

# Reincarcerated: The Experiences of Men Returning to Massachusetts Prisons

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# Contents

Introduction. Recidivism in Massachusetts .....	3
About the Massachusetts Prisoner Recidivism Study .....	4
Organization of Report .....	5
Section I. What Are the Characteristics and Criminal Histories of Survey Respondents?.....	7
Characteristics .....	7
Criminal Histories .....	7
Section II. What Were the Experiences of Survey Respondents During Their Previous DOC Incarceration? .....	9
Offense Type, Sentence Length, and Time Served .....	9
Programming.....	10
Reentry Preparation .....	11
Section III. What Were the Circumstances and Challenges Faced in the Community?..	13
Housing, Neighborhood and Peer Influence .....	13
Substance Use in the Month before Reincarceration.....	15
Employment and Finances.....	18
Family Relationships and Support .....	18
Health and Medical Care.....	19
Involvement in Community Programs and Services.....	19
Nonwork Activities .....	21
Section IV. What Was the Extent of Criminal Activity between Incarcerations? .....	23
Self-Reported Criminal Activity .....	23
Contact with the Criminal Justice System Prior to Reincarceration .....	25
Circumstances that Led to Reincarceration .....	26
Section V. What Were the Experiences of Respondents on Parole Supervision?.....	29
Interactions with Parole Officers .....	29
Parole Conditions and Compliance .....	30
Violation Type, Trigger, and Detection .....	30
Section VI. What Are Respondents' Perspectives on Challenges and Future Success in the Community? .....	36
The Single Biggest Challenge after Release .....	36
Services That Were or Would Have Been Helpful after the Previous Release .....	37
Services or Programs Most Helpful in Prison and in the Community after Release .....	38
Summary of Findings and Discussion .....	41

## Tables and Figures

Figure 1. Race and Ethnicity .....	7
Figure 2. Marital Status.....	7
Table 1. Criminal Histories: Averages for Technical Violators, New Crime Parole Violators and New Crime Only Respondents.....	8
Figure 3. Offenses Leading to Previous Incarceration .....	9
Table 2. Mean Time Served for Previous Incarceration .....	9
Figure 4. Program Participation During Previous Incarceration.....	10
Figure 5. Housing Arrangement During Most of the Time in Community by Housing Type.....	14
Table 3. Primary Reasons for Returning or Relocating. ....	15
Figure 6. Substance Use in the Month before Reincarceration by Substance Type . ....	16
Figure 7. Substance Use in the month before Reincarceration by Frequency of Use and Respondent Type .....	17
Table 4. Community-Based Program Participation by Release Status.....	20
Figure 8. Hours Per Week Spent on Nonwork Activities .....	21
Table 5. Percentage of Respondents Self-Reporting Any Crime (Whether Arrested or Not) .....	24
Figure 9. Time to Commit First Self-Reported Crime by Type .....	24
Table 6. Number of Arraignment Charges Between Incarcerations by Respondent Type .....	25
Figure 10. Offense Categories for First Arraignment after Release for New Crime Respondents.....	26
Figure 11. Problems and Emotional States at the Time of Arrest or Technical Violation Leading to Reincarceration .....	27
Figure 12. Frequency of Contact with Parole Officer in the Month before Reincarceration.....	29
Figure 13. Technical Violations Resulting in Parole Revocation.....	31
Figure 14. The Single Biggest Challenge after Release .....	36
Figure 15. The Most Helpful Service after Previous Release .....	37
Figure 16. Services that Will Be Most Helpful in Prison .....	38
Figure 17. Services that Will Be Most Helpful in the Community after Release.....	39

## Sidebars

Key Findings.....	1
Definition of Terms.....	5
Methodology.....	6
Companion Report.....	8
Sample Representativeness.....	8
Focus Groups with Parole Officers .....	32

## Key Findings

- Nearly all respondents (96 percent) reported that they participated in some type of in-prison programming during their previous incarceration. Just over three-quarters (76 percent) received some type of transitional assistance specifically designed to prepare them for release to the community.
- After their most recent release from prison, only a third of respondents (33 percent) reported returning to the neighborhood they had lived in before prison.
- Most respondents (86 percent) reported that their families had been helpful during their transition from prison, particularly in providing housing and emotional support.
- Nearly half of all respondents (49 percent) lived with someone who had a problem with drinking or drug use, and over a third (38 percent) lived with someone who had served time in jail or prison.
- Over two-thirds of respondents (67 percent) reported drunkenness or illegal drug use in the month before reincarceration. Over a third (38 percent) reported *daily* substance abuse. Sixty-one percent of new crime respondents had been drunk or used illegal drugs in the 24 hours preceding the offense.
- Respondents not under parole supervision were far more likely to report using alcohol or drugs on a daily basis in the month before incarceration (71 percent) than technical violators (31 percent) and new crime parole violators (13 percent).
- Most respondents (77 percent) were employed at some point between release and reincarceration. However, only 56 percent were employed at the time of arrest.
- More than three-quarters of respondents (79 percent) were involved in some type of community program or service after release, most commonly Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous (AA/NA) (64 percent), counseling (31 percent), or an employment-related program (25 percent). Those under parole supervision were more likely to report participating in community programs. About half of all respondents (49 percent) reported wanting to participate in certain community-based programs but being unable to do so.
- In terms of substance abuse treatment in the month before reincarceration, nearly half of all respondents (47 percent) reported attending some type of program, such as AA or NA. Among those who reported heavy drug or alcohol use, only 32 percent reported participating in a program in the month before reincarceration.
- Fifty-five percent of all respondents released to parole reported violating at least one condition during their time in the community, whether or not they were caught. By far, the most common reported violation was failure to report for drug testing. Among those who reported that a technical violation resulted in their parole revocation, the two most common responses were a positive test for drugs or alcohol (53 percent) and failing to report to their parole officer (33 percent).
- Forty-one percent of respondents reported that they had committed some type of crime while in the community. New crime respondents not under parole supervision were significantly more likely to report criminal activity (78 percent) than both technical violators (22 percent) and parole violators returned for a new crime (35 percent).
- Official CORI data showed a similar trend: respondents had an average of four arraignments between incarcerations. Parolees, both technical violators and new crime parole violators, had substantially fewer arraignments between incarcerations (averaging less than one and three, respectively) than new crime only respondents (ten).
- Drug sales or distribution was the most common self-reported crime type among both new crime respondents and technical violators (28 percent). One out of four respondents who reported dealing drugs committed this offense within 48 hours of release.
- Nearly two-thirds of new crime respondents (63 percent) reported that they had not worried about getting caught at the time they committed the offense that led to their return to prison.
- Over half of new crime respondents (57 percent) said that something could have prevented them from committing the offense. Most common responses were employment, children, and sobriety.





## INTRODUCTION.

# RECIDIVISM IN MASSACHUSETTS

The rising incarceration rate in America over the past quarter century has resulted in more prisoners being admitted to and released from prison each year. In 2005 alone, more than 698,000 state and federal prisoners returned to communities across the country, a four-fold increase over the past two decades.<sup>1</sup> Incarceration and release trends in Massachusetts generally mirror this growth.<sup>2</sup> Between 1980 and 2006, the Massachusetts state adult prison population increased more than threefold—from 2,754 to 9,405 individuals.<sup>3</sup> The number of people being released from Massachusetts' prisons has also increased substantially. In 1980, 1,015 individuals were released from the state's prisons. Over the past two-and-a-half decades, this number more than doubled to 2,337 individuals.<sup>4</sup>

The phenomenon of prisoner reentry has been increasingly recognized as an important public safety issue not only because of the increasing volume of releases from prison, but particularly because of persistently high recidivism rates. Nationally, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that over two-thirds of released prisoners are rearrested for a new offense within three years of their release, and over half are back in prison serving time for a new offense or a technical violation of their parole.<sup>5</sup>

Recent Massachusetts Department of Correction (DOC) figures<sup>6</sup> show that three-year recidivism rates among Massachusetts prisoners, as measured by a return to prison, were lower than the national average, though still substantial.<sup>7</sup> Thirty-nine percent of DOC prisoners released in 1999 were returned to a state, county, or federal facility within three years of release.<sup>8</sup> The majority of those who recidivated in Massachusetts were reincarcerated for conviction of a new crime, but more than a third were returned for technical violations of parole.<sup>9</sup>

Research on recidivism has generally focused on static predictors of recidivism and the characteristics of career criminals. It is now widely known, for instance, that a young age at the

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<sup>1</sup> Sabol, William J., Todd D. Minton, Paige M. Harrison (2007). Prison and Jail Inmates Midyear, 2006. Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin. NCJ 217675. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on incarceration and release trends in Massachusetts as well as the characteristics of Massachusetts's state prisoners, release and supervision policies, and the geographic distribution of released prisoners, see Lisa Brooks, Amy Solomon, Sinead Keegan, Rhiana Kohl, and Lori Lahue. 2005. Prisoner Reentry in Massachusetts. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

<sup>3</sup> Kohl, Rhiana (forthcoming 2008). Impacts of Admissions and Releases in Prisons, Vol.34. Boston, MA: New England Journal on Criminal and Civil Confinement.

<sup>4</sup> Kohl, Impacts of Admissions and Releases in Prisons.

<sup>5</sup> Langan, Patrick and David Levin. 2002. Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1994. Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report. NCJ 193427. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

<sup>6</sup> Kohl, Rhiana and Hollie Matthews Hoover (2007). "Recidivism Overview." Milford, MA: Massachusetts Department of Correction.

<sup>7</sup> DOC recidivism figures apply only to criminally sentenced prisoners released from the DOC, which consist primarily of state sentenced prisoners.

<sup>8</sup> Hoover, Hollie A. 2005. Recidivism of 1999 Released Department of Corrections Inmates. Concord, MA: Massachusetts Department of Correction.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* While the proportion of DOC inmates paroled has remained stable (approximately a third of releases to the street since 1995), admissions of parole violators has had a significant impact on the DOC population, representing 9 percent of criminally sentenced admissions in 2006. Kohl, Rhiana (Unpublished Report 2007) Parole and Technical Violations at the DOC. Concord, MA: Massachusetts Department of Correction.

time of first offense and a higher number of previous arrests are among the strongest predictors of recidivism, and that a small fraction of offenders are responsible for the majority of crime.<sup>10</sup> Research also shows that persistent career offenders are more likely to be drug users.<sup>11</sup> In addition to substance abuse, the emerging prisoner reentry literature documents the enormous challenges of housing, employment, and health among this population.<sup>12</sup>

What is missing from recidivism research is an understanding of the *processes* that lead a released prisoner to reoffend—in other words, *why* he or she commits a new crime. The postrelease circumstances and experiences of released prisoners as well as their previous incarceration experiences are critical to understanding the recidivism process. Because this information is best gathered through personal interviews, here we present findings from field research with recently reincarcerated prisoners as well as parole officers. This report attempts to deepen our understanding of recidivism in Massachusetts and factors that contribute to returning to prison.

### ***About the Massachusetts Prisoner Recidivism Study***

The primary goal of this study is to better understand the experiences of recidivists and how their previous incarceration and time in the community relate to their returns to prison. Drawing upon interviews with 178 male prisoners returned to the Massachusetts Department of Correction (DOC) within three years of release as well as DOC administrative data, this report presents aspects of respondents' incarceration experience, preparation for reentry, and life in the community, as well as criminal offending and the circumstances leading up to their reincarceration. This largely descriptive analysis highlights key challenges released prisoners face in the community, such as housing, employment, and substance abuse; experiences on parole supervision; respondents' emotional state and life circumstances preceding the offense or parole violation; and prisoners' insights into services that may help them avoid reincarceration in the future. (See the methodology sidebar for more detail on the study design.)

In Massachusetts, as in other parts of the country, parole violators have a substantial impact on prison populations. Nationally, few data exist concerning whether those returning for technical violations have also committed a new crime or the extent to which reincarcerating technical violators contributes to public safety. As such, this study also explores the challenges and circumstances unique to technical parole violators and the connection between technical parole violations and underlying criminal behavior. To identify such differences, we compare technical violators with new crime respondents in our sample. To explore the connection between technical parole revocations and underlying criminal behavior, we examine self-reported criminal activity and parole violations, as well as official criminal history data.

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<sup>10</sup> Visher, Christy. 2000. Career Criminals and Crime Control. In Joseph Sheley (Ed) *Criminology: A Contemporary Handbook* (pp.601-619). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. Also, see Tracey, P. M. Wolfgang, and R. Figlio. 1990. *Delinquency Careers in Two Birth Cohorts*. New York: Plenum.

<sup>11</sup> Visher, Christy. 2000.

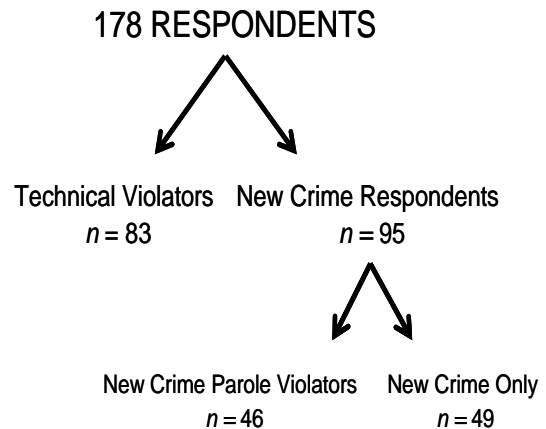
<sup>12</sup> See Solomon, Amy, Christy Visher, Nancy LaVigne, and Jenny Osborne (eds). (2006). *Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry: Research Findings from the Urban Institute's Prisoner Reentry Portfolio*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

In addition to the circumstances surrounding technical violations, we are also interested in exploring the role of parole supervision in prisoner reentry. In doing so, we examine respondents' experiences in the community between incarcerations and note the differences between people released to parole supervision (including those reincarcerated for a technical parole violation *or* an arrest for a new crime)<sup>13</sup> and those released without parole supervision.<sup>14</sup> To provide further insight into behaviors that signal parole failure and the process by which parole is revoked, we also present highlights from focus group discussions with Massachusetts parole officers.

### Definition of Terms

Throughout this report, we refer to survey respondents who were returned to prison for a new crime as **new crime respondents**. This group includes individuals originally released to parole supervision (**new crime parole violators**) as well as those who were not released to parole (**new crime only respondents**).

**Technical violators** refer to individuals whose parole has been revoked for a violation of one or more technical conditions of parole supervision. Parole violators who have been returned to prison for a new arrest are not included in this group.



## Organization of Report

This report begins by presenting demographic and criminal history information on the prisoners in our sample. Section II examines the circumstances surrounding the previous DOC incarceration from which respondents were released. Section III discusses the experiences and challenges that respondents faced in the community after they were previously released. Section IV explores the respondents' criminal activity between incarcerations, gathered through self-reports and data from the Criminal Offender Record Information (CORI) database, as well as the circumstances surrounding the events that led to their return to prison. Section V explores the experience on parole supervision; and finally, Section VI discusses respondents' perspectives on overcoming future challenges when they are released. The report ends with a summary of the findings and a brief discussion of their implications.

<sup>13</sup> The DOC considers any individual who has been released to parole supervision and is returned to the DOC while still on parole a parole violator. Parole violators can be returned on a technical violation, an arrest for a new crime, or a combination of both. Initially, parole violators are held as parole detainees for up to 15 days until they receive a hearing by the Parole Board; following this hearing, they are either released back to parole supervision or their parole is revoked. In this study, new crime parole violators are defined as respondents in our sample who were released to parole supervision and returned to prison as parole violators resulting from an arrest for a new crime (in addition to any other violation).

<sup>14</sup> Although probation plays a role in postrelease supervision—20 to 26 percent of those released without parole at the expiration of their sentence have terms of probation to serve, and at least an additional 10 percent have both probation and parole terms to serve—we did not address the role of probation in this study. Probation and parole functions are carried out by separate agencies in Massachusetts.

## Methodology

The findings presented in this report are the result of surveys conducted with 178 male prisoners returning to state prison in Massachusetts within three years of their last release from a Massachusetts Department of Correction (DOC) facility. Survey data were collected through one-on-one interviews conducted at the Massachusetts Correction Institution at Concord, the state institution that serves as a central intake facility for male offenders committed to DOC custody. Guideline, an independent research and consulting agency based in Massachusetts, conducted the interviews between July 2006 and June 2007. Prisoners who were last released within three years, who were age 18 or older, and who were residing in the general population were eligible to participate in the study. All prisoners meeting the eligibility criteria during the study time period were selected for participation in the study.<sup>15</sup> The one-on-one interview format and availability of bilingual interviewers for Spanish-speaking inmates helped to reduce language and literacy barriers, and ensure access to all eligible participants. The interviews were voluntary and no compensation was offered; still, the overall participation rate was very high. The participation rate among eligible identified prisoners was 82 percent, including those who either refused or were “no shows.”<sup>16</sup> Among those screened by interviewers, only 8 percent refused to participate in the study.

Survey interviews were completed with 100 new crime participants and 94 technical violators. After interviews were completed, 15 respondents were determined to be ineligible.<sup>17</sup> In addition, one respondent was interviewed twice because he had been reincarcerated twice during the interview period. We chose to include his first interview in the sample. The resulting sample of 178 respondents is made up of 95 individuals reincarcerated due to an arrest for a new crime (“new crime respondent”) and 83 individuals who were reincarcerated due to a violation of a technical parole condition (“technical violator”).

In the sample, 129 of the 178 respondents (72 percent) were on parole at the time of their return to prison. At various points in the report, we compare the experiences of those on parole supervision with those not on parole supervision. In these analyses, we further separate the sample into three groups: individuals who returned to prison solely because of a technical violation ( $n = 83$ ); individuals returning for a new crime and a parole violation (“new crime parole violators”) ( $n = 46$ ); and individuals returning solely for conviction of a new crime (“new crime only”) ( $n = 49$ ).<sup>18</sup> For further clarification on these three groups, see definition of terms.

In addition to survey data, we analyzed Massachusetts Department of Correction administrative data on respondents' incarceration circumstances. This data included information on the offenses leading to respondents' initial incarceration, basic demographics, the dates of release and readmission to prison, and whether respondents were released to parole.

Criminal history data were obtained from the Massachusetts Criminal Offender Record Information (CORI) database. CORI comprises data submitted on all crimes committed in Massachusetts where an arraignment is held. An arraignment is the process of formally charging an individual with a crime in a court of law. One arraignment corresponds to one criminal charge against an individual. If a single incident contains multiple counts, each count is considered a separate charge and a separate arraignment. An individual is often arraigned for numerous offenses on the same date for the same incident.

When interpreting this report, it is important to keep in mind that this research is based on a limited sample of men returning to the Massachusetts Department of Correction, and one that is not necessarily representative of the total Massachusetts recidivist cohort or the Massachusetts prison population more generally. In most instances we include total numbers (“ $n$ ”) as well as percentages to keep this fact in the forefront. While we report all differences in numbers and percentages in tables and charts, we emphasize in the text only those differences that are statistically significant.

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<sup>15</sup> Originally, we sought to interview 100 new crime respondents and 100 technical violators, expecting to oversample for technical violators. However, midway through the interviews, recidivist admissions slowed markedly, and we continued to accept all recidivist admissions for participation in the study.

<sup>16</sup> Prisoners identified as eligible for the study were scheduled by DOC staff to meet with interviewers, at which time prisoners were given information and invited to participate. Appearance at this meeting was not mandatory, however, and some prisoners who were scheduled to meet with interviewers did not do so for reasons unknown. These were classified as “no shows.”

<sup>17</sup> Twelve respondents were found to have been out of prison for longer than the maximum three-year period; three additional respondents who were initially in the technical violator sample had, in fact, been previously released to probation, not parole.

<sup>18</sup> In total, 134 respondents in our sample (75 percent) had been paroled from their previous incarceration; however, 5 of these respondents had completed their parole supervision before being arrested and convicted for the crime that led to their reincarceration. These 5 individuals are categorized as new crime only respondents. Unless otherwise noted, our analyses of respondents on parole does not include those 5 respondents.

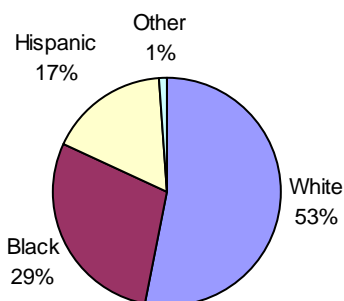
## SECTION I.

# WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS AND CRIMINAL HISTORIES OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS?

### *Characteristics*

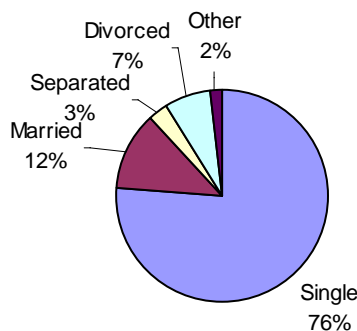
The average age among respondents was 35 years. About half of respondents (53 percent) were white (figure 1). Less than a third (29 percent) were black, and less than a fifth (17 percent) identified themselves as Hispanic. Most respondents (76 percent) had never been married (figure 2). Twelve percent were married at the time of the interview, and 10 percent were divorced or separated. Over two-thirds (68 percent) had children, and 62 percent had children under 18. More than two-thirds (67 percent) had graduated from high school or earned a GED.

**Figure 1. Race and Ethnicity (n = 178)**



Source: Massachusetts Department of Correction  
Administrative Data

**Figure 2. Marital Status (n = 178)**



Source: Massachusetts Prisoner Recidivism  
Survey

### *Criminal Histories*

Respondents had considerable prior involvement with the criminal justice system. As shown in table 1, respondents averaged 47 arraignments and four incarcerations prior to their last incarceration. Respondents also became involved in the justice system at an early point in their lives, with an average of six juvenile arraignments. New crime respondents and technical violators had similar criminal histories; however, new crime only respondents had significantly more juvenile arraignments than technical violators.

**Table 1. Criminal Histories: Averages for Technical Violators, New Crime Parole Violators and New Crime Only Respondents**

	All respondents (n = 178)	Technical violators (n = 83)	New crime (parole) (n = 46)	New crime (no parole) (n = 49)
Age				
First arraignment	19	19	19	19
First drug-related arraignment	23	23	23	23
First adult alcohol-related arraignment	21	21	21	23
Juvenile arraignments	6	5	6	8
Prior adult arraignments	47	44	53	46
Prior adult incarcerations	4	4	4	4

Source: CORI Arraignment Records

Note: Multiple arraignments can represent one arrest incident.

## Companion Report

Two reports resulted from the Massachusetts Prisoner Recidivism Study. In addition to this report, a companion report, *Massachusetts Recidivism Study: A Closer Look at Releases and Returns to Prison*<sup>1</sup>, presents an analysis of administrative data on the Massachusetts Department of Correction 2002 release cohort and compares recidivists with nonrecidivists. This analysis provides context for the recidivism survey and also expands on analyses of static data.

<sup>1</sup> Kohl, Rhiana, Hollie Matthews Hoover, and Susan McDonald (2008). *Massachusetts Recidivism Study: A Closer Look at Releases and Returns to Prison*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

## Sample Representativeness

In order to assess the representativeness of our recidivist study sample, we compare the characteristics of this group with a larger cohort of male recidivists released from the Massachusetts Department of Correction in 2002 and returned to prison within three years. While survey respondents and 2002 recidivists were generally similar in demographics and criminal histories, the biggest difference between the two groups is the share that was released to parole supervision. Forty percent of recidivists in the 2002 release cohort had been released to parole compared with 75 percent in the survey sample.<sup>1</sup>

For more information on how recidivists compare to nonrecidivists, see the analysis by the Department of Correction in the companion report, *Massachusetts Recidivism Study: A Closer Look at Releases and Returns to Prison*.

<sup>1</sup> In Massachusetts, parole is entirely discretionary. The Parole Board is charged with determining the suitability of a prisoner's parole based on whether there is a reasonable probability that the individual will live in freedom without breaking the law. As a result, the highest risk offenders may be less likely to be paroled than lower level offenders. At the same time, parolees are more likely than those released without parole supervision to be reincarcerated for either a technical violation or a new crime.

## SECTION II.

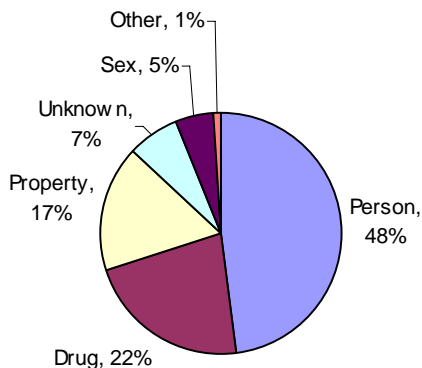
# WHAT WERE THE EXPERIENCES OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS DURING THEIR PREVIOUS DOC INCARCERATION?

### *Offense Type, Sentence Length, and Time Served*

During the incarceration from which respondents were most recently released (i.e., the previous incarceration), their average time served was more than three years. Figure 3 shows that half of all respondents (48 percent) were convicted of a crime against a person (e.g. homicide, robbery, assault).<sup>19</sup> Another quarter of respondents (22 percent) were convicted for drug-related offenses. Most of the remaining respondents were convicted of property offenses (17 percent) and a small portion committed a sex offense (5 percent).

Table 2 displays the average time served by offense type. The technical violators and new crime respondents were generally comparable along these lines. Although relatively few committed sex offenses ( $n = 9$ ), these respondents served the longest sentences.

**Figure 3. Offenses Leading to Previous Incarceration (n = 167)**



**Table 2. Mean Time Served for Previous Incarceration (n = 178)**

Offense type	Time served (months)
Person	46
Drug	29
Property	24
Sex	78
Other	32
Average	39

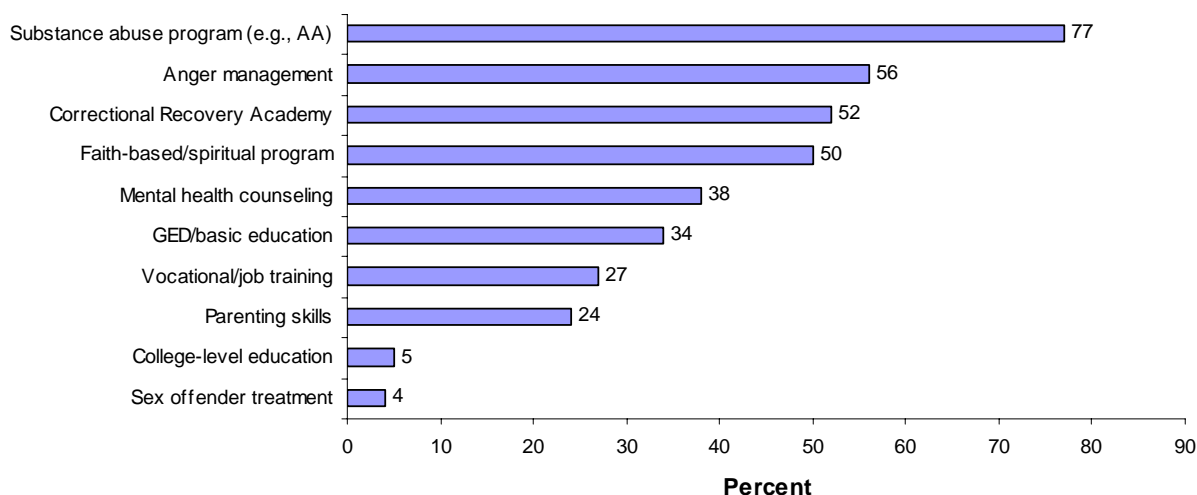
Source: Massachusetts Department of Correction Administrative Data  
Note: Percentages refer to the governing offense.

<sup>19</sup> Data on offenses leading to previous incarceration reflect the governing offense, which is the offense associated with the longest maximum release date. In most cases, Massachusetts prisoners are serving time for an incident that resulted in more than one offense.

## Programming

Nearly all (96 percent) respondents reported that they participated in some type of in-prison programming during their previous incarceration. Many participated in multiple programs, with 90 percent of respondents taking more than one program, and over half (57 percent) participating in more than three in-prison programs. The most commonly cited program type was substance abuse treatment, with over two-thirds (77 percent) participating in Alcohol and/or Narcotics Anonymous (AA/NA) or another substance abuse program (figure 4). Many prisoners also participated in anger management (56 percent), Correctional Recovery Academy<sup>20</sup> substance abuse (52 percent), and faith-based or spiritual programs (50 percent). Of those participating in a General Education Development program, more than half (56 percent) earned a GED certificate during their last prison stay.

**Figure 4. Program Participation During Previous Incarceration (n = 178)**



Source: Massachusetts Prisoner Recidivism Survey

<sup>20</sup> The Correctional Recovery Academy (CRA) is one of nine skill-based residential programs the DOC provides that target substance abuse, anger management, criminal thinking, and relapse prevention. Substance abuse monitoring is a major component of CRA, which the DOC developed in collaboration with Spectrum Health Systems, Inc.



## ***Reentry Preparation***

Three-quarters (76 percent) of respondents received some type of transitional assistance specifically designed to prepare them for release to the community.<sup>21</sup> The most common type of prerelease assistance was the DOC's transition workshop, in which 65 percent of respondents participated.<sup>22</sup> Almost half of respondents (44 percent) reported being offered more than one prerelease transition program or service. Of these, prisoners reported that the most helpful services were the transition workshop and working one-on-one with a transition planner.

Of those who received transitional assistance, most (82 percent) started prerelease preparation more than a month before their release. Over half (56 percent) began prerelease programming or services more than three months before release, and a quarter (26 percent) reported first receiving transitional assistance more than six months before release.

Transitional assistance covered a range of topics, most commonly immediate plans after release, access to health care and substance abuse treatment, and finding a place to live. Thirty-nine percent of those receiving transitional assistance reported receiving a referral for services in the community as part of this assistance. Of those who received referrals, almost half (46 percent) reported following up with the community provider.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> All inmates released from the DOC are triaged by facility staff and receive a reentry plan. Though efforts are made to include the inmate in the transition planning process, inmate participation varies and many refuse assistance.

<sup>22</sup> The now 10-day transition workshop meets for 2.5 hours per day and is offered to inmates who are within one year of their earliest possible release date, including their parole eligibility; therefore, they may be released later or much earlier than a year after participating in the workshop. During the workshop, transition planners assist inmates in developing the necessary skills for successful transition back into the community. Inmates also receive assistance in developing a comprehensive discharge plan that addresses such issues as housing, employment, vocational, and job readiness skills; financial and money management skills; family transition and community involvement; recovery support systems; and attainable goal setting. The Transition Workshop expanded from 5 to 10 days in July 2007, after the period during which all survey respondents would have participated. One of the major components added in this expansion focuses on enhancing employability.

<sup>23</sup> This question was limited to only respondents who participated in transition services while in DOC and received a referral. Additional respondents may have received community service referrals through other sources.

There were no significant differences in the rate of follow-up between those released to parole supervision and those who were not, which is notable given program participation is often a condition of parole. Nor was there a difference in follow-up rates between those reincarcerated for technical violations versus new crimes.



### SECTION III.

## WHAT WERE THE CIRCUMSTANCES AND CHALLENGES FACED IN THE COMMUNITY?

The following section examines the circumstances surrounding respondents' lives in the community after they were released and before they returned to prison. On average, respondents were in the community for 12 months before returning to prison.<sup>24</sup> We explore the challenges and opportunities that respondents face in the community, their prosocial as well as negative behaviors, and their support networks in order to understand factors that may contribute to recidivism. We also compare the experiences of technical violators with those who were returned to prison for a new arrest or conviction of a new crime and the characteristics of those under parole supervision compared with those who are not supervised by parole.

### *Housing, Neighborhood and Peer Influence*

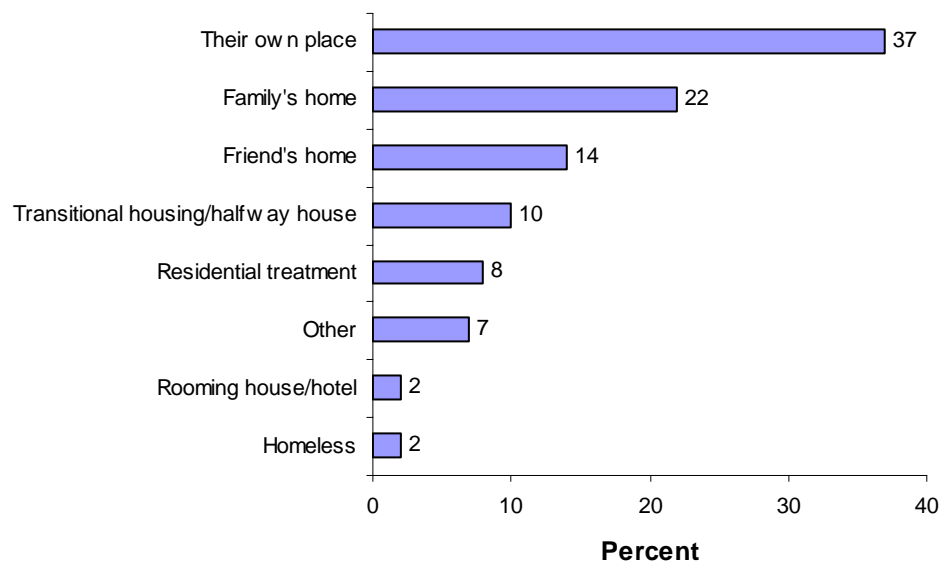
Few respondents reported having difficulty finding housing after their last release. Only 16 percent reported having trouble finding a place to live, typically because they lacked money for rent or a deposit. During most of their time in the community, 37 percent of respondents lived in their own house or apartment, and 22 percent lived in the home of a family member (figure 5). A significant portion of respondents lived at a friend's home (14 percent) or in some kind of transitional housing or halfway house (10 percent). Two percent reported they were homeless.

Though most respondents found housing, this housing may not have been stable. Over half (57 percent) moved at least once during their time in the community, and nearly a quarter (23 percent) moved more than once.

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<sup>24</sup> The median is 9 months, and the mean is 12 months.

**Figure 5. Housing Arrangement during Most of the Time in Community, by Housing Type (*n* = 178)**



Source: Massachusetts Prisoner Recidivism Survey

Note: Categories are mutually exclusive. The sum of categories is greater than 100 percent due to nearest integer rounding.

At the time of arrest or technical violation, most respondents (85 percent) did not live alone, reporting most commonly that they lived with intimate partners (41 percent), friends (15 percent) or other family members—either in their own homes or the homes of others. While this signals some support in the community, it may also be a source of negative influence. Nearly half of all respondents (49 percent) lived at some time with someone who had a problem with drinking or drug use. Over a third (38 percent) lived with someone who had served time in jail or prison.

After their most recent release from prison, only a third of respondents (33 percent) returned to the neighborhood they had lived in before prison.<sup>25</sup> When asked about their primary reason for moving to a different neighborhood, about a third (29 percent) reported that they had relocated to stay out of trouble, and nearly a fifth (19 percent) reported relocating to stay with their families (table 3). Over half (59 percent) said that it was difficult to find a job in their neighborhoods, and nearly a third (30 percent) felt it was difficult to avoid crime and drugs in their neighborhood.

<sup>25</sup> Respondents were asked if the neighborhood they returned to was the same they had lived in prior to prison. Because there was no standard definition for “neighborhood,” responses could indicate geographic or political boundaries, a different area within the same community, or a different block within the same neighborhood.

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**Table 3. Primary Reasons for Returning or Relocating (n = 177)**

	Percent	<i>n</i>		Percent	<i>n</i>
<b>Returned to same neighborhood</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>Moved to a different neighborhood</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>118</b>
Where they lived before	42	25	Stay away from trouble	29	34
Be with family or friends	34	20	Be with family or friends	19	23
Nowhere else to go	14	8	Attend drug treatment	11	13
Parole requirement	5	3	Lost housing/no other housing available	9	11
Close to workplace	3	2	Relationship problems	7	8
Ease of transportation	2	1	Stay away from drugs	6	7
			Move to better neighborhood	5	6
			Parole requirement	5	6
			Live closer to services	3	4
			Get a fresh start	3	3
			Live closer to job	3	3

Source: Massachusetts Prisoner Recidivism Survey

Note: Data on one of the respondents is missing

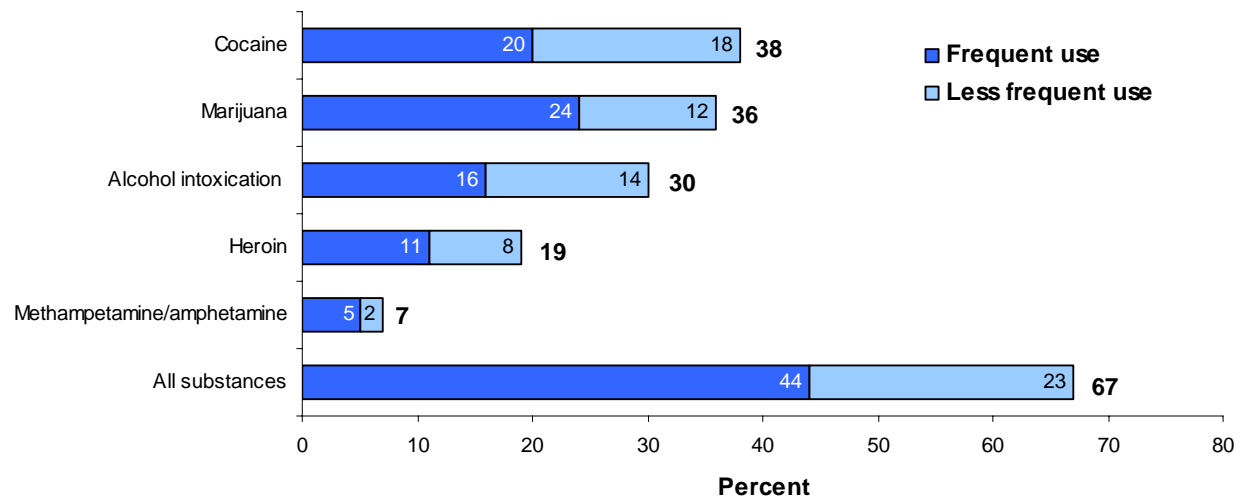
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Respondents gave a mixed picture of whether negative peer influence was a factor in their lives after release. Nearly half said that most or all of their friends had sold drugs or spent time in prison or jail. Yet, 39 percent of respondents said that most or all of their friends were people they could hang out with and not worry about getting into trouble. Over half (54 percent) reported that most or all of their friends were employed.

### ***Substance Use in the Month before Reincarceration***

Over two-thirds of respondents (67 percent) reported drunkenness or illegal drug use in the month before reincarceration. Nearly half (44 percent) reported intoxication or drug use several times a week, and over a third (38 percent) reported daily substance abuse. The most common drugs used were cocaine (38 percent) and marijuana (36 percent) (figure 6).

**Figure 6. Substance Use in the Month before Reincarceration by Substance Type (n = 177)**

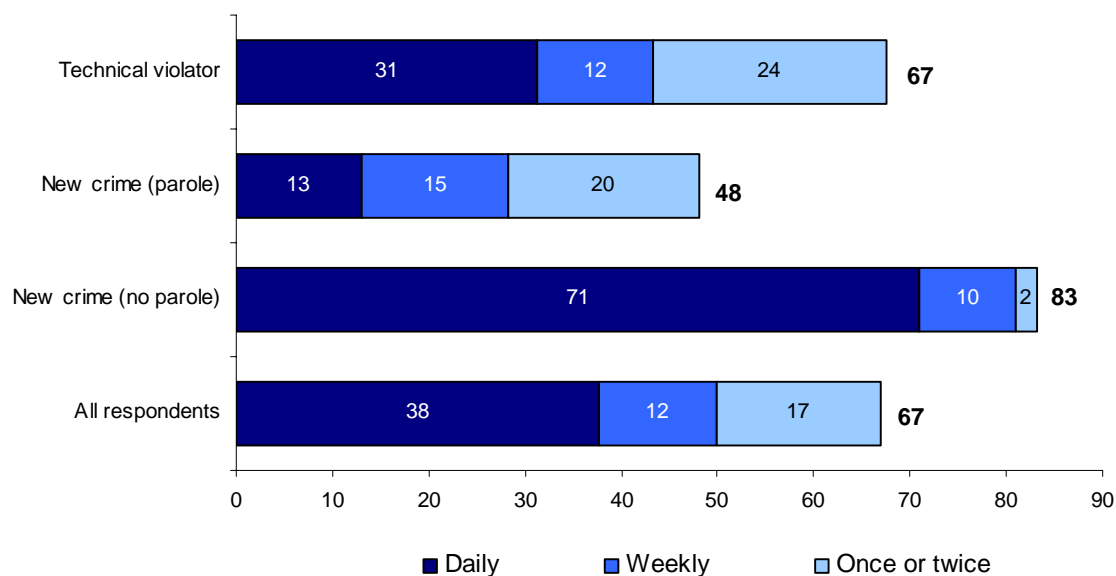


Source: Massachusetts Prisoner Recidivism Survey

Note: Frequent use was defined as using more than once per week. Data on one of the respondents is missing.

The self-reported rates of substance use among the three groups—new crime only respondents, new crime parole violators, and technical parole violators—show a great deal of variation. New crime only respondents were much more likely than others to report daily substance abuse (figure 7). New crime parole violators were the least likely to report daily substance abuse, and the most likely to report no substance use at all.

**Figure 7. Substance Use in the Month before Reincarceration by Frequency of Use and Respondent Type (*n* = 178)**



Source: Massachusetts Prisoner Recidivism Survey

Forty percent of all respondents reported having difficulties before they returned to prison that were related to or resulting from their drug and alcohol use. The most common issues cited were relationship problems (26 percent), arguments at home caused by drinking or drug use (25 percent), arguments about respondents' substance use (23 percent), and problems at work (16 percent).<sup>26</sup> Importantly, more than half of new crime respondents (61 percent) had been intoxicated or had used illegal drugs in the 24-hour period preceding the offense that led to their reincarceration.

Overall, nearly half of all respondents (47 percent) reported attending some type of substance abuse program (including AA or NA) in the month before reincarceration. This group was split between those who reported that they were in treatment because they felt they needed it (48 percent), and those who attended treatment because of legal or parole supervision requirements (50 percent). Respondents on parole were more likely to report participating in a substance abuse program (55 percent) than those who were not on parole (24 percent). Those who reported using drugs and alcohol frequently were less likely to report participating in a substance abuse program in the month before reincarceration (32 percent). However, 62 percent of frequent users reported that they had wanted or attempted to stop using in the month before reincarceration, but were unable to do so.

<sup>26</sup> The new crime and technical violator groups reported similar rates for all of these problems; however, new crime respondents were significantly more likely to report fights, property damage, or arrest resulting from drug and alcohol use.

## ***Employment and Finances***

Most respondents (77 percent) were employed at some point between release and reincarceration. However, only 56 percent were employed at the time of arrest, suggesting the difficulty of maintaining steady employment for many respondents in our sample. Those who held a job at any time were employed for about 60 percent of their time in the community. Of those employed, most (83 percent) were working full-time. Nearly half (41 percent) were working in construction. No other occupation—including food service, maintenance, auto repair, warehouse work, and retail—accounted for more than 10 percent of reported jobs. The median wage for those employed at the time of arrest was \$13.00 per hour. Although parole supervision conditions may require individuals to maintain employment, no significant differences existed in employment rates between those under parole supervision and those not under parole supervision.

Of the quarter of respondents (23 percent) not employed at any time in the community, two-thirds reported spending time looking for a job. While a few were disabled, in residential treatment, or did not want to work, most stated that they tried but could not find employers who would hire them. Most respondents (68 percent)—even those who did find employment—felt that their criminal record had affected their ability to find work. Responses between the technical violator and new crime respondent groups were nearly identical in this respect.

Legal employment was the primary source of income for the majority of respondents (56 percent); however, one in ten reported illegal activities and under-the-table work as their primary source of income during their time in the community. One in ten also reported financial assistance from family or friends as their primary source of income. Fewer than 5 percent relied on Social Security or other public assistance. The median income from all sources was \$2,200 per month.

Over two-thirds of respondents (69 percent) owed some form of debt at the time of their reincarceration. Criminal justice supervision fees were by far the most common form of debt (48 percent), followed by consumer debt (25 percent), court costs (19 percent) and child support (19 percent). The median amount of debt owed was \$2,000.

## ***Family Relationships and Support***

Family relationships and support were strong for respondents in our sample. Most (86 percent) reported that their families had been helpful during their transition from prison, particularly in providing housing and emotional support. In accordance with the high level of family support and assistance, most respondents (76 percent) reported having more than one close family relationship. During their time in the community, respondents had the most contact with intimate partners (33 percent), mothers (26 percent), and sisters (11 percent). Nonetheless, there was some evidence of family conflict. One in ten respondents reported that a family member had threatened, harassed, or physically hurt them in the month prior to reincarceration, and more than one in ten reported having no close family relationships.

Of respondents with children under 18 years old, about a third (31 percent) were living with their children at the time of arrest. Most fathers (70 percent) said that it was easy for their children to adjust to their return from prison. While two-thirds of fathers had spent time with their children



on at least a weekly basis in the month prior to their reincarceration, nearly one in five (19 percent) had not seen their children at all.

### ***Health and Medical Care***

Well over a third of respondents (42 percent) reported a health condition requiring treatment or medication. Of these, more than a third had difficulty getting medical treatment or prescription drugs. While lack of insurance was cited as one of the most common reasons for difficulty accessing care or medicines, 84 percent of respondents with health conditions reported having some type of health coverage. Among all respondents, about three-quarters (74 percent) reported having some kind of health care coverage while in the community. Over half of all respondents (57 percent) were insured by Mass Health. Others reported having insurance through a job (11 percent), Medicare (5 percent), other source (6 percent), or a family member (5 percent).

Over a third of respondents (41 percent) used emergency room care at some time while in the community.<sup>27</sup> Fourteen percent of respondents had been hospitalized for a physical health problem. Respondents with and without reported health problems were equally likely to be hospitalized.

### ***Involvement in Community Programs and Services***

More than three-quarters of respondents (79 percent) were involved in some type of community program or service. About 21 percent of all respondents reported receiving a referral from DOC for these programs—most often for substance abuse treatment.<sup>28</sup> Among all respondents, the most common programs individuals participated in were AA/NA (64 percent), counseling (31 percent), and employment skills, employment readiness, or job placement (25 percent). Those under parole supervision were more likely to report participating in community-based programs than respondents who were not under parole supervision (table 4).

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<sup>27</sup> There appears to be no connection between emergency room use and whether respondents had health insurance, or between emergency room use and the type of coverage among those insured. Those respondents with health problems requiring care and medication also used emergency room services at the same rate as those without self-reported health problems.

<sup>28</sup> This may include referrals provided through formal prerelease transition programs or other DOC social services or discharge planning; therefore, this figure is different than the percentage reporting referrals through transition programs.

**Table 4. Community-Based Program Participation by Release Status**

Program	All respondents (percent)		
	All respondents (n = 178)	Parole (n = 134)	Nonparole (n = 44)
Any program	79	87	57
Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or Narcotics Anonymous (NA)	64	72	41
Counseling/mental health	31	34	21
Employment skills/readiness or job placement	25	28	16
Trade/job training	17	19	11
Other substance abuse treatment	16	17	14
Anger management	16	15	18
Life skills	11	13	7
Parenting	8	8	7
ESL	4	5	2
GED/basic education	3	5	0

Source: Massachusetts Prisoner Recidivism Survey

Note: We asked this question of all respondents who were released to parole supervision, regardless of their supervision status upon return to prison. In this table, the nonparole group includes the 5 new crime only respondents who had completed their parole supervision before being arrested and convicted for the crime that led to their reincarceration.

Overall, about half of respondents (49 percent) reported wanting to participate in certain programs but being unable to do so.<sup>29</sup> The most common desired, yet not accessed, programs were trade or job training (46 percent), employment readiness (40 percent), and life skills (29 percent).

Forty percent of all respondents were involved with some type of civic, religious, or other community-based group, most often a church or other religious organization (20 percent) or sports team (7 percent). One in five (20 percent) had a mentor or case manager in the

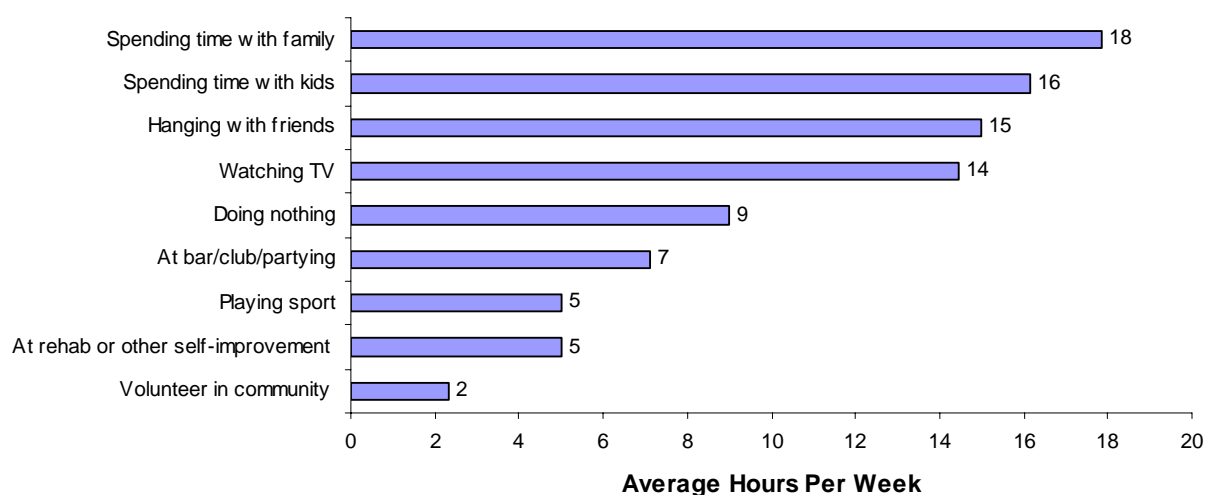
<sup>29</sup> The survey did not ask respondents why they were unable to participate in programs in which they were interested; however, speculations as to possible reasons include too few program slots, program schedules that interfered with work, and program cost.

community.<sup>30</sup> These mentors and case managers were most often affiliated with transitional housing, a substance abuse treatment program, or a faith-based or religious organization.

## Nonwork Activities

Respondents engaged in a range of activities during their free time. On average, respondents reported spending the most hours per week doing things with their families and friends (figure 8). The average respondent reported spending 10 hours per week engaged in such activities as sports or rehabilitative and self-improvement programs, but also reported spending 9 hours “doing nothing” and 14 hours watching television. Overall, respondents reported spending an average of 30 hours a week engaging in unstructured and/or unproductive activities and an average of 12 hours involved in more positive self-improvement activities.<sup>31</sup>

**Figure 8. Hours Per Week Spent on Nonwork Activities (n = 178)**



Source: Massachusetts Prisoner Recidivism Survey

Note: Average hours per week are based on mean values.

<sup>30</sup> Not including parole and probation officers.

<sup>31</sup> Respondents under parole supervision reported spending more hours per week in structured, prosocial activities than those not under parole supervision. However, these differences are not statistically significant.



## SECTION IV.

# WHAT WAS THE EXTENT OF CRIMINAL ACTIVITY BETWEEN INCARCERATIONS?

To help understand the events and circumstances that led to respondents' return to prison, we examined criminal activity in the community. Examining respondents' self-reported illegal activities allows us to see patterns in the type and timing of criminal activity, to explore underlying criminal behavior among technical violators, and to draw comparisons between technical violators and those reincarcerated for a new crime.

Arrest data from the Criminal Offender Record Information (CORI) database provided additional information on the type of criminal activities in which respondents engaged while in the community and the amount of formal contact they had with the criminal justice system before their return to prison. Together, these data yield a more comprehensive picture of respondents' criminal activity between incarcerations.

### ***Self-Reported Criminal Activity***

Over a third of respondents (41 percent) reported that they had committed some type of crime while in the community.<sup>32</sup> The proportion of respondents self-reporting any crime was substantially higher among those who returned to prison for a new crime (57 percent) compared with the 22 percent of technical violators who admitted to criminal activity while in the community. Looked at through a different lens, respondents who were not on parole supervision were far more likely to report committing crime in the community (78 percent) than both technical violators and new crime parole violators (35 percent) (table 5).<sup>33</sup> Drug sales or distribution was by far the most common self-reported crime type among all respondents (28 percent).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Research has shown that individuals generally underreport their involvement in criminal activity. However, consistent patterns emerge between CORI data and the self-reports of new crime respondents and those of technical violators.

<sup>33</sup> Multivariate analysis revealed that being under parole supervision (either as a technical violator or new crime parole violator) predicted the amount of self-reported crime between incarcerations. The differences between these groups of respondents remained when controlling for the effects of other factors known to predict recidivism (e.g., respondents' criminal histories, age at first arraignment, and age at last prison release).

<sup>34</sup> The survey did not ask about drug possession.

**Table 5. Percentage of Respondents Self-Reporting Any Crime (Whether Arrested or Not)**

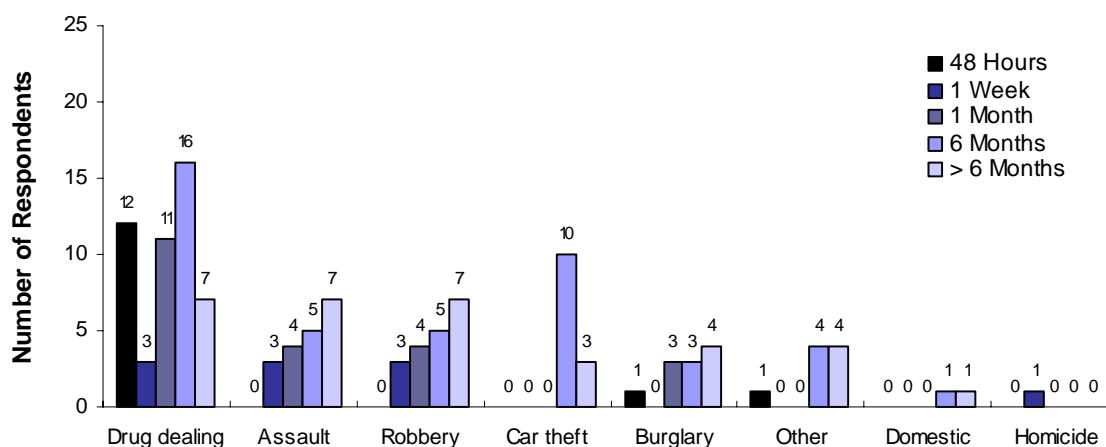
	All respondents (n = 178)	Technical violators (n = 83)	New crime (parole) (n = 46)	New crime (no parole) (n = 49)
<b>Any crime type</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>78</b>
Drug sales	28	18	13	59
Burglary	6	0	2	20
Assault	11	2	13	22
Robbery	7	1	4	21
Car theft	6	1	2	19
Domestic	2	1	0	4
Homicide	1	0	0	2
Other	6	1	12	8

Source: Massachusetts Prisoner Recidivism Survey

Note: These offense categories are not mutually exclusive.

In order to find out whether these results were a function of the fact that new crime only respondents were in the community longer than parolees (as discussed later in this section), we also looked at self-reported criminal activity during respondents' first 6 months out of prison following their previous incarceration. The findings were consistent—65 percent of new crime only respondents reported committing at least one crime during those initial 6 months out of prison compared with 17 percent of new crime parole violators and 14 percent of technical violators.

The amount of time after release within which respondents committed their first offense varied by crime type (figure 9). One out of four respondents who reported dealing drugs committed this offense within 48 hours of release. An additional 22 percent reported selling drugs between one and four weeks after release and another 33 percent between one and six months. By contrast, most of those who reported committing robbery and assault did so after the first month out, and all car thefts were reportedly committed between one and six months after release.

**Figure 9. Time to Commit First Self-Reported Crime by Type**

Source: Massachusetts Prisoner Recidivism Survey

## Contact with the Criminal Justice System Prior to Reincarceration

Overall, CORI data show that respondents had an average of four arraignments between incarcerations.<sup>35</sup> There were substantial differences across respondent groups: new crime only respondents had an average of 10 arraignments; new crime parole violators had 3; and technical violators averaged less than 1 arraignment between incarcerations (table 6). Technical violators and new crime parole violators—i.e., the parolees—had substantially fewer arraignments between incarcerations than new crime only respondents. Between CORI records and the self-reported data, these findings suggest that respondents without supervision who returned to prison for a new crime engaged in more criminal activity than the paroled recidivists.<sup>36</sup>

**Table 6. Number of Arraignment Charges Between Incarcerations by Respondent Type**

	All respondents ( <i>n</i> = 178)	Technical violators ( <i>n</i> = 83)	New crime (parole) ( <i>n</i> = 46)	New crime (no parole) ( <i>n</i> = 49)
Arraignments between incarcerations	4	1	3	10

Source: CORI Arraignment Records

## Type of Criminal Activity

New crime respondents were arraigned for a variety of offenses.<sup>37</sup> Figure 10 illustrates the offense categories for new crime respondents' first arraignment after release. Exactly one-third were arrested for crimes against property while crimes against persons (18 percent) and drug-related crimes (17 percent) each made up about a fifth of the offenses.<sup>38</sup> Compared with the governing offense that led to their previous incarceration, fewer respondents were first arraigned for crimes against people and more were arraigned for property offenses.

<sup>35</sup> Arraignments do not necessarily correspond to arrest incidents. One arraignment corresponds to one criminal charge against an individual. A single incident can result in multiple charges, and each charge is counted as a separate arraignment. Therefore, one arrest can result in multiple arraignments.

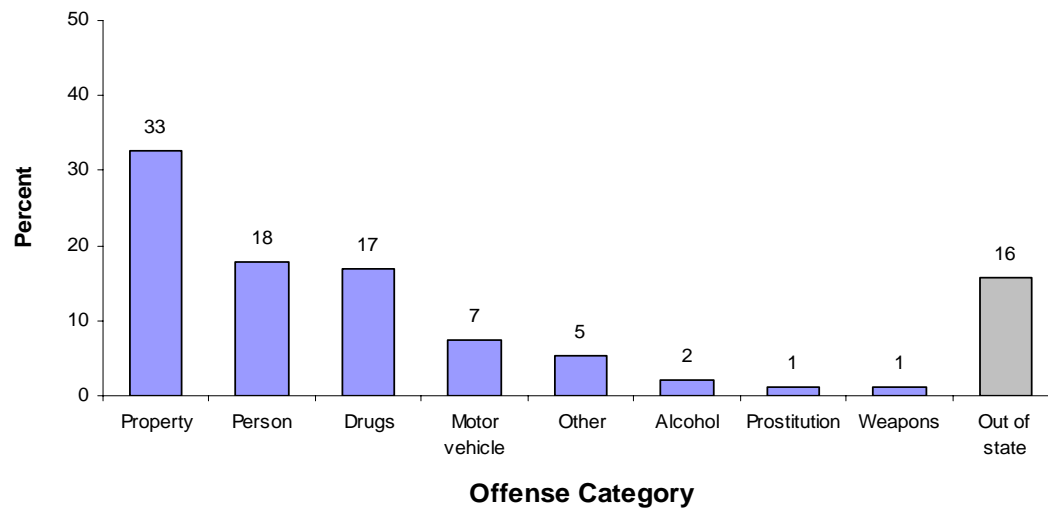
<sup>36</sup> We tested whether new crime only respondents had more arraignments between incarcerations simply because they had a longer average amount of time between incarcerations. Separate analyses demonstrated that the number of arrests per month actually decreased as respondents' time out of prison increased. These same analyses showed that respondents who were released to parole and returned to prison for a technical violation or a new crime parole violation had lower rates of arraignments per month than new crime only respondents. The differences in arraignments between these groups of respondents remained even when controlling for other factors known to predict recidivism (e.g., respondents' criminal histories, age at first arraignment, and age at last prison release).

<sup>37</sup> Information on respondents' first arraignment after release is only included for new crime respondents because the number of technical violators with arraignments between incarcerations was too small for analysis.

<sup>38</sup> Sixteen percent of new crime respondents committed a crime out of state, and data on their offenses were not available.

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**Figure 10. Offense Categories for First Arraignment after Release for New Crime Respondents (n = 95)**



Source: CORI Arraignment Records

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## ***Circumstances that Led to Reincarceration***

### **Time to Reincarceration**

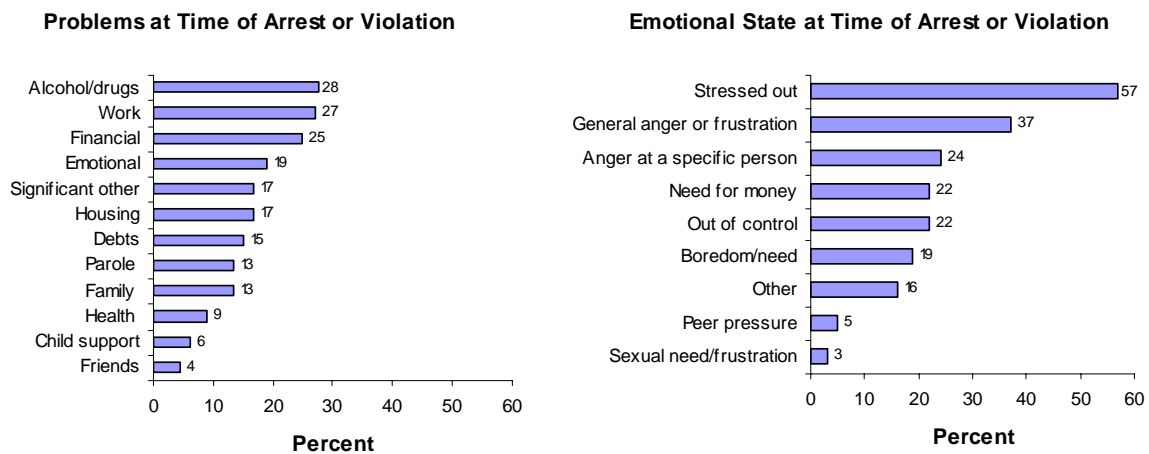
Overall, respondents spent an average of one year in the community before being reincarcerated. New crime respondents, regardless of their supervision status, were in the community longer than technical violators (15 months and 9 months, respectively). Looked at differently, those released without parole supervision spent considerably more time in the community (more than 19 months) than those released to parole—more than twice as long as technical violators and nearly twice as long as new crime parole violators (11 months). The differences in time out of prison between new crime parole violators and new crime only respondents is likely due to differences in court processing. Parolees whose parole is revoked on the basis of a new arrest are typically returned to prison immediately, whereas released prisoners not under parole supervision at the time of rearrest must be convicted and sentenced before returning to prison.

### **Problems and Emotional State Leading up to the Return to Prison**

When asked what types of problems respondents were experiencing at the time of the arrest or technical violation resulting in reincarceration, the most common responses were problems with drugs or alcohol (28 percent), work (27 percent), money (25 percent), and emotional problems (19 percent) (figure 11). When asked about their emotional state at the time of the arrest or technical violation, more than half reported that they were stressed out (57 percent) and more than a third reported general anger or frustration (37 percent).



**Figure 11. Problems and Emotional States at the Time of Arrest or Technical Violation Leading to Reincarceration (n = 178)**



Source: Massachusetts Prisoner Recidivism Survey

Note: The categories in figure 11 are not mutually exclusive. Respondents were permitted multiple responses.

When asked about their thought process before and during the act that resulted in their arrest and reincarceration, nearly two-thirds of new crime respondents (63 percent) reported that they had not worried about getting caught when they committed the offense. Over half of new crime respondents (57 percent) reported that something could have prevented them from committing the act. When asked what could have deterred them, common responses were employment, children, and sobriety.



## SECTION V.

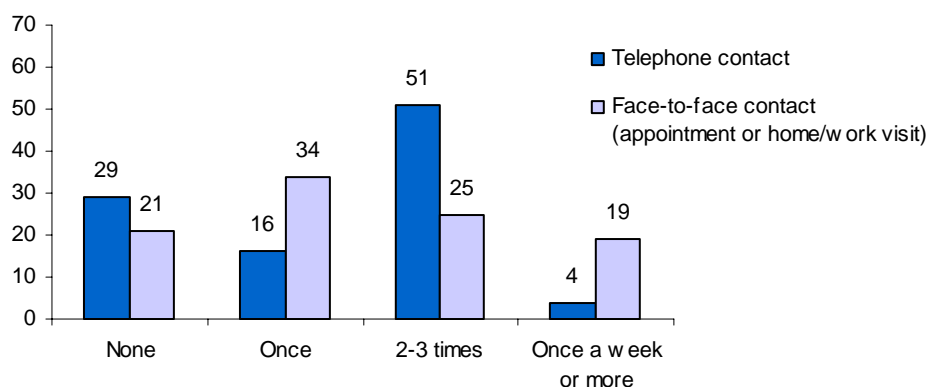
# WHAT WERE THE EXPERIENCES OF RESPONDENTS ON PAROLE SUPERVISION?

Three-quarters of respondents (75 percent) had been paroled from their previous incarceration.<sup>39</sup> In addition to the technical parole violators—who by definition were released to supervision—more than half of those in our sample who were reincarcerated for a new crime had been released to parole. Of those released to parole and returned for a new crime, the vast majority (96 percent) were still under supervision when they were reincarcerated for the new arrest.

### *Interactions with Parole Officers*

Of the respondents on parole at the time they were reincarcerated, more than three-quarters (79 percent) had seen their parole officer at least once in the month prior to reincarceration.<sup>40</sup> One in five (19 percent) had seen their parole officer at least once a week, and one-quarter (25 percent) had seen their officer two or three times (figure 12). One in five had not seen their officers at all in the month before their return to prison. Over 70 percent reported that their parole officers had visited them at least once in the month prior to reincarceration, and over a third had been visited several times over the past month. The majority of parolees who reported meeting with their parole officer in the past month (88 percent) reported that these face-to-face meetings lasted 30 minutes or less. In addition to office and field visits, the majority (55 percent) had spoken to their parole officers several times on the telephone within the month before reincarceration.<sup>41</sup>

**Figure 12. Frequency of Contact with Parole Officer in the Month before Reincarceration ( $n = 129$ )**



Source: Massachusetts Prisoner Recidivism Survey

<sup>39</sup> As noted in the sample representativeness sidebar, the share of our study sample released to parole supervision is not representative of the general DOC population released to parole, which is about one-third of all releases.

<sup>40</sup> This includes both office and field visits.

<sup>41</sup> There were no significant differences between technical violators and new crime parole violators in the amount of reported contact with parole officers in the month before reincarceration.

Most of those who were on parole reported positive opinions of their experience on parole. The vast majority of respondents on parole found their parole officers to be respectful toward them (89 percent), trustworthy (80 percent), helpful in providing information (75 percent), and helpful in transitioning them to the community from prison (76 percent). More than half of respondents also found supervision to have helped them stay free of crime and drugs. These responses did not differ significantly between technical violators and new crime parole violators.

### ***Parole Conditions and Compliance***

In addition to the standard conditions imposed by the parole board,<sup>42</sup> almost all parolees (96 percent) reported that their parole officers imposed additional “special” conditions. The most common were drug testing (91 percent), alcohol testing (73 percent), substance abuse counseling (53 percent), and no contact/association orders (32 percent).

Fifty-five percent of respondents released to parole reported violating at least one condition during their time in the community, whether or not they were caught. By far the most common self-reported violation was failure to report for drug testing. More than two-fifths of those on parole reported violating this condition at least once.

Nearly a quarter (25 percent) of all respondents released to parole reported having received a warning or sanction for a parole violation, not including the violation that resulted in their return to prison. A positive alcohol or drug test was the most common violation resulting in a warning or sanction. Over a third of respondents under parole supervision had tested positive at least once without resulting in a parole revocation.

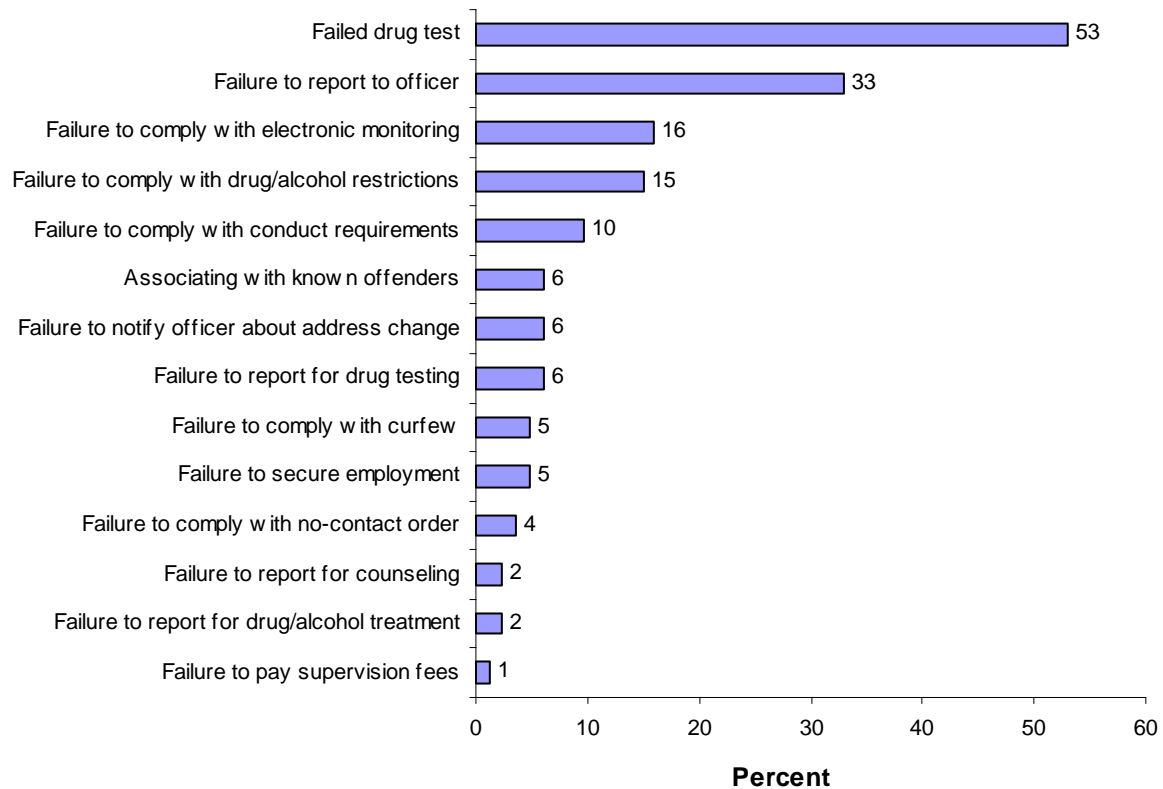
### ***Violation Type, Trigger, and Detection***

When asked about the technical violations that resulted in their parole revocation, the two most common responses were positive tests for drugs or alcohol (53 percent) and failing to report to their parole officer (33 percent) (figure 13). In two-thirds of cases (65 percent), the respondent’s parole officer detected the violation. Ten percent reported that the police detected the violation. Of the remainder, many reported that other officials, such as program staff or drug treatment counselors, detected the violation.

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<sup>42</sup> In Massachusetts, standard parole conditions include such rules as notifying parole officers of a change in address, paying monthly supervision fees, reporting to the parole office on the day of release, and making earnest efforts to maintain legitimate employment.

**Figure 13. Technical Violations Resulting in Parole Revocation (n = 81)**



Source: Massachusetts Prisoner Recidivism Survey

Note: Percentages are based on the number of technical violators. Respondents could report multiple types of technical violations. Data on two technical violators is missing.

Most technical violators (86 percent) reported that while they were in the community under parole supervision, they had understood the conditions of their parole “very well,” and nearly all (99 percent) understood their conditions to some degree. More than half (59 percent) of technical violators reported that while they were in the community, they thought it would be “likely” or “very likely” that they would eventually be caught violating the conditions of their parole.

## Focus Groups with Parole Officers

In 2002, 40 percent of Massachusetts prisoners who were reincarcerated within a year of their release were returned to prison for a violation of parole, and more than a quarter (28 percent) were returned for a technical violation. Little data exist concerning the extent of criminal activity associated with technical violations or whether reincarcerating technical violators enhances public safety. To contribute to an understanding of the underlying factors associated with technical violations, the research team conducted two focus groups with parole officers in Massachusetts.<sup>43</sup>

The research team conducted the two focus group discussions on June 21, 2007, in two regional offices. The first was held outside Boston (Natick) with 8 participants and the second was held in Worcester with 10 participants. Richard Stroker, senior manager at the Center for Effective Public Policy, facilitated the two sessions. The focus group discussion sought the parole officers' perspective on the needs and problems facing parolees and factors that lead individuals to succeed or fail; the underlying behavior driving technical violations and how parole officers typically respond to failure and success; and how parole supervision can be most helpful in addressing parolees' needs and ensuring public safety.

### *Background on Participants*

Most of the focus group participants were veterans in the field, many having come from the Massachusetts Department of Corrections prior to joining parole. Participants had a range of experience from six months to 25 years with the Parole Board, and as many as 35 years in corrections and parole combined. Most parole officers in the focus groups had a nonspecialized, mixed caseload that was geographically-based. Nonspecialized caseload sizes ranged from 40 to as many as 80 cases. Participants included a mix of supervisors and line staff, including "reentry officers" working at a Regional Reentry Center.

## Needs and Problems Facing Parolees

### *Substance Abuse*

In both focus groups, parole officers overwhelmingly agreed that substance abuse, along with employment, were the central and most pervasive challenges facing parolees. Parole officers reported that the vast majority of their caseloads had problems related to substance abuse. However, parole officers estimated that less than 20 percent of parolees on their caseload receive substantial treatment. One reason cited for the low levels of treatment participation is the limited availability of treatment programs, especially residential treatment.

While parole officers acknowledged a need for residential drug treatment programs both during and after prison, they emphasized the importance of treating individuals in the community as opposed to the controlled environment of prison where they are unable to apply what they learn to real world stresses, such as paying bills, maintaining personal relationships, and meeting basic survival needs.

### *Employment*

Parole officers stated that finding and sustaining gainful employment is as central a challenge for parolees as substance abuse. They estimated that 85 to 90 percent of the people on their caseload have a hard time finding meaningful employment. When they do find employment, it is often low-wage, making it difficult to support themselves and their families.

In addition to providing for themselves and their families, parolees are often faced with overwhelming financial obligations, including supervision fees, court fines, and restitution. While parole officers acknowledged that employers' access to CORI records is an obstacle to employment, they reported that parolees have very high, often unrealistic expectations and limited education or vocational skills to meet these expectations.

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<sup>43</sup> Although the caseload of parole officers in Massachusetts consists primarily of county-sentenced individuals as opposed to state-sentenced, we asked participants to focus their comments on parolees returning from state prison. According to officers, state-sentenced parolees, who are returning from state prison, tend to be older and the challenges they face—though the core issues are the same—tend to be more deeply entrenched than those returning from county houses of correction.

## *Mental Health*

The broad range in type and severity of mental health problems makes it difficult for parole officers to estimate the prevalence among their caseload; however, they estimated that over half have mental health problems. According to several parole officers, many parolees with mental health problems have not been previously diagnosed, and as a result, have not received adequate treatment during incarceration. In these cases, the Parole Board does not set supervision conditions that require treatment or medication, creating a challenge for parole officers, who must sometimes work to restructure conditions to address severe mental health issues. Given limited treatment resources, they focus only on the most serious cases.

## *Housing*

Even though most parolees have some place to go after release, either with families, partners, or friends, parole officers stated that these places are often not good places for parolees to be. They are often surrounded by negative influences and the people and places that contributed to their incarceration in the first place.

Overall, parole officers reported struggling with the lack of resources and referral sources to which they can connect parolees. While structured housing resources do exist—especially residential treatment and sober housing programs—they are often removed from the communities where parolees are returning and where families are located; therefore, many parolees do not complete these programs.

## *Attitude*

Parole officers emphasized the role of an individual's attitude in his or her success on parole and in the community. Parolees, consumed with feelings of optimism immediately following release, believe that everything will fall into place. When they have difficulty finding employment or dealing with old problems, many realize that the negative circumstances and people in their lives have not changed and, as one parole officer stated, "If they didn't have it easy before, they won't have it easy when they come back." Parole officers indicated that the combination of high expectations and low sense of self-worth is detrimental to many parolees' success.

Parole officers have found that fear of failure, on the other hand, can often motivate a parolee to comply with rules and maintain treatment regimens. Some parole officers stated that many parolees are not dissatisfied enough with the direction of their lives to make any changes. According to parole officers, it is the parolee who takes things slow and does not try to make up for lost time in prison who has greater long-term success.

## *Factors that Lead to Success and Failure*

When asked about the first signs of failure, parole officers reported the following: lack of contact or no longer showing up for appointments; smoking; calls from family members or partners who have not heard from a parolee or are worried about a parolee's behavior.

When asked about factors that lead parolees to succeed, parole officers reported the following: attitude, motivation, and interest in personal success; age; substance abuse under control; steady employment; and family support.

## **The Extent to Which Technical Violations Reveal Underlying Criminal Behavior**

Most parole officers believed that technical violations, such as failure to report or attend treatment and other necessary meetings, are a precursor to criminal activity, especially as it relates to substance use. While they acknowledged that crimes against persons or property are less likely to underlie technical violations, parole officers also reported that when parolees start using drugs again, the majority will resort to person or property crime to feed their addiction.

## **Responding to failure and success**

According to focus group participants, a parole officer is always balancing public safety and an individual's chance to be rehabilitated. Most parole officers seemed to view their responsibilities as a hybrid of social work, service brokerage, and law enforcement.

### *Use of Graduated Sanctions*

Many parole officers agreed that the parole board places too many conditions on supervision, making it unrealistic for parolees to comply with all conditions and essentially setting them up for failure. To change or modify conditions, parole officers are required to submit a request through a formal hearing with board members and the court. However, parole officers reported that they do not need permission to use certain low-level sanctions, allowing them a tool to address noncompliance with certain conditions.

Parole officers agreed that low-level sanctions are appropriate only under certain circumstances. Failing to appear for a scheduled appointment and testing positive for heroin each require different responses, and depending on the frequency and severity of the violation, a community-based or low-level sanction may not be appropriate. For the first dirty urine, parole officers stated that they usually increase the number of urine tests required. After the second dirty urine, many parole officers will file a revocation, especially if the substance is a highly addictive drug, such as heroin or crack. Parole officers stated that with certain drugs, they know from the first dirty urine that parolees will continue to test positive, especially if they get kicked out of their treatment program. Parole officers believed that continuing to use a community-based sanction in such situations is useless because a positive test for an addictive drug will often lead to others and eventually result in revocation and a return to prison.

The introduction of graduated sanctions is relatively new, and their use is not yet consistent. Parole officers noted that the use of graduated sanctions depends on the supervisor's attitude in each regional office as well as the parole officers' attitudes. While graduated sanctions can be an effective tool to modify behavior, parole officers noted that their colleagues may also respond to noncompliant behavior with lower-level sanctions to avoid the labor-intensive revocation process. Moreover, while graduated sanctions can be more appropriate in some cases, parole officers stated that there is a point when they must be proactive about preventing future criminal activity. According to parole officers, revocation in response to certain technical violations prevents future criminal activity.

### *Use of Incentives*

Parole officers found that informal step-downs, such as easing up on conditions, reducing fees, and reducing the frequency of required contact, are valuable incentives. However, responding to positive behavior with graduated incentives may be more arduous for the parole officer than using graduated sanctions in response to noncompliant behavior because the parole board must approve the removal of any condition, no matter how informal.

In lieu of formally altering conditions, some parole officers found that verbal positive reinforcement motivates parolees. For example, one parole officer noted that praising parolees as often as possible for doing something positive, however minor, such as going to the library or enrolling in classes, can maintain ongoing success and achievement. Some parole officers noted that parolees are more likely to trust them and maintain positive activity if they emphasize that the focus of their job is not to catch parolees violating their conditions but to help parolees achieve success.

Proactively involving a parolee's family in the supervision process has been an effective approach for many parole officers. When parolees slip up, they often beg their parole officer not to tell their mother or girlfriend. Some parole officers have found it helpful to engage family members in the process of holding a parolee accountable and make sure family members know about the parolee's behavior.

### *Thoughts on Improving Community Supervision*

Parole officers had several ideas for improving parole supervision. Their primary suggestions related to time spent in the field with parolees, discretion with supervision conditions, and partnering with other community-based organizations. Parole officers stated that they would like to spend more time working with parolees out in the field and less time in the office doing paperwork. At the same time, parole officers recognized that field supervision requires substantial travel, checking on parolees or parolees' family members. One parole officer estimated that he travels close to 200 miles a day on his route, despite the fact that his caseload was organized geographically.



Parole officers discussed their lack of discretion in determining or altering supervision conditions. Currently, the Parole Board is responsible for setting conditions, and a parole officer has no authority to modify, add, or reduce conditions. The process for petitioning the board for a change is cumbersome, lengthy, and often goes unanswered. Parole officers thought they ought to have some authority within their office to alter or modify conditions as they become more familiar with the individuals on their caseload. In the view of many parole officers, the recidivism rate would be lower if parolees did not pile up numerous technical violations that result from the unreasonable number of conditions tacked on to their supervision.

Parole officers emphasized the importance of expanding and nurturing their partners in the community. To improve their role as service brokers, parole officers indicated they would benefit from a specialized staff person whose primary purpose is facilitating contacts to service providers and employment opportunities. For example, they thought parole outcomes would improve dramatically if a job developer were on staff at every regional parole office to help parolees find jobs. The local career centers that parolees use as a referral source have not been very successful in placing parolees in jobs, and parole officers reported having little time to assist with such needed skills as résumé writing and interviewing.

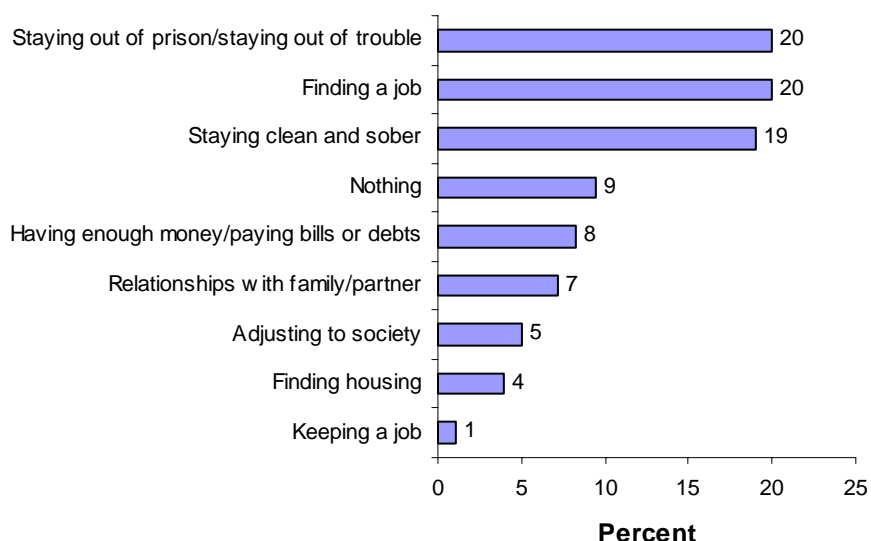
## SECTION VI.

# WHAT ARE RESPONDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON CHALLENGES AND FUTURE SUCCESS IN THE COMMUNITY?

### *The Single Biggest Challenge after Release*

After their initial release from prison, respondents reported facing challenges in a range of areas. When asked about their single biggest challenge in the community, respondents most commonly answered finding a job (20 percent), staying out of trouble (20 percent), or staying clean and sober (19 percent). An additional 8 percent reported their biggest challenge was not having enough money to pay bills or debts, and 7 percent reported problems in their relationships with family members or intimate partners. Four percent reported problems with finding housing. Despite their return to prison, 9 percent of respondents reported no great challenge after their release.

**Figure 14. The Single Biggest Challenge after Release**



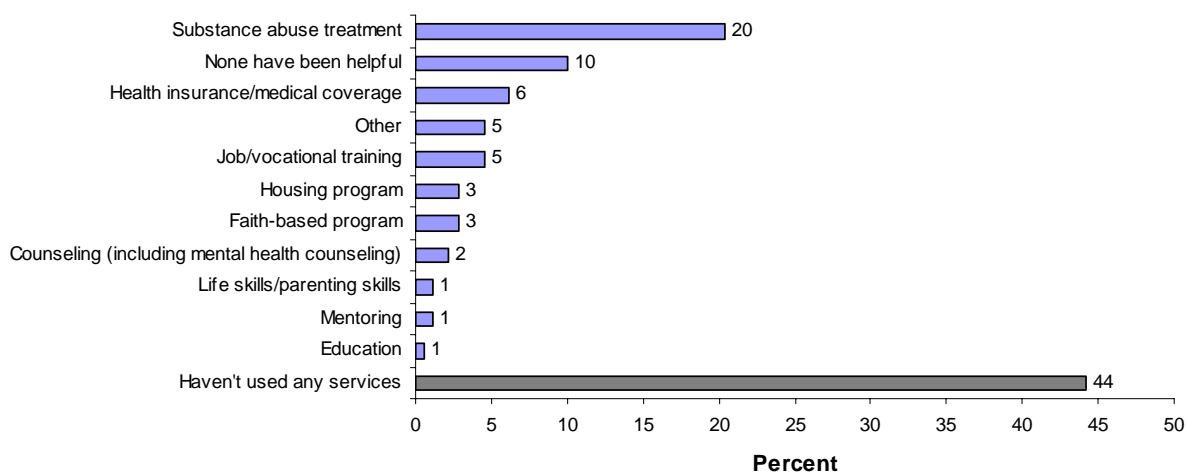
Source: Massachusetts Prisoner Recidivism Survey

## Services That Were or Would Have Been Helpful after the Previous Release

Although more than three quarters of respondents reported some contact or involvement with community-based services or programs after their last release, far fewer seemed to use those services. When asked what one service had been most important in assisting them after release, nearly half (44 percent) reported not having used any service at all.<sup>44</sup>

Substance abuse treatment was by far the most commonly cited (20 percent) service that had been most important in assisting respondents after release. Six percent reported that health insurance had been the most important service. No more than 5 percent reported any other program or service—including job training, housing, education, life skills, counseling, or mentoring—as being most important after release. An additional 10 percent reported that no service had been helpful.

**Figure 15. The Most Helpful Service after Previous Release**



Source: Massachusetts Prisoner Recidivism Survey

Note: These categories reflect open-ended responses and are not mutually exclusive.

Perhaps not surprisingly, most respondents reported services, programs, or support that would have been helpful to them after release. Job-related training was the most commonly reported service that would have been useful (63 percent). More than half of respondents reported financial support (58 percent), health insurance (56 percent), employment readiness (55 percent), and education (53 percent) as services that would have been useful. Nearly half reported that housing programs (49 percent), life skills or parenting skills (46 percent), and counseling (47 percent) would have been useful after release. About 40 percent reported that substance abuse

<sup>44</sup> This percentage is inconsistent with the share of respondents who reported using services in the community when asked in a separate multiple response/closed-ended survey question.

treatment and mentoring would have been helpful, and 29 percent reported that faith-based programs would have been helpful after release.

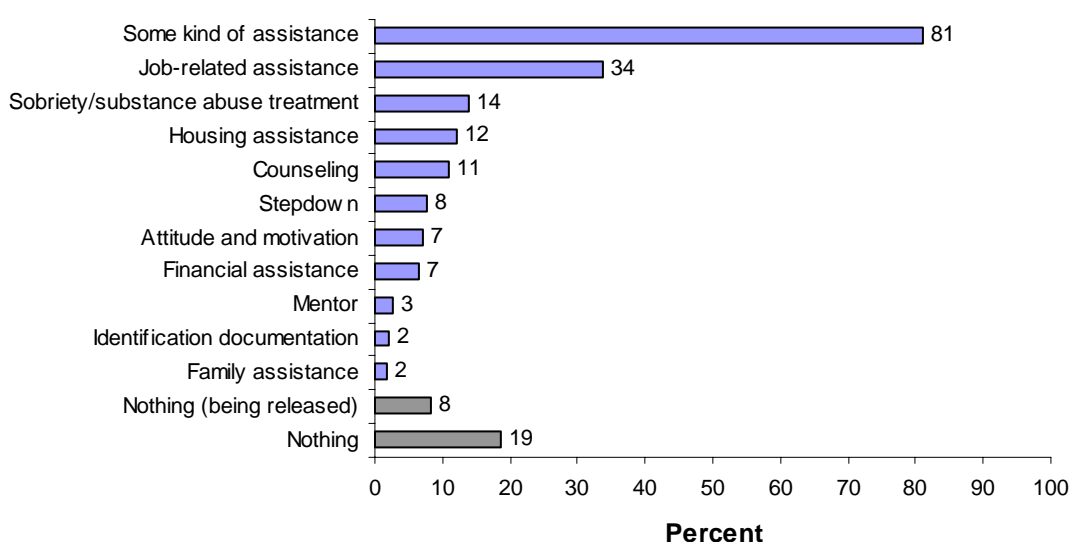
## ***Services or Programs that Will Be Most Helpful in Prison and in the Community after Release***

### **Services that Will Be Most Helpful in Prison**

Most respondents (81 percent) would like additional assistance in prison to help them better prepare for their next release. The most commonly reported assistance that would be most helpful while in prison was job-related services. A third (34 percent) reported wanting assistance with job-related services, including job placement, job or vocational training, education, and work-release programs that enable them to earn and save money. About 14 percent of respondents reported that substance abuse counseling or treatment would be most important.

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**Figure 16. Services that Will Be Most Helpful in Prison**



Source: Massachusetts Prisoner Recidivism Survey

Note: These categories reflect open-ended responses and are not mutually exclusive.

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More than 1 in 10 (11 percent) reported that general counseling or mentoring would be most helpful while in prison, and an equal share (12 percent) reported that having their housing arrangement set up while incarcerated would be most helpful. An additional 7 percent reported that financial assistance would be most helpful while in prison to prepare for release.

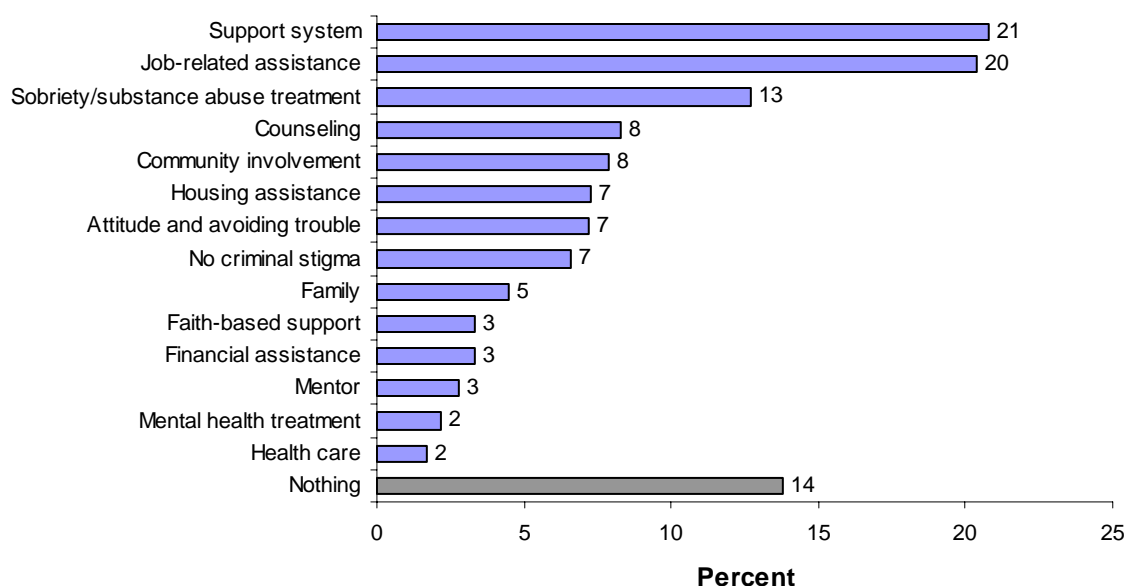
Several respondents (about 8 percent) wished to be placed in a lower security level or in a separate prerelease, step-down or outpatient program before release, rather than being released directly to the street. Many noted concerns with the negativity of the correctional environment. Personal motivation and improving one's attitude during incarceration were the most important factors to success after release for 7 percent of respondents.

Nearly one in five (19 percent) did not report the need for any assistance or services while in prison, stating either nothing would help or that getting out of prison would be most helpful.

### Services that Will Be Most Helpful in the Community after Release

Respondents reported several factors that will be most helpful in their transition to the community once they are released. Responses ranged from specifics like job training and placement and substance abuse counseling to achieving more general goals like staying busy and maintaining a positive attitude. A fifth of respondents reported that finding a job, especially before release, would be most helpful to their success in the community after release. Thirteen percent reported the need to participate in substance abuse counseling or treatment, especially through support groups like AA and NA. About 7 percent reported that finding housing would be most important after release.

**Figure 17. Services that Will Be Most Helpful in the Community after Release**



Source: Massachusetts Prisoner Recidivism Survey

Note: These categories reflect open-ended responses and are not mutually exclusive.

Fifteen percent reported the need to take action themselves to better their chances in the community by being a peer mentor; a more involved community member; staying out of trouble; or maintaining a positive attitude. Keeping busy is an important factor in staying out of trouble for several respondents, whether through work or in general.

Compared with self-reported reentry needs in prison that focused primarily on concrete programs and services, self-reported needs in the community focused more on having a support system. One in five (21 percent) expressed the need for various support networks, such as a church, the

community, family, group counseling (e.g., AA meetings or one-on-one counseling), or a mentor or someone to talk to.

Seven percent of respondents were concerned about problems relating to their “ex-offender” status, such as CORI background checks and the judgment of the community. When thinking about how they were going to get a job after release, CORI was cited as a major barrier for many. A few respondents also complained that services are only reserved for people released on parole, despite the need expressed by those not released to parole.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The survey of prisoners and analysis of Massachusetts Department of Correction administrative data allowed for a unique look into the experiences and perceptions of former prisoners. The study examined the in-prison and community experiences of 178 prisoners who were returned to the Massachusetts DOC within three years of release, with special attention to the similarities and differences between those returned to prison for a new crime and those returned for a technical violation of parole.

### **DOC Program Involvement**

The sample was composed of individuals with substantial criminal histories and multiple previous incarcerations. Nearly every respondent (96 percent) reported having participated in some type of prison program during their previous incarceration, and three-quarters specifically received transitional preparation. Therefore, the DOC seems to be reaching many prisoners who warrant substantial assistance and/or supervision upon release. At the same time, an important opportunity exists for the DOC to further focus its reentry preparation on developing tangible links to community services, particularly job-related and substance abuse services. Such links might take the form of specific referrals, resource booklets to describe what services exist in specific Massachusetts cities, and concrete strategies about how to access job training, substance abuse treatment, faith-based institutions, and other resources.

Those expected to be released at the expiration of their sentence may warrant particular focus from the DOC, as they are less involved in community services than those released to parole supervision. The recently established Regional Reentry Centers that the state operates for prisoners released without parole or probation supervision requirements could play a role in increasing the chances of connection to services after release.

### **Housing and Neighborhood**

Although finding housing did not seem to be a major challenge and family was supportive for most, nearly half of the respondents lived with someone who had a drinking or drug problem, and almost 40 percent lived with someone who had served time in prison or jail. Thus, many returning to seemingly stable housing arrangements may be continually exposed to substance abuse and criminal activity. This finding emphasizes the importance of treatment and relapse-prevention strategies that take place after release in a setting where temptations and triggers are acute.

After their most recent release from prison, only a third of respondents returned to the neighborhood where they had lived before prison. The most common reason for relocation was a desire to avoid trouble. While this indicates that respondents understand the negative influences that may be present in their communities, it complicates the work of service planners who often rely on information about communities where prisoners come from when arranging access to postrelease services. The fact that many respondents do not return to the same address—or even to the same neighborhood—highlights the importance of gathering accurate release information at discharge and developing referrals and transition (and/or supervision) strategies that apply to the neighborhood of return.

## **Substance Abuse**

Substance abuse emerged as an enormous factor in respondents' return to prison. Over two-thirds of respondents reported drunkenness or illegal drug use within the month before reincarceration. Nearly half of all respondents reported intoxication or drug use several times a week, and over a third (38 percent) reported daily substance abuse. Among respondents who returned to prison for a new arrest, 61 percent had been intoxicated or used illegal drugs in the 24 hours preceding the offense.

Respondents who were under parole supervision reported lower rates of substance abuse than those who were not. Among parole violators, technical violators reported higher rates of substance abuse than those who were returned for a new crime. Positive tests for drugs or alcohol were the most common cause for parole revocations. In addition to the self-reported heavy use, drug sales and distribution were the most common types of criminal activity between incarcerations for new crime respondents and technical violators.

In terms of drug treatment, less than half of all respondents were participating in some type of substance abuse program in the month before reincarceration, most commonly AA or NA. Treatment participation rates were higher among those who were under parole supervision, and notably, substance abuse was lower in this group. Among frequent users, the rate of program participation in the month prior to reincarceration was even lower than that of all respondents at less than a third. Importantly, nearly two-thirds of frequent users reported they had wanted or attempted to stop using drugs or alcohol but were unable to, suggesting that many who need treatment are in fact open to it. Clearly, there is a group of heavy users who need treatment but are not being reached.

## **Employment**

In addition to substance abuse, respondents repeatedly referenced the challenge of finding stable employment with a livable income. Over three-quarters of respondents found work after they were released; however, employment was not stable for most. Just over half were employed at the time of arrest. On average, respondents reported being employed about 60 percent of their time in the community. Nearly a quarter did not work at all. Finding a job was a common challenge, and job-related assistance (including training and placement) is the service that respondents reported would be most helpful in their transition to the community. In fact, when asked what could have deterred their reoffending, the most common responses were a job, children, and sobriety.

## **Health Care**

Three-quarters of respondents had some type of health insurance, and over half of those insured had coverage through Mass Health. Despite this fact, respondents reported a high level of emergency room use (this was true for those with and without health insurance). This suggests an opportunity to educate soon-to-be-released prisoners about accessing primary health care and examine the availability of primary health care providers in the communities to which many prisoners return.



## **Free Time**

The average number of hours per week that respondents spend watching TV, “doing nothing,” or at bars and clubs (totaling about 30 hours) suggests a lot of unstructured time that could be better utilized. The amount of free time presents both a challenge and an opportunity in transitioning people from the highly structured prison environment to free society.

## **Criminal Activity**

Many respondents reported having engaged in criminal activity during their time in the community between incarcerations. Those returned to prison for a new arrest were much more likely than technical violators to report having committed crimes between incarcerations. Drug sales was the most common crime type among all respondents. Further, one of four who reported drug dealing indicated they committed this offense within 48 hours of their previous release. Another 22 percent sold drugs within their first month out. This reinforces the need to focus on the first few days and weeks after release, when the risk of relapse and reoffending are high—especially for those with serious substance abuse problems.

## **The Role of Supervision**

Respondents on parole generally reported positive experiences under community supervision. They felt their parole officers were respectful, trustworthy, and helpful, and most reported understanding their supervision conditions very well. The study findings consistently show, through self-reports and CORI data, that respondents on parole committed less crime and engaged in less substance abuse than those not under parole supervision. Parolees were also much more likely to have participated in community-based treatment and services. These findings suggest that parole in Massachusetts is playing a role in facilitating access and promoting adherence to treatment and services, suppressing criminal activity, and reincarcerating people when they break the law or violate their conditions of supervision.

With respect to the technical violators in particular, both self-reports and CORI data clearly show that technical violators’ criminal activity is substantially lower than those reincarcerated for new crimes. This is an important finding as some theories suggest that the underlying criminal behavior among technical violators is quite high and that revoking parole may serve as a way to control crime among such violators.

Our study does not address whether reincarcerating technical violators is the best or most efficient way to prevent reoffending. Increasingly, the Massachusetts Parole Board is implementing graduated sanctions to address parole violations. The focus group discussion suggested—and the authors concur—that expanding the availability of community-based sanctions will increase the tools at a parole officer’s disposal when responding to violations and working to change parolee behavior. Developing standardized guidelines for using graduated sanctions (and incentives) that balance discretion and the specific factors in each case with a need for consistency would improve monitoring and tracking of parolees to better determine “what works” and for whom. Additional community-based options also allow prison beds to be reserved for the most serious offenders.

In addition to the utility of graduated sanctions, parole officers noted that offering meaningful incentives for parolees, such as reducing fees, office visits, and drug testing, is particularly useful in modifying behavior and encouraging parolees to succeed. Such incentives are currently difficult to employ because the Parole Board must approve any changes to conditions. The Parole Board may want to consider a range of options in this regard that can be executed at the officer or supervisor levels.

As is the case in every state around the country, many individuals will relapse or reoffend and return to prison. This study intended to shed light on why these former prisoners return to prison. The survey and focus group findings illustrate how deeply certain individuals are entrenched in substance abuse and criminal activity while facing challenges with basic needs, such as stable work, housing, and positive peer networks. The Massachusetts DOC and Parole Board are making substantial efforts to prepare prisoners for release and supervise and support them in the community. The survey findings present additional opportunities for DOC and the Parole Board to prepare prisoners better for the realities of their release, including connections to tangible contacts and resources in their communities of return. Reentry strategies would also benefit from enhanced information sharing between the DOC, parole, and community-based organizations that provide services and treatment. An increased—and more strategically coordinated—network of community-based interventions would give returning prisoners, supervision agencies, and family members additional tools in the effort to keep these highest risk individuals sober, employed, connected to family, and out of prison. Even moderate inroads in these areas will translate to safer communities throughout the state.