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How Former Prisoners Use Employment,
Social Support, Public Benefits, and Crime
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ABSTRACT

Former prisoners are at high risk of economic insecurity due to the challenges they face in finding employment and to the difficulties of securing and maintaining public assistance while incarcerated. This study examines the processes through which former prisoners attain economic security, examining how they meet basic material needs and achieve upward mobility over time. It draws on unique qualitative data from in-depth, unstructured interviews with a sample of former prisoners followed over a two to three year period to assess how subjects draw upon a combination of employment, social supports, and public benefits to make ends meet. Findings reveal considerable struggle to meet even minimal needs for shelter and food, although economic security and stability can be attained when employment or public benefits are coupled with familial social support. Sustained economic security was rarely achieved absent either strong social support or access to long-term public benefits. However, a select few subjects were able to leverage material support and social networks provided by family and partners into trajectories of upward mobility and economic independence. Implications for the wellbeing of former prisoners and their families are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Former prisoners are at high risk of economic insecurity due to the challenges they face in finding employment and securing and maintaining public assistance while incarcerated or otherwise under criminal justice system supervision. These challenges stem both from the stigma of involvement in the criminal justice system (Pager 2003) as well as the disadvantages that characterize this population, such as low levels of education, mental health problems, and substance use (Visher and Travis 2003). Few prisoners leave prison with jobs or other necessary resources waiting for them on the outside (Travis 2005).

Given these challenges, the well-being of former prisoners is likely to be heavily determined by their access to and effective use of both public and non-profit social services and by their ability to access social support from family, friends, and romantic partners. Yet we know little about how former prisoners make ends meet after their release from prison, how or why some are able to secure services and supports while others are not, or which services and supports create pathways to employment or long-term legitimate income sources. Because economic security during the period immediately after prison is important to establishing a conventional lifestyle rather than returning to crime, understanding how former prisoners make ends meet may help us to understand longer-term post-prison trajectories. Indeed, the prospects for successful reentry are often dim, as the chances of returning to prison within three years range from 50 to 75% percent or greater depending on individual and geographic characteristics (Langan, Levin, and United States. Bureau of Justice 2002).

A primary reason for these gaps in our knowledge is that this population is difficult to study. Current and former prisoners are often absent from large scale surveys, as the institutionalized population is usually excluded from the sampling frame of social science datasets, and those involved in the criminal justice system are thought to be only loosely attached to households, which typically form the basis for sampling. Moreover, this population is difficult to recruit while under community supervision or in custody without the assistance of criminal justice authorities and difficult to follow over time due to high rates of residential mobility.

This research draws on unique qualitative data from in-depth, unstructured interviews with a sample of former prisoners followed over a two to three year period, beginning just prior to their release from prison. We focus on the processes through which our subjects attain economic security. We examine how they develop stable resources to meet their basic material

needs for shelter and food and how they achieve upward mobility. Our primary research question is: how do former prisoners make ends meet after release? More specifically, how do they gain access to social support, social services, and employment? Which forms of social support and social services are conducive to improved prospects for long-term employment or other permanent sources of income in this population? How do former prisoners achieve economic stability and upward mobility over time?

Our findings reveal a sobering portrait of the challenges of meeting even one's basic needs for food and shelter after prison, as many subjects struggled with economic security while navigating the labor market with a felony record and low human capital, attempting to stay away from drugs and alcohol, and re-establishing social ties. However, our results also show how many former prisoners do manage to attain some level of economic security and stability by combining employment, public benefits, social services, and social supports. Although employment was important for many, long-term economic security was rarely achieved without either strong social support from family or romantic partners or access to long-term public benefits like SSI and housing assistance. While some subjects achieved economic stability, only a select few were able to leverage material support and social networks from family and partners into a trajectory of upward mobility and economic independence.

EMPLOYMENT, HOMELESSNESS, AND SERVICE USE AMONG FORMER PRISONERS

Questions about the poverty and unmet basic material needs of former prisoners have become increasingly important as this population expands. Over the last two decades, the number of individuals incarcerated in prisons and jails in the United States has risen dramatically. In 1975 the population in jails and prisons on any given day in the US was roughly 400,000 people, but by 2003 this number increased more than fivefold to 2.1 million (Western 2006). As a consequence of this dramatic rise in incarceration, many communities are now grappling with the problem of reintegrating former prisoners. Roughly 600,000 people are released each year from state and federal prisons in the U.S., and about 80 percent of them are released on parole (Raphael 2011). The large number of individuals exiting prison every year and evidence of incarceration's effects (e.g. Holzer, Offner, and Sorensen 2005b; Manza and Uggen 2006; Pager 2003; Western 2006) have prompted renewed interest among academics and

policy makers in the challenges of integrating former prisoners back into society (Visher and Travis 2003).

Incarceration is disproportionately experienced by young, low skill, African-American men, and has important consequences for their well-being. For example, declining labor force participation by young black men during the late 1990s, when a strong economy pulled other low-skill workers into the labor market, has been attributed to incarceration and its effects (Holzer, Offner, and Sorensen 2005b). Previous research has demonstrated that the steady flow of people into and out of prisons has played a role in increasing inequality in recent decades, primarily by reducing opportunities for employment and lowering wages (Western 2006).

Securing stable employment is a key challenge for former prisoners and a strong predictor of desistance from crime (Raphael 2011). Previous research on the employment prospects of returning prisoners has focused mainly on the effects of the stigma of felony convictions or serving time in prison on employment (Pager 2003; Western 2006). The importance of employment is heightened by its link to recidivism. There is fairly strong evidence both that criminal behavior is responsive to changes in employment status (Hagan 1993; Sampson and Laub 1993; Tanner, Davies, and O'Grady 1999; Uggen 2000; Visher, Debus-Sherrill, and Yahner 2010) and that incarceration or other contact with the criminal justice system reduces subsequent employment and wages (Freeman, Peterson, and Vroman 1992; Raphael 2006; Western 2006). There is even some evidence that employment among former prisoners peaks in the months following release and then declines over time (Pettit and Lyons 2007; Sabol 2007; Tyler and Kling 2007). The difficulty of obtaining and maintaining employment for former prisoners is illustrated by a recent Joyce Foundation demonstration project on transitional jobs (Kirk and Laub 2010). Although those who were randomized to receive transitional jobs participated at extremely high rates, one year later they were no less likely to be unemployed or to have returned to prison than the control group.

Previous research has also shown high rates of homelessness among former prisoners (Metraux and Culhane 2004; Roman and Travis 2006). After release, former prisoners must rely on family, friends, or institutional living arrangements such as treatment centers, halfway houses, and homeless shelters to secure housing (Travis 2005) and there is some evidence that, for many, this need persists far after release. Visher et al. (2004) report that, among 147 former prisoners from Baltimore one-year after release, 19 percent lived in their own home, 69 percent lived in

someone else's home, and 10 percent lived in a residential treatment center. Despite heavy reliance upon shared housing arrangements, securing housing with family or friends may be complicated by rules that bar those with a felony record from public housing developments or Section 8 housing (Travis 2005).

Besides exclusion of certain offenders from federally supported housing, many states also ban those with felony convictions from benefits such as food stamps, TANF, and SSI, either permanently or temporarily (Kirk 2011a; Kirk 2011b; Raphael and Stoll 2009; Travis 2005; West, Sabol, and Greenman 2010), although states may "opt out" of these bans, as Michigan does. Moreover, offenders who were receiving state and federal income support often face the loss of these benefits during incarceration, some of which can cease once a person has been incarcerated for 30 days or longer (Khan, Epperson, Mateu-Gelabert, Bolyard, Sandoval, and Friedman 2011). Reinstating these benefits following a period of incarceration can be an arduous process (Holzer, Offner, and Sorensen 2005a). Furthermore, offenders who were receiving educational financial aid at the time of a felony drug conviction are barred from receiving this aid for a period of time based on the number of felony convictions they have received, although eligibility is reinstated once the offender completes a drug treatment program (20 USC §1091 United States Code). Notably, restrictions on many public benefits apply largely to drug offenders. Because drug-related offenses constitute the majority of crimes committed by women, it is likely that female offenders are disproportionately impacted by these restrictions (Pew Center on the States 2008).¹

The challenges facing former prisoners with regard to employment, income supports, and homelessness raise a number of questions about how former prisoners make ends meet after prison. Given challenges in finding employment, how do they meet their basic material needs for shelter and food? Which former prisoners are able to meet these needs through social services, public benefits, and support from family and friends rather than by returning to crime? And which short-term solutions lead to more successful reintegration into the labor market in the longer term?

¹ Our study was conducted in Michigan, a state with relatively fewer restrictions on services and support for former offenders than other states. Those with felony convictions or recently released from prisoner remain eligible for Medicaid, food stamps, SSI, and federal financial aid.

METHODOLOGY: DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

We take an inductive approach, relying upon qualitative methods as those best suited to uncover diverse and complex social processes. In qualitative interviews, the researcher can begin to reveal the subject's understanding of his or her experiences, gather data on the details of those experiences, and explore if and how the processes suggested in the literature square with the subject's experiences and conceptualizations (Lofland and Lofland 1995). Our data come from in-depth longitudinal qualitative interviews that probe the social, economic, and cultural processes related to prisoner reentry and criminal desistance. The sample of 15 male and seven female interview subjects was selected from Michigan Department of Corrections' (MDOC) administrative records, based on their expected date of release (in order to select offenders who would be released within two months of the baseline interview) and county of release (to focus on four counties in Southeast Michigan).

Our goal in selecting subjects was to ensure racial and gender diversity, diversity of local geographic context, and diversity of services and supervision provided by MDOC. Accordingly, the sample was stratified by gender, race (white vs. black), reentry county (urban vs. suburban), and type of release (parolee receiving services from Michigan Prisoner Reentry Initiative [MPRI], parolee not receiving MPRI services, or being released without parole [i.e., "maxing" out]).² Within the categories defined by these characteristics, potential subjects available at the time of recruitment were selected at random. Three male subjects refused to participate in the study and one female subject was discontinued from the study after she was denied parole following the first in-prison interview. These subjects were replaced by additional randomly selected individuals with the same sampling characteristics, resulting in a response rate for in-prison pre-release interviews of 86% (24/28).

Individuals involved in criminal activity, the criminal justice system, and substance abuse are challenging to study. Although we began the study with pre-release interviews with 24 subjects, two subjects, one male and one female, left the study immediately following their prison release. These subjects were younger than our average subject, and both were

² The Michigan Prisoner Reentry Initiative is a statewide policy effort to reduce crime and incarceration by providing additional services to parolees and by implementing a regime of "graduated sanctions" for technical parole violations. During our research, MPRI was still being phased in, and not all parolees received services. During subject recruitment, MPRI parolees tended to be those classified as "high risk" or "medium risk" by MDOC. This research is not an evaluation of MPRI.

subsequently convicted of new crimes. All remaining 22 subjects were interviewed once before release, and were interviewed repeatedly during the two years following their release, with follow-up interviews targeted at approximately 1, 2, 6, 9, 12, 18 and 24 months (see Appendix A for detailed interview timing), for a total of 138 interviews.

We intentionally allowed post-release interview timing to vary somewhat across subjects depending on their circumstances. In some cases we conducted interviews more frequently when their lives seemed particularly unstable. In other cases subjects took up criminal behaviors – using drugs, committing other crimes, and absconding from parole – for a period of months. For these individuals, we were able to complete interviews at a later date that discussed the missed time period, including follow-up interviews in prison with three subjects. For all but one of our subjects who committed new crimes, we were able to interview the subject at some point afterwards, sometimes after the two-year period that is the main focus of this study. One subject was killed in a shooting during the second year of the study. Another subject achieved stable employment and marriage one year after release and did not require further formal interviews, although we kept in touch with him informally throughout the study period and monitored his parole agent case notes for arrests or other indications of re-offending, of which there were none.³ For all but two subjects, we obtained consent to access their MDOC records, allowing us to view their parole agent case notes for updated contact information, substance use tests, parole violations, and arrests. In total, we were able to maintain regular contact with 19 subjects across the two-year period, although this involved less frequent interviews with four imprisoned subjects once they were incarcerated, and a truncated interview schedule with the subject who was killed. Three subjects attrited during the course of the study at 2, 12 and 20 months.

In-prison interviews were conducted in a private office or an otherwise empty visiting room. MDOC regulations forbid recorders within prisons, so field notes were used to document in-prison interviews. Post-release interviews, conducted in the subjects' residences, the researchers' offices, or in a public location, were recorded and transcribed. Interviews covered a diverse array of topics, both researcher and subject driven, but focused on the subject's community context, family roles and relationships, criminal activities and experiences, life in prison, service use, and health and well-being, including drug and alcohol abuse. Initial in-prison interviews were roughly 90 minutes long, while follow-up interviews usually lasted between one

³ This subject reached a "saturation point" after three consecutive interviews revealed little new information about his circumstances, plans, or perspectives, owing to his stable family and employment situation.

and two hours. Subjects were matched with interviewer on gender but not race. Our research design captures subjects both directly before release, allowing for investigation of subject's pre-release expectations, and during the first two years after release, a critical period for desistance (Raphael 2011). We are aware of no other longitudinal qualitative study of reentering prisoners that both begins before release and follows subjects for up to two years.

Half of the male sample is white and half black.⁴ At the initial interview, men ranged in age from 22 to 71, with most subjects in their late-twenties to early-thirties. Crimes of which male subjects were convicted range from armed robbery to driving under the influence (multiple convictions can lead to imprisonment) to manslaughter. Five male subjects were being released from prison for the first time; all others had experienced multiple prison spells.⁵ The female sample is also half white and half black. Women ranged in age from 22 to 52 at the initial interview, with most subjects in their late-thirties or early forties. Women's crimes ranged from felony firearm possession to retail fraud to drug selling. Three women were leaving prison on their first release; the other four had served previous prison terms. We assigned pseudonyms to all subjects and to any other individuals mentioned by name.

The coding and analysis of the field notes and transcripts was conducted using Atlas TI qualitative software. We generated an initial list of codes prior to analysis based on categories and concepts motivated by theory and prior empirical research, and then developed additional codes during the course of the analysis. The analysis alternates between two parallel forms, subject-based analysis, which considers the details of each case and interconnections between domains, and cross-case analysis, which looks for patterns across individuals within domains. For this analysis, we have used the field notes and transcripts to carefully code information regarding job search and employment, use of public and private social services and informal sources of support from family and friends, as well as barriers to accessing employment, services and supports. We then began our analysis by creating a detailed timeline and summary of employment, services and social supports for each subject, paying particular attention to changes over time and to whether and how basic material needs – particularly shelter and food – were being met.

⁴ Latinos make up a very small proportion of the Michigan population and of individuals released from Michigan prisons.

⁵ This does not include time in jail. Whereas jails are run by local cities and counties and hold individuals with sentences less than one or two years or awaiting trial, prisons are run by the states or the federal government and hold individuals who have longer sentences.

Five states of material wellbeing emerged from the data, which we term (a) Desperation, (b) Survival, (c) Stability, (d) Mobility, and a residual category, (e) Custody. “Desperation” refers to extreme material need: living on the streets or in abandoned buildings and not having enough food to eat. Few subjects experienced this state of extreme deprivation, and those who did so experienced it for only brief periods of time. “Survival” refers to a state in which the individual is “getting by” day to day, but housing and food sources are unstable and insecure. Those living in homeless shelters and relying on soup kitchens or food pantries fall into this category, as do those who are moving from household to household frequently, relying on short term social support for shelter and food. We also include in this category those who are living in short-term transitional or temporary housing or in residential treatment programs with an impending end date. Individuals with housing of their own that they were nonetheless at risk of losing, due to impending losses of public benefits or social supports, were also characterized as unstable and in the “survival” state.

“Stability” refers to a stable living arrangement in which shelter and food needs are being met and there is reasonable certainty that this state will persist for the foreseeable future. An individual who lives with his or her parents after release and can stay there as long as necessary would fall into this category. We also characterized individuals as stable when they had sufficient income from either employment or public assistance (typically SSI) to meet their basic needs, as long as they themselves perceived their circumstances to be permanent.

“Mobility” was reserved for individuals who were not only stable, but had sufficient resources or prospects for advancement to move beyond a day-to-day existence and toward a more middle class standard of living. For example, an individual with the resources to sustain attendance at college or who has secured a job with good prospects for career advancement and improved future income would be characterized as upwardly mobile. Individuals in this category had strong stakes in conformity, commitments to conventional norms, and low levels of material stress. Few of our subjects ever achieved this state of economic security. Finally, the state of “Custody” occurs when an individual is under custody for either a short or long period of time and therefore shelter and food needs are being met by the jail, prison, program, or detention center where he or she is housed.

Because we observed considerable movement between these states among our subjects, our next step in the analysis was to develop a typology of trajectories of these states over time based on the patterns of transitions between states. These trajectories, which we describe in greater detail in the results section below, are divided into four groups: (1) constant desperation and survival (failure to achieve any stability), (2) transitions back and forth between desperation or survival and stability, (3) transition to maintained stability, and (4) stability followed by upward mobility. Of our 22 subjects, we characterize seven as being in a constant state of desperation or survival throughout their time in the community. Another six subjects achieved stability at some point but fell back to a survival state again at least once. Four subjects transitioned to the stability state and remained there, and four achieved upward mobility.

Finally, we compare across subjects with different trajectories to understand how some former prisoners achieve long-term stability and/or mobility while others are in a constant state of mere survival. For example, to understand why some subjects who are in the stable state at release are able to transition to mobility while others are not, we compare the experiences of individuals in group 3 with those in group 4. To understand why some subjects fail to achieve any stability while others who start out in the survival state transition to a more stable material existence, we compare individuals in group 1 with those in groups 2 and 3. In using these comparisons in the analysis below we take into account the role of individual characteristics at release (e.g. race, gender, education and work experience, prior addiction) but focus on the *processes* through which transitions are made (e.g. reconnecting with family or romantic partners to garner social support, securing public benefits, strategies to overcome the felony stigma in the labor market). In other words, our in-depth qualitative data allows us to trace in ethnographic detail over time how subjects came to be in particular states, and what opportunities and resources they did and did not pursue or have access to.

For the purposes of this analysis, we also paid careful attention to material resources secured through criminal activity as well as other involvement in criminal activity and contact with the justice system, as these activities are tightly linked with securing basic material needs through more conventional means. We consider crime to be illegal behavior, whether or not such behavior was known to law enforcement authorities. Although drug use is technically a crime, we treat personal substance use as an intervening process that often, but not always, led to other criminal behavior. By this definition, four of the 15 men and two of the seven women remained crime free two years after release.

We close this discussion of our data and analysis by noting a feature of our sample that is important for understanding our subjects' trajectories of material wellbeing. Like most former prisoners, our subjects have high rates of drug and alcohol addiction, and these issues played an important role in their attempts to secure social supports, their ability to comply with service providers' expectations, and their capacity to gain and sustain employment. Our interviews made clear that conventional measures of involvement in drugs, such as whether a subject has been convicted of a drug-related crime, understate the prevalence and significance of these addictions. The majority of subjects' crimes were committed while under the influence of drugs or alcohol or motivated by drugs. Six of our 15 male subjects characterized themselves as alcoholics, five as both drug abusers and alcoholics, three as drug abusers solely, and only one reported no addiction to drugs or alcohol. Of seven female subjects, four characterized themselves as drug addicted, one as drug and alcohol addicted, and one as formerly drug addicted. Only one woman did not describe a serious current or past problem with drugs or alcohol. Moreover, both of the women who did not currently think of themselves as addicts had been incarcerated for criminal offenses involving drugs (sale or transport).⁶

Although our observations about the tight link between drugs and crime comports with some prior research, such as one study showing that over half of those arrested and booked for serious crimes tested positive for drugs (Feucht and Kyle 1996), we also recognize that the causal connection between drug and alcohol abuse and criminal offending is difficult to disentangle.

RESULTS

We begin by describing the four trajectories of material wellbeing and fulfillment of basic needs that we observed in our data, providing examples of each and describing how subjects combined various sources of material resources to make ends meet, both immediately after release and over time. We then compare subjects to understand the processes through which some subjects were able to achieve trajectories of economic stability or upward mobility after release from prison, while others were not.

⁶ Though almost all subjects on parole were regularly tested for drug and alcohol use when they reported to their parole officers, a failed test alone never resulted in a return to prison. Instead, parole officers who discovered (via tests or otherwise) their clients had returned to substance use first required them to enter treatment.

Making Ends Meet: Trajectories of Survival, Stability, and Upward Mobility

Our analysis begins with descriptions of the four trajectories we observe among our subjects. While identifying and describing typical trajectories requires considerable simplification of complex patterns, these four trajectories broadly capture significant distinctions between our subjects. The trajectories vary in the level of economic security that the former prisoner achieves, the speed with which the subject attains that economic security, and whether that security is maintained over time. We emphasize that many subjects experienced frequent transitions between states of economic security and insecurity.

Seven of our subjects achieved little if any long-term economic security in the years following their release. At best these individuals vacillated between extreme desperation and mere survival, never realizing any sustained period of material security or ability to meet basic needs. Most but not all of these subjects struggled mightily with substance abuse and addiction. In some cases this prevented them from effectively seeking employment and developing the social ties necessary to secure housing and food through social support, but in other cases, drug or alcohol relapse resulted from initial failures at these goals. This group also tended to maintain substantial involvement with the criminal justice system, facing additional sanctions such as drug treatment, short jail stays, and returns to prison. An example of this trajectory is Kristine.

Kristine is a single white woman in her mid-forties who has served four prison, five jail and three probation sentences, all for retail fraud or receiving stolen property. Her criminality is intimately linked with her long-term addiction to both crack and heroin. Kristine's case illustrates both the significant barriers to economic stability experienced by many of our subjects in the survival/desperation trajectory as well as the challenges they faced leveraging available resources into stability due to addiction.

Upon her release from prison, Kristine moved back in with her mother, a retired autoworker living off social security, a small pension and a little office-cleaning work on the side. Confined to the house by tether, Kristine spent her days lying on the couch, talking on the phone and attending her mandated parole office visits. While she hoped to return to waitressing once her tether was removed, her health problems posed a substantial barrier. Kristine struggled with searing pain and numbness in her back and leg, stemming from a car accident, which made long periods of standing impossible. Both the medication she took to control the pain as well as her hepatitis C made her sleepy, and she often napped during the day. Clearly not a promising

job candidate, she applied for SSI but was turned down. Aside from \$162 she received monthly in food stamps, her only income came from assisting her mother with office cleaning and occasionally cleaning her sister's home. Her mother supplied everything else that Kristine needed.

Soon after completing three months on tether, Kristine sought out old friends, which led to a serious episode of relapse. During this period Kristine explained that she shot up heroin three times daily, prostituted herself and committed retail fraud; she "went to the stores," six or seven times over the course of one week. Although she returned to her mother's house following this episode, she was not clean for long, and caught a new case of retail fraud the following month. Over the next six months she alternated between living at home with her mother, in- and out-patient treatment facilities, and jail.

One episode of relapse particularly illustrates how the power of addiction interfered with Kristine's ability to leverage even the meager resources available to her. Following a three month sentence in a technical rule violation center, where Kristine had been sentenced for a variety of parole violations, she was released into the community. She soon secured a job cleaning hotel rooms through an old friend who worked for the company. Unfortunately, this friend had a substantial drug problem and frequently used on the job. When the friend offered Kristine crack one day at work, Kristine was not strong enough to resist. Spiraling into relapse, she lost her job.

Although some resources were available, Kristine's inability to secure employment or substantial government benefits meant that, aside from reapplying for SSI, she had little hope of acquiring economic independence. While living off of her mother's good-will was a temporary solution, her mother's age and health problems meant that it was not going to be a solution in the long-term. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, for Kristine as for others in this category, addiction kept her from leveraging the nominal resources that were available.

Seven subjects experienced a second trajectory, attaining some degree of long-term stability but then transitioning back to the survival state, and sometimes back to stability again. This trajectory is characterized by transitions back and forth between periods of desperation or survival and longer periods of security. Upon release most subjects in this category struggled to maintain access to food and shelter but eventually managed to achieve stability through either employment, family support, or some combination of the two, only to see that stability evaporate

when a living situation with family or partner turned to conflict, layoff or job loss occurred, or crucial supports for maintaining employment, such as transportation assistance, were lost. Others started out immediately with strong family supports that provided for their basic needs, but either rejected these supports after a time or were asked to leave by their families. Often these downward transitions were accompanied by relapse to addiction or by minor property crimes intended to generate economic resources. Social supports provided by family or romantic partners often but not always allowed for some sort of stability despite struggles with employment.

One example is Lamar, a single African-American man in his forties with no children who served two prison terms for armed robbery. His case illustrates the tenuousness of the stability state, especially when social supports are weak, help from social service programs is short-lived, and prospects for a living-wage job are slim. A high school graduate from a foster family, Lamar got involved in the “party scene” in his late teens and early twenties, and eventually committed multiple armed robberies for money to buy drugs and pay living expenses. He was released on parole once but was returned to prison when he committed another armed robbery. After his second release he was re-incarcerated for a parole violation when a friend hid a gun under the passenger seat of his car. Paroled a third time in fall 2007, Lamar lived for a week with his foster brother before moving to the city’s homeless shelter. He took his breakfasts at a local soup kitchen, obtained food stamps, and spent his days applying for jobs, taking the bus everywhere he could and completing applications. He estimates that he applied for over 200 jobs in the months after his release. His persistence paid off with two part-time service sector jobs, one stocking shelves and another in a fast-food restaurant. With this new source of income and help from the state’s prisoner reentry program, he secured a subsidized room in a boarding house. Meanwhile, he also continued to “party” and use cocaine on the weekends, carefully timing his use to avoid detection by his parole officer. Soon thereafter Lamar landed a full-time job as a line cook at a newly opened restaurant, but then lost that job after a conflict with the manager around the breaks he needed due to a medical condition that made him sensitive to the hot work environment in the kitchen. Not long before his room subsidy was set to run out, he got a job as a taxi driver, and with this new income, meager savings and some additional help from the reentry program, he secured his own apartment.

At this point, by his own admission, he became a little too comfortable with his new economic stability and success on parole and began to make mistakes. Lamar skipped appointments with his parole officer when they coincided with the most lucrative taxi shifts, bought some stolen money orders from a neighbor for a fraction of their face value, and was accused by his sister-in-law of stealing and pawning some jewelry (though this later turned out to be a misunderstanding). This was enough to result in another parole violation, and he was returned to prison for almost a year. All of the progress he had made toward economic stability and all the possessions he accumulated were lost when he was arrested and returned to prison. Almost two years after his last parole, he was paroled again, returning to a rooming house for parolees, this time entering into a recessionary economy. Once more deploying his strategy of applying for every job he could, Lamar eventually got a food service job through a temp service, and rented a small apartment of his own, but lost the job and then the apartment when the temporary job was over and he did not get hired for a permanent position. Over three years after we first met him, Lamar moved back to the city's homeless shelter. His experiences are typical of the tenuous hold on economic security that characterizes individuals in this trajectory, as illustrated by the frequent transitions between survival and stability and back to survival.

Four subjects experienced a clear upward trajectory to economic security and maintained that economic security over time. These subjects tended to receive substantial family support in addition to another source of support like low-wage employment, public benefits or a government program. The combination of the two meant that family did not have to be relied upon constantly, which can strain such relationships, but could be accessed on an as-needed basis to maintain one's gains when benefits were cut off or a job loss occurred. Despite these advantages, upward mobility was out of reach because the subjects did not have the human capital or social networks to land a more lucrative job and their social support was insufficient to increase their education, at least in the short term. An example of this trajectory is Jennifer.

Jennifer, 38, is a single white woman with two grown children and one adolescent. She gave birth to the first of these children at 13, at which point she dropped out of school. The next twenty-five years were spent selling drugs, using drugs or in jail. Upon her prison release she received substantial material support from family and an old "fiancé," with whom she was no longer romantically involved. She initially relied upon this fiancé for housing, food and transportation. A few months later, her sisters were able to purchase a trailer from an elderly

relative that was to be Jennifer's new home. They also provided the money needed to move the trailer to a "felon-friendly" trailer park and pay the first month's lot rent. Set up in her own home, Jennifer was able to regain custody of her young son. Her son brought with him \$125 he received in food stamps monthly, and the SSI payments he received on behalf of his father, who suffered from rheumatoid arthritis. These benefits provided a source of economic stability while Jennifer sought out her own government benefits; applying for Medicaid, SSI, food stamps and TANF. Her TANF and food stamp award came through first, granting her and her son an additional \$600 per month. Soon after she was approved for SSI, both for illiteracy and the chronic injuries she had sustained as a result of a car accident. She and her son together received roughly \$1100 monthly in government benefits, which her sisters and girlfriend supplemented occasionally with money or food stamps, as needed. With the help of family support and substantial government benefits, Jennifer attained economic stability, albeit at a level below the poverty line.

Jennifer was able to attain stability quickly upon release by leveraging family and partner supports to meet her basic needs for food, transportation and housing, and soon thereafter established SSI and food stamps, assuring her a meager but steady income stream for life. Yet Jennifer's chances of achieving mobility beyond this foundational state were slim. Illiterate and beset by learning disabilities, a felony record and a seventh-grade education, Jennifer had little chance of securing a job, and, unsurprisingly, her neighborhood job search turned up nothing. Jennifer had held a job only once in her life, a six-month food service position when she was 16. Additionally, while family provided important assistance, family ties were never going to lead to upward mobility. All of her family members and her romantic partner were poor, justice-involved, and either unemployed or working low-wage jobs. While other subjects in this category attained stability via different paths, such as by securing low-wage employment, they too were able to do so only with the substantial support of romantic partners and family. Like Jennifer, others in the stability state often had no clear path to upward mobility.

Finally, four subjects were upwardly mobile. They were released to families or partners who had substantial support to give. These were typically middle class families that could offer not only a place to stay and food to eat but long-term shelter and other material resources. Often this support was accompanied by job networks that led to higher paying and more stable employment or provided the "breathing space" to search for the right job or return to school

without having to worry about material needs in the shorter term. Individual characteristics enabled this trajectory as well, as these subjects had the educational or employment backgrounds to take full advantage of such opportunities. Daniel provides an example of this trajectory.

Daniel, a single white male in his early thirties with no children, got involved with drugs in his mid-teens, and was regularly carrying a gun by age 17. As a 21-year-old, Daniel and a friend decided to rob an associate, and in so doing, Daniel shot the man in the back of the head. His only previous offense had been loitering in a house that was being monitored for drug activity. After serving 12 years for manslaughter, Daniel moved in with his father and stepmother, who were both retired and living on social security benefits. He lived at this residence for close to a year and a half. While Daniel made some attempts to look for other housing during this period, he was not pressured to move or to contribute rent or household expenses until after he found a job, at which point he was asked to contribute \$75 per month. In addition, Daniel enjoyed the benefits of a high school diploma and freedom from the addictions that plagued many of our other subjects.

With a stable residence and basic needs met, Daniel was able to take the time needed to look for a job with long-term career opportunities. Although before prison Daniel made the majority of his income selling drugs, he had also had legitimate work experience as a forklift driver. While he remained willing to work for low-wage jobs and had applied to various jobs, he also scoured his social network, trying to find job opportunities through his neighbors, brothers, and friends. More than six months after release, he started his first job, which he located through a family friend. He worked full-time for a janitorial supply company—eventually receiving benefits—while he also pursued his longer term career goal, employment as a physical trainer.

Once Daniel became a full-time personal trainer, he was able to move into his own apartment. Stably employed, he applied for grants to further his education in the realm of nutrition and personal training. Although Daniel benefited from a strong drive to succeed and a commitment to his chosen career, he also benefited every step of the way from family support and a social network that provided him with the resources to pursue this interest. His family paid for his initial gym membership; his sister drove him to appointments, his father let him take his car to drive to his first job; he found the job at the gym through a friend; his mother put him on her credit card so he could improve his credit score; and his cousin helped him find his first apartment. Daniel's case illustrates how strong family support can provide a crucial foundation for upward mobility.

How Stability is Achieved

How and why do some former prisoners achieve economic stability while others do not? In this section we draw upon comparisons across individual subjects on different trajectories to understand the sources of this variation. We highlight three primary resources through which stability of economic security (though typically not upward mobility) was achieved: employment, social supports, and public benefits. The examples we discuss below will also reveal, however, that success in one pathway was often contingent upon individual characteristics and access to other resources as well.

Employment: As the normative pathway to economic security and social reintegration (particularly for men), finding a job was the primary short-term goal of almost all subjects at the pre-release interview. Moreover, for those ineligible for public benefits like SSI or Section 8 housing vouchers, employment would be the primary means of attaining long-term economic security. The barriers facing former prisoners in the labor market, the stigma of a felony record and low levels of education and work experience coupled with health and substance abuse problems, are well known.⁷ Yet many of our subjects found employment, and some were able to translate this employment into a trajectory of long-term economic security. Some, like Lamar above, found jobs through sheer volume of applications, while others like Daniel relied on their social networks. Securing and maintaining employment was facilitated by effective presentation of self (see Michelle below), regular access to reliable transportation, either public transportation (Lamar) or friends and family able and willing to help with rides (Daniel, Jake below), and proximity to jobs in the suburbs (Lamar, Michelle).

The importance of employment for initiating a long-term trajectory of economic security is illustrated by the comparison between Michelle and Jada. Both Michelle and Jada were young, high school educated mothers. For both, this period of imprisonment had been their first. However, their experiences securing employment following their incarceration differed dramatically and had significant implications for their economic security.

⁷ Another possible barrier to employment, particularly employment in the formal labor market, is outstanding child support arrears, which has been suggested as a reason why many low-skill choose to work under the table or in the underground economy. The hypothesis is that when considerable income is removed from formal paychecks to cover child support arrears, men move out of the formal labor market. We found little evidence of this effect, as no men with children discussed child support arrears as affecting their decisions about work or crime, and none complained about child support arrears being removed from their pay. We note, however, that our sample of fathers is very small, and some reported that it was easy in Michigan to stop the accumulation of arrears while incarcerated.

Twenty-five year old white Michelle had grown up in a working class suburb of Detroit. As a child, Michelle had witnessed drug and alcohol-fueled violent encounters between her parents, and experienced both physical and sexual abuse from family members and family friends. She was a rebellious teen who began smoking heroin and developed a serious drug addiction. She bore a child at 18 and married another heroin addict at 22. While drug selling proved lucrative for the couple for a time, soon the two were homeless, living under a bridge, and had lost custody of their child. The relationship ended shortly thereafter. Over the following years, Michelle attended nine different drug rehabilitation programs twelve separate times.

Following her release from prison, Michelle relied extensively upon family to meet her needs. Her father and step-mother provided food, transportation and other necessities, requiring only that she pay \$150 in rent monthly, \$100 of which they set aside for her in a savings account. In order to earn the money necessary to pay her rent, and because she liked to keep busy while she worked hard to stay clean, she began applying for jobs at the many service-sector employers in her suburb. A little over a month following her release, a relative provided her with a referral that landed her a part-time position in a fast-food restaurant. About a month later she secured another position, this time waitressing 40 hours per week at a nearby diner. Working 60 hours per week, Michelle was able to pay off her parole and driver's license fees, a significant barrier to transportation facing many of our subjects in a state that invests relatively little in public transportation. About a month later she quit the fast-food job over a conflict with her boss and dissatisfaction with her pay, but continued working full-time at the diner. Not long thereafter, Michelle and her boss "got into it" at the diner and Michelle was fired. A frequent customer witnessed the exchange and offered to connect her with a new job with his sister's company. The very next day she had secured part-time work conducting surveys at the mall near her house. For a short time, she also supplemented this position working at a grocery store, but ultimately gave up this second position when she was able to secure full-time employment at the mall. Not long after starting this full-time job, she had a major heroin relapse. She was able to continue working while using heroin for a while, but eventually lost the job. Around this time her father started using drugs again too, and he kicked her out of the house. With nowhere to stay, she was forced to live in a hotel, where she lived until her ex-boyfriend's mother offered her a home while she straightened out. Shortly thereafter, she and her ex reconnected. They soon moved in together to their own apartment and Michelle secured yet another waitressing job at a nearby diner.

Despite Michelle's volatile, sometimes angry personality, felony record and serious heroin addiction, securing a job was never a problem. Not only was she able to access friends and family for job networks, but she always seemed to get the job. She was young, white and blond, with some college education and an assertive personality. She reported that potential employers never asked her if she had a criminal record, likely because her appearance and demographic characteristics did not fit their image of a former prisoner. She was also easily able to maintain employment because she nearly always had a stable, low-cost place to stay, transportation to and from work, and no childcare responsibilities to interfere with work. Finally, the suburban neighborhoods she lived in with her father and her boyfriend were, unlike many Michigan cities, relatively prosperous, and provided more low-wage job opportunities.

Michelle's experience contrasts markedly with that of Jada, a comparison that reveals how crucial employment is for stability, economic as well as emotional. Jada is an African-American mother of two in her early 30's living in a small, impoverished community on the outskirts of Detroit. Upon graduating from high school, Jada started taking business classes at a local community college. However, she soon had a baby and, unable to find reliable child care she could afford while attending school, never completed her college degree. Instead, she began working in the fast food industry and then moved into health care, first as a home health aide, and later, as a nursing aide. Starting out at minimum wage, her wages increased over the roughly ten years she spent in this career. Upon her arrest she was earning \$12.50 per hour. While she was working, her boyfriend, the father of her youngest, sold marijuana out of their house. She estimated that this brought in between \$400-600 dollars a week. During a raid of her house, the police discovered marijuana and a gun. Although both belonged to her boyfriend, at his behest she claimed the gun was hers. He was already on probation and a weapons conviction would mean he would be sent to prison for a long time. Neither she nor her boyfriend thought prison was likely for her. And it may not have been, had she not been caught smuggling drugs into prison for him a few months later.

Upon Jada's release from prison she worried about finding a job. As a felon, she was no longer eligible to work in nursing, and because she had two felony convictions, she would not be able to expunge her record. The only lucrative occupation she had ever had was now closed to her. Further, she knew no one who could help connect her with a new job. Her mother worked as a teacher's aide, a position also closed to those with a felony conviction, and her sister was on

welfare. Over the two years following her release she was employed for less than two months. Initially, she searched for a job every day, submitting resumes and looking online for openings. As the months dragged on and she was unsuccessful, her efforts dropped off. When she heard about a job lead or a business that hired felons, she would often apply, but nothing resulted. Jada appeared to suffer from depression, and in interviews she was often disengaged, irritable and pessimistic. Undoubtedly, her affect hampered her job search, but so too did her long period of unemployment fuel her hopelessness. During one memorable interview, the normally reserved Jada broke down in tears, sobbing, “I just want a job so bad!”

In marked contrast to Michelle, Jada’s job search yielded nothing. Jada’s long work history and absence of substance abuse problems should have given her an advantage over Michelle, but Jada was shut out of the one career path she had known and knew no one who could refer her to a job or connect her with employment of any kind. Jobs were scarce in her neighborhood, and those open to felons even scarcer. Finally, unlike Michelle, no employers took a chance with Jada. Race likely played a role, as did her increasingly frustrated self-presentation. Jobless, Jada subsisted entirely on food stamps, meager welfare benefits, and hand-outs from friends and family. Her rent was paid almost entirely by Section 8, and she and her children received Medicaid. The family subsisted on less than \$900 per month, \$400 of which was food stamps. She grappled every day with the reality that when her welfare time-limit ran out, her situation would only worsen.

Employment, however, is not always a clear path to long-term economic security, as the comparison between Jake and Christopher, both white men, illustrates. Jake quickly gained and, for the most part, maintained employment, leading to considerable stability. Like Michelle, Jake had the benefit of considerable family support. Christopher, on the other hand, not only struggled to gain employment, but failed to maintain it and translate work into longer-term security, ultimately recidivating and only briefly experiencing a period of stable housing and employment. A lack of family support and a serious drug problem prevented him from achieving the security that Jake attained.

Jake was in his late twenties when he was released from prison. As the father of two young children (ages five and seven at the time of his release), he simultaneously looked to his parents for support while trying to provide child support to his own family. Yet Jake was limited in the extent to which he could support his family. He did not want to apply for public benefits,

as he explained, “I’ve been a burden on the state and a burden on the community long enough.” Moreover, he had only attained a GED. Although he considered further education after his release, he stayed focused on available employment options.

Jake did not have a lengthy criminal record or a history of unemployment. He was in prison for a second drunken driving offense, the result of alcohol addiction. Before going to prison he lived alone in his own apartment and worked both in a restaurant and part time for an asphalt company. He was not concerned about getting a job once released. “I’ve always been a good worker...I have three past employers who have already told my family they would hire me.” He predicted he would have a job lined up within a week of being released.

Upon release Jake moved into his father’s house, where he lived for over a year, attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and an outpatient drug abuse program. He soon secured employment at a restaurant and began contributing \$300 per month for rent (which eventually increased to \$525 per month). He was relatively independent, paying for his own food and getting rides to work through co-workers and friends. His job was low paying, and a large amount of child support was taken directly from his paychecks, but he continued to work there for seven months until he was fired. Following this, he entered a difficult period of unemployment. But after looking for jobs online and asking around, he found a job with a local mechanic who paid him in cash, allowing him to control the amount of child support he paid. Through employment, Jake was able to gain some stability and begin to support himself financially.

Christopher had a very different experience. He struggled to achieve stability throughout his parole period. In and out of prison over the prior seven years, mostly for drug offenses or offenses related to drug use, Christopher seemed to recognize in his pre-release interview that he needed to have something to do upon release to structure his time. He intended to move to a local homeless shelter and from there to a halfway house. He did not want to live on his own right away for fear he would relapse, but no family would take him in. For Christopher, staying free from prison for a year would be “unbelievable.”

Christopher did initially move to a homeless shelter, but he quickly returned to using drugs and alcohol and found himself living on the streets. His first seven months involved considerable housing instability and substance use, until he moved in with a girlfriend he met at a drug treatment program. After yet another stint in jail and treatment, he moved back in with his

girlfriend. He found a subsidized temporary job through the state prisoner reentry program and then secured potentially more lasting employment at a local car detailing shop. Two months later, however, Christopher was back in jail again, for more parole violations. Upon his release he returned to the detailing shop and eventually started a detailing shop of his own with his wife and another business partner. For eight months Christopher seemed to finally be gaining some stability. However, substance use crept back into his life. Two years after his initial release onto parole, he was back in prison for robbing a bank while drunk.

Whereas for Jake, employment led to some stability, for Christopher it did not. Christopher had very little social support, outside of his wife, though he remained in intermittent telephone contact with his father. A high school graduate with skills in auto repair, he seemed to have the basic human capital to support himself without extensive social support. Yet he could not consistently benefit from his skills because of the substance abuse, which regularly derailed his employment and interfered with his job searches.

Social Support: Almost all prisoners leave prison with little more than the clothes on their backs. For those who do not move directly into a treatment program or other institutional living situation, family, friends, or romantic partners are the only options other than a homeless shelter. Family support provides not just an immediate place to live and meals to eat, but transportation, emotional support, and a stable base from which to develop longer-term strategies for shelter and food security.

The role that social support can play in economic security and stability for former prisoners is illustrated by comparing the experiences of Lamar to those of DeAngelo. Recall from above that Lamar received little material support from his family after release, though he did describe them as emotionally supportive. As a result, Lamar had little to fall back on other than social services, which were often only short term, and his own tenacity in searching for employment, leaving him frequently at risk of homelessness. In contrast, DeAngelo was able to rely heavily on the social support of romantic partners, who provided housing, food, and other forms of assistance. DeAngelo is also an African-American man. He was in his late 20s when he was paroled after his second term in prison, having been sentenced to prison first for breaking and entering and then for drunken driving. DeAngelo has a young son, and he separated from his wife prior to his most recent incarceration. He describes himself as an alcoholic and struggled with a number of related mental health issues including depression, anxiety, and bi-polar

disorder. When DeAngelo was released in fall 2007, he moved in with his girlfriend and her mother. This home permitted him a period of re-adjustment to life outside of prison and gave him the time needed to secure health insurance through a county program, begin treatment for his mental health problems and addiction, and look for a job that paid a living wage. His girlfriend also shuttled him to appointments and job interviews because he lost his license after the drunken driving conviction. DeAngelo had worked as a waiter before, and eventually found a position waiting tables at a chain restaurant nearby, making \$13 to \$15 per hour depending on tips.

About three months after his release, DeAngelo moved out of his girlfriend's mother's house, and with the help of the state's reentry program, first got a subsidized room in a boarding house and then a month later moved into his own apartment. The relationship had frayed; his girlfriend had her own mental health problems, and the two of them were constantly fighting. DeAngelo began taking courses in auto body repair at a community college, and a new romantic partner moved in to his apartment. She had her own public benefits and cared both for her own child and DeAngelo's son. After he was fired from his job as a waiter because of incompatibility between his class and work schedules, he found another part-time waiter job, but that job did not last long after he realized that their household could get by on his girlfriend's benefits and his financial aid. About nine months after his release from prison, he was arrested again, this time for driving without a license, and was returned to prison for a technical violation.

DeAngelo served another six months in prison and, like Lamar, lost everything he owned when the landlord emptied his apartment for nonpayment of rent. When he was paroled again he went immediately to a subsidized apartment provided by the state reentry program. He quickly reconnected with the first girlfriend, who in the meantime had begun dancing at a club and established her own household. She drove him to appointments and interviews on her days off, and helped him with groceries. When his time in the subsidized apartment was up, DeAngelo moved in with this girlfriend and established custody of his son. The girlfriend quit her job, applied for and received SSI, and helped care for DeAngelo's son. The couple made ends meet with her SSI benefits and help from her family, supplemented by some under the table income DeAngelo made by cutting hair and doing odd jobs. Four months later he found another restaurant job, this time as a line cook at a restaurant two bus rides from their home. Then he broke up with his girlfriend again. Without his girlfriend's support, he lost his access to reliable transportation and a caring babysitter, and a few months later he lost his job after his schedule

changed and he could not get to work on Sundays on the bus or work in the evenings because he needed to care for his son. He has since enrolled in a culinary class during the day while his son is in school and makes ends meet by selling beauty products on commission, cutting hair, and doing odd jobs. He is behind on his bills but managing to make rent every month, at least for now.

DeAngelo's experiences illustrate the importance of social support for achieving and maintaining stability of basic material resources. In his case, romantic partners buffered him from homelessness and the effects of unemployment and provided other forms of material support, particularly transportation that facilitated his access to health care and employment. In contrast, Lamar had no such support, and more frequently dropped from a state of stability to that of survival or desperation.

While DeAngelo's experience demonstrates the importance of social support, social support is not always sufficient to achieve economic stability in the long term, as illustrated by the comparison between James and Henry. Both African-American men, James and Henry depended on family to meet their material needs after their release. However, while James was able to achieve some degree of economic security with the help of his social network, Henry was never able to achieve stability.

James, a high school graduate in his mid-twenties, relied heavily upon the support of his mother, who subsisted on disability. Before prison he had lived in her apartment, and he continued to live with her in a house owned by his brother after release. She asked only that he contribute financially to the household once he had obtained a job.

Prior to prison, James suffered from alcoholism. He was imprisoned for drinking and driving, which had caused a death. . James attended multiple substance abuse programs, but did not seem to have continuing alcohol problems. He attended Alcoholics Anonymous monthly with his mother, who had struggled with substance abuse problems in the past as well. James had worked an assortment of service sector jobs prior to prison, and he intended to work in custodial maintenance when he was released from prison. Despite applying to many different janitorial positions, he was unable to find a job. He began working at a barbershop, renting a chair from the owner. After building up a clientele, he achieved some degree of economic security and began attending barber school. He was able to afford barber school because he lived with his mother. Although James had a daughter and a son with two women, he did not have to pay child support for either child. He received a bridge card (food stamps), which helped contribute to the households in which he lived.

Close to a year after his release, James moved into a new girlfriend's residence, where she lived with her four children. They both contributed to the rent. James' girlfriend received \$600 a month from public benefits for herself and her children. She provided James with transportation as well as a stable living environment. Despite this, James did not last long in the barber school. He dropped out of school, and prioritized work because of increasing stress about the bills associated with his new family.

Henry's experience was very different from James'. While James was able to leverage social support from his family and girlfriend and find a job that provided him with sustained economic security, Henry was unable to translate social support from his key source of support—his fiancé—into long-term security through employment. An African-American man in his early fifties with two grown sons, Henry relied upon his fiancé rather than parents or siblings for material support. Before prison, he and his fiancé were renting a two-bedroom house where they lived with her two children, and Henry worked for an asphalt company. Henry served time for “fleeing and eluding” after he led police on a car chase while high, his second time in prison for a drug-related crime.

After prison, Henry returned to his fiancé, although she had moved to a new residence with her children. His fiancé paid the entire monthly rent. His fiancé's son, who suffered from cerebral palsy, received SSI, and Henry applied to be the son's official caretaker so Henry could be paid by the state for his care. Henry failed to find work other than a few small maintenance jobs, reporting lack of transportation as an impediment to applying for jobs. Substance use also continued to be a problem after Henry's release, generating considerable instability. A few weeks after his release Henry “dropped dirty” at the parole office. He was arrested one month after his release for an armed robbery but was acquitted three months later. Less than one month after the acquittal, he was jailed again for attempting to steal a car from a dealership. This time he was incarcerated for just over a year.

Upon release, Henry rejoined the household, with his fiancé paying the entire rent from the SSI the family was receiving. Henry remained unemployed, and five months later he was again incarcerated, this time for a much lengthier sentence. Although she supported Henry materially, his fiancé had many problems of her own. She was ill throughout his reentry period. She had surgery while he was in prison and again after he was released, and needed further surgery still. She also smoked marijuana and drank on occasion, a dangerous partner for

someone with a long history of substance abuse. Although Henry also kept in touch with his mother, sister, and some of his extended family, they were not a source of support. For a short period he considered living with one of his adult sons in Tennessee, but this plan never came to fruition. Given his problems with substance abuse, Henry seemed to require more than the material support that his fiancé could provide. Despite his best intentions to be a provider for his fiancé and her children, and despite the stability that her government benefits provided, he continued to move in and out of jail and prison, never developing any economic stability of his own.

Both James and Henry had significant social support, especially with regard to housing. However, the support James received from his family proved more effective, helping him achieve stability and economic independence. Henry's case, on the other hand, demonstrates that social support may not always be enough, as many reintegrating prisoners need more than a place to live and food security to achieve stability in the long term, especially those who struggle with substance abuse. Family support can provide a pathway to economic stability, but it is highly dependent on the amount of resources the family can offer and the services and other supports the returning offender can access. The ex-offender must be positioned to take advantage of the opportunities that social support provides.

Public Benefits: For those who qualify for them, long-term public benefits such as SSI or Section 8 can provide a basis for long-term stability in a state of economic security, particularly if supplemented with other sources of income.⁸ However, they are typically too little to leverage into upward mobility. Public benefits are hard to obtain, requiring medical proof of disability in the case of SSI or making it to the top of a waiting list in the case of Section 8. Many of our subjects also received Medicaid and obtained food stamps to supplement their food budgets.

The significant role that public benefits can play in economic stability can be seen in the comparison between Jennifer and Lenora. Jennifer, introduced previously, is a long-term addict who used prison as an opportunity to change her life. Upon release, a great deal of family support followed by speedy establishment of food stamps, Medicaid and SSI, both for herself and her son, allowed her to attain a minimum level of economic security, although the benefits

⁸ In analyzing our data we looked carefully for evidence of barriers to accessing public benefits among those who appeared eligible from the information we had available. We found little evidence of significant barriers, though we note that Michigan is a state that has opted out of many of the federal restrictions on benefits for those with criminal records.

were not sufficient to pull her family above the poverty line. Nonetheless, with the help of family support, benefits and a strong commitment to sobriety, Jennifer made it; never relapsing or committing another crime.⁹ In contrast, Lenora, an African American woman in her sixties released from her eighth prison bit, was unable to establish substantial long-term benefits and, thus, never stabilized. This was true despite the fact that Lenora had an extensive employment history and was resourceful, motivated and energetic.

Lenora was an alcoholic and occasional hard drug user since her teenage years. To support her habit she engaged in “retail fraud,” stealing from stores and selling the items on the street. She bore two children, whom she helped raise when she was not incarcerated, maintained close relationships with family members and worked in various legal and illegal professions. Prior to her most recent prison term, she had been employed as a presser at a drycleaner for three years. She worked during prison as well, as a trash porter and in the kitchen, working her way up to lead. Upon release, she brought this energy and enthusiasm to her job search, as well as her search for charitable and government benefits. She first landed in a halfway house in Detroit, and for four months the state’s prisoner reentry initiative covered both food and rent. At the halfway house, she and the other residents were required to be out of the house for the entire day, searching for jobs. On one of her daily outings she stopped by a university in Detroit, and discovered that she qualified for financial aid. She signed up, believing that financial aid could be her “ticket out,” a financial resource that would allow her to establish permanent housing and buy a car.

Over the following months she took advantage of jobs skills training at Goodwill Industries, free clothing at a local charity, a short-term position subsidized by the reentry initiative and supports and services offered from a number of other Detroit-area charities. And yet her frustration at not being able to get a full-time, permanent job led to a several-month bout of relapse and retail fraud that ended when she was assigned to inpatient drug treatment. Both the relapse and the inpatient residence disrupted her educational plans, compromising her chance for additional loans and grants. Following her completion of the inpatient treatment program, she stayed on as a resident trainee for four months, earning \$75 a week plus room and board. She

⁹ She, like nearly all of our subjects, did regularly drive without a license or car insurance. Most of our subjects owed thousands of dollars in “driver’s responsibility” fees that they needed to pay in order to obtain a valid driver’s license. Car insurance was likewise a financial impossibility. In the rural setting where Jennifer’s trailer park was located, there was no public transportation and she effectively had no alternative.

hoped to be hired on to a permanent position. She was not, and thereafter moved in with her nephew, paying \$300 in rent a month and subsisting on food stamps and sporadic temporary employment. The last we saw of Lenora, her nephew's house was being foreclosed upon and she was planning to move, possibly into a homeless shelter. She admitted that her stress at having no income aside from food stamps and the threat of losing her housing had led her back to drinking, and drinking triggered thoughts of stealing. Despite Lenora's resourcefulness, accessing a half dozen charitable organizations, employment support, transitional housing services and educational financial aid, the short-term nature of each of these economic supports never provided her with economic security. Each employment or housing opportunity came with a time limit, after which she had to struggle again to meet her basic needs. Though Lenora sought out public benefits, unlike Jennifer, she was never eligible for those that provided longer term stability. The comparison between Jennifer and Lenora reveals the importance of public benefits for economic security among former prisoners who struggle with employment.

How Mobility is Achieved

Four of our subjects achieved upward mobility that resulted in significant promise for long-term economic security and a more middle-class lifestyle. We now turn to the question of how they did so when so many others did not. We find that strong and sustained social support, usually from family or a romantic partner with considerable social and economic resources was the primary path to upward mobility. For example, family or partners who could actively assist with employment by harnessing the social capital of their own job networks contributed to better paying jobs with possibilities for career advancement for the ex-offender. Abundant family or partner resources also give former prisoners access to communities and institutions that promote upward mobility. Consider first the comparison between Randall and Leon. Randall eventually achieved some measure of long-term economic stability with considerable social support but never attained upward mobility, while Leon's social support provided not only for basic material needs but the social networks to actively assist him in finding a well-paying job with prospects for advancement.

Randall is an African-American man in his late thirties who had been in prison for drug dealing, car theft, and firearms. Although there was no evidence that Randall had a substance abuse problem, he paroled to a drug treatment program (largely because he had nowhere else to

go) and then spent a week in a homeless shelter before moving in with his brother, his sister-in-law, and their two teenage sons. Unable to find a job, Randall contributed his food stamp benefits to the household, did odd jobs for other family members, and briefly sold marijuana to generate a small income. After two months, Randall grew frustrated with his brother, who had a drinking problem and was verbally abusive, and moved out. He stayed in a series of short term housing situations, even once living in an abandoned house in the dead of winter, and eventually landing in a more permanent arrangement with his step sister and her father. However, this was not always a stable living situation, as Randall worried that he was contributing little to the household other than his food stamps and that his uncle's son, who also had a felony record, might want to move into the house, displacing Randall. Living in Detroit far from most work opportunities and with less than a high school education, weak soft skills, no recent work experience, and a long list of felonies, Randall was never able to find a job while living with his uncle. At various points in time he returned briefly to drug dealing, sold plasma, and served a month in jail for stealing a cell phone. Eventually he moved out of the house to live with his fiancé, who is a bus driver, and her son in the suburbs, but he was miserable there. He felt trapped in the apartment with nothing to do and no way to contribute to the household. Nearly three years after his release from prison, Randall finally landed a job as a line cook at a restaurant.

Leon also received considerable social support from relatives, but in contrast to Randall, the form and extent of that support helped Leon to secure a well-paying job that led to upward mobility. Leon is an African-American man in his mid-thirties who served time in prison for armed robbery. He has an 11-year old son and was separated from his wife before he was incarcerated. Although Leon went to college for two years, his drug addiction landed him in trouble. When paroled, he moved in with his father, then to a halfway house in order to qualify for a rent subsidy in the future. After a conflict with the halfway house manager, he moved in with his sister. Leon's job search was at first frustrating, as he applied for over 40 jobs with little response. Those that did respond were difficult to get to or were not jobs in which he was interested. Then Leon's uncle connected him with a friend who ran a non-profit organization, and he landed a temporary job. After three months on this provisional status, he became a regular full-time employee with benefits, then rose further up the ranks in the organization to a position of greater responsibility and slightly higher pay. With this job security, Leon and his girlfriend,

who also works, moved into an apartment of their own. Leon sees his son every week and voluntarily contributes \$300 a month in child support. He is constantly on the lookout for an even better job, and starting to think about returning to college to finish his degree. Leon's experiences illustrate the power of social support to launch a former prisoner on an upward trajectory. His father and sister met his basic needs while he started his job search, allowing him the flexibility to patiently wait for a better job offer. More importantly, his uncle used his social networks to find Leon a job that was appropriate for his level of education and provided opportunities for upward mobility, starting Leon on a "virtuous cycle" of social and economic reintegration. In contrast, while Randall also received considerable social support, that support was difficult to sustain and only sufficient to meet his most basic material needs, as his family was unable to provide the type of social resources that were critical to Leon's success.

A second comparison that reveals the importance of family social support and job networks for upward mobility is between Daniel and Jake, both discussed above. While Daniel managed to achieve upward mobility, Jake gained some degree of economic security but never had the social and economic resources to be upwardly mobile. Single white males of similar age and without significant substance abuse problems, Daniel and Jake differed in the quality and quantity of social support they received, contributing to their different long-term trajectories.

Recall that Daniel was single and without children. While he did date, he tended to see potential romantic partners as more of an economic burden than a source of support. Most of his social support was from his immediate family. He lived with his father and stepmother, his mother and sister provided him with transportation, his mother helped him build credit by adding him to her credit card, and his family provided him with food and clothing. Throughout the period following release he looked to his social network to find jobs, with his sister ultimately helping him find full-time employment at a janitorial supply company and his friend helping him secure a job at a gym as a personal trainer. He even drew on extended family members for help, including asking a cousin to help him find an apartment. Social support was critical to Daniel's success. Daniel's social support network had the resources, both social and economic, to help put him on a path to upward mobility.

In contrast, although Jake achieved a level of basic economic security, he did not have the type of social support that Daniel leveraged into upward mobility. Jake actually gained full-time employment (at a restaurant) much more quickly than Daniel, but this was because he had

previously worked there, rather than finding the job through family or friends. His next job (with a car mechanic) was found through a job search and application process. While he mentioned the restaurant where his sister was a manager as a potential source of employment, he never ended up working there. He also believed that he might be able to get a job at a car manufacturer through his father, but he would have to move to Tennessee and the certainty of this opportunity was unclear. Furthermore, Jake contributed a significant amount of money to his parents' households. By the time he had his second job he was living alone in his father's house and paying \$525 per month, similar to what he would have paid for an apartment of his own. While his mother initially provided him with transportation, he did not receive much else in terms of material support from his family.

Moreover, the people in Jake's social network faced many adversities of their own, making it difficult for them to provide much in the way of support. His only romantic partner during this period was introduced to him while she was in prison, and he later separated from her because she relapsed after being diagnosed with cervical cancer. One of his three sisters was on probation and married his prison bunk mate, causing tension in their relationship. He had a good relationship with his mother, but she was diagnosed with cancer and later moved out of the state.

Thus, while Jake was able to attain some degree of security and stability through employment, his social network did not provide him with the resources to be upwardly mobile. Daniel, however, did have a very strong support network that helped him not only to attain employment but to secure the kind of employment, with benefits and higher wages that lead to upward mobility. The comparison between Daniel and Jake illustrates just how important a strong social network can be for upward mobility after prison.

CONCLUSION

This study draws on longitudinal qualitative interviews with a diverse sample of former prisoners in Michigan to understand how former prisoners meet their basic needs for food and shelter after prison, how they access resources required for economic security, and how some leverage social and economic resources to establish a trajectory of upward mobility. We began by describing the trajectories of economic security and stability experienced by our subjects. Almost a third experienced a trajectory of persistent desperation and struggle for mere survival, experiencing frequent periods of homelessness and housing instability, relying on short term

measures such as social support and social services to meet their most basic needs, and never attaining the stability of resources needed to make ends meet on a day-to-day basis. An equal number attained some degree of stability but intermittently experienced periods of desperation and struggle for survival. This high degree of instability and material need highlights the challenges that former prisoners face in making ends meet, both immediately after release and in the years that followed. Former prisoners experience significant volatility in their economic security. The remainder of the sample was more fortunate, divided equally between those who attained a trajectory of stable access to minimal but sufficient economic resources and those who experienced a trajectory of upward mobility.

We next compared the experiences of subjects across trajectories to understand how some former prisoners were able to make ends meet and attain economic security while others were not. Those who experienced longer-term stability of food and shelter did so by combining multiple sources of support, including employment, social support, and public benefits. Typically our subjects paired either employment or public benefits with social support. Non-profit and charitable social services provided short-term and emergency resources but were never sufficient on their own to provide economic security. This analysis highlighted the importance of social supports for making ends meet. Free housing or low cost housing, often accompanied by free food, helped former prisoners transition back to the labor market or public benefits after release, buffered the shocks of loss of jobs or other resources, and protected against homelessness and hunger when relapse occurred. Nevertheless, not all former prisoners with access to social support were able to leverage those resources to attain economic stability, as drug and alcohol addiction prevented them from taking full advantage of what family, friends, and romantic partners had to offer. Neither employment nor social support consistently translated into economic stability when this was the case. Only some public benefits, particularly SSI and Section 8 housing assistance, were sufficient to provide a base of long-term economic security, although food stamps and TANF provided some subjects with temporary supplements to other resources. The wide availability and use of food stamps in particular allowed many subjects to contribute to the households that housed and fed them after release and in the subsequent years.

Finally, we compared the subjects who experienced trajectories of upward mobility to others who merely experienced stability of material resources to understand how former prisoners achieve upward mobility. These results also pointed to the importance of social

support, though social support of a particular kind. Subjects who experienced upward mobility did so because family or romantic partners not only provided them with the material support to make ends meet but also drew on social networks to help them secure better jobs that paid far above the minimum wage, provided benefits, and had potential for career mobility. Only subjects who returned to more advantaged families or partners with significant material and social resources benefited from this form of social support. Such families or partners had the material resources to support the former prisoner in the long term while he or she took the time to look for better jobs or complete schooling, and such families or partners had sufficiently rich social networks that they could provide leads to jobs with career ladders.

It is clear from the subjects' experiences presented above that drug and alcohol dependence played a significant role in the economic wellbeing of many subjects. Indeed, all but one of those who struggled with homelessness and constant economic instability suffered from significant substance abuse problems after release. Episodes of addiction relapse often derailed attempts to find or maintain employment or reconnect with family, and past behavior while under the influence of drugs or alcohol was sometimes responsible for severing of social ties that had provided important social support prior to prison. Substance abuse problems both resulted in access to fewer resources and made it more challenging for subjects to take full advantage of the resources to which they did have access. Yet the struggle to meet basic needs among former prisoners is not merely a substance abuse story. Other subjects with histories of substance abuse did achieve stability and upward mobility, and not all problems with employment, social support, and public benefits could be traced back to drug and alcohol abuse.

It is also apparent from the experiences presented above that criminal activity and resulting criminal justice sanctions are closely tied to economic instability and uncertainty. This in part reflects crimes to support drug habits, such as shoplifting, prostitution, car theft, and robberies, but criminal activity by other subjects was also linked directly to material stress, and drug relapses that led to crime where often also the result of the stresses associated with unemployment or impending homelessness. Criminal justice sanctions also create their own instability and economic uncertainty. For example, even short periods of incarceration can lead to loss of housing and material possessions, complicate applications for public benefits, and result in job loss.

The importance of social support from family, friends, and romantic partners for the material wellbeing of former prisoners has two implications. One is that the wellbeing of most former prisoners will be tied closely to that of the families and partners to which they return after prison. Among our subjects, those who returned to families with greater social and economic resources were clearly better off in both the long and short term. Former prisoners without access to social support will face greater challenges in meeting their basic needs and attaining economic security. Many of the initiatives of the state's prisoner reentry program, such as transitional housing, transportation vouchers, and employment services, are designed to replace the services often provided by families for those without such social support. The magnitude of the social support that families do provide suggests that prisoner reentry programs have much to make up for when serving those former prisoners without family social support.

A second implication is that families are bearing most of the burden of meeting the material needs of former prisoners, particularly in the immediate post-release period before former prisoners can secure their own employment or public benefits. This burden falls disproportionately on those families with the fewest resources, creating material strain that affects not just former prisoners but spills over to many others as well. We saw multiple examples above of families and romantic partners "stretching" public benefits intended for some family members (e.g. TANF, SSI, Section 8) to cover the needs of former prisoners as well because these are the primary sources of income supporting the household. This suggests that the rise in incarceration and accompanying increase in prisoner reentry is placing additional burdens on public benefits that are invisible to policymakers but have important consequences for the wellbeing of low-income children and families they are intended to support.

Appendix A

Table A1: Timing of Follow-up Interviews by Subject (Months Since release)

Subject	Interview Number							
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Christopher	1	2	7	11	16	23		
Damian	1	3	9	12	17	23		
Geoffrey	1	2	8	9	11	22		
James	1	2	6	9	(Subject deceased)			
Daniel	1	4	9	14	21			
Henry	1	1	<u>19</u>	21	(Prison)			
Jake	1	3	8	12	D			
Leon	2	3	8	11	16	23		
Randall	3	4	6	8	11	13	19	22
David	1	9*		(Prison)				
Lamar	1	2	6	16*	<u>21</u>	<u>23</u>		
DeAngelo	1	2	5	9	16	18	21	25
Paul	1	2	5	9	13			
Morgan	2	3	15*	(Prison)				
Clinton	1	2	R*	(Prison)				
Jennifer	2	3	6	10	13	19	27	33
Kristine	1	2	9	14	17	26	31	(Jail)
Michelle	1	2	5	9	12	18	30	(Jail)
Jocelyn	1	2	6	8	11	17	24	32
Lenora	1	2	6	13	20	D		
Jane	1	2	6	8	12	<u>29</u>	(Jail)	
Jada	1	2	7	9	11	18	25	36

NOTE: Interview Number 1 is the pre-release interview

*In-Prison Interview

R = Interview Refused

D=Dropped out of the study

X=Subject interviewed following release from prison or jail

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