

## The Challenges of Prisoner Reentry from a Rural Perspective

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**Abstract:** *Inmates face many challenges as they attempt to transition from the institution to the community. Securing suitable housing, finding employment, and addressing substance abuse and mental health problems present formidable obstacles to offenders as they attempt to reconnect with society. To this point most, if not all, of the focus on prisoner reentry has been from an urban perspective, with little attention on how these obstacles affect inmates returning to rural areas. This paper examines the challenges rural-bound offenders face when returning to the community, focusing specifically on housing, employment, substance abuse, and mental health. While little research has been conducted in this area, by combining current research on prisoner reentry with knowledge from other disciplines such as sociology, addictions, and health care, it is possible to gain a better understanding of how these obstacles impede reintegration in rural settings. Furthermore, this paper addresses the need to develop policies that recognize the unique features of rural communities.*

**Key Words:** prisoner reentry; rural.

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### Introduction

Over the last several years, the issue of prisoner reentry has dominated the corrections literature, which should not be surprising considering the volume of ex-inmates who are returning to our communities each year. As a direct result of this nation's increased reliance on imprisonment as a response to criminal behavior, there are record numbers of individuals serving time in state and federal correctional facilities. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, "at year-end 2002, 1,440,655 prisoners were under the jurisdiction of State or Federal correctional authorities" ([www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/)), a number that has more than quadrupled over the last twenty-five years (Spelman 2000). While some have asserted that this reliance on incarceration has made our communities safer, others contend that this punitive response has only made matters worse by diverting resources away from programs that address the social causes of crime, while at the same time further alienating already marginalized communities. However, regardless of one's view on the efficacy of imprisonment, there is one reality of this phenomenon that cannot be debated, "the more people we put in prison, the more will eventually come out" (Travis, Solomon and Waul 2001:4).

In 1980 there were an estimated 170,000 offenders released from prison confinement (Lynch and Sabol 2001). Over the next twenty years, this number more than tripled with an estimated 592,000 inmates being released from State and Federal facilities in 2001 ([www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/)). These numbers become even more concerning

when one considers the fact that not only are there more individuals serving time in prison, but they are also serving longer sentences (Lynch and Sabol 2001). Due in large part to the passage of truth-in-sentencing laws and the abolishment of discretionary release in many states, inmates on the average are serving longer sentences than at any other time in our history. At the same time, there is strong evidence to suggest that inmates are leaving confinement less prepared to face life in the community (Austin 2001; Lynch and Sabol 2001; Petersilia 2001a; Travis et al. 2001). As Petersilia (2001a:4) noted, "fewer programs, and a lack of incentives for inmates to participate in them, mean that fewer inmates leave prison having participated in programs to address work, education, and substance use deficiencies." In short, one undeniable consequence of the imprisonment binge has been the release of record numbers of inmates, who have served longer sentences and are less prepared to face life in society (Travis et al. 2001).

While these facts are in themselves concerning, prisoner reentry takes on a new level of significance when one considers the impact these returning inmates will have on their communities. As Travis et al. (2001:1) report, "nearly two-thirds of released prisoners are expected to be rearrested for a felony or serious misdemeanor within three years of their release," which "translate[s] into thousands of new victimizations each year." While public safety concerns are paramount, the consequences of prisoner reentry are not limited to fears of re-offending. The return of tens of thousands of ex-offenders also has the potential to affect labor markets, social services, and

community health care systems (Lynch and Sabol 2001; Travis et al. 2001). Furthermore (and probably most importantly), prisoner reentry will affect the families and friends to whom these individuals will return after their release (Lynch and Sabol 2001; Petersilia 2001; Travis 2001; Travis et al. 2001).

As discussed above, the impact of prisoner reentry has far reaching consequences, a fact which has not escaped the attention of either policymakers or academics. Over the last several years, this issue has received considerable attention. Funded largely from federal dollars, states have implemented a variety of programs aimed at easing the transition of offenders back into the community. At the same time, this issue has become the focal point for many researchers, which has both increased our awareness of the consequences of this phenomenon, as well as guided policy makers in the development of new programs. However, inasmuch as academics and policymakers might be commended, they might also be criticized for their narrow focus on the impacts of offender reentry.

To this point, most of the focus on prisoner reentry has been from an urban perspective. As a result, both researchers and policymakers have largely ignored how this phenomenon affects rural communities. In some respects this lack of attention can be understood given what is known about the distribution of ex-inmates in society. While there exist no comprehensive national data on the spatial dispersion of released inmates, there is ample evidence to suggest that “released prisoners are concentrated in a few large states and, within these states, are increasingly concentrated in the core counties that contain the central cities of metropolitan areas” (Lynch and Sabol 2001:3). This fact should not be a surprise considering that crime occurs more frequently in urban areas (Weisheit and Donnermeyer 2000). However, there is a danger in excluding rural areas from discussions on prisoner reentry simply because the problem has not reached the level found in urban locales. The fact remains that many offenders return to rural areas, and these communities, not unlike their urban counterparts, are impacted by their return. In other words, while prisoner reentry may not be more of a problem in rural communities, it is still a problem; and a problem that is deserving of attention from both researchers and policymakers.

The exclusion of rural perspectives on prisoner reentry might be considered trivial if there were nothing about rural communities or the experiences offenders face when returning to rural areas that differentiate them from urban settings. However, rural communities differ from urban communities in many important ways. As a result, there is a need to understand the challenges prisoners face

when attempting to reintegrate in rural areas. Moreover, the unique features of rural communities make it likely that urban-based policies will be ineffective in rural settings.

### **Defining Rural**

Before discussing the unique challenges faced by prisoners returning to rural areas, it is necessary to discuss the definition of rural. One of the most difficult aspects of studying rural issues is coming up with a definition that captures the broad meaning of this concept. As Weisheit and Donnermeyer (2000:311) observed, “as a concept, rural defies simple definition.” This difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that rural communities are not homogenous (Weisheit and Donnermeyer 2000). They vary in a number of ways including culturally, economically, and socially. In other words, “rural Wyoming is very different from rural Delaware in a number of dimensions, including population density, proximity to urban places, composition of the population, and economic base” (Weisheit and Donnermeyer 2000:312). Because of this diversity, one needs to be careful when making sweeping generalizations about rural communities (Murray and Keller 1991). With these difficulties in mind, in the following paragraphs, I develop a definition of rural which takes into account many of the important ways in which rural and urban communities vary.

Most definitions of rural focus strictly on population counts (Murray and Keller 1991). For example, the U.S. Census Bureau classifies places with a population of less than 2,500 people as rural, while those exceeding this count are considered urban (<http://www.census.gov/population/censusdata/urdef.txt>). The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service (ERS N.d.a) uses a more sensitive measure, which utilizes a nine point scale to rank counties on their overall level of urbanization based on a combination of factors including population size and proximity to urban centers. In many cases, it is necessary to strictly operationalize rural; however, for the purposes of this paper, it is more valuable to think of rural as a matter of degree falling somewhere on a continuum between rural and urban based both on population size and degree of isolation from larger communities.

While rural areas are commonly defined by their small number of residents and isolation, this does not in itself describe the unique features of rural communities. It is important when developing a definition of rural to look beyond population counts and explore how these communities and the lives of the people living in these communities are affected by the rural landscape.

Because of the relatively small population size and isolation from urban locales, rural residents face many unique challenges. Rural residents, for example, are less likely to have access to the same level of both private and public services as their urban counterparts (Murray and Keller 1991; Robertson 1997). Health care services, government programs, and other assistance programs tend to be concentrated in urban areas. Individuals in need of these services are often forced to travel to urban areas, find alternative resources, or simply go without.

Rural communities also tend to be economically limited when compared to urban locales. Residents in many smaller communities do not have access to a wide range of employment opportunities. Although rural communities are becoming more economically diverse, many are still dominated by a single economic activity such as farming (Ghelfi and McGranahan 2004). At the same time, a growing number of rural economies are dependent on tourist activities or cater to the older retired population (Whitener and McGranahan 2003). Many of the jobs (especially low-skilled jobs) created by these activities tend to be more service oriented and do not offer the same economic benefits as those in the goods production sector (Gibbs, Kusmin and Cromartie 2004). Overall, rural residents earn less than their urban counterparts, which is evidenced by the fact that a greater percentage of rural residents living below the poverty line are employed full-time (Brown and Hirschl 1995). The depressed economies in many rural areas not only affect individuals and families, but limit the ability of local governments to address the problems of its residents. Less income and spending in rural communities limits the tax base that elected officials and public servants have to work with (Besser 1998).

A further unique feature of rural communities involves the level of social interactions. Rural areas are considered to have high levels of acquaintance density. Acquaintance density can be defined as the “average proportion of the people in a community known by the community’s inhabitants” (Freudenbury 1986:29-30). It is commonly asserted that there is little privacy in rural areas. As noted by Weisheit and Wells (1996:384), “the rural dweller has substantially more physical privacy but substantially less social privacy.” Just the opposite is true in urban communities. Urban residents come in contact with many people throughout the course of their day, but they “are unlikely to know (or care) much about the whole of that individual’s social world” (Weisheit and Wells 1996:384). In many respects, high level of acquaintance density might be considered a benefit to living in rural areas. The idea of living in a close-knit

community where problems are handled informally is appealing to many. However, in certain situations this lack of anonymity can be destructive. Rural residents, for instance, may avoid seeking treatment for mental health or substance abuse problems for fear of being labeled by others in the community (Rost, Smith and Taylor 1993). At the same time, a returning offender may find it difficult to be accepted back into a community where everyone is aware of his previous transgressions.

It has been purported that rural communities exhibit certain unique cultural qualities as well. For example, it has been suggested that rural residents are distrustful of outsiders (Weisheit and Donnermeyer 2000). At the same time, rural dwellers have been characterized as being less supportive of public programs and often resist government involvement in their lives (Weisheit and Donnermeyer 2000). Rather than seeking outside or government assistance, rural residents tend to deal with problems on their own or seek the assistance of family and friends (Conger 1997). These cultural barriers make it likely that support services will be under-utilized even when they are readily available in rural communities.

The concept of rural can encompass a wide variety of meanings depending on the context in which it is used. When looking at prisoner reentry from a rural perspective, it is important to recognize that the rural nature of the community can influence the reintegration process on many levels. Therefore, it is important to not limit definitions of rural to simple dichotomous distinctions based on predetermined population counts or economic considerations. The concept of rural must integrate the full meaning of rural to include population, economy, cultural values, and social interactions. For it is only when the concept of rural is broadly defined that the true nature of prisoner reentry in rural communities can be considered.

### **Challenges of Prisoner Reentry**

Inmates face many obstacles as they transition from the institution back into the community, ranging from meeting basic survival needs such as shelter and employment to addressing long-standing problems with addictions or mental illness. Not only do these barriers present problems for the transitioning offender, they also ultimately “present serious risks to the communities to which large numbers of prisoners return” (Travis, et al. 2001:25). Toward this end, many researchers have recognized the importance of both understanding how these obstacles effect the reintegration process and the need to implement programs to make these challenges less daunt-

ing (Petersilia 2001a; Taxman, Young and Bryne 2002; Travis et al. 2001). However, these barriers have only narrowly been considered from an urban perspective, with little regard or guidance on how these obstacles will affect inmates returning to less populated areas.

It is clear that prisoner reentry is a problem in rural areas, especially for those inmates and corrections professionals who reside in these areas. It is important to understand the unique challenges offenders face when returning to rural areas. Due in large part to the unavailability of support services and the unique features of rural life, the barriers rural offenders face are often more challenging and require distinct policy interventions. Specifically, this paper examines the roles housing, employment, substance abuse, and mental health play in the reintegration process. While there has been no systematic research on how these issues influence reentry in rural areas, by combining current research on prisoner reentry with knowledge from other disciplines such as sociology, addictions, and health care, it is possible to gain a better understanding of how these obstacles impede reintegration in rural settings.

### *Housing*

While offenders certainly exhibit a diverse set of needs, it is often the most basic survival needs, such as finding suitable housing, that provide the biggest obstacles to successful reentry (Taxman et al. 2002). It is difficult to imagine how an offender attempting to transition back into the community could be successful without the benefit of a stable residence. As Bradley et al. (2001:1) observed, “housing is the lynchpin that holds the reintegration process together.”

Establishing a causal link between housing and future offending is a difficult task at best. As Rodriguez and Brown (2003:4) point out, “current research suggests that homelessness and incarceration are linked, though the nature of the relationship remains unclear.” Specifically, it is difficult to discern whether homelessness is a contributing factor to crime, or whether it is simply another symptom of other underlying causes such as drug addiction or mental health problems. While it may be difficult to make a direct link between housing and recidivism, it is not difficult to see how housing problems add to the already daunting task of reestablishing community ties. “Ex-offenders who live in a shelter or on the street don’t have a fixed address or phone number where potential employers can contact them” (Rodriguez and Brown 2003:3). In addition, not having a residence will likely make it more difficult to establish connections

with mental health or substance abuse providers (Bradley et al. 2001).

However, despite the obvious importance of housing, there is strong reason to believe that a large percentage of inmates either leave prison without a roof over their heads, or find themselves without a place to live shortly after their release. Below I examine what is known about the extent of the housing problem among offenders and discuss the factors that contribute to this problem. I then explore this issue from a rural perspective by examining what is known about the housing problems in rural areas. I also examine why housing solutions that have shown promise in urban settings may be ineffective and even impractical in rural areas.

**Scope of the problem.** Assessing the scope of the housing problem for ex-offenders is a difficult task. As Rodriguez and Brown (2003:2) point out, “there are no national statistics on homelessness among people leaving correctional facilities.” However, some figures from specific jurisdictions shed light on how widespread the problem might be. In a 1997 report, the California Department of Corrections estimated that as many as 10 percent of the state’s parolees are homeless on any given day, and in some urban areas such as Los Angeles and San Francisco this number is thought to be as high as 50 percent (Travis et al. 2001). Similarly, Bradley et al. (2001) found that a large percentage (33%) of Massachusetts prisoners included in their sample reported being homeless at some point prior to their current commitment. More recently, Metraux and Culhane (2004) found that over 11 percent of inmates released from New York State prisons to New York City between 1995 and 1998 entered a homeless shelter within two years of their release. These numbers become even more alarming when you consider that the national average for homelessness in a given year is approximately 1 percent (Urban Institute 2000b).

A national figure on the extent of homelessness among ex-offenders would undoubtedly be beneficial, but this in itself would fail to capture the true scope of the housing problem for ex-prisoners. While it appears obvious that many ex-offenders find themselves without a place to live following their release, it is likely that many more are living in residences that are less than optimal. Without other alternatives, many likely put themselves back into environments that are not conducive to their rehabilitation (Rodriguez and Brown 2003; Bradley et al. 2001). Additionally, those few offenders who have the money to secure a residence will likely be forced into impoverished neighborhoods where employment opportunities are limited and crime is abundant (Bradley et al. 2001).

**Contributing factors.** There are several factors which contribute to the problems ex-offenders face in securing suitable housing. At the most fundamental level, it is an economic problem (Bradley et al. 2001; Rodriguez and Brown 2003). If offenders had access to unlimited funds, finding appropriate housing would not be an issue. However, the reality is that most offenders find themselves in low-paying jobs with few legitimate means for securing desirable housing (Bradley et al. 2001). While it is true that offenders “face the same social and economic conditions that lead to homelessness among the general population” (Rodriguez and Brown, 2003:3), they also confront additional obstacles due to their criminal conviction.

Offenders who are on probation or parole following their release may be subject to certain conditions which restrict them from living at certain residences or in certain areas (Rodriguez and Brown 2003; Bradley et al. 2001). For example, an offender might not be permitted to return home to a spouse who was a codefendant or victim in the crime. At the same time, because offenders under supervision are subject to such tight controls (i.e. unannounced home visits and restrictions on alcohol and firearms), family and friends may be unwilling to accept them into their homes (Bradley et al. 2001; Rodriguez and Brown 2003). In addition, certain offenders, due to their conviction, may find themselves ineligible for government-funded housing programs. While individual states vary on the restrictions they impose, federal law requires states to exclude certain types of sex offenders and drug offenders from these programs (Legal Action Center 2004).

**Rural housing challenges.** Despite popular belief, “homelessness is not exclusively an urban phenomenon” (Fitchen 1991:177). As is the case with most rural issues, the literature on rural homelessness is sparse. Likewise, there are few national estimates on rural homelessness in the United States (Aron and Fitchen 1996; First, et al. 1994; Fitchen 1991). Most attempts to quantify the homeless population have concentrated on urban areas (Aron and Fitchen 1996; First et al. 1994); however, some studies have made efforts to include rural areas. For example, Burt et al. (1999) estimated, based on 1996 survey data, that 9 percent of the nation’s homeless population resides in rural areas. While estimates of rural homelessness are consistently lower than those based in urban locales, there is a common belief that homelessness in rural areas is disproportionately undercounted (Fitchen 1991; Post 2002).

Unlike much of the highly visible urban homeless population who are seen living on the streets or concentrated in homeless shelters, the rural homeless population tends

to be more widely dispersed and less noticeable (Cooper, O’Hara and Versluys, 2002; Fitchen 1991; Post 2002). As Cooper et al. (2002:10) observed “homelessness in rural areas often manifests itself differently than in urban areas.” Instead of living on the streets or congregating in homeless shelters, the rural homeless are more likely to inhabit abandoned farmhouses or other structures which lack the basic necessities such as running water or electricity (Aron and Fitchen 1996; Cooper et al. 2002; Fitchen 1991). As a result, obtaining reliable counts is difficult.

Not unlike urban homelessness, rural homelessness is ultimately an economic problem (Cooper et al. 2002; Fitchen 1991; Post 2002). However, there is reason to believe that the economic conditions in rural America are more conducive to homelessness. Overall, the poverty rates observed in rural areas are higher than those found in urban communities. More specifically, the Economic Research Service (2004:2) reports that “in 2002, 14.2 percent of the nonmetro population, or 7.5 million people, were poor, compared with 11.6 percent of the metro population.”

There is also a lack of affordable housing options for many rural residents. The majority of the housing stock in rural areas is owner-occupied. The Housing Assistance Council (HAC) (2001) reports that 76 percent of rural households are owner-occupied, which is considerably larger than the national average of 68 percent. However, for many rural residents home ownership is not an option, and they are left to compete for a limited number of rental properties. The unavailability of affordable and quality rental properties has become a major problem in many rural communities (HAC 2003).

As discussed above, there is strong reason to believe that both the economic conditions and the lack of affordable housing options in rural communities contribute to the housing problems faced by rural residents. It is not difficult to see how these same factors serve as roadblocks for ex-inmates as they attempt to reintegrate into rural communities. However, there is more direct evidence to suggest that ex-inmates face profound difficulties maintaining stable housing when returning to rural areas. Based on a survey of the homeless population, Burt et al. (1999) found that rural homeless clients were more likely than their urban counterparts to have been incarcerated; 64 percent of rural homeless individuals had spent time in juvenile detention, jail or prison, compared to 55 percent of clients in central cities and 44 percent of suburban clients.

**Policy implications.** In an attempt to ease the transition of offenders into the community, many programs

have been implemented, and many more proposed with the goal of assisting ex-inmates with their housing needs. In a perfect world, the resources needed to provide stable housing for the 600,000 inmates returning to the community each year would not be an issue. However, “in the current economic climate...few agencies can find additional funds to support housing efforts” (Rodriguez and Brown 2003:4). As a result, many programs have had to rely on the services of existing agencies. Programs such as Project Greenlight, which was implemented in New York City to help offenders find housing after their release, depend on linking offenders with available transitional housing services (Rodriguez and Brown 2003).

Programs such as Project Greenlight have shown great promise in urban settings; however, there is reason to doubt their efficacy in rural areas. Inmates returning to urban communities have the benefit of connecting with existing housing services, but this does not reflect the reality of rural communities. In rural areas, there are simply fewer homeless shelters and other housing programs available to assist returning offenders (Urban Institute 2000a). Furthermore, those programs that do exist are most likely “located in county population centers, or they are multi-county organizations that are not easily accessible” ([http://www.raconline.org/info\\_guides/housing/](http://www.raconline.org/info_guides/housing/)).<sup>1</sup>

It is likely that rural offenders will not have the benefit of a wide array of housing services. As a result, programs designed with the goal of helping offenders find housing in rural communities will have to take a more active role in developing housing options. Instead of simply identifying existing housing referrals, rural solutions will require coordination between local government agencies and existing community organizations such as faith-based groups in order to develop housing options to assist offenders in their reintegration. This will not be an easy task; however, there is reason to be optimistic. While rural areas may lack economic resources, they are “notably rich in social capital” (Aron and Fitchen 1996:85). Program developers will have the advantage of building on the “many bonds of informal support” in smaller communities (Aron and Fitchen 1996:85).

Efforts to increase housing options for rural-bound offenders would certainly benefit from financial resources. However, as discussed above, the current economic climate makes it unlikely that correctional agencies will have the funds necessary to support these efforts. In those situations where money is available, it will likely be reserved for programs in urban settings which are home to higher concentrations of returning offenders. As a result, there is a need to explore alternative funding options for rural-based programs.

A number of funding options exist for local governments and non-profit organizations to increase the availability of affordable housing in rural areas.<sup>2</sup> For example, the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Rural Housing Service (RHS) offers a variety of funding opportunities and loan programs for both non-profit organizations and local governments to increase the availability of rural rental housing. At the same time, private organizations such as the Fannie Mae Foundation offer grants to nonprofit groups for the purpose of increasing affordable housing opportunities in both rural and urban areas. Program developers are encouraged to explore diverse funding opportunities and enlist the assistance of experts in this field.

### *Employment*

Employment has long been considered a necessary component for successful offender reentry (Petersilia 2001a; Travis et al. 2001). This belief is evident by both the large number of programs aimed at improving an offender’s ability to maintain a job in the community, as well as the near universal requirement that offenders under probation or parole supervision maintain employment. Research focusing on the relationship between employment and re-offending reinforces this belief (Wilson et al. 2000). As Travis et al. (2001:31) note, “studies have shown that having a job with decent wages is associated with lower rates of reoffending.” The importance of employment in the successful reintegration of an inmate is obvious in many ways. Most inmates leave prison with little or no savings (Petersilia 2001a), and often with little support from family and friends. Therefore, the availability of legitimate employment opportunities might mean the difference between becoming a contributing member of society or returning to criminal activity. Although it is rarely discussed in the reentry literature, the psychological benefits of obtaining and maintaining a job likely contribute to an offender’s long-term success (Liker 1982).

Despite the importance of employment in successful community reentry, there is compelling evidence that ex-offenders do not fare well in the labor market. As Freeman (2003:9-10) reports, “as far as we can tell from micro-surveys and administrative data, they (ex-inmates) have relatively low employment rates and earn less than other workers with comparable demographic characteristics.” There are two categories of factors which contribute to the problems offenders face when attempting to enter the job market. These factors can be described as “supply-side” and “demand-side” factors (Freeman

2003; Holzer et al. 2001). Supply-side factors refer to the individual characteristics of ex-offenders that affect their employability, such as inadequate job skills or lack of education. Demand-side factors refer to the willingness of employers to hire ex-prisoners. Below, I examine these factors more closely, and look specifically at how these issues affect offenders returning to rural areas. I then examine how the unique features of the rural economic landscape contribute to the employment problems ex-offenders face. Finally, I discuss the implications of these findings for efforts designed to increase the employability of returning inmates.

**Supply-side factors.** It is evident that ex-offenders lack the skills necessary to compete for many jobs. Most have very limited education, leaving them to compete for a shrinking number of unskilled jobs (Freeman 2003). Harlow (2003) reports that over 40 percent of incarcerated adults have not graduated from high school or completed their GED, compared to only 18 percent of the general population. In addition to deficiencies in education, disproportionately large numbers of offenders report having both mental and physical health problems, which will also have a negative effect on their ability to enter the labor market (Freeman 2003). Freeman (2003:10) reports that 21 percent of all offenders report having a medical condition which limits their ability to work, while another 10 to 16 percent report mental health issues as well. These numbers highlight the difficulties ex-offenders face in securing employment following their release; however, they also suggest that effective programs designed to address these problems have great potential for enhancing ex-inmates' chances for success and for improving the well-being of the families and communities to which they will return upon their release (Freeman 2003).

It is unknown whether inmates returning to rural areas are any less prepared to enter the labor market than those reintegrating into urban settings. However, there is no reason to conclude that the skills they possess give them any advantage over their urban counterparts. As will be discussed in more detail below, there is little evidence to suggest that rural inmates are any less affected by factors such as substance abuse or mental health. At the same time, there is at least some reason to believe that inmates coming from rural jurisdictions are less educated than their urban counterparts. One study, for example, found that nearly 19 percent of the rural working-age population did not possess a high school degree or its equivalent, compared to 15 percent of the working-age urban population (McGranahan and Ghelfi 1998). At the same time, rural residents are less likely to have attended college or earned a college degree (McGranahan and

Ghelfi 1998). These findings at least suggest that rural inmates possess fewer of the skills needed to successfully compete in the job market.

**Demand-side factors.** While it is important to consider how offender characteristics impact the employment of ex-offenders, it is equally important to consider the employment demand for this group. As Travis et al. (2001:31) observed, "the stigma attached to incarceration makes it difficult for ex-prisoners to be hired." Recent evidence confirms that many employers are unwilling to hire ex-inmates. A survey of more than three thousand businesses in four cities (Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, and Los Angeles), for example, found that a large percentage of employers were unwilling to hire individuals with a history of incarceration (Holzer, Raphael and Stoll 2002). Only 38 percent of the potential employers surveyed would consider hiring ex-offenders. In addition, 32 percent stated that they consistently utilized background checks, while another 17 percent do so on an inconsistent basis. Holzer et al. (2002) also noted that firms that are most likely to utilize background checks are also the ones most likely to refuse to hire ex-offenders.

The results of this study reveal that all ex-inmates find themselves at a disadvantage when on the job market; however, there is strong reason to believe that this may be more problematic for offenders in rural communities. The ability for employers to act on their aversion to hiring ex-offenders is dependent on their having knowledge of an applicant's criminal record (Holzer et al. 2002). One effective means for obtaining this information is through the use of criminal background checks. However, it appears that a large percentage of employers do not consistently utilize this resource. For instance, Holzer et al. (2002) found that while 62 percent of potential employers would not consider hiring ex-inmates, only 32 percent reported using background checks on a consistent basis. Based on this finding, it is probable that many employers unknowingly have ex-inmates on their payroll. However, this is less likely to occur in rural settings. As discussed earlier, rural areas experience high levels of acquaintance density, "which means that most residents have some level of familiarity with others in the community" (Lewis 2003:4). As a result, it is reasonable to conclude that employers in small communities will have greater knowledge about potential employees, which includes knowledge about prior incarcerations.

The employment disadvantages for inmates returning to rural communities result in part from the characteristics of employers in rural locales. Rural employers are more likely to be small businesses with few employees

(Besser 1997). While this fact in itself is unremarkable from a reentry standpoint, it becomes important given Holzer et al.'s (2002:21) finding that "establishment size distribution among the least willing employers is skewed towards smaller firms." In other words, smaller firms, which are most common in rural communities, are least likely to hire ex-inmates. Similarly, Holzer et al. (2002:22) concluded that service sector employers, whose jobs require contact with customers are "most averse to hiring ex-offenders." This finding is especially concerning for rural-bound offenders who will likely be competing for service related positions after their release. As reported by Gibbs, Kusmin and Cromartie (2004:38), "most low-skill jobs in rural areas are in the service sector." These factors suggest that the employers most abundant in rural areas are also the least willing to hire ex-inmates.

**Rural job market.** In addition to the supply-side and demand-side factors discussed above, there are more general features of rural job markets that exacerbate the difficulties offenders will experience in rural communities. While urban and rural areas experience similar levels of unemployment, there remain large disparities in the wage gap between urban and rural workers. For example, the ERS (n.d.b) reports that "in 2002, average weekly earnings in nonmetro areas were 21 percent lower than in metro areas" (<http://www.ers.usda.gov>). Not surprisingly, rural workers are more likely than their urban counterparts to secure jobs that pay only minimum wage (Whitener and Parker 1996). In short, rural workers earn less than urban workers, and there is no reason to believe that this pattern does not hold true for ex-inmates.

From a reentry perspective, it is not only the ability to hold a job that is crucial, but the ability to hold a job that provides sufficient wages. As Travis et al. (2001:31) note, "reductions in wages are likely to lead to increases in illegal earnings and criminal activity." In fact, Grogger (2000:271) estimates that "a 10-percent increase in wages leads to a 10-percent decrease in the crime participation rate." Due to the realities of the rural job market, it appears that a large percentage of ex-inmates will be unable to find jobs that provide a decent wage, which will likely increase their propensity to return to illegal activity to supplement their income.

**Policy implications.** While both urban and rural offenders face difficult challenges in trying to enter the job market, there is evidence to suggest that correctional-based employment programs have the potential to mitigate some of these problems. In their meta-analysis of evaluation of correctional-based employment programs, Wilson et al. (2000:361) observed that "the evidence from this collection of 33 comparison group evaluations of cor-

rections-based education, vocation, and work programs is that participants are employed at a higher rate and recidivate at a lower rate than nonparticipants." While they caution that their results are likely biased by the poor methodological quality of the studies considered, there is still reason to believe that these programs have promise.

To this point, studies evaluating correctional-based employment programs have not made distinctions between success rates for urban versus rural offenders. Because of the unique economic features of rural communities, it seems appropriate that future research should examine this issue. Understanding more clearly how ex-inmates fare in the rural economic job market will provide policymakers and correctional administrators the guidance necessary to develop programs that will benefit all offenders.

While more research in this area is needed, there is sufficient knowledge to suggest how employment programs might be constructed in order to better serve rural-bound inmates. First, due to the variation between urban and rural job markets, it is obvious that one-size-fits-all training programs are less likely to benefit rural offenders. The lack of diversity in many rural communities indicates that job training programs for rural offenders will need to be matched to the specific needs of the community. While offenders in urban areas might have the benefit of diverse employment opportunities, rural-bound inmates will be constrained by the specific needs of the community to which they intend to return. Therefore, corrections professionals will need to be aware of the diverse needs of the communities they serve, both urban and rural and, when possible, should develop programs that will provide inmates the skills needed to be competitive in their local job markets.

There is also a need to reach out to potential employers. As discussed earlier, many prospective employers are unwilling to consider offenders for employment based solely on their prior incarceration. Even the best designed training programs will be ineffective if offenders are not given the opportunity to use their skills upon release. Therefore, in urban and rural communities alike, there is a need to reach out to potential employers in order to open doors for inmates upon their release. This will require a better understanding of why employers are averse to hiring ex-offenders, so that strategies to overcome these reservations can be developed.

#### *Substance Abuse and Mental Health*

Substance abuse presents one of the biggest challenges facing ex-inmates as they attempt to reintegrate

into society (Travis et al. 2001). The majority of inmates serving time in state and federal prisons have a history of drug and alcohol use. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) reports that 83 percent of all inmates reported past drug use (Mumola 1999). Furthermore, 51 percent of prisoners indicated that they were under the influence of drugs and alcohol at the time they committed their offense (Mumola 1999). Despite the fact that an overwhelming number of inmates report having issues with substance abuse, few appear to be getting the help they need while incarcerated. Mumola (1999:1) reports that only “a third of State, and about a quarter of Federal prisoners - said they had participated in drug or alcohol treatment or other substance abuse programs since admission.”

While not as pronounced as substance abuse, a substantial number of inmates report having mental health issues. Based on the results of a national survey of state and federal inmates, Ditton (1999:1) reported that “an estimated 283,800 mentally ill offenders were incarcerated in the Nation’s prisons and jails.” Similarly, the National Commission on Correctional Health Care (NCCHC) (2002) reported that incarcerated offenders are diagnosed with schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders at a rate which is three to five times greater than the rate for the general population. Incarcerated offenders also experience higher levels of bipolar disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder (NCCHC 2002). It is also important to consider that a significant number of offenders are diagnosed with co-occurring disorders. As reported by Ditton (1999), more than a third of all mentally ill offenders are also diagnosed as alcohol dependent, and 60 percent of mentally ill inmates were under the influence of drugs or alcohol when they committed their crime.

The challenges of reintegration, which are daunting in themselves, are made even more difficult for inmates with substance abuse or mental health problems. Regardless of whether they are returning to urban or rural communities, it is likely that these problems, especially if untreated, will impede the reentry process and lead to further incarceration. While there is some evidence to suggest that rural residents are more protected from certain types of drug use, overall there is little reason to believe that rural inmates are any less affected by substance abuse problems. Furthermore, the literature suggests that rural and urban inmates experience similar rates of mental illness. Below, I examine urban-rural variations in patterns of substance abuse and mental illness. I then discuss some of the barriers rural offenders face in meeting their treatment needs. Finally, I explore the policy implications for programs designed to meet

the needs of rural-bound offenders who require substance abuse or mental health services.

#### **Urban-rural variations in substance abuse.**

Studies that examine variations in urban-rural drug and alcohol use suggest that there are some distinct patterns. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider all of the studies that have contributed to the knowledge on this issue, there are some general themes that appear. First, it appears that overall rural residents are less likely to use illegal drugs. In studies that focus both on juvenile and adult drug usage, the results consistently reveal that drug use is more common in urban communities. For example, Edwards (1997:72) concluded that “there is a lower aggregate level of drug use among youth in very small, rural communities (population less than 2,500) than among those in larger rural and metropolitan communities.” Similarly, information from the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA), confirms that metropolitan residents over the age of 12 are more likely than non-metropolitan residents to abuse illicit drugs (SAMHSA 2003).

While urban residents are disproportionately affected by illicit drug use, it appears that alcohol is more problematic for rural communities (Weisheit and Donnermeyer 2000). The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA 2004) report that underage drinking and binge drinking among youth between the age of 12 and 17 were higher in rural areas than in metropolitan areas. Similarly, Olson, Weisheit and Ellsworth (2001) observed that DUI arrests in rural counties in 1997 greatly exceeded arrest rates in metropolitan areas. Specifically, they report that “the DUI arrest rate for cities of 100,000 or more was approximately 362 per 100,000 people, whereas the DUI arrest rate for rural counties was 835 per 100,000 . . .” (Olson, Weisheit and Ellsworth 2001:11).

Finally, there is also a general consensus that all rural places are not homogenous in their substance abuse patterns (Conger 1997; Edwards 1997). Although many rural areas are largely protected from the problems associated with substance abuse, other rural areas experience rates of substance abuse which often exceed those in metropolitan areas.

There is a substantial amount of research focusing on urban-rural variations in substance abuse among the general population, but relatively little research on urban-rural differences in substance abuse in the criminal population. The evidence that does exist suggests that rural offenders are not less likely than urban offenders to be involved with drugs or alcohol. For example, Dunhart (2000) observed that according to National

Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) data, rural violent crime victims were more likely than urban victims to perceive that the perpetrator was under the influence of drugs or alcohol, which suggests that violent crime in rural areas is more closely linked to substance use. Other evidence suggests that rural offenders may be more prone to use certain types of drugs. Herz's (2000:1) study of methamphetamine use among arrestees in rural Nebraska revealed that "substance abuse in general was more widespread in the city, but there were few rural-urban differences in use of methamphetamine."

The most comprehensive study focusing on urban-rural variation in substance abuse patterns among the prison population was completed by Leukefeld et al. (2002). In their study of 661 prison inmates from Kentucky, they found that urban inmates were more likely to use drugs than rural inmates, but the differences were small. As noted by Leukefeld et al. (2002:723) "the marginally statistical significant differences in drug use between rural and urban incarcerated drug abusers were not expected." Furthermore, they found that "rural respondents reported more frequent use of alcohol and sedatives than did urban drug abusers" (Leukefeld et al. 2002:724). Overall, the idea that rural offenders were more protected from chronic drug use was not supported by this study (Leukefeld et al. 2002).

**Urban-rural variations in mental health.** Although some evidence suggests that mental illness, like substance abuse, is more concentrated in urban areas (Robins et al. 1984), other evidence suggests that these disorders are more evenly distributed (Kessler et al. 1994). The President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health (2004:5), for example, asserts that "the prevalence and incidence of adults with serious mental illnesses (SMI) and children with serious emotional disturbances (SED) are similar between rural and urban populations."

As noted above, there are compelling reasons to believe that mental illness is found at a disproportionately high rate in the prison population. Although few researchers have examined variations in mental illness among urban and rural offenders (Powell et al. 1997), the existing evidence suggests that there is little difference. For example, in their study on rural jail and prison inmates, Powell et al. (1997:435) concluded that "rates of mental illness do not appear to significantly differ whether an offender is incarcerated in an urban or rural prison setting." In short, there is no reason to believe that rural offenders are any less likely to be diagnosed with a mental disorder.

**Barriers to treatment in rural areas.** There is strong evidence to suggest that involvement in substance

abuse treatment can provide great benefits for offenders as they transition into the community (Seiter and Kadela 2003). As Travis et al. (2001:26) report "rates of relapse following release from prison are strikingly high in the absence of treatment." At the same time, it is unlikely that offenders who suffer from mental illness will be able to handle the pressures of community reintegration without proper medication or assistance from mental health professionals. Therefore, regardless of whether offenders are returning to urban or rural areas, it is imperative that they have access to necessary treatment.

There is good reason to believe that rural inmates will be less likely to access services in the community. Studies confirm that rural substance abusers are less apt to utilize treatment resources (Robertson and Donnermeyer 1997), and more specifically, studies confirm that rural inmates are less likely than their urban counterparts to have previously accessed substance abuse services while in the community (Warner and Leukefeld 2001). There is also evidence that residents in rural areas in need of mental health treatment are less willing to seek professional help; a fact which has frequently been proposed to explain why suicide rates are higher in rural communities (Beeson 2000; New Freedom Commission 2004). Below, I examine some of the factors that prevent rural offenders from utilizing treatment resources.

The most obvious barrier for rural offenders in need of treatment is the lack of services available in rural areas. As noted by Robertson (1997:413), "the availability of treatment services appears to vary with population density and proximity to urban areas." Rural communities may be less likely to attract qualified treatment providers and may lack the resources necessary to support a wide array of treatment options (Robertson 1997). In addition, rural residents are more likely to be geographically isolated from treatment facilities (Leukefeld et al. 2002). According to SAMHSA (2002), individuals with substance abuse disorders living in rural areas live an average of 13 miles from their nearest treatment provider, a distance more than seven times greater than their urban counterparts. At the same time, rural residents have less access to public transportation (ERS 2005) and, as a result, are more reliant on private transportation, "which may not be available after incarceration" (Leukefeld et al. 2002:724).

In addition to the structural barriers found in rural areas, there are other unique features of rural communities that discourage offenders from utilizing treatment services. High levels of acquaintance density make it unlikely that those seeking treatment services will be able to keep it a private matter. Research studies focusing on this issue

have supported the contention that rural residents are more likely than urban residents to avoid seeking mental health services out of fear of being labeled by others in the community (Hoyt et al. 1997; Rost, Smith and Taylor 1993). It is likely that these same forces will inhibit returning offenders from accessing the support services they need.

Rural communities often exhibit unique cultural features that can suppress treatment utilization. For example, many researchers have suggested that residents in rural communities are less willing to seek outside assistance for their problems (Conger 1997; Leukefeld et al. 2002; Lewis 2003; Warner and Leukefeld 2001; Weisheit and Donnermeyer 2000; Weisheit and Wells 1996). Conger (1997:48) observed that “compared to urban residents, rural people tend to be more family centered and rely more heavily on family members for help and support during times of need.” At the same time, rural residents tend to be more distrusting of outside assistance and, therefore, are less likely to seek the help of a stranger (Weisheit and Donnermeyer 2000). These factors suggest that rural offenders will be less likely to utilize treatment options even when they are readily available in the community.

**Policy implications.** It is essential that policies initiated to increase treatment utilization among rural bound offenders address the unique challenges facing this population as they return to the community. Policy makers and correctional administrators will need to be cognizant of the fact that both the structural and cultural variations found in rural communities will require interventions very different from those found in urban settings.

Identifying and addressing the criminogenic needs of inmates is paramount regardless of where the offender calls home. However, for the rural offender, this task takes on a new level of significance. Because of the lack of treatment services available in many rural communities, it is essential that corrections professionals view the incarceration as an opportunity for intervention (Leukefeld et al. 2002). Toward this end, rural inmates should be aggressively targeted for participation in treatment programs, especially if they require services that are not offered in their communities. This will require prison officials to have sufficient knowledge of the inmates under their control, as well as an understanding of the treatment services available in rural communities. In addition, it is necessary that institutional treatment staff take this opportunity to address the cultural barriers that might prevent the offender from seeking help in the community.

While actively engaging rural offenders in the

institution is an important first step, it is also essential that policy makers recognize the need to improve the availability of treatment services in rural areas. As detailed above, rural offenders often do not have access to a wide range of treatment options. While one obvious solution would be an increase in government spending to ensure the availability of treatment options in all communities, economic realities make this an unlikely solution. Instead, correctional professionals will need to look for alternative answers to this problem. One option that has received increased attention in the mental health literature has been the utilization of technology to provide services in isolated areas (Cruser, Sperry and Harper 2000). The availability of interactive video technology allows clients in rural areas the ability to connect with mental health professionals. This system has shown promise for delivering services to inmates in rural prisons (Cruser et al. 2000) and should be further explored as an option to provide offenders returning to rural areas the specialized treatment they need.

In addition to exploring the benefits of technology, it may also be necessary to expand the role of community corrections personnel in rural areas. As observed by Ellsworth and Weisheit (1997:210), many community corrections agencies “have yielded to public and political demands to shift work roles from offender service to community protection.” The result has been an increased focus on enforcement aspects of the job. In urban areas, parole staff can more readily compensate for this transition by brokering offenders out to other existing community agencies to meet their needs. However, in rural areas community corrections officers do not have the benefit of diverse referral sources (Ellsworth and Weisheit 1997). Especially in times of crisis, the parole officer may be the only source of support. Therefore, it is crucial that community corrections staff in rural areas have the ability to meet these needs. This may require correctional administrators to hire staff in rural areas that possess more service oriented qualities. Furthermore, it is likely that these professionals will require more diverse training in order to fill the service gaps of the communities they serve.

## **Conclusion**

Offenders face many challenges as they attempt to transition from incarceration to the community. The difficulty of this task is evident by the large percentage of offenders who get caught up in the cycle of incarceration. Furthermore, the issue of prisoner reentry has taken on a new level of importance over the last 25 years due to the

increased number of prisoners who are released into the community each year. In response to this growing concern, researchers have made a commendable effort toward better understanding the challenges offenders face when leaving the institution. At the same time, many programs have been implemented to assist inmates as they reenter society. However, too little attention has been given to the unique challenges facing offenders returning to rural areas. A lack of affordable housing options, few quality employment opportunities, and a lack of community resources represent just a few of the challenges ex-inmates face when they return to rural areas. It is clear that more research is needed both to better understand these challenges and to develop programs that recognize the unique features of rural communities.

### Endnotes

1. In the course of researching this paper, I benefited greatly from a variety of organizations which provided valuable information on rural topics through their websites. In the appendix, I provide a list of these organizations and their homepage addresses. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but should provide a starting point for anyone interested in acquiring further information.

2. The Rural Housing and Economic Gateway website (<http://www.ruralhome.org/gateway/index.htm>) is an excellent resource for anyone interested in obtaining further information on funding sources for rural housing initiatives.

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- Appendix: Rural Websites**
- Economic Research Center  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
<http://www.ers.usda.gov/>
- The Housing Assistance Council  
<http://ruralhome.org/>
- The National Association for Rural Mental Health  
<http://narmh.org/>
- National Center on Rural Justice and Crime Prevention  
Clemson University  
<http://virtual.clemson.edu/groups/ncrj/>
- Rural Assistance Center  
<http://www.raconline.org/>
- Rural Housing and Economic Gateway  
<http://www.ruralhome.org/gateway/index.htm>
- Rural Housing Service  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
<http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/rhs/>
- The Rural Institute  
University of Montana  
<http://ruralinstitute.umn.edu/>
- Rural Policy Research Institute  
<http://rupri.org/>
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**About the author:**

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