Four Thousand Voices: Self-Reported Barriers to Reentry

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IN 2005, A MAN addicted to cocaine walked into state prison, leaving behind a job, a family, and a less than ideal peer group. Fourteen years later, following completion of his sentence, he was released into a changed world and faced the fact that those released from custody recidivated 66 percent of the time (Langan & Levin, 2002). This high likelihood of a commission of a new crime is driven by several barriers that those reentering society face. Saddled with a felony conviction, a drug addiction, a lack of education, and a strained relationship with his family, this man struggled to find employment and reestablish positive relationships.

This man is not unique. Each day, hundreds of thousands reenter society across the country following a felony conviction (Hughes & Wilson, 2003). Each face their own set of challenges (Visher & Travis, 2011). Typically, on parole or probation, their worlds have changed dramatically as they struggle to successfully reestablish themselves in their communities (Travis, 2005; Iwamoto et al., 2012). The perceived and real obstacles they must overcome, as they assimilate back into society, are often daunting.

Five in six (83 percent) individuals who spend time in prison are arrested for a new crime at some point following their release from incarceration (Alper, Duruse, & Markman, 2018). Four in nine (44 percent) are arrested at least once within a year of release (Alper, Duruse, & Markman, 2018). These numbers are staggering and reflect the extraordinary challenges individuals face when reentering society. They also account for a significant amount of the crime that communities experience (Hunt, Iaconetti, & Maass, 2019; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001; Stattin & Magnusson, 1989). As a result, society has a strong interest in helping these individuals succeed. To do that, those engaged in this effort must understand the actual and perceived challenges that reentrants face.

Drug addiction, antisocial peers, difficulty in obtaining employment, and a limited education have been identified as specific challenges faced upon release from incarceration (Travis, 2005; Mears & Barnes, 2010; Wilson & Petersilia, 2011; Delgado, 2012; Hinton, 2016). More specifically, upon reentry, many returning to the community are ready and willing to put in the work to obtain a reliable job (Cook et al., 2015). However, individuals often have trouble securing and maintaining employment, despite how important a job is to a successful transition back to the community (Travis et al., 2001). Limited prospects, due in part to perceptions and lack of trust of ex-felons by employers, await prisoners and convicted felons upon reentry (Oluwasegun & Ritter-Williams, 2019).

Compounding those barriers are often a lack of appropriate clothing and desired image (Smiley & Middlemass, 2016) and specialized training (Pati, 2009). Hindering their prospects further are the lack of resources they need to print resumes or search for an online job listing, or even the ability to travel to the interview due to lack of transportation or bus fare (Wilson & Davis, 2006). These individuals often lack work experience prior to prison, and without job skills, while saddled with a new felony record, limited opportunities exist (Williams, 2007; Wilson & Davis, 2006). Yet, employment benefits reentrants in more ways than keeping the individual busy and financially sound: It builds confidence and connection within the community (Capece, 2020). Researchers have identified the correlation between employment and recidivism (Sampson & Laub, 2003; Petersilia, 2009; Delgado, 2012).

Individuals released from prison often face challenges associated with substance abuse (Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2002). Studies have shown that almost 70 percent of individuals released from prison have drug or alcohol abuse problems (Taxman et al., 2013). Although some prisons attempt to address substance abuse problems for certain defendants while incarcerated, researchers have found that only about 13 percent participate in these programs (Taxman et al., 2014). Those with substance abuse problems are more likely to recidivate (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Baillargeon et al., 2009). In 2008, researchers conducted a meta-analysis and discovered that the odds of involvement in crime are close to three times higher for those dealing with substance abuse (Bennett, Holloway, & Farrington, 2008).

A lack of education is another barrier faced by individuals attempting to reintegrate

into society after incarceration. Reentrants are already at a disadvantage through possession of a criminal record, but, in many cases, they also lack marketable qualifications such as a high school diploma or college degree. Education is important not only for its own sake but for the expanded opportunities of employment it may provide (Rosenbaum, Kariya, Settersten, & Maier, 1990). Studies have shown that a focus on education while incarcerated can aid individuals upon release (Andrews & Bonta, 2006). A lack of education may limit job opportunities (Williams, 2007), and studies suggest that 95 percent of reentrants report needing additional education upon release from prison (Visher & Travis, 2011), although life skills education alone is not shown to help reduce recidivism (MacKenzie, 2006).

Researchers have stressed the importance of strong and prosocial networks (Mallik-Kane & Visher, 2008; Niebuhr & Orrick, 2020) and the difficulty in finding them (Leverentz, 2011; Cobbina, 2010). Developing prosocial bonds (Sampson & Laub, 1993) and avoiding enablers (Leverentz, 2006) of new criminal activity are essential in preventing a return to prison. Researchers have focused on the importance of family in grounding individuals in the community (Farrall, 2004). Both formal and informal support are needed (Vaux, 1988; Burnett, 2009; Griffiths et al., 2007), but many of the family members and friends the ex-felon returns to struggle with similar issues of addiction, unemployment, a poor support system, and limited education (Heidemann et al., 2014; Cobbina, 2010).

Perhaps as important as these actual barriers are the perceived barriers that reentrants encounter. Those obstacles that reentrants anticipate may cause them to alter behavior or succumb to challenges. The current study furthers the knowledge base with respect to reentry and recidivism by seeking to understand which barriers individuals perceive to be the most burdensome, using a comprehensive survey of over 4,000 respondents who had been convicted of a felony and are now starting on their road to reentry, while on parole or probation. Those surveyed lived in Dallas County, one of the most populous counties in the country. Their responses spanned one year. They were asked to identify the barriers they anticipated and to provide additional biographical information, such as the amount of time they spent incarcerated and their age.

Methods and Analysis

As part of the Dallas Project Safe Neighborhood efforts, the United States Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Texas created a program designed to reduce recidivism rates, and more specifically, violent recidivism. In designing the program, the USAO sought to respond to the high number of convicted state felons committing violent crimes after release from incarceration in the Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) area. This program was offered once a month on a set day for consistency. Attendees for this program were parolees that have been released within 60 days from incarceration from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) or those who had been recently placed on probation. On average, 386 individuals attend the program in Dallas each month. A total of 4,249 attended in 2019.

The program has four goals: (1) welcome offenders back into the community; (2) educate recently released probationers and parolees about the coordinated effort of federal, state, and local authorities to prosecute crimes to the fullest extent of the law; (3) educate offenders about the legal consequences of committing a crime as a convicted felon; and (4) inspire them to seek and use reentry services to better their lives.

Agency representation during this program included the local police department, the local Sheriff's Department, the District Attorney's Office, the state and federal probation office, the parole office, the U.S. Marshal, the FBI, the ATF, and social service providers. The presentation was designed to engage the partners by introducing their agencies on a positive note as well as educating them on the consequences of committing crimes as a convicted felon. This presentation was interspersed with video clips from formerly incarcerated individuals (who had attended this program in the past) with encouragement to seek services and become productive citizens. The social service providers discussed upcoming events such as job fairs and educational opportunities as well as how to access services that are available.

At the end of the program, attendees were asked to complete a bilingual survey (English or Spanish) created by the United States Attorney's Office that asked participants for their feedback on the program, their age, whether they were being released on parole or probation, their length of time incarcerated, if any, and their perception of the biggest barrier to success upon reentry. Options for the biggest barrier included: (1) lack of employment opportunities, (2) returning to the same peer group, (3) drug addiction, and (4) level of education. Respondents were asked to select one barrier.

Surveys were completed on paper and turned in to program administrators as respondents left the room. Thus, a single survey exists for each respondent. Those surveys were then compiled, reviewed, and tabulated in order to review summary results.

The survey was designed and distributed prior to researcher involvement and the decision to use this data for analysis. Therefore, I had no input in creating the survey or suggesting questions. Respondents were not offered an opportunity to enter a barrier not listed and were not offered the opportunity to order the barriers in increasing or decreasing order. However, scholars can still significantly benefit from the self-reported results of over 4,000 individuals entering society on their perceived barriers to successful reentry.

Results

On average, 386 individuals attended the reentry program in Dallas each month. A total of 4,249 attended in the 12 months in this study ranging from January 2019–December 2019. (One month a year the reentry night is not held.) A total of 4,004 reentrants completed the survey. Of those that completed the survey, 1,716 (42.8 percent) reported being released on parole within the past 60 days and 2,288 (57.14 percent) reported being recently placed on probation. A total of 1,618 (40.4 percent) participants reported having spent no time in prison; 1,556 (38.8 percent) reported having spent less than 5 years; 513 (12.8 percent) reported having spent between 5-10 years in prison; and 317 (7.9 percent) reported having spent more than 10 years in prison. Of the 4,004 attendees who completed the survey, 845 (21.1 percent) reported currently being between 18-25 years in age; 1,456 (36.3 percent) reported being between 26-35 years in age; 920 (22.9 percent) reported being between 36-45 years in age; and 783 (19.5 percent) reported being over 45 years in age. Demographics of the responding population are presented in Table 1 (next page).

In response to the biggest barrier, 2,220 (55.4 percent) reported that they viewed "employment" as the biggest barrier to their successful entry/completion of parole/probation; 924 (23.0 percent) reported that returning to the same peer group was the biggest barrier to successful entry/completion of parole/probation; 494 (12.3 percent) reported that education is the biggest barrier to their

successful entry/completion of parole/probation and 366 (9.1 percent) reported that drug addiction was the biggest barrier to their successful entry/completion of parole/probation. Results are presented in Table/Figure 2.

Two by two chi-squares were run to determine statistical significance of age on the respondent's perception of the biggest barrier and again on the length of time in prison on their perceived biggest barrier. Both were related to the biggest barrier in a significant way using a p < .05 critical probability. Among those who served 10 years or more in prison, 62 percent (198/317) of them identified employment as their biggest barrier, compared to 52 percent (840/1618) of those who did not serve time in prison. Of those who served no time in prison, 8 percent (132/1618) said that drug addiction was their biggest barrier compared to 10 percent (161/1556) who served some but less than 5 years in prison. Results are presented in Table 3.

With regard to age, of those 18-25, 53 percent (449/845) found employment to be

the biggest barrier, and 59 percent (545/920) of those 36-45 reported the same. Over 23 percent of those aged 18-25 reported peer group as their biggest barrier, and 22 percent of those over 45 said the same. Over 16 percent (140/845) of those ages 18-25 reported education being the biggest barrier, while only 11 percent (167/1465) of those 26-35 and 11 percent (100/920) of those 36-45 reported the same. A little over 7 percent (63/845) of those 18-25 reported drug addiction as their biggest barrier where 10 percent (92/920) of those 36-45 and 11 percent (85/783) of those over 45 reported the same. See Table 4 for results.

Discussion

As an initial matter, the volume of respondents in this survey is by itself informative. Over 4,000 individuals facing reentry responded. These individuals were each facing the challenges associated with reentry following a criminal conviction. The responses were entered and obtained over a twelve-month period and all were residents of Dallas County—which represents the eighth largest county in the United States.

Each survey in this study was completed following an hour-long presentation in which eventual respondents were exposed to a discussion of the consequences related to their criminal conviction. This discussion included vignettes of individuals who also were reentering following a conviction, and what barriers they faced upon reentry. The training also included a discussion of relevant laws that might impact someone who had been convicted of a felony, and what individuals might

do to avoid recidivism. Interspersed in the training were motivational speeches by law enforcement professionals and individuals who work in the reentry field on a regular basis regarding what they had each observed about recidivism and successful reentry. Finally, the respondents were offered resources to overcome potential barriers. Only at the conclusion of each of these steps did the respondents complete the survey, asking them to identify the biggest barriers they might face in reentering society following a criminal conviction.

This process is notable for discussion because one might assume that such an hour-long training might provide respondents with the opportunity to soberly, and without distraction, reflect on their own individual situation. Thus, the responses may be deemed even more credible or accurate than if the survey was simply completed in some unrelated proceeding or in an attachment to a larger set of questions or issues. The focus and narrowed scope of the training and the subsequent responses adds to the likelihood that such responses are an accurate reflection of the perceived barriers of reentry.

With a few notable exceptions, the self-identified barriers to success seemed to vary little when compared to the amount of time an individual spent incarcerated or the age of the respondent. In largely similar proportions, respondents across the board (in terms of incarceration time and age) ranked the barriers in the following order: (1) employment, (2) peer group, (3) education, and (4) drug addiction. The last two factors were identified in roughly the same percentages and were

TABLE 1:
Survey Respondents' Demographic Information

n=4,004

Demographic	n	%
Age (years)		
18-25	845	21.1
26-35	1,456	36.3
36-45	920	22.9
Over 45	783	19.5
Years of Incarceration		
None	1,618	40.4
Less than 5 Years	1,556	38.8
5-10 Years	513	12.8
More than 10 Years	317	7.9

TABLE 2:
Most Significant Self-Identified Barrier to Success Upon Reentry

Identified Barriers		
Employment Opportunities	2,220	55.4%
Returning to the Same Peer Group	924	23.0%
Education	494	12.3%
Drug Addiction	366	9.1%

TABLE 3:
Relationship between Length of Prison Time and Biggest Self-Identified Barrier to Reentry

	No Time in Prison	Less than 5 Years	5-10 Years	More than 10 Years
Employment	52.0%	56.9%	57.6%	62.0%
Drug Addiction	8.0%	10.0%	8.9%	8.0%
Peer Group	23.5%	22.8%	23.0%	20.5%
Education	16.4%	9.8%	9.5%	8.5%

TABLE 4:
Relationship between Age and Biggest Self-Identified Barrier to Reentry

	18-25	26-35	36-45	Over 45
Employment	53.0%	54.0%	59.1%	56.0%
Drug Addiction	7.0%	9.0%	11.0%	11.0%
Peer Group	23.0%	25.5%	19.0%	22.0%
Education	16.0%	11.0%	10.9%	11.0%

transposed in certain situations.

The data reveal that obtaining "employment" or adequate "employment" is considered the biggest barrier to reentry success. This finding was consistent regardless of the amount of time that a respondent had spent in custody, although the percentages rise with the amount of time in prison. Those who served no time in prison identified this as the single biggest barrier to successful reentry in 52 percent of responses. That number rose, in steps, by a total of 10 percent, as the amount of time a respondent spent incarcerated increased. For example, individuals who had been incarcerated for more than 10 years identified "employment" as the biggest barrier in 62 percent of responses, whereas those who had not been imprisoned at all identified employment as the biggest barrier in 52 percent of responses. This result, in some ways, appears logical. A longer period of incarceration often suggests a more serious offense of conviction, which may provide concern to potential employers (Chiricos, Barrick, Bales, & Bontrager, 2007; Wilson & Davis, 2006; Travis et al., 2001; Cook et al., 2015).

Similarly, those who have been incarcerated for a longer period of time may have fewer contacts with potential employers, less relevant or recent experience, and fewer skills desired by potential employers (Cook et al., 2015; Pogorzelski, 2004; Hinton, 2016). In fact, perhaps the only surprising result of this portion of the survey is that the delta (10 percent) was so small between those who had not been incarcerated and those who had been incarcerated for more than 10 years.

Inversely, and again unsurprisingly, those respondents aged 18-25 identified "education" as the biggest barrier to reentry success in 16 percent of responses. This was higher than any other age group. This concern is well founded. As other scholars have studied, a felony conviction can impact access to education (Petersilia, 2005; Viser et al., 2008). Those in the other three age groups, (26-35, 36-45, and over 45) each identified "education" as the biggest barrier in only 11 percent of responses. "Estimates show that roughly one-third of 25–34-year-old male inmates in state prisons held a high school diploma compared to 90 percent of males of the same age in the general population" (Berg & Huebner, 2011: p. 388; Uggen, Wakefield, & Western, 2005).

Of those who were incarcerated more than 10 years, 8 percent (27/317) stated that "drug addiction" was their biggest barrier to reentry success. This finding might be surprising,

although investigative reports often find prisoners have access to illegal drugs while incarcerated (Snell, 2020; Browder, 2019). The fact that these re-entering individuals still view their drug addictions—which in most cases should not have been fed for at least a decade—as their biggest obstacle to success speaks volumes about the power of addiction and the recognition of that power by those who are so addicted.

The result may also be partially explained by the fact that drug crimes account for a significant, if not the most significant, number of sentences that are over 10 years. A Bureau of Justice report in 2017 showed that 21 percent of sentenced people in state prisons and local jails are incarcerated for crimes committed to obtain drugs or money for drugs (Bronson, Stropp, Zimmer, & Berzofsky, 2017). Nearly 40 percent of those incarcerated for property crimes and 14 percent of those locked up for violent crimes reported that they had committed their most serious offense as a result of drugs (Bronson et al., 2017). Through simple extrapolation, that equates to over 473,000 people who are incarcerated as a result of drug addiction. Similarly, drug addiction and incarceration are highly correlated. Fifty-eight percent of state prisoners and 63 percent of sentenced jail inmates met the criteria for drug dependence or abuse, while only 5 percent of the total general population over the age of 18 met that same definition (Bronson et al., 2017).

"Drug addiction" was identified as a more identified barrier of success by older respondents than younger respondents. Only 7 percent of those aged 18-25 identified "drug addiction" as the biggest barrier to reentry success compared to 11 percent of those aged 45 or older. This may be explained by the additional life experience or maturity of older respondents, but it does not appear to be explained by rates of addiction. As groups who focus on drug addiction report, roughly 7.3 percent of those aged 18-25 battle an illicit drug use disorder, whereas only 2 percent of those over 26 years old face a similar addiction (Bronson et al., 2017).

"Peer Group" was identified as the biggest barrier to reentry success in roughly the same percentages across all age groups. This result seems surprising, given that studies have shown that peers tend to have a greater influence on younger individuals than those of a more senior age (Shapiro & Schwartz, 2001). However, because some of the older individuals may have been in prison for an extended

time, their criminogenic peer group may be their only connection in the community.

The way to successfully address the issues these individuals are recognizing may be to bridge reentry programs from in prison and continue them on the outside. (Clear, Rose, & Ryder, 2001; Seiter & Kdela, 2003; Hunter et al., 2016). However, the survey results suggest it is worthwhile to talk with individuals years before they are released to address primary concerns and how they might meet them head on when they are released.

Conclusion and Limitations

Self-report studies in criminal justice have been used and relied upon since the 1930s (Junger-Tas & Marshall, 1999), but a fair criticism of the survey addressed here is that the design of the survey caused the results to be less instructive than they otherwise could be. The author was not consulted or involved in the design of the survey. Instead, the author became aware of the existence of the surveys and survey results after they were completed. Instead of simply identifying the single biggest barrier to reentry success, if respondents had been asked to rank those barriers, additional information and conclusions could have been gleaned.

Similarly, additional barriers could have been added as options, such as "housing" and "transportation." The "employment" choice could have been expanded upon to allow respondents to respond with greater detail. Respondents could have identified whether obtaining any employment was the barrier or whether obtaining better employment posed a larger obstacle. Nevertheless, obtaining written responses from more than 4,000 individuals returning to the community after a felony conviction, either through probation or upon release from prison, is one way to better understand and inform research on the perceived struggles these individuals face in entering society.

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