



Cops and Corrections: Reentry Collaborations For Public Safety

By Justin Jones and Edward Flynn

Ready or not, more than 650,000 people are expected to be released from state prisons this year, and approximately 9 million individuals will leave U.S. jails.¹ For those who work in a state correctional facility, odds are they will again see more than half of these individuals who are leaving prison — unless significant changes are made in how criminal justice professionals approach their reentry to the community.

If past BJS statistics hold true, more than two-thirds of those released from prison will be rearrested for a new offense within three years, and more than 50 percent will return for committing new crimes or for violating conditions of their supervision.² In a recent report, JFA Associates paints a similarly bleak picture: Individuals are serving longer sentences than ever before and are returning to prisons at alarming rates. About 40 percent of those released from prison will be sent back, many for technical violations of parole or minor offenses.³ The costs will be staggering for correctional budgets and for affected families and communities. Prison crowding and related budgeting issues will continue to make it difficult for corrections to offer the kinds of services that can ease inmates' reentry.

Law Enforcement as Partners

The release and recidivism statistics are not surprising to policing professionals. They only confirm what law enforcement officers have believed all along: that they are arresting and rearresting the same individuals in their jurisdictions time and again. These high rates of recidivism highlight significant public safety challenges that affect jurisdictions of all sizes.

Although there is a relatively small number of places in the country where law enforcement is actively engaged in collaborative reentry initiatives, there is a growing awareness among policymakers and practitioners that correctional and law enforcement agencies should work together to support successful re-integration. In the places where reentry is being approached in a systematic way, correctional and law enforcement agencies are often taking the lead in coordinating and leveraging their resources and expertise to provide people with needed supports, incentives and enhanced supervision.

Though reentry collaborations must include a broad range of criminal justice agencies, law enforcement brings distinct perspectives, tools and resources to the table. The chief executives of law enforcement agencies can ensure that any efforts are publicly framed in terms of the safety issues related to reentry, effectively combating any allegations that reentry is “soft on crime.” They can attest that when there is no coordinated reentry effort, officers on the street repeatedly encounter the same men and women — without positive long-term outcomes for these individuals, their families or the public. Law enforcement agencies are also able to send an important message to people leaving prison. They inform ex-offenders that they are willing to help them find the supports and services they need, while at the same time watching the ex-inmates to hold them accountable for their actions. Leaders in policing know that more must be done to prevent the commission of new crimes and to strengthen communities by helping people returning from prison and jail become contributing members of their neighborhoods.

Because of their history with community policing, law enforcement professionals are uniquely positioned to make the necessary connections between correctional and community service providers, as well as with victims and individuals at risk of involvement with the criminal justice system. Many leaders understand that reentry planning can only be successful if there are appropriate supports in place.

Signs of Progress

In recent years, public safety professionals and community stakeholders have recognized that collaborative reentry strategies can help reduce criminal activity and victimization.⁴ To support these local collaborations, the federal government has made significant investments in reentry grant programs. Other landmark work that has been done to promote multidisciplinary approaches includes the creation of the Reentry Policy Council in 2001 by the Council of State Governments (CSG). This brought together 10 national association partners and more than 100 of the most respected work force, health, housing, public safety, family, community and victim experts in the country to develop detailed recommendations and guidance on reentry. The Reentry Policy Council, now directed by the CSG Justice Center, issued a report in 2005 that reflected this growing commitment to cross-system collaborations. The report includes critical information about the role of law enforcement and corrections, and laid the cornerstone for important future work on comprehensive reentry strategies.

Recognizing the need for a much more detailed, step-by-step plan to include law enforcement in a cooperative reentry initiative, the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Community Oriented Policing Services decided to support the development of a collaborative reentry toolkit. This resource, *Planning and Assessing a Law Enforcement Reentry Strategy*, is being developed by the CSG Justice Center and the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) to provide law enforcement officials with practical information and structure to engage their correctional and community partners in fostering coordinated reentry initiatives. (This tool and other reentry-related resources will be made available at www.reentrypolicy.org.)

Resources for Partnering

The International Association of Chiefs of Police and the Urban Institute have released several recent resources that corrections professionals can use to learn more about the police role in reentry.⁵ These groups, as well as experts from probation, parole, corrections, the community and other disciplines, were involved in the development of the CSG Justice Center/PERF reentry planning and self-assessment tool.

Planning and Assessing a Law Enforcement Reentry Strategy focuses on 10 “elements” that represent the core components that law enforcement needs to assume an effective role in a comprehensive reentry initiative. Each element is first concisely described. Then recommendations for implementation are included, followed by assessment questions for readers to evaluate their own agency’s efforts. Finally, resource lists for more information on the various topic areas are presented. As practitioners will attest, it is unlikely that a single department will have in place every aspect of all 10 elements. The document describes a full range of activities that may be undertaken to initiate or enhance reentry efforts, recognizing that practical barriers such as limited community-based mental health or drug treatment services may restrict the implementation of some recommendations. The planning and assessment tool encourages law enforcement agencies to work with reentry partners in evaluating their own jurisdiction’s progress and to tailor responses to the community’s specific needs and resources. It is not meant to be used as a scorecard but rather as a mechanism for law enforcement to make continual self-assessments. These can help guide improvements, as well as help potential partners, including corrections, fully understand the role of policing professionals and their limitations.

Police executives increasingly recognize the importance of developing and sustaining a partnership with correctional agencies that are involved in almost every aspect of reentry. Many of the following 10 elements require a close law enforcement-corrections working relationship that is built on trust, information-sharing and a common vision.

Viability. The question of viability is one of the first matters that law enforcement executives must consider when thinking about engaging in or expanding their involvement in a collaborative reentry strategy. Political barriers can be among the most difficult to overcome, which is why it is necessary to analyze the current environment to determine the viability of such strategies and to resolve any concerns or address misperceptions. It is critical that executives receive buy-in from elected and appointed officials, the community and the law enforcement agency’s own personnel. Using a number of outreach mechanisms, leaders can garner long-term support for the department’s contributions.

Stakeholder involvement. No agency alone can develop and execute an effective reentry initiative. Program effectiveness is dependent on a strong collaborative effort among stakeholders that includes criminal justice agencies, health and human service agencies, and community leaders. The relationships between agencies and departments must be more than words on paper. To be successful, all involved parties must actively support these formal

partnerships and contribute to the collective effort. Inventories of potential stakeholders and what they bring to the table are included in the toolkit. They serve as starting points for ensuring that the right experts, resources and support structures are put in place.

Priority population. To make the best use of available resources, police officials and their program partners should collectively select a priority population that will be served by the reentry initiative. Though many street officers could intuitively identify who is at greatest risk of committing new crimes, particularly violent crimes, it is critical to base this decision on an analysis of available information, including criminal histories and other police intelligence. Law enforcement information, together with corrections data and input from other reentry partners, can help identify the population that is both at high risk of re-offending and most likely to benefit from the supervision and services that the collaborative program can offer. Working with community-based organizations, the reentry partners can determine whether there are local resources to adequately serve the identified population.

Mission, goals and performance measures. Corrections should work with law enforcement representatives and other partners to develop a structure for the initiative and clarify their commitment to supporting safe and successful reentry. This should be part of the planning process, not something that is developed simultaneously with the program's implementation. All involved parties must agree upon goals and measures before any participants are engaged. The program's mission, goals (ultimately to reduce recidivism) and performance measures will set the tone for the initiative as it progresses. The toolkit provides issues to consider during this part of the planning process.

Initiative's terms and participant identification. Building on the goals and mission, corrections, law enforcement and other partners must work with their staff to develop the initiative's requirements with which participants, once selected, must comply. Program leadership must consider a wide variety of factors during this phase, including mandatory or voluntary enrollment, reporting frequency, involvement of drug testing, application of a curfew and more. It is important that all collaborating agencies agree on a detailed plan that includes what requirements the participants must meet and what appropriate incentives and sanctions will apply.

Information exchange and systems collaboration. Perceived barriers to information exchange often frustrate practitioners. Agencies employ a variety of information systems that are often incompatible with one another, and problems with information-sharing are compounded by agency culture, questions of legal authority and different organizational models. For a reentry initiative to be effective, partner agencies must create systems for appropriate information exchanges and for routine communication. These can range from the use of fully integrated systems to the use of a dedicated stand-alone terminal established in a law enforcement or correctional facility to even the simple exchange of printed reports. To sustain open lines of communication, executives must formalize interagency practices with memoranda of understanding or other

agreements defining the parameters of the arrangement. The toolkit provides examples of agreements and highlights different agencies' efforts to overcome common barriers to sharing information.

Transition planning. Reentry does not happen in one day or even in a year; it is a dynamic, long-term process. An effective reentry strategy may require law enforcement involvement prior to an individual's release from a correctional facility. Law enforcement and correctional executives must collaborate with one another and other partners to exchange key information and prepare the individual (as well as family members, victims of the crimes and the community) for release. Drawing on the relationships developed through a long history of community policing, law enforcement can contribute in many critical areas to making this transition successful.

Enhanced supervision. Given community corrections caseloads, there is a need for other partners to help support supervision. Police executives can work with program partners to design strategies that enable officers to support probation and parole operations. Police agencies can strengthen surveillance and supervision through such activities as sharing information they gather through routine patrol and street-level encounters; helping discouraged individuals from committing future crimes through increased visibility; and engaging service providers, families and the public to support successful re-integration.

Organizational capacity. Reentry partners, including law enforcement and corrections, that recognize the value of participating in a multidisciplinary initiative should establish an organizational structure to support it. Each criminal justice agency should ensure that leaders set a positive tone and clear policy direction for reentry. It is important that department leaders promote and explain the need for the initiative within the agency to ensure buy-in. To create ongoing organizational capacity for reentry, executives must also recruit and identify qualified personnel for any specialized assignments; address staffing and oversight issues; provide personnel with appropriate discretionary authority; set out clear expectations and training; and develop strategies and capacities for promoting the initiative outside the agency.

Sustainability. From a reentry initiative's earliest stages of development, agency leaders must work with other policymakers to help ensure the effort's long-term survival. Executives must develop plans for maintaining program staffing, identifying funds, developing public relations strategies and evaluating efforts. Representatives for law enforcement, corrections and other disciplines should be prepared to make the most of media opportunities to highlight the successes of the reentry partnership, as well as plan for possible media attention that will focus on reentry challenges and negative high-profile events involving participants.

This overview of the 10 essential components of any law enforcement-involved reentry initiative provides a glimpse into the many issues that corrections professionals, law enforcement practitioners, community-based service providers and other partners must address. There is always the concern that such a cursory overview makes it appear that the tasks are easy — they are not. Though a

growing number of jurisdictions are taking on reentry initiatives, there are significant challenges ahead that can only be overcome through long-term collaborations and community support. The best public safety strategy is to address recidivism, thereby reducing further victimization. Collaborative law enforcement efforts are key to this success.

ENDNOTES

¹ Sabol, W.J., T.D. Minton and P.M. Harrison. 2007. *Prison and jail inmates at midyear 2006*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Beck, A.J. 2006. The importance of successful reentry to jail population growth. Presentation of BJS numbers at the Jail Reentry Roundtable of the Urban Institute, 27 June in Washington, D.C. [BJS reported that in 2005, 650,478 people were released from state prisons. Recent forecasts by the Pew Charitable Trusts (Feb. 14, 2007) indicate that the numbers are expected to increase each year under current policies. See *Public Safety, Public Spending: Forecasting America's Prison Population 2007-2011*.]

² Langan, P.A. and D.J. Levin. 2002. *Recidivism of prisoners released in 1994*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

³ Austin, J., T. Clear, T. Duster, D.F. Greenberg, J. Irwin, C. McCoy, A. Mobley, B. Owen and J. Page. 2007. *Unlocking America: Why and how to reduce America's prison population*. Washington, D.C.: The JFA Institute.

⁴ Collins, T.J. 2007. The reentry movement in corrections: Shift in paradigm or passing fad? *Corrections Today*, 69(2): 8, 20.

⁵ For example, see International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP). 2007. *Building an offender reentry program: A guide for law enforcement*. Alexandria, Va.: IACP; La Vigne, N.G., A.L. Solomon, K.A. Beckman and K. Dedel. 2006. *Prisoner reentry and community policing: Strategies for enhancing public safety*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services; Other reentry publications by the Urban Institute may be found at <http://urban.org/justice/index.cfm>.

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