



UNITED COALITION EAST PREVENTION PROJECT
a program of Social Model Recovery Systems, Inc.



“Welcome Home”



“Nobody wants to hire a convict.” (Focus group participant)

It is UCEPP's contention that there is no logic to spending billions of dollars a year to incarcerate people, over half for non-violent drug offenses, from one neighborhood and return them, 18 months later on average, marginalized, unskilled and ill equipped to the same unchanged neighborhood.

OUR COMMUNITY'S PLIGHT

In the Central City East or the area commonly referred to as *skid row*, community poverty is intense, and so is addiction; there is a common belief that a "chicken-or-egg" causal relationship exists between the two. Moreover, either addiction or poverty - or both - can lead to incarceration. Yet, as a typical parolee can confirm, prisons don't provide rehabilitation or drug treatment programs. Chronic substance abusers, who use drugs in inner city communities like ours, *continue using* in prison; there is no interruption of use. Drugs are easily accessible and inmates use inside the prison for the same reasons that cause them to use outside: to combat the stress of a life characterized by poverty, violence, inescapable hopelessness and disenfranchisement. The criminal justice system's singular focus on punishment guarantees that most offenders will be as ill-equipped to be productive, law-abiding citizens upon release as they were the day they entered prison. **The Little Hoover Commission Report confirms that more than 75% of all inmates released on parole have alcohol and/or other drug problems, while 50% are illiterate and nearly 80% have no jobs.**

The United Coalition East Prevention Project's (UCEPP) effort is to enhance the recovery process for those seeking to escape the cycle of addiction, increasing safety and wellness. This brochure is part of a continuing attempt to highlight the multitude of problems confronting our community and those formerly or currently on parole. To clarify and better understand those problems, UCEPP conducted focus groups and one-on-one surveys. We hope to shed light on some of the complex social issues which result in disenfranchisement and incarceration, particularly for African Americans (83% of survey respondents) and males (89% of survey respondents). We hope that this report will inform as well as inspire all those who are concerned about creating safer and healthier communities.

Our community is the poorest community in the State of California with the nation's largest homeless population. The streets are teeming with drug activity in the midst of the daily movements of the homeless, women and children, the working poor and people in recovery. Although our community has a concentration of social services designed to meet their needs, these providers are obviously overwhelmed. **Of those individuals surveyed, 87% had a history of alcohol and/or drug abuse, the drug of choice for most being crack/cocaine.**



"For four years I was in prison for sales. The real dealers are in the same places, on the same corners so the people getting busted are the people afflicted with the disease of addiction." *

WHY THIS MATTERS

Involvement with the criminal justice system is a core issue in our community, a variable that is present in the lives of the majority of the people we serve. During the past quarter we attentively read newspaper reports on the condition of the California Youth Authority as well as the California Department of Corrections (CDC).

Unfortunately, we have been confronted with the challenge of sifting through this complicated bureaucracy to better understand its implications in our community. What we found is disturbing:

- In 2001, 125,991 people were paroled from CA prisons (Little Hoover Commission Report, 2004).
- Of these parolees, 68% were re-parolees and 43% of these were convicted for drug crimes (CDC 2001).
- From 1990 to 1996, the number of California inmates charged with drug offenses increased as follows: African-Americans, from 25% to 48%; Latinos from 20% to 25%, and women from 9% to 14% (Uniform Crime Reports 2002).
- Two out of three inmates released from CA prisons return to prison before they complete parole (Little Hoover Commission Report, 2004).

“There is a downtown in every neighborhood. I tried to do a geographic move, New Orleans, Arkansas deep down in the south, drinking, smoking crack just trying to stay away from it. For black men we can’t run.”*

WHAT THE DATA TELL US

Regarding housing:

- 84% of respondents stated that they receive no housing assistance that would enable them to live in permanent housing.
- More than half of those surveyed were currently residing at a treatment facility. This was followed by a mission/shelter and then a single room occupancy residential hotel.

These responses illustrate a process of community integration/adaptation in which those released from prison enter programs or mission/shelters to meet their housing needs. Many of these individuals are classified as homeless and some actually live on the street.

- Nearly half of those surveyed had lived in *skid row* for 3 or more years, demonstrating that this area is more than just a way-station for transients and those released from prison. Many have made this community their home.
- 62% of respondents identified the lack of housing as a barrier to finding a job.

EXPERIENCES OF INMATES AFTER THEY LEAVE

If the conditions confronting inmates during incarceration are not harsh enough, imagine being released from prison and returning to nothing—no job, no home, no family, nothing. To get any assistance from the Department of Corrections with a parole issue there is a chain of command that must be followed from the parole officer all the way to Sacramento. But there are no guarantees that help will be provided. On average it takes one year to receive a response from Sacramento to a complaint about a parole agent. Some parolees believe that parole officers categorize them either for recidivism or dismissal, and do not assist those they assume will be recidivists. For example, one parolee says that the agent he has had for two years has never assisted him. The agent has not even provided bus tokens so that the parolee could get back and forth for appointments. The agent knows the parolee is an addict but did nothing to help him find a rehabilitation program – the parolee found one on his own. Previously, he relapsed after completing six months in a program because he had nowhere to go, no California identification, and no income. This parolee is currently homeless, without clothes, and still has no California identification. When he asked his agent for help to get his identification, the agent insisted there was no money in the budget. Yet another parolee with the same agent was just given a clothes voucher and a hotel voucher.

Many parolees are denied government benefits (i.e. food stamps) or have had them limited or sanctioned. Restrictions are even placed on meager re-entry services like transportation funds for vocational rehabilitation. Some of the female focus group participants have been banned for life from receiving government aid. One former parolee, after spending a total of twenty years in state penitentiaries doing back breaking manual labor, suffers from degenerative disc disease, but is not eligible for state disability benefits. However, in some cases—like student aid—the federal government will grant benefits if the parolee completes a rehabilitation program.

Identification is a big hurdle. The County’s General Relief program won’t accept identification issued by the State Department of Corrections, so parolees can’t apply for benefits. In California, adults over 18 must have identification issued by the State Department of Motor Vehicles to work, open a bank account, rent an apartment, almost everything. But no one honors identification issued by the State Department of Corrections. Further, using state issued identification is embarrassing. It is difficult to find a job, or to keep from violating the terms of parole. Parolees who have been convicted of felony drug possession are not eligible for General Relief benefits for single adults or Temporary Aid to Needy Families benefits for adults with children.

“With a felony you can’t get no job - you just go back to drug dealing.” *

The Central division police station is right in the heart of our community. The role of the police has often been criticized by community members who are frustrated with the overwhelming amount of drug activity occurring sometimes right on police property. **The perceived selective enforcement of laws results in what we call the criminalization of poverty, as the homeless and substance addicted are frequently the focus of police attention.** Focus group participants spoke of harassment by the police, and the pain of living in poverty.

“Where I come from the goal is to go to prison. No one has a job waiting for them when they return.” *



*Remarks of focus group participants

"Parole officers are unresponsive; they make a negative judgment about you based on your jacket (arrest record) and treat you negatively. If you don't get help with your disease (addiction), you're just going back." *

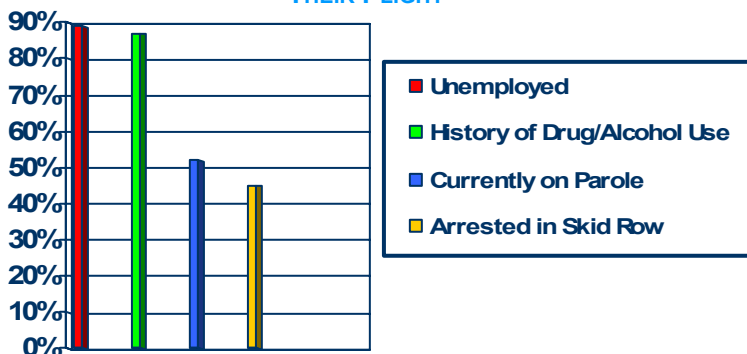


"People in front of the programs getting high. People chopping dope on the steps of LAPD Central division, this is a training ground for police officers." *

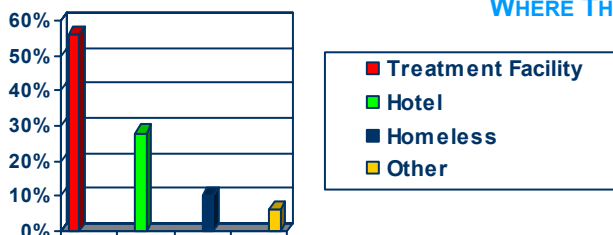
For many, drug dealing becomes the only viable option for accessing food, clothing, and shelter. For many of the respondents their interaction with the justice system began decades ago. More than half of those surveyed experienced their first incarceration between the ages of 12 and 18 and for mostly drug-related charges. Yet counseling was provided for only 14% of those surveyed.

"All I knew how to do was get high. It is legal here in skid row. In downtown it seems everything that is illegal is legal here. I see my old friends, I cannot get a job, I start drinking, am depressed, frustrated." *

THEIR PLIGHT



WHERE THEY LIVE



WHAT THE DATA TELL US

Regarding employment:

Parolees arrive with no jobs and very few prospects.

- 76% of respondents identified being on parole as a barrier to finding a job.
- A staggering 89% of respondents were unemployed.
- More than half of those surveyed were on General Relief.

There are few places for convicted felons to get work, although they have a better chance if they are off parole.

- 70% of respondents had violated parole, mostly for failure to report/keep an appointment, failure to report a job or address change, and for (drug) testing dirty.
- Of those who had violated parole, 49% were living in *skid row* when they violated.
- Of this group, 57% were violated on a technicality, i.e. being in the company of another known felon, or being detained by police for questioning, and 54% of the cases were drug-related.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The current and former parolees surveyed by UCEPP identified the following as priorities for improving the prison/parole system:

PRISON

- Provide more job training (identified as the greatest need).
- Change sentencing laws.
- Provide comprehensive “wrap around” services such as rehabilitation and re-entry services.
- More educational programs.
- Provide more treatment/recovery services.
- Reduce prison overcrowding.
- More educational classes, job training, rehabilitative services or self help groups.
- Inmates should not be required to make purchases from catalogues as prices are grossly inflated.
- Improve medical services and health conditions (i.e. obstetrics and gynecology for women).
- Provide structured services for incarcerated mothers (i.e. monthly trips for women & children, different phone times, children visiting time).
- Prison should be rehabilitative/restorative and not punitive.

PAROLE

- Create a system of checks and balances to make the prison/parolee system more accountable.
- Inmates should be represented by a private entity that represents their grievances.
- Decrease parole time.
- Parole department should assist with obtaining clothing, job placement, housing, unification with children, drug treatment, transportation, identification.
- Parole agents need to be trained in mental health, substance abuse and other services available in the communities to better assist the parolees. They should be assigned for the long term and turnover should be minimized. Agents should also be subjected to drug testing.
- Prison credentials should be comparable to state credentials; inmates should get validation from the State for work done while incarcerated.
- Assist parolees with housing, and funds for transportation and schooling.
- Eliminate racial disparities.
- Share what we know with the parole department.

“For poor people of color, the cliché, about staying away from people, places and things is not appropriate.”

SUMMARY

The recommendations described here speak of a need to change a punitive, dehumanizing process that punishes those with problems. The flaw in this approach is that it pushes those who are poor, disenfranchised, and/or addicted further away from society. As survey participants indicated, access to jobs, education and placement/re-entry services are vital for anyone attempting to start over in life. Unfortunately, many parolees never receive the services they need and are returned to drug and crime infested communities with fewer opportunities than they had before incarceration. This has become the norm. It is especially harmful for those suffering from addiction. Instead of receiving adequate services they are constantly exposed to drugs and alcohol, and are subjected to more of the stress and trauma that cause people to turn to self medicating as a way to ease the pain. These findings also shine light on larger societal problems of race and class. We are hopeful that this information will stimulate discussion of these issues, and ultimately an improvement in the State’s approach to addiction and incarceration.

“You can parole to just an address; you can be sent right back to “skid row” if you were arrested here, or sent for the first time, even though your home address is in Riverside.” (survey respondent)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Social Model Recovery Systems/UCEPP makes this report available to stimulate discussion, criticism, and stir public debate about the criminal justice system's punishment approach, the need for rehabilitative services, and the issues of substance abuse and poverty in our community. Additionally, we hope this report provides evidence to policymakers that change is desperately needed.

Gathering data this sensitive is never an easy task. Obviously, problems of this magnitude cannot be solved by one person, one program, or one agency alone. Therefore, we would like to send a heartfelt thank you to the following organizations who opened their doors and allowed us the opportunity to obtain critical data: [Midnight Mission](#), [S.T.A.I.R.S program at the Weingart Center](#), [Chrysalis](#), [VOA \(Volunteers of America\)](#), [New Way of Life](#), [Salvation Army](#) and [SRO Housing Corp.](#)

There are two individuals in particular who acted as a bridge at critical junctures: [Jeffrey Rawls](#) and [James Jackson](#). Each of them directed us and made initial contacts to key people and organizations in the community. Because of their intervention people said yes, when they could have said no; people whose support and receptiveness ensured the success of this report. UCEPP would like to acknowledge [Jeffrey and James](#) for helping others say "yes".

Many people provided hours and hours of opinions, review, and recommendations enabling us to prepare this report. It is not possible to thank them all. However, there are two individuals whose countless hours cannot go unmentioned. To [Mary Lee, Esq.](#) for her invaluable advice, willingness to help and strong sense of conviction—thank you. We must acknowledge the "[Woman Warrior](#)", [Leslie Croom](#), who was our guiding strength throughout this journey. Her sense of purpose kept us focused and would not let us ignore the fact that ethnic minorities are appallingly over represented in the justice system, and disproportionately afflicted with problems associated with their court involvement thus hindering their ability to reintegrate into our community. Her unwavering and forceful vigilance continues to challenge us to assess, transform and dream of better communities.

This report has allowed the UCEPP team ([Leslie Croom](#), [Charles Porter](#), [Socorro Chacon](#)) the opportunity to tell the outside world about the challenges inside our community, while exploring ways to reach solutions that will shift the criminal justice system's punishment approach to a rehabilitation model which will incorporate after-care services.

Finally, words simply cannot express our gratitude to the men and women who willingly bared their souls and shared their painfully personal stories and who despite their hardships continue to move ahead with their lives and improve their circumstances with dignity and pride. By considering such private flesh and blood life experiences, we hope to stimulate public debate, and ultimately create change. Without the dedicated involvement of these individuals, our important grassroots efforts would not exist.

On behalf of the Agency, we thank you all.

[Zelenne L. Cárdenas](#)

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