Individually Perceived Supports and Barriers to Successful Community Reentry After Serving a

Prison Sentence

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Abstract

Many ex-offenders face a myriad of challenges to community re-entry after serving a prison sentence that may contribute to recidivism. This qualitative research study explored individually experienced supports and perceived barriers that contributed to a successful reentry experience, and how individuals learned to effectively manage and meet the various challenges of living in the community after being released from prison.

Prison as a Social Institution and a Transforming Experience

Individual Transitions from Prison to the Community

Review of the Literature

According to Bureau of Justice Statistics, 5.6 million U.S. residents, or 1 in every 37adults have served time in prison. With the exception of those who die in custody, all prisoners return to free society (Bushway, 2006, p.562; Travis, 2005; Visher & Travis, 2003). Ninety-one percent of state prisoners returning to communities are men who average age 35 (Binswanger, et. al 2007; Travis, 2005). Many of these former prisoners leave prison with low educational levels, serious family commitments (e.g., parenting and spousal roles), histories of drug and alcohol abuse, previous criminal histories, little or no work history, and limited ties to the conventional community at large. When former inmates have difficulty adjusting post-release, they are likely to reoffend (Cobbina, 2010; Thomson, 2004; Visher & Travis, 2003; Western, et al, 2001), with the majority of ex-offenders reoffending (Cobbina, 2010; Visher &Travis, 2003). In fact, within three years, almost 70% of former inmates will have been rearrested, and 50% will be back in prison, either for a new crime or for violating conditions of their release (Travis, 2005; Visher & Travis, 2003). Men were more likely to be returned to prison (53%) than women (39.4%); blacks (54.2%) more likely than whites (49.9%); non-Hispanics (57.3%) more likely than Hispanics (51.9%); younger prisoners more likely than older ones; and prisoners with longer prior histories of criminal behavior were more likely to be returned to prison than those with shorter records (Langan & Levin, 2002). Once back behind bars, individuals learn how to commit future crimes and become trained to accept that prison life is a social norm (Corrections Today, 2009; Travis 2005).High recidivism amongst the ex-offender population is due in part to an unavailability of economic and social supports (Thomson, 2004; Travis 2005).

A sentence to prison does not erase personal history. Prisoners carry with them their life experiences, needs, skills, and relationships from community to prison, and back to the community again. Prison is a unique experience for some that may have provided an abrupt and beneficial departure from a life of antisocial behavior. Men and women sometimes credit prison as an opportunity to turn their lives around (Laub & Sampson, 2001 Travis, 2003).   For others, time in prison has intensified their attachment to the relationships, attitudes, and mindsets that define their criminal lifestyle. Still for others, prison is a dehumanizing experience, leaving the former prisoner bitter, angry, and depleted many levels. Some never recover from the effects of prison (Travis, 2003).

There is little research on prison itself as a social institution and a transforming experience (Visher & Travis, 2003). The former prisoner has been transformed by his or her prison experience. The former prisoner, by living in prison, becomes in danger of being institutionalized; meaning he or she becomes accustomed to the routine of institutional (prison) life and its norms and otherwise finds it difficult to become fully functional outside the institution's walls once released back into the greater community. The person who emerges from prison is more than the product of a series of interventions. That person has been shaped by prison life-with its own unique social relationships, conflicts, norms, and community life (Travis, 2005; Visher & Travis, 2003).Transitioning from prison back to the community is a dynamic process, it involves the former prisoner and various parts of the community, including family members, employers, pro-social peers and a pro-social environment and activities.

Transitional Stages Related to Prison Life

Every prisoner's life experiences include four transitional stages, these stages are: (a) life prior to prison, (b) life in prison, (c) the moment of release and immediately after prison release, and (d) life during the months and years following prison release (Visher & Travis, 2003). An individual's long-term post-prison reintegration is likely to depend on personal and situational characteristics that are best understood as a life-course framework, including: *pre-prison circumstances* (demographic profile, work history and job skills, criminal history, substance abuse involvement, family characteristics), *in-prison experiences* (e.g., length of stay, participation in treatment programs, contact with family and friends, pre-release preparation), *immediate post-prison experiences* (moment of release, initial housing needs, transition assistance, family support), and *post-release integration experiences*(e.g., employment experiences, influence of peers, family connections, social service support, criminal justice supervision); It is not known which of these four stages has the largest impact on long-term post prison reintegration (Zamble & Quinsey, 1997; as reported by Visher & Travis, 2005).

Individual circumstances prior to prison also predict recidivism; these circumstances may affect the transition from prison back to community life (Travis, 2005; Visher & Travis 2003); in particular, substance abuse history, job skills and work history, mental and physical health, and intensity of pro-social community ties and individual behavior help predict post-prison outcomes (recidivism or permanent reintegration). Slightly more than half of inmates report being employed full-time prior to incarceration (Travis, 2005; Western et al., 2001); the poor employment histories and job skills of returning prisoners create limited opportunities for obtaining stable employment and a living wage upon release. Former prisoners who are able to rejoin the labor market, through previous employers or contacts from family or friends, however,

are more likely to have successful outcomes after release (Travis, 2005). On the other hand, former prisoners who were deeply embedded in a criminal lifestyle for many years prior to incarceration may be at the highest risk of poor outcomes after release (Travis, 2005; Western et al., 2001). Former prisoners who can return to pro-social, normal pre-prison roles and relationships, as opposed to those who cannot, may have more success post-prison (Travis, 2005).

Ex-prisoners are often adversely impacted by their time in prison. Long periods of imprisonment were found to reduce an individual's ties to family and friends (Lynch & Sabol, 2001), diminish job skills, and decrease post-release employment prospects (Western et al., 2001). An analysis of 50 studies that looked at the effect of prison sentences on recidivism found that longer prison sentences were associated with higher recidivism for both high and low-risk offenders (Haney, 2003; Ross & Richards, 2002). Other research shows that lengthy exposure to the harsh, impersonal conditions of prison life and the institutionalization that results from living in such an environment may have short and/or long-term effects on an individual's ability to readjust to life outside of prison (Haney, 2003; Ross & Richards, 2002) . In some way, an ex-prisoner is undoubtedly changed by his or her time in prison. However, existing research has not attempted to estimate how these experiences might affect the process of reintegration or the relative impact of experiences in prison on post-release outcomes, taking into account pre-prison experiences and post-release circumstances (Visher & Travis, 2003).

Family Ties During Prison

One fact is clear; prisons separate prisoners from their families and close friends. Almost every person sent to prison is connected to a relevant network of interpersonal relationships. Strong ties between prisoners and their extended family networks and their close friends appear to positively impact post-release success (Solomon, et. el 2001; Travis, 2005; Visher & Travis, 2003). Prison serves as a major impediment to maintaining or [re]developing supportive ties between the prisoner and his or her family or other personal supports; distance is a major factor in this equation (Solomon, et. el 2001; Travis, 2005; Visher & Travis, 2003). A majority of state prisoners (62%) are held in facilities located more than 100 miles from their homes (Mumola, 2000; Travis, 2005). According to Travis (2005) in an analysis done by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) in 2003, researchers found a relationship between distance and family visits: "The distance prisoners were from their homes influenced the extent to which they saw family and friends. The farther prisoners were from their homes, the higher the percentage of prisoners who had no visitors; those whose homes were closer to the prison had the most visits (p.133)." Geographic distance prevents many families from making visits, and for those who do make the journey, additional financial burdens can be incurred as a result of the journey. Lynch and Sabol (2001) found that the frequency of letters, phone calls, and prison visits with family and friends decreased as a prison term gets longer. Unfortunately, in some states, state prisoners are only allowed visits by their biological family members; prisoners are not allowed to define the "family" relationships that matter most to them (Klein, et. al, 2002; Travis, 2005). Family members that are not legally related cannot visit a prisoner. Distinctions of legality and biology are superimposed on the reality of family networks, limiting meaningful contact that could make a difference to the prisoner and his or her family (Klein, et. al, 2002; Travis, 2005).

Post-Release Experience

To understand the individual journey of reintegration after prison release, attention should focus on the complex and dynamic moment of release (Lynch & Sabol, 2001; Solomon, et. al, 2001; Travis et al. 2001). Reestablishing life after prison is a very complex and involved process that may include the following: finding a place to live; obtaining identification; reestablishing ties with family; avoiding and/or returning to high-risk places and situations; and the often discouraging and intimidating challenge of finding a job, often with a poor work history that is compounded with a criminal record. Most prison systems do little to facilitate a prison to community transition. In Illinois, released prisoners receive $50, a set of clothes, and a bus ticket (The Economist, 2002). One third of all state departments of corrections report that they do not provide inmates with funds upon their release (Solomon, Waul, & Gouvis 2001; Travis, 2005; Visher & Travis, 2003). Many prisoners report having significant anxiety about their release, and at the same time, they may also have high expectations about how their lives will be different "this time" (Uggen, Manza, & Behrens, 2003). Little is known about whether prisoner's attitude about their future or their readiness to change has any value in predicting post-release outcomes. Recognizing the many challenges faced in the immediate post-release period, and understanding how ex-prisoners succeed or fail in meeting them, may help explain the long-term course of an individual's transition from prison to community (Ripley, 2002).

Post-Release Programs

Recent reviews of the impact of correctional programming on post-release outcomes generally conclude that a variety of programs, including those focused on individual improvement in education, job skills, cognitive skills, and substance abuse (Cullen, 2002; Steurer et al., 2001; Wilson & Gallagher, 2000), help reduce recidivism. It is important to understand individual pathways in the transition from prison to community as a function of personal behaviors, choices, personal identity, and of an individual's social environment (Laub & Sampson, 2001; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001; Uggen, et al., 2003).

Family Ties and Post-release Circumstances

Travis (2005) found that for former prisoners, family support plays a critical role during the first 30 days after release from custody, specifically with emotional support and housing assistance. Travis found family acceptance and encouragement, as well as, perceived emotional support from family were related to post-release success. Those recently released inmates who demonstrated the greatest success in employment and abstinence from drugs, and generally exhibited optimistic attitudes, were "the ones that talked most about their family's acceptance of them" (Visher & Travis, 2003).

Evidence supports that maintaining and strengthening family-ties positively affects post-prison outcomes (Klein et.al, 2002; Travis, 2005, Visher & Travis 2003). Supportive programs and services for inmates and their families help sustain the process of strengthening family ties. A few studies, primarily program evaluations, report that providing certain social services to families of recently released prisoners leads to several positive outcomes, including decreased drug use; fewer physical, mental, and emotional problems; and decreased recidivism (Shapiro & Schwartz, 2001; Sullivan et al., 2002). La Bodega de la Familia, a resource center located in

Manhattan, New York's Lower East Side provides an example of the social services offered to families of recently released prisoners. La Bodega Familia is a case-management service for criminal offenders who have co-occurring disorders, and their families (Sullivan, et. al., 2002; Travis, 2003). La Bodega Familia offers vital supports that include but are not limited to housing assistance, education, and employment.

Reestablishing Family Roles

According to Travis (2005), reestablishing a commitment to family roles (e.g., as husband/wife, parent, or son/daughter) after release from prison can be critical to developing a pro-social identity (Bushway, et. al, 2001; ,Klein, et. al, 2002, and Uggen, et al., 2003). In a 1997 survey, 55% of state prisoners reported that they were parents; however, only 16% of prisoners reported being married and 59% had never been married (Lynch & Sabol, 2001; Mumola, 2000). Moreover, nationally only 47% of black males are married (compared to 64% of white males), and marriage rates among black men have been declining for the past several decades. Thus, for a substantial group of released men, reintegration to a family role of husband or parent that involves day-to-day responsibilities is not a social role that they will step into immediately upon release. Yet the importance of this role for identity transformation toward law-abiding citizen after release is highly significant (Bushway, 2001; Uggen et al., 2003; Visher & Travis 2003).

Some research indicates that returning prisoners who start to take on conventional roles within their families have greater success in transitioning from prison. Married men have more successful transitions than single men (Bushway, 2001; Travis, 2005; Visher &Travis, 2003). Men who reside with their wives and children upon release have more successful transitions than those who live alone or with a parent (Travis, 2005; Visher & Travis, 2003), and recently

released inmates who describe their marriage as harmonious do better than those who describe their marriage as one of conflict (Travis, 2005; Visher & Travis, 2003). On the other hand, a study of the social-psychological processes affecting recidivism and desistance identified interpersonal conflict with heterosexual partners as a common problem mentioned by recidivists, second only to problems involving substance abuse (Zamble & Quinsey, 1997 as cited in Travis, 2005).

Reestablishing Employment

A successful post-release transition to a conventional lifestyle requires stable and gainful employment. Persons who have been convicted of a felony offense often have difficulty finding legitimate opportunities to earn a living wage, either because of weakened connections to employment opportunities, the depletion of work skills during time in prison, or the stigma of incarceration (Solomon et al., 2001; Uggen et al., 2003;Western et al., 2001). Some ex-prisoners simply cannot adjust to the routines involved in a commitment to legitimate work, or at least not until they reach older ages (Uggen, 2000). Few returning prisoners seem to find jobs on their own, but rather turn to family, friends, and former employers for help (Solomon et al., 2001). Former prisoners who were deeply embedded in a criminal lifestyle for many years prior to incarceration may be at highest risk of poor outcomes after release because they may lack the disciplined habits of routinely reporting to a supervisor, boss, or other authority figure (Western et al. 2001).

Reestablishing Civic Responsibility

In addition to work and family, a third area of identity transformation for returning prisoners is that of responsible citizen, including civic participation such as voting, volunteer

work, or "giving back," and neighborhood involvement (Travis et al., 2001; Uggen et al., 2003).

Many returning prisoners voice the importance of such a role for themselves as they reintegrate

into their communities (Maruna, 2001; Solomon et al., 2001; Uggen et al., 2003). Depending on

state and federal laws, however, those with a felony conviction also face barriers to full

participation in their community, including their right to vote, serve on juries, and hold elective

office, as well as limited work opportunities and housing choices (Samuels et al., 2002; Travis et

al., 2001; Uggen et al., 2003). Uggen and his colleagues (2003) believed that civic reintegration

should be part of models of transition from prison to community because this role can help

solidify identity from deviant to law-abiding citizen.

Influences on Post-Release Circumstances

       Peer influence.

       Peer influence in the period after release can be either positive, negative, or both; the

impact of peers can depend on other circumstances facing the newly released individual, such as

other social supports, exposure to criminogenic situations, and self-efficacy (e.g., desistance)

(Bushway, 2001; Travis, 2005). Prison may facilitate the development of social networks, and

these connections may encourage returning prisoners to continue illegal activities (Bushway,

2001; Travis, 2005). Positive peer relationships, and probably new relationships, in the period

after release are an unquestionably important component of the identity transformation that must

occur for former prisoners to avoid returning to the lifestyle that resulted in their incarceration

(Laub & Sampson, 2001; Maruna, 2001).

       Family influences.

       Family influences that may be important to successful community reintegration are

contingent upon the nature of family contact and the type of support offered by family members.

In the study of crime, criminal behavior has long been tied to family attributes (Klein et al., 2002; Travis 2005; Visher & Travis, 2003). Many studies have examined the impact of an individual's early family structure and experiences on criminal activity, but there is little literature that examines the impact of family ties for returning prisoners.

Community Influence: Transitioning From Prison to Community

A third set of factors that can influence the transition from prison to community is the environment to which the former prisoner returns (Clear, et al, 2003; Visher & Travis, 2003). Neighborhood-level indicators, such as socioeconomic status, racial diversity, and residential stability, and their effects on child development and health outcomes for individuals was the focus of a conference organized by the National Academy of Sciences for the U.S. (Lannotta & Ross, 2002). Overall, the research found that the impact of neighborhood factors on individual outcomes shows that effects are ultimately dependent on individual characteristics (Clear, et al, 2003; Lannotta & Ross, 2002). In the study of crime and delinquency, (for review, see Sampson, 2002) structural features of neighborhoods, such as residential stability, and measures of informal and formal social control, have either direct or indirect effects on individual criminal activity. Additionally, other research has shown that returning prisoners are concentrated in our nation's central cities and within them, in a relatively small number of neighborhoods that often are characterized by severe poverty, social disorganization, and high crime rates (Clear et al., 2003; Lynch & Sabol, 2001; Travis et al., 2001).

For returning prisoners, a number of neighborhood indicators and resources may affect post-release outcomes, including housing values and availability of housing, job availability or proximity to jobs, health care services, and substance abuse treatment (Harm & Phillips, 2001; Travis et al., 2001). Social-structural features of neighborhoods that are vital to a successful

transition from prison, include finding and holding a job, avoiding use of alcohol and illegal drugs, finding affordable housing, and receiving physical and mental health care.

State Policies and the Transition from Prison to Community

State policy is a fourth and powerful influence on an individual's transition from prison to community. People are sent to prison because State Law has decided that their crimes should result in their imprisonment. An important development in state policy that has influenced the transitions from prison to community is the increased use of prison as a response to crime. More people being sent to prison means more people experience reentry. State policies have significant ramifications for the period immediately following prison. To be eligible for parole, a prisoner must demonstrate that he or she has a job, a place to live, and a social support system. In 2002, approximately 450,000 individuals were released to some form of supervision, and the remaining 150,000 were released with no legal status, no parole officer, and no government official responsible for their reintegration (Visher & Travis, 2003). State parole policies often play a significant role in transitions from prison to community; former prisoner can be returned to prison for violating conditions of their parole.

More people have been to prison than ever before in American history (about 13 million); according to one estimate, 1 in 8 American males and 1 in 5 African Americans were imprisoned (Uggen, et al. 2003). It appears that many inmates are not prepared for the journey home, as they are subjected to stringent supervision, and are sent back to prison after what appears to be minor infractions. Former prisoners also face housing regulations that can deny felons access to public housing, and many have difficulty accessing medical care and obtaining needed medication. These impacts of public policy tend to overwhelm the more fragile influences of individual

determination, family influences, and peer groups. Measuring the impact of these policies on individual transitions from prison to community, however, is another research challenge.

Gaps and Weaknesses

There are several gaps in the literature. Most studies focus on recidivism outcomes, and ignore or pay little attention to the family context of the former offender. A better understanding is needed of the nature of family ties and key-relationships before incarceration. Secondly most studies consist primarily, or exclusively, of male participants. Those studies that do include females do not necessarily reflect outcomes for women released from prison. Literature confirms the correlation between family ties and post-prison success, but does not discuss the more difficult systematic issues such as poverty and sub-par educational background that could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of problems and solutions.

Transitions from Prison and Counseling

Many ex-prisoners face a plethora of challenges that serve as potential impediments to full community participation. In an attempt to assist former inmates in their readjustment to community living, a range of services at state, local, and federal levels are specifically targeted to this demographic. Substance use disorders are endemic among prisoners and parolees *(*Journal of Offender Rehabilitation, *2008).*In 2002, 68% of inmates had substance abuse or dependence prior to incarceration (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2005; Harrison, 2001). Of drug involved offenders, only 13% to 32% report receipt of addiction treatment in prison **(**Fríedmann et al, 2008*).* Most drug-involved offenders return to the community without having received treatment in prison and many will relapse during the period of community reentry (Fríedmann et al, 2008; Harrison, 2001) Approximately 24% of offenders return to prison within three years of release, typically as a result of violations of supervision requirements such as failure to attend treatment,

detected substance use, or re-arrest (Hanlon, et al, 2000; Langan & Levin, 2002; Solomon, et al, 2001). Addiction treatment during the transition back to the community can reduce substance use and criminal behavior, but newly released offenders have limited motivation for treatment (Fríedmann et al, 2008).

Behavioral science suggests that sustained positive change is likely to follow reinforcement of desired behavior than punishment of undesired behavior (Visher & Travis 2003; Fríedmann et al, 2008). Consistent with this belief, Operant Conditioning posits that behavior followed by reinforcement will be repeated whereas behavior followed by punishment will decrease or discontinue. Considerable research has shown that interventions that have their foundation in operant conditioning, such as the community reinforcement and voucher-based reinforcement approaches, are effective in reducing antisocial behaviors (Katz, Gruber, Chutuape, & Stitzner, 2001). Operant Conditioning emphasizes reinforcement of desired behavior rather than punishment for undesired behavior. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) alcohol and other drug (AOD) problems are a major contributor to crime, and that many offenders with a history of substance abuse go untreated. A 2008, U.S. General Accounting Office report estimated that 74% of the total inmate population in state prisons was in need of drug treatment and that only 15% received any treatment.

When a drug offender enters the criminal justice system, placing him or her in prison rarely stops the addiction; however, the individual is presented with an opportunity to change behaviors related to drugs and crime. Prison-based and post-incarceration programs offer drug treatment as well as other interventions, such as education and employment counseling, to help an inmate or a parolee enter society drug-free. Prison-based programs have been effective in the

reduction of crime and have shown even greater success when used in concert with community-based treatment (Fríedmann et al, 2008; Hanlon, et al, 2000; Steurer, et al, 2003; Sullivan, et al, 2002).

For over 200 years prisons have had prominent distinction in the criminal justice system. Today the incarceration experience penetrates deeply into the fabric of American life. Little is known, however, about the impact of imprisonment on the individuals who are sent there, their support networks and family, peer groups, neighborhoods, and the larger society. There is a need for greater research that focuses on the experience of imprisonment and its far-reaching, multifaceted effects.

Some literature contains a number of studies that focus on reentry failures examining the various transitions from prison to community (Langan, et al, 2002; Travis, 2005; Western, et al 2001). Other studies focus on reentry successes (Ross &, Richard, 2002; Travis, 2005; Wilson, et al, 2000); they provide useful models of the processes of desistance from crime. Not many studies have looked at both recidivism and desistance from crime. A more comprehensive approach would examine both sides of the reentry coin. Obtaining employment, appropriate resolution of conflicts, maintaining sobriety, participating or joining a community organization, mentoring a young person in the neighborhood, and becoming politically active are all indicators of successful reintegration into the institutions of contemporary society, and are critical issues that should receive more research attention (Travis, 2003).

Only a handful of studies have examined the lives of individuals released from prison. These studies have been based on small or unrepresented samples (Maruna, 2001; Solomon et al., 2001) or were conducted many years ago (Sampson & Laub, 1993). As a result, those previously conducted studies may not be fitting to the issues facing prisoners being released

today. Most literature on criminal offenders focuses on recidivism or the failure to desist from

criminal behavior. Recidivism studies emphasize identifying factors that might predict the

occurrence of criminal activity. Some literature reflects that researchers have recognized that the

study of criminal desistance has historically focused on outcomes reflecting either arrest or no

arrest (Bushway et al., 2001; Laub & Sampson, 2001; Maruna, 2001). Laub and Sampson (2001)

present research pertaining to desistance that has focused on individual change instead of simply

arrest or no arrest.

Recent research on criminal desistance is directly relevant to the transitions from prison

to community, but most existing studies fail to take into account the incarceration experience and

its immediate repercussion. This exclusion is important because reports of returning prisoner's

experiences chronicled in newspaper and magazine accounts (Feuer, 2002; Ripley, 2002; Reaves

& Hart, 2002), supplemented by accounts in books and articles written by former prisoners

themselves (Ross & Richards, 2002), suggest that these two stages in a prisoner's life and

eventual transition to the community are critical to explaining outcomes and reintegration post-

prison.

Little research exists on the period following imprisonment. Moving from prison, which

is an institution of total control, to the often chaotic and hectic environment of modern life is a

powerful transition that is poorly understood by researchers, yet vividly portrayed in the writings

and art work of former prisoners. Society has placed many legal barriers and other unofficial

obstacles on the road to reintegration. Additionally, the world continues to evolve, it does not

stand still. During his or her time in prison technology has continued to evolve, the prisoner's

children grow-up, intimate partners may have moved on, former employers might have a job

waiting, and criminal associates may or may not be ready to reconnect (Travis, 2005; Visher and Travis, 2003).

Understanding individual influences on transitions from prison to community is very complex. At the heart of successful transition from prison to community is the personal decision to change (Solomon, et al 2001). This decision sets in motion an identity transformation and a script for explaining one's current identity and previous behavior (Maruna, 2001; Uggen et al., 2003). The individual's social environment during this transition, however, is as important as his or her readiness to change (Marina, 2001; Uggen, et al., 2003). These social factors are acceptance or rejection by family, friends, and neighbors; the ease or difficulty encountered in establishing a conventional lifestyle, including housing, work, and transportation; and an individual's ability to manage other potential obstacles, such as substance abuse, physical and mental health problems, and financial obligations. Moreover, an individual's successful transition into roles such as husband/wife, parent, respected employee, and law-abiding citizen may be impeded even for those who commit to change. Finally, as the literature on criminal careers illustrates (Laub &Sampson, 2001; Visher & Travis, 2003) most criminals age-out of their criminal behavior. Though most offenders discontinue criminal behavior as they become older, many continue to face barriers to full citizenship long after they have completed their sentences. Additional points to consider would be: What are some common barriers faced by former inmates who are returning to the community after serving a prison term? How do those individuals who are returning to the community after a prison term [re]establish appropriate and sound relationships with family members and society? And how can former inmates create pro-social opportunities and identities for themselves?

Method

"Phenomenology is concerned with the study of experience from the perspective of the individual, 'bracketing' taken-for-granted assumptions and usual ways of perceiving. Epistemologically, phenomenological approaches are powerful for understanding subjective experience, gaining insights into people's motivations and actions, and cutting through the clutter of taken-for-granted assumptions and conventional wisdom." (Lester, 1999)

The purpose of this research is to identify individually experienced supports, and perceived barriers, that impact successful community reentry after serving a prison sentence. The hypothesis for this research project is that many ex-offenders face a myriad of challenges to community re-entry after serving a prison sentence, and that these challenges may contribute to recidivism. This study explored the role of different factors that help increase or decrease the chances of a successful reentry experience, and how individuals learned to effectively manage and meet the various challenges of living in the Monroe County community after being released from prison.

Setting

Sample.

Approximately four to eight people residing in a Western New York State county, who have successfully re-entered the community after being released from prison, were asked to participate in this research study. For the purpose of this study, participants were determined to have successfully re-entered the community if they had self-identified as successfully completing post-release supervision, and not had involvement in nefarious behaviors or been arrested for a new criminal offense within the past five years. Participants in this study were at one time a New

York State Prison inmate. All participants in this study were over the age of eighteen. This group

represents a cross-section of the population who can thoroughly define the community reentry

experience after a prison sentence

Participants

Four men and one woman affirmatively responded to the request for research participants

in the research project. The student researcher engaged in personal and face-to-face discussion

with each participant about the objectives and goals of this research project. Eventually the

female potential participant became ill, and to date has not been available to participate in

discussions. Additionally, one of the male participants later declined participation in the research

project because of personal schedule restrictions. Only three male participants remained, this

presented the challenge of having limited diversity of reentry perspective.

Each of the study's participants had spent a significant period of time incarcerated as an

inmate in the New York State prison system. K.C. had initially spent 20 years in prison before

being released under life parole supervision; K.C. has since lived in the community for seven

years. K.C. has succumbed to some of the pressures and challenges faced by many ex-prisoners;

however, he has also learned to overcome or circumvent those challenges and to live more

productively. K.C. agreed to meet with the student researcher for interview and discussion; K.C.

consented to meet with the student researcher at the student researcher's place of employment.

The student researcher works for a human service organization that provides case management to

high-needs populations; the student researcher's office is located inside of a building that is

located in a high-needs neighborhood.

S.K. spent twenty-one years in prison after being granted release to the community under life parole supervision; after being supervised by parole for ten years without an infraction, S.K. was released of all obligations to the division of parole. S.K. was the secondly research participant to be interviewed; S.K. determined that he would be most comfortable discussing his reentry experience in the solitude of his Mercedes Benz's cockpit at a local park. The Student researcher met R.J. at the park at 9:00 a.m. when it opened. S.K. was parked so that a view of the city was foremost apparent; it provided a sense of serenity and solace with the stillness of the morning. The student researcher placed the digital voice recorder on the dashboard of the Mercedes-Benz and recorded the discussion and interview of S.K.'s reentry experience and perspectives.

E.I., the third research participant, served two separate state sentences in one decade totaling eight years of incarceration. To date E.I. has been living in the community, he has satisfied all parole supervision mandates or requirements, and for the past five years has been without parole supervision, and has remained gainfully employed. E.I. agreed to meet with the student researcher at a local coffee house that is frequented by medical students and professionals alike. E.I. and the student researcher met inside a partially-private room with an open door-way. E.I. and the student-researcher were undisturbed and afforded the necessary privacy to conduct the discussion and interview.

Materials

Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Materials used was a hand-out of two separate documents that contained a series of questions that had been developed by the student researcher with the assistance of S.K., one of the research participants, for guided discussion. Participants were asked to respond to five pre-determined open-ended individual survey questions (see form 1), which aimed at exploring participants' experienced supports and perceived barriers that impacted their community reentry after being released from prison. The student researcher provided each participant with a copy of the five pre-developed opened-ended discussion points (see form 2); focus group discussion was in response to the five pre-developed open-ended discussion points. Participants were encouraged to articulate their individual experiences as it relates to their own community re-entry.

Research Design/Procedure

A focus group discussion was initially scheduled to take place one week before individual interviews/discussions were to be held. Instead because of research participant's difficulty with schedule coordination, Individual interviews took place prior to the focus group discussion/interviews. Following the individual interview/discussions, there was a lapse of about three weeks before all research participants were able to coordinate their schedules so as to meet in one room for one and one half hour. The student researcher initially aimed to reserve a room at a local public library but was unable to reserve a date and time that would meet each of the research participants' schedule needs. There was an initial plan to provide a catered lunch from Salvatore's Pizzeria. After the student researcher asked each participant what type of meal they would like to have provided for them prior to the focus group discussion, the general consensus

was for Chinese food. The student researcher used his personal vehicle to drive to a local

Chinese restaurant and used his personal funds to buy a meal large enough to feed the research

participants and the student researcher. The researcher met with the group participants as a group

for a focus group discussion. The writer utilized his professional office space for the focus group

discussion. The writer and participants met after business hours ensuring that no clientele or staff

members would be present to present a potential disturbance of the group interview and

discussion. During the initial 20 minutes before the focus group began, two of the three research

participants finished playing a game of chess and began eating the Chinese food the student

researcher had bought for the focus group discussion. After the research participants completed

their game of chess, the student researcher began the focus group discussion. Participants were

invited to be seated, thanked for participating in the discussion and reminded that "today's

discussion would be digitally recorded," and that the student researcher will keep their identities

confidential. The student researcher then began the digital recorder. The student researcher then

explain to the group that the purpose of having this discussion is to explore the individually

experienced supports and perceived barriers that impact successful community re-entry after

incarceration, and to add the findings to existing research literature. The student researcher

provided each participant with a copy of the five pre-developed opened-ended discussion points

(see form 2); focus group discussion was in response to the five pre-developed discussion points.

Participants were encouraged to articulate their individual experiences as it relates to their own

community re-entry. The focus group lasted for one hour and thirty minutes. At the conclusion of

the focus group, the student researcher thanked the research participants for their participation

(see closing protocol).

1. For individual interviews, the student researcher arranged to meet with each participant at a pre-determined, and mutually agreed upon, time and location. The student researcher suggested to each research participant that they meet with the student researcher at his office located at 1645 St. Paul Street in the city of Rochester. At the onset of each individual interview, participants were reminded that the discussion will be digitally voice-recorded and that confidentiality is guaranteed. Participants were asked to respond to five pre-determined open-ended individual survey questions (see form 1), which aimed at exploring participants' experienced supports and perceived barriers that impacted their community reentry after being released from prison. The student researcher posed each individual survey question at a time to the participant from a pre-printed document (see form 1) prepared by the student researcher. At the conclusion of each individual interview, the student researcher asked the participant if they had anything additional they would like to share. The student researcher then thanked the research participant for their time and reported that the student researcher would make a follow-up correspondence to arrange for a group discussion/interview.

Individual Discussion/Interviews

There were various locations within the community where individual discussion/interviews were conducted. Each research participant suggested separate and distinct meeting sites with the student researcher for interview and discussion. One research participant agreed to be interviewed by the student researcher in the student researcher's professional office; the student researcher's office is located in a secure building and is an enclosed room with a door that locks. Meeting at the student researcher's office also ensured privacy. The remaining two

research participants arranged to meet privately with the student researcher at alternative and secure locations chosen by the research participant. One research participant agreed to meet the student researcher at a coffee shop in a private room; and the other research participant was more comfortable meeting in the early morning at a local park and sitting in the privacy of his personal automobile conducting the interview/discussion. Though each individual interview was held in separate and distinct locations, each interview was conducted relatively the same. Upon meeting with the research participant[s], the student researcher initially thanked the participant for their willingness assist in the research and reminded the participant that the discussion would be recorded. Research participants were asked if they had any questions or needed additional clarity before the student researcher began the recording device; after providing answers or additional clarity for participants, the student researcher began the interview session using a series of pre-developed questions (see Form 1) to help guide the interview. Upon asking research participants the final research question, the student researcher informed participants that this would be the last inquiry during our time together. After the student researcher asked the last question on Form 1 and each participant had responded, the student researcher again thanked participants for their time and sharing their insights.

Group Discussion/Interviews

Group discussion/interview was conducted after business hours in the board room of the office building that the student researcher works at. The student researcher works for a local non-for profit agency where case management services are provided for high-needs/high-risk populations. Interview group consisted of three research participants and the student researcher. Focus group discussion centered on several pre-developed discussion points (see Form 2]. Group

interview lasted approximately ninety minutes. At the conclusion of the group

discussion/interview student researcher told research participants that "our time together has

expired; thank you for your consideration, and for taking time out of your day to share your

insights and experiences. Your participation in today's discussion will help add to the literature

on community reentry after being released from prison."

Results

There were several factors that the participants believed explained their successful

reintegration. These factors were sorted into four broad themes that will be discussed more fully

below: Changed Living Arrangements, Social Environment, Employment and Income, and Self-

Responsibility.

The first theme of changed physical living arrangements referred to the quality of the

neighborhood – for example, the presence or absence of police, drugs and crime. The social

environment was related to the physical environment, but describes the social supports that

served in a positive way to keep the men on track. Employment and income describes both some

positive and negative experiences, and underscores the importance of gainful employment in

helping the men stay on track. The fourth theme, Self-Responsibility, describes the men's

orientation to taking responsibility for themselves. This responsibility could be related to

admitting their offenses, to choosing the people that would support them, even if that meant not

being around family members.

Change of Living Arrangement[s]

Research participants thought it important to relocate from their old neighborhood, household, or to a completely different city that was unrelated to the places they had once lived prior to committing the offense for which they had been incarcerated. Research participants unanimously agreed that they thought their success and survival in the community would be enhanced if they lived in low-crime neighborhoods with pro-social, gainfully employed and supportive family and community members. Research participants expressed that upon their release from prison they did not want to return to their previous neighborhoods to live. One participant identified his reputation in the old neighborhood as something that would not be favorable, and as a result he moved to another city:

> *I knew I didn't have a chance and that it would be a battle. So I knew I*
> *was facing a losing battle and to best give myself the opportunity to make*
> *some changes in my life I felt the first change should be to relocate. To*
> *somewhere I had never been before. To give myself somewhat of a clean*
> *start, a fresh start.*

Another participant said that he was a changed man and did not want to identify with people, places and things from his past criminal lifestyle; he also moved away to another city where he thought employment would be more plentiful. He stated

> *My crime was committed in Westchester County and I moved to Monroe*
> *County. It was the best decision for me to move to Monroe County because*

if my behavior has changed in any way you can't throw me back in the

same setting and expect me to repel those people.

Based on the information gathered from participants in this study, there is a strong positive correlation between changed living environment and successful community reentry following a prison sentence.

A third participant cited a simple eight-block neighborhood change, from a house hold of low-income and low-expectations to one where there were high expectations and substantial income helped make a difference with personal post-prison outcomes. Participants reported that when they made deliberate changes in their living arrangements they were better able to acquire useful and needed information and access resources.

Employment/Income

Having gainful employment.

Being able to obtain gainful employment was identified as an important portion of having a successful reentry experience into the community after serving a prison sentence. Employment/income provides the participant a legitimate versus an illegitimate means of transitioning to a conventional lifestyle. Additionally, employment/income can also assist the ex-inmate in providing additional meaning and purpose to their days. The following quotes provide an example:

EI: "……where me and my dad had stable employment so we had space,

the place where he bought his house was not a high crime area like where

my mom lived. Mom was on disability even before I went in so when I got

out she was still on disability so her potential for her income to grow was
not likely either."

SK: "……so getting a job and all this stuff is what made me make the
decision to go to Monroe County, because in New York City its
overcrowded and they just don't have enough jobs for the people they do
have down there. Now why would I put myself in that position when I
know I have a support system in Monroe County? So I went where my
support system/person."

However, persons who have been convicted of a felony offense often have difficulty
finding legitimate opportunities to earn a living wage and in many cases resort to criminal means
to earn needed monies to achieve a particular standard of living or to simply have their needs
met.

KC: "…but employment for me is extremely difficult. I put in application
after application……at times though I supplemented my income with
what is called labor ready, and by some less than honorable ways. But I
did what I had to do to feed myself and try to support my family,
significant other, as best I could under the conditions I had to work with."

Self-Responsibility

Research participants spoke to their recognition of the importance of making deliberate and conscious decisions which can help him or her become more responsible for outcomes in their daily life. Research participants emphasized the importance of also having a sense of congruence between their internal and external environments. My interpretation is that participants think that in order to achieve this s hoped for and anticipated sense of balance that old negative influences had to be avoided and/or discarded and replaced with newer and positive influences. Failure to do such could greatly increase ones chances of recidivating. One research participant reports the following:

> SK: *"……If there is an improvement, this means I'm no l longer the same person I was when I went in, if there isn't an improvement, then recidivism is a must. If you haven't improved yourself, bettered yourself while you were in there then you're going back. But if you've bettered yourself then you need to step away from people, places, and things that caused you to come to prison in the first place."……Along with your bad judgment, you can't blame it all on other people or places or things that sent you to prison. It was your bad decision ultimately but the same token, your involvement do have an influence on your decisions."*

Employment Issues

While employment was seen as a positive thing in that it gave the men something to keep them focused, it was difficult for them to find employment. Part of this had to do with the availability of jobs in general, and an additional difficulty arose from having a felony conviction. For example, for EI, who had been convicted of two felonies related to robbery, it was difficult to convince a potential employer that he would not be a threat.

> *"... my first felony conviction was for robbery and my second conviction*
>
> *was for a series of violent crimes including robbery. So it speaks to some*
>
> *safeties, social safeties, economical safeties, emotional and legal safeties*
>
> *that people would have owning a business. These were legitimate*
>
> *concerns and here I am saying give me an opportunity, an opportunity I*
>
> *was already given and blew it . . . : Even though none of the robberies I*
>
> *was convicted of had anything to do with the establishments I worked at,*
>
> *but we never got a chance to have that part of the conversation"*

In contrast to EI's story, SK believed that he was able to gain employment because of his educational back ground in addition to his personal sense of integrity and honesty when it came to disclosing his felony status. A quote from SK follows:

> *"I got my shot when we went to the job fair and filled-out an application*
>
> *for Office Max - they called me for an interview. He was going through*
>
> *the thing and then said: "there's no one here with a felony here is there?"*
>
> *And I raised my hand and said: yes, I have a felony." He pulled out my*

resume and looked at it, and I said "will this preclude me from this job? I

don't want to waste anybody's time and I'll just keep looking. The guy told

me "no that's not going to preclude you." The interview continued, the

orientation and everything continued so I left on a Thursday and he called

me back the next day and asked me if I could start the Monday."

CW: what do you think contributed to you getting the job?

SK: Education and the fact that I was so forthright about having a felony

conviction ......That helped because the interviewer was so shocked that I

was straight forward about having a felony......he said I was the best

candidate there. The only thing I had against me was that I had a felony,

but even with that he asked me for references and I had to give corrections

counselors as references.

For SK, the prison counselors had given him a positive and helpful reference. In SK's case, the prison experience worked in his favor as opposed to the outcomes of the majority of persons being released from prison who are attempting to [re]enter the work force.

"those counselors gave it to the store manager the way they should have

they didn't hold back they were straight forward and said listen, he's a

good man. He made mistakes when he was nineteen yrs old; he did 23 yrs

and went on from there."

SK's account of finding employment is a far cry from what the average reentrant from prison to community experiences when seeking employment opportunities. Aside from SK, the

additional two research participant's described their quest for employment as an arduous and intimidating process. The process was so intimidating for one participant that the participant discontinued seeking employment and resigned to receiving public benefits. It appears as though SK was fortunate in the sense that he was interviewed by someone who appeared to be considerate and not as biased as the layperson is towards those who have been convicted of felony offense[s].

Research participant KC reports a different experience than that of the other researcher participants. KC's experience seemed more typical of the stories heard from men who are attempting to reenter the work force after completing a prison sentence; finding employment has been difficult. KC notes:

"My criminal history first and foremost. I am always, no matter what level

I get to, I am confronted with my past. Without looking at anything

further, it is my past that continues to come back and haunt me and as a

result you can't be hired or you will be released, let go from any

employment. So in my opinion it has been my criminal past that has been

my biggest barrier and most detrimental to me. Something I can't change

or undo. It is what it is."

Employment helps add meaning and purpose to life. When the returnee is not employed, it becomes easier to revert back to old deviant behaviors. By reverting back to old ways, the release thus increases their chance of recidivating by either violation of the conditions of release and/or committing another crime which ultimately culminates in the loss of their liberty and a

new commitment to the penal institution. Again, KC clearly describes his experiences with being

unemployed and how that correlated with his return to custody.

> *"……Yes, and so I succumbed to my own vices and my own weaknesses.*
>
> *Needless to say I violated. Over a period of time I violated a number of*
>
> *times, and was sent back upstate. This gave me the opportunity to be with*
>
> *just myself and do some thinking again and regroup I guess with my*
>
> *thoughts; myself."*

An overriding theme of these results can be interpreted as the research participants'

understanding of the need for having the ability to be self-directed in developing and maintaining

a pro-social structure for their own life. Which other words means that during the course of day

to day living in the community for the newly released inmate, it becomes imperative that all anti-

social and deviant behaviors and associates are abandoned to help increase efficacy and

reinforcement of developing a new and different lifestyle which does not include elements that

might result in a recommitment to prison.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the individually perceived supports and barriers

to successful community reentry after serving a prison sentence. The primary theme of

discussions/interviews were living arrangements, self-responsibility, and employment issues.

Three former state inmates/parolees participated in the research. The research results were a

culmination of interpretations gleaned from information provided in individual and group

interviews with research participants that suggest that the person who is emerging from a place

of incarceration is solely responsible for the choices he or she makes and their outcome[s]; this directly correlates with Solomon, et al, who stated that:

> *"at the heart of successful transition from prison to community is the*
>
> *personal decision to change."*

Research participants reiterated Solomon et al as they spoke to the belief that most important for the newly released inmate returning to the community is that he or she must be committed to change, self-motivated and personally accountable for their own behaviors; this is otherwise referred to in the writing as self-responsibility. Second to self-responsibility is the importance of habitation, emphasizing where one will live upon release. Uggen, et al.(2003), note that:

> *"the individual's social environment during this transition, however, is as*
>
> *important as his or her readiness to change. These social factors are*
>
> *acceptance or rejection by family, friends, and neighbors."*

Does one return to the community to live in a shelter, or with family or friends? Does the neighborhood and household/residential composition where the reentrant reside support successful community reentry? Research participants each noted that their decisions to live in new and different communities and neighborhoods were an attempt to begin their lives anew; an attempt to place distance between themselves and familiar people, places, and things. Old and negative influences were discarded. Research participants unanimously agreed that people, places, and things have the power to influence their decisions, and in an attempt to make the best possible decisions, it was considered imperative to relinquish ties with all negative influences

that may have contributed to the research participant's original commitment to a term of incarceration.

Research participants described the importance of having supportive and meaningful relationships. A supportive relationship had been loosely defined as any relationship that provides the reentrant with moral support and encouragement to continue to strive for a better life. In addition, that support in the relationship also extends to material supports such as assistance obtaining suitable living or housing conditions, clothing, food, and employment. Research participants described a family member or a significant other as providing the type of supportive and resourceful relationships needed to help acclimate the released person to community living. Newly released inmates will need access to resources and/or access to systems that can help them meet their needs. This further speaks to the importance and nature of relationships, as in many cases association implicates assimilation. Hence, like-minded individuals who may share the same interests and goals are likely to develop meaningful and supportive relationships that help perpetuate and manifest those shared goals and interest. Travis found that for former prisoners, family support plays a critical role during the first thirty days after release from custody, specifically with emotional support and housing assistance. Travis found family acceptance and encouragement, as well as, perceived emotional support from family were related to post-release success. Peer influence, which is similar to family support, in the period after release can be either positive, negative, or both. Laub, & Sampson, (2003) posited that positive peer relationships, and probably new relationships, in the period after release are an unquestionably important component of the identity transformation from inmate/prisoner to citizen that must occur for former prisoners to avoid returning to the lifestyle that resulted in their incarceration.

A successful post-release transition to a conventional lifestyle requires stable and gainful employment. Persons who have been convicted of a felony offense often have difficulty finding legitimate opportunities to earn a living wage. Research participants agreed that to obtain and maintain gainful employment as fundamental to maintaining their liberty. Having gainful employment had been described by participants as a means of developing meaning and purpose out of their days, and also providing an alternative to antisocial and deviant behavior. However, finding gainful employment is especially challenging to the newly released inmate who not only has a felony history working against them and the community biases that are attached to that felonious history, but also in many cases ex-prisoners lack significant work histories and qualifications for particularly gainful employment, thus placing them at an even greater disadvantage for competing in the contemporary job market.

Their still remains the profound questions about what is the relationship between society and its felons. Consider that prison is big business in the United States, and with a prison system that arrest record numbers of people each year and also releases hundreds of thousands of people a year too, has the high rate of incarceration intensified the tendencies to further marginalize and exclude former prisoners? Have our criminal justice policies created a larger class of convicts cut off from many of the rights and benefits of society, or has our experience with mass incarceration made the prison experience so common, among poor minority males in particular, that we must come to terms with a new reality of prison as a likely life event for that sector of our society? If that is true, how do our imprisonment policies reflect larger social forces of exclusion and state control?

The research community has a large role to play in unpacking these tough questions. The social challenge posed by the new realities of imprisonment and reentry is sufficiently compelling to warrant an urgent call for a substantial and ongoing research investment.

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