

**The Impact of Community Context on the Risk of Recidivism among Parolees
at One-, Two- and Three-Year Follow-ups**

A Senior Honors Thesis

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ABSTRACT

In 2009, 5,018,855 offenders were released from prison under some sort of community supervision. Of these, 819,308 were released on parole, meaning they had served an allotted amount of time in prison and were to complete the rest of their sentence outside of a correctional facility. However, 14% of this population returned to prison in 2009. This places an economic burden on both state and federal correctional systems, which are already buckling under the pressure of budget cuts brought about by the recent economic collapse. Therefore, it is imperative to identify the external factors that influence the rate of recidivism among parolees to alleviate the financial burden that re-incarceration incurs to both the state and federal governments as well as taxpayers. A careful analysis of the recidivism rate of offenders in Ohio released on parole indicates that race, poverty, female-headed households, and availability of manufacturing jobs show strong predictability of re-incarceration. Thus, changes in rehabilitation focus to prepare prisoners to better cope with the environment into which they are released has potential to decrease the recidivism rate and ultimately help both state and federal corrections departments meet budgetary constraints.

INTRODUCTION

During 2009, the number of individuals released from prison into some sort of community control totaled 5,018, 855 (*Bureau of Justice Statistics*, 2010). This number encompasses both offenders released on probation (an alternative to incarceration during which time an offender is released into community supervision) and on parole (a period of conditional release into the community following a prison term). While the number of offenders in the federal parole population increased by 5,232 in 2009, state parole populations saw a decrease of 10,758. Furthermore, the rate of re-incarceration of parolees decreased from 15% in 2006 to 14% in 2009. These numbers are incredibly significant because they demonstrate that, as the United States was experiencing one of the worst economic declines in recent history (Roubini, Rogoff, and Behrvesh, 2009) over five million convicted felons were re-entering the workforce with hopes of finding jobs to support themselves financially.

In addition to the pressure placed on parolees by the floundering economy, the financial collapse also placed extreme amounts of strain on all forms of government programs, including the federal and state prison systems. In March of 2010 the California Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections was forced begin efforts to release 6,500 prisoners within the year to reduce overcrowding and conserve funding (Archibold, 2010). In recent years, with prison overcrowding across the country reaching levels disturbingly close to earning the label of “cruel and unusual punishment”, many prison systems looked to parole as a means of reducing overcrowding and saving the money that would be used to house the prisoners within correctional facilities. (Craig, 2010) While the overall drop in re-incarceration rate from 2006 to 2009 (*Bureau of Justice Statistics*, 2009) may appear promising, this does not mitigate the fact that 14% of parolees have re-entered the prison system in the last year. This high probability of

parolee re-incarceration essentially means that the system must again spend money housing and feeding the very offenders they had previously released in an effort to fit budget constraints.

Therefore it is crucial to understand what external factors most often cause parolees to re-enter the prison system in an effort to reduce the financial burden their re-incarceration places on both state and federal prison systems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The problem of recidivism has existed since the inception of prisons, and a substantial body of research already exists on the matter. A primary example of such research is seen in *The Malta Experiment* by sociologist Baumer who, concerned with the concentration of recidivism research in mostly Western industrialized countries, chose to examine recidivism in the Republic of Malta. This Mediterranean country is a society in which “social institutions of community, family, and religion are particularly strong.” (p. 602) Theoretical ideas suggest that the crime rate should be significantly decreased in this society, which was consistent with the crime data of Malta. One would also hypothesize that recidivism rates would be reduced in this type of society because social institutions increase social cohesion, thus making reintegration more easily possible. Baumer collected his data from prison records from the only existing prison in Malta, and examined the time (in months) between release from prison and re-imprisonment and the time (in months) between release from prison and reconviction. The results of Baumer’s analyses showed that approximately 32% of inmates released from Malta’s prison during the period under review were reimprisoned and 42% were reconvicted within six years of their release from prison. He noted that age at release and criminal history were the strongest predictors of recidivism. Furthermore, he found that recidivism rates in Malta are similar to those in societies where social institutions are not as strongly integral; he hypothesized that this could be due to poor rehabilitation programs in Malta or that the social

institutions cause people to have strong negative reactions towards people who violate the norms of the institutions. Indeed, my research demonstrates that the lack of support systems for U.S. parolees – as examined through an analysis of female-headed households – can prove very hindering for parolees attempting to avoid recidivism.

Another view of recidivism is seen in the research done by Joan Petersilia. In *Recidivism and Prisoner Reentry in the United States* Dr. Petersilia looked at recent changes in the parole system in the United States in light of the punitive policies currently embraced by society. She explains that possibility of parole is in and of itself important to the correctional systems, as it encourages inmates' cooperation in prison in return for earlier parole release for "good time." However, she contends that parole also poses certain issues to those under its supervision, noting that parole officers are often more concerned with parole violation than actual rehabilitation, and that few states offer truly helpful rehabilitation programs for parolees. Finally, she states that the conditions of parole are often far too strict for the parolees to reasonably abide by, and thus they frequently return to prison due to technical violations. Her concluding suggestions for reducing the recidivism rate in the United States include delivering appropriate work training to parolees, which is supported by my data which suggests that opportunity for gainful employment may reduce the rate of recidivism. Indeed, my analyses suggest that giving prisoners the skills they need to secure manufacturing jobs leads to lower recidivism rates amongst parolees.

Sabol (2007) details how labor market conditions in Ohio affect the time it takes for an ex-prisoner to find work and impacts their ongoing post-prison employment experience. Using data collected between 1999 and 2000 concerning prisoner release and unemployment insurance record, Sabol analyzed the length of initial unemployment and probability of future employment. His findings indicated that "county unemployment rates are negatively associated with the time to find a first job upon release from prison" (p. 2) at a rate of approximately 2%,

and that “obtaining a vocational training program certificate reduces the probability of exiting the initial spell of unemployment and also of quarterly employment.” (p. 4) While his findings also showed that pre-prison employment significantly increased the likelihood of a parolee attaining post-prison employment, this conclusions does not offer much help to rehabilitate ex-offenders, as there is no way to identify a person who will eventually serve time in prison and then help them obtain a job before incarceration. Since his research indicates that “prison programming does little to enhance the capacity of offenders to compete in local labor markets unless these offenders already bring labor market skills and experiences” (p. 29), changes in employment training programming could potentially dramatically reduce recidivism.

Steurer, Smith, and Tracey (2001) used a longitudinal study to examine and analyze over 3,600 inmates released in Minnesota, Maryland, and Ohio. The study used educational level achieved during incarceration as the major variable, and their results showed that receiving some sort of education in prison reduced the likelihood of re-incarceration by 29%. Furthermore, the researchers explain that while \$11, 700,000 was spent on the costs of education in the prison system, the amount of savings for the state and for taxpayers brought about by the reduction in recidivism returned over \$23,000,000 to the state. Finally, the authors emphasize that although the budgetary savings is an important benefit of prison education, the reduction of crime is an even more important benefit of prison education. The findings from my research point to multiple useful options to reduce the expenditures incurred by our prison system through returning parolees.

In the same vein, Trumbull and Witte (1982) attempted to identify the determinants of prison costs, taking into account price and type of labor and capital utilized, type of inmate, rehabilitative activities, security arrangements, prison size, and other prison characteristics.

Trumbull and Witte then used statistics from the federal prison system to run an economic model to identify which variables had the greatest impact on prison costs. They came to the conclusion that increasing prison size could effectively reduce the costs of prisons. They also concluded improving correctional standards such as building single-bed cells and creating more living space could potentially reduce costs. Their model showed that increasing living space by 7 feet would reduce the cost of confinement per inmate per day by \$3.92, and housing prisoners in single cells would reduce the cost of confinement per inmate per day by \$7.20. While the researchers could find no distinct reasoning behind this logic, discussions with prison guards and other prison personnel believed the rationale behind this budgetary reduction was due to improved inmate morale and lower security costs. However, with severe overcrowding occurring in most state and federal prisons, the likelihood of housing inmates in single-bed cells appears to be an idealistic situation instead of a practical reality.

Visher and Travis (2003) explain that of the 600,000 inmates released from prison in 2002, 7 out of 10 were rearrested within three years and half had returned to prison due to either a new offense or a technical violation of their parole. They argue that most research focuses strictly on recidivism and does not take into account the post-prison readjustment environments that inmates are released into. They claim that successful reintegration hinges on four factors: “personal and situational characteristics, including the individual’s social environment of peers, family, community, and state-level policies.” (p. 1) They believe that negative peer influence can often lead to post-prison reoffending, whereas reestablishing the prisoner’s role in the family may often lead to a reduction in the possibility of recidivism. The community, they argue, often provides barriers to successful reintegration because of both the reduction of rights and also due to the resistance to accept someone into the community who bears the label “convict”. Finally,

they argue that state policies have become more punitive in recent years, leading to more people being incarcerated for longer periods of time, the weakening their ties to community and their families, which could ultimately make reentry more difficult. In conclusion, they emphasize that more longitudinal research must be done to examine these factors and their relationships to ex-inmates, as well as the influence that social policies may have on prisoner readjustment to society.

METHODS

Due to the current economic climate of the United States and – specifically – state and federal prison systems, it is imperative to determine effective ways of conserving money to allow corrections department to fit their budgetary constraints. Trumbull and Witte argued that reduced the amount of inmates in a prison to a number between 1,000 and 1,600 (1982) would provide a substantial reduction in costs, but with prisons systems operating at a national rate of over 100% capacity, this option does not appear manageable. (Marwah, 2002) Others have suggested privatizing prisons as a way to reduce costs, but the danger these prisons pose to their employees and the surrounding areas makes this approach highly unappealing. (Waggenpack, 2010) I aimed to instead focus on recidivism as a major monetary problem of the prison system, and analyzed previously compiled data to determine which specific environmental variables best predicted a parolee's return to prison.

Background

The primary material used in this study was the data set described in the preceding section. As mentioned before, the data used to conduct this study was collected prior to my investigation by Paul Bellair and Brian Kowalski. Although unpublished, the data set was

provided for me with the consent of Dr. Bellair for the express purpose of conducting this research. It should be noted that the original data is available through the Community Corrections Information System, and that the data set used in this study is merely a reduced sample of the aforementioned data base.

Data

As previously stated, the data analyzed for the purpose of this study was collected prior to my awareness of the problem of recidivism in the United States and, more specifically, in Ohio. Paul Bellair and Brian R. Kowalski of The Ohio State University compiled this data using the sampling frame of the Community Corrections Information System (CCIS) data base. This data base is maintained by the bureau of Research at the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections, and contains records of approximately 10,000 parolees and those on post-release control during the first six months of 1999. In addition, this data base also included the 2000 census tract identifiers for the neighborhoods of release.

Parolees released into half-way house or those who were granted permission to move out of state were removed from the sample to “reduce the impact of residential mobility among subjects.” (Bellair & Kowalski, 2010) Furthermore, Bellair and Kowalski sorted the ex-inmates based upon the census tracts into which they were released. If multiple inmates fell into the same tract, only a single element was used; this element was decided upon using a random number table and weighing observations of how many prisoners were released into that neighborhood. The researchers also counteracted potential biases by comparing a randomly selected portion of the sample with missing cases, then obtaining their post-release addresses of these cases to ensure that there was only one respondent per census tract sampled. These measures resulted in a

sample of 1,568 parolees and PRCs, and this sample was used during all of the statistical analyses done in this study.

Independent Variables

Although the data set contained over thirty independent variables, only four were identified as key variables for this study. Based on analysis of both relatively current statistics and commonly accepted theories, poverty, female-headed households, the rate of unemployment, and availability of manufacturing jobs appear to be linked to ex-prisoners' inability to remain out of jail while on parole. In this research, "poverty" refers to the absolute poverty of the neighborhood into which the parolee returns upon release from prison. "Female-headed households" refer to the census tracts in which the majority of families have a female head of household. The "rate of unemployment" refers to the current rate of unemployment in Ohio during 1999 and the first six months of 2000, during which this sample was collected. Finally, the "availability of manufacturing jobs" refers to the number of available manufacturing jobs in Ohio at the time of the parolees' release.

The disproportionate amount of minorities in Ohio's prison system suggests that race is somehow correlated with arrests and convictions, and thus may also be a key indicator in probability of re-incarceration. Social disorganization theory, borne out of the Chicago school, postulates that neighborhood conditions often foster crime; the existence and severity of poverty in a given neighborhood may increase the rate of recidivism in that area and is therefore analyzed here. Single-headed households are often spoken of in the same context of Hirschi's social bonding theory, which states that a person's bond to social institutions may determine his or her level of criminal activity.(1969) Justifiably, single-headed households should also be analyzed to

determine their role in recidivism. Finally, it is often difficult for ex-felons to find jobs (especially in an economy where employment opportunities are scarce for even those who hold college degrees), making the availability of manufacturing jobs a key variable in this study. (Jones, 2011) Thus, the next logical step appears to be analyzing these variables to determine if there is in fact a direct link between these elements and the rate of recidivism amongst Ohio parolees.

Dependant Variable

The dependant variable in this study is the rate of recidivism amongst Ohio parolees at one, two, and three year follow-up points. While the raw number of parolees who reoffend can be found in the Department of Justice's Bureau of Statistics (for national data) and the State of Ohio, Office of Criminal Justice Services (for data specific to Ohio), these numbers do not indicate the link between the recidivism and external variables which may exert an influence. Based on my prior research, this variable should fluctuate in a positive correlation with all of the previously mentioned independent variables. Therefore, a statistical analysis was performed to determine if my theoretically-based hypothesis was supported by the data compiled from the Community Corrections Information System database.

Procedure

This investigation looked to identify the specific external factors which exert some influence over the recidivism rate of paroles re-entering the community. The variables were imputed into SPSS, a software package designed to calculate descriptive statistics (such as cross tabulation and frequencies), bivariate statistics (such as means and ANOVA), prediction for numerical outcomes, and prediction for identifying groups (such as Factor analysis).

The first analysis measured the rate of recidivism in relation to poverty and the type of offense. We created three broad categories reflecting low (0-20%), medium (21-40%) and high (41% or higher) poverty and replicated this for recidivism at one-, two- and three-year follow-ups. The results of this analysis can be found in Figure 1 and will be discussed in the following section.

Analyses of female-headed household, the unemployment rate, and availability of manufacturing jobs were similarly structured. The results are presented in Figures 2-4. These results were then used to determine if my hypothesis should be rejected and to guide a discussion of future policies and planning within both state and federal prison systems.

RESULTS

Poverty

Figure 1 presents the findings of the data for the percentage of inmates returning to prison during the first three years of parole as a function of poverty and type of offense. The database compiled by Bellair and Kowalski divided poverty into separate categories ranging from 0-10% poverty to >60% poverty, and thus my analysis resulted in 9 variable results for each of the seven categories of poverty. While these specific results were useful, it was determined that showing each level of poverty ultimately cluttered the figure; therefore, the percentages of poverty were combined and are represented as Low Poverty (0-20%), Medium Poverty (21-40%), and Extreme Poverty ($\geq 41\%$).

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

As the results demonstrate, the percentage of parolees returning to prison increases with time at all levels of poverty, except in the case of technical offenses in the extreme poverty

section. The figure shows that 28% are re-incarcerated for a technical offense at year two, while re-incarceration for a technical offense at year three was only 25.5. The difference between these two numbers is not significant, and may actually be accounted for by the smaller sample size of those living in extreme poverty. However, another explanation for this unusual variation may be found in the figure itself: The number of parolees returning to prison during the first three years of parole due to new offenses is highest for those in the extreme poverty group, potentially indicating that those living under such seriously impoverished conditions do not violate the technical terms of their parole quite as often because their time is spent committing new crimes. This assumption is consistent with Robert Agnew's *General Strain Theory*, which purports that those without the means to attain middle-class standards turn to deviance to achieve those ends. Therefore, those parolees in extreme poverty much commit crimes in order to maintain the middle-class standards that they are being encouraged to live by through rehabilitation programs and societal pressures, thus explaining the findings presented in Figure 1.

Another important findings demonstrated in Figure 1 is that the rate of re-incarceration increases for all violations across all years as the level of poverty moves toward the more extreme end. While this is a somewhat predictable outcome, the large gap between the recidivism rates of those parolees experiencing low poverty and those living in extreme poverty (as seen in the difference of 7.32 between low and extreme poverty for new offense at first year) reaffirms the belief that these groups are incredibly different and programs developed to treat these groups must be varied accordingly.

Female-headed households

Figure 2 demonstrates the impact of female-headed households on the rate of recidivism amongst parolees at one-, two-, and three-year follow ups after release from prison. The analysis

demonstrates that parolees returning environments in which female-headed households are prevalent demonstrate moderately high rates of recidivism, which increase as time passes since the parolee's release from prison.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 2 shows that, during the initial year following the parolee's release from prison, 12% returned due to a technical violation of parole and 4% returned because of the commission of a new offense. At the two-year follow up, 18.9% of the parolees had returned to prison because of a technical violation, while 10.7% returned due to a new offense. Finally, after three years, 20.9% of the parolees in the sample population returned to prison due to a technical violation and 16.6% returned because he committed a new offense. The increase in those returning to prison does not appear to drastically increase over time, but the indication that over 10% returned to prison within just twelve months of exiting indicated that the parolee was experiencing difficulties readjusting to life outside of prison, and was clearly not sufficiently aided by a strong community support system. As will be discussed later in this paper, the existence of a strong support system is vital in maintaining a productive life while on parole; a key element of this support system is the family structure, and this figure gives evidence that single-headed households alone often cannot provide an adequate support system.

Rate of unemployment

Figure 3 demonstrates the impact that the level of unemployment in the job market exerts upon parolees as they are released from prison. Interestingly, this table demonstrates that lower employment rates may actually be associated with higher recidivism rates, but this trend quickly shifts as the rate of unemployment rises.

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Availability of manufacturing jobs

Consistent with these findings, my analysis in Figure 4 aimed to further unpack the problem of unemployment and identify the influence of the availability of manufacturing jobs on successful reentry and a reduction in recidivism. The correlation between the rate of availability of manufacturing jobs and the rate of recidivism appears to mirror each other; as the existence of manufacturing jobs evaporated, the rate of recidivism rose, and vice versa.

[FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

As demonstrated in previous work by Bellair and Kowalski, the availability of manufacturing jobs – such as working on a car assembly line or creating textiles – is a key component of successful reentry. Due to the very low literacy rate of U.S. prisoners, their employment qualifications are often extremely limited. Thus, it is imperative that they find work in lines of employment that do not require high levels of educational attainment and cognitive skills; manufacturing jobs offer secure employment without requiring high levels of cognitive functioning or requiring a certain level of educational achievement. Thus they are ideal for employing those recently released from prison, and Figure 2 clearly shows the positive effect their availability has on reducing recidivism rates.

DISCUSSION

The high rates of recidivism that continuously plague this country increasingly came to light following the judicial system's shift in the 1980s towards more punitive models for the treatment of the incarcerated. (Lab) Compounded by the economic turmoil this country has experienced since 2008, the need to reduce the costs that recidivism places on both state and federal corrections systems has become all the more apparent. Bellair and Kowalski identified low skilled employment opportunities and African American racial identification as important

factors predicting a person's probability of returning to prison while on parole, and my research supported these findings. However, my analyses went further and found that the households in which the parolee was raised – and to which they most often return to (Petersilia 7) – as well as the level of poverty that the inmate was experiencing during the time leading up to the incarceration.

As the results discussed, recidivism increased at the three year follow-up in direct correlation with the level of poverty of the parolee. Those living in extreme poverty re-entered the prison system due to a technical violation or a new offense after one year at rates of 18.1 and 10.27, while those living in low poverty had recidivism rates of only 10.85 and 2.95, respectively. In addition, Figure 3 indicates that as the rate on unemployment increases from 0% to $\geq 31\%$, so too does the recidivism rate; the recidivism rate ranges from barely 18% to nearly 100%. Figure 4 indicates that a similar pattern appears when one specifically looks at manufacturing job opportunities available in the labor market: as the percentage of availability jobs decreases, the recidivism rate increases. Finally, Figure 2 demonstrates that those parolees either raised in or returning to female-headed households demonstrate high recidivism rates that increase over time. Indeed, in their first year on parole, 12% of parolees from female-headed households returned to prison for a technical violation and 4% returned for a new offense; at the end of three years, 20.9% of parolees had returned to prison due to a technical violating and 16.6% had returned because of a new offense.

The findings of this study pose great implications for the current policies implemented by both state and federal correctional and rehabilitation programs. Extreme poverty has often been associated with crime, and this data corresponds with that assumption. While it is ridiculous to believe that prisoner re-entry programs could somehow possess the ability to alter entire

neighborhoods or communities consumed by poverty, programs should be implemented to encourage prisoners to adapt to living in such environments. Life within prisons is very structured, and all material needs are minimally fulfilled through the prison itself; it is unrealistic to think that prisoners will be able to return to a situation in which they have very little material wealth after having everything provided for them during their prison sentence. Programs should be designed to somehow wean prisoners off of their dependency on all materials being provided to them so that they do not turn to theft or robbery when they return to their poverty-stricken communities while on parole, as appears to be the case based on the data presented here, especially in Figure 1. Moreover, community programs that aid prisoner reentry should focus on both minority and majority populations as opposed to directing a disproportionate amount of resources towards strictly minority parolees.

Sociologists and social workers have long maintained that a major determining factor of the success of reentry for ex-prisoners is the support systems they have both while in prisons and upon release. Research has shown that supportive family networks – specifically emotional support and housing assistance during the first 30 days of release – lead to much lower rates of recidivism with regard to parolees (Nelson et al, 1999). As my data demonstrates, parolees who come from single-headed homes (and presumably return to those or similar situations) show high levels of recidivism, thus supporting Nelsons’ previous findings and the prevalent assumptions of sociologists and social workers. In terms of policy implications, the encouragement of continued family support for parolees with strong support systems or development of family support networks must be taken into account in re-entry problems. More specifically, multiple mandatory therapy sessions with both the inmate and family members during the end of the prison stay and the first few months of parole with the goal of improving family communication

skills and increased use of positive reinforcement should be incorporated into rehabilitation and reentry programs.

Obtaining permanent employment upon release from prison is a very critical but often extremely difficult factor influencing the probability of a parolee's return to the correctional system. Many employers are unwilling to hire a person with a felony and prison time on their records, and with many well-qualified and educated people experiencing unemployment due to the economic troubles, parolees are finding it hard to compete with others to obtain jobs. In congruence with the findings of Bellair and Kowalski, my analyses show that the availability of manufacturing jobs plays a key role in altering recidivism rates. A higher concentration of available manufacturing jobs shows a positive correlation with the likelihood of successful reentry for parolees (that is, less likelihood of recidivism). In light of this data, state and federal governments need to increase their Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) programs which offer tax breaks to companies that hire undesirable candidates such as ex-convicts. These companies often are built on manufacturing jobs, and the continued encouragement by government organizations ensures that there are at least some available jobs for parolees looking to start their lives over after serving their time.

CONCLUSION

There are many barriers to successful reentry even for the most dedicated and optimistic parolee. Often, the public is not willing to overlook the conviction record of a parolee and labels him or her as a "criminal." The stigma connected to that word often proves detrimental both mentally and socially to many ex-prisoners during the initial reentry process, and commonly follows them throughout the remainder of their lives. Furthermore, the evidence presented here

offers verification that certain post-release factors – specifically: poverty, race, single-parent households, and availability of manufacturing employment – have a crucial impact during the first three years of parole. These factors must be dealt with accordingly both during preparation for reentry and in the first few years of the ex-prisoner’s reintegration into society. If correctional systems continue to turn a blind eye to these factors, they are condemning inmates to the pattern stated most bluntly by Jeremy Travis: “But They All Come Back.”

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Figure 1. Percentage of Inmates Returning to Prison during First Three Years of Parole at Levels of Poverty by Type of Offense

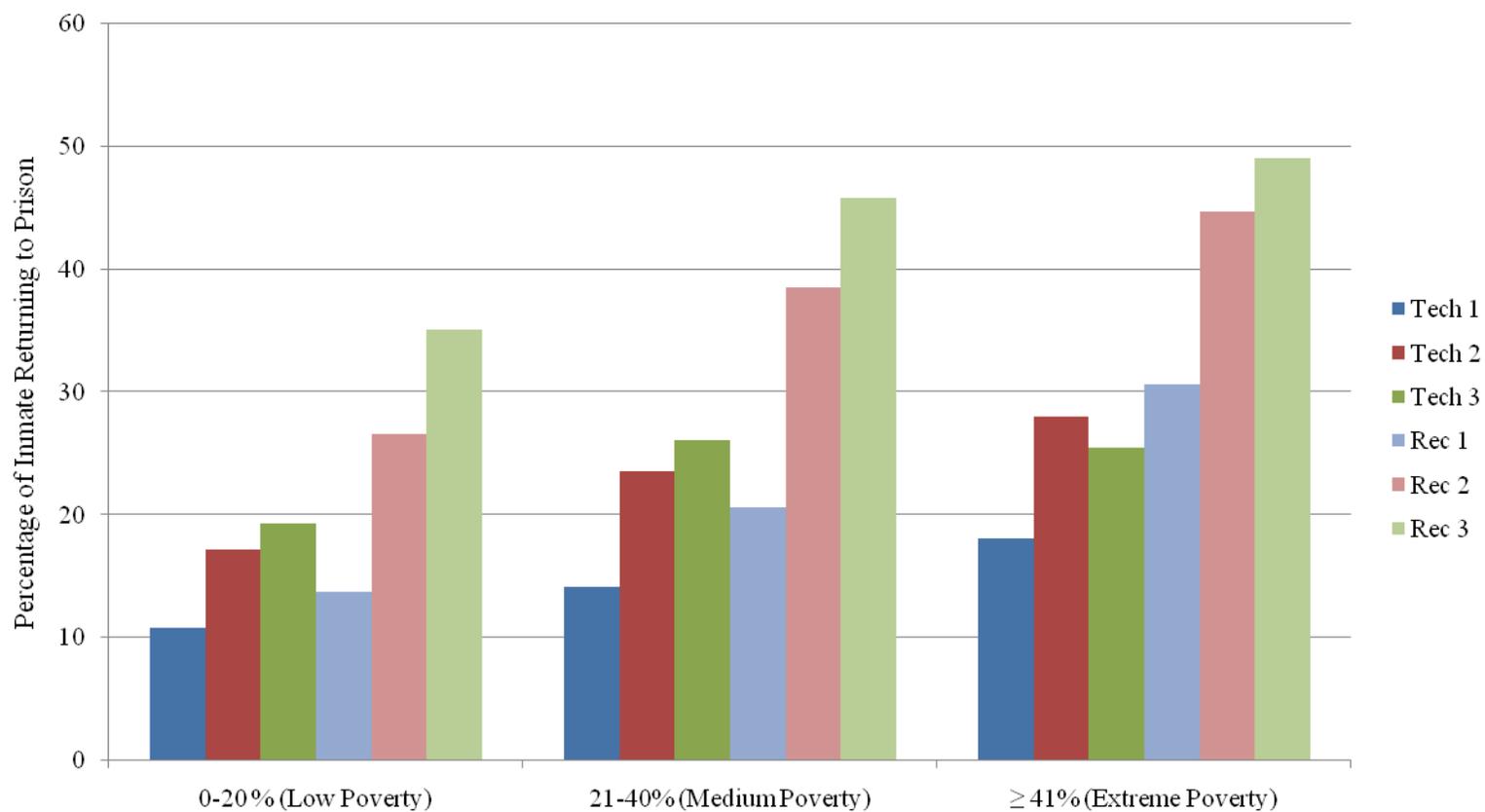


Figure 2. The Associate Between Female-Headed Households and Recidivism of Parolees at One-, Two-, and Three Years Post Release

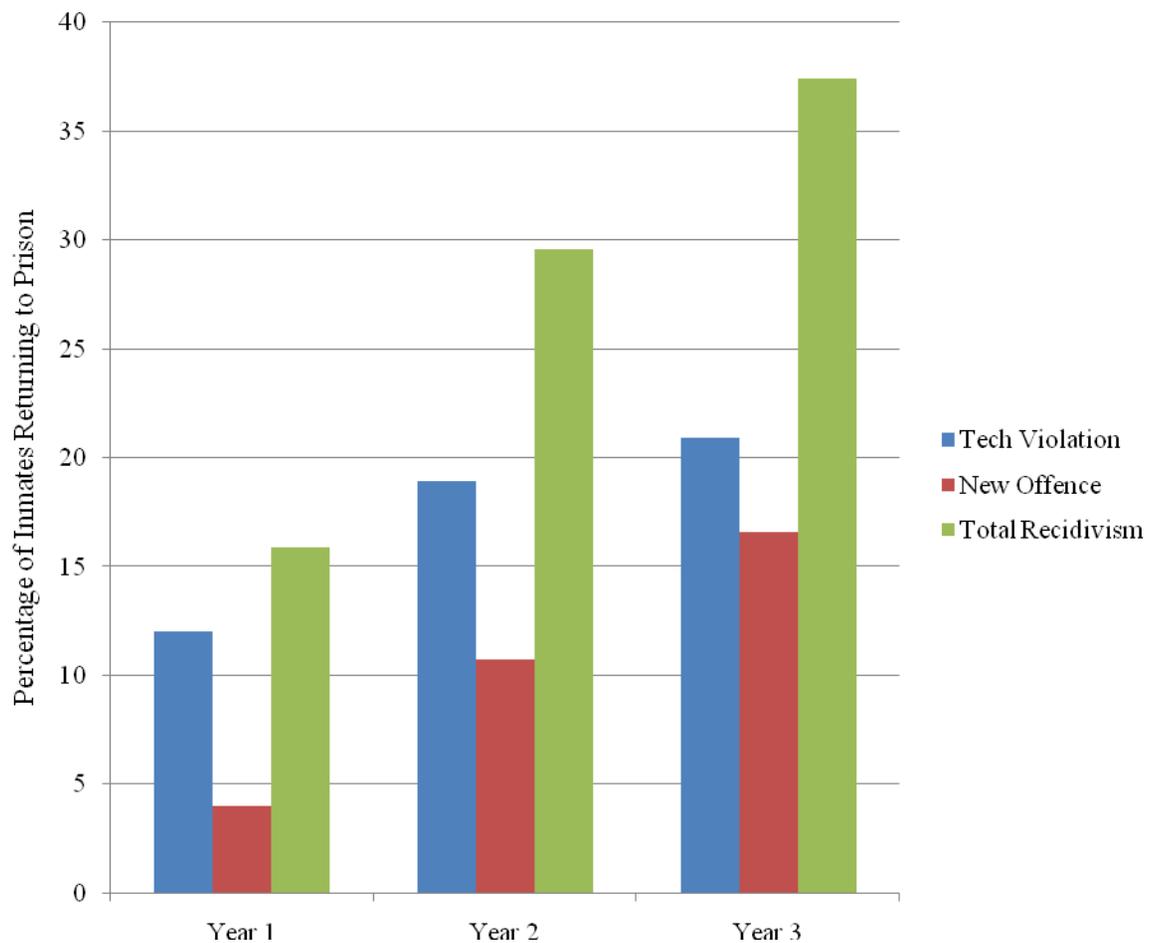


Figure 3. The Impact of Percentage of Unemployment in the Labor Market on Recidivism Rates after Three Years

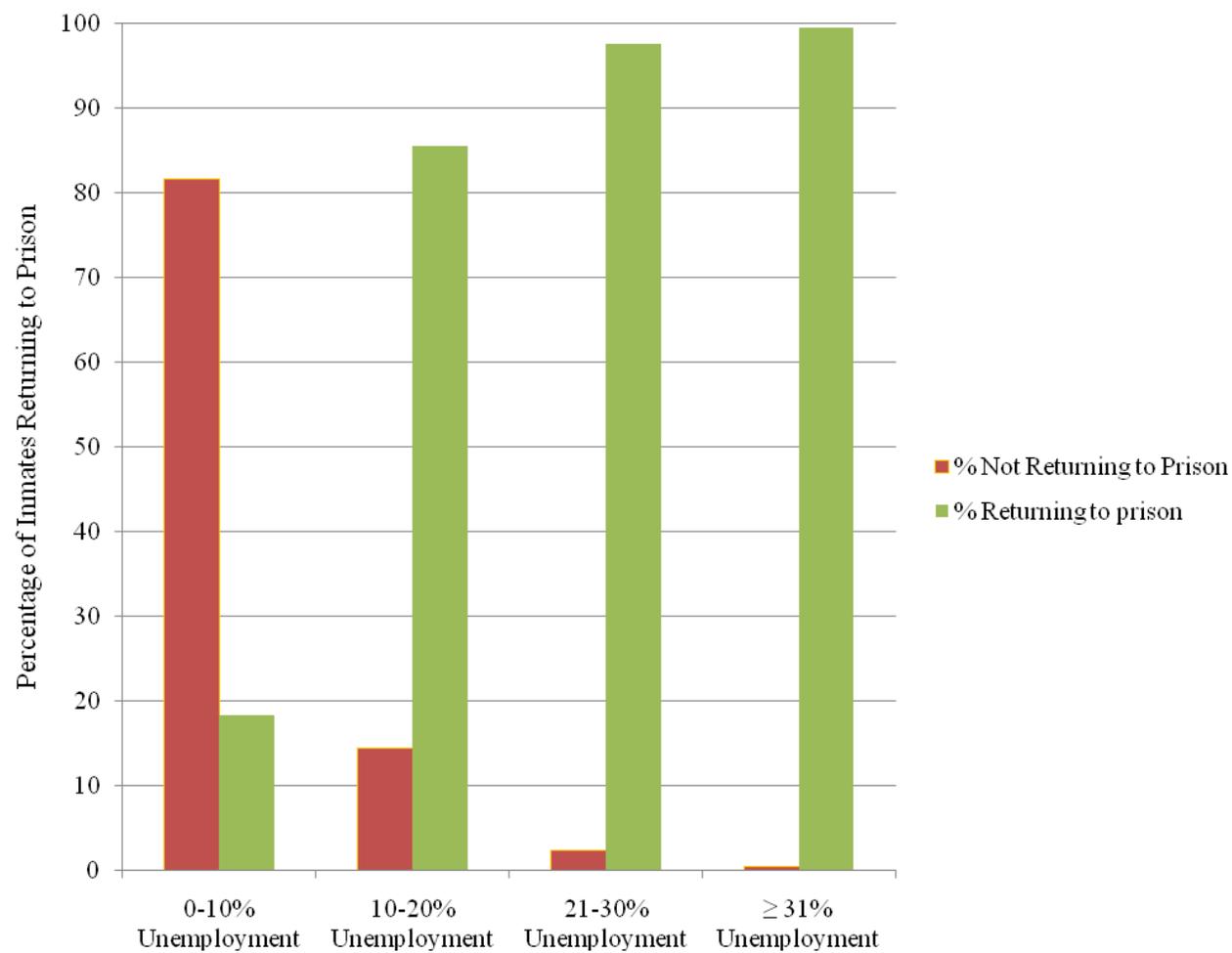


Figure 4. The Impact of Availability of Manufacturing Jobs in the Labor Market on Recidivism at Three Years

