



The Boston Reentry Study: Housing Insecurity 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

Securing stable housing consistently ranked among the biggest concerns for those just released from prison. Six months out of prison, 35 percent were staying in temporary or marginal housing, and this percentage grew to 43 percent by 12 months out of prison (Figure 1). Housing insecurity was most common for older men and for those with histories of drug addiction and mental illness. These men were also among the most unlikely to stay with a family member initially after prison release. Significantly, 70 percent of those over 44 were living in

Linda, age 44

"There's eight women in the house, there's no staff there, but it's a sober house, and everybody does everything collectively... we vote on everything...it's great, I really like it."

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.

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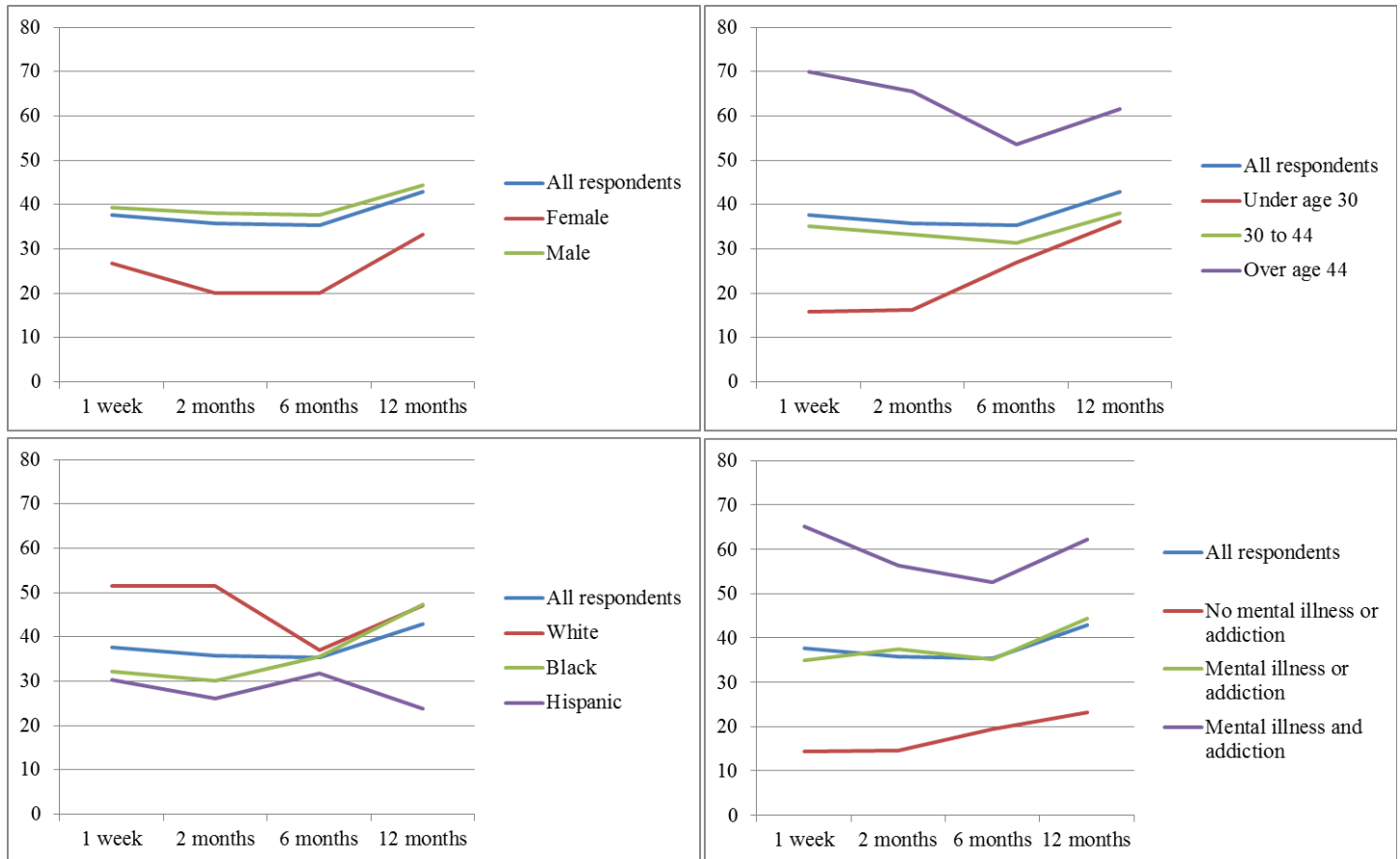
Boston Reentry Study

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 in marginal or temporary housing, one week, two months, six months, and twelve months after prison release



temporary housing during the first week, compared to only 16 percent of those under 30. Women showed lower than average rates of housing insecurity throughout the year after prison release.

For respondents who could not stay in a private home with a family member, partner, or friend, temporary housing filled a critical need soon after release. A portion of respondents stayed in privately operated sober houses, which often required residents to pay weekly rent and submit to frequent drug testing. These residences varied widely in quality. Linda, a black woman in her mid 40s, stayed in a sober house for the entire year after release. She paid \$150 a week for her own room and lived in the

house with seven other women. Later in the year, she was able to move into a residence in a different state operated by the same organization in order to be closer to her family. Many sober houses, however, were very unstable. Roger, a 46-year-old white man, moved into a sober house at release where he had stayed prior to his incarceration. He lived with two other men and was expected to pay \$500 a month. Despite its designation as a sober house, Roger reported frequent drug use at the residence, an unhealthy environment for someone who struggled with addiction. Chaotic living situations were common when respondents were staying in marginal or temporary housing, and upon leaving, they often faced periods of homelessness or other precarious housing.

Roger, age 46

“My house is a zoo, it’s crazy...there’s people in my house high...I mean, I’m strong, but I’m not that strong. Sometimes when I’m just sittin’ around there all day, and I’m seeing this in and out, in and out, in and out, and I got money in my pocket...there’s really no desire to do it, it’s kind of like autopilot...It’s a shootin’ gallery.”