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But Some of Them Don't Come Back (to Prison!)

Resource Deprivation and Thinking Errors as Determinants of Parole Success and Failure

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This article reports on a study of the causes and correlates of parole success and failure in Pennsylvania. Surveys, interviews, and focus groups were conducted with parole violators and parole successes. Data were collected on employment, housing, social relations, supervision, and parolees' responses to parole challenges. The primary correlates of parole failure were found to be antisocial attitudes, poor problem-solving and coping skills, and unrealistic expectations about life after release from prison. Contrary to expectations, this study found little evidence that job acquisition or housing were significant parole challenges. The greatest problem for parolees was managing themselves in a prosocial manner while facing demands from their environment.

Keywords: *parole violators; parole successes; antisocial attitudes; coping skills*

Two prominent and intersecting streams of inquiry in contemporary criminal justice are life course studies and reentry policy, exemplified, respectively, in the work of Laub and Sampson (2003) and the Urban Institute (see, e.g., Travis, 2005). Life course research examines personality, ecological, and other factors leading to persistence in, or desistance from, criminally deviant behavior over the long term. Reentry studies are concerned with how best to prepare offenders for successful reintegration to society after a period of incarceration. The broad and long-standing

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literature on offender program evaluation also contributes to reentry research. Life course research, then, focuses largely on the "why" of desistance, whereas reentry research focuses on "how" to promote desistance within the reintegration process. These two streams of inquiry represent a nexus of fundamental and applied research.

Recently, there has been a surge of scholarly and practitioner interest in the broad topic of prisoner reentry, some of which makes strong and sometimes untested claims about the impact of nearly 700,000 state and federal prisoners hitting the streets annually (Petersilia, 2003). A brief search for recent, published scholarly articles on this topic produced more than 120 citations. Many criminal justice agencies, primarily state and local corrections and parole/probation agencies, have established special offices and assigned staff to the task of prisoner reentry. National organizations such as the Council of State Governments have established working groups such as the Reentry Policy Council to focus attention and resources on the issue. Attention on reentry will continue with the passage of the Second Chance Act and the millions of dollars in program funds slated to be released to criminal justice agencies in the coming years.

Closely connected to discussions of reentry is concern over the impact of parole violators, especially technical violators, on correctional resources. In 2004, there were 745,125 offenders on some form of parole supervision nationwide, with per capita rates ranging from 3 per 100,000 in Maine and Washington to 806 per 100,000 in Pennsylvania (Glaze & Palla, 2005). Parole outcomes are less than optimal. Over the past 15 years, the proportion of state parolees successfully discharged from parole has never exceeded 46%. In 2001, parole returns to prison accounted for 37% of all national prison admissions, up from 17% in 1980. More than half of parole returns are for violations of technical conditions of parole, not necessarily for new offenses (Burke & Tonry, 2006).

The Current Problem: Parole Violators in Pennsylvania

From 1998 to 2004, the number of offenders released annually from Pennsylvania state prisons increased by 54%, with nearly three fourths conditionally released onto parole supervision. Current statistics indicate that 56% of those released onto parole supervision in Pennsylvania will return to prison within 3 years of being released, with upwards of two thirds of parole returns being for technical violations rather than new crimes.

Admissions to Pennsylvania's prisons for parole violations have increased at double the rate of new court commitments over the past 7 years (51% and 25%, respectively).

Parole violators (PVs) account for a significant portion of the 13% increase in the Pennsylvania Department of Correction's (PADOC) inmate population over the past 7 years. Parole violators made up nearly 36% of all admissions to state prison in Pennsylvania in 2003, accounting for nearly 18% of the total population of nearly 41,000 state prison inmates in Pennsylvania at the end of 2003. Considering a total annual prison budget of approximately $1.6 billion in recent years, any offender subgroup accounting for one fifth of the correctional population clearly has tremendous fiscal and public policy import.[1]

Although the PADOC has maintained an active agenda of program evaluation and other research (Welsh & Zajac, 2004), a specific examination of PVs was lacking. Given the substantial impact of this group of offenders on agency resources, the PADOC initiated a study of the determinants of parolee success or failure in late 2002. This study was driven by several questions. How do successful parolees differ from parolees who violate the conditions of their parole or commit new crimes? What does the recidivism process look like for PVs compared with the desistance process for successful parolees? What is the relative importance of individual-level factors (e.g., poor decision making) and environmental/structural factors (e.g., job markets) in influencing parole outcomes? How can the criminal justice system intervene to alter the trajectories of failing parolees? The factors differentiating criminal persistence from desistance and what to do about them are significant for criminal justice research, policy, and practice. Indeed, since the introduction of the criminal career paradigm into criminology 20 years ago (Blumstein, Cohen, Roth, & Visher, 1986), the discipline has seen a proliferation of research on the criminal recidivism process (Zamble & Quinsey, 1997), criminal desistance (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001) and on correlates of recidivism (risk/needs factors) and "what works" in rehabilitating offenders (Andrews & Bonta, 2003).

Prior Research: Reentry, the Life Course, and Criminogenic Needs

Research on reentry and life course criminology proffers some answers to the question of persistence and desistance factors for PVs. Several themes seem to emerge from this research.

Reentry

The primary challenges confronting offenders returning to the community, and implicitly a key explanation for their failure to remain in the community, seem to focus on structural factors related to limited opportunities and resources as well as numerous barriers faced on release. Commonly identified barriers include employment, housing, family reunification, securing identification and other vital documents, health care, transportation, and reclaiming elements of "civic identity" such as the franchise (Travis, 2005). Other researchers identify demographic characteristics, such as race, as key determinants of reentry outcomes (Steen & Opsal, 2007). Probably the two most prominent structural factors identified as key contributors to parolee success are employment and housing.

Employment is posited as perhaps the most critical variable in the reentry equation, with some studies finding that employed parolees are up to three times more likely than unemployed parolees to remain arrest free (Meredith, Speir, & Johnson, 2007). Numerous reentry studies and reports have expanded on the extreme difficulty of securing employment during the reentry process, in some cases reporting unemployment rates of upwards of 50% for recently released offenders (Petersilia, 2003; Solomon, Visher, La Vigne, & Osborne, 2006; Travis, 2005). This literature also typically argues that when employment is found, it is primarily low-skilled, low-wage, "dead-end" work (Holzer, Raphael, & Stoll, 2003). Factors external to the offender, such as job markets, legal barriers to ex-felon employment, employer reluctance, and even poor transportation are often identified as prime determinants of employment outcomes (Independent Committee on Reentry and Employment, 2006). The ex-offender employment problem, then, is defined as resource deprivation—there simply are not enough jobs and support services available to meet the demands of inmates reentering society. Policy responses to these structural employment issues center on job creation, employer incentives to hire ex-offenders and job training before or after release (Independent Committee on Reentry and Employment, 2006; Petersilia, 2003; Travis, 2005).

Housing is seen as another key offender need and predictor of reentry outcomes. As with employment, much of the writing on reentry posits extreme difficulties faced by ex-offenders in finding safe, affordable housing (Petersilia, 2003; Solomon et al., 2006; Travis, 2005). Estimates of parolee homelessness have ranged from 12% to upwards of 50% (Roman & Travis, 2005). Again, barriers to ex-offender housing are commonly seen as structural, such as lack of affordable housing stock, reluctance of landlords

to rent to former prisoners, and legal restrictions on felons seeking public housing. Policy responses to the problem of ex-offender homelessness have focused largely on structural fixes, such as supportive housing placements for returning prisoners and efforts to assist families in their attempts to provide housing and support to ex-offenders, exemplified in the La Bodega de la Familia program in New York City (Travis, 2005).

The Life Course and Desistance

Life course research has become a prominent theoretical paradigm within criminology and holds particular promise for providing a better understanding of prisoner reentry issues, specifically as they pertain to pathways in and out of criminal/deviant behavior. The life course approach, albeit a somewhat more theoretically driven approach than is often found in the prisoner reentry literature, provides an especially rich perspective on prisoner reentry by considering continuity versus change in criminal behavior over extended periods of the lifespan. To date, however, few have attempted to merge findings from life course criminology with research on parole and prisoner reentry (for two noted exceptions, see National Research Council, 2007; Visher & Travis, 2003).

Of particular relevance to the study of prisoner reentry is the concept of desistance, a concept not unique to, but certainly well situated within, the life course framework. Desistance has been variously described and defined, but the general focus is on understanding why offenders stop or slow down their rate of offending (Blumstein et al., 1986). From the existing literature, several themes emerge as seemingly important factors related to desistance. In perhaps the most comprehensive existing desistance study, in which Laub and Sampson report on their 50-year longitudinal follow-up of 500 delinquent boys who were born in Boston during the 1920s (Laub & Sampson, 2003), the authors uncover three primary factors that they conclude tend to serve as "turning points" in altering criminal trajectories: (a) marriage, especially strong marital attachment; (b) work, especially strong ties to work and job stability; and (c) military service. Similar evidence for such events, particularly for marriage and work, as potential turning points tied to desistance have been found by others (Warr, 1998). Desistance studies have also found that cognitive factors are primary contributors to criminal desistance. Maruna (2001), in his qualitative study of ex-convicts, finds evidence that desisters are those who are able to move through a process of cognitive transformation in which they tend to demonstrate greater control over their lives and destinies, hold more prosocial outlooks on life, take responsibility

for shaping their future, and find generative meaning or purpose in life. Giordano, Cenkovich, and Rudolph (2002) similarly conclude that cognitive transformation is crucially linked to desistance. Still other studies addressing criminal desistance factors focus on desistance as primarily a function of age (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983).

Effective Offender Intervention and Criminogenic Needs

Also relevant to this study is the body of literature surrounding the principles of effective offender intervention, which refer to a variety of program features and practices that have been linked empirically to outcomes, such as program intensity, staff qualifications, treatment modality, and offender risk level (Lowenkamp, Latessa, & Smith, 2006). One of the most critical of these principles involves targeting criminogenic needs, most notably antisocial attitudes (e.g., poor attitudes toward school or the workplace); poor decision-making, problem-solving, or self-control/self-regulation skills; criminal friends; and substance abuse. Programs addressing these needs can reduce recidivism by upwards of 20 percentage points compared with programs that ignore these needs (Andrews & Bonta, 2003). Unresolved criminogenic needs may be implicated in ongoing failure of offenders on parole, and thus could be important targets for (a) reentry programs, (b) programs for PVs, and (c) research into the causes and correlates of parole outcomes.

Method

In response to the strain on the correctional system posed by PVs and the research questions noted above, in 2002, the PADOC began a two-phased study of the parole reentry process. Phase 1 was a study of PVs returned to the custody of the PADOC. Phase 2 was a study of parolees currently under supervision, determined to be parole "successes." This research is informed by similar work conducted by Zamble and Quinsey (1997) in Canada, which to our knowledge is the only similar study of PVs conducted prior to our study.

Phase 1: Parole Violators

The sample for Phase 1 consisted of all PVs admitted to 12 of the 27 PADOC state correctional institutions (SCIs) during the period December

2002 through January 2003. These 12 SCIs were selected based on historical trends of PV admissions to the PADOC, allowing for maximal data collection over a given period of time. The authors developed an 85-item self-administered survey that tapped into the following domains of the reentry experience: living arrangements, financial situation, employment, leisure activities, marital/family relationships, alcohol and other drug (AOD) use, emotional/mental/physical health, thoughts/feelings/actions related to the events of the violation, and parole/community supervision experience, along with personal background information. To elicit fresh recollections of the events surrounding their violation, surveys were administered to PVs as soon as possible after their return to prison. Participation was voluntary and no incentives were provided.

By the end of the survey period, a total of 542 surveys were collected (a 91% response rate). Based on analysis of parole returns to custody, this represented approximately 75% of parole returns to the PADOC during this period. The average respondent in this sample had been out of prison for 16 months before being returned to prison for a parole violation. Table 1 provides an overview of respondent demographics, which mirror closely the overall inmate demographics within the PADOC. Of the adjudicated violators within this sample, 69% were violated for breaking a technical condition of their parole whereas 31% were violated for committing some sort of new crime. A comparison of survey responses between technical parole violators and new crime parole violators revealed no significant differences between the two groups on their demographics, criminal risk, or responses.

After analysis of the survey findings, recurring themes were further explored through focus groups conducted with approximately 62 PVs at four of the participating SCIs during the spring and summer of 2003. These four sites were chosen based on numbers of PVs willing to participate in the focus group process.

Phase 2: Parole Successes

Defining the parole "success" (PS) group (as a comparison group to the PV group) was more challenging. Strictly speaking, parolees would not be considered fully successful until they have completed their term of parole and are discharged from supervision. At that point, though, they can become much more difficult to locate. Instead, we defined a parole success as an individual who had been on parole supervision for at least 3 years, with no violations or other return to incarceration. Three years exceeds the

Table 1
Demographic Statistics

	Violators (%)	Successes (%)
Age[a] (years)	35 (8.7)	41 (11.1)
Race		
White	28.2	53.2
Black	59.1	33.8
Hispanic	12.3	13.0
Other	0.4	0.0
Gender		
Male	93.4	93.5
Female	6.6	6.5
Primary offense		
Murder/homicide	5.7	14.3
Sex offense	0.9	8.6
Assault	7.1	15.7
Robbery	21.9	12.8
Burglary/property	26.7	22.9
Drugs	37.7	25.7
City last paroled to		
Philadelphia	41.2	28.8
Pittsburgh	8.5	5.7
Erie	5.7	1.6
Reading	5.3	4.9
Allentown	3.2	0.8
Harrisburg	2.7	2.5
Chester	2.3	1.6
Other	31.1	54.1

a. Age is represented as mean (*SD*).

mean time under supervision for all parolees in Pennsylvania (25 months), far exceeds the mean time on parole prior to a violation for our sample of PVs (16 months), and corresponds to the 3-year benchmark for recidivism tracking used by the PADOC as well as many other state correctional agencies and the federal government. A recent updated examination of the PS sample found that approximately 92% of those originally identified as PSs continue to remain successful to date, meaning that these parolees have now remained successful on parole for nearly 6 years, or have been successfully discharged from supervision.

We administered a 72-item survey to 704 successful parolees during the summer of 2004; this survey was similar in content to that administered to the PVs.[2] Again, participation was voluntary and no incentives

Table 2
Selection Bias Analysis for the Success Group Sample

	Total Success Group Sample (n = 704)		Success Group Surveys Returned (n = 123)	
	Mean	*SD*	Mean	*SD*
Age*	37.31	9.99	40.54	11.11
Male	0.94	0.24	0.93	0.26
African American*	0.51	0.50	0.34	0.48
Violent crime	0.53	0.50	0.48	0.50
Property crime	0.13	0.34	0.16	0.37
Drug crime	0.26	0.44	0.25	0.44

*$p < .01$.

were provided. We received a response rate to the PS survey of 30% of returnable surveys (N = 186). Based on other studies done within the PADOC, active parolees can be a difficult population to entice into participation in research, particularly those nearing the end of their parole terms. To test for potential selection bias in the PS group survey responses, we compared demographic statistics for the entire success group sample with demographics for the subset of respondents who returned a completed survey (see Table 2). Although the age difference reached a level of statistical significance, with survey respondents 3 years older on average, the absolute difference was not enough to raise a significant concern. Furthermore, the two groups were nearly identical on gender and on previous controlling offense. From this analysis, the only evidence that we found for a *potential* selection bias was on the race variable, with 51% of the sample African American but only 34% of survey respondents African American. Given that this study was officially conducted by PADOC staff and that prior research has documented lower levels of trust in authority (particularly in the criminal justice system) among minority populations (Sherman, 2002), we suspect that African Americans may have been somewhat more reluctant to participate in the study. Overall, however, we believe that Table 2 provides adequate evidence to conclude that our survey respondents were reasonably representative of the broader PS group.

To further ensure that a potential selection effect did not bias any findings pertaining to the PS group, we compared criminal risk assessment scores for the entire success group sample with those for the subset of the sample who returned a completed survey. Based on assessment results from

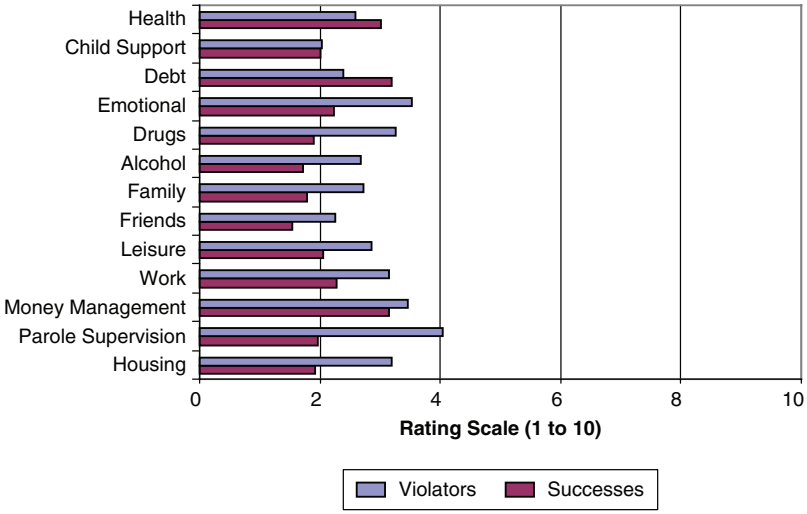
the Level of Service Inventory–Revised (LSI-R), which is a 54-item criminal risk assessment tool administered to all PADOC inmates prior to being paroled from prison, the average LSI-R score for the entire success group sample was 15 compared with the average LSI-R score for the subset who returned a completed survey, which was 14. This one-point difference is neither statistically nor substantively significant. A score on the LSI-R of both 14 and 15 is classified as "low risk" according to the PADOC's established cutoffs for nominal risk categories. Thus, the measured level of criminal propensity for PS survey respondents is, on average, low, which makes sense given that this group is intended to represent successful parolees. Furthermore, the level of criminal propensity for PS respondents is nearly identical to that for the full sample respondents who were approached for participation. We can therefore be confident that our respondents were no less criminally prone than were the full sample of parole successes, which would be the primary concern if a selection effect were present, and that selection bias does not pose a significant threat to our findings.

Table 1 presents demographic statistics for this sample of PSs. As with the PV group, in 2004, we followed up the survey with focus groups and individual interviews with willing participants to explore more deeply the central themes emerging from the survey. Focus group and interview participants were randomly selected from the sample. Thirteen telephone interviews were conducted, and a focus group with four parolees was also conducted at a community corrections center (CCC) in Philadelphia.

Analysis

As an analytic strategy, we used a "mixed methods" approach by combining quantitative analysis of the survey data with qualitative analysis of information gathered from our interviews and focus groups (Laub & Sampson, 1998). In the quantitative analysis, we did not attempt to build a composite explanatory model but instead followed a risk factor approach, primarily conducting bivariate comparisons between PVs and PSs on individual survey questions using chi-square and correlation coefficient statistics. Our emphasis here was principally on using the quantitative results as a primer for our later qualitative interviews and focus groups. As such, we adopted a three-step analytic approach. We first examined, through bivariate quantitative analysis, the results from broader survey questions that were intended to gauge more general problem areas. Next, we analyzed data from more targeted survey questions across various specific domains to further build on themes from the broader questions examined in the first

Figure 1
How Much of a Problem Did Each Area Cause on Parole?



step. Finally, we synthesized interview and focus group transcripts and notes to look for confirming/disconfirming evidence for the survey findings as well as to provide a richer context for interpreting themes identified from the survey findings.

Findings

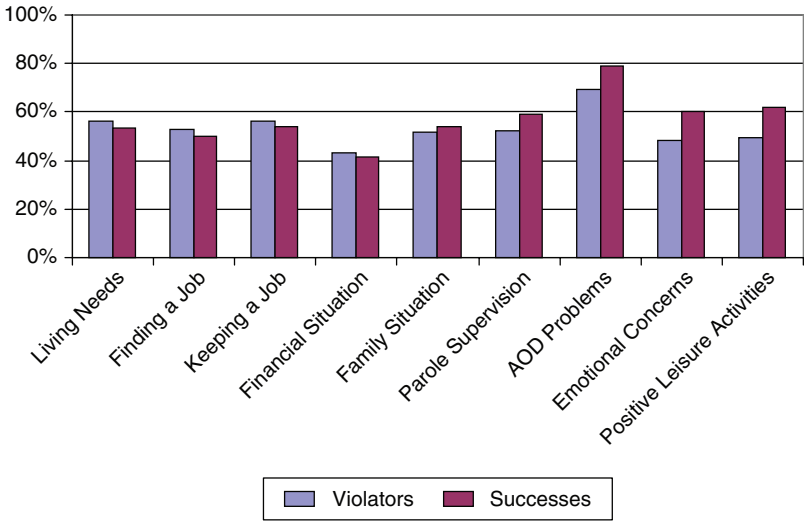
Figure 1 displays average ratings by group for one of the primary overview questions on the survey, in which respondents were asked to rate how much of a problem a number of different life domains caused them while on parole. We selected these domains to represent a variety of obstacles that are typically identified in the reentry literature as being particularly problematic for offenders returning to the community. Respondents rated each area on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 meaning that the area was *not at all a problem* related to parole success and 10 meaning that the area was *a significant problem* related to parole success. Although the average ratings for PVs were higher than for PSs across most areas

(as expected), what is perhaps most interesting is that none of the average ratings for both groups were higher than the midpoint of 5. Low problem ratings for the PS group are not surprising, because those in this group were presumably able to succeed on parole (at least in part) by facing relatively few problems across these areas or overcoming obstacles in these areas. However, one would have expected PVs to indicate a higher degree of difficulty across at least some of these problem areas, but instead PVs indicated that no potential problem area stood out as especially troubling. Furthermore, very little dispersion in average ratings across problem areas was observed for either group (i.e., ratings across all areas were clustered within a narrow range at the lower end of the scale), and the observed differences between PVs and PSs across average ratings were trivial. Thus, simply examining results from this overview question provides very little basis for discerning the relative importance of problem areas within each group or for discriminating between the two groups across problem areas. For the PV group, we may offer two explanations for these low ratings: (a) it may be that a cumulative effect is occurring, where individual risk factors are only weakly or moderately related to parole violations in and of themselves but strongly predictive of parole violations when combined; or (b) PVs may hold unrealistic self-assessments of their situation and the degree to which problem areas presented obstacles to their success on parole.

A second overview question on the survey asked respondents to indicate how well PADOC programming prepared them to address various potential problem areas (see Figure 2). This question was intended to gauge departmental strengths and weaknesses in treatment/intervention programming. Among both groups, respondents felt best prepared to address AOD problems and least prepared to address financial management problems. Across most categories, more than half the respondents felt moderately to well prepared. Once again, few differences between the two groups were observed. Therefore, this overview question did not differentiate PSs from PVs.

Apart from providing favorable evidence for the beneficial impact of a variety of programs and services, the above two overview questions alone provided little insight into differentiating between PVs and PSs. We thus turn to an analysis of more detailed survey questions across four primary domains: (a) social network and living arrangements, (b) employment and financial situation, (c) AOD use, and (d) life on parole. Below are the findings across these four domains, integrated with findings from the qualitative interviews and focus groups.

Figure 2
Percentage Moderately/Well Prepared by Prison Experience



Social Network and Living Arrangements

In the "social network and living arrangements" domain, the first set of questions examined the degree to which respondents affiliated with criminal others while on parole. Parole violators were significantly more likely than PSs to associate with individuals with criminal backgrounds while on parole (58% vs. 40%).[3] From the interviews and focus groups, it was further apparent that identification with criminal/antisocial peers while on parole was an important factor differentiating PVs from PSs. These findings come as no surprise given the documented relationship between peers and criminal behavior (Andrews & Bonta, 2003).

Other questions in the "social network and living arrangements" domain provided some indication that a quality marriage or intimate relationship was a protective factor for those on parole. Parole successes were significantly more likely to live with a spouse/significant other while on parole (34% vs. 22%). Successes who were in a marriage/relationship were significantly more likely than PVs who were in a marriage/relationship to indicate that the relationship was working out "mostly good" to "excellent" (97% vs. 89%). The qualitative interviews, particularly with the PSs,

provided further evidence for these findings on the connection between an intimate relationship and success on parole. Those from the PS group consistently reported being in stable, supportive relationships and primarily defined their identity as "family man."

Finally, in the "social network and living arrangements" domain, PSs and PVs did not significantly differ in their difficulty in finding a place to live after being released from prison. Only 18% of PVs and 17% of PSs reported having a "somewhat hard" to "very hard" time finding a place to live postrelease. Interviews and focus groups again confirmed the finding that obtaining a place to live postrelease was not a significant reentry concern and it certainly does not appear to differentiate PSs from PVs.

Employment and Financial Situation

In the "employment and financial situation" domain, several survey questions attempted to disaggregate employment differences between the two groups. Despite PVs being slightly more likely than PSs to report having a "somewhat hard time" or "very hard time" getting a job while on parole (59% vs. 46%), the two groups were equally likely to report eventually obtaining employment. In fact, the majority of respondents in both groups indicated that they were employed at some point while on parole (83% of PVs and 88% of PSs) and that their primary source of income on parole was employment (76% of PVs and 80% of PSs). Furthermore, the groups were equally likely to report that their job search process did not "stress them out" (77% of PVs and 79% of PSs). In interviews with PVs, statements were frequently made such as "anybody with a driver's license can get a job" and "you can walk in today and anybody will hire you to flip burgers."

Although simply finding a job did not appear to differentiate PSs from PVs, other aspects of employment did substantially differ between the two groups. Successes were significantly more likely than PVs to report being employed the entire time they were on parole (69% vs. 48%), indicating more job stability among PSs. It also became apparent from the interviews that those in the PS group were more successful at keeping a job. The majority of PSs reported some level of satisfaction with their job whereas the majority of PVs indicated job dissatisfaction. Violators were particularly dissatisfied with the types of jobs available to them often indicating that their jobs did not provide enough money to pay bills and make ends meet. In fact, PVs were more likely than PSs to report a monthly income of less than $1,000 (55% vs. 33%).

Perhaps the strongest employment difference that emerged from the focus groups and interviews, however, was in attitudes toward employment. Whereas PSs were mostly committed to employment regardless of the type of employment, PVs often reported refusing to take lower end jobs and work their way up. Many in the PV group felt entitled to higher paying jobs straight out of prison, disregarding the realities of having a criminal record and of having to earn increased job responsibilities. Generally, negative attitudes toward employment and unrealistic job expectations were consistently observed among the PV group. In interviews, PSs more often made statements such as "I've been working the same job for 5 years, I've never missed a day of work and I've never been late for work." One PS who was interviewed indicated that he had to go out and get another job to make ends meet because his primary job paid only $4.68 per hour plus minimal tips, but he also indicated that he was "holding on to it, trying to find a better job." Violators on the other hand often made comments such as, "I won't work at [a fast food restaurant] no matter what," again indicating refusal to start with a "survival job" and work up to a "career job."

Significant financial management difficulties were also observed as being more characteristic of the PV group, further compounding the problem of low-paying employment. One proxy for assessing money management skills is asking whether a respondent has a bank account. Parole successes were significantly more likely than PVs to indicate that they had a bank account while on parole (73% vs. 39%). Violators were more likely to report that they were "not at all" or "just barely" able to make ends meet (37% vs. 29%), despite the fact that the PV group reported a median amount of debt that was less than half the median amount of debt reported by the PS group ($2,000 vs. $5,000). Focus group and interview responses suggested that a larger proportion of those in the PV group simply lacked basic financial management skills such as keeping a budget or prioritizing spending.

Alcohol or Other Drug Use

It comes as no surprise that PVs were significantly more likely than PSs to report that they used AODs while on parole (57% vs. 22%), despite the fact that both groups were equally as likely to have been previously assessed in prison as having an AOD dependence problem. For PVs who drank or used drugs while on parole, their relapse was mostly not something that occurred right around the time of their violation; 54% first relapsed longer than a month before their violation and only 26% first relapsed during the

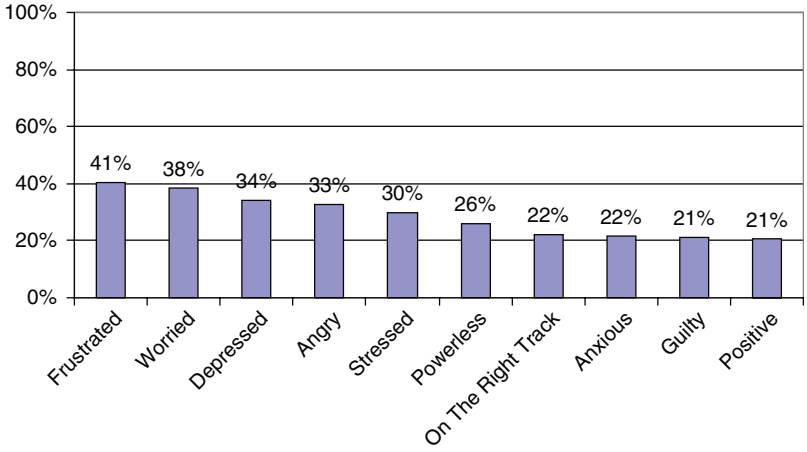
week of their violation. The qualitative analysis revealed that poor management of stress was a primary contributing factor to relapse for those who relapsed among both groups. This suggests that AOD use may be more of a symptom of deeper underlying problems such as poor self-management/problem solving. Although AOD use was clearly an important factor differentiating PSs from PVs, problem-solving/coping skills may be equally important targets for treatment in this domain.

Life on Parole

The fourth domain ("life on parole") captured information about some of the dynamic events, thoughts, and emotions experienced by respondents that may have differentiated PVs from PSs. For PVs, the findings in this domain specifically provided an immediate context to their recidivism incident, also allowing for comparisons/contrasts to be made with PSs who experienced similar contextual situations without recidivating. One survey question in this domain asked the PV group to indicate the range of emotions that they experienced in the last 48 hours before they violated parole (see Figure 3). Nearly three fourths (74%) of PVs indicated that some sort of dysphoric emotion (e.g., stress, depression, frustration, worry, anger, etc.) was the strongest emotion experienced during the 48 hours preceding their violation. Dysphoric emotions also tended to be cumulative, with the majority of PVs reporting that they experienced multiple types of dysphoric emotions immediately preceding their violation. Additionally, in the focus groups, the vast majority of PVs recalled that the moments leading up to their violation were characterized by a variety of confusing and unpleasant emotions. A relationship seemed clear between being in a dysphoric emotional state and violating parole. The deeper question, however, was whether violations were a direct result of parolees experiencing unpleasant emotional states or a function of other variables that help explain this apparent direct relationship. The survey and interview data suggest that this relationship was really explained by three other important variables.

First, postrelease expectations helped to explain the relationship between unpleasant emotions and parole violations. Many PVs held unrealistic expectations about what life would be like outside of prison. As evidenced in other domains throughout the survey, respondents in the PV group mostly reported confidence in their ability to easily find and keep high-paying jobs, avoid risky situations and people, maintain friction-free relationships, and generally be successful on parole. When asked how confident they were that they would succeed on parole, the vast majority in both the PV and PS

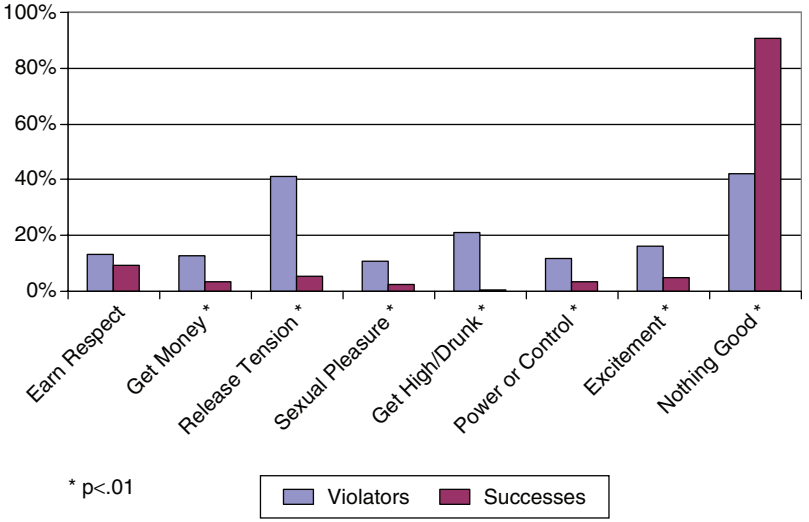
Figure 3
Emotions Experienced by PVs During Their Last 48 Hours in the Community



groups reported being mostly or completely confident that they would succeed (91% of the PVs and 98% of the PSs). This degree of confidence seems reasonable for the PS group, given that they do indeed appear to have been successful on parole. For the PV group, however, there is incongruence between their expectations of being successful while last on parole and their eventual parole violation. It would seem to become more difficult for parolees to manage negative emotional experiences when they are expecting that life outside of prison will be easy and that most things will go right for them. Those respondents who failed to anticipate the problems and negative emotions that they faced were more likely to resort to parole violating behavior.

Second, the attitudinal disposition of parolees helped to explain the relationship between negative emotional conditions and parole violations. Parole violators were more likely than PSs to maintain antisocial attitudes (see Figure 4). When asked to think back to what good things and bad things they saw as potentially resulting from a hypothetical parole violation, PSs were significantly more likely than PVs to indicate that nothing good could potentially result from a violation (91% vs. 42%). Violators were more likely to see a variety of positive outcomes as being a basis for

Figure 4
What Benefits Do You See Potentially Resulting From Violating Your Parole?



violating parole, including earning respect, getting more money, releasing tension, sexual pleasure, getting high or drunk, and having a sense of power or excitement. Conversely, PSs were more likely to indicate that they saw negative consequences of violating parole, including the pain of a victim, returning to prison, family/friends being hurt, a sense of guilt, getting hurt or dying, losing a job, and breaking a religious or cultural code. When PVs did see negative consequences, it was more often in reference to themselves, not to others.

This general antisocial disposition was evidenced in several of the previous domains examined as well. For example, as noted in the area of employment, PVs more typically held negative or unconventional attitudes toward work, often refusing to take certain jobs or to work at all. From the focus groups, when asked to provide a general explanation for what led to their violation, PVs most often employed various "techniques of neutralization," in which they minimized the impact of their behavior or shifted the blame for their violating behavior to others (often their parole officer) instead of accepting responsibility for their behavior. All these indicators suggest a

general antisocial disposition among PVs, in which they were more likely to (a) view violating parole as an acceptable option in their repertoire of behavior, (b) maintain a general lack of empathy for others, and (c) shift blame or deny responsibility for negative behavior. When faced with negative emotional experiences, it becomes easy to see how those with a more general antisocial disposition are more likely to respond to their negative emotions by violating parole.

The third variable accounting for the relationship between negative emotional states and parole violations was poor problem-solving or coping skills. In the previously examined question where respondents were asked to indicate positive and negative consequences of a potential parole violation, they were additionally asked to weigh these consequences and indicate whether: (a) the benefits outweighed the costs, (b) the costs outweighed the benefits, or (c) the costs and benefits were equal. The vast majority of PSs (95%) saw more bad things than good things resulting from a violation. In other words, PSs viewed the costs as outweighing the benefits.

On the other hand, only about one third of PVs (31%) saw more bad things than good things resulting from a violation, meaning that the majority of PVs either saw more benefits than costs or saw the costs and benefits being equal for violating parole. This, in combination with the context provided in the interviews/focus groups, provided strong indicators of deficient problem-solving skills among PVs, in that PVs seemed unable to fully anticipate the long-term consequences of their violating behavior and instead saw more immediate benefits.

Violators also failed to use resources to aid in solving their problems. For example, 77% of PVs indicated that they did not turn to anyone for help or tell anyone that they were having thoughts of violating parole prior to doing so. Instead, PVs' behavior tended to be better characterized as impulsive reactions to immediate situations. Nearly half of PVs indicated that they did not consider alternatives to the sequence of events that led to their parole violation and 40% said they reached a point before their violation where they felt they were not in control anymore. Recall from previously described findings that PVs also tended to have more difficulties with financial management skills, which we would suggest is one aspect of self-management/problem solving.

Taking both the survey results and interview findings as a whole, PVs appeared much less prepared than PSs to manage their lives and successfully cope with daily obstacles across many different areas of life. Statements from interviews and focus groups most typical of PVs' problem-solving skills included the following: "I thought about alternatives and consequences, but

got frustrated and just ran," "I just said fuck it, deal with the consequences later," and "I never really thought about how bad [my violation] would be." Many PVs could identify their problems but could not identify a strategy for addressing them. The last question asked at the end of each focus group was "what will you do differently the next time you are released?" Again, although PVs were eager to provide lengthy explanations for why they had previously violated parole, they typically were unable to provide a cogent response to this last question about how they would handle the future. Many spoke in terms of tunnel vision, seeing no alternatives. Frequently among the PV groups, we heard similar stories of a common pathway to violating parole, where the parolee would be going through a negative experience or run into a problem (e.g., having interpersonal problems with another resident in a halfway house, a family member dying, conflicts with coworkers or bosses, etc.) and responded in a way that demonstrated poor coping and problem-solving abilities.

Successes, on the other hand, appeared more likely to have the necessary problem-solving abilities and coping skills to deal with the daily issues or concerns they faced. Successes were asked on the survey if they had ever come close to violating parole and if so why and how did they respond. The majority of PSs who indicated that they had come close to violating parole reported that stress was the primary reason for coming close to violating. In fact, PSs clearly experienced the same stressors and faced the same types of problems and emotional difficulties that PVs experienced. However, the PS group's most frequent responses to these "stresses" that brought them close to violating parole included "thinking about the consequences" (81%), "finding positive solutions" (75%), and "thinking through it" (73%). One statement from an interview that was characteristic of PSs' outlook was the following:

> I knew that I had to perform whether I'm under stress or not. I'm not going to say that it wasn't hard because it was. You know, there was many nights where I felt like I couldn't do the job . . . but you keep working at it and working at it . . . you learn to deal with situations.

To summarize the major findings from this domain, an initial appearance of a significant relationship between negative emotional experiences and parole violating turned out to actually be explained by three other variables: (a) postrelease expectations, (b) attitudinal disposition, and (c) coping/problem-solving ability. Dysphoria alone could not account for differences between the two groups, because PVs and PSs both experienced negative

emotional experiences and faced significant life problems in their transition to the community. However, they were differentially prepared to respond to these situations. Parole violators were more unrealistic in their expectations, held more antisocial attitudes, and indicated more deficient coping/problem-solving skills.

Discussion and Conclusions

Several major themes emerged from this study. First, our findings suggest that basic structural factors such as simply finding a job and a place to live are not the major reentry concerns suggested by so much of the reentry literature. Second, these results confirm previous research indicating a link between antisocial attitudes, peer groups, and recidivism. Third, our evidence suggests that those who violate parole have difficulties with basic life skills such as financial management. Fourth, previous research findings connecting AOD use and recidivism can also be generalized to predictors of parole violations, in that substance abuse relapse is more of a problem among PVs than among PSs. Fifth, one important identified protective factor against violating parole is having a prosocial support network of peers and/or family members. Finally, the overarching theme is that there appear to be three primary factors differentiating PSs from PVs: (a) PVs are more likely to maintain unrealistic postrelease life expectations; (b) PVs more often demonstrate antisocial attitudes, values, and beliefs; and (c) PVs are more likely to indicate poor coping or problem-solving skills as characterized by impulsivity, failure to generate alternatives, failure to recognize the consequences of choices, and keeping problems to oneself or failing to take steps of avoidance.

Ideally, researchers enter into studies with few preconceived notions about what the answer "should" be, or at least with these notions fully noted (e.g., as hypotheses) and in check. In the interest of disclosure, we were expecting from our readings of the reentry literature that the PVs in our study would report great difficulties with finding employment, with locating an acceptable place to live, with reuniting with family, and in general with responding to any number of structural barriers and resource issues impeding their return society. Conversely, we expected that the PSs would have experienced few challenges with employment, housing, or other structural barriers facing them on reentry.

What we discovered challenged these notions. Finding a job was much less of a problem than keeping the job and making the most of it as part of

a larger plan for social reintegration. Few of our subjects reported being homeless or having significant difficulties with housing. Thus, structural, resource, and other community constraints were not significant barriers as reported by the offenders in this study. Instead, the primary barrier lay with their own cognitive distortions and poor decision-making, problem-solving, and coping skills. This came across most clearly in our findings regarding employment. We were struck by how few of our subjects (PSs or PVs) reported that they had been unable to find *any* work during their time on parole. Many indicated that finding a job was easy, that "anyone could do it." What came across equally clear was difficulty in holding onto a job, primarily for the PV group. Respondents in this group repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of jobs that they did get, and they felt that these jobs were beneath them and/or were incapable of meeting their financial needs as they defined them. Our conclusion is that this reveals poor attitudes toward employment, as well as deficiencies in basic life skills such as living within a budget and managing oneself in the workplace. These likely contribute to the high levels of employment instability for the PV group.

Conversely, although some subjects in the PS group also complained about the income and/or working conditions associated with their jobs, they were far more likely to see these as challenges that *could* be overcome. This group reported more employment stability and were more likely to use one job as a stepping stone to a better job. They were also less likely to quit a job on a whim, recognizing in many cases that they had obligations to family and self that would not be well served by quitting a job without having another at hand. They may not have been satisfied with their current situation, but they recognized the need to make the best of it and work toward a better future. Our conclusion is that this reveals more prosocial attitudes and higher level coping skills than was found with the PV group. A similar set of conclusions was found with regard to the other problem domains we examined, such as housing, peer relations, and compliance with parole authorities.

Our results do not suggest that resource deprivation and structural barriers are unimportant but that reentry outcomes are a product of those things *plus* individual offenders' attitudes and perceptions of them and of their skill in dealing with them. We would even offer a tentative conclusion that the latter may be the more important variables in the reentry equation. This suggests that core criminogenic needs such as antisocial attitudes, values and beliefs, poor decision-making and problem-solving skills, poor choices in associates, and substance abuse are critical determinants of parole success

or failure (desistance vs. persistence). Correctional policy and programming to promote desistance should devote at least as much effort to these criminogenic needs as to activities such as resume writing, job search and apartment hunting.

Turning to policy recommendations stemming from this study, our first recommendation concerns assessment. The reentry policies and practices of a given jurisdiction must be driven by objective information about the needs of its offenders, on both the micro and macro levels. At the micro level, individual offender needs assessment is a cornerstone of effective correctional practice (Andrews & Bonta, 2003). Much as with treatment within a correctional institution, reentry services should be driven by the individual needs of the offender. Individual assessment is the key to getting the right reentry services to the right offenders. At the macro level, correctional agencies would benefit from doing the sort of study that we report on here. Such research would afford insight into the broader reentry challenges in their jurisdiction, which could inform larger policy and planning decisions about how best to use limited reentry resources. At least four other states have approached the PADOC for advice on conducting a similar parole violator/success study and we are aware of at least three others that have recently done such studies (Brooks et al., 2008). This is encouraging, but clearly much more remains to be done if we are to create a rich national portrait of reentry and parole outcomes. The findings we report here are preliminary, exploratory, and suggestive. This work must be replicated in other settings and with larger samples to support the development of stronger conclusions about the importance of individual-level and structural factors in parole outcomes.

Second, the recommendation above notwithstanding, our findings about factors contributing to success or failure on parole (e.g., poor life management skills, unstable employment, substance use, emotional instability, etc.) suggest that reentry programs that focus on cognitive–behavioral treatment aiming to instill prosocial attitudes, values, and beliefs in offenders and strengthen or develop general problem-solving skills may be particularly effective in discouraging parole violations. Third, reentry programming should focus more attention on teaching offenders specific and transferable life skills such as budgeting and money management techniques and job management skills. Employability programs for inmates should focus at least as much on managing the social and behavioral context of work as on actually finding a job. Correctional Service Canada's National Employability Skills Program is one example of a program that attends to the "soft skills" of maintaining employment. Fourth, because of

the extent of reported substance use among PVs and the severity of AOD problems experienced by some PVs, it is important that reentry efforts continue to provide intensive AOD treatment programs for inmates assessed as needing those services. Finally, reentry programming should encourage offenders to stay "rooted in reality" on release from prison and maintain realistic postrelease expectations. Given the antisocial orientation of many offenders, incarceration itself may be viewed by offenders as their primary problem and simply being released from prison may be viewed as the solution to that problem. Programming should prepare offenders to understand that their problems do not stop at the prison gates but often become more complex, or at least different, in the community.

Two potential limitations of this study must be noted. First, most of the data used for this study are self-reported. Some readers may question the candor with which our subjects have reported their parole experiences. It should be noted, however, that fairly strong support has been found for the validity of the use of self-report data in studies of offenders even with regard to agreement between self-report and official records (Hiller & Naravic, 2006). More to the point, many of the issues of central interest to this study, such as immediate responses to acute dynamic stressors, would be difficult to verify short of following the offenders for extended periods of time to witness firsthand their experiences and reactions to them, which would likely change the nature of the offender behaviors of interest to us.

Finally, our study centered on offenders released from a single state correctional system at a particular point in time. We do not know if what is found in Pennsylvania broadly generalizes to other jurisdictions or across time. Future research in this area should be conducted in other jurisdictions and should make use of more longitudinal methods. Such research will be useful for disaggregating the degree to which our findings are "universal" versus situated in a particular place and time.

Notes

1. All figures in this article for state corrections in Pennsylvania drawn from internal reports of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, most of which are available at www.cor.state.pa.us. We report statistics from circa 2003, as this was when the current study was initiated.

2. The wording of a few questions on the success group survey had to be slightly modified from the parole violator version of the survey to provide a sensible frame of reference for those currently not in prison. Also, some questions were eliminated on the success group survey because they were not applicable to this group. Additionally, a few questions were added to the success group survey that were not on the original parole violator survey but

allowed for a better profile of the success group. The survey instruments were quite lengthy; please contact the authors for copies of them or of the interview/focus group protocols if desired.

3. This and all subsequent percentages and figures that are presented as findings are taken from the survey results.

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