

“Built around failure”

Improving county jail inmates’ perceptions of reentry

By Dr. Michael J. Jenkins, Dr. Harry Dammer and Dana Raciti

Nearly 10 million individuals are released annually from prisons and jails across the U.S.¹ Of those who enter prison or jail, 93 percent will be released.²

Of those individuals returning to society, approximately two-thirds will end up reincarcerated within three years — with nearly half convicted of new crimes and half with violated terms of parole.³ Jails, and Pennsylvania jails in particular, house approximately half their inmates at any given time as a result of recidivism.⁴ Despite knowing that even brief stays in jail can elicit negative consequences for the individual in the future (i.e., harsher sentences, less economic success and a higher likelihood of criminal behavior),⁶ lack of funding for jail reentry programs and briefer terms in jails compared to prisons, results in minimal research on reentry and recidivism among formerly jailed populations.⁷ In addition, even less research exists on the perspectives of incarcerated individuals who are in jail after having experienced an attempt at reentry.

The study described in this article analyzes the perspectives of inmates, presently incarcerated in a county jail, who unsuccessfully attempted reentry. It adds to the limited research that examines reentry issues from the perspective of individuals who have unsuccessfully tried reentry and eventually returned to jail. The study contemplates the reentry challenges those inmates faced and will face in the future. It also has the unique elements of a jail context, perspectives of individuals who have experienced reentry and recidivism, and participants who represent male and female individuals. This article concludes with some suggestions for improving the reentry process.

Why reentry matters

Reentry affects the formerly incarcerated individual, their family, their community and, in a greater context, society as a whole.⁸ Formerly incarcerated people return and attempt to reintegrate into certain types of areas within cities across the U.S. These areas typically experience a high concentration of poverty and

significant rates of unemployment. As a result, these communities are unprepared to provide basic structural necessities to returning citizens and may become even more unstable as a result — allowing the cycle of recidivism to continue.⁹ Improving reentry experiences would benefit many, but the commitment of all levels of society — including the individual, their family, the community and the government — is necessary.¹⁰

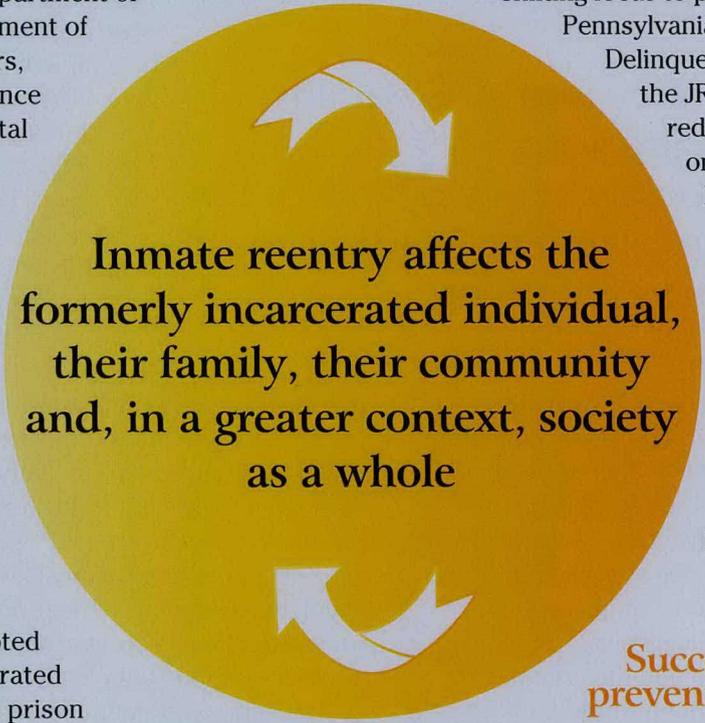
The government has always held a prominent role in the corrections system, but its involvement in reforming practice to prevent jail reentry can be seen as equivocal. Over the years, many government agencies — including the Department of Justice, Department of Education, Department of Labor, Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration — have provided support via funding for inmate reentry programs.¹¹

In addition, legislation, such as the Second Chance Act enacted in 2008, also allotted federal money toward reentry programming.¹² The programs created from the funding have attempted to help formerly incarcerated individuals, mostly from prison settings, overcome the barriers to successful reentry (e.g., difficulty attaining employment, limited education, financial issues, lack of housing, severed ties with family and friends in the community, and physical and mental health issues).¹³ These programs, which predominately target prison populations, rarely address provision of quality programs to meet the needs of citizens returning to the nation's communities from the jail setting.¹⁴

These government-funded reentry programs encountered additional obstacles to success with recent criminal justice practice and policy changes. These changes (i.e., stricter parole requirements and adjusted mandatory sentencing guidelines) contributed to the growth in jail populations.¹⁵ Due to the nature of the current correctional system, offenders are recidivating more frequently and are being released after longer sentences with minimal

development of prosocial skills and behaviors.¹⁶ By increasing costs to taxpayers, and by creating more opportunities for additional failed reentries, the changes in policy and subsequent influxes in the incarcerated population adversely affect society and contradict the positive impact government funding could have on preventing recidivism.¹⁷

On a local level, Pennsylvania's Justice Reinvestment Initiative (JRI) has created awareness for the difficulties in reentry. Pennsylvania's JRI — a collaboration between the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, Board of Probation and Parole, governor's office, district attorneys, Senate and House of Representatives — was created in 2011 to analyze Pennsylvania's correctional system and initiate necessary changes, such as reducing recidivism, decreasing spending and shifting focus to proactive public safety. The Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency's 2016 reports indicate the JRI's current interest is on reducing recidivism by focusing on an inmate's needs and his or her likelihood of reoffending, altering sentencing by using early assessment and alternative punishments and associated policy reformation.¹⁸ Continued research through the JRI, and research like this study, will shape future criminal justice practice and policy implementation.



Inmate reentry affects the formerly incarcerated individual, their family, their community and, in a greater context, society as a whole

Successful reentry: What prevents it?

The primary goal of reentry is to reintegrate into the community successfully “an individual who has discharged his legal obligation to society by serving his sentence and has demonstrated an ability to live by society's rules.”¹⁹ Similarly, successful reentry is often defined as abstinence from criminal behavior.²⁰ Ideally, preparing incarcerated individuals to “live by society's rules” and remain “abstinent from criminal behavior” should initiate as soon as the offender begins his or her sentence; however, preparation for reentry often begins only when release is approaching.²¹ Even when preparation for reentry does occur prior to release, a disconnect often exists between services offered inside jail and services offered outside jail.²² With no collaboration existing between jail services and community services, ex-inmates often fail to find appropriate services in their communities.²³

In addition, several risk factors — including age, gender, race, gang affiliation, substance abuse, mental illness, length of prior criminal history, type of offense committed and length of incarceration prior to release — increase the chances of failed reentry.²⁴ Mental illness and substance abuse, in particular, present substantial impediments to successful reentry. After a period of deinstitutionalization in the 1960s, which involved closing mental health institutions and transitioning former residents to the community, the numbers of inmates with diagnosed and undiagnosed mental health issues substantially increased.²⁵ The individuals who were released from mental health institutions had minimal connection to the community for positive rehabilitative support, ultimately leading to frequent contact with the criminal justice system.²⁶ Once incarcerated, individuals with mental

disproportionate number of ex-offenders return to impoverished communities with minimal resources.³¹ Little collaboration exists between the jail and the community, which results in returning citizens often failing to seek out their own resources or seeking out illegal methods of support for themselves. Furthermore, the community may not even have the necessary resources to help. Unfortunately, if the returning citizen's community does not have resources to offer, the risk of recidivism drastically increases.³²

Similarly, the level of support an ex-inmate has in the community can predict reentry outcomes. If an individual feels connected to society, then the individual will be less likely to continue offending.³³ This connection to society is often exhibited through family support.³⁴ In this case, family may be loosely defined as any supportive individuals close to the

ex-inmate. When the offender is completing his or her sentence, family support in the form of visitations is helpful in reducing recidivism.³⁵ The frequency of family visits appears negatively correlated with the likelihood of recidivism — the more a family visits an incarcerated person, the less likely it is that the formerly incarcerated person will be

reincarcerated.³⁶ Families also support the reentry process by providing adequate housing and easing financial strain when a recently incarcerated individual first reenters society.³⁷ Various trial programs have been created in an attempt to successfully reintegrate citizens into society, many of which emphasize involving the family in the process. However, successful inmate reentry remains infrequent, and families continue to be underutilized as a tool to help with reentry. A greater emphasis on creating support — family or otherwise — for ex-inmates may help increase rates of successful reentry.

The changes in policy and subsequent influxes in the incarcerated population adversely affect society and contradict the positive impact government funding could have on preventing recidivism

health diagnoses rarely receive any rehabilitative therapy or treatment. Many individuals with mental health disorders also concurrently face substance abuse or addiction disorder.²⁷ Decades after deinstitutionalization and many years of research, the criminal justice system continues to seek knowledge of how to prevent recidivism for ex-inmates with mental health and addiction diagnoses.²⁸

Current reentry programming in the criminal justice system attempt to account for individual risk factors like those mentioned above by designing individualized treatment plans. Although beneficial in theory, individualized treatment plans are often ineffective due to the brief length of treatment, the offenders' lack of readiness to change, and their disengagement of the treatment process, among other reasons.²⁹ Additional programming for education, job training, substance abuse treatment, health and wellness, parenting, and various counseling programs may be available to aid in reentry preparation; however, these programs are also underutilized among incarcerated individuals.³⁰ It is crucial to discover the reality of how these risk factors inhibit the reentry process and what can be done to help improve the success of reentry programming against these factors.

The conditions of the returning citizens' communities also determine success of reentry. A

Methods

Studies that use qualitative methods to examine offender reentry frequently analyze the interactions between recidivism rates, substance abuse, co-occurring disorders and health risks.³⁸ Qualitative methods allow researchers to view the reentry process from the perspectives of former offenders (for example, this study includes those who have attempted reentry but have failed and returned to jail). An analysis of perspectives from incarcerated people who have experienced being in jail — and more specifically, failing at reentry — is valuable in determining the true voids in the reentry process.

This study began at the request of a local, county-wide reentry task force, which the jail administration leads. The task force includes representatives of many local social service and criminal justice agencies. The board meets monthly to discuss and problem-solve on issues relevant to citizens returning to their local community. The board was interested in hearing — via an objective research process — what members affected by the jail and reentry experiences had to say about jail and reentry conditions in the county.

Participants

With the assistance of the jail representatives, this study recruited 30 individuals incarcerated currently in a county jail — 25 men and five women — to participate in one of four focus groups. Prior to their most recent incarceration, all participants who were included in data analysis previously attempted to complete reentry, experienced failed reentry and were reincarcerated. At the time, all were currently and had been previously incarcerated in a county-run jail with a capacity of nearly 1,200 inmates. Table 1 compares data provided by jail administrators on their entire jail population to the data collected in focus groups. Numbers based on these small focus groups should be interpreted with caution. However, the lower percentage of the group affected by substance abuse or mental health issues could suggest the findings might have even greater significance for jail populations dealing with these issues more often.

Table 1

Characteristic	Entire Jail Population	Participants
Cost to incarcerate an inmate per day	\$53	N/A
% reporting history of substance abuse	70%	50%
% with prior criminal history	77%	100%
% reporting mental health issues	42%	15.38%

Procedure

This qualitative study included four separate focus groups inside the prison to understand the participants' perspectives of what is needed for successful reentry. They consisted of seven men, eight men, five women and 10 men, respectively, and lasted a period of two days in March 2014. The same two researchers led each of the focus groups and asked six identical, open-ended questions pertaining to the participants' most recent incarceration, reentry and anticipated reentry experiences. The questions and corresponding prompts were intended

to encourage participants in multiple ways to reflect on their preincarceration, past reentry, current incarceration and post-incarceration experiences.

The following questions were asked to each focus group:

- Please tell us what your work, leisure activities and family life was like prior to your most recent incarceration.
- Thinking again about while you were out on the street, prior to your most recent incarceration, please tell us what agencies or services in the community were most helpful in your effort to lead a productive and non-criminal lifestyle. Least helpful? Again, please remember to speak only about agencies and not specific people.
- What would you say, preferably in one sentence, was the main reason(s) for why you wound up back in prison?
- During your current stay in jail, have you been working on a prerelease plan, and do you believe it has been helpful toward achieving your goal of staying out of prison after release? Why or why not?
- If you were the head judge of the county or head of adult parole and had the power to help inmates who were soon to be released from prison, what would you do?
- Describe some of the main concerns or barriers that you anticipate for when you will return to the community.

Analysis

The same two researchers combined their extensive notes from each focus group, matched respondents' responses to each question, and

organized them by group and questions to analyze them for emerging themes. They then divided the themes into categories related to preincarceration, current incarceration and future concerns for post-incarceration. The themes were also coded quantitatively according to frequency of response:

- Few = less than 10 percent.
- Some = 10 to 24.9 percent.
- Many = 25 to 50 percent.
- Most = over 50 percent.
- Almost all = over 75 percent.

Included are qualitative assessments of the

Table 2

Pre-Incarceration	
<i>Life prior to most recent incarceration:</i>	
Many identified as having substance abuse issues	50%
Many experienced financial difficulties	46.15%
Many returned to prison on parole/probation violations	34.62%
Almost half of those were violated for hot urine	15.38%
Many said Intensive Probation (IP) is difficult	26.92%
Many were employed	26.92%
Some were employed in temporary work	15.38%
Some were unemployed	15.38%
Some had unstable or no housing	15.38%
Some battled mental health issues	15.38%
<i>Agencies in the community:</i>	
Many stated a one-stop resource agency was helpful	48%
Many mentioned one or more mental health or social service agencies as helpful	26.92%
Some stated AA was helpful	24%
Some stated a drug & alcohol counseling center was helpful	16%
Some stated a drug & alcohol counseling center was not helpful	12%
Some mentioned friends as a source of help	12%
Few did not utilize any services in the community	8%
<i>Reasons contributing to their most recent incarceration:</i>	
Many stated personal reasons, i.e. "Myself," "Couldn't keep up," "Lost Focus," "...helpless and depressed"	37.04%
Many mentioned unstable finances and living situations	25.93%
Some attributed their recidivism to drugs	22.22%
Few said intensive supervision probation was to blame	7.41%
Few mentioned lack of transportation	7.41%
Incarceration	
<i>Are you currently working on a Pre-Release plan? Do you believe it has been helpful in working to achieve your goal of staying out of prison after release?</i>	
Most have no plan	72.73%
Many think a plan would be helpful	40.91%
Some have a plan but it is not helpful	13.64%
Few have a plan and it is helpful	4.55%
Post-Incarceration	
<i>Desired changes to improve reentry process:</i>	
Most desire a greater emphasis on rehabilitation	58.82%
Many desire changes to the system itself	41.18%
Many desire enhanced programming to help with reentry	29.41%
Some desire changes in probation officer	23.53%
Some desire help finding housing/more housing options	23.53%
Some desire more training in employment and education	17.65%
Some desire a more individualized focus	17.65%
<i>Main concerns or barriers to reentering society in the future:</i>	
Most mentioned finding a job/employment	53.33%
Some anticipated no help from their PO	20%
Some mentioned a lack of services/need to enhance services	20%
Some stated a need for education	20%
Some worried about encountering problems because of their record	20%
Some mentioned difficulty with housing	13.33%
Few identified relapse potential	6.67%
Few mentioned family issues	6.67%
Few said socialization	6.67%
Few identified lack of direction	6.67%

members' interactions within the group to highlight the robustness with which participants appeared to present certain perspectives.

Results

Table 2 depicts the evident themes from the participants' responses to each question as related to preincarceration, incarceration and post-incarceration.

Preincarceration (previous reentry experiences)

Many respondents identified as having substance abuse issues that made it significantly more difficult to reenter society. Respondents appeared to be in agreement when participants made statements such as, "The hole is deeper when you get out than when you get in." Along with this, many individuals experienced financial difficulties, noting that they felt they were, as one respondent states, "In a corner and couldn't get out." Participants passionately agreed that the burden of "working off court costs and fines" was an aggravating hurdle for them upon reentering society. As one member noted, "I could not pay my bills, so I started hustling."

The numerous and strict requirements of probation (i.e., intensive probation) were concerning to many respondents. Many of them had been returned to jail on a probation violation, with half of those violations resulting from "hot urine," i.e., a urine sample that tested positive for drugs. As respondents mentioned, they felt here was "no second chance" and that intensive probation is "set up for failure." Many reported having been employed (some by temporary employment agencies); nearly half used a popular one-stop agency in the area (which received the most enthusiastic support from our respondents); about 15 percent reported having unstable or no housing; and the same percentage also battled mental health issues, with some reporting that Alcoholics Anonymous or another drug and alcohol treatment centers were helpful, and many others saying other mental health or social service agencies were beneficial. Almost all reported having accessed some service within the community. Balancing the many meetings, employment and probation requirements was a strong point of stress for the respondents here.

Many in this study took personal responsibility for the reason they were reincarcerated. Only a few blamed probation requirements for their most recent return to jail. Many mentioned unstable financial and living situations, and some pointed to drugs as contributing to their return. As one person commented, "[You] have to want it." Only 12 percent

mentioned friends as a source of support for them, with none explicitly mentioning their family.

Incarceration

During the segment surrounding their current incarceration, the focus groups mainly discussed whether or not they had a prerelease plan. Nearly three-quarters of the participants reported having no such plan, but many thought it would be helpful to have one. "I'm leaving Monday, said one participant, "but where do I go?" Some of the participants had a plan but did not think it was helpful. In describing the imprisonment and probation systems, most participants hoped for a greater emphasis on rehabilitation. As one person said, "There's no uplifting in prison." They also expressed frustration with the lack of coordination of services inside and outside of prison. For example, a respondent stated that his medication was "hit and miss" as he moved into and out of prison.

Post-incarceration (concerns about reentry)

Many of the respondents believed various parts of the criminal justice system were in need of change. As mentioned previously, most desired a greater emphasis on rehabilitation throughout the system. Others offered suggestions such as reducing court costs and fines, straighter sentencing, flexibility with probation conditions (to allow for the reality of relapse), enhanced reentry programming, and improved communication between offenders and criminal justice professionals. For example, respondents strongly discussed the frustration they felt as a result of being held in jail (or returned to jail) for failure to pay court costs and fines. They stated that this made it difficult for the court to give the incarcerated individual a set release date, adding to the respondents' frustration.

Discussing the probation function specifically, respondents reported the probation office should be more helpful instead of being "built around failure." They suggested the probation office offer more help for the former inmate in finding housing, more training for employment and education, and take a more individualized approach. Participants noted, "[Probation officers] should look at the individual and not paint everyone with the same broad stroke," also stating that officers should act more as an "advocate," instead of focusing on putting probationers back in jail. Most mentioned finding a job as one of their main concerns related to potential reentry barriers, with 20 percent stating they did not think their probation officer would be helpful in



finding a job. Some realized they needed more education. They also lamented that their record overshadows their “education, volunteer and work experiences,” making it difficult to secure a job.

Limitations

Despite the unique characteristics (i.e., reincarcerated county jail inmates) of the current study, the results are based on the analysis of responses from a small group of individuals. Therefore, the conclusions about greater criminal justice or reentry processes should be interpreted with caution. Nonetheless, the findings — as they correspond to and deviate from past research — should cause one to reflect on how one’s own research and practice agenda might benefit from them. Certainly, the challenges that respondents anticipated facing while on probation have been the subject of much research, and the probation office is not solely to blame for respondents’ concerns. For example, research shows that probationers with probation officers who follow a balanced, professional orientation (social work and law enforcement orientations) have fewer technical violations and rearrests. Notably, the fact that individuals who have been reincarcerated failed to mention the support of family is worthy of further investigation, as perhaps, the lack of salience of this variable might help to explain their difficulties with the reentry process.

New Concerns

This study raises serious concerns about the barriers to reentry set forth if a criminal justice system does not focus on rehabilitation. These

include the many demands that are placed on a probationer’s time (i.e., attending drug and alcohol counseling sessions, meeting with their probation officer, anger management courses, and holding a full-time job); the lack of a prerelease plan while in jail; and being held in jail for failure to pay court costs and fines, or having to pay them off first before attending to other financial needs while back in society. Respondents reported that these processes work together to make the returning citizen worse off than when they had entered jail.

This research also suggests areas of a returning citizen’s life that need more attention if they are to successfully complete reentry, as well as services that returning citizens find helpful for maintaining productive lifestyles postrelease. Respondents in this study found a one-stop service to be most helpful in meeting the varied needs of a returning citizen. From offering bus passes, to providing Christmas gifts for their children, to helping them access employment and educational resources, respondents repeatedly mentioned this one-stop resource as very helpful. In line with the continuity, coordination and integration of care approach used in various health care settings,³⁹ respondents also noted that more communication among drug, alcohol and mental health treatments, inside and outside of jail, would help with their time management barriers and offer a more beneficial treatment cycle. Given that a significant amount of offenders have been identified with mental illness and substance abuse tendencies, establishing this connection between jails and treatment centers would be highly beneficial for those attempting reentry.⁴⁰ Responses also suggest that a rehabilitative focus of the probation and jail systems would assist with the overall success of using such treatment programs in helping the individual to reenter society.

According to authors Richard P. Seiter and Karen R. Kadela of Saint Louis University, Missouri, reentry programs should serve the dual purpose of preparing for transition and initiating treatment with a connection to community programs to ensure continuity of care.⁴¹ Continuity, coordination and integration of care for the reentry process would recommend initiating the reentry process when the individual begins their term of incarceration and continuing after release. However, previous research and this study demonstrate that continuity of care and connection with community programs after release often do not occur. Individuals in this study felt they were most in need of employment, education, housing, and drug and alcohol counseling. A prerelease plan, starting as soon as one enters a jail facility, would be helpful to that end.⁴²

Despite previous research identifying family and

friends as potential factors affecting the reentry process, family and friends were not commonly mentioned as affecting reentry into society in this study. More often than not, previous research demonstrates the family as a valuable resource for facilitating reentry because the family frequently provides living necessities (i.e., shelter, food, money) and supportive relationships.⁴³ However, as identified by author Damian J. Martinez,⁴⁴ families may also inhibit successful reentry. For example, another source found that former inmates may feel pressure from their families to reintegrate into society, which, in turn, may contribute to their return to criminal behavior. In addition, the former inmates in that study also indicated that involvement with friends may prevent successful reentry, as these friends may also be involved in criminal behavior. Regardless of a potential positive or negative influence by families and friends, it is important to note respondents in this study rarely made mention of any influence by families and friends in the reentry process. The lack of emphasis of family's role in reentry, either positive or negative, may be related to this study's low number of female participants, as previous research does indicate female inmates found family, specifically children, to have an influence on reentry.⁴⁵ Respondents also realized the need to take personal responsibility for their own lives post-incarceration, as similarly found in an article by Martin F. Horn.⁴⁶

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