

Engaging Communities in Reentry



Executive Summary

Table of Contents

- Acknowledgements 1**
- Introduction and Background 2**
- Methodology 4**
- Major Themes 5**
 - Resources and Barriers 5
 - Community, Family, & Culture 8
 - Internal Struggles 11
- Women and Reentry 14**
- Community Perspectives 15**
- Catch 22 15**
- Discussion 16**
- References 18**

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Introduction & Background

To understand prisoner reentry at a local community level, New Living Way Christian Center, the Minnesota Department of Corrections, and the Council on Crime and Justice collaborated to conduct community listening sessions with previously incarcerated men and women in North Minneapolis, Frogtown in Saint Paul, and Rochester, Minnesota. With funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the sessions aimed to capture the voice and experience of those returning home from prison and to uncover respondent's experiences from a local, community perspective. The hope is that the project findings will be used to spark innovative community initiatives, refine current programmatic efforts, and influence policy decisions in the future.

The prison population in the United States has experienced a four hundred percent increase in the last twenty-five years alone (Beck, Karberg, & Harrison, 2002). Mass imprisonment has been identified as one of the most startling changes in U.S. culture during this time period (Pattillio, Weiman, & Western, 2004). With literally hundreds of thousands of prisoners annually returning to various communities, the aftermath of imprisonment and the reentry process are of particular interest (Hairston, 2002). The transition from prison to home involves a complex set of issues within intersecting arenas of public safety, community preparedness, and public policy.

According to the United States Office of Justice Programs, nearly 650,000 people are released from state and federal prison yearly, not including the even higher number of those returning home from local jails (reentry.gov). A recent report by the Pew Center on the States found that since 2007, one in every 100 adults is currently confined in an American jail or prison (Pew, 2008). Some experts argue that the removal of offenders from communities might do more

harm than good, especially in communities of color (e.g., Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999; Rose & Clear, 1998). Imprisonment disproportionately impacts people and communities of color (Watts & Nightingale, 1996; Clear, Rose & Ryder, 2001). This is especially evident in Minnesota, as it has led the nation in racial disparities in imprisonment rates between African Americans and Whites (Wagner, 2004).

Often times the communities with the fewest resources and are least prepared to handle the strains of returning ex-offenders, receive the highest numbers of those returning. The three communities represented in this study represent five percent of the total population of Minnesota. Therefore, a healthy amount of resource-straining demographic percentages should also be around five percent, yet often they are twice that. These three communities contain nine percent of those in poverty in Minnesota. In addition to this, these communities contain 11 percent of the foreign born population of Minnesota; 10 percent of those Minnesotans on public assistance; nine percent of foreclosures; and 11 percent of those using public transportation in the state of Minnesota. Finally and most important to this study, these communities in 2006 and 2007 represented nine percent of ex-offenders re-entering the community.

When a community is forced to deal with such a high percentage of social concerns there are far fewer resources to assist with reentry services. These communities are also receiving much less financially from their constituents through various taxes, due to high foreclosure rates and the amount of poverty in these communities. In sum, ex-offenders are re-entering communities that are un-resourced and un-prepared to best reintegrate them.

Project Methodology

This project utilized community listening sessions to obtain information from formerly incarcerated people from three target communities in Minnesota: North Minneapolis, Frogtown (St. Paul), and Rochester. In addition, participants represented one of three groups: 1) those previously incarcerated in a Minnesota facility who returned to a target community over three years ago and have not been re-incarcerated; 2) those previously incarcerated in a Minnesota facility who returned to a target community less than three years ago and have not been re-incarcerated; 3) those previously incarcerated in a Minnesota facility who returned to a target community, but were re-incarcerated at Minnesota Correctional Facility (MCF) - Lino Lakes Correctional Facility (males) or MCF -Shakopee Correctional facility (females).

In total, 86 people participated in 13 Community Listening Sessions. These included: two sessions at a library in Frogtown for previously incarcerated males (one group recently released, one group having been released over three years ago), three sessions at a church in North Minneapolis for previously incarcerated males (two sessions of recently released; one session for those released over three years ago), three sessions at MCF- Lino Lakes with re-incarcerated males (one group from each of the three target communities), three sessions at MCF- Shakopee with re-incarcerated females (one group from each target community), and two sessions with released women (one in the Twin Cities, one in Rochester), which mixed those both recently released and released over three years ago, due to a smaller sample size.

According to self-report data, participants served an average sentence of 41.4 months, in a State Correctional Facilities. Many were incarcerated several times, with an average number of approximately three different periods of incarceration. Thirteen percent of participants were incarcerated six or more times. Nearly half of the participants in the community were

unemployed at the time of the session, with only 21 participants (24%) holding full-time employment. Overwhelmingly, participants reported having children (with an average of three children per participant) – only 11 participants (13%) did not have children.

In addition to the Community Listening Sessions conducted with ex-inmates, similar sessions were held with those who work in the field of reentry in each of the target communities. These included reentry program staff, corrections staff, grant managers, policymakers, pastors, employment counselors, and others. These sessions centered on a discussion of current community efforts in reentry, and offered an opportunity for those working on this issue to compare perspectives and share experiences. In total, three sessions were held (one in each community), with 24 participants in attendance.

Major Themes:

Resources & Barriers

External factors often shaped participants' reentry experiences and outcomes. These included an overall feeling that the time spent inside prison did not well-equip them for reentry into the community, that Department of Corrections policies put them in a position to fail and return to prison, that barriers to employment and housing were central to their feelings of helplessness, and that current community-based programming did not adequately meet their needs.

Each group of respondents (those recently released, those having been released for some time, and those who were re-incarcerated) spoke of many of the same issues; however, each group had some unique experiences related to their time since release. Those recently released expressed hope for the future – they described an internal urge to give back to their community,

to reestablish their lives, to make different choices. Those who had been through the reentry experience over the course of several years were more pragmatic and practical in their descriptions, noting how difficult many aspects of reentry were, sharing disappointments and setbacks, but also stories of success. Those who were re-incarcerated spoke to those setbacks with a more pronounced sense of frustration, perhaps due to the prison context and a tendency to speak more about barriers and failures in reentry.

The actual experience of reentry which our participants described to us often seemed to stem from the interaction of external barriers in the community combined with the internal struggle of reentry. Common outcomes for participants involved settling for low-wage employment, being trapped in certain neighborhoods (often communities most afflicted by criminal activity and economic downturn), and feeling recycled or used by mostly ineffective community-based programming. Many were acutely aware of their position within the corrections system and programmatic sphere, especially in regards to their age, gender, and race, and urged community agencies to let those with the experience of incarceration and reentry lead efforts and hold prominent positions within reentry programming and lobbying efforts.

An initial barrier to successful reentry began within the prison. Many participants felt their time inside prison was wasted, idle, or useless and did not prepare them for release. As one remarked,

“They did nothing to prepare me for reentry, educating me. You know they have programs there, I think, but the ultimate goal when you’re in the system like that is basically to house you and let you out. They don’t force the issue, like ‘we need you to accomplish something while you’re here.’”

Housing and employment were constantly described as main barriers to successful reentry. Some viewed barriers to employment and housing as a discriminatory act that happened immediately upon application to a job or apartment. Many expressed that they weren’t

attempting to hide their criminal record, but that they wanted an opportunity to be evaluated for employment based on their skill sets and work histories, instead of solely on the existence of their felony. As one person said,

“Basically, make it the same for felons as it is for everyone else: for employment, where you live, everything I mean because it’s limited, for felons it’s really limited, it ain’t really too much. We just want the same thing. Basically to be even, to be equal.”

Barriers to housing and employment are complex issues involving the interaction of the internal stigma of a criminal record, the external reality of having a felony record publicly available, and the resulting outcome of having limited options. As one person described it,

“I felt like I had a big F right here, that everybody knew I was a felon, that every job I went to was just, automatically would not hire because I was a felon. People would treat me differently because I was a felon, and besides for obvious reasons would add that along to it, just made it psychologically worse for me. There came a time where you just like, you just be...I mean I came to a time where I was just like forget this.”

Obtaining housing posed similar challenges to the participants, however, the outcome was often a feeling of being “trapped” in the same neighborhood they committed criminal acts in, simply due to a lack of available housing outside of communities such as North Minneapolis and Frogtown. As one participant told us,

“North Minneapolis has had a history of being “the north side” and it’s just limited to crimes and drugs and for me being an ex-crack user, to be over here is very challenging cause I have people that will...you know I’ll be pumping gas and ‘hey man you alright, you straight?’ And I’m like yeah, I am, but....because I got a job. And that’s where I will like cross, I say God, please. You know, you see through this crisis that I would not have chosen to live over in North Minneapolis had it not been so accessible. So I think that’s a problem.”

Participants had mixed reactions on the availability and quality of current reentry programming in North Minneapolis, Frogtown, and Rochester. Many told us stories of local leaders who had positively and profoundly changed their lives for the better. However, many also told stories of false hope being offered to them in prison, with no follow-through upon

release. Some participants felt recycled or shuffled through programming, or felt that programs existed only to obtain funding and staff, and not to help ex-offenders with their immediate needs.

Often, an emotionally charged portion of the community listening sessions focused on what participants felt was the misuse of funding in current reentry programs. The participants were very aware of their status as a group that was reserved certain funding streams and the ways in which that money was and was not appropriately spent. When programs did not deliver on their promises, it was immediately noted and remembered. One participant said,

“Quit funding organizations that don’t do nothing, stop it. You’ve got plenty of organizations, you’re giving all this money and they’re not doing nothing.”

Repeatedly, and regardless of the time since release or of the community, we were told that the single best improvement for current community programming would involve staffing programs with people who had actually been incarcerated. As one person said,

“So the money’s being placed in the hands of a person who’s detached from the actual situation....So when you see ex-felons in these prominent positions, it sends that message of hope.... Because nobody can reach us like us.”

It was clear from the Community Listening Sessions that the participants who had experienced reentry in North Minneapolis, Frogtown, and Rochester could clearly articulate what did and did not assist them in that process. In addition, many participants had strong recommendations of what changes needed to occur, both systemically and at the community level.

Community, Family, & Culture

Many social aspects had a significant effect on the reentry mindset of a participant. “Community” for the participants seemed to revolve strongly around just a few key community stakeholders. The main stakeholders that participants talked about were their family, their local

neighborhood community, and their faith community. These three community forces seemed to be major components in the successful reentry of participants back into their communities. While their presence alone did not necessarily equate to success in reentry, they did offer a catalyst of support for participants.

Participants from nearly every focus group noted the significant role that their family had on their reentry, and more importantly their lives. The role of the family in the participants' lives seemed to vary from individual to individual. One re-incarcerated participant described his family as *“loving and supportive”* yet felt this was a façade for his family being uncomfortable with having him home, and in the end, put pressure on him to recidivate. He said that they were unable to sufficiently support him because they *“just didn’t know how to [support a prisoner].”*

Participants also talked a lot about how their upbringing has influenced the choices they have made. Some participants described their family as *“career criminals”* or *“livin’ the life.”* Many participants also discussed having children who were also incarcerated. Most wished they could have been a more positive influence on their children, instead of being in prison. However, most participants did not feel that they were to blame for the incarceration of their children.

The local community seems is a crucial influence in the lives of the participants. A few people talked about the support of their local community, yet, positive comments about the community were usually in the minority. Often what the participants talked about when it came to their local community was the persistent pressure to return to their former ways of life. As demonstrated by one participant,

“There was people all around me pushing on me, but there wasn’t nobody out there telling me you need to stop doing what you’re doing.”

Many of the participants talked about faith as it related to a faith community specifically. Participants would talk about these communities as a type of moral center for their lives. One participant describes the role of people of faith as,

“I went to a good church... and I just stayed in close contact with the people of God there and that was my strength.”

Another describes his “church family,”

“My church family is living right...So my family in the church is my real family that I cling to.”

For many of the participants who discussed faith, it was the connection with both the spiritual presence and also with the corresponding faith community that inspired them.

Other participants mentioned how faith communities were significant means of support through programs and allowing access to resources. One person talks about the ability to form community and networks in church, *“There was church, I had at least people I could network with, maybe try to see if I could get a job here.”* Another participant talked about all the things he got from “people of God.” He describes his experience,

“From putting money in my pocket when I first got out, to getting me a place to stay, in between the times when I didn’t have a job I always can go to the people of God to get some wisdom, to get some direction, to get some support.”

Faith communities were mentioned most by participants when they were talking about the resources that they received from them.

The final way that participants talked about communities of faith is with disappointment and sometimes anger. Many have seen people from faith-based organizations come into the prisons and offer to help them upon release, but once they are released little help was ever offered. One person described this,

“All these little faith based people who came in the penitentiary, promise you the world, they come in and just give you, they just feed you a lot of information. When you get

released contact us,... and when I got out, I went to these different churches; I'm not going to say to call their bluff, but just to see [about their] integrity."

For some there is a lack of trust with people of faith, but for the most part participants wanted people of faith to offer them more. One participant asked spiritual leaders to come to them and step up. Another participant harkened back to past faith leaders, and asked for current leaders to follow their example.

"I think the church needs to stop being so afraid to go out there and start walking up to these you know, the dope dealer on this corner, five or six of them, and asking them respectfully. Now it's a gamble... but you don't stop. Martin Luther King didn't stop. Malcolm X didn't stop. Chance[s] have to be taken and take back your community. Run the dope dealer out if he don't want to act right. Talk to these youth because their role models are the dope dealers..."

There was some question in a few of the participants' comments about the reliability of the faith communities to be there for them. Some of the participants were fearful of faith communities, and didn't feel they could "*unveil and undress*" their true selves before people of faith. However, it is clear for many that faith is an important source of both external and internal support. Faith also made them think about their life's purpose.

Internal Struggles

Individuals who have been incarcerated often face many internal struggles. Much of the literature has focused on the external struggles, such as finding a job, housing, or reconnecting with family, but research somewhat overlooks the internal struggles and mindsets of those incarcerated. We did not explicitly ask about this during the listening sessions but this became a re-occurring theme that was repeatedly raised by participants.

Maybe not surprisingly, many of the participants feel lonely and isolated from their family and communities. One participant described this loneliness,

“When you’re locked up it’s like who really cares when you’re there. They’re [family members] not feeling what you’re feeling inside.”

This loneliness can sometimes lead to feelings of depression,

“The mental part was something I had to deal [with] besides the personal issues like not being able to spend time with your family, your wife, your father....”

Participants discussed being physically imprisoned but also referred to be mentally imprisoned as well. For some that mental imprisonment continued even after they were released from prison and they had to work to break that prison mentality.

“I’ve been out of prison, but I wasn’t out of prison for many years. You really need to bow down to really break those walls down because prison is a state of mind.”

Individuals released from prison often face many challenges. They have to find a job, housing, and reconnect with their family – and they must do this usually within the first 30 days. For a lot of the participants, the pressures became too high and they began to feel they cannot meet those expectations, so they choose to go back to prison and finish out the rest of their sentence. These pressures often becomes too much for many. One participant who was re-incarcerated stated,

“The responsibility part that was just like too much pressure. I fell because my lack of experience; I didn’t know what to do. My family couldn’t understand where I was coming from. I feel like my PO was putting pressure like you know....you’ve got to do this. I understand that everybody expected me to be better, at the same time I can’t win everything is pointing at me like that.”

These external pressures and realizations of freedom often led to intense fears for some,

“My last six or seven months I kind of got fearful because you prepare to come home and and in your mind you really want to get there. In my last four months...I was scared because I had a dream of freedom...it scared me to death.”

Despite these fears, many were excited to be released from prison and saw this as an opportunity to change their life around. It was their second chance and many knew that having a reentry plan was important to their successful reintegration.

“A plan is necessary. You ain’t got one you usually going to go right back to what you were doing before and probably right back to prison. My plan is helping me.”

In addition to their reentry plan, many also felt a sense of individual control over their successful reentry and their ability to change. One participant stated,

“I guess...the first thing that really helped me was basically taking responsibility for what I did. Once I did that, then I was able to start making changes to changes to my life...”

Some expressed strong feelings to never wanting to go back to prison as a reason for their change.

“When I got out I knew it wasn’t a place for me and when I got out I just didn’t want to go back again...that’s what made me want to change not to go back.”

It takes a great deal of resilience and support from others to successfully transition from prison. Some did not have that support and felt just as alone as they did while incarcerated.

“I’m by myself just like I was in this penitentiary, there I was by myself then and when I got out there, my girl wasn’t there and my kids weren’t there. I was my by myself that was really stressful.”

Others, however, did have some support and were more easily able to make the transition. We found through the listening sessions that their internal mindset seemed to be as important as their external support. The belief and motivation by some that they had to power to change their situation was prevalent.

Women & Reentry

Listening sessions were also conducted with women who were re-incarcerated as well as those who had successfully transitioned from prison. The full report will go into more detail regarding their experiences. Women experienced some of the same challenges as demonstrated in the men's listening session. However, women had greater challenges re-connecting with their family. For many women their children were immediately returned to them after their incarceration. This was an additional challenge in that they not only had to take care of themselves, but also their children. One female participant stated the difficulty in caring for her kids right away,

"I have four kids and two of the times I got out of prison I just went and got them back cause they're my kids, you [know] what I mean, and I wasn't ready to get them back. So then they constantly got shifted back to the people...[to my family]."

Another central theme in the listening sessions with the women is that many of them were incarcerated due to drug abuse, either they were using when they got caught for an offense or they were involved in activities to support their drug habit (such as prostitution or stealing). In contrast, the men in the listening sessions had a variety of criminal behaviors for which they were incarcerated for.

Lastly, many women felt that they were overlooked when it came to both prison programs and reentry programs. They felt that many of the services went to men and several thought there needed to be more services that addressed women's needs in prisoner reentry. One participant shared her views, *"The men have everything. Men have office and Vo-tech...they have IT there. We have nothing here. We have cosmetology."* Another participant stated,

"Prisons are increasingly female instead of male, there are single parents that's been incarcerated. There is not a lot of programs from parents, for female ex-offenders. There is probably no support for female ex-offenders. We need to have housing, clothing,

social work, counseling; we need all of that, we need those things. There is not a lot of help out there.”

Community Perspectives

Sessions held with reentry service providers and professionals gave some insight into the coordination of reentry programming in the target communities and revealed some parallel efforts already occurring. The full report will analyze these sessions in greater detail, however, some main themes involved an overall awareness of the frustration many inmates faced in their attempts to cope with all aspects of reentry at once; a pronounced need for holistic programming (and the funding to create such programming); and suspicion that many local efforts to address reentry were not coordinated with one another.

Some particular issues in each community also emerged, including foreclosed houses in North Minneapolis and a lack of networking of reentry professionals in Frogtown. In Rochester, there was an extended discussion of the difficulties faced while working in a rural area where resources were either spread thin or non-existent, as well as a feeling that reentry as an issue was not acknowledged or understood by the community.

Catch 22

So what does this all mean and why does it matter? The challenges faced by many individuals following release are high and as reported by the participants, there is insufficient, effective preparation. To amplify this stress, individuals after release are expected to immediately overcome these challenges and reach multiple, simultaneous goals, or face the consequences of going back into prison. In sum, there is a sort of a “catch 22” to the whole process of prisoner reentry. For example, an individual must obtain permanent housing, but they

often cannot acquire housing without employment; they need access to reliable transportation to obtain employment, but often times they cannot get bus cards or find buses that go to suburban areas where jobs are often located. Often they cannot overcome one challenge without encountering another challenge. This quote sums it up best,

“Now you try to go to some of these other services, they don’t want to give you nothing until you get a job. So you can’t get a bus card until you get a job, so you can never get nothing until you got something so how do you suppose to get something if you ain’t go nothing?”

Another female participant stated,

“Just having a felony, your housing, your job. I mean nobody wants to hire a felon...And then you can’t find housing because you’re a felon. But then you eventually find housing and you’ve got to make so much money...to be able to fit into the criteria of that housing and then any housing you might be able to get is in neighborhoods that you don’t really want to live in.”

One participant in the community listening sessions who represented probation mentioned that there are two philosophical stances that probation officials could take: some agents believe their role is more rehabilitative, helping the offender to positively change their life. While other agents saw their role as punitive and their goal is to protect public safety. These two stances can have varying consequences and outcomes for ex-offenders.

Discussion

As demonstrated by this executive summary and by the upcoming full report, the challenges surrounding prisoner reentry stretch far beyond the areas of employment and housing, overlapping into all aspects of a person’s life and impacting all the ways one interacts socially, economically, and politically within their community. Programming must be holistic and at the same time, more community collaborations and partnerships need to occur in order to effectively meet the needs of the formerly incarcerated. This issue is ever more important due to the high

number of individuals returning from prison both on a local and national level. Having holistic reentry services will reduce recidivism and increase public safety simultaneously.

The project was conducted in three communities in Minnesota, but this issue impacts many more. Community agencies, community members, and family members need to be better prepared and more equipped to receive those coming back from prison. The burden, however, also rests on those returning. They must return to the community both physically and mentality stable to begin their lives again. Many community agencies during the listening session expressed frustration with the limited funding available in this area. Funds are undoubtedly limited, but there are cost-effective recommendations that can be implemented. In addition, one has to consider the cost of incarceration versus the cost of keeping an individual out of prison in the long term. Limited funds also highlight the need for greater collaboration. The full report and lessons learned at the forum will assist in the development of recommendations that can be implemented to effectively address prisoner reentry.

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