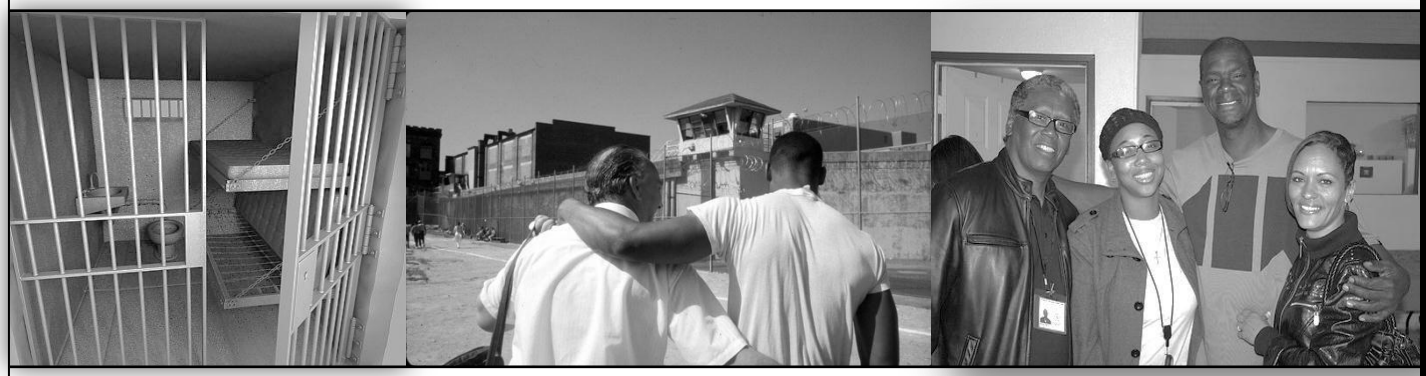

SPEAKING TRUTH ON COMING HOME

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON REENTRY IN RICHMOND

Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization

Richmond Office of Neighborhood Safety

PACIFIC INSTITUTE

Who We Are

We are the Safe Return Team, a motivated group of formerly incarcerated Richmond residents working with Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization (CCISCO), the Richmond Office of Neighborhood Safety, and the Pacific Institute to carry out research, community organizing and education, and policy development and advocacy to create the right conditions for people to successfully reintegrate with the community. We began in September, 2010, and have since then accomplished the following:

- Participated in the Greater Richmond Community Reintegration Collaborative with agencies and other stakeholders to develop a strategic plan for reentry in Richmond.
- Interviewed 450 residents about their perspectives on how Richmond can become safer, healthier, and more powerful.
- Designed an extensive survey using scientific methods to assess the service and employment needs and assets of people recently released to the area from incarceration.
- Surveyed 101 adults on probation and parole who were released within the past 3-18 months.
- Researched best practices for violence prevention and reentry support, and are developing specific recommendations for improving policy and programs.
- Participated in more than 75 hours of training on scientific research methods, community organizing strategies, and violence prevention.
- Planned two major events on reentry in Richmond for this summer: an employment and housing rights training for formerly incarcerated residents on June 25 and a community forum on reentry challenges and solutions on July 23.
- Met with 10 organizations from the Bay Area and throughout the US to learn from successful models of violence prevention, economic development, and reentry services, including the National Employment Law Project, Bay Area Legal Aid, United Way of the Bay Area, Center for Thought and Action, EPOCA, Mandela Foods Cooperative, All of Us or None, and the Omega Training Institute.

For more information, email **SafeReturnRichmond@gmail.com** or call **510-367-6160**

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

This project is made possible through the generous support of the Mitchell Kapor Foundation, The California Endowment, and the Kaiser Foundation. Many individuals and organizations offered their insight, information and made accommodations to the project. These include the members of the Greater Richmond Community Reintegration Collaborative, the Richmond Probation Office, Richmond Parole, Rubicon Services, the Richmond Housing Authority, and many community leaders and interested residents. We hope this report reflects the great appreciation we have for your work and our continued commitment to work with you.

1. Introduction

Jeff Rutland rents a small house in Richmond, works full time teaching gardening and designing gardens, volunteers in his community, and leads a vibrant life. About one year ago, Jeff was released from San Quentin. His story of successful reintegration is a sign of what is possible, but it is also exceptional. Of the Richmond residents who were released from incarceration within the last 3-18 months, four out of five are unemployed, and seven out of ten do not have a stable place of their own to live.

The Safe Return Project was launched in the fall of 2010 by Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization (CCISCO), the Richmond Office of Neighborhood Safety, and the Pacific Institute to carry out community research on the needs and strengths of people coming home from incarceration to the Richmond area. A team of formerly incarcerated Richmond residents, the Safe Return Community Researchers, was recruited and took on the responsibility of developing research questions, participating in the design of a survey questionnaire, hosting focus groups and interviews with residents and service providers, and meeting with parole, probation, and other agencies involved in re-entry. This brief report is the preliminary summary of our research to date (full detail to be released in fall 2011), including the responses of 101 recently released residents to our survey of 151 questions conducted in person at parole and probation offices.

2. Our Vision

Fulfilling health and safety needs in Richmond relies on the community creating an effective system for receiving and reintegrating residents returning from incarceration. We envision a Richmond where community members involved in the criminal justice system have strong relationships with their family and community have real opportunities for sustainable employment and a stable place to live, and have access to the information and services that ensure they have the necessities for building successful lives.

We understand that breaking the cycle of incarceration and crime will take positive leadership by formerly incarcerated residents contributing to the greater community. We are taking action to dispel the myths that people who have been incarcerated cannot transform their lives and be a positive force in the community.

The playing field must be leveled so that once people have served their time, they face the same challenges and opportunities as the rest of the community. People coming home already face many unique challenges, such as having been out of the workforce and having a resume gap to explain when seeking employment, without the added obstacle of discrimination based on having a record. Once people have served their time, they should be given the opportunity to demonstrate that they are rehabilitated. It is not fair, and does not ultimately serve the community, to give people a second sentence stigmatizing them in the community after they have served their sentence inside a prison.

3. Research Questions and Methods

The overarching goal of the Safe Return Project is to conduct rigorous, community-based research to fill gaps in information needed to understand and support the reintegration of residents involved in the criminal justice system. The initial recognition that more information was needed came from the agencies, community groups, and other stakeholders developing a strategic plan for re-entry in Richmond through the Greater Richmond Community Reintegration Collaborative, convened in July 2010 by the Richmond Office of Neighborhood Safety. The Collaborative realized that little information existed that systematically documented the needs, assets, and interests of residents returning from incarceration.

With an initial sense of the need for research, three organizations (CCISCO, the Richmond Office of Neighborhood Safety, and the Pacific Institute) convened a team of formerly incarcerated residents to be trained as community researchers and to design and carry out a survey of their peers. The Community Researchers carried out focus groups with residents and meetings with the strategic planning collaborative to develop a set of priority issues to research, then worked with Pacific Institute staff to develop and carry out a scientifically sound survey. The questionnaire was developed using a survey instrument previously utilized in a national study by the Urban Institute and social scientists.[1] The Community Researchers also added many original questions to create the final survey of 151 questions covering the following topics:

- Demographic Information
- Pre-Release Programs
- Finding Housing (Post-Release)
- Finding Employment (Post-Release)
- Relationships with Family, Friends, and the Community
- Transportation
- Health Conditions
- Relationships with Parole/Probation Officers
- Post-Release Programs
- Likelihood of Reoffending

Survey interviews were conducted in person at the Richmond Parole, Richmond Probation, and New Hope residential program at Neighborhood House of North Richmond. With this approach of asking every adult reporting to these offices to participate, we ensured the

[1] Visher et al 2004

maximum likelihood that any resident eligible for the survey would be included in the sample. To be eligible to participate in the survey, individuals met the following requirements:

- 18 years of age or older
- Released from prison or jail within the last 3-18 months
- Currently or previous to incarceration lived in Richmond, North Richmond, or San Pablo

Survey participation was confidential, voluntary, and respondents received a fifteen dollar gift card. Survey interviews were conducted in English between 8am and 5pm on multiple days in March, April, and May, 2011. One hundred one people were surveyed.

We have identified several potential limitations to our research approach. The survey interviews were conducted in English, preventing monolingual speakers of other languages from participating. There may also be individuals who were required to stay at their residence rather than report to the parole or probation offices, preventing them from a chance to participate in the survey. Lastly, the survey relies on self-reported data because it is designed to document the individual perspectives of residents, often missing from research and policy development. As with all self-reported data, the findings are subject to lapses in memory and over-reporting or under-reporting by participants. Surveys relying on self-reporting are a time-tested and uniquely valuable methodology, commonly used in academic studies and professional needs assessments.

4. Findings – Incarceration and Release

Over the last 30 years, more and more people in Richmond and across the country have been sent to prison. In Contra Costa County, the rate of prison admissions grew 486% between 1970 and 2000.[2] This is mostly due to the "War on Drugs," the massive increase in policing and incarceration launched in the early 1980s. Between 1980 and 2003, the number of drug offenders in prison or jail in the U.S. increased 1,100% from 41,100 to 493,800.[3] The result of this history is that now approximately 25% of people in California have a criminal history, meaning an arrest or conviction of some kind.[4] This cycle of incarceration disproportionately affects Black and Latino families. African Americans comprise 6% of California's population and 29% of the prisoners and parolees. As a city with majority Black and Latino residents, Richmond was affected by the drug war more than other areas. In the nation's largest cities, drug arrests for African Americans rose at three times the rate for whites from 1980 to 2003, even though studies show drug use among different racial groups is roughly the same.[5] Of the 101 residents in our survey, 84% were people of color, with 60% African American.

Incarceration affects individuals, families, and the community in profound ways. Children with incarcerated parents can experience emotional and psychological challenges.[6] At the

[2] Pacific Institute 2009
[3] King 2008
[4] NELP 2011
[5] King 2008
[6] Parke and Clarke-Stewart 2003

neighborhood level, high rates of incarceration destabilize the community, strain relationships, and prevent people from accessing employment, housing, and other necessities.[7]

What people often forget is that the incarcerated almost all come home. Ninety-five percent of the people sent to prison in California are eventually released, and almost all are required to return to their home county. There are about 2,000 residents in Richmond, North Richmond, and San Pablo who are currently on parole or probation. This amounts to 28% of the people on probation or parole in Contra Costa County.[8] Thousands more Richmond residents are no longer on probation or parole but still have the mark of a record and its lasting effects.

The conditions in California prisons are far from what is needed to rehabilitate people. The U.S. Supreme Court recently found “needless suffering and death” and ruled the overcrowding in California prisons unconstitutional because it amounted to cruel and unusual punishment.[9] These are the conditions that people incarcerated for crimes in Richmond endure in between the time they are sent away and the moment they come home. This poses a major burden to communities like Richmond seeking to address the needs of residents returning home and to reduce recidivism.

In our survey of Richmond residents who recently returned, we found that more than half had not benefited from a single training or support program while they were incarcerated. Twenty-nine percent had participated in a substance abuse program, and less had participated in all other pre-release programs asked about (See Figure 1).

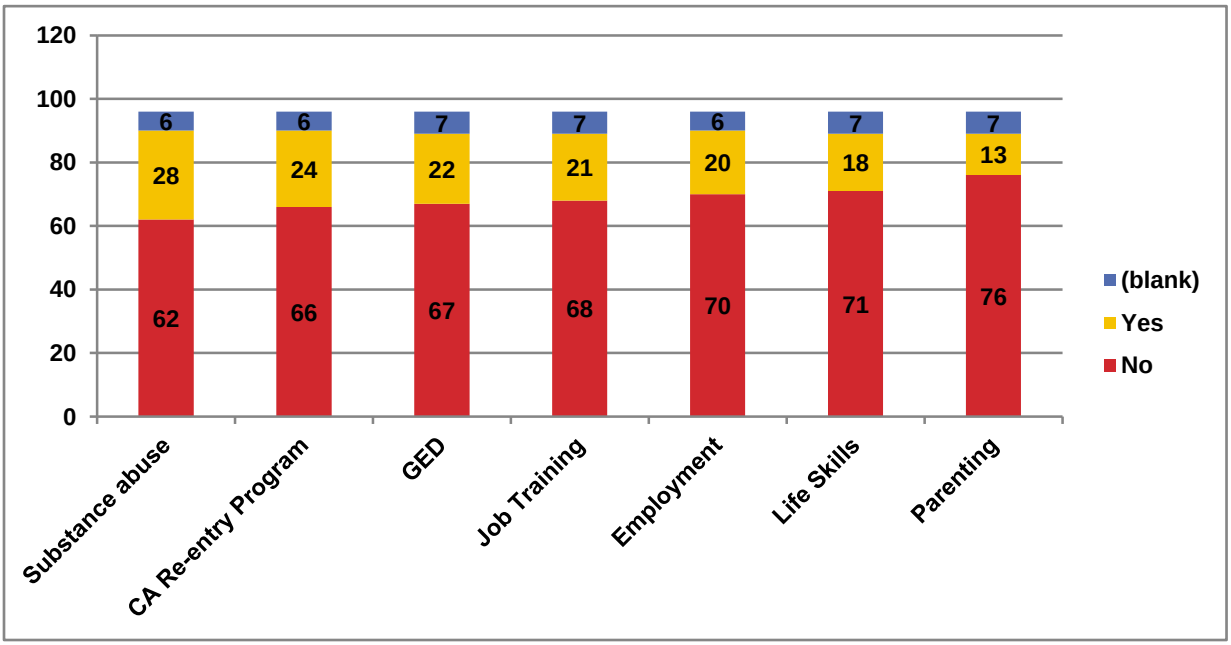

Figure 1. Participation in programs while incarcerated

We asked the survey participants to rate the pre-release services and information they had received, with a score of 1 for Not Helpful at All and 10 for Extremely Helpful. One third said

[7] Rose and Clear 2003
[8] Contra Costa County Reentry Strategic Plan
[9] US Supreme Court 2011

the services were not helpful at all, a score of 1. Two respondents said they were extremely helpful.

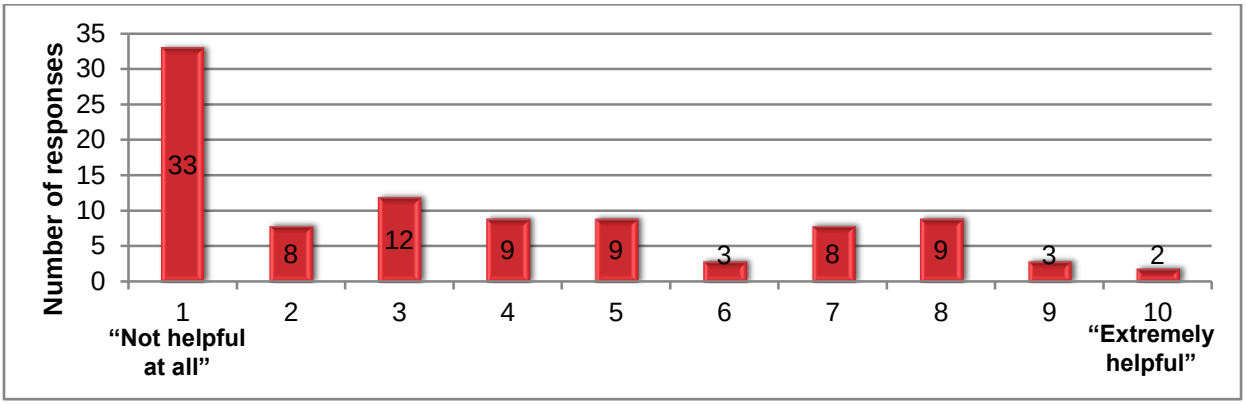

Figure 2. Rating of services provided during incarceration

The availability of training, counseling, and educational programs varies widely depending on the jail or prison and has been dramatically reduced in recent years. Programs in California prisons are run purely by volunteers because the state has eliminated funding for paid teachers and trainers. In places where there are many volunteers, like San Quentin, there are a range of programs, but in most prisons there is little available. In rural areas like Tehachapi, or in prisons that do not have a thriving volunteer base, programming is limited or not available.

The level of preparation that prisoners receive while incarcerated has great effect on the chances of success when individuals step off the bus in their community. When released, people coming home are provided a bus ticket and often return in the slippers and clothes the prison issued them. If they are coming from state prison, they get $200, which covers a few nights lodging, whereas county and federal facilities provide even less or no resources for the transition.

Our survey asked several questions about the first three days after release, which captured the stark statistics in Figure 3.

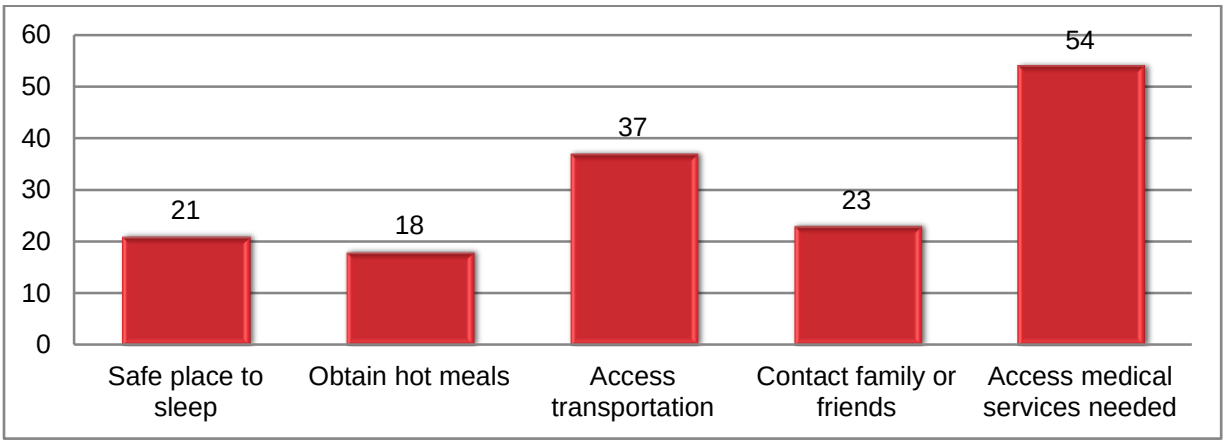

Figure 3. Number of individuals reporting key challenges in the first three days after release

5. Housing

There are no affordable housing programs in Richmond for people transitioning from incarceration. If someone cannot rely on family and friends and does not have a job yet, he or she must go to the homeless shelter or go to another city. At the nearest housing program for parolees, Volunteers of America (VOA) in Oakland, there were so many Richmond residents this year that they sometimes outnumbered the Oakland residents in the program. VOA recently decided it could no longer take Richmond residents.[10]

In our survey of people released within the last 3-18 months, we found that that seven out of ten were essentially homeless. This included 34% who were staying with friends or family, 11% in short-term shelters, and 25% in halfway houses or residential programs.

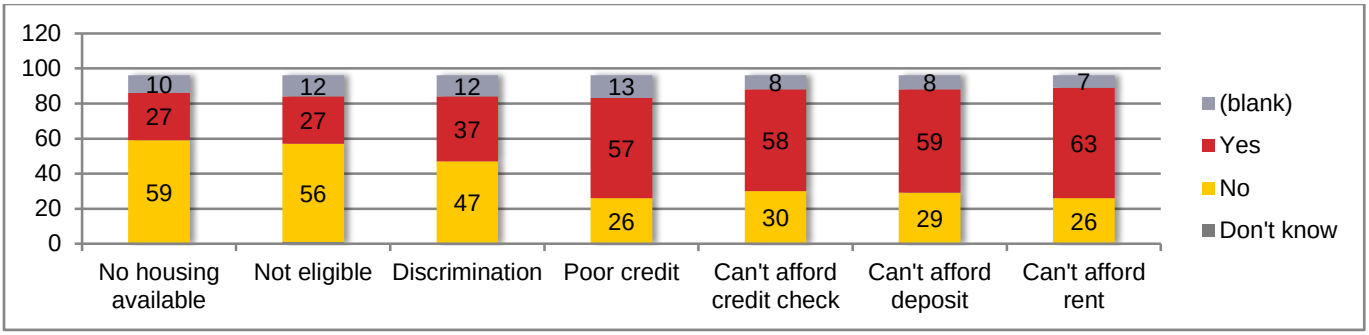

Figure 3. Challenges faced in accessing housing

The most common challenge that respondents face in accessing housing are financial: six out of ten report difficulties affording a credit check, deposit, and rent (See Figure 3). About one-third of those surveyed said discrimination had been a barrier, while slightly less said they were not eligible for affordable housing programs.

6. Employment

Employment is widely recognized as critical to becoming a fully contributing member of the community, yet unemployment among formerly incarcerated people is extremely high. Seventy-eight percent of the people we surveyed are unemployed. This is more than four times the overall unemployment rate in Richmond and six times the state rate. Of the one out of four who are employed, about half had a job in the first two months, and half took longer to get the job they have. For the remaining 78%, they are typically relying on family, friends, and programs to meet their needs or are going without.

[10] Communication with staff, Volunteers of America

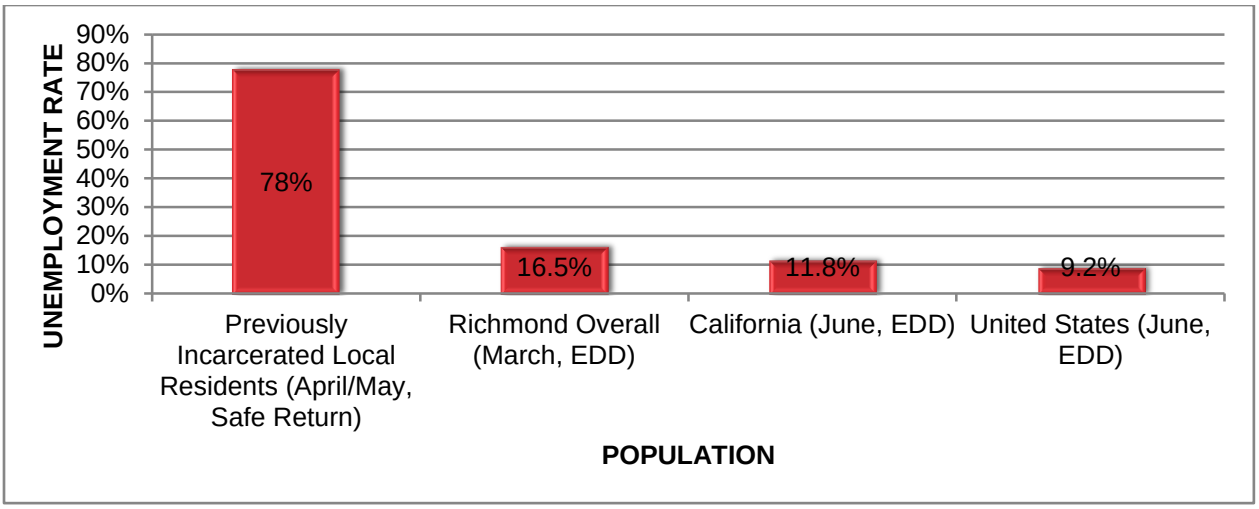

Figure 4. Unemployment rates of previously incarcerated local residents compared with other populations

For people with a record, barriers to gaining employment go far beyond the heightened competition of the current economic climate. Some of these barriers are inevitable, such as a resume gap and time away from the workforce, where others are preventable and unnecessary. It is extremely common that employers of all kinds ask job applicants about their past convictions and even arrests. As of three years ago, all of the top ten employers, including the city of Richmond and Contra Costa County, had this type of question on their application form.[11] National studies have found widespread employer discrimination against people with a record: 60% of employers in one study said they would definitely not or probably not hire someone with a record.[12] A national study this year found blanket "need not apply" policies, with some of the largest employers in the country telling applicants with a past conviction or arrest they should not even apply.[13] For a few types of jobs, such as caring for children or handling large sums of money, there are laws preventing employers from hiring applicants with a certain past crimes. But for the vast majority of jobs, no legal requirements exist barring people with a record from being considered and hired.

7. Services and Information

Service providers are a critical link for people coming home from incarceration to obtain things as basic as a valid ID and as central as job placement. Needs for services were highlighted in our survey by the challenges residents face in obtaining food, healthcare, and transportation and paying the bills. Half of those surveyed said they had skipped meals due to difficulties getting food. About half of those we surveyed were receiving food stamps, and one quarter were receiving General Assistance. Of the people surveyed, all of whom were released more than three months earlier, about one out of five still did not have a valid ID. This is actually illegal and can be a violation of probation or parole, leading to re-incarceration. Of the people

[11] Pacific Institute 2009
[12] Holzer et al 2001
[13] Rodriguez and Emsellem 2011

who did have an ID, more than half did not have a driver's license, preventing them from obtaining a job that requires driving or is inaccessible by public transportation.

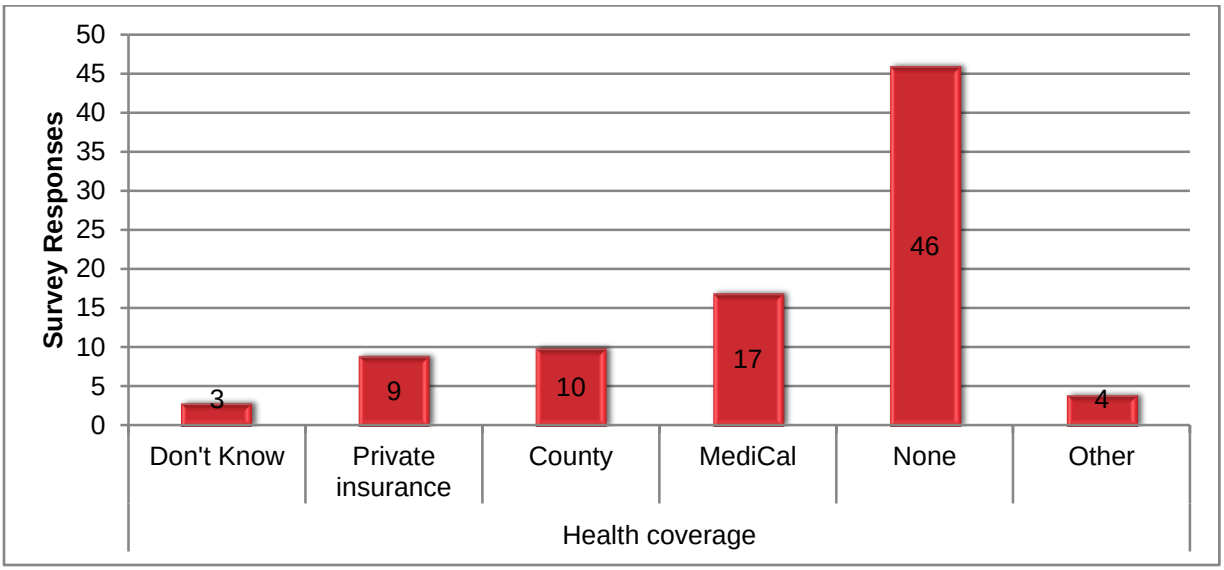

Figure 5. Type of health coverage of formerly incarcerated residents

Thirty three percent of those surveyed had a health condition a doctor had diagnosed, with the top three conditions reported being asthma, bi-polar disorder, and high blood pressure. Seventy percent of those surveyed said they had wanted to see a doctor but did not because of the cost. Nearly half had no health insurance (Figure 5).

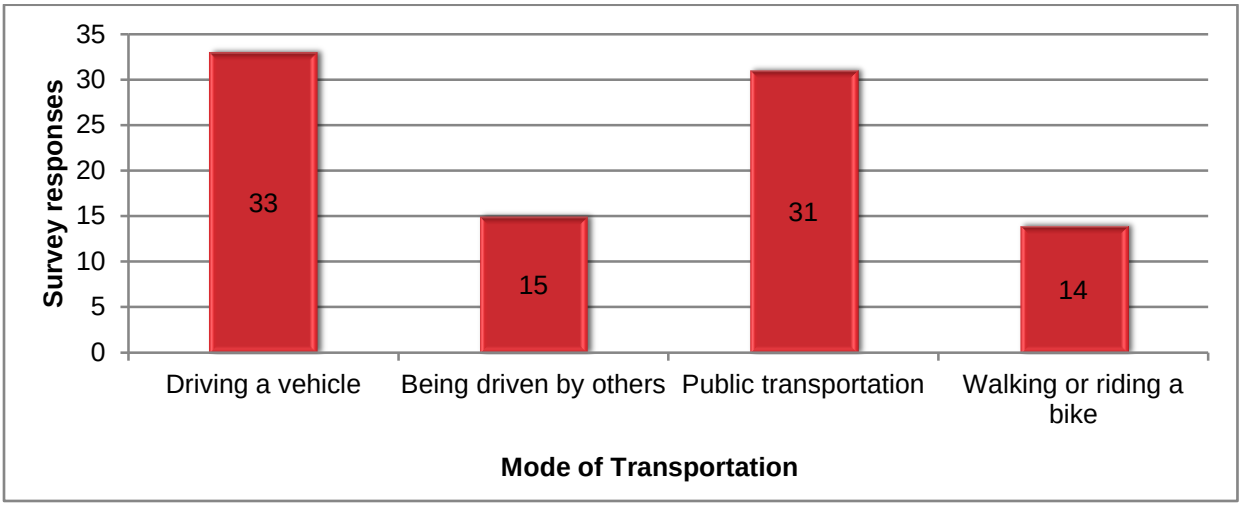

Figure 6. Mode of transportation of formerly incarcerated residents

Two thirds of the survey respondents rely on other people or public transportation or simply walk or ride a bike as their means of transportation. Three quarters of those who do not drive said they also do not have a bus pass or bus tickets. Less than half said they had never been late or missed a commitment because of transportation problems. One third said this happens once a week or more often.

Residents return from incarceration with diverse service needs and complicated eligibility limitations, yet there is not a straightforward way to find out which services are offered where,

and what the eligibility requirements are. Gaps in needed services and lack of coordination, evaluation, and integrated outreach of existing services limit Richmond's ability to meet the needs of returning residents. Currently, the only place where parolees can get information on multiple services available is the Parole and Community Team (PACT) meeting, which they are required to attend. This meeting is arranged by the Division of Adult Parole and attended by providers who each give a short presentation on their service, but its limitations in leading to sustained connections between providers and parolees has been noted by parolees, providers, and parole officials alike. The City of Richmond by way of the Office of Neighborhood Safety has assisted CDCR and Richmond Parole at each local PACT meeting since 2008 by ensuring that the city's street outreach staff is present and available to assist returning citizens who were convicted for gun offenses with resources and service coordination. The Office of Neighborhood Safety also provides a welcome home meal for every returning citizen attending the PACT meetings. Last year the position with parole responsible for coordinating the PACT meetings was eliminated by the state, forcing parole to cease coordinating outreach to service providers and local non-profits and the city to come forward.

8. Impact on Family and Community

Formerly incarcerated people are part of families and communities. Research highlights that family support is critical in order to help avoid recidivism.[14] Before, during, and after incarceration, these relationships are often complex. During incarceration, the absence of community members negatively impacts the socio-economic stability of the community[15] and can cause emotional stressors on family members.[16] Upon release from prison, formerly incarcerated people must negotiate their reintegration into these relationships.

When asked how their time in prison changed their relationships with family members, 33% of respondents reported that their relationships "drifted apart," 28% reported that their relationships became "closer," and 27% reported that there was no change in their relationships. Some respondents noted that their family members "do not want anything to do" with them, while others noted that they are able to lean on their family members for emotional support, housing, and information about employment opportunities. These mixed results reflect the complex nature of relationships that the processes of imprisonment and reentry shape.

Sixty four percent of the people surveyed have children. Seventy three percent of the parents have children under age 18. Only one quarter of these parents had visits with their kids while incarcerated. Of those that had visits, more than half were limited to non-contact visits. In addition to "leaving behind" children during incarceration, formerly incarcerated parents and their children must negotiate or rebuild relationships upon re-entry.[17]

In addition to family as possible sources of support for formerly incarcerated people, half of the respondents reported belonging to a church, mosque, or other religious organization. Faith

[14] Hairston 1998
[15] Clear, Rose, and Ryder 2001
[16] Hairston 2003
[17] Travis, Solomon, and Waul 2003

and spirituality are important coping mechanisms in difficult and stressful situations.[18] Additionally, churches or faith-based organizations are important resources in communities.[19] The fact that numerous residents reintegrating into their communities seek out such organizations, lift up such spaces for expanded partnerships and services.

Another key aspect of relationships with the community is the political power of formerly incarcerated people. When asked if they were eligible to vote, sixty nine percent responded "no". However, this included half of the people on probation, and these individuals are eligible to vote. Of those who said they were eligible to vote, 84% said they plan to vote in the next election. While there are many other ways this community can express its political power, voting is one that while limited for those still on parole, is untapped by those unaware that being on probation and having a felony do not prohibit you from voting in California.

9. Conclusions

The Safe Return survey data confirms individual accounts of the challenges in successfully reintegrating after incarceration. Before returning to the community, most individuals do not receive information and programs they need. Upon return, they rely primarily on family for housing, transportation, and other support. The majority are not well connected with service providers. Half of these individuals are going without health insurance, and three quarters of non-drivers lack access to public transportation. More than three months after returning to the community, nearly four out of five people are unemployed, and seven out of ten do not have a place of their own to live. These major challenges can be overcome though, as the leadership accomplishments of the Safe Return project have already begun to show. With stronger partnerships with the greater Richmond community, action can be taken to transform the possibilities for our brothers and sisters coming home.

10. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the Safe Return survey, meetings with hundreds of residents and agencies, advocates, and service providers, we have developed the following recommendations for improving reintegration after incarceration in Richmond:

- **Establish a supportive housing program in Richmond that provides medium-term housing and connections to services for residents recently released from incarceration.** Given the astonishing need for housing among people returning, and the complete absence of affordable medium and long-term housing, Richmond must prioritize the creation of such a program. An example of such a program is the MOMS program in Oakland for recently returned mothers, implemented by Richmond's own Director of Housing.

- **Remove barriers to employment for formerly incarcerated people and improve employer practices in recruiting and hiring this community.**

[18] Cotton et al. 2006; Chatters et al. 2008
[19] McRoberts 2003

Dozens of other cities, counties, and states have removed the question about criminal history from job applications.[20] Asking this question should only be permitted after the employer has determined that the applicant is otherwise qualified, and employers should be advised/encouraged to only use this information if the past conviction has to do with the job responsibilities.

- **Create a one-stop referral service for people coming home.** The need for basic services, complicated landscape of eligibility, and absence of single source for information and referrals points to the urgent need for a one-stop service that includes a phone number and staffed office where individuals can go to get accurate up to date information on existing services, eligibility, and contact information.

- **Form a regular meeting of formerly incarcerated people in Richmond for mutual support in developing and implementing a personal plan for success.** The Safe Return project has recognized since its inception that people who have been through the process of re-entry have critical insight into what it will take to support our peers in their own reintegration. We are committed to creating a community space to provide structured peer-support for reintegration.

[20] National League of Cities (2010)

References

Brooks, Lisa E., Christy A. Visher, and Rebecca L. Naser. 2006. "Community Residents' Perceptions of Prisoner Reentry in Selected Cleveland Neighborhoods." Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

Chatters, L. M., Taylor, R. J., Jackson, J. S., & Lincoln, K. D. (2008). Religious coping among African Americans, Caribbean Blacks and Non-Hispanic whites. J Community Psychol, 36(3), 371-386.

Clear, Todd, Dina Rose, and Judith Ryder. 2001. Incarceration and the community: The problem of removing and returning offenders. Crime & Delinquency 47 (3): 335-51.

Contra Costa County (2011). *Contra Costa County Re-entry Strategic Plan*. Accessed online at www.cocoreentry.org.

Cotton, S., Zebracki, K., Rosenthal, S. L., Tsevat, J., & Drotar, D. (2006). Religion/spirituality and adolescent health outcomes: A review. Journal of Adolescent Health, 38(4), 472-480.

Hairston, Creasie Finney. 1998. Family ties during imprisonment: Do they influence future criminal activity? Federal Probation 52 (1): 48-52.

Hairston, Creasie Finney. 2003. Prisoners and their families: Parenting issues during incarceration. In Prisoners once removed: The impact of incarceration and reentry on children, families, and communities, ed. Jeremy Travis and Michelle Waul, 259-82. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.

Holzer, H.J., S. Raphael, and M. Stoll (2001). Will Employers Hire Ex-offenders? Employer checks, background checks, and their determinates. *Berkeley Program on Housing and Urban Policy,* University of California Berkeley, 33.

King, Ryan (2008). *Disparity by Geography; The War on Drugs in America's Cities*. Washington, DC: The Sentencing Project.

Martinez, Damian J. and Johnna Christian (2009). The Familial Relationships of Former Prisoners Examining the Link between Residence and Informal Support Mechanisms. Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 38(2).

McRoberts, O. (2003). Streets of Glory: Church and community in a Black urban neighborhood. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

National League of Cities and National Employment Law Project (2010). *Cities Pave the Way: Promising Reentry Policies that Promote Local Hiring of People with Criminal Records*. Washington, DC: National League of Cities.

Pacific Institute (2009) *Measuring What Matters.* Oakland, CA: Pacific Institute.

Parke, R. D., & Clarke-Stewart, K. A. (2003). The effects of parental incarceration on children: perspective, promises, and policies. In J. Travis and M. Waul (Ed.), Prisoners once removed: the impact of incarceration and reentry on children, families, and communities. (pp. 189-232). Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.

Rodriguez, Michelle Natividad and Maurice Emsellem (2011) 65 Million Need Not Apply. NY, NY: National Employment Law Project

Rose, D. R., & Clear, T. R. (2003) . Incarceration, reentry, and social capital. In J. Travis and M. Waul (Ed.), Prisoners once removed: the impact of incarceration and reentry on children, families, and communities. (pp. 189-232). Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.

Travis, Jeremy, Amy L. Solomon, and Michelle Waul. 2002. Background Paper: The Effect of Incarceration and Reentry on Children, Families, and Communities.Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute. Available at http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/410632_HHSConferenceBackground.pdf

United States Supreme Court (2011) Brown v. Plata, 5/23/2011. Accessed online at http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/10pdf/09-1233.pdf

Visher, Christy, Nancy LaVigne, and Jeremy Travis. 2004. "Returning Home: Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry Maryland Pilot Study: Findings from Baltimore". Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.