

Rethinking the Reentry Paradigm

Rethinking the Reentry Paradigm

A Blueprint for Action

SECOND EDITION

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I started my academic career later than most, having worked in the field of healthcare before going to graduate school. Perhaps that also helped me to look at much of the criminal justice system from a public health perspective. I am now an Associate Professor at Rowan University in the Department of Law and Justice Studies and have been so fortunate to have a department and college that supports and promotes the work of their faculty. I am particularly grateful to my colleagues and Dean for their support and encouragement in the writing of this book.

To my husband, Bob, who has supported me without reservation, I thank you. You knew the importance of this book to me and encouraged me every step of the way. Your love and support are beyond words. And, to my Aunt Barb, thank you for our standing dinner and game night on Friday where family is central and laughter is in abundance. Lastly, in recognition to my dear friend, Eric McCord, who passed far too young, you continue to inspire me to be the best that I can be. You believed that we can truly make a difference through research and knowledge, something that you practiced every day with great passion.

I'm a better educator, a better researcher, and most importantly a better person for having had you in my life.

I tell my students that one of the most important, yet under-addressed, subjects in criminal justice are the stories of the people leaving prison and returning home. Once the prison door shuts, the people inside and the obstacles they face within the institution and on reentry are rarely thought about and often forgotten. The impact on families and communities left behind are the collateral damage. As a society and as human beings, we owe people the opportunity to effectively reintegrate back into society and live fulfilling and productive lives. However, as this book lays out, that is often not the case. We must do better as a society in allowing people to be more than the sum of their mistakes.

Kimberly Houser

February 2023

Since the writing of the first edition of this book, much has changed—but also stayed the same. While I may have changed jobs a time or two, or three, since 2012, I remain surrounded by people who have invested considerable time and energy in helping me affect change despite strong headwinds. I have now had the privilege of working for four distinct higher education systems and have come full circle with the A&M System in finding an academic and geographic home in Texarkana.

As provost, one does not have much time to write or think. In fact, one does not have much time to do much of anything. But the opportunity to work on a new edition of this book and turn the reins over to my colleague Kim Houser, someone who believes as firmly as I do that reentry matters, has been invigorating as well as a humble reminder that we can never lose sight of why any of us got into the higher education business to begin with. We transform lives and make a difference—one person at a time. This reminder has helped me stay the course on more than one occasion. A heartfelt thanks to Emily Cutrer who as president and mentor (whether she realized it or not) has supported me in my provostian efforts to do good, make change, and move the dial. Enjoy your next chapter. You have certainly earned it.

A tour working for UNT Dallas and with the Dallas Police Department and other north Texas law enforcement agencies to broaden police

leadership horizons resulted in some of the most challenging, meaningful, and rewarding work I have ever done. I have incredible respect for those who do the job right and who put their lives on the line every day to keep us safe. I applaud your willingness in the safe space that was our classroom to demonstrate your humanity, vulnerability, and desire for a better world. You are leaders who—on a daily basis—can affect change on the ground and in the communities you serve. Just remember that each citizen engagement is a chance to reframe the narrative.

A two-year detour to Montana as provost brought with it very big sky, beautiful sunrises, cold temperatures, rugged terrain, difficult decisions, and experiences that have forever shaped me as an academic and human being. Sadly, however, the ‘take home’ was not much different than the one I encountered when I worked for parole in New Jersey, probation in Dallas, and other organizations that shall remain nameless. In summary: change is difficult, so the status quo is satisfactory; people want change until they don’t and then only when it applies to someone else; and most people do not have the intestinal fortitude to make the real change that is necessary to move the dial in a meaningful way. A profound thanks to Dan Edelman for his encouragement, trust, and confidence in me, my abilities, and my vision. We almost had it. Much gratitude to my soul sister and dear friend Christine whom I left behind but who continues to influence me in ways too numerous to count.

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will pass far too quickly for my liking but with you by my side I know that anything is possible and that the future is bright.

Melinda Schlager Arnold
February 2023

Introduction

Ironically, the concept of offender reentry has encountered as many barriers and impediments to legitimacy 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 overwhelmingly punitive approach to the latter. Those words graced the pages of the original edition of this book and are truer than ever today.

In the nearly 11 years since the first edition of this book was released, some things have changed but more things have stayed the same. A cursory review of the Bureau of Justice Statistics webpage reveals that statistical reports on prisoner counts remain current with *Prisoners in 2021—Statistical Tables* (published December 2022); that reports on recidivism are reasonably up-to-date, as seen in *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 34 States in 2012: A 5-Year Follow-Up Period (2012-2017)* (published in July 2021 with results that indicate that little to no progress has been made in reducing recidivism, I might add); but that information on reentry is virtually nonexistent. The last official BJS report, *Reentry Trends in the United States*, was issued in October 2002.

Understandably, shifts in criminal justice funding priorities happen. An emphasis on homeland security and human trafficking, among a variety of high-profile concerns, has resulted in the redirection of substantial funds away from other priorities (such as drug enforcement). But one thing is consistent. The overwhelming majority of people who go to prison also, eventually, go home. Yet, neither the challenges they encounter nor the policies, processes, or the likelihood of their success have principally changed in the last decade. More concerning still is the sad reality that the barriers and impediments to reentering society after having spent time in prison haven't fundamentally changed since the

first prison opened and the first person was released from prison to the community. Attention must continue to be paid.

Even today, our best efforts to address the offender reentry problem often result in the most deleterious and (un)intended of consequences. Some of the most well-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 continues to be a testament to his or her fortitude and occurs despite the system, not because of it.

At this juncture, it is commonly accepted knowledge that 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). Until offender reentry became a household phrase in corrections circles in the early 21st century, most of us hadn't given it much thought. The criminal justice system has most often been concerned with getting the bad guys off the streets, not the notion that the bad guys at some point leave prison and return to the streets. But precisely because 95% of people in prison ultimately leave, this has required all of us in the business to 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 still don't have a good handle on the breadth and depth of the practice nor have we been able to completely parse out the relationship between the reentry process and victims, offenders, and the community. 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.

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, environmental, and social concerns. At base, reentry is comprised of a patchwork quilt of policies and programs that individual offenders may access, the outcomes of which can (at least to some degree) be quantified. What we lack, however, is a theoretical construct or narrative through which to understand offender reentry or implement effective policy that enhances the chances of better outcomes.

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 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 people who leave prison and who return to the community on parole or some type of post-incarceration supervision. Keep in mind that plenty of people 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 people under active supervision. One can reason that if it is difficult for people on supervision to successfully reintegrate, it is likely doubly problematic for those 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 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 always lags considerably because of the time that must pass in order to determine whether someone has become criminal justice involved again.

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://nationalreentryresource-center.org>. Information on federal legislation that supports funding for many reentry initiatives including the Second Chance Act can be found at http://www.reentrypolicy.org/government_affairs/second_chance_act. Additional information can be located at www.reentrypolicy.org.

At the end of the day, offender reentry impacts everyone. We are naive and misinformed if we think otherwise. When someone is released from prison (regardless of the manner in which they are released), their departure from closed custody and subsequent arrival in the community has ramifications for them, 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—and continued—moral failure may be our insistence to glorify and publicize punishment while fostering and promoting ignorance and silence surrounding the reentry process and the human beings that engage and often fail in this herculean task.

“Correction does much, but encouragement does more.”

— Goethe

