

Leaving the Street *In Brief*

By Chelsea Farley

“My God, I can’t believe I lost so many years....” Alberto is thinking about his five-year-old daughter, stunned by how much she grew while he was in prison.¹ Like many of the 600,000 ex-prisoners who are released each year, Alberto is motivated to stay out of trouble. He loves his daughter. He wants to provide for his family. But what are the odds that Alberto’s motivation will pay off?

The statistics are not encouraging. Two thirds of people released from prison are rearrested, and more than half end up back behind bars within three years.² With more than two million people incarcerated in the U.S., high rates of recidivism have far-reaching implications. Accordingly, policymakers are focusing their attention on prisoner reentry, and program planners are searching for effective ways to promote employment and reduce recidivism. Too often, however, the discussions about reentry present ex-offenders as a monolithic group.

A new report from P/PV belies the failing of this perspective. ***Leaving the Street: Young Fathers Move from Hustling to Legitimate Work***, by

Lauren J. Kotloff, provides

a rare glimpse inside the lives of young urban men with criminal records, exploring how they got involved with “hustling,” their experiences in the labor market, their feelings about fatherhood, and the many emotions that surface as they attempt to leave the streets behind.

The report is based on P/PV’s in-depth interview study of 27 men participating in the Fathers at Work initiative. The study focused on men who had relied on illegal hustling—primarily selling drugs—as a source of income. Recruited from three Fathers at Work programs—Impact Services in Philadelphia, STRIVE in Chicago and the Vocational Foundation, Inc., in New York City—the participants in the study ranged in age from 19 to 30. Most (21) were African American; 6 were Latino. Seventeen had never earned a high school diploma or GED, and 23 had been incarcerated.

More than half the men were selling drugs by the time they were 16. They describe a paucity of other options available to them in their early teen years: “There used to be a lot of violence going down in my house,” says Alfredo. “That just pushed me off, you know. I spent more time in the streets that I did at home.” And



The Fathers at Work initiative is a national demonstration designed to help low-income, noncustodial fathers secure living-wage jobs, increase their involvement with their children and manage their child support obligations. Sponsored by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Fathers at Work was launched in 2001 in five cities, with P/PV providing technical assistance on employment and evaluating the overall initiative. For more information, visit P/PV’s website, www.ppv.org.

school was not a refuge. “I was missing class, and I just stopped going. I didn’t see nothing, like what am I gonna get out of this? I’m going to school for nothing, man, that’s how I was looking at it. I just stopped going and decided to be in the streets and just hustle.”

The men also hustled for basic financial reasons. According to James, “It was because I needed money. People wouldn’t give me [a job]—so I’ll go get it myself then.” Chris describes a desire for material goods, perhaps typical of most adolescents: “I wanted to be in style. I wanted to be with my friends, you know, all my friends had the latest things. I was getting the reject stuff, and basically I just wanted to fit in.” Omar told researchers, “I looked at the guys in the neighborhood with the money and the cars and the jewelry and the clothes and noticed they got all the girls. I said, ‘You know what, I’m gonna be just like him, I’m gonna have that.’”

Once they started hustling, the lifestyle was, in some ways, addictive. Many of the men, like Carlos, became the primary breadwinners for their families: “I’m not trying to brag or nothing, but it was like I was the light for the house and everything was, like, going through me, like everything... money-wise and just family-value-wise.... I mean I used to pay my mom’s rent and everything... buy them cars.”

Most of the men in the study moved back and forth between hustling and some form of legitimate work, balancing the two worlds in different ways. Some worked steadily, while others spent long periods without a job. Those who did work were employed in low-skill, low-wage jobs (in both the formal and informal labor markets), and many described dirty, difficult and even hazardous working conditions. But the men coped with these conditions in markedly different ways. As researchers examined the men’s experiences with work and hustling, four distinct groups emerged.

The Reluctant Hustlers preferred legitimate work and hustled only as a last resort. They liked working with different types of people and learning new skills, and they enjoyed the stability and focus that a regular job can provide. George personifies the attitude of this group: “I wouldn’t [hustle] if I had a job. But I didn’t have a job, I had to find a way to have money and support myself. I mean, you have to do something to get the money.... Everybody can’t get their grass cut every day. Everybody can’t shovel snow when it ain’t snowing. Everybody can’t pick up garbage when there ain’t no garbage out there.”

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—George, *Reluctant Hustler*

The Ambitious Workers hustled more consistently, but like the Reluctant Hustlers, they valued legitimate work. On average, Ambitious Workers had more education than the other men in the study. They were hardworking and enterprising, with relatively strong workplace skills. Anthony’s path was typical of this group. He started hustling while still in high school. He moved from selling marijuana and cocaine to being in charge of the heroin trade for an entire block. At the same time, he managed to graduate from high school and hold down a job. According to Anthony, “I worked, I was never dumb about it. Like a lot of guys, they just go out there and do it [hustle], and that’s all they did. I [hustled], but I worked, too.”

The third group, **the Reluctant Workers**, made hustling their priority. They worked intermittently, often in jobs that facilitated hustling or simply satisfied probation requirements. But, unlike the men in the first two categories, Reluctant Workers didn’t seem to associate working with feelings of satisfaction and self-worth. While the Ambitious Workers often used legitimate jobs to support more entrepreneurial activities (e.g., Tyrone used his role as a security guard to build up a repair business),

the Reluctant Workers specifically chose employment that wouldn't interfere with hustling (Lewis, also a security guard, liked the job because it left him with plenty of time and energy to sell drugs). As one of these men states: "I don't mind work. It was just easier selling drugs."

The final group, **the Committed Hustlers**, earned money almost exclusively from hustling prior to entering Fathers at Work. They began hustling at a young age. They rarely sought employment, and when they did, their efforts were halfhearted and ineffectual. Those who worked were frequently fired (for reasons such as absenteeism, failed drug tests and poor social skills). Guy exemplifies the attitude of the Committed Hustlers. A father at 15, Guy supported his family by hustling. Asked if he'd ever attempted to get a job, Guy replies: "I thought about it, but it didn't happen because it was just a thought.... The only time I thought about it was when they locked me up or when they was gonna lock me up. But something always pushed me back out there, you know."

Not surprisingly, the Reluctant Workers and Committed Hustlers were ill-prepared for the formal labor market. As Leonard explains, years of hustling left him hard-pressed to deal with the demands of the workplace: "If you decide to turn over a new life and try to make it legit, you're gonna be lost, because you don't have no idea, no structure. I didn't know any workplace etiquette.... Say like with selling drugs, I could come out at eight and leave at nine if I wanted to. But when you step back into reality, it's not gonna work."

Faced with these challenges, the Fathers at Work programs offer a wide range of services to participants, including soft skills training, job development and placement, fatherhood workshops and help with child support issues. Preliminary evidence suggests that these services are valuable, but some men are clearly doing better than others. One year after enrolling in Fathers at Work, more than three quarters of the men in the study were employed in full-time jobs.³ Yet the more work-oriented men (the Reluctant Hustlers and the Ambitious Workers) had noticeably better outcomes. The average monthly earnings for this group were \$1,542, compared with just \$1,142 for the

hustling-oriented group—a difference of \$400 each month. Three of the four men who were unemployed at the one-year mark were from the hustling-oriented group. This group was also much less satisfied with their opportunities for advancement (a key finding, as job satisfaction is a well-known predictor of retention).

Understanding ex-offenders' differing experiences, attitudes and expectations can help programs better tailor their services to different needs. *Leaving the Street's* final recommendations for programs include: assessing work and hustling experience early on, building on existing motivations to change, helping participants address personal issues that can be barriers to employment, strengthening social supports, and helping participants develop and implement long-term career goals and plans.

Low-income fathers, especially those with criminal records, were once an afterthought in social policy. Focusing on helping them become more engaged and productive family members and citizens is a crucial shift. Really understanding them will go a long way toward enhancing the effectiveness of the policies and programs being developed—thus giving men like Alberto a shot at leaving the street for good.

Endnotes

- 1 Participants' names have been changed.
- 2 Statistics were gathered from the following sources:
U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin, Prisoners in 2003, November 2004. Retrieved 1/24/05 from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/p03.pdf>;
U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin, Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2003, May 2004. Retrieved 1/24/05 from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/pjim03.pdf>;
U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Reentry Trends in the U.S.: Recidivism. Retrieved 1/24/05 from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/reentry/recidivism.htm>
- 3 Follow-up data were available for 18 of the men, and reported findings are limited to this group.

To view *Leaving the Street* in its entirety, please visit our website: www.ppv.org.

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P/PV is a national nonprofit organization whose mission is to improve the effectiveness of social policies, programs and community initiatives.

Editors

Mark Elliott,
Executive Vice President

Chelsea Farley,
Communications Director

Design

Malish & Pagonis

Public/Private Ventures

2000 Market Street, Suite 600
Philadelphia, PA 19103

Tel: (215) 557-4400

Fax: (215) 557-4469

New York Office

The Chanin Building
122 East 42nd Street, 42nd Floor
New York, NY 10168

Tel: (212) 822-2400

Fax: (212) 949-0439

California Office

Lake Merritt Plaza, Suite 1550
1999 Harrison Street
Oakland, CA 94612

Tel: (510) 273-4600

Fax: (510) 273-4619

Url: <http://www.ppv.org>

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Public/Private Ventures
2000 Market Street, Suite 600
Philadelphia, PA 19103