

**Sustainable Communities and Corrections:
The Impact on Local Populations**

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Abstract

The concept of sustainable communities has provided a context for policy analysis in a wide variety of areas. It has not, however, found wide application in criminal justice. This paper will examine corrections, including imprisonment, from the perspective of community sustainability. An analysis of incarceration levels and the concentration of parolees and probationers in a northeastern city is used to examine this idea. Data reveal high concentrations of corrections populations in high crime neighborhoods. Census data also show declines in populations of young men and over all declines in parenting aged adults in the same neighborhoods. The data suggest that corrections policy and incarceration in particular has been harmful to sustainability in urban poor neighborhoods. The patterns found are inconsistent with contemporary views on desirable social structure and neighborhood efficacy. With growing interest in areas such as reentry and mass incarceration, sustainability may provide a useful context for analyses in criminal justice.

Sustainable Communities and Corrections:

The Impact on Local Populations

The concept of sustainability has found application across a wide range of fields but its potential utility has received little attention in criminal justice. In early discussions of sustainability the inclusion of the social sciences was largely limited to the view that the policy process needed to be understood and considered by those studying the environment. As it has been extended, those interested in sustainable development and sustainable communities have come to understand that a broad set of social factors and their underlying policies have implications for the environment. Thus ecological sustainability could not be independent from social sustainability. Income distribution, democracy, and human rights have become part of a legitimate discourse on sustainability. Perhaps in its most advanced form of that argument some have suggested that concern with sustainability has spawned a “global humanitarian movement which is restoring grace, justice and beauty to the world” (Hawken, 2007). That may go further than many analysts are comfortable with, but general concern for social factors has been widely embraced.

The chart below identifies one set of variables associated with sustainable communities and provides examples of positive and negative contributions to that end.

Table 1: Features of Sustainable and Unsustainable Communities		
Criteria	A Sustainable Community	An Unsustainable Community
Economic Growth	A strong stable economic base and a broad range of workers	Domination by dependent forms of development, few employment opportunities, insecure, short term jobs, vulnerable, divisive
Citizenship	Strong social capital as evinced by active residents and communities, politically engaged, volunteerism	Passive dependent citizens and communities, low community engagement and ownership, low volunteerism and/or social capital
Governance	Representative and accountable governance as evinced by a balance of top-down visionary politics and bottom-up emphasis on inclusion and participation	Closed, unaccountable government, passive, lack of visionary politics, parochialism
Community Characteristics	An ethnically and socially balanced community with a range of skills in the workforce, well-populated neighborhoods	Few skills in workforce, separation and segregation, lack of diversity, high levels of physical separation between groups, formal and informal segregation
Urban Design	Self-contained communities that are able to cater to a range of needs, with accessible public spaces, broad range of amenities, diverse architecture	Uniform architecture closed, absence of community facilities, sprawling, no sense of community in design, slumlords, vacant buildings, disrepair
Environmental Dimensions	Reuse of brownfield sites, good public transport with minimized transport times to work and shopping	Expansion into greenfield sites, car dependence, long transport to work and shopping, absence of public transport
Quality of Life	A strong pull for a range of social groups via attractive environments, high quality of life, good public spaces	Low quality of life, strong push for many social groups
Identify, belonging and safety	A sense of community identity and belonging, tolerance and respect between diverse groups, low levels of antisocial behavior and crime	Lack of local culture or development of anti-social subculture, no ownership of public spaces, intolerance between groups, divided local politics, high levels of crime, disorder and fear (adapted from Raco, 2007)

This paper will explore the value of the concept of sustainability for understanding and discussing the implications of corrections policy. To accomplish this we will provide an example in an analysis of one community affected by issues of corrections and prisoner reentry.

Scholars interested in sustainability warn against what they describe as “the ever narrowing focus of researchers” (Daly & Cobb, 1994, p. 363), and call for attention to broad questions regarding sustainability and for the greater use of complex multidisciplinary models. In terms of criminology and criminal justice, attention to sustainability would certainly mean focusing on the

implications of crime and crime policy for the health of geographically and demographically defined communities. In that context the impact of corrections is certainly germane, yet there is only a small volume of research which directly addresses questions of community sustainability and corrections. Few criminology and criminal justice researchers have tried to measure the impact of corrections practices on communities and still fewer have addressed the possibility that some practices may have negative consequences at the community level. The vast body of work on deterrence, incapacitation and treatment has focused primarily on impacts on individuals. More rare have been critical appraisals of the effects of corrections practice at other levels.

Only recently have imprisonment and the related topic of prisoner reentry become areas in which significant research has examined the impact of policy on communities. Much of that seems to have been spawned by a 1995 conference held by the Vera Institute to bring together a range of people including academics, private sector funders, legislators and criminal justice professionals to “initiate a conversation...on how increasing rates of incarceration may affect individuals...families and communities (Taylor 1996, p. I).” In papers for the conference, Todd Clear (1996) examines the ways in which imprisonment may actually increase crime in neighborhoods. John Hagan (1996) considers the impact on children of prisoners. Carl Taylor (1996) addresses incarcerated children and Nightengale and Watts (1996) review the economic impact of incarceration. Since the conference at least eight books have been published which address the impact of imprisonment and use the term “mass incarceration” in their title (Weiman, 2004; Jacobson, 2005; Gottschalk, 2006; Useem & Piehl, 2008; Clear 2007; Pager 2009; Herivel & Wright, 2009; Alexander, 2009, Drucker, 2006). The American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2009) also lists “The Challenge of Mass Incarceration in America” as one of its current social policy projects.

The link between crime and incarceration continues to receive attention. Clear's essay was based on earlier research which showed that imprisonment, through "coercive mobility," increased social disorganization in high incarceration communities (Clear, Rose, Waring and Scully, 2003). Further study has indicated that moderate levels of incarceration can lead to reductions in violent crime but that high neighborhood incarceration rates are related to increased violence (Renauer et al., 2006). Clear (2007) brings together much of the research on the impact of prison and provides an analysis of the impact on crime as well as on individuals, families, neighborhoods and communities. His book ends with a call to action in favor of a developing model of community justice.

The recent research on the impact of incarceration has covered a broad range of topics. Among them has been concern with the impact on communities. The studies thus provide some illustration of concern with how communities are influenced by criminal justice policies. Although they do not explicitly adopt the language of sustainability they do pursue many of the questions that the concept would prompt. An inquiry more directly focused on sustainability also might address the impact of different levels of correctional control and supervision on community outcome variables. Research, for example, could focus on how offender populations influence community solidarity and community efficacy or at what point community resources are overwhelmed by the removal of prisoners from communities, their reentry, and the by the supervision of offenders in the community.

Corrections and Sustainable Communities: An Illustration

In this section we will explore the impact of crime and crime policy on neighborhoods in one northeastern city which we will call, Central City. This is a city of over 200,000 people

occupying 35 square miles in a metropolitan area of over 1 million. Over a combined period of more than 30 years the authors have studied a variety of issues and have used a wide a range of methods in the study of crime and justice in this community. Here we will focus on corrections and prisoner reentry as the means of investigating what attention to questions of sustainability might add to our understanding of local issues.

In Central City, population statistics show that prisons have become the leading source of immigration into the community. It is a condition apparently not uncommon in small and medium sized northeastern cities. In 2008 an average 1530 parolees a month called Central's County home. Central City is the largest community in its county. Eighty Nine percent of local parolees reside in the City. But the migration patterns are not uniform across the community. The map below (A) illustrates the concentration of these parolees in a limited number of City neighborhoods. This is also true for probationers whose residences are mapped in the second figure (B).

INSERT MAP A AND MAP B ABOUT HERE.

Crime and corrections data make it clear that that section of the community, which has become known as the Crescent, that forms a semi-circle around the center of town to the north, northwest, northeast, and southwest, holds the greatest concentrations of crime, probationers and parolees. This overlap is, of course, not surprising. The city contains the highest crime neighborhoods in the county and those neighborhoods also house the highest number of offenders under supervision. The city itself and its poor and high-minority neighborhoods also provide the locations for the relevant social services including the offices of probation and

parole, the most affordable housing and treatment facilities for mental health, substance abuse and interrelated services as well as other front-line not-for profit service providers. In ecological terms the neighborhoods present an attractive niche for offenders released from incarceration.

Table 1 extends our analysis with the addition of the number of jail inmates and state prisoners from the high parolee zip codes in the Central City. The data below include the total rate per 10,000 of combined correctional populations, the rate for men age 20 to 49 and the ratio showing the number of these men in the population for every one that is under correctional control of one form or another. In the highest zip code 1 of every 3.2 males age 20-49 is under some form of correctional control (this does not include pretrial release).

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Census data for these high corrections areas also support other reports that have addressed the impact of imprisonment on the gender distributions in neighborhoods. The combined effect of crime and crime policy, particularly violence and incarceration, can significantly alter the population sex ratio in these areas. Here we will examine this point with US Census data for 2000. We will use 1990 census data to consider changes over time. Relevant data from the 2010 Census are not scheduled to be released in until 2012.

Chart 1 shows the smaller number of young men compared with young women in the highest parole zip code. The 2000 census data indicate that there were 140 female residents age 20-49 for every 100 similarly aged males. Males are underrepresented by a count of nearly 1000 in the zip code area. That means that, other things being equal the probability of women in these

ages finding a similar aged unattached male partner in the area is 71%. There are 81 young men for every 100 young women in the second highest parolee zip code. Public health research has also shown that high incarceration rates have the unintended consequences of destabilizing neighborhoods and increasing undesirable health consequences. Research in North Carolina showed that rates of sexually transmitted disease and teen pregnancies increased where neighborhood incarceration significantly distorted the ratio of young women to young men (Thomas & Torrone, 2006).

INSERT CHART 1 ABOUT HERE

There is one more view of the data which appears to be relevant to understanding the impact of imprisonment and parole on these neighborhoods. Examining the age distribution in the neighborhoods is revealing in the series of three charts below. Chart 2 represents a suburban, low parolee neighborhood while charts 3 and 4 represent the high parolee neighborhoods described above. Focusing analysis on the 2000 census data, Chart 2 indicates that this zip code has a significant number of young children in it. Those numbers then drop off, presumably as young adults have gone to college or moved elsewhere for work. The numbers increase for the ages of likely parents and then drop off as the population gets older. As noted above the data also show that the number of males and females stays roughly similar until the tendency for women to outlive men is noticeable beyond about age 70. This overall pattern, which seems consistent with traditional family structures, was repeated in all suburban and wealthy urban residential zip code areas in the county.

INSERT CHART 2 ABOUT HERE

The high parolee areas present a very different picture. In these high crime, high imprisonment and high parolee areas there are large numbers of young children. At the same time there seem to be comparatively few adults of parenting age to supervise them. The zip codes reveal very different population distributions across the low and high parolee areas. Whether gender differences are considered or the distribution of the whole population of the zip codes is examined, the high parolee areas differ significantly from other areas of the metropolitan community.

INSERT CHART 3 ABOUT HERE

Data from the 1990 census can provide some opportunity to consider the impact of time on these neighborhoods when compared with the data from 2000. For the low parole area the 1990 census (Chart 2) show that the pattern of moderate numbers of young children, declining numbers through early adulthood and then increases in the common parental ages, is largely unchanged across the decades. In Chart 3 the 1990 census data for the high parole area show some similarity to the overall pattern for the low parole zip code as seen in Chart 2. But, the same level of stability is not present for the populations of the high parolee zip codes by 2000.. The increases in the parental ages, are not as evident as in the low parolee area, and they

diminish across the census years. This offers some suggestion that the traditional family neighborhood distributions seen in the low parolee area may have been present to a greater degree in the high parolee areas in the past. Chart 4, with its focus on the other high parolee neighborhood also lends some support to the hypothesis. These data are at least suggestive about change and the impact of crime and criminal justice practice on neighborhoods, particularly since the great increases in incarceration occurred beginning in the late 1970s. Significant changes in the demographic and age structure of these neighborhoods did coincide with growth in the use of incarceration.

It is easy to see that the differences noted above will have vast implications for the nature and quality of life in the various neighborhoods. The comparative absence of marriage age and eligible males can be expected to affect gender roles. The large numbers of children relative to those in parenting age groups can also contribute to crime problems and will not afford the protections that have been attributed to strong communities under such contemporary theoretical concepts as collective efficacy (Sampson et al. 1997) In fact, it is quite easy to conclude that these high parolee neighborhoods have been significantly affected in clearly negative ways by population changes that are at least partially attributable to some combination of crime and crime policy, particularly incarceration and reentry (see Moore 1996). Considered in the context of sustainability, the data raise important questions as to the health and even long term viability of communities that experience declines in the male population and subsequent distortions in the gender ratio, and whose overall population distribution shows large increases in youth and decreases in the resources for supervision provided by older residents. The data do raise the question about whether the end result of both high volumes of crime, and our response to those

crimes, result in a structure within neighborhoods that can continue to be considered healthy and sustainable.

Discussion

There has been relatively little research on crime or criminal justice that has directly invoked the concept of sustainability, a concept which appears to have found utility in other areas including within the social sciences. The analysis suggests, however, that there may be some value in applying this concept in this field. Just as energy policy has incorporated the development of energy sources and concern with the consequences of the choices we make, the idea of sustainability does call our attention to the effects of both crime and criminal justice practice particularly at the neighborhood or community level. In fact, real value may lay in the way in which sustainability encourages analysis of the combined effects of crime and crime policy.

For some purposes, the sorting out of the effects crime and policy may be unnecessary and even undesirable. Efforts to minimize negative influences in neighborhoods might even benefit from the simultaneous consideration of both. Thus sustainability analysts suggest the importance of the task of exploring how these combined effects might be minimized at the community level. It is possible that support for innovations such as community justice, problems solving courts and restorative justice can be found in such analyses, and might even be found independent of traditional ideological considerations. That is, sustainability may lead to productive consideration of the unintended harms associated with some policy choices including our use of incarceration.

The potential to distinguish analysis from ideology, or to at least limit the most caustic effects of their interaction, suggests a second potential contribution of sustainability analysis to the field of criminal justice. In this field, ideology and interest group politics have often been seen as playing a central role in the policy making process to an extent even greater than in many other areas (Stoltz, 2002). Some have argued that the crime and justice involve fundamental societal principles and thus policy making in the area involves important symbolic content that appeals to ideological and moral elements (see Ismaili, 2006). The result can be high levels of interest group balkanization (Nownes, 2000) which is often heavily influenced by the media (Cavender, 2004). “Sustainability” may offer some prospect for mitigating such balkanization.

As the focus of sustainability has expanded in the social sciences the potential value of the concept for structuring discourse has continued to be of interest. Some authors argue that sustainability analysis provides a means of opening discussion and engaging ideological and political differences (Choucri, 1999). Others have characterized the subject as a “contested discursive field which allows for the articulation of political and economic differences... and introduces to environmental issues a concern with social justice and political participation”(Becker, Jahn and Stiess. 1999, p. 1). The concept of sustainability may discourage easy characterization along political dimensions and it may encourage broad discourse which accommodates differing perspectives, even on mass incarceration.

It seems unlikely that even those with different ideological perspectives on this subject will not see that the neighborhoods under study have experienced harm as a result of corrections policy. The precise cause or degree of that harm may be subject to debate but the idea of sustainability should facilitate rather than inhibit that discussion.

Social science views of sustainability do not translate easily into quantifiable indices of disaster. We have no equivalent of 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere—the now widely accepted threshold for global warming. In fact it may be the lack of precision and general ambiguity of the concept of sustainability from a social science perspective, and the absence of doomsday criteria for communities that are useful in promoting discussion across seemingly impermeable ideological boundaries. One need not accept a cynical view that ideological differences will prohibit all legitimate discourse. It seems possible that analyses that engage the concept of sustainability may indeed contribute to real progress in the discussion and formulation of penal policy.

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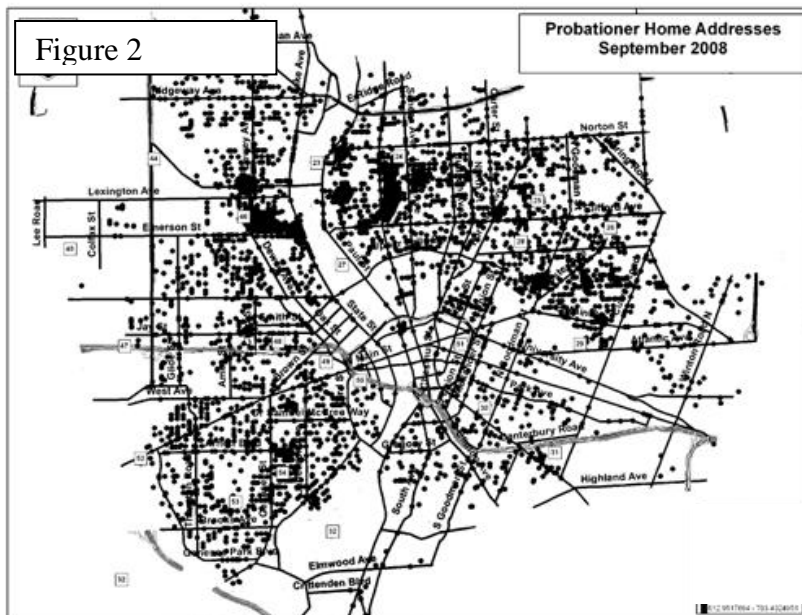
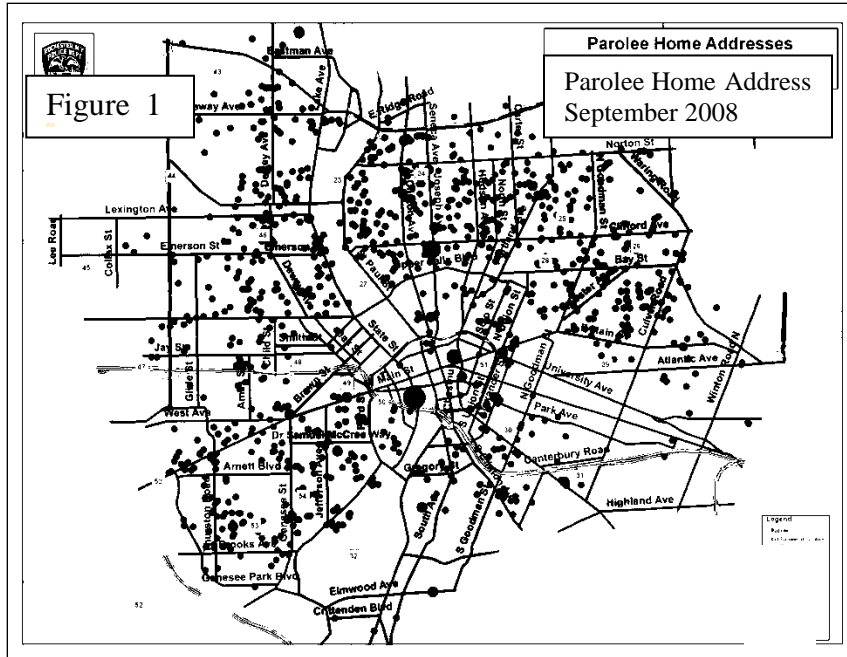
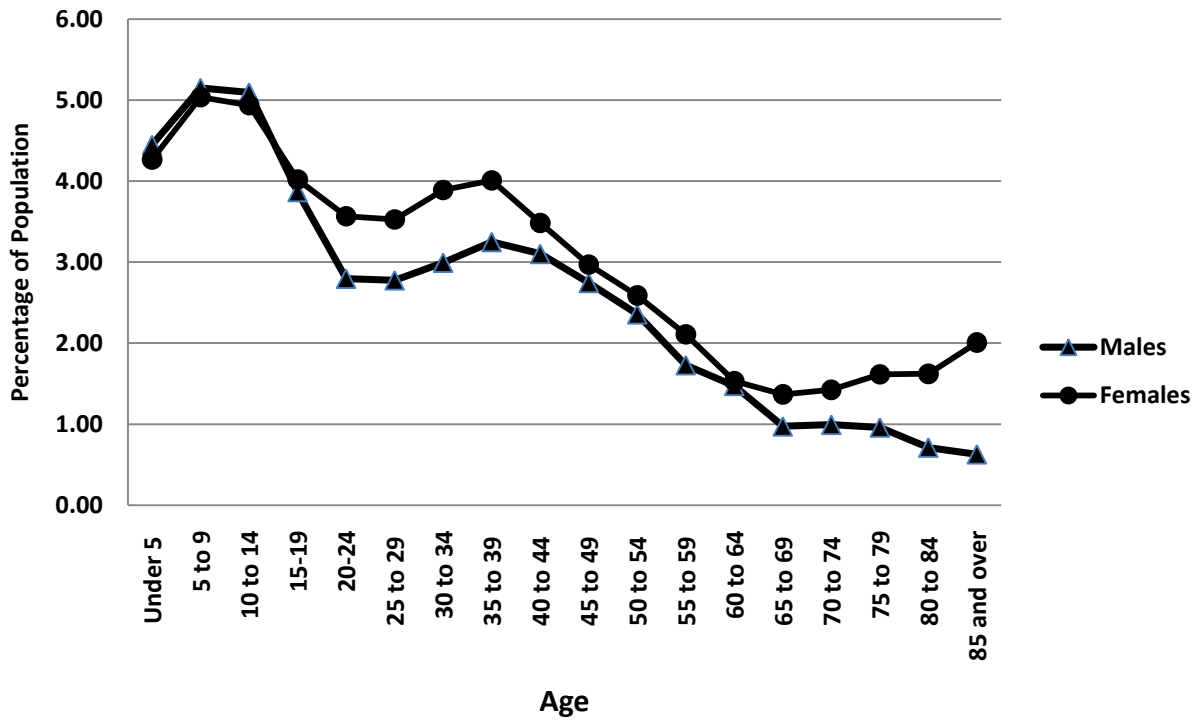


Table 1: Concentrations of all Correctional Populations in High Parolee Zip Codes

Zip Code	Parolees	Probationers	Prisoners	Jail Inmates	Total Rate /10,000	Total young males rate (age 20-49)	Young men in corrections as a proportion of all young males in area
1	128	314	251	62	524	3135	1/3.2
2	233	766	452	156	447	2538	1/3.9

(Prison and jail data by zip codes are estimated based on actual confined populations and distributed based on parole and probation distributions.)

Chart 1: High Parolee Zip Code #1 Population by Sex, 2000



**Chart 2: Low Parolee Zip Code
Population by Age**

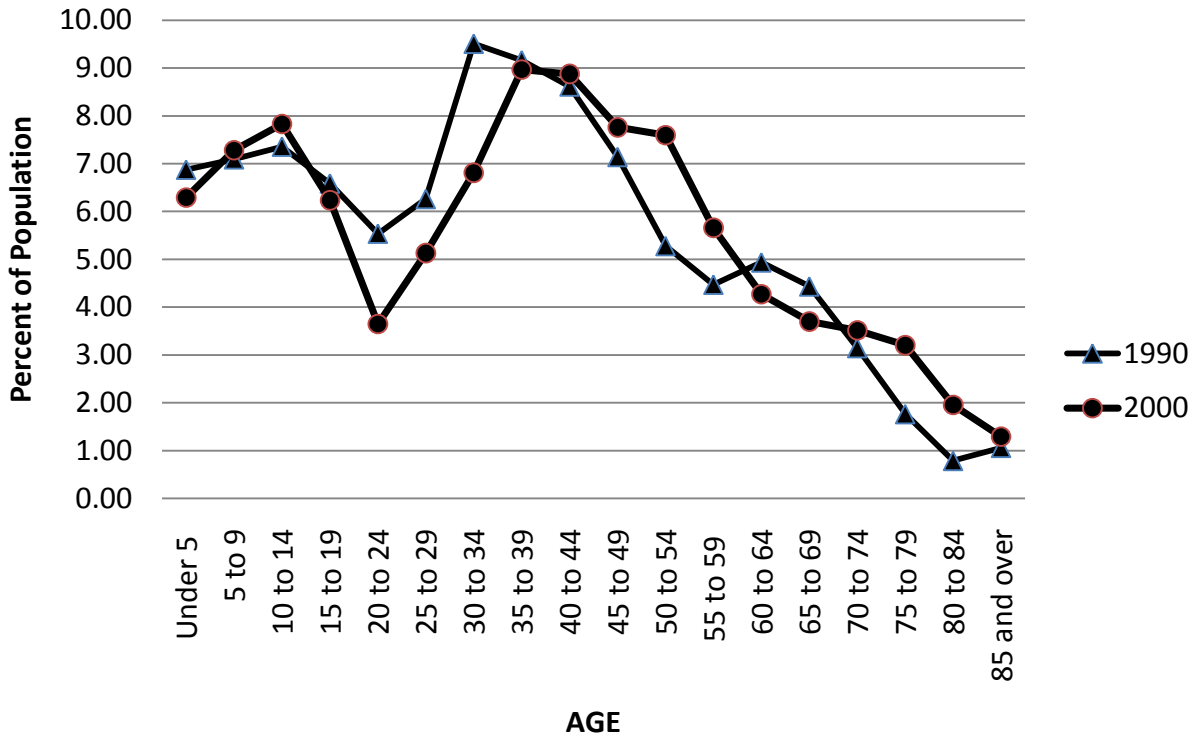


Chart 3: High Parolee Zip Code #1 Population by Age

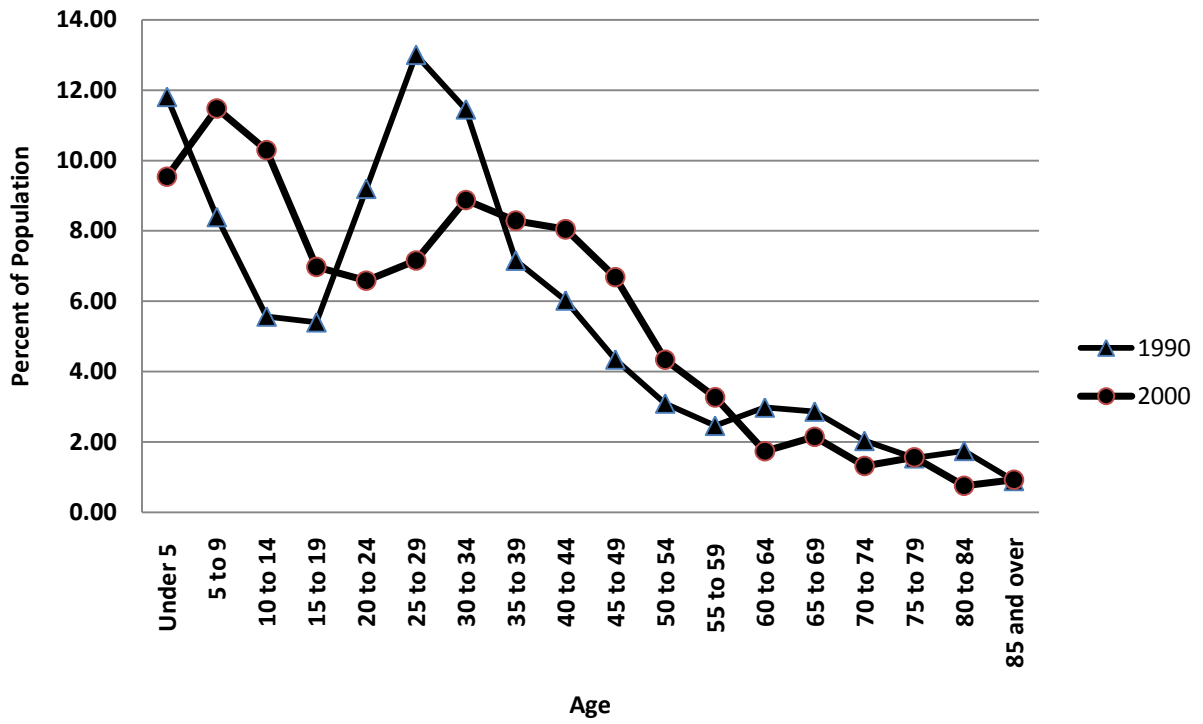


Chart 4: High Parolee Zip Code #2 Population by Age

