

POLICY BRIEF 2016-03

Graduated Reintegration: Smoothing the Transition from Prison to Community

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Graduated Reintegration: Smoothing the Transition from Prison to Community

In 2014, approximately 600,000 of the 1.6 million people serving state or federal prison sentences in the United States were released. Half of these releasees will be re-incarcerated within three years, either for new crimes or for violating the conditions of their release. Failure to successfully transition back to the community is not only tragic for the person who is re-incarcerated, but it is also expensive for state and federal governments and harmful to public safety. Furthermore, high rates of recidivism contribute to the high rates of incarceration in the United States.

In a new Hamilton Project policy proposal, Angela Hawken and Mark A.R. Kleiman, both of New York University, discuss the challenges facing the formerly incarcerated as they reenter the community. They propose conducting pilot programs to explore the potential of a more gradual transition out of incarceration. This transition, which the authors term graduated reintegration (GR), would entail enhanced services and a gradual relaxation of supervision. Public safety, released prisoners and their families, and even government finances all stand to benefit from an improved approach to community reentry.

This policy proposal, “Graduated Reintegration: Smoothing the Transition from Prison to Community,” draws elements from work release, furlough programs, halfway houses, and home confinement; from swift-certain-fair community supervision; and from services-oriented reentry programs that focus on jobs and housing. While past experience with each of these approaches will guide the program’s design, the ensemble is new, and the authors suggest working out the details of graduated reintegration in a multiphase pilot program to ensure public safety and program success.

The Challenge

The authors argue that individuals are too often released from prison with little or no real support provided for their reintegration into the community. The transition they are expected to make—from complete supervision to complete autonomy—is fraught with difficulties that impair their chances of success. Evidence suggests that immediately following their release from prison, releasees experience tremendous stress, high criminal recidivism, and even sharply elevated mortality.

Abrupt Transition from Incarceration

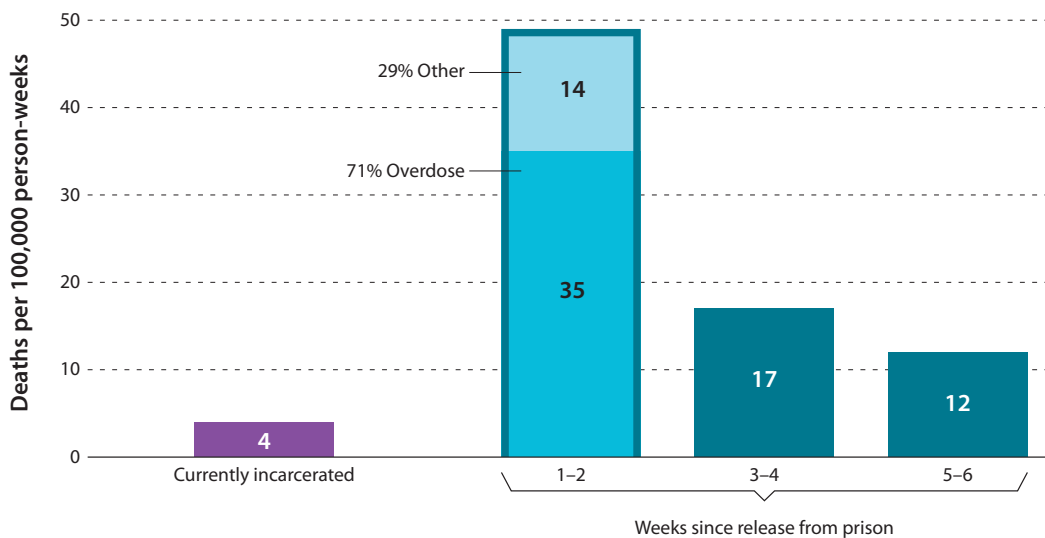
By its design, the current process of abruptly moving an inmate from a prison cell to freedom under parole supervision—or under no supervision at all—does not maximize a releasee’s chance of success, according to the authors. Hawken and Kleiman note several ways that even modest transition support is often lacking, particularly in the immediate days and weeks after release from prison. For example, releasees often

- receive only a small sum of money (typically less than \$100) and a one-way bus ticket upon release;
- receive the bare minimum of medications and care for health conditions, as well as inadequate preparation for applying to Medicaid or other insurance plans;
- lack adequate personal identification documents, presenting a barrier to gaining services and employment; and
- leave prison at inconvenient locations and times of day that make it hard for them to secure immediate shelter or to attend their first parole meetings.

This contributes to releasees’ unusually high levels of stress and sharply elevated mortality rates immediately after release. Figure 1 shows the dramatic difference between mortality risk for the recently released and the currently incarcerated.

FIGURE 1.

Mortality Rates, by Incarceration Status and Time since Release



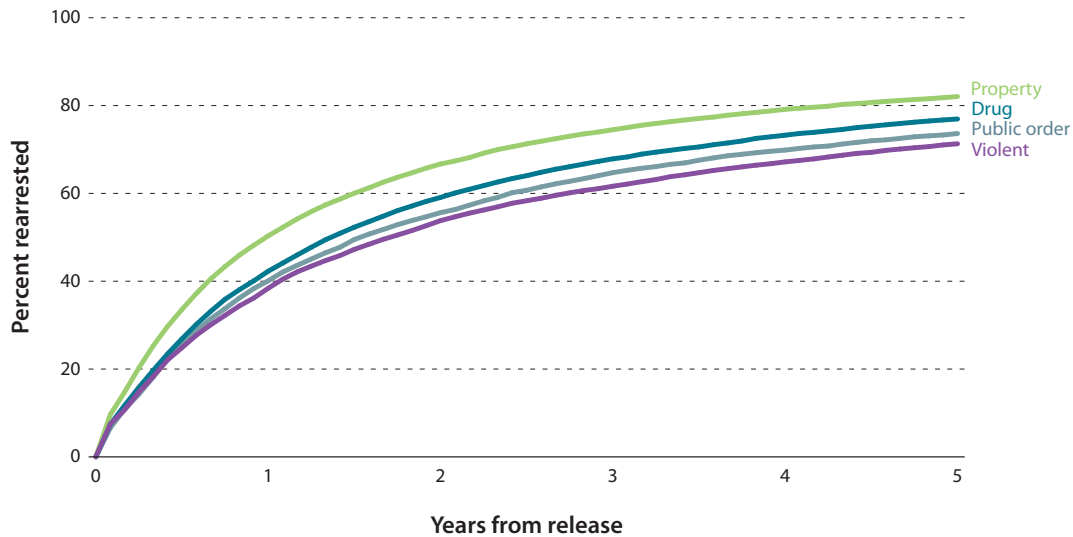
Sources: Ingrid A. Binswanger, Marc F. Stern, Richard A. Deyo, Patrick J. Heagerty, Allen Cheadle, Joann G. Elmore, and Thomas D. Koepsell, “Release from Prison: A High Risk of Death for Former Inmates,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 356 (2007): 157–65.

Note: Mortality rates were converted to person-weeks by dividing person-years values by 52. Data come from the incarcerated population and the recently released from prison population for the state of Washington from July 1999 to December 2003. There were 30,237 released inmates during the time period, of whom 443 died during a mean follow-up period of 1.9 years. For additional details on methodology, see Binswanger et al. (2007).



FIGURE 2.

Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 2005



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), “Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 30 States in 2005: Patterns from 2005 to 2010,” Special Report, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington DC (April 2014).

Note: Monthly data reported for state prisoners released in 30 states in 2005, and prisoners are tracked for five years following release. Public order includes 0.8 percent of cases in which the prisoner’s most serious offense was unspecified.



These difficulties faced by releasees make it more difficult for them to acquire and maintain a job. Two months after release, only 31 percent of former inmates report being employed. As the authors observe, this is particularly unfortunate given how closely related formal employment or participation in work-release programs are to the chances of avoiding recidivism.

According to the authors, the abrupt, unsupported transition from incarceration to the community contributes to high recidivism rates. In the most recent study of recidivism, 77 percent of state prisoners released in 2005 were arrested again by 2010. Recidivism is highest immediately after release: 43 percent of released prisoners are arrested again during the first year, as shown in figure 2. This pattern suggests that implementing policies that focus on the months immediately following release might yield substantial benefits.

The authors note that even those releasees who do not commit new crimes may nonetheless return to prison. The high rate of return to prison for technical violations—conduct that is not itself a criminal offense but is contrary to the terms of supervision—may reflect problems with the current system of post-release supervision. Parole and other forms of supervised release tend to have many rules, some of which are burdensome and not properly customized to an individual’s situation. Additionally, inadequate monitoring and enforcement means that many violations go undetected; when a violation is discovered, the system lacks the flexibility to punish the individual’s behavior through any means other than re-incarceration.

The authors note research indicating that the certainty of punishment or apprehension generally matters more than severity of punishment (re-incarceration, in this case) for crime deterrence. When punishment is infrequent, random, and severe, as it often is in the current system, it may result in re-incarceration without deterring criminal conduct by releasees. However, when punishment is swift, certain, and proportionate to the offense, it deters misconduct with a minimum of re-incarceration.

A New Approach

Hawken and Kleiman argue that the current release process generates too sudden a transition from round-the-clock support and supervision to self-sufficiency and liberty, requiring more coping skills—both cognitive and emotional—than many releasees possess. Making the reentry process more gradual, structured, and comprehensible to releasees, and providing resources—especially housing—will promote more-successful reintegration.

Hawken and Kleiman propose to conduct pilot programs exploring the potential of graduated reintegration (GR). These pilots, conducted by state corrections agencies, would explore the impact of GR in a variety of settings, building an evidence base that would both hone the details of the program and facilitate its extension to the broader incarcerated population.

Graduated Reintegration is designed to shorten prison stays while providing both supervision and services designed to make the transition into the community successful. Its principles are:

- Early physical release from prison into assigned and supported housing;
- Retention of prisoner status until the original earned release date;
- Closely monitored initial release conditions, including movement restrictions, limitations on visitors, position monitoring, alcohol and other drug testing, and restrictions on the use of cash;
- Swift and certain rewards for compliance and achievement (in the form of relaxed restrictions) and sanctions for noncompliance (in the form of tightened restrictions);
- No return to prison except for new crimes, absconding, or deliberately and repeatedly flouting the rules;
- A subsistence allowance, provided as a debit card or electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card usable for approved purchase categories;

- Encouragement and help in seeking and holding employment; and
- Encouragement and help in forming pro-social relationships and advancing in education and skill.

Services

GR would start while the individual is inside prison, thus setting the stage for post-release success. The process would commence with merit-based selection of inmates for prerelease training, selecting for the program those most likely to succeed in it. GR participants will be given as much preparation and counseling as possible while they are in prison, including general education, paperwork for a driver's license or substitute photo ID, enrollment in Medicaid or other health insurance (if eligible), clothing appropriate for job search, transitional medical supplies and prescriptions, physical and mental health inventory, and personality and cognitive testing.

Housing is the most important service provided under GR: it provides a stable base for the participant while encouraging a degree of separation between participants and their former, potentially harmful, social networks. After participants are released from prison, they will be transferred to apartments selected for them. GR also includes a basic subsistence budget for food and other necessities in the form of a debit or EBT card, with account reviews to ensure that expenditures are consistent with the program's rules.

Participants will sometimes have a number of other needs, such as the need for dental care, mental health care, treatment for addiction, help finding and maintaining employment, educational services, and so on. The extent to which these services are provided by the program, as opposed to outside organizations, and the extent to which participants are required to accept the services, can be determined in pilot programs or by the local administrators of the program. Hawken and Kleiman propose to offer as many services as possible consistent with keeping the costs of the program down, and to mandate service acceptance only in extreme situations.

Employment is a central goal of the program, and would be encouraged both before and after release from prison with job training and employment services. Since GR participants will be pushed to find formal employment and forbidden to handle cash, off-the-books work should be less attractive to them. With housing and basic subsistence provided under GR, new releasees will have the opportunity to seek out employment that is suited to their personality and skills, improving the odds that they will maintain employment.

Supervision

Based on good behavior, GR participants would eventually transition into housing in communities paid for by the program. The housing units will be scattered, rather than concentrated, rented either from Section 8 property owners or from the private market. The authors point to research showing that individuals assigned to concentrated housing are more likely to be involved with drug use and other criminal activity than are individuals assigned to scattered-site housing. GR scattered-site housing units would be just like the other apartments in their buildings, except that these units will be monitored remotely with cameras pointed at the exterior door. In addition, each participant's whereabouts will be continuously monitored electronically. Moreover, each participant's position will be matched against the times and places of reported crimes, as much in hopes of deterring crimes as of identifying the perpetrators if crimes are committed.

Each participant would be assigned an officer to supervise the GR process. This officer will administer a prescribed system of rewards and sanctions, with the dual purpose of facilitating the releasee's integration into the community and maintaining public safety.

Roadmap

- Federal and state governments would conduct pilot programs to test the feasibility of graduated reintegration (GR) and its impacts on outcomes of interest, such as days spent in prison. The estimated cost of GR would be \$13,000 to \$21,000 per participant per year spent in the program.
- The first step will be a five-participant pre-pilot that will serve as a proof-of-concept implementation study, where the focus is on implementation details rather than on outcome analysis. If the pre-pilot is successful, a 30-person pilot using the same participant profile and in the same jurisdiction should be administered. If the pilot is successful, a larger trial should be administered. The authors suggest that the default term be 12 months (with shorter periods resulting from compliance with GR conditions), but expect that time requirements may vary for different groups.
- If the pilot phase is determined to be successful for one specific location and group of releasees (e.g., property offenders in Baltimore), additional pilot phases will take place in other locations and for other groups.
- The supervision aspects of the program to be tested include:
 - Electronic monitoring of housing and participants,
 - A schedule of sanctions and rewards,
 - Restriction of remittances from family, and
 - Restriction on drug and alcohol use.
- The services aspects of the program to be tested include:
 - Apartments integrated in communities,
 - Food and necessities allowance provided through a debit or EBT card,
 - Employment and job training services, and
 - Other services such as dental care, mental health care, treatment for drug abuse, and educational services.

Unlike inmates, releasees would be prohibited from receiving remittances from family and friends. However, participants would gradually gain more freedom as part of the reward system, transitioning steadily from being prisoners to being members of the community with jobs, homes, savings, and successful independent lives. By contrast, they would lose privileges and freedom as a response to bad behavior. For example, the initial post-release condition might require participants to be at home from 6 p.m. to 7 a.m., except for specific prosocial activities. Violations could lead to an earlier curfew, or even restriction to the apartment for a fixed period, such as a weekend. Compliance could lead to a later curfew, the opportunity to use electronic devices, or the ability to communicate more freely with friends and family.

The authors emphasize that the details described above are a starting point for a conversation about GR. Any agency implementing GR would have to invite its staff, both administrators and frontline corrections and parole officers, to weigh in on the design details. Implementation choices that suit one agency may be impracticable in another due to political feasibility, agency culture, or resource constraints. Most importantly, the details of GR would be informed by the evaluations proposed by the authors: as more is learned about what does and does not work, subsequent implementations of GR would be improved.

Learn More about This Proposal

This policy brief is based on the Hamilton Project discussion paper, “Graduated Reintegration: Smoothing the Transition from Prison to Community,” authored by

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Implementation and Evaluation

Though many of the components of GR are familiar, with evidence to support their effectiveness, the combination of policies is new. Therefore, the authors propose testing GR with small groups of inmates before scaling it up to large populations.

The first step will be a five-participant pre-pilot that will serve as a proof-of-concept implementation study, where the focus is on implementation details rather than on outcome analysis. If the pre-pilot is successful, a 30-person pilot using the same participant profile and in the same jurisdiction should be administered. If the pilot is successful, a larger trial should be administered. The authors suggest that the default term be 12 months (with shorter periods resulting from compliance with GR conditions), but expect that time requirements may vary for different groups.

The authors suggest that GR eventually be extended to violent offenders, since reducing this group’s recidivism would yield the greatest benefit in reduced victimization. Indeed, the authors note evidence that high-risk offenders respond the most to intensive rehabilitation supervision programs. However, the authors propose that only participants classified as no more than moderately risky be selected for the pilot stage.

The conventional measure of success in reentry programs is the rate of recidivism, defined in terms of new arrests, new convictions, or returns to prison. Although not all new arrests, convictions, and returns to prison are equivalent, those differences are lost in simple percentage counts. In addition to more-traditional metrics, the authors suggest using a seriousness-adjusted crime rate that takes into account the number of offenses and offense severity, as defined by maximum sentence length or by public opinion. This rate would be averaged over the entire participant group during the pilot period.

Other measures of success could include substance use, utilization of health care, employment status, earnings, housing status, measures of social connectedness, or self-reported stress or happiness levels. Changes in scores on culturally unbiased IQ tests, such as the Raven’s Progressive Matrices, could also be used, as well as measures of locus of control, self-efficacy, and conscientiousness.

The authors discuss the complexity of evaluating a program like GR that has no natural control group, at least in the short run. Had they not entered GR, participants would otherwise have remained in prison, where outcomes like recidivism are not measurable. One possible evaluation method would be to compare GR participants to nonparticipants who appear similar in terms of observable measures such as race, education, and age. More convincingly, randomly assigned GR participants can be compared to nonparticipants after the latter group has left prison.

Benefits and Costs

From a financial perspective, GR will operate in the gap between prison (roughly \$30,000 per person per year) and parole (roughly \$3,000 per person per year) in terms of both expense and the level of restriction imposed on participants.

GR starts before, rather than on, the inmate’s anticipated release date. Thus GR starts with a decrease in expenditure and an increase in liberty. Insofar as GR programs can be operated by state departments of corrections (in states where the corrections department manages prisons and parole), those departments avoid having to re-budget funds.

If GR turns out to be no better than cost neutral while reducing re-offending and improving outcomes for potential victims as well as for prisoners and their families, that should be sufficient justification for the program. Excessive focus on cost savings might lead to unfortunate program choices. Since housing is a major cost element, GR will be more expensive in cities where rents are high; while the case might be made for offering participants the option to be housed elsewhere for their own benefit, it would be unwise and unjust to exclude GR from high-rent cities.

Under the most conservative assumptions—housing is priced at market value and only 10 percent of participants are employed—the annual cost is roughly \$21,000 per participant. An optimistic scenario, with subsidized housing and a GR participant employment rate of 50 percent, implies annual average participant costs of about \$13,000 per participant.

TABLE 1.

Daily Participant Costs

Program costs	Average cost per day
Rent (unemployed participant)	\$20.00
Rent (employed participant)	\$12.00
Food/Other (unemployed participant)	\$15.00
Supervising officer	\$8.22
Video monitoring	\$ 6.67
GPS monitoring	\$ 5.00
Transport (unemployed participant)	\$ 3.33
Capital improvement	\$ 2.74
Tablet	\$ 1.37
Wireless internet	\$ 1.17
Drug testing	\$ 0.71

Note: Cost assumptions include: rent costs \$500/month plus \$100/month in utilities; employed participants contribute \$8/day towards rent; drug testing occurs once a week at \$5/test; the annual cost of a specialized corrections tablet is \$500; the monthly cost of internet is \$35; GPS monitoring costs \$5/day per resident, which includes outsourced monitoring on weekends and evenings; video monitoring costs \$200/month per camera; there is a capital cost of \$1000/bed; unemployed participants receive \$15/day for food but employed participants cover their own food costs; unemployed participants receive \$3.33 towards transportation but employed participants cover their transportation costs; a supervising officer dedicated to the caseload will cost \$90,000 per year.

Conclusion

The authors contend that the criminal justice system often provides insufficient support for reintegration into the community and creates a transition that is too abrupt. Releasees frequently face obstacles such as finding shelter and food, navigating the job market, and obtaining medical care, all after years of strict supervision and little experience of autonomy in prison. This combined burden sometimes makes successful reintegration a remote possibility.

Hawken and Kleiman propose a new program to ease prisoners’ transitions back into society, holding the promise of more-successful reintegration and thus improved public safety. A swift, certain, and fair schedule of sanctions and rewards provides a roadmap for the transition. GR also provides monitored housing, support for food and medical expenses, and reentry programs such as job training and employment services that address the many challenges of reintegration.

Questions and Concerns

1. Will GR put the public at risk?

Under the current system, recidivism rates are high, with about three quarters of state prisoners rearrested during the five years after release. All consequential criminal justice reforms affect public safety; the question is how to manage that risk. Most inmates will be released someday. The authors' aim is to test whether changing the circumstances surrounding the participants' release, and providing a bridge from prison to community, can alter criminal trajectories, and reduce their negative behaviors. Though GR itself has not yet been tested, many of its components have, and existing research suggests that many of the elements of GR have beneficial effects on recidivism and public safety.

2. How will inmates be selected for the program?

Implementing agencies will set the eligibility criteria. The authors recommend that decisions regarding eligibility, as well as implementation details, be made in consultation with corrections administrators and frontline staff. The authors maintain that GR should be voluntary; inmates would volunteer for the opportunity to earn their way onto early GR release through good behavior and prerelease program completion. For initial implementation pre-pilots, GR should focus on those nonviolent inmates who are most likely to succeed outside prison. If GR shows promise at the pilot level, it can be extended to more-challenging subpopulations.

3. Under what conditions would participants be removed from the program?

The program will closely monitor compliance and respond to missteps, but will remove participants from the program and return them to custody only if they commit new crimes, abscond, or flout the rules. This includes failure to comply with home-detention sanctions.

Highlights

Angela Hawken and Mark Kleiman, both of New York University, propose to test a new approach to the reintegration of recently released offenders (to be called graduated reintegration) that would make prisoners' transition from incarceration to the community more gradual and better supported.

The Proposal

Implement pilots of graduated reintegration, a program intended to ease released inmates' transition into the community. This program would make the transition back into society smoother and more sustainable, with services and supervision provided to address the unique difficulties associated with reintegration.

Test the effectiveness of graduated reintegration. Pilot evaluations would provide information about the feasibility and impacts of graduated reintegration in a variety of settings.

Benefits

This proposal would benefit released inmates and their families by facilitating a more successful transition back into the community. Public safety would be enhanced as recidivism is reduced. Finally, time spent in prison would fall, potentially reducing costs for federal and state governments.



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