

# BALTIMORE PRISONERS' EXPERIENCES RETURNING HOME

## KEY FINDINGS & POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Most prisoners are optimistic about life after release, but anticipate challenges and obstacles they will need assistance to overcome. This suggests that most prisoners are open and responsive to both prerelease and postrelease assistance.
- Families, including intimate partners, are an important source of housing, emotional support, financial resources, and overall stability for returning prisoners. Strategies and resources designed to strengthen family ties during the period of incarceration and after release (e.g., prerelease family conferencing sessions) are recommended.

(Continued on page 2)

The Urban Institute, in 2001, launched a four-state, longitudinal study of prisoner reentry entitled *Returning Home: Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry*, beginning with a pilot study in Maryland. The first phase of the pilot study involved an analysis of preexisting corrections data to describe Maryland's incarceration and reentry characteristics (see sidebar "A Portrait of Prisoner Reentry in Maryland"). The second phase of the pilot study involved a series of interviews with prisoners returning to the city of Baltimore, once before and twice after they were released. In addition, interviews with family members of some of the prisoners in our sample were conducted, as were focus groups with residents in two of the Baltimore communities that are home to high concentrations of returning prisoners (see sidebar "Returning Home Study Methodology" for more details about the data collection). This research brief documents the findings from phase two, the primary data collection effort, and provides empirical evidence on the actual experiences of prisoners returning home to Baltimore. It presents key findings on a range of reentry challenges faced by these men and women following their release from prison and describes factors that relate to postrelease success or failure, such as employment, substance use, individuals' expectations and attitudes, health challenges, criminal histories, and the family and community contexts awaiting them.

The purpose of this research brief is to provide a foundation for policy conversations about ways to improve the chances of successful reintegration for prisoners coming home, whether to Baltimore or to other communities around the country. In many respects, our findings confirm conventional wisdom about the challenges posed by the experiences of incarceration and reentry. Yet, in a number of ways, this empirical examination of those experiences has yielded results that are at odds with official documentation or challenge established notions about policy interventions designed to ensure that returning prisoners will find jobs, stay away from crime and drugs, find housing, secure health care, and reunite with families (see sidebar "Interpreting this Report"). It is our hope that listening to the experiences of those prisoners—and members of the communities to which they return—will point the way to policy innovations that are empirically grounded, pragmatic, and reflective of the realities of reentry.

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## PREPARATION FOR REENTRY

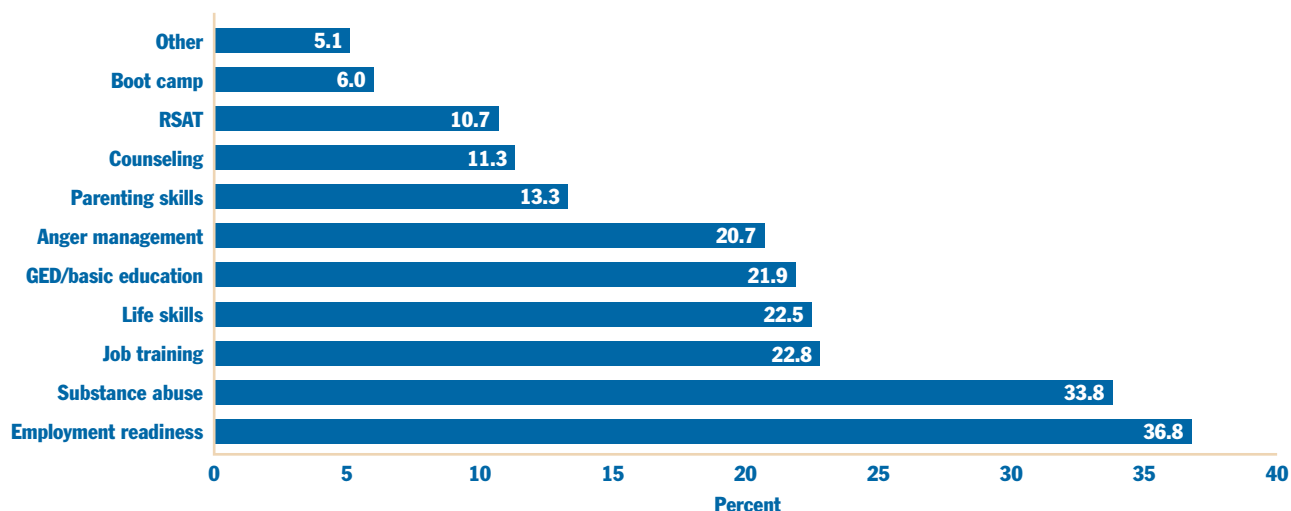
Prior research has shown that prison programs can contribute to positive postrelease outcomes, including reduced recidivism.<sup>1</sup> In Maryland, the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) offers a range of programs, including education and job training, substance abuse treatment, and counseling, as well as a small reentry program offered in conjunction with the Enterprise Foundation. However, fiscal constraints preclude the DPSCS from offering programs to all prisoners who are eligible and interested in participating, and in many cases prisoners are on waiting lists and leave prison before they are able to benefit from these programs. While the respondents in our sample were not necessarily

involved in programs at every point of their incarceration, just over two-thirds of respondents (70 percent) reported participating in at least one program over the course of their terms. Average participation rates varied by program; the largest shares (around one-third) participated in employment readiness and substance abuse treatment programs (figure 1). Respondents who participated in educational/employment and substance abuse treatment programs were more likely to have been sentenced to longer prison terms and to have completed longer stays in prison than nonparticipants. In addition to traditional in-prison programs, one-quarter of respondents returning to Baltimore reported participating in a prerelease program designed to help them prepare for their return home.

### KEY FINDINGS & POLICY IMPLICATIONS

*(Continued from page 1)*

- Returning prisoners who were employed after release relied largely on personal connections—family, friends, former employers—to find their jobs. Social connections that are maintained during the period of incarceration can be an important resource in helping released prisoners achieve positive postrelease outcomes.
- Those who found jobs after release were more likely to have participated in work release jobs while incarcerated than those who did not find jobs. Expanding work release programs could increase the employment rates of former prisoners in Baltimore.
- A significant proportion of returning prisoners are clustered in a handful of neighborhoods with high levels of social and economic disadvantage. Residents in two such neighborhoods cited parenting skills, education, more intensive policing, and a greater involvement of public agencies as areas in which to focus reentry efforts. In addition, these focus group participants believed that the community should play a role in addressing the needs of ex-prisoners.
- Younger respondents, those with family members with substance abuse problems, and those with friends who sell drugs were more likely to use drugs after release. Substance abuse treatment programs should target ex-prisoners with these characteristics.
- Those who participated in substance abuse treatment programs while in prison were less likely to use drugs after release than those who did not participate. Expanding such programs could improve postrelease outcomes for more returning prisoners.
- Respondents reported suffering from various physical and mental health conditions and most did not have health care coverage after release, suggesting the need for better coordination between prison health services and community health services.
- One-third of respondents were rearrested within six months. Those who were rearrested were younger, had more extensive criminal histories, and were more likely to engage in substance use before prison. These data on recidivism underscore the overarching policy challenge of finding ways to slow down the revolving door of individuals cycling in and out of prison. One place to start is to focus squarely on the high levels of drug and alcohol use reported by prisoners themselves.

**FIGURE 1. Share of Respondents Who Participated in Each Type of In-Prison Program (N=150)**

Note: Only those prisoners interviewed after release were asked about participation in in-prison programs. RSAT = Residential Substance Abuse Treatment program.

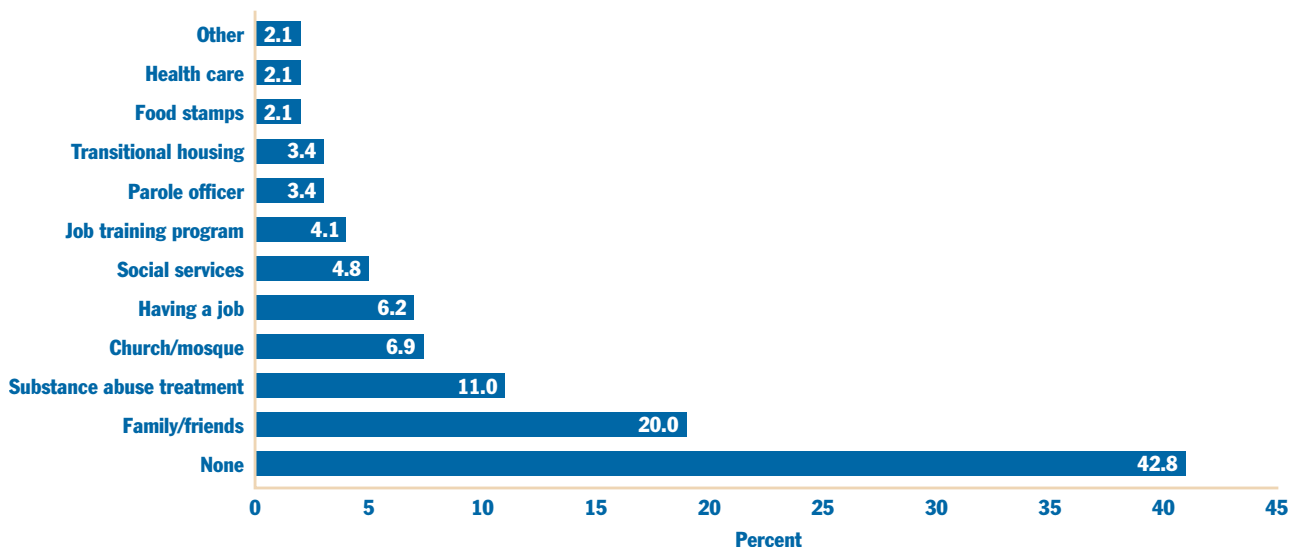
After their release, almost half of respondents (45 percent) reported participating in a community program or accessing services in the community, including substance abuse treatment, employment skills, and adult education. When we asked respondents in an open-ended question what services, programs, or support had been most helpful to them since their release, however, the largest share (41 percent) said nothing had been helpful to them (figure 2). When asked what programs or services they would have liked to have but did not receive, the most common responses related to employment: 26 percent of respondents said they would like job training and 13 percent simply said they wanted a job. Other common responses included housing (11 percent), education (10 percent), health care (8 percent), and substance abuse treatment (6 percent).

### ATTITUDES AND EXPECTATIONS

Prior research has suggested that prisoners' attitudes about themselves will affect their ability to reunite with their families and communities and that prisoners with higher levels of motivation are more likely to succeed after prison.<sup>2</sup> We asked respondents in our sample a number of questions to assess their attitudes towards

#### REENTRY DEFINED

The concept of "reentry" is applicable to a variety of contexts in which individuals transition from incarceration to freedom, including release from prisons, jails, federal institutions, and juvenile facilities. We have limited our scope to those sentenced to serve time in state prison in order to focus on individuals who have been convicted of the most serious offenses, who have been removed from communities for long periods of time, who would be eligible for state prison programming while incarcerated, and who are managed by state correctional and parole systems. In Maryland, some jail inmates are also housed in state prisons because of acts of the 1991 General Assembly which resulted in the State of Maryland taking over operation of the Baltimore City detention center complex, processing, detaining, and managing Baltimore Region arrestees [An. Code 1957, art. 41, § 4-1403; 1999, ch. 54, § 2.]. However, jail inmates are housed for relatively short periods of time, are not eligible for most prison programming, and are not subject to post-release supervision. Thus, the challenges of jail reentry are substantively different than those of prisoner reentry and are not addressed in this report.

**FIGURE 2. Services, Programs, or Support That Have Been Most Useful to Respondents at One to Three Months after Release (N=145)**

Note: Some respondents gave more than one answer, so percentages do not total to 100 percent.

themselves as well as their readiness to change. Respondents' answers demonstrated high levels of self-esteem. For example, over 90 percent agreed with the statement "I have much to be proud of" and only 6 percent agreed with the statement "I am basically no good." Respondents' prerelease responses also provided a strong indi-

cation of readiness to change. Almost all respondents *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that they wanted to get their lives straightened out (92 percent), wanted to give up hangouts and friends that got them in trouble (87 percent) and were "tired of the problems caused by the crimes [they] committed" (82 percent).

### INTERPRETING THIS REPORT

Research projects of this complexity are often accompanied by a number of caveats with regard to interpreting and generalizing findings, and this study is no different. The intent of *Returning Home* is to present the released prisoner's point of view—a perspective that is not often represented in criminal justice research. This view is derived from self-reported data—a time-honored method of gathering sensitive information from a variety of types of respondents, and one that enables rigorous analyses that cannot be achieved through ethnographic studies, focus groups, and various forms of journalism. The perspective on the experience of reentry presented here is both distinctive, because it is richer than official data, and representative, because it tells the story of all prisoners reentering society, rather than just those who avail

themselves of social services or who are rearrested. Thus, the findings in this report are authentic, drawing from the perspectives of those who are experiencing first-hand the challenges of prisoner reentry. That said, it is important to bear in mind that, as with all self-reported data sources, our findings may include factual inaccuracies resulting from lapses in memory and the potential for respondents to overreport or underreport certain types of experiences and behaviors (e.g., crime and substance use). Nonetheless, we are confident that the findings presented here are valid and as accurate as those collected through comparable studies that rely upon self-reported data.

Readers may view some findings in this report as new, different, or at odds with other descriptions of the reentry

(Continued on page 5)

We were also interested in respondents' expectations for life after prison. When asked how easy or hard they expected it to be to accomplish reentry challenges like finding jobs and housing, reuniting with family and friends, and avoiding returning to prison and parole violations, over two-thirds of respondents expected it to be *pretty easy* or *very easy* to deal with each issue. The one notable exception was paying off debts, which 62 percent of respondents expected to be *pretty hard* or *very hard* to do. Although respondents were largely optimistic about dealing with reentry challenges after release, the majority of respondents also indicated that they wanted help dealing with these issues. For instance, 80 percent of respondents said they would need *some help* or *a lot of help* getting more education, and of those who did not already have housing lined up, 73 percent said they would need help doing so.

### MOMENT OF RELEASE

Very little is known about the circumstances surrounding the first hours, days, and weeks after a prisoner's release. Anecdotal evidence suggests that prisoners may be released at any hour of the day and night, without any place to go, and may spend the first few nights homeless on the streets. The experiences of those in our sample

were somewhat encouraging with regard to these initial reentry challenges. Nearly all respondents were released during daylight hours. This timing is advantageous for released prisoners—they are more likely to be able to meet immediate needs if they are released when parole and social service agencies are open and transportation is more readily accessible. Friends or family met 39 percent at the prison gates, while the remainder took buses or taxis, or walked to their destination. Most of the respondents in our sample were released from facilities located in Baltimore City, close to the communities where their families live. On their first night out, none of the prisoners in our sample slept on the streets (figure 3), with the largest share (42 percent) staying at the homes of family or friends.

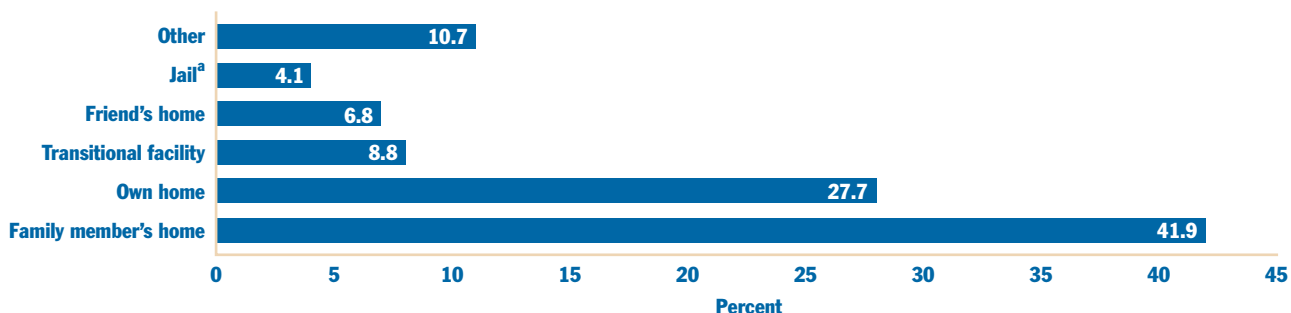
Most prisoners in our sample left prison with few financial resources; however they had many financial obligations. In many cases the only money Maryland prisoners receive upon release comes from their own accounts, often savings from work release jobs. Some prisoners also receive “gate money” from the prison upon their release. Eighty-five percent of respondents reported having some money at the time of their release in amounts ranging from \$3 to \$2340, with a median of \$40.<sup>3</sup>

experience. This can be explained in part by the fact that prisoners' perspectives of that experience differ in some respects from the assumptions shared by many researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. It is also likely that some commonly held views of prisoners are shaped by the experience of working with certain sub-populations rather than with all those who return to society. Again, it is important to keep in mind that this research is based on a sample of all prisoners being released rather than a sample of released prisoners who have sought services in the community.

It is also important to recognize that this sample represents a reentry cohort rather than a portion of the existing “stock” population of prisoners, and this distinction has implications for our findings. For example, prior Maryland Division of Correction data indicate that only 3 percent of prisoners par-

ticipate in work release programs, whereas this study found that almost 33 percent of our sample did. Both statistics are correct, but the former represents a snapshot of the work release experience at any given moment, while the latter statistic represents the percentage of released prisoners who participated in work release over time. In addition, the *Returning Home* focus is on prisoners returning to Baltimore and specifically on those serving prison rather than jail terms.

Thus, readers of this report should view it as presenting a unique perspective, namely that of a representative sample of those released prisoners sentenced to time in state prison and returning to Baltimore. Our cautions about the study's limitations with regard to sample size or other methodological concerns should not detract from the study's potential to inform practice and policy and shed light on the experience of leaving prison.

**FIGURE 3. Where Respondents Went after Release (N=148)**

<sup>a</sup>Respondents with outstanding charges for other crimes.

## FAMILY

Very little research has been devoted to exploring the role a released prisoner's family might play in the reentry process. Respondents in our sample had high expectations of the support they would receive from their families after release: 42 percent of respondents expected family to be a source of financial support during the first month after release and two-thirds of respondents expected to live with family after release. These expectations were largely realized. At one to three months after release, 51 percent of respondents were receiving some financial support from family and 80 percent were living with family members. Overall, 89 percent of respondents *agreed or strongly agreed* that their family had been as supportive as they had hoped after their release from prison. In fact, most respondents reported close family relationships before, during, and after prison, with over 40 percent reporting four or more close family relationships at every data collection point.

This finding on close family relationships has implications for successful reentry. Our analysis found that respondents with closer family relationships, stronger family support, and fewer negative dynamics in relationships with intimate partners were more likely to have worked after release and were less likely to have used drugs. It is evident that family support, when it exists, is a strong asset that can be brought to the table in the reentry planning process. However, one must also recog-

nize that prisoners' expectations about the family support they will receive after release may differ from what they actually experience, resulting in strained family relationships and negative reentry outcomes.

Respondents' families may pose some liabilities as well: 60 percent of respondents had someone in their family who had been convicted of a crime, and over one-quarter reported having three or more family members with a substance abuse or alcohol problem. Family members may also influence negative reentry outcomes, such as a return to substance use or criminal activity. Reentry planning focused on both positive and negative family influences is essential.

## SUBSTANCE USE

Much prior research has documented a link between substance use and criminal activity. For example, earlier studies have found that more than half of state prisoners nationally reported that they were under the influence of drugs or alcohol at the time they committed the offense that led to their imprisonment<sup>4</sup> and that three-quarters of soon-to-be-released prisoners have a history of drug or alcohol use.<sup>5</sup>

The substance use histories of respondents in our sample mirror these national data, with a significant share of respondents reporting extensive and serious involve-



### A PORTRAIT OF PRISONER REENTRY IN MARYLAND

This report stems from an earlier research inquiry based on an analysis of data on Maryland prison and release trends over time, as well as data on the cohort of Maryland prisoners released in 2001. The results were published in a research monograph entitled *A Portrait of Prisoner Reentry in Maryland*. Some key findings from the *Portrait* include the following:

- Between 1980 and 2001, Maryland's prison population more than tripled. This growth is attributable to more people, specifically drug offenders and parole violators, cycling through prison on shorter sentences.
- Maryland's rising prison population has placed a strain on already limited programming resources. Substance abuse, vocational training, and educational programs are available to a small fraction of those being released.
- The number of people released from Maryland prisons reflects prison population trends: 9,448 individuals were released from Maryland prisons in 2001, more than double the number released in 1981.<sup>a</sup> One-third had been serving time for drug offenses; assault, larceny, and robbery were the next most common conviction offenses.
- About half of the prisoners released in 2001 had served two years or less in prison; the largest share (37 percent) served between 40 and 60 percent of their sentences. More than two-thirds of released inmates in Maryland had served prior terms in prison, and one-fifth had violated their parole at some point in their criminal careers.

<sup>a</sup> While these numbers represent individuals released from Maryland *prisons* after serving sentences of one year or more, it is important to note that approximately 5,000 additional inmates are released to Baltimore City each year after having served *jail* time (typically less than a year). The sizable number of jail releasees makes the impact of reentry on Baltimore even greater.

- The largest share (59 percent) of released inmates who returned to Maryland returned to Baltimore City. Within Baltimore City, releasees were further concentrated in a handful of communities—Southwest Baltimore, Greater Rosemont, Sandtown-Winchester/Harlem Park, Greenmount, Clifton-Berea, and Southern Park Heights—most of which are also characterized by high levels of poverty and crime. Some services for ex-prisoners are located in close proximity to the neighborhoods with high rates of releasees, but other services are located in central Baltimore, which is some distance from these high-concentration areas.

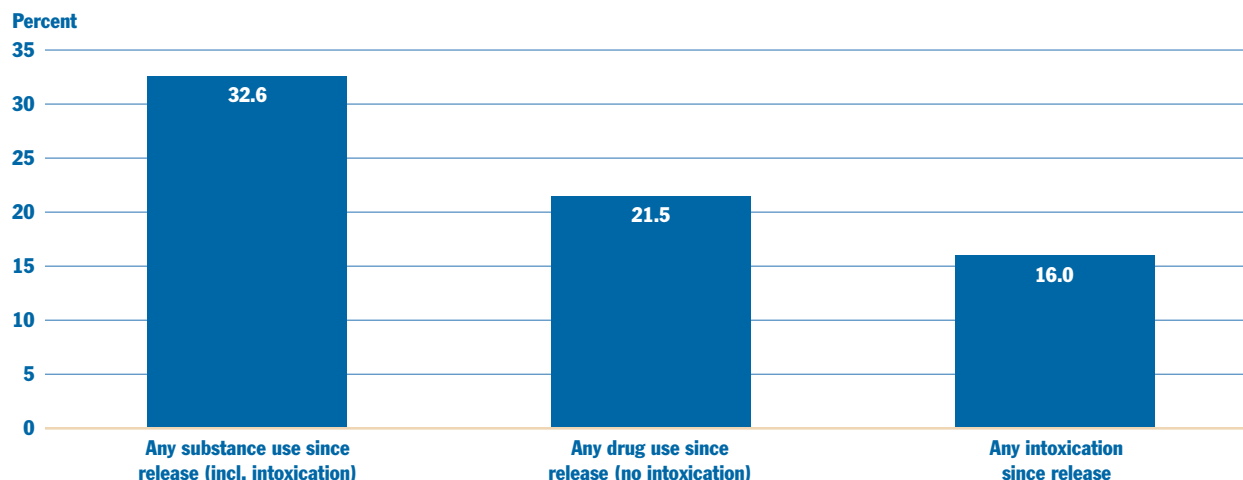
The *Portrait* also raised some questions that could only be answered through one-on-one interviews with released prisoners over time, including:

- To what extent are prisoners returning to Baltimore drawn back into a pattern of drug use and how many of them seek and receive treatment for these problems?
- What factors predict employment outcomes for returning prisoners, both in terms of finding and keeping a job?
- What are the family circumstances of released prisoners, and what role does family play in either facilitating or preventing substance use, employment, and recidivism?
- What is the impact of prisoner reentry on communities, and how do community characteristics affect individual postrelease outcomes?

The answers to these and related questions are found within this research brief.

ment with drugs and alcohol. The majority reported some drug (78 percent) or alcohol use (61 percent) prior to prison, with cocaine and heroin topping the list of drugs by type. Thirty percent of respondents reported using cocaine on a daily basis, and 41 percent reported using heroin daily in the six months before entering

prison. Preprison drug and alcohol use caused serious problems for most respondents. Nearly two-thirds of drug users reported arrests caused by their drug use,<sup>6</sup> about one-half of drug users reported relationship problems and arguments at home about their drug use, and about one-third of drug users reported missing

**FIGURE 4. Substance Use at One to Three Months after Release (Ns = 141, 149, and 144, respectively)**

Note: Those classified under “intoxication” reported that they had drunk alcohol to the point of being drunk.

school and/or work and losing jobs as a result of their drug use.

During the time they spent in prison, respondents whose primary conviction was for a drug offense (possession or sales) were more likely to have participated in a drug or alcohol treatment program (35 percent) than those convicted of other offenses (20 percent).<sup>7</sup> Overall, 27 percent of respondents reported participating in a specific drug or alcohol treatment program, and 46 percent reported having attended Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous (AA/NA) while in prison.<sup>8</sup>

During the first few months after their release, one-third (33 percent) of respondents reported some type of drug use or intoxication (figure 4). A number of factors were related to postrelease substance use. Younger respondents were more likely to use drugs after release than were their older counterparts. Those who used drugs after release were more likely to have family members with substance abuse problems and friends who used or sold drugs. Respondents who received substance abuse drug treatment in prison were more successful at avoiding subsequent drug use than those who did not.

## FINANCIAL OBLIGATIONS AND SUPPORT

As noted earlier, most of the prisoners in our sample expected that personal finances would be a significant challenge to them, and this belief was confirmed during postrelease interviews. When interviewed one to three months after release, about half of respondents (47 percent) said it had been hard to support themselves financially. Nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of respondents reported owing some amount of debt for supervision fees, child support, and other costs. Average monthly debt exceeded average monthly income for 20 percent of respondents interviewed at one to three months after release. Respondents’ expectations for financial support were different from what they experienced after exiting prison. Before release, the largest share of respondents (54 percent) expected to rely on their own jobs for financial support; after release, the largest share (51 percent) relied on their families for financial support (figure 5).

## EMPLOYMENT

Prior research has suggested that finding and maintaining a legitimate job after release can help reduce the



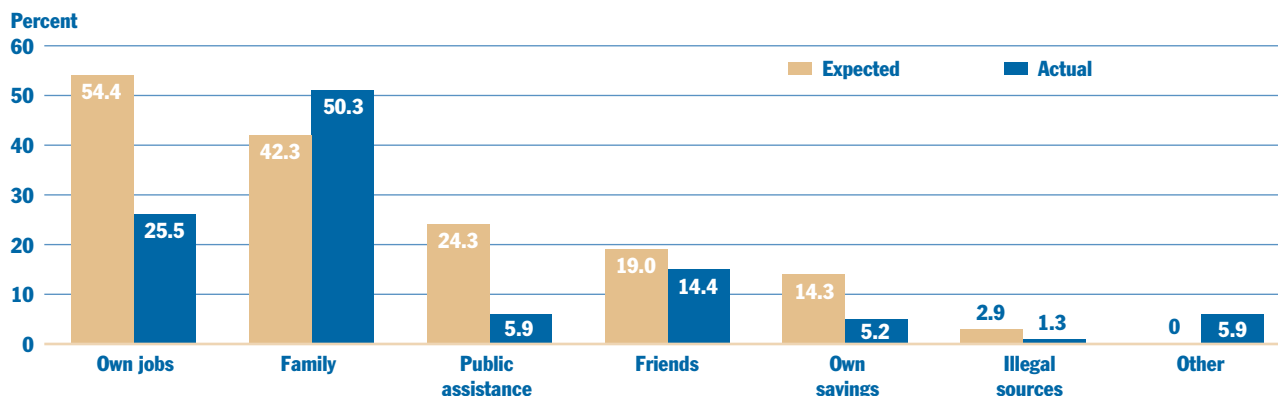
### PROFILE OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS

- Initial sample consisted of 324 respondents—235 males and 89 females.
- Median age of respondents was 34 years old.
- Eighty-three percent of respondents were black, 8 percent were white, and the remaining 9 percent identified with other racial groups. Three percent of respondents were Hispanic.
- Half (49 percent) had a drug offense as their most serious charge for their current prison term, while one-fifth (22 percent) were serving time for violent offenses such as assault and robbery, and another fifth (21 percent) were in prison for property offenses such as burglary and theft.
- The median time served was 18 months.
- Most respondents (84 percent) had at least one prior conviction, with 42 percent reporting four or more prior convictions. Over two-thirds (68 percent) had served time in prison before, and over one-quarter (28 percent) had spent time in a juvenile correctional facility. More than half (56 percent) had their first arrest before they reached the age of 18.
- The majority reported some drug (78 percent) or alcohol use (61 percent) prior to prison, with cocaine and heroin topping the list of drugs by type.
- Less than half (42 percent) had high school diplomas before entering prison and nearly half (45 percent) had been fired from a job at least once.
- Over two-thirds (68 percent) were single and had never been married.
- At the time they entered prison for this term, 59 percent had children under the age of 18.

chances that an ex-prisoner will reoffend,<sup>9</sup> but research also points to the challenges ex-prisoners often face when seeking employment after release.<sup>10</sup> Although almost two-thirds of our respondents were employed right before entering prison, their employment histories were characterized by high turnover rates and poor job records. Less than half (42 percent) had high school diplomas before entering prison and roughly the same share

(45 percent) had been fired from a job at least once. During the time they spent in prison, some respondents participated in programs aimed at improving job skills and preparing for postrelease employment. About a third of the prisoners interviewed said they participated in employment readiness programs, about a quarter participated in a job-training program, 13 percent increased their education level while in prison, and one third held an in-prison job.

**FIGURE 5. Expected (N=272) and Actual (N=151) Postprison Financial Support During First Month Out**



In addition, one-third of the respondents indicated that they held a work release job while they were incarcerated; on average, these work-release jobs lasted 17 weeks.

After release from prison, respondents had some success in finding employment. About two-thirds of respondents (64 percent) reported having worked for at least one week since their release. At the first postrelease interview, 44 percent were currently working at a job for at least 40 hours per week. The most common jobs included warehouse or factory work (29 percent), food service industry jobs (20 percent), and construction/demolition (11 percent). Our analysis found a number of significant differences between those who were employed full time after release and those who were not. Specifically, fully employed respondents were more likely to be male and to have held a work release job, and also held preprison jobs for longer continuous periods than those who were not fully employed.

Our interviews also yielded important insights into the job-finding methods that were most successful for released prisoners. Although most respondents expected to use newspaper ads or yellow pages to find jobs, the methods that proved to be successful for those who found jobs typically involved personal connections. Roughly half of those who worked for at least one week talked to friends (54 percent) or relatives (45 percent) to find their jobs, and a sig-

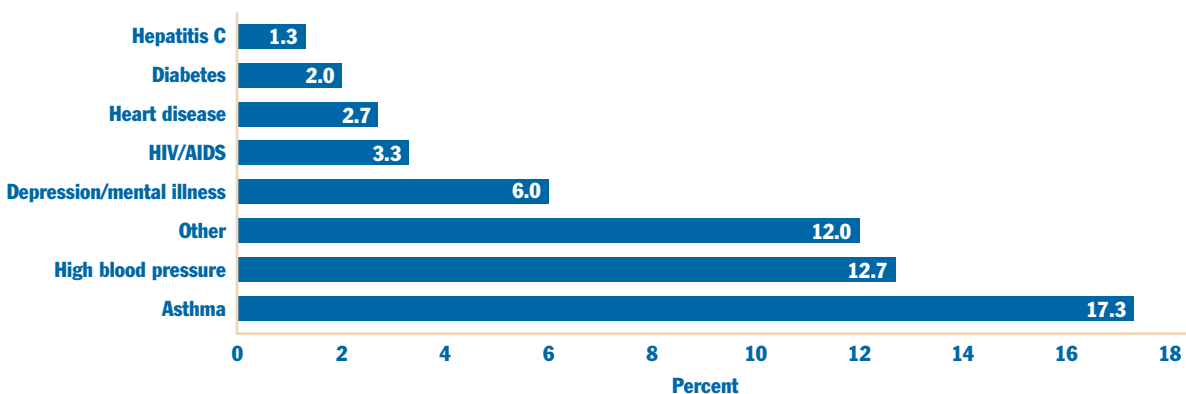
nificantly larger share of respondents who had worked talked to their former employer to find a job as compared with those who had not worked since release.

## HEALTH

Prisoners nationwide suffer from mental disorders and chronic and infectious diseases at greater rates than the general population.<sup>11</sup> With regard to the respondents in our sample, almost 40 percent reported suffering from at least one physical ailment, with asthma and high blood pressure being the most commonly reported (figure 6). Furthermore, one-fourth were taking medication for a chronic health condition prior to and during incarceration, and two-thirds of those individuals (66 percent) were still taking prison-distributed medications after release. Nonetheless, most respondents expressed positive opinions about their physical health prior to, during, and following their stay in prison. Eighty-eight percent of those interviewed prior to release rated their health as good or excellent, as did 80 percent of those interviewed after release.

After release, few respondents had health insurance or medical coverage. Only 10 percent reported having private insurance or belonging to an HMO and even fewer respondents (less than 5 percent) reported receiving a

**FIGURE 6. Share of Respondents Reporting Each Health Condition (N=150)**



disability pension, being on Medicaid or Medicare, or having Veteran's Administration (VA) health insurance. Despite the lack of health insurance among respondents, more than half of the sample (58 percent) had visited a doctor for a general checkup since their release from prison, and 19 percent had used emergency room services for a health-related problem.

In terms of mental health treatment, exactly half of all respondents indicated a desire for help obtaining counseling following their release from prison, and 30 percent wanted help acquiring mental health treatment. Less than 10 percent of the respondents interviewed after release believed they suffered from mental illness, although about one-quarter of respondents reported experiencing serious anxiety and depression. About one in five respondents reported experiencing symptoms associated with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the one to three months after their release, including feeling upset when reminded of prison, avoiding thinking or talking about prison and having repeated, disturbing memories, thoughts, or images of prison.

### PAROLE SUPERVISION

The majority of Maryland prisoners are released to some period of supervision in the community, where they are subject to a series of parole conditions and supervised by the Maryland Division of Parole.<sup>12</sup> General parole conditions for those on supervision in Maryland include reporting to a parole officer as directed, working regularly, and not possessing, using, or selling drugs or weapons.<sup>13</sup> In our sample, just over three-quarters (77 percent) were released to some period of parole supervision. About one-fifth (21 percent) completed their sentences (i.e., "maxed out") and, therefore were released with no further supervision, and the remaining 2 percent escaped from custody.<sup>14</sup>

Of those on parole, over half (60 percent) reported meeting with their parole officer within 24 hours of their release, and almost all (94 percent) reported meeting with their parole officer within one week of their release.

After the initial meeting, most reported to their parole officers two to three times per month and met with them for 30 minutes or less each time. Eight percent reported having never seen their parole officer, even at four to six months after release. While in prison, most of the respondents (82 percent) who expected to be on parole believed that their parole officers would be helpful in their transitions back to the community. Although parolees generally gave high marks for the professionalism of their parole officers after release, only about half felt that supervision had helped with their transitions, or would help them to maintain drug- and crime-free lives.

Many respondents had a history of parole violations. At the time of the prerelease interview, 27 percent of respondents reported having had their parole revoked in the past. One to three months after release, most of the respondents under supervision reported being in compliance with their parole conditions, but one-fifth (21 percent) reported violating at least one. The most frequently violated conditions were attending substance abuse treatment (10 percent), staying away from drugs (9 percent) and working regularly (6 percent).

In addition to respondent self-reports, we obtained records from the Maryland Division of Correction to measure the extent to which respondents were returned to prison for violating conditions of their release. We found that 10 percent of all *Returning Home* respondents were returned to prison within six months for violating parole conditions.

### CRIMINAL INVOLVEMENT

A recent Bureau of Justice Statistics study found that within three years of their release, over two-thirds (68 percent) of released prisoners nationally were arrested for a new crime and over half (52 percent) returned to prison. Such repeat involvement with the criminal justice system was strongly evident in our sample. The criminal histories among those in the Baltimore sample were extensive and began early in life: most respondents (84 percent) had at least one prior conviction, with 42 percent reporting four

or more prior convictions. Over two-thirds (68 percent) had served time in prison before, and over one-quarter (28 percent) had spent time in a juvenile correctional facility. More than half (56 percent) had been first arrested before they reached the age of eighteen. In addition, almost two-thirds (60 percent) had at least one family member who had been convicted of a crime, and 40 percent had a family member who was serving a prison sentence at the same time as they were. In spite of their extensive criminal histories and high levels of familial criminal involvement, 78 percent of respondents expected that it would be *pretty easy* or *very easy* to stay out of prison following their release.

Yet despite optimistic expectations, within six months of their release from prison, roughly one-third (32 percent) of the sample had been rearrested for at least one new crime,<sup>15</sup> 10 percent reconvicted for a new crime, and 16 percent reconfined to prison or jail for the new crime conviction or technical violation (figure 7).<sup>16</sup> Drug charges accounted for half (51 percent) of the reconvictions after prison release. Although we only followed released prisoners for six months after release, it is likely that additional instances of reconvictions and reconfine-ments have occurred since then.<sup>17</sup>

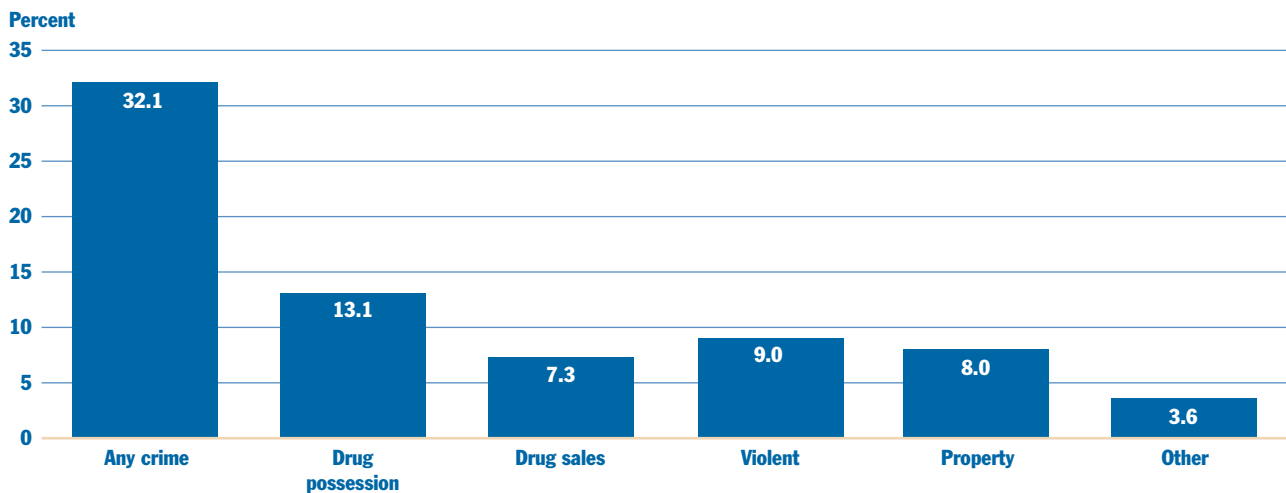
There were several significant differences between respondents who were rearrested after release and those who were not (figure 8). In addition to being more likely to have used drugs preprison and postrelease, rearrested respondents were younger, less spiritual, less likely to believe in the legal system,<sup>18</sup> less likely to be on postrelease supervision, and were more likely to think their neighborhood was not a good place to find a job as compared to those who were not rearrested.

Of those who were sent back to prison, 45 percent were returned for technical violations,<sup>19</sup> 26 percent were returned following an arrest for a new crime, and 26 percent were returned following a conviction for a new offense.<sup>20</sup> Very few prisoners were returned to prison within the first three months after release; the overwhelming majority of returns to prison occurred in the fourth, fifth and six months after release, with about 3 percent of the study sample being returned in each of these months.

## COMMUNITY

Findings from *A Portrait of Prisoner Reentry in Maryland* indicate that a large proportion of ex-prisoners are con-

**FIGURE 7. Arrests in the First Six Months after Release (N= 299)**



Source: Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services.

**FIGURE 8. Profile of Rearrested Respondents (N=96) Compared to Those Not Rearrested (N=203)**

- ◆ Younger current age
- ◆ Male
- ◆ Younger at first arrest
- ◆ Higher number of prior arrests, convictions, and incarcerations
- ◆ More likely to have used drugs preprison and postrelease
- ◆ More likely to have used more than one drug at the same time postrelease
- ◆ Less likely to be on postrelease supervision
- ◆ Fewer job opportunities in postrelease neighborhood
- ◆ Less likely to believe in the legal system
- ◆ Less spiritual

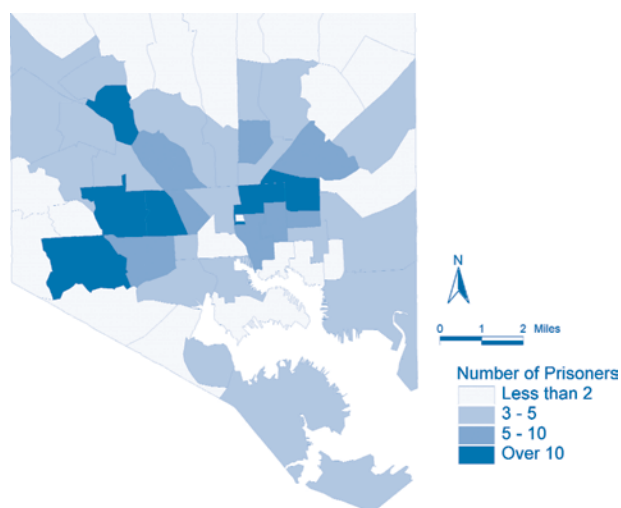
centrated in disadvantaged communities with high levels of poverty and unemployment. Recent research has also shown that prisoners who return to communities with higher levels of concentrated social and economic disadvantage have higher rates of recidivism,<sup>21</sup> and that communities affected by high levels of incarceration and reentry experience higher crime rates than would be expected.<sup>22</sup> In our sample, 36 percent of the prisoners returned to only 6 of 55 Baltimore communities—Sandtown-Winchester/Harlem Park; Greenmount East; Southern Park Heights; Greater Rosemont; Clifton-Berea; and Allendale/Irvington/South Hilton (figure 9). All six of these communities have above-average rates of unemployment, percent female-headed households, and percent of families living below the poverty level.

While it may not be surprising that the communities to which released prisoners in our sample returned are disadvantaged, an analysis comparing respondents' preprison and postrelease addresses contradicts conventional thinking that prisoners return to their old neighborhoods upon release from prison. In fact, half of the respondents in our sample did not return to the neighborhoods they had lived in before prison. Those who settled in new neighborhoods

indicated that they were either living with family members who had moved to new addresses or they wanted to avoid trouble. Of those who did return to their former neighborhoods, slightly more than half thought the community was safe. By contrast, three-quarters of those who resided in a different community thought their new neighborhood was safe, suggesting that they chose a new home in part because it presented fewer risks. Although some respondents may have chosen to return to a new neighborhood to avoid trouble, those who did so did not have significantly lower recidivism rates than those who returned to their original neighborhoods.

We were also interested in how returning prisoners affect their communities. To this end, we conducted focus groups with residents of two neighborhoods in Baltimore—Sandtown/Winchester and Southern Park Heights—that are home to large numbers of returning prisoners. Residents of both neighborhoods were in general agreement that crime and disorder caused by returning prisoners present major challenges for their communities and that younger returning prisoners, especially those who have served relatively short sentences, are the most difficult segment of the population to assist. By

**FIGURE 9. Distribution of 283 Released Prisoners Who Returned to Baltimore City, by Neighborhood, 2003**



contrast, residents were much more sympathetic toward prisoners returning after longer prison sentences. In addition, residents felt that drug trafficking was largely to blame for the problems in their communities and that the police have not done enough to address these concerns. Proposed solutions to the problems associated with prisoner reentry included better parenting, better education, more intensive policing, and a greater involvement of public agencies—particularly the corrections system—in preparing prisoners for their return home. In addition, focus group participants believed that the community should continue to work to address the needs of ex-prisoners.

## SUMMARY

This report is the second product of the *Returning Home* study in Maryland. The first, *A Portrait of Prisoner Reentry in Maryland*, documented the trends in incarceration and reentry rates in the state, and the changing policy environment regarding sentencing and parole supervision. Where that report was broad, this one has been deep, describing the process of leaving prison and returning home through the lens of the experiences of prisoners returning to Baltimore. In some respects, the perspectives and experiences of these released prisoners are consistent with conventional wisdom on the topic of reentry. They typically come to prison with significant prior involvement in crime and drug and alcohol use. They typically have family members who are incarcerated or using drugs or alcohol. They typically have low levels of education and poor work histories. And after they return home, they are rearrested at high rates and sent back to prison.

In addition to adding important details and nuances to conventional wisdom, this report also presents new insights that are very provocative. Families matter in ways that have not been documented before. Communities are an important piece of the reentry picture. Many prisoners move into new communities, seeking environments that are better suited to their successful reintegration. Many view their communities as safe and resourceful, but plagued by drug markets and poor police service. In addition, returning prisoners have

complicated health challenges, and health care is poorly coordinated beyond the prison walls.

This report is intended to provide a foundation for policy conversations about ways to improve the chances for successful reintegration for prisoners coming home to Baltimore. Listening to the experiences of those prisoners—and members of the communities to which they return—should point the way to policy innovations that are empirically grounded, pragmatic, and reflective of the realities of reentry.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Sarah Lawrence, Daniel Mears, Glenn Dubin, and Jeremy Travis. 2002. “The Practice and Promise of Prison Programming.” Research Report. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute; Gerald Gae, Timothy Flanagan, Lawrence Motiuk, Lynn Stewart. 1999. “Adult Correctional Treatment.” In *Prisons*, edited by Michael Tonry and Joan Petersilia. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; James Lynch and William Sabol. 2001. “Prisoner Reentry in Perspective.” *Crime Policy Report*, vol. 3. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

<sup>2</sup> Shadd Maruna. 2001. *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

<sup>3</sup> Ninety percent of respondents who reported having money at the time of release reported sums ranging from \$3 to \$600. The way the questions were asked in the survey does not allow us to clearly distinguish between gate money and other funds. See “Financial Obligations and Support” section for more information about other financial resources respondents had after release.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Mumola. 1999. “Substance Abuse Treatment, State and Federal Prisoners, 1997.” Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report. NCJ 172871. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.

<sup>5</sup> Allen Beck. 2000. “State and Federal Prisoners Returning to the Community: Findings from the Bureau of Justice Statistics.” Paper presented at the First Reentry Courts Initiative Cluster Meeting. Washington, DC April 13, 2001. Available at: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/sfrc.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> The way the question was posed does not enable us to distinguish whether such arrests were for drug-related crimes or other types of crimes.

<sup>7</sup> Drug or alcohol treatment programs offered in Maryland prisons include a residential substance abuse treatment (RSAT) and an intensive substance use treatment program designed for female prisoners.

<sup>8</sup> This question was asked during the prerelease interview (N = 324).

<sup>9</sup> Robert Sampson and John Laub. 1997. “A Life-course Theory of Cumulative Disadvantage and the Stability of Delinquency.” *Advances in Criminological Theory* 7: 133–161; Miles Harer. 1994. “Recidivism of Federal Prisoners Released in 1987.” Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Prisons, Office of Research and Evaluation; Christopher Uggen. 2000. “Work as a Turning Point in the Life Course of Criminals: A Duration Model of Age, Employment, and Recidivism.” *American Sociological Review* 65: 529–546.

<sup>10</sup> Harry Holzer, Steven Raphael, and Michael Stoll. 2003. “Employment Barriers Facing Ex-Prisoners.” Urban Institute Reentry Roundtable Discussion Paper. Available at: <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=410855>.

<sup>11</sup> National Commission on Correctional Health Care. *The Health Status of Soon-to-be-Released Inmates: A Report to Congress*, vol. 2. Available at: [http://www.ncchc.org/stbr/Volume2/Health%20Status%20\(vol%20\).pdf](http://www.ncchc.org/stbr/Volume2/Health%20Status%20(vol%20).pdf); Paula Ditton. 1999.

(Continued on page 16)



### RETURNING HOME STUDY METHODOLOGY

*Returning Home* is being implemented in two stages. The first stage was a pilot study in Maryland and the City of Baltimore, which was conducted from December 2001 through May 2003. The purpose of the pilot was to test research procedures being developed for the full study states using a reduced sample size, as well as to learn about the nature of prisoner reintegration in Maryland. The second stage involves implementation of the full research study in three additional states: Illinois, Ohio, and Texas. The full research design calls for a sample of 650 soon-to-be-released prisoners (450 men and 200 women), followed for 12 months after release and interviewed three times after the initial in-prison survey. In the pilot study in Maryland, our reduced sampling goal was 350 prisoners returning to Baltimore and two postrelease interviews within six months. As implemented, we surveyed 324 prisoners before release (235 men and 89 women).

Although the pilot study relied on a smaller sample size than the full study states, efforts were made to ensure that the men and women included in the sample were representative of all prisoners released to Baltimore. Our prerelease sample is generally representative of all state prisoners returning to Baltimore, with the exception that the *Returning Home* sample has fewer parole violators and more prisoners whose sentences expired than the general population of prisoners returning to Baltimore. Of the 720 soon-to-be-released prisoners returning to Baltimore whom we invited to orientation sessions to learn about the study, 396 did not attend or attended but refused to participate. When we compared these 396 nonparticipants to the 324 men and women who did participate, we found no significant differences between the two groups in terms of their age, racial distribution, number of prior arrests, and other characteristics. Participants had somewhat fewer prior incarcerations and served shorter terms in prison than nonparticipants, meaning that prisoners with more extensive criminal histories and more serious conviction offenses carrying longer terms may be somewhat underrepresented in our sample. Nonetheless, when we looked at

recidivism rates six months after release, participants and nonparticipants were rearrested, reconvicted, and recommitted at similar rates.

Locating released prisoners for the postrelease interviews was difficult, time-intensive, and costly. Because of limited resources and because it was a pilot study, we reduced the target sample goals for completing the postrelease interviews: the first postrelease interview (PR1) was conducted with 153 of the original respondents (47 percent) and the second postrelease interview (PR2) was conducted with 104 of the original respondents (32 percent). It was important for us to verify that respondents interviewed postrelease were a representative subsample of the 324 original participants. When we compared those who were interviewed at PR1 (n=153) to those who were not (n=171), we found virtually no significant differences between the two groups in terms of baseline characteristics (e.g., age, race, prior commitments, time served), and few differences in terms of prerelease interview responses. PR1 nonparticipants were somewhat more likely to have been rearrested after release and to have a higher number of rearrests, although not reconvictions or returns to prison. A similar analysis comparing those interviewed at PR2 (n=104) to those who were not (n=49) again found very few significant differences between the two groups. The relatively small sample of prisoners interviewed at PR2, however, limits our confidence in the analysis of data from that interview, so PR2 findings are not discussed in much detail in this report.

With regard to the family component of the study, the full design calls for a postrelease interview with a family member of every prisoner surveyed before release. For the pilot study, our goal was a sample of 50 family members; we ultimately interviewed 41 family members nominated by the prisoners in our sample. Since we considered the family component of the pilot study to be highly exploratory, the data gathered from those interviews are not discussed in this report. For more information about the *Returning Home* study methodology, please see chapter 2 of the full technical report, *Returning Home Maryland Final Report*, at [www.urban.org](http://www.urban.org).

“Mental Health Treatment of Inmates and Probationers 2000.” Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report. NCJ 174463. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.

<sup>12</sup> Both prisoners released by parole board decision and mandatory releases are supervised in the community for some period, and are subject to the same rules, regulations, and community supervision conditions.

<sup>13</sup> Nancy La Vigne and Vera Kachnowski. 2003. “A Portrait of Prisoner Reentry in Maryland.” Research Report. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

<sup>14</sup> These four prisoners were classified as “walk-offs” who absconded from a low-security environment such as work release.

<sup>15</sup> Based on an N of 299, representing the number of respondents for whom official record recidivism data were available.

<sup>16</sup> Both arrests and convictions were assessed using official records obtained from the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services.

<sup>17</sup> In fact, almost one-third of our respondents’ postrelease charges were still pending as of June 2003.

<sup>18</sup> For more information on respondents’ spiritual beliefs and attitudes toward the legal system, see chapter 9, “Attitudes and Expectations,” of the full technical report, *Returning Home Maryland Final Report*, at [www.urban.org](http://www.urban.org).

<sup>19</sup> We defined technical violations as returns to prison that were not preceded by an arrest. The DOC data did not provide any further information about the behavior underlying the violation.

<sup>20</sup> Additionally, one respondent was returned after escaping from custody and one respondent was returned for indeterminable reasons.

<sup>21</sup> Eric Baumer. 2003. “Community Context and Offender Recidivism in Illinois.” Unpublished Report.

<sup>22</sup> Todd Clear, Dina Rose, Elin Waring, and Kristen Scully. 2003. “Coercive Mobility and Crime: A Preliminary Examination of Concentrated Incarceration and Social Disorganization.” *Justice Quarterly* 20 (1).

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