

The prison system: parole and re-entry

[Law](#), [Criminal Justice](#)



The Prison System: Parole and Re-Entry Stemming from the war on drugs came three strikes laws and mandatory minimum sentencing. Never in the history of the United States have this many people been incarcerated, but at the same time never have this many people been released from prisons either. Currently, over two million individuals are incarcerated in prisons and jails across the United States, and over three fourths of these people will be released at some point ([www. ojp. usdoj. gov/bjs/](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/)). The justice systems of the United States has been referred to as a revolving door, describing the cycle of so many Americans who are released, reconvicted, and incarcerated. The overcrowding issues in prisons today make it difficult to establish programs to prepare the inmate for release; there is simply not enough funding for these types of programs. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, about six hundred thousand inmates are released from prison each year, and roughly two thirds of these individuals will return to prison from either new convictions or parole revocation within the first three years of release. ([www. ojp. usdoj. gov/bjs/](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/)). Many barriers placed on inmates include; criminal records, employment, health care, public assistance, housing, transportation, and voting. Inmates are released from prison with no guidance or help with such issues. As a result, inmates are released into society with little, if any skills to become a functioning member of society. Clear, Cole, and Reising (American Corrections, p. 381-382) point out that when incarcerated in the United States, prisoners are released in three different methods. One method used is discretionary release, each state has a parole board which evaluates an inmate when eligible for parole. The amount of elements that are reviewed include the nature of the crime, the inmates behavior while

incarcerated, and participation in rehabilitative programs that are made available. When the parole board releases an inmate on discretionary release, that person is then monitored within the community by a parole officer, and must abide by the rules and conditions of parole. If such rules are not abided by, the recent parolee will once again re-enter the prison system. Mandatory release is another way of getting out of prison, which accounts for nearly forty percent of inmate release. When an inmate has served their sentence in its entirety, minus good time, they are then released into parole supervision. Such inmates are not evaluated by a parole officer and may not have any kind of plan for life outside of prison. The last method of release is expiration, when an inmate serves every bit of the sentence handed to them, they are released and they state is no longer able to supervise this individual. The number of expiration releases has been on the rise for a few years, rising to approximately eighteen percent of releases nationally. These individuals are not supervised in the community whatsoever, and may not have a plan for life after prison either. (American Corrections 382-385). Most states do not offer any assistance to inmates being released. In the state of Missouri upon a prisoners release, they are given a bus ticket and what little money they may have on their books. One can see how it would be easy to fall back into a life of crime; offenders are put back onto the streets, stigmatized by incarceration with absolutely nothing. For most released inmates, the only hope is to look for their family for support and a place to live. Unfortunately, for a lot of felons families are not always able or willing to be a support system for their recent paroled family member. In Samuels and Mukamal's 2004 report After Prison:

Roadblocks to Reentry, another problem faced by released inmates is public access to criminal records. States have the power to expunge or seal the records of any arrest that does not lead to a conviction; however most states do not ever expunge records of convictions. Criminal records are carried with convicted felons for the rest of their lives, and are often available to the public. Due to the fact that these are public record, obtaining employment is often hard if not impossible for many parolees. Employment is essential in the success of someone who has been released from prison. As a rule on parole the parolee must be actively looking for work or have a job. It is up to the individual parole officer to take action if the parolee is not making the proper efforts to find work. If the parolee continues to struggle in effort to find employment for an extended period of time, the courts could revoke his parole and send him back to prison. Aside from being stigmatized by having a criminal record, other barriers of employment haunt many offenders. In her book, *When Prisoners Come Home*, Joan Petersilia outlines other reasons why it is hard for inmates to obtain employment. Many offenders went into and came out of the prison with very low, if any level of education, making any skilled job hard to get. In addition to the already mentioned obstacles inmates must face, some may have also developed substance abuse or mental health problems that were not properly addressed while in prison. Without proper treatment, these roadblocks can keep a person that has served zero prison time from working, let alone someone with all the extra baggage a parolee is trying to overcome. Along with the issues already discussed, released inmates find some of their basic rights taken away. As discussed by Samules and Mukamal, the loss of a drivers license can impair

an individual's ability to run errands and get a job. If the person is able to find a home or work, it is likely that they will not have a drivers license for some period of time. Twenty-seven states automatically revoke the license of people convicted of a drug charge, even if it is not driving related. In other words, directly out of prison many offenders' licenses are revoked, leaving them unable to get where they need to be. Visser and Lattimore published a 2007 report in the National Institute of Justice about prisoners and their re-entry needs. SORVI is a nationwide program highlighting which states use corrections sources to transition inmates into functioning citizens. Clearly, many needs still need met but this study was performed with prisoners and getting their input on what their current needs are. Among the needs most requested were education, financial assistance, drivers license, job training, and employment. SORVI participants completed a survey outlining their needs, and ninety-four percent said that more education was needed, while eighty percent of the group requested employment. Many other needs were addressed in this report; seventy-six percent stated they were in need of health insurance, while thirty-eight percent requested alcohol or substance abuse treatment. The general services needed by SORVI group are outlined as transportation, money management, access to food or clothing, identification, financial assistance, housing, and legal assistance (1-6). When leaving prison, some of the inmates are put into re-entry programs to help them meet these needs, but there are not many programs available due to the lack of funding. Due to the fact that these issues are so new in the criminal justice field, the success rates of these programs are still somewhat unknown. While the public opinion on many of these issues is changing and

communities are recognizing the needs of the offenders, we may see changes in corrections soon. Prisons are way too overcrowded as it is, and these inmates are basically thrown into the streets with no skills or rehabilitation. These released offenders are destined to fail from the moment of their release. This revolving door of criminal activity must be stopped at some point in time. Without any employment, education, housing, and funding the only place to go for some offenders are back to jail or prison. Unfortunately, many feel that their only chance to survive relies on criminal activities that support them socially and financially. " Bureau of Justice Statistics." [www. ojp. usdoj. gov](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov). N. p., 2010. Web. 1 Feb 2011. Clear, Todd, George Cole, and Michael Reisig. *American Corrections*. Seventh. Transcontinental Printing, 2006. 381-385. Print. Petersilia, Joan. *When prisoners come home: parole and prisoner reentry*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2003. Print. Samuels, Paul, and Debbie Mukamal. *After Prison: Roadblocks to Re-Entry*. 2004. 8-24. Print. Vishner, Christy, and Pamela Lattimore. " Major Study Examines Prisoners and Their Needs." *National Institute of Justice*. (2008): 258. Print.