



# The Boston Reentry Study: Family Support After Prison

Over 600,000 men and women are released from prison each year in the United States, returning mostly to poor inner-city communities. The formerly incarcerated face the challenge of social integration after prison – of establishing ties to families, households, and the labor market. The transition from prison also presents challenges to the families and communities that must provide housing, work, and safety for those who have often spent many years in incarceration. In this way, incarceration has become intimately tied to the experience of poverty in America. A collaborative research project involving Harvard University's Program in Criminal Justice and the Massachusetts Department of Correction studied the process of community return after incarceration. Beginning in May 2012, the Boston Reentry Study followed 122 men and women leaving state prison in Massachusetts for communities in the Boston area. Respondents were interviewed five times over 12 months: in prison just prior to release, and 1 week, 2 months, 6 months, and 12 months after prison release. Interviews aimed to examine the employment, family life, housing, and health of men and women just released from prison. Interview data are linked to administrative records

and proxy interviews to supplement the information on an elusive and high-risk population. The study's key objectives were to demonstrate high rates of retention in a panel survey for this critical but hard-to-reach population, and to build a rich data set that details the social contexts of those released from incarceration. The interview response rate over the course of the study was 94 percent, and over 90 percent of respondents completed the final 12-month interview.

## Research Findings

Family members provided significant support to the men and women in the sample. Figure 1 shows the percentage distribution of financial and housing support provided by family members during the year after prison by gender, age, race, and reported mental illness/substance abuse. In the first week after leaving prison, 67 percent of respondents received money or a place to stay from family. Various family members, including mothers, siblings

Karen's mother (age 52), after Karen regained custody of her kids after 10 years:

"The relationship has been good. We don't do too much together, but when she's here we talk...talk about the children, talk about her well-being, how she's getting along, how things is coming along for her. We have dinner together...I still help her with the kids, as far as taking control of the kids when she's at work, when she's at her programs and school."

*This research brief is one in a Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston series prepared by the Boston Reentry Study (BRS) based on a longitudinal survey conducted in 2012-2013. The BRS was conducted by Bruce Western (Harvard University), Anthony Braga (Rutgers University), and Rhiana Kohl (Massachusetts Department of Correction). Bruce Western can be reached by mail: 79 John F. Kennedy Street, Cambridge, MA 02138; by phone: (617) 495-8697; or by email: western@wjh.harvard.edu.*

*The Boston Reentry Study was made possible by the hundreds of men and women who shared their time and life experience so that we may learn about the effects of incarceration on American families and communities. We thank the Massachusetts DOC for their help and acknowledge NIH, NSF, Russell Sage Foundation, the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, and Harvard University for their support.*

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## Boston Reentry Study

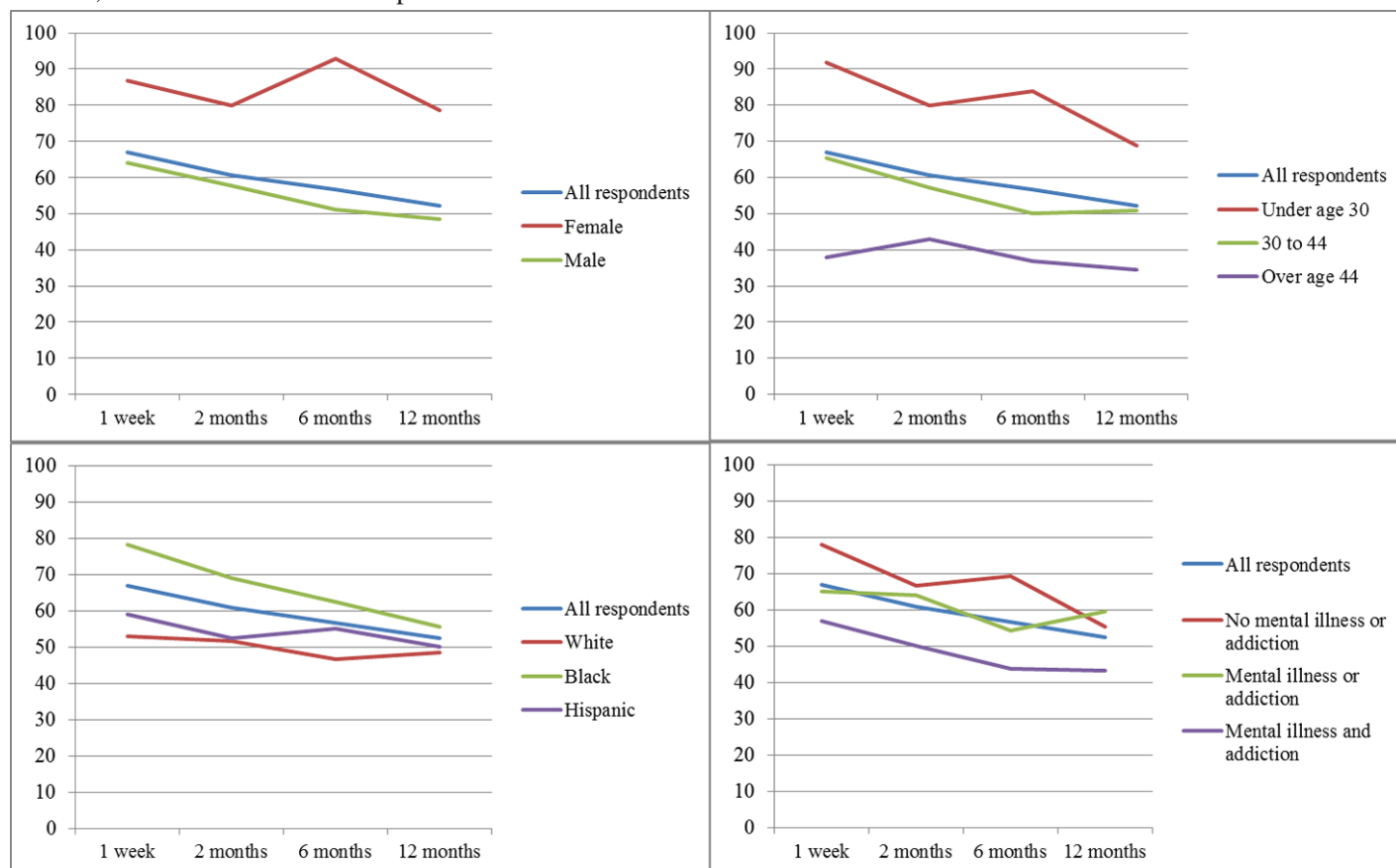
More information on the Boston Reentry Study can be found at <http://scholar.harvard.edu/brucewestern/boston-reentry-study>.

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Figure 1: Percentage of respondents receiving money from family or staying with family, one week, two months, six months, and twelve months after prison release



and cousins, provided financial support and housing to over half of respondents consistently in the year after prison release. This is particularly true for younger people in the sample—92 percent of those under age 30 received money or a place to stay during the first week compared to only a third of respondents over age 44. Female respondents tended to receive family support at higher rates than men throughout the year after prison. Black respondents reported receiving more family support than whites; only 19 percent of Hispanic respondents reported receiving money or a place to stay from family during the first week. Individuals without histories of mental illness or addiction received higher levels of support, especially during the first week of prison release.

Assistance from families, particularly from mothers and

sisters, was not limited to financial and housing support, but spanned a variety of different domains. Respondents’ families often provided childcare, sometimes taking custody for periods of time. During the time that Karen, a black woman in her 30s was incarcerated, her mother had custody of her two sons. After her release, Karen worked with different programs to regain custody of her children while her sons, and eventually Karen herself, stayed with Karen’s mother. Families also provided basic needs for respondents such as clothing or transportation. Jemarcus, a black respondent in his 40s, relied on a female cousin to take him to church while he stayed in a homeless shelter in downtown Boston. She would also take him to visit other family members, and helped him navigate a strained relationship with his mother.

Jemarcus’s cousin (age 50), on supporting him after release:

“When he first came out, it was more because every Sunday he used to come to church. And I would make and bring dinner for him. Because at first his mom wasn’t talking much to him [...] I just tried to keep him focused and make sure he’s doing the positive things he’s supposed to do.”