to reestablish their lives based on their own ideas of who they are and what they want to be, and in light of the enormous set of obstacles that block their way—then the potentially positive effects of prison’s “time out” from social chaos on the outside are immediately erased. To increase stable employment and reduce recidivism, policies and programs must help create clearer paths for those who want to reconnect successfully with society.

In doing so, we must understand that there is no “archetypal” ex-offender returning home from prison. The challenges facing people in the study varied substantially depending on individual circumstances—their incarceration history, the type of “correctional” facility they left, level of family support, and prior work history, among other things. We met a few ex-offenders who upon their release were greeted by a large extended family and had several job offers within weeks of getting out of prison. These were the lucky ones. A larger number of respondents lacked these important “props” but nonetheless had great hopes and a strong desire to work and to connect to good programs and other supports. With the right set of supports, many of these respondents—despite numerous issues including substance abuse, anger, housing and transportation—could be well positioned to successfully find and maintain gainful employment.

A third group of respondents had problems so severe that their chances of securing and keeping a job were slim and their likelihood of returning to crime and prison very high. They had active drug problems, histories of violence, mental or physical health problems, little or no education, and little interest in leaving the streets. The diversity of the reentry population points to the need for programs and policies that take these differences into consideration.

Recommendations

1. Improve programs for offenders within correctional facilities in order to respond to labor market demand; hold IDOC and ex-offender vocational and job-training programs to the same accountability standards as other programs funded by the state’s workforce development system.

Time in prison can be an important opportunity for inmates who are motivated to gain new skills and to rehabilitate their lives. Currently, ex-offenders find upon release, however, that the “skills” they had proudly acquired while in prison are often useless on the outside. Though responses differed depending on the length of time in prison, and length of time since release, comments about how in-prison programs help with reentry afforded a generally consistent view: preparation for release was inadequate.

A number of programs within corrections facilities are aimed at assisting offenders in developing job skills and finding future employment, including prison industries, vocational training, and work-release programs. For inmates who take advantage of these programs, there needs to be a demonstrated connection to what happens between the training/education and direct employment opportunities on the outside. In-prison programs should be matched with Bureau of Labor Statistics information on labor market demand, tied to wage data and industry skills standards, and should ensure that prisoners are receiving training for jobs and industries that hire people with felony convictions. Illinois Department of Corrections workforce and vocational training programs need to be integrated into the existing State workforce development systems and held to the same accountability standards that other workforce development organizations follow.

2. Help to articulate the potential pathways for ex-offenders so that they move from prison to a network of opportunities and supports.

As with other studies, particularly the Vera Institute’s “Three Months Out,” our assumption was that ex-offenders would know what they needed to help them get jobs. What we learned, however, is that ex-offenders have so many barriers to overcome that they often are at a loss to know what they need, how to set priorities, where to get help, and sometimes, how to follow up to advocate for themselves. A number of practices could assist ex-offenders: make direct connections from prison to community organizations prior to release; provide and widely disseminate up-to-date information on resources and supports available to ex-offenders; create community-based mother-child programs in which women serve their sentences while caring for their young children; and develop a program where ex-offenders can go for peer support.
Respondents repeatedly touted organizations such as St. Leonard’s and Grace House as places where they could get their immediate needs met and receive comprehensive services—housing, food, counseling, job training, and support—to ease the transition and provide a structured pathway. But these specialized programs are rare. Developing a better understanding of how these programs operate and the characteristics that make them successful in the eyes of ex-offenders can help in formulating better policies and programs.

3. Develop peer mentoring and support systems.
Ex-offenders who were motivated to transform their lives also provided peer support. They support each other “just by talking,” sharing information on resources, helping to set realistic expectations, providing advice for avoiding recidivism, preparing for work, trading insights on various training and education programs and jobs, and by developing new, positive peer networks.

4. Learn from successful workforce preparation and employment programs focused on ex-offenders and conduct additional research on best practices.
A handful of repeatedly cited workforce development programs work specifically with men and women upon their release from prison. Because of their relationship to various criminal justice agencies, these programs encounter clients at the critical time of reentry. Many ex-offenders are mandated to attend such a program. In other cases, offenders have contact with the program while in prison, or peer group networks refer them. Because the immediately returning population of ex-offenders is unattractive to most employers, training programs that provide work opportunities enable ex-offenders to “put something between me and my conviction.”

Many programs have also implemented some strategies that hold promise, and they point to some specific and unique approaches for serving ex-offenders, as distinguished from the rest of the hard-to-serve population. One that stands out is focusing on immediate work through transitional work strategies and helping ex-offenders meet their pressing needs such as stable housing. Yet, there have been few recent systematic evaluations of job placement and development programs for ex-offenders. Little is known about what happens to ex-offenders after being placed in a first job. There is a need for additional, formal evaluations of ex-offender workforce development programs that document effective strategies specific to ex-offenders and focus on short- and long-term employment outcomes. In addition, internal data analysis capacity is necessary to track participants more effectively, to identify trends among different subsets being served, and to develop long-term mechanisms for job retention.

5. Improve capacity of standard workforce development and employment programs to work with ex-offenders.
Though many employment service providers focus on a general population of job seekers, ex-offenders are part of their client population. The types of services ex-offenders may need are not necessarily different from other hard-to-serve populations, but the number and intensity of resources they need may be greater. Additionally, ex-offenders may be harder to place in jobs. Better training and understanding of the lessons learned from specific programs to ex-offenders would enable this larger group of providers to serve the rapidly growing population of ex-offenders more effectively.

At the same time, exemplary workforce development and employment programs have developed strategies to focus on retention and wage progression—a focus that could enhance the work of ex-offender specific programs. Because it is within the first three years that recidivism is most likely to occur, ex-offender employment programs should provide multi-year support, focused on the first three years after release. Programs that employ some of the more promising welfare-to-work program strategies, such as the very successful publicly funded temporary jobs projects piloted in several states, often involve working over consecutive years with participants who may cycle in and out of a variety of work preparation and employment experiences that can lead to better jobs.
"The first day of release is the scariest day. I was shook up. There was too much temptation. I didn’t know what was up. You don’t know what’s happened while you were gone. You don’t know if someone is waiting to kill you. When you are in the penitentiary, you think you are going to go home and really do something different. I got off the Greyhound and had to sit down and maintain my composure and think. I took a deep breath, looked around, and said, ‘I don’t think I can do this.’ Damn. I don’t have no job. Now the same guys that were on the corner with me, half are dead and half are rich. Now there’s temptation. Thirty days pass. A little money from my family starts to come in. You feel more happy and then you start looking for work, trying to set up your life right. Then another 30 days pass and you ain’t got no job. I’m thinking to myself, damn!”

Male, 21, convicted of robbery. Served three years and had been released three months at the time of the focus group. He did not complete high school and is not currently working. He has one child.

An unprecedented number of individuals will be released from American prisons in coming years—nearly 600,000 in the next year alone as compared to fewer than 170,000 in 1980 (Travis, 2001). In Illinois, more than 25,000 offenders will be released from state prisons in 2002; 16,000 of them will return to Cook County. Two-thirds will be African-American and most will return to a relatively small number of neighborhoods that already experience enormous social and economic disadvantage. Thirty-six percent of all ex-offenders—and 48% of black ex-offenders—will return to prison in Illinois within three years of release (Street, 2001). This high rate of recidivism clearly comes at a tremendous cost to the individual, his or her family, the community, and to society in general. And yet, until very recently, local, state and federal policymakers have seriously neglected issues of reentry.

Many observers of the criminal justice system believe that quickly cementing an ex-offender’s ties to employment is crucial; studies have shown that having a job with decent wages is associated with lower rates of re-offending (Travis, 2001). But, survey data indicate that one-year after release, as many as 60% of former inmates are not employed (Petersilia, 2000). The goal of this report is to deepen understanding of ex-offender reentry, particularly as it relates to work. It brings to light the immediate accounts of ex-offenders who are seeking jobs using data from focus groups and individual interviews with 72 ex-offenders with felony convictions. This report presents their experiences and perceptions during the first 18 months after release from prison, a period that often determines whether an ex-offender will make it on the outside or return to prison. The authors’ methodology was designed to ensure candor. Respondents were recruited from various nonprofit organizations; flyers were also distributed. Women, who comprise the fastest growing segment of the incarcerated population, were over-sampled. The sample may be considered more “motivated” than the general ex-offender population because the majority were connected to a job training or social service program (See Appendix A for a detailed methodology).

The data, though not intended to be predictive or quantitative, is rich. Ex-offenders speak with force and clarity about their experiences, attitudes, hopes and fears. In our analysis of the data, we highlight patterns and themes that suggest future policy and program strategies to help the many people leaving prison who want to successfully reconnect with society and with work. Of particular salience is the large number of respondents who viewed their prison time as “saving their lives” because it created the possibility of a new and better start, even while it also had its own dangers and debilitating consequences. For some, incarceration provides a “time out,” or it “scares straight.” Some were provided with avenues for training and education. At the very least—even for those who view prison as a negative experience—the vast majority of the sample saw the moment of release as a potential turning point and vowed never to return. In the absence of an
integrated set of public policies and private strategies for handling reentry, however, the possibilities for growth and redirection engendered in prison are lost once people are released. The pathways to restarting one’s life are not clearly marked and ex-offenders quickly hit dead ends.

The report is organized in three sections. It begins with a description of the characteristics of the sample in relation to the overall ex-offender population. Part II presents findings from the research, examining opportunities and challenges ex-offenders face as they return home and their interactions with and attitudes towards work and employers. All of this information is synthesized in Part III and incorporated into recommendations for improved policy and program development.

Part I: Overview of the Reentry Population and Study Sample

1. Characteristics of People Leaving Prison and the Study Sample

The research respondents who took part in this study were primarily African-American (88%) and included both men (68%) and women (32%). The vast majority were poor before they went to prison. Most were only marginally attached to the mainstream labor market prior to their incarceration.

All had at least one felony conviction and were released from prison within the past 18 months. The chart on the left provides a snapshot of the sample compared to the overall adult parole population in Illinois.

Public perceptions of the ex-offender population returning from prison that bear out in national statistics also are confirmed in the study sample. In particular, a large and growing population of young, under-educated, low skilled, black, male (and increasingly female) job seekers returns from prison to the street facing a complex set of barriers. This group enters the labor market after spending some of their prime earning years behind bars and without having gained either the work readiness skills or job experience that lead to steady employment and higher earnings. For example, a 38-year-old male with four felony convictions, reported: “Since 1982, I’ve only been on the streets for a total of 23 months. [The last time I was out], I had a landscaping

job for four months. I got paid $4 an hour.” And this 31-year-old female with one felony conviction: “I have never had a job. I’ve never had my own apartment. I never had a high school education.”

A. Incarceration History

Respondents self-reported conviction of crimes such as drug possession and delivery (35%), and theft, burglary and robbery (36%), often to support a drug habit. Some had been convicted of violent crimes — sexual assault, murder and attempted murder (20%). Most (81%) were released to parole after an average prison term of 4.3 years and a median term of 1.3 years.

The shortest length of stay was one month; the longest was 17 years. The majority (62%) of people in the sample had more than one felony conviction and had previously spent time in prison. Most of the repeat felonies were drug-related.
B. Work Experience Prior to Prison

I’ve worked a month or two weeks here and there. The longest I’ve ever been employed was at age 16 as a car porter with my father.

Male, 38, with five felony convictions.

About 50% of women and 40% of men in the sample were employed at the time of their arrest. This employment was often at the margins and unsteady. In some instances, respondents reported having supervisors who were also drug users or working for relatives and friends. Most described piecing together part-time, low-wage jobs with illegal activities that generated additional income. The jobs they held included retail sales, telemarketing, home health care aid, laying asphalt, cooking, and seasonal roofing. A small few were trades people—a carpenter, forklift driver, and machinist—and one worked for the railroad. Many enjoyed their jobs, wanted to work, and understood the importance of employment in bettering their lives.

I liked my work. Smelling the scent of fresh cut wood early in the morning, being out in the sun, using my hands...

Male, 43, with three felony convictions and six children. He is a carpenter by trade.

I had a job for five years... doing inventory and assembly line work for airplane kits. It was a peaceful escape... [My] boss was happy with me... He had a heart and he was good to me. My job became a second home.

Male, 35, in prison for burglary. He has two felony convictions, is working on his GED and has four children.

However, many described poor work habits—sleeping on the job, frequently missing work, using drugs while working, refusing to do certain assigned tasks they felt were demeaning—or felt discrimination prevented advancing to or obtaining good jobs. Many men, especially, were quite angry when describing their past work experiences.

I worked at a local race track as a security guard. It was cool. I slept in the booth all day. White people ran it and they were prejudice. They favored the Mexicans and put me at the back gate. I lost the job because I tore him off.

Male, 26, in prison for four years for theft. He has three felony convictions and a GED.

When I hurt my back it was a good way to tell [my employers] to go f**k themselves. They were hiring guys from Poland, Hungary and Mexico and they promoted their own friends. Now they are making more than I am and they don’t even have a green card. Am I going to stand on this dock for the rest of my life and not get shit out of it—with a bad back and bad eyesight? They didn’t give a shit about me.

Male, 47, spent six months in prison for drug possession. He has four felony convictions, did not complete high school and has four children.

For those with drug addiction problems, the need for drugs often interfered with job performance and pushed respondents toward criminal activity.

I had a job at Metra railroad for five years. The job paid well and I supplemented it with stealing to support my habit. Promotions started to pass me by, though.

If it wasn’t for drugs, I could have excelled.

Male, 38, spent four years in prison for receiving stolen property. He has a total of eight felony convictions, was a high school graduate and has one child.

I loved my job but I had so much guilt and it would be hard to go to work and not be high and not pick things up. I had beautiful clients that adored me. I couldn’t stop stealing and this is why I quit. I would take money. It was the guilt of knowing. All the time I didn’t get caught it was doing something to me on the inside, but I wanted that high so bad.

Female, 29, spent three years in prison for drug possession. She did not graduate from high school, has one child and prior to prison worked at a home health aide.

Those who were not working before they were arrested described even more chaotic lives and depicted prison as providing an escape or “time out.”

My days were ugly—drugs, prostitution, stick-ups.

Everything I did, I did in the name of getting one more [high]. Days and nights melted into one another. The day I got arrested I was in danger of losing my right foot. It was the day I got rescued. I was living on the streets.

Female, 31, in prison for burglary. This was her first felony conviction.

II. In-Prison Experiences

A. Education and Training in Prison

Only a small percentage of prisoners in Illinois engage in any type of meaningful work experience or vocational education while in prison. Those who “took advantage of what prison had to offer” came out with more identified skills and confidence than when they were incarcerated. Several got GEDs or training certificates, and a few even took
lives they had ever focused on their education or understood their own interests and skills. A 25-year-old female who received a GED, and certificates in horticulture, business management, self-esteem, parenting and lifestyle, while in prison, reported: "I became a leader and I didn’t even know I had leadership potential. In the pen, I stayed in school. I was eager to learn something because I knew I was coming back home.”

In another instance, a 33-year-old male who served nine years for armed robbery described working on a farm learning to slaughter animals while in prison; he also received training as a salad prep, a cook for diabetic people, a custodial worker, and in laying drywall. These experiences gave him a renewed sense of self.

There are things I didn’t realize I could do until I got incarcerated. [In prison] I found out so many other things about me—that I love and that I can smile. I joke now. Before I felt like the world was against me. Now I think, ‘how could I have done these bad things when I am not even a bad person?’ Now I can draw, play chess and drive a truck. I love me today. That’s all I got.

Studies show that participation in higher education and vocational training programs reduces recidivism.

In-prison education, training, and other programs clearly helped, at least temporarily, to increase the self-esteem of respondents in the study, but access to these programs is not universal, and the programs vary in quality. Illinois recently eliminated higher education programs in state prisons and reduced vocational training programs. Current program offerings provide instruction in building trades, culinary arts, commercial custodian, horticulture, auto mechanics, and training of seeing-eye dogs. Combined, these programs have the capacity serve 2,500 youth and adult inmates at a time.

Focus Group Respondents Designed the Ideal Discharge Planning Program

Focus group respondents were asked to design the ideal discharge planning program. Below are the ideas they generated.

1. Improved Connection to Community

Almost to a person, respondents feel that the ideal discharge planning program needs to connect them to real opportunities and resources back in the community to which the ex-offender is returning.

2. Longer and More Comprehensive Preparation

One man, with the concurrence of many others, suggested “a mandatory, on-going process from the day you start [prison] until the day you leave.” Or, at the very least, a longer program—not just for “three hours a day, two weeks before you leave prison.”

3. Access to Real Employment Opportunities

Help in getting jobs was the universal request. Respondents suggested that IDOC:

- Provide more in-prison vocational education and job training programs that prepare them for real jobs on the outside;
- Identify and provide lists or direct connection to employers willing to hire ex-offenders; and
- Provide recommendation letters from teachers and counselors.

One entrepreneurial respondent recommended that a place of business be created that only hires ex-offenders and helps them build a resume through subsidized jobs. “It’s mandatory. We must work. The government should hire you so you don’t need to do wrong to get you a pair of shoes.” Several people suggested that ex-offenders be bonded by a federal agency in order to reassure potential employers. Though this policy exists, respondents seemed unaware of it or were unclear how the program works.

4. Connection to Financial Assistance, Support Services, Education, and Housing

Respondents want more financial assistance to help tide them over until they can get a job. Current IDOC policy provides $50 gate money and a bus ticket to those inmates with no savings. Those with more than $50 in their account receive only a bus ticket. For those with few resources, the money they have is not enough to provide for their basic needs or to cover other costs associated with looking for a job. A few respondents reported walking miles to a job interview or training program because they had no money for the bus or train. Participants also suggested funds for education in and out of prison.

More halfway houses and work release programs were on every focus group’s list of necessary services. Housing supports were especially crucial. Several respondents were homeless. Many people expressed the need for counseling services for themselves and for their families, to help rebuild relationships. Another respondent suggested that a program for ex-offenders, similar to Alcoholics Anonymous, be established so ex-offenders would have a place to go for peer support when frustration and depression begins to set in.
Inmates not on a work assignment or in training spend their time in their cell. Maximum-security facilities offer no in-prison programs. And, respondents reported long waiting lists, making it difficult for those with short “bits” in prison, to get any kind of job training, though programs such as parenting and anger management were available to them.

B. Preparation for Release

PreStart is a joke. They expect to prepare you for the street in two weeks after you have been incarcerated for years.

Male, 24, served 14 years for murder and had been released for one month.

A lot of what they give you, referrals and such, are old numbers. When I got out and called, most of them didn’t exist.

Female, 44, convicted of aggravated battery and had been released two weeks.

The best thing that PreStart did was to give information about AIDS prevention.

Female, 35, served 10 years for attempted murder and had been released one month.

According to the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, PreStart, Illinois’ in-prison discharge planning program, “was designed to address the problems of parole by shifting the emphasis for most offenders from surveillance to assistance. It aims to help offenders make the transition back to the community, primarily through referral for community services.” For study respondents, PreStart’s length varied by facility, its curriculum was inconsistent, and overall, they believed it was ineffective in terms of its stated goals. Respondents report outdated materials, inadequate preparation for jobs, and referrals to agencies that no longer existed or were too full to accept them.

Part II: Findings

1. Coming Home—Unmarked Pathways and Unexpected Obstacles

I was locked up for nine years and nine months. I was anxious to get out to something but whatever it is, I ain’t found it. I am looking for employment, a place to stay, and I am looking for peace. I don’t see anyone having peace out here.

Male, 58, in prison for aggravated criminal sexual assault.

He had been released for two months.

Virtually all inmates—74%—will return to society within a fairly short time frame. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (1998) reports that among felons sentenced to state prison, average sentence length is five years, but the average term served is about half of that.² Often the first response to release is culture shock at moving from the imposed order of prison to a lack of predictability. For non-violent, first-time offenders, the implications of having a felony conviction only become clear to them as they attempt to find work and re-establish their lives. Many are unaware of the types of jobs foreclosed to them as a result of having a felony conviction.

Sixty-two percent of respondents were repeat offenders, meaning, essentially, that they “failed” at reentry at least once before. This population of returning offenders had spent time in prison before their most recent incarceration and had more than one felony conviction. The number of those “failing” at reentry—or repeat offenders—is increasing (Lynch, 2001). The experience of leaving and returning to prison and community is, logically, associated with sporadic attachment to the formal labor market (Western, 2001), creating gaps in work histories that are unattractive to employers.

It is psychological because you say [criminal activity] is out of your system but it ain’t. You want to do right but you can’t. When you encounter so much money, that’s where your pride comes in. You really have to sacrifice to be right. I had the hustle withdrawal. You get hooked to the money, the adrenaline rush. A job doesn’t even come into it. But now that I want a job, am I going to tell them [employers] that I have been down for drugs, then down for guns, and then again went down for robery?

Male, 32, served five years for armed robbery and had been released one year ago. Currently, he is unemployed and has two children.

Lastly, for those respondents who spent significant portions of their lives behind bars, changes in society, new technologies, unfamiliar changes in old environments, and sudden freedoms—tempered by the fear of violating parole—make the transition home especially daunting.

In addition to the barriers faced by all returning prisoners, many had never lived on their own before, held a job, or engaged in any of the social and employment development activities that lead to a more stable lifestyle.

So many things have changed in the years I have been gone. Things are all kind of strange. It’s confusing. Technology and things have advanced and I am having a hard time getting familiarized.

Male, 34, released from prison two weeks prior to the interview after serving 12 years for murder. He completed his GED in prison.
A. The Sincere Decision to Change One’s Life Becomes a Missed Personal and Societal Opportunity

I was strong as a bull ox when I got out. I had lots of spiritual knowledge and just personal, physical healthiness. Then you get back out and you get around certain people. I am 45 years old and a lot of my friends are dead or locked up in prison or I don’t know where they are. I think that God has his arms wrapped around me for some reason I do not know. I got out and stayed with my sister. I was looking for employment but getting doors shut in my face. And, you just can’t stay with your family for too long ‘cause it just don’t mix and when you’re your own person you need to have your own anyway. I applied for Section 8 four years ago. Luckily it takes about that long so I was blessed because they called me down on July 18th to pick up my voucher so I am off the street right now. That has taken a whole lot of pressure off of me. I have been down to [local social service program] and places like that and luckily again, when I leave here I am going to work. But it is not steady. It will be finishing up in three days. I need something steady. Okay, I am going to eat today but I got my young son with me. You know, I got a drug problem. For the last month I haven’t been on drugs so it’s kind of okay. I try to tell my son I am holding on to every dollar because you don’t just get some more and get happy and spend it all. You got to think about tomorrow. Sometimes you get depressed, man. I just now got a telephone yesterday. Even if someone wants to give you a job, if they don’t have a place to call you back to, [to say], okay, you can come in tomorrow, you are in big trouble.

Male, 47, served six months for theft and had been released one month at the time of the interview. He has been convicted of a total of five felonies and has two children.

“Coming home” is seen by respondents as an opportunity to turn their lives around. There was a general feeling among respondents that, if given a realistic opportunity to “live straight,” they could change their lives. Yet this wishfulness to “start over” was mixed with deep uncertainty about whether they would succeed at doing so. Study respondents were aware about their chances for success. In Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives, author Shadd Maruna observes:

“Ex-offenders sitting in a prison cell or riding in a police van decided crime doesn’t pay. But, desire and actually staying ‘straight’ is not the same thing.” He describes the “brick wall” that ex-offenders face: “It is surmountable, but is enough of an obstacle to make most turn around and ‘head back’ to crime, back to lives they are familiar with, but mostly, back to prison.” (Maruna, 2001)

B. Few Respondents had the Necessary Resources and Supports to Navigate the Risks and Opportunities that Reentry Presented

I was dropped back into the same environment I came out of. Bottom line, most of us are. If you go back to the same environment, eventually you are going to get pulled back into that same lifestyle. It doesn’t matter how strong you say you are. When they let you out they give you $50 and they take your bus fare out of that. Then they dump you at a bus stop. I didn’t have anywhere to go when I got out. I am right now staying in a men’s shelter. I’m tempted to go back out there to sell nation packs16. I got to eat too. I don’t want to, you see, ‘cause I got kids too and I don’t want nobody selling my kids drugs but it seems like the only thing I have left. I have been through [this program]. I’ve been through [that program]. I ain’t no better off. I gotta survive. No ifs, ands, or buts about it and that’s the cold hard reality of it. I ain’t gonna starve too long for nobody. Not for Jesus Christ if he came down here and told me, ‘Don’t you sell drugs.’ Damn, you ain’t in my shoes.

Male, 47, served six months for drug possession and was released one year ago. He has four felony convictions, did not graduate high school and was homeless at the time of the interview.

Study respondents expressed fear, frustration and anger at their inability to create a secure future. They found themselves in the same situation they were in before going to prison. Struggling to find someone who would give them a chance, they were, over time, becoming more and more depressed about their inability to do so. Though almost everyone in the study was connected one way or another to some program, few could name resources other than the program they were in, and all were struggling to piece together their lives or maintain what they had achieved.

1. Those who had a seamless connection from prison to a program and who had strong family were more optimistic about the future.

Only one respondent reported feeling stable in terms of having independent housing, steady work that offered good benefits, strong family and peer support, and a positive future outlook. She felt her success was due, in large part, to her family:

I have a large family. Four of my cousins picked me up from prison. I went straight out and got my state id, then we went and had some food and to a nightclub. I had a job waiting for me because my cousin owns a temporary employment agency. My family has put money away for me while I was gone. I have been home about one year. I work downtown at a medical research firm. I travel. I make $30,000 a year.

A 39-year-old woman explained why she decided not to go back to her family when released:
"I went," one interview subject reported, "to [a local program for ex-offenders]. I wanted to go. I wrote letters [from prison] and begged them to let me in. I wanted to go somewhere where I would feel safe and I could stay clean."

But comprehensive programs that provide housing, counseling, training and positive peer supports and community connections, like the one she was enrolled in are rare. Those that had access to them felt that they had a foothold on a positive pathway.

2. Former prisoners have an important role to play in the reentry process.

Peer networks — those who were in the same situation and former prisoners who have made a successful reentry — played a critical role in the reentry process for those who had access to such support. Ex-offenders’ willingness to help each other and encourage change was remarkable.

In one focus group, a respondent told how not having his GED was holding him back. Another respondent told him about a new alternative high school” for ex-offenders and offered to meet him the next day and take him there.

In a different focus group, a young man had seen a flyer for a job-training program on his way to the discussion and shared the number with everyone there. Several respondents told their groups about a residential program that they found especially valuable, valuable because of the others going through the same experience and finding ways to support each other:

In jail you are trying to uphold an image where no one can see your weaknesses. At [this program], you can talk about your problems and no one looks down at you.

Male, 33, spent nine years in prison for armed robbery.

C. Ex-Offenders, Upon Leaving Prison, Find a Different, More Confusing “Set of Operating Rules” on the Outside

In 2000, when I got violated", I had thought if I didn’t get high and if I lived straight, I wouldn’t get arrested again.

I had a studio apartment and had been clean for five years and six months. I had finally found a job that would keep me, that paid well, and was reestablishing a relationship with my daughter. I was violated for disorderly conduct because someone from my past came to my house and I called the police to help me — instead I got arrested... and went back to do nine more months.

Female, 34, with three children.

Prison is based on a system of compliance and imposes a strict social structure. Despite the stress of prison life, often “following the rules” results in direct benefits such as reduced sentences — called “good time” — better jobs and greater freedoms. Upon leaving, those ex-offenders who are motivated to change their lives believe they will find good jobs and a “straight” life if they “follow the rules.” They discover, however, barriers that cannot be ameliorated by compliance to a set of clear guidelines. Their hopes and expectations are quickly replaced with confusion, frustration, and disillusionment as they come out with few material resources to fall back on and encounter a world they perceive as, at best, largely unconcerned with their needs and at worst, hostile to them.

D. For Respondents, Parole Equaled Monitoring and Surveillance, Not Support and Connection

Before I went to prison, I would wake up and the only thing on my mind was catching the bus. Now, I am changed. I wake up and I think how am I going to get from my front door to the bus stop. Here I am now, on parole, with a felony conviction. And, I am going to be walking down the stairs and some old lady is going to ask me for a light, and I am going to stop and give it to her. The police will have been stalking the place. And, it will end up she has a blunt on her and here I am standing next to her. So, the police, they ask to see my i.d. And they call it in and see I am on parole. Now, they are going to assume I was with her and they are going to put the handcuffs on me as well. And so, I am going on down to the police station. And, I miss my bus. And the employer who is waiting to interview me assumes I don’t want the job and gives it to someone else. So, that’s what has changed for me since I’ve gone to prison.

Male, 30, served four months for drug possession and had been released three months. This was his first felony conviction; he has some college, two children and was working as a forklift driver at the time of his arrest.

Respondents spoke about wanting to be “off paper”, reporting fears that a small infraction will land them back in prison — jaywalking, a car accident, or talking to someone who was in a gang. This is not surprising given the increasing number of parolees who are returned to prison for parole violations or for new crimes committed while on parole. In fiscal year 2001, more than 14,781 parolees were returned to prison in Illinois as compared to 8,150 parolees returned in 2000 and 7,076 in 1999. This one hundred percent increase over two years in the rate of parolees returning to prison is the result of an effort to strengthen monitoring and supervision of parolees in Illinois.
II. Navigating the World of Work

When you have no job or nothing you just freak.

Male, 24, served one year for gun possession and had been released for three months. This was his first felony conviction; he has one child.

I need to get used to the habit of work again. But I know I don’t have lots of time left on earth and I don’t want to mess around.

Male, 43, spent three years in prison for driving while intoxicated. This was his third felony conviction.

I got a temporary [60-day] job at McCormick Place. It kind of hurt me when it was over. [The supervisor] called my mama and gave her a good report. I am still out there looking. I am ‘fast fooding’ it now because I got bills.

Male, 26, served four years for theft and had been out 10 months. He has three felony convictions, a GED, and one child.

In addition to the very real disadvantages this population has in the labor market prior to incarceration, the “X-on-the-back,” as study respondents described it, has its own labor market consequences. Ex-offenders attempting to reintegrate into society face a powerful combination of barriers to employment: the stigma of a felony conviction; time out of the labor market that hinders the development of job skills and experience; legal restrictions that ban ex-offenders from a variety of jobs; bans on the receipt of federal and state financial aid for higher education.

A. The Majority of Ex-Offenders Leave Prison with Serious Problems that Hamper their Efforts to Secure Employment

Most ex-offenders leave prison without savings to weather a job search or prospects for employment. Few even have a place to live if their family is unwilling to accept them back, and return from prison homeless. “After my second incarceration my family wrote me off. I had nothing,” one woman reported. Another stated: “Even my mom abandoned me.” And when families are more accepting, the stress of reintegration is still present.

Female respondents were much more likely to report family stressors after their release and they wanted to focus immediate attention on regaining custody or reestablishing relationships with their children. “I have to deal with my kids and my fiancé’s personality,” said one 39-year-old woman with five children. “When you come from a big family, you never have a free moment. It is like spreading yourself thin, like jam across bread.” Advocates have noted that the hope of reuniting with their children is the most powerful incentive for many women to strive to address their addiction, maintain sobriety, successfully complete parole, and maintain gainful employment. Community-based mother-child programs in which women serve their sentences while caring for their young children report dramatically decreased recidivism rates nationwide. Women on parole whose children are removed from their custody or who permanently lose custody of their children through court termination of their parental rights in many cases are so devastated that they soon relapse into drug use and resume a downward spiral of self-destructive behavior.

Several respondents described themselves as “not being work-ready,” believing they had to first struggle with issues of drug addiction, anger, and depression. And one 41-year-old woman explained:

I’ve been on the inside or on drugs for so long, I don’t even know who I am. I can’t think about what I can give to a job until I find out who I am.”

Mental and physical health issues often are exacerbated in prison, and many people suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome from experiences in prison or before arrest. As one 24-year-old man described: “You’ve been raped in prison or whatever, and the memories of jail or your problems might still be strong.”

Old peer groups were often quick to support an ex-offender’s choice to resume criminal habits and drug and alcohol abuse. This was the case particularly for male respondents aged 34 and younger:

It was one year [after release] before I started looking for a job. The streets were calling me.

It took me six months [before looking for work] because I was testing out the streets again. I spent my time with my baby and my girl, and kicking with my buddies.

B. The Gap Between Ex-Offenders’ Skills and Labor Market Demand is Exacerbated by the Prison Experience

Some researchers contend that the prison environment has a regressive effect on work habits, social skills and networks, and on employability by creating attitudes and habits that work well for inmates on the inside, but not on the outside (Western, 2001). This experience often then, exacerbates already existing labor market disadvantages. Racism remains a documented barrier for many ex-offenders. In their study, Soft Skills and Race: An Investigation of Black Men’s Employment Problems, Philip Moss and Chris Tilly show that employers put a great deal of
emphasis on the importance of “soft skills.” These skills, which are defined to include everything from dress to language, communication styles, and perceived levels of motivation, are often complicated, value-based measurements. The researchers believe that “employer assessments of the soft skills of current or potential workers are invariably subjective [and] that often racial discrimination can—consciously or subconsciously—enter into such assessments.”

1. The lack of job skills, and job-hunting and work experience outside of prison—along with gaps in employment history due to time in prison—compounded ex-offenders struggles to find employment

I have been hanging out in institutions since age 13. I learned some trades—cooking, cleaning, and painting. But I am under-educated. I am 33 now and I spent 17 years altogether incarcerated. I never had a job, except a prison job. I am afraid because I have never been on a job interview.

Male, most recently served nine years for armed robbery and had been released for one month. He has a total of five felony convictions, is not working and has not completed high school.

Almost to a person, respondents believed they would do a good job “if only given the chance.” They did not connect their skill and education level, work history, or the poor work habits they described when talking about work experience prior to prison, to their current difficulties in finding a job. Telling in itself was that no respondent said that he or she might have been rejected for a reason other than the felony record. Respondents could list general ways to be positive about getting a job (“Stay focused.” “Don’t let anyone push you off your square.” “Maintain your composure.” “Stay determined.” “Get rid of slang language.” “Present yourself as positive person”), but had little to offer about specific job-hunting and interviewing techniques. They blamed their criminal record. For example, one 34-year-old male who had been incarcerated since he was 18 years old and had no work experience outside of prison said:

I am qualified for many things but I was convicted of murder and I am having a hard time finding a job. Now I have a telemarketing job. It’s the only job I can get and I didn’t check the box [felony conviction on the application]. It is a shame that my first job had to be something I didn’t go to school for.

Male, 34, spent 15 years in prison where he got his GED, a B.A. degree from Roosevelt University and “tons of certificates.”

2. Respondents were discouraged to find the programs and jobs they had completed in prison had little meaning to employers on the outside

Most of the respondents did not get jobs traceable to the training they received in prison. Very little coordination exists between in-prison programs, labor market demand, and jobs realistically available to ex-offenders. The optimism and confidence that respondents gained from participating in prison programs was quickly shattered.

As one female respondent who participated in horticulture training in prison put it: “You get geared up about your training and you can’t get a job. These people out here don’t care nothing about me being able to plant a tree.”

Other respondents reported similar frustrations:

Jobs [in prison] don’t prepare you for the future. You can be in the kitchen or clean up the grounds. Sometimes you could get piecework for the clothing industry, but the machines are old and you come out still not prepared.

Female, 42, spent four years in prison for drug conspiracy and had been released for 18 months.

I took computer courses…and the people who taught the skills were real nice, I enjoyed the class. We even had a graduation. But we weren’t hooked up to jobs on the outside…it’s hard to keep up the skills—they get rusty.

Female, 50, spent six months in prison for theft and had been released for one year. This was her fourth felony conviction. She had a GED and one child.

I have found in the real work the certificate doesn’t really count for a whole lot.

Female, 25, spent six years in prison for aggravated battery.

3. Many respondents expressed unrealistic expectations about the jobs they could obtain

Many respondents said they would take any job—even minimum wage to start—yet in describing pre-prison work experiences had talked about feeling “disrespected” by the low pay they had received. Others had plans that seemed grandiose given their actual work history and educational background—e.g., own their own business within three years, head an agency for ex-offenders, or manage a large store. Some simply hoped to stay off drugs, reconnect with family, and get a job, any job that could lead to a livable wage.

C. Addressing the Added Consequences of a Felony Conviction on Employment

I have always had jobs but now that I have this conviction, it is kind of affecting me and it is difficult. I didn’t imagine
it would be this difficult to find a job. They [employers] see theft. I think they don’t want to hire no thief.

Male, 29, served five years and had been released for two months. He has some college education and one child.

I do not know how I will be employed being I am a convicted felon. I dread answering to a prospective employer. I can’t live on $5 or $7 an hour. Considering my background, that is all I am worth in the eye of the public. Just because I’m a convict with a history of drugs, I [still think I should get a job] I’m qualified for.

Female, 35, served one year, nine months for forgery and had been released for four months. This was her second conviction; she had some college and one child.

Even those respondents with good work experience prior to conviction felt that the stigma of a felony conviction would wipe out the benefit of having a good resume, good training or educational qualifications. This perception is backed up by data. One widely cited employer survey found that 65% of all employers would not knowingly hire an ex-offender, regardless of the offense and that employers are more likely to hire welfare recipients or applicants with little work experience than ex-offenders (Holzer, 1996; Petersilia, 2000).

1. **Most respondents believe that revealing their felony conviction on a job application will automatically lead to rejection**

Many report meeting employers who are negative and cynical about hiring applicants with felony convictions. The majority would rather take the risk of being fired later, when and if an employer discovers that they left their record off their job applications.

People kept telling me that I should tell the truth because God got my back, but he hasn’t. I am never going to be honest about my background.

Female, 39, in prison for eight years for robbery and had been released 16 months. Prior to arrest she worked for bulk mail services for 15 years. Since release has been bouncing from job to job.

Others reported they could not find a positive way to talk about their crime. This was particularly true for those who committed murder and other violent offenses.

I don’t know how to explain the fact that I committed murder to someone and all I have is my word that I won’t do it again. I get stuck every time. How do you get a person to trust you in a job interview like that?

Male, 34, spent 12 years in prison and had been released two weeks. He had some vocational education training. This was his first felony conviction.

A few respondents feel compelled to disclose their criminal record to employers. They believe that employers should see this as a sign of their honesty and give them a chance.

Honesty has hindered me from a lot of jobs but I know I will find one. I am just waiting on my chance.

Male, 27, spent five years in prison for drug possession and had been released for five months. He is a high school graduate with one child and he has five felony convictions.

I am going to take my dope fiend mentality and apply it to my job search. When I am offered a position, I hope I can explain where I was and why and my new goals.

Female, 47, served 26 months for burglary and drug possession and had been released for one month. This was her third felony conviction; she has three children and has never had a job in the formal labor market.

2. **Respondents were unsure how to overcome employers’ negative perceptions of people with criminal records**

It’s up to an employer to be willing to take a chance on an ex-offender. Ex-offenders really want a chance but employers’ fears are valid

Female, 35, in prison for fraud and had been released for one year at the time of the interview.

They say [employers] do not discriminate, but they lie. I think it is wrong. If God is willing to give us a chance, who are [employers] to judge the outcome of anything.

Female, 27, served three years for aggravated discharge of a firearm and had been released five months.

Conflicting views of the validity of employers’ fears about hiring ex-offenders appeared in almost every focus group. Often, contradictory perceptions came from the same person. No one doubted that employers were afraid to hire men and women who had been to prison, even if they had bad feelings about it, and almost everyone agreed that employers had good reason to worry as a general matter, even if they did not believe this justified blanket policies.

Responses to the question, “What do you think are employers’ greatest fears about hiring an ex-offender included: “they think you’ll rob them blind;” “violent temper;” “you might get upset and kill them;” “you might be a fence”; “drug and alcohol abuse;” “they think you are a bad person—they stereotype you.” “poor work performance;” “punctuality,” “dependability,” “cleanliness,” “attitude;” “ability to relate to other employees;” “lawsuits;” and “women getting harassed [by you].” And from one astute observer, “You gotta expect they’ll be worried about violence, what [an ex-felon] is bringing to the job, and fear that we’ll be inconsistent [about attending work]”.
One male respondent offered this example of employers’ fears and how hard it was to dispel them: “I was in Buffalo Grove [working for a telemarketing agency]. Some money came up missing, and everyone’s eye went to me because I have a conviction, and I wasn’t even arrested for stealing. You’re guilty until proven innocent.”

With some exceptions, anger and hostility were palpable in male respondents’ comments about employers. Female respondents, while expressing some anger, also tended to express sadness. Some respondents had an overall sense of entitlement:

These guys [in the focus group] don’t want social-worky talk. They’re sick of telling their stories. They want jobs, they want something from society. They feel it is owed.

Male, 39, served nine months for burglary and had two felony convictions.

Another respondent angrily described the common employer practice of asking whether someone has committed a felony as racist behavior:

I feel that the question [have you been convicted of a felony] is a form of racism. I understand if I am trying to work in your bank and, if I embezzled, then you should know about it. Does the fact that I sold drugs matter to a job at UPS? The company doesn’t need to know what my background is. If my background says I shot a few people, you don’t need to know that. They say they are not discriminating but they are.

Male, 31, served one year for drug possession and had been released for 15 months. He is currently working and did not tell his employer he had a felony conviction.

3. Respondents struggled to differentiate themselves from the stereotype that they believe employers have of ex-offenders

Ex-offenders in our sample wanted to differentiate themselves from other ex-offenders in employers’ eyes. They believe other ex-offenders are less motivated than they are and have poor work performance, giving all ex-offenders the reputation of being bad risks.

Programs] send people to jobs who quit after two or three days. It makes it bad for the next person who wants that job. The employer gets soured.

Female, 44, convicted of aggravated battery and had been released for one month.

Program[s’s] resource center has too many brothers coming to it. Lots of brothers don’t want to work for it. They do it for a couple of days, then blow it off... Then I come for an interview, and it comes full circle... they said they don’t hire ex-cons.

Male, 37, spent nine years in prison for burglary.

The vast majority of respondents used a narrative of self-help, seeing this inner strength as something that distinguishes them from other ex-offenders for employers and for society in general. Many used words and phrases from the 12-step recovery and other self-help programs or from a religious perspective. (“I’m working on myself one day at a time.” “I know Jesus has something good planned for me.” “I’m blessed to be here at [this program].”)

Lots of people expect [programs to do things for you. You can’t spend your life waiting for that. I gotta help myself.”

Female, 39, spent three years in prison for drug possession. This was her second felony conviction.

I’ve got to keep my focus, keep my goals to achieve. I’m going to own my own business, live a righteous life, and serve God.

Male, 34, spent 12 years in prison for murder. He has a high school diploma and some vocational training.

Though only a few respondents talked about church as a helping agency, those who did felt it was one of few institutions that would accept them back. Many people in the study referred to the need for programs to help with drug abuse, family problems, and social connections.

D. “Everything I Found, I Found on My Own.” The Lack of Help and Support with Employment

Only 26% of respondents in the sample were working at the time of their interview. Of those who were working, their jobs were most often temporary or conditional in nature.

When asked who helps them the most in finding a job, the most typical responses were “everything I found, I found on my own,” the “phone book,” a family member, other ex-offenders, a teacher or counselor.

Others found a job with the help of a nonprofit program. The more comprehensive the program, the more respondents seem to feel it helped. Most respondents, however, were unaware of programs beyond the one’s they were involved with that could assist them and were struggling to find avenues for support and opportunity.
Part III:
Discussion of Findings and Recommendations

I'm worried about myself. I got a temper, I got rage. It would be so easy to go back, to get arrested for something. Male, 28, spent nine months in prison for drug possession and had been released six months. This was his sixth felony conviction. He did not graduate from high school and has four children.

I wonder, can I really accomplish anything? Even if I'm going in the right path, can I really make it?

Female, 29, spent three years in prison for drug possession and had been released six months. This was her second felony conviction and she has one child.

I. Discussion of Findings

To a large extent, ex-offenders’ difficulties are traceable to more fundamental social problems than merely the failing of corrections, reentry programs, and other services. The findings sometimes contradict themselves as they reflect the complexity of the individual ex-offender’s life and the problems of poverty in his or her neighborhood. The focus groups point to the same conclusion Leon Dash came to in his book, *Rosa Lee*, in which he chronicles the life of a welfare recipient for five years after her release from prison:

[There are] immense difficulties [in] any effort to bring an end to poverty, illiteracy, drug abuse, and criminal activity. These problems are woven together so tightly that there is no way to separate the individual threads, especially in those communities overwhelmed by drug abuse. Reforming welfare doesn’t stop drug trafficking; better policing doesn’t end illiteracy; providing job training doesn’t teach a young man or woman why it’s wrong to steal.

The respondents’ descriptions of their lives reflected a poverty of choices and judgment, and sometimes also the desperation of the drug addict. One unexpected finding was the large number of respondents who talked about prison “saving my life” in that it provided “time out,” it “scared straight,” and it provided opportunities for education and training—though it had its own dangers and debilitating effects. As with any human being, change comes hard and an experience that has an enormous impact on one’s life—illness, a death of a loved one, or a prison term—can be the beginning of making change.

The majority of the sample viewed the moment of release as a potential turning point and were motivated never to return. But, in the absence of an integrated set of strategies for handling reentry, the possibilities for growth and redirection engendered at the moment of release from prison may be lost once people are back in their old environments. When respondents are unable to reestablish their lives favorably based on their own ideas of who they are, what they want to be, and in light of the enormous set of obstacles that block their way—then the positive effects of prison as a “time out” are immediately erased. To increase stable employment—and reduce recidivism—policies and programs must help create clearer paths for those who want to reconnect successfully with society.

In doing so, we must understand that there is no “archetypal” ex-offender returning home from prison. The challenges facing people in the study varied substantially depending on the individual’s circumstances. Many of these differences were based on specific factors, such as education level, family support, gender and previous work experience. We met a few ex-offenders who upon their release were greeted by a large extended family, had several job offers within weeks of getting out of prison, and were on a clear pathway. Others had great hopes and a strong desire to work and get connected to good programs and other supports. With the right set of supports, many of these respondents, despite substance abuse and anger issues, and questions about permanent housing and transportation, seemed to have the right attitudes about work to hold a job. A last group of ex-offenders had problems that were so extreme that the chances of securing a job were slim; the chances of recidivism very high. These were the men and women with active drug problems, histories of violence, mental or physical health problems, little or no education, and little interest in leaving the streets. The diversity of the reentry population points to the need for programs and policies that take these differences into consideration.

II. Recommendations

There is no central policy focus nor is there a central governmental agency to coordinate the transition from prison to work. Little coordination exists among the multiple systems in which an ex-offender might find him or herself. Yet there is wide agreement that to avoid recidivism, quickly cementing an ex-offender’s ties to employment and the community is critical. This will require the linking of local corrections, probation, workforce, health and welfare systems, with community organizations, employers and other supports. While this type of coordination is often difficult to realize in practice, policymakers, service providers, government officials, and community leaders can create policies
and programs to proactively begin moving in this direction.

A. Improve Programs for Offenders within Correctional Facilities to Respond to Labor Market Demand; Hold IDOC and Ex-Offender Vocational and Job-Training Programs to the Same Accountability Standards as other Programs Funded by the State’s Workforce Development System

Time in prison can be an important opportunity for inmates who are motivated to gain new skills and to rehabilitate their lives. Currently, ex-offenders find upon release, however, that the “skills” they had proudly acquired while in prison are often useless on the outside. Though there was some difference in responses depending on the length of time in prison, and length of time since release, reactions to questions about how in-prison program help with reentry afforded a generally consistent view: preparation for release was inadequate.

A number of programs within corrections facilities are aimed at assisting offenders in developing job skills and finding future employment, including prison industries, vocational training, and work-release programs. For inmates who take advantage of these programs, there needs to be a demonstrated connection to what happens between the training/education and direct employment opportunities on the outside (see endnotes for examples of model programs in other states). In-prison programs should be matched with Bureau of Labor Statistics information on labor market demand, tied to wage data and industry skills standards, and should ensure that prisoners are receiving training for jobs and industries that hire people with felony convictions. The Illinois Department of Corrections workforce and vocational training programs need to be integrated into the existing State workforce development systems and held to the same accountability standards that other workforce development organizations follow.

B. Help to Articulate the Potential Pathways for Ex-Offenders so that they Move from Prison to a Network of Opportunities and Supports

As with other studies, particularly the Vera Institute’s “Three Months Out,” our assumption was that ex-offenders would know what they needed to help them get jobs. What we learned, however, is that ex-offenders have so many barriers to overcome that they often are at a loss to know what they need, how to set priorities, where to get help, and sometimes, how to follow up to advocate for themselves. A number of practices could assist ex-offenders: make direct connections from prison to community organizations prior to release; provide and widely disseminate up-to-date information on resources and supports available to ex-offenders; create community-based mother-child programs in which women serve their sentences while caring for their young children; and develop a program where ex-offenders can go for peer support.

Respondents repeatedly touted organizations such as St. Leonard’s and Grace House as places where they could get their immediate needs met and received comprehensive services—housing, food, counseling, job training, and support—to ease the transition and provide a structured pathway. But these “boutique” programs are rare. Developing a better understanding of how these programs operate and the characteristics that make them successful in the eyes of ex-offenders—and employers—can help to formulate better policies and programs.

C. Develop Peer Mentoring and Support Systems

Ex-offenders who were motivated to transform their lives also provided peer support. They support each other “just by talking,” sharing information on resources, helping to set realistic expectations, providing advice for avoiding recidivism, preparing for work, trading insights on various training and education programs and jobs, and by developing new, positive peer networks.

D. Learn from Successful Workforce Preparation and Employment Programs Focused on Ex-Offenders and Conduct Additional Research on Best Practices

There are a handful of repeatedly cited workforce development programs working specifically with men and women upon their release from prison. Because of their relationship with various criminal justice agencies, these programs often connect to ex-offenders at the critical time of reentry. Many times, ex-offenders are mandated to attend such a program. In other cases, the program had contact with the offender while in prison, or ex-offender peer group networks referred clients to them. Because the immediately returning population of ex-offenders is unattractive to most employers, training programs that provide work-opportunities enable ex-offenders to “put something between me and my conviction.”
These programs tend to share some common characteristics (Festen, 2000):

- Work release, parole or probation often directly refer participants;
- Emphasis is on job readiness, life skills and addressing felony convictions with potential employers;
- “Work first” is a priority and the focus is on placement in a private industry job;
- Staff are experienced in providing for the distinctive needs of ex-offenders, such as assistance in obtaining a state identification card; and
- Staff has established relationships with employers willing to hire ex-offenders.

Many have also implemented some strategies that hold promise, and they point to some specific and unique approaches for serving ex-offenders, as distinguished from the rest of the hard-to-serve population (see endnotes for examples of such programs). One strategy that stands out is focusing on immediate work through transitional work programs and helping ex-offenders meet their pressing needs such as stable housing. Yet, there have been few recent systematic evaluations of job placement and development programs for ex-offenders. Indeed, there is a general lack of assessment centered on employment-related programs for ex-offenders (Mukamal, 1997). Most literature that exists examines recidivism rather than labor market outcomes. Even less is known about what happens to ex-offenders after being placed in a first job.

There is a need for additional, formal evaluations of ex-offender workforce development programs that document effective strategies specific to ex-offenders and focus on short- and long-term employment outcomes. In addition, internal data analysis capacity is necessary to track participants more effectively, to identify trends among different subsets being served, and to develop long-term mechanisms for job retention and advancement.

E. Improve Capacity of Standard Workforce Development and Employment Programs to Work with Ex-Offenders

Though many employment service providers focus on a general population of job seekers, ex-offenders are part of their client population. The types of services ex-offenders may need are not necessarily different from other hard-to-serve populations, but the number and concentration of resources they need may be greater. Additionally, ex-offenders may be harder to place in jobs. Better training and understanding of the lessons learned from specific programs for ex-offenders would enable this group of providers to serve the rapidly growing population of ex-offenders more effectively.

At the same time, exemplary workforce development and employment programs have developed strategies to focus on longer retention, a focus that could enhance the work of ex-offender specific programs. Because it is within the first three years that recidivism is most likely to occur, ex-offender employment programs should provide multi-year support, focused on the first three years after release. Crossover learning between programs would be beneficial. For example, ex-offender specific programs, like those illustrated in the previous section, often model the work-first philosophy guiding current welfare policy. In doing so, they have important strategies to share with programs targeting other hard-to-serve populations. But these programs have not developed mechanisms to help participants prepare for additional education and training that lead to higher wages, or offer long-term career tracks. Programs that employ some of the more promising welfare-to-work program strategies, such as the very successful publicly funded temporary jobs programs piloted in several states, often involve working over consecutive years with participants as they cycle in and out of a variety of work preparation and employment experiences that could lead to better jobs.
Appendix A: Methodology and Research Sample

Data for this report was collected through a sample of 20 individuals interviewed and seven (7) focus groups. In all, the project consultants spoke with 73 respondents through focus groups or interviews. The Chicago Urban League recruited respondents from several nonprofit organizations. Sampling was aimed at recruiting adults, aged 18 and older, convicted of a felony offense and released from prison within the past 18 months. Four of the focus groups were with male respondents; three were all female. Focus groups were separated by age: 18 to 34 and 35 and older.

Women were over-sampled in the study compared to their percentage of the overall prison population for two reasons: 1) According to the Illinois Department of Corrections, the female prison population has increased by 70% over the past five years—more than double the rate for males; and 2) because of the relatively small number of females in prison as compared to males, their voices have been under-represented. Though this study does not specifically compare male experience to female experience, we looked for gender differences and we incorporated those we identified in our analysis of the text of the report.

The research design and guides for focus groups and interviews were developed with the assistance of an advisory group with deep and varied experience in criminal justice and employment issues (see Appendix C). All respondents were promised confidentiality and paid a stipend of $25, plus transportation costs. Systematic procedures for data collection, data handling and data analysis were used. The authors also conducted a limited literature review, examining existing literature on prisoner reentry, employer attitudes towards people with criminal records; and other research related to ex-offenders, incarceration and criminal justice policy.

The demographic characteristics of the study sample are as follows:

- 68% male; 32% female.
- 88% black; 7% white; 3% Hispanic; 1% Native American; 1% multi-racial.
- 50% were between the ages of 18 and 35.
- 31% had less than a high school education; 36% had a high school diploma or GED; 22% had some college; 5% had earned an associate’s degree; 1% had earned a bachelor’s degree; and 1% had done graduate work.
- 26% were working.
- 30% were parents and one-half of the males had custody of their children at the time of their arrest.

The institutional history of the study sample is as follows:

- Respondents were primarily convicted of drug related offenses such as possession and delivery (35%), and theft, burglary and robbery (36%), often to support a drug habit.
- Twenty percent committed more serious crimes like rape, murder or attempted murder.
- 83% were on parole at the time of the study.
- For 38%, this was a first felony conviction. Twenty-five percent had two felony convictions; 13% had three; 7% had four, 11% had five, 4% had six, and 3% had seven or more previous convictions.
- The average length of stay in prison was 4.3 years and the median was 1.3 years.
- The shortest length of stay was one month; the longest was 17.5 years.

Appendix B: Sources


Appendix C: Advisory Group Members

Brenda Palms Barber
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North Lawndale
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Executive Director
Chicago Legal Advocacy to Incarcerated Mothers

Paul Street
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Chicago Urban League

Carlos Vega and Barbara echols
Deputy Director & Executive Director
Prison Action Committee

Bob Wordlaw
Executive Director
Chicago Jobs Council
Endnotes

1 Conversation with Gail Smith, Executive Director, Chicago Legal Aid for Incarcerated Mothers.

2 An "X on one's back" means having a felony conviction.

3 A "blunt" is a slang term for a cigar filled with either marijuana or a combination of marijuana and cocaine.

4 According to the Illinois Department of Corrections, in the last 5.5 years, the female state prison population has increased by 70%, and the rate of female admissions has been more than double that for males. The growth is primarily related to drug crimes. Approximately 80% are mothers.

5 This data represents only those ex-offenders who are released to parole, Illinois Department of Corrections, June 25, 2001. Data on those who are released unconditionally is not available. Some researchers estimate that, nationally, up to 20% of the released population, is released unconditionally (Travis).

6 Western, Bruce, Princeton University, Department of Sociology, Telephone interview conducted on October 2, 2000 for The Joyce Foundation's internal report, "Ex-Offender Employment Policy: An Overview of the Issues". November 2000.

7 The phrase "I tore him off" is a slang term that means, "I stole from him".


9 Ibid

10 A "bit" is a slang term that refers to a prison term. Someone who has "done three bits" has been to prison three times.


13 "Selling nation packs" is slang for dealing packages of drugs (of any sort) for a gang.

14 This is a new program at St. Leonard's House.

15 "Being violated" is a slang term for being caught violating conditions of parole.

16 "Off-paper" is a slang term for being completely finished with the Department of Corrections-off probation, parole, etc.


18 Jobs that require state licensure allow the state to deny the right to a license on the basis of certain types of criminal records. Felony convictions trigger the most restrictions. According to research conducted for the Safer Foundation in 2000, in Illinois there is an absolute barrier to employment as a childcare provider if one has been convicted of any one of a multitude of crimes. The following acts allow restriction of licensing if one has been convicted of a felony: Illinois Landscape Architecture of 1989 (225 ILLCS 315), Illinois Roofing Industry Licensing Act (225 ILLCS 333), and the Barber, Cosmetology, Esthetics, and Nail Technology Act of 1985 (225 ILLCS 410).

19 The Higher Education Act of 1998, signed into law last fall, includes a provision that delays or denies all federal financial aid eligibility for any student with a drug conviction, no matter how minor.

20 Conversation with Gail Smith, Executive Director, Chicago Legal Aid for Incarcerated Mothers.

21 PRIDE Enterprises (Prison Rehabilitative Industries and Diversified Enterprises), based in St. Petersburg, Florida, operates 51 diverse industries (e.g., textiles, manufacturing, print and digital information services) in 21 correctional institutions throughout Florida, using business professionals to train close to 5,000 inmates per year within a private enterprise environment. PRIDE helps create employment opportunities for inmate workers and assists their transition into employment upon leaving prison. PRIDE claims that 84% of former workers do not return to crime. In fiscal year 1999, PRIDE sales totaled $158 million. Of this $3.6 million went to the state of Florida -- $1.9 million in inmate wages, the remainder for room and board, restitution, and other social services. (Festen, 2000). Washington State's Corrections Clearinghouse, a branch of the Employment Security Department, illustrates one state's dedication of resources to preparing ex-offenders for the workplace and to finding employment. As one example, the Clearinghouse developed an unusual "transition-to-trade" initiative tailored to women offenders. It got three unions -- carpenters, laborers and ironworkers -- to fund and staff a pre-apprenticeship program for inmates in the women's correction center. Women who successfully complete the program are guaranteed membership in one of the unions, thereby improving their chances of being hired after release. The Clearinghouse also connects women with union mentors to help them succeed upon release -- for example, by providing guidance on how to deal with troublesome male coworkers. (National Institute of Justice)

22 Pioneer Human Services in Seattle is one of the largest self-sustaining nonprofits in the country. It provides employment training, housing and counseling services to 6,000 ex-offenders and drug abusers each year (about 1,900 individuals at any given time). Less than 1% of the company's funds come from private foundations or contributors. Its companies include sheet-metal factories, catering services, real estate management, and product distribution. Program operators claim that the 50% turnover rate is high because Pioneer meets its goal to train employees well enough to get higher paying jobs in the private sector as quickly as possible. Nearly 11% leave within 30 days. In a small sample of 402 former employees, Pioneer found 96.6% of them were still employed one year after leaving the company (Pioneer Human Services web site). The Center for Employment Opportunities in New York is a well-known ex-offender training program that works with non-violent adult felons leaving New York State's boot camp. It places participants in day labor work crews as a strategy to provide immediate work and develop job readiness skills that will prepare participants for private sector jobs. Work crews provide model works with short-term, low-skilled, minimum wage, day-labor employment. Assignments typically include custodial services in government buildings, highway cleanup, and graffiti removal. In addition, participants spend one day a week in the Center's office working with an employment specialist to find a private sector job. The Center is now developing strategies to use its work crew contacts more to its advantage. For example, one of the Center's largest work crew contractors is City Tech College, which has a large hospitality-industry training program. The Center is attempting to find ways that work crew members -- already felony building -- might access that training (National Institute for Justice; Festen).

23 Except where specific barriers exist and in dealing with the issue of having a felony record.

24 The inter-relationship and overlap of ex-offender populations and welfare populations is striking both because some welfare recipients are ex-offenders, and former felons often have families on welfare and because almost all face the same challenges. When Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, it affected the lives of many ex-offenders as well as those women and children sustaining their lives through welfare. A provision in the law precluded, for life, receipt of food stamps and cash grants by those with a drug felony conviction, unless a state overrides the federal proviso. (In Illinois, the ban was modified to exclude convictions for simple possession or use.) PRWORA, or "welfare reform," as it came to be known, also included a five-year limit on welfare, rigorous work participation requirements, and increased and stricter sanctions on those clients who failed to fulfill the conditions for maintaining their status. At the time, because of the strong economy, the workforce needed workers and employers were looking for sources of labor in places that at other times were considered unacceptable. More employers were responsive to working with ex-offenders, and the Department of Labor issued several Requests for Proposals to work with the "hardest-to-serve," including ex-offenders whose children were receiving public aid.