Law Enforcement's Perspective of Prisoner Re-Entry

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Abstract

The levels of engagement of Law enforcement in prisoner reentry initiatives continues to vary among jurisdiction. Engaging law enforcement throughout the process of prisoner reentry extends far beyond the boundaries of enforcing laws and has proven to be an effective tool to assist released prisoner to successfully reenter their home community. A philosophy shift by leadership and investment of resources is needed to interest involve law enforcement in reentry initiative. This study reveals that law enforcement in Florida do not have a define role in prisoner reentry as many respondents indicated that their agency's role in prisoner reentry is unknown. This study is an examination of law enforcement's perspective of prisoner reentry in Florida.

Introduction

The primary goal of correctional systems across the country is to enhance public safety by providing care, custody and control of inmates sentenced to a period of incarceration. Priorities of corrections have changed over time as the attitude towards crime and those who commit those crimes have been influenced by community outcries, politics, and economics. Tied to the changing priorities is the effect prison reentry has on the community.

Prisoner reentry impacts all facets of society. It is the process of inmates leaving correctional custody and returning to the community. Federal and state correctional facilities held over 1.6 million prisoners at the end of 2010 (Guerino, Harrison, & Sabol, 2011). That means one in every 201 United States Citizens was incarcerated. In 2010, over 700,000 inmates were released from federal and state custody (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2011).

Due to the large number of inmates returning to the community, the issue of prisoner reentry has led to an examination of the effectiveness of the transition from prison to the community. Corrections agencies are seeking ways to balance the traditional correctional practices with a process that ensures successful community reintegration for released inmates. Literature on the law enforcement role in reentry exists and offers strategies to connect policing initiatives and prisoner reentry. Through this research, I want to examine the Florida law enforcement's perspective of prisoner reentry and the application of suggested strategies in Florida.

Literature Review

The Florida Department of Corrections has an inmate population of over 101,000 and over 150,000 of offenders under some form of community supervision. It is the third largest correctional system in the country. The mission of the Florida Department of Corrections is "To protect the public safety, to ensure the safety of Department Personnel, and to provide proper care and supervision of all offenders under our jurisdiction while assisting, as appropriate, their re-entry into society". In fiscal year 2010-11, over 35,000 inmates were released from prison and returned to the community. Eighty-eight percent of all inmates in Florida prisons will eventually be released to Florida's communities. One third of all inmates released return to prison within three years of release. (Florida Department of Corrections, 2012).

Nationally, two-thirds of released prisoners are rearrested within three years of release. Half of all releases return to prison within that same period for new crimes or technical violations of supervision. The literature suggests that recent prison releases account for one-fifth of all adult arrests by police (Rosenfield, Wallman, & Fornango, 2005). The rate of arrests and subsequent re-incarceration of released offenders indicate that returning prisoners contribute to a considerable amount of crime (La Vigne, Soloman, Beckman, & Dedel, 2006).

The current economic times and rising costs of incarceration presents an opportunity to invest in innovative ideas all while reducing the costs of corrections (Scott-Hayward, 2009). As corrections agencies aim to increase the opportunities for post-release success, there has been a deliberate attempt to involve law enforcement, other criminal justice entities and social service agencies. This is a philosophical shift in the criminal justice system that takes the correctional focus from only care, custody and control during incarceration to the development of mutually beneficial community partnerships with all stakeholders who impact the process of transition from prison to the community (Byrne, Taxman & Young, 2002).

There is a heightened interest in prisoner reentry and this interest has an impact on public policy. The increased numbers of individuals who were arrested and incarcerated during the implementation of mandatory minimums, truth-in-sentencing and reduction in parole are now returning to the community. Historically, law enforcement has blamed rising crime rates and community violence on returning offenders. As the interest in public safety has changed and resources decreased, law enforcement agencies are evaluating crime control strategies and their attitude toward released offenders. A national conversation on emphasizing the development of policies that promote prisoner reentry success and enhanced public safety is occurring (Travis, 2005).

The role of police is to regulate conduct by applying the law. Police are expected to deal with problems. Police are expected to maintain peace and order and provide a safe environment in the community (Goldstein, April 1979). Released prisoners influence the fear of victimization among the citizens and the public's confidence in police and corrections. The literature indicates that by providing law enforcement knowledge about releasing prisoners in advance, it gives law enforcement an opportunity to assess any potential risks these offenders may pose to the public and plan community interventions to address those risks (La Vigne, 2007).

Citizens expect police to respond to their calls for help swiftly and deal with the problems to the citizen's satisfaction. Citizen's immediate need for a police response to a call for help has resulted in increased financial investments in police equipment such as vehicles, communication devices and new procedures. Law enforcement agencies inability to adjust to the community's evolving needs can impact community relations and changes needed to shift priorities (Goldstein, 1979).

Incarceration and return to the community impacts the formal and informal social controls found in communities. Formal controls are identified as public entities such as police, judges, and other areas of the criminal justice system. Informal controls are identified as social networks in the neighborhood and family (Clear & Rose, 1999).

Prisoner reentry relies upon a balance between formal and informal controls to ensure released prisoners receive the appropriate community support during reintegration. Law enforcement is considered a social control agency and is not always able to provide positive reinforcement due to the series of events that normally lead to their involvement with citizens. Often, there is a mutual distrust and negative experiences between law enforcement and released offenders that continuously create barriers to the type of interactions that can occur. Law enforcement agencies that recognize these barriers and seek strategies to eliminate them are more likely to offer offenders assistance in reintegrating back in the community (Young, Taxman & Byrne, 2002).

Community policing is defined as "a law enforcement strategy that utilizes a problem-solving approach to respond to the needs of the community" (La Vigne, 2007). Community policing is different from traditional policing as it requires analysis and planning of law enforcement's mission. These strategies encompass the application of traditional law enforcement functions such as response to calls, routine patrol, investigations, and arrests and are focused on the outcome of these applications (Scheider, 2008). The research suggests that prisoner reentry can work well in the community policing strategic structure. The expectations of law enforcement involvement in prisoner reentry align with the same expectations of community policing activities. Engaging law enforcement in prisoner reentry requires them to step outside of the traditional police role and look for opportunities to use their law enforcement skills to assist prisoners transitioning from prison to the community. Surveillance is one example of a police duty that can be used to not only deter crime, but to recognize the needs of the returning population and make referrals for services (La Vigne, 2007).

Travis and Petersilia (2001) state that released offenders return to a small number of neighborhoods that are already disadvantaged. Removing these offenders from the community and then returning them to the community creates instability because the conditions in the community have changed during their term of incarceration. This state of instability causes the citizens to desire more police presence to maintain order. Law enforcement is focused on controlling crime and not the reintegration of returning prisoners.

The impact of prisoner reentry affects communities differently. Communities that deal with low employment opportunities, poverty and high crime are the areas where a large number of inmates return. These communities struggle with establishing and maintaining adequate social support systems that promote pro-social behavior. In these

communities, released inmates have a higher chance of posing public safety risks requiring law enforcement to focus on an enforcement role. (La Vigne, 2007).

Opportunities to engage law enforcement exist in the communities where released inmates often reside. Some residents recognize that released prisoners can change and become productive. Citizens also tend to focus more on the risks released prisoners pose if community reintegration is unsuccessful. The literature suggests that law enforcement should have interest in and be engaged in prisoner reentry due to citizens' perception of crime risks and victimization caused by the released offender's return to the community. Crime rates are used to measure police performance and effectiveness in the community and crimes committed by released prisoners are often viewed as preventable. Law enforcement's visibility in reentry efforts can be used strategically to enhance positive perceptions and reduce fears of being victimized by this segment of the population (La Vigne et al, 2006).

The International Association of Chiefs of Police (2005) report that law enforcement entities have commonly partnered with corrections officials to provide enhanced supervision services or fugitive apprehension support, but do not participate in reentry initiatives. There is a belief by law enforcement that they are included in reentry efforts as an afterthought and are often times viewed as the "stick" while social service agencies are considered the "carrot". Other common law enforcement involvement with released offenders is centered on supervising specialized populations such as violent adult offenders or sex offenders.

The law enforcement community is vital to the reentry process and over the years has struggled to identify strategies to meet their goals and balance the enforcement approach with the needs of inmates transitioning back to the community (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2005). Researchers indicate that law enforcement entities should be open to the idea that they may be required to assume a leadership role in the community's reentry initiative or they may contribute to reentry efforts by providing support to returning offenders through traditional police activities and enforcement. (COPS, 2007).

Potential law enforcement roles identified by the International Association of Chiefs of Police are the provision of increased surveillance, encouraging compliance, engaging the community, focusing on places/situations, exchanging information, connecting individuals to service providers and assisting crime victims (Schwartzfield, Weiss-Mead, Plotkin & Draper, 2008). One initiative that clearly demonstrates law enforcement's commitment to improving conditions in the community is the Community Policing Initiatives found in police departments around the country. Community policing programs are considered an extension of the "patrol" style of policing and encourage the police department to work in teams, meet and work with community groups, personnel from social service agencies, public health, and other criminal justice agencies to address the community's crime/order maintenance problems (Byrne & Hummer, 2004). Public safety is a common focus among law enforcement, corrections and the community.

The most common obstacles that law enforcement agencies encounter in working with other agencies in offender reentry efforts are difficulties in communicating and information sharing (La Vigne et al, 2006). The literature suggests that law enforcement agencies should establish collaborative relationships to improve

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communication by participating in planning the inmate transition process and clearly stating the need for information about the returning offenders to the correctional departments (Byrne, Taxman & Young, 2002). In addition, law enforcement can participate in community meetings on this issue to ensure their role in prisoner reentry is known by the community and demonstrate their willingness to explore non-traditional roles.

Corrections and law enforcement partnerships are a reflection of two agencies with distinctly different missions working toward a common goal. (Byrne & Hummer, 2004). When law enforcement is evaluating an opportunity to enter in to a reentry partnership, they must be able to market successfully the services they can offer that promote successful prisoner reentry. The literature recognizes that the roles of law enforcement agencies and the role of community organizations is different, but do not conflict. Each role is equally important as it takes a collaborative effort to address prisoner reentry at the community level (COPS, 2007).

Communities view law enforcement as the leaders in crime prevention and the fight against crime. Involvement in prisoner reentry will allow law enforcement the opportunity to fulfill this role and equally provide the right community support to offenders who want to change their lives (Sipes, 2008). As new data emerges highlighting increases in violent crime in some jurisdictions across the country, policy makers have expressed a growing interest in having law enforcement play a vital role in initiating or engaging in reentry efforts. These efforts can reduce the likelihood that offenders will commit new crimes after their release, further victimize citizens or fail to complete conditions of their sentence, thereby improving public safety. (Jannetta & Lachman, 2011).

Method

In an effort to collect information from selected law enforcement agencies in Florida on the topic of "Law Enforcement's Perspective of Prisoner Reentry", an electronic survey was distributed. The link to the survey instrument was emailed to a random sampling of Sheriffs and Police Departments located in areas identified as Northern, Central and Southern regions of Florida. The electronic distribution of the survey was used because it was good way to reach the selected group across the State and allowed for responses to be collected and analyzed effectively.

The State of Florida has 66 Sheriff's Departments and 293 Police Departments. The sampling of these agencies randomly selected to receive the survey was based on the following:

- 10% of Sheriff's Departments selected from the Northern region
- 10% of Sheriff's Departments selected from the Central region
- 10% of Sheriff's Departments selected from the Southern region
- 10% of Sheriff's Departments selected from the Northern region
- 10% of Police Departments selected from the Northern region
- 10% of Police Departments selected from the Central region
- 10% of Police Department selected from the Southern Region

The geographical boundaries for the regions identified coincide with the Florida Department of Corrections correctional facilities boundaries.

Survey Results

The survey instrument contained a total of twelve multiple choice and open-ended questions. The respondents were given an explanation as to why this information was being collected, how it would be used, a definition of prisoner reentry, and the value the respondents input would have on the research.
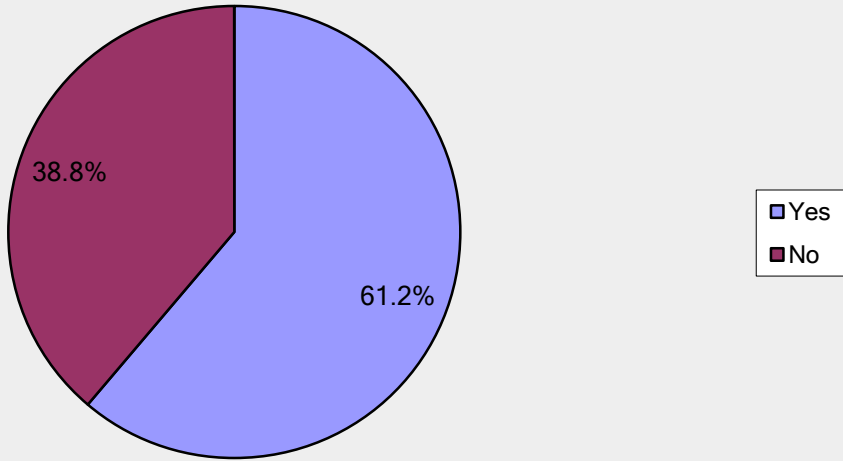
Some demographic information was requested from each respondent to ensure concise comparisons could be made. All respondents were required to provide responses to these questions. Demographic information collected included the following:

- City/county
- Type of agency
- Number of law enforcement officers
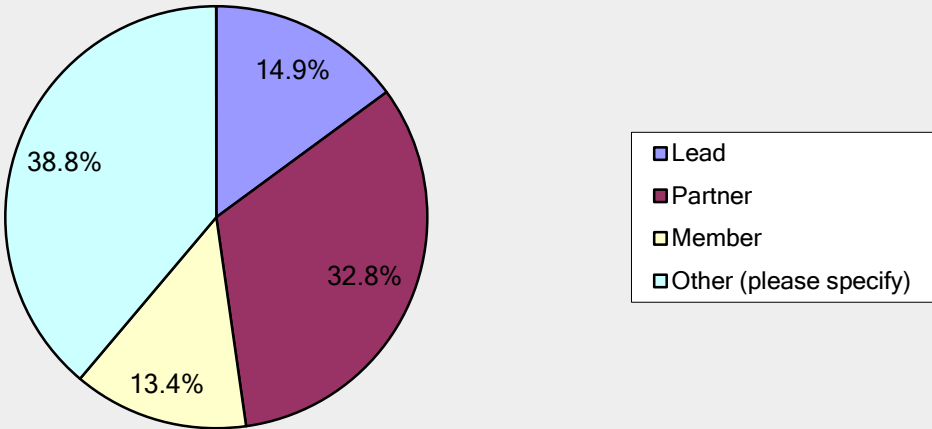- Years of experience
- Rank

Eighty-one percent of the respondents were from a Sheriff department compared to 19% of responses from Police Departments. Sixty one percent of respondents were from agencies that have 300 or more law enforcement officers compared to 10% from agencies with 149 or fewer law enforcement officers. For years of experience, 57% of the respondents have 16 or more years followed by 22.4% having 11 to 15 years of experience. Regarding rank within the agency, 42% identified themselves as Officers and 26% Lieutenants. An option of other was also available for this question. Four respondents identified themselves a**s** Police Chiefs and one respondent indicated Sheriff.

Sixty-six percent of respondents indicated that their agency has specific policies, procedures and processes related to released inmates and 34% said they did not. The charts below reflect the respondent's participation in prisoner reentry initiatives and their role.

Does your agency participate in any prisoner reentry initiatives, programs or meetings?

38.8%

61.2%

Yes
No

If your agency participates in prisoner reentry initiatives, programs or meetings, how would you best describe your agency's role?

14.9%

38.8%

32.8%

13.4%

Lead
Partner
Member
Other (please specify)

Sixty percent of the respondents indicated that prisoner reentry activities are not incorporated in the agency's community policing initiatives or other agency programs.

When asked, "Which activities best describe your agency's involvement with released inmates," 60% indicated that enforcement of release conditions best described their agency's involvement. Fifty-eight percent selected victim notification followed by

33% indicating community notification. Five percent selected participation in reentry activities as the response that best described their agency's involvement. The table below indicates the responses to the question, "Which resources do you feel will encourage your agency to become involved with prisoner reentry activities?"

Responses Available	Percentage
Enhanced communication with corrections departments	31%
Development of formal agreements for information sharing	16%
Development of common goals and activities across the corrections department, communities and law enforcement	45%
Increase funding to support dedicated staff within your agency for reentry	45%
None of the above	10%
Other	9%

Respondents were given the option to select all answer choices that apply. Combined ninety percent or the respondents indicated that the development of common goals and activities between the corrections department, communities and law enforcement as well as dedicated staff is needed to encourage the agency to become more involved with prisoner reentry. Thirty-one percent of respondents selected enhanced communication with corrections department as a resource that is needed to encourage involvement.

Discussion

The current economic times and rising costs of incarceration has contributed to a philosophical shift in the criminal justice system's focus from strictly care, custody and control during incarceration to the development of processes to ensure the transition from prison to the community is effective. Traditionally, community involvement with released inmates is found in the family unit, faith-based community, and social service providers. Law enforcement's interaction with released inmates is commonly found in surveillance, enforcement, and re-arrests activities. As corrections agencies and communities aim to increase the opportunities for post-release success, law enforcement, other criminal justice entities and social service agencies must develop collaborative relationships and be engaged in the reentry process.

Florida Department of Corrections has adopted a re-entry philosophy that recognizes if inmates spend their time in prison getting an education or vocation, attending substance abuse treatment programs, and learning skills that could eventually lead to increased employment opportunities, they are more likely to become productive citizens and less likely to commit new crimes that lead them back to prison. Corrections agencies realize that it takes committed community partners to assist these individuals continue to work towards rehabilitation they initiated in prison.

Law enforcement leaders have a common interest with corrections agencies to prevent these individuals from re-offending, enhancing public safety and reducing victimization. By building on existing partnerships, incorporating prisoner reentry in

other community policing strategies or prevention programs, corrections and law enforcement can have a great impact on increasing public safety. The research supports having police departments engaged in and understanding their role in reentry.

For Florida's law enforcement community, the responses to the survey indicate that increased efforts are needed to engage police in reentry activities. About thirty-eight percent of the respondents indicated they do not know the role their agency plays, they have no role in prisoner reentry or their role is enforcement as it related to prisoner reentry. This statistic reveals that more internal training and education among the staff about prisoner reentry is needed. Offenders are returning from incarceration to communities across Florida. Agencies must recognize that a shift in philosophy in dealing with this population must occur for officers to better serve the community.

The survey results also indicate that the majority of agencies do not incorporate prisoner reentry in any existing programs. Agencies should work smarter not harder by identifying ways to modify current community initiatives to incorporate prisoner reentry strategies (Building An Offender, 2005). A significant number of agencies indicated they are involved with prisoner reentry meetings, programs and initiatives with only about 15% of the respondents identified themselves as the lead. It is recommended that leadership share information throughout the organization about current participation in reentry meetings and initiatives incorporate reentry strategies in current community policing initiatives and consider taking a leadership role in these efforts.

Victim notification and enforcement of conditions described the most common involvement law enforcement agencies have with released inmates. Other respondents indicated that criminal registration and contact with specialized populations such as sex offenders were the types of contact. These functions are typical duties and responsibilities of Sheriff Department's in Florida. Research suggests that these traditional contacts can be expanded to be opportunities for collecting more detailed information from an offender and identification of risks this offender may pose to the community. These contacts will also provide opportunities for law enforcement to offer encouragement and referrals to reentry programs and services aimed at assisting offenders.

As with other agencies, law enforcement faces the fiscal challenges to accomplish their goals to protect the public with minimal resources. The development of common goal with corrections and other partners and designated resources were the areas in which most agencies indicated would encourage involvement in prisoner reentry activities. Key reentry stakeholders in every community are the corrections department, community service providers and law enforcement. These entities already share a common goal of enhancing public safety and decreasing crime in the community. It is recommended that law enforcement agencies evaluate the current relationships with these entities and develop strategies to expand existing common goals that ease the transition from prison to the community.

Based on the research conducted and the survey results, comprehensive, multi-agency strategies must be developed to combat the rate of recidivism and the societal consequences that result from a released prisoner's inability to reintegrate successfully to the community. Most important, the community's stakeholders must recognize the offender's needs and provide the interventions that interrupt the return to criminal behavior and victimization of citizens.

Shila Ann Salem began her corrections career in 1994 as a Correctional Officer with the North Carolina Department of Corrections. In 1995, she was promoted to Correctional Program Assistant/Case Manager. Mrs. Salem's career with the Florida Department of Corrections began in 1998 at Liberty Correctional Institution as a contracted substance abuse counselor. Throughout her tenure with the Department, Mrs. Salem has been afforded the opportunity to work in a variety of rewarding positions and has gained correctional experience as a Probation Officer, Correctional Administrator, an Assistant Bureau Chief, and Bureau Chief. Presently, Mrs. Salem is Regional Reentry Coordinator for Region 1. Her responsibilities are to provide regional support, management and oversight of the correctional facility's inmate transition and reentry programs. Mrs. Salem holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Criminal Justice from Fayetteville State University, a Master of Arts degree from Webster University and is credentialed by the Florida Certification Board as a Certified Criminal Justice Addictions Professional. Mrs. Salem has over 17 years of corrections experience and her work ethic is a testament to her drive and strong desire to promote positive change.

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APPENDIX A

Survey

Law Enforcement Perspective of Prisoner Reentry

In fulfillment of the requirements set forth in the Florida Department of Law Enforcement Executive Institute Senior Leadership Program, I am distributing this survey to collect pertinent information on the topic of "The Law Enforcement Perspective of Prisoner Reentry. Prisoner Reentry is a current issue being dealt with by criminal justice and non-criminal justice entities across the State of Florida. Prisoner reentry occurs when inmates complete their term of incarceration and returns to the local community. Effective prisoner reentry will result enhanced public safety, improved conditions in the local communities and avail opportunities for those individuals leaving incarceration to assume a productive, crime-free life upon release. Your participation will assist in ascertaining the current law enforcement perspective of prisoner reentry and guide future efforts to engage law enforcement in prisoner reentry activities. Please take a few minutes to complete the questions below. The survey should take 5 - 10 minutes to complete. Thank you for your time and assistance.

1. Please indicate your City/County. _____

2. How would you describe you agency? (Please select one response)

   (a) Local/Municipal Police Department

   (b) Sheriff's Office

   (c) Other_____

3. Please select the category that best describes the number of law enforcement officers in your agency.

   (a) 1-149

   (b) 150 - 299

   (c) 300 or more

4. Please select the category that best describes your years of experience in law enforcement.

   (a) 0- 5

   (b) 6 – 10

   (c) 11 – 15

   (d) 16 or more

5. Please indicate your rank within your agency.

   (a) Captain

   (b) Lieutenant

   (c) Sergeant

   (d) Detective

   (e) Officer

   (f) Other

6. Please indicate if your agency has specific policies, procedures or processes related to released

  inmates.

   (a) Yes

   (b) No

7. Does your agency participate in any prisoner reentry initiatives, programs or meetings?

   (a) Yes

   (b) No

8. If your agency participates in prisoner reentry initiatives, programs or meetings, how would you best

  describe your agency's role?

   (a) Lead

   (b) Partner

   (c) Member

   (d) Other (Please Specify)_____

9. Are prisoner reentry activities incorporated in your agency's community policing initiatives or other

   agency plans?

   (a) Yes
   (b) No

10. Which activities below best describe your agency's involvement with released inmates?

    (a) Surveillance
    (b) Enforcement of release conditions
    (c) Community Notification
    (d) Victim Notification
    (e) Participation in reentry activities
    (f) None of the above
    (g) Other (please specify)

11. What type of resources do you feel will encourage your agency to become involved with prisoner

    reentry activities?

    (a) Enhanced communication with corrections departments
    (b) Development of formal agreements for information sharing
    (c) Development of common goals and activities across the corrections department, communities and
        law enforcement
    (d) Increase funding to support dedicated staff within your agency for reentry
    (e) None of the above
    (f) Other (please specify)