The First Month Out: Post-Incarceration Experiences in New York City

I. Introduction

Cal was released from Queensboro Correctional Facility in July 1999, three and a half years after he began a prison term for selling drugs and violating the conditions of his parole from a previous drug conviction.8

Cal returned to the same neighborhood he came from—one he describes as drug infested. He moved back in with his fiancée and her seven-year-old daughter, as well as his stepdaughter and her son. Finances were already tight: his fiancée is on public assistance, and the family spent four days without electricity because they could not pay the bill. . . .

Despite the hardships, Cal felt fortunate to be with his loved ones again. None of his family members were on drugs, and he considered them a good influence on him. “I missed them a lot,” he said. “And I owe them a lot. They need support.”

Determined to get a job, he immediately started following up on a list of potential employers he had received in his pre-release class in an upstate prison. These places were that supposedly hired ex-offenders. But . . . either the places did not exist or they did not accept parolees. Cal was discouraged but not defeated. He started pounding the pavement every day. . . . “You gotta look,” he said. “A lot of people expect the jobs to come to them.”

One morning he got up at 6:00, arrived at the unemployment office at 8:30, walked 25 blocks to a hotel that had posted a listing, and was turned down for a job cleaning toilets when he told them he was on parole. . . .

His third week out, Cal asked the moving company across the street from his apartment if they had any openings. He did not mention that he was on parole, and they hired him on the spot. His parole officer was thrilled for him and asked only to see pay stubs as evidence of his work. At the end of his first month out, Cal was working two to four days a week, in shifts that could last 16 hours. The work was hard . . . but he was trying to log as many hours as possible to qualify for union benefits. He was less worried about the stability of this job once he . . . discovered that his boss had been on parole too. . . .

Cal was less sanguine about staying off drugs. Some old friends he still saw were using drugs. . . . He coped with temptation by staying inside with his family as much as he could. Unfortunately, he was not able to get an appointment to be assessed for drug treatment until a month and a half after he got out. His parole officer extended his curfew to 11 p.m. so that, after he was assessed, he could attend evening treatment sessions.

Cal was guardedly optimistic about his future. On a scale of one to five, with one meaning “least likely,” he rated as two the possibility that he would end up back in prison. “I’m going to do my best not to go back.”

Cal’s story raises many of the issues that confront the approximately 350 people who are released from prison and jail to New York City daily. His search for work, his reunion with his family, his attempts to stay away from drugs, his return to the same neighborhood and to the same friends with whom he used to associate: these scenarios are played out every day in neighborhoods throughout the city. . . . Mining the details of his life during this period lends a texture to the discussion of the problems people face when they get out, and the possible solutions, that no purely statistical survey can convey.

Researchers at the Vera Institute of Justice set out to collect and analyze such detail in the summer of 1999, commissioned by the New York State Task Force on Parole and with support from the Open Society Institute’s Center on Crime, Communities and Culture. By studying a relatively small group of people just released from prison, 49 in all, we hoped to learn not only whether they got jobs, stayed away from criminal activity and drugs, and obeyed the conditions of their parole, but how they did so. Indeed, reviewing the details of 49 stories, we were able to identify patterns of success and failure in finding jobs, feeling satisfied and dissatisfied with parole services, staying clean and relapsing, and staying straight and returning to criminal activity. . . .

The following report is an account, issue by issue, of what we learned from participants about life in the first thirty days after getting out of prison or jail. . . . Those first days and weeks appear to be critical, with arrest rates for released prisoners highest soon after release and declining over time.7 The study showed that the first month is not only a period of difficulties, but also a period of opportunities to get people started on the path to employment, abstinence from drugs, good family relations, and crime-free living.
II. The Moment of Release

The bus from Lakeview Shock Incarceration Facility pulled into the Port Authority Terminal shortly after midnight. Upon arriving, Joelle told her platoon-mate Natalie she had “some business to take care of uptown.” Natalie tried to convince her friend . . . to hold-off getting high until after tomorrow’s meeting with her parole officer . . . but Joelle seemed unsuasyed as she got into a cab alone and Natalie went home with her parents . . . . They did not meet again for ten days, when Joelle stopped Natalie on the street to ask for money.

As this brief sketch illustrates, the moment of release presents mixed opportunities: it can be an occasion for a joyful family reunion—perhaps the first step toward becoming part of family life again—or a first chance to resume old habits. Ultimately, each person must choose among competing courses of action, but the release process itself can influence those decisions.

Unfortunately, release procedures at some facilities work against making these connections. When people return to the city late at night, for example, relatives and program representatives are less likely to meet them. Parents like Natalie’s who go to Port Authority at 12:30 a.m. are the exception, not the rule . . . . Inmates from other upstate prisons who return to the city on commercial buses and trains may also arrive late at night . . . . Transporting the people going to New York City from far-away prisons at night—so they arrive in the city early the next morning—is one possible solution.

III. Families

. . . . We developed two scales to measure and then correlate family strength and individual success. At each interview, we asked people to rate the level of family support—as they defined it—on a scale from one to five. On one occasion, we also asked them to answer several questions designed to reveal degrees of family cohesion, and to say whether . . . any family members use drugs and whether . . . the family accepted phone calls from the person while he or she was in prison. Higher scores on our Family Strength Index indicate stronger and more active family relationships . . . . The Individual Success Index, measures success using the following criteria: having a family relationship, Family Strength Index indicate stronger and more active family relationships. . . . The Individual Success Index, measures success using the following criteria: having a job, staying away from illegal activity and drug use, making new friends, and securing stable housing (where stable means the person expects to stay there six months or longer).

We found that total family strength scores correlate strongly with total individual success scores. . . . By separately analyzing aspects of each scale, we also found that self-defined family support was the strongest predictor of individual success, although drug use in the family and communication during incarceration also influenced a person’s success.

These rough analyses back up what people told us: that once they have their family’s acceptance, they feel confident enough to develop new relationships and begin planning for the future . . . . The people who found jobs, stayed away from drugs, made new friends, and felt optimistic about the future were the ones who talked most about their family’s acceptance of them.

IV. Employment

The number-one concern for most of the people in the study was landing a job . . . . People consistently were more preoccupied with finding work than avoiding drugs and other illegal activity or staying in good health . . . . By the end of the month, more than a third (18 of the 49) had found full or part-time jobs in the mainstream labor market.

. . . . There are some differences between people who got regular jobs and those who did not. Everyone who found a job had prior work experience, and seven of them were employed when they were arrested. All were under 40, and they reported significantly stronger family support than those who did not find jobs . . . . People with some college education were also more likely to get jobs. Eight of the 49 people who completed the study had taken at least one college-level course, and all but one of them landed a job during the month. Having a high school diploma, however, was not positively correlated with getting a job.

Within roughly two weeks after release, nearly three-quarters (12 out of 18) of those who got jobs during the month had already been hired. Of the 12, eight took a job they had held in the past. That their employers were willing to rehire them—despite a criminal record—suggests they were good employees. The jobs may not be the best they could get, but . . . many of them decided that any job is better than being unemployed.

After two weeks out, the pace of finding jobs slowed down dramatically. Only six people were hired during the second half of the month. They all found new jobs, a few of them through personal connections. Three searched somewhat randomly on their own; the other three used employment programs that specialize in helping ex-offenders.

Job searching with little or no assistance takes time, effort, and perseverance. In addition to Cal, whose story introduces this report, two other people pounded the pavement for weeks, then finally found work . . . .

The demographic traits of the 31 people who finished the study but did not find jobs are dramatically different from those who did. They were older (37 compared with 30). The majority (23 of 31) were unemployed at the time of arrest, and about half of these people (15) had not

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worked in a long time, if ever. The 13 long-term unemployed are men and women over 40, many of whom also have long-standing substance abuse problems and conveyed little confidence in their ability to find a job.

V. Alcohol and Drug Abuse

Nearly all the people who completed the study—46 out of 49—told us they had abused alcohol or used illicit drugs the year before they were incarcerated. A minority, about one out of every five who had used drugs, described their habit as “no problem.” At the other extreme, fully half of the group said they had used drugs more than once a day and labeled their habit “an extremely serious problem.”

Returning to the outside world and facing situations that used to trigger drug use makes relapse very tempting. Moreover, many people feel anxious and stressed out—feelings they used to quell by getting high. Despite these pressures, the vast majority of former drug users in our study told us they managed to stay clean during their first month out. While we made no attempts to confirm their stories, they were nearly always consistent with what we observed over the course of several lengthy interviews.

Many people could identify clear [personal] reasons for staying clean. . . . Several people mentioned the pressure of regular drug tests by parole.

The seven people who relapsed have little in common, but one indicator stands out: weak family bonds. Most of the people who relapsed (five out of seven) had lower overall scores on the Family Support Index compared with those who stayed clean.

Thirty-five people reported attending at least one treatment session by the end of the study. Most had been required to attend treatment, although some went voluntarily. The reactions to mandated treatment among those who enrolled during the study varied considerably. A few people . . . found treatment extremely helpful. . . .

More people, however, found little value in treatment. Those who were heavy users before they were incarcerated said that sitting in a classroom with other addicts and talking about how good it feels to get high only stimulated their appetite for drugs. . . .

Although people's assessment of the value of mandated drug treatment programs is mixed, it is interesting to note that most of the people who relapsed were not getting consistent treatment. Five of the seven people who relapsed were required to be in a program but did not go regularly. . . .

Whether or not people wanted treatment, many had to overcome obstacles to enroll in and attend these programs, ([discussed below]) and some did not get in before the study ended.

VI. Preparation for Release

Most people were offered some kind of pre-release planning where they were incarcerated. Only five people in general confinement, four at H1IP, and ten from Rikers said they were not offered any. . . . We asked people during the pre-release interview how useful they found this planning, on a scale of one (“not at all useful”) to five (“extremely useful”). The average for the eight populations, except shock, was slightly below three. Shock participants gave consistently high ratings. But the averages do not tell the whole story, since individual ratings of helpfulness varied widely.

While people expressed diverse views of pre-release services, they were consistent in what they believed would make a difference in their preparation for release. Even more interesting, their suggestions were echoed by parole officers with whom we spoke. Both felt that by concentrating on the following areas, pre-release planning could make a difference in the lives of people after they leave prison:

Job Assistance. As noted in the section on employment, helping people assess their job skills, develop networks, and make connections with employers who are willing to hire ex-offenders could happen before release, which would give people a boost in their job search. Indeed, people mentioned wanting help finding a job more than any other pre-release service. They wanted to be steered toward particular employers who would hire ex-offenders. . . .

Basic Documentation: Birth Certificate, Social Security card and Photo ID. In order to legally work in the United States, people are required to show proof of identity and employment eligibility. . . . [In addition, over half the people who completed the study (28 out of 49) were applying for Medicaid, which requires proof of identity.] . . . Unfortunately, only 32 of the initial sample of 88 obtained birth certificates. Many people also reported having to secure their own Social Security card after release. Photo identification is also required for many daily transactions, such as cashing checks. . . . Study participants suggested that preparation for release include acquiring documentation required for work, as well as government-issued photo identification, such as a non-driver’s ID.

Making Necessary Links with the Health and Mental Health Care Systems. Most people in the study were required to enter drug treatment upon release. To pay for these programs, however, many needed Medicaid. They could not apply until after they were released and obtained identification—and then they had to wait up to 45 days for this coverage to be effective. Study participants . . . believe this process should be completed before release.

Two people were required by parole to get mental health treatment, yet neither of them left their facility with a current mental health evaluation. Their treatment had not begun by the end of the thirty days because they still had not been assessed. Conducting mandated mental
health evaluations as part of the preparation for release would make the treatment process more efficient.

Connections with Community Service Providers. Five people reported making connections while in prison to a community or nonprofit service organization. In four cases, these early contacts led to concrete assistance that eased the transition to life outside prison or jail. (The fifth person, who said she would be going to a program for mentally ill, chemically addicted people run by Catholic Charities, dropped out of the survey.)

Making these early connections—to mental health providers, drug treatment programs, and other services—more often would mean that more people would be met upon release and swiftly integrated into the programs.

Notes
1 Excerpted from Marta Nelson, Perry Dees, & Charlotte Allen, The First Month Out: Post-Incarceration Experiences in New York City (Vera Institute of Justice, 1999).
2 All names have been changed to protect participants’ identities.
3 See, for example, Allen J. Beck, Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report: Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1983 (U.S. Department of Justice, 1989).
4 During each interview, participants were asked to rate their concern about several issues on a scale from 1 to 5, ranging from “not at all concerned” to “extremely concerned.” Finding a job had a 2.9 rating across the surveys, the highest of any concern.
5 Those with jobs had a mean response of 4.6 on a 1-to-5 scale of perceived family helpfulness, while those without jobs had a mean response of 3.8. The difference between these means is statistically significant at the .05; the p-value is .0190.