When Prisoners Return to Communities: Political, Economic, and Social Consequences

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IN 1999, STATE prisons admitted about 591,000 prisoners and released almost the same number—about 538,000. If federal prisoners and those released from secure juvenile facilities are included, nearly 600,000 inmates arrive on the doorsteps of communities throughout the country each year.

Virtually no systematic, comprehensive attention has been paid by policymakers to dealing with people after they are released, an issue that has been termed "prisoner reentry." Failure to do so may well backfire, and the crime reduction gains made in recent years erode, unless we consider the cumulative impact of tens of thousands of returning felons on families, children, and communities. In particular, failure to pay attention to parole services is unfortunate, since most inmates, at the point of release, have an initial strong desire to succeed.

Of course, inmates have always been released from prison, and officials have long struggled with how to help them succeed. But the current situation is different. The numbers dwarf anything in our history, the needs of parolees are more serious, and the corrections system retains few rehabilitation programs.

A number of unfortunate collateral consequences are likely, including increases in child abuse, family violence, the spread of infectious diseases, homelessness, and community disorganization. And with 1.3 million prisoners, many more people have real-life knowledge of the prison experience. Being incarcerated is becoming almost a normal experience for people in some communities. This phenomenon may affect the socialization of young people, the ability of prison sentences to scare and deter, and the future trajectory of crime rates and crime victimization.

Parole in the U.S.—Managing More People, Managing Them Less Well

Changes in sentencing practices, coupled with a decrease in availability of rehabilitation programs, have placed new demands on the parole system. Support and funding have declined, resulting in dangerously high caseloads. Parolees sometimes abscond from supervision, often without consequence. Not surprisingly, most parolees fail to lead law-abiding lives and are rearrested.

Determinate Sentencing Means Automatic Release

Parole in the United States has changed dramatically since the mid-1970s, when most inmates served open-ended indeterminate prison terms—10 years to life, for example—and a parole board, usually appointed by the governor, had wide discretion to release inmates or keep them behind bars. In principle, offenders were paroled only if they were rehabilitated and had ties to the community—such as a family or a job. This made release from prison a privilege to be earned. If inmates violated parole, they could be returned to prison to serve the balance of their term—a strong incentive not to commit crimes.

Today, indeterminate sentencing and discretionary release have been replaced in 14 states with determinate sentencing and automatic release (Tonry 1999). Offenders receive fixed terms at the time of their initial sentencing and are automatically released at the end of their prison term, usually with credits for good time. For example, in California, where more than 125,000 prisoners are released each year, no parole board asks whether the inmate is ready for release, since he or she *must* be released once the prisoner has served the determinate term imposed by the court. Most California offenders are then subject to a one-year term of parole supervision.

A parolee must generally be released to the county where he last resided before going to prison. Since offenders overwhelmingly come from poor, culturally isolated, inner-city neighborhoods, that is where they return.

Indeterminate sentencing was abolished because of its discretionary quality. Studies showed that wide disparities resulted when the characteristics of the crime and the offender were taken into account, and were influenced by the offender's race, socioeconomic characteristics, and place of conviction. But most corrections officials believe that *some* ability to individualize is necessary, since it provides a way to take account of changes in behavior that occur after the offender was incarcerated. Imprisonment can cause psychological breakdown, depression, or mental illness, or reveal previously unrecognized personal problems, and the parole board can adjust release dates accordingly.

Most Parolees Have Unmet Needs

State and federal incarceration rates quadrupled between 1980–1996, and the U.S. prison population now exceeds 1.3 million persons. Sentences for drug offending are the major reason for increases in admissions—accounting for approximately 45 percent of the growth. Aggravated assault and sexual assault are also major contributors to growth (Blumstein and Beck, 1999).

State and federal government have allocated increasing shares of their budgets to

building and operating prisons. California, for example, with the largest prison-building program, has built 21 prisons since the mid-1980s, and its corrections budget grew from 2 percent of the state general fund in 1981–1982 to nearly 8 percent in 2000–2001. Similar patterns exist nationwide, and prison spending was the fastest growing budget item in nearly every state in the 1990s.

Increased dollars have funded operating costs for more prisons, but *not* more rehabilitation programs. Fewer programs, and a lack of incentives for inmates to participate in them, mean that fewer inmates leave prison having participated in programs to address work, education, and substance use deficiencies. In-prison substance abuse programs are expanding, but programs are often minimal and many inmates do little more than serve time before they are released. The Office of National Drug Control Policy reported that 70–85 percent of state prison inmates need substance abuse treatment; however, just 13 percent receive any kind of treatment in prison (McCaffrey 1998).

These reductions come at a time when inmates need *more* help, not less. Many have long histories of crime and substance use, are gang members, and lack marketable skills. Deinstitutionalization has also led to a greater number of mentally ill people being admitted to prisons and jails. A recent survey revealed that nearly one in five U.S. prisoners report having a mental illness (Ditton 1999). Psychologists warn that overcrowded and larger "super max" prisons can cause serious psychological problems, since prisoners in such institutions spend many hours in solitary or segregated housing, and those who study prison coping have found that greater time in isolation results in depression and heightened anxiety (Liebling 1999).

Gangs have become major factors in many prisons, with implications for in-prison and post-prison behavior. Racial tensions in prison mean that inmates tend to be more preoccupied with finding a safe niche than with long-term self-improvement. Gang conflicts started (or continued) in prison get settled after release: "There is an awful lot of potential rage coming out of prison to haunt our future" (Abramsky 1999).

Parolee Supervision Replaces Services

Upon release, 80 percent of parolees are assigned to a parole officer. The remaining 20 percent—including some of the most serious—will "max out" (e.g., not have received any credits for good time) and will receive no supervision. The offenders *least* willing to engage in rehabilitative programs are often *not* subject to parole supervision and services. About 100,000 parolees (about 1 in 5) left prison in 1998 with no post-custody supervision.

Parole officers are charged with enforcing conditions of release, including finding and maintaining employment, no drug use, and not associating with known criminals. The number of parole agents has not kept pace with the increased caseloads. In the 1970s, one agent ordinarily was assigned 45 parolees; today, caseloads of 70 are common—far higher than the 35 to 50 considered ideal. Eighty percent of all U.S. parolees are supervised on "regular" rather than intensive caseloads, which means less than two 15-minute face-to-face contacts per month (Petersilia 1999). Supervision costs about $2,200 per parolee, per year, compared to about $22,000 per year, per prisoner. Those arrangements do not permit much monitoring, and the *Los Angeles Times* recently reported that parole agents in California have lost track of about one-fourth of the 127,000 parolees they were supposed to supervise in 1999 (Associated Press 1999). Nationally, about 9 percent of all parolees have absconded (Bonczar 1999).

Most Parolees Return to Prison

Persons released from prison face a multitude of difficulties. They remain largely uneducated, unskilled, and usually without solid family support systems—to which are added the burdens of a prison record. Not surprisingly, most parolees fail, and rather quickly—rearrests are most common in the first six months after release.

Fully two-thirds of all those released on parole will be rearrested within three years. Parole failures now constitute a growing proportion of all new prison admissions. In 1980, parole violators constituted 18 percent of all admissions, but recent years have seen a steady increase to the point where they constituted 35 percent of all new admissions in 1997 (Beck and Mumola 1999).

The Collateral Consequences of Parole Release

Recycling parolees in and out of families and communities has unfortunate effects on community cohesion, employment and economic well being, democratic participation, family stabilization and childhood development, mental and physical health, and homelessness (Hagan and Dinovitzer1999).

Community Cohesion and Social Disintegration

The social characteristics of neighborhoods—particularly poverty, ethnic composition, and residential instability—influence crime. There are "tipping points," beyond which communities are no longer able to exert positive influences on the behavior of residents. Norms start to change, disorder and incivilities increase, out-migration follows, and crime and violence increase (Wilson 1987).

Elijah Anderson vividly illustrates the breakdown of social cohesion in socially disorganized communities. Moral authority increasingly is vested in "street-smart" young men for whom drugs and crime are a way of life. Attitudes, behaviors, and lessons learned in prison are transmitted into the free society. Anderson concludes that as "family caretakers and role models disappear or decline in influence, and as unemployment and poverty become more persistent, the community, particularly its children, becomes vulnerable to a variety of social ills, including crime, drugs, family disorganization, generalized demoralization and unemployment" (Anderson 1990, p.4).

Prison gangs have growing influence in inner-city communities. Joan Moore notes that most California prisons are violent and dangerous places, and new inmates search for protection and connections. Many find both in gangs. Inevitably, gang loyalties are exported to the neighborhoods. The revolving prison door strengthens street gang ties. One researcher commented, "In California… frankly I don't think the gangs would continue existing as they are without the prison scene." (Moore 1996, p. 73). Moore also found that state-raised youth, whose adolescence involved recurring trips to California juvenile detection facilities, were the most committed to the most crime-oriented gangs. She warns that as more youth are incarcerated, earlier in their criminal career, larger numbers of youths will come out of prison with hostile attitudes and will exert strong negative influences on neighborhoods.

Rose, Clear, and Scully (1999) explored the direct effects of offenders going to prison from Tallahassee, Florida, and returning to their home community after one year in prison. Rather than reducing crime (i.e., through the deterrent or rehabilitative effects of prison), releasing offenders into the community in 1996 resulted in increases in crime in 1997,

even after other factors were taken into account. One explanation is individualistic, that offenders "make up for lost time" and resume their criminal careers with renewed energy. But Rose et al. offer another explanation that focuses on the destabilizing effect of releasing large numbers of parolees on the communities' ability to influence its members. They argue that "coerced mobility" (i.e., forced removal from a community), like voluntary mobility, is a type of people-churning that inhibits integration and promotes isolation and anonymity—factors associated with increased crime.

Work and Economic Well-Being

The majority of inmates leave prison with no savings, no immediate entitlement to unemployment benefits, and few employment prospects. One year after release, as many as 60 percent of former inmates are not employed in the regular labor market, and there is increasing reluctance among employers to hire ex-offenders. A survey in five major U.S. cities found that 65 percent of all employers said they would not knowingly hire an ex-offender (regardless of the offense), and between 30 and 40 percent had checked the criminal records of their most recent employees (Holzer 1996). Unemployment is closely related to drug and alcohol abuse. Losing a job can lead to substance abuse, which in turn is related to child and family violence.

The "get-tough" movement of the 1980s increased employment restrictions on parolees. In California, for example, parolees are barred from law, real estate, medicine, nursing, physical therapy, and education. In Colorado, the jobs of dentist, engineer, nurse, pharmacist, physician, and real estate agent are closed to convicted felons. Their criminal record may also preclude them from retaining parental rights, be grounds for divorce, and bar them from jury service.

Simon (1993) notes that these disabilities are inherently contradictory. The U.S. spends millions of dollars to "rehabilitate" offenders, convincing them that they need to obtain legitimate employment, and then frustrates whatever was accomplished by barring them from many kinds of employment and its rewards. Moreover, the loss of a solid industrial base, which has traditionally supplied jobs within poorer inner-city communities, has left urban parolees with few opportunities.

The under-employment of ex-felons has broader economic implications. One reason America's unemployment statistics look so good compared with those of other industrial democracies is that 1.6 million mainly low-skilled workers—precisely the group unlikely to find work in a high-tech economy—have been incarcerated, and are thus not considered part of the labor force (Western and Becket 1999). If they were included, U.S. unemployment rates would be two percent higher. Recycling ex-offenders back into the job market with reduced job prospects will have the effect of increasing unemployment rates in the long run.

Family Stabilization and Childhood Development

Women are about 7 percent of the U.S. prison population, but their incarceration rates are increasing faster than those for men. About 80 percent of U.S. female inmates are mothers with, on average, two dependent children; two-thirds of their children are under 10 (Snell 1994). More than half of incarcerated men are parents of children under 18 years of age. Altogether, more than 1.5 million children have parents in U.S. prisons, and the number will increase as the proportion of female inmates increases.

We know little about the effects of a parent's incarceration on childhood development, but it is likely to be significant. When mothers are incarcerated, their children are usually cared for by grandparents or other relatives or placed in foster care. One study found that roughly half of these children do not see their mothers the entire time they are in prison (because there are fewer prisons for women, women are often incarcerated further away from their children than are men, making family visits more difficult). The vast majority of imprisoned mothers, however, expect to resume their parenting role and reside with their children after their release, although it is uncertain how many actually do (Bloom and Steinhart 1993).

Mothers released from prison have difficulty finding services such as housing, employment, and childcare, and this causes stress for them and their children. Children of incarcerated and released parents often suffer confusion, sadness, and social stigma, and these feelings often result in school-related difficulties, low self-esteem, aggressive behavior, and general emotional dysfunction. If the parents are negative role models, children fail to develop positive attitudes about work and responsibility. Children of incarcerated parents are five times more likely to serve time in prison than are children whose parents are not incarcerated (Beck et al. 1993).

We have no data on involvement of parolees in family violence, but it may be significant. Risk factors for child abuse and neglect include poverty, unemployment, alcohol/drug abuse, low self-esteem, and poor health of parents—common attributes of parolees. Concentrated poverty and social disorganization increase child abuse and neglect and other adjustment problems, which in turn constitute risk factors for later crime and violence.

Mental and Physical Health

Prisoners have significantly more medical and mental health problems than the general population, due to lifestyles that often include crowded or itinerant living conditions, intravenous drug use, poverty, and high rates of substance abuse. In prisons, 50-year-olds are commonly considered old, in part because the health of the average 50-year-old prisoner approximates that of average persons 10 years older in the free community. While in prison, inmates have access to state-provided health care, but upon release, most are unable easily to obtain health care and have the potential for spreading disease (particularly tuberculosis, hepatitis, and HIV) and presenting serious public health risks (McDonald 1999).

In New York City, a major multi-drug-resistant form of tuberculosis emerged in 1989, with 80 percent of cases being traced to jails and prisons. By 1991, the Rikers Island Jail had one of the highest TB rates in the nation. In Los Angeles, an outbreak of meningitis in the county jail moved into the surrounding neighborhoods.

At year-end 1996, 2.3 percent of all state and federal prison inmates were known to be infected with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), a rate six times higher than in the general U.S. population. The rate grows faster among prisoners than elsewhere because they live in close living quarters. Public health experts predict that these rates will continue to escalate and eventually make their way to the streets, particularly as more drug offenders, many of whom engage in intravenous drug use, share needles, or trade sex for drugs, are incarcerated (May 2000).

Inmates with mental illness also are increasingly being imprisoned—and being released. In 1998, 16 percent of jail or prison inmates reported either a mental condition or an overnight stay in a mental hospital (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1999). Even when public mental health services are available, many mentally ill individuals fail to use them because they fear institutionalization, deny

they are mentally ill, or distrust the mental health system.

Democratic Participation and Political Alienation

An estimated 3.9 million Americans—one in 50 adults—were in 1998 permanently unable to vote as a result of a felony conviction. Of these, 1.4 million were African American males, representing 13 percent of all black men. The numbers will certainly increase. In 1996, a young black man aged 16 had a 28.5 percent chance of spending time in prison during his life. The comparable figure for white men was 4.4 percent (Bonczar and Beck 1997; Mauer 1999).

Denying large segments of the minority population the right to vote will likely alienate former offenders further. Disillusionment with the political process also erodes citizens' feelings of engagement and makes them less willing to participate in local activities and to exert informal social control over residents. This is important, since our most effective crime-fighting tools require community collaboration and active engagement.

Housing and Homelessness

The latest Census counts about 230,000 homeless in America. In the late 1980s an estimated quarter of them had served prison sentences. The figure is surely higher now, with many U.S. cities reporting a critical shortage of low-cost housing. California officials report that 10 percent of the state's parolees remain homeless, but in urban areas such as San Francisco and Los Angeles the rate reached 30 percent to 50 percent (Legislative Analysis Office 1999).

Transients, panhandling, and vagrants increase citizens' fears, and that ultimately contributes to increased crime and violence. This is because neighborhood crime often worsens when law-abiding citizens are afraid to go onto streets filled with graffiti, transients, and loitering youth. Fearful citizens eventually yield control of the streets to people who are not frightened by these signs of decay, and who often are the people who created the problem in the first place. A vicious cycle begins. Wilson and Kelling illustrate this by describing how a broken window can influence crime rates. If the first broken window in a building is not repaired, people who like breaking windows may assume no one cares, and break some more. Soon, the building will have no windows. As "broken windows" spread—homelessness, prostitution, graffiti, panhandling—businesses and law-abiding citizens move away, and disorder escalates, leading to more serious crime (Wilson and Kelling 1982).

Responding to the Problem

Government officials voice growing concern about the problem of prisoner reentry. Former Attorney General Janet Reno recently called prisoner reentry "one of the most pressing problems we face as a nation" (Reno 2000). Former President Clinton included $60 million in his 2000-2001 federal budget for "Project Reentry," a federal program to encourage responsible fatherhood among offenders, job training for parolees, and establishment of reentry courts. Reentry courts are modeled on "drug courts," which use judges instead of corrections officers to monitor released offenders (Travis 2000). California's Governor Gray Davis, in a "State of the State" address, called for hiring 100 new parole officers to increase surveillance of high-risk offenders and find the 20 percent of California parolees who have absconded.

Initiatives like these may or may not prove useful, but often they are not based on thoughtful analysis and debate. It is safe to say that parole has received less research attention in recent years than any other part of the correctional system. A congressionally mandated evaluation of prevention programs included just *one* parole evaluation among hundreds of recent studies that were examined (Sherman et al. 1997). I have spent many years working on *probation* effectiveness but know of no similar body of knowledge on *parole* effectiveness. Without better information, the public is unlikely to give corrections officials the political permission to invest in rehabilitation and job training programs for parolees. With better information, we might be able to persuade voters and elected officials to shift away from solely punitive crime policies and toward policies that balance incapacitation, rehabilitation, and just punishment.

Parole *release* also needs to be reconsidered. In 1977, 72 percent of all U.S. prisoners were released after appearing before a parole board, but that figure had declined to 28 percent by 1997, the lowest since the federal government began compiling statistics on the subject.

Parole was abolished because it came to symbolize the alleged leniency of a system in which hardened criminals were "let out" early. If parole were abolished, politicians argued, then parole boards could not release offenders early, and inmates would serve longer terms. However, this has not happened. Stivers (2000) shows that, after controlling for offender and offense characteristics, inmates released in 1995 in non-parole states served seven months less, on average, than did inmates with the same characteristics released in states using discretionary parole. Similar experiences in Florida, Connecticut, and Colorado caused those states to reinstate discretionary parole after discovering that abolition resulted in shorter terms being served by most offenders.

Parole experts have been saying all along that the public is misinformed when it labels parole as lenient. To the contrary, through their exercise of discretion, parole boards can target more violent and dangerous offenders for longer periods of incarceration. When states abolish parole or reduce parole authorities' discretion, they replace a rational, controlled system of "earned" release for *selected* inmates with "automatic" release for nearly *all* inmates (Burke 1995). Non-parole systems may sound tough, but they remove an important gate-keeping role that can protect communities and victims.

Parole boards are in a position to demand participation in drug treatment, and research shows that coerced drug treatment is as successful in achieving abstinence as is voluntary participation. Parole boards can also require an adequate plan for a job and residence in the community—and that has the added benefit of refocusing prison staff and corrections budgets on transition planning.

Parole boards can meet personally with the victim. Involving victims in parole hearings has been one of the major changes in parole in recent years. Ninety percent of parole boards now provide information to victims on the parole process, and 70 percent allow victims to be present during the parole hearing.

Perhaps most important, parole boards can reconsider the tentative release date when more information about the offense and offender has been collected, and the offender's behavior in prison has been observed. Over 90 percent of U.S. offenders receive criminal sentences as a result of pleading guilty to offenses and not as a result of a trial. Usually they plead guilty to a reduced charge. Because there is no trial, there is little opportunity to fully air the circumstances surrounding the crime or the risks presented by the criminal. The parole board can revisit the case to discover how much injury the victim really suffered, or whether a gun was involved—even though the offense to which the offender pled, by definition, indicates no weapon was involved. Burke observes: "In a system which

incorporates discretionary parole, the system gets a second chance to make sure it is doing the right thing" (Burke 1995, p. 7).

Ironically, "no-parole" systems also significantly undercut post-release supervision. When parole boards have no ability to select who will be released, they are forced to supervise a more serious parolee population, and not one of their own choosing. Parole officers say it is impossible to assure cooperation of offenders when offenders know they will be released regardless of their willingness to comply with certain conditions (e.g., get a job). And, due to prison crowding, some states are no longer allowing parolees to be returned to prison for technical violations. Parole officers say that parole has lost its power to encourage inmates toward rehabilitation and sanction parole failures. Field supervision tends to be undervalued and, eventually, underfunded and understaffed.

No one would argue for a return to the unfettered discretion that parole boards exercised in the 1960s. That led to unwarranted disparities. Parole release decisions must be principled, and incorporate explicit standards and due process protections. Parole guidelines, which are used in many states, can establish uniformity in parole decisions, and objectively weigh factors known to be associated with recidivism. Rather than *entitle* inmates to be released at the end of a fixed time period, parole guidelines specify when the offender becomes *eligible* for release.

We also need to rethink *who* should be responsible for making parole release decisions. In most states, the chair and all members of the parole board are appointed by the governor; in two-thirds of the states, there are no professional qualifications for parole board membership. While this may increase the political accountability of the parole board, it also makes it highly vulnerable to improper political pressures. In Ohio, by contrast, parole board members are appointed by the director of corrections, serve in civil service positions, and must have an extensive background in criminal justice.

Concluding Remarks

Parole supervision and release raise complicated issues and deserve more attention than they now get. Nearly 700,000 parolees are doing time on U.S. streets. Most have been released to parole systems that provide few services and impose conditions that almost guarantee parolees' failure. Monitoring systems are getting better, and public tolerance for failure is decreasing. A rising tide of parolees is back in prison, putting pressure on states to build more prisons and, in turn, taking money away from rehabilitation programs that might help offenders stay out of prison. Parolees will continue to receive fewer services to help them deal with their underlying problems, assuring that recidivism rates and returns to prison remain high—and public support for parole remains low.

This situation represents formidable challenges to policy makers. The public will not support community-based punishments until they have been shown to "work," and they won't have an opportunity to "work" without sufficient funding and research. Spending on parole services in California, for example, was cut 44 percent in 1997, causing parole caseloads nearly to double (now at a ratio of 82-to-1). When caseloads increase, services decline, and even parolees who are motivated to change have little opportunity to do so.

In 2001, the United States is likely to have two million people in jails and prisons and more people on parole than ever before. If parole revocation trends continue, more than half of those entering prison in the year 2001 will be parole failures. Given the increasing human and financial costs associated with prison—and all of the collateral consequences parolees pose to families, children, and communities—investing in effective reentry programs may be one of the best investments we make.

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