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Returning Home Illinois Policy Brief

Employment and Prisoner Reentry

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Returning Home: Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry is a longitudinal study of prisoner reentry in Maryland, Illinois, Ohio, and Texas.

Returning Home explores the phenomenon of prisoner reentry within five domains: (1) the individual experience, as documented through interviews with prisoners before and after release from prison; (2) the family experience, as documented through interviews with family members of returning prisoners; (3) the peer group experience, as documented through prisoner interviews both before and after their release; (4) the community experience, as documented through interviews with key community stakeholders and focus groups with residents; and (5) the broader policy environment at the state level.

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Finding employment is one of the most important reintegration challenges ex-prisoners face after release, and one that can have a significant impact on their chances of remaining crime-free. Prior research shows that finding and maintaining a legitimate job after release can reduce the chances of reoffending following release from prison, especially for older offenders.¹ Research also shows that the higher the wages, the less likely persons released from prison will return to crime.²

Although two-thirds of former prisoners report that they held a job just prior to their incarceration, most prisoners experience great difficulties finding jobs after their release.³ During the time they spend in prison, individuals lose work skills, forfeit the opportunity to gain work experience, and sever interpersonal connections and social contacts that could lead to legal employment opportunities upon release.⁴ And, while the period of incarceration could be viewed as an opportunity to build skills and prepare for placement at a future job, the evaluation literature provides mixed support for the effectiveness of in-prison job training programs.⁵ After release, the stigma of their ex-prisoner status makes the job search even more difficult: a recent survey of 3,000 employers in four major metropolitan areas revealed that two-thirds of the employers would not knowingly hire an ex-prisoner.⁶

This policy brief draws on employment data gathered as part of the *Returning Home* study through interviews with 400 male Illinois prisoners before and up to three times after their release.⁷ We present findings on pre- and in-prison employment training and experiences as well as postrelease employment outcomes among released prisoners who returned to Chicago. We also detail the characteristics of successful job seekers and briefly discuss the policy implications.