

# Rethinking the Reentry Paradigm



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*A Blueprint for Action*

Melinda D. Schlager

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY-COMMERCE

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# Acknowledgments

Ironically, as a salient issue in corrections policy, offender reentry has encountered as many barriers and impediments to legitimacy and practice as have the thousands of people who leave prison every day and reenter society. That neither has been overwhelmingly successful should not be surprising given society's wholesale ignorance of the former and its overwhelmingly punitive approach to the latter. Yet, we are almost always astounded (and dare I say sometimes gleeful) when reentry policies and by extension reentering offenders fail. This phenomenon is most perplexing.

Our usual and customary response to a social problem is to throw money at it. Throwing money at a problem does not—in and of itself—solve it. It might make the problem well-funded, but it does not assure that the problem will be fundamentally addressed in any meaningful way. Offender reentry is no exception. Our best efforts to address the offender reentry problem have often resulted in the most deleterious and (un)intended consequences. Some of our best intended reentry policies and practices have fallen prey to organizational missteps and implementation failures and have been co-opted for political gain at the expense of the people for which they were developed. That any offender is successful in the reentry process is a testament to his or her fortitude and occurs despite the system, not because of it.

Never pleasant or fair or just, my personal experiences as a consumer of criminal justice services have forever colored my worldview on this subject. While hindsight is always marred by faulty memory and the need or desire to reframe painful events, it does often provide a clarity that is not always possible in the heat of the moment. If nothing else, my experiences ignited a life-long passion for doing the right thing particularly when it is not politically expedient or popular, and for that alone I am thankful.

Without doubt, the journey to this point has led me down the road less traveled; a trip that began more than 20 years ago and one that will continue if only because of my penchant for eschewing the path of least resistance. While serendipity has not always been my ally, we have crossed paths. The opportu-

nity to work in the field at the same time as I was working in the classroom has been, in my mind, the best possible training ground. My thoughts on offender reentry have forever been shaped by the desire, né compulsion, to marry theory with practice and a fundamental belief in the notion that having any meaningful impact on this system we call justice is not possible otherwise.

As with any endeavor of this kind, there are many to thank professionally and personally. Professionally, while I cut my teeth as an academic at Rutgers I was simultaneously undergoing trial by fire as a practitioner at Parole. I can remember coming home many an evening with my head spinning. I owe much of that “mind bend” to Mario Paparozzi who was boss but who will always be mentor and partner in crime. Other key stakeholders in my intellectual development (whether they know it or not) include Dan Lombardo, Pat McKernan, and Rich White, from Volunteers of America-Delaware Valley. They are in a class all their own, not only talking the talk, but walking the walk on a daily basis; providing care and counsel to those in need with nary a judgment and always an open hand and heart.

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The move South brought an entirely new perspective. From the classroom to the courthouse, I was able to experience the flip side of the reentry process in probation, or pre-entry. Things ARE bigger in Texas (don’t let anyone tell you different); a Dallas County probation population of 55,000 is testament to that fact. My experiences working in probation were priceless, if only because they further reinforced to me that the system is not set up to do the right thing and that anyone who attempts to do so does so at their own peril. Thanks to the probation officers who vociferously resisted change but who helped me

hone my arguments for why change is necessary and critical if we hope to make a difference.

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Melinda D. Schlager  
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# Introduction

At least 95% of all people incarcerated in state prison at this very moment will be released from prison at some point in the future. Put another way, 9.5 out of every 10 people sent to prison will leave either upon completion of their sentence or on parole supervision (Releases From State Prison, 2002). Most of us haven't ever given this statistic much thought. Customarily, we have only been concerned with getting the bad guys off the streets, not the notion that the bad guys will at some point return to the streets. But precisely because 95% of people in prison will leave, we must reorient our thinking.

Thinking about offender reentry is more difficult than it sounds. We know basically what offender reentry is, but after more than one hundred years of releasing people from prison to the community, we are still trying to understand the breadth and depth of the practice and to parse out the relationship between the reentry process and victims, offenders, and the community. These concerns aside, one considerable obstacle to thinking clearly about the reentry problem is that it has no overarching theoretical construct or "glue" that holds it together (Bazemore & Boba, 2007; Maruna, 2006; Simon, 1993). In fact, scholars contend that current views of offender reentry include, "the rather bizarre assumption that surveillance and some guidance can steer the offender straight" (2001, p. 24). If it were only that easy.

Current scholarship on offender reentry supports this assertion. The bulk of the literature on offender reentry evaluates and/or describes its direct (impact on recidivism) or indirect (reentry programming) ability to "work." While efforts to evaluate what works have been instrumental in determining what works best for whom in what circumstances, resultant policies and programs are generally geared toward addressing specific problems and/or deficits in individual offender skill sets but are absent a clear narrative that fuses individual-level offender problems with contextual concerns.

So reentry is tangible in the sense that it is comprised of a patchwork quilt of policies and programs that offenders may access, the outcomes of which can (at least to some degree) be quantified. But knowing what works in reen-

try is not enough. If offender reentry is not cohesive in what it is and what it does (or how we understand it), it is unlikely that it will be successful. Therefore, we must also develop a theoretical construct or narrative through which to discuss offender reentry if we hope to garner a more complete understanding of it and make any substantive change to reentry policy and practice.

This book is divided into three distinct parts. Part I brings together disparate issues that, when viewed in tandem, provide the reader with an understanding of what comprises offender reentry. Where Part I explores the various dimensions of offender reentry, Part II provides several contexts within which to view it. Finally, Part III fuses together the dimensions of reentry with various contextual frameworks in order to provide an integrated narrative for moving the discussion and practice of offender reentry forward.

A word (or two) about some of the limitations of this book. First, when discussing the reentering offender, this book, unless otherwise indicated, is talking about offenders who leave prison and who return to the community on parole or some type of post-incarceration supervision. Keep in mind that plenty of offenders leave prison upon completion of sentence and without additional supervision. While these offenders need and require access to reentry services (perhaps more than anyone), the focus of this discussion is on those offenders under supervision. One can reason that if it is difficult for offenders on supervision to successfully reintegrate, it is likely doubly problematic for those offenders with no support.

Second, while this book attempts to be as inclusive as possible of all offender types, it does not specifically address sex offender populations. This is not an oversight but a calculated omission. Sex offenders encounter the same barriers and impediments to reentry as all other offenders—and then some. Given page and content constraints, a decision was made to leave out any specific mention of sex offenders and to subsume them into the general conversation about reentering offenders.

Third, this text specifically addresses issues related to offender reentry at the state level. While a mention of federal statistics may occur here and there, the overwhelming focus of this book is to evaluate offender reentry at the state level. Federal release mechanisms and practices vary from those at the state level and for purposes of streamlining the discussion, the decision was made to concentrate on state-level offender reentry practice.

One cannot discuss any criminal justice topic without discussing race. Offender reentry is no exception. However, it was not possible to parse out issues solely relevant to race and reentry and to isolate them in a single chapter. Therefore, discussions of race permeate virtually every chapter of the book. Where



relevant, racial distinctions between reentering offenders is made. Otherwise, the discussions in the book should be read as inclusive of all races and ethnic groups.

Observant readers will notice a variety of statistics in this book. Some of these numbers are more time-sensitive than others. That is, many of the official statistics provided in this book come from the Bureau of Justice Statistics and are not always available for the most recent year. In all cases, the data provided is the most recent data available. This issue is no more visible than in discussions of recidivism. National recidivism data is 10 or more years old and while relevant, it is not recent.

Finally, information on offender reentry is often fractured in its location and content. However, there are a few places where one can look to begin the process of understanding and further studying this most important criminal justice issue. First, any student of offender reentry should consult the mammoth body of work on the subject by The Urban Institute. This organization was one of the trailblazers with respect to identifying and studying offender reentry and students of the subject should start with a reading of some of the seminal reports written by Urban staff for a good primer on the subject. Specifically, and most relevant here, the Urban Institute has engaged in a series of studies as part of the *Returning Home: Understanding the Challenges of Offender Reentry* project. In fact, some of the work from these studies appears in chapters throughout this book. Access to this link (<http://www.urban.org/center/jpc/returning-home/publications.cfm>) should provide students of offender reentry with all of the ammunition they need to study this topic in earnest.

In 2001, the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI) was born. This was the federal government's first attempt to bring together multiple governmental agencies to tackle the offender reentry problem. The first round of grants asked states to put together a reentry program that addressed the needs of adult and/or juvenile offenders being released from prison to communities around the United States. Most (but not all) states submitted proposals and grant monies to develop reentry programs were released. As part of this initiative, a series of evaluations of various offender reentry programs were conducted. A great place to read about SVORI and locate information on these evaluations is: <http://nij.gov/topics/corrections/reentry/evaluation-svori.htm>. Mention of the SVORI initiative occurs in this text. Hopefully these reports and information from the website can provide you with appropriate context.

Other information on offender reentry can be obtained from the National Reentry Resource Center at <http://nationalreentryresourcecenter.org>. Information on federal legislation that supports funding for many reentry initia-

tives including the Second Chance Act can be found at [http://www.reentry-policy.org/government\\_affairs/second\\_chance\\_act](http://www.reentry-policy.org/government_affairs/second_chance_act). Yet additional information can be located at [www.reentrypolicy.org](http://www.reentrypolicy.org).

At the end of the day, offender reentry impacts everyone. We are naive and misinformed if we think otherwise. When an offender leaves prison (regardless of the manner in which they are released), their departure from closed custody and subsequent arrival in the community has ramifications for the offender, their family, the community to which they return, and society at large. Therefore, we have a social and moral obligation as citizens not only to do reentry (because most offenders are coming home), but also to think reentry. Only when we attach the same level of importance to prison release as we do to prison admission will we affect any real change. Our collective moral failure may be our continued insistence to glorify and publicize punishment while fostering and promoting ignorance and silence surrounding the reentry process and the human beings that engage in this herculean task.