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Problems Prisoners Face in the Reentry Industry

Jessica Plante

ABSTRACT

Prison sentences vary depending on the crime committed. When sentences come to an end, prisoners return to society. Society does not just accept these prisoners back into everyday life with open arms. This paper explores the challenges incarcerated individuals experience when they reenter society after incarceration? The discussion focuses on the different challenges that these individuals face in their battle of entering back into society and being accepted by individuals in the communities they return to. Some key elements will focus on how reentry affects work, housing, rehabilitation and relationships.

Prisoners in the Work Force

Many researchers refer to prisoners returning to society as an industry. The Industry consists of individuals and institutions that both help and hurt reentering prisoners when they are looking for jobs, housing, or rehabilitation. The Industry started when it recognized that men and women prisoners that were being released needed help with their transition from prison to society (Ducksworth 2010:557). Two of the main components of the industry are the prisoner reentering society and the institutions helping that prisoner find a job. Finding work is a battle in the reentry process for a few reasons. In the 1970's state prisoners were released from prison with \$40, a suit that was purchased from a thrift shop, and a bus ticket (Ducksworth 2010 558). One reason for such sparse preparation is a lack of resources. In the 1970's there was no job search assistance when sending prisoners back into society. Prisoners were sent out with some cash and very few things, and had to figure out how to go back into society without support. There are now many programs that help individuals slowly come back into society and work with these individuals to find jobs. However, these work programs do not make finding work easy. Few of the participants in these programs gain employment beyond entry level, temporary, or part time positions (Ducksworth 2010 558).

A contributing factor is that many individuals, after serving their sentences, have very low levels of education and suffer from drug addictions that hinder their professional success. These individuals don't find full time jobs because of the stigma and policies of being a criminal.

Sociologists have researched the stigma of being an ex-prisoner. In Shane Kilcommins work he found that prisoners miss the transition roles to becoming an adult when they go to prison. This means that getting an education, being married, and attaining a job are markers of being an adult, yet when someone goes to jail they miss all these markers. People in the work force therefore judge incarcerated individuals by how they are reintegrating into citizen roles such as workforce participants. Some individuals cannot gain full time employment because they cannot obtain labor and technical licenses (Ducksworth 2010 558). These licenses may be required to hold certain jobs. Few inmates have marketable employment skills or sufficient literacy to be gainfully

employed (Petersilia 2003). This means that the employee does not receive constant work and payment from the employer.

Another problem that prisoners face in the reentry process into employment is the views of the individuals of the workplace. Employers and other workers show signs of discrimination when working with someone who has gone to prison. Very few former prisoners ever truly enter or reenter the workforce; only a small percentage of the group actually obtain positions with status, which also provide a good living salary (Duckworth 2010, 558). The two articles written by Duckworth and Petersilia focus on the struggles that prisoners face when looking for employment. They each agree that many individuals leaving incarceration do not have the skills to gain employment and have trouble holding positions once they have them. Entering the work force is extremely difficult for incarcerated individuals because of discrimination, prohibitions against licenses, and the stigma of not being able to gain higher than entry-level jobs. Studies show that by having a job with a good paying wage will keep the ex-prisoner from reoffending (Garland 2013). Having a good job is just part of being able to reenter successfully into society.

Forming Relationships

The relationships that an ex-offender forms with members of society can lead to the prisoner facing problems they would not have experienced if they were not labeled an “incarcerated individual”. Prisoner reentry is a “geographically concentrated phenomenon in the sense that most returning prisoners move to a relatively small number of cities, counties, and even neighborhoods” (Morenoff 2014). These neighborhoods are usually lower class neighborhoods either in cities or low-income housing areas. People in these areas view these incarcerated individuals as having a negative impact on the neighborhood and on society as a whole. These once incarcerated individuals face the problem of returning into a society that has already anticipated a negative impact of the individual returning. One study found that high rates of prison release were associated with high levels of crime in Sacramento neighborhoods (Morenoff 2014). The results from studies in other cities were more mixed with their findings.

When prisoners return to society they usually return to low socioeconomic neighborhoods. Most lower class neighborhoods consist of high levels of unemployed

people and residents below poverty level. Returning prisoners may be "especially vulnerable to the effects of neighborhood social isolation because they already face considerable labor market barriers, including lack of human capital, stigma from employers, and legal exclusion from some occupations and public benefits" (Morenoff 2014). These low class neighborhoods already face social isolation because of their lower socio-economic status residents, so when reentry individuals enter these neighborhoods there is a possibility of compounding the social isolation that they are going to experience.

Creating and maintaining social relationships can be hard for returning prisoners. Society consists of interpersonal relationships where people and prisoners must live and work in similar social territory as one another. Prisoners face residential instability, which makes creating social relationships hard to keep or create (Morenoff 2014). By not establishing, these social relationships reentry individuals lose a sense of private and parochial control. "This leads to diminishing the amount of collective supervision and surveillance and creating a climate in which it is difficult to foster norms of mutual obligation among neighbors. Former prisoners who return to neighborhoods with lower levels of informal social control may face fewer sanctions for deviant behavior and more opportunities to return to crime" (Morenoff 2014). This means that by not creating relationships with people in the community, people may not look out for the once incarcerated individual and help them stay on a crime free path.

Recently released prisoners do not establish these relationships because by moving from one neighborhood to the next they are not living with stability. By moving from place to place, they are not benefiting from a stable, unchanging environment. Not living in one place for a long amount of time makes it hard to create social relationships. Research regarding the life-course theory has shown that desistance from crime is linked to successful transition to adult roles (Kilcommins 2007: 262). Having instability makes it hard for a person to make strong relationships and keep a job. Not having stability in their life can lead these individuals back into crime. In a sample of reentering prisoners in Michigan, the median returning prisoner experienced 2.6 residential moves per year, or one move every 4.5 months (Morenoff 2014).

Rehabilitation

Part of the reentry process is rehabilitation. Rehabilitation, by definition, “is the reshaping of the psyche wherein unconventional, detrimental, and criminal attitudes and values are redirected toward a pro social and self-efficacy raising outlook” (Miller 2010). One focus of rehabilitation is to provide proper treatment for each individual. When not receiving the right type of treatment while returning back to society, the reentry individual not only puts themselves in danger but also the communities that they go back to. Less than one-third of exiting prisoners receive substance abuse treatment or other forms of mental health treatment while in prison (Petersilia 2003). Evaluations of reentry programs have primarily focused on the effectiveness of drug treatment, as disrupting the drugs–crime nexus is a major goal in many jurisdictions. As with the vocational program literature, most have found modest levels of support for the ability of substance abuse treatment to reduce recidivism. Similarly, evaluations of halfway houses and cognitive-behavioral therapies for violent and sex offenders have shown promise for reducing recidivism or, at least, time to recidivism (Miller 2010). If individuals do not receive help then they have a very high chance of returning to prison.

Female Ex-prisoners

Research tends to focus only on the male prisoners who are returning back into communities. For many women, one of their primary roles relates to motherhood. This means that women are usually the primary caregivers of children, therefore when a woman returns back to her family she must take on the caregiver role again. Many female offenders that go to jail are mothers. Most female offenders are parents and upon reentry, they have to assume more parental responsibilities than their male counterparts (Williams 2014).

Like men, women return to economically depressed communities where they lack many resources that are needed to help them through the reentry process. Large portions of women prisoners are drug users and when returning to society these women must seek out treatment or risk going back to prison (Williams 2014). Women may be turning to drugs due to stresses of being a single mother. Women do not commit the same types of crime as men like theft or drug offenses. Our criminal justice system and reentry industry has mostly focused on. The primary design of the criminal justice system was to monitor,

rehabilitate and transition male offenders (Williams 2014). Many policies took a gender-neutral approach, which disadvantaged the unique problems which women in the criminal justice system face.

Female and male offenders differ in their overall need, therefore females differ in their challenges and needs when trying to reenter society. Female offenders are significantly more likely to be unemployed at the time of their arrest and to not receive welfare assistance (Williams 2014). Before incarceration these females had trouble keeping or finding work, therefore when returning to society the difficulty of finding work will increase because they now have added the stigma of being a prisoner. One article states, “the post-incarceration employment pathways of the women in one study were shaped both by their pasts and their ability to mobilize tangible and intangible resources in the present” (Leverentz 2006). Females take their past and bring it into the present.

The women in the study faced barriers and restrictions due to being incarcerated and having criminal charges. Overall women experience different problems compared to men. Focusing on society’s view of mothers, many people feel that women experience a high sense of separation from their child and their family. Society views mothers as individuals who have a need to nurture and care for their children and home. When women return back into society they have to take on the needs and care for their children. Society has to take on the role of caring for a child when mothers are sent to prison. “The public pays \$25,000 annually for a child in foster care with an incarcerated mother” (Williams 2014). This means that if family cannot care for the child, or if the child is taken away then the tax money from the public pays for the child in foster. Most children with an incarcerated mother are moved from place to place, from relatives to informal/formal placements. “This has far reaching effects for the stability of families and the communities of those who are incarcerated, especially women offenders” (Williams 2014). When females go to it affects their personal relationships formed with people who still reside in everyday society. “These relationships can be both positive and negative forces in the women’s lives, and sometimes simultaneously” (Leverentz 2006). The relationships are a bond that the women have to conventional society and people need some of these relationships to help them throughout their reentry process.

Housing Process

A major problem prisoners reentering society face is finding housing. One choice is going to a halfway house. This can be a good choice because, “a halfway house provides a structured environment where there are rules that must be adhered to and onsite criminal justice staff providing constant oversight. There is also onsite access to support and guidance, and a step between immediate return to the community and prison” (Williams 2014). A halfway house stay also helps in the transition from an environment where there is sensory deprivation to the community where there is sensory overload (Williams 2014). This means that individuals can slowly return to society in a controlled environment instead of being overwhelmed and without help when returning into normal communities. Incarcerated individuals that return to society under community supervision, like parole or supervised release, do not live in a structured and supportive environment like that of a halfway house. A downside to Halfway Houses is that the individual may only be able to stay at the house for certain duration of time (Inderbitzin 2009). Studies have shown that the first month after release is a vulnerable period “during which the risk of becoming homeless and/or returning to criminal justice involvement is high” (Cortes and Rogers 2010). Many private homes are not in reach for reentering individuals because they do not have enough funds to purchase and maintain these homes. Also, some landlords do not want to rent out homes or spaces to people that have a criminal background.

Homeless shelters are looked at as a last resort (Cortes and Rogers 2010). Public housing is an option yet owners may refuse to house people with certain criminal records. Public housing applications may also be lengthy and intimidating (Cortes and Rogers 2010). Some public housing districts require applicants to verify their income. This is a problem because ex-prisoners may not have a steady income yet. Another housing option is supportive housing. Supportive housing helps support the reentry individual. Community corporations or neighborhood housing corporations run these types of homes and the individual only pays 30% of the rent (Inderbitzin 2009). Again, people can be denied this type of housing because of their criminal record. There are different types of homes for an ex-offender yet their status of an offender still affects their access to these types of housing.

Future research in the reentry industry should focus on women, and specifically, compare reentry men to reentry women. Future research should also compare all aspects of the reentry industry. This research may find that housing, job searching, and relationships may all impact the prisoner differently. Research should look at the different types of assistance that each gender needs, the assistance they actually receive, and which gender reenters society more successfully.

Reentry is not an easy process. Ex-offenders face a multitude of problems such as housing, jobs, social relationships, and rehabilitation. Finding housing is difficult because there are options but many options can be closed off due to the status of being a criminal. Society looks at the ex-offender in negative ways and will not let the offender quickly back in. The way the individual is received by the neighborhood affects whether they will reenter successfully or return to prison. Women face a large problem when returning because as a mother, they must take back the role of being a mother and care for their children when they return. Work becomes a strain on the individual, due to the lack of employers that are willing to hire someone who was once incarcerated. From the articles discussed in the paper, sociologists should do more research in the re-entry industry. By understanding the reentry process, society can help prisoners make a smooth and successful reentry from prison.

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