Survey Reveals Barriers to Successful Ex-Offender Re-Entry

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Introduction

A total of 6,025 men and women were released from incarceration to Monroe County in 2011, according to correctional facility and probation/parole administrations. 113 were released from federal prisons, 1,038 from state prisons, and 4,874 from Monroe County Jails. Thousands more in our community have been incarcerated in the past or carry a conviction history. Many community organizations assist people in establishing productive, law-abiding lives when they return home from incarceration. It is becoming increasingly obvious to all those involved in re-entry that ex-offenders need much more than rules and punishment to prevent them from unnecessary frustration and from committing more crimes. Like all people, ex-offenders need safe and affordable housing; the opportunity for education, training, and employment; food and health care; and a supportive community that encourages personal growth, goal attainment, positive relationships, and civic engagement. The challenge is that those trying to re-establish their lives after incarceration often start building from bare ground with very limited resources. Also, having a criminal record carries with it unforeseen societal consequences long after a person has completed his or her sentence. Many people are not aware of these consequences, but such repercussions often prevent successful reintegration and may hinder goal achievement for the rest of an ex-offender's life.

The Voices of Re-Entry Project aims to shed light on these issues by gathering information and opinions from ex-offenders in the Rochester community. *Our survey was developed to assess the needs and goals of those who have returned to the Rochester after incarceration and to assess their satisfaction with local supportive services they have received. We evaluated the systemic barriers our respondents faced when trying to reach their goals.* We want to convey the goals and struggles of those with criminal histories to help human service agencies provide more effective services and help our community make better policies with regards to ex-offenders. We encourage all readers to challenge their opinions about what it means to carry the burden of a past mistake.

This survey was conducted by the Judicial Process Commission (JPC), a small grassroots non-profit agency in Rochester, NY that has supported ex-offenders for over forty years. JPC provides a wide range of personalized, voluntary services to assist individuals in re-establishing their lives, reaching their goals, and becoming positive contributors to our community. Services include criminal

record review and correction, advice for navigating the job market while having a criminal record, assistance applying for certificates that increase employability and reinstate civic rights, client advocacy, and assisting with obtaining identification. Clients are often referred to educational programs, job training, food and clothing pantries, mental health and addiction treatment providers, legal assistance, housing programs, and more. JPC runs a mentoring program for individuals coming out of incarceration, as well as a weekly workshop where representatives from other agencies give presentation on their services or health and wellness information. JPC also provides support services to twenty mothers who have a high risk of re-incarceration and their children, as well as a small Shelter Plus program to help transition ex-offenders out of homelessness. The Judicial Process Commission works closely with many agencies, such as the Monroe County Legal Assistance Center, Monroe County Sheriff's Department, and RIT's Center for Public Safety Initiatives.

Since JPC works with people at all stages of their lives after incarceration, we have a unique opportunity to explore the needs of those with a criminal history—no matter how old. A criminal record is a burden you must carry for life in New York. Therefore, JPC clients consist of some people who have been recently released, some who have been arrested but have never been to jail, and some who haven't been involved in the criminal justice system for many years. Yet many opportunities such as employment, housing, and sometimes even obtaining student loans and voting are limited by law or policy for those with past criminal records, and it can be very difficult for ex-offenders to meet their basic needs long after they serve their sentences.

In our conversations with community partners, it is apparent that there is very little data about the needs of those with older criminal records. The formal criminal justice system follows people only while they are incarcerated, on probation, or on parole. Post-release supervision sentences are generally not more than 5 years, though we demonstrate below the very long-term effects of having a criminal history, since *over a third of our respondents have been out of jail for more than 5 years*. Individuals often seek supportive services from a wide range of human service agencies, and there is usually very little communication between service providers. We offer this and future data to the community in its efforts to conduct more effective, meaningful programs and services for those returning from incarceration, or ideally before they ever get involved with the criminal justice system.

Overview of Results

- 80 respondents sufficiently completed the survey
- Demographics:
  - Age: average 42, range 18 to 64
  - 73% male, 27% female
  - 68% African-American, 22% Caucasian
- 75% most-recently incarcerated for a non-violent, non-sexual offense
- 33% of respondents have been out of jail or prison for more than 5 years
- Most pressing needs when last released from incarceration:

  - Employment: a top-3 need for 74% of respondents
  - Housing: 68%
  - Health care: 36%
  - Identification: 30%
  - Obtaining food: 24%
- Re-entry services respondents were most satisfied with: social support from friends, family, and community; identification services; and addiction treatment
- Re-entry services respondents were least satisfied with: probation/parole, housing, and employment
- 59% of respondents were *unemployed, able to work, **and** looking for work* at the time they took the survey. Only 7% were employed full-time and 3% were employed part-time
- Only 25% have been employed full-time at some point since their release
- 8.5% were enrolled in school at the time they took the survey
- What respondents felt they needed most to gain or secure employment: driver's license, better resume, computer skills
- 80% were homeless (18% in shelters, 62% in temporary arrangements with friends or family) upon release from their most recent incarceration
- 56% needed assistance getting identification after they were last released
- Almost all respondents have received the public assistance they need, but many have needed assistance ever since their release due to lack of employment opportunities
- 46% were incarcerated, in their opinion, as a direct result of a chemical dependency issue
- One third have been diagnosed with a mental health condition, while only 11% received mental health counseling during their incarceration

Details about specific barriers faced by our respondents and other results are discussed below. These results provide a glimpse into the hidden *long-term effects of certain policies and their impact on ex-offenders and our community*. Public education and awareness about re-entry issues will ultimately benefit those in re-entry, their families, and our society as a whole. We invite you to continue reading for more detailed analysis of the issues faced by the thousands of individuals returning to our community each year from incarceration.

What Does it Mean to be in Re-Entry?

No matter how long a person's jail or prison sentence was, readjusting to the community presents many obstacles and anxieties. Even if someone served just one month in jail, he or she has spent time away from family, friends, children, and work. With limited and expensive communication, many inmates struggle to keep in touch with loved ones. Families struggle if a person they rely upon is absent from their lives. Inmates often incur large debts through court costs, restitution, and civil fines. Some inmates have family who can help, but most struggle with debt long after they have been

released. Some prisons offer paid work to some inmates but typically pay less than 40 cents an hour.

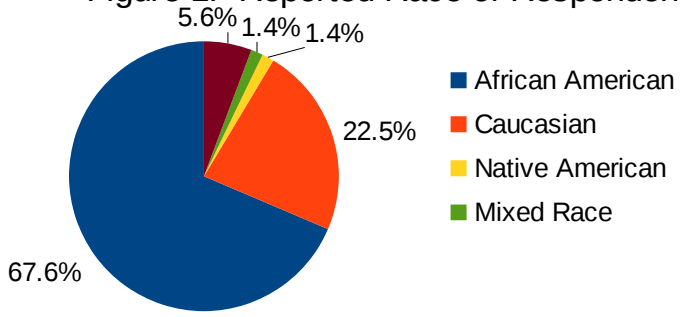
After incarceration, individuals must find a place to live and obtain food and personal care products, usable identification, and, ultimately, a source of income, all the while being socially stigmatized, readjusting emotionally, managing debt, and being required and expected to disclose conviction information to everyone. It is difficult to plan such logistics during incarceration since contact with the outside world is so limited and costly. Many ex-offenders have mental health, chemical dependency, or medical issues as well. Then, the challenge of re-establishing one's outside life is often made difficult by a number of societal, systematic, legal, economic, and emotional factors. Barriers within one institution are often compounded with barriers in another. Thus, ex-offenders are often trapped in frustrating self-perpetuating cycles. Our societal systems should set one another up for success, not for failure, frustration, hopelessness, and bitterness—sentiments that do nothing to build our community. It is imperative that we begin to look at the barriers in our society that ex-offenders must navigate and try to increase their ability to secure—with a reasonable amount of effort—basic needs and avoid recidivism.

Many people believe it is the responsibility of individuals and their families to provide such assistance with these struggles. Surely these personal social supports are irreplaceable and invaluable; very few of us would be able to succeed with just the assistance of strangers. Unfortunately, though, many people do not have such support. When dealing with legal struggles, there are many burdens put upon the convicted person's loved ones: identifying available resources, forgiving what the person may have done, understanding the legal jargon, and navigating the often-incomprehensible social and justice systems at work. Friends and family may be uninformed or misinformed. They may have already helped their loved ones through drug addiction, mental illness, multiple incarcerations, or financial struggles and are simply exhausted. Whatever the reason, many people leave jail having burnt bridges or lost touch with loved ones, no matter how much they may have changed. In these times, people turn to their community. We need data-informed, just, efficient community systems to successfully reintegrate ex-offenders and offer a real chance to do right after they serve their sentence.

Demographic Information

Eighty people sufficiently completed the survey. Respondents were *on average 42 years old*, ranging from 18 to 64 years old. *A third of respondents were last released from incarceration over five years ago* but still face poverty and lack of opportunity, due in part to a number of societal and systematic factors. Others (generally the younger subset) have been recently released from incarceration.

Figure 1: Reported Race of Respondents



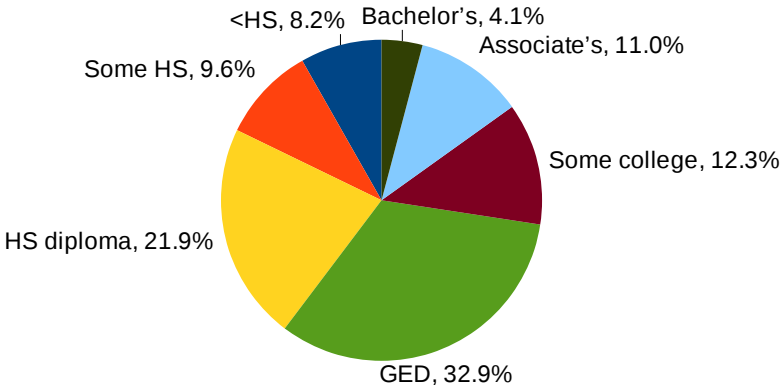
Nearly ¾ of our respondents (73%) were male. *Respondents were predominantly African-American (68%)* (see Figure 1). Only 4.6% of

respondents reported a Hispanic ethnicity. 77% reported a non-Hispanic ethnicity, and the rest did not specify. We believe the low percentage of Hispanic respondents reflects the unfortunate difficulty JPC has accommodating the Hispanic population, having no Spanish-speaking staff. Also, the survey was only distributed in English.

It is quite apparent that there is a racial and gender disparity among incarcerated individuals in the U.S. According to the 2010 Census, Rochester's population of 210,565 residents was 43.7% Caucasian and 41.7% African American. 16.4% of the population were Hispanic or Latino. As can be seen from our survey, African-American males represent most of the incarcerated population. Nationally, 0.4% of Caucasians are incarcerated compared to 2.3% of all African Americans and 0.7% of all Hispanics. In New York State, 9.4 times as many African Americans and 4.5 times as many Hispanics than Caucasians were incarcerated in 2005 (Marc Mauer and Ryan S. King, *Uneven Justice: State Rates of Incarceration by Race and Ethnicity*, The Sentencing Project, July 2007).

Finally, Figure 3 shows the highest level of education of the respondents at the time they took the survey. *Over half of respondents (55%) have a high school diploma or GED*, but nearly one in five respondents (18%) have less education. In fact, *8.2% never attended high school at all*. However, *about 15% have a college degree*, and another 12% have done some college coursework. When asked what education level they would like to have, *most respondents indicated wanting to get a college education* (24% want to obtain an Associate's degree, 17% want a Bachelor's degree, 20% want a Master's degree, and 8.7% want a doctoral degree), while 30% are satisfied having a GED or high school diploma.

Figure 3: Current Highest Education Level

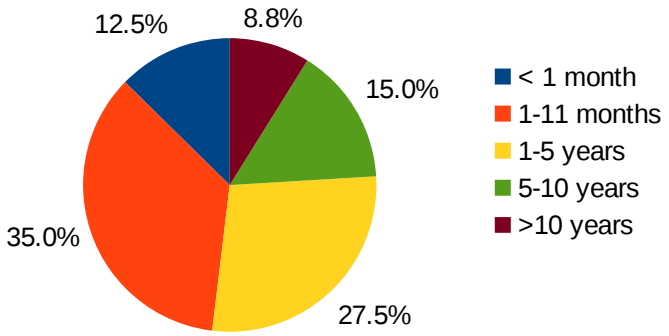


Information on Most Recent Incarceration

Throughout the survey, unless otherwise noted, we asked clients about their experiences upon release from their *most recent* incarceration. *75% had been incarcerated more than once.* First, we inquired about the length of each respondents' most recent incarceration (Figure 4). Nearly half of respondents were incarcerated for *less* than one year in a city or county facility. Incarceration terms *longer* than one year are normally served at a state or federal prison. Essentially all of our respondents lived in Rochester within 6 months of release from incarceration, and most had lived in Rochester prior to that as well. Therefore, our respondents most likely sought re-entry support services in the Rochester area.

We asked respondents to indicate the type(s) of crimes for which they were most-recently incarcerated. They could select multiple categories. One-third (33%) were incarcerated for drug-

Figure 4: Length of Most Recent Incarceration



related convictions (68% of whom indicated no other category), and a third (34%) indicated a non-violent crime. 14% were convicted for theft/robbery. One-fifth of respondents (21%) were incarcerated for violent offenses and 6.5% for sex offenses. Therefore, *about three-quarters of respondents were incarcerated for non-violent offenses unrelated to sexual misconduct.*

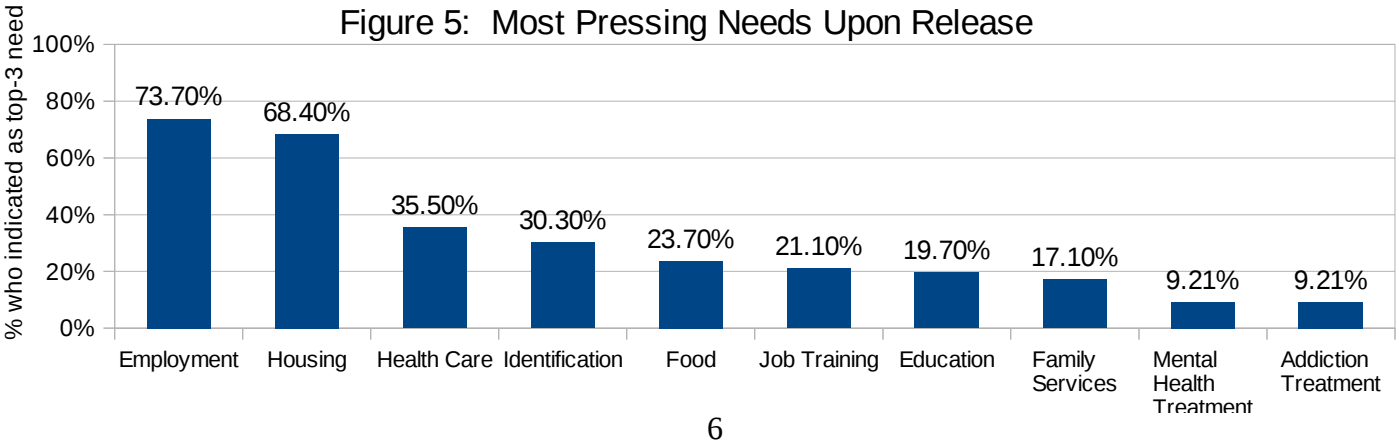
14% of respondents were last incarcerated due to a probation, parole, or conditional discharge violation. Offenders are placed on probation or parole supervision as part of their sentence; they may begin probation/parole after their release from incarceration or may be placed on supervision immediately upon conviction, serving no jail time unless they violate the conditions. Several actions can violate probation, including committing a new crime, missing appointments with one's probation or parole officer, showing a positive urine screening for alcohol or other substances, missing a curfew, traveling without prior permission, not filing reports on time, or not attending mandated programs. Thus, a person does not have to commit a new crime in order to violate probation or parole.

Urgent Re-Entry Needs

Our results show that there are some general trends for what those in re-entry most-urgently need, despite each individual situation being vastly different. For this survey, we inquired about the following needs: housing, identification, employment, health care, family services/childcare, food, education, job training, mental health, and addiction/chemical dependency treatment. Please keep in mind that a need in one area is inevitably linked to needs in other areas. For example, if someone does not have proper identification, it is impossible to access social services, get a job, apply for health care, go to school, rent most apartments, cash a check, or enroll in most programs. Without an income, it is can be difficult to afford the fees for identification documents.

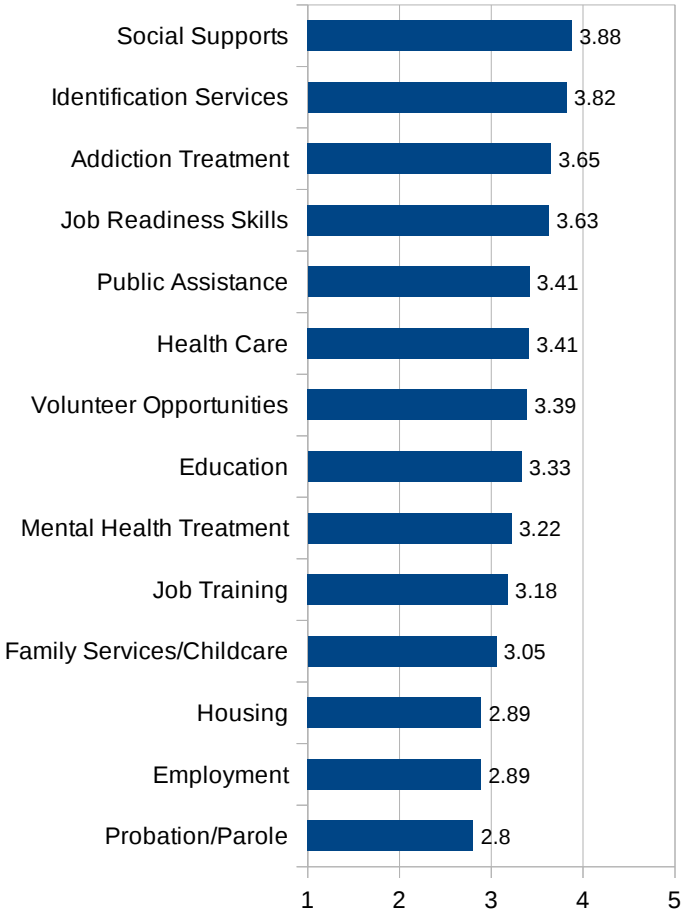
We first asked respondents what their three most pressing concerns were upon release from

Figure 5: Most Pressing Needs Upon Release



their last incarceration. Figure 5 depicts the results. Two needs were by far of highest concern: about three-quarters (74%) indicated employment among their top-three concerns and nearly as many (68%) indicated housing. A large number of people needed healthcare services, identification, and assistance finding food. Some of these trends can be explained because just about every person needs employment, housing, food, identification, and basic health care, while not everyone needs childcare services, mental health services, or addiction treatment. Therefore, the percentages of people who need the latter services will naturally be lower. It is nonetheless shocking how many of those in re-entry need assistance with such basic needs. We will focus on the top four concerns (employment, housing, health care, and identification) in this report. Future studies will analyze the particular needs of those with mental health, chemical dependency, or family concerns.

Figure 6: Average Satisfaction Rating for Services
1=very dissatisfied, 3=neutral, 5=very satisfied

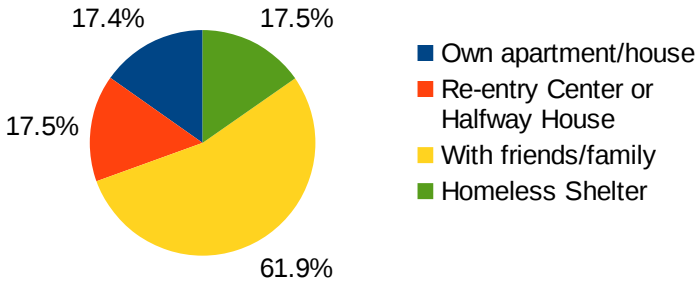


We also asked how satisfied respondents were with supportive services in the community (Figure 6). Only three services scored on average below neutral: probation/parole, housing, and employment. Alarmingly, people were most dissatisfied with services for their two most pressing needs (employment and housing). The services with which people were the *most* satisfied were social supports (friends, family, community and religious groups), identification services, and addiction treatment. Respondents reported that when they were released, they were most active in trying to improve their social supports, find housing, and get identification and health care. They were least active in finding volunteer opportunities and accessing mental health services, followed by accessing education, training, and employment (probably because one needs a stable place to live and an ID before applying for jobs).

Housing

Most of our respondents lived with friends or family immediately upon returning home (62%), but only 17% rented or owned an apartment or house. The rest lived in transitional housing (18%) or in homeless shelters (18%). *Living in a homeless shelter or temporarily staying with friends or family qualifies a person as homeless by HUD definitions. Thus, 4 out of 5 of our respondents (79%) qualified as homeless upon release from incarceration.*

Figure 8: Residence Immediately Upon Release



We plan to look into housing issues in future studies. We hope to get a better idea of how long it takes ex-offenders to find stable, safe housing, if they were able to. We will also assess the barriers to securing housing. We know that a major barrier is not having a reliable way to pay a security deposit and rent. Also, ex-offenders often find themselves living in unsafe neighborhoods after their incarceration due to exclusion and stigma. Most landlords run background checks on prospective tenants, and many refuse to rent to a person with any criminal history or with a felony conviction. Those convicted of sex offenses usually have restrictions on where they can live, which drastically limit their housing options. Sex offenders are barred from living in public housing, apartment complexes, and most homeless shelters because children live or attend school or daycare nearby. Further, those with past drug **or** felony convictions are generally ineligible for public housing.

Employment Discrimination Law

Having a criminal record is a major barrier to securing employment. Under New York State law, employers are only allowed to deny a person employment based on a criminal record if a conviction that the individual has is "directly related to the functions of the job" (e.g. those convicted of writing bad checks or embezzlement can't work with money or at a bank, and those with a DUI conviction can't be a bus driver) or if, considering eight statutorily enumerated factors, the employer determines that hiring the person would "pose an unreasonable risk to persons or property." Employers in New York are legally required to consider such factors as how old the applicant was when the crime was committed, how long it has been since the crime was committed, and the applicant's positive accomplishments since then (New York State Correction Law, Article 23-A).

While such legal discrimination may make sense on some levels, the negative impact it has on individuals with a criminal history is huge. With local unemployment rates hovering around 7.4%, a record number of applicants are applying for each open position, and ex-offenders are the last to be considered. If asked, ex-offenders must disclose all convictions on a job application. If ex-offenders do not disclose their full, accurate conviction history when asked, the employer can legally reject the applicant for falsification or incompleteness. Imagine if the worst, most regretful things you have ever done, perhaps decades ago, could be seen by every person you apply for a job with or live near. That is the reality for those with a criminal record. Many go back to jail within a year of their release from violating probation or committing another crime, having very few other real options. Many more simply get discouraged and may quit looking for work or advancing their education.

Excluding ex-offenders from opportunity and employment makes it more likely that they will go back to illegal activity. As indicated by our survey, even those with non-violent or minor convictions still face extreme barriers in the job market for decades. Having a criminal record can

even make finding volunteer opportunities difficult for the same principles of exclusion. If we claim to want to reduce crime and reduce dependency on social services, we must provide real opportunities for stability and employment. There is a detrimental mismatch among our voiced ambitions as a community, our policies, and how we actually treat individuals who are trying to improve their lives.

Life-Long Permanence of Criminal Records and Proof of Rehabilitation

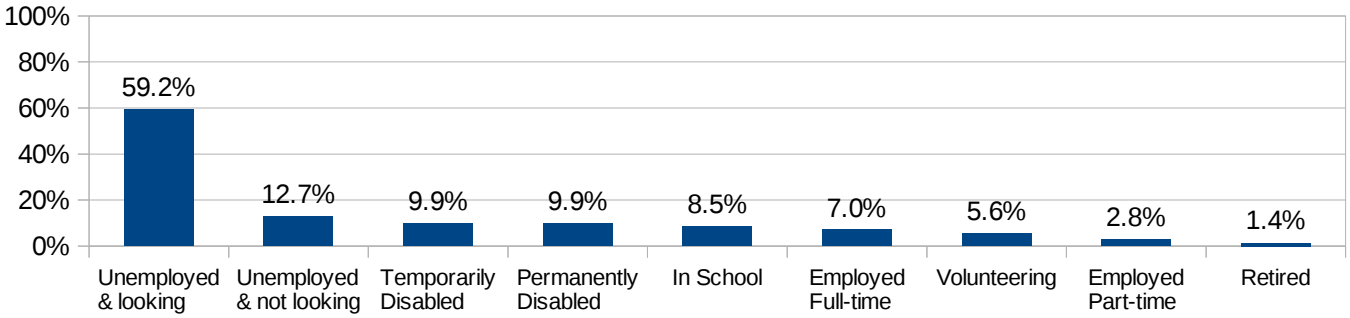
New York State does not allow criminal convictions (misdemeanors or felonies) to be expunged or erased from a person's record, no matter how old or how minor the offense. Some states do allow expungement in limited cases. New York, thankfully, offers instead Certificates of Relief from Disabilities and Certificates of Good Conduct. These certificates restore the ex-offenders' ability to be employed or licensed in many fields and provide "a legal presumption of rehabilitation" for employment considerations

After a certain number of years without incarcerations or convictions, ex-offenders may apply for a Certificate. Applicants must submit proof of rehabilitation and positive accomplishments since their last conviction, proof of stability, several letters of support, personal statements, and more. *A Certificate is generally required to secure employment in most government or civil service jobs and generally in many fields that require state licensure, such as health care (most jobs in hospitals or nursing homes), law, massage therapy, notary, real estate, teaching, social work, child care, hair and beauty fields, funeral directing, and security.* Without a Certificate of Relief/Good Conduct, anyone with a criminal record can legally be denied employment in all of these fields and more, for having a criminal record at all. Many individuals have worked in fields such as health care for over a decade and then are terminated when their employer runs a required background check for the first time. The employee must stop working until they receive the Certificate and meet other requirements, which may take many months. If an applicant is denied a Certificate, he or she must wait a full year before applying again, and there is no appeal process for the denial. Also, although the Certificates provide court-issued proof of rehabilitation, employers can still take a person's convictions into consideration when reviewing his or her job application. Offering expungement or conditional sealing instead would allow people to eventually truly put their mistakes behind them after proving they are no more likely to commit new crimes than other citizens.

Unemployment Rate: 59% Able to Work and Actively Looking

We asked about respondents' current employment status and allowed them to indicate as many categories as were applicable. The results are shown in Figure 7. These results may be skewed because only those who came to JPC during business hours were asked to take the survey, excluding some of those who may have been working at the time, and JPC assists clients with unemployment issues, such as applying for Certificates. The unemployment rate is nonetheless staggering. **Well over half (59%) of respondents to our survey are *currently unemployed, able to work, and actively seeking employment***, while only 7% are employed full-time, and 2.8% are employed part-

Figure 7: Current Employment Status



time. 8.5% were in school at the time. Even those who have been out of jail or prison for *more than five years* have an unemployment rate of *seventy percent* (70%). Compare this to Rochester's 7.4% unemployment rate, which counts people who may not be currently looking for work. *About a quarter of respondents have not been employed <u>at all</u> since their release despite being able to work. Only a quarter have been employed full-time at some point since their release*, 16% have worked part-time, and 24% have had temporary jobs. 17% have not been employed due to a disability.

Our current job market is difficult for all job-seekers. For those with a criminal record, obtaining employment can feel impossible. We need to address issues of chronic, legally-and-socially-sanctioned unemployability for those with a criminal history. If we can provide opportunities for record expungement, accessible job training, and review of job applicants for their qualifications before their criminal history, we could work towards our goal of having our able-bodied community members being positively productive in our community.

<u>Increasing Employability: Volunteering, Education, and Training</u>

We asked what three things respondents felt they needed most in order to gain or secure employment. *42% thought that a driver's license was among their top-three needs for employment, and 38% need better computer skills. Others indicated needing a car or reliable transportation (27%), a Certificate of Relief/Good Conduct (24%), and more education (20%).* About a quarter want to improve their résumé (26%) or information on how to disclose their convictions to employers (23%). 20% need job-specific training, and *12% need identification.* 14% want to improve their interview skills.

Since volunteering is a great way to gain experience in a field and network with potential employers, we asked about respondents' volunteer experiences. Keep in mind that many volunteer opportunities are limited for those with criminal history for the same reasons that employment opportunities are limited. Thus it can be surprisingly difficult to find a volunteer opportunity, which is often quite discouraging. Nonetheless, *29% of respondents have done some volunteer work since their release, and 11% tried to find a volunteer opportunity but haven't yet*. 29% are not interested in volunteering, but 32% are interested in volunteering but haven't tried to find an opportunity yet.

Respondents identified barriers to education and job training, which increase employability. Overall, *41% of respondents felt like nothing prevented them from accessing education after*

incarceration. 16% did not try to access such programs. The *most common barriers to getting into educational programs were not being able to afford it* (16% of all respondents) *and not having enough identification or documentation to enroll* (18%). 16% faced other barriers, such as illiteracy, developmental disabilities, defaulted student loans, and needing stable housing and finances first.

While colleges generally say they don't base admissions decisions on criminal history, debilitating social stigma carries into higher education in the form of policies that impose barriers to accessing education, perpetuating the withholding of opportunity for ex-offenders. Recently, some college are requiring disclosure of criminal history on applications. Monroe Community College, for instance, requires applicants to disclose any felony convictions and their probation/parole supervision status. This can delay application review and/or disqualify the person from on-campus housing and certain types of financial aid. *6.8% out of all our respondents were denied admission to a school due to their criminal record, and 8.1% had their admission delayed due to their criminal record*. Also, *over half of respondents struggled to get job training. One-third struggled due to their criminal record*. Others were not able to afford the training, needed more prior education, or needed identification or documentation.

Health Care

Over one-third of respondents indicated health care as one of their top three concerns upon their last release from incarceration. We asked how urgent respondents' medical needs were upon their release. *Almost one in ten reported having life-threatening concerns or needing emergency care (7.1%)*, but the rest ranged fairly evenly from having no medical concerns (20%) to having very urgent concerns. *The most common need reported was getting health insurance (46%).* 14% needed help paying past medical bills. A quarter of respondents needed to obtain prescription medications for which they already had a prescription.

Identification

Proper government-issued identification is required for employment, job and educational program applications, accessing social services, and more. Those returning from incarceration often only have prison or jail-issued identification cards, which needless to say are not the best thing to show to a potential employer. Some people have forms of identification *before* going to jail or prison, but these documents may have expired or gotten lost during their incarceration. When released, ex-offenders are frustrated to find that *many agencies that require "government-issued ID" do not accept jail/prison IDs or NYS Department of Human Services Benefit Cards*, even though these photo IDs are issued by government agencies and are fingerprint and/or DNA-verified. *Over half (56%) of respondents to our survey needed to get a form of identification after they were released from jail or prison. Almost one-third (30%) said that this was one of their three most pressing needs at the time.*

A major barrier to obtaining identification when starting anew is that one must show a photo ID when applying for a form of ID like a birth certificate. To get a photo ID, one must submit other

forms of ID to prove identity. Many people are very quickly frustrated by this cycle. In fact, *of our respondents who did need to get identification, 57% struggled to get a form of ID because they did not have enough other forms of ID.*

Another major barrier is cost. While Social Security cards are issued up to ten times in one's life at no cost, birth certificates almost always cost money—$30 in Monroe County. *57% of our respondents who needed an ID were not able to afford the fee for the identification. Also, 37% did not know how to obtain the ID they needed, 20% had to wait too long to get the ID, and 20% had unreliable contact information that prevented them from completing the ID application process.* Since most recently-released ex-offenders do not have any income to pay the fees and agencies do not accept the ID that they do have, one can quickly see why JPC spends so much effort in assisting individuals with this basic need.

Results About Other Issues

Our survey also provided some interesting findings with regards to other issues. We intend to explore all of these complex issues much thoroughly in future analyses.

- Family Situation: 62% of respondents have raised at least one child, on average 3 children each. There are over 145 total children affected by the lives of our 80 respondents. One-tenth of our respondents are currently paying child support, and about one-quarter are supposed to pay child support but cannot pay right now due to lack of income.
- Public Assistance: A large number of people are currently receiving a range of services, but very few need something for which they have been denied. Health care and *emergency* food stamps are the most common service being received. Many respondents have been receiving food stamps and/or public assistance ever since their release.
- Mental Health: Overall, 48% of respondents indicated having no mental health concerns at all, but *out of all of our survey respondents, one-third have been diagnosed with a mental illness.* 16% of all respondents are currently receiving mental health counseling, and 14% currently take prescriptions for mental health concerns. *Only one out of three respondents with a mental health condition received mental health counseling during their incarceration.* According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, one in four adults in the United States experience a mental health disorder in a given year. In the general population, fewer than one-third of adults with a diagnosable mental illness receive mental health services. Therefore, our respondents have a slightly higher rate of diagnosis than the general population, but the percentage of those actually receiving therapy is about the same. (Our respondents were no more or less likely to receive counseling in jail or prison than anyone else with a mental illness diagnosis in the U.S.) Other studies have shown that 24% of state prisoners and 21% of local jail inmates have recent history of a mental health disorder. Seventy percent of youth in the juvenile justice system have a mental illness diagnosis, with at least 20% experiencing significant functional impairment (HEART Coalition of Greater Rochester). Making

counseling more accessible to all individuals, including inmates and ex-offenders, could go a long way towards improving individual lives, communities, and crime rates.

- Addiction/Chemical Dependency: *Almost half (45%) of respondents stated that their most recent conviction was, in their opinion, a direct result of a chemical dependency issue.* Only a quarter (25%) have never had an addiction. Respondents indicated that community support groups, religious communities, and family helped the most in their addiction recovery after incarceration. (These are also the most-commonly accessed types of support.) Other supportive factors such as social services, probation/parole officers, educational programs, training, jobs, and housing programs were also strong supportive factors in many respondents' recovery. It seems as if most people were able to access recovery services if needed, but many respondents have a criminal history in the first place because of a pre-existing addiction.

Efforts to Mitigate These Problems

Some work is already being done to address re-entry issues. For instance, at the Judicial Process Commission, we support clients through the Certificate of Relief/Good Conduct application process to give them the best chance to obtain and use these certificates. Jails and prisons also offer re-entry support services and programs for inmates to enroll in. While not everyone can get into these programs and offerings vary by facility, many facilities offer life skills classes, computer classes, GED classes and testing, employment readiness programs, and more.

Efforts have been made to improve the employability of ex-offenders. Our partners at the Monroe County Legal Assistance Center work tirelessly to assist individuals facing illegal employment discrimination. There are also some federal tax breaks and wage subsidies for those who hire ex-offenders and a federal bonding insurance program to protect employers from any financial risk they feel they may face by hiring an ex-offender. Ultimately, it is our hope that community members will consider what skills ex-offenders can bring to a job and what type of person they are today and rank these considerations at least as important as their criminal past.

The Voices of Re-Entry Project Committee at JPC will be using what we have learned through this initial study to guide future studies. First, we plan to analyze the data from this survey much more extensively. We will also conduct shorter surveys to fill in informational gaps and suggest realistic policy and system changes that could help people have a better chance for success when choosing to live a crime-free lifestyle.

How Did We Get Here?

Due to lack of sympathy and accurate information, supportive programs for ex-offenders are often the last to be funded. But we must recognize that many of those who have a criminal history have struggled with unmet needs, addiction, or trauma long before they committed a crime. There is no doubt that those experiencing trauma, violence, and poverty need support for these issues before they get to a point of committing a crime. But if they do commit a crime, they also need more than

just some time in a prison cell and strict supervision to work through these issues.

Understanding the root causes of a person's criminal history does not excuse their actions. It is an exercise in humanity and perspective. We all have a story. The moment a job interviewer asks a candidate what he or she *learned* from their mistake, or what circumstances led them to commit a crime, or why they took a plea deal, they begin to see the person as a person, not as just a "criminal." They begin to see that both those who are convicted for murder and those who are convicted for writing a bad check must answer, "Yes" on job applications when asked if they have committed a crime. Both are unlikely to be called for an interview simply because they checked "Yes."

Most people believe that if someone commits a crime, he or she serves the sentence imposed and can go on living a normal life afterwards. When returning from jail, many individuals have aspirations and new perspectives and want to seek out a new way of life, only to face debilitating stigma in the community, accompanied by systematic barriers that can thwart even the most valiant of efforts to establish a new life for oneself. Even those with minor criminal histories struggle for the rest of their lives to overcome the social stigma and legally-endorsed discrimination against their character and employability, often leading to perpetual and extreme poverty or to new crimes being committed. Re-entry is complicated, but there are steps we could take to start shifting the paradigm on how to best assist those returning to our community. The Voices of Re-entry Project will continue to shed light on ex-offender's struggles, dreams, and humanity so that we, as a community, can begin to offer people a true chance to make things right.

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