

Prisoner Reentry and the Role of Parole Officers

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OVER THE PAST few years, there has been a renewed interest in the reentry of prisoners to the community. This has come about for several reasons. First, with the tremendous growth in the prison population in the United States, there has also been a tremendous growth in the number of releasees. Camp and Camp (1998, p. 59) report that 626,973 prison inmates were released from prison during 1998. In New York City alone, the New York State Department of Correctional Services releases approximately 25,000 people a year to the city, and the New York City jails release almost 100,000 (Nelson, Dees, & Allen, 1999). In the State of California, 124,697 prisoners left prisons during 1998 after completing their sentences, almost ten times the number of releases only 20 years earlier (Petersilia, 2000a). Even with the increase in the number of adult felons in prison, a significant number are supervised in the community. In 1997, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported a total of 5,726,200 adults under correctional supervision. Of those, 3,296,513 were on probation, 557,974 were in jail, 1,176,922 were in prison, and 694,787 were on parole (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999, p. 1).

Second, the increasing number of inmates returning from prison has taxed available community resources for offender reintegration. When there were only a few hundred thousand prisoners, and a few thousand releasees per year, the issues surrounding the release of offenders did not overly challenge communities. Families could house ex-inmates, job-search organizations could find them jobs, and community social service

agencies could respond to their individual needs for mental health or substance abuse treatment. However, with the high number of offenders now returning to their communities, the impact of these offenders on their families and their communities has intensified (Petersilia, 1999).

Third, in many states, the release decision and process has changed, resulting in a change to the once prevalent preparation for release emphasized by both prison and parole board administrators. With the previous extensive use of indeterminate sentences and release by parole boards, correctional systems were organized and operated in a manner to ensure inmates were prepared for reentry. Prison counseling staff emphasized programs to prepare inmates to appear before the parole board. Parole consideration required inmates to make sound release plans. Inmates had to develop a plan, parole officers investigated the plans, and reports on the plan acceptability were made to the parole board. If substantial support was not available in the community, halfway houses were routinely used to assist in the prison to community transition. If someone was granted parole, the parole board identified the conditions of supervision and the required treatment programs. After an offender was released, parole officers, whose primary responsibility was to guide the offender to programs and services, supervised offenders in line with the conditions mandated by the parole board.

Currently, many states have opted to abolish parole, and 15 states and the federal government have now ended the use of indeterminate sentencing. Twenty other states

have severely limited the population eligible for parole. Only fifteen states still have full discretionary parole for inmates. In 1977 over 70 percent of prisoners were released on discretionary parole. By 1997, this had declined to 28 percent (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1997). This change has modified much of the historical preparation for release, and the correctional process has de-emphasized release preparation in favor of emphasizing monitoring the ex-inmate after release.

Changes have occurred in the way offenders are supervised in the community after release from prison. For most of the 1990s, both probation and parole underwent a transition from helping and counseling offenders, to managing risk and conducting surveillance. This perspective is referred to as the "new penology" (Feeley & Simon, 1992). Rhine (1997, p. 73) describes this perspective as one in which:

crime is viewed as a systemic phenomenon. Offenders are addressed not as individuals but as aggregate populations. The traditional corrections objectives of rehabilitation and the reduction of offender recidivism give way to the rational and efficient deployment of control strategies for managing (and confining) high-risk criminal populations. Though the new penology refers to any agency within the criminal justice system that has the power to punish, the framework it provides has significant analytic value to probation and parole administrators.

It has been suggested that supervision styles of parole and probation officers fall into either a "casework" or a "surveillance" ap-

proach. A casework style of supervision places emphasis on assisting the offender with problems, counseling, and working to make sure the offender successfully completes supervision. A surveillance style of supervision emphasizes monitoring and enforcing compliance with the rules of supervision and detecting violations leading to revocation and return to custody. The transition from casework to surveillance style of supervision can have a dramatic effect on the reentry of offenders. Some of the impetus for the change result from an increase in caseload size. Petersilia (2000b) reports that in the 1970s, parole officers were usually assigned 45 parolees; today parole caseloads of 70 offenders are common. With significantly larger caseloads, parole officers have little time to focus on the offender as an individual, or provide counseling or referral to community agencies. As a result, officers have little choice but to concentrate on surveillance, and the impersonal monitoring of offenders.

Many issues confront prison releasees as they return to the community. A study by the Vera Institute of Justice in New York City identified a number of these (Nelson). The study included 88 randomly selected inmates released from city jails in 1999. Issues identified included finding housing, creating ties with family and friends, finding a job, addressing alcohol and drug abuse, continued involvement in crime, and the impact of parole supervision. Most offenders end up living with families or friends until they find a job, accumulate some money, and then find their own residences. For most releasees, their age at release, lack of employment at time of arrest, and history of substance abuse problems all make it difficult to find a good job. Release is a stressful time, and many ex-inmates relapse into drug or alcohol abuse.

Although these issues present practical, social, and economic concerns, they pose another dire result. Whether because of tougher parole and release supervision with minimal tolerance for mistakes or the failure of the system to prepare inmates for release, an increasing number of inmates being released are reincarcerated as parole and release violators. During 1998, there were 170,253 reported parole violators from the states, representing over 23 percent of new prison admissions (Beck & Mumola, 1999). Even more alarming is that 76.9 percent of all parole violators were charged with a technical violation only, without commission of a new felony (Camp, p. 59).

The emphasis on surveillance of community offenders results in a trend to violate releasees for minor technical violations, as administrators and parole boards do not want to risk keeping offenders in the community. If these minor violators later commit a serious crime, those deciding to allow them to continue in the community despite technical violations could face criticism or even legal action. This "risk-free" approach represents an "invisible policy" not passed by legislatures or formally adopted by correctional agencies. However, these actions have a tremendous impact on prison populations, cost, and community stability.

Research Design

To date, there has been limited research on what parole officers do while supervising offenders and assisting with reentry to the community. A study by Saint Louis University faculty attempted to identify some of the important reentry activities performed by parole officers, and to determine what they perceive as important in assisting offenders to successfully return to the community. The researchers requested permission from the Missouri Department of Corrections to administer a survey and conduct interviews with officers in the Eastern Probation and Parole Region of the State of Missouri. Missouri is a "combined" state, where the Department of Corrections oversees both probation and parole supervision throughout the State, and officers supervise both probationers and parolees.

The study research design included several steps:

Step 1: Identify the tasks performed by parole officers, create data collection instruments, and pretest these survey and interview instruments. Sample survey and interview instruments were shared with Missouri probation and parole district administrators, who suggested revisions to clarify questions and make them more representative of the functions of parole officers.

Step 2: Survey officers and identify the types of activities performed in supervising parolees. All probation and parole officers in the Eastern Probation and Parole Region of Missouri were potential candidates for completing the surveys. While completing the surveys was voluntary, approximately 46 percent of the possible officers did so (114 out of 250). The actual return rate of those asked to complete the survey was higher than 46 percent, because not every officer was available on the day of the survey administration.

Step 3: Conduct interviews were conducted with eleven (approximately 10 percent of those surveyed) probation and parole officers to collect more detailed information about survey questions, and to seek officers' opinions of the most important aspects of their jobs. Interview questions covered the role of parole officers, the importance of supervision activities, the conflicts between helping offenders and protecting society, and other qualitative aspects of probation and parole officers' duties.

Step 4: Analyze the data and write the report. The data were analyzed, and a final report was written and provided to the Missouri Department of Corrections. The report describes the functions of probation and parole officers, and relates some of these officers' opinions on the importance and impact of their supervision perspectives.

Data Collection and Analysis— Surveys

Survey Administration

Researchers went to each of the six district offices within the Eastern Region of Missouri to administer surveys to all available officers. At each office, a few additional surveys were left for officers not available on the day of survey administration. The written survey, as well as the verbal instructions from the researcher, explained that a random sample from officers completing the written survey would be asked to participate in an in-depth interview on the same subject matter. Eleven officers participated in the interviewing process. At least one employee at each district office is represented in the interview data.

Description of the sample

As noted, 114 surveys were completed and eleven officers interviewed. The mean age of respondents was 33.5 years, with the youngest respondent being 21 years old and the oldest respondent 56 years of age. The average time on the job as a probation or parole officer was 5.5 years, but the range encompassed almost 23 years. Sixty percent of respondents were women, and 40 percent were men. The sample was distinctly white in nature: 76.4 percent of respondents described their ethnicity as "White/Non-Hispanic," while just over 19 percent listed themselves as "Black/Non-Hispanic."

Almost all respondents have college degrees, which is a requirement for the job of probation or parole officer in the state of Missouri. Of this group, 22.3 percent have

some graduate school education, and another 16 percent have earned a graduate degree. Among graduate degree holders, a criminal justice major was most frequent, representing 54.1 percent of respondents. Psychology was the college major for 17.1 percent of respondents. Other majors included sociology (9.0 percent), social work (4.5 percent), education (3.6 percent), business (1.8 percent), and an "other" category (9.9 percent) in which majors such as art or history appeared.

The great majority (95.6 percent) of respondents supervised both probationers and parolees. Caseload types were fairly evenly split, with 55.3 percent of respondents managing a specialized caseload, 43.9 percent managing a regular caseload, and one officer supervising a mix of regular and specialized caseloads. The specialized caseloads included intensive supervision, sex offenders, violent offenders, mental health offenders, or substance abuse offender caseloads. Mean caseload size was 60 offenders for each officer. The smallest caseload was 8 offenders, while the largest caseload indicated by survey respondents was 127 offenders.

Programs available for parolee reentry

Officers completing the survey were asked to identify programs available for assisting with prisoner reentry. There were 104 responses to the question, with only 10 respondents not giving an answer. Respondents were amazingly consistent in their citations of available programs for parolees. This is unusual for free-response questions. Only two responses out of 104 could not be coded into one of the five categories noted below. The great majority of respondents identified more than one program that they were aware of, were currently using, or had used in the past. Responses, in order of frequency, are as follows:

1. *Job training and/or vocational rehabilitation.* Fifty-seven respondents (55 percent) cited these programs.
2. *Substance abuse treatment.* Fifty-six respondents (54 percent) cited these programs.
3. *Residential facilities and/or halfway houses.* Forty-three respondents (41 percent) cited programs offering transitional housing arrangements.
4. *Work release programs.* Thirty-five respondents (34 percent) cited these programs.
5. *Employment assistance.* Twenty-three respondents (22 percent) cited some kind

of employment assistance program, to include help with finding a job, keeping a job, support while on the job, and specific needs with job training.

Officers were also asked to identify the most important aspect of reentry programs for improving parolees' chances for success. Ninety-five of the 104 officers listed responses to this question. In order of frequency, respondents indicate the following activities as the most important:

1. *Keeping the offender in a steady job/steady employment/legitimate means of making a living.* Thirty-two respondents (34 percent) cited steady or continuous employment as critical. Key in their responses is the term "steady" or "stable," meaning episodic or odd jobs were not the intended.
2. *Obtaining and being successful with substance abuse treatment/staying drug free.* Twenty respondents (21 percent) cited staying off drugs and alcohol as critical for success. Respondents stated that if the offender was still using drugs, access to and participation in any other program was "a waste of time."
3. *Support systems/resources as needed (generic terms).* Nineteen respondents (20 percent) cited support for offenders as critical. Most said simply, "support" but 9 respondents (47 percent of those who cited support) cited specifically family support and 3 respondents (19 percent) cited peer support.
4. *Structure/stability/patterns.* Sixteen respondents (17 percent) cited structure in the offenders' post-institutional life as critical to success. Examples of this structure (other than that which employment brings) were not given. However, from the responses it appears that officers are referring to offenders staying with the routines of their behavior as they should, getting up and going to work on time, attending required programs, and meeting their other responsibilities, such as paying fines or following curfews.
5. *Supervision, monitoring, or control itself.* Fourteen respondents (15 percent) cited the supervision of offenders in meeting their parole or probation conditions as critical. They used terms such as supervising, monitoring, controlling, and following up.
6. *Holding offenders accountable for actions.* Four respondents (4 percent) cited hold-

ing offenders accountable for their actions. These respondents noted that offenders need to be held responsible for their own behaviors and their own successes or failures in post-institutional life.

Finally, officers were asked to identify the most important aspect of their job in improving a parolee's chances for success. Again, there was a high response rate, with 105 officers answering this question. As with the first part of this question, there was strong cohesion among responses. Four themes emerged in these responses.

1. *Monitoring/supervising/controlling aspects of the job of parole officer.* Thirty-five respondents (33 percent) cited some form of supervision as crucial to the success of the parolee. Terms such as monitoring, supervising closely, verifying, making sure, supervision, surveillance, and ensuring compliance are all used in this response.
2. *Assess needs and refer/direct to appropriate community agencies.* Twenty-nine respondents (28 percent) cited assessment of individual offender needs (most respondents did refer to specific offender needs rather than "blanket" referrals) and/or referral to treatment resources. Only a few respondents cited specific referral programs such as substance abuse or sex offender programs.
3. *Help maintain employment.* Twenty-one respondents (20 percent) cited various aspects of keeping offenders employed in appropriate jobs. Referral assistance, on-the-job support, encouraging the offender to maintain full-time employment, and assessing continuing employment needs were some of the common responses cited.
4. *Hold offender accountable/responsible for behaviors and success.* Fourteen respondents (13 percent) cited offender acceptance of his or her responsibility as a crucial job factor. Respondents indicated that holding offenders accountable for the various aspects of supervision and making sure that they recognized the consequences for violating supervision were important, because all the programs in the community would not help those who refused to accept responsibility for the outcome of their period of supervision.

Individual Interview Analysis

The final question on the survey informed respondents that more extensive individual interviews were to be held, that they would be voluntary, and asked if they would agree to be interviewed. No respondents indicated an unwillingness to be interviewed, and a random group was selected. In addition, officers specifically requesting to be interviewed were accommodated. The interview group included at least one officer from each district office. The makeup of the interview group in age, time on the job, caseload type and size, and background mirrors the survey group. Responses to the interview questions that focused on prisoner reentry are presented below.

Officers were first asked to describe any parolee reentry programs in their district or the state with which they were familiar, and rate how effective they believed them to be. "Parolee reentry" programs were defined as programs that assist with the return of offenders from prison to the community. Of the eleven responding officers, the following percentages listed these "parolee reentry" programs:

- Drug and alcohol programs: 77.7%
- Work release programs: 77.7%
- Counseling programs: 55.5%
- GED programs: 44.4%

Officers listed the specific programs they most regularly used for these types of offender needs. Most responding officers suggested that these reentry programs are always effective, if they are implemented correctly. As an example, one officer replied that the halfway house regularly used works well for offenders while they are living there. Two respondents commented that GED programs are extremely effective. The majority of officers agreed that the most effective reentry programs are employment and drug treatment programs.

Officers were asked their opinion of what two or three things could be done to reduce the level of parole revocations in Missouri. The majority of officers suggested a more proactive approach to all programs—placing offenders in programs to match their needs rather than placing them in programs after problems arose. Specific suggestions to reduce revocation rates (by percent of the eleven respondents) included expanded use of the following programs or activities:

- Drug treatment and therapy: 45%
- Job training and work release: 45%
- Halfway house programs: 18%
- Electronic monitoring: 27.3%
- Intensive sentences and accountability: 18%
- Smaller caseloads: 18%

Summary and Conclusions

The results of these surveys and interviews are important to consider in the casework-surveillance debate, and indicate a need to review the activities performed by parole officers in supervising and assisting offenders in their return from prison to the community. With the rising number of prisoners released from prison each year and the increase in the percent of prison admissions made up of parole violators, it is critical that the reentry functions most critical to success be identified and expanded. In this study, researchers surveyed and interviewed parole officers in St. Louis, Missouri to determine what supervisory functions they performed that they considered most important in the reentry process, and which of those they believed most effective.

Parole officers identified maintaining steady employment, staying drug free, receiving support from family and friends, and developing stable patterns of behavior as the most critical aspects of success for successful prisoner reentry. When asked what they do in their job that is most important in improving parolees' chances for success, officers identified close monitoring of behavior, assessing and referring parolees to community agencies based on their needs, helping parolees maintain employment, and holding offenders accountable for their behaviors as most important.

While these findings are certainly not new, they do provide additional insight. As noted above, over the past decade, there has been a transition from the dominant style of casework supervision, which emphasizes assisting the offender with problems, counseling, and working to make sure the offender successfully completes supervision (Rothman, 1980), to a style of surveillance supervision which emphasizes the monitoring of offenders to catch them when they fail to meet all required conditions (Rhine, 1997). The concern is that this transition parallels an increase in the number of parole revocations, to a point where they now represent almost one-fourth of all new prison admissions. Over three-fourths of these parole violations are for technical violations only.

In this study, officers asked to identify the aspects they considered most important to successful prisoner reentry as well as their own job contributions to this success, responded with activities that seem to be on the "casework" side of the supervision style continuum. Officers believed that by assessing

and referring parolees to community agencies based on their needs, helping parolees maintain employment, and holding offenders accountable, they contributed to offenders' success in maintaining steady employment, staying drug free, having support from family and friends, and developing stable patterns of behavior. While monitoring and holding offenders accountable can be seen as "surveillance" activities, in this study, their focus is not on catching offenders who violate conditions of supervision so that they can be returned to prison. In fact, all of the activities identified by the majority of parole officers as important aspects of their jobs for improving the chances of successful offender reentry are activities that emphasize assisting offenders in their success in the community.

These findings suggest that even during a period when parole officers are increasingly charged with close surveillance of parolees through the use of intensive supervision, electronic monitoring, urine testing for drug use, and specialized supervision programs for offenders with histories of violence, they continue to believe that the most effective functions they perform are those that help and assist those under supervision. It is possible that we have pushed the emphasis on surveillance and risk reduction to a point where the casework activities become second priority, triggering more failures in reentry than in the past. Parole administrators and correctional policy makers may need to reconsider such surveillance policies to prevent them from overriding the importance of traditional casework activities in improving the success rates of offenders returning to the community from prison.

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