

# Prerelease Reentry Programs: Posing Problems For Offenders Post-Release

# Melissa Kay Gray, Dr. Jessie L. Krienert Department Of Criminal Justice Sciences Illinois State University



## Introduction

Currently over 600,000 people are released from our state and federal prisons each year (Carson, 2020). Additionally, over 4.9 million people leave our jails annually, with 428,000 cycling in and out 3 or more times in a 12-month period (Jones & Sawyer, 2019). Research indicates that upon release nearly 70% will be rearrested within 3 years and over 80% within 9 years (Alper & Markman, 2018).

## **Prerelease Programming**

Prerelease programming starts inside the prison before offenders are released back into their communities. Prerelease programming focuses on the needs of offenders by preparing them with the tools they need to transition back into society. Many of these tools include how to obtain stable housing, gain employment, and sustain strong familial bonds (Brown, 2018). The purpose of prerelease programming is to successfully return offenders back into society, thereby reducing the risk of recidivism.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the views of parole officers and TASC reentry case mangers about the types of existing pre-release programs that impact post-release success. Additionally, questions about gaps in existing programming relating to offender needs, as well as attitudes towards pre-release programming in general, are addressed.

## **Research Question**

What impact does prerelease programming have on an offender's successful transition back into their communities?

## Prior Literature

## **Employment**

Previous research has identified stable employment as a strong predictor of post incarceration success (Apel & Horney, 2017). Unfortunately, offenders face many barriers to employment when returning to the community. Offering offenders job skills and vocational training within prison can provide personal value, independence, dignity, and a positive stake in society (Eley, 2007).

## **Education**

Education has consistently been correlated with lower recidivism (Magee, 2021). Often linked with employment, Ellison, et al (2017) found in a meta-analysis that in prison education programs reduced recidivism by 1/3 and increased the likelihood of gainful employment by 24%.

## **Substance Abuse**

Many state and local prisons have provided inmates with substance abuse treatment to help improve behavior that has been related to drug use. Duwe's (2017) content analysis examined institutional programming and the outcomes for prisoner's post release, noting substance abuse intervention treatment not only enhanced public safety but lowered the risk of recidivism. They concluded substance abuse treatment in prison had positive effects on post-release outcomes as well as a reduction of prison misconduct. Other studies have linked substance abuse post release to family support (Mowen, Boman 2019), suggesting family conflict can increase post release substance abuse. Research has also found that offenders who received substance abuse assessments within prerelease programming, were more likely to engage in substance abuse treatment post released (Hamilton, Belenko, 2016).

## **Mental Health**

Offenders with mental illness are transitioning from prison back into their communities at exceedingly high rates. Hopkin, et.al (2018), in a systematic review of the literature, identified that targeting mental health issues during prerelease can improve the outcome of offenders returning to their communities and reduce the risk of recidivism.

## Disconnect between Parole and Pre-Release,

Parole officers play a key role in an offender's transition. Current research has shown that it is vital to prioritize information between prerelease programming, communities and behavioral health providers (APA, 2017). Furthermore, the development of effective strategies for successful reintegration are perpetuated by lack of education and job skills (Vishner and Travis, 2003). To improve effective reentry practices it is important that reentry practices target induvial needs (APA, 2017).

## Methodology

## **Study Design**

This study utilized a qualitative research design, conducting in depth intensive interviews. Both IRB approval and Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) approval was received prior to the start of the project. All interviews were conducted through Zoom and handwritten notes were taken to maintain confidentiality.

#### **Participants**

6 IDOC Parole Agents

3 TASC Reentry Case Managers

#### **Analysis Strategy**

Interviews were analyzed using MAXQDA. A detailed thematic codebook was created, and all responses were coded.

# Results



## **Program Awareness**

As noted in the word cloud above, job skills and education were the most commonly mentioned words during the interview process. Other common programs included, moral recognition therapy and psychosocial groups and cognitive behavioral therapy. Respondents noted not only awareness of such programs, but consistently listed these types of programs as needed, important, and successful.

## **Suggested Improvements**

When asked about improvements that were needed for prelease programming, the most common response was job/employment skills, followed by vocational training and education. For example, on officer stated, "I think more vocational programs, training courses. If we can get factories helping with vocational jobs when they are released from prison". Similarly, another explained, "having private companies come in and helping offenders getting jobs for example and there is employment opportunities in Peoria". Another officer highlighted the need for better communication between pre and post release programs, "Communication with post release is important, not getting into the GED program quick enough. Identifying the needs in the beginning when they enter prison.

## **Skills Needed to Succeed**

Similarly, when asked about what skills offenders needed to succeed, the most common responses fell into the categories of job/vocational skills, substance abuse treatment, and education. As one participant stated, "Give them skills, something they can build on like job programs. TASC helps with prerelease and continuing services". Similarly, another officer explained "the current programs do help offenders learn life skills to get ahead besides just the GED. There are jobs they can work even if it pays less. I think plumbing programs can help parolees learn skills" Additionally, another officer described, "the biggest skills, I think job skills, and because they go back to just using drugs, substance abuse it is just as equally important."

## **Attitudes toward Pre-Release Programming**

Mixed responses were given when asked about how respondents felt about prerelease programming. Some officers felt inmates were not prepared for release. As one officer stated, "It sucks not preparing guys to be in the real world. Just pushing offenders out. Who is facilitating groups? What short term goals are they setting? They need tools to be successful". Similarly, another agent reported, "Offenders just want to be out, I've been with my DLC for 20 years, seeing offenders go back to the community committing crimes and victimizing people. They go through the motions; they are habitual offenders and at what point do they stop? It's just a lifestyle."

Others highlighted the importance, or necessity of prerelease programming. As one Reentry Case Manager stated, "It's really important, should be more of it. If there were more opportunities with TASC they would do better transitional planning". Similarly, another simply stated, "Yeah, gives them a head start to post release programs."



## Conclusion

Participants felt pre-release programming was both needed and successful. When asked about potential improvements, job skills, education, and substance abuse treatment were the top listed pre-release skills that were requested from parole agents and reentry case managers.

Much research has been done on prerelease programming and the different types of services that they offer to offenders however, more research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of prerelease programming, and the impact that these programs may or may not have on recidivism rates among offenders' post-release. Incorporating the feedback from parole offices and reentry case managers who supervise ex-offenders is important because it can help improve evidence best practices that are currently being implemented with in Illinois Department of Corrections.

## References

Alper, M., & Markman, J. (2018). 2018 update on prisoner recidivism: A 9 year follow up period (2005-2014). Bureau of Justice Statistics. <a href="https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/18upr9yfup0514.pdf">https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/18upr9yfup0514.pdf</a>.

APA. (2017). Consensus Workgroup Policy Recommendations to the 115the Congress & Trump Administration on Behavioral Health Issues in the Criminal Justice System

Health Issues in the Criminal Justice System Apel, R., & Horney, J. (2017). How and why does work matter? Employment conditions, routine activities, and crime among adult

male offenders. *Criminology*, 55(2), 307-343.

Bradley Brown, R. D. D. (2018). Causes of Recidivism Among Mentally Ill Prerelease Offenders from the Perspective of Former

Correctional Mental Health Professionals.

Brown, R. D. (2018). Causes of Recidivism among Mentally Ill Prerelease Offenders from the Perspective of Correctional Mental Health Professionals (Doctoral dissertation, Walden University).

Carson, A. E. (2018). *Prisoners in 2016*. Bureau of Justice Statistics. <a href="https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p19.pdf">https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p19.pdf</a>. Duwe, G. (2017). The use and impact of correctional programming for inmates on pre-and post-release outcomes (Vol. 48). US

Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice.

Ellison, M., Szifris, K., Horan, R., & Fox, C. (2017). A Rapid Evidence Assessment of the effectiveness of prison education in

reducing recidivism and increasing employment. *Probation Journal*, 64(2), 108-128.

Jones, A., & Sawyer, W. (2019). Arrest, release, repeat: How police and jails are misused to respond to social problems. Prison Policy

Hamilton, L., & Belenko, S. (2016). Effects of pre-release services on access to behavioral health treatment after release from

prison. *Justice Quarterly*, 33(6), 1080-1102 Hopkin, G., Evans-Lacko, S., Forrester, A., Shaw, J., & Thornicroft, G. (2018). Interventions at the transition from prison to the community for prisoners with mental illness: a systematic review. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health* 

Services Research, 45(4), 623-634.
Initiative. <a href="https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/repeatarrests.html">https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/repeatarrests.html</a>.

Magee, G. (2021). Education Reduces Recidivism. Technium Social Sciences Journal, 16, 175-182.

Travis, J., Solomon, A.L., & Waul, M. (2001). From prison to home: The dimensions and consequences of prisoner reentry. Mowen, T. J., & Boman IV, J. H. (2019). The criminogenic influence of family on substance use during reentry: A life-course perspective on between individual differences and within individual changes. *Justice quarterly*, *36*(5), 841-869. Visher, C. A., & Travis, J. (2003). Transitions from prison to community: Understanding individual pathways. *Annual review of* 

sociology, 29(1), 89-113.