

How former prisoners become connected

David J. Harding, Jessica J. B. Wyse, Cheyney Dobson, and Jeffrey D. Morenoff

David J. Harding is Associate Professor of Sociology and Public Policy and Research Associate Professor in the Population Studies Center and Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan; Jessica J. B. Wyse is a National Institute on Aging Postdoctoral Fellow at the Population Studies Center at the University of Michigan; Cheyney Dobson is a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Michigan; Jeffrey Morenoff is Professor of Sociology and Research Professor in the Population Studies Center and Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

Former prisoners are at high risk of poverty because of the challenges they face in becoming reconnected to society by finding employment or accessing public assistance.¹ These challenges are the result of the stigma of incarceration, as well as the disadvantages that often characterize this population, including low levels of education, mental health problems, and substance abuse.² Few prisoners leave prison with jobs or other necessary resources already secured.³

Given these challenges, the well-being of former prisoners is likely to be heavily determined by their access to, and effective use of, both public and nonprofit social services and by their ability to access social support from family, friends, and romantic partners. We know little about how former prisoners make ends meet after their release from prison, how or why some are able to secure services and supports while others are not, or which services and supports create pathways to employment or long-term legitimate income sources. Because economic security during the period immediately after prison is important to establishing a conventional lifestyle rather than returning to crime, understanding how former prisoners make ends meet may help us to understand longer-term post-prison outcomes.

A primary reason for these gaps in our knowledge is that this population is difficult to study. Current and former prisoners are often absent from large-scale surveys, as the institutionalized population is usually excluded from the sampling frame of social science datasets, and those involved in the criminal justice system are thought to be only loosely attached to households, which typically form the basis for sampling. This population is also difficult to recruit while under community supervision or in custody without the assistance of criminal justice authorities, and difficult to follow over time as they tend to move often.

This research draws on unique qualitative data from in-depth, unstructured interviews with a sample of former prisoners in Michigan followed over a two- to three-year period,

beginning just prior to their release from prison. We focus on the processes through which our subjects attain economic security. We examine how they develop stable resources to meet their basic material needs for shelter and food and how some achieve upward mobility. Our primary research questions are: How do former prisoners make ends meet after release? More specifically, how do they gain access to social support, social services, and employment? Which forms of social support and social services are conducive to improved prospects for long-term employment or other permanent sources of income in this population? How do former prisoners achieve economic stability and upward mobility over time?

Our findings reveal a sobering portrait of the challenges of meeting even one's basic needs for food and shelter after prison, as many subjects struggled with economic security while navigating the labor market with a felony record and low human capital, attempting to stay away from drugs and alcohol, and reestablishing social ties. However, our results also show how many former prisoners do manage to attain some level of economic security and stability by combining employment, public benefits, social services, and social supports. Although employment was important for many, long-term economic security was rarely achieved without either strong social support from family or romantic partners, or access to long-term public benefits such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and housing assistance. While some subjects achieved economic stability, only a select few were able to attain upward mobility and economic independence.

Employment, homelessness, and service use among former prisoners

Questions about the poverty and unmet basic material needs of former prisoners have become increasingly important as this population expands. Over the last two decades, the number of individuals incarcerated in prisons and jails in the United States has risen dramatically. In 1975 the population in jails and prisons on any given day in the United States was roughly 400,000 people, but by 2003 this number increased more than fivefold to 2.1 million.⁴ As a consequence of this dramatic rise in incarceration, many communities are now grappling with the problem of reintegrating former prisoners. Roughly 600,000 people are released each year from state and federal prisons in the United States, and about 80 percent of them are released on parole.⁵ The large number of individuals exiting prison every year, combined with evidence of the effects of incarceration, has prompted renewed interest among academics and policymakers in the challenges of integrating former prisoners back into society.⁶

Incarceration is disproportionately experienced by young, low-skill, African American men, and has important consequences for their well-being. For example, declining labor force participation by young black men during the late 1990s, when a strong economy pulled other low-skill workers into the labor market, has been attributed to incarceration and its effects.⁷ Previous research has demonstrated that the steady flow of people into and out of prisons has played a role in increasing inequality in recent decades, primarily by reducing opportunities for employment and lowering wages.⁸

Finding stable employment is a crucial challenge for former prisoners, and having a job is associated with reduced probability of recidivism.⁹ There is fairly strong evidence that criminal behavior is responsive to changes in employment status, and also that incarceration or other contact with the criminal justice system reduces subsequent employment and wages.¹⁰ There is even some evidence that employment among former prisoners peaks in the months following release and then declines over time.¹¹ The difficulty of obtaining and maintaining employment for former prisoners is illustrated by a recent Joyce Foundation demonstration project on transitional jobs.¹² Although those former prisoners who were randomly selected to receive transitional jobs participated at extremely high rates, one year later they were no less likely to be unemployed or to have returned to prison than the control group.

Previous research has also shown high rates of homelessness among former prisoners.¹³ After release, former prisoners must rely on family, friends, or institutional living arrangements such as treatment centers, halfway houses, and homeless shelters to secure housing, and there is some evidence that, for many, this need persists far after release. Visher and colleagues report that, among 147 former prisoners from Baltimore one-year after release, 19 percent lived in their own home, 69 percent lived in someone else's home, and 10 percent lived in a residential treatment center.¹⁴ Despite heavy reliance upon shared housing arrangements, securing housing with family or friends may be complicated by rules that bar those with a felony record from public housing developments or Section 8 housing.¹⁵

Many states also ban those with felony convictions from benefits such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly Food Stamps), TANF, and SSI, either permanently or temporarily, although states may "opt out" of these bans, as Michigan does. For those who had been receiving state and federal income support but lost those benefits during incarceration, reinstatement can be an arduous process.¹⁶ Furthermore, offenders who were receiving educational financial aid at the time of a felony drug conviction are barred from receiving this aid for a period of time based on the number of felony convictions they have received, although eligibility is reinstated once the offender completes a drug treatment program.¹⁷ Notably, restrictions on many public benefits apply largely to drug offenders. Because drug-related offenses constitute the majority of crimes

committed by women, it is likely that female offenders are disproportionately impacted by these restrictions.¹⁸

The challenges facing former prisoners with regard to employment, income supports, and homelessness raise a number of questions about how former prisoners make ends meet after prison. Given challenges in finding employment, how do they meet their basic material needs for shelter and food? What are the processes through which former prisoners are able to meet these needs through social services, public benefits, and support from family and friends rather than by returning to crime? And which short-term solutions lead to more successful reintegration into the labor market in the longer term?

Results

We begin by describing four distinct trajectories of material well-being and fulfillment of basic needs that we observed in our interview data. We then explore the processes through which some subjects were able to achieve economic stability of upward mobility after release from prison, while others were not.

Making ends meet after prison: Trajectories of survival, stability, and upward mobility

Seven of our 22 subjects achieved little if any long-term economic security in the years following their release, experiencing frequent periods of homelessness and housing instability, relying on short-term measures such as social support and social services to meet their most basic needs, and never attaining the stability of resources needed to make ends meet on a day-to-day basis. Most, but not all, struggled with substance abuse and addiction. In some cases, this prevented them from effectively seeking employment and developing the social ties necessary to obtain housing and food. In other cases, drug or alcohol relapse resulted from initial failures at achieving these goals. This group also tended to maintain substantial involvement with the criminal justice system, facing additional sanctions such as drug treatment, short jail stays, and returns to prison.

Another seven of our subjects attained some degree of stability but intermittently experienced periods of desperation and struggle for survival. Upon release, most subjects in this category struggled to maintain access to food and shelter, but eventually managed to achieve stability through employment, family support, or some combination of the two. However, that stability was fragile, and could vanish when a living situation turned to conflict, layoff, or job loss occurred, or supports crucial for maintaining employment (such as access to transportation) were lost. Others in this category started out with strong family supports that provided for their basic needs, but either rejected these supports after a time, or were asked to leave by their families. Often, these downward transitions were accompanied by relapse to addiction or by minor property crimes intended to generate economic resources.

Four subjects attained a trajectory of stable access to minimal but sufficient economic resources, and maintained that economic security over time. These subjects tended to receive substantial family support in addition to another source of support such as low-wage employment, public benefits, or a government program. The combination of the two meant that family did not have to be constantly relied upon, but could be accessed as needed when the second source of support was interrupted. Despite these advantages, upward mobility was out of reach since the subjects did not have the human capital or social networks to land a more lucrative job, and their social support was insufficient to increase their education.

Finally, four subjects were upwardly mobile. They had partners or families, typically middle class, who could offer not only a temporary place to stay and food to eat, but long-term shelter and other material resources. Often, this substantial support was accompanied by job networks that led to higher paying and more stable employment, or else provided subjects with sufficient time to search for the right job or to return to school without having to worry about short-term material needs. Individual characteristics were also important, as these subjects had the educational or employment backgrounds to take full advantage of such opportunities.

How stability is achieved

How and why do some former prisoners achieve economic security while others do not? We identified three primary resources through which long-term stability (though typically not upward mobility) was achieved: employment, social support, and public benefits. Typically our subjects paired either employment or public benefits with social support. Nonprofit and charitable social services provided short-term and emergency resources but were never sufficient on their own to provide economic security. Our analysis highlighted the importance of social supports for making ends meet. Free or low-cost housing, often accompanied by free food, helped former prisoners transition back to the labor market or public benefits after release, buffered the shocks of loss of jobs or other resources, and protected against homelessness and hunger when relapse occurred. Nevertheless, not all former prisoners with access to social support were able to leverage those resources to attain economic stability, as drug and alcohol addiction prevented them from taking full advantage of what family, friends, and romantic partners had to offer. Neither employment nor social support consistently translated into economic stability when this was the case. Only some public benefits, particularly SSI and Section 8 housing assistance, were sufficient to provide a base of long-term economic security, although SNAP and TANF provided some subjects with temporary supplements to other resources. The wide availability and use of food assistance in particular allowed many subjects to contribute to the households that housed and fed them after release and in subsequent years.

How mobility is achieved

We also compared the subjects who achieved upward mobility to those who merely experienced stability of material

resources. These results also pointed to the importance of social support, though social support of a particular kind. Subjects who experienced upward mobility did so because family or romantic partners not only provided them with the material support to make ends meet but also drew on social networks to help them secure better jobs that paid far above the minimum wage, provided benefits, and had potential for career mobility. Only subjects who returned to more-advantaged families or partners with significant material and social resources benefited from this form of social support. Such families or partners had the material resources to support the former prisoner in the long-term while he or she took the time to look for better jobs or complete schooling, and such families or partners had sufficiently rich social networks that they could provide leads to jobs with career ladders.

Conclusion

This study draws on longitudinal qualitative interviews with a diverse sample of former prisoners in Michigan to understand how former prisoners meet their basic needs for food and shelter after prison, how they access resources and make the connections required for economic security, and how some leverage social and economic resources to establish a trajectory of upward mobility. It is clear from the subjects' experiences that drug and alcohol dependence played a significant role in the economic well-being of many subjects. Indeed, all but one of those who struggled with homelessness and constant economic instability suffered from significant substance abuse problems after release. Episodes of addiction relapse often derailed attempts to find or maintain employment or reconnect with family, and past behavior while under the influence of drugs or alcohol was sometimes responsible for severing of social ties that had provided important social support prior to prison. Substance abuse problems resulted in access to fewer resources, and also made it more challenging for subjects to take full advantage of the resources to which they did have access. However, the struggle to meet basic needs among former prisoners is not merely a substance abuse story. Other subjects with histories of substance abuse did achieve stability and upward mobility, and not all problems with employment, social support, and public benefits could be traced back to drug and alcohol abuse.

It is also apparent that criminal activity and resulting criminal justice sanctions are closely tied to economic instability and uncertainty. This in part reflects crimes to support drug habits, such as shoplifting, prostitution, car theft, and robberies, but criminal activity by other subjects was also linked directly to material stress, and drug relapses that led to crime were often also the result of the stresses associated with unemployment or impending homelessness. Criminal justice sanctions also create their own instability and economic uncertainty. For example, even short periods of incarceration can lead to loss of housing and material possessions, complicated applications for public benefits, and result in job loss.

The importance of social support from family, friends, and romantic partners for the material well-being of former

prisoners has two implications. One is that the well-being of most former prisoners will be tied closely to that of the families and partners to which they return after prison. Among our subjects, those who returned to families with greater social and economic resources were clearly better off in both the long- and short-term. Former prisoners without access to social support will face greater challenges in meeting their basic needs and attaining economic security. Many of the initiatives of Michigan's prisoner reentry program, such as transitional housing, transportation vouchers, and employment services, are designed to replace the services often provided by families for those without such social support.¹⁹ The magnitude of the social support that families do provide suggests that prisoner reentry programs have much to make up for when serving those former prisoners without family social support.

A second implication is that families are bearing most of the burden of meeting the material needs of former prisoners, particularly in the immediate post-release period before former prisoners can secure their own employment or public benefits. This burden falls disproportionately on those families with the fewest resources, creating material strain that affects not just former prisoners but spills over to many others as well. We saw multiple examples of families and romantic partners "stretching" public benefits (such as TANF, SSI, and subsidized housing) intended for a smaller number of family members in order to also cover the needs of the former prisoner. This suggests that the rise in incarceration and accompanying increase in prisoner reentry is placing additional burdens on public benefits that are invisible to policymakers but have important consequences for the well-being of low-income children and families they are intended to support. ■

¹This article draws on an analysis described in greater detail in D. Harding, J. J. B. Wyse, C. Dobson, and J. D. Morenoff, "Making Ends Meet After Prison: How Former Prisoners Use Employment, Social Support, Public Benefits, and Crime to Meet their Basic Material Needs," NPC Working Paper #2011-25, National Poverty Center: Ann Arbor, MI, 2011. Available at: http://npc.umich.edu/publications/working_papers/?publication_id=222&.

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⁶Visher and Travis, "Transitions from Prison to Community."

⁷H. J. Holzer, P. Offner, and E. Sorensen, "What Explains the Continuing Decline in Labor Force Activity among Young Black Men?" *Labor History* 46 (2005b): 37–55.

⁸Western, *Punishment and Inequality in America*.

⁹Raphael, "Incarceration and Prisoner Reentry in the United States."

¹⁰For effects of change in employment status on criminal behavior, see for example, C. Visher, S. Debus-Sherrill, and J. Yahner, "Employment After Prison: A Longitudinal Study of Former Prisoners," *Justice Quarterly* 28, No. 5 (2010): 1–21. For evidence that incarceration reduces subsequent employment, see for example, D. Pager, "The Mark of a Criminal Record," *American Journal of Sociology* 108, No. 5 (2003): 937–975.

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¹⁴C. Visher, V. Kachnowski, N. La Vigne, and J. Travis, "Baltimore Prisoners' Experiences Returning Home," Returning Home Study Paper #2, The Urban Institute, Washington, DC, 2004.

¹⁵Travis, *But They All Come Back: Facing the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry*.

¹⁶Holzer et al., "What Explains the Continuing Decline in Labor Force Activity Among Young Black Men?"

¹⁷United States Code. "Student Eligibility." in *Title 20, Chapter 28, Subchapter IV, Part F*.

¹⁸Our study was conducted in Michigan, a state with relatively fewer restrictions on services and support for former offenders than other states. Those with felony convictions or recently released from prison remain eligible for Medicaid, food stamps, SSI, and federal financial aid.

¹⁹The Michigan Prisoner Reentry Initiative is a statewide policy effort to reduce crime and incarceration by providing additional services to parolees and by implementing a regime of "graduated sanctions" for technical parole violations. During our research, the program was still being phased in, and not all parolees received services.