



# Employment after Prison: A Longitudinal Study of Releasees in Three States



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## KEY FINDINGS

- Eight months after prison, 65 percent of respondents had been employed at some point, but only 45 percent were currently employed.
- Most respondents relied on family and friends for income after release, more so than legal employment.
- Respondents who held a job while in prison and those who participated in job-training programs while incarcerated had better employment outcomes after release.
- Once in the community, 48 percent of respondents wanted but were unable to participate in programs to improve their work skills, most commonly because they were unaware of program availability.
- Most respondents who found work did so by speaking with friends and family; however, the most successful strategy for long-term employment was returning to a previous employer.
- Respondents who were employed and earning higher wages after release were less likely to return to prison the first year out.

*This study was funded by the generous support of the JEHT Foundation. Any opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Urban Institute, its board, or its sponsors.*

To learn more about *Returning Home* and prisoner reentry, please visit our web site: [www.urban.org/justice](http://www.urban.org/justice).

Most individuals released from prison held some type of job prior to incarceration and want legal, stable employment upon release. Some criminal justice research suggests that finding and maintaining a legitimate job can reduce former prisoners' chances of reoffending, and the higher the wage, the less likely it is that individuals will return to crime.

However, most former prisoners experience difficulty finding a job after release. During the time spent in prison, many lose work skills and are given little opportunity to gain useful work experience. Moreover, the availability of job-training programs in prison has declined in recent years.

A large proportion of former prisoners have low levels of educational attainment and work experience, health problems, and other personal characteristics that make them hard to employ. For example, 40 percent of state and federal prisoners have neither a high school diploma nor GED, nearly a third have a physical impairment or mental condition, and over half reportedly used drugs in the month before their arrest (Petersilia 2005). Once in the community, not only are many employers reluctant to hire convicted felons, but many former prisoners are legally barred from certain occupations.

In this brief, we explore the reality of finding employment after release from prison from the perspective of 740 former male prisoners in Illinois, Ohio, and Texas.<sup>1</sup> Interviews were conducted as part of a comprehensive, longitudinal study of prisoner reentry entitled *Returning Home: Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry*, which examined factors that contribute to successful or unsuccessful reintegration into the community. We focus on addressing the following key questions:

- ◆ *What are the employment experiences of those being released from prison and returning home?*
- ◆ *What factors influence whether former prisoners find work in the year after release?*

Notably, our findings may reflect correctional practices at the time of data collection (study samples were recruited from 2002 to 2003 in Illinois and 2004 to 2005 in Ohio and Texas), but do not necessarily reflect those currently in place.

## DESCRIPTION OF RETURNING HOME RESPONDENTS

The sample of 740 men was ethnically and racially diverse (74 percent African American, 16 percent European American, and 9 percent Hispanic). Almost all (99 percent) were United States citizens, and 43 percent had voted in an election (table 1). The median age was 35 years. Before entering prison, a quarter were married and over half (56 percent) had children under 18. About half had at least a high school education prior to prison. About three in five respondents reported using illegal drugs more than once a week in the six months leading up to their imprisonment, with marijuana and cocaine each accounting for about a third of reported drug use. This number increased to about two in three respondents when alcohol intoxication<sup>2</sup> was also considered.

**Table I. Characteristics of Respondents**

	Men (n = 740)
<b>Demographics</b>	
Age (median)	35 years
Black or African American	74%
White or Caucasian	16%
Hispanic	9%
U.S. Citizen	99%
<b>Education and Family Relationships</b>	
High school diploma or GED when entered prison	52%
Married or living together as married before prison	25%
Had children under age 18 when entered prison	56%
<b>Pre-Prison Substance Use</b>	
Frequent drug use or intoxication	66%
Frequent illegal drug use	59%
<b>Criminal History</b>	
Age at first arrest (median)	17 years
Served time in a juvenile facility	34%
Previously convicted of a crime	84%
Served time in prison before	68%
Had parole or probation revoked before	47%
<b>Current Prison Sentence</b>	
Time served (median)	15 months
Violent offense conviction	20%
Drug offense conviction	39%
Current term due to probation or parole violation	30%
In maximum/high risk security	5%
Released to parole or mandatory supervision	76%

Many respondents had a significant history of criminal activity before the current incarceration. Eighty-four percent had prior criminal convictions with about a third having four or more previous convictions. Sixty-eight percent had served a prison term before (28 percent had served three or more prior prison terms), and 47 percent had been returned to prison for a parole or probation violation at some point. About a third (34 percent) had served time in a juvenile correctional facility, and the median age at first

arrest was 17 years.

The largest share of the sample (39 percent) was serving time for a drug offense (either possession or sales) for their current prison term. Thirty percent were in prison for a parole or probation violation, about a third of which were technical violations. The median time served was 15 months, and 5 percent were in maximum security for the majority of their prison term.

**PRE-PRISON EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES**

Many of the Returning Home respondents had an active employment history before entering prison. More than two-thirds (68 percent) had worked in the six months preceding their incarceration, with most holding jobs in the construction, maintenance, cleaning, automotive, and food service industries. The majority (70 percent) had held a job for at least one year prior to entering prison, and the median hourly wage was \$9 per hour. Besides employment, respondents reported a variety of other sources of income (figure 1). Illegal income was a source of financial support for over a third (35 percent) of the sample. However, only 11 percent reported that all of their income came from illegal activity.

**IN-PRISON PROGRAMMING AND WORK EXPERIENCE**

About half of the respondents (53 percent) reported holding a job during their incarceration (table 2). Nine percent had worked in the community in a “work release” job, earning an average of 20 cents per hour. Many respondents (65 percent) also worked to learn new skills through education and employment programs while in prison (figure 2). Thirty-two percent participated in a GED or other educational program if it was available, with 35 percent of those individuals who were offered or took an educational course earning a GED. Twenty percent of respondents said that no employment or education programs were offered to them in prison.

**THE RETURNING HOME PROJECT**

Launched in 2001 and completed in June 2006, the *Returning Home* study explored the pathways of prisoner reintegration, examining which factors contributed to successful or unsuccessful reentry and identifying how those factors could inform policy. The data collected included measures of both reintegration (e.g., family support, employment, substance use) and recidivism (e.g., self-reported crime, reincarceration).

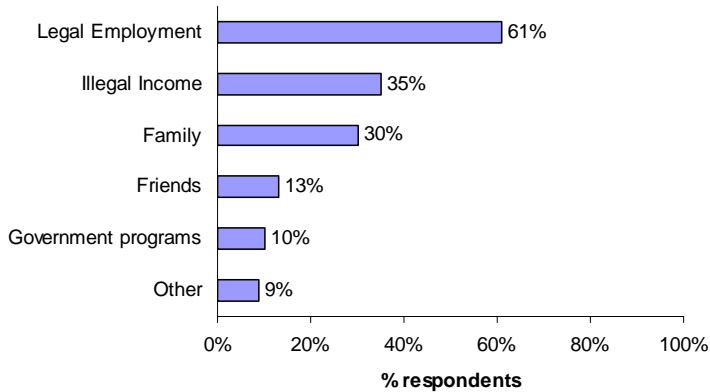
The *Returning Home* study targeted male prisoners serving at least one year in state prisons<sup>3</sup> and returning to the areas of Chicago, Illinois; Cleveland, Ohio; and Houston, Texas. Study samples were recruited from 2002 to 2003 in Illinois and 2004 to 2005 in Ohio and Texas.

In Illinois and Texas, prisoners were recruited through preexisting prerelease programs when groups of prisoners were already convened. During these sessions, *Returning Home* interviewers held orientations explaining the study and distributed self-administered surveys to those willing to participate. In Ohio, interviewers scheduled their own times at pre-selected facilities to explain the study and distribute surveys.

The prerelease questionnaires were designed to capture respondents’ experiences immediately before and during their current incarceration. After release, two in-person interviews conducted with all prerelease respondents captured postrelease experiences immediately after and during the year following release.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 1. Pre-Prison Sources of Income<sup>a</sup>**

**Before prison legal employment was the most common means of financial support, followed by illegal income.**



<sup>a</sup> Respondents could indicate more than one source.

**EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES: TWO MONTHS AFTER RELEASE**

Finding a job was an important goal for many of the returning prisoners. Seventy-nine percent spent time searching for a job after being released. The most common reason cited for not searching for a job was already having a job lined up while still in prison (27 percent). Other reasons for not actively searching for a job were having health problems (15 percent), being permanently disabled (15 percent), having other things to do such as attend school (10 percent), participating in treatment programs or house detention (6 percent), needing to care for others (5 percent), not wanting to work (4 percent), and other reasons (29 percent).

Most participants (86 percent) used multiple strategies to find a job, including talking with friends and relatives, responding to newspaper or help-wanted ads, speaking with their parole officer, and contacting their former employer (figure 3). In regards to enlisting their parole officer for help, 20 percent felt that their parole officer was helpful in finding a job. Many respondents had difficulty finding employment, and the majority (70 percent) felt that their criminal record had affected their job search. For instance, many people felt that background checks inhibited their ability to acquire a job and thought employers did not want to hire someone with a criminal record.

Two months after being released, 43 percent of respondents had been employed at some point since leaving prison, but only 31 percent were currently employed. Only half of those who reported having a job lined up before release had worked at any point since returning to the community. Those who had found employment had, on average, worked for about 60 percent of the time since their release. The most common types of jobs were construction or general manual labor (27 percent), maintenance (12 percent), and assembly line or factory jobs (12 percent). Seventy-two percent of those employed had a full-time job, and hourly wages for all jobs ranged from \$2 to \$80 with a median wage of \$8 per hour.

Although the majority of respondents felt their criminal record had impacted their job search, 87 percent of those employed said their current employer knew about their criminal history. Most reported high job satisfaction: the majority liked the work they did (88 percent), believed their job would provide better opportunities (75 percent), and felt they had good relationships with their co-workers (90 percent). However, 47 percent said they were not happy with the amount of pay their job provided.

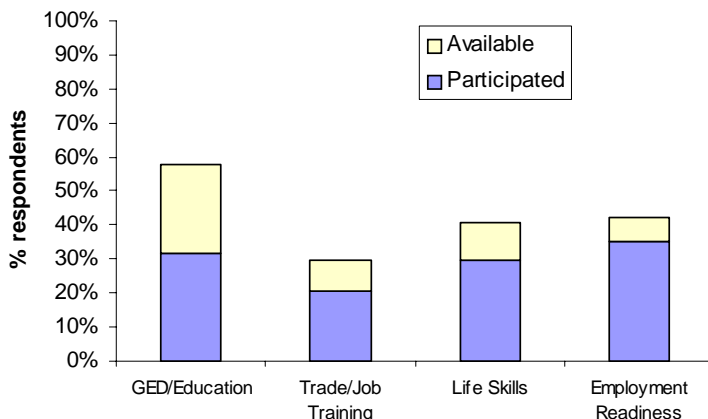
In addition to formal employment, 28 percent

**Table 2. In-Prison Experiences of Respondents**

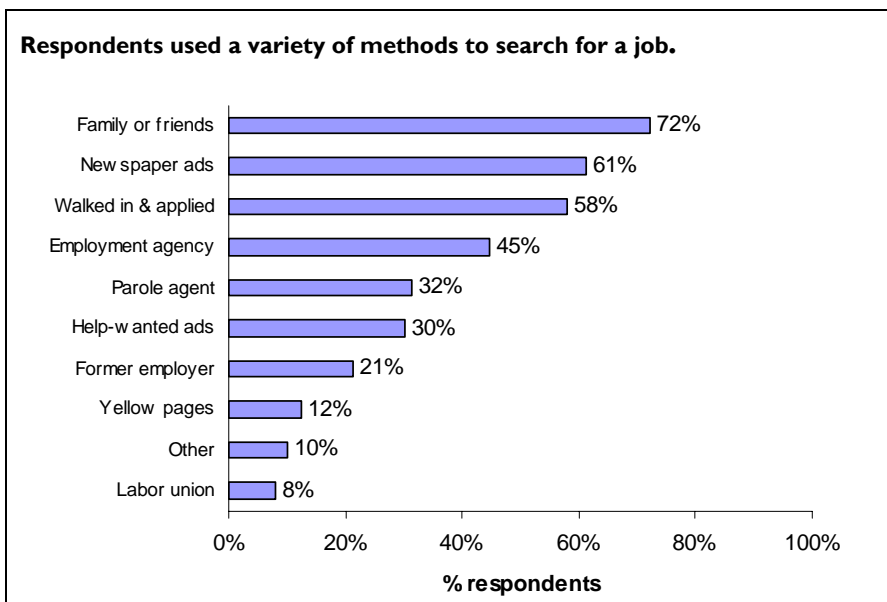
	Men (n = 740)
<b>Program Participation</b>	
Participated in any employment program	65%
Participated in education/GED classes	32%
Earned a GED in prison <sup>5</sup>	14%
Participated in life skills program	30%
Participated in employment readiness program	35%
Participated in trade/job training program	21%
Felt that prerelease programs were helpful <sup>6</sup>	69%
<b>Prison Employment</b>	
Currently holding job in prison when interviewed	53%
Current prison job has regular schedule	89%
Has held work release job	9%

**Figure 2. In-Prison Availability and Participation Rates of Employment-Relevant Programs**

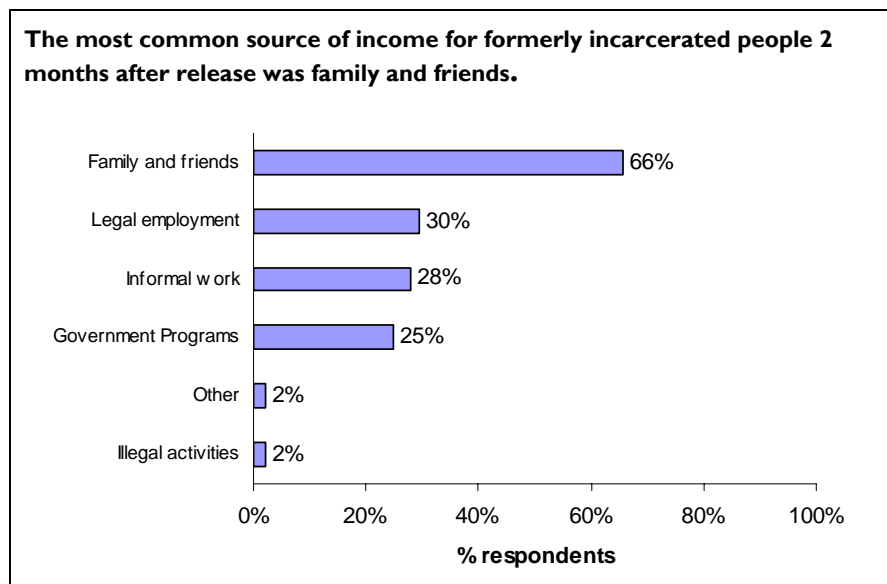
**Many inmates improved their job skills in prison through education and training programs if they were available.**



**Figure 3. Strategies Used to Find a Job**



**Figure 4. Sources of Income, Two Months after Release**



of respondents had done some type of informal work for pay. Many also found other means of financial support beyond paid work (figure 4). Two-thirds received financial assistance from friends and family, and about one in five also relied on public assistance. The percentage of former prisoners who reported illegal activities as a source of income two months after release (2 percent) decreased considerably from pre-prison levels (35 percent). Considering all sources of income, the median total income for participants was \$410 per month.

**EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES: EIGHT MONTHS AFTER RELEASE**

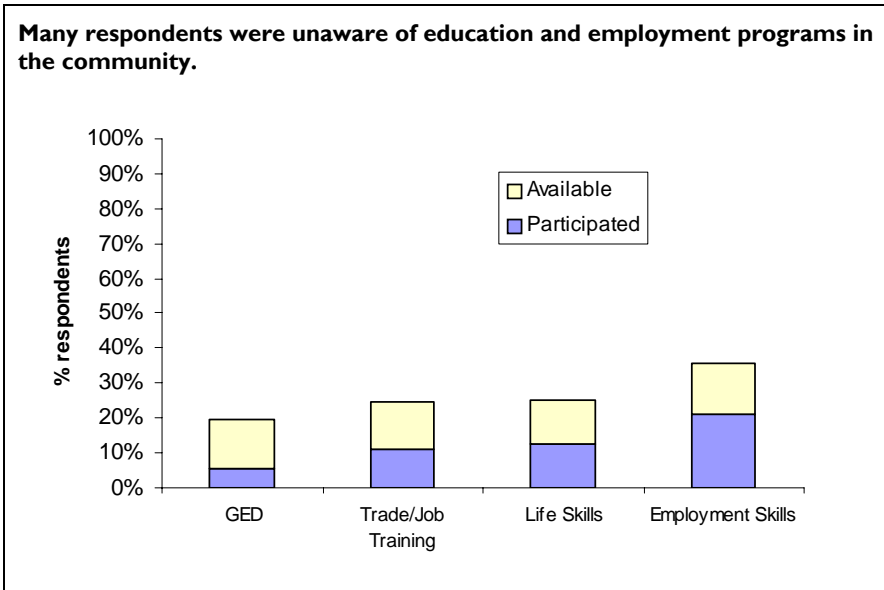
When participants were interviewed approximately eight months after release, many were still searching for a job. Respondents reported using similar methods as they had in

the first two months after release, with the most popular strategies being talking to friends and family (73 percent), walking in and applying for a job (62 percent), and using newspaper ads (57 percent). Thirteen percent said their parole officer was helpful with their job hunt. The majority (71 percent) again said that their criminal record affected their ability to obtain a job. The most commonly cited reason for not actively job hunting was personal challenges such as health problems or older age (32 percent). Only 4 percent said they had not searched for a job because they did not want to work.

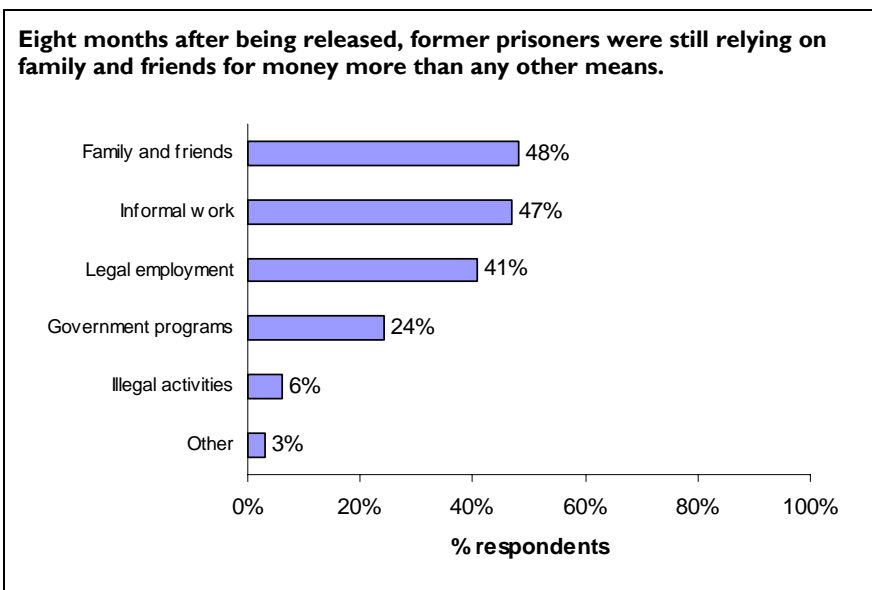
Some former prisoners participated in community programs to enhance their job marketability. However, many were not aware of available programs (figure 5). Of those who knew of education and employment programs (60 percent), participation rates ranged from 29 percent for GED classes to 61 percent for employment skills programs. In addition, of those who were aware of available services, 62 percent participated in some type of substance abuse treatment program and 48 percent received counseling. About half of all respondents said they wanted to enroll in programs or classes but were unable to (48 percent). Some reasons cited for not taking advantage of postrelease programs and classes included being unaware of program opportunities (28 percent), being too busy (16 percent), wanting to take a class that was too full (8 percent), not being able to afford the class (6 percent), having transportation issues (4 percent), and lacking eligibility or required qualifications (5 percent). When asked which programs and services had been the most useful since release, job training was the most popular response (45 percent).

Eight months after release, more respondents had successfully found employment than at two months postrelease. Sixty-five percent had been employed at some point since release; however, less than half were actually employed at the time of the interview. While the majority reported that their criminal history made the job hunt more difficult, 80 percent of employed respondents said their employer knew about their criminal history. On average, respondents worked a total of three months since release, and those who were employed tended to hold one job. The most common types of jobs were construction or general manual labor (24 percent), food service (12 percent), and maintenance (10 percent). Hourly wages for all jobs ranged from \$2 to \$90 with a median hourly wage of \$9. Most

**Figure 5. Availability and Participation Rates of Employment-Relevant Programs, Eight Months after Release**



**Figure 6. Sources of Income, Eight Months after Release**



employed respondents worked at least 40 hours per week (72 percent), although 40 percent reported working more than 40 hours and 15 percent said they worked 60 or more hours each week.

Surprisingly, very few employed respondents reported transportation difficulties. The median time spent traveling to work was 30 minutes, while the median distance was 10 miles. However, respondents indicated they would be willing to travel much farther for a job if necessary; the median time respondents were willing to commute was 60 minutes. Most respondents traveled to work by car (64 percent), either in their own car (42 percent) or with other people (21 percent). The second most common mode of traveling

to work was public transportation (26 percent). Only 4 percent said they did not have transportation when necessary.

As was the case two months after release, the majority of employed participants reported high job satisfaction, with most stating they enjoyed their work (90 percent), got along well with coworkers (91 percent), and felt the job would lead to better opportunities (79 percent). However, about half (51 percent) were unhappy with the amount of pay.

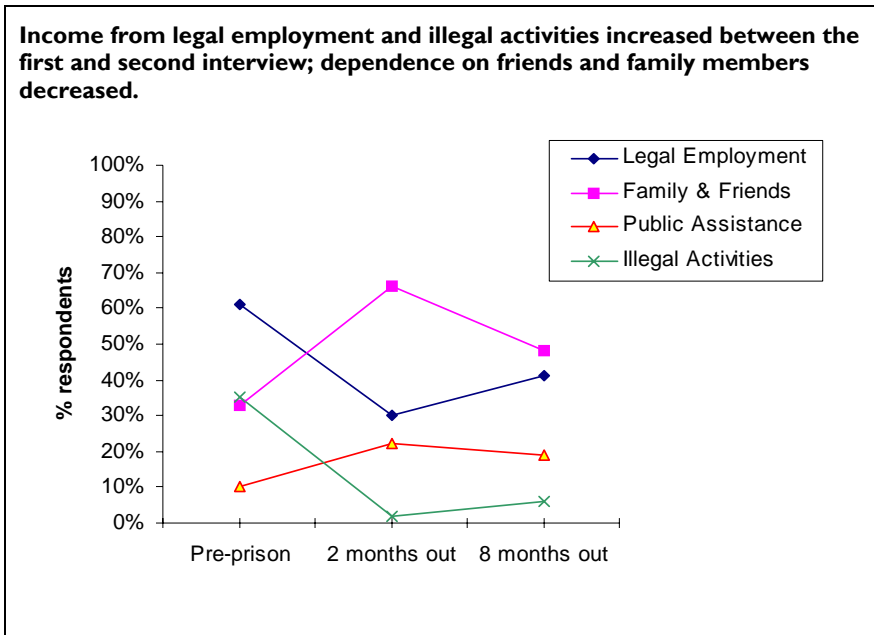
Respondents found other means aside from legal employment to supplement their income. Forty-seven percent had performed some type of informal work such as automotive repairs, carpentry work, and lawn maintenance (figure 6). With the higher rates of formal and informal employment eight months after release (compared with two months postrelease), reliance on other forms of financial support decreased (figure 7). However, a substantial number of former prisoners (48 percent) continued to rely on family and friends for financial support. Also, the portion with income from illegal activities increased slightly from 2 to 6 percent. The median monthly income from all sources increased from \$410 at two months out to \$700 eight months after release (table 3).

**IDENTIFYING PREDICTORS OF EMPLOYMENT SUCCESS**

To better understand why some individuals experience greater employment success than others, we used multiple regression to identify factors predictive of better employment outcomes.<sup>7</sup> Two outcomes were examined: being employed eight months after release and the percentage of time employed since release (as measured eight months out). Through these regression analyses, various characteristics and circumstances were identified as important to finding and maintaining employment after release from prison (tables 4 and 5).

Respondents from Texas and Ohio generally had better employment outcomes for both measures. This may be due to differences in general employment rates and opportunities or specific policy variations across states. In addition, respondents who were younger were more likely to be currently working eight months after release and to have worked for a larger proportion of time. Not surprisingly, individuals with a stronger pre-prison employment history

**Figure 7. Percentage of Respondents Reporting Income Sources**



were more likely to be employed after release. Predicted probabilities of being employed eight months out were 30 percent for those who had not worked in the six months prior to their most recent incarceration, compared with 51 percent for those who had worked in that time period. Furthermore, holding an in-prison job increased the chances of employment eight months after release, as did searching for work through a former employer (predicted probabilities of employment were 61 percent for those returning to a former employer, compared with 43 percent for those who did not).

**Table 3. Employment Experiences of Respondents, Two and Eight Months after Release**

	Men 2 months after release (n = 740)	Men 8 months after release (n = 740)
<b>Employment</b>		
Actively searched for a job*	79%	74%
Feels criminal record has affected job search	71%	71%
Any employment since release**	43%	65%
Currently employed**	31%	45%
Median hourly wage for all jobs combined†*	\$8.00	\$8.95
Median number hours works per week†	40.00	40.00
<b>Types of Income Sources</b>		
Total monthly income (median)**	\$410.63	\$700.00
Legal employment**	30%	41%
Informal work**	28%	47%
Family and friends**	66%	48%
Public assistance	22%	19%
Illegal activities**	2%	6%

Notes: Z tests and Wilcoxon signed rank tests were conducted to identify statistically significant differences across time. A single asterisk (\*) denotes differences with a p-value < .05 and a double asterisk (\*\*) denotes differences with a p-value < .01. The symbol † denotes the subsample of respondents who were employed.

On average, respondents with a job lined up while still in prison worked a greater percentage of time after release than those without a job lined up (those with a job lined up worked 59 percent of the time since release compared with 40 percent for those with no job lined up). Interestingly, though, having a job lined up before release was not significantly related to being employed eight months after release. This may indicate that helping inmates find a job before returning to the community assists in initial employment but does not necessarily help them maintain employment.

Remaining abstinent from illegal drug use<sup>8</sup> two months after release, having photo identification, identifying one's race as white, and owing debt were all associated with higher levels of employment over the follow-up period, but those factors had no relation to whether respondents were currently working eight months after release.

In contrast, participating in trade or job training while in prison was associated with higher employment likelihood eight months out (62 percent compared with 41 percent for those who did not participate), but had no relation to the overall amount of time spent employed. Respondents who said they intended to commit crimes or use drugs once released were less likely to be employed eight months after release. Health problems (both physical and mental) were also associated with poorer employment outcomes after release.

## SUMMARY AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Employment is an important component of the reentry process. Even more than a steady source of income, jobs can provide a sense of structure and responsibility to former prisoners as they struggle to reintegrate after release. Unfortunately, many will face a difficult path toward finding and keeping employment.

One important finding of the analyses in this report was the particular vulnerability of those without previous work experience. Prison administrators and service providers must realize that individuals with weak employment and educational histories will need additional assistance with finding a job after prison. Furthermore, most returning prisoners in the sample had an extensive history of substance abuse, and those who turned to drugs early after their release—within the first two months—were less able to find a job eight months out. However,

**Table 4. Predictors of Percentage of Time Employed since Release**

<p><b>Those who ...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• were from Ohio or Texas</li> <li>• identified themselves racially as white</li> <li>• worked in the six months before prison</li> <li>• had worked longer periods of time</li> <li>• held a prison job</li> <li>• had a job lined up before release</li> <li>• had a photo ID</li> <li>• owed debt</li> <li>• had a strong, healthy attachment to their children<sup>†</sup></li> <li>• used a former employer to find a job<sup>†</sup></li> <li>• felt in control of their lives<sup>†</sup></li> </ul> <p><b>...were employed a higher percentage of time since release.</b></p>	<p><b>Those who...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• were older</li> <li>• used any illegal drugs after release<sup>†</sup></li> <li>• had a chronic physical health condition</li> <li>• had a mental health condition</li> </ul> <p><b>...were employed a lower percentage of time since release.</b></p>
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Note. The symbol <sup>†</sup> denotes a finding with marginal significance (p < .1).

**Table 5. Predictors of Being Currently Employed Eight Months after Release**

<p><b>Those who...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• were from Ohio or Texas</li> <li>• worked in the six months before prison</li> <li>• had worked longer periods of time</li> <li>• held a prison job</li> <li>• participated in job training in prison</li> <li>• used a former employer to find a job</li> <li>• were married<sup>†</sup></li> </ul> <p><b>...were more likely to be employed.</b></p>	<p><b>Those who...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• were older</li> <li>• intended to commit crimes or use drugs after release</li> <li>• had a chronic physical health condition</li> <li>• had a mental health condition</li> <li>• had minor children<sup>†</sup></li> </ul> <p><b>...were less likely to be employed.</b></p>
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Note. The symbol <sup>†</sup> denotes a finding with marginal significance (p < .1).

only 39 percent had received substance abuse treatment while in prison. Continuity of care with evidence-based treatments will assist former prisoners in resisting substance use and should ultimately help them find employment. Similarly, returning prisoners need continuous medical care as having a health condition also led to poorer employment outcomes.

Given that some individuals were at particular risk for poor employment outcomes, it was encouraging to see that participation in in-prison programs increased the likelihood of postrelease employment. Respondents who held a prison job and those who participated in job-training programs while incarcerated had better employment outcomes after release. Also after release, many respondents were interested in participating in community programs to further improve their work skills. However, nearly half could not attend a program despite this desire, most commonly because they were unaware of available programs or services in their community. This finding highlights the

importance of prerelease programs designed to provide individuals with knowledge about programs and how to connect with resources in their communities. For example, “one-stop” reentry centers are being implemented in some communities to help recent releasees gain access to services and programs.

The hiring process itself is a large hurdle for most returning prisoners. Restrictions on convicted persons working in certain types of jobs impedes the process of finding a job, and the majority of respondents felt that many employers did not feel comfortable hiring individuals with a criminal record. Having to provide criminal history information before the interview process eliminates many job opportunities for former prisoners. Some states, such as Texas, have decided to stop asking about criminal records on applications for certain job positions. Giving employers the opportunity to meet and speak with job applicants before discovering their criminal history has the potential to improve job outcomes for former prisoners. Another important but sometimes overlooked factor is having a source of identification at release that is not affiliated with the department of corrections. Holding some form of identification, either at the moment of release or acquiring one soon after, was related to better job outcomes.

Most respondents looking for a job after release used multiple strategies in their search, but the most successful one was returning to a previous employer to find work. However, this again exemplifies the vulnerability of individuals without previous employment. Given that many former prisoners were released to supervision, parole agencies and officers might be one useful source for employment resources; yet, few respondents in the sample reported that their parole agent was helpful in their job search.

Once returning prisoners find a job, there is an additional challenge of maintaining employment. Eight months after release, 65 percent of respondents said they had been employed at some point since their incarceration but less than half were currently employed. Furthermore, while those individuals who had a job lined up while still in prison did work more after release, they were no more likely to be employed eight months out than those who did not have a job lined up. More study is needed of the challenges former prisoners face in keeping a job once employed.

## Did Employment Experiences Affect Recidivism by Former Prisoners?

Research by the Bureau of Justice Statistics shows high recidivism rates among former prisoners in the first year after release: nearly half (44 percent) are rearrested, 22 percent reconvicted, and 10 percent returned to prison on a new sentence.<sup>a</sup> However, not all return to a life of crime; some former prisoners successfully reintegrate and avoid recidivism—at least in the short term. The ultimate task for researchers and practitioners is identifying which key factors inhibit or promote recidivism after release.

Toward this end, we analyzed several pre- and post-prison experiences as possible predictors of recidivism 8 and 12 months after release—with a specific focus on employment predictors. Recidivism outcomes included self-reported new crime (19 percent of sample) or rearrest (26 percent of sample) eight months after release, and officially recorded reincarceration<sup>b</sup> (21 percent of sample) one year after release. Through multivariate logistic regression, we assessed the effect of employment on recidivism while controlling for other factors related to criminal behavior. Those factors included respondent age, race, criminal history, pre-prison education, marital status, children, and type of release (supervised or not). In addition, we controlled for the state in which respondents were imprisoned (Ohio, Illinois, or Texas), the exact amount of time since release when outcomes were assessed, and substance use two months after release.

Results showed that working before prison and earning wages early after release were significantly related to reincarceration the first year out. After controlling for all the factors listed above, respondents who worked in the 6 months before prison were nearly half as likely to be reincarcerated 12 months out as those who had not worked (16 percent compared with 28 percent).<sup>c</sup> Similarly, the more wages earned two months after release, the lower a respondent's likelihood of reincarceration. Predicted probabilities of reincarceration were 8 percent for those earning more than \$10 per hour; 12 percent for those earning \$7 to \$10 per hour; and 16 percent for those earning less than \$7 per hour—compared with 23 percent for those who were unemployed. Also notable was that respondents who participated in job training classes while in prison (about a fifth of the sample) were less likely to be reincarcerated one year out—with a difference approaching significance ( $p = 0.084$ ) of 13 percent compared with 22 percent. Neither pre- nor post-prison work was related to *self-reported* recidivism outcomes after release, but releasees who had held a job while in prison were significantly less likely to report having been rearrested eight months out (19 percent compared with 28 percent of those with no job in prison).<sup>d</sup>

Collectively, these results point to the importance of past employment experiences and meaningful employment early after release in achieving longer term reintegration success. All things equal, former prisoners who are able to secure a job, ideally at higher than minimum wage, by two months out are more likely to successfully avoid recidivism the first 8 to 12 months after release. In-prison jobs and evidence-based employment programs may help toward this end.

<sup>a</sup> Langan, Patrick A., and David J. Levin. 2002. *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1994*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

<sup>b</sup> For either a new crime conviction (7 percent of sample) or supervision violation (14 percent of sample).

<sup>c</sup> Based on predicted probabilities from multivariate regression models for differences significant at  $p < .05$ .

<sup>d</sup> This finding remained true though significant at  $p < .10$ , even after controlling for time served and disciplinary control in prison.

Another powerful finding of this study was the relationship between wages and recidivism (see textbox this page). Individuals who made more than \$10 an hour were half as likely to return to prison as those making less than \$7 an hour. This may be due to the difficulty in supporting oneself or one's family on an inadequate salary. About two in five respondents resorted to working over 40 hours a week to earn more money. Many respondents relied on family and friends and, to a lesser extent, on government programs for financial support after release. Although this reliance decreased over time, 48 percent of respondents were still reporting their family and friends as sources of income eight months after release. Furthermore, even after considering all sources of income, the median monthly income eight months after release was only \$700 per month.

The struggle to find and keep a job after release is a crucial element of the reentry process. It is an important part of becoming a productive member of the community and assists in developing personal responsibility and gaining

independence and self-reliance. However, there are a number of obstacles to obtaining and maintaining employment, including the reluctance of employers to hire those with criminal records, the lack of previous education or employment history for some individuals, and the gap in work history during the prison term. In addition, former prisoners must juggle a number of other reentry challenges while trying to acquire steady employment, including finding stable housing, dealing with health problems, and attempting to renew family relationships. It is also important to remember that individuals need to desire a change in their lives. Respondents who said they intended to return to a life of crime and drugs after release had, unsurprisingly, poorer employment outcomes.

While finding and maintaining employment is only one among a number of challenges for returning prisoners, it can have an enormous impact on the success of releasees in avoiding recidivism and in improving their quality of life after release. Addressing the employment status of releasees is thus key to increasing the chances for positive outcomes for



this population. With the knowledge provided through this and other studies on reentry, policymakers and service providers should be better equipped to assist individuals who are ready and willing to make the life changes necessary to successfully negotiate reentry challenges.

<sup>1</sup> Self-reported data are considered a valid source of information about offenders' attitudes and expectations, beliefs, and personal understanding of their behavior and experiences. However, despite extensive interviewer training, some respondents may have intentionally or unintentionally under- or overreported certain behaviors and experiences.

<sup>2</sup> Intoxication was defined as "getting drunk."

<sup>3</sup> In Texas, prisoners from state jails were also interviewed. The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) confines low-level drug and property felony offenders in state jails rather than state prisons, for terms lasting between 75 days and two years.

<sup>4</sup> For more on study recruitment and participation, see La Vigne, Nancy G., Christy Visher, and Jennifer Castro. 2004. *Chicago Prisoners' Experiences Returning Home*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. Visher, Christy, Demelza Baer, and Rebecca Naser. 2006. *Ohio Prisoners' Reflections on Returning Home*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. La Vigne, Nancy, and Vera Kachnowski. 2005. *Texas Prisoners' Reflections on Returning Home*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

<sup>5</sup> While 14 percent of all respondents earned a GED in prison, 35 percent of respondents who were offered or took a GED course earned a GED.

<sup>6</sup> Of those who participated in prerelease programs.

<sup>7</sup> We used logistic and linear regression to assess the effect of various predictors on employment after release while controlling for factors such as respondent age, race, criminal history, pre-prison education and employment history, marital status, and children. In addition, we controlled for the state in which respondents were imprisoned (Ohio, Illinois, or Texas), the exact amount of time since release when outcomes were assessed, and substance use before prison and two months after release.

<sup>8</sup> Respondents in Ohio and Texas were asked whether they had used any illegal drugs in the last 30 days while respondents in Illinois were asked whether they had used any illegal drugs since release.

<sup>9</sup> Actual interview times varied across respondents and states; thus, multivariate results presented in later sections control for time since release.

<sup>10</sup> This number excludes 9 respondents who were reincarcerated before their first interview was conducted.

<sup>11</sup> Weights larger than four were truncated to four to avoid skewness of results. When weights were applied, the analyzed sample showed comparability to the initial sample across all prerelease characteristics and reincarceration.

## EMPLOYMENT DATA GATHERED FROM *RETURNING HOME*

The *Returning Home* study asked respondents many questions about workforce participation, gathering information on their employment history before prison, experiences during prison, and experiences after release. Employment history information was collected during the self-administered prerelease survey approximately 30 days before release and asked prisoners about their work experiences during the six months prior to their current prison term. They were asked how many jobs they worked, the total number of hours worked each week, the type of work, and how much they earned. Respondents were also asked about their work experiences while in prison—whether they held an in-prison job, what kind of work they did, how many hours they worked, how long they had the job, and how much money they earned. Respondents were also asked about their expectations and plans for employment after release, including how they planned to find employment, how much money they expected to earn, and how difficult they anticipated finding and keeping a job would be.

During one-on-one interviews conducted approximately two and eight months after release, respondents were asked more extensive questions about job experiences. The two-month interview asked about job training received during prison, and specifically whether respondents were offered or participated in employment readiness, job training classes, or work release. Both the two- and eight-month interviews included questions about respondents' experiences looking for work since release—whether, how, and for how long they had looked for a job, and how their criminal record may have affected their job search. They were asked whether, for how long, and in what capacity they were working, as well as how many hours per week they worked and how much money they earned. In addition, they were asked how they found their current job (if employed), how far their job was from where they lived, and how they traveled to their job. Finally, respondents were asked a series of questions regarding satisfaction with their job.

## SAMPLE REPRESENTATIVENESS AND METHODOLOGY

The prerelease samples of prisoners interviewed for the *Returning Home* study were generally representative of male prisoners in the relevant geographic areas in terms of race, sentence length, and time served. Within some states, differences emerged in terms of age (the Texas sample was about 2 years older than other Texas-bound releasees), criminal history (the Illinois sample had more prior incarcerations than other releasees), current offense type (the Ohio sample was less likely to have been incarcerated for a drug offense and the Illinois sample for a technical violation), and prison housing security-level (the Illinois and Ohio samples were more likely to be housed at medium-security). In addition, the Illinois and Ohio samples contained somewhat greater percentages of supervised releasees.

After release, following the sample prisoners was difficult and costly at times; yet, 61 percent of the 1,238 males interviewed initially were located for two different postrelease interviews—one at two months out and the other at seven to eight months out.<sup>9</sup> The focus of this analysis is on the 740 respondents who completed both interviews in addition to the initial, in-prison survey.<sup>10</sup>

To correct for differences between the final sample analyzed and the original sample interviewed before release, inverse probability weights (IPW) were used within each state.<sup>11</sup> Increasingly popular among economists and statisticians, IPW methods provide an intuitive approach to correcting for non-representation by weighting sample members by the inverse probability of their being selected. In this way, IPW methods can be used to correct general forms of sample selection, attrition, and stratification problems (Wooldredge 2002; Hirano, Imbens, and Ridder 2003).

The analytic approach in this brief included presentation of descriptive statistics on former prisoners' experiences and use of multivariate regression to identify predictors of employment outcomes. All analyses were performed using the inverse probability weights described above, though visual comparison of weighted and unweighted results yielded substantively similar conclusions.