



Prisoner Reentry in Houston: Community Perspectives



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About the Returning Home Study

Returning Home: Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry is a longitudinal study of prisoner reentry in Maryland, Illinois, Ohio, and Texas led by staff at the Urban Institute's Justice Policy Center. The study explores (1) the individual reentry experience through interviews with prisoners before and after release from prison; (2) the family perspective on reentry from interviews with family members of returning prisoners; and (3) the community context of reentry based on interviews with key community stakeholders and focus groups with residents.

The JEHT Foundation, the Houston Endowment, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) support *Returning Home-Texas*. NuStats, Incorporated, an Austin-based research firm, conducted the original data collection under the supervision of Robert Santos.

Additional information on *Returning Home*, including other reports that present findings from Texas, can be found online at <http://www.urban.org/projects/reentry-portfolio/index.cfm>.

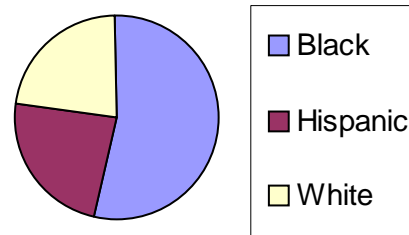
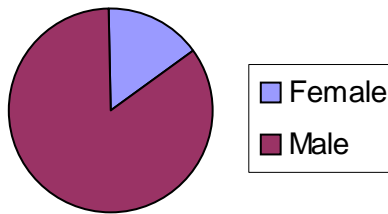
In Texas each year, over 70,000 men and women are released from state prisons and state jails, and more than one in five return to the Houston metro area.¹ These returning prisoners face a range of challenges, from securing housing and employment to rebuilding relationships with their families and support networks. They must deal with these issues while at the same time avoiding old pathways to criminal behavior and, in some cases, substance abuse. The impact of prisoner reentry, however, extends far beyond these individuals and their families and friends. The communities to which former prisoners return as well as the local government and social service networks that serve these communities have a significant stake in the successful reintegration of returning prisoners.

This research brief explores prisoner reentry from the perspective of Houston stakeholders and community members. The stakeholders' views were elicited through semi-structured telephone interviews with service providers, local advocates, and officials in corrections, parole, probation, policing, and city government. These perspectives were supplemented with findings from a series of focus groups comprised of residents of Houston neighborhoods with the greatest concentrations of returning prisoners.²

The aim of this policy brief is to provide local context on the issue of prisoner reentry in Houston, complementing other publications from *Returning Home: Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry*, a multifaceted research effort that focuses on the experiences of returning prisoners and their families (see sidebar to the left for more information). The report begins by describing stakeholder and resident views on the challenges faced by prisoners returning to Houston, particularly in the areas of housing, employment, and substance abuse. We then present perspectives on the criminal justice policies and practices that effect reentry success or failure. The report concludes with a discussion of stakeholder and resident perspectives on the role of the community, local government, and the nonprofit sector in reentry.

Prisoner Reentry in Houston: The Numbers

In the 2007 fiscal year, one in five people leaving Texas state prisons and state jails returned to Harris County, the county that contains Houston. The charts below show the 15,268 men and women who returned to Harris County by gender and race/ethnicity. (Source: Texas Department of Criminal Justice)



THE EXPERIENCE OF RETURNING HOME

Both community stakeholders and residents agreed that prisoner reentry is a significant issue in Houston and that those returning from Texas prisons and state jails face a difficult path to reintegration success. According to respondents, the biggest challenges facing returning prisoners are securing employment and housing, as well as avoiding problems with drug and alcohol abuse. These hurdles are compounded by personal challenges, such as rebuilding family relationships and support networks, avoiding negative influences, maintaining hope and self-esteem, and adjusting to daily life on the outside. Below we explore the most common reentry challenges identified by stakeholders and residents.

HOUSING

Stakeholders indicated that finding appropriate housing is a key component of successful reentry. Having stable housing in positive surroundings is an important prerequisite to meeting other challenges, such as finding employment and rebuilding family relationships. Unfortunately, stakeholders overwhelmingly felt that finding suitable housing was a significant problem for prisoners returning to Houston. Discrimination by landlords and rental agencies can severely limit housing options, resulting in former prisoners living in distressed, marginalized neighborhoods or on the streets. Community residents also observed that former prisoners are often coming back to the same neighborhoods they lived in prior to incarceration and that the return to old hangouts and negative influences from the past

can quickly put them on the path to reincarceration.

Stakeholders indicated a major need for expanding supportive transitional housing in Houston, which for many returning prisoners can provide vital support and supervision during their initial transition. Some residents echoed this view, suggesting placement in halfway houses or other transitional housing as a means of helping released prisoners adjust to life on the outside gradually within a supportive environment. Overall, respondents emphasized that the importance of appropriate housing extends beyond access to a stable residence and involves finding a positive living environment conducive to rehabilitation.

EMPLOYMENT

Both community stakeholders and residents identified several barriers facing returning prisoners in the area of employment, and residents generally felt that finding a job is the single biggest challenge in successful reintegration. According to respondents, obtaining a job is critical not only because it provides income and self-sufficiency, but also because a daily routine can help individuals avoid negative influences and stay focused on reentry success. Unfortunately, both groups noted that discrimination by employers is common, particularly for those with serious felonies. Stakeholders suggested that educating employers about tax incentives and bonding programs can support efforts to hire former prisoners. Such steps could remedy some of

the prejudice in hiring, as could removing legal barriers that prevent former offenders from working in certain fields.

Lack of education and skills is also a major concern for returning prisoners, and both stakeholders and residents indicated a need for increased educational opportunities, vocational training relevant to the current job market, and job search training both within prison and after release. Some respondents also emphasized the importance of job sustainability and felt that maintaining employment can be more of a problem for former prisoners than finding a job. Matching returning prisoners with employment that suits their skills and interests may be the best long-term strategy for both employers and employees. Keeping expectations realistic is also important, as stakeholders indicated that some returning prisoners become discouraged by

Barriers to Accessing Social Services

Community stakeholders identified several barriers that may prevent former prisoners from getting the services and support they need:

- Limited transportation, lack of child care, and poor health are all barriers to accessing services.
- Many programs are limited to non-violent offenders or people who were very recently released, excluding a large share of former prisoners.
- Returning prisoners are often unaware of existing services, especially support for basic needs like food, clothing, and healthcare.
- Many former prisoners are not “tech-savvy” and may be more successful in accessing services if given a human contact rather than a phone number or internet address.
- Some providers are out of touch with the needs of returning prisoners and are not tailoring services to their clients.
- Former prisoners are sometimes treated with a lack of respect by providers, which discourages them from accessing services.
- There is a need for increased cultural sensitivity on the part of providers.

ongoing rejection and abandon their job search. Others set unrealistic limits as to the types of jobs or wages they will accept, thereby restricting their opportunities.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE TREATMENT

For many returning prisoners, reentry success depends on tackling difficult and longstanding histories of drug and alcohol abuse. Many do not receive adequate treatment while incarcerated, and, even for those who do, the period immediately after release is a time of major upheaval and stress, putting them at high risk for relapse. Unfortunately, community stakeholders indicated that Houston has a significant lack of options for substance abuse treatment, particularly for those needing in-patient programs. Many attributed this gap to a lack of funding from government and private sources. Furthermore, obtaining a slot at the treatment centers that serve low-income clients often involves major bureaucratic hurdles that discourage potential participants.

BASIC NEEDS

Stakeholders emphasized that returning prisoners face many challenges beyond the “big three” of housing, employment, and substance abuse. These range from acquiring identification documents (such as drivers licenses) to obtaining food and clothing. There is also a major need for mental and physical health services and for maintaining the continuity of healthcare that was received during incarceration. Other needs identified by community stakeholders include: assistance at the moment of release, opportunities for support from other former prisoners, aid for families left behind, and assistance with family reconciliation.

Because many returning prisoners, particularly those leaving state jails, are not under any form of supervision after release, there is also a basic need for guidance during the reentry process. Support and information about services and legal issues could be delivered through a case management approach. Stakeholders also emphasized the importance of removing barriers that may discourage former prisoners

from accessing existing services. Some common barriers identified by stakeholders are listed in the text box on the previous page.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE POLICIES AND PRACTICES

PREPARATION FOR RELEASE

It is clear from the discussion above that returning prisoners face a range of challenges as they attempt to reintegrate successfully into the community. Unfortunately, according to both community stakeholders and residents, prisoners returning to Houston are not well prepared for life outside the prison walls. To better prepare them for release, respondents recommended a significant increase in reentry preparation, education, skills-building, substance abuse treatment, counseling and other programming within Texas prisons and state jails. Some also emphasized the importance of assisting inmates in maintaining family connections and saw the strengthening of these relationships as critical to success after release. Both stakeholders and residents repeated the now-familiar maxim that reentry planning should start at admission to prison or jail and that preparing inmates for release should happen throughout the course of

their incarceration. A list of additional recommendations for preparing inmates for release has been included in the text box below.

Although stakeholders saw significant room for improvement in the program offerings and reentry preparation provided in Texas correctional facilities, many felt that the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) is moving in the right direction. They reported that TDCJ culture is changing and that there is a greater understanding about the importance of rehabilitation and reentry preparation among agency leadership. TDCJ's increased efforts to engage the community and encourage volunteer involvement within state correctional facilities were cited as tangible evidence of this shift.

POST-RELEASE SUPERVISION

Local residents identified insufficient post-release supervision and support as a major contributor to recidivism, and while stakeholders generally had a more positive perspective on the post-release supervision system, they agreed that there is room for improvement. The most significant issue is that probation and parole agencies lack staff and resources and the large caseloads that result

Preparing Inmates for Release

Community stakeholders offered several concrete suggestions for better preparing Texas state prison and state jail inmates for reentry:

- Expand existing programs to serve more inmates. Some of the most successful programs have a limited number of slots.
- Focus on concrete release preparation, working with inmates to create a transition plan, identify social support networks, develop job search strategies, and learn basic life skills.
- Strongly encourage inmates to obtain a basic level of education and some type of vocational skill. Use incentives such as early release or in-prison privileges, or even consider requiring inmates to obtain these skills as part of their sentence.
- Revamp vocational offerings to better reflect current job market needs and new technologies.
- Encourage inmates' connections to their families by facilitating positive visiting opportunities. Create a welcoming environment for family members and work with community groups to improve families' access to transportation to the facilities. Involve family members in reentry planning when possible.
- Improve the identification and treatment of mental health conditions among inmates and work to ensure continuity of mental health care upon release.
- Develop step-down programs to ease the transition of those inmates going straight from administrative segregation or other high-security environments to the streets.

limit the ability of parole and probation officers to monitor and support those under their supervision. In addition, significant numbers of people are leaving Texas correctional facilities—particularly state jails—without any type of formal supervision and support.

Despite these challenges, some stakeholders felt that post-release supervision is improving, as parole and probation agencies have increasingly focused on supporting successful reentry as a complement to their traditional task of monitoring offenders. Like Texas correctional facilities, these agencies have also made strides in collaborating with the community. Yet both stakeholders and residents recommended that parole officers play a stronger, more engaged role in monitoring former prisoners and assisting them in reentry. For example, officers might develop relationships with local businesses and assist their clients in obtaining employment, as it can be difficult for former prisoners to make these connections on their own.

Although representatives from parole and probation felt that supervision conditions were generally fair and well-crafted, some community advocates suggested that certain conditions were restrictive or difficult to fulfill and that parole revocation rates were unnecessarily high, particularly for technical violations. Additionally, some residents criticized the practice of requiring parolees to pay fees for their parole supervision as an added burden on individuals who are already struggling financially.

ROLES FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND NONPROFITS

Local residents tended to view reentry support as the responsibility of the state justice system and emphasized the importance of the types of policies and practices discussed in the previous section. While community stakeholders agreed on the importance of involving the criminal justice system in reentry, most also envisioned a much larger role for local government and nonprofits.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Stakeholders expressed an interest in seeing greater awareness among local elected officials about reentry and more resources directed toward addressing the issue. Specifically, they suggested that local government take an active role by:

- Devoting more resources, money, and staff to planning and coordination efforts;
- Investing in services and programs for returning prisoners;
- Expanding the Houston Mayor’s Office’s reentry activities;
- Developing alternatives to incarceration; and
- Building multi-agency coalitions to tackle the issue, involving local government, police, criminal justice agencies, service providers and the community.

Despite their desire for increased action by local leaders to address prisoner reentry, some stakeholders indicated that the politics surrounding the topic make such action difficult. They acknowledged the political risks involved in advocating for a group of people that much of the public views as undeserving of support.

NONPROFIT SERVICE PROVIDERS

Turning to the nonprofit sector, stakeholders described a small but dedicated group of service providers severely lacking in resources and capacity. Stakeholders repeatedly portrayed the social service infrastructure in Houston as underdeveloped, overburdened and unable to meet the needs of returning prisoners (as well as others in need). Service providers need increased funding and resources, with funding that is consistent over time, as well as long-term capacity-building. Stakeholders disagreed on whether private funders were willing to dedicate resources to reentry. Some felt that there was interest on the part of funders, but funders needed assistance in connecting with organizations in need of resources or they were reluctant to fund services explicitly

devoted to reentry at the expense of other community needs. Other stakeholders felt that government, not the private sector, should be funding these services.

COMMUNITY AND FAITH ORGANIZATIONS

Stakeholders also emphasized the need for the involvement of faith institutions and grassroots community organizations in the reentry process. They had conflicting opinions about the level of involvement of community-based organizations, with some reporting a great deal of activity and engagement among these organizations and others finding them to be apathetic and disinterested in tackling the problem. Despite this disagreement, most stakeholders were clear on the need for community-based organizations to play an active role in local reentry collaborations.

Community stakeholders also had mixed opinions about the growth of faith-based responses to reentry. Some saw strong potential in faith institutions because they operate on the ground within the communities most affected by reentry. They are able to motivate community members and activate a significant amount of human capital in the form of volunteer time and effort. One respondent, however, observed that clients are sometimes wary of services they perceive to have a hidden religious agenda and secular nonprofits can become frustrated with funding streams that appear to favor faith-based programs. Clearly the potential for valuable work on reentry by faith-based organizations needs to be balanced with careful implementation that respects clients' religious freedom.

In contrast to community stakeholders, residents did not talk extensively about a role for local government or nonprofits in the reentry process and they tended to see reentry support as the responsibility of the state justice system. Some advocated for the development of halfway houses, reentry centers, or other programs providing comprehensive services to returning prisoners. Although they were not clear on who should fund or develop such programs, some residents indicated they would support the use of tax dollars for the purpose. A few individuals mentioned the involvement of churches in the

reentry process, but there was no consensus on the church's role.

COMMUNITY RESPONSES TO REENTRY

COMMUNITY ATTITUDES

Houston stakeholders perceived a significant lack of awareness in the broader community about the issue of prisoner reentry, combined with a general feeling of fear and hostility toward formerly incarcerated people. Several respondents felt that the majority of Houston residents are unaware of the challenges faced by returning prisoners, and some do not even realize that significant numbers of people are returning from prison to their city. Other stakeholders indicated that the general public is aware of the large number of prisoners returning to Houston, but the attitudes that accompany this knowledge are typically fear and a lack of sympathy and respect for former prisoners. This perspective was attributed to the emphasis Texas culture places on individualism and personal responsibility, leading to a "tough on crime" philosophy that can be unforgiving of former offenders. A few stakeholders felt that the media contributes to these fears with sensationalistic coverage that fails to address the complexity of the reentry issue.

Stakeholders also suggested that the opinions of community members depend on their personal experiences with the justice system and incarcerated individuals. This indeed seems to be the case, as many of the focus group participants—who live in neighborhoods with large numbers of returning prisoners—reported feeling comfortable living near and interacting with former prisoners, particularly those with less serious offenses. A significant share of focus group participants had relatives, friends, neighbors, or co-workers who had previously been incarcerated, which is perhaps why their attitudes toward returning prisoners were less hostile than the attitudes of the general public (as described by the stakeholders we interviewed). Overall, residents participating in the focus groups reported that returning prisoners are generally accepted into their

communities without much discussion of the incarceration, although the nature and circumstances of the offense condition the community response. Those incarcerated for nonviolent or drug offenses are much more likely to be welcomed back than serious violent or sexual offenders, who are often ostracized.

The different perspectives of stakeholders and residents regarding community attitudes about returning prisoners suggest that attitudes vary from neighborhood to neighborhood. Participants in the Spanish-speaking focus group, for example, generally had a different perspective than other residents on the former prisoners living in their neighborhood. The Spanish-speaking residents associated returning prisoners with criminal activity and public disorder in the community and many reported avoiding them out of fear for themselves and their children. They reported feeling afraid of all types of former prisoners regardless of offense, age, or gender, although they were particularly wary of sexual or violent offenders. These views differ from the perspectives of the primarily non-Hispanic, African American participants in the other focus groups, as discussed in the previous paragraph.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Despite the fact that former prisoners are a common sight in some neighborhoods, residents in all focus groups reported that few local leaders are talking about reentry. Stakeholders agreed, citing an absence of elected officials and community leaders who are speaking openly about reentry issues. Stakeholders emphasized the importance of involving the community and its leaders in the reentry process. Some approached the matter from a restorative justice framework³ and described the critical role of community involvement in the healing process. Residents, on the other hand, did not see much of a role for the local community in assisting former prisoners with reintegration and some expressed a personal preference not to be involved in the issue. Rather, they tended to view rehabilitation and reentry support as the responsibility of the state and the justice system. Residents did, however, view family support as an essential part of reentry success, but typically felt

that the involvement of other community members beyond family and close friends was unnecessary.

CONCLUSION

This research brief has highlighted the opinions of Houston community stakeholders and residents who participated in interviews and focus groups as part of the *Returning Home* study. These individuals identified several key challenges to the successful reintegration of former prisoners, particularly in the areas of employment, housing, and substance abuse, as well as some of the barriers that prevent returning prisoners from accessing social services. Both stakeholders and residents indicated that prisoners returning to Houston are not well-prepared for reintegration. They advocated for an expansion of in-prison programming as well as post-release supervision and support through the parole system.

While most residents were of the opinion that the responsibility for supporting successful reentry lies primarily with the criminal justice system, stakeholders indicated an interest in increasing the involvement of local government, nonprofit service providers, and faith- and community-based organizations in the process. The two groups also had different perspectives on public attitudes toward former prisoners, suggesting that these attitudes may vary across neighborhoods and communities.

The perspectives of community stakeholders and local residents who work, live, and interact with returning prisoners on a daily basis provide important context about the dynamics of prisoner reentry in Houston. Because the impact of reentry extends beyond former prisoners and their families to the neighborhoods and communities in which they live, such perspectives should form an important part of any discussion of reentry.

METHODOLOGY

This research brief is based on findings from the following research activities conducted as part of Returning Home Texas:

Interviews with Community Stakeholders

In the fall of 2006, researchers conducted 11 one-on-one telephone interviews with Houston community members and local and state-level reentry stakeholders whose professional and personal activities have provided them with extensive knowledge of the issue of prisoner reentry in Houston. These individuals include high-ranking officials in corrections programming, parole, probation, policing, and city government; service providers working with prisoners, former prisoners and their families; and advocates working to spread knowledge, improve policies and practices, and build local coalitions around reentry issues. The stakeholders interviewed spanned the government and nonprofit sectors, and included people who had been incarcerated or had family members incarcerated. Stakeholders were identified through recommendations from existing contacts in Houston and through snowball sampling.⁴

Focus Groups with Local Residents

In the spring of 2006, researchers conducted four focus groups with Houston residents living in neighborhoods with large concentrations of returning prisoners: Fifth Ward, South Park, and Greater Fondren Southwest. Most participants were African American men and women over the age of 35. However, one of the focus groups was conducted with Spanish-speaking residents of Fifth Ward, most of whom were women of Mexican descent. Participants were recruited via telephone through random digit dialing and through recommendations from other participants and community service providers. Only individuals who had lived in the neighborhood for at least three years, had not been incarcerated in a prison or state jail in the past five years, and were at least 18 years of age were eligible to participate. Altogether, 17 individuals participated in the three English-language focus groups and 8 individuals participated in the Spanish-language focus group.

ENDNOTES

¹ Texas has two types of correctional facilities at the state level: state prisons and state jails. Both incarcerate convicted offenders, with state jails housing lower-level offenders sentenced to between six months and two years and state prisons housing those individuals sentenced to more than two years. In the 2007 fiscal year, 72,032 individuals were released from Texas prisons and state jails. Of these individuals, 15,168 (21 percent) had been convicted in Harris County (Houston) and were therefore likely to be returning to Harris County. These figures are from a private email communication with TDCJ officials on November 27, 2007.

² See the “Methodology” box for more information on the interviews and focus groups.

³ Restorative justice is a conception of justice that focuses on establishing healing and restoration among the offender, victim, and community.

⁴ Snowball sampling is a research technique in which participants in a study recommend other potential participants from their professional and social networks.