Reflections on *The First Month Out*: Reentry Then and Now

In May 1999, I joined the Vera Institute of Justice as a senior planner to engage in a classic Vera exercise: Take a criminal justice problem, investigate its causes and effects (particularly on the lives of people going through the system and on their communities), look at past attempts to fix or alleviate the problem, and come up with a new solution that government could support politically, financially, and operationally. The problem I was given in 1999 was how to ensure that the mass release of people from prison—the by-product of the mass incarceration that dominated the 1990s—did not become the latest social ill. Vera wanted to learn how government and its nonprofit allies could transform a prisoner’s release from a time of frustration and potential repeated criminal behavior into a moment for opportunity and connection. Reentering the community should be the end of a sentence, not the start of another cycle through the criminal justice system.

The return issue (reentry) had not yet been coined appealed to me then, and still does—both pragmatically and, dare I say, spiritually. Evidenced by the passage of the Second Chance Act in 2008, Americans of all ideological persuasions believe in fresh starts. The United States seems to hold that after people pay their debt to society, they should be given the opportunity to work hard, be with their families, dream their dreams, and make their contribution. Second chances are apolitical, part of the national fabric, the founding myth. This was my fiercely held ideal. *The First Month Out* sought to uncover the reality by exploring and documenting the reality of prisoners’ experiences in the days and weeks following release from prison or jail. This research project accomplished that goal in a moving, personal way.

Rereading the final report now, what I remember most vividly is the people. I conducted several of the interviews with formerly incarcerated individuals myself and oversaw a team of five other interviewers who compared notes and impressions on a weekly basis. As I reread the fictionalized names I recalled people’s real names, even after all these years. I relived how intense the reentry experience was for them—how happy, how frustrating, and how confusing. I remember hearing about their experiences as an observer in their homes, in rooms at homeless shelters, in a McDonald’s, on park benches. As a former prisoner, rights lawyer with the Legal Aid Society, I was sympathetic and listened carefully, but I was unable to truly share in their experience or affect the outcome. Despite all the goodwill I had toward them and felt they had toward me, my inability to affect the outcome rendered the experience odd and not entirely satisfying. From this experience, my career as a service provider—rather than a researcher or lawyer—was born. Mostly, however, upon rereading the report, I wonder: Where are they now? And I wish—with all my heart—that they are free, have a home, and are living their lives richly.

In terms of research, policy, and practice, significant advances have been made in reentry practices in New York since the release of *The First Month Out*. Some of our very practical, obvious suggestions—such as “Don’t release people in the middle of the night” and “Do provide birth certificates and Social Security cards before release,” as well as our emphasis on facilitating meetings between community-based organizations and potential clients before release—are now standard practice in New York City and New York State. I believe that *The First Month Out* may have triggered some discussion at the city and state level about how to handle returning prisoners, helping to raise the profile of harmful practices and reducing recidivism directly after release. In the years following the release of the report, as more researchers tackled the issue, additional reports and discussions helped bring about changes to reentry policy and practices both in New York and throughout the country.

Despite its contributions, *The First Month Out* was in some ways flawed. As an early project in the field of reentry research, the report lumped together reentry stories from people coming home from state prison after years of incarceration with those from people leaving the county jail after only months away. What emerged is that the jail reentry experience differs from the prison experience in many ways: length of time away from home (jail stays are generally significantly shorter than prison stays), continuity between life before incarceration and life after (much more continuity in jail reentry), and the different characteristics of the populations (e.g., the jail population tends to be older, have more substance abuse and mental illness, and include more lifestyle crimes). Although we noted
for, the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO)—a Vera spinoff from 1996—was evaluated by MDRC (a leading social policy research organization), which reported statistically significant reductions across all measures of recidivism—arrests, convictions, incarceration—for program participants who entered the CEO employment program within three months of release.¹ Reentry providers have also sought to show that the issues of the formerly incarcerated touch on many other areas of public concern: connecting children to parents, finding work and building skills for the hard to employ, and treating substance abusers, among other issues. Most important, reentry providers have sought to prove that meeting the needs of returning community members is an important piece of a bigger agenda: investing in and growing human capital in the United States.

Note

¹ Cindy Redcross, Transitional Jobs for Ex-Prisoners: Three-Year Results from a Random Assignment Evaluation of the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) (Presented at the APPAM Annual Research Conference, Boston, Mass., Nov. 2010) (available from the author at cindy.redcross@mdrc.org.).