
From the Inside/Out: Greene County Jail Inmates on Restorative ReEntry

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Abstract

The application of criminal justice sanctions is often misguided by a failure to recognize the need for a comprehensive approach in the transformation of offenders into law-abiding citizens. Restorative justice is a growing movement within criminal justice that recognizes the disconnect between offender rehabilitative measures and the social dynamics within which offender reentry takes place. By using restorative approaches to justice, what one hopes of these alternative processes is that the offenders become reconnected to the community and its values, something rarely seen in retributive models in which punishment is imposed and offenders can often experience further alienation from society. In this study, the authors wish to examine factors that contribute to failed prisoner reentry and reintegration and explore how restorative reintegration processes can address these factors as well as the needs, attitudes, and perceptions that help construct and maintain many of the obstacles and barriers returning inmates face when attempting to reintegrate into society.

Keywords

restorative justice, prisoner reentry, social reintegration

Introduction

The concept and explanation of justice appears to be simple and to the point. Yet, a deeper look beyond the dictionary definition or politically correct explanation of justice may prove to be a challenging task. The nature and meaning of justice have historically

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been embedded in the ideological roots of our legal system, translated into the apprehension of offenders, their trial in court, and the outcome of their sentencing. However, a misunderstanding of the role of justice in the application of legal proceedings is very often the source of failure within the dynamics of punishment and corrections.

The administration of justice has traditionally focused on achieving balance, fairness, and equity in the development of correctional policies, practices, and procedures. During the 1980s and 1990s, the *restorative justice movement* brought forth a philosophy of justice that focused more on the interrelationship between the offender, government, victim, and the community in cases involving delinquency and crime (Dorne, 2008). Restorative justice is considered a preventive approach based on the assumption that the crime's origins are in social conditions, and therefore, the response to criminality must take into account the social context of crime (Maiese, 2003).

The restorative justice movement emerged to address the failure of the criminal justice system to deal with offenders, victims, and communities in a holistic manner. A major thrust of this movement has been to increase the role of the community in promoting changes that will prevent the problems and conditions associated with crime and the need for criminal justice intervention. The principle components of restorative justice have traditionally been incorporated within the context of informal processing of first-time, nonviolent offenders. The successful application of restorative justice practices has been the subject of criminological research for the past several years, with programs throughout the United States embracing the opportunity to provide State Legislatures with the assurance that their funding resources are being used effectively to serve victims, offenders, and the community (Hass & Corno, 2010).

The promising outcome of restorative justice practices has been the subject of recent literature on its possible application during the process of prisoner reentry (Bazemore & Boba, 2007; Bazemore & Erbe, 2004; Bazemore & Maruna, 2009). The goal of this study is to examine the structure of a restorative reentry model, explore the application of its various components in different correctional settings, and elaborate on its need as expressed by offenders facing the struggles of reintegration into society. Engaging in this dialog has become an urgent matter as incarceration rates in the United States continue to be the highest in the world, and failed reentry continues to account for a large portion of both state and federal inmates. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, there were 2,292,133 people incarcerated in U.S. state and federal institutions by year-end 2009 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010). To put this in perspective, this is around 4 times higher than the world average and 4 to 7 times higher than other Western countries (Hartney, 2006).

In this article, we aim to outline various factors that contribute to fears, anxieties, and expectations of prisoner reentry and explore how restorative reentry and reintegration processes can address these factors as well as the needs, attitudes, and perceptions that help construct and maintain many of the obstacles and barriers returning inmates face when attempting to reintegrate into society.

Barriers to Offender Reintegration

Research has shown that rehabilitative programs in prison can help reduce the number of inmates returning to state and federal facilities; however, although the rates of incarceration in our country have continued to rise, the increase in population has not been adequately matched with sufficient funding for prison programming and offender support on release (Leverentz, 2011; Petersilia, 2004). In fact, mounting evidence suggests that recidivism can be directly linked to failures in the reintegration process regarding socioeconomic barriers such as employment, family relationships, and social capital (Farrall, 2004). It is therefore no surprise that an overwhelming number, even as high as one third, of all new inmates received by state prisons are people sentenced for parole violations or failures to meet the conditions of supervised release (Austin, 2001; Hattery & Smith, 2010; Lynch & Sabol, 2001; Petersilia, 2001; Sabol & Couture, 2008; C. Visher, LaVigne, & Travis, 2004; Wilkinson, Bucholtz, & Siegfried, 2004). It is evident that a large percentage of our nation's incarcerations involve people imprisoned because they failed to successfully reintegrate into society, a fact that makes clear the importance of effective reentry practices in reducing our national rates of incarceration, restoring our communities, and meeting the needs of transitioning offenders and their families.

The need for increased success in prisoner reentry has recently become recognized at the federal level as an urgent and nationally relevant issue. In 2008, the then President Bush signed the Second Chance Act, which appropriated US\$191 million for offender reintegration, focusing on state and local reentry programs, offender education and job training, transitional services, and research (Gideon & Loveland, 2011). Although this kind of financial support is encouraging, the question remains as to what factors most directly lead to failed prisoner reentry and what kinds of programs and services can best meet the needs of offenders, victims, and communities when an inmate is released back into society.

Many factors can contribute to the failure of offenders returning to the community after an extended period of incarceration. Often considered in the reentry literature are the hardships of finding suitable housing, obtaining adequate employment, getting transportation, managing finances, attending treatment, and staying away from criminogenic influences (Bazemore & Stinchcomb, 2004; Hattery & Smith, 2010; Leverentz, 2011; C. Visher et al., 2004). The challenges of employment, housing, social welfare, health care, and transportation are very often intricately linked to one another, creating inevitable failure for many returning offenders due to insurmountable barriers and the denial of social assistance. Many prisoners are not adequately functional before their incarceration and typically suffer high rates of unemployment and low levels of education (Gideon & Loveland, 2011; The Urban Institute, 2002; C. Visher et al., 2004). These circumstances challenge ex-offenders on community reentry and are aggravated by the legal and social restrictions related to their conviction.

Moreover, returning offenders suffer extremely high rates of homelessness, and many rely on their families or friends to offer them shelter after their release (Leverentz,

2011; Petersilia, 2001). Often their incarceration limits their ability to afford rent or moving costs as well as to supply potential landlords with an employment history or references (Leverentz, 2011). Their conviction can also make them legally ineligible for governmental housing assistance (Leverentz, 2011; Roman, 2004).

In addition to housing assistance, certain felons can also be denied other forms of public welfare (Roman, 2004). For instance, many states enforce a strict ban for food stamps on anyone with a felony drug conviction, and offenders charged with a drug-related offense can also face restrictions for federal student loans and work study assistance (Hattery & Smith, 2010; Leverentz, 2011).

Returning to society with a felony conviction can also severely inhibit one's ability to secure employment (Hattery & Smith, 2010; Leverentz, 2011). Leverentz (2011) notes that ex-offenders are often legally restricted from seeking occupations that "work with vulnerable populations, such as childcare, home health care, or nursing, and private sector jobs such as barber, beautician, pharmacist, embalmer, optometrist, plumber, and real estate professional" (p. 362).

Although the challenges of employment, housing, welfare assistance, health care, and transportation are all legitimate barriers worthy of exploration, an overarching concern that merits further attention in the reentry literature is the impact of a deviant self-identity on the successful reintegration of offenders into the community during the process of reentry (Leverentz, 2011). The effects of self-perception and social stigma experienced by ex-offenders indeed compound the numerous obstacles they face when reentering their communities.

The conferring of a deviant identity on an individual will impact their treatment by family, friends, teachers, peers, and employers. Moreover, the application of a negative label, having a profound impact on the self-image of a person, results in a cycle of deviance amplification, whereby the activity labeled as deviant is "amplified" by the spiraling effect of negative social reaction (Wilkins, 1964). This process has long-term effects on an individual's self-identity and may stimulate his or her involvement in behavior patterns that reflect the beliefs, ideas, and behaviors of this new identity, which are consistent with the development of a criminal career. What, then, can be done to avoid this cycle?

The impact of social stigma and community isolation on successful community reentry is well documented in the literature. Researchers note that the challenges of reentry are compounded by a society that does not allow the offender to responsibly reintegrate. Edgar and Newell (2006) note,

The transition from captivity to freedom is a vital time to concentrate on inclusion. Social inclusion is needed in the attitudes of the prisoner and society, to give prisoners a sense of belonging and to encourage each one to think of himself or herself as a citizen with a contribution to make to his or her community and society. (p. 104)

Two very important elements to reentry are captured in this passage: the role of identity in the reentry process and the concept of citizenship when considering prisoner reintegration and postrelease restrictions.

An inmate's transition back into society is in many ways a reciprocal process of identity negotiation and transformation between the offender and the community to which he or she is returning (Bazemore & Boba, 2007; Bazemore & Maruna, 2009; Bazemore & Stinchcomb, 2004; Burnett & Maruna, 2006; Maruna, 2001; Maruna, LeBel, Mitchell, & Naples, 2004). According to Maruna et al. (2004), this process not only refers to the community's perception of the returning offender but also the offender's own self-perception; in other words, offenders are "active participants and not passive victims of the labeling process" (p. 278). To successfully reintegrate into society, the former prisoner must shed the offender label and find a new identity that fits positively within his or her community (Maruna et al., 2004). This requires not only a sense of atonement and restitution for previous bad acts but the ability to contribute effectively to their community as well (Maruna et al., 2004). As Maruna et al. elaborate, "Ex-offenders need to be morally and socially reintegrated, but they also have to feel that this reintegration has been justified by their own efforts to 'make good' and redress past crimes" (p. 279).

In order for reintegration to successfully occur, these efforts toward restoration must, in turn, be acknowledged and rewarded by the ex-offender's family and community (Burnett & Maruna, 2006; Edgar & Newell, 2006; Maruna & LeBel, 2003; Young, Taxman, & Byrne, 2002). Citizenship implies not only certain duties but shared rights and privileges as well. Many ex-offenders reenter society willing to work and contribute to the community but are then met with the continued denial of their equal citizenship through the less-than-subtle messages of driving restrictions, occupational barriers, and loss of voting rights (Hattery & Smith, 2010; Leverentz, 2011). Some researchers (Maruna, 2006; Maruna & LeBel, 2003; Petersilia, 2001; Rose & Clear, 1998) contend that because of the reciprocal nature of both identity transformation and community citizenship, problems like reentry and recidivism would be best addressed by the eventual expiration of an ex-offender's criminal conviction, "allowing the person freedom from having to declare previous convictions to potential employers, licensing bodies, or other authorities and to resume full citizenship rights and responsibilities" (Maruna & LeBel, 2003, p. 1).

In addition to transforming one's sense of public and private self, an ex-prisoner must also learn to readapt to life outside of a prison environment. Cesaroni (2001) describes "breaking away from the effects of institutionalization" as one of the most daunting struggles faced by returning offenders (p. 89). Certain behaviors and attitudes can become more pronounced in a prison environment as a way of coping and surviving but then become obstacles to an ex-inmate's ability to relate and work with people in the outside community (Cesaroni, 2001).

As mentioned above, offender reintegration is a reciprocal process involving not only the perceptions, will, and efforts of the returning offender but those of the community as well. In other words, in order for prisoner reentry to become more effective, we must not only attend to the needs and challenges of the imprisoned but also to those faced by the community preparing to receive them back into society. As various studies indicate, many of the barriers facing returning offenders are socially and legally

constructed, a fact that suggests we need to better address the community needs and attitudes that encourage the creation of these obstacles rather than merely the obstacles themselves. In other words, the failure of traditional and existing reentry programs to overcome and dissolve these barriers is perhaps due, in part, to their failure to meet the needs of victims, families, and communities struggling to welcome offenders back into society; in short, they do not acknowledge and address the mutuality of successful reintegration and so they do not yield it.

Greene County Jail Inmates on Reentry: A Focus Group Study

Method

The exploration of the experiences surrounding an offender's return to the community is undoubtedly best articulated by those who are closest to that process: the offenders facing the prospects of release from incarceration. In October of 2010, we began examining the struggles, worries, and anticipations that offenders expect to face in preparation for their release and during reentry, by conducting a focus group study at the Greene County Jail in Springfield, Missouri. After obtaining the necessary permission to conduct the study and going through the proper training, we initiated our request for 10 to 15 inmates to meet with us once a week for an hour, for a period of 8 weeks. The program coordinator placed a sign-up sheet in each of the housing "pods." The sign-up sheet read as follows: "Come join [the first author], Missouri State University, for an in-depth discussion of your views on what works best to facilitate the re-entry process." Within a couple of days, 14 male inmates signed up as volunteers to participate in the focus group study.

The focus group methodology was used for several reasons. First of all, we wanted to gain an insightful understanding of the perspective of offenders on reentry using a format that encouraged safe discussion in which offenders could say whatever they wanted without repercussion. Moreover, we wanted to capture content that would inform of emotions, struggles, and personal feelings; content that could only be solicited through the rich detail of open-ended dialogue (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Through this study, we wanted to gain insight and not make predictions, and therefore, the focus group methodology allowed us to get as close to the offenders as possible, in an effort to understand their views and better create a portrait of the patterns, themes, and experiences they communicate (Fern, 2001).

The criminal histories, sentences, and personal experiences of our focus group participants seemed to vary dramatically. Some were first time, nonviolent or petty offenders, whereas others were career criminals with recurrent patterns of criminal behavior. Some were facing short sentences of less than 1 year, whereas others were awaiting sentencing in State or Federal prison. Although personal data were not formally obtained, we learned through our interaction that our focus group participants were quite diverse in their sociodemographic characteristics. Some were older offenders

in their mid to late 50s, whereas others were quite young. Moreover, race and education varied significantly as well as family background and finances. They all had one thing in common; as we will see later on in this study, they all seemed to agree on the dynamics of struggle that they would face one day after being released from prison and going back into society.

Our focus group series was structured around eight 1 hr sessions conducted weekly at the Greene County Jail. Each Tuesday, a group of 9 to 12 offenders gathered in a meeting room and sat with us around a large conference room table. Dialog was open ended, and each session started out with an unstructured format that very often included the offenders talking to one another about how their day was going, discussing updates in their court cases, and laughing about conflicts with jail staff. Offenders were encouraged to speak their minds, be honest in their responses, and respect one another's thoughts and opinions. There were two researchers in the room during each session, with one researcher leading discussion and the other researcher taking extensive notes that were later organized and type written. We were not allowed to bring into the jail any type of recording device. Focus group sessions revolved around discussions that emerged from topics that were developed prior to each session and introduced at the beginning of each session (see appendix). Each topic had a set of related questions, but very often, the dialogue that ensued from a particular question could take us in very diverse directions that proved to be rich in content, giving us tremendous insight into the challenges and hardships these offenders will face once released from incarceration.

Results

The social realities of reestablishing one's identity within the law-abiding community is a tremendous strain that offenders face. The opportunity for freedom, with its euphoric sense of relief, is short lived, as the struggles of adjustment become an inevitable certainty. The reentry process is dominated with the struggle for survival—with obtaining food, clothing, residence, transportation, and employment being at the top of the list of immediate concerns. However, with this immediate struggle for survival is another type of struggle, one that goes beyond the preoccupation with "making it" as described by John Irwin in his seminal work *The Felon* (Irwin, 1987). This struggle was described to us with a greater sense of passion and emotion, and was cast in the context of an urgent search for acceptance, healing, and a forgiveness of past transgressions. With this search came a genuine desire to shed old habits and replace them with new ones. However, the challenge of doing that was met with continuous obstacles or barriers to change (Samuels & Mukamal, 2004). One of the most apparent gaps in reentry as described by various inmates of the Greene County Jail was the consideration of "how to change" as part of the process. As one inmate puts it,

We are told where to live, but not given a chance to live, where to work, but not how to keep a job, stay clean but not given an alternative, who to stay away from but not who to connect with. (Inmate No. 3, Greene County Jail)

A recurrent theme expressed to us in our focus group sessions revolved around mending the strain with family and loved ones that occurs after a lengthy period of separation. Thoughts of regret and fears of failure and rejection consume the minds of offenders. Paying back debts, connecting with spouses and children, assuming primary household functions, and most of all, being forgiven were all perceived as obstacles to successful reintegration. Offenders conveyed the need to reestablish bonds with family and loved ones in a formal, structured manner as an integral component of the reentry process. Moreover, and consistent with findings in the literature (Gideon, 2010; La Vigne, Thompson, Visher, Kachnowski, & Travis, 2003), these reintegration challenges were particularly poignant for substance abusers, as the fear of failure was compounded by the expectations of relapse:

Staying clean? That's a whole new ball game! We need more structure and routine everyday once we're on the outside . . . or else we'll fall right back into the same life style and bad habits that we used to, which means drinking and doing drugs. For most of us that was a way of life and our family and friends even expect it. I think that's what makes staying clean even harder, is that we are expected to fail and it's just a mindset that they and even society has. (Inmate No. 5, Greene County Jail)

A forum for open dialog that encourages communication between the incarcerated offender and family members was seen as an opportunity to address anxieties, conflicts, and hostile feelings before an offender is released from prison and away from the immediate concerns over finances, employment, and social services that they face immediately on release. As stated by an offender,

The struggle for survival, paying bills, finding a job, staying clean, make connecting with family even more difficult . . . making that connection while we're still in here right before we get out is the right way to go. (Inmate No. 9, Greene County Jail)

Another struggle that permeates reentry is the lack of a structure that reinforces positive change and reintegration. A major sentiment expressed to us by our focus group participants was the need for some type of mentoring program where they can make the right social contacts to build a successful life and overcome their personal struggles. One inmate described this need in the following poignant way:

When we're in prison, we have to become dull in our feelings and emotions. We can't care; we actually learn not to care about anyone or anything. We become defensive and hostile. Then we're released back into the community with these same attitudes. I need someone to teach me how to love and care, and be anyone like that and if I don't make that connection, I'll go right back to hanging with my boys on the street corner and sell drugs. (Inmate No. 2, Greene County Jail)

A companion to mentoring is accountability, and the need to be held accountable in a manner that is accepting, encouraging, and strengthening was seen by offenders as essential to successful reintegration. It's one thing to be given conditions of release that are formally enforced, but it's a totally different thing to know that someone or some group or entity, beyond the parole or probation officer, will hold you accountable to those conditions not because they have to but because they care. The released offender needs a structured setting where positive behavior is reinforced, dependency is discouraged, and proper decision-making processes are evaluated. This will give offenders the confidence that they need to be able to successfully transition from prison to community as well as provide a network of support and accountability.

Beyond the need for structured support and mentoring is another key component of successful reentry articulated by Greene County Jail inmates. This component involved a more broad sense of community forgiveness and acceptance. The continuous reminder created by certain restrictions on voting, employment, housing, and social services along with the easy and unlimited public access to criminal records are symbolic affirmations that the debt to society has not been paid by the offender and that community rejection continues. This not only alienates offenders from the law-abiding community but also creates a sense of disenfranchisement as well as a continued level of suspicion and distrust. As one inmate describes,

We are constantly reminded that we are ex-cons. We can't vote, we can't work wherever we want and we can't get some benefits that other people who haven't committed a crime get. Our photos are all over the internet for anyone to look at and judge us based on our past. So essentially, society wants us to be law abiding citizens yet they are shunning us from becoming full citizens with rights and privileges and constantly reminding us of who we were not who we are now or who we could become. How would you expect us then to act? (Inmate No. 6, Greene County Jail)

Although offenders acknowledge the need for public safety, they also recognize the need to balance this safety against the setting up of road blocks in their successful path to reintegration. Offenders desire meaningful employment and not simply a job to satisfy some release condition or to just get by. Meaningful employment is seen as defining one's role in society as a productive member of the community. This will in turn reinforce the offender's sense of repayment and reparation to the community and their potential for forgiveness and acceptance. Unfortunately, employment opportunities are often limited by the offender's prior conviction status. Many skilled jobs, especially those that are higher paid and have benefits, are not open to offenders, whereas the jobs that are available do not match with the skills, abilities, and potential of the ex-offender, thereby reiterating their low value as a contributing member of the society. (Bushway, 2004; Harris & Keller, 2005)

The loss of civil liberties and other "collateral" consequences of incarceration are continuous reminders that the "slate is not clean" (Taxman, Young, & Byrne, 2002).

Offenders described this process of carrying a debt to society that will never be forgiven as emotionally and psychologically damaging. Although the majority of offenders acknowledge their mistakes and recognize the need for change in their behavior patterns, they also express that society in general is not structured to help them “move on.” One offender pleads,

I know what I did was wrong, and I’m paying for it by being here. Everyone makes mistakes, but everyone deserves to be forgiven, especially after they’ve done their time. We need to be assured that we are forgiven, not just by our families, but by society in general. This is the only way that we can let go of the past and start new. (Inmate No. 11, Greene County Jail)

Offenders need to be reassured that they can embrace the norms and values of mainstream society and be embraced back. The psychosocial complexities involved in the process of reentry point to the challenges faced by offenders who are trying to rejoin society as law-abiding, positive members. Without a reintegration structure that communicates to the offender acceptance, the road to reintegration will become a sequence of uphill battles that will lead to inevitable failure. The focus of reentry must shift programmatically in the direction of positive integration with particular attention to the psychosocial needs of offenders to be forgiven, to repair the harm their crime has caused and to initiate healing—all key components of restorative justice. As one inmate expressed,

I need someone to tell me that it’s o.k., that I am still loved and that I can be capable of love and that I’m still respected, and accepted. I need someone that I can look up to, a sort of role model, that can teach me how to be caring and compassionate. (Inmate No.2, Greene County Jail)

Restorative Reentry Practices

Restorative reentry refers to programming and policy aimed at repairing the harm an offense has caused a community and allowing a returning prisoner the chance to reintegrate or earn back the responsibilities and privileges of citizenship (Bazemore & Maruna, 2009; Burnett & Maruna, 2006; Maruna, 2006; Wilkinson et al., 2004). It also includes addressing not only the immediate needs of returning offenders, such as housing and employment, but also the needs of victims and communities as well. In other words, restorative reentry is unique in that it emphasizes social attachment and reintegration above mere reentry and empowers communities to become more directly involved in the resettlement of returning offenders (Bazemore & Maruna, 2009; Maruna, 2006). In the remaining pages, we will examine restorative reintegration in greater detail and also explore some specific examples of restorative reintegration processes.

According to Maruna (2006), restorative reentry incorporates four core elements: a commitment to a community-driven approach, an emphasis on reparation and community

service, neutralization of the effects of social stigma, and a chance for renewed citizenship free from conviction-related restrictions.

As noted above, effective reintegration relies, in part, on the attitudes and perceptions of the community as well as the returning offender (Bazemore & Maruna, 2009; Burnett & Maruna, 2006; Edgar & Newell, 2006; Maruna et al., 2004; Maruna & LeBel, 2003; Young et al., 2002). Maruna (2006) further emphasizes,

Whereas resettlement is typically characterized by an insular, professionals-driven focus on the needs and risks of offenders, restorative reintegration would instead seek to draw on and support naturally occurring community processes through which informal support and controls traditionally take place. (p. 28)

In other words, restorative reentry is rooted in the belief that community-based agents such as friends, family, and volunteers are a source of more effective social control for returning offenders than formal supervisors or judicial authorities and the concept of community networks acting as a form of social capital that can increase their chances of success and productivity. (Bassani, 2007; Travis, 2001; Travis & Petersilia, 2001; Young et al., 2002).

Another benefit of community-driven reentry is the impact it can have on the ex-offender's perception of society as a whole and his or her particular role in it. According to Young et al. (2002), when the community is directly involved in the reentry process, "released offenders come to understand that they have a place in the community, that they are accepted, that others in the community will provide support to facilitate their reintegration" (p. 11). In other words, it can be a vital part of the identity transformation we discussed earlier, as the objective role change of an inmate status will be reinforced by the subjective qualities of responsibility, acceptance, and citizenship. Moreover, community-driven reentry will impact the offender's own perception of, and belief in, eventual reintegration, essential component of successful reentry as articulated by several offenders in our focus group discussions.

The second component of restorative reentry put forth by Maruna (2006) is reparation. Repairing the harm of an offense is a central tenet of any restorative justice process or initiative, and service to the community, particularly when that service is focused on projects that the community finds meaningful and valuable, can be a rewarding source of offender reparation and reintegration (Bazemore & Boba, 2007; Bazemore & Stinchcomb, 2004; Burnett & Maruna, 2006). Wilkinson (2001) notes, "The benefits of community service can be characterized as restorative in nature because of its potential to help repair the damage to the community fabric resulting from crime" (p. 49). However, it is important that these kinds of activities be voluntary in nature rather than punitively imposed (Burnett & Maruna, 2006). As Burnett and Maruna (2006) explain, "The idea is to 'turn participants on' to the satisfaction of this sort of work" (p. 88). In other words, it is important to note that community connection cannot be coerced and that what makes something like community service restorative rather than retributive is that the focus and intention of the work be consensually

generated between the offender and their victim or community. During our focus group discussions with Greene County Jail inmates, they expressed the sentiment that a major obstacle in their pathway to successful reintegration once released into the community was the fear of failing their conditions of release and being sent back to jail. Community service, often a condition of release, was perceived by many offenders as an obligation or punishment, rather than presented as a form of reparation, community involvement, and citizenship. As one offender put it,

Community service is another “do this or else” . . . it’s not about me giving back to my neighborhood but more like me standing out as a criminal with a debt to pay. (Inmate No. 8, Greene County Jail)

Community service work can also contribute to the transformation of an offender’s identity from that of criminal to productive citizen, thereby neutralizing the effects of social stigma (Bazemore, 1998; Bazemore & Maruna, 2009; Burnett & Maruna, 2006). As we explored earlier, a major barrier to successful reentry is the social identity created by the “offender” label itself (Leverentz, 2011; Maruna et al., 2004). The reintegration process can therefore be enormously enhanced by the ex-offender’s willingness to serve the community and begin the process of transforming their deviant identity into a positive reputation more in line with community values and norms. This identity transformation is both an external and internal process involving the offender’s public, as well as personal, self-image (Bazemore & Boba, 2007; Bazemore & Stinchcomb, 2004). As Bazemore and Stinchcomb (2004) argue, “In addition to providing both concrete and symbolic repayment for damages, community service may also promote a cognitive change in self image consistent with a pro-social identity, as well as an opportunity to demonstrate competency and trustworthiness” (p. 4).

The final element of restorative reentry outlined by Maruna (2006) is the chance to renew one’s citizenship in terms of responsibility as well as rights and privileges. He elaborates,

Convictions . . . are merely labels given by the State in the name of punishment, and equally these can be taken away in the name of reintegration, along with a restoration of the full civil rights, liberties, and duties that all of us share. (Maruna, 2006, p. 31)

As we touched on in an earlier section, restorative reentry is unique in that it challenges communities to allow for the full reintegration of offenders. This goes beyond physical reentry to include reincorporation of the offender into society without continued or permanent punitive barriers that increase reentry failure and aggravate an already high rate of incarceration (Maruna, 2006; Maruna & LeBel, 2003; Petersilia, 2001; Rose & Clear, 1998). Moreover, this approach recognizes reentry as a mutual process between offenders and communities, a process that must account not only for the immediate and long-term needs of released inmates but also the needs of those who

prepare to receive them. Restorative reentry focuses on truly restoring the convicted offender into the folds of society, a recurrent theme in our focus group discussions, where offenders expressed a desire for acceptance, not only by family but by society as a whole:

When is our debt ever going to be paid . . . when will we be full citizens, with rights like everyone else . . . when will we cease to be criminals . . . only when society stops treating us that way and accepts us for who we are and who we can be and not who we were. (Inmate No. 11, Greene County Jail)

In the sections to come, we will survey current restorative reentry initiatives and explore how they utilize the elements of restorative reentry we have explored thus far. Restorative reentry programs can vary dramatically in terms of purpose and process; however, certain core models have emerged over the years as highly conducive to restorative goals and values. These models include mediation, family group conferencing, circle groups, and victim impact panels.

Mediation. Mediation is a process whereby two or more parties come together with a neutral facilitator to discuss, and attempt to resolve, shared issues and conflicts (Umbreit, 1995). Mediation can be used in the reentry process to bring victims and offenders together as well as other parties such as the family members and friends of a returning offender.

The Neighborhood Justice Center in Las Vegas, Nevada, incorporates mediation in the reentry process to help reentering inmates and their families address the impact of the prisoner's offense and incarceration as well as plan for the offender's transition back into family and community life (Strahl, 2006). An inmate's family is often deeply affected by the crime and imprisonment of an incarcerated loved one (Bobbitt & Nelson, 2004; Strahl, 2006; Walker, 2010). They not only experience the social stigma associated with the crime but also suffer the additional financial burden due to loss of income and the emotional toll associated with losing one's spouse, coparent, father, mother, or child (Bobbitt & Nelson, 2004; Strahl, 2006). Moreover, although families of ex-offenders are burdened by the reentry process itself, they are also typically their main source of financial, material, and emotional support during the period of transition (Bobbitt & Nelson, 2004).

The reentry mediation program run by the Neighborhood Justice Center in Las Vegas is a voluntary program that inmates can initiate before their release (Strahl, 2006). The program, called FORUM (Families and Offenders Reconciliation Using Mediation), brings inmates together with their families to discuss the impact of the offender's incarceration as well as make a plan regarding their reentry (Strahl, 2006). Additional mediation sessions are also held after the inmate's release to follow-up regarding the family's transition (Strahl, 2006).

The FORUM program is restorative in nature because it is community-based and community operated, and it addresses the social stigma associated with reentry, while also allowing for offenders to make reparation toward family members and friends. It

also provides the opportunity for offenders to address many of the obstacles to reentry that we explored earlier, such as identity transformation, transitioning from the effects of incarceration, and planning for social and material needs on release.

Family group conferencing. Family group conferencing (FGC) is a restorative process designed for group dialogue and decision making (MacRae & Zehr, 2004; Umbreit & Armour, 2010). Unlike mediation, FGC does not rely on a neutral facilitator but rather allows families and groups to come together to privately discuss their issues and concerns as well as generate a shared plan of action to help move them forward (Umbreit & Armour, 2010). Trained coordinators help the group plan the conference and get it started; however, an important element to FGC is the opportunity for families to work without the aid of a service provider to communicate, share, and make decisions (Umbreit & Armour, 2010).

Since 2003, FGCs have been used as part of the reentry process for inmates of Adams County Prison in Pennsylvania (Thurman-Eyer & Mirsky, 2009). Prior to release, family members are given the opportunity to meet with the incarcerated offender as well as prison staff in a group setting (Thurman-Eyer & Mirsky, 2009). Correctional officers, caseworkers, and counselors provide family members with an overview and assessment of the inmate's behavior during incarceration. The family and their incarcerated loved one are then allowed to begin a discussion of the behavior that led up to the offender's imprisonment and their needs and plans for a successful transition back into society (Thurman-Eyer & Mirsky, 2009). According to the program's manager, this process has been highly successful in encouraging positive dialog and mending the disconnect between incarcerated offenders and their families and has led to more successful reintegration experiences for both (Thurman-Eyer & Mirsky, 2009).

In many ways, this program seeks to address the same needs and issues as the mediation program mentioned previously. By allowing families to communicate openly about the prisoner's offense and incarceration, and allowing the offender the chance to address and repair the harm that their crime has caused, families are better able to support the reentering member in their transition back into society.

Circles. Restorative circles involve a process very similar to family group conferencing; however, in circles, a facilitator often remains with the family or group throughout the course of its sharing and dialogue. Circles can be used for a variety of purposes, such as healing, support, and reintegration, and have proven effective in helping groups share safely and openly as well as make decisions guided by their collective wisdom and needs (Pranis, 2005).

In Hawaii, the Huikahi Restorative Circle program was created in 2005 by two community organizations, the Hawaii Friends of Civic & Law Related Education and the Community Alliance on Prisons and the Waiawa Correctional Facility, and is used to help offenders and their families plan and prepare for reentry by discussing the impact of the inmate's offense and incarceration as well as planning for their needs on return to the community (Porter, 2007; Walker, 2010; Walker & Greening, 2010; Walker, Sakai, & Brady, 2006). Walker et al. (2006) describe the process as follows:

A Restorative Circle is an approximately three-hour group planning process for individual inmates, their families and prison staff. The Circle results in a written transition plan for the inmate preparing to leave prison. The plan details his needs, which include the need for reconciliation with his loved ones, any non-related victims not present at the Circle, and the inmate himself. Reconciliation is whatever the group determines is needed to repair the harm. It can be as simple as “staying clean and sober” and “forgiving myself.” (p. 2)

The Huikahi Restorative Circle program has generated promising indications of lowered recidivism rates and an increased sense of optimism on behalf of its participants concerning their postrelease transition (Walker & Greening, 2010). Although additional time is needed to test the efficacy of this program in increasing criminal desistance and lowering rates of reentry failure, the program’s initial results speak to the potential of restorative programs that focus on repairing harm and including family and community support in reentry planning.

Victim impact panels. Victim impact panels are used in a variety of justice contexts as a tool for deepening empathy and offender awareness of crime’s impact (Herman & Wasserman, 2001; McDowell & Whitehead, 2009). These panels can be a unique way for victims to become more involved in the reentry process without having direct contact with their own offender (Herman & Wasserman, 2001). In a victim impact panel, crime victims share with offenders how crime has affected their lives (Herman & Wasserman, 2001; McDowell & Whitehead, 2009). This can include emotional suffering as well as material losses, physical injury, and/or mental trauma. Participants in panel programs are often encouraged to dialogue with victims to better understand the way crime has affected their lives.

A victim impact program is an essential component of San Bruno, California’s Resolve to Stop the Violence Project (RSVP), a restorative prison dorm housed in a county jail near San Francisco (Mirsky, 2010; Schwartz, 2009). The RSVP project includes various programs focusing on such things as education, art, and counseling, all helping to ensure that inmates within the dorm “return to society as emotionally healthy, productive individuals” (Mirsky, 2010).

Although not specifically a reentry program, RSVP is a strong example of prison programming that can directly benefit anticipated offender reintegration. Research and discussion concerning prisoner reentry is beginning to focus more heavily on ways that successful release can be an objective of not only the prerelease phase but also incarceration and even intake (Wilkinson, 2001; Wilkinson et al., 2004). As Reginald Wilkinson (2001) writes, it is “imperative that reentry initiatives commence at the institution level, and more importantly, during the reception process” (p. 47).

Victim impact panels are restorative in that they bring community members and crime victims into contact with offenders and provide the opportunity for dialogue, learning, transformation, and even healing. As Herman and Wasserman (2001) note, “These programs seek to foster reintegration by educating offenders about the impact

of crime on its victims and generating remorse that will change offender behavior in the future” (p. 436). However, beyond the needs and benefit for offenders, it is important to remember that victims also have needs concerning offender reentry, and participation in victim impact panels can be a source of empowerment and healing for victims struggling in their own way to socially reintegrate after an experience of crime.

A Strengths Based Approach to Reentry

Although the various restorative processes discussed above do incorporate elements of restorative reentry, such as community involvement, reparation, and identity transformation, none of the example programs we have explored meet all of Maruna’s (2006) suggestions for the comprehensive restorative reentry paradigm that we are suggesting as a model for structuring reentry. Although restorative processes have a clear part to play in these initiatives, there is an apparent lack of any fully comprehensive reentry plan rooted entirely in restorative theory and practice.

Current trends in the evolution of initiatives in prisoner reentry appear to encompass comprehensive, multifaceted plans that address a range of needs and strive to include community members, organizations, and agencies. This approach has been described in the literature as “systemic” (Byrne, Taxman, & Young, 2002; Wilkinson et al., 2004). Recommendations for effective offender reintegration have focused on the transformation of reentry programming to span the course of criminal justice proceedings to include everything from sentencing to reception and intake to postrelease planning and supervision (Petersilia, 2003). Moreover, the structure of reentry is moving in the direction of mending the divide between prison and community by integrating citizens and community agencies in meeting reentry goals during the period prior to release from incarceration and during parole supervision, with reentry programming within the community existing as an extension of those beginning inside prison walls (La Vigne et al., 2003; Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, 2002). Researchers describe a *structured reentry phase* whereby institutional staff collaborate with community corrections staff, treatment teams, and community agencies in the development of reintegration plans for offenders preparing for release from prison (Byrne et al., 2002).

However, a final piece of the puzzle is still missing, a piece that is worthy of more exploration, a piece that was revealed to us through the words of those facing the immediate and inevitable toll of reentry. Through our interaction with offenders at the Greene County Jail, we gleaned a very different and unique perception of reentry, one that involves a strengths-based approach that engages and empowers offenders to not only increase their level of commitment to social norms and their attachment to community institutions but to also decrease their reliance and dependence on the State or family members. Prisoners seek community affirmation and support, articulating a genuine desire to address the harm that their crime has caused, not only to the victim and community but also to their families. As described by Taxman et al. (2002),

A reentry process that does not engage the offender in becoming a productive member of society is likely to be another notation on the chart of “tried” strategies. The offender must be challenged to become a contributing member of society. (p. 2)

A strengths-based strategy to reentry builds on an offender’s personal skills, strengths, and assets while addressing areas of deficit and concern. Focusing on enhancing those positive areas in an offender’s life will not only encourage their moral acceptance within the community but will also increase the chances of long-term changes within their behavior patterns. Moreover, the development of personal and technical skills will increase competency and achievement based on the ex-offender’s level of education and proficiency, ensuring that they will become positive contributors within their communities. Becoming positive members of the wider community will in turn reduce the impact of social shame and stigma caused by criminal behavior and increase opportunities for praise, approval, and acceptance. In order for these processes to take place, the community must become the primary agent of both formal and informal efforts at reintegration.

Community-led and community-driven reintegration is the core foundation of the comprehensive restorative reentry approach we are suggesting, a model that incorporates the main ideological and programmatic components of restorative justice. Within this model, the role of the community is transformed beyond the traditional partnering with criminal justice agencies to include a coordinated effort at improving the quality and delivery of reentry services. One avenue for solidifying this transformed partnership can be the incorporation of restorative justice *reparative boards* in the reentry process.

One of the most important components of the restorative justice process is the use of community reparative boards as an integral part of the offender’s supervision. These boards are comprised of volunteer members of the community who are trained and educated in the restorative justice process and who play an active role in monitoring the progress of offenders in the program. Board members address the needs and interests of offenders, their progress in making amends for the loss caused by the crime, and their motivation and attitude to abide by the norms and values of a responsible, law-abiding citizen (Hass & Corno, 2010). Moreover, reparative boards serve as a liaison with victim organizations, community service sites, and other community partners.

Once an offender is released from prison, community reparative boards can play an active and integral role in developing and implementing a community reintegration plan for the offender. Community-based citizen boards can meet regularly with offenders to provide them with an opportunity for structured interaction that supplements the formal social controls provided by law enforcement, the courts, and corrections. Moreover, utilizing community advocates who are well trained to address the problems and needs of reentering offenders will not only provide an invaluable resource that will assist in the development of reentry initiatives but will also serve as a mechanism by which offenders can develop a sense of social responsibility to the victim and community (Hass & Corno, 2010).

As part of the restorative reentry process, board members take on a case-management approach, acting as a collateral contact for offenders to increase accountability, provide a format within which an offender can develop a positive relationship with effective community leaders, and assist offenders in making the necessary contacts and relationships in the community to meet their needs for skill development (Hass & Corno, 2010). By utilizing this approach, board members are able to discuss with offenders personal challenges and other factors associated with their criminal behavior, identifying areas of deficit in their lives as well as encouraging the development of personal skills and promoting empowerment and independence.

Citizen reparative boards can effectively communicate to offenders the need to accept full responsibility for their actions and not make any excuses. Moreover, they can become a source of appropriate praise and approval, promoting mutual respect and terminating the process of disapproval with healing and forgiveness (Maiese, 2003). Including the offender as a member of a community of care will assist in the process of “destigmatization” and increase the formal reconciliation between the offender, their victim, and the law-abiding community at large. This will in turn promote the reflection on positive behavioral changes within the offender as well as reaffirm the need for continued moral support and nurturing.

The successful reintegration of offenders after a period of segregation from community membership involves more than addressing their immediate struggles to find housing, find employment, and establish family connections. The restorative reintegration model that we are proposing requires a mutual reconciliation between the offender and society where the offender’s need for acceptance and redemption are met with society’s need for reparation and healing. This approach is a catalyst for the mobilization of community-wide resources to repair the harm caused by criminal behavior through the effective implementation of a comprehensive restorative reentry model of justice.

Conclusion

The reintegration of offenders into society is indeed a complex phenomenon that involves a careful connection between addressing the transitional needs of offenders for employment, housing, and social services, with their need for acceptance, forgiveness, and making amends. Reentry should be perceived as a process whereby the transformation of offenders into law-abiding citizens is achieved through a cooperative effort between criminal justice agencies, the community and society as a whole. We believe that a comprehensive reintegration program, one that includes all of the elements of restorative reentry, will provide offenders with a strengths-based approach that will fill in the missing puzzle pieces during the reintegration process and bridge the divide between the needs of the community for safety and the needs of the offender for restoration. Only then will true social integration occur, and the meaning of rehabilitation will become transformed to encompass the offender’s redefinition of self as a having a positive, self-fulfilling role within the community. Very often, we rely on offenders to change their way of thinking to live a conventional lifestyle and

abide by the norms of society, without really providing them with a plan of action that sets the stage for role transformation. The concept of restorative reintegration provides a model of reentry that allows for offenders to be able to first act differently to begin thinking differently.

Although restorative principles, processes, and objectives are becoming more widely adopted into initiatives and programs aimed at improving prisoner reentry, there are significant gaps in the research regarding the outcomes of restorative reintegration (Burnett & Maruna, 2006) as well as assessments regarding the attitudes, perceptions, and understanding of prison and supervisory staff to these kinds of processes. Evaluative research gaps exist, as well, in regards to our understanding of how social identity and family processes impact postrelease transition (C. A. Visser & Travis, 2003). This study has shed some light on the need for a systematic understanding of the personal anxieties that offenders facing the prospect of release will go through. A comprehensive reentry program must account for these anxieties to properly address the potential risks and failures involved in community supervision of released offenders. Our focus group study has laid the foundation for similar types of inquiries in other jails and prisons that can prove to be invaluable in the effort to address offender needs, reduce recidivism, increase community safety, and decrease the cost of correctional intervention.

However, what is clear is the failure of a business-as-usual approach to prisoner reentry. Americans have a low feeling of confidence in the justice system overall, including prison rehabilitation and postrelease supervision and support, and there is even some evidence to suggest that the public is relatively unaware of how restrictive postrelease barriers can be and, when asked, indicate some support of renewed citizenship and voting rights (Immerwahr & Johnson, 2002). In other words, as we originally proposed, many obstacles to effective reentry are socially constructed and therefore transformable. Although change can be difficult, restorative processes are proving invaluable to reentry efforts that seek to address and engage the mutual needs of prisoner release and the reciprocal nature of systemic reintegration and resettlement.

Appendix

Focus Group Discussion Topics

TOPIC: The Social Context of Crime (October 5, 2010)

Discussion Points (shorter discussion points to save time for initial introductions)

- What does the “social context” of crime mean?
- What does the term “cycle of criminality” mean to you?
- Are there certain social conditions that contribute to breaking the law? What are these?
- What is your role in changing those conditions? What is society’s role?

(continued)

Appendix (continued)

TOPIC: The Core of Offending Behavior (October 12, 2010)

Discussion Points

- Recall the very first time you “messed up” . . . when was that, what were you thinking, how did people react, how did you react?
- How do you distinguish between right and wrong?
- Is there a connection between making amends for the harm done to the victim and the community and accepting responsibility for the crime you committed?
- Are there *obstacles* to accepting responsibility and being willing to participate in rehabilitation and restitution programs?
- If you came face to face with the victim of your crime, what would you say? How would this experience impact you?
- How are you a leader? How are you a follower? Who do you lead, and who do you follow?

TOPIC: The Road to Recovery (October 19, 2010)

Discussion Points

- What does the term “intervention” mean to you?
- What is it about your immediate environment (now) that you would change?
- What is it about your environment once you are released that you worry about the most?
- What are your plans for reconnecting with family once you are released?
- In what ways are family and friends a barrier to recovery?
- In what ways are family and friends an asset to recovery?

TOPIC: The Road to Forgiveness and Healing (October 26, 2010)

Discussion Points

- What does the term reintegration mean to you?
- How can reintegration be a positive versus a negative experience?
- What “tools” do you need in order to take positive steps after release from jail?
- What are your biggest “nightmares” about being released from incarceration?
- Are you concerned about gaining the respect of your family and friends?
- Do you feel that you need to be forgiven? By whom?
- How does one forgive?
- Does forgiveness play a role in the process of healing? In what ways?

TOPIC: The Nature and Meaning of Change (November 2, 2010)*Discussion Points*

- What does the term “free will” mean to you?
- Are criminal acts rational choices?
- What role do anger, stress, and resentment play in your lives...what about drugs/alcohol?
- In what ways do you, today, this very minute, want to change?
- Which is more important to you, needing someone, or being needed...what’s the difference?

TOPIC: What is ReEntry? (November 9, 2010)*Discussion Points*

- What does being “set up to fail” mean to you?
- What does the term “reentry” mean to you?
- How does society in general, and the department of corrections in specific usually deal with the problem of prisoner reentry?
- The traditional approach to prisoner reintegration focuses on immediate needs:
 - accommodation
 - employment/financial management
 - financial management
 - family relationships
 - Substance abuse counseling
 - others???
- What does this model assume?
- Is this assumption problematic in any way?
- What needs are not addressed by this approach?

TOPIC: What is Restorative Justice? (November 16, 2010)*Discussion Points*

- Have you heard of the term “restorative justice”? What does that concept mean to you?
- What is the connection between you as an offender, the victim of your crime, and the community in which you will return after release from jail?
- In what ways can community volunteers participate in your successful transition back into society?
- Do you have positive role models to look up to? Is this something you need? Why?

(continued)

Appendix (continued)

- Are there any skills, emotions, norms, values, etc., that you need to “relearn”?
- Processes are provided with an opportunity to have a direct influence on the offender by instilling a sense of disapproval in a respectful yet authoritative capacity and act as a collateral contact for the offender in encouraging responsible behavior.

TOPIC: A Strengths-Based Approach To Reintegration (November 23, 2010)

Discussion Points

- What does the term “moral exclusion” mean to you?
 - What is your ideal approach to a better system of positive reintegration back into society?
 - When should the “reentry process” begin? During incarceration? After release? Both?
 - How is “change” different from “transformation”?
 - What does it take to transform your role in society once you are released from jail?
 - How can the “community” around you encourage change **and** transformation and discourage dependency?
-

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