

CHAPTER 1



Introduction

Prisoner reentry—several decades ago, it barely registered in the public consciousness. Yes, crime control had featured prominently in presidential elections since the 1960s and, in particular, in President Lyndon Johnson’s campaign against Barry Goldwater.¹ Johnson appointed a commission of high-profile researchers and, in 1967, received the commission’s report and recommendations. In 1968, Congress, informed by the report and cajoled by Johnson, enacted the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act. Since that time, crime has received top-priority attention from presidents.

What has changed, then? It is not the attention to crime. Rather, a tough-on-crime era arose, beginning in the 1970s and ascending into prominence in the 1980s. This era ushered in unprecedented emphases on punishment over rehabilitation and, in particular, intensive use of incarceration. Put differently, the quality and quantity of punishment changed. The country turned away from rehabilitation and toward incapacitation and deterrence as the way to reduce recidivism. It turned, too, toward retribution and the development of an ever-expanding array of strategies for achieving it. Social exclusion rather than inclusion of those who offend constituted the “new penology.”²

In some ways, the logic seems simple and straightforward. If rehabilitation does not work—as the famous Robert Martinson report, published in 1974, suggested—and if crime stands to overrun society, recourse to no-nonsense punishment should be pursued.³ And it should “work.” That is, it should signal to all Americans the country’s moral code. It should reduce crime rates by educating would-be offenders about this code and simultaneously by scaring them away from even considering a criminal lifestyle, a mechanism typically referred to as general deterrence. It also should reduce recidivism in a similar manner. A tough stint in the “slammer” should induce fear among those released from prison and so induce a specific deterrent effect.

Missed in all of this simple and straightforward logic were the kinds of insights that might have led to a more careful and considered approach to crime control and punishment. Prisons, of course, cost money. Once built, they typically

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remain in place. Few politicians, for example, can successfully run on a campaign of reducing prison capacity. The potential to be painted as “soft on crime” sits there and, as Governor Michael Dukakis learned in his 1988 presidential campaign, can contribute directly to losing an election.⁴ Accordingly, any increase in the capacity to incarcerate should not be undertaken lightly, precisely because it obligates taxpayer dollars almost indefinitely. Put differently, investing in a prison is tantamount to obtaining a mortgage from which one cannot escape.

Finances, however, barely scratch the surface when we consider incarceration. As decades of scholarship now establish, the intensive pursuit of incarceration has created ripple effects of unintended harms that, to date, do not seem counterbalanced by benefits that may have accrued from the investment. This problem, and the need to do something about it, provides the motivation for this book. Any solution, however, requires first understanding the nature of the problem, its causes and contours, and the range of possible strategies for intervening. Simply calling for less incarceration will not suffice. Indeed, it is not appropriate. Crime hurts people. Punishment, including incarceration, stands as a time-honored way to address that harm. But it is not the only or even necessarily the best way to do so.

As we discuss below, the scale of changes in the country’s use of incarceration demands attention. For scholars, innumerable opportunities exist to develop a better understanding of crime and offending. For policy makers, practitioners, and the public at large, the situation is cause both for optimism and for utmost concern. On the optimistic side, numerous opportunities exist for improving punishment policy in the United States. The concern, however, is that the failure to take advantage of these opportunities will result in immediate consequences in the form of more costs, more crime, and more suffering.

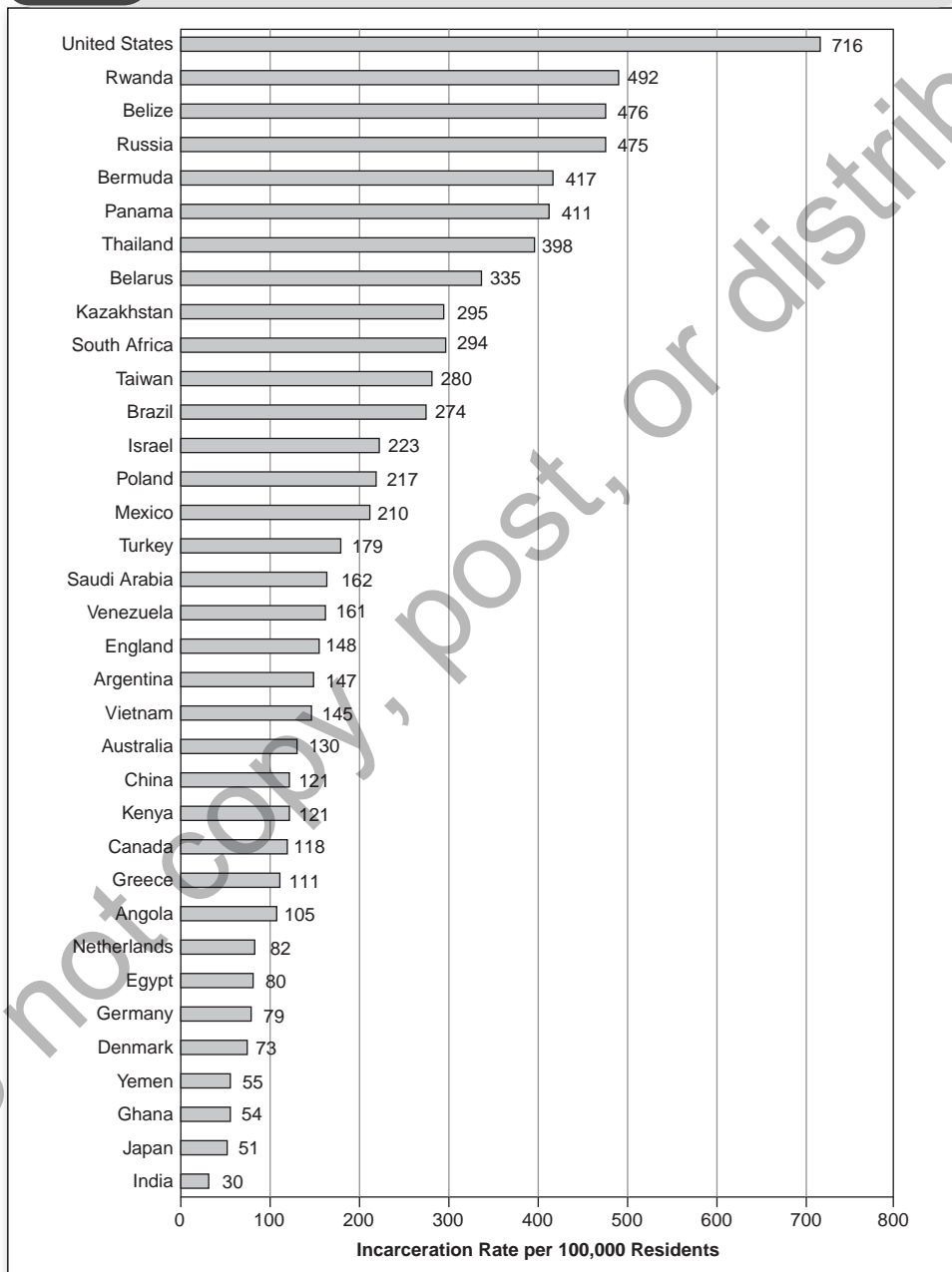
MASS INCARCERATION AND REENTRY

After decades of relatively consistent, low-level increases in prison populations, the United States embarked in the late 1970s and early 1980s on the equivalent of a policy that has come to be called “mass incarceration.” States and the federal government built prisons. Lots of them. And they filled them, so much so that America’s use of incarceration exceeds that of almost all other countries.⁵ As inspection of Figure 1.1 shows, after adjusting for population size differences, the United States incarcerates more individuals per capita than any other country in the world. Counting both jail and prison populations, the United States incarceration rate is 716 per 100,000 residents. By contrast, Russia’s incarceration rate is 475, the United Kingdom’s is 148, and Germany’s is 79. The United States stands at the top of this list even if all countries, not just those in the figure, are included.⁶ The world incarceration rate is estimated to be 144 per 100,000 individuals.⁷

In absolute terms, the number of inmates in state or federal prisons in the United States soared from 500,000 in 1980 to over 2.3 million in the course of just over three decades, with only a slight tapering off in recent years. The increase well exceeded what would be predicted by changes in population and, as will be discussed, crime rates. Figure 1.2 shows that, in 1980, the United States incarcerated 139 individuals in state or federal prisons per 100,000 adult residents; by 2012, that rate increased to 480. (International comparisons typically

include jail populations, hence the higher United States incarceration rate shown in Figure 1.1.) Put differently, over this time span, incarceration rates increased by approximately 250 percent.

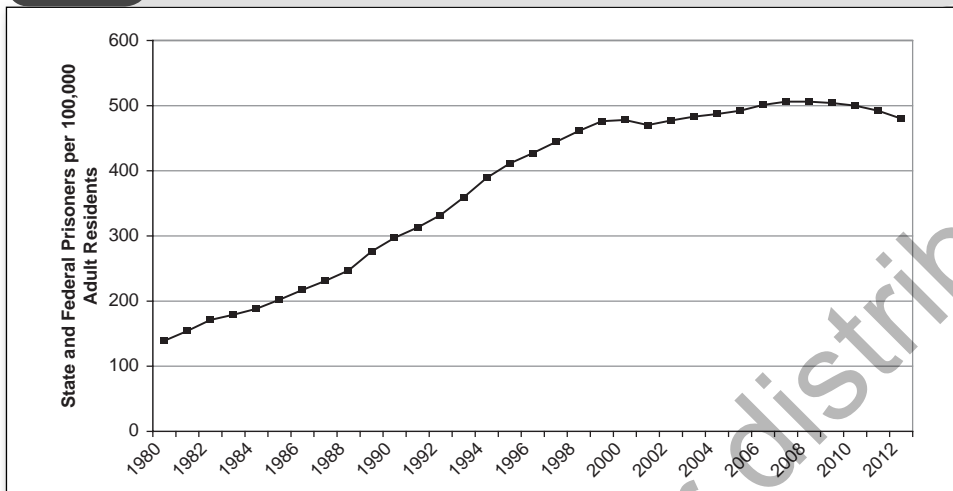
Figure 1.1 International Rates of Imprisonment for Selected Countries



Source: Selected countries from Walmsley (2013). A complete list of countries and updated statistics is available through the International Centre for Prison Studies (<http://www.prisonstudies.org/world-prison-brief>).

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Figure 1.2 Incarceration Rates in the United States, 1980–2012



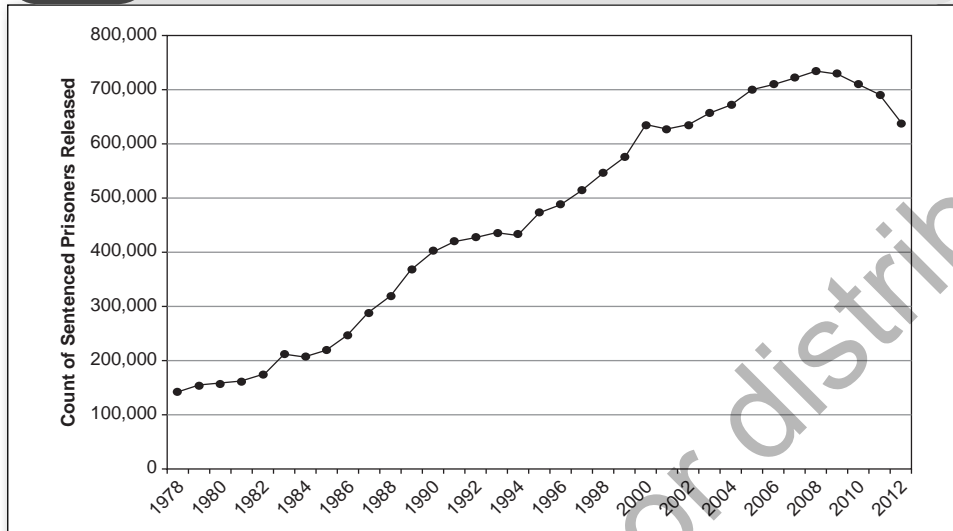
Sources: Bureau of Justice Statistics (2000); Carson and Golinelli (2013a, b); Harrison and Beck (2006).

During this same time period, the correctional system, which includes individuals on probation, in jails and prisons, and on parole, expanded from 2 million to over 7 million individuals.⁸ For example, probation populations increased from just over 1 million to well over 4 million.⁹ The reentry population grew, too, despite lengthier terms of incarceration. Nothing short of life sentences for all inmates can change the fact that, in general, over 93 percent of all inmates return to society.¹⁰ The end result, as shown in Figure 1.3, is that between 600,000 and 700,000 individuals are released annually from state and federal prisons back into society. By contrast, in 1980, the country released 154,000 individuals from prison. This steady and dramatic increase in the correctional system occurred for three decades. It did so despite several economic downturns that led observers to speculate that the expansion simply could not continue. But it did. And it left the country in a position where, even with a leveling off or even a moderate tapering of the prison population, a commitment to mass incarceration—and its many intended and unintended consequences—remains.

Indeed, the end result involves much more than the release of individuals from prison. Release is but the start of a complicated process for ex-prisoners, one that is built on an equally complicated set of practices, policies, and social conditions. The reentry of prisoners into society has far-reaching consequences that implicate not only ex-prisoners but also their families, the communities to which they return, states, and the country. More than a decade of research on reentry highlights this fact and underscores that mass incarceration has imposed, and will continue to impose, substantial costs on society with benefits that remain largely speculative. For example, from 1982 to 2011, total state corrections spending increased from \$15 billion to \$53 billion in real dollars.¹¹ That estimate does not reflect the significant increase in costs for law enforcement and the courts or the costs that victims, families, and communities incurred

Figure 1.3

Sentenced Prisoners Released from State and Federal Jurisdiction, 1977–2012



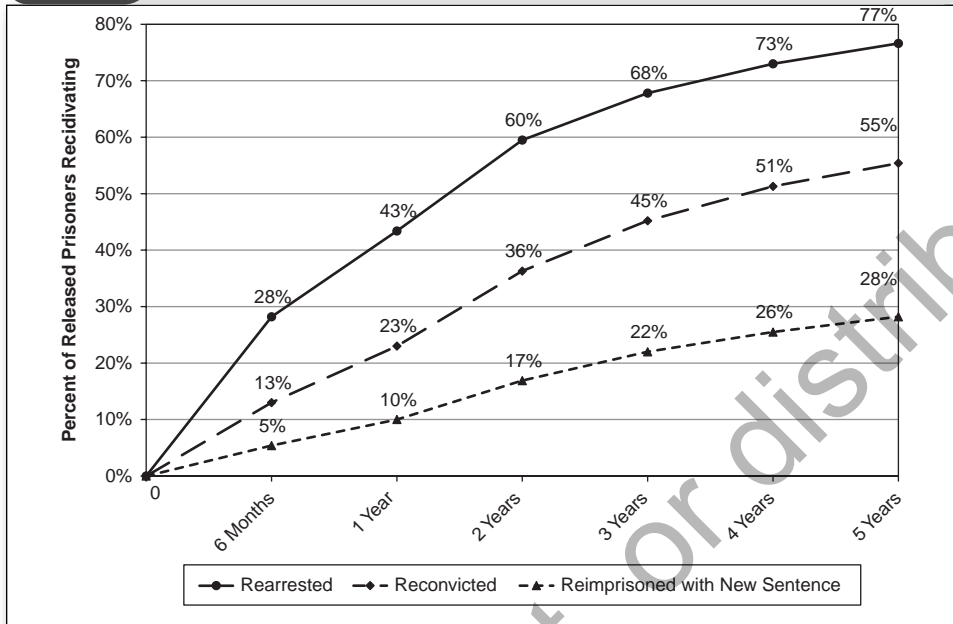
Source: Carson and Golinelli (2013).

during this period. There are other consequences associated with mass incarceration as well. These include the potential for increased offending or crime rates, declines in neighborhood cohesion and labor markets, and other quality-of-life indicators.¹²

There is no evidence that rates of recidivism declined during the era of mass incarceration.¹³ A national assessment of recidivism rates among prisoners released from thirty states in 2005 found that, within 5 years of release, 77 percent of prisoners were rearrested for a felony or serious misdemeanor (rearrest rates did not vary appreciably by type of crime), 55 percent were reconvicted of a new crime, and 28 percent were sent to prison for a new crime (see Figure 1.4).¹⁴ An even more sobering picture emerges when we recognize that over half of prisoners (55 percent) were reincarcerated within 5 years of release; some returned due to new prison sentences while the rest returned due to technical violations (e.g., failing a drug test, missed parole officer appointments, or the like).¹⁵ The initial months after release constitute the period when individuals are most at risk of recidivism: Rearrest occurs for over one-fourth (28 percent) of prisoners within the first six months of release. Thereafter, the likelihood of recidivism increases, but at a slower rate. The high levels of recidivism do not constitute evidence that incarceration worsens offending, but they raise critical questions about its effects.¹⁶

Other consequences of mass incarceration exist. To use one prominent example—the widespread and increased use of supermax incarceration, including the military’s reliance on the prison facility at Guantanamo after the September 11, 2001, attacks, led to international condemnation of the United States. The emergence and use of supermax housing occurred in the absence of any credible empirical research documenting its benefits.¹⁷ Throughout the

Figure 1.4 Recidivism of U.S. Prisoners



Source: Durose et al. (2014:8, 15).

book, we will discuss other examples. What we will emphasize here is that the country achieved, in but a few decades, historically unprecedented growth in incarceration. By so doing, it placed enormous demands on taxpayers while simultaneously limiting opportunities both to punish and to promote public safety through other potentially more effective and efficient approaches.

If the benefits of greater use of prison outweighed the costs, there might be cause for celebration, especially if benefits greatly exceeded costs. Yet review of the literature on mass incarceration, reentry, and punishment suggests just the opposite. Research indicates that large-scale incarceration and the more general “get-tough” shift in punishment have harmed communities. They have created or amplified racial and ethnic disparities and tensions and disenfranchised large swaths of the American populace. In addition, although in some places mass incarceration and “get tough” punishment may have modestly reduced crime and recidivism, considerable evidence suggests that elsewhere they have increased crime and recidivism relative to what otherwise would have occurred.¹⁸

That bleak assessment, one found in many scholarly accounts, suggests substantial cause for concern. Perhaps it overstates the case, or maybe it misses the mark altogether. Maybe large-scale investment in incarceration in recent decades needed to happen and created benefits that have yet to be fully appreciated. Is such an assessment accurate? How would we know? These are critical questions that should interest us all—citizen, policy maker, practitioner, and scholar alike. To avoid simplistic assessments requires careful consideration of many facets of mass incarceration and its end result, mass reentry.

Figure 1.5 Mass Incarceration and Reentry—and Why They Matter

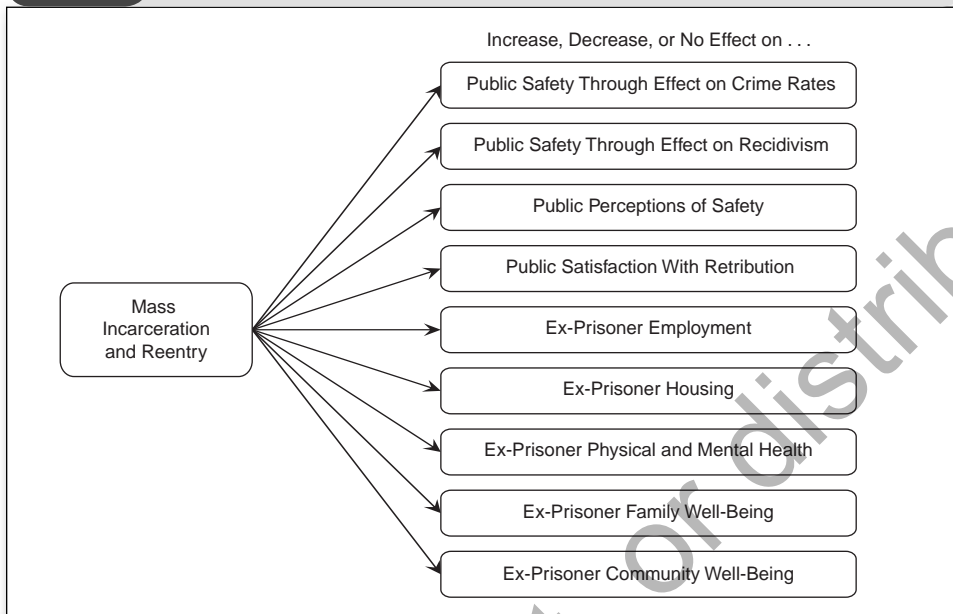


Figure 1.5 illustrates the point. On the left stands mass incarceration and reentry. To the right stand a range of community outcomes that may be affected by them. These include increased public safety through reduced crime rates or reduced recidivism, or both; increased public perceptions of safety, which may or may not directly accord with actual crime rates or incarceration rates; public satisfaction with a central goal of punishment, namely, retribution; and other dimensions that may seem at first blush to lie outside the purview of criminal justice and yet may be affected by incarceration. Imprisonment, for example, may affect ex-prisoner employment prospects and access to subsidized housing. It may affect mental or physical health. It may affect families, who bear additional burdens when individuals leave prison without the possibility of employment and with physical or mental illnesses that place demands on or affect other family members. Not least, it may influence communities in a myriad of ways, from increased crime rates to reduced quality of life. The net sum of the benefits and costs along each of these dimensions ultimately determines whether mass incarceration, or any other approach to punishment and public safety, is effective.¹⁹

Swirling in and around the many considerations that emerge when we investigate such questions are opportunities to pursue avenues of research of long-standing relevance to social scientists. What, for example, are the causes of offending? Historically, the bulk of criminological theory on offending derived from a focus on delinquents and youth populations. With the advent of mass incarceration, a logical shift to understanding offending over the life course emerged, as did theorizing that incorporated insights about changes in psychological and social development and context as individuals age.²⁰ Studies have turned, too, to examining the effects of incarceration on macro-level crime rates

and the causes of the “punitive” turn in American punishment.²¹ Such work creates the potential to answer interesting and important scholarly questions and to develop more theoretical insight into offending, crime, and social control efforts. Just as relevant, it holds the potential to contribute to discussions about and evidence for policies, programs, and practices that can more effectively and efficiently promote public safety and well-being. By “effective,” we mean here that significant improvements in outcomes (e.g., reduced recidivism) occur, and by “efficient” we mean here that these improvements arise from relatively little cost or, alternatively, from the least necessary cost.

A silver lining, then, to the emergence of mass incarceration and reentry consists of the opportunities to advance policy and scholarship in mutually reinforcing ways. Any such benefit, however, rests on appreciating the character and complexity of reentry. There is no single explanation of mass incarceration to which scholars adhere.²² There is no one “silver-bullet” solution to reducing crime or the recidivism of prisoners. The best prison program, for example, cannot control or shape the community and social conditions to which inmates return. Accordingly, efforts to reduce recidivism ideally focus on individuals not only while they are incarcerated but also after they leave prison. Such efforts should address many other factors that contribute to pro-social outcomes. Likewise, no single criminological theory will reshape reentry policy or will do so effectively. Offending results from a multitude of factors. Efforts to focus only on one or two simply will not succeed or do so “to scale”—that is, in a way that substantially reduces offending for the bulk of people sent to prison. There is, too, no single best way to integrate the on-the-ground insights of criminal justice and corrections administrators and practitioners into the creation of effective and efficient policy and practice or to have such insights inform research. Rather, many ways exist to do so.²³

THE GOALS OF THIS BOOK

This book is motivated by these opportunities and observations. In writing it, we are well aware of the excellent accounts of prisoner reentry that exist.²⁴ We necessarily cover some similar terrain, such as discussion of trends in and the profile of prison populations. However, we depart substantially from prior work in developing several interrelated arguments about reentry theory and research and how to improve policy and scholarship. A strength of the ever-growing body of work on reentry lies in the illumination of important facets of mass incarceration and its consequences for individuals and society. At the same time, the risk is that we lose sight of the forest for the trees.

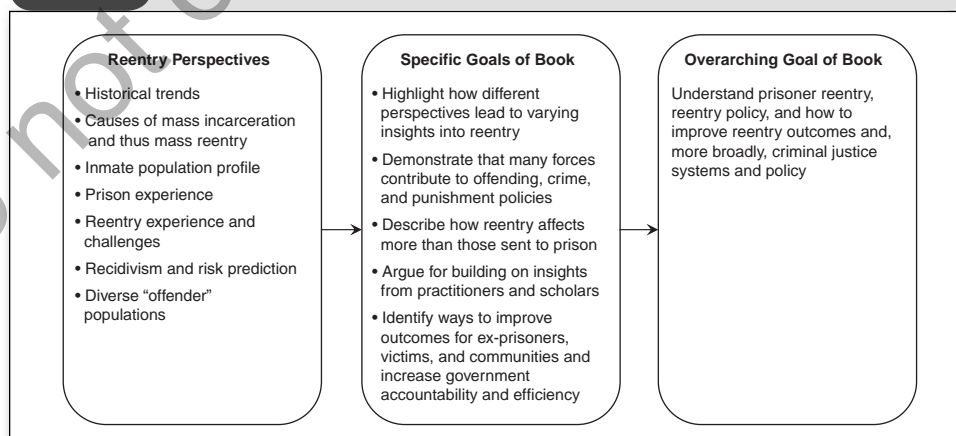
In this book, our focus centers on both the forest and the trees. Without an understanding of the broader contexts and factors that affect reentry, it is difficult to appreciate the significance of particular empirical findings. Even so, narrowly focused studies can illuminate significant issues that have far-reaching consequences and that give color to abstract arguments. For example, the fact that little is known about the amount of time that inmates spend in supermax housing points to broader concerns about the lack of systematic analysis of prison system operations and their effects.²⁵ The broader patterns are, however,

critical. One significant trend in reentry policy over recent decades consists of a greater focus on individual offenders. Change the individuals, through deterrence or some other mechanism, and society will be safer. Such an approach, however, neglects the role that the criminal justice system plays in creating a population of prisoners and affecting their potential for offending. It neglects, too, the role that communities play in contributing to crime and other social problems.

At the broadest level, then, our goal is to contribute to our understanding of and policy on reentry and, in turn, criminal justice. We argue that substantial improvements in criminal justice broadly—not just within the prison system or in parole or community supervision—are needed to understand and to improve reentry. This argument builds on Jeremy Travis’s advocacy of a “reentry framework” for thinking about and questioning many aspects of criminal justice, including law enforcement and sentencing practices, correctional system operations, release policies, and, more generally, how we as a society approach crime prevention and justice.²⁶ Here, the strength of our argument rests in large part on the examination of reentry from different perspectives, including the historical context of recent incarceration trends, the salience of in-prison and post-prison contexts and experiences for reentry, variation in the experiences that different groups have during reentry, the complicated nature of recidivism prediction and management, and the range of outcomes relevant to assessing reentry policy. In this book, we examine reentry through these perspectives, each addressed in separate chapters (described below). We do so because in our view the perspectives are important to understand in their own right. However, the perspectives provide a strategic benefit as well—they enable us to advance the goal of the book by developing several related arguments, as depicted in Figure 1.6.

First, we argue for the necessity of diverse perspectives if we are to understand reentry processes, including their causes and consequences, and to improve reentry outcomes. An increase, for example, in the incarceration of individuals for drug-related crimes points to the potential need to investigate whether this shift

Figure 1.6 Book Perspectives and Goals



is appropriate. If it is, how do we best reduce offending among this group relative to, say, murderers or sexual offenders? In a related vein, to the extent that the characteristics of inmates vary and that this variation is related to in-prison and post-release behavior, policies must address these characteristics to improve outcomes. We argue that the substantial heterogeneity of the inmate population indeed requires such policies; the risk otherwise is a costly investment in imprisonment for little to no effect.

Second, we argue that improvements in reentry outcomes require efforts that address the broad array of forces that contribute to offending and crime and to punishment policies. For example, prison in and of itself may do little to affect recidivism. Rather, the experiences in prison and the conditions in the communities to which ex-prisoners return may exert a significant if not greater influence.²⁷ Understanding such possibilities, which is easy to do when we examine reentry from different vantage points, constitutes a central avenue by which to improve reentry outcomes and to advance scholarship on the causes of offending.

Third, we argue that such perspectives highlight the importance of looking beyond the individuals who go to prison to the other individuals affected—such as victims, families, and communities—and examining the panoply of considerations that arise when we do so. For example, an exclusive focus on prisoners neglects the fact that the growth in incarceration institutionalizes more of an offender-based rather than a victim-based system of justice. In so doing, it potentially deprioritizes victims and, indeed, the very concept of justice. Certainly, punishing individuals may satisfy some victims and communities, but it frequently can do little to restore the harm that these groups experience. A focus on prisoners, too, neglects the fact that the United States embarked on a set of policies that prioritized punishment rather than the equivalent of a balanced portfolio of financial investments. Put differently, we can focus on more and tougher incarceration or we can seek approaches that may satisfy better the many demands of the criminal justice system, including the call to increase public safety and achieve that ephemeral but no-less-important goal of justice. And we can seek approaches that achieve these outcomes while minimizing costs and harms to prisoners, victims, communities, and society at large.

Fourth, we argue that further substantial advances in reentry policy and scholarship require a better integration of insights both from practitioners and from scholars. Here, again, when we examine reentry from different perspectives and when we attend carefully to the insights from the research that has accumulated in recent years, it is evident that a significant disjuncture between theory and practice exists. As but one example, a considerable amount of risk prediction occurs with little guidance or insight from criminological theory. At the same time, hewing to one theory or another will not likely assist much with informing decisions about which inmates or ex-prisoners warrant more supervision or specific services or treatment. Better linkages between the efforts of those who work in corrections and those who work in academia can help to bridge the gap and result in policies and practices that may be more effective. We do not hew toward a primarily theoretical orientation or practitioner orientation. Rather, the book is informed by and argues for the systematic integration of theoretical insights from criminology and other disciplines and the insights that policy makers and practitioners have about criminal justice and corrections.

Finally, building on these arguments, we argue that a wide range of different approaches can be used to effectively reduce crime and recidivism and to improve other reentry outcomes, such as increased employment and reduced homelessness and drug abuse. We also argue that viable approaches exist to improve cost-efficiency and government accountability and to create justice that focuses not only on felons but also on victims and communities.

CRIMINOLOGICAL “VERSUS” CRIMINAL JUSTICE THEORY AND RESEARCH

In this book, we draw on theory and research to arrive at insights about reentry and, more generally, criminal justice and corrections. We also seek to identify ways in which theory—the more formal statement of how or why certain phenomena occur—might be advanced by a focus on reentry. Theory, research, and policy should, in our view, go hand and hand, but they do not always do so. We should be focused not only on crime but also on policy responses to prevent and respond to crime.

Criminology emerged in part from a focus on applied, pragmatic questions about controlling crime and promoting public safety. This emphasis reflected the origins of the American Society of Criminology (ASC), which emerged in 1941 largely through the impetus of August Vollmer, who had been a police chief.²⁸ Criminology transitioned into a discipline of academic standing by emphasizing questions about the causes of behavior and, in particular, of offending. In so doing, it sought to become less of a professional enterprise and more of a scholarly one that addressed basic scientific questions rather than pragmatic, or applied, policy-relevant questions.²⁹

In recent decades, it seems that the field has moved to a middle ground. We can see it reflected, for example, in the fact that ASC presidential addresses frequently call for bridging the worlds of theory and practice.³⁰ We can see it, too, in the observations of those who receive the ASC’s Edwin H. Sutherland Award, which is given to those who have made “outstanding contributions to theory or research in criminology on the etiology of criminal and deviant behavior, the criminal justice system, corrections, law, or justice.”³¹ In his Sutherland Award essay, for example, David Garland expressly called for greater attention to understanding changes in penal policies.³² And in Francis Cullen’s Sutherland Award essay, he called for scholarship aimed at using a science of offending to develop evidence-based approaches to reducing offending.³³

Even so, a tension exists in the field, one reflected by the names of programs. Some refer to themselves as departments of “criminology” or of “criminal justice” or, in an attempt perhaps to be more inclusive, of “criminology and criminal justice.” Such distinctions matter to faculty. For example, some prefer to see themselves as scientists who pursue pure knowledge and equate such efforts with “criminology.” Others view themselves as focused on the nitty-gritty problems of policy and professional practice and relate more to the term “criminal justice.” This tension can be seen in the names of the two prominent

criminological associations in the United States—the ASC (with the emphasis on “criminology”) and the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS) (with the emphasis on “criminal justice”).

Our view is that the divide makes little sense. Theory is implicated in all that we do, whether as scientists or individuals in our day-to-day lives. We may not always call our efforts to understand the world “theories,” but they are just that, theories. The most theoretical study frequently is motivated by, and may have direct or indirect implications for, policy and practice. Conversely, even the most avowedly exploratory empirical study of some aspect of the criminal justice system involves theory. The selection of topics, measures, independent variables, control variables, and the like all require recourse to theory, whether it is articulated or not.³⁴ That is all to the good. The history of science provides repeated instances of advances in knowledge that arrive from many directions, whether they be efforts to develop better measuring devices, create better bridges, or test theories that seemed fanciful at best until someone devised a way to evaluate them.³⁵

In our view, greater scientific advances in criminology and criminal justice occur when all areas of study, theoretical or applied, are embraced as opportunities simultaneously to develop theory and to improve policy and practice. Accordingly, we see little need to distinguish between “criminology” and “criminal justice.” Even so, such phrasing permeates academic writing and institutions and agency descriptions. For example, Peter Kraska has emphasized that for many scholars, “‘theory’ is . . . assumed to be concerned with crime and crime rates,” while the study of criminal justice is “tacitly, and sometimes explicitly, relegated to the narrow role of evaluative and descriptive scholarship.”³⁶

We view criminology and criminal justice as investigating the same universe of questions. These include questions about the causes of offending and of variation or changes in crime rates, the effectiveness of different sanctions on offending (at the individual level) and crime rates (at the macro level), the emergence or continuity of varying types of punishment regimes, organizational operations in corrections and why actors or groups within them act as they do, and more. We are not alone in this view. For example, *Criminology*, the flagship journal for the ASC, publishes studies not only on the causes of offending but also on the causes of variation in sentencing. *Justice Quarterly*, the flagship journal for the ACJS, regularly publishes studies on these same topics. Accordingly, notwithstanding the claims of some scholars, the actual practice of research by “criminologists” spans a wide range of topics.

A focus on reentry illustrates why we and others take the above stance. Reentry clearly involves a focus on offending. The criminal justice system arrests, convicts, and sentences people who commit crimes. Certainly, scholars and practitioners alike can embrace an effort to understand the causes of offending, what traditionally has been viewed as a “basic” scientific pursuit. The scholar might focus primarily on theorizing offending and testing competing theories, while the practitioner might focus on implications of a given theory. But scholars have long held an interest in understanding the use of formal and informal social control in society. Indeed, that focus generates a steady stream of scholarship in criminology, sociology, law and society, and other related disciplines. It, too, stands as a form of “pure” science. Yet the focus could not be

of more relevance for policy. When we understand why a given penal practice targets some groups more than others, we have a basis for informing discussions about changing it.

What, though, of studies of the police, the courts, jails, prisons, probation, parole, and other dimensions of criminal justice or correctional systems? Here, again, an endless array of questions exist, many of which focus directly or indirectly on offending or law-making or some aspect of organizational practice or decision making. In each instance, scholars may tack into the questions from overtly theoretical directions or on-the-ground policy-and-practice directions. The end result remains the same: Studies occur and we gain some form of insight into the world of crime and justice. Sometimes large strides in theory or practice occur, and sometimes not. Betting on which type of study— theoretical or applied—will yield noteworthy increases in knowledge or will yield improvements in policy will not likely succeed, not if the history of science is any indication.

With these observations made, we will say that many pragmatic questions about the criminal justice system have been neglected by the field. In academic settings, greater acclaim frequently goes to those who develop or test theories, and “theory” often is equated with the study of crime and crime rates.³⁷ That has much less to do with objective scientific merit than with sociological influences on topic selection, available data, methodologies, and the like.

Here, again, a focus on reentry proves instructive. On the face of it, no objective basis exists to determine which of the following questions is more important for science or policy: What causes some individuals to specialize in offending? Why do some convicted sex offenders recidivate at high rates while others do not? Why do some courts frequently employ prison sentences while others avoid them? Why do some states pass laws that seem to affect disproportionately, whether intentionally or not, minorities? What affects inmate culture or correctional officer culture, and how do these cultures influence behavior or system-wide patterns of order? Under what conditions do particular administrative approaches to operating prisons create greater order or disorder? Why are the people who are least likely to be victims of crimes sometimes the most punitive in their policy preferences? Why do some policy makers or states or agencies attend more to a balance of ideological and evidence-based considerations in devising policies and practices while others give greater weight to ideology? More broadly, what affects the decision making of individuals throughout the entire criminal justice system?³⁸ What makes some communities better able to adopt anticrime efforts, to withstand large declines in economic conditions, or to adapt to large increases in returning inmate populations?

In our view, science and policy are equally well advanced by attending to all of these types of questions. For that reason, we approach the topic of reentry in this book from many perspectives to understand it better. We do so, too, to argue for research that seeks to create theory about and greater insight into all aspects of crime and the criminal justice system. At the same time, we argue for a line of research that seeks to shed light on the myriad questions and challenges that confront policy makers, criminal justice and corrections officials, and the many individuals in the trenches who seek to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of our federal, state, and local justice systems. In every instance, the

scientific bar remains the same—use the best theory and research methodologies to investigate questions. The end goals are, however, broader. They include knowledge creation (“science for science’s sake”) and insights that policy makers and practitioners can use to inform their decisions.

TERMINOLOGY AND SCOPE

In this book, we focus broadly on prisoner reentry. That includes a focus not only on prisoners who are released and their future criminal behavior but also on changes in reentry trends and policies, the factors that give rise to them, the different effects of reentry on those who leave prison, and their families and the communities to which they return, as well as victims. The reason is simple: Reentry involves much more than the release of prisoners into society. It entails a discussion about how the country arrived at a place where it leaned, in historically unprecedented ways, on incarceration as a mode of punishment. It entails a discussion about the good but also the bad that can result from incarceration and about consequences that go well beyond recidivism and that affect groups other than ex-prisoners. To focus only on ex-prisoners would be too narrow an approach. In addition, we would miss an opportunity to examine critical questions about what we expect from punishment, the operations of the criminal justice system, the effectiveness of decision making throughout this system, the ability of the criminal justice system to affect society through diverse mechanisms, and more.

What exactly, though, is “reentry”? It can be defined variously.³⁹ No one definition is more correct than another, just more or less encompassing. When we discuss reentry, for example, we might refer to virtually anyone who has ever been in prison, whether the incarceration occurred a year earlier or 50 years earlier. We could focus only on individuals coming out of prison and not jail. We could focus only on those released to some form of supervision. In this book, we take an inclusive approach, with reentry referring to the release of individuals from some form of incarceration and the experiences and impacts that arise during the days, weeks, months, and even years after release. These impacts may occur among ex-prisoners or others, including their families and communities. The bulk of empirical research to date has focused primarily on prison releasees, but that is slowly changing. In addition, most research examines reentry for delimited periods of time, such as the experience of individuals in the year or two after release. That, too, is changing. In the discussions that follow, we will not be limited by empirical research. We will draw on it where relevant and go beyond it where it does not exist. In the latter instance, important theoretical, conceptual, or pragmatic policy questions will be examined even if research does not yet allow us to identify answers.

This point warrants emphasis—one of the central contributions of scholarship on reentry in recent years lies in the identification of important new questions, many of which have profound implications for policy. As but one example, scholars have highlighted the ways in which reentry may differentially affect communities. What is this variable effect? How and why does it

arise? How might reentry be structured in ways to minimize harmful effects on communities? Such questions may seem straightforward. Basic. Yet they previously remained largely unasked.

What else is meant by “reentry”? Reentry refers, too, to a process or set of experiences.⁴⁰ It is not a goal or an outcome. By highlighting that individuals who leave prison go through experiences, the term draws our attention to the potential for those who leave prison to affect or to be affected by the settings to which they go and the people with whom they come into contact. Reentry is a dynamic event, not a static moment. Those who leave prison, for example, do not necessarily have a constant level of risk of offending. Rather, the experiences that they face may alter that risk in favorable or unfavorable ways. These experiences, too, may affect or interact with one another in contributing to finding a home or a job, successfully returning to family, and more.

Reentry does not here refer to “reintegration.” Scholars employ the latter term to mean a variety of things. It typically refers to the idea that an individual returns to their social network or community and their established place in society. The image that comes to mind consists of individuals hard at work. They are part of a pro-social family. Yet they commit a crime and so are sent off to prison to be rehabilitated. Then they reintegrate. That is, they pick up where they left off. In many ways, though, the term leads us astray. For example, many people who go to prison were not “integrated” in the first place. They may not have had jobs or housing, they may not have been in the running for parent-of-the-year or friend-of-the-year awards, and they may not have been well-equipped to function in mainstream society. Accordingly, *re*-integration seems a bit of a misnomer. At the same time, while it may lead us to ask questions perhaps about treatment needs, educational needs, and the like, it does not lead us to view the matter much like an anthropologist might: What happens to these people when they leave? What conditions or experiences makes for successful transitions? What ripple effects arise when ex-prisoners return to communities? By contrast, a focus on reentry—the process of reentry—leads more directly to asking such questions and, by extension, seeing the nuances, complexity, and the fuller range of consequences of incarceration.

What terminology should we use when discussing the people who go to prison? The risk in labels is that they carry a great deal of baggage. To be called a “criminal” is to conjure up many associations. Movies help (or hurt) us here. The scary offender who lacks remorse comes to mind. But someone who commits a crime is more than a “criminal.” We all occupy many social roles, each with connotations and assumptions that may be correct but frequently fall short. The man walking through the grocery store with a 9-year-old having a pleasant conversation presumably is a father, and presumably a nice one, too, given the tenor of the conversation. That same man without his son—who is he? What is his character? Here we flounder and search for any cue that might tell us something about him. The problem, of course, is that our assumptions may be wildly off target. When they are correct, we give them greater weight and trust our judgment more. When they are incorrect, we write it off to the fact that, well, it was just a guess.

We all know, in short, that labels matter and that each of us consists of more than what any one classification suggests. That holds as well for the

individuals who go to prison. They are more than “criminals” or “inmates” or “ex-prisoners.” The “more than” is important here. It helps to humanize these individuals so that we can see ourselves in them, understand them better, and potentially devise policies that may be more effective. It is important, too, so that even if we cannot relate to or understand them, we can see the potential for a range of social forces to affect them. Without such recognition, we are left with a shell—a “criminal” who is criminal in character and intent. What we fail then to see is the fact that criminal behavior by this individual does not have to be a foregone conclusion and that many factors may contribute to his or her offending. Homelessness, unemployment, neurological impairments, and more may be at play.

None of these factors need constitute grounds for sympathy or provide grounds for in any way excusing crime. Rather, they simply point to a pragmatic issue that almost all of us, regardless of political orientation, can agree is important. If a given factor affects offending, if it does so in a sizable way, and if we can do something about it, well, then, we should consider the factor when devising policies that punish, reduce offending, and benefit society in other ways if possible. There is nothing inherently liberal or conservative in such a statement. Indeed, given how divisive and ideological debates about crime policy can be, our avowed intention throughout the book is to remain on the pragmatic, non-ideological question of what can be done to improve reentry outcomes that benefit society. Productive debates about policy are more likely, in our view, when policy makers and the public focus on evidence about what works rather than on ideologically based preferences that lead to assumptions about what must be effective.

For these reasons, we endeavor here to vary the terminology in the book. To refer to “individuals who are released from prison” has the virtue of avoiding the label “inmate” or “prisoner.” It also is cumbersome. So, we also will use shorthand terms—offenders, inmates, prisoners, ex-prisoners. However, we emphasize here that the terms serve only to identify groups of individuals, not necessarily characteristics associated with them. Indeed, in the book, we emphasize that although a general profile of the “typical” person who goes to prison can be identified, considerable variation in this profile exists and has important consequences for what the reentry experience will be like and what outcomes may result.

A final observation—the book focuses on reentry, and in so doing focuses on reentry to society after a period of incarceration. What, though, of individuals who are convicted and sentenced but who received some other sanction? Many convicted felons, for example, receive a sentence to probation rather than to prison. Do they experience reentry? That is, do they undergo experiences similar to what individuals released from prison experience? Perhaps. For example, they face similar “invisible” punishments, such as restricted rights to vote and limited access to public housing. They may face barriers to employment due to having to report a felony record. There may be stigma associated with the felony record that affects them. In these and other ways, as we discuss in Chapters 6 and 9, there may be parallels to what ex-prisoners face after release. This focus serves to highlight a more general question of central relevance to the book: What do we gain by primarily get-tough approaches to crime?

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The remainder of the book is organized into eight chapters, each with discussion questions that can be used to reflect on the material or to guide discussion of it, and a concluding chapter. Full disclosure should be made up front: This book is about reentry, but it is also about something more. The focus on reentry serves a strategic purpose. It provides a lens through which to highlight the need for criminal justice and correctional system policy that more cost-efficiently achieves justice and improves public safety and well-being. Put differently, if we want to understand the reentry experience and how to improve reentry outcomes, we need to know what happens well before prisons release inmates. At the same time, if we want to understand crime and correctional policy, we need to understand why reentry has become a critical policy problem in recent decades. We therefore begin the book by describing the historical context that has given rise to “mass reentry” and the reasons for this change. With that context established, we then focus more directly on reentry. The specific chapters proceed as follows and culminate with an assessment of what needs to happen to improve not only prisoner reentry but also criminal justice and corrections.

Chapter 2 discusses historical trends in prisoner reentry and reentry policy. In so doing, it highlights the considerable changes that have occurred. This discussion situates mass incarceration and reentry in a historical context and at the same time highlights the varying approaches used to combat crime. In turn, it establishes a framework for identifying ways to understand and improve punishment and a range of outcomes associated with reentry.

Chapter 3 discusses the causes of mass incarceration and how many of these factors, more than any science-based rationale, have contributed to investment in a less-than-ideal portfolio of sanctioning. The chapter extends prior work in several ways, including identifying how systems-level forces contribute to reentry and problems associated with it.

Chapter 4 provides a profile of the inmate population, the “typical” inmate, and the salience of this profile for reentry. The primary focus here centers on reasons why we should care about the inmate profile as well as the importance of identifying and monitoring not only inmate characteristics but also the factors that influence the profile of the prison and reentry population. The chapter highlights the considerable disadvantage of the prisoner population and of the communities from which they come. It highlights, too, the use of tougher and more incarceration for certain groups, such as drug offenders. Not least, it highlights that silver-bullet solutions to reentry do not neatly fit with the heterogeneous set of characteristics and problems associated with different reentry groups. These observations align with the argument that understanding reentry and improving reentry outcomes requires systemic, nuanced approaches that draw on evidence about what works. It requires an understanding of the lives and contexts of the individuals sentenced to prison. It requires, too, understanding the social forces that contribute to changes in the types of individuals flowing into and out of the prison system.

Chapter 5 describes the prison experience and how it may affect reentry outcomes. In so doing, it points to the heterogeneity inherent to the prison experience. We argue that different types of prison experiences can affect in-prison

behavior (e.g., misconduct) and reentry outcomes (e.g., recidivism). Despite the increased attention given to mass incarceration, relatively little scholarship exists that systematically describes inmate experiences and how these may affect behavior during and after incarceration. The chapter addresses this issue directly and investigates questions that emanate from a focus on the prison experience. For example, how do inmates and ex-prisoners perceive themselves and the prison experience, and why do such perceptions matter? Also, prison should punish, but what exactly should the punishment involve? Of central policy relevance, what effect does incarceration in fact have on recidivism? What types of accountability exist to ensure that abuses, which are likely in coercive settings, do not occur? The chapter examines the prison experience to address such questions and to identify tensions in punishment policy in America. For example, punishment that leads to more recidivism is clearly problematic. Why spend money for more crime? At the same time, we punish to obtain some measure of retribution. But how do we know when we have the appropriate amount or retribution and reduced recidivism, especially if trade-offs between the two are involved? In a related vein, what exactly do we, as a society, want the prison experience to entail?

Chapter 6 focuses on the reentry experience and challenges that ex-prisoners face upon release. Scholarship has identified many facets of the reentry experience that create grounds for concern. Homelessness within the first few weeks of release from prison is, for example, problematic. It runs counter to what most citizens would seem to want from punishment. It places a burden on communities. And it reduces the life chances of those who wind up homeless. However, obtaining housing stands as but one of a long list of challenges ex-prisoners face. We can choose not to care about these dimensions. The individuals who come out of prison committed crimes after all. But if society pays the cost of unsuccessful reentry, then we all should care. The chapter advances this argument. In so doing, it examines the logic of invisible punishments and the many barriers to successful reentry that exist. As part of this discussion, we describe the reentry process and its implications for ex-prisoners, families, communities, and, in turn, the criminal justice system. The discussion provides the groundwork for identifying ways to improve reentry outcomes and to advance scholarship on the causes of desistance from, for many ex-prisoners, a lifetime of offending.

Chapter 7 examines an issue central to almost any criminal justice policy discussion—recidivism and efforts to predict who will reoffend. On the face of it, scholarship on recidivism would seem to be advanced. There have been, after all, many decades to study it. In fact, though, the understanding of desistance remains very much a nascent science. As but one illustration, risk prediction instruments frequently accord little with criminological theory and include few if any measures that capture an individual's prison behavior. Put differently, in making a prediction about future behavior, states and local jurisdictions frequently ignore immediate past behavior, even though it may be a good predictor of the future. They ignore, too, how local community conditions may influence the likelihood of recidivism. The result is less accurate risk prediction. Another important result is that we are led to focus exclusively on the individual rather than his or her social context when designing interventions. Other outcomes besides recidivism—such as homelessness, unemployment, mental illness, and

more—warrant attention. Even so, recidivism constitutes a central defining outcome of interest when discussing criminal justice. The chapter discusses these issues and argues that effective reentry practices require careful consideration of multiple factors. At the same time, it highlights the importance of ties between practitioner and scholarly communities. It also highlights that risk prediction leads us primarily to focus on offenders when, in many instances, a focus on improving our criminal justice and correctional systems, as well as our laws, may be the route to greater increases in public safety.

Chapter 8 examines a diverse set of reentry populations to highlight the need for policies that reflect the distinct backgrounds, needs, prison experiences, and family and community contexts of these varied groups. In part, the chapter serves to debunk myths perpetuated in media accounts. Contrary to many such accounts, criminals come from a variety of backgrounds and the causes of their offending vary greatly. Their incarceration experiences vary. The effectiveness of incarceration for different groups may vary as well, along with their reentry experiences and challenges. The chapter examines several demographic groups (the young, females, and minorities) in detail and then discusses several other groups, including supermax inmates, drug abusers, those with mental illness, and those with learning disabilities. It does so to illustrate one of the book's central arguments—that get-tough sanctioning has had unintended effects that remain largely unappreciated and that undermine the goals of the criminal justice system.

Chapter 9 discusses reentry policy and what can be done to improve reentry outcomes. The good news is that remarkable advances in scholarship have led to considerable insight about policies, programs, and practices that *don't* work, those that are promising, and those that *do* work. The bad news is that much more progress needs to be made, including less investment in ineffective and costly policies that create collateral consequences. There is, as well, far too much investment in approaches that rest on weak theoretical foundations and limited to no empirical research.

In this chapter, we discuss the good news and bad news and end on an optimistic note concerning the many different possibilities for improving knowledge and reentry policy and practice. In so doing, we argue *against* relying on silver-bullet solutions, such as mass incarceration or specific types of programs that are used exclusively. At the same time, we argue *for* relying on a diverse portfolio of strategies. Any such portfolio should focus on policies, programs, and practices that can be promoted by different stakeholder groups and that can target diverse areas, such as drug abuse, education, and employment, to improve public safety and reentry. The chapter highlights the need not only for effective reentry strategies but also for those that improve outcomes at the least costs. That idea is common sense. But common sense has not featured prominently in federal and state punishment and reentry policy making, though exceptions certainly exist.

We argue, too, for broadening our focus from one that centers primarily on reentry policy to one that underscores the need for a system of justice that serves victims and communities as well or better than it serves offenders. America has no “victim justice systems” or “community justice systems” at present. Rather, it has a “criminal justice system” that focuses primarily on crime and criminals.

The end goal, however, of a criminal justice system lies in advancing broader interests like achieving justice, reducing crime and recidivism, and supporting victims, families, and communities. Any discussion focused on improving reentry policy necessarily, in our view, requires considering how the entire criminal justice system can be improved to fulfill its broader and arguably more important set of obligations. It requires, too, investing in research that can fulfill policy-maker calls for promoting government accountability.

Finally, Chapter 10 returns to the book's central argument and ends optimistically. In it, we emphasize that, as earlier chapters demonstrate, a wide range of approaches can be pursued to improve punishment policies, prisoner reentry, and, more broadly, criminal justice and corrections. These approaches will not be magically well-implemented or successful. Indeed, they will take considerable effort and will require policy making and practices that prioritize research. No silver-bullet approach will work that is so effective in theory—or from a “common sense” perspective—that we need no or minimal research to defend it. Mass incarceration serves as a cautionary lesson in support of that assessment. The solution? Careful, sustained, research-based policy making and practice. Many local, state, and federal agencies have taken steps in that direction, and that truly is grounds for optimism.