



URBAN INSTITUTE
Justice Policy Center
<http://justice.urban.org>

Reentry Mapping Brief

Informing and Engaging Communities through Reentry Mapping

By Diana Brazzell

January 2007

*The **Reentry Mapping Network (RMN)** is a partnership between the Urban Institute and community-based organizations in 14 jurisdictions¹ that are analyzing and mapping local data on prisoner reentry and using the findings to improve their communities.*

One of the purposes of the Reentry Mapping Network is to develop best practices for the local mapping and analysis of prisoner reentry data. This brief, the first in a series, is a part of that effort and is designed to directly inform the work of local organizations taking on these important issues.² The brief is based on the experiences of the RMN sites since the project's inception in 2001.

For more information on the Reentry Mapping Network, email rmn@ui.urban.org or visit us online at www.reentrymapping.org.

*The Urban Institute is a nonprofit nonpartisan policy research and educational organization established to examine the social, economic, and governance problems facing the nation. Funding and support for the Reentry Mapping Network and this brief were provided by the **Annie E. Casey Foundation**. Any opinions expressed in this brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders.*

As the number of people being released from prison and returning home each year has continued to grow,³ communities across the country have become increasingly aware of the impact of prisoner reentry in their jurisdictions. Many communities are engaged in efforts to address the needs of returning prisoners as well as the families and neighborhoods to which they are returning. Analysis and mapping of local-level data on prisoner reentry can inform and improve these community efforts to address reentry, from the policy decisions of local governments to a neighborhood church's outreach to returning prisoners.

This brief is designed to equip organizations with strategies for effectively disseminating reentry-related mapping and analysis findings. The brief outlines key elements of the process and offers specific recommendations based on the experiences of the Reentry Mapping Network sites.

CRAFTING A COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

Planning for research dissemination and community engagement should begin in a reentry mapping project's earliest stages. Three key elements will contribute to the success of a community engagement strategy:

- (1) Enlisting the support and involvement of community stakeholders;**
- (2) Developing a diverse and complementary set of dissemination methods; and**
- (3) Presenting research findings strategically to create a foundation for positive community action.**

The primary components of community engagement outlined above should guide the work of any local reentry mapping research initiative, and they provide the structure for what follows in this brief.

ENGAGING COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS

The range of individuals who encounter the issue of prisoner reentry in their professional, civic, and/or personal lives is broad. Figure 1 lists some of the community stakeholders who are likely to find research on the local dynamics of prisoner reentry useful and informative. When successfully communicated to these stakeholders, reentry research can help shape community attitudes, grassroots activism, service delivery, policy decisions, government practices and other local responses to reentry.

Within the broad group of local stakeholders who may benefit from a reentry mapping project's research, there will likely be a subset of stakeholders who are closely involved with the project and its planning processes. Stakeholder partners can contribute valuable knowledge on the needs, perspectives, and priorities of the larger community. Partners can, for example, provide input on their constituent's research priorities, guiding the project to focus on issues of concern to the community. A relevant research agenda is often a prerequisite to successful community engagement. While research that is out of touch with community needs may produce interesting findings, it will contribute little to public dialogue and will likely fail to spark community interest.

Figure 1: Local Reentry Stakeholders

- Residents
- Former prisoners and their families
- Neighborhood organizations
- Grassroots advocacy organizations
- Churches and other religious institutions
- Local business owners and employers
- Non-profit and government service providers
- Police, parole, and probation officers
- Community leaders
- Local government officials
- Victim advocates
- Foundations and grant-making organizations

Involving key local stakeholders and being attentive to community needs is also crucial to building the legitimacy of the project in the eyes of the community. A reentry mapping project faces a difficult task in that it must earn trust from and address the concerns of constituencies as diverse as police, former prisoners, and victim advocates. These groups frequently have varied reentry priorities and may see themselves as advocating for conflicting interests, differences that stakeholder partners can help a project understand and navigate. As a project builds legitimacy, the community will be more willing to devote time and attention to learning about its work, and more likely to accept and act on its findings.

Often the most effective strategy for partnering with local reentry stakeholders is to link up with an existing reentry collaboration or roundtable. The RMN team in Winston-Salem worked closely with a local grassroots, faith-based reentry coalition, while the RMN partner in Louisville incorporated its reentry mapping project into the broader work of a citywide justice reinvestment planning initiative. If a strong local reentry coalition does not exist, a reentry mapping initiative may want to convene one or may invite key stakeholders to serve on an advisory board specifically for the reentry mapping project. The RMN initiatives in Denver and Atlanta were both guided by advisory boards made up of diverse groups of community stakeholders.

DEVELOPING A DISSEMINATION PLAN

A successful community education campaign requires a strategic plan that employs a wide array of events, products, and venues to reach the multiple reentry stakeholder audiences in a community. The dissemination activities should function together as part of a comprehensive effort. For example, a newspaper article or community meeting may highlight a more detailed written report as a source of further information. Thinking in terms of an integrated dissemination plan, rather than isolated products, will help maximize the impact of a

project's activities. The major components of a public dissemination campaign will likely include community events, written products and media work.

The development of a public dissemination and engagement strategy involves careful consideration of the range of audiences the project aims to reach, as well as the most suitable and productive means for communicating research findings to each audience. Determining the best venues and products to reach a given audience will depend on the audience's knowledge base, its perspective and priorities regarding reentry, and the ways in which the audience will likely use the research. Logistical factors such as the reading level of the intended audience and the times of day people are available to attend events should also be taken into consideration. Again, one of the most effective ways to learn about audience needs and how community stakeholders can benefit most from a project's research is to ask the stakeholders themselves and involve them in the planning processes.

Community Events

Community events, from large public forums to small group meetings with select stakeholders, are ideal settings to communicate reentry research findings. A successful public dissemination campaign will likely involve multiple events aimed at various audiences. Community events allow project partners to communicate information in a range of ways, both verbal and visual, as presentations can be supplemented with PowerPoint slides, full-color maps, enlarged tables and graphs, and even film clips or personal testimony from people affected by reentry. Presenters are able to communicate nuances within the research and have more control over the way findings are framed. Events also provide a forum for community members to ask questions about the findings and provide feedback on the research process. In addition, neighborhood-level events are often the best way to communicate information to community members who may not be reached through other channels due to illiteracy or lack of Internet access.

Community events are a powerful engagement tool because they allow for the direct connection of the research and action components of a project. By gathering interested stakeholders in one room, these events allow the presentation of research findings to be followed immediately by community discussion on the issues raised and by the presentation of information on local efforts relating to reentry. Ideally a meeting will produce specific action steps, outlining *who* will do *what when*. This will keep local reentry efforts moving forward and will underscore to participants that the project is about both research and action.

The first step in planning a community reentry event is determining the purpose of the event. Clarity on the event's purpose will guide the identification of the target audience and the type of event and venue that is most appropriate. A workshop for service providers, a community-wide forum for the public release of a project's findings, and a small, focused policy meeting for local officials will naturally all take different forms. The event's purpose and the size and composition of the audience will determine the logistics of the event as well as the information that is shared and the way in which it is presented. The amount of background information on the topic of reentry, the level of detail provided on the research findings, and the way findings are framed will vary according to the audience's knowledge base and the presenter's goals.

Community events were the centerpiece of many RMN sites' public dissemination strategies. The Denver RMN partner has planned four public forums corresponding to the priority areas identified for the project by its community advisory committee: employment, housing and homelessness, substance abuse, and mental health. The forums include the presentation of relevant data, time for policymakers and others to discuss the issue in depth, and specific training opportunities for practitioners.

Written Products

In order to provide for the widest possible dissemination of useful information, reentry research findings should be documented in a set of written products aimed at multiple audiences and covering a range of topics. Each written product, whether a factsheet or a comprehensive report, should be tailored to fit its intended audience and its purpose within the reentry mapping initiative. The types of information included, the length of the document, the complexity and level of detail, and the language used will all depend on the needs and knowledge base of the audience.

The RMN partner in Hartford, Connecticut, created a series of two-page reentry policy briefs providing information on specific local reentry topics. One brief provided an overview of the dynamics of incarceration and reentry in Hartford, while the others covered education and reentry, housing and homelessness issues faced by former prisoners, and the incarceration and reentry of women. Each brief combined local-level statistics with policy information on the topic and included tables and graphs. A common style template unified the series, and background on the project was provided at the start of each brief. The two-page brief format allowed the authors to provide a degree of specificity without overwhelming readers with too much information.

Another effective strategy is the creation of a web site highlighting research findings and providing links to additional information on reentry. The RMN partners in Providence created a web site that showcased a wide collection of reentry resources and information at the local, state, and national level, including reentry maps, information on government and community resources, and links to reentry-related reports and campaigns. The site can be viewed online at <http://local.provplan.org/reentry/T>.

Media Outreach

A successful media campaign can bring information on local reentry issues to a large audience, including many people who might not

be reached by other dissemination activities. It may also draw some of these people to publications or events where they can learn more, thereby serving as an important piece of the overall community education strategy. In addition to sharing information on reentry and related issues, media attention can energize local reentry efforts by building support and awareness in the community for their activities.

As part of their public dissemination strategy, the Providence RMN partners—the Providence Plan and the Rhode Island Family Life Center (FLC)—worked closely with local media. *The Providence Journal*, the major local paper, ran articles on many of the project's primary activities: community workshops that were held by the partnership to disseminate project findings, a policy brief produced by the FLC on felon disenfranchisement in the state, and efforts by the FLC and other local organizations to repeal Rhode Island's ban on food stamp benefits for people with felony drug convictions. The FLC also co-hosted a press conference with Governor Donald Carcieri to announce the launch of the Governor's Reentry Steering Committee. The press packet distributed at the event included local reentry maps and data. These media efforts built support for campaigns working to change state policy on voting rights and food stamp eligibility for former offenders.

PRESENTING REENTRY INFORMATION

Regardless of the intentions of those presenting the information, research findings on reentry will always be politically charged because they cannot be disconnected from a host of controversial and potentially sensitive issues that surround them. These issues include racism, the equity of the criminal justice system, public safety, and the well-being of various local communities. Reentry findings can touch off a range of responses, both positive and negative, and may elicit fear or increase tensions among community members. Such responses typically reflect legitimate concerns, but may become counterproductive if allowed to polarize community discussion and prevent positive action. A reentry mapping initiative

should anticipate strong responses to its findings from all sides, but can consider strategies for presenting reentry information in a way that empowers community members and sets a foundation for positive action.

A reentry mapping initiative should be clear about what its intentions are in analyzing and presenting reentry information. A purely research-driven effort may simply aim to provide information that can inform community decisions. A more activist-oriented effort should make it clear that the aim is to improve the

safety and well-being of everyone in the community by making it easier for people to successfully reintegrate into society after release from prison. The concerns of victims, residents, and other stakeholders negatively affected by crime and by the flow of people returning from prison must be recognized and balanced against the legitimate needs and concerns of the people returning and their support networks. A reentry mapping initiative can create a tone of cooperation among different parties by being clear about its intentions and staking out a position that values

Figure 2: Strategies for Presenting Reentry Information

- **Tackle the issue of race head-on.** Most community stakeholders will be aware that the criminal justice system in the United States disproportionately affects communities of color, especially African-American communities. The RMN partners in Winston-Salem found it important to address issues of race and reentry directly, as avoiding the topic may actually deny community members a voice in claiming the issue and working to develop positive solutions.
- **Use neutral colors (blues, greens) when mapping reentry.** Because reds or oranges are often associated with danger or a warning sign, using these colors to show the locations of returning prisoners can suggest that they are a threat to the community.
- **Be specific about the relationship between crime and reentry.** The locations of violent offenders and especially sex offenders have been an ongoing source of anxiety in communities across the country. However, RMN partners in Seattle, San Diego, and other cities found that concentrations of former prisoners did not always correspond to the areas with the highest crime rates. While crime maps can be distressing to residents, they may help disentangle the issue of reentry from fears and concerns about crime.
- **Keep in mind that more services are not always welcome.** While maps of services and other assets can help communities feel equipped to address reentry issues, a concentration of service providers is not always perceived as beneficial to a neighborhood. Maps of service locations in Denver revealed a heavy concentration of providers, especially shelters and other residential service agencies, in certain neighborhoods. Residents of these neighborhoods felt that the spatial pattern of service locations concentrated and isolated many of the most needy returning populations, while straining the well-being of the surrounding communities. One way to channel these concerns is to frame service provider maps as a springboard for further discussion among service providers and residents about community needs and the siting of services.
- **Remind the audience that former prisoners can be assets to a community.** Discussions of prisoner reentry often focus on the problems faced by former prisoners and their many vulnerabilities and needs. However, people returning from prison also have strengths and assets, and, with the right resources and support, can contribute to their families, neighborhoods, and communities. Presenting reentry maps and research with this idea in mind can empower former prisoners instead of isolating them, and can create a more welcoming attitude in the communities they are returning to.

the concerns of all groups. A public forum where various groups have the opportunity to voice their concerns and thoughts on the issue can be essential to framing the project in a positive manner.

The opportunity to frame research findings is not just about avoiding controversy and negative responses; it also allows a reentry mapping initiative to present important information in a way that empowers residents and encourages them to become involved in efforts to address reentry in their communities. One effective way to accomplish this goal is to present maps of community assets (see figure 3) at the same time that maps of reentry and other community challenges, such as poverty and crime, are presented. This allows community stakeholders to begin formulating action plans with an understanding that they have an existing foundation of resources in place.

Figure 3: Community Assets for Responding to Reentry

- Businesses employing low-skilled labor
- Job-training and job-placement programs
- Adult education facilities
- Public transportation networks
- Social services
- Churches and other faith groups
- Community health centers/clinics
- Housing for returning prisoners
- Community-based organizations

The presence of local leaders who are ready and willing to direct efforts to address reentry in the community will contribute to a tone of empowerment. Presenting reentry information to an affected community as a stand-alone piece of information without providing support for community action or response can overwhelm residents and make them feel powerless in the face of reentry problems. As the Indianapolis RMN partner learned, moving

directly forward from presenting the problem to beginning work on a solution increases the likelihood that community members will become engaged on the issue of reentry and involved in efforts to address it.

In addition to the overall framing of the reentry issue, an initiative will likely encounter specific challenges when deciding how to present reentry information. Figure 2 on the previous page outlines some of these challenges and how the RMN sites have managed them.

CONCLUSION

Reliable research on the dynamics of prisoner reentry at the local level is sorely needed, as policy and programming decisions relating to reentry are frequently made based on national-level data or anecdotal evidence. The organizations affiliated with the Reentry Mapping Network, and others like them, are working to fill this information gap in cities across the country. In order for such research efforts to have an impact, their findings must make it into the hands of local stakeholders acting on this issue. This brief has aimed to illuminate some of the ways reentry research dissemination and community engagement can effectively be achieved.

The successes of RMN sites in informing and engaging their communities come, in a large part, from understanding the local landscape and responding to the concerns and needs of community members. The basic principle of “knowing the audience” is strengthened by a broader philosophy that underlies the action-research model guiding the RMN. This philosophy advocates respect for stakeholders as active participants in a knowledge-seeking research process, rather than as passive consumers of research.

ENDNOTES

¹ The RMN partner cities are Atlanta, Georgia; Chicago, Illinois; Denver, Colorado; Des Moines, Iowa; Hartford, Connecticut; Indianapolis, Indiana;

Louisville, Kentucky; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Oakland, California; Providence, Rhode Island; San Diego, California; Seattle, Washington; Washington, D.C.; and Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Valuable work is also being done by RMN affiliates in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania; Detroit, Michigan; Los Angeles, California; Nashville, Tennessee; and New York, New York.

² For more comprehensive information on reentry mapping and the experiences of the RMN sites, see *Mapping Prisoner Reentry: An Action Research Guidebook* (Nancy La Vigne, Jake Cowan, and Diana Brazzell, 2006, 2nd ed., Washington, DC: The Urban Institute), available online at <http://www.urban.org/publications/411383.html>.

³ Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice. 2004. "Reentry Trends in the U.S.: Releases from State Prison." <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/reentry/releases.htm>