

## Ex-Offenders Reentering the Workforce

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Approximately 650,000 individuals will be released from incarceration in state and federal prisons this year. However, little is known about the challenges ex-offenders face when they endeavor to reenter the workforce. The authors used consensual qualitative research methods to analyze data from 2 focus groups: one for male ( $n = 6$ ) and another for female ( $n = 9$ ) nonviolent felony offenders, all of whom were receiving services at day reporting centers, which offer a nonresidential form of community corrections. Attendees discussed their reentry experiences, and 11 domains were identified, encompassing ex-offenders' needs for education, training, and practical assistance; challenges in obtaining and maintaining a job; and available support, including personal networks and resources from the correctional system. Findings suggest that counseling professionals should attend to ex-offenders' social networks, including social aspects of the workplace, as such networks can offer support or represent a liability for individuals in transition. Substance abuse issues impact ex-offenders' social viability as well as their career-related reentry attempts. Finally, career development practitioners should understand the internal and external impacts of the stigma associated with incarceration.

*Keywords:* career development, ex-offenders, workforce reentry, career transition

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Incarceration rates for U.S. residents have increased 700% between 1970 and 2005 and are forecasted to climb an additional 13% in the next 5 years (Public Safety Performance Project, 2007). Recent Bureau of Justice Statistics (2001) estimates indicate that about 2,186,230 individuals are being held in federal or state prisons or in local jails (Beck & Harrison, 2006). Each year, about 650,000 individuals across the United States face the personal and social challenges associated with the transition back to life and work outside of a correctional facility (Office of Justice Programs, n.d.). Some individuals are released back into the community unconditionally. However, many are granted conditional release to what is termed *community supervision* or *community corrections*. This form of supervision is ordered by a court and usually is managed by a probation or parole officer. It can include mandatory curfews, drug testing, and the requirement to search for, obtain, and keep a job (Council of State Governments, 2005). Ex-offenders face a host of challenges in their efforts to find and secure employment (Holzer, Raphael, & Stoll, 2003; Lynch & Sabol, 2001; Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001). Yet, little is known about the specific issues that ex-offenders face while attempting to (re)join the legitimate workforce, and, for the most part, career development researchers have not focused on the specific needs of

offender populations (Schaefer, Friedlander, Blustein, & Maruna, 2004; Vernick & Reardon, 2001). This brief report uses consensual qualitative research methods (CQR; Hill et al., 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997) to initially examine the career-related experiences of nonviolent felony offenders as they endeavor to return to the workforce.

The process of transitioning from prison or jail back to the community has been termed *prisoner reentry*, and this construct has received increased attention both in the professional literature (Council of State Governments, 2005; Holzer et al., 2003; Lynch & Sabol, 2001; Travis et al., 2001) and in the popular media (Cose, 2006). Policymakers recently have identified the key challenges surrounding prisoner reentry, which include ex-offender substance abuse, physical and mental health, employability and workforce participation, housing, and the interrelationships among these factors (Travis et al., 2001). A few counseling professionals have considered the offender population in the design and the delivery of career development interventions (e.g., Chartrand & Rose, 1996; Garrison, Dewald, & Metcalf, 2000). However, research efforts are limited in the counseling literature. Buboltz, Miller, and Williams (1999), for example, reported that inmates *or* juvenile delinquents comprised the sample of interest in only 0.4% of *Journal of Counseling Psychology* publications during the years 1973–1998. The lack of available career development interventions for ex-offenders seems particularly striking given counseling psychologists' specific expertise in career development and transition as well as in personal and work-related adjustment (Vernick & Reardon, 2001). The field's alignment with multicultural concerns also could be seen as an asset in working with a population that is highly diverse—nearly half of ex-offenders are African American, whereas one fifth are Latino or Asian (Holzer et al., 2003). Finally, counseling professionals who endorse social justice

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goals (Blustein, McWhirter, & Perry, 2005) may well find that they can provide valuable services in local, state, or federal correctional systems or conduct research that could impact policy.

### Career Services in Corrections

Although most state correctional systems endorse the provision of vocational services and programming to offenders, these services may differ from those typically developed and delivered by counseling and career development specialists. Lawrence and her colleagues (Lawrence, Mears, Dubin, & Travis, 2002), for example, identified four major categories of such programming: educational instruction, vocational training, prison industries, and employment services training. Educational instruction usually includes adult education classes and classes that allow offenders to earn a general education degree (GED). Vocational training entails skills development in specific industries or trades such as horticulture, plumbing, or electrical work. Prison industries are actual jobs that offenders can hold during their incarceration. Whereas these activities are vocational in nature, their primary goals are to keep offenders occupied while they are in prison and to reduce prison operating costs by having offenders earn their keep. For example, offenders may provide laundry or maintenance services or produce textiles or furniture sold to consumers. Finally, employment services training typically involves assistance with basic career-related activities such as resume writing, interviewing, and workplace relationship skills. Employment training services probably are closest to what counseling psychologists would consider as a career intervention.

Vernick and Reardon (2001) noted that most of the vocational programming in corrections focuses on vocational skills training and orienting ex-offenders toward finding a job upon release, not on traditional career development efforts. So, ex-offenders may carry out career exploration and decision making, career choice, implementation activities, and attempts at work adjustment, with only a limited awareness of their career interests, needs/values, and abilities. The pressures of the reentry environment demand that ex-offenders take and try to keep most any available work opportunity. Thus, a sizable number of reentering ex-offenders may find themselves working jobs for which they are not well suited or looking for a job before they are ready to do so.

### Career Issues of and Relevant Characteristics of Ex-Offenders

As with any group, there is considerable variability in ex-offenders' work histories, occupational attainment, and career development needs. Ex-offenders, however, may differ from the modal counseling client in that they may only have had limited exposure to the legitimate labor market, and their work histories can be marked by impulsive resignations, interpersonal difficulties, and employer-initiated job terminations (Lynch & Sabol, 2001; Railey & Peterson, 2000). The types of jobs that ex-offenders obtain often are the same low-wage, low-skill jobs that disappear during times of economic downturn (e.g., Smith & Woodbury, 1999). By most estimates, about one third of ex-offenders were unemployed prior to their prison entry (Lynch & Sabol, 2001), and only about 60% of offenders held either a high school diploma or had attained a GED prior to incarceration

(Harlow, 2003). Although statistics vary, estimates suggest that up to 75% have a history of substance abuse or dependence, and about 16% have a diagnosable mental disorder (Travis et al., 2001). Finally, many offenders reenter society in debt, owing court- or supervision-related costs (e.g., fees for mandated urine screens) or facing immediate financial obligations such as restitution or child support. These factors can intensify ex-offenders' need to find and keep a job.

### Purpose

Despite recognition that reentry entails complex interrelationships among workforce participation and other life events and roles (Travis et al., 2001) and that offenders may have different needs than many who present for career counseling, few findings are available to guide career practitioners who wish to assist offenders with career reentry (Lawrence et al., 2002). We used qualitative methods because we wished to understand the reentry-related experiences of offenders from their perspectives, and in their own words. We agree with Chartrand and Rose (1996), who noted the "tremendous need for theories of career development and corresponding interventions that truly address the life circumstances of economically and occupationally disadvantaged groups" (p. 342). Although researchers have identified key challenges in offender reentry (Travis et al., 2001), they have not shown how these challenges interrelate. We also wondered whether offenders may have additional career-related concerns that were not yet articulated in the literature. Qualitative methods seemed the best choice for generating a more accurate description of career-related reentry, as it is lived by offenders themselves. Hill's (Hill et al., 2005, 1997) CQR methods were used in the present study.

### Method

#### *Participants*

Fifteen participants (6 men and 9 women) attended focus group sessions. All were recruited by the Eastern region community corrections staff of a southeastern state, and all received services from one of three day reporting centers (DRCs). DRCs offer a nonresidential form of community corrections. Sometimes they are called a one-stop shop for services and sanctions because probation and parole officers at these facilities carry out random checks on ex-offenders' daily itineraries, including scheduled job interviews and community service, whereas other staff provide substance abuse programming, GED classes, and parenting skills programming. Ex-offenders who do not abide by conditions of their release are returned to prison. The average length of supervision at the DRCs we studied was 8.5 months (range = 5–12 months); hence, participants only recently had been released from a state institution (i.e., prison).

Participant ages were 21–46 years ( $M = 32.6$ ,  $SD = 8.24$ ). Of the participants, 8 were African American, 6 were European American, and 1 indicated an ethnicity of "other." Two participants were married or partnered, 4 were separated or divorced, 8 were single, and 1 was widowed. Of the 15 participants, 10 had children. In terms of education, 7 had a high school diploma or general equivalency diploma, 6 had taken at least one college-level course, 1 had attended some high school, and 1 indicated "none of

the above.” The data revealed that much of this educational attainment occurred subsequent to participants’ incarcerations. With regard to employment status, 6 currently were working full time, 4 were working part time, and 5 were not working but desired full-time employment. Participants were incarcerated, on average, for a total of 3 years ( $SD = 4.28$ ). The average age when first incarcerated was 25.6 years ( $SD = 7.94$ ).

### *Project and Protocol Development and Focus Group*

Staff from a department of corrections (DOC) and a department of correctional education (DCE), two separate agencies in this state, assisted in the overall design of the project and in the development of the interview protocol. Attendees included community stakeholders—a regional director for community corrections, staff from several probation and parole offices, staff from several DRCs—and two university researchers. Face-to-face meetings were held to discuss issues related to ex-offender reentry, to develop the interview protocol, and to work out the logistics of conducting the focus groups. This group of professionals decided, after considering the supervision demands at the DRCs and ex-offenders’ time limitations, that data collection would occur during two (90-min) focus groups. After the first meeting, a preliminary interview protocol for the focus groups was generated and distributed to meeting attendees via e-mail. Feedback was solicited and incorporated into the protocol. By the conclusion of a third meeting, the protocol was finalized, and the two focus groups were scheduled.<sup>1</sup>

The focus groups were led by a 30-year-old African American female social psychologist skilled in focus group facilitation. Groups began with the orienting statement “Let’s start by discussing your career-related experiences and goals,” along with a number of related questions, such as “What work, if any, do you do right now?” “What work did you do prior to your incarceration?” The protocol was organized around the following topics: (a) career-related help participants had, (b) career-related help participants wished they had, and (c) general career-related questions. The last section, for example, asked participants to consider the role of career interests when they choose a job after incarceration and what career-related advice participants have for someone who currently is incarcerated.

### *Procedure*

*Sample and data collection.* The sample comprised volunteers who met the following criteria: They were (a) nonviolent felony offenders under supervision at a DRC; (b) considered, by probation staff, to be similar to most offenders who present for services; (c) not in immediate crisis, or with known, significant, physical or emotional impairments; and (d) interested in an opportunity to discuss their experiences. DRC staff explained the project and used a recruitment script (required by the university institutional review board [IRB]) to offer ex-offenders participation in the study. The project passed through both the university’s and the DOC’s institutional review boards.

Ex-offenders were approached by corrections staff who explained the project and offered participation in the study. The university IRB was concerned about possible coercion (or perceived coercion) in the recruitment procedures, so a specific re-

ruitment script was developed and used by corrections staff. Two focus groups were conducted: one for male participants and one for female participants. Correctional staff recommended this strategy so as not to introduce gender dynamics. The two focus groups were held in the evenings, 1 week apart. Transportation to and from the DRC facility was provided by a state vehicle. Informed consent was explained to participants and obtained in writing. A light meal was provided prior to the start of the groups, and, at the conclusion of the groups, participants were given a \$25 gift card as remuneration. At the outset of each group, members selected a pseudonym that served to protect their identities during audiotaping. This activity also served as an icebreaker task.

*Data transcription and domain identification.* Audiotape transcription was done by members of Victoria A. Shivy’s research team. Two teams conducted the data analyses. The CQR analysis team for domain identification included five women who ranged in age from the mid 20s to mid 50s. Four team members were of European American descent, and one was a Chinese national. CQR analysis team members included one university faculty member, a DOC regional administrator, a DOC reentry specialist, and two doctoral students—one of whom had worked with reentering ex-offenders for about 1 year. Hence, this team had special expertise in corrections. The focus group facilitator was not involved with data analysis. Prior to beginning actual data analysis procedures, members discussed their beliefs and biases regarding career-related aspects of offender reentry. Domain identification team members read and coded each focus group transcript independently. No start list was used (Hill et al., 2005). Once all team members completed their individual analysis of the data, the team met as a group to discuss the process and to arrive at consensus. Transcripts and domain listing were returned to analysis team members several days later, and a phone meeting ensured that domain identification was complete.

*Core ideas, categories, cross-analysis, and audit procedures.* A second team of individuals then identified core ideas and developed categories. Although use of a second team is not a standard CQR procedure (e.g., Hill et al., 1997), we believed that additional coders could enhance the objectivity of data analysis. The second research team included three women and one man who ranged in age from the mid 20s to early 40s: one university faculty member and three doctoral students—two of whom had worked with reentering ex-offenders, one who worked as a sheriff’s deputy, and one who had completed a graduate assistantship in the research and management division of the DOC. All team members were of European American descent. The university faculty member and one of the students who had served on the domain identification team also served on this team. Before undertaking any data analysis procedures, members of this team shared their experiences in working with offenders as well as any strong beliefs or opinions concerning career development and offender reentry. Team members discussed potential power disparities among group members, which were minimized, to some degree, by the fact that all members had experience in corrections. Members of this team reorganized the focus group transcripts by domain and then iden-

<sup>1</sup> For further information, see the online supplementary materials (female protocol) available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.54.4.466.supp>

tified core ideas and categories. Team members met to reach consensus. A cross-analysis then was conducted.

The work of both analysis teams was reviewed by an auditor (e.g., Hill et al., 1997). The auditing procedure occurred after consensus was reached on the domains, categories, and core ideas were constructed, and the cross-analysis was complete. The auditor, who made suggestions to the team regarding the domain names, categories, and core ideas (Hill et al., 1997), was a third-year counseling psychology doctoral student with particular interests in career development issues and in qualitative research methodology.

## Results

Eleven domains were identified from the focus group data, and, along with their associated categories, these are presented in Table 1. Representative participant quotations are presented in Table 2. We termed a category as *general* if articulated by all but 1 or 2 of the participants ( $n = 15$ ). Similarly, we termed a category *typical*

if articulated by 7 or more of our participants, and *variant* if articulated by 3–6 participants. We chose these criteria, rather than using criteria for the full sample size, because 2 female participants elected to speak very little during their focus group. We could not identify a subject variable that accounted for their behavior. This decision is in line with the modified CQR guidelines recently published by Hill et al. (2005). We present the domains and categories below, elaborating on findings that go beyond the key reentry challenges already identified in the literature.

### *Focusing on Education, Training, and Programming*

Participants mentioned the importance of receiving various forms of education, training, or programming—before, during, and following their incarceration. This domain was identified early in the focus groups, and discussion continued throughout the meetings. Categories included the notions that (a) education and training empower individuals, and therefore is recommended; (b) that educational opportunities are available in the correctional

Table 1  
*Domains, Categories, and Frequencies for Offender Issues*

Domain/category	Frequency
Focusing on education, training, and programming	
Education empowers individuals; thus, it is strongly recommended.	General (14)
Educational opportunities are available in the correctional system.	Typical (10)
Specific vocational education experiences help.	Variant (6)
Thinking through your career and occupational possibilities	
Identify career goals and resources.	General (14)
Adopt a career perspective—plan for a career, not just a job.	Variant (6)
Anticipate career barriers, as they are unavoidable.	Variant (5)
Understanding the role of social networks	
Develop a positive social network; a negative social network hinders reentry.	Typical (9)
Social networks offer support and assistance.	Variant (6)
Social networks impact employability.	Variant (5)
Navigating the system	
The system provides structure, including relationship with probation officer.	Typical (10)
Policies and limitations of the system can hinder reentry efforts.	Typical (10)
The system offers resources.	Variant (4)
Recognizing stress and challenges; finding motivators	
External factors, stresses, and barriers complicate reentry.	Typical (10)
Incarceration and release are stressful times.	Typical (9)
Self-narratives help ex-offenders redefine themselves.	Variant (6)
The prospect of a career can be motivating.	Variant (5)
Coming to terms with your offender status	
Status disclosure impacts job opportunities.	Typical (11)
Ex-offenders face stigma, stereotyping, and loss of privilege.	Typical (8)
Dealing with substance abuse issues	
Treatment is available in the correctional system.	Typical (10)
Understand the power of addiction, relapse, and its consequences.	Typical (9)
Addressing basic needs	
Basic needs: Food, housing, and transportation.	Typical (8)
Ex-offenders are aware of their basic needs.	Variant (4)
Having children impacts reentry	
Child care is a major responsibility.	Typical (7)
Child care responsibilities limit or impact program participation.	Variant (4)
Losing custody of your children always is a possibility.	Variant (3)
Doing time means aging	
Advancing age limits opportunities; increases urgency and pressure to succeed.	Variant (6)
Socioemotional maturity can accompany advancing age.	Variant (4)
Looking to your spiritual side	
Spiritual beliefs and spiritual practices are helpful.	Typical (11)

*Note.* General = 13–15 respondents; Typical = 7–12 respondents; Variant = 3–6 respondents.

Table 2  
*Participant Quotations*

Domain	Quotation
Focusing on education, training, and programming	I suggest they go back to school and get a trade if they don't have any kind of skills training or anything, just get a trade, and focus on that, and move on from there.
Thinking through your career and occupational possibilities	What they teach us is, don't look at the job you're doing, look at the big picture. I'm only doing this for the moment, I'm not doing this forever.
Understanding the role of social networks	When I got out the first time, I didn't have any people in my family. They had kinda given up on me.
Navigating the system	It's like putting structure in your life. I didn't have a job, the [probation officer] kept telling [me] if you don't get a job, you are going back to jail.
Recognizing stress and challenges, finding motivators	People who have not been incarcerated or doesn't [sic] have a record, they don't realize how hard it is, and how hard you try to make a change, and how hard the transition is. We are constantly stressed about finding a job and keeping jobs.
Coming to terms with your offender status	On my application, I forgot exactly how it was worded . . . but I said we can talk about it, or something. I didn't put I was convicted.
Dealing with substance abuse issues	When you come home, you maybe meet with your probation officer for maybe once a month. So, you are going to screw it up. You got a whole month to do what you want to do, maybe clean up a couple days before you got to go.
Addressing basic needs	When you get out of jail, you have to, you got to do what you have to do to survive out there. You need to eat, you need shelter, you go to do what you got to do. You might want a good career and all that good stuff. But, you got to work to survive first, and once you get stuck in that mode, and say you have children, it's hard to go and get a career with a better paying job because you are going at it to survive.
Having children impacts reentry	That child care issue can kill you. That child care issue can send you back to jail.
Doing time means aging	I'm middle-aged, you know, and I figured I was kind of negative about [applying for a job], but I went ahead and filled out for it. I figured they probably wanted someone younger, but I said well, a new start. I'll give it a try.
Looking to your spiritual side	Stay focused on God, and everything else will fall into place.

system; and (c) that specific vocational education experiences help offenders with reentry. Participants had almost uniformly positive things to say about educational opportunities in corrections. However, some noted that self-assignment into programming could be difficult, with long waiting lists or opportunities that varied by institution. Participants urged current inmates to take part in available programming.

### *Thinking Through Your Career and Occupational Possibilities*

Participants also discussed career and occupational possibilities, including things that facilitate occupational choice, and things that get in the way. They discussed the importance of (a) identifying career goals and resources, (b) adopting a career perspective (planning for a career and not just a job), and (c) anticipating career-related barriers. Some research has shown that, especially with younger offenders, attitudes toward education and work—rather than educational and work opportunities themselves—are most associated with positive outcomes (Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, Van Kammen, & Farrington, 1991). Our data revealed that participants were thinking through many aspects of their career and occupational possibilities. A few characterized their intended postincarceration positions as stepping-stones to subsequent and more coveted positions, which represents a more planful approach to reentry. However, not all individuals engaged in such thinking. More focused on the blocks and barriers that they have experienced prior to and during their incarceration and their expectations for future problems. This focus on negative affect and negative events may result in career-related concerns that require more intensive interventions (cf. Brown & Ryan-Krane, 2000).

### *Understanding the Role of Social Networks*

Participants in our groups mentioned (a) the importance of developing positive, and avoiding negative, social networks; (b) the overall positive impact social networks can have in offender reentry; and (c) how relationships impact employability. Offender workforce reentry can be construed as a process of social integration, as offenders attempt to reconnect with family, friends, segments of the workforce, and religious and social institutions (Council of State Governments, 2005). Vocational psychologists (Brown & Ryan-Krane, 2000; Schultheiss, 2006) recently have acknowledged the importance of social networks in career development, encouraging practitioners to build interventions with social networks in mind. Similarly, criminal justice researchers recognize the strong effects of social networks in desistance from crime and in recidivism (Maruna, 2001). Participants in our groups mentioned the downside of social networks, that is, how returning to dysfunctional relationships can negatively impact employment and employability. This seemed especially true for participants struggling with substance abuse issues. Participants also, however, noted the positive roles that relationships can play in career development. For some, family and friends were a way to maintain a viable and personal connection to the workplace (e.g., Schultheiss, 2006). Finally, a few participants described the social support they received throughout their incarceration. These experiences contrast strongly with the isolation or negative social experiences other participants described.

### *Navigating the System*

*The system* refers to the correctional system and, at various times, includes authority figures within the correctional system,

such as probation officers, the politics or ways of the correctional system, and correctional administration. Participants' experiences with the system punctuated the focus groups and focused on the ideas that (a) the system provides structure, including a relationship with a probation officer; (b) the policies and limitations of the system can hinder offender reentry efforts; and (c) resources are available from the system. With regard to the system, the comments we most often heard suggested that the correctional system provides reentering offenders with a sense of structure. Typically, this structure was embodied by the availability of a probation officer who motivated offenders to look for work and to steer clear of substance use. Hence, the system may function as a temporary social network. However, participants also described difficulties in navigating the system, with its rules and policies.

### *Recognizing Stress and Challenges, Finding Motivators*

Participants also described the stressors, challenges, and motivators related to the difficult circumstances that ex-offenders have faced, and will face, upon reentry. This domain includes, but also goes beyond, career-related issues. Participants noted that (a) external factors, stresses, and barriers complicate the transition home; (b) incarceration and release are stressful times; (c) self-narratives help ex-offenders redefine themselves; and (d) the prospect of a career can be a motivating force. Themes such as starting over in life or starting at the bottom of a job hierarchy were common. Racism and discrimination were discussed as specific barriers. One participant, who happened to be White, made the following observation:

It's easier for White people. . . . I know what I am talking about, because I had somebody hire me straight out of prison. Didn't know me from jack, didn't know me from anything. . . . The first day I got out, I had a job, and here I am convicted of property crimes all my life. And I had some very, very good friends that I had made when I was incarcerated and, you know, a couple of them were Black, and they got out long before I did, and they still aren't working. . . . And, I learned the hard way that this is a society that is geared toward racism. It's not easy for me to say that because of where I was raised.

As seen in Table 2, a consistent theme centered around just how stressful reentry is. Finally, participants relayed changes in self-narratives (Maruna, 2001), or the identity narratives that allow individuals to understand the totality of their life experiences. One participant said:

When I got my first paycheck, I looked at that check . . . and I shared it with my counselor, too. I can't live off this. I'm not used to this. But, either I'm used to that little bit of money or I got to be used to being locked up. See, I got a choice today.

Another participant related a story of how he awoke at 4 a.m. in prison and said, "I ask myself a question. What do I want to do for the rest of my life? From there on, I started getting myself together . . ." This theme seems consistent with Haney's (2006) observation that ex-offenders may need to rework their identity, vocational and otherwise, in order to succeed in reentry.

### *Coming to Terms With Your Offender Status*

Holzer, Raphael, and Stoll (2002) reported that two thirds of employers would not knowingly hire an ex-offender. The social

stigma associated with a felony conviction also is well-known to participants and is an area of concern for many. The added security awareness of the post-September 11 era has resulted in increased background checks. Hence, a significant issue in the life of reentering offenders is whether to "check the box"—a slang phrase that refers to whether an ex-offender intends to disclose his or her conviction on a job application. Participants discussed (a) the relationship between status disclosure and job opportunities and (b) the stereotyping and loss of privilege associated with having a felony conviction. Interventions designed to help reentering offenders should offer ways to deal with the stigma associated with being an offender, the emotional toll that stigma can take, and how this stigma plays out in the workplace.

### *Dealing With Substance Abuse Issues*

The majority of offenders have a history of substance abuse or dependence, and about half of all offenders report being under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol when perpetrating the crimes that led to their incarceration. Thus, it is not surprising that participants discussed (a) the treatment that is available in the correctional system and (b) the importance of understanding the power of addiction and the consequences of relapse.

### *Addressing Basic Needs*

Participants discussed (a) specific needs for food, housing, and transportation; and (b) their awareness of the basic needs they have. Participants not only described the specific needs that they have but also their concerns about and awareness of relying on others for help. One participant remarked, with a sense of exasperation, "How do you like living off somebody, eating all their food?" Although career development professionals may not focus on ex-offenders' housing problems, it is important to understand how such needs impact reentry more generally. For example, individuals convicted of drug offenses may not be allowed to enter public housing properties, whether to live or to visit—even if that is where their family resides. Similarly, many offenders do not qualify for Medicaid benefits.

### *Having Children Impacts Reentry*

Of the 15 participants, male or female, 10 indicated that they had children. Issues related to childcare seemed to dominate the thinking of these ex-offenders, who suggested that (a) child care is a major responsibility, (b) child care responsibilities limit or impact program participation, and (c) losing custody of your children always is a possibility. Unfortunately, for this group, child care responsibilities frequently were seen as conflicting with participation in correctional programming, including supervisory requirements, and as complicating the search for employment. This theme was salient enough that 2 female participants who did not have children spontaneously spoke of the freedom that they have to pursue a range of educational and employment possibilities. Many female offenders expend considerable energy trying to retain or regain custody of their children. Hence, child care responsibilities can complicate offenders' workforce reentry efforts.

### *Doing Time Means Aging*

The issue of aging was mentioned by several participants. The youthful appearance of the focus group facilitator may have

sparked some of the discussion early on. Participants noted that (a) advancing age limits employment opportunities and results in increased urgency or pressure to succeed and that (b) socioemotional maturity can accompany advancing age. Although the literature is far from agreement as to the way in which age and desistance from crime interact, in general, criminal behavior does decline with age (Maruna, 2001). Several participants observed the potential relationship between age and socioemotional maturation. But other participants noted the sense of urgency, pressure, and/or limitations (oftentimes physical limitations that impact occupational performance, as in the trades) associated with advancing age. The reality of aging may serve to ground participants as they consider their reentry efforts. It also, however, may present structural barriers to job placement, especially when offenders lack the confidence to learn new job skills.

### *Looking to Your Spiritual Side*

Finally, several participants alluded to the role of spirituality in their lives, generally, and with regard to reentry in particular. They suggested that spiritual beliefs and spiritual practices are helpful to reentering offenders.

## Discussion

We conducted our study as an initial attempt to explore the career-related experiences of nonviolent felony offenders endeavoring to return to the workforce. An overriding motivation was to sensitize counseling and career development professionals to the concerns of this large group of individuals who, unfortunately, have received only limited attention from our field. A second intent of this brief report was to identify workforce reentry themes that are salient, and perhaps unique, to ex-offenders. Not surprisingly, several of the domains we identified mapped onto the major challenges already identified in offender reentry (Travis et al., 2001). However, additional issues seemed salient to this population, and likely are important for counseling professionals to know and understand.

In particular, we saw that the role of social networks was particularly important to ex-offenders—both in terms of potential support and as a possible liability. Vocational psychologists (Brown & Ryan-Krane, 2000; Schultheiss, 2006) have become more interested in the role of social networks in career development. For ex-offenders, many of whom have a history both of substance abuse and an urgent set of basic needs (i.e., housing, food, transportation, and the like), finding and keeping a supportive social network may go hand-in-hand with finding and keeping a job. Similarly, the workplace may offer opportunities for a support network. However, some ex-offenders may lack the social skills to tap into social aspects of the work environment, or, they may approach social situations with considerable anxiety (Haney, 2006).

Our findings also support theorists' (e.g., Lynch & Sabol, 2001) characterization of reentry as a time of social reintegration. In their thinking, ex-offenders' reduced levels of attachment to institutions of social integration, including their families of origin, the legitimate labor market, schools, or faith-based organizations, may limit reentering offenders' efforts to take full advantage of the support and opportunities these institutions can provide. Both the internal

and external impacts of the stigma associated with being an ex-offender complicate many aspects of social life. Consequently, counseling professionals may want to assess ex-offenders' social skills and/or social confidence when addressing workforce reentry. We saw that "the system" may help provide ex-offenders with a temporary social network. Learning, more generally, to navigate the system and to access its available resources may be a critical task both for ex-offenders and for their psychological providers. After community supervision ends, ex-offenders may then need to learn to distance themselves from the system. Findings from at least one study (Goodstein, 1980) suggest that offenders' ability to adapt to incarceration may predict a more difficult transition home.

Although it goes without saying that workforce reentry is a stressful time, researchers and practitioners may have underestimated the degree of stress that ex-offenders experience (Haney, 2006). Ex-offenders who have child care responsibilities may, in particular, feel immediate and significant stress. Many female offenders have their children returned to them immediately upon release—before they successfully have secured housing or employment. Others learn they must struggle to regain custody of their children. These situations exact a significant emotional toll on a growing number of individuals. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (2001) reports that between 1990 and 1998 national incarceration rates for women increased by 88%, and the number of women under parole supervision grew by 80%. These increases, and the clues provided by our data, suggest that research attention should be paid to the special workforce reentry needs of female offenders.

## Limitations and Future Directions

The present study has a number of limitations associated generally with exploratory, qualitative research efforts. The sample of individuals studied was small, and, for unknown reasons, 2 participants elected to speak very little, yielding an effective sample size of about 13 participants. The sample size of this study is in line with many published efforts (Hill et al., 1997); however, additional efforts should be conducted to validate these findings, as they could be sample specific. Although this initial, exploratory study identified issues salient to ex-offenders' career-related reentry, future work must be based in a strong theoretical foundation, such as the social cognitive career theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2002), in order to advance understanding of this important, and often neglected, population. Finally, the composition of the research teams was a concern, as they lacked ethnic diversity. In particular, there were no African American research team members, despite the fact that 8 study participants identified their ethnicity as African American. Although we do not believe our data analysis was biased, it would be naive to ignore this limitation of the study. Future research efforts should engage a team of ethnically diverse researchers.

The strength of this study resides in its focus on an understudied population: ex-offenders reentering the workplace. Despite the documented and forecasted growth of this population, few efforts have addressed their career development-related needs. This study represents a start and begins where researchers (e.g., Chartrand & Rose, 1996) suggest—with the perceptions and voices of ex-offenders themselves. Qualitative analyses allowed us to uncover themes in the experiences of participants and to develop contextualized interpretations of events. Although this exploratory study

is limited in scope, the findings offer a glimpse of workforce reentry in the context of community supervision in the United States.

A few counseling psychologists have been involved with the design and the delivery of interventions for offenders. The significant numbers and needs of this population suggest that perhaps this should change. Haney (2006) states that:

For the first time in history, the discipline of psychology is in a position to address the causes of crime in a systematic and truly scientific way that has profound implications for the reframing of contemporary prison policy and the redirection of criminal justice resources. (p. xv)

Reentry initiatives represent a strong redirection of resources, and one in which counseling psychologists could well play a significant role.

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