



When Relatives Return: Interviews with Family Members of Returning Prisoners in Houston, Texas



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Tracey L. Shollenberger

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During the first few months after release, returning prisoners face a range of reentry challenges, including securing stable housing, finding and keeping work, reestablishing relationships with loved ones, and avoiding reincarceration. Though these challenges are formidable, most returning prisoners do not face them alone. Many have strong ties to family members in the community to whom they turn for encouragement and support. Prior research from the Returning Home project and other studies have documented that returning prisoners expect and receive high levels of support from family after release, and that those who have access to family support fare better than those who do not on a range of reentry outcomes.¹ Given the potential value of involving family in reentry planning,² it makes sense to learn more about the family members who are closest to returning prisoners and to examine the challenges they face in supporting their relatives.

This research brief examines the challenges of incarceration and reentry from the perspective of family members on the outside. It draws from interviews with family members of 427 men and women recently³ released from Texas state correctional facilities⁴ and returned to the Houston area. Addressing a series of questions about the experiences of these family members with their relatives' incarceration and return home, the brief begins with a discussion of the nature and extent of contact family members have with their relatives behind bars. It then turns to describe the degree to which family members provide emotional, financial, and other forms of tangible support. Since these family interviews are linked to a larger, longitudinal study of returning prisoners, information about how the findings from family interviews relate to findings from interviews with the returning prisoners is provided throughout.⁵ Differences in the experiences and perspectives of family members of returning men and returning women are also explored. The brief concludes with a discussion section providing policy recommendations that focus on the unique needs and contributions of family.

Defining Family

For this study, family was defined as “blood or legal relatives, people you have a child in common with, and significant others or guardians you lived with before you entered prison or state jail this time.”

For clarity, the term “family member” is used to refer to the individuals who completed the single family interview upon which the findings in this report are based (N=427), while the term “relative” is used to refer to the returning prisoners who were interviewed at three points in time as part of the larger Returning Home-Texas study. The findings presented in this report include responses from a small share of long-time friends that were nominated by returning prisoners as family.

WHO ARE THE FAMILY MEMBERS OF RETURNING PRISONERS?

As a group, the family members in this study are typically female, mostly African-American, and older than their returning relatives.⁶ Though many types of relationships are represented among these family members, the largest share of family members are mothers or grandmothers—women in a maternal role. The majority of these family members reported educational attainment at or above the high school level, but many were not working due to age or physical health problems. Most had prior experience with incarceration in their families, either their own or that of other family members. Overall, they

reported strong, long-standing relationships with their relatives returning from prison, and nearly all were in contact with their relatives before and during the incarceration period.

AGE, RACE, ETHNICITY, AND MARITAL STATUS

Table I provides demographic information on the 427 family members interviewed for this study. The majority are female, and as a group are somewhat older than the returning prisoners, with a median age of just over 50. The largest share are African-American, and roughly one in seven identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino/Latina. In terms of marital status, three-quarters had been married at some point in their lives, and two in five were married or living as married at the time of the interview.

EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT, AND INCOME

As a group, the family members in this study were better educated than their returning relatives. More than seven in ten family members (71 percent) reported educational attainment at or above the high school level, and over a third (37 percent) reported at least some college education. Despite these credentials, only half (52 percent) were employed at the time of the interview. Among those who were not employed, the most common reasons provided were that they were retired or too old to work (39 percent), were permanently disabled (23 percent), or had other health problems that prevented them from working (16 percent). Among those who were employed, some were working long hours

Table 1. Family Member Demographics

Female	77%	Married or living as married	40%
Male	23%	Single, never married	25%
		Divorced	15%
Black or African-American	61%	Widowed	15%
White	26%	Separated	5.0%
Other Race	12%		
Multiple Races	0.6%	Median age (years)	51
Hispanic or Latino/Latina	14%		

or multiple jobs. Two in five (40 percent) were working more than 40 hours per week, and one in eight (13 percent) was working more than one job. The median wage reported by employed family members was \$12.00 per hour.

Many family members cited household income from multiple sources during the month prior to the interview. About half (53 percent) cited their own employment as a source of income for their households. Other common sources of income were Medicare/Medicaid (40 percent), another household member’s employment (25 percent), food stamps (25 percent), Supplemental Security Income/Social Security disability (23 percent), and Social Security retirement (17 percent). In general, the sources of income reported by family members reflected the fact that as a group they tended to be older than their returning relatives and more likely to have health problems that prevented them from working.

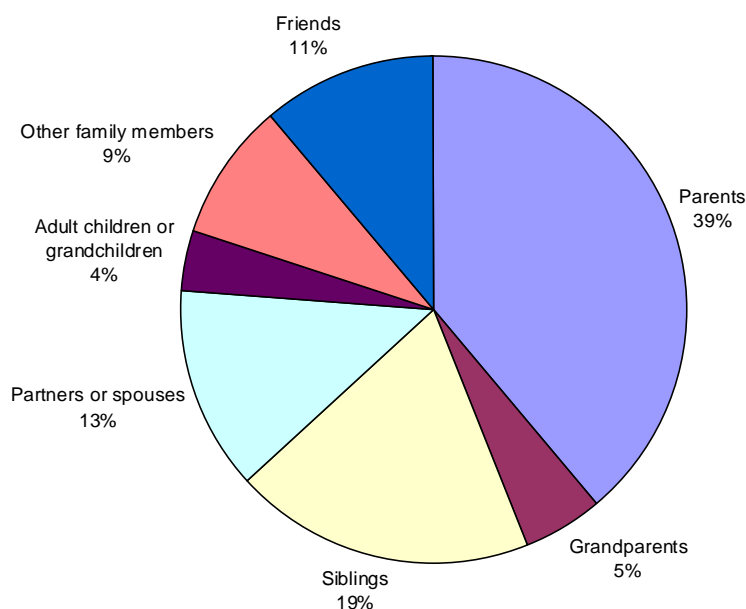
INVOLVEMENT WITH THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

For many family members, the release of the

incarcerated relative in this study was not a pivotal event, but merely one of many incarcerations and returns they had experienced throughout their lives. Three in ten family members (30 percent) reported having at least one other relative—most commonly a child, brother, or cousin—incarcerated at the time of the interview in addition to the returning prisoner in the study. Over half (56 percent) of those with other family in prison expected that at least one additional relative would be released from prison within the following year.

Similarly, many family members had personal experience with arrest and confinement. Over a third (36 percent) reported having been arrested at least once as an adult, and more than one in five (21 percent) reported having served time in an adult correctional facility. Combining personal experiences with those of relatives, most family members had some prior experience with the processes of incarceration and reentry. Indeed, many had long histories of family imprisonment that had prepared them

Figure 1. Relationships of Respondents to Returning Relatives



for the challenges associated with the incarceration and release of the relative who participated in this study.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH RETURNING PRISONERS

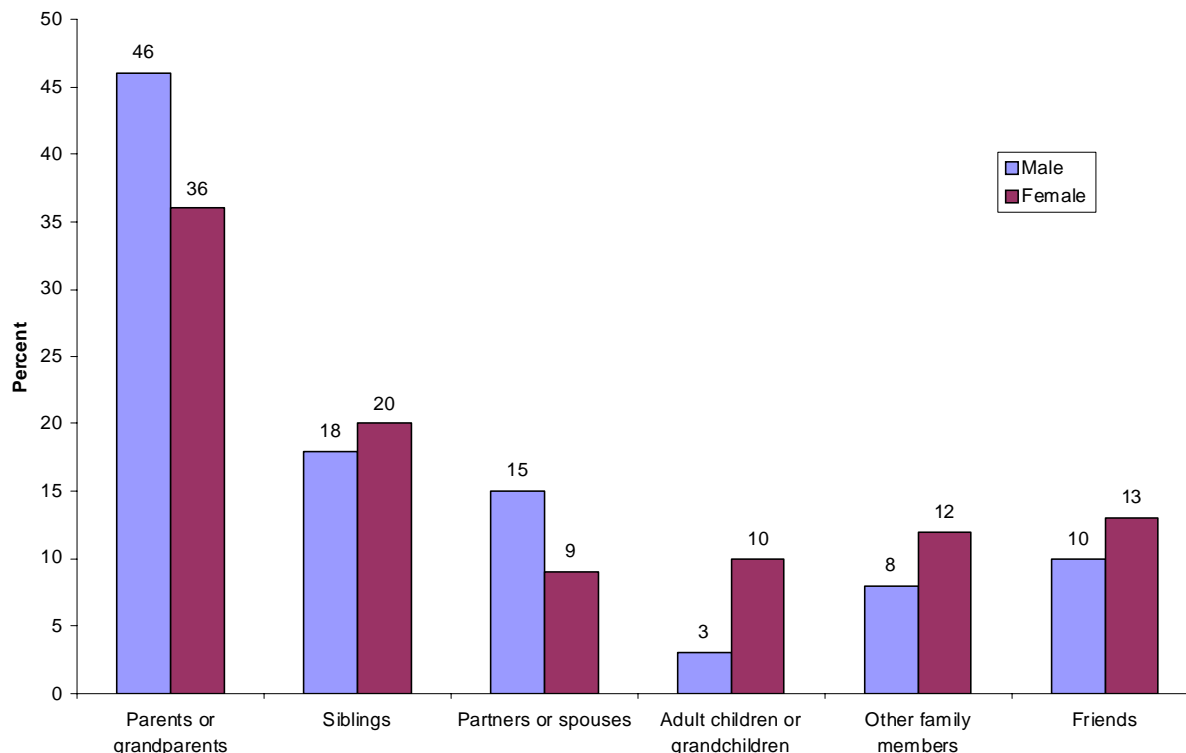
Figure 1 shows the nature of the relationships between the family members and their returning relatives. The largest share are parents of the returning prisoners. The next largest shares are siblings and intimate partners, including boyfriends and girlfriends, spouses, and ex-partners.⁷ The remaining family members are grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews, adult children or grandchildren,⁸ and long-time friends. More than a third (39 percent) of intimate partners are also co-parents, having minor children in common with the returning prisoners.

The family members nominated by men returning from prison differ somewhat from those nominated by women. Figure 2 shows that male returning prisoners were more likely than women to have nominated parents and intimate

partners, whereas women were more likely than men to have nominated children or grandchildren. For both men and women, parents and grandparents made up a larger share of nominated family members than siblings and intimate partners combined, indicating perhaps that many of these returning prisoners had stronger ties to their families of origin at the time of release than to any families they had created for themselves through intimate relationships, marriage, or parenting.

In general, the relationships between family members and their returning relatives were long-standing and strong. The typical relationship had spanned three decades,⁹ and most family members had remained in contact with their incarcerated relatives over time. Almost nine in ten family members (88 percent) had lived with their relatives at some point in their lives, and over half (58 percent) lived together during the year prior to their relatives' most recent prison terms. Almost all (97 percent) were in contact with their

Figure 2. Family Members' Relationships to Returning Prisoners by Gender



relatives during the six months prior to prison, and just over half (52 percent) were in contact on a daily basis. As described below, most continued to communicate with their relatives during the period of incarceration.

HOW ARE RELATIONSHIPS MAINTAINED DURING INCARCERATION?

Prior research has established a strong link between contact with family during prison and positive outcomes for returning prisoners after release.¹⁰ In this study, nearly nine in ten family members (89 percent) maintained some form of contact with their relatives while they were incarcerated in Texas prison or state jail.¹¹ Among those who stayed in communication, almost all (96 percent) exchanged mail, and roughly three in five (59 percent) visited at some point during the relative's prison term.¹²

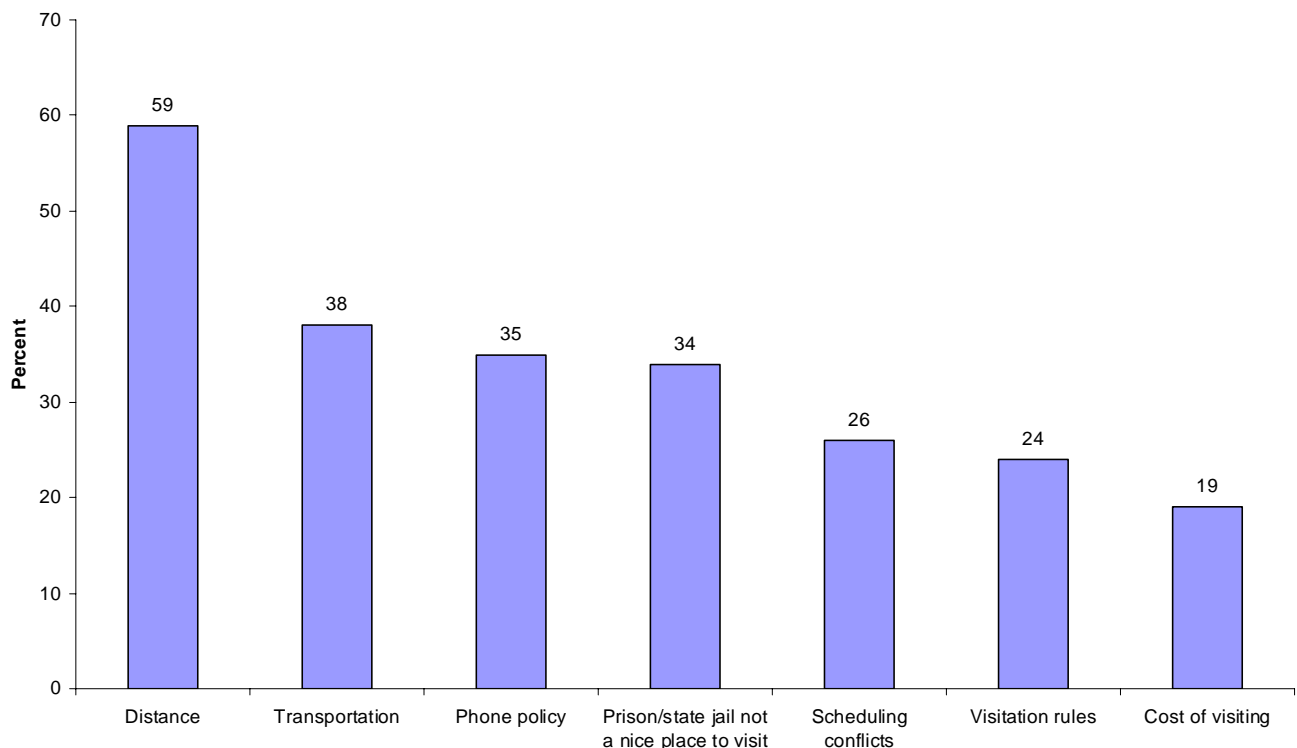
For some family members who remained in touch, in-prison contact was frequent. Just over half (52 percent) were in contact by mail on a

daily or weekly basis, and one in eight (13 percent) visited weekly. Intimate partners were especially likely to keep in touch with their incarcerated loved ones on a frequent basis. Intimate partners were more likely than were other types of family members to exchange mail on a daily basis (36 percent vs. 5 percent) and to visit on a weekly basis (35 percent vs. 11 percent). The frequency of contact that some family members maintained is impressive given the obstacles to communication that many family members reported facing while their relatives were behind bars.

WHAT BARRIERS DO FAMILIES FACE IN MAINTAINING CONTACT WITH THEIR INCARCERATED RELATIVES?

Family members were asked whether each of a range of potential obstacles had made keeping in touch with their incarcerated relatives difficult. Figure 3 depicts the barriers most frequently cited by family members: distance,

Figure 3. Obstacles to Keeping in Touch During Prison (Family Members' View)



Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive.

transportation, restrictions on telephone use, prison or state jail not being a nice place to visit, scheduling conflicts with visitation times, regulations surrounding visitation, and the cost of visiting being too high. Smaller shares of family members said that communication was hampered by not being able to miss work (18 percent), problems with reading or writing (9 percent), and lack of childcare (8 percent). Some family members emphasized that other obstacles, such as health problems and not knowing where their relatives were incarcerated, also made keeping in touch difficult for them.

In addition to the external and logistical problems listed in figure 3, some families simply did not want to stay in touch. Thirteen percent of family members said they did not want to keep in touch with their incarcerated relatives, and 6 percent said that their incarcerated relatives did not want to stay in touch with them. Some family members said that anger, emotional difficulty, and not knowing what to say made communication especially difficult.

DISTANCE, TRANSPORTATION, AND COST

As shown in Figure 3, family members were most likely to cite distance as an obstacle to maintaining contact with their incarcerated relatives, with nearly three in five family members reporting that distance had made it difficult to stay in touch. For many family members, this issue was closely linked to a lack of transportation. Indeed, transportation was the second most commonly cited obstacle to contact, a problem for nearly two in five family members. Those who visited their relatives in prison or state jail reported a median travel time of two hours to reach the facility, which was the same as the median estimated travel time reported by those who did not visit.

In addition to distance and transportation, the costs of staying in touch presented a serious challenge for some families. Family members who visited their incarcerated relatives reported spending a median of \$30 per visit. In addition, family members who exchanged mail or packages with their incarcerated relatives reported spending nearly \$20 on postage during the month prior to release. Though some family members

were burdened by these costs, most managed to maintain some form of contact with their relatives behind bars. For some, keeping in touch during the incarceration may have paved the way for rebuilding relationships with their relatives in the community after release.

HOW ARE FAMILY MEMBERS AFFECTED BY THE RETURN OF THEIR RELATIVES?

For most family members, renewing their relationships with their returning relatives during the first few months after release was fairly easy. Though some reported hardships including anxiety and financial strain, most said that their relationships had become stronger or easier as a result of their relative's release. Some family members were actively engaged with their relatives' reentry, communicating with their relatives' parole officers, while others experienced the swift reincarceration of their relatives due to arrests or parole violations.

RENEWING RELATIONSHIPS

Just as family members faced the challenge of maintaining relationships with their relatives during the incarceration period, they also faced the challenge of rebuilding their relationships in the community after release. Most family members (84 percent) had been informed of their relatives' upcoming release at some point before it occurred, and nearly all (97 percent) had reconnected with their relatives in the community by the time of the interview. At the time of the interview, many family members were in frequent contact with their returned relatives. Roughly seven in ten (69 percent) were in contact with their relatives on a daily basis, many due to the fact that they were living under the same roof. Nearly three in five (58 percent) had lived with their returning relatives at some point since release, and just under half (46 percent) were living together at the time of the interview.

Most family members reported that renewing their relationships with relatives in the community had been fairly easy. Most (88 percent) said that it had been easy to re-

establish contact with their relatives, and nearly the same share (83 percent) said that it had been easy for them to adjust to having their relatives back in the community. Nonetheless, some family members expressed a variety of difficulties associated with their relative’s return home. Figure 4 highlights several of these difficulties, the most common of which were increased anxiety and financial hardships.

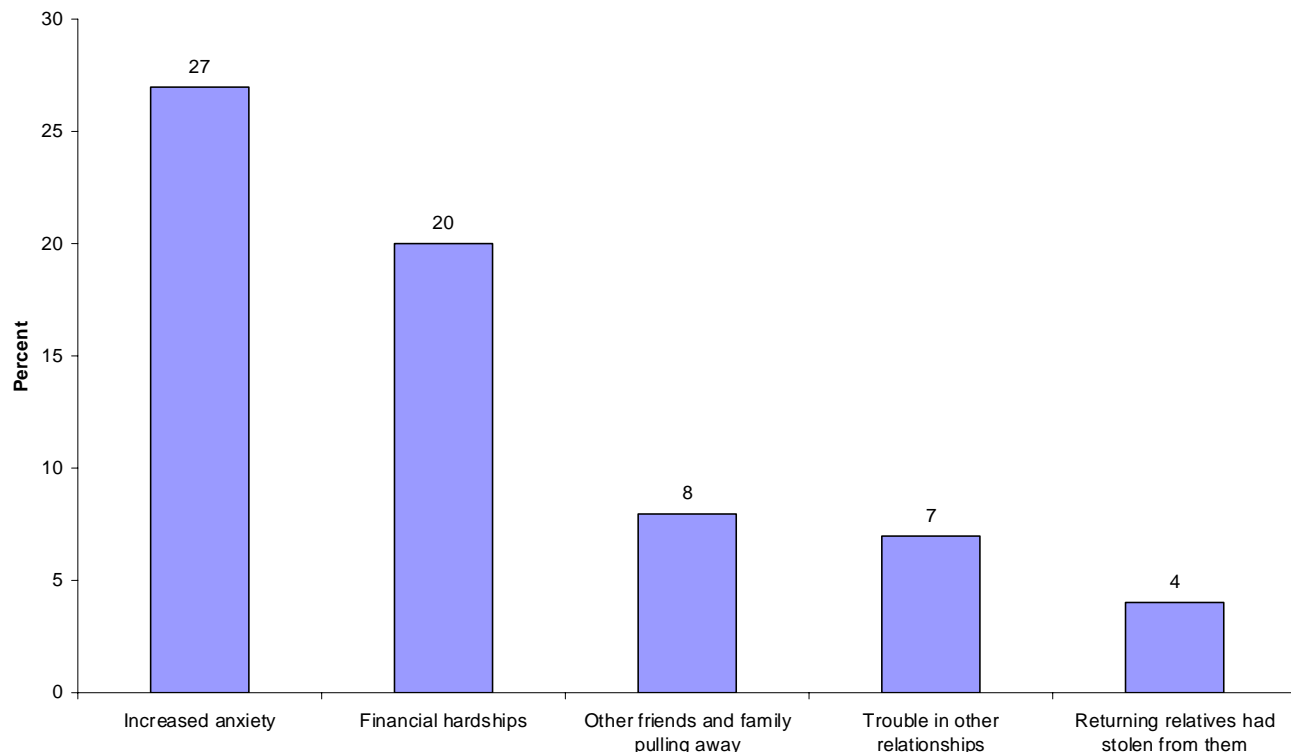
Despite the range of challenges faced by some family members, more than half (54 percent) reported that their relationships with their returning relatives had become stronger or easier since release. About a third (32 percent) indicated that there had been no change in their relationships, and only one in seven (14 percent) said that their relationships had become weaker or more difficult. Though these findings seem optimistic, they capture the family members’ perspectives at only one point in time, between two and five months after their relatives’ release. It is possible that family members’ perspectives on how easy or difficult it is to renew

relationships with their relatives and to cope with the other challenges of reentry will change over time, particularly among those who are providing high levels of financial and emotional support to their returning relatives.

SUBSTANCE USE

Returning prisoners interviewed as part of the larger Returning Home-Texas study—especially returning women—reported extensive histories of substance use that continued during the months after release. For this reason, family members were asked explicitly about the impact of their relatives’ return on their own drug and alcohol use. It is interesting to note that relatively small shares of family members reported any alcohol intoxication (drunkenness) during the 30 days prior to the interview (5 percent) or any illegal drug use (3 percent) during that time (most commonly marijuana). In addition, only 4 percent of family members reported using hydrocodone.¹³ For both alcohol and illegal drugs, the rates of use reported by family members were significantly

Figure 4. Difficulties Faced by Family Members After Release



Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive.

Methodology

Returning Home-Texas is a longitudinal study of the experiences of men and women released from Texas state correctional facilities and returning to the Houston area. Returning prisoners were interviewed at three points in time: once just prior to release (N=676) and twice after their return to the community (N=509 and N=378). Family members of these returning prisoners, as well as community stakeholders, were also interviewed to provide a more comprehensive view of prisoner reentry in Houston.

This research brief highlights findings from the single wave of interviews with family members (N=427), conducted between two and five months after their relatives' release. During the prerelease interview, returning prisoners were asked to nominate family members to whom they felt closest to participate in the survey. From these nominations, interviews were conducted with one family member in each of 427 of the returning prisoners' families. In general, interviews were conducted with the first family member listed who could be reached and was willing to participate; however, if a returning prisoner nominated an intimate partner, that individual was contacted first to increase the share of intimate partners in the sample.

Inverse probability weighting (IPW) was used to statistically adjust for differences between the original sample of 676 nominated family members and the 427 who were interviewed, as well as for an intentional oversampling of female returning prisoners. Increasingly popular among economists and statisticians, IPW methods provide an intuitive approach to correcting for general forms of sample selection, attrition, and stratification problems (Hirano, Imbens, and Ridder 2003; Wooldridge 2002).

lower than the rates of use reported by their returning relatives during the same time period.

Among substance users, most reported that there had been no change in their alcohol intoxication (83 percent) or illegal drug use (84 percent) since their relatives' return. The few who did report change said that their substance use had decreased since their relatives' release:

15 percent of drug users and 13 percent of alcohol users reported a decrease in use.

Despite the fact that most family members had daily contact with their relatives and that many were living together, substance use of family members on the outside was not typically affected by the return of their relatives.

CONTINUED CONTACT WITH THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM: SUPERVISION, REARREST, AND REINCARCERATION

Some family members continued their contact with the criminal justice system after their relatives' release due to their relatives' parole status, rearrest, or reconfinement. At the time of the interview, just under half (48 percent) of family members reported that their returning relatives were on parole. Among those whose relatives were on parole, half (50 percent) had talked to their returning relatives' parole officer. Family members who spoke with their relatives' parole officers discussed the guidelines and restrictions associated with their relatives' parole and acquired information on how to help their relatives with job placement, housing, and access to resources in the community.

While some returning men and women remained on parole in the community at the time of the interview, others had already been rearrested or reconfined. One in ten family members (10 percent) reported that their returning relatives had been arrested at least once since their return to the community. Among those whose relatives had been arrested, 10 percent said that their relatives had been arrested more than once. According to official records obtained from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, one in thirteen relatives (7 percent) had been reincarcerated by the time of the interview. For the families of these individuals, the process of renewing their relationships in the community had ended, and the process of maintaining contact during incarceration had begun again.

WHAT TYPES OF SUPPORT DO FAMILY MEMBERS PROVIDE AND FOR HOW LONG?

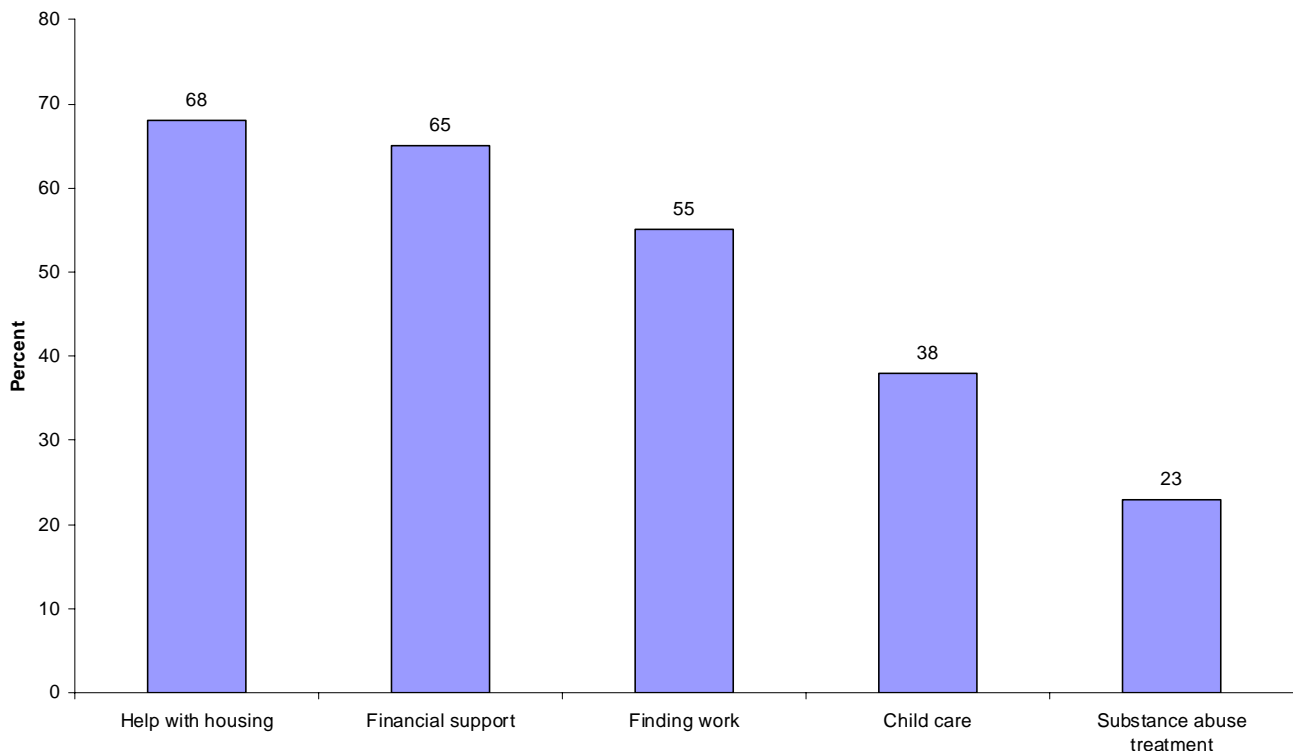
After release, family members assist their relatives in navigating a range of reentry challenges in the community. Figure 5 shows the percentages of family members who had provided assistance with housing, financial support, finding employment, child care, or help accessing substance abuse treatment at any point since their relatives' release.¹⁴ By the time of the interview, the majority of family members (83 percent) had helped their relatives in at least one of these ways, and many had provided multiple forms of support. Details on the two most common forms of support—housing and financial assistance—are provided below. In addition to these tangible forms of support, most family members indicated that they were also providing emotional support to their returning relatives. Some family members found financial and emotional support difficult to provide.

HOUSING

As shown in Figure 5, over two-thirds (68 percent) of family members had provided some form of housing support to their returning relatives since release. Family members helped with housing in two ways: by providing housing to their returning relatives, and by helping their returning relatives to find housing of their own. More than half (58 percent) of family members had provided housing to their returning relatives at some point since release, and nearly one-fourth (23 percent) had helped their relatives to locate their own housing.¹⁵

Some family members set limits on the amount of time they would allow their family members to live with them. Among those who were providing housing to their relatives at the time of the interview, just under half (47 percent) said that they would provide housing indefinitely or forever, while the remainder imposed some sort of limit on the duration of the living arrangement. Some said they would

Figure 5. Types of Support Provided by Family



Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive.

provide housing only until their relative found his or her own place (32 percent), others said they would provide housing until their relative found a job (13 percent), and still others set limits on behavior, saying they would continue to provide housing as long as their relative stayed off drugs or stayed out of trouble (8 percent). Among those who were not providing housing at the time of the interview, more than one in five (21 percent) anticipated that they would provide housing at some point during the next twelve months.

Given that laws in some areas prohibit convicted felons from living in public housing, family members were asked whether any such laws had affected their decisions about whether to provide housing to their returning relatives. Fewer than one in ten family members (9 percent) was living in public housing at the time of the interview. Among those living in public housing, roughly one in four (26 percent) indicated that rules barring convicted felons from living in public housing had affected their decisions about whether their returning relatives would live with them.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

By the time of the interview, nearly two-thirds of family members (65 percent) had provided financial support to their relatives at some point since release. As with housing, family members varied in the period of time they were willing to provide financial help. Among those who provided financial support, nearly half (47 percent) had provided or expected to provide support only until the returning prisoner found a job. Nearly a third (28 percent) indicated they had provided or were providing support as long as the returning relative needed it, and one in six (16 percent) expected to provide financial support indefinitely. Smaller shares expected to provide support as long as the returning relative stayed off drugs or out of trouble (3 percent) or until the returning relative found his or her own place to live (3 percent).

DIFFICULTY PROVIDING SUPPORT

Some family members reported hardships in providing assistance to their returning relatives during the weeks and months after release.

Among those who had provided financial support by the time of the interview, nearly half (45 percent) said that it had been difficult to provide. In addition, roughly one in seven family members (15 percent) indicated that providing emotional support to their relatives had been difficult. This difficulty in providing emotional support was linked to the gender of family members and their returning relatives. As shown in figure 6, providing emotional support was most difficult for female family members who were supporting returning women. Given the gender dynamics associated with parenting and caregiving,¹⁶ it is possible that some of this difficulty in providing emotional support is attributable to conflict over the care and well-being of minor children.¹⁷

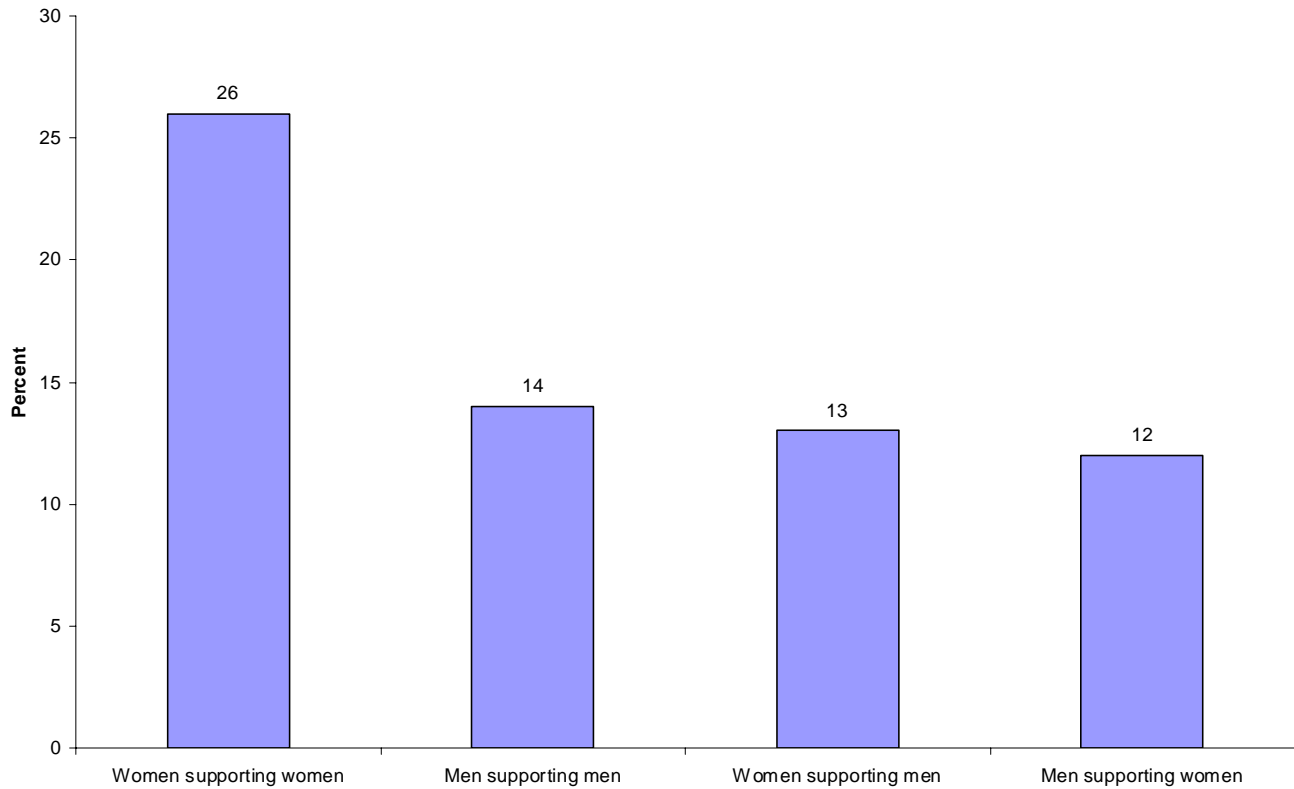
ARE SOME FAMILY MEMBERS ESPECIALLY LIKELY TO PROVIDE SUPPORT?

As a group, the family members in this study provided high levels of support to their returning relatives after release in a variety of tangible and intangible ways. Some family members, however, were particularly supportive. Several characteristics of family members and their relationships with returning relatives—including relationship type, gender, and whether they were living together—predicted whether they provided various forms of support.¹⁸

RELATIONSHIP TYPE

Parents and grandparents were more likely than other types of family members to have provided financial support to their returning relatives (75 percent vs. 57 percent) and were almost twice as likely to have helped them with child care (51 percent vs. 28 percent). They were less likely than other family members, however, to have helped their returning relatives find their own housing (17 percent vs. 28 percent). These findings suggest that some parents and grandparents were accustomed to caring for their children and grandchildren, whether or not they wanted to do so, and that some were happy to have their returning relatives in their homes indefinitely.

Figure 6. Difficulty Providing Emotional Support by Gender



Intimate partners, by contrast, were more likely than other family members to have helped returning relatives in a way that supported financial independence. As a group, spouses, boyfriends, girlfriends, and ex-partners were more likely than other types of family members to have helped returning relatives find work (71 percent vs. 53 percent).

GENDER OF FAMILY MEMBER

Male and female family members were equally likely to have provided some form of support to their returning relatives after release; however, they differed in the types of support they provided. While men and women were equally likely to have provided financial support (62 percent and 65 percent, respectively), men were more likely than women to have helped returning relatives find housing (34 percent vs. 20 percent) and gain access to substance abuse treatment (31 percent vs. 20 percent). Women, by contrast, were more likely than men to have helped returning relatives find a job (58 percent vs. 46 percent) and to have provided returning parents with child care (42 percent vs. 25 percent).

GENDER OF RETURNING RELATIVE

Family members of returning men were more likely to provide some forms of support than were family members of returning women. Family who were supporting men were more likely than were family members supporting women to provide help finding employment (59 percent vs. 38 percent) and help accessing substance abuse treatment (24 percent vs. 15 percent). Family members of male returning prisoners were also more likely to report that providing emotional support to their returning relatives had been easy (87 percent vs. 76 percent).

LIVING TOGETHER

Family members who had lived with their returning relatives at any point since release were more likely to have provided other forms of assistance than were those who had not lived together (93 percent vs. 68 percent). This trend holds true for several specific types of help including finding work (66 percent vs. 38 percent), providing child care (48 percent vs. 23 percent), providing financial support (80

percent vs. 44 percent), and helping returning relatives access substance abuse treatment (26 percent vs. 18 percent). Interestingly, those who had lived together were also more likely than those who had not to report that providing financial (60 percent vs. 46 percent) and emotional support (89 percent vs. 80 percent) to their returning relatives had been easy.

WHAT RESOURCES AND SUPPORT DO FAMILY MEMBERS OF RETURNING PRISONERS NEED?

Despite the high level of family involvement in the reentry process, very few family members had access to services designed to help them as family members of returning prisoners. Only one in twenty family members (5 percent) had been offered or had received any services from community organizations or other agencies that were specific to their status as family members of released prisoners.

Given that some family members expressed difficulty in providing support and that some were providing multiple forms of support over time, family members were asked what services would be useful to them in a single, open-ended question. They responded with a variety of resources and support that could assist them as family members of returning prisoners, including financial support, counseling in the community, faith and religious services, and help for their returning relatives.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

“We need financial support so that when our relatives come out of jail they won’t be such a burden on us. We have to carry them until they get on their feet.”

“I am tired of having to constantly lend financial support to my son.”

Some family members expressed a need for financial support, especially in the days and weeks immediately following their relatives’ release. Family members emphasized that they were bearing the expense of supporting their relatives immediately after release by providing them with housing, financial support, transportation, clothing, food, and other tangible needs. Some

family members felt that services such as food stamps, transportation vouchers, help with rent and utility bills, and clothing assistance for their returning relatives would be particularly helpful. Others expressed that repeatedly lending support to relatives as they cycled in and out of prison jeopardized their own financial security and that of their households.

COUNSELING

“After my sister was released from prison, she entered the household my son and I were living in and expected to have a say in how things are done. Counseling would have helped, but I can’t afford it.”

“Family counseling would have been great for preparing her children and allowing them to tell her face to face how they feel about her return.”

“Family counseling would help me deal with the stress and would help her stay away from drugs.”

“The family as a whole needs counseling to learn to deal with and accept the situation that occurred.”

Some family members indicated that they needed emotional support more than tangible support in addressing the challenges of their relatives’ reentry. They highlighted the need for counseling services in the community, both for themselves and for their returning relatives. They emphasized the need for a range of counseling services, including support groups, mentoring programs for returning relatives, and family counseling. Some family members viewed counseling as a means through which they would be able to communicate with their returning relatives: to hear what their relatives had been through, to explain to their relatives what they had gone through as family members, and to reconcile any divergent expectations for life after release. Other family members expressed an interest in counseling programs as a means of obtaining guidance on how to help their returning relatives in the community.

FAITH AND RELIGIOUS SUPPORT

“My church would help me deal with any challenges I might have.”

“All I need is the Lord.”

Some family members highlighted the role of faith in coping with the challenges of their relatives' return home. Some said that faith, God, or prayer was the only resource they needed. Others emphasized the need for counseling and other resources to be faith-based or delivered through a religious organization. Still others indicated that they relied on members of their congregations for support. The vast majority of family members (98 percent) indicated that they found strength in religion, and more than seven in ten (71 percent) reported belonging to a church, mosque, synagogue, congregation, or other formal religious organization.

SUPPORT FOR RETURNING RELATIVES

“Help him find a job, so he can get his own place and help support his children.”

“My son is already back in jail. A big part of that was the trouble he had in finding a job.”

Many family members focused on the needs of their returning relatives rather than their own needs as family members. For these individuals, helping their returning relatives—especially with job placement—would be the best way to help them as family members. In addition to job training and job placement assistance, some family members emphasized that their relatives needed help accessing other services in the community, such as substance abuse treatment, counseling, mental health services, support groups, and mentoring programs with other formerly incarcerated persons who had returned to the community successfully. Some family members—especially those whose relatives had been incarcerated for many years—emphasized that their relatives needed help readjusting to life on the outside.

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DISCUSSION

As a group, the family members in this study had close, long-standing relationships with their formerly incarcerated relatives that they maintained before, during, and after the incarceration period. Despite the reentry difficulties faced by some of these family members—including increased anxiety and financial strain—most said that it had been fairly easy for them to adjust to having their relatives back in the community during the first few months after release. Nonetheless, these family members mentioned a range of services that would be helpful to them in the community, including family counseling and support groups, financial help in the form of food stamps and transportation vouchers, and help with job placement for their returning relatives.

The findings in the present study add to the findings from previous research on family members of men returning to Chicago communities (see Naser and Visser 2006) by including the experiences of family members of returning women. In general, the family members of women returning to Houston were more likely to experience difficulty in providing emotional support to their relatives and were less likely to help their relatives find jobs and gain access to substance abuse treatment in the community than were family members of returning men. In addition, family members of returning mothers painted a more complicated picture of the impact of their relatives' return on her minor children than did family members of returning fathers, with more than one in five reporting that the mothers' return had had a negative effect on her children in the months immediately following release.¹⁹

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Though many family members provided extensive support to their returning relatives—both financially and emotionally—very little was offered to them unique to the fact that they were family members of returning prisoners and supporting their relatives' reintegration. Given the strong connection between family support and positive outcomes for returning prisoners,

addressing the needs of the family members who are providing this support should be a top priority for reentry practitioners. Counseling services, job placement assistance, and transitional financial support would be especially helpful for some family members. These services may be targeted to family members who are providing high levels of support, who express difficulty in providing support, or who anticipate that they will be providing support for an extended period of time. In terms of service delivery, tapping into family members' preexisting ties to the faith community should be considered. Most family members indicated belonging to a religious organization in the community, and reaching out to family members through these institutions could be an effective means of providing counseling services and other forms of support.

FUTURE RESEARCH

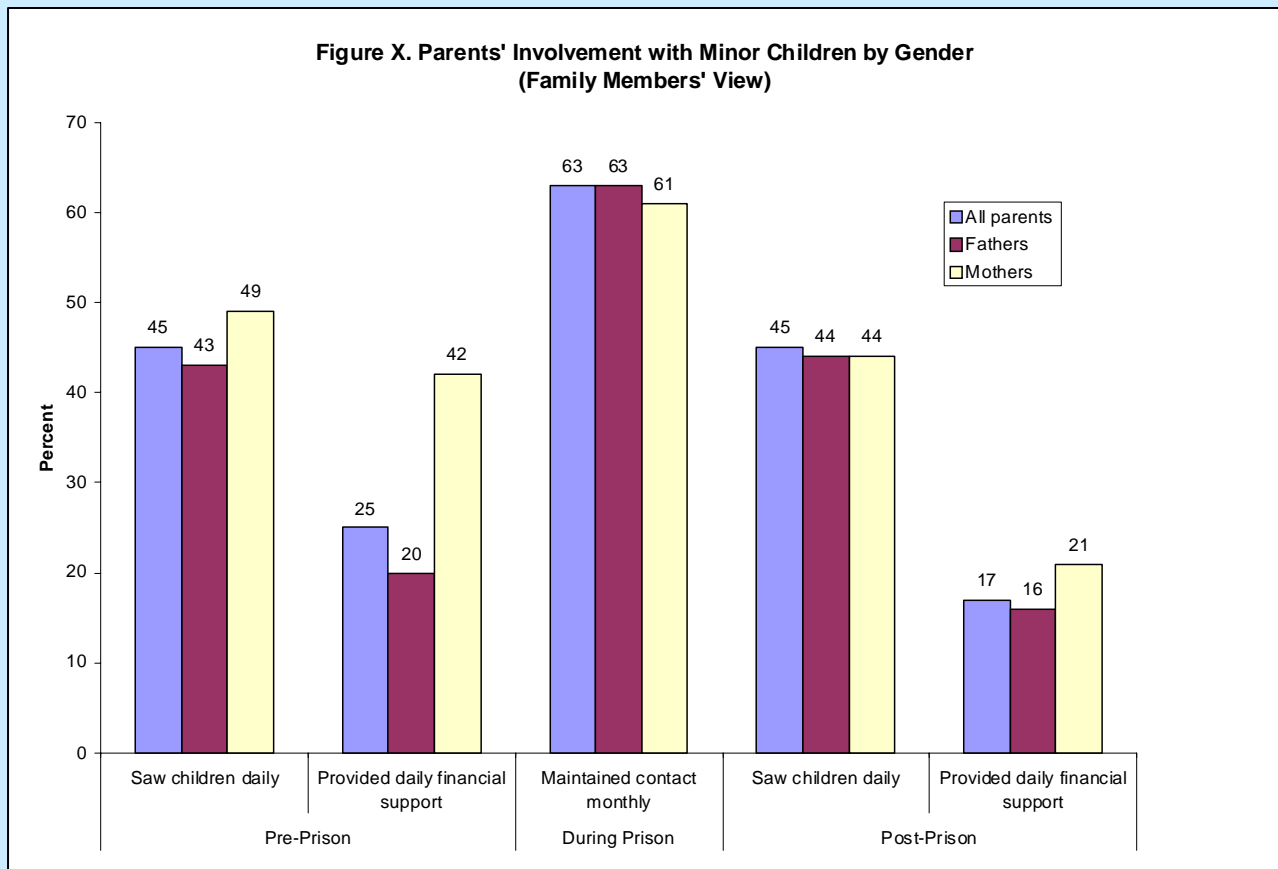
The interviews with family members highlighted in this brief were conducted between two and five months after their relatives' release. Given that some returning prisoners—and their family members—experience a “honeymoon period” of optimism and renewing relationships with family immediately after returning home, future research should follow up with family members over time to determine whether their experiences and perspectives change as they continue to provide support and as larger shares witness their relatives cycling back into the system. In addition, more information is needed on why some family members of returning parents, especially returning mothers, view the return of these parents as having a negative impact on their minor children, and whether these perceptions are influenced by the extent to which family members are called upon to care for these minor children during the incarceration term.

Minor Children

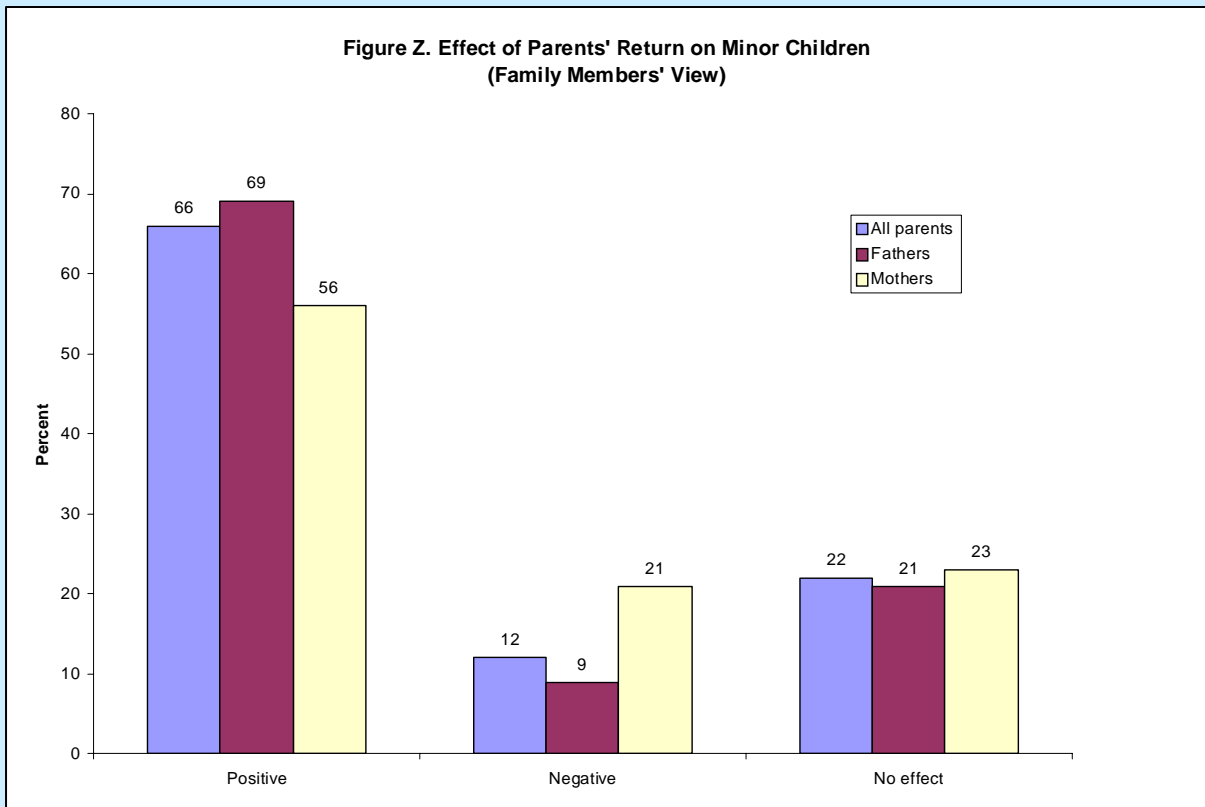
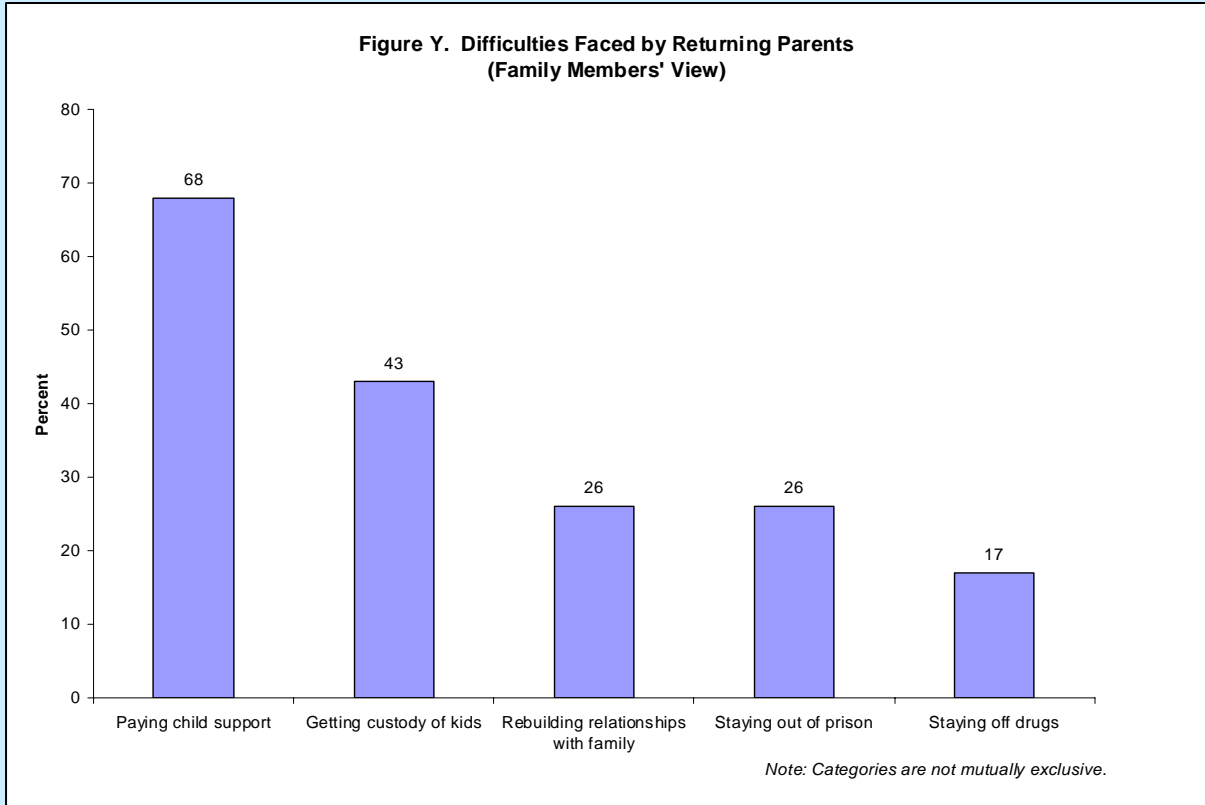
Although no minor children of returning prisoners were interviewed for this study, the adult family members of returning prisoners with children were asked for their impressions of how any minor children of the returning prisoners had been impacted by the incarceration and return of their parent. Nearly half (45 percent) of family members reported that their relative was the parent of at least one minor child at the time of the interview. According to these family members, most parents (88 percent) were in contact with their children during the year preceding their most recent prison term. Nearly two in five (39 percent) had legal custody of their children, and more than one in five (29 percent) was required to pay child support.

According to family members on the outside, incarcerated parents had substantial contact with their minor children during the year prior to prison, and most maintained some form of contact throughout the prison term (see figure X). Not surprisingly, women were more likely than men to have been parents of minor children (62 percent vs. 41 percent) and to have had legal custody of their children prior to prison (57 percent vs. 33 percent), while men were more likely than women to have been required to pay child support (36 percent vs. 10 percent). Despite these differences, family members reported that incarcerated mothers and fathers maintained similar levels of contact with their children before, during, and after the incarceration period. In general, the level of contact between incarcerated parents and their minor children resumed to pre-prison levels during the months initially following release, while the share of parents who were contributing to their children's financial support decreased.

Interestingly, family members reported that it was more difficult for returning prisoners to renew relationships with their minor children than to renew relationships with other family members after release. When asked to identify whether each of a variety of post-release challenges had been difficult for their returning relatives, family ranked paying child support and getting custody of kids as more difficult than several other reentry challenges (see figure Y). Despite difficulties renewing relationships, most family members reported that the incarcerated parents' return had had a positive impact on his or her minor kids (see figure Z). However, family members of returning mothers were more likely to report that the release of the parent had had a negative effect on minor children than were family members of returning fathers. For some family members, this negative perception may have been linked to disruptions to the children's home environment after release, including frequent moves or changes in caregiving arrangements.



Minor Children



ENDNOTES

¹ For examples, see La Vigne et al. (2004); Nelson, Deess, and Allen (1999); Visher et al. (2004).

² See, e.g., Sullivan et al. (2002).

³ Family members were interviewed between two and five months after their relatives' release.

⁴ Texas has two categories of state correctional facilities: state jails, which house individuals sentenced to less than two years for nonviolent Class A misdemeanors, third-degree felonies, or probation revocations; and state prisons, which house individuals sentenced to two years or more for higher-level felony offenses. For this study, family members of both returning state prisoners and returning state jail inmates were interviewed.

⁵ See La Vigne, Shollenberger, and Debus (2009), which is the source of this information on returning prisoners.

⁶ Family members were identified by asking soon-to-be-released prisoners to nominate family members to whom they felt closest. Given that only one member of each returning prisoner's family was interviewed, the findings presented in this brief do not generalize to all family members of returning prisoners in the Houston area. In addition, family members under the age of eighteen—including any minor children of the returning prisoners—were not eligible for the study. See the text box on methodology for more information on how the family sample was constructed.

⁷ Efforts were made to maximize the share of intimate partners in the sample. See the text box on methodology for details.

⁸ Nearly half (45 percent) of returning prisoners in the study were parents of minor children. Although no minors were interviewed in conjunction with this study, the adult family members interviewed were asked for their impressions of how any minor children of the returning prisoners had been affected by the incarceration and return of their parent. See the text box on minor children for more information.

⁹ The median relationship length was 29 years.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Holt and Miller (1972).

¹¹ Statistics provided in the section refer only to the returning relatives' most recent prison or state jail term.

¹² At the time of data collection for this study, phone use was prohibited for prisoners incarcerated in Texas state correctional facilities.

¹³ Only one family member reported cocaine use. No family members reported use of heroin, methadone, amphetamines, ecstasy, or other drugs.

¹⁴ Only one family member of each returning prisoner was interviewed; therefore, the percentages of returning prisoners who received support from family were higher than the percentages shown in figure 5, since many returning relatives also received support from additional family members who were not interviewed for this study.

¹⁵ These figures do not sum to 68 percent because some family members provided both forms of housing support.

¹⁶ Although family members in this study were not asked whether they cared for any of their relatives' minor children, it is likely that many—especially family members of incarcerated mothers—assumed formal or informal caregiving responsibilities while their relative was behind bars. Nationally, most children with incarcerated fathers live with their mothers during prison, while most children with incarcerated mothers do not live with their other parent. Instead, children with incarcerated mothers are most likely to be cared for by their grandparents, and are several times more likely than children with incarcerated fathers to be cared for by other relatives or friends, or to live in foster care. See Glaze and Maruschak (2008).

¹⁷ In the words of one female family member, "I am scared of being around her because I had her children taken away from her long ago. She still has bad feelings about me, and I need help dealing with the stress."

¹⁸ Only differences significant at 0.1 or below are reported.

¹⁹ See the text box on minor children for more information.