

# Life After Prison

About: Bruce Western, *Homeward. Life in the Year After Prison*, Russell Sage Foundation

*by François Bonnet*

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**Every year in the United States around 650,000 people are released from prison, many of them destined to return. Bruce Western and his research team followed 122 released prisoners over a one-year period.**

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Bruce Western is a key figure in literature on mass incarceration. Along with Katherine Beckett, he showed that the American prison population had become so large in the 1990s that the unemployment rate was artificially reduced as a result<sup>1</sup>. With Becky Pettit, he calculated that for black men who reached adulthood in the 1980s, the probability of being incarcerated at least once was 60%<sup>2</sup>. In *Homeward*, he reports on the longitudinal follow-up of 122 men and women who were released from prison in the state of Massachusetts in 2012 and 2013.

Researching people who have come out of prison is generally complicated by the fact that the people surveyed tend to disappear because of their residential instability, their lack of Internet usage, their difficulty in keeping a mobile phone and their sudden changes of phone number. However, the ones who disappear are precisely those who have the most difficulties; longitudinal follow-ups of released prisoners therefore generally tend to present an artificially optimistic view of the situation of those surveyed. The success of the Boston Reentry Study carried out for *Homeward* lies in the fact that it completed 94% of scheduled interviews (one pre-release interview in prison, followed by interviews conducted two weeks later, then two, six, and twelve months after release). Bruce Western offers a qualitative analysis of the survey,

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Western and Katherine Beckett, "How unregulated is the US labor market? The penal system as a labor market institution", *American Journal of Sociology*, 104(4), 1999, pp. 1030-60.

<sup>2</sup> Becky Pettit and Bruce Western, "Mass imprisonment and the life course: Race and class inequality in US incarceration", *American Sociological Review*, 69(2), 2004, pp. 151-169.

which is a new aspect of his professional career. The statistics are descriptive, and the chapters link life stories that illustrate how different groups of former prisoners (men / women, whites / minorities, etc.) experience different aspects of their prison release.

## **When Prison Continues on the Outside**

On the day of their release from prison, some people are met by family or friends, while some take the bus alone (or even walk along the road). The survey shows that six months later, this second category of respondents remains just as isolated. Over the first few weeks, the adjustment is very difficult for everyone involved. Technology has changed, everything is complicated, and any crowded place causes intense stress. Respondents also have a keen awareness of their position in the social hierarchy, especially when they live in homeless shelters.

The interviews made Western aware that mental and physical health issues—depression, schizophrenia, illness, disability, chronic pain, and addictions—were important components of the overall problem of prison release. All these difficulties come together: they take heroin to relieve sadness and pain, a dirty needle gives them an infectious disease, the pain becomes intolerable and intensifies the addiction, a fellow drug user dies of an overdose, which aggravates their depression, and so on. For part of the sample—especially older white women and men, their physical and mental issues are so severe that the idea of reintegration through work is meaningless.

## **Gendered Prison Release**

The men and women who come out of prison form two distinct groups in relation to the labor market. In simple terms, men and women do not face the same pressure to generate income. Women have better family support and more social assistance, meaning they do not have to look for work. Men face a stratified labor market based on race. In general, their criminal record, poor health, and skill level do not leave them with many prospects. However, white men can do better if they have kept in touch with a union<sup>3</sup> and if they are not completely destroyed by their addictions; black and Latino men on the other hand tend to have access only to the least appealing jobs. Generally speaking, in contrast with the tendency of social science literature to regard work as the best way to achieve rehabilitation, the author

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<sup>3</sup> In the United States, recruitment in certain sectors such as construction is controlled by unions. Jobs in these sectors are generally paid well above the minimum wage. Historically, unions are linked more to the white working class.

shows that most of the income generated by those released from prison is provided by social assistance and the financial support of the family. For those who are alone, begging remains an option. The book does not devote a particular chapter to this, but it often features in the life stories recounted.

The families of the former prisoners have generally been badly affected by the imprisonment, the visiting facilities, and by all the money they had to send to the prisoner for his canteen food. The consequences are particularly adverse for the prisoners' mothers who, at 50-plus and with all kinds of worries of their own, have to shoulder their son's care at their own expense. According to Western, the family is an ambivalent resource. The relatives of released prisoners are almost always from the same very disadvantaged social background. The family is both a source of income and housing, but also forms an environment where poverty, violence, mental illness, addictions and tensions caused by family restructuring will have a destabilizing role.

## **Back to Square One**

The life of the respondents is also (de)structured by violence. Contrary to a strong trend in the social sciences, B. Western defines violence as *physical* violence. He believes that, in order to avoid stigmatizing vulnerable populations, some literature is rather too inclined to minimize or contextualize the extent of the violence they experience. *Homeward* shows the omnipresence of violence in the lives of people who go to prison. Since childhood, most of the people surveyed have witnessed violence, including murder, have lost loved ones to violent death, have had serious accidents, and have suffered and committed violence themselves. The author tells the story of a woman who was bullied at school then raped twice; she then beat up a love rival, had two serious car accidents, overdosed, contracted infections from dirty needles, lost a close friend to an overdose, suddenly relapsed into opioid addiction, developed hepatitis and multiple lung and kidney infections, was mugged, etc. It is this violence, often linked to alcohol abuse, which sends people back to prison.

38 of the 122 people interviewed were sent back to prison over the course of the Boston Reentry Study. Respondents on parole were more likely to return to prison, mainly because of their addictions, which leads Western to conclude that recidivism is not really a question of choice. In keeping with the standard criminological script, older people released from prison are less likely to return, because they are less likely to receive unexpected police checks, and also because they commit fewer crimes.

The author devotes two chapters to the specific experiences of women, who represent 10% of the prison population in the United States (as opposed to 6% in Germany, 4.5% in the United Kingdom and 3.5% in France), and to the question of racial inequalities (the rate of

imprisonment among blacks is 5 times higher than among whites). However, the main message of his book is to confirm the link between poverty, crime and punishment. Its key purpose is to show how sub-proletarianization leads to prison, and how prison perpetuates sub-proletarianization. Taking the implicit opposite view to urban ethnography, *Homeward* offers an extremely harsh and pessimistic view of poverty, where violence, mental illness, alcohol and drugs put an end to any notion of reentry. Crime is a logical and normal consequence of poverty, and recidivism is a logical consequence for fundamentally pathological lives. Western is not looking to blame his respondents; on the contrary, for him, the basic problem is the incapacity of the welfare state to take care of the poor, and the inhuman excesses of the penal system. *Homeward* suggests that mass incarceration is a cruel and counterproductive policy which has almost no effect on crime but inflicts devastating harm on the poorer classes of American society.

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