

## **THE BOSTON FOUNDATION COMMUNITY SAFETY INITIATIVE**

In 2002, the Boston Foundation launched an Initiative to promote safety in Boston neighborhoods. The Community Safety Initiative seeks to reduce violent crime in Boston neighborhoods by maintaining collaborations and relationships among the key actors in the field (e.g., police, corrections agencies, neighborhood-based organizations, faith-based groups, etc.). It also addresses crime-related activities of high risk individuals, especially youth, and promotes reduction of the cultural tolerance of violence. The Community Safety Initiative accomplishes its goals through three types of activities: grantmaking; research and policy advocacy; and community convenings/discussions.

One component of this work is a series of Community Forums hosted by the Boston Foundation during 2003 and 2004. The discussions explore the nature of timely public safety issues, their impact on community life and public policy, and the potential for concerted action. Representatives of community groups, law enforcement organizations and a variety of public agencies join other interested citizens to learn about the issues. These forums are co-sponsored by the Gardiner Howland Shaw Foundation and coordinating partners MassINC and the Crime and Justice Institute.

### **OFFENDER RE-ENTRY**

The first two forums focused on the challenges faced by incarcerated offenders as they leave prison, along with the challenges for communities where they choose to settle. This issue has become more prominent in recent years. Rising crime rates in the 1970s and 1980s were tackled in part by an increased focus on “punishment”: harsher and longer prison sentences for many more people. Now, decades later, the offenders are finishing those sentences and returning to society. Some go back to the neighborhoods where they once lived. Some find families, friends, mentors or a church to help with the transition. However, for others, everyday life is full of frustration – housing is expensive, jobs are hard to find – and illegal activities are readily available once again.

During the same time period, “rehabilitation” was de-emphasized, and services for prisoners diminished in scope and quality. The availability of GED classes, substance abuse treatment, and job skills training decreased both within correctional institutions and at community agencies. Therefore, incarcerated individuals often leave prisons and jails with little preparation for their new lives – and they move to communities that have fewer resources than in the past.

Given the lack of resources for offenders, it is not surprising that many often recidivate (i.e., return to prison/jail after being released). The most recent statistics available from the Massachusetts Department of Corrections are for individuals released in 1996. Forty-five percent of these individual’s had returned to prison within three years of their release, with the majority (31%) returning to prison within 18 months of release<sup>(1)</sup>. The most frequent types of crimes committed by these individual’s which led to their reincarceration were person offenses (e.g., assault and battery, armed robbery, carjacking, etc.), property offenses (e.g., burglary, larceny, vehicle theft, shoplifting, etc.), and drug offenses (e.g., distribution or possession with intent to distribute, trafficking, unlawful possession of controlled substance, etc.). Nationally, recent recidivism rates from the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that 41% of individuals released on parole in 2002 returned to prison<sup>(2)</sup>.

This confluence of problems served as the impetus for two gatherings: a large forum of professionals who work on these issues, and a focus group of ex-offenders who could comment about their daily lives. The following provides a brief summary of each of the two offender re-entry sessions, common themes with supporting research, and opportunities for action.

## OFFENDER RE-ENTRY SESSIONS

***Prisoner Re-entry: What are the Next Steps?*** - This community forum was organized by MassINC and held at the Boston Foundation in January 2003. Following opening remarks by Lieutenant Governor Kerry Healey and Executive Office of Public Safety Secretary Edward Flynn, Professor Anne Piehl of Harvard's JFK School of Government moderated a panel discussion that included: Trusee Allah, Nation of Islam Ministry of Outreach; Tim App, Executive Director, Massachusetts Parole Board; Andrea J. Cabral, Sheriff, Suffolk County; Edward Davis, Superintendent of Police, City of Lowell; Paul Joyce, Chief of the Bureau of Special Operations, Boston Police Department; and Marie St. Fleur, Representative, 5<sup>th</sup> Suffolk District. A 20-minute Question and Answer session with the audience followed the panel discussion.

***Offender Focus Group*** - A focus group with recently released ex-offenders was organized by the Crime and Justice Institute and held at the New Covenant Christian Center in May 2003. Key public safety officials in positions to influence policy (i.e., Public Safety Secretary, Department of Corrections Commissioner, Parole Board Chair, Suffolk County Sheriffs Department Superintendent, Executive Director of the Criminal Systems History Board, Assistant U.S. Attorney, Assistant Attorney General, etc.) were invited to observe the focus group. This two-part event began with introductory remarks by Professor Frank Hartmann of Harvard's JFK School of Government and a guided discussion with 10 recently released ex-offenders facilitated by Wilbur Smart, (reentry case manager, Youth Opportunity Boston), and Kurt Francois, (reentry case manager, Community Resources for Justice). Immediately following, Professor Hartmann facilitated a discussion with the 33 invited public safety officials who had observed the focus group.

## COMMON THEMES SUPPORTED BY RESEARCH

Many different issues arose in both events, most of which focused on the rehabilitation or punishment of ex-offenders. Some important issues discussed were: a mandatory post-release supervision period for all ex-offenders; improving the services and resources available for ex-offenders post-release in the areas of housing, employment, and mental health and substance abuse; and increasing the collaboration and coordination of services among different agencies. All of these issues have significant policy implications, some of which are addressed in the last section of this report. What follows are the common themes, in no particular order, from these events with some supporting research.

### **Balance Between Rehabilitation and Punishment**

*"I think there are four key foundation blocks for the [re-entry] process... solid policy that articulates and balances the needs of public safety versus the needs of the offenders...; respect [for] the offenders that we deal with as people...; modeling of the behavior that we expect to see from the offenders...; [and a] belief in the offender's capacity to change..."* Forum Panelist

Historically, there has been much debate about whether the purpose of incarceration is to rehabilitate or punish individuals. The common belief among participants and attendees at the re-

entry sessions was that a balance is needed between rehabilitation and punishment. Offenders must be held accountable for their behavior, but they also must be given access to rehabilitative services such as treatment and skill-building programs. Thus, there must be a balance between public safety needs and the needs of offenders when developing policies that influence the services provided by prisons/jails.

In addition to policies, the balance between rehabilitation and punishment should also be reflected in the daily work of corrections, probation, and parole officers. Discussion at both events focused on the sometimes overlooked but highly important role these officers have in ex-offenders' lives. In addition to their role in monitoring ex-offenders, these officers can positively influence the lives of ex-offenders by: treating them with respect; acting as a role model by successfully doing their job everyday; and believing in an ex-offender's capacity to change.

### **Post-Release Supervision**

The transition back to the community is a crucial period for successful re-entry, and the balance of rehabilitation and punishment should extend beyond institutions into the community. One mechanism for fulfilling this function popular with both forum panelists and participants was a "mandatory" post-release supervision period for all ex-offenders leaving prison/jail. Discussion at the forum focused on developing legislation mandating some level of supervision for everyone leaving prison or jail, especially higher-risk ex-offenders.

Currently, many of Massachusetts' highest-risk ex-offenders, those most likely to commit further crime, leave prison/jail without any monitoring in the community. A common way that some of these individuals avoid post-release supervision is by choosing to "wrap" their sentences. "Wrapping" a sentence means that an offender chooses to complete his/her prison/jail sentence and declines an early release on parole. Parole, (a conditional release at the end of a prison term that is typically granted after one or two hearings), is the most common form of post-release supervision for individuals leaving prison/jail, although not all prisoners are eligible for parole. Another form of post-release supervision, furloughs (a specified period of time spent away from prison, usually supervised but sometimes unsupervised, allowing an inmate to visit family, seek employment, or make contacts to help their transition back into the community) was used in Massachusetts until the late 1980's<sup>(3)</sup>. The furlough program no longer exists in Massachusetts and fewer prisoners are being released on parole. Prior to the 1980's, two-thirds of Massachusetts' inmates were generally released from prison on parole<sup>(3)</sup>. However, in 1999 the Massachusetts Parole Board supervised only 25% of prisoners released from state prisons<sup>(4)</sup>. A tendency for sentence "wrapping" along with fewer numbers of prisoners being released on parole reflects an important gap in the current system which forum panelists and participants felt should be addressed by a "mandatory" post-release supervision period.

This "mandatory" post-release supervision period was suggested as a way to support ex-offenders' transition to the community. Post-release supervision was not viewed as a punishment for individuals leaving prison/jail; rather it was seen as a resource to provide structure and support as well as monitoring of ex-offenders as they transition back to the community. Research on post-release supervision suggests that the use of services (i.e., substance abuse, mental health, job training) and mentors should be essential components to any post-release supervision. More specifically, cognitive-behavioral treatment interventions (i.e., those that focus on attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors) are the most effective strategies to reduce recidivism for "hard-core offenders"<sup>(5)</sup>. Additionally, research also suggests that an ex-offender's level of supervision post-

release should match his/her level of risk to commit further crime. High-risk offenders often require intensive interventions to reduce recidivism while lower-risk offenders benefit most from low intensity interventions or no intervention at all <sup>(6)</sup>. Thus, intensive post-release supervision may not be necessary for all individuals coming out of prison/jail. The use of validated assessment tools can assist administrators in determining an individual's level of risk and need.

### **Improve Resources Post-Release**

*“There’s nothing after you leave prison. You get your \$5 and go on your way. Don’t have anything. No information about places to go outside to continue your GED. Just kicked out with no resources.”*

Focus Group Participant

The current trend of strict punishments for those who commit crimes has overshadowed efforts focused on rehabilitating offenders. Consequently, resources are not systematically available or delivered in a coordinated fashion for individuals once they leave prison or jail. Improvements are needed within prisons and jails in the discharge planning process and in the services provided so that individuals leave prison with the resources they need to succeed. However, successful re-entry to the community is not the sole responsibility of the criminal justice system. Individual ex-offenders must also be responsible for seeking out services to assist them in their transition.

To support crime-free lives, ex-offenders must be able to secure housing and find employment in their communities. Planning for these resources should begin while an individual is still incarcerated and continue when he/she has re-entered the community. By supporting offenders' smooth transition back to their community, we help increase their ability to succeed in living a crime-free life that, in turn, increases public safety.

#### **Housing**

One of the first barriers an individual faces when released from prison/jail is housing. Many ex-offenders lack the financial resources or personal references necessary to secure housing in the private housing market; and federal laws bar many ex-offenders from public housing and federally assisted housing programs <sup>(7)</sup>. Additionally, there is a lack of access to transitional housing programs for ex-offenders returning to the community. Transitional housing programs ease an ex-offender's re-entry into the community by providing a short-term place to live where they can build up enough resources to secure more permanent long-term housing. As a result many individuals go to homeless shelters when they are released from prison/jail. The Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance reports that during 1997-2000 an average of 972 individuals each year entered homeless shelters directly upon release from state or county correctional facilities <sup>(8)</sup>.

#### **Employment**

*“Need programs available to all people getting out to help them get a job. If I can't find a job then I'm going back to what I know best.”* Focus Group Participant

Securing a stable and adequate source of income is essential to an ex-offender's successful transition back to their community. Studies have found that having a job with a decent wage is associated with lower rates of recidivism <sup>(7)</sup>. Thus, those with stable jobs that provide an adequate income are less likely to commit further crimes. Unfortunately, many individuals leaving prison/jail do not have the skills, education, or resources to secure a job. They often lack interview or basic job skills, and frequently do not know how to write a resume. In addition to these issues, discussions in both events focused on inadequate job-training programs, a lack of accessibility to existing programs while incarcerated, and a need for

committed employers who will hire ex-offenders after release. Many focus group participants felt that access to more resources is needed to help ex-offenders find jobs once they are back in the community. These resources included: job training; continuation of GED classes; job coaching; job referrals related to an individual's skill set; and follow-up support services to both employers and employees.

However, even ex-offenders with sufficient job skills often face difficulties securing employment post-release. One reason for this may be a reluctance of employers to hire individuals with a criminal record. There is a stigma attached to individuals that have been incarcerated that is often difficult to overcome. For example, one study found that 90% of employers surveyed were willing to consider filling their most recent job vacancy with a welfare recipient, while only 40% were willing to consider doing so with an ex-offender<sup>(9)</sup>. A suggestion that arose to address this stigma was to recruit and train employers on how to interpret criminal background checks. Additionally, this would require commitment from probation and parole officers to match appropriate referrals to employers, depending on an offenders' criminal history, and ongoing engagement with employers to maintain communication regarding the offender's work performance.

### **Mental Health and Substance Abuse**

*"The majority of individuals that go to prison had issues in the first place... and the prison isn't designed to deal with those issues... If those issues aren't dealt with he is going to go back to what he knows best... dealing drugs, stealing, robbery..."* Focus Group Participant

Housing and employment are not the only major obstacles facing individuals when they leave prison/jail. Many of these individuals also have significant mental health and substance abuse issues. These issues often existed long before the ex-offenders were incarcerated, and for many, contributed to their criminal lifestyle. Studies indicate that about three-quarters of inmates have a history of substance use and one in six suffer from mental illness, yet fewer than one-third of exiting prisoners receive substance abuse or mental health treatment while incarcerated<sup>(10)</sup>. Studies have also found that participation in drug treatment programs while incarcerated can significantly reduce substance use, hospital stays for drug and alcohol problems, and recidivism<sup>(7)</sup>. However, continuation of treatment post-release is an essential component to ensure success. Research has found that the most successful outcomes were among those that received treatment both while incarcerated and in the community during a period of post-release supervision<sup>(7)</sup>.

### **Collaboration and Coordination of Services**

*"If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes the same village to take that wayward child and bring him/her back into the fold."* Forum Panelist

There was much discussion at both events about the need to increase the collaboration and coordination among agencies within and outside of the criminal justice system. Suggestions specifically for criminal justice agencies included improving the flow of information between and within these organizations along with overcoming a tendency toward specialization (i.e., increasing communication between parole and probation systems). Another suggestion was to increase the number of collaborative partnerships between criminal justice agencies and agencies outside of the field (i.e., schools, faith-based groups, community-based non-profits, social service agencies). Both of these suggestions stemmed from the fact that many agencies are currently working with the same

individuals yet these agencies rarely communicate with each other. For example, an individual may have a parole officer, a substance abuse counselor, a Department of Social Services (DSS) caseworker, and be attending GED classes yet none of these agencies currently share their information with each other. Collaboration and coordination among different agencies can help prevent duplication of services and conflicting directives, such as when an individual may be required by their DSS caseworker to attend parenting classes in order to keep custody of their children, but also be required by their parole officer to do community service work at the same time as these classes. An improved system of controlled information sharing between custodial agencies and community-based organizations could also support the transition to community by providing linkages to resources prior to release from prison/jail.

One perceived barrier to information sharing concerns issues of confidentiality. Many agencies are not comfortable providing information to outside agencies for fear of violating confidentiality agreements with their clients. For example, an individual may be taking certain medications as part of their treatment but they are not permitted share this information with anyone unless the client signs an official consent form. This information could be very useful to that individual's other service providers as that medication may interfere with other services they are receiving. Confidentiality issues are very complex and it may not be possible to overcome them entirely. However, addressing these issues so that agencies begin to share more information with each other can have a very positive impact on the reentry process for ex-offenders.

An example of a successful collaborative partnership that has been able to overcome confidentiality issues is the Boston Reentry Initiative. Much of the success of the Boston Reentry Initiative can be attributed to collaboration among the different agencies that provide services as well as the continuation of services from incarceration into the community. The partners in this initiative include community-based health and human service providers along with criminal justice agencies (i.e., Boston Police Department, Suffolk County Sheriff's office). Another element contributing to its success is the use of mentors. Initiative participants develop a relationship with a mentor while incarcerated and later continue that same relationship post-release. These relationships, while beneficial for the ex-offenders, also establish relationships between criminal justice and faith-based community groups.

### **Remember Women**

Women are often overlooked in discussions of re-entry issues due to the greater number of incarcerated men. However, their re-entry process is often more difficult. The bridges that women burn through their criminal histories tend to create more long-lasting disconnects with families, children, and friends often leaving them without support in the community.

## **OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION**

*"We don't need more money to make this work...It's a coordination of resources problem and it has to go beyond the criminal justice system into other systems."* Forum Panalist

Currently, there is a great need to build on past successes and improve existing policies and programs to address offender re-entry issues. There was substantial enthusiasm and energy at both re-entry sessions suggesting that this is the time to begin advocating for changes. Some key suggestions that were made in the events included: implementing systemic changes; improving

resources for ex-offenders; implementing research-based programming; and increasing communication and collaboration.

### **Systemic Change**

Changes are needed in the systems that influence the way ex-offenders transition from prison/jail back to their communities. Legislation is needed that mandates some level of post-release supervision for ex-offenders which incorporates the use of an assessment tool to determine the level of supervision and ex-offender's treatment needs. Additionally, a reallocation of existing resources is needed to improve the reentry process in Massachusetts.

### **Improve Resources for Ex-offenders**

Improvements are needed in the availability of resources for individuals both while they are incarcerated and post-release. It seems unrealistic to believe that an ex-offender is going to succeed in transitioning back to their community if they do not receive appropriate services targeting their specific needs (i.e., housing, employment, substance abuse treatment, etc.) while incarcerated or post-release.

### **Implementation of Research-Based Strategies**

The existing leadership in Massachusetts expressed interest in using research-based programming at both re-entry sessions. Currently, there is a body of research supporting various programmatic elements and systemic processes that have been proven to work to reduce future criminal behavior in ex-offenders. For example, cognitive-behavioral treatment programs that focus on interpersonal and coping skills have been found to reduce recidivism in ex-offenders. These research-based programs are also more cost-effective to manage than unproven, untested programs in a climate of fiscal crisis. Another example, is the use of a uniform assessment measure that assess one's risk to commit further crime and characteristics associated with criminal behavior (e.g., substance abuse). For an in-depth discussion of what works to reduce recidivism see: Gendreau, P. & Andrews, D. A. (1990). Tertiary Prevention: What the meta-analysis of offender treatment literature tells us about "What Works". *Canadian Journal of Criminology*, 32, 173-184.

### **Increase Collaboration and Coordination**

Collaboration among agencies and coordination of services is greatly needed, particularly in the current climate of budget crisis. Research supports the use of collaboration and coordination between agencies as an effective way to enhance supervision and service provision to ex-offenders. Historically, Massachusetts has been an innovator in collaborative partnerships focused on reducing recidivism. For example, the nationally recognized Operation Cease-Fire, a collaborative project of the Boston Police Department and many different criminal justice and community-based agencies, began in the early 1990's in Boston. Current political and policy leaders expressed interest and willingness to make changes to help support ex-offenders returning to the community at both events. It is important to build on this momentum and continue to bring together individuals at all levels from service providers to policy-makers for discussion and planning on re-entry issues.

## CONCLUSION

There are many gaps in the current system's ability to provide services to ex-offenders transitioning from prison/jail back to their communities. The answer to filling these gaps does not need to be increased funding. Many of the barriers that prevent ex-offender's successful transition back to their communities can be addressed by improving the current system so that existing resources are available systematically and delivered in a coordinated fashion among multiple agencies.

Implementing system reforms that emphasize collaboration between agencies serving ex-offenders can greatly improve the services ex-offender's receive. Additionally, legislation requiring some level of post-release supervision for ex-offenders that incorporates the use of validated assessment tools and treatment services is needed to address many of the gaps in the current system.

Successful transitions of ex-offenders into the community benefits everyone. An ex-offender who succeeds in establishing connections and a support system in their community is less likely to commit further crime. Individuals at all levels from policy makers to service providers at both events agreed that systemic and policy changes are needed to support individuals being released from prison/jail. These changes can help support the growing number of ex-offenders returning to their communities, and by supporting this transition we can support their ability to live crime-free lives.

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