



## When a Parent Comes Home

Do you believe a parent's release from incarceration is more difficult for the parent or the child? Mentors who attended our January Seedling Mentor Training were asked to consider and respond to this complex question which deeply affects our mentees. The varying responses of the group led to a candid dialogue about the sobering challenges awaiting individuals released from prison. Unless a loved one takes them in, basic needs such as housing, food, and employment are not readily accessible.

- The application process for private as well as public housing requires a criminal background check. All housing authorities are given broad discretion by HUD to determine their own criminal history screening criteria. The Housing Authority of the City of Austin has a 4 year look back period and also reserves the right to deny housing based on a pattern of behavior. Private landlords often have longer look back periods and can be hesitant to provide housing to those with a criminal background.
- In Texas, individuals convicted of a drug felony after 1996 can never receive Temporary Assistance to Needy Families nor Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits ("food stamps").
- Finding stable work is an enormous barrier for the formerly incarcerated. Many, already lacking a high school diploma, job skills, and community support, must now face the stigma attached to hiring a person having been incarcerated. While the government has strategies in place to give incentives to employers for hiring former offenders, individuals often don't receive the employment support they need, and still the majority of employers are nervous to hire.

Depending on individual circumstances, a minimum sentence is no less than two years. Most individuals released from incarceration have no other options but to return to the same community, negative influences, and family dysfunction experienced before their conviction. Those who struggled with addiction or poor mental health prior to being sent to prison will most likely continue to struggle due to little or no rehabilitation therapy during their incarceration. Imagine these overwhelming obstacles, coupled with all the feelings of returning into the lives of one's child and family.

How do families and children manage to adjust to the parent's return after their absence? Nell Bernstein describes the stress and resentment that can affect the family's ability to positively adapt in her book All Alone in the World:

*“Anger they may have suppressed during brief and precious visits or phone calls boils to the surface. Children who have grown into adolescents chafe under the authority of parents eager to reestablish themselves at the helm of the family. The realization that things will never be as they were, that lost time cannot be made up, can be overwhelming.”*

One child of a returned parent expressed her frustration and anger by reasoning, “People think that you can just come out and jump back in: that life has left a space open for you.” Families learn to cope in a parent's absence; similarly, they must again adjust and adapt when the parent returns. They essentially experience a reentry process of their own.

Day to day coping without the parent becomes the family's new “normal” and different families adopt different coping styles. When released, this coping style can continue or change completely, but not without friction. Anne Adalist –Estrin explains this and more in her article.

#### [Homecoming: Children's Adjustment to Parent's Parole](#)

Mentors sometimes wonder if they are still needed when their mentee's parent returns home from prison. It is a rare case when the answer is no. While each story is unique, it is helpful for mentors to have insight into what the parent of his/her mentee faces.

A special thanks to our presenters:

- Laura Sovine, Chair of Planning Council of the Austin/Travis County Reentry Roundtable
- Shira Ledman, Executive Director of Seedling Foundation

To learn more about The Austin/Travis County Reentry Roundtable, visit their website <http://www.reentryroundtable.net/information-on-reentry/> and check out tab for “About Reentry”.