

Perspectives on Parole: The Board Members' Viewpoint

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THE ORIGINS of parole date back to the 19th century, when the practice of "giving mark" was established by English and Irish prison reformers (Clear & Cole, 1990). Under these early systems, prisoners were granted a release from incarceration if they accumulated a designated number of "marks" by following institutional rules and working toward self-improvement. The extension of parole as a correctional practice into the United States was linked to the adoption of the indeterminate sentencing models of the early 20th century. Under these models, the correctional system's primary function was to reform the prisoner. Once this reformation was completed, it made sense to release inmates back into society since the correctional system had diverted them from their criminal tendencies. It was the parole board that exercised this discretion in terms of these releases, deciding whether the incarcerated had, indeed, been reformed.

Over the last 20 years, however, the nature of parole has changed. The political constituencies of many jurisdictions began to view indeterminate sentencing as too lenient and opted to shift to determinate sentencing. Using this form of sentencing, the courts prescribe an upper limit of years that the offender must serve with a set rate of "good time credit" the offender may earn for following institutional rules and for meeting personal treatment goals. The discretion for release, then, was removed from the parole board and retained by the judiciary through the process of charging the offenders for their crimes. The parole board, however, maintained the responsibility for parole revocation hearings, deciding if the offender should be reinstitutionalized for violating court-prescribed conditions for release.

Currently, the increasing number of offenders under correctional supervision has affected all members of the criminal justice system, including parole boards. Jackson, Rhine, and Smith (1989) report that between 1970 and 1988 the number of inmates in United States prisons roughly tripled. These figures are corroborated by Joo, Ekland-Olson, and Kelly (1995), who note that incarceration rates have nearly tripled since 1980. At the end of calendar year 1996, the total number of adults under correctional supervision—incarcerated or in the community—reached a new high of 5.5 million (Brown & Beck, 1997). The criminal justice system has responded in traditional fashion by increasing parole (Joo et al., 1995) and changing the methods by which parole is granted. For instance, California parole is considered auto-

matic, and the parole board serves only to deny, rather than grant, release. Many states have even utilized Emergency Powers Acts, which increase parole eligibility in order to meet court-mandated prison population limits (Jackson et al., 1989). The resulting increase in the parole population has been staggering as the number of parolees has swelled from 220,000 in 1980 to 457,000 in 1989 (Joo et al., 1995).

More recently, in 1996, there was a 3.7 percent increase in the overall parole population, with eight states reporting increases of at least 10 percent in their parole populations. New Hampshire (up 35.8 percent) and Alaska (up 20.5 percent) experienced the greatest increases (Brown & Beck, 1997). Similarly, between 1985 and 1996, there was a 134.7 percent increase in the number of persons released on parole (Brown & Beck, 1997). Currently, about 12.4 percent of individuals under correctional supervision are on parole (U.S. Department of Justice, 1996). The problems associated with such rapid parole population growth include overwhelmed community support services such as substance abuse counseling and halfway houses, increased caseloads for parole board members and a concomitant decrease in the quality of community supervision, and an inability to revoke parole caused by crowded county jails and overburdened state prisons (Jackson et al., 1989).

In the United States, then, there are primarily two forms of parole currently in use: discretionary parole, by which the parole board grants release, and mandatory parole, by which the judiciary defines release as a function of sentencing. Until recently, discretionary parole was most commonly used, although in 1996 mandatory parole was used slightly more often (48 percent compared to 46 percent respectively) than discretionary parole (U.S. Department of Justice, 1996). However, use of the parole board as a release mechanism is likely to increase in coming years. Indeed, despite the general public's distaste for parole and parole's perceived leniency, conditions in prisons are forcing correctional officials to use early release mechanisms to keep their institutions within the constitutional standards defining "cruel and unusual punishment" (Jackson et al., 1989).

Given parole's common use, and the likelihood that such use will expand in the coming years, the nature of the parole decision-making process should come under academic scrutiny. Standards for release are, at best, ill defined and irregularly applied. In one of the best studies on this topic, Talarico (1975) suggests that parole board release is not based on "a detailed clinical assessment of treatment effects that parole theory and model are based on" (p. 136). Instead, the decision is an interplay between a variety of external factors about which parolees and the public are misinformed. The net result is a public that is frightened

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about a perceived threat from the paroled offender and an incarcerated population frustrated about the perceived caprice within the parole process.

Goals and Objectives

Despite both the pivotal role and dynamic nature of parole in the criminal justice system, few research efforts have been directed at understanding parole board decision-making processes. The goal of this research was to collate a data set that will begin to detail how and why parole is granted in individual parole cases across the United States, as well as provide greater insight into the primary actors in the parole process. Prior work on this topic is sparse and has become dated. This study specifically will add to the literature on parole board decision-making processes by determining: 1) parole board members' perceptions of the most important purpose of corrections; 2) parole board members' perceptions of the most serious problem facing parole boards; 3) parole board members' perceptions of the most important areas of change that might improve the parole board process; 4) parole board members' primary rationales used to justify parole as an early release mechanism; 5) the importance of various rationales parole board members use as justification for the continuance of parole; and 6) the importance of various release criteria as justification for parole board members to grant parole.

Methodology

This study employed a survey methodology. Parole board members were selected as the appropriate respondent group on these issues because of their familiarity with the parole decision-making process. Researchers who have used this approach to analyze similar criminal justice issues have argued that administrators are the most appropriate unit of analysis when one seeks to determine how policies are actually formulated, initiated, and carried out by those with the power to do so. As Baker, Blotky, Clemens, and Dillard argue:

It is on the basis of information seen from the administrator's perspective that decisions are made, determining correctional policy, which affects not only the lives of employees and inmates within the system, but also the manner in which the correctional system functions within society. (1973, p. 459)

To maximize response rates, Dillman's (1978) "total design method" (TDM) was used for the data collection. Dillman's method is based on social exchange theory and requires three things to increase survey response: 1) minimized cost for responding, 2) maximized reward for doing so, and 3) established trust that those rewards will be delivered. These three criteria are achieved by keeping the survey short, offering information on the results and policy implications of the study to the respondents, and obtaining an endorsement from a pertinent sponsoring agency for the survey's administration. The National Judicial College and

the leadership in the National Parole Board Association were contacted for letters of support.

Fifty studies based on the TDM have been reviewed by Dillman (1978). The response rates for these efforts range from a low of 53 percent to a high of 96 percent. Here are just a few examples: Appellate Judges, 956, or 69 percent; State Supreme Court Justices, 350, or 94 percent; Prison Administrators, 1,200, or 81 percent.

Personal experience with the technique has yielded similarly impressive results. Of the seven survey processes the current researchers have completed (on both state and national levels), each has had a completion rate of over 70 percent.

The TDM requires multiple mailings to achieve its high response rates. Although the results of individual surveys were kept confidential in this study, each survey was numbered so that the instrument's return could be tracked. The survey was initiated by mailing a cover letter, an endorsement letter, and a survey instrument to each respondent. At the end of 1 week, a reminder postcard was sent to all respondents. This served as both a thank you for those who returned the survey and a reminder for those who did not. At the end of 3 weeks, the first follow-up letter and a replacement questionnaire was sent to non-respondents. The letter reminded individuals that their questionnaires had not been received and appealed for their return. At the end of 6 weeks, a second follow-up letter and survey was sent to all non-respondents. This letter was tracked and, thereby, allowed the targeted individual anonymity. The sensitive nature of the topic may have adversely affected completion rates, and using this strategy relieved some respondent apprehensions and increased overall response rates. The surveys were administered in early 1996, and the final return rate was approximately 59 percent.

The Population

The sample frame has been compiled as The 1995 Directory of Juvenile and Adult Correctional Departments, Institutions, Agencies and Paroling Authorities. This volume provides a current list of the names, addresses, and phone numbers of all parole board members in the United States. The final respondent group of 351 was drawn from this list. In that there are relatively few parole board members in the United States, the population as a whole can be surveyed, eliminating both sampling error and bias.

Respondent Demographics

The median age for the respondent group was 52 with a range of 35 to 78. Approximately 70 percent of the respondents were male and 30 percent were female. Approximately 80 percent of the respondents were Caucasian. Twelve percent had no more than a high school diploma, 35 percent had a bachelor's degree, and 53 percent had an advanced degree. Approximately 65 percent identified themselves as politically conservative and 35 percent identified themselves as politically liberal. The median number of years of experience in the criminal justice system was 19 and the median number of years in parole was 7.

The Instrument

The majority of the survey questions dealt with the standards used to apply and revoke parole. The questions were fill-in, yes/no, or typical five-point Likert construction. Using a Likert format, respondents identified their relative agreement/disagreement to declarative statements. Demographic information also was collected.

Results

The first question in the survey asked the parole board members what they thought was “the most important purpose of corrections.” Five options were provided: 1) rehabilitation (training offenders to lead non-criminal lives); 2) deterrence (preventing crime by showing potential offenders the serious consequences of committing a criminal offense); 3) incapacitation (protecting the public by removing offenders from the community, where they might commit additional crimes); 4) retribution (simply making offenders pay for the crime they have committed: “an eye for an eye”); and 5) restitution (creating a situation whereby inmates work to restore those damaged by their act). Of the five options, incapacitation was most often ranked as the first or second most important purpose (71.8 percent). In order of perceived importance, the other options were rehabilitation (63.4 percent), deterrence (47.7 percent), and restitution (22.7 percent). Retribution was ranked a distant fifth, with only 12.4 percent noting it as their first or second most important purpose. Table 1 provides the results.

TABLE 1.
PERCENTAGE OF RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION: “WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PURPOSE OF CORRECTIONS?” (“1” IS THE MOST IMPORTANT, “5” IS THE LEAST IMPORTANT)

Purpose	Importance				
	1	2	3	4	5
Rehabilitation	42.5	20.9	21.6	11.2	3.7
Deterrence	12.9	34.8	31.8	11.4	9.1
Incapacitation	50.4	21.4	14.5	13.0	0.8
Retribution	3.1	9.3	18.6	17.1	51.9
Restitution	4.7	18.0	18.0	35.2	24.2

The second question asked the respondent to rank by seriousness the problems currently facing parole boards. Seven options were given: 1) lack of commitment by parole board members; 2) burnout among parole board members; 3) lack of support for the parole process by government officials; 4) lack of support for the parole process by the public; 5) media coverage of parole board activities; 6) excessive caseload demands; and 7) lack of support for the parole board by other correctional officials. Interestingly, the percentage of respondents who noted lack of public support (69.9 percent) and lack of government support (51.9 percent) as the first or second most important problem in parole far surpassed the percentage who noted that excessive caseload demands (37.1 percent) were most important. Table 2 displays the results.

TABLE 2.
PERCENTAGE OF RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION: “WHAT IS THE MOST SERIOUS PROBLEM FACING PAROLE BOARDS?” (“1” IS THE MOST IMPORTANT, “7” IS THE LEAST IMPORTANT)

Problem	Importance						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Lack of commitment by parole board members	0.8	3.0	6.1	4.5	6.1	18.9	60.6
Burnout among parole board members	0.0	3.8	5.3	6.0	21.8	46.6	16.5
Lack of support for the parole process by government officials	26.3	25.6	15.8	14.3	15.0	0.8	2.3
Lack of support for the parole process by the public	35.3	34.6	17.3	9.0	1.5	1.5	0.8
Media coverage of parole board activities	12.1	19.7	18.2	22.7	14.4	6.1	6.8
Excessive caseload demands	26.7	10.4	15.6	17.0	20.7	4.4	5.2
Lack of support for the parole board by other correctional officials	5.3	7.5	21.8	22.6	21.8	12.8	8.3

The third question asked the subjects what they considered the most important area of change that could improve the parole board process. The options included were: 1) better systems of inmate classification; 2) more treatment-based programs within the prison; 3) more programming options available outside the prison; 4) better trained parole board members; 5) better developed guidelines for paroling decisions; and 6) better public understanding of the parole process. In general, the need for better public understanding of the parole process and more treatment-based programs within prison (both at 56.6 percent) were most commonly cited as the first or second most important problem in the parole process while the need for more programming options available outside the prisons (48.2 percent) appeared to be of high importance as well. Table 3 displays these data.

TABLE 3.
PERCENTAGE OF RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION: “WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT AREA OF CHANGE THAT MIGHT IMPROVE THE PAROLE BOARD PROCESS?” (“1” IS THE MOST IMPORTANT, “6” IS THE LEAST IMPORTANT)

Problem	Importance					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Better systems of inmate classification	4.4	10.3	16.2	22.8	19.9	26.5
More treatment-based programs within the prison	35.3	21.3	23.5	9.6	8.1	2.2
More programming options available outside the prison	16.1	32.1	24.8	17.5	6.6	2.9
Better trained parole officers	6.7	7.4	10.4	16.3	31.1	28.1
Better developed guidelines for paroling decisions	11.0	13.2	11.8	14.0	22.1	27.9
Better public understanding of the parole process	41.2	15.4	14.0	14.0	7.4	8.1

The fourth question asked the respondents about the primary rationale they used to justify parole as an early release mechanism. The six options were: 1) reintegration (It creates circumstances whereby offenders are aided in their transition from institutional life back into society.); 2) incentive (It helps to maintain order within the institution by giving the correctional official a reward to offer for “good behavior.”); 3) prison overcrowding (It helps to maintain court-mandated prison population caps by lowering the number of incarcerates.); 4) rehabilitation (It allows prisoners who have demonstrated change in their tendencies to begin restructuring their lives in society at large.); 5) sentencing disparities (It allows for the criminal justice system to reconcile arbitrary differentials in punishment levied against offenders who have committed the same crime.); and 6) punishment (It allows the criminal justice system to continue to impose a sanction against offenders who might otherwise simply be released.). The two options that were perceived as being of greatest importance (either first or second option) were rehabilitation (74.7 percent) and reintegration (59.9 percent). Table 4 displays these data.

TABLE 4.
PERCENTAGE OF RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION:
“WHAT IS YOUR PRIMARY RATIONALE USED TO JUSTIFY
PAROLE AS AN EARLY RELEASE MECHANISM?” (“1” IS THE
MOST IMPORTANT, “6” IS THE LEAST IMPORTANT)

Rationale	Importance					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Reintegration	26.3	33.6	18.2	14.6	6.6	.7
Incentive	11.0	13.2	37.5	19.1	16.9	2.2
Prison Overcrowding	5.1	3.7	3.7	12.5	28.7	46.3
Rehabilitation	43.5	31.2	13.0	8.0	2.9	1.4
Sentencing Disparities	8.1	11.0	15.4	28.7	22.1	14.7
Punishment	13.1	11.7	10.2	16.1	18.2	30.7

The fifth question addressed the respondents’ perceived importance of several rationales according to their appropriateness as justifications for the continuance of parole. The rationales included: 1) “helps reintegration to society”; 2) “works as incentive for good behavior in prison”; 3) “helps relieve prison overcrowding”; 4) “works toward the end of rehabilitation”; 5) “helps to remove sentencing disparities between prisoners”; and 6) “extends the length of punishment possible.” Based on the responses, it appears that parole board members use parole because they believe that it helps reintegration to society (95.4 percent rate it as very, or somewhat, important), that it works toward the end of rehabilitation (89.9 percent), and because it works as an

incentive for good behavior in prison (86.9%). Table 5 presents these data.

Note: For Tables 5 and 6, the following response category abbreviations are used: “VI” is very important; “SI” is somewhat important; “N” is neutral; “SU” is somewhat unimportant; and “VU” is very unimportant.

TABLE 5.
PERCENTAGE OF RESPONSES REGARDING RATIONALES
AS JUSTIFICATION FOR THE CONTINUANCE OF PAROLE

Rationale	Importance				
	VI	SI	N	SU	VU
Helps reintegration to society	75.2	20.4	2.9	1.5	0
Works as incentive for good behavior in prisons	35.5	51.4	8.0	5.1	0
Helps relieve prison overcrowding	6.5	21.7	25.4	23.2	23.2
Works toward the end of rehabilitation	58.7	31.2	8.0	2.2	0
Helps to remove sentencing disparities between prisoners	10.1	37.0	27.5	31.7	3.6
Extends the length of punishment possible	13.0	25.4	28.3	15.9	17.4

The sixth question asked the respondents to rate the importance of each of the following release criteria in their decision to grant parole: the nature and circumstances of the inmate’s offense; the inmate’s prior criminal record; the inmate’s attitude toward family responsibilities; the inmate’s attitude toward authority; the inmate’s attitude toward the victim; the inmate’s institutional adjustment; the inmate’s community support; the inmate’s financial resources; the inmate’s physical health; the inmate’s psychological health; the inmate’s insight into the cause of his or her past criminal conduct; the adequacy of the inmate’s parole plan; the attitude of the offender’s victims about the offender’s release; prison conditions; public sentiment about the offender or the offense type; public notoriety of the case; and the inmate’s age.

In general, it appears that parole board members feel that the nature of the inmate’s offense, as well as the inmate’s prior criminal record, attitude toward the victim, institutional adjustment (as measured by the inmate’s participation in prison programs), and insight into the causes of past criminal conduct are the most important factors in the decision to grant parole. In contrast, the board members appear to feel as though the inmate’s physical health and age, prison conditions, and the public notoriety of the case are of lesser importance in the decision to grant parole. Table 6 presents the results.

TABLE 6.
PERCENTAGE OF RESPONSES REGARDING THE
IMPORTANCE OF RELEASE CRITERIA AS JUSTIFICATION
FOR THE DECISION TO GRANT PAROLE

Rationale	Importance				
	VI	SI	N	SU	VU
The nature and circumstances of the inmate's offense	90.6	6.5	2.2	0.7	0.7
The inmate's prior criminal record	79.9	19.6	0.7	0.0	0.0
The inmate's attitude toward family responsibilities	20.3	58.7	13.8	6.5	0.7
The inmate's attitude toward authority	38.4	50.7	10.1	0.7	0.7
The inmate's attitude toward the victim	60.9	34.8	3.6	0.7	0.7
The inmate's institutional adjustment	55.1	41.3	3.6	0.7	0.0
The inmate's community support	29.0	60.1	9.4	1.4	0.0
The inmate's financial resources	14.5	52.9	26.8	5.1	0.7
The inmate's physical health	2.9	29.0	51.4	13.0	3.6
The inmate's psychological health	49.3	40.6	8.7	0.7	0.7
The inmate's insight into the causes of his or her past criminal conduct	53.6	40.6	5.1	0.7	0.0
The adequacy of the inmate's parole plan	47.1	44.9	5.1	2.9	0.0
The attitude of the offender's victim(s) about his or her release	37.7	42.0	17.4	1.4	1.4
Prison conditions (overcrowding)	1.4	15.9	30.4	21.7	30.4
Public sentiment about the offender or the offense type	13.0	50.0	26.8	7.2	2.9
Public notoriety of the case	14.5	40.6	34.1	5.8	5.1
The inmate's age	11.6	44.2	31.2	5.8	7.2

Discussion

Each of the survey questions raises several significant areas of discussion based on the responses of the parole authorities. Thus, the following discussion addresses several of the issues within the context of each question.

The first question asked the respondents what they thought was the most important purpose of corrections. It appears that the parole board members included in the present study believe that correctional practices should be designed to protect society and rehabilitate offenders, as opposed to punishing offenders. Such a finding could be explained through the nature of parole decision-making. For example, because they may bear the brunt of the responsibility for releasing an offender on parole who subsequently commits a serious crime, these board members may be more concerned about the well-being of the individual offender and society than about inflicting punishment upon the offender. It could be argued that releasing an offender who has been punished, yet not "corrected," is of little interest to parole board members.

Based upon the responses to the second question, which

asked the subjects what they thought was the most serious problem facing parole boards, it appears that parole board members perceive a lack of support from both the public and government. Because one of the limitations of survey research is the inability to further "pry" into subject responses, future research should be directed toward a better understanding of why, and to what extent, parole board members perceive a lack of support from both groups, as well as how the situation can be improved. Nevertheless, the present research findings suggest that, given the significance of their decision-making roles, parole board members do not feel as though they should be solely responsible for the entire parole process. In other words, similar to the recent movement in law enforcement toward greater involvement of the community in addressing crime, parole board members recognize the need for, and encourage help from, those typically outside of the parole process.

Similarly, based on the finding that a lack of government support was noted as the second most important problem facing parole boards, it is not surprising that excessive case-loads was noted as the third most important problem facing parole boards. Such findings lead to speculation that parole board members believe that their workload could be reduced through a greater concern for the roles they play in the correctional process. Yet, despite the perceived lack of support these officials receive and their excessive workload, the subjects appear to believe that parole board members are quite committed to their job and that burnout is not a problem. In other words, the problems facing parole boards have little to do with parole board personnel, but with other factors instead.

In general, the responses to the third question were consistent with the responses to the first and second questions. For example, respondents frequently noted that the most important area of change that might improve the parole board process involved both the need for more treatment-based programs within prison and a better public understanding of the parole process (the percentages of respondents who cited these responses as the first or second most important area of change were exactly the same). The high number of responses suggesting the need for more treatment-based programs within prisons is consistent with responses to previous questions, which found that parole board members are concerned about the well-being of the offenders and society, and the answers to the fourth question, which suggests that 74.7 percent of the parole board members felt that rehabilitation was a highly important rationale to justify parole as an early release mechanism. The results also resemble responses to previous questions in that board members noted that they were not necessarily concerned about the punishment of the offender and that they perceived a lack of government support. Accordingly, the need for more programming options available outside of prisons was selected as the third most important area of change. Because the respondents rated the need for better treatment programs and programming options as more important than the needs for better developed guidelines

and a better classification system (ranked fourth and fifth in importance, respectively), we can begin to see where the need for government support would be required. Nevertheless, additional research obviously is necessary.

The finding that parole board members believe that one of the most important areas of change to improve the parole process requires the public to better understand the parole process also is consistent with the finding in the second question, which suggested that parole board members would like greater public support. Finally, it does not appear that parole board members perceive the problems of the parole board process to involve parole board members, as the response suggesting the need for better parole board members was least often cited by the subjects.

The fourth question of the survey concerned the respondents' primary rationale used to justify parole as an early release mechanism. In accordance with the responses to several of the previous questions, parole board members suggested that the well-being of the offender and the safety of society were of utmost importance. By most often noting rehabilitation and integration as the most important factors in their primary rationales used to justify parole, respondents demonstrated consistency in their concerns about the parole process. Interestingly, punishment, which previously was ranked low in importance by the parole board members, was noted by the respondents as the third most important rationale used to justify parole as an early release mechanism. Although the percentage of respondents who supported punishment as an important rationale to justify parole was significantly lower than those who felt reintegration and rehabilitation were most important (a difference of roughly 35 and 50 percent, respectively) and nearly half (48.9 percent) of the respondents ranked it last or second to last in importance, punishment was selected as more important than incentive, sentencing disparities, and prison overcrowding, the latter being the least often used rationale to justify parole as an early release mechanism. These findings appear to be in contrast to previous research which suggests that parole has been employed pragmatically to promote prison discipline (i.e., incentive) and reduce prison overcrowding (e.g., Abadinsky, 1978).

The fifth question addressed the parole board members' perceptions of various rationales for the continuance of parole. Once again, many of the results are in accordance with the responses to the previous questions in the present research. For example, once again parole board members appear to be concerned about the reintegration and rehabilitation of the parolees (which were most often noted as "very" or "somewhat" important) while the continuance of parole as a justification for helping to relieve prison overcrowding and as an extension of the length of punishment were most often noted as somewhat, or very unimportant. Interestingly, in contrast to previously noted results which suggested that parole board members generally do not support parole as an incentive for good behavior in prison, 86.9 percent of the responses to this question noted that respondents felt that the continuance of parole was either very, or

somewhat important as an incentive for good behavior in prisons. Thus, it appears that as a rationale to justify parole, parole board members are slightly more supportive of the rationale of punishment than that of incentive for good behavior. Yet, with regard to the rationale for the continuance of parole, the opposite is true. Further research in this area could shed greater insight into why such is the case.

A great deal of research has focused upon the issue addressed in the sixth and final question of the present research, which concerned the subjects' perceived importance of various criteria in the decision to grant parole. In general, with regard to the issue being addressed/measured in the present question, many of the findings in the present research have been suggested by previous research in the area. For example, the criteria that were most often (at least 90 percent) cited as very, or somewhat important were as follows (in order of noted importance): 1) the inmate's prior record; 2) the nature and circumstances of the inmate's offense; 3) the inmate's institutional adjustment; 4) the inmate's attitude toward the victim; 5) the inmate's insight into the causes of his or her past criminal conduct; 6) the adequacy of the inmate's parole; and 7) the inmate's psychological health. Other release criteria noted in the present research and consistent with previous research that were found to be somewhat, or very important, although not to the extent as the previously noted criteria (at least 80 percent but less than 90 percent), were the inmate's support in the community and the inmate's attitude toward authority, which were noted as being of equal importance.

The factors that appeared to be of least importance to parole board members in their decision to grant or deny parole also were consistent with the previous literature and, in part, with the above-noted research findings in the present study. For example, prison condition was the release criterion that was generally noted as least important in parole decision-making. This finding is consistent with the findings of the present research and, by its absence in the previous literature concerning the factors related to parole decision-making, is consistent with prior research. An inmate's health and public notoriety of the case also appear to be of little consideration in the parole decision-making process, and they, too, are absent in the previous research. Finally, based on the present results, an inmate's age does not appear to be an overly important release criteria although Heinz et al. (1976) noted that the relationship between age and parole is curvilinear with the youngest and oldest having the greatest chance of parole.

Conclusion

As noted above, many of the results regarding the factors used in the parole decision-making process are consistent with previous research on the topic (c.f., Thomas, 1963; Gottfredson, Wilkins, Hoffman, & Singer, 1973; Heinz, et al., 1976; Stanley, 1976; Carroll, 1978; Schmidt, 1979; Carroll, Weiner, Coates, Galegher, & Alibrio, 1982; Carroll & Burke, 1990; Turpin-Petrosino, 1993). Also, a general analysis of the

results of the present study provides the reader with several recurring "themes." First, it appears that parole board members feel that they should not be the only ones involved in the parole process. They appear to request the support of the general public and government officials to make the parole process more effective and more efficient and to provide efficacious post-release support. To what extent, and in what manner, this support need be supplied requires further research. Accordingly, parole board members do not appear to perceive the problems currently facing parole boards as internal ones. In other words, they do not perceive the need to increase the standards for, or professionalism of, parole board members.

Second, it appears that parole board members have a concern for the well-being of both individual offenders and the general public. In a period when punishment and punitiveness are becoming more the norm than the exception in the criminal justice system, some may find comfort in the finding that parole board members would rather "correct" than punish offenders. As we gravitate toward punishment as our correctional philosophy, it will be interesting to see what impact, if any, this concern has on policy or decision-making in the parole process.

Finally, it appears that parole board members do not perceive their role in the criminal justice system as one that is, or should be, affected by prison overcrowding. Contrary to conventional wisdom, parole board members do not perceive the parole process as one that is, or should be, dictated by the increasing prison population. Whether the perceptions of the parole board members directly reflect "reality" requires further research in this particular area. Historically, the parole process has been affected by the prison population (e.g., Jackson et al., 1989; Abadinsky, 1978), yet the respondents in the current study do not seem to believe that that is the situation.

Through obtaining a better understanding of parole decision-makers, we hope that we can obtain a better grasp of the current state of parole and of how parole board members wield their discretion. Although we would like to think of such personnel as automatons who consistently make unbiased, accurate, and consistent decisions each time they are presented with a case, such a case is highly unlikely. As Gottfredson and Ballard (1966, p. 112) ask, "Are differences in parole decisions associated not only with the characteristics of the offenders themselves (or their crime) but also with the persons responsible for the decisions?"

It is quite likely that despite our attempts to limit parole board member discretion—for example through parole guidelines—the answer to Gottfredson and Ballard's question is "Yes, the characteristics of parole board members do play a role in the parole process." As such, the present research has attempted to obtain a better grasp of the beliefs, perceptions, and values of those largely involved in the decision-making process, with the ultimate goal of furthering our understanding of the parole process.

Working in a branch of corrections, parole board members often face the difficult task of deciding if an offender is ready to return to society. They must determine if the person is "corrected." The innumerable variables in predicting human behavior can quite easily lead to an incorrect decision. When that incorrect decision results in physical harm, or even loss of life, it becomes easy to point fingers at the persons responsible, whether directly or indirectly, for this harm. Yet, such is the role parole board members play daily. With such decision-making powers and the amount of discretion inherent in the position, the need for understanding what "makes these people tick" becomes vital. We hope that we have added to this understanding.

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