

## Family Members' Experiences with Incarceration and Reentry\*

Rebecca L. Naser

*Peter D. Hart Research Associates*

Christy A. Visher

*The Urban Institute*

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**Abstract:** *This paper explores the impact of the incarceration and return of individuals from prison on their families, including relationships with intimate partners, adult family members, and children. Based on responses from 247 family members of Chicago-bound male prisoners interviewed several months after their imprisoned family members were released, we describe the personal circumstances of the families of returning prisoners, the frequency and type of contact with the imprisoned family members, and the level of family support for the former prisoners after release. We discuss some of the hardships the family members experience during the incarceration and reentry process, and some of the support networks that these family members rely upon, as they face challenges associated with prisoner reentry—the challenges of supporting a family member who has recently been released from prison. We also examine areas of assistance and support that family members of recently released prisoners identified as needed. Findings indicate that these family members are highly supportive of their formerly incarcerated relative, providing financial and emotional support. But family members also experience significant hardships during the reentry period, including financial strain and increased anxiety. Finally, we discuss the policy implications of these findings for developing correctional and community programs and offer suggestions for further research on family issues regarding prisoner reentry.*

**Key words:** prisoners, family, incarceration, reentry

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### Introduction

Among the many challenges facing prisoners as they return home is their reunification with family. For most former prisoners, relationships with family members are critical to successful reintegration, yet these relationships may be complicated by past experiences and unrealistic expectations. Research has documented that many family members of returning prisoners are also wary about their loved ones' return from prison and that a significant adjustment in roles is often necessary (Furstenberg 1995; Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999).

Family is undoubtedly important to understanding the reintegration process confronting former prisoners. Recent studies indicate that upwards of three-quarters of former prisoners reside, at least initially, with family

members after release (La Vigne, Visher, and Castro 2004; Visher et al. 2004; Nelson, Deess, and Allen 1999). However, little systematic information exists about the nature of family members' relationships with former prisoners. The subject has been virtually ignored in theories of recidivism (for an exception see Waller 1974), although desistance research indicates that the family may be critical to explaining individual pathways after release from prison (Laub and Sampson 2003; Sampson and Laub 1993).

Most former prisoners have extensive family relationships that are likely affected by their incarceration and eventual return home. About one-quarter of prisoners are married, about half (55 percent) are parents, and 44 percent lived with at least some of their children before incarceration (Mumola 2000). Almost one-quarter of

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inmate parents have three or more children, and the majority of these children are under age 10 (Mumola 2000). Also, incarcerated parents maintain a surprising level of contact with their children, especially in light of the difficulties introduced by the prison environment. More than 80 percent of prison inmates report having had some kind of contact with their children during their period of incarceration (Mumola 2000). These family ties also extend to the period after release. In a study of former prisoners in Chicago, 71 percent reported that support from family would be important in helping them stay out of prison (La Vigne et al. 2004). Thus, the opportunity to renew and maintain successful relationships with family may lead to more involvement after release in conventional roles such as parent, spouse, and employee (Edin, Nelson, and Paranal 2004; Sampson and Laub 1993; Uggen, Manza, and Behrens 2004).

Existing research provides strong empirical evidence that the family of a returning prisoner has a significant impact on post-release success or failure – indeed, the family often serves as a ‘buffering agent’ for the newly released prisoner (e.g., Irwin 1970). Among the family influences that may be important is the strength of family relationships before and during incarceration, including the frequency of contact during incarceration, and whether family provides a pro-social or antisocial influence. Further, the type and level of support offered by family after release, whether emotional, financial, or other tangible support such as housing and transportation, is likely to influence former prisoners’ success or failure after release (La Vigne et al. 2004). While much of this research supports a strong correlation between family ties and post-release success, it fails to address how and why this effect occurs and how the family is affected by incarceration and reentry.

The Urban Institute’s *Returning Home* study provides the first in-depth analysis of family members’ experiences with incarceration and reentry by analyzing interviews with 247 persons who had family members released from prison approximately three months before their interviews. These data enable us to explore several research questions, including: What are some of the consequences of incarceration and reentry for families? When an incarcerated family member returns home, what types of support does his family provide? What challenges do families of returning prisoners face? Upon what support systems and coping mechanisms do these family members rely?

This paper begins with a summary of related literature, followed by a description of how the study sample was selected. We then examine the characteristics

and circumstances of the family members in our study, providing an in-depth look at their demographic characteristics, their relationships with the recently released family members, the frequency and type of contact they had with their imprisoned family members during incarceration, and the hardships and challenges these family members of returning prisoners experienced. We then explore coping mechanisms and types of internal (e.g., personal spirituality) and external (e.g., religious and community organizations) assistance and support upon which these family members relied. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of these research findings for policy and practice.

### Related Literature

In the same way that most research on former prisoners addresses the prediction of recidivism, research that considers the family’s impact on returning prisoners also almost exclusively focuses on the outcome of recidivism, rather than attempting to understand the complicated social processes through which family may affect reintegration. Further, our understanding of the role of family in the reintegration process is based primarily on studies that focus on family relationships and ties during prison. For example, a remarkably consistent association has been found between family contact during incarceration and lower recidivism rates (Adams and Fischer 1976; Arditti et al. 2003; Glaser 1969; Hairston 2002; Holt and Miller 1972; Klein, Bartholomew, and Hibbert 2002; Ohlin 1954).

In recent decades, research that has focused on the impact of returning prisoners on their families has concentrated primarily on the effects on children whose parents are incarcerated. These studies have found that the absence of incarcerated parental figures creates emotional and financial strain for children (Adalist-Estrin 1994; Fishman 1983; Hairston 1989; Schneller 1976; Sharp & Marcus-Mendoza 2001; Swan 1981). Surprisingly, few studies examine the family’s general experiences with the incarceration and eventual return of a family member from prison, a perspective that may provide insight into the role of family in the reintegration process for returning prisoners and enhance our understanding of why some returning prisoners succeed and others do not.

Three studies of former prisoners conducted outside the United States provide additional clues about the importance of family relationships to post-release outcomes. In the early 1990s, 311 male recidivists in the Ontario region completed detailed interviews shortly after their return to prison concerning their lives in the

community preceding the new offense (Zamble and Quinsey 1997). When asked about problems experienced since release, the most common difficulties mentioned were interpersonal conflicts, primarily with heterosexual partners. In the early 1990s, researchers at the University of Oxford conducted a two-year longitudinal study of 130 male property offenders as they transitioned from prison to the community (Burnett 1992). Analysis of post-release interviews revealed that respondents who continued to engage in criminal activity were more likely to have relationship problems, less likely to have children, and more likely to experience conflict with their parents or other relatives than were those who desisted from criminal involvement (Burnett 2004). Additionally, an older study of over 400 men released from prisons in Ontario in 1968 points to the importance of several post-release factors in predicting recidivism, including spending time with children shortly after release (Waller 1974).

In recent longitudinal research on prisoner reentry, different types of family support provided to recently released prisoners appear to improve post-release outcomes. In particular, perceived emotional support and tangible support, such as housing and financial assistance, were associated with employment and reduced substance use (La Vigne et al. 2004; Visher et al. 2004; Nelson et al. 1999). Researchers have also found that general family acceptance and encouragement are related to post-release success. In a study of recently released prisoners in New York City, members of the sample who demonstrated the greatest success in employment and abstinence from drugs and generally exhibited optimistic attitudes were “the ones that talked most about their family’s acceptance of them” (Nelson et al. 1999:10).

A few studies, primarily program evaluations, have examined formal support systems that provide assistance to family members of returning prisoners. These studies have found that providing services to the family members of recently released prisoners can lead to positive outcomes for former prisoners, such as decreased substance use and fewer physical, mental, and emotional problems (Couturier 1995; Shapiro and Schwartz 2001; Sullivan et al. 2002). However, these studies have also found that involvement of families in the reintegration process may create additional strain in family relationships. A family support program designed to help former prisoners reduce their drug use and avoid criminal activity found that participating families reported higher rates of emotional problems and stress than did families in a comparison group (Sullivan et al. 2002).

Virtually no research exists that examines the formal

and informal support networks (e.g., family, religious and community organizations) and positive or negative coping mechanisms (e.g., personal spirituality, substance use) these family members utilize to mitigate the strain, emotional problems, and stress associated with their roles as supportive family members to recently released prisoners. A related literature – studies of the effects on families of military-imposed separations (e.g., Boulding 1950; Hill 1949; McCubbin and Dahl 1976)—has not been applied to the situations facing families of incarcerated persons.

Religious and spiritual beliefs are important sources of strength for many people, and research indicates that a person’s well being may be enhanced by certain dimensions of spirituality (e.g., Ellison 1991). Research has also shown that religious coping mechanisms, when compared to other coping mechanisms, help individuals to better react to stressful situations (Seeman and McEwen 1996). Furthermore, religious groups can be important emotional and tangible support systems (Bradley 1995). On the other hand, non-criminal justice research indicates that drug and alcohol use is related to stressful life situations and may be used as a negative coping mechanism (Saxon et al. 2001; José et al. 2000; Butters 2002). These issues have been virtually unexplored when it comes to understanding how families of returning prisoners deal with the additional stress associated with providing emotional and tangible support to a recently released family member.

It is clear that returning prisoners rely on family and that family support can play an important role in successful reentry. For these reasons, reentry programs involving families could benefit from a greater understanding of the circumstances faced by family members of former prisoners, the types of assistance that families are able and willing to provide to returning prisoners, the additional stresses associated with providing such support, and the coping mechanisms and support systems these families rely upon. However, few studies have examined the lives of family members of prisoners or studied what happens when an imprisoned family member returns home (see Fishman 1990 for an important exception).

Researchers, practitioners, and policymakers are realizing that family can be an integral part of the reentry process. Travis declares, “The imprisonment of millions of individuals and the disruption of their family relationships has significantly undermined the role that families could play in promoting our social well-being” (2005:120). However, serious gaps exist in our knowledge about how families react to the return of an incarcerated family member, the type of support that former prisoners receive

from family after their release, the stress these events place on the family members of returning prisoners, and the support systems and coping mechanisms family members rely upon to mitigate the added strain and stress. This paper provides some systematic information about these issues. Understanding the nature of family relationships in the context of incarceration and prisoner reentry will help inform policies and practices that are designed to support the families of prisoners during periods of disruption and lead to successful outcomes for ex-prisoners and their families.

## Methodology

### *Sample*

The data for this paper come from *Returning Home: Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry*, a four-state longitudinal study of prisoner reentry involving in-depth interviews with prisoners before and after their release and interviews with a family member of each prisoner approximately three months after the prisoner's release. The survey instruments cover virtually every aspect of prisoner reentry, including individuals' and family members' assessments of family relationships and support before, during, and after prison. The prisoners recruited for study participation were identified as being between one and three months from their release date, had been sentenced to a year or more in state prison, were returning to Chicago, and were 18 years of age or older. Participants were recruited to participate in a pre-release interview and two post-release interviews—at approximately two months and approximately six months after release.

During the pre-release interview<sup>1</sup>, prisoner respondents were asked to identify and refer three family members for inclusion in the family interview component of the project. In this study, "family member" was defined as a blood or legal relative, someone with whom they have a child in common, or a partner or guardian they lived with prior to incarceration or planned to live with after release. Interviews were primarily conducted by phone. This paper analyzes data collected in 2003 from 247 family members of recently released prisoners in Illinois.<sup>2</sup>

### *Measures*

The family member interviews covered a variety of topics including personal characteristics, contact with the prisoner during incarceration, types of support provided

after release, and difficulties experienced due to the prisoner's return.

To estimate the kind and frequency of contact during the prison term, we asked family member respondents to indicate how often they made phone calls to or received phone calls from the prisoner, how often they sent or received mail, and how often they visited their family member in prison. Response options included never, a few times a year, monthly, weekly, daily, and don't know.

To ascertain what costs and challenges are associated with staying in touch with a family member in prison, we asked a series of questions about how much time was spent traveling to the prison and gaining access to the visitation room and how much it cost respondents every time they visited (including expenses such as gas, tolls, bus fare, lodging, food, etc.). We also asked respondents how much money they spent on phone calls (initiating and receiving) and mail during the final month of their family members' prison terms. To learn more about the challenges to staying in touch, we read family respondents a series of 13 statements—each representing a different challenge—and asked them to identify which things made it difficult to stay in touch with someone in prison. For each statement, respondents were asked to respond "yes" or "no," indicating whether the issue mentioned was something that made it difficult to stay in touch with their family member in prison.

To ascertain what kinds of support family members were providing to recently released prisoners, we asked family members a series of questions about the kinds of emotional and tangible support they provided to their recently released family members, including emotional support, financial support, housing, assistance with childcare, and help finding a job. We also asked the family respondents about any hardships they experienced in providing these types of support.

Given the likely increase in stress associated with serving as a source of emotional and tangible support to a recently released family member, we asked a series of questions about the coping mechanisms and support systems family members of returning prisoners relied upon. Specifically, we sought to ascertain whether they relied upon drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism, the extent to which they relied upon their spirituality as a source of internal support, and the amount and kinds of support they received from religious and community organizations. Regarding drug and alcohol use, we asked participants to indicate whether their drug and alcohol use had increased, decreased, or remained the same since the family members' return from prison. We modified a scale



created to measure religiousness and spirituality (Fetzer 1999) to create two measures: one of spirituality and one of perceived religious support. The **Spirituality Scale**<sup>3</sup> consists of six items that measure concepts such as how often one prays or meditates, whether one feels guided by God in the midst of daily activities, and whether one's faith helps him to know right from wrong. Spirituality Scale mean values range from one to four, with one representing low levels of spirituality and four representing high levels. The **Religious Support Scale**<sup>4</sup> was also adapted from the Fetzer measure (1999) and consists of five items that measure concepts such as whether the people in one's church or other religious institution would help out if one was ill, whether the people in one's religious institution make him feel loved and cared for, and the degree to which one's religious institution matters to him. Religious Support Scale mean values also range from one to four, with one representing low levels of perceived religious support and four representing high levels. Finally, to identify other sources of support that family members believed might be helpful, we included an open-ended question: *Are there any services that could help you, as a family member of someone returning home from prison?*

### Characteristics of Family Sample

The sample consists of 247 family members of male prisoners who were recently released from prison and returned to the City of Chicago. Nearly 90 percent of the sample identified themselves as African American or black, seven percent as white, and the remaining four

percent as some other race or biracial. Seven percent is of Hispanic origin. The median age of family respondents was 46 years old. Forty percent had not completed high school, 32 percent had earned a high school degree or a GED, and the remaining 28 percent had completed at least some college course work. A large majority of our respondents were women (87 percent), and over half were mothers or stepmothers and sisters or stepsisters of the recently released prisoners (36 percent and 15 percent, respectively). Nearly one in five were intimate partners of the recently released prisoners, and nine percent of respondents had children with the ex-prisoners.

The members of our sample had long standing relationships with their family members who were incarcerated and maintained regular contact with them both before and after their incarceration. The median length of time they had known each other was 27 years and, on average, they had lived together for 19 years before the prison term began. Nearly three-quarters of respondents (73 percent) indicated that their recently released family member lived with them during the year before leaving for prison, and over half had lived together for that entire year. A slightly higher percentage – 76 percent – reported that their family member lived with them for some period after release from prison, and nearly two-thirds had lived together the entire time since release. Only four percent of our sample reported that they had no contact with the recently released family member since his release from prison.

### Maintaining Contact with an Incarcerated Family Member

#### *Types And Frequency Of Contact*

Even though the members of our sample identified numerous challenges to staying in touch with their incarcerated family member, almost all of them—95 percent—were in contact with their incarcerated family member during his prison term. Over 70 percent reported sending mail to or receiving mail from their incarcerated family member at least monthly, with one-third reporting weekly contact by mail. Fifty-eight percent made phone calls to or received phone calls from their incarcerated family member at least monthly, with 26 percent doing so weekly and six percent doing so on a daily basis. Five percent of our sample never sent or received mail, and 13 percent never made phone calls to or received phone calls from their incarcerated family member during his prison term. While monthly mail and phone calls were quite common, visitation was not. Over two-thirds

**Table 1. Characteristics of Sample**

N = 247

Characteristic	
Median age	46 years
Percent female	87 %
Percent that are intimate partner of released	20 %
Percent living with ex-prisoner during year before prison term	73 %
Percent living with ex-prisoner at any time since release	76 %
Percent with at least one minor child living in their home	38 %
Percent with high school degree/GED or higher	60 %
Percent employed at time of interview	47 %
Percent receiving food stamps, housing aid, and/or public assistance	34 %
Percent that had served time in prison or jail	5 %
Percent that reported illegal drug use in the 30 days prior to interview	1 %

of respondents (67 percent) never visited their family member during his prison term, and only nine percent visited at least monthly.

We were interested in exploring whether family respondents who were intimate partners<sup>5</sup> of the prisoner (20 percent of our sample) had different levels of contact during the prison term than family respondents who were blood relatives of the prisoner, such as parents, siblings, grandparents, children, and cousins (80 percent of our sample). We found that similar percentages of each group had at least monthly mail and phone contact and that intimate partners were more likely to visit their incarcerated family member. Furthermore, there were substantial differences in the percentages of intimate partners and blood relatives that had weekly and daily contact of any kind. Over 70 percent of blood relatives and over 80 percent of intimate partners had at least monthly mail contact with the prisoner. However, only one quarter of blood relatives reported weekly mail contact and none reported sending or receiving mail to/from their incarcerated family member on a daily basis, while 73 percent of intimate partners reported weekly mail contact and one in ten reported sending or receiving mail on a daily basis.

Almost equal percentages of intimate partners and blood relatives reported at least monthly phone contact with their incarcerated family member, 64 percent and 65 percent respectively. Twenty-nine percent of blood relatives reported weekly phone contact. Intimate partners were much more likely to have weekly phone contact, with over 40 percent calling or receiving phone calls from their incarcerated family member on a weekly basis. Six percent of both types of family members reported daily phone contact, and approximately one in eight of both groups reported never having phone contact with the incarcerated family member.

The largest difference between intimate partners and blood relatives, in terms of contact with incarcerated family members, pertains to visitation. Almost two-thirds of blood relatives (71 percent) never visited their family member during his prison term, as compared to approximately half of the intimate partners in our study. Furthermore, blood relatives visited with much less frequency than did intimate partners. One-quarter of intimate partners visited at least monthly, with eight percent visiting on a weekly basis. Only five percent of blood relatives visited at least monthly. Eleven percent reported that they visited only once or twice during their family member's prison term.

We also wanted to know whether the prisoners in our study maintained contact with their children during their

prison term. Therefore we asked respondents a series of questions about their incarcerated family member's contact with his own children while in prison. According to the reports from family members, just over half of the incarcerated family members with minor children were in contact with their children at least monthly while serving their prison term. Approximately 40 percent reported that the incarcerated family member kept in touch via letters and phone calls, and 22 percent indicated that the children visited during his prison term.

#### *Cost And Challenges To Staying In Touch*

Our study participants identified numerous challenges to staying in touch with an incarcerated family member (see Table 2). The top challenges they identified relate to the distance they lived from the prison and the costs and logistics associated with visiting. The number one challenge to staying in touch with an imprisoned family member was that the prison was located too far away, with 75 percent of respondents mentioning this reason. An additional 38 percent reported that the cost of visiting was too high, and 34 percent indicated that they did not have transportation. It is not surprising that respondents identified distance, costs, and logistics as major challenges. Of those that did visit their incarcerated family member, the median amount of time it took to travel to the prison was three hours, and they waited an additional 40 minutes to gain access to the visitation room. On average, it cost our respondents \$55 to visit their imprisoned family member. The two-thirds of our respondents that did not visit their family members were asked how long it would have taken to travel to the prison, had they done so. For this group, the median travel time to the prison increased to four hours, a possible indicator of why they did not visit their incarcerated family member.

Even though almost 60 percent of our sample had at least monthly phone contact with their incarcerated family member, over half (52 percent) reported that the cost of making or receiving phone calls was an impediment to staying in touch. During the final month of the prison term, the median amount of money they reported spending on phone calls to and from their incarcerated family member was about \$50.

In addition to distance, cost, and logistical difficulties, roughly one out of seven respondents cited one or more problems in their relationship with the imprisoned family member as a reason why they did not maintain contact. Most simply did not want to stay in touch, some saying that they were upset or disappointed and others that they were, "tired of [seeing] him going to jail." Others avoided

contact because their incarcerated family member did not want to stay in touch with them, either because the relationship was strained or because the family member did not want to be seen in prison. For some, the feeling of not wanting to stay in touch was mutual (felt by both the respondent and their imprisoned family member).

**Types of Support Families Provide**

<b>Challenge</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Prison located too far away	75 %
Cost of making/receiving phone calls	52 %
Cost of visiting	38 %
Prison not a nice place to visit	36 %
Lack of transportation	34 %
Could not miss work	32 %
Visitation times did not work with schedule	26 %
Child care issues	10 %
Did not want to stay in touch with imprisoned family member	10 %
Visitation rules were difficult	9 %
Imprisoned family member did not want to stay in touch with me	8 %
Reading or writing problems	1 %
Other challenges	15 %

**and Hardships Experienced**

We know from prior research that soon-to-be released prisoners expect to rely quite heavily on their family members for a wide variety of support once released. We also know from prior research that family members often exceed the expectations of recently released prisoners in providing a web of emotional, financial, and other kinds of tangible support in an effort to assist their family member in the transition back into the community (La Vigne et al. 2004; Nelson et al. 1999; Visher, La Vigne, and Travis 2003). Our study participants demonstrated a similar willingness to provide support to their recently released family members, even though they also characterized providing certain kinds of support as difficult. A large majority of our participants (83 percent) provided their recently released family member with financial support, yet over half reported that doing so was pretty or very hard. As reported previously, 76 percent of participants allowed their recently released family member to live with them for some period after release, and 40 percent provided assistance in finding housing. Thirty-seven percent provided assistance with child care (for those who had minor children), and about one in five of our

participants helped their recently released family member find employment.

However, our respondents also identified hardships associated with their family member's return from prison. Almost one-third of respondents (30 percent) were having financial hardships due to their family member's return. Nearly 10 percent felt more anxious due to his return, and four percent reported having trouble in relationships with others due to the return of their family members from prison.

Virtually all of the released prisoners (95 percent) were on parole, and about one-quarter (27 percent) of the family members we interviewed had talked with the released family member's parole officer. Most respondents spoke to parole officers seeking advice about ways to help their recently released family member to obtain a job, job training, or additional education and to avoid drug use or enter drug treatment. Others wanted to be made aware of the "rules" that their family member had to follow, so they could better monitor their family member's activities and help him remain out of prison. In general, respondents talked to parole officers in search of some type of support to aid them as they tried to help their family members overcome the many challenges of reintegration.

For many returning prisoners, family is their greatest support system. Three-quarters of our prisoner sample in Illinois had served time before, and, according to national statistics, about 50 percent of released prisoners will be re-incarcerated within three years. However, the family members in our study were optimistic about the future and about their roles as supportive family members. Ninety percent of respondents indicated that it would be pretty or very easy to renew their relationship with their recently released family member, and 35 percent said that their family member's return had actually made their relationship stronger or easier. Over 80 percent of respondents reported that providing emotional support to their recently released family member was pretty or very easy. Somewhat surprisingly, 78 percent felt it would be pretty or very easy for their family member to stay out of prison.

**Substance Use as a Source of Stress on Family Relationships**

Resuming old behavior patterns that may have previously led to imprisonment—such as drug use and criminal activity to support a drug habit—can be a tremendous source of stress for the family members of a recently released prisoner. Although the family interviews

were conducted an average of just three months after the prisoner’s release, nearly one-fifth (18 percent) of the respondents indicated that substance use and/or re-arrest had already become a problem for their released family member. Of the 11 percent who cited drugs as a problem, respondents described their family members as “begging for money,” “selling to support his habit,” and/or “hanging around with friends [and] not taking care of himself.” One respondent, a former addict herself, said that the ex-prisoner’s drug use was a problem because, “I have been clean for ten years and I don’t want them around.” We also asked respondents more specifically how drugs had affected their relationship with the released family member. Over three-quarters (77 percent) of those who stated drugs were a problem reported negative effects.<sup>6</sup> Participants described feeling angry and frustrated, disappointed and hurt, and ultimately resentful of their family member’s drug use. Several stated that continued relapsing had destroyed any trust they might otherwise have had in their family member and, in one case, had completely “ruined the relationship.”

Eleven percent of respondents stated that their recently released family member had already been arrested at least once since his release, most often for a drug-related crime (27 percent). Other reasons included violating parole or house arrest conditions, being in the “wrong place at the wrong time” by hanging out with friends, or committing new crimes such as burglary and domestic violence.

### Sources of Support and Coping Mechanisms of Family Members

Incarceration and reentry are not only stressful for the imprisoned individual, but are also difficult for the family members of those transitioning from prison back into the community. During difficult times or times of transition, individuals rely on a variety of coping mechanisms and support systems to deal with increased pressure and anxiety—from looking within to one’s spirituality to turning outward to family, friends, or support groups such as one’s church or mosque. Given the stress and hardships associated with providing different kinds of emotional and tangible support to family members returning from prison, we wanted to examine some of the potential coping mechanisms and support systems that family members of returning prisoners turned to during the period of reentry.

First we examined the degree to which family members of recently released prisoners relied upon drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism. Interestingly, only two percent of respondents indicated that they were

drinking more since their family members returned and no respondents reported increased reliance on drugs.

As discussed previously, we included in our survey a number of scales that measured concepts such as spirituality and perceived religious support. Table 3 provides the mean values of each scale. As a review of the table indicates, our respondents reported high levels of spirituality and perceived religious support. Scale values range from one to four and the mean scores for all scales exceed 3.5.<sup>7</sup> High Spirituality Scale scores indicate that the family members included in our study have high levels of personal spirituality and that spirituality is an important factor guiding their daily lives. Furthermore, high Religious Support scores indicate their belief that they receive—or would receive if needed—strong support from their church or other religious organization. Seven percent of the family members in our study were offered or received services from a religious or community organization specifically because they had a family member recently released from prison. The most common services received were counseling and mental health services and food services.

To identify other sources of support that respondents

**Table 3. Sources of Support: Spirituality and Religious Institutions**

Scales	Min-max	Mean
Spirituality Scale	1–4	3.59
Religious Support Scale	1–4	3.72

believed might be beneficial, we asked the following open-ended question: *Are there any services that could help you, as a family member of someone returning home from prison?* More than two-thirds (67 percent) of the respondents listed at least one type of service that would be helpful. However, the respondents typically mentioned services designed to help the released prisoners, not themselves. Participants most commonly requested help obtaining a job or job training for their recently released family member (43 percent), while others wanted financial assistance (16 percent), counseling (11 percent), housing (10 percent), drug or alcohol treatment (9 percent), and/or health care services (9 percent). Listed below are some representative examples of the responses that participants provided:

- “If he could get a job it would be easier for him and the rest of the family, so he wouldn’t have to depend so much on others.”



- “If they can help the inmates get a job and a job training program, everything else is basically ok. I hope he can get financially stable, get housing and live his life the right way like he's been doing so far; that would help the family.”
- “Money to help family take care of ex-convicts until they get a job.”
- “Counseling for inmates and their families together, so we can learn to trust and build back a relationship, also to be able to adjust in society. Jobs are [also] needed for ex-cons.”
- “Find [a] counseling program for family and inmates so we can cope with problems incurred in prison.”
- “Help ex-convicts get into training programs to get a job and have their own place to live so they can stay busy and adjust to society.”
- “Put him in a drug program; jail won't help.”
- “Job, counseling, drug treatment facility, housing, and financial support.”

### **Policy Implications**

In our previous research we noted that soon-to-be-released prisoners had high expectations for family support and relationship quality after release, hypothesizing that if these expectations were not met, a downward spiral of relapse and recidivism could ensue (Visher et al. 2003). We then learned that prisoners' expectations about family relationships and support were typically met and, more often than not, were exceeded (La Vigne et al. 2004). The present research complements our previous findings by illustrating the many kinds of support family may provide to recently released prisoners from the family members' own perspectives.

This research also indicates that family members experience serious hardships during the period of incarceration and after their family member's release from prison. It also suggests that they would benefit from programs or services to assist them, as family members of recently released prisoners, and from programs to assist their recently released family member. Areas of needed support and assistance that were most frequently mentioned by the family members of returning prisoners included financial assistance and helping the recently released prisoner to secure a job or job training.

Overall, our findings suggest that prisoners and their families would be well served by corrections policies that remove barriers to contact during incarceration and perhaps even encourage contact through the establishment of programs specifically designed to reinforce positive relationships with the family members they are likely to rely on after their release from prison. Based on this study, the family members most frequently relied upon appear to be mothers, sisters, and intimate partners. Based on our respondents' identification of barriers to in-prison contact with family, both reducing the costs of phone calls and housing prisoners closer to their communities should be top priorities for corrections officials and inmate family associations.

Future research on this topic should examine family relationships and the types and levels of support that family is willing and able to provide to a member who has recently been released from prison over a longer period of time. This study surveyed family members approximately three months after the prisoner's release. It is likely that the hardships and strain that our family sample reported—during the brief three-month period since release—will intensify with time. This raises serious questions about how long family is able and willing to serve as a major support system for the returning prisoner, and what effects discontinuing such support has on the recently released prisoner and his or her prospects for successful reintegration into his family and their community.

In addition, future research should examine the role that gender plays in family relationships and support among current and recently released prisoners. This research was conducted with a sample of male prisoners, which is likely to yield considerably different results from a similar analysis conducted with female prisoners, who typically have more complex relationships with children and may have less support from intimate partners. A component of the *Returning Home* study mentioned previously involves data collection from both male and female prisoners and their family members in Maryland and Texas. This will allow for an examination of the role that gender plays in family relationships and support.

### **Endnotes**

1. When prisoners failed to provide family referrals at the pre-release interview, they were asked again to provide three family referrals at the first post-release interview.

2. We compared respondents who provided a family referral (N=308) to those who did not (N=92) and

found no significant differences across a wide range of characteristics, including race, criminal history, current sentence length, conviction type, pre-prison education, employment, marital status, alcohol use, self-esteem, control over life, intention to commit crime post-release, pre-prison family support and relationship quality, and perhaps most importantly, likelihood of reconviction or reincarceration following release. Only one difference emerged as statistically significant in a multivariate regression: respondents who provided a family referral were somewhat more likely to have used drugs before prison (70 percent vs. 60 percent).

3. Chronbach's alpha = .83.

4. Chronbach's alpha = .98.

5. Intimate partners include spouses, former spouses, boyfriends, girlfriends, and fiancés.

6. Others reported that drug use had no effect on their relationship with their family member, some stating that this was because they no longer saw that person.

7. Comparable work by Fetzer (1999) using data from the 1997-1998 General Social Survey showed lower means for items similar to those on our Spirituality and Religious Support Scales.

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### About the authors

**Rebecca L. Naser, Ph.D.** is a Senior Analyst with Peter D. Hart Research Associates. Her primary research interests include prisoner reentry and issues of social inequality.

**Christy A. Visher** is a Principal Research Associate within the Justice Policy Center of The Urban Institute. Her primary research interests include criminal careers, communities and crime, and the evaluation of strategies for crime control and prevention. [cvisher@ui.urban.org](mailto:cvisher@ui.urban.org).

**Contact information:** For further information, please contact Christy Visher, [cvisher@ui.urban.org](mailto:cvisher@ui.urban.org), at The Urban Institute, Justice Policy Center, 2100 M Street, NW, Washington, DC 20037.