YOUNG ADULTS REENTERING THE COMMUNITY FROM THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM: THE CHALLENGE OF BECOMING AN ADULT

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YOUNG ADULTS REENTERING THE COMMUNITY FROM THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM: THE CHALLENGE OF BECOMING AN ADULT

In a recent review, Michael Shanahan describes the transition to adulthood in the contemporary United States as less predictable and more precarious than ever before (2000: 685). If the transition to adulthood is more variable and more difficult for the general population, what are the difficulties faced by adults who spend their late teens and early twenties in prison or under correctional supervision? In this chapter we consider the vulnerability and resilience of young adults who return to the community from the criminal justice system across various domains of adjustment, including work, family, civic life, mental health, and substance use.

Consider Dylan, a white Minnesota inmate incarcerated at age 16 and imprisoned for more than half his life when interviewed at age 29 (as part of the first author's study of the political life of convicted felons). Although Dylan had attained none of the standard markers of adult status when he entered prison, 13 years later he appeared to be a mature, accomplished, and well-educated adult. Yet, Dylan is also keenly aware of the difficulties he will face when he is released from prison, because he is "off-time" relative to his age cohort with regard to the assumption of adult roles (Caspi, Elder, and Herbener 1990; Hagestad and Neugarten 1985).

> "I have this feeling of I have so much to make up for, like lost time, and I have nothing to show for it. I'll get out when I'm 34. I have no house, no car,

> no anything. So I'm going to have to spend a lot of my time working just to get my feet on the ground."

Pamela, a female inmate incarcerated for prescription drug abuse, suggested that it is difficult to view her fellow inmates as full-fledged adults, no matter their age:

> "That's how the women are here, just beaten up. Beaten up little kids who grew up. They're like little kids walking around in woman bodies…"

These comments raise questions about the links between crime, punishment, and adulthood. Can people "grow up" in prison? Are correctional facilities and detention centers necessarily "holding pens" in which no development can take place, or do they have the potential to help their clients assume stable adult roles? We first describe the young adult correctional population in the United States. We then detail the life course delays and disadvantages of young offenders prior to entering the criminal justice system. We next describe the consequences of punishment on the transition to adulthood for ex-offenders. Finally, we consider social context and variation in crime, punishment, and the transition to adulthood.

The U.S. Criminal Justice System that Defines the Population

The American criminal justice system can be divided into a rough sequence of police, court, and correctional functions. The farther that people are drawn into this sequence -- from initial police contact, to arrest, to booking, to charging, to conviction, to sentencing, and

ultimately to placement in a secure facility -- the greater the potential for stigma, social exclusion, and disruption in life course transition processes. Our primary concern in this chapter is therefore with the back-end of this system and the young adults who reenter the community after being placed by courts under the supervision of one or more correctional agencies. In particular, we consider the challenge of the transition to adulthood for those serving time as probationers, prisoners, and parolees.

Probation

Probation is a criminal sentence that allows an individual to remain in the community under the supervision of the court for a specified period of time. If the probationer breaks the law or fails to abide by the terms of the probation agreement (which may involve conditions such as drug testing, work requirements, and travel restrictions) for the duration of the sentence, probation may be cancelled or revoked and a more severe sentence imposed. About 3.9 million adults were under probation supervision in 2001 (U.S. Department of Justice 2002a). The most recent estimate available suggests that about 26% of probationers (about 1 million individuals) are between the ages of 18 and 24 (Bonczar 1997). Although probation is often applied to first-time offenders or those convicted of non-violent offenses, it is important to note that about 53 percent of all probationers have been convicted of felonies, or crimes that are punishable by one year or more in a state prison.

Prison

While probationers are generally permitted to retain work, family, and community ties, prisoners are physically removed from these domains. Because a prison term is likely to

have the strongest implications for the transition to adulthood, our discussion below relies heavily on interview and survey data from prison inmates. Roughly 1.4 million offenders were serving time in state or federal prisons in 2001, with an additional 600,000 held in local jails (U.S. Department of Justice 2002b). In contrast to prisons, jails confine people before as well as after they have been sentenced. About 59 percent of the 2001 jail population consisted of persons awaiting trial, and most jail inmates who have been convicted are sentenced to jail terms of less than one year (U.S. Department of Justice 2002b). Overall, about 100,000 young adults aged 18-24 will be released from prison this year.

Parole

In addition to probation and incarceration, parole represents a third correctional population of interest that poses challenges in the transition to adulthood. Parole refers to the planned conditional release and supervision of prisoners before the expiration of their prison sentences. Parolees are subject to similar conditions as probationers and they may be returned to prison for new offenses or for technical violations of parole rules (such as leaving the local area). In contrast to previous years, today a greater percentage of parolees enter supervision as a result of mandatory release dates rather than through discretionary decisions made by parole boards. In 1990, about 59% of prisoners were released by parole boards compared to 36% in 2001. Currently, approximately 16% of those released to parole are between the ages of 18 and 24, about 90% are male, and 65% are members of racial minority groups (U.S. Department of Justice 2001a). About 40% of the approximately 700,000 people within in the total parole population were returned to prison as a result of technical violations or new offenses in 2001 (U.S. Department of Justice 2002a).

All together, a record 6.5 million people were serving time in prison, on probation, or parole in 2001, representing about 3.1 percent of the total U.S. adult population and a far greater proportion of the young adult population (U.S. Department of Justice 2002a). In recent years, approximately 600,000 people have been released from prison annually, 500,000 complete parole, and 2 million exit probation supervision (U.S. Department of Justice 2002a). Many of these individuals are young adults, facing a multitude of roadblocks to assuming stable adult roles.

To provide some basic descriptive data on the young adults who face the greatest barriers in entering or resuming work, family, and community roles, we will draw upon data from a large-scale nationally representative survey of young adults in prison. The 1997 *Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities* is based on personal interviews conducted by the Bureau of the Census with approximately 14,000 state prisoners and 4,000 federal prisoners (U.S. Department of Justice 2001b).

To provide illustrations throughout the chapter, we also reference qualitative interviews conducted in Minnesota as part of a project on the scope and impact of political restrictions on convicted felons in the United States (Manza and Uggen forthcoming; Uggen and Manza 2002). Prisoners, parolees, and felony probationers were asked about their participation in political and civic life and their attitudes about crime and community. Each taped interview lasted approximately one hour and took place in private rooms at two state correctional facilities and one county community corrections office.[i] To protect the confidentiality of those interviewed, we assign each respondent a pseudonym when quoting directly from the interview transcripts.

The Transition to Adulthood and Entry into the Criminal Justice System

Historically, transition markers such as moving out of the home of origin, completing an education, finding stable work, getting married and becoming a parent have signaled adult status (Hogan 1981; Shanahan 2000). Becoming an adult is not only a matter of achieving the markers of adult status but also of obtaining them in reasonable sequence at a socially prescribed or normative age.[ii] Most young people enter the criminal justice system lagging far behind their age cohort in employment status, socioeconomic attainment, marriage formation, establishment of an independent residence, and other markers of adulthood. Although prisoners may gain marginal increases in human capital while incarcerated, such as the attainment of a General Equivalency Diploma, the vast majority of inmates will reenter their communities with these deficits intact.

Family of Origin Disadvantages and Socioeconomic Attainment

The socioeconomic divide between correctional populations and the general population is visible when people enter the system, and often more pronounced when they exit it. This observation holds across almost all domains of adult adjustment, but is especially true for socioeconomic attainment and disadvantaged family status. We present some descriptive data from the 1997 National Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities (U.S. Department of Justice 2001b) in Figure 1. The inmate survey provides nationally representative data on state prisoners. For purposes of this chapter, we selected only those inmates age 25 or younger in order to develop a portrait of the transition to adulthood for young adult former prisoners who return to the community.

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1 reveals high rates of disadvantage in prisoners' families of origin as well as a number of continuing deficits that are likely to impact inmates' lives upon release from prison. With regard to socioeconomic background, almost one-fourth of young inmates spent some portion of their childhood in public housing developments, and almost half reported that their parents or guardians received public assistance. About 16 percent had been placed in foster care or institutional homes at some point during their childhood and one-third of these young inmates reported growing up with parents or guardians who abused alcohol or drugs.

A growing research literature details the deleterious consequences for the children of incarcerated individuals. Children of incarcerated parents suffer economically from the removal of the parent's legal (and illegal) income (Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999), may be at greater risk of precocious exits from adolescence (Hagan and Wheaton 1993), and are especially vulnerable to involvement in the criminal justice system themselves (Hagan and Palloni 1990). In the inmate survey, about one third of young prisoners report that at least one parent or guardian spent time in prison or jail while they were growing up.

Juvenile Criminal History

A juvenile criminal history tends to increase later criminal involvement by restricting work and educational opportunities (Hagan 1993; Laub and Sampson 1995). For example, James, a white 24 year-old that we interviewed in prison, was first charged at 11 for an assault, was first placed into custody at 12 for auto theft, and had an adult theft conviction at 18 before his most recent conviction for manslaughter at age 19. He noted that "Since age 11,

I have never been ‘off paper’ [not serving a probation, prison, or parole sentence] … I’ve been wasting quite a few tax dollars.” Overall, about 70% of inmates under the age of 25 in the survey had a prior criminal record before sentencing for their most recent offense.

[Figure 2 about here]

Figure 2 presents some descriptive statistics on young adults in prison with reference to their criminal histories. We distinguish between first-time offenders (about 30 percent of the sample), non-violent recidivists (about 26 percent of the sample), and recidivists whose past or current offense has involved a crime of violence (about 45 percent of the sample). A strikingly clear gradient emerges across the three groups in childhood disadvantage. The violent recidivists are most likely to report that one or more of their parents had been incarcerated, that they lived in foster homes as children, and that they had social ties to delinquent friends while growing up. First-time offenders reported the lowest levels on these indicators. Non-violent recidivists fell somewhere in the middle, reporting greater childhood disadvantages than the first timers but fewer than the violent recidivists.

Focusing on the life course trajectories of delinquents, Hagan (1993) argues that early criminal involvement restricts later education and work opportunities thereby making continued involvement in crime more likely. As offenders become “embedded” in criminal networks, barriers to occupational and educational attainment accumulate over time, making major life changes increasingly difficult. As this model would suggest, those with more extensive criminal justice contact are also somewhat more likely to be delayed on several markers of adult status. Violent recidivists are far less likely to have obtained a high school diploma or G.E.D. than the other groups and somewhat less likely to be working full-time at the time of their most recent arrest. Consistent with criminal embeddedness arguments,

violent recidivists are also more likely to report other problems, such as regular use of illegal drugs and homelessness, and to be tied to spouses or siblings who have also been incarcerated.

Looking backward in time, it seems clear that young prisoners who become more deeply embedded in the criminal justice system often had difficult family backgrounds and ties to delinquent friends and parents in childhood. Looking forward, they are likely to experience greater problems in attaining adult status and greater difficulty in adjustment once they leave prison. In contrast, those entering prison with no prior record are likely to have had a relatively more advantaged background and, perhaps, brighter prospects in the future.

Substance Abuse

> "When I drink, I always get into trouble. *Something always happens.*"
>
> Kevin, probationer, age 21 (emphasis added)

Currently, about 22% of prisoners are incarcerated specifically for drug offenses and the vast majority of prison inmates reported prior illegal drug use. About half of all inmates were drinking or using drugs at the time of their offense; of these, about 1 in 6 also report supporting drug use as the primary motivation for their most recent criminal offense (U.S. Department of Justice 1999; see also Uggen and Thompson 2003).

> "I thought, 'Okay. It's always the other person that gets into trouble.' When it finally happened to me - alcohol just makes it easier to do and get into trouble."
>
> Alex, prison inmate, age 37

Alex was convicted of manslaughter when he stabbed his brother during an argument. He argues that his alcoholism was a contributing factor to the crime and now attends an AA program in prison. Despite high rates of substance abuse among prisoners, only one third of inmates using drugs within a month of their arrest have participated in substance abuse treatment since admission to prison. Drug and alcohol abuse is particularly high among younger inmates. Among prisoners under the age of 25, 71% report regular illegal drug use, 63% report drug use in the month prior to their arrest, and 33% were using drugs at the time of their current offense (U.S. Department of Justice 1999). Drug use is similarly high in the probationer population. In 1995, about 70% of probationers reported past illegal drug use yet only 17% of probationers completed drug treatment during their sentence.

Physical, Mental, and Learning Disabilities

Relative to the general population, prison inmates have much higher rates of serious health problems and mental illnesses. Travis and Visher (this volume) report that about 20% of prison releasees have HIV or AIDS and 38% tested positive for tuberculosis. Travis and Visher also report high rates of serious health problems resulting from sustained drug and alcohol abuse.

The prevalence of mental illness in the prison population has also grown substantially since the deinstitutionalization movement of the early 1960s, and what some have called the criminalization of mental illness (Lamb and Weinberger 1998; Teplin 1984a). Lamb and Weinberger (1998) report that the number of mentally ill persons in state hospitals has fallen from 559,000 in 1955 to 72,000 in 1998, primarily as a result of closures of state mental

hospitals and the shift to the penitentiary as the primary site of mental health care. Mentally ill inmates are more likely to be incarcerated for violent offenses, to have been homeless and unemployed at the time of arrest, and to report a family history of incarceration, substance abuse, and physical or sexual abuse victimization compared to inmates with no reported mental or emotional conditions (Ditton 1999, Teplin 1984b). Today, about 10% of all prison inmates and 16% of probationers reported a mental condition or an overnight stay in a mental hospital (Ditton 1999). Such self-reports are likely to significantly underestimate the prevalence of mental illness. Though prisons may not be the most effective site for mental health treatment, about 60% of mentally ill inmates and about half of mentally ill probationers received some form of treatment (medication, counseling, or group treatment program) while serving their sentences.

Although the inmate survey does not formally assess disabilities, respondents self-reported their mental health and disability status in interviews, as shown in Figure 3. About 20 percent of young prison inmates reported having some type of disability, while 10 percent reported having a learning disability, 7 percent an emotional or mental disorder, 5 percent a physical disability and 3 percent a speech disability. Although no directly comparable self-reported disability data are available for the general population, it is likely that the prevalence of disabilities among prison inmates is high relative to other groups. According to the 1997 Survey of Income and Program Participation, for example, 11 percent of the civilian non-institutionalized population age 15 to 21 reported any disability, 5.3 percent reported a severe disability (U.S. Census Bureau 2000: 140). The fact that one-in-five prison inmates report a disability thus suggests somewhat greater vulnerability among correctional populations to physical, mental, or emotional difficulties.

[Figure 3 about here]

Moffitt's (1993) developmental research points to neuropsychological deficits as a primary factor for distinguishing between offenders who persist in crime after adolescence and those who leave delinquency behind to adopt conventional adult roles. Adolescents with a childhood history of neuropsychological deficits are more likely to persist in crime into adulthood. Because neuropsychological problems also tend to be associated with disadvantaged family situations, the deficits experienced by "life-course persistent" offenders in early childhood are magnified over time, resulting in criminal involvement long after adolescence that hinders adjustment across the domains of school, work, family, mental health, and substance use.

Adult Status Markers: Work, School, and FamilyFormation

Given the prevalence of early childhood disadvantage, substance abuse, and disability among prison inmates, it is perhaps unsurprising that this group would also lag behind their age cohort in educational and occupational attainment immediately prior to entering prison. Figure 4 compares the school, work, and family statuses of young prison inmates with males aged 18-24 in the general population (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1998, 2000). Most strikingly, the educational attainment of young inmates lags far behind that of their counterparts in the general population. Almost three-fourths of US males aged 18-24 have attained at least a high school diploma, relative to less than one-fifth of inmates. At the time of their most recent arrest, inmates were also more likely to have been unemployed relative to non-inmates, and much less likely to be working full-time. The two groups are roughly comparable in terms of marital status, with the vast majority of both populations unmarried

in this age range. Over one-third of the inmate group, however, reported having at least one child (unfortunately, no directly comparable data are available for the general male population).

[Figure 4 about here]

All in all, offenders enter prison with a multitude of problems across most domains of adult adjustment. Young offenders, particularly those with juvenile criminal histories, are more likely to have been raised in adverse economic and familial circumstances. A substantial portion have physical health problems, mental health and substance abuse issues, and learning disabilities. When arrested, many young inmates were homeless, unemployed, or under-educated. To what extent can prisons address these deficits? Below, we explore the opportunities and challenges to improving the health, education, and occupational attainment of young offenders while they are serving their sentences.

Serving a Sentence: Opportunities for Development Behind Bars?

Criminal sentences disrupt employment, family arrangements, and civic engagement. While probationers are allowed to complete their sentences in the community, prisoners are removed from most important social contacts for the duration of their sentences. In some cases this may be a positive development, for example, when inmates are removed from criminal peer networks or volatile family situations. At the same time, incarceration also cuts inmates off from active participation as parents, community members, and employees. Additionally, with substantial variation across jurisdiction, inmates may also be subject to serious injury or sexual assault while behind bars (Bell, Coven, Cronan, Garza, Guggemos, and Storto 1999). The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that in 1997 roughly 20% of State

prisoners younger than 25 were injured in prison; of these, about 10% were injured in fights with other inmates (U.S. Department of Justice 2001c).

Current and former inmates now face substantial difficulty entering programs and receiving services that are likely to improve their employment prospects. Many convicted felons are prohibited from receiving financial aid for higher education. Felons on probation or parole are often barred from public assistance programs and access to public housing (Rubenstein and Mukamal 2002). Larry, a 30-year-old prisoner, expressed regret about recent restrictions on inmate access to higher education,

> "I think education is underrated. There's not enough of it. They keep taking it away. You know, I was going to [*name of university*] through their program and they took the program away. About a year later they brought a smaller version of it back, but still it's not the same as it was."

Larry also doubts the utility of GED-only educational programs for prisoners,

> "Well, the G.E.D.'s not gonna do anything. You know, there's all kind of guys in here that have a G.E.D. and they're still running around committin' crime, you know. They need to go to some higher education. A G.E.D. is not going to change anybody's intelligence level. All you got's this little piece of paper saying, "Yeah, I'm *almost like* a high school student."

Offenders also increasingly face the termination of their parental rights as a result of incarceration. For those who retain their parental rights, maintaining consistent contact with

children is extremely difficult (Travis and Visher, this volume). Currently, incarceration rates among women are rising, yielding greater family disruption, since women are more likely to be living with their children prior to incarceration (Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999). Mary, a 40 year-old prisoner, described the difficulties of physical separation from one's children and the uncertainty of resuming parental duties upon release from prison.

> "And it crushes a lot of women. I mean their whole world gets totally shattered in here because they don't have their children nearby. Or their children are in different homes and things like that. There's a lady here who has four children, and they're each in a different foster home. When she gets out is she going to be able to collect her children back? I don't know."

Given the substantial costs associated with removing inmates from community, work, and family life, can prisons release inmates who are better off than when they entered? Whereas prisons generally provide inmates with some degree of education and work experience, jails are much less likely to provide such programming and jail conditions vary dramatically across jurisdictions. Moreover, though most prisons offer education programs, substance abuse treatment, or vocational training opportunities for inmates, participation in such programs is low and has been declining (Travis and Visher, this volume). Inmates are also subject to the long-term trend in US correctional policy emphasizing a punitive rather than a rehabilitative ideology. Our qualitative interviews suggest that inmates are aware of this emphasis as well. Craig, a 22-year-old prisoner, was one of many inmates who felt that

the dominance of punitive programs is a direct reflection of the wishes of community members, as opposed to policies imposed by politicians or correctional authorities.

> "The general attitude is that, at least with the prison system, is more things are just being taken away. It's getting where it's not so much for politicians, but it's actually the whole community, the whole society is saying, "We want more punishment." "We don't think treatment works. It's not worth it." They just wanna punish. It's real frustrating, it seems like there's not a lot of understanding maybe from the public, or maybe an attempt to work with each other. It seems like a lot of guys in here become angry at the public.

A number of popular biographies have described prison as a transformative experience. For example, the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* and Nathan McCall's *Makes Me Wanna Holler* describe incarceration as a time in which reflection, rest, and growth is possible. Also, despite public skepticism and political resistance, a growing research literature has shown that rehabilitation programs are capable of lowering recidivism rates for those who participate (see Cullen and Gendreau 2000 for a review). Without such programs, the life course perspective, our qualitative interviews, and research on criminal desistance suggest that prison will fail to transform the majority of inmates from immature or disadvantaged offenders into active community members, responsible parents, and stable employees upon release.

Reentering the Community: Consequences of Punishment

Perhaps the most important first step to community re-engagement and criminal desistance is the adoption of a noncriminal identity. Viewing oneself as a *former* offender is likely to impact an inmate's desire for legitimate employment (and persistence during the job search), chances of successful family reintegration, and resistance to attractive criminal opportunities. Such a process may begin prior to prison release (for example, in cognitive behavioral treatment programs), the society outside the prison walls will heavily influence the extent to which former inmates perceive opportunities for legitimate success and the fate of their developing prosocial identity (Maruna 2001).

Matsueda and Heimer (1997) offer a social-psychological perspective on crime that is useful for understanding the barriers ex-prisoners face in adopting prosocial identities. In this model, self-concept, identity, and the adoption of some roles (for example, "gang member") over others ("computer programmer") are a function of social interaction. The most salient roles are those that are played repeatedly over time and those that are reinforced in social relationships (1997, 167). This approach suggests that prison reentry programs may be successful only insofar as the social relationships and environment outside of prison reinforces earlier principles learned in prison.

Life course research helps to explain how young adults make their way into the criminal justice system as well as identify the sorts of barriers they are likely to face when returning to their communities. Those with early disadvantages are likely to become embedded in problematic life course trajectories with the attendant barriers to work, family, and civic reintegration. Yet it should be noted that it is often the effects of *punishment* rather than offending that disrupt or delay life course transitions. Thus far, we have shown the substantial disadvantages probationers, inmates, and parolees possess prior to entering the

criminal justice system and discussed the challenges to development while serving their sentences. We next describe the barriers to a successful transition to adulthood that arise from criminal punishment.

Work

Obtaining legitimate and quality employment may powerfully assist in the adoption of a durable noncriminal identity. There is ample evidence that work may be important for explaining both the onset of crime in childhood and adolescence and desistance from crime in adulthood. Although the transition from school to full-time work is a clear marker of adult status in the United States, the effects of employment on crime are likely to be age-graded. For example, Uggen (2000) finds that a basic employment opportunity reduces criminal involvement for offenders age 27 and older, a group that is noticeably delayed with respect to adult work transitions. Though evidence suggests that the simple provision of employment is unlikely to impact the criminal behavior of young offenders (Uggen 2000), job quality and earnings are both tied to reductions in crime among offenders (Uggen 1999; Uggen and Thompson 2003). In contrast, adolescents who work more than twenty hours per week (Bachman and Schulenberg 1993) or in more adult-like work settings (Staff and Uggen 2003) tend to be more involved in delinquency than those who work less or not at all. Such findings may be indicative of a precocious transition to adulthood or a "hurried adolescence" (Safron, Schulenberg, and Bachman 2001) associated with delinquency, substance use and other risky behaviors. Thus, early as well as late transitions to adult work roles tend to increase criminal involvement because the meaning of work and other important life course transitions is age-dependent.

Beyond the impact of work on crime and criminal desistance, a burgeoning research literature is demonstrating strong punishment effects on employment and earnings, showing that imprisonment affects both the quantity and quality of work available to former prisoners (Pager 2002; Western 2002). This pattern of decreased earnings and fewer job opportunities for ex-prisoners has had an especially strong impact on younger workers and African Americans (Pager 2002; Western and Pettit 2000). In our own interviews, several inmates expressed frustration over their inability to get a good job when their criminal record is known to employers. As Karen, a white inmate in her thirties, put it:

> "What is it, the fourth question of every job interview? 'Have you ever been convicted of a crime?' They ask you that before they ask for your prior work history or education. All that's on the second page, so they read "felon" before they ever read that side."

Similarly, Rita, another female inmate in her forties, had little work experience and few concrete plans for employment. She described a rich network of associates available to assist her in disposing of stolen merchandise, or trading it for drugs that she could sell at a high profit. Her opportunities for legitimate employment, however, paled in comparison:

> "I don't know what I'm going to be able to do to make money unless I go out and sell drugs again…I mean, I'm gonna get a job that probably, if I'm lucky, makes $8 or $9 an hour, which I can go make a drug deal in a half-hour and make $300, you know?"

Michael, a probationer, describes himself as “stuck in streetlife” and explained how his criminal justice experiences have affected his work prospects:

> “I’m glad I’m gonna get off probation, and drop my felony. For real. I want a good paying job, ‘cause I had a job at [*name of Casino*] in ’97, I was going to get that job, too. That same day I caught that robbery case … that job was gonna pay me like $11 an hour, I had experience as a cook, I went through cooking classes up in the workhouse and got a certificate for like six weeks… I was going to be a top chef out at [*Casino name*]. Couldn’t do it though, caught that felony, couldn’t even do it, can’t work at a casino, you can’t get a government job, neither, if you got a felony.”

Family

In addition to employment, strong family ties may reduce recidivism and aid in community reintegration of former inmates. Marriage, for example, may reduce crime because spouses provide informal social control for offenders and tend to reduce associations with criminal peers (Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998; Warr 1998). As in research on employment, marital quality and commitment, rather than the mere presence of a marital union, appears to be critical to inhibiting subsequent crime. Horney, Osgood, and Marshall (1995) report that cohabitation, in the absence of marriage, may even increase offending. Additionally, the presence or even the quality of marriage is less important to future offending when the spouse is also an offender (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002).

Returning prisoners whose spouses are involved in crime may be even *more* likely to continue in crime relative to unmarried offenders.

Prison inmates increasingly face the formal termination of their parental rights (Braman 2002) and informal barriers to assuming adult family roles. Since 1991, the number of children with an incarcerated parent has increased from about 900,000 to almost 1.5 million (about 2.1% of all children under 18). A majority of prison inmates have at least one child under age 18 and almost half of incarcerated parents were living with their children prior to entering prison. Incarceration also has an impact on a substantial number of very young children – roughly 22% of children with an incarcerated parent were under the age of five (U.S. Department of Justice 2000).

Our qualitative interviews suggest that children can have a powerful impact on the offending of their parents. For example, Scott, a 26 year-old African American father on probation, discussed how becoming a "family man" made legitimate work more attractive to him.

> "I think being a family man has changed me in that [career] way. To want to be- To get my money right because I don't want to look like a piece of nothing in front of my kids. So stuff like that has to do with pride, too. That helps, man. That helps to have a family."

In contrast, Lori, a 37 year-old prisoner, describes how losing her parental rights while incarcerated had a dramatic effect on her behavior.

> "I remember when they took my son from me. Let me tell you something – I was literally nuts for two years. I didn't give a shit. I did as I pleased when I pleased, and I didn't give a shit about the consequences."

Unfortunately, sociological research has been relatively silent about the impact of children on their parent's criminality and the potentially harmful consequences of reuniting children with criminal parents (Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999). Several theories of crime, however, suggest ways in which the presence of children may impact the criminal offending of their parents. Children may reduce parental crime if their presence helps to strengthen family attachments and reinforce a prosocial identity. Alternatively, children may increase criminal involvement of parents by adding stress and financial strain to individuals who already experience a wide variety of disadvantages. While more young adults are involved with the criminal justice system, we know very little about the impact the experience may have on the transition to parenthood, parenting skills, and parental attachment.

Civic Life

As with parenting, barriers to civic engagement and political participation of ex-inmates have been relatively neglected areas of study (Uggen, Manza, and Behrens 2003). Civic barriers such as the loss of voting rights and restrictions on community life compound the labor market, educational, and early childhood disadvantages experienced by ex-prisoners and powerfully reinforce the social isolation of former offenders. In a recent study of felon disfranchisement, Uggen and Manza (2002) report that nearly 4.7 million felons and ex-felons are legally disfranchised in the United States. While this group appears to be more

alienated from mainstream politics and community life than the rest of the population (Uggen et al 2003; Uggen and Manza 2003), they have valuable political views to contribute, and their civic inclusion may facilitate their successful adjustment when they return to the community.

Regardless of whether felons would exercise the right to vote if given the opportunity, those we interviewed generally viewed voting as fundamental to citizenship. As Lynn, a prisoner in her thirties, put it, voting is a "part of being a citizen and being an adult. Once you reach the age of eighteen, that's something you get to do." Correspondingly, they viewed disenfranchisement as a clear indicator that they were unwanted or unaccepted as full citizens in their communities. This sentiment is clearly expressed by Paul, a male in his thirties who describes himself as "exiled" from his community,

> "Giving back voting rights is another way to make a person feel part of that community. How can you feel that you're giving back to a community that you're a part of when you're exiled from it by not being able to vote and have a voice in it?"

This feeling of exile is especially troubling in light of Matsueda and Heimer's (1997) argument that role adoption is in part a function of the reactions of others and conditioned by social context. Of central concern, then, is Paul's reaction to the denial of voting rights and restrictions placed upon him because of his sex offender status,

> "When they say, 'What are you going to give back to the community for this and for that?' Well, hey, community doesn't want a damn thing to do with me, why should I go back and give anything?"

Paul's viewpoint suggests that civil restrictions may inhibit the assumption of other adult roles and undermine the correctional goal of encouraging offenders to empathize or identify with community members as a strategy for reducing crime (see, e.g., Braithwaite 1989). Moreover, for young offenders in particular, voting at age 18 may be the first opportunity for civic engagement. Once this opportunity is lost, young ex-offenders with no voting history may be less likely to exercise this right when and if it is regained.

Social Stigma

In addition to substantial disadvantages in the labor market, barriers to family reintegration and educational attainment, and civil penalties, offenders also face heightened stigmatization once they leave prison. Sex offenders, perhaps the most stigmatized group of offenders returning to the community, face especially severe barriers to community reintegration. In the words of Alan, a Minnesota sex offender in his thirties, "We're a step below murderers. People would rather have a murderer living next door than me."

Alan's comments appear to reflect the sentiments of the general public, for there appears to be far greater stigma associated with sex offenses than even violent crimes. In a nationally representative Harris Interactive poll conducted in July 2002, about 80 percent of Americans expressed support for the extension of voting rights to convicted felons who have completed their sentences. In a survey experiment in which the offense category was varied,

however, sex offenders received a far lower level of support, with only 52 percent of the respondents supporting their right to vote after they have completed their sentences (Manza, Brooks, and Uggen 2002). The increased use of community notification procedures and sex offender registration requirements may increase public safety but may also have the unintended effect of increasing sex offender recidivism by removing virtually all routes to the adoption of adult roles, prosocial community involvement, and occupational or educational advancement.

Cumulative Disadvantage and Multiple Barriers for Ex-Offenders

One of the most important findings drawn from life course research on the causes and correlates of criminal offending concerns the interactions between early life disadvantage, later disadvantages, and criminal outcomes. Early life disadvantages such as poverty, criminal parents, and neuropsychological deficits combine to lower later educational and occupational attainment, thereby increasing the likelihood of criminal involvement (Hagan and Palloni 1990, Moffitt 1993). Earlier disadvantages and delayed transitions are magnified over time, resulting in problematic transitions to adulthood and increased criminal offending.

Also, irrespective of gender, race, conviction offense, or correctional status, the "felon label" acts as a substantial barrier to returning to normal work, family, and civic roles. Our respondents suggested important interactions across these domains as well (Uggen et al 2003). For example, barriers to educational attainment or employment impede family reintegration and the assumption of positive parenting roles. Similarly, restrictions on voting, civic participation, and housing limit the ability of offenders to become active citizens. For ex-inmates, those who return to their communities will do so with additional challenges,

beyond the difficulties that may have brought them to prison. Yet many were optimistic about the prospects for assuming or resuming roles as active citizens. Lynn, whose drug use and criminal activities were widely discussed in her small town, said that "people seen that I changed," and she was eager to rejoin that community and establish a new role as a volunteer.

> "When I get out I'll be home in time to do whatever I can to help out with [my hometown] centennial. The last two years I've been on house arrest so I couldn't be involved. I had to sit at home. So this will be my first year not [on house arrest], and I plan on, you know, whatever day if they need me to clean up the streets, whatever, I plan on doing it."

In contrast, the young probationer Michael described his trepidation upon returning to a high-crime urban neighborhood after a period of incarceration.

> "you don't really see progress. I mean people work, they get in stuff, volunteer and stuff, but it's, it's the same cycle…Day in, day out, people go to jail, get married, people born, same thing, people get drunk, people get high, it never stops."

Despite these misgivings, Michael also wanted his neighbors to witness his assumption of adult roles:

> “I want to be there [in my old neighborhood] so people would know, “hey, man, [Mike’s] doing something, going to work everyday, family going to church. He was out there wild, look at him now, he’s changed…I’d be right there, but, all in all, when you do that, you still have people who might be mad at you, that you made the change, people you used to run with, you know, might not like that.”

However, though Michael spoke at length about his desire to someday leave crime behind, become involved in his community, and “raise a family like middle-class people,” these roles seem to lack salience for him. In particular, he discussed his difficulties making the most of the employment opportunities available to him.

> “they gave me a chance, you know, working at [names company] making $8 an hour, [it] was a cool job, you know, I was always by myself, can’t complain about that. They gave me a chance. It was a white guy, too. They gave me a chance, because I was looking sincere, you know I came to work on time…I worked there about six months. Then, I don’t know, man, I just stopped going. I don’t know why.”

In contrast, when asked about where he will live after leaving prison, Dylan references his educational training in prison, describing his work plans in terms of a “career” rather than merely getting a “job.”

> "I don't think I'll live there [my hometown] because of the career I've chosen in prison, I'm a computer programmer. I'm from a small town so I won't be able to have a career necessarily. So I'll probably have to live in the city."

A noticeable difference between Dylan and Michael is the way in which they describe themselves and their work goals. Michael is merely "looking sincere" while expressing doubt about his ability to maintain a legal job whereas Dylan -- who has yet to leave prison and put his plans to a test -- describes himself as a computer programmer. Michael, at 23 a world-weary probationer, has experienced life on the outside as a felon while Dylan has yet to confront the stigma experienced by those with a criminal history. Combating the reactions and expectations of others when co-workers, neighbors, and friends discover his criminal record is a difficulty Dylan has not yet faced.

Karen, a female inmate, echoed other respondents when she described the substantial labor market consequences of her criminal history. She also argued that her status as a felon would interfere with her ability to remain an involved parent once she returned to her community.

> "Even to go into the school, to work with my child's class -- and I'm not a sex offender -- but all I need is one parent who says, "Isn't she a felon? I don't want her with my child."

Frustration at the inability to be viewed as anything other than a felon was a consistent theme throughout our qualitative interviews. As Karen put it,

> “I am more than a felon. I am educated. I am intelligent. I’m hard working, I’m a good mother, I’m dependable, all of those things. I don’t have to worry about parole telling me I’m a felon because there’s gonna be a ton of other people that are going to say, “You’re a felon.”

Finally, it is important to note that the barriers we have described in this chapter impact a historically unprecedented rate and number of young adults in the United States. We conclude the chapter below by placing the United States in an international context and describing differences in the impact of punishment on the transition to adulthood for various groups within the United States.

The US Pattern in Context

To understand U.S. patterns, it is important to consider them in relation to those of other societies. Just as high rates of criminal punishment are exceptional in the U.S., the transition to adulthood for ex-prisoners is also distinctive in American society.

[Figure 5 about here]

Figure 5 presents incarceration rates for a wide variety of countries, including the U.S. The United States is increasingly divergent from other nations in both its rate and manner of criminal punishment. To take but one example, the U.S. incarceration rate is more than 6 times that of Japan. Moreover, a sentence to prison is much more common in the U.S. relative to Japan for all types of crime. Prison sentences for adults and probation sentences for juveniles are highly unusual in Japan, even for violent crimes (Ministry of Justice 2000;

Thornton and Endo 1992; Westermann and Burfeind 1991). In contrast to the U.S., juveniles in particular are rarely confined as a result of criminal involvement.[iii] In addition to high incarceration rates, the American trend toward community notification, sex offender registries, housing restrictions, and work barriers appear unusually restrictive when placed in international context. For example, political disenfranchisement is rarely applied to non-incarcerated felons in other industrialized nations (Uggen and Manza 2002).

Age, Race, and Gender Disparities

Lastly, within this country, it is important to note that the impact of high incarceration rates and its consequences are not equally apportioned to all U.S. citizens. More young people than ever before are reentering the community from the criminal justice system, and, as Bruce Western and Becky Pettit (2002) have noted, prison time has become a common event in the life course for young black men. As a result, many of the problems ex-prisoners encounter when returning to the community are disproportionately borne by young African-American males. Compared to Whites, African American men are about six times more likely to enter prison at some point during their lifetimes (Bonczar and Beck 1997). Because age, gender, and race are closely correlated with criminal punishment, a high percentage of the young, male, and African American populations are incarcerated. For example, about 8 percent of all African American males aged 18 to 24 (and 10 percent of all African American males aged 25 to 29) were in prison in 2001 (U.S. Department of Justice 2002c).

African American ex-prisoners are disproportionately affected by labor market disadvantages (Western and Pettit 2002) and felon disenfranchisement (Uggen and Manza 2002). For example, one audit study found that the stigma of a felony conviction was even

stronger for African-American job applicants than for Whites (Pager 2002). Minority children also face an increased risk of losing their parents to prison. Relative to Whites, African American children are about 9 times more likely to have an incarcerated parent. Latino children experience parental loss at a rate three times that of White children (U.S. Department of Justice 2000). Finally, because imprisonment disproportionately impacts poor African American communities, the ability for these neighborhoods to develop effective informal social control networks is increasingly limited (Clear and Rose 1998). African American men often enter prison with a number of barriers to a successful adult transition, and the prison experience and stigma they face upon release only exacerbate these barriers.

Conclusion

This chapter has detailed the barriers hindering the transition to adulthood for young adults with experience in the criminal justice system. We have shown that young prisoners in the United States lag far behind their counterparts in the general population across the domains of education, employment, family formation, and behavioral adjustment. Extant research on the transition to adulthood for this group, along with our own qualitative interviews, suggests that disadvantages accumulate across these domains as former felons attempt to assume adult roles when they reenter their communities. We have also emphasized the social-psychological processes that link adult transitions to criminal behavior over the life course. Simply put, those who develop a stable identity of "felon" or "criminal" are unlikely to develop the social relationships and role behavior needed to assume other adult roles (Uggen et al 2003). Since most young people engage in some form of delinquency during

adolescence, settling down and aging out of crime may itself be a separate facet of the transition to adulthood (Uggen and Massoglia 2002).

Perhaps the most fundamental question in life course research on crime is whether common life events, such as entering employment, marrying, or establishing an independent residence, are causes of future behavioral trajectories or simply reflections of underlying individual predispositions. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) adopt the latter view, refuting the significance of life course events and proposing instead a theory of crime based on stable individual differences in self-control. In their view, criminal propensity remains stable over the life course and predicts life course trajectories, events, and criminal involvement. Thus, according to Gottfredson and Hirschi, the relationship between such factors as marriage and work and reduced crime is spurious. Rather, those with low self-control are unlikely to enter stable marital or employment situations in the first place, and will remain involved in crime well beyond adolescence. If this position is correct, then policy efforts to facilitate the transition to adult roles are unlikely to affect the future criminal behavior of those involved in the criminal justice system.

If, as we believe, life course theories are correct in suggesting that major life transitions play an independent causal role in shaping changes in criminal offending over time, policy efforts to help correctional populations manage adult life and weave them back into the social fabric have great potential to reduce future crime (Uggen 2000; Sampson and Laub 1991). Unfortunately, a significant challenge raised by John Hagan and Bill McCarthy (this volume: 2) in their discussion of homeless youth is relevant to the criminal justice population as well – though we can identify potentially significant events that may positively alter the life course of criminal offenders, we cannot predict who will be responsive to these

events and who will remain involved in crime. Nonetheless, sociological research and our qualitative interviews suggest that removing barriers to work, family, and civic engagement may play a role in facilitating the adoption of stable adult roles among young offenders.

It is encouraging that most offenders are aware of these barriers and, at some level, maintain their desire to become active, responsible, productive adult citizens. Moreover, many struggle to make progress toward assuming these roles even while they are incarcerated. We conclude with a brief excerpt from an interview with Larry, a 30 year-old prisoner, who entered prison at age 20 after a homicide conviction.

> *Larry*: "When I first got locked up I thought, you know, "Life is over." I mean that's it. … "I'm not getting out 'til I'm 36, you know, I'm twenty years old." I mean I was just torn to shreds, you know? And I mean, and of course I had guilt over, uh, you know, killing my friend and that, you know, will haunt me for the rest of my life, I'm sure. But, uh, I don't see it anymore as, you know, "I'll never get out," and it's not so far in the future. It's only six years away now. And, you know, 36 really isn't that old anymore, you know? And I've grown as a person basically, you know? If you look at any 20 year-old and any 30 year-old, you know, there are differences -- those are the differences that I've had between when I came in and who I am now.

> *Uggen*: "Some people think that once a prisoner comes in at a certain stage that… they sort of get warehoused. You know, put on a shelf and --

Larry: “And then you don’t grow or mature until you get out? I think that’s bogus.”

As Larry suggests, such progress is indeed possible while behind bars, even for those removed from society for serious crimes.

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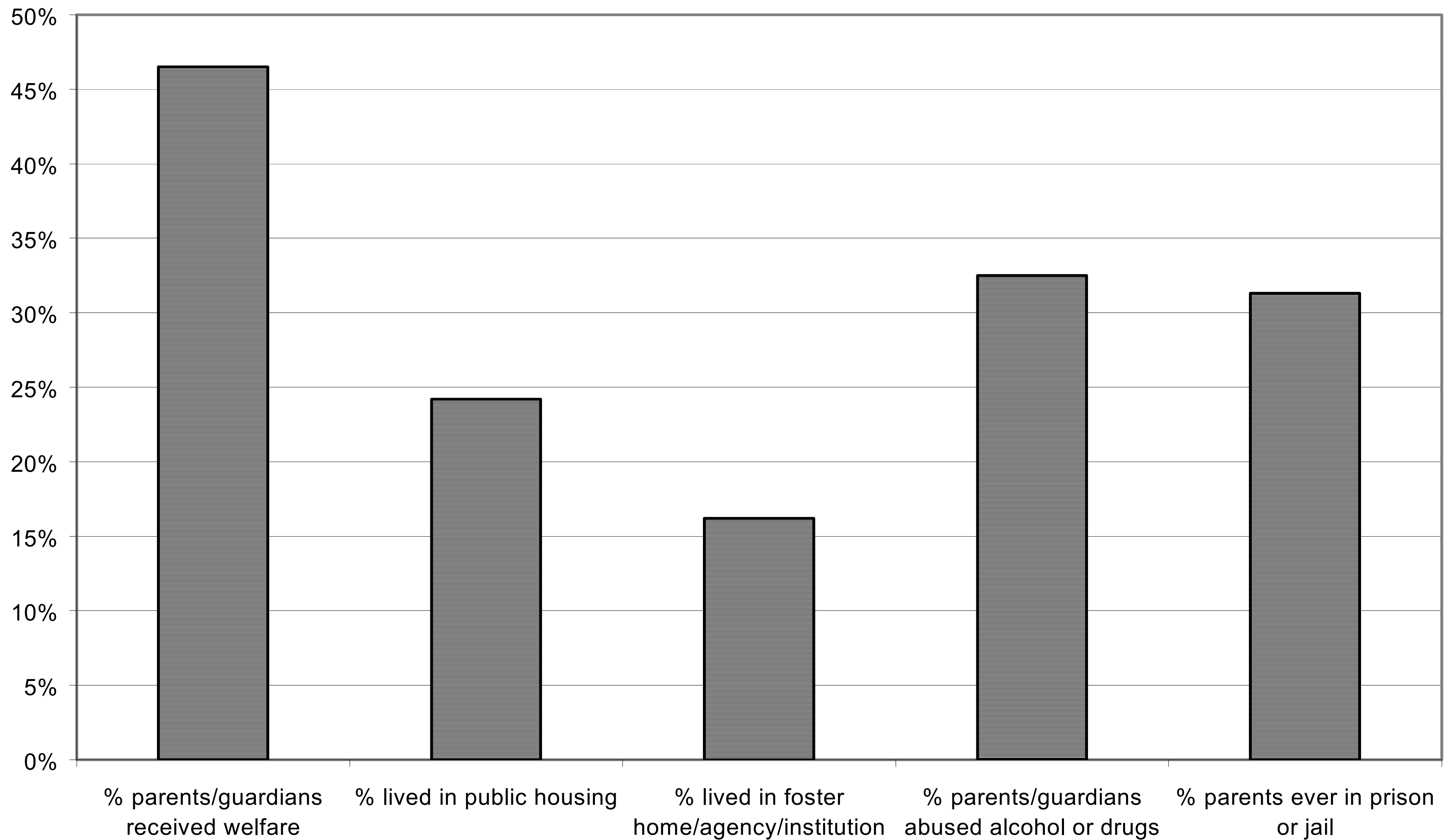

Figure 1: Early Childhood Disadvantages of Prison Inmates 25 Years of Age or Less, 1997

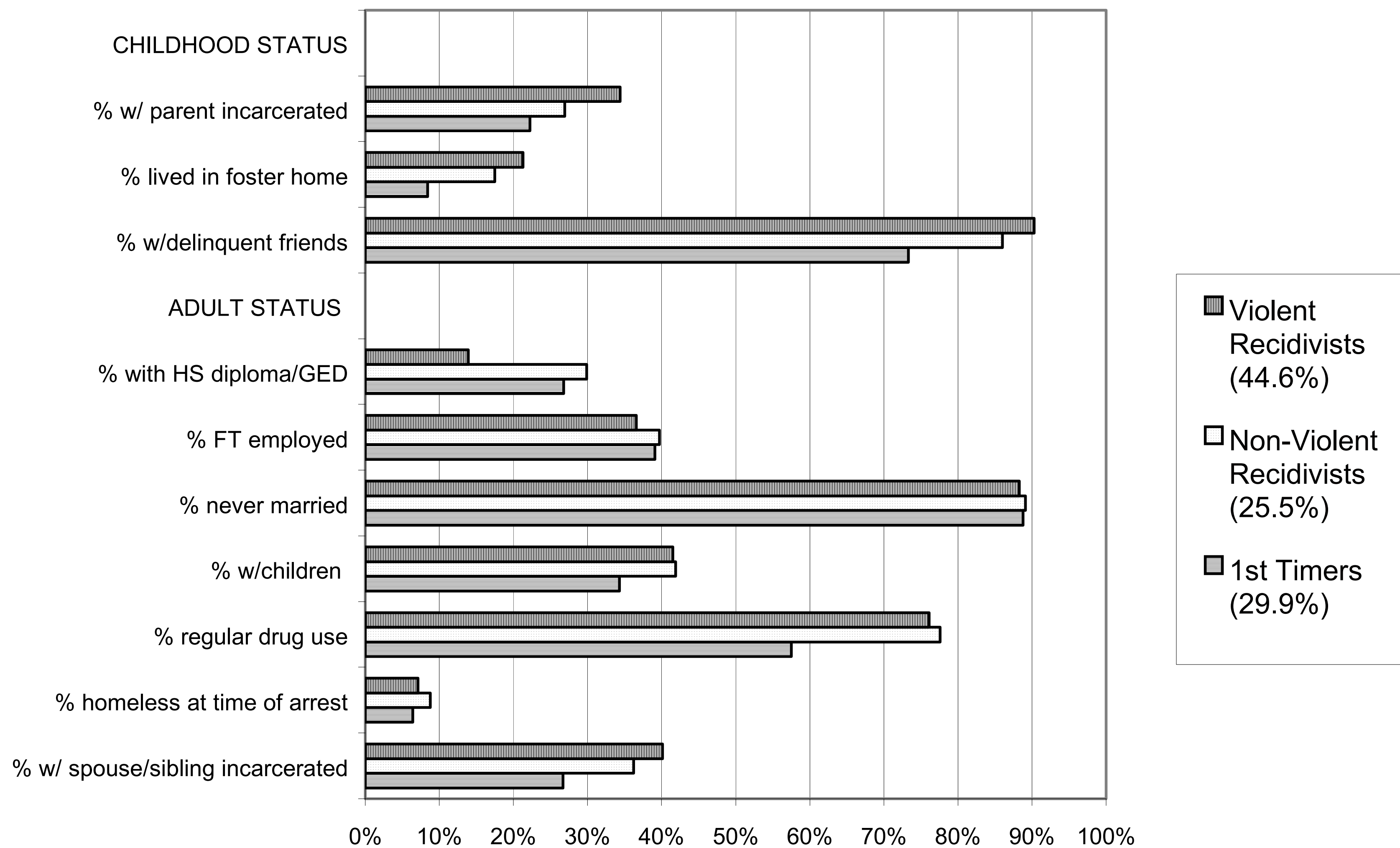

Figure 2: Characteristics of Prison Inmates Age 25 or Younger by Criminal History

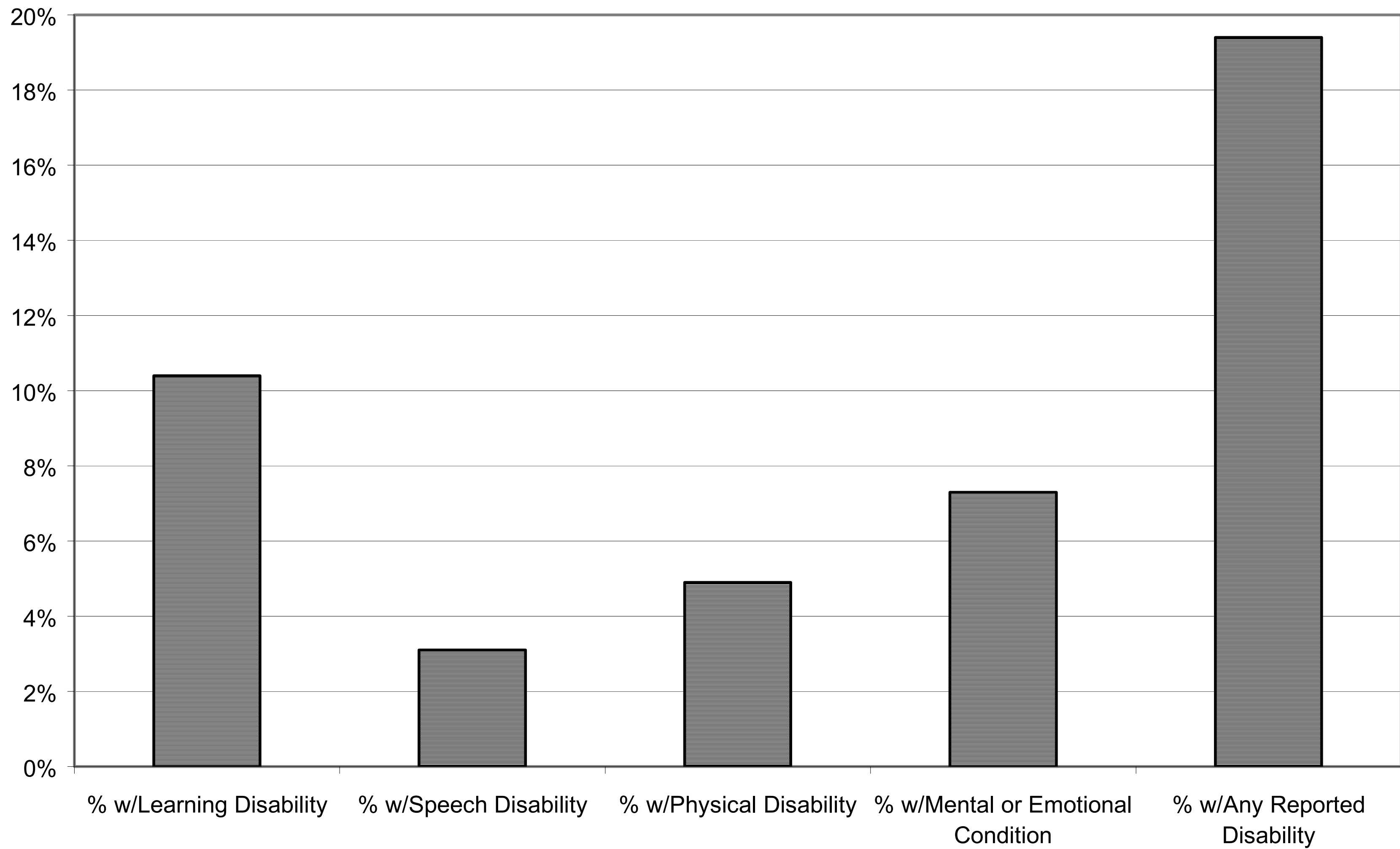

Figure 3: Self-Reported Disabilities or Conditions of Prison Inmates Age 25 or Younger, 1997

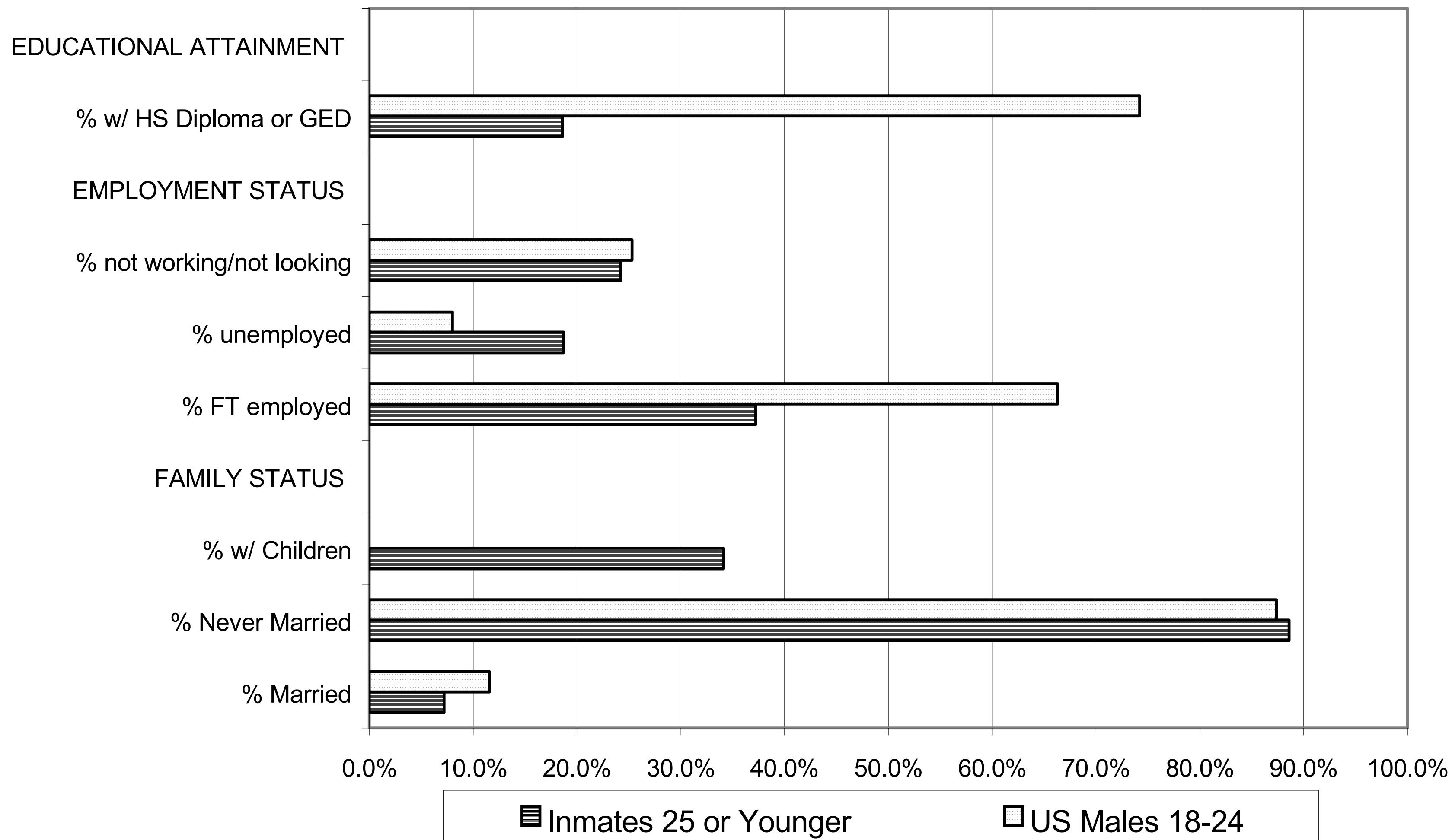

Figure 4: Comparison of Young Inmates 25 or Younger and US Males 18-24 by Adult Status Markers, 1997

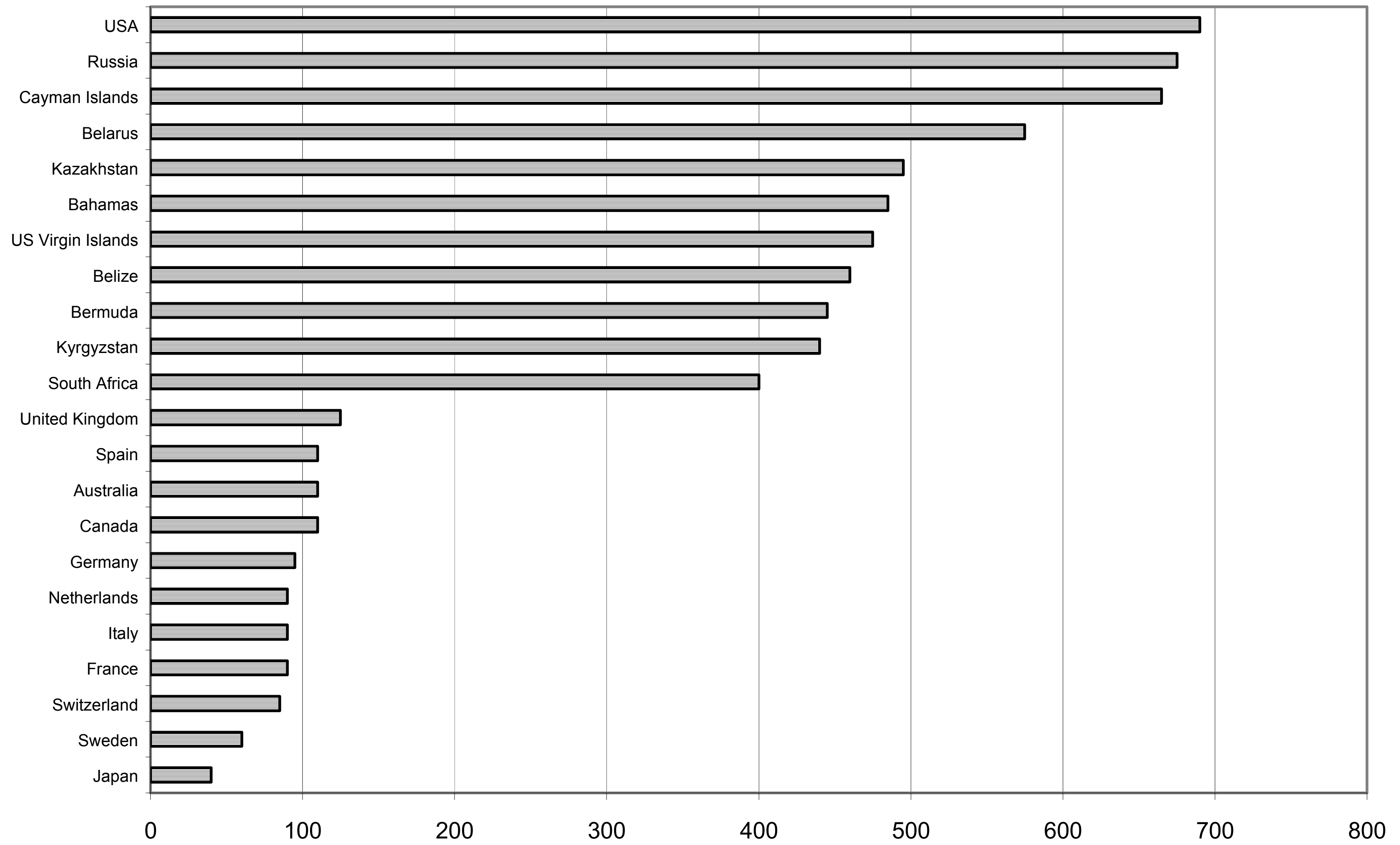

Figure 5: Incarceration Rates Per 100,000 by Country, 2000

ENDNOTES

[i] The volunteer respondents consist of 10 female prison inmates, 13 male prison inmates, 7 male felony probationers, and 3 male parolees. The respondents range from 20 to 54 years of age and represent all major offense categories, although almost all of the interviewees had been convicted of at least one violent crime. Twenty-two of the respondents are White, 6 are African-American, and 5 are Native American.

[ii] The timing of life course transitions is also culturally specific and structurally determined. For example, becoming a parent for the first time at approximately age 25 is considered normative behavior in the contemporary United States. However, becoming a parent at age 14 renders a teenage mother "off-time" in relation to her age cohort. Off-time events often have consequences long after they occur and hold the potential to delay or disrupt later transitions. Early pregnancy, for example, is likely to impact later educational and occupational attainment.

[iii] Although a variety of explanations have been offered to explain Japan's low crime rate and comparatively light sentencing practices, perhaps the most influential argument has been that Japan relies more heavily on informal social control to curb crime (Braithwaite 1989; Westermann and Burfeind 1991). For those young offenders who are incarcerated, community involvement in social reintegration after prison is much greater. For example, community volunteers, rather than professional corrections officers, monitor the majority of Japanese probationers and parolees. In contrast to the experiences of felons in the United States, Japanese offenders are much less likely to experience community "exile." Additionally, prison programs in Japan place an even greater emphasis on work than U.S. prisons, and are directed toward repairing educational and occupational deficits of inmates. In contrast, as our qualitative interviews suggested, stigmatizing shaming, or shaming which acts to label offenders as apart from the community, appears to be the norm in the United States. Beyond the greater rate and form of criminal punishment in the United States, differences in the age distribution of crime in the US and Japan impacts the transition to adulthood for ex-prisoners. Criminal involvement in the United States tends to peak at age 17 or 18, whereas crime

peaks earlier in Japan, at age 14 or 15, just prior to high school entry (Harada 1995). In the U.S., the crime peak corresponds to a biological age associated with legal adult status. Given that the consequences of punishment are more serious after the age of 18 (and, today, earlier because of the increased certification of juveniles into adult court), offenders with minimal criminal involvement face harsh consequences and long-term imprisonment in the U.S.