

**The Re-Entry of Ex-Offenders:
A Study of a Halfway House**
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For years we have had the police apprehend offenders, turn them over to the courts and prosecutors, who in turn commit them to prison — none taking the burden of seeing the results of their jurisdiction after punishment.

Johnnie Poindexter (1976)

All ex-offenders face a difficult period of transition upon release from prison and return to “free” society. Few agencies or individuals are aware of the hardships of re-entry, and even fewer members of society have accepted the responsibility to amend the situation. The halfway house, which is the setting of my fieldstudy, is one of the few institutions which attempts to facilitate ex-offender re-entry. In this paper I will focus on the ex-offender’s period of transition between penal and “free” society: his or her necessity to adapt to regained autonomy, the time “lost” from “free” society, and the stigma of being labelled an “ex-convict.”

Originally, I had planned on conducting my fieldwork at a coed or female halfway house, hoping that I would have the opportunity to actually live in the house. I was disappointed at the uncooperative reactions I was greeted with by many Bay Area female halfway houses. One halfway house director decided that the house was too small for a fieldstudy. One director did not want the residents or the staff to “be subject to a fieldworker’s interrogation.” A state-controlled work furlough program postponed my fieldstudy because of clearance procedures, although the residents’ visitors are not required to obtain this clearance. After my discouraging encounters with coed and female halfway houses I toyed with the idea of conducting a fieldstudy on the seclusiveness of halfway houses. Then I approached an all-male halfway house. I met with Paul Dickson of Allied Fellowship Service and my fieldstudy on ex-offender re-entry became possible.

Background

It is important to keep in perspective the process of which the halfway house is a part. There were 1,068,907 adults arrested in California in 1975 (California Department of Justice 1974-5). There were 16,575 adults sentenced to jail or prison in California that same year (State of California 1975). A 1972 estimate indicates that for every one hundred crimes, fifty are reported, which lead to twelve arrests, six convictions and two offenders sent to jail (Taggart

1972:6). The large discrepancy between the number of crimes committed and the number of adults sent to prison is the result of complex cultural and economic problems, ranging from plea bargaining and what criminologists call “the theory of normal crimes,” to poverty and racism in the legal system.

After a period of years (minimally one third of one’s sentence) a prisoner can be released on parole. The majority return to prison or jail within six months; within five years, seventy-five percent of them are back in jail. Until 1962, parolees were by law restricted from associating or living with each other. The California Department of Corrections considered this communication to be only detrimental to the ex-offenders’ rehabilitation. In 1962, CDC formally agreed to allow certain facilities to house parolees for the purpose of assisting their re-entry into society. This was the beginning of ex-offender halfway houses.

Allied Fellowship House: Structure, Ideology and Rules

At Allied Fellowship House I conducted a one-month fieldstudy. I visited the house at least five days a week — observing, interviewing over twenty staff and residents, and participating as much as I could. Both staff and residents knew my status as a fieldworker. All interviews were voluntary and I have used pseudonyms for all the residents involved.

In 1962, AFS began to provide its services to parolees. The Fellowship believes that by providing a man with room and board, they are alleviating a basic worry. With this service, together with job and educational counseling, the ex-offender can ease back — rather than be shocked back — into society.

AFH is composed of two large old houses in East Oakland. They are decorated with poems and posters expressing the equality of people of all races. The Tenth Avenue house consists of living quarters for nine parolees and one house manager, upstairs. In the downstairs there are the dining room, living room, kitchen, and office. The Ninth Avenue house consists of living quarters only. Here, the capacity is ten parolees and one house manager.

Currently Paul Dickson serves as director, Jennifer is Paul’s assistant, Rocky is house manager, Bennie and Johnnie are assistant house managers, and Rachael is the job and educational counselor. The house manager, his two assistants, and the cook, Herman, are all ex-convicts. Their past experience as prisoners serves

two beneficial functions: 1) they know exactly what incarceration and re-entry entail, and 2) this understanding can diminish the distance and resentment that usually prevail between staff and residents in offender-related institutions. Staff and residents have a common basis of communication, and the staff can serve as a positive role model.

AFH does not structure communication or daily activities, but tries to maintain a substitute family atmosphere. The men live together in a cooperative situation with each person having the responsibility of a chore and to clean up after himself. The men are expected to be considerate and respectful of all in the house but there are no false expectations that the men are to feel the closeness of kin with each other.

There are only four major rules at AFH which all men must agree to:

- 1) Alcohol in any form is not permitted in either house or on the premises.
- 2) Drugs in any form other than tobacco are prohibited.
- 3) Violence or threats of violence against anyone are prohibited.
- 4) Possession of any weapon is prohibited.

If any man breaks any of these rules he can be and will be expelled immediately from the program and the house. The staff's philosophy is that the program itself is not worth risking or ruining for one man.

The Residents

At AFH I met a total of nineteen residents. Thirteen of the men are Black, three are Chicano, and three are White. Nearly all of the men are from lower-class families. The men live in the halfway house by choice and because they have no other place where they can go. Often they have little, if any, communication with their families.

At this time in their lives, they often focus on prison and legalities rather than on their return to "free" society. Legal jargon, legal issues, prison experiences and clichés such as "life of crime" are woven into their speech. The residents more often describe themselves as "cons" (convicts) or "addicts" than as "ex-offenders." Prison experiences affect not only their speech but even their choice of heroes. George Jackson, a famous prisoner of Soledad Prison, is often mentioned in a heroic sense. It seems as if the men have not yet internalized their recent change in status.

The men sometimes categorize themselves according to the type of crime they have committed and the severity of the prison they were sentenced to. First, approximately half of the residents have committed drug-related crimes, such as burglary or pimping, in order to purchase heroin. They often refer to themselves as "addicts" or sarcastically as "dope fiends." These men were sentenced to drug offender prisons or occasionally to the more severe state penitentiaries.

Second, a few of the men were labeled as "crazy"

because of the suicidal way in which they had committed a crime. It was as if they had wanted to be caught. These men were confined to a hospital-like prison or a county jail.

A third category could include those men that had committed severe acts of violence. These men usually had grown up in a ghetto where violence was accepted. Their crimes are not isolated acts but rather part of a consistent pattern in their lives. Although there are men in prison who have committed other types of crime, such as embezzlement, forgery and sex-related crimes, these men usually do not come to live in halfway houses, although at the time I conducted my fieldstudy at AFH there were exceptions: two men in the house had committed rape.

Of the nineteen residents and six staff members that I met, I extensively interviewed seven men. I have chosen to include three life histories in this article, one from each of the above crime categories. These men differ according to the type of crime they have committed, the severity of the penitentiary they were sentenced to, and the degree to which they have made progress in re-entry.

Hector

My first contact with a resident occurred in the middle of a Friday afternoon in May. Hector needed transportation to a job interview. I offered to drive him and we talked during the forty-five minute car ride. Hector was born in a Los Angeles ghetto — Spanish Harlem. He grew up knowing the streets and their violence, but he was not actively involved in street life. At nineteen Hector, a married man by then, began to shoot heroin. To support his habit Hector robbed. For a few years he was able to keep his job and support his habit with burglaries. By 1973, Hector's habit cost him \$100 to \$200 a day. Hector lost his job and began to pimp his wife to support his habit. A few months later he was arrested on a burglary charge, but he was quickly released on his "Own Recognizance" (OR). Immediately, Hector left town (violating parole and OR) and moved to Northern California to stay with his sister.

At his sister's house, Hector seriously thought about his life and his situation. He decided to "dry up" and "do something." In a few weeks he had "kicked his habit" and enrolled in school. In school he learned about "his people" (Mexicans) and his "complexes" (Chicano psychology). Although Hector was violating his parole, he single-handedly undertook the process of re-entry. A Chicano community program hired Hector as a youth coordinator and for ten months Hector successfully worked as a part of the "institution." After ten months Hector decided to inform his parole officer of his whereabouts. Though his parole officer accepted Hector's re-entry, there was still a warrant out for his arrest from when he had been released on his OR. Hector went back to the courts to

be proven guilty and sentenced to nine months. After ninety days Hector went before the parole board. He explained to the board that he had successfully rehabilitated himself without their help and for this he wanted to be released, but he was refused because of his "attitude toward parole." One hundred eighty more days passed before Hector was released from prison.

Each week passed without a job. Hector began to "fall back into his old ways." Fortunately, his parole officer understood the situation and referred him to AFH. Here, Hector has been helped in his job efforts. He is working temporarily as a salesperson at a clothing store and at the same time Rachael (the job counselor) has been providing Hector with job interviews for permanent work. Hector feels that AFH has "saved" him. He states that he likes the staff because they are capable and, more importantly, because they treat him like a capable person. Hector regards the staff as people who try to understand and work with him. He says that it is not important to him that the house managers are ex-convicts, though he does feel that the staff should understand his minority status as a Chicano and as an ex-convict.

Hector firmly believes that he will be able to "make it" again. Before Hector moved into AFH he had stopped believing this. Now Hector also has a good possibility of winning a large sum of money in a law suit regarding his wife's death. Hector believes that if he can locate a job and if he avoids the temptation of associating with — as he describes them — other "dope fiends," he will once again be able to re-enter society.

Hector holds an opinion common to many residents in the halfway house i.e., that ex-convicts have a very difficult time finding jobs and yet, ironically, they supply many jobs to other people — judges, lawyers, jail guards, and parole officers. Even more ironic is the fact that the very ex-convicts who are the staff members of the house have their jobs only because of other ex-offenders. Hector seems to be saying that people should be grateful to ex-offenders for while presenting their cases in court, serving time, and reentering society, they were creating jobs. Many ex-convicts expressed this same idea that people in "free" society owe something to ex-convicts. The more traditional view is that offenders are imprisoned because offenders owe something to society. Who owes whom? Who oppresses whom? The perspective an individual holds is determined by which side of the cell wall he or she has lived on.

Phil

Phil is a young man who is having a harder time than most fitting into the program. He is less reserved and less cautious than most of the men. Possibly this is because he has not gone through typical incarceration nor has he ever been completely immersed in a "life of crime" or street life, as many of the residents have.

Phil was born in Virginia, fifth in a family of thirteen children. His mother moved them often from relatives' homes to apartments to housing projects. "Moms" was strict — a churchgoer and a hard worker. She always did small jobs — such as making aprons — to make a little extra money. His father was in the service and visited them when he was on leave. Phil always felt as if they were the poorest family in the poor neighborhoods that he grew up in. He describes himself as the "cooty boy" and he blames it on his economic situation. Phil spent most of his life in Ohio, not very happy and very interested in "little girls." The illegal involvement he did have consisted of the candy stealing that he and his sister did. As he looks back on it now, Phil laughs at the foolishness of not stealing something better to eat. He and his sister knew it was "wrong" but if you are hungry it seems all right. They never told "Moms."

At age fifteen, Phil ran away from home because of a conflict with his mother. He moved in with an older sister. Later he moved back home because he was wrongly accused of stealing money from his sister's house. He had stopped going to school by this time, though he liked school. After two weeks of living with his mother again, Phil joined the Job Corps and moved into their dormitory. Phil said that he learned about all kinds of people there — homosexuals, pimps, older ladies that sleep with young boys, and drug dealers. He "learned how to talk to ladies" — to say what he thought they wanted to hear. But still Phil was a fairly quiet boy. He worked, earned money, bought nice clothes and a car, and then he moved home.

This time at home Phil was no longer a "cooty boy." He said that he developed "instant friends." He was and is very skeptical of friends of this sort. Phil feels that most people are only your friends when things are good and as soon as things turn bad, friends are nowhere to be found. Phil declares that he is not this type of friend.

He was not happy living at home, and he had too much "pride" to stay with other people. Phil lived in his car for five months and then joined the Navy. He did not like the Navy but he did like the economic security. Phil went to Viet Nam as a volunteer radio controller on a ship. He stated that there were ghettos and prejudice on the boat as there are in the city. Phil has a tendency to notice races and expect racism in every situation, even in "nonracist" environments such as halfway houses, and this attitude may account for his conflicts with many men in the house.

After two years of the Navy, Phil moved to Oakland, worked as a janitor, and started college. By this time he had become a more outspoken person. At this time in his life he was independent and economically secure. He had "pretty lady friends," though he thought that most of them were just interested in his money. He also had a good male friend and his situation seemed secure.

Then everything collapsed. Phil was laid off his job

and missed three days of class looking for a new job, so he was dismissed from school. Soon, he found himself without any money and without anything to do. He did not want to return to the Navy and he was too "proud" to ask for help from his friends or family, so he walked into an Oakland bank and wrote a note asking for money. The bank teller handed over the money and Phil drove home. The police caught him sooner than he had expected because a citizen had reported Phil's license plate number.

Phil said that he had anticipated jail. He decided to act crazy in order to be sentenced to a prison for the mentally disturbed. In fact, Phil thinks that playing crazy was a courageous and smart plan. He stated that "not many criminals have the courage to be labeled crazy, on account that it will be on your record all of your life." His ploy was successful. Phil thought the mental hospital prison was "like heaven!" He said there was a library and it was possible to sit and study all day. After ninety days Phil was asked if he wanted to leave, but he replied that he was not ready yet.

During his stay in the institution Phil's mother visited him once. Other outside contact consisted of the information that staff members and certain prisoners provided. After one year, Phil decided that he was ready to return to society. Phil is now waiting at AFH for final court approval of his release, but he is having a difficult time finding a job. Phil begins college again this summer. He wants to become a psychiatric technician, or a narrator for a tour, or a speech therapist in an elementary school.

Phil is a controversial resident at the halfway house. Many men feel that he tries too hard for attention and that he is obnoxious. A few men accept him as a "good little kid." Part of the staff does not feel that Phil should be in the program because he is a nuisance. Another part of the staff feels that his personality should not determine his program eligibility. The staff solved this problem just recently by arranging for Phil to be placed in another halfway house that requires less autonomy.

Most of Phil's life has been spent in a state of insecurity. He grew up in economic insecurity. Then he chose Job Corps and the Navy for security. Again his economic situation fell apart. This time Phil looked to psychiatric penal institutionalization for security. Now Phil is ready to try again. AFH tried to help and now another halfway house is providing aid. Where will Phil go next if his economic security is again threatened?

Bennie

Bennie, an assistant house manager at AFH, was incarcerated in a maximum security state penitentiary for a total of six years. These six years in prison have had a great impact on Bennie's life. Bennie was born on a farm in Oklahoma. He first saw an automobile when he was ten years old. Now, Bennie drives a

motorcycle and a Cadillac (a present from a "lady-friend") and wishes that his house were on wheels. Bennie appears to lead the fun life of a bachelor, but there is also in Bennie a sincere concern for ex-offenders. He wants to help other ex-convicts and he has found that the only legal way to do this is through an institution such as AFH. At AFH Bennie can help other ex-convicts learn to "survive" on the "outside."

The difference between survival on the "outside" and survival on the "inside" (prison), Bennie explained, is that on the "outside" people must play certain games. "There is a whole society in prison," he said. "San Quentin is a city. Everything that goes on on the 'outside' goes on in there, except in prison it is more intense." In prison, Bennie sees the games as being stripped away. In prison, he became aware of people's needs. Bennie also became aware of himself.

"I can't remember how things were before prison," he declared. Now, out of prison and working, Bennie still does not consider himself as a part of the "institution." (This same view is held by Johnnie, the other assistant manager.) Bennie has learned to adapt to "free" society, but he still feels separate from it. His process of re-entry consists of acceptance and minimal mental adaptation to society's rules, games, and wrongs. The games that San Quentin stripped from him have now returned to confront him.

Bennie's prison experience has made him feel alienated from the "institution," the President of the United States, and the "games of free society," but he has adjusted in order to live in "free" society. His analysis is that he adapts to the games, rules and wrongs so as not to be wronged by them. Like many residents at AFH, he forcefully declares that he will not be put back in prison again.

Life at AFH

When I visited AFH, the staff, residents and I ate dinner together, watched "the fights," together, and talked with each other. The residents have only one organized group activity and that is dinner. At dinner, announcements are made and at Wednesday's dinner a very informal meeting is held in which residents and staff discuss minor grievances. Dinners are not mandatory, so sometimes there are slip-ups in group communication, but important personal communication occurs privately and follows no particular schedule. The residents of AFH appreciate the halfway house, but they have their reservations. As mentioned before, ex-offenders do not feel that they owe anything to society to compensate them for the amount of time they spent and worked in prison. Therefore, any seemingly unnecessary demands that the house places on the residents are quickly spoken against. For example, at one Wednesday dinner meeting that I attended Rocky told the residents that they were not allowed to install inside locks on their bedroom doors. He reminded the residents that they already have outside

locks and that inside locks could only mean one thing — that something is happening inside the room that the staff should not find out about. Rocky asked for comments and Hector voiced an objection, stating that a man needs his privacy. Rocky answered by saying that a man could suddenly have a heart attack or an epileptic fit and if the door was locked it could cost the man his life. Dinner table conversation changed but the issue did not seem resolved. After dinner Rocky approached Hector in the kitchen and said that he respects the residents' privacy but he also becomes suspicious if he knocks on a door and a man does not want to allow him to enter for five minutes. Rocky said that this makes him wonder if the man has a lady upstairs or if he is shooting drugs or drinking alcohol. "Why won't the man open his door? What does he have to hide?" Rocky asked. Hector conceded Rocky's argument and the issue was settled.

The men are tired of being restricted and they do not expect a halfway house to restrict them. Even though the residents of AFH have fewer restrictions placed upon them than any other halfway house in the area, they will quickly protest any personal infringements that the staff sees as necessary. Protesting and a show of temper follow and then the staff and residents try to reason with each other calmly and rationally. The staff, of course, makes the final decision but hopefully the decision seems just.

Society's Part in Re-Entry

The common factor for most of the ex-offenders at AFH is a past of poverty. Johnnie, the assistant house manager, described it as the hypocrisy of growing up oppressed. He grew up in a Black ghetto where the elementary school teachers tell the children that *everyone* in America can work and become rich, but then Johnnie would walk home to stand in the unemployment line with his father who needed and wanted a job but was unable to get one. The hypocrisy and oppression extended even further. When young Black boys vandalize or steal, they are often met with kicks and racist shouts from police rather than being properly scolded or apprehended, Johnnie explained. He completed his explanation by telling me that when a person is oppressed by someone who seems unreachably far away, the oppressed person strikes back by oppressing someone else.

If the "hypocrisy" of the United States' economic and racial patterns help to determine a man's deviance, the same hypocrisy will also affect the man's re-entry into "free" society from prison. If an ex-offender once again faces the old hypocrisies and he is not satisfied with unemployment or welfare checks, most likely he will once again offend the rules of society. Mike is an AFH resident who will not be satisfied with unemployment nor a low paying job. Although Mike is only nineteen, his past income, though illegally obtained, was well over ten thousand a year. He be-

lieves that to "live comfortably" in the U.S. a man needs to earn twenty to thirty thousand a year. Mike explained to me that if he can find a job that pays twenty to thirty thousand a year, he will "stay clean." If he can not find a job which pays this much, part of Mike's income will again be illegally obtained. Mike grew up with street life income and he accepts its availability. Economics and discrimination greatly affect every man's life. This is true for an employed man, an unemployed man, an offender and an ex-offender.

When an ex-offender is released from prison he does not expect that he will often be harshly discriminated against after he is released. He soon realizes that even though he served his time in prison he still is not accepted into society as an equal. An ex-offender always carries the stigma of a deviant.

I asked one resident if he is honest about his past as an offender to prospective employers. He explained that if he receives a job application that asks, "Have you ever been arrested?" he knows that the employer is not ready to accept him as an equal and he "may as well not bother to apply." Another resident told me that sometimes he will answer honestly to such questions, but often he will lie. Then, if he is hired, after a week or two he will tell his employer that he is an ex-convict. The resident feels that if his employer can see him work efficiently then perhaps the resident's ex-offender status will not determine his eligibility for the job. This resident feels that often he is judged by his ex-offender status alone.

"Free" society must be receptive to ex-convicts in order for ex-convict re-entry to occur. The ex-convict quickly becomes aware of the dilemma: that society's relationship with its deviants is hypocritical. Society expects its ex-offenders to rehabilitate; yet at the same time society does not accept its offenders as ever being totally rehabilitated. The ex-offender — especially the ex-felon — does not regain equal status after imprisonment. The ex-felon no longer has the right to vote, may not join the police force and may not be employed by civil service agencies. Many companies will not hire ex-convicts because ex-convicts are considered a financial risk by bonding agencies. Society's punishment of its offenders extends beyond imprisonment, and a society which does not fully re-integrate its ex-offenders punishes them for life.

The Halfway House's Part in Re-Entry

Like all people, ex-offenders need food, shelter and clothing. In order to obtain these things a man must be employed. A job is probably the most determining factor in a man's re-entry. (See Hector.) AFH believes that if an ex-offender is to re-establish himself in the community he needs to be employed or enrolled in school. At AFH, Rachael and Jennifer both concentrate on this facet of re-entry. Rachael learns where and when job openings are available and sometimes she will even develop a job for a resident. Skills Bank,

an organization which helps ex-offenders locate jobs, is another employment resource for AFH residents, and The California State Employment Development Department is also accessible.

Every weekday, Monday through Friday, a man is expected to be awake and out of bed by nine o'clock. He is to spend the majority of the day searching for a job or taking care of other relevant business, such as applying for a social security card or driver's license or finding a place to live. At the end of the week each man writes a progress report on his activities. Rachael and Jennifer read the progress reports and continuously meet with the men to discuss more job or educational options and to discuss specific problems that a man might meet while job seeking. This one-to-one contact between staff and residents is an example of the informal counseling provided at AFH. If a staff member notices that a resident is having problems, regarding employment or otherwise, the staff member meets with the resident privately to discuss the problem and possible solutions.

Economic insecurity and society's hypocrisies are major problems in ex-convict re-entry. If a man can reach a position of economic security and if he can survive and overcome discrimination, then he will be able to re-enter society. Again, of course, this is contingent on whether society will accept him. Obviously, this is difficult to achieve. AFH, by assisting the ex-offender in his first two months out of prison, has made successful re-entry more realistic. Whereas the recidivism rate for an unaided ex-offender is between seventy-five and eighty-five per cent, AFH's recidivism rate is below twenty-five per cent.

The process of re-entry is a very tenuous, critical period in an ex-offender's life. His nervousness is expressed by the quantity of cigarettes he smokes and the quantity of liquor he consumes. His first step in solving the problems is facing them. If an ex-offender views his dilemma realistically he has a greater chance of successful re-entry. With job and educational counseling from a group of concerned people, the process of re-entry can be eased a great deal. With an aware and receptive society, re-entry can become a complete reality.

Conclusion

This fieldstudy has been heavily influenced by an ex-convict perspective — perhaps too heavily. The attempt has been to provide insight into ex-convict re-entry as experienced by the ex-offenders themselves. By studying a halfway house and by interviewing only ex-offenders, I am focusing my study on the situation that the individual exconvict must face and how he does or does not confront it. I chose to focus on the individual rather than focusing on the society which also faces or avoids the situation of deviant re-entry.

If I were to expand on this study I could study

members of society who are personally confronted with ex-offender re-entry. I could begin by interviewing the families and friends of ex-offenders. Another possible source would be employers and bonding agencies.

Allied Fellowship House serves a purpose in the process of re-entry. It provides men with basic survival ingredients and lessens worries. AFH aids an ex-offender in his critical transition period. I feel very grateful toward AFH. I appreciate the institution and staff for taking an active part in the re-entry process, and I feel thankful to the staff and residents for being cooperative and open with me in a crucial period of their lives. I hope I did AFH justice in describing the institution, the staff and the residents in their efforts to confront the difficult psychological and sociological problems of ex-offender re-entry.

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