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# Issue Brief



Social, Economic, & Workforce Programs Division

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## Improving Prisoner Reentry Through Strategic Policy Innovations

### Summary

An estimated 640,000 inmates will be released from state prisons in 2005.<sup>1</sup> Within three years, 67 percent of these individuals will be rearrested, and over half will return to prison. Given the tremendous investment that states are making—an estimated \$40.7 billion in corrections cost alone in 2004<sup>2</sup>—policymakers should be concerned about whether or not they are getting the most return for their investment in terms of public safety.

Governors and other state policymakers have the opportunity to improve public safety—and potentially reduce corrections costs—by improving the process by which individuals exit prison and reenter society. Research shows that returning prisoners who have access to key supports and services on release commit fewer crimes, maintain employment, and show improved outcomes for health, income, and a broad range of other indicators. Conversely, former prisoners with few supports and services are more likely to continue to commit crimes.

There are a number of initial steps that governors and other state policymakers can take to improve the reentry process. These include:

- Raising the profile of prisoner reentry as a public safety issue and not solely a corrections issue.
- Improving the decision making processes by which individuals are sent to prison.
- Improving how prisoners are prepared in prison for release.
- Improving the process by which prisoners exit prisons so that key supports and services are in place during the initial transition.
- Developing reentry initiatives that build on key social relationships—such as family, friends, and the faith community—and improve access to other community-based supports and services.
- Targeting and supporting high-risk communities to which the majority of prisoners return.

This *Issue Brief* describes prisoner reentry issues and challenges and suggests strategies that governors and other state policymakers can use to initiate long-term improvements.<sup>3</sup> Its findings build on the work of NGA's Prisoner Reentry Policy Academy and the Council of State Governments' (CSG) *Report of the Re-Entry Policy Council*.<sup>4</sup>

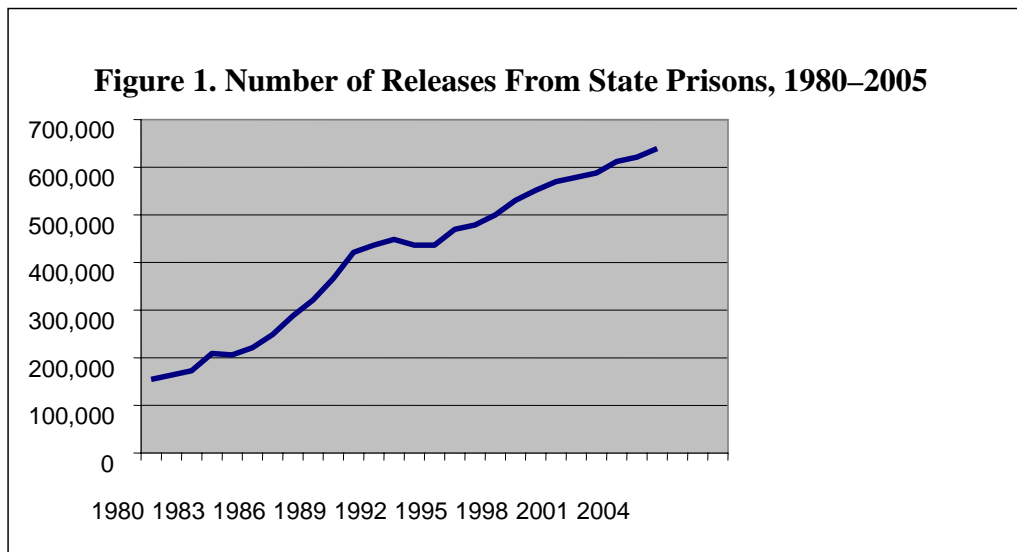
### Why is Reentry so Important to States?

States should be concerned about prisoner reentry for three main reasons: the growing prison population and numbers of returning offenders; the impact of returning prisoners on crime rates; and the rising cost of corrections.

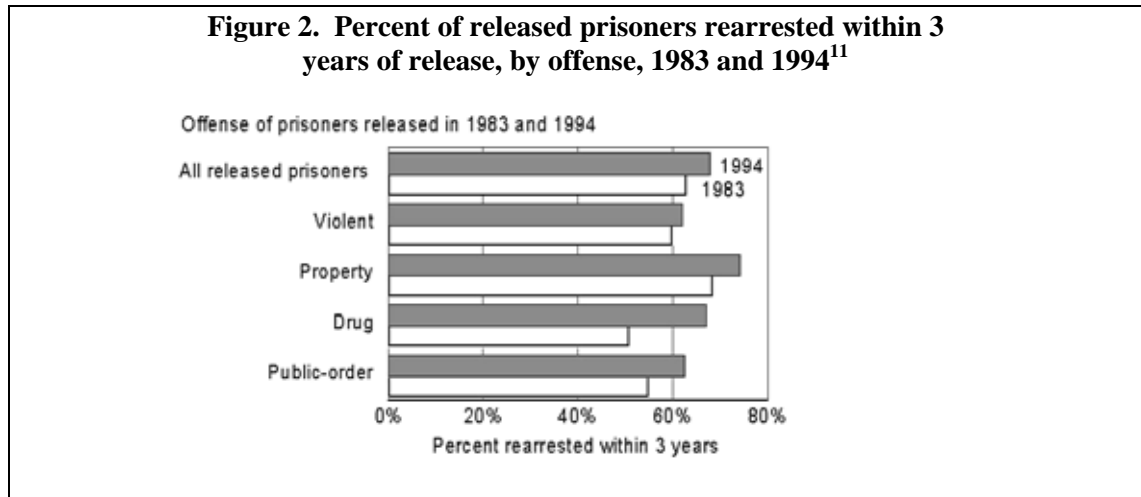
#### *More individuals than ever are in prison and leaving prison*

Prisoner reentry will remain a long-term issue as unprecedented numbers of individuals are sent to and released from prison. At midyear 2004, over 1.3 million prisoners were under the jurisdiction of state correctional authorities, a 46 percent increase from 1994 levels.<sup>5</sup> Between 2003 and 2004, states added nearly 25,000 prisoners to their rolls.<sup>6</sup> The 20-year trend reveals a 215 percent increase between 1984 and 2004. Prison overcrowding also continues to be an issue as most states' prison systems are at, beyond, or near capacity. In 2003, 22 states reported being at or above highest capacity and 20 more reported being at or above 90 percent of their highest capacity.

Along with this growth in prison population is a corresponding rise in the number of individuals being released from prison each year. This is not surprising considering that over 95 percent of all prisoners eventually will be released. In 2005, an estimated 640,000 individuals will be released from state prison—a 37 percent growth from 1995.<sup>7</sup> Figure 1 shows the 25-year trend for number of releases from state prisons.<sup>8</sup>



**Recently released offenders commit a significant number of crimes.** An estimated 67 percent of released offenders will be rearrested for a new offense within three years of release—84 percent of them for a felony and 16 percent for a serious misdemeanor.<sup>9</sup> About 35 percent of all felony arrestees were under some type of correctional supervision, such as parole or probation, at the time of arrest.<sup>10</sup> Figure 2 shows the most recent data available on recidivism rates among returning offenders. Although these data are somewhat dated, they show that despite significant investments in corrections, reducing recidivism rates and improving other outcomes remains a major issue for states.



***Corrections costs are large and growing***

Since 1982, state spending on corrections has grown by 538 percent, representing an average annual growth of 9.9 percent.<sup>12</sup> According to the National Association of State Budget Officers’ (NASBO) *2003 State Expenditure Report*, states spent \$39.4 billion on corrections in 2003 and an estimated \$40.7 billion in 2004.<sup>13</sup> According to NASBO, “Pressure to control (corrections) expenditures is expected to persist as states continue to deal with structural budget problems, pent-up demands, and growing state prison populations.”<sup>14</sup> Compounding the cost of growing prison populations is the increasing length of prison sentences, which result in a growing number of older prisoners who require more costly health care. In fact, health care is fast becoming a major cost driver for correction systems.

**It’s All Connected: Impacts of Prisoner Reentry**

The churning of large numbers of individuals in and out of prisons not only affects the prisoners themselves, but also has a tremendous impact on families and children, public service systems, and communities.

***Impact on families and children***

About 46 percent of prisoners reported living with their children before they were incarcerated. This translates into about half of male and two-thirds of female prisoners having children with whom they will want to reconnect after their release. Nationwide, about 1.5 million minor children and 336,300 households have a parent who is incarcerated. Although in some instances—such as an abusive or violent living situation—family reunification may not be desirable, in most cases returning prisoners and their children want to become reconnected. Providing supportive services to families during

the transition from prison is essential to ensure the well-being and safety of family members, as well as the returning individual. The 10 percent of mothers and 2 percent of fathers who report having a child in foster care during their incarceration will need even more intensive and specialized services.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Impact on public service systems***

Returning prisoners are large consumers of public services. For example, 80 percent have substance abuse issues, 16 percent have mental illness, and disproportionately high numbers have chronic diseases (e.g., tuberculosis, hepatitis C, and HIV/AIDS).<sup>16</sup> Many are also homeless, unemployed, and unskilled. These individuals typically do not have adequate support networks or health insurance and will turn to public service providers for assistance. Without adequate access to continued treatment, those returning prisoners with communicable diseases or mental illness pose a potential health and safety threat to the public.

### ***Impact on communities***

Returning prisoners typically are concentrated in specific communities. Nationally, five states account for nearly half of all releases and 16 states for three-quarters. Within these states, most released prisoners return to just a few neighborhoods. For example, in Maryland, 59 percent of prisoners in the entire state return to Baltimore, and most of these return to a handful of poor neighborhoods. In some neighborhoods in Brooklyn, New York, one in eight men are sent to prison each year. Such high concentrations place additional demands on communities where resources and services already are scarce.

## **Challenges to Improving Prisoner Reentry**

Improving prisoner reentry requires coordinated and often intensive services and supervision. However, developing effective strategies is challenging for a number of reasons including the high risks and high needs of the returning prisoner population; systemic barriers to public services; uncoordinated service systems; an overburdened parole system; and a limited range of sanctions and revocation policies.

### ***Risk factors of returning offenders***

Returning offenders confront a range of personal issues that place them at a significantly greater risk than the overall population for having a serious mental illness, having a chronic illness, being homeless, or being unemployed. These risk factors not only compromise the chances of attaining successful outcomes, but unless adequately addressed, may also increase the likelihood that these individuals will commit more crimes.

Risk factors include the following:

- **Substance abuse:** Eighty percent of returning offenders have a history of substance abuse.
- **Mental illness:** Sixteen percent of returning offenders are diagnosed with a mental illness. Prisoners are two to four times more likely than the general population to be schizophrenic, depressed, bipolar, or suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Of teens in juvenile detention centers, nearly 66 percent of boys and 75 percent of girls have at least one psychiatric disorder. In addition, 73 percent of mentally ill inmates suffer from a co-occurring substance abuse disorder.
- **Chronic disease:** Twenty-five percent of the U.S. population currently living with HIV or AIDS was released from prison within the last year. Overall, 2 percent to 3 percent of the prison population has HIV or AIDS. The rate of state prisoners testing positive for HIV is 5–7 times greater than in the general population. In addition, 18 percent of returning offenders have hepatitis C. The rate of prisoners infected with hepatitis C is 9 to 10 times higher than that of the general public. Seven percent of returning offenders have tuberculosis.

- **Lack of education:** Roughly half of returning offenders are functionally illiterate, and 70 percent are high school dropouts.
- **High unemployment:** Employment is cited as an effective strategy for helping returning prisoners succeed, but most returning prisoners do not have jobs before being released and fare poorly in the labor market. For example, a study of California parolees found that only 21 percent had full-time jobs and 70 percent were unemployed. Another study found that employment rates among young men who had been incarcerated were 20 percent to 25 percent lower than those of their peers who had not. Other studies show a 50 percent reduction in job offers for individuals with criminal records and a 64 percent decrease for African-Americans with criminal records.<sup>17</sup>
- **Homelessness:** Many returning offenders formerly were or will become homeless. At least 10 percent of returning prisoners are homeless both before and after incarceration. The rate is twice that—20 percent—for those with mental illness. According to one study, for those prisoners returning to major cities, the rates are substantially higher—30 to 50 percent. A study of the New York prison system found that 11 percent of released prisoners entered a homeless shelter within two years of release.

#### ***Systemic and legal barriers to public services***<sup>18</sup>

A number of challenges make it difficult for returning prisoners to gain access to public benefits or services that might assist in their transition back into the community. They include the following:

**Bans to public assistance.** The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 includes a lifetime ban on eligibility for food stamps and cash benefits under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program for anyone convicted of a drug-related felony. The law also prohibits states from providing TANF assistance, food stamps, supplemental security income (SSI), and public housing to anyone in violation of parole or probation. This ban is irrespective of whether or not an individual has completed his or her sentence, been employed and was laid off, or earned a “certificate of rehabilitation.” States have the option of passing legislation to limit the ban or eliminate it altogether, but most states restrict at least some people with drug felony convictions from eligibility for federally funded public assistance and food stamps.

There are also often long delays in processing applications for benefits for returning prisoners. These delays are significant because returning prisoners are at the highest risk for committing new crimes immediately following their release.

**Public housing restrictions and limited transitional housing.** Returning prisoners often are ineligible for public housing. These restrictions also extend to living with family members in public housing. While there is limited evidence demonstrating the link between homelessness and criminal behavior, there are indications that returning prisoners with more stable housing may be less likely to be rearrested and reincarcerated. Compounding these issues is the fact that transitional housing for returning offenders is also extremely limited.

**Difficulty obtaining state-issued identification.** Many prisoners are released without state-issued identification or the documentation (e.g., a birth certificate or social security card) that would allow them to obtain state-issued identification. Furthermore, many state departments of motor vehicles do not accept prison documents as proof of identification. Without proper forms of identification, returning prisoners may not be able to apply for jobs, benefits, or housing.

***Uncoordinated service systems***

Because of their multiple needs, many returning prisoners receive services through a number of public agencies simultaneously without appropriate coordination. For example, an individual's parole requirements may not be coordinated with their mental health or substance treatment needs making it difficult for them to fulfill the conditions of their parole while undergoing treatment. A more coordinated response of post-release supervision and services is needed to effectively address the multiple needs of offenders.

***Overburdened parole system***

About 80 percent of all returning prisoners are released to some form of parole supervision.<sup>19</sup> However, a recent study shows that the parole system is overburdened and that parole—especially mandatory parole—did little to reduce the rearrest rates of returning prisoners.<sup>20</sup> In its report, the Urban Institute raises a number of issues related to the role and function of parole. For example:

- Parole officers manage, on average, a caseload of 70 parolees and typically only meet with parolees for about 15 minutes once or twice a month. This raises the question, does this constitute supervision?
- Parole officers often are located far from the neighborhoods where the individuals in their caseloads reside. Without knowledge of where parolees are living, parole officers are in less of a position to assist and sanction parolees.
- Responses to parole violations often are inconsistent and inappropriate for the seriousness of the infraction. Without consistent and intermediate responses to violations, the deterrent effect of supervision is greatly reduced.
- Parole has markedly shifted toward surveillance as its core function and away from a social support-type service. Research, however, shows that a “mix of appropriate treatment and surveillance is needed to positively affect offender behavior.”

***Lack of a range of alternative sentencing options and sanctions***

A final challenge confronting states is the lack of a range of graduated and intermediate sentencing options for individuals who are charged with new offenses or fail to meet the conditions of their parole. Without such a range, states lack the discretion to work with offenders in the most appropriate (and least costly) settings based on risk factors and offense history. In other words, without options such as halfway houses and treatment beds, reincarceration may be the state's only response to violations of release conditions.

**Crucial First Steps To Improving Prisoner Reentry**

Governors and other state policymakers can use a number of strategies to begin to address some of these challenges to improving prisoner reentry.

***Raise the profile of prisoner reentry as a public safety issue and not solely a corrections issue.***

Given the impact of prisoner reentry on so many dimensions of society and public service systems, implementing successful strategies will require cross-agency coordination and public will. For too long reentry has been viewed mainly as a corrections issue. In fact, its impact and solutions are much broader than what correction agencies are capable of adequately addressing alone.

Governors are uniquely situated to garner the necessary support and buy-in by emphasizing the public safety aspects of successful reentry. In particular, there are four ways that governors can implement and promote this type of awareness.

**Create an interagency governance structure.** Governors can create a state-level, interdisciplinary prisoner reentry policy committee to identify barriers to successful reentry and develop and implement strategies that improve coordination across both state and local agencies. For example, Rhode Island Governor Donald Carcieri signed an executive order creating the Governor's Reentry Steering Committee for Released Inmates. Comprised of cabinet-level officials, this committee aims to develop ways to help former inmates successfully transition into Rhode Island communities, with an emphasis on reducing recidivism rates. The committee provides policy direction, helps coordinate statewide reentry programs, and focuses on improving policies or practices that are unnecessary obstacles to successful reentry.

**Identify overlapping services and populations as they relate to prisoner reentry.** Demonstrating the interrelation of public service systems will help to gain buy-in from agency officials, especially as they recognize the shared populations they serve. Many agency officials already recognize this overlap, but by using data that clearly demonstrates the relationship between populations, governors can make successful prisoner reentry a priority for noncriminal justice or corrections agencies. Identifying overlapping populations also assists in developing cross-training programs among agencies. Recognizing these shared populations, Idaho has established at least six memoranda of understanding (MOAs) to improve the coordination of services for current inmates. For example, the Department of Corrections and the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation have established an MOA that places counselors in the prison system to qualify eligible offenders prior to release. The Department of Corrections and Boise State University have established an MOA that places an education counselor in the institution. The Departments of Corrections and Health and Welfare have established an MOA so that substance abuse treatment services for returning prisoners can be accessed immediately upon release from the institution.

**Improve how data and information are used for planning and management.** Mapping where prisoners are returning is a powerful way states can demonstrate the impact of reentry on certain geographic areas and across systems. It also is useful for developing strategic plans and allocating resources by showing concentrations of returning offenders and gaps in capacity and services. States including Idaho, Illinois, Georgia, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, Virginia, and Rhode Island have used this type of mapping to aid in their strategic planning.<sup>21</sup> States are also beginning to improve the sharing of information across criminal justice and noncriminal justice agencies to improve reentry collaboration.

**Identify and involve key constituents involved in prisoner reentry.** To help develop buy-in for reentry initiatives, states should reach out to key constituent groups including local law enforcement, victims' groups, legislators and other policymakers, and the media. For example, Virginia has included legislative staff members from appropriations committees on their state prisoner-reentry policy team. Similarly, Michigan's reentry committee meetings include victims' advocates, local law enforcement from across the state, and members of the press. Support from such groups can be essential to the success of a state's initiative, especially if there is a high-profile crime committed by a former prisoner.

***Improve the decision making processes by which individuals are sent to prison.***

Part of the challenge confronting states in improving prisoner reentry is the sheer number of individuals in prison, most of whom eventually will be released. By addressing "front end" issues—who is sent to

prison—in the context of an overall prisoner reentry strategy, states have the opportunity to reduce prison populations and expand effective—and less costly—treatment options. There are three areas to consider.

**Expand the use of treatment and community-based sanctions.** A number of states have expanded the use of community-based treatment options for certain offenders. For example, Arizona, California, Kansas, and Nebraska each have adopted sentencing policies to divert first-time, nonviolent drug offenders into treatment and have realized significant cost savings as a result. States can build on such strategies as a component of an overall reentry framework, using these states as potential models.

**Improve parole revocation policies.** For many states, prison growth is being driven by the reincarceration of parole violators for technical offenses such as failing a drug test or missing an appointment. For example, over 60 percent of prison admissions in California are technical parole violators. Recognizing the impact of reincarcerating large numbers of technical parole violators, states such as Michigan have made great strides in improving parole revocation policies and practices. In fact, Michigan successfully avoided projected major prison overcrowding without building new prisons by amending its revocation policies and expanding its use of community-based sanctions.

**Examine the role and responsibilities of parole and probation officers in supporting prisoner reentry.** Questions have been raised about the efficacy of parole. Of particular concern is the movement toward surveillance as parole's core function and away from social support. This presents a difficult policy issue as to the function of parole and probation in supporting the goals of reentry, especially as they relate to ensuring linkages to key support services. These issues are also compounded by the fact that many parole and probation functions are often locally controlled. However, it is encouraging to note that states such as Georgia, Massachusetts and New Jersey have included parole board chairs and members as active participants of their states' reentry policy teams.

***Improve how prisoners are prepared in prison for release.***

Ninety-five percent of all prisoners will eventually be released. Without sacrificing the ultimate goal of improved public safety, preparing prisoners to reenter society needs to be a major focus of what occurs in prison. While corrections agencies may not be in a position to address the multitude of issues confronting prisoners, they can take a number of steps to improve what happens in prison to prepare prisoners for release. These steps include the following.

**Begin reentry planning on intake.** What takes place immediately on admission to a correctional facility has an impact on how, when, and what kind of services are delivered before, during, and after reentry. Information about a individual's risk, needs, and strengths in a variety of areas should be gathered at admission—and reassessed throughout supervision. This information lays the foundation for all the programs, services, and decisions that follow.<sup>22</sup>

**Use validated needs and risk assessment tools.** Virtually all states use some form of needs and risk assessment tools. These tools are essential in identifying and managing high-risk inmates and creating service plans for all inmates across a spectrum of issues, including substance abuse, mental health, and education. Although use of these tools has improved, states need to ensure that they are research-based and validated for the target population.

**Improve access and involvement of local service providers and faith-based organizations.** Local service providers and faith-based organizations can play a key role in assisting prisoners in transitioning

from prison and by providing counseling services, life skills training, transitional jobs, and other programs and services. For that reason, their participation in post-release planning as early and consistently as possible is essential. However, access or “in reach” into prisons for these organizations often is difficult. To encourage the involvement of such supportive organizations, states need to improve the processes for allowing such groups access to institutions and participation in post-release service planning. For example, Massachusetts’s Women in Transition (WIT) program, specifically available to women offenders, offers a wide range of programs inside the facility that are modeled after what is offered in the community. Programs focus specifically on domestic violence, parenting family issues, healthy relationships, medical and women’s health issues, substance abuse, sexual abuse, and food and nutrition. Through the program tutors from local community colleges work an offender while incarcerated and help them transition to educational services in the community. WIT has also fostered relationships with North Shore Community College and Northern Essex Community College and offers GED education and scholarships to inmates.

***Improve the process by which prisoners exit prison***

Planning and preparation for reentry—if it occurs at all—typically does not occur until the last few weeks or months of an individual’s incarceration.<sup>23</sup> States need to improve the steps leading up to and the process by which prisoners exit prisons. This includes improving how release decisions are made; improving when and how prisoners are released from institutions; ensuring that prisoners have a transition plan; ensuring that eligible returning prisoners have applied for or have secured public benefits prior to exiting a facility; and ensuring that returning prisoners have proper identification upon release. To improve the process by which prisoners are prepared for release states can take the following steps.

**Improve how release decisions are made.** There are significant differences across states in how release decisions are made. However, according to the Reentry Policy Council, “decisionmakers need information about the progress, risks, needs, and strengths of each reentering individual. Such information should guide decisions even when there will be no period of supervised release after incarceration, and therefore no enforceable conditions of release.”<sup>24</sup> Currently, most releases occur automatically and do not necessarily result from individualized assessments. Twenty-five years ago, most prisoners (65 percent) were released after a parole board considered a prisoner to be rehabilitated or had sufficient linkages with the community (e.g., a job, family, and housing). Today, only 24 percent of prisoners are released through a discretionary process. The remaining 76 percent are released under a predetermined mechanism—mandatory release, split sentence, or unconditional release.<sup>25</sup> States need to use validated risk-assessment tools and analysis of an individual’s criminal history and behavior in an institution in assessing the risk of certain individuals and in developing an effective transition plan that maximizes public safety.

**Improve how and when prisoners are released from institutions.** How and when a prisoner is released from a correctional facility can affect that individual’s chances of success, especially because the greatest risk for recidivism rates is immediately upon release. Currently, most prisoners are released with little more than a bus ticket and some spending money.<sup>26</sup> Reportedly, some have been dropped off in high-crime high drug trafficking areas late at night or in the early morning hours. States can take logistical steps to help ensure a smooth transition out of a facility, such as requiring correction agencies to advise community-based partners about upcoming release dates and releasing prisoners during hours when supportive services are available. For example, in Massachusetts, whether individuals are released on parole or not, the state will transport prisoners to the parole offices and release them from there.

**Ensure that returning prisoners have a detailed and specific transition plan.** Good transition plans ensure that the first hours and days immediately following release—the most critical time period—are structured to facilitate a smooth reentry. Most returning prisoners have some type of post-prison supervision plan, but a detailed and specific plan is an essential element for successful reentry. A good example is Michigan’s transition accountability plan (TAP). A core element of Michigan’s reentry initiative, the TAP is prepared for each inmate beginning with the intake into the facility, with the goal of ensuring a seamless system of services for the offender for a successful transition. For example, a TAP might include specific referrals to employment, housing, or health service providers, as well as post-release supervision requirements.

**Ensure that eligible returning prisoners have applied for or secured public benefits, especially health benefits, before exiting prison.** According to the Council of State Government’s Reentry Policy Council Report, “Given the broad array of benefits for which a person leaving prison may be eligible, the complexity of that application process, and the need for benefits to start (or re-start) as soon as possible after release, the transition team should prepare the inmate for the benefits application process prior to his or her return to the community.”<sup>27</sup> Transition teams also should think broadly about all possible benefits including SSI, Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), Medicaid, Medicare, veterans’ benefits, TANF, and educational benefits under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA).<sup>28</sup>

**Ensure that released individuals have proper identification.** Without proper identification, returning prisoners may be unable to secure employment or housing, or apply for benefits. Coordination between state corrections and other identification-granting agencies would help returning prisoners obtain proper documents more quickly. Two states—Illinois and Montana—have laws requiring the department of motor vehicles to exchange department of corrections-issued identification for state-issued identification. Similarly, Louisiana’s Office of Motor Vehicles is piloting a program at several correctional facilities to make state identification cards and license renewals made on site for inmates before their release.<sup>29</sup>

**Notify victims.** For victims, timely notification of an offender’s release date is extremely important in helping them prepare emotionally, take any measures they deem fit for their own safety, or exercise any other legal rights they may have, such as attending parole hearings. Corrections officials should create a systemwide policy establishing how and when information should be communicated to victims. For example, the individuals or teams responsible for reentry planning might notify victims of scheduled releases in person, using trained personnel who understand victims’ issues and can make appropriate referrals to therapists, counselors, and other services.<sup>30</sup>

***Develop reentry initiatives that build on key social relationships and improve access to community-based supports and services.***

Returning prisoners need the support of communities, families, and public service systems to succeed. States can facilitate their transition back into the community by better coordinating services across systems, focusing on transitional supports, and building on key supportive relationships. In particular, states can help returning prisoners develop an effective social support system by focusing on the following areas.

**Develop a more open and integrated case management approach.** Given the multi-dimensional issues confronting returning prisoners, transition plans that integrate services at both the state and community levels are most likely to support the goals of successful reentry. For example, to improve the

interdisciplinary coordination of services for returning prisoners, Michigan's Departments of Corrections, Labor and Economic Growth, Community Health, and Family Independence Agency, teamed up to develop an integrated approach to prisoner reentry. The goal of Michigan's approach is to implement a seamless system of services for offenders, beginning at the time of entry to prison and continuing through their transition to communities.

Ohio's Reentry Management Teams take another approach that brings together representatives from up to seven program areas to provide prisoners with treatment or services to assist in developing and implementing a multi-disciplinary plan. These program areas include: employment and education; substance abuse; community functioning; attitude; family/marital/personal relationships; personal and emotional; and associates. Other states, such as Missouri and Rhode Island, have developed similar approaches.

**Help returning prisoners find jobs and ancillary supports.** Most returning prisoners are released without a job. Various estimates show that only 14 percent to 50 percent of returning prisoners have secured a job prior to release.<sup>31</sup> Job placement and other intermediary organizations can play a pivotal role in helping returning prisoners find transitional and permanent employment. For example, the Center of for Employment Opportunity (CEO) in New York City places returning prisoners in temporary employment while they seek permanent jobs. Similarly, the Safer Foundation in Chicago works with returning prisoners to improve the likelihood that they will secure and maintain a job by providing pre-employment training and then maintaining contact with both the client and the employer for one year after placement to resolve any issues that may arise to threaten continued employment.<sup>32</sup>

It is important to note that although a job is an important element of a successful reentry strategy, employment needs to be considered in context with other issues, including mental health, housing, and substance abuse. Securing a job may not necessarily be the top priority for each returning prisoner.

**Provide a continuum of care for prisoners with high-need health, mental health, and substance abuse issues.** Returning prisoners with chronic and communicable diseases, mental illness, and substance abuse problems need long-term care strategies in place prior to release. Without an effective continuum of care, treatment gains realized in prison could be lost and other complications could arise. For example, individuals on anti-retroviral treatment for HIV who fail to adhere to treatment regimens may develop drug-resistant viral strains and become more contagious.<sup>33</sup> There are similar health complications for individuals being treated for TB who interrupt their treatment. Individuals with substance abuse and mental health issues also confront challenges when treatment is interrupted.

Some programs demonstrate that parole and probation officers can play a key role in supporting and enforcing a continuum of care. For example, an outreach program for TB patients who were released from New York City's Rikers Island showed a dramatic increase in participation in community-based treatment—increasing from 20 percent to 92 percent—when small incentives were used to get returning prisoners to treatment. Other similar studies demonstrate the effectiveness of community supervision in keeping people in treatment for the crucial first 90 days after release.<sup>34</sup>

**Adopt strategies that leverage and build on family and other supportive relationship and social networks.** The release of an individual will most likely directly affect family members and other close acquaintances. In fact, according to one study, 71 percent of prisoners expect to live with their families on

release.<sup>35</sup> However, family members are often not notified of or prepared for an individual's release. Strategies that prepare and build on the strengths of family relationships show great promise in improving outcomes for returning prisoners and their families. For example, a study of La Bodega de Familia, a family-support reentry program in New York City serving parolees with substance abuse problems, found that for families participating in the program, substance abuse and re-arrest rates among returning prisoners were significantly reduced and family well-being improved. The success of the program has been attributed to the combination of informal pressure, motivation, and encouragement of family members as well as program staff.<sup>36</sup>

***Target and support high-risk communities to which the majority of prisoners return.***

Because the majority of prisoners return to a relatively small number of communities, states should develop strategies tailored to meet the needs of these highly impacted areas. As they help returning prisoners to connect with local employment, health, and social services, states need to target program resources to those communities where the greatest number of prisoners live and develop innovative partnerships to address local issues more comprehensively.

**Form local partnerships.** Partnerships between state agencies and local areas are essential to supporting highly impacted communities and form the core of the U.S. Department of Justice's Federal Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI). Through SVORI, state agencies—typically corrections departments—have established partnerships with key community agencies with the goal of forming new and innovative strategies. For example, through their SVORI grant, the Indiana Department of Corrections formed a strategic partnership with Fort Wayne, Indiana. Through this partnership, Fort Wayne established and operates a local reentry court that coordinates with the Indiana Department of Corrections and imposes a reintegration plan for returning offenders. In addition to offering a range of support services, including GED classes, substance abuse services, family counseling, employment services, and a transitional job program, Fort Wayne's reentry court also is responsible for imposing graduated sanctions and providing rewards for individuals under community supervision.

**Encourage the development of supportive and transitional housing for returning offenders.**

Homelessness is prevalent among returning prisoners. In fact, in describing their prison system, one state secretary of corrections said that they are “operating the largest homeless shelter in the state.” Without stable housing, any chance for a successful reintegration is seriously compromised, but the supply of transitional and supportive housing for returning prisoners is extremely limited. This is particularly pressing for communities with high numbers of returning prisoners.

A number of states are working with local communities to increase the housing options available for returning prisoners. This includes directly funding local service providers, developing “reentry housing” for high-need individuals, and providing incentives for the private and nonprofit sectors to develop housing options for returning prisoners. For example, the Illinois State Department of Corrections directly funds St. Leonard's Ministries, a local housing and social service provider. By paying St. Leonard's just under what it costs the department to supervise a parolee, the department provides housing and social services for parolees. The Women's Prison Association in New York City receives state, local, and federal funds to provide transitional housing for women and their children as well as a range of other social services, including health and mental health care, family reunification assistance, and employment services.

**Engage local law enforcement.** Local law enforcement can play an important role in the reentry process through both supervision and support. For example, Lowell Massachusetts Police Department’s Reentry Initiative is designed to provide support to and to improve the surveillance of returning prisoners. Through the program, the Massachusetts Department of Corrections notifies the Lowell Police Department prior to a local inmate’s release. A police officer then meets with the inmate while still in prison to both offer a range of support services available through their program and inform the inmate that the department is aware of the upcoming release and will be informally monitoring his or her conduct in the community.

### **Conclusion: Changing Corrections Culture to Focus on Reentry**

The goal of successful prisoner reentry is improved public safety. However, improving prisoner reentry will require a culture shift in corrections and criminal justice philosophy that emphasizes the reentry process and *not only* containment and control. Such a shift will require a holistic approach that balances public safety with the needs of former prisoners and balances what happens in prison with the goal of successfully reentry. At a minimum, such a shift will require coordination among corrections, public safety, workforce, health, mental health, welfare, child welfare, and education systems at state and local levels.

Governors are in a position to lead this change and make prisoner reentry a priority across key agencies. Given the sheer number of individuals in and returning from prison, given how inextricably linked these individuals are to families and communities, given the impact that these individuals will have on public health, welfare, housing, and workforce systems, and given the alternatives to doing nothing—continued growth in corrections budgets and continued high rearrest rates among returning prisoners—successful prisoner reentry needs to be a shared goal for all public agencies.

### **End Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Projection calculated by Allen J. Beck, Chief, Corrections Statistics Program, Bureau of Justice Statistics, based on data available in Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2004* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2005).
- <sup>2</sup> Total expenditures for all state justice-related activities (including corrections, law enforcement, and judicial) was nearly \$63.4 billion in 2001.
- <sup>3</sup> NGA’s prisoner reentry policy academy works with interdisciplinary reentry policy teams from seven states comprised of representatives from governors offices and key state agencies, such as corrections, public safety, health and human services, welfare, workforce, and housing. The goal of the academy is to develop statewide, strategic action plans that coordinate services across agencies and improve reentry outcomes along a number of dimensions. The participating states are Georgia, Idaho, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Virginia. For more information on state activities related to prisoner reentry, visit NGA’s [prisoner reentry](#) Web page. Funding for the academy was made possible through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (OASPE), Office of Minority Health (OMH), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the JEHT Foundation.

- <sup>4</sup> The Council of State Governments' Reentry Policy Council (RPC), established in 2001, brought together a bipartisan network of over 100 policymakers and practitioners from across the country to identify policy recommendations to improve the likelihood of successful reentry for people leaving prisons and jails. The RPC was divided into three main advisory groups—public safety and restorative activities, supportive health and housing, and workforce development and employment opportunities. This Issue Brief builds on many of the recommendations from the final report of the RPC. Read CSG's [\*Report of The Reentry Policy Council\*](#).
- <sup>5</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2004* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2005).
- <sup>6</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Prisoners in 2003* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2004).
- <sup>7</sup> Total Sentenced Prisoners Released From State or Federal Jurisdiction, Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Prisoner Statistics data series (NPS-1).
- <sup>8</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics, Total Sentenced Prisoners Released From State or Federal Jurisdiction, National Prisoner Statistics data series (NPS-1) and *Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2004* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2005).
- <sup>9</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Recidivism of Prisoner Released in 1994* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2002.)
- <sup>10</sup> Gerard Rainville and Brian Reaves, *Felony Defendants in Large Urban Counties, 2000*, (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003) 8. It should be noted that the 35 percent cited here is a conservative figure for crime rates. It excludes recently released prisoners not under supervision and reflects arrests only.
- <sup>11</sup> Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Recidivism of Prisoner Released in 1994*, June 2002. Washington: DC.
- <sup>12</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Justice Expenditure and Employment in the United States, 2001* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2004).
- <sup>13</sup> This figure does not reflect other criminal justice costs (e.g., police, parole, probation, etc.)
- <sup>14</sup> National Association of State Budget Officers, *2003 State Expenditure Report* (Washington, DC: National Association of State Budget Officers, 2004) 56.
- <sup>15</sup> Christopher Mumola, *Incarcerated Parents and Their Children* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000).
- <sup>16</sup> Caterina Gouvis Roman and Jeremy Travis, *Taking Stock: Housing, Homelessness, and Prisoner Reentry* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2004).
- <sup>17</sup> Amy Solomon, Kelly Johnson, Jeremy Travis, and Elizabeth McBride, *From Prison to Work: The Employment Dimensions of Prisoner Reentry* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2004) 39.

- <sup>18</sup> For more information on barriers to public services, the Legal Action Center's *After Prison: Roadblocks to Reentry* provides a state-by-state examination of the legal barriers that individuals with criminal records face in each state. Available online at: <[www.lac.org/roadblocks.html](http://www.lac.org/roadblocks.html)>.
- <sup>19</sup> Amy Solomon, Vera Kachnowski, and Avinash Bhati, *Does Parole Work: Analyzing the Impact of Postprison Supervision on Rearrest Outcomes* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2005) 1.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> To view these maps visit NGA's prisoner reentry Web page at <[http://www.nga.org/center/divisions/1,1188,C\\_ISSUE\\_BRIEF^D\\_7711,00.html](http://www.nga.org/center/divisions/1,1188,C_ISSUE_BRIEF^D_7711,00.html)>.
- <sup>22</sup> *Report of the Reentry Policy Council*, 110.
- <sup>23</sup> *Report of the Reentry Policy Council*, 255.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid. 229.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid. 231.
- <sup>26</sup> Jeremy Travis, Amy Solomon, and Michelle Waul, *From Prisons to Home: The Dimensions and Consequences of Prisoner Reentry* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2001) 19.
- <sup>27</sup> *Report of the Reentry Policy Council*, 337.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid. 337–338.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid. 320–321.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid. 384.
- <sup>32</sup> For more information on CEO and Safer Foundation visit: <<http://www.ceoworks.org/>> and <<http://saferfoundation.org/>>.
- <sup>33</sup> *Report of the Reentry Policy Council*, 371.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>35</sup> Nancy G. LaVigne, et al., *A Portrait of Prisoner Reentry in Maryland* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2003).
- <sup>36</sup> For more information on La Bodega de la Familia visit: <<http://www.labodegadelafamilia.org/>>.