



The Boston Reentry Study: Finding Work After Prison

Over 600,000 men and women are released from prison each year in the United States, returning mostly to poor inner-city communities. The formerly incarcerated face the challenge of social integration after prison – of establishing ties to families, households, and the labor market. The transition from prison also presents challenges to the families and communities that must provide housing, work, and safety for those who have often spent many years in incarceration. In this way, incarceration has become intimately tied to the experience of poverty in America. A collaborative research project involving Harvard University's Program in Criminal Justice and the Massachusetts Department of Correction studied the process of community return after incarceration. Beginning in May 2012, the Boston Reentry Study followed 122 men and women leaving state prison in Massachusetts for communities in the Boston area. Respondents were interviewed five times over 12 months: in prison just prior to release, and 1 week, 2 months, 6 months, and 12 months after prison release. Interviews aimed to examine the employment, family life, housing, and health of men and women just released from prison. Interview data are linked to administrative records

and proxy interviews to supplement the information on an elusive and high-risk population. The study's key objectives were to demonstrate high rates of retention in a panel survey for this critical but hard-to-reach population, and to build a rich data set that details the social contexts of those released from incarceration. The interview response rate over the course of the study was 94 percent, and over 90 percent of respondents completed the final 12-month interview.

Research Findings

Employment posed a serious challenge for the men and women in the sample, particularly just after release. Figure 1 shows the percentage of the sample in paid employment by gender, age, race, and reported mental illness/substance abuse. By the first week, only 18 percent reported paid employment. By 2 months, the number of people working more than doubled, but still a majority was not employed. From six months to one year, a little more

Ricky, age 36, on maintaining his work-release job:

"You know people are scared. You know, it's their first time doing the program and working with us. They don't know what to expect from us once we go home. They could deal with us because they had some type of control...I just kept pushing them like all you have to do is give me an opportunity. Give me a chance and I can prove to ya'll."

This research brief is one in a Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston series prepared by the Boston Reentry Study (BRS) based on a longitudinal survey conducted in 2012-2013. The BRS was conducted by Bruce Western (Harvard University), Anthony Braga (Rutgers University), and Rhiana Kohl (Massachusetts Department of Correction). Bruce Western can be reached by mail: 79 John F. Kennedy Street, Cambridge, MA 02138; by phone: (617) 495-8697; or by email: western@wjh.harvard.edu.

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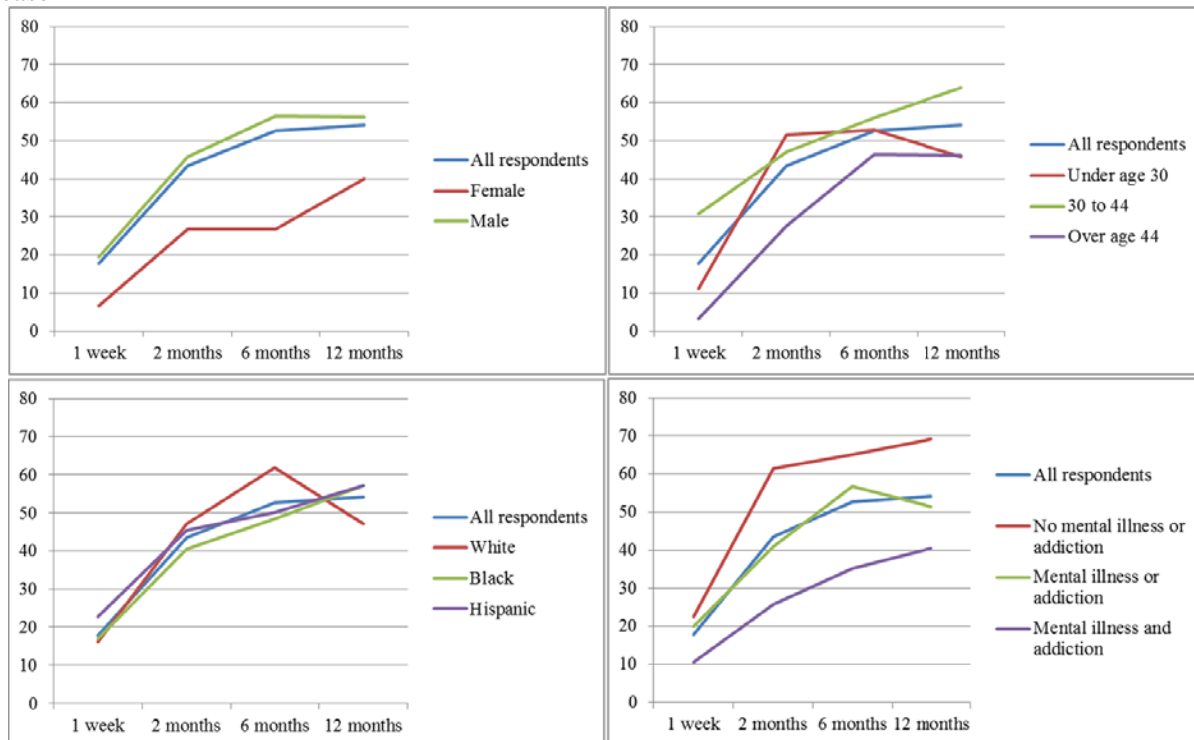
Boston Reentry Study

More information on the Boston Reentry Study can be found at <http://scholar.harvard.edu/brucewestern/boston-reentry-study>.

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Figure 1: Percentage of respondents in paid employment, one week, two months, six months, and twelve months after prison release



than half of respondents reported paid employment. Employment rates were lower for women than men—about a quarter of the women in the sample were working by 6 months compared to 57 percent of men. Older respondents had initial hardships with finding work, whereas those between 30 and 44 years old tended to report higher rates of paid employment. Employment rates showed little enduring variation by race and ethnicity, but individuals with reported histories of mental illness and addiction had consistently lower than average rates of paid employment.

While respondents often struggled to find work, we observed good jobs and stable employment in a few cases. Union membership, for example, often brought higher wages and more consistent work. Patrick, a white male in his early 30s, became a union member after his release with the help of his father, who was also a member. While Patrick struggled with relapse and drug addiction, his union membership offered him a stable job and livable wages. Patrick maintained his job with the union from the two-month through the 12-month interview. Work release programs, which allow certain inmates to find jobs in the community while they are incarcerated, also contributed

to greater financial stability during the transition out of prison. Ricky, a respondent in his 30s, kept his work release job after his release from prison. By the six-month interview Ricky had been promoted and was able to buy his own car. While not all respondents kept their work release jobs after their release as Ricky did, work release participants left prison with much higher savings. Respondents who participated in work release report having an average of \$4,152 in their account on the day of their release, while those who did not report an average of \$573. Out of the 122 respondents interviewed, 29 participated in a work release program.

Union members and work release participants comprise a minority of respondents. By contrast, many respondents maintained tenuous employment doing day labor or working on specific construction projects that only lasted until the task was completed. Malcolm, a black respondent in his 20s, pieced together his employment working several different temporary jobs. While he reported that he was employed at the six-month interview, he had not been able to get hours at any of his jobs in several weeks, and was unsure if he still held a position at any of them. The stability of employment, for those who had it, showed great variation throughout the sample.