

Introduction

AFTER JOHN, a Black man in his 30s, was released from the Suffolk County House of Correction, he moved back to a small apartment in a poor, predominantly Black neighborhood in Boston that he shared with a cousin and several roommates. He spent most of his time within walking distance of his apartment. He walked, worked out in a nearby park, and carefully navigated his relationships with other young men in the neighborhood, “I don’t want to be seen with them, ’cause I don’t wanna be labeled. You know what I’m saying?” He avoided the temptation to return to selling drugs. He said, “because it was up to the point that’s all I had left to do. . . . Post up on a block, nine times out of ten you’re going to get an up. I just stood firm.” John had most recently been incarcerated on assault charges after stabbing his son’s mother’s new boyfriend. As a result, they had a restraining order out on him, and so he also tried to avoid them. He complained about the difficulty of this, “First of all we live in the same neighborhood, so if I walk, we going to bump into them.” John’s experience illustrates why many criminologists argue for the dangers of people returning to an old neighborhood, or to a disadvantaged neighborhood, after incarceration. He was embedded in a neighborhood that included recent victims, people who knew him as someone who sold drugs, and other young Black men who might draw the attention of the police. Still, he had stable housing, which put him in a better position than many others leaving prison or jail.

In contrast, Sandy, a white woman in her 30s, spent her first few months after incarceration “bouncing” from place to place. After one night at her boyfriend Carl’s father’s house, they had a falling out with the father and had to leave. She and her boyfriend stayed in a motel, in several rented rooms, and on the street. A long period of addiction had strained her relationships

with her family, and she could not count on them for support. Paying for rented rooms “obviously puts me in a position to do illegal stuff, because my family sucks.” Sandy continued to acquire new charges related to shoplifting and to struggle with drug use. In several of the apartments in which they stayed, other residents used drugs, as did she and her boyfriend. Sandy did not consider halfway houses, shelters, or sober homes viable options, because many would not allow her and Carl to stay together, and the cost for the two of them was prohibitively high. She found new places to stay through chance encounters, such as running into people she knew at the bus stop. These fluid housing arrangements and chance encounters characterized Sandy’s living situation for several months after her release from the House of Correction. Not only did she and her boyfriend move regularly, but they moved across the entire Boston region. In their case, even defining their “neighborhood” in a clear way is impossible.

John and Sandy are two of the individuals I and a team of research assistants interviewed about their return to the community after incarceration in the Suffolk County House of Correction in Massachusetts. The overarching premise of this book is that neighborhood and place are important dimensions of reentry from prison or jail. While few might disagree that place matters, we have a less clear sense of *why* or *how* it matters, and we rarely get a view of the lived social-interactional dynamics between returning prisoners and receiving communities. As Nikki Jones writes in *The Chosen Ones*, “The process of redemption is situated in social settings and social interactions” (Jones 2018: 4). Importantly, these interactions include “everyday” interactions, not just those with the formal criminal legal system. I argue that place matters through the interactions it fosters. These interactions include those with family, loved ones, and other ongoing relationships, but also with familiar faces and strangers on the street. These interactions, as shaped by both neighborhood and activity space—or the places a person goes as part of routine activities—shape outcomes, including offending, surveillance, relationship formation, and access to opportunities.

These interactions also are shaped by one’s own social position, and how that shapes others’ responses. For example, one theme that repeatedly came up in our interviews is that of Black and Latino men feeling profiled as “fitting a description.” Everyone with a criminal record and a history of incarceration feels this to some degree, particularly when their records may be checked. Black and Latino men, especially younger men, experienced a more generalized assumption of guilt and suspicion. This too is shaped by location, as

behaviors and people are more and less tolerated across places. As John Irwin argued in 1985's *The Jail*, "offensiveness" is a more important factor in arrest than is crime seriousness. Offensiveness is something that "conventional witnesses or their agents (the police) impose upon events; it is a summation of the meaning they attach to the acts, the context, and, above all, the character of the actors" (Irwin 1985: 23). Acts performed by people who are seen as "disreputable" are viewed very differently than those performed by "ordinary citizens," and acts performed in disreputable places may be more tolerated than those same acts in other places. Irwin argued that jails primarily house what he called the "rabble class"—people who are detached, or not well integrated into conventional society, and disreputable, or perceived as irksome, offensive, or threatening (Irwin 1985). People in positions of power use these arrests, detentions, and incarcerations to manage the less powerful.

Jailing and shorter-term incarceration, like in a House of Correction, continue to disproportionately impact people who are marginalized along several dimensions, including because of racism, sexism, and the criminalization of poverty. Policing policies like stop-and-frisk and order maintenance policing disproportionately impact low-income Black and Latinx communities (Western et al. 2021). In some cases, this takes the form of "recovery management," where law enforcement may try to coerce people into programs or services (Gowan and Whetstone 2012; Stuart 2013, 2016) or "banishment," where ordinances delimit zones of exclusion from which "undesirables" are banned (Beckett and Herbert 2009). While some of the strategies and frameworks have changed, the dynamics of cyclical arrest, incarceration, and release of marginalized populations remain (Sered and Norton-Hawk 2014; Comfort 2016; Kohler-Hausmann 2018; Ellis 2020).

This book makes several contributions. First, it presents a multifaceted analysis of how neighborhood context and place shape incarceration and reentry, from *both* returning prisoner and receiving community perspectives. While a growing body of research focuses on formerly incarcerated individuals and their experiences of reentry, few examine the community's perspective. Even more rarely are these two perspectives included in the same study. In addition to interviews with men and women returning from incarceration, we interviewed residents of three neighborhoods—parts of Dorchester, the South End, and South Boston—chosen because of their proximity to the House of Correction and their varying relationships with it and with crime and crime narratives. A second contribution is that it takes a comprehensive view of the role of locations and place. For example,

I also address experiences such as Sandy's—people with few if any ties to place. Often experiences like Sandy's are treated as missing data because of the difficulty of characterizing their residence, yet their stories are crucial in understanding neighborhood and place dynamics. In addition, I analyze the experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals who return to suburban or rural areas. Together, these experiences are key to understanding both the importance and limitations of neighborhood as a concept.

REENTRY AND SHORT-TERM INCARCERATION

A vast majority of people who are sentenced to incarceration will be released—in 2019, over six hundred thousand people were released from state or federal custody (Carson 2020). After several decades of dramatic increases, the prison population, including both admissions and releases, has been slowly decreasing since a high in 2009. In 2019, the state and federal incarceration rate decreased slightly for the eleventh consecutive year and the prison population has declined 11 percent since its 2009 peak (Carson 2020). In addition, the racial disparities in incarceration decreased somewhat in this period, as the incarceration rates for Black and Latinx men and women decreased faster than the white incarceration rates. While prison sentences in the United States are long by international standards, the mean time served for people released from state or federal prison in the United States in 2016 was 2.6 years and the median time served was 1.3 years (Kaeble 2018). Forty percent served less than a year (Kaeble 2018).

While much of the attention on prisoner reentry is focused on people being released from state and federal prisons, they represent only one dimension of the criminal legal system. County and city jails typically are used to hold people in pretrial detention and for shorter sentences (usually less than a year). While jail admissions have also declined in the past decade, 10.7 million people are admitted to a city or county jail, on average for stays of twenty-five days (Zeng 2020).¹ Much like prisons, our use of jails has increased dramatically in the past several decades (Subramanian et al. 2015). Rates of substance use disorders and mental illness are much higher in jail than in the whole population. As with prison incarceration, Black people are disproportionately jailed. People who are detained prior to their conviction often remain incarcerated because they cannot afford bail (Subramanian et al. 2015). The possibility of a faster release from detention is one factor in a

decision to plead guilty. In many ways, jails reflect a criminalization of poverty and disadvantage more so than the protection of the public. As Reuben Miller recently wrote, “It is clear to anyone paying attention that the legal system does not administer anything resembling justice but instead manages the nation’s problemated populations” (Miller 2021: 6). This dynamic is nowhere more visible than in jails and among those serving short sentences.

The system of incarceration in Massachusetts is relatively unusual in the United States. Rather than a two-tier system of county/local jails and state prisons, Massachusetts has a three-tier system, with county jails, for pretrial detainees, county Houses of Correction, for those sentenced to 2.5 years per charge or less, and state prisons, for those sentenced to more than 2.5 years per charge.² The House of Correction system is central to understanding incarceration in Massachusetts; it houses the majority of people sentenced to incarceration in the state. Judges in Superior Courts can sentence defendants to either state or county sentences, while judges in the much busier District Courts cannot sentence someone to state prison.³ In fiscal year 2013, 91.4 percent of the 39,049 convictions in Massachusetts were seen in a District Court, and 8.6 percent were seen in Superior Court. Overall, in fiscal year 2013, 88 percent of incarcerated defendants were sentenced to a House of Correction and 12 percent were sentenced to a state facility.⁴

Black and Latinx people are overrepresented in the Massachusetts criminal legal system, at all levels. Much of the race/ethnic disparities can be explained in the nature and severity of the initial charges (Bishop et al. 2020). The picture of incarceration in Massachusetts is further complicated by the fact that not all counties have facilities for women, and so some women serve county sentences in the one state women’s prison.⁵ Suffolk County *does* have facilities for women; approximately 11 percent of their release population are women.⁶

Massachusetts experienced similar patterns of incarceration as the country in the past decade, with the number of people incarcerated peaking in 2010 and then slowly decreasing.⁷ In the period we were recruiting (January 2014–June 2015), approximately fifteen hundred people were released from the Suffolk County House of Correction a year.⁸ Most of these were released to Suffolk County. The average sentence for all people released from the House of Correction during our recruitment period (2014–2015) was about nine months, and their average time served was approximately six months.⁹ The total release population was approximately 33 percent white, 43 percent Black, and 22 percent Hispanic or Latinx.

Approximately 35 percent of incarceration sentences in Massachusetts include a split or “from-and-after” sentence.¹⁰ With a split sentence, the sentence is divided between time in custody and a sentence that is suspended for a period of probation. If the person violates the terms of their probation, they will be returned to custody for the suspended period. A from-and-after sentence links two charges, often with a custodial sentence on one charge followed by a period of probation on a second charge. Approximately 25 percent of those starting a probation sentence do so after a period of incarceration.¹¹ There are sixty-two district courts in Massachusetts, and the Boston Municipal Court has eight further divisions within the city. It is thus not difficult to pick up charges out of multiple courts. Occasionally someone in our sample was transferred after serving one county sentence to complete a sentence in another county. More common was the need to juggle several overlapping probation sentences out of multiple courts. Those with supervised probation should have their cases transferred to their jurisdiction of residence. Those with administrative probation only (a less intense supervision) remain in the sentencing court. In these cases, the person may have to report less frequently but maintain obligations to multiple courts simultaneously. Probation violations could result in more time in a House of Correction. These violations could reflect new arrests or criminal charges, but also things like not reporting a change of address, missing court dates, a positive drug test, or failing to pay required fines or fees.

Jails remain a way for cities to “manage” their disadvantaged and “disreputable” populations (Irwin 1985; Stuart 2016; Western et al. 2021). Many of the people who are housed in county facilities in Massachusetts, and many of the people in this sample, are serving time for relatively minor charges, like drug possession, shoplifting, public order offenses, and probation violations. The circumstances surrounding their arrests are often tied to disadvantages resulting from racism, poverty, and addiction. They also are often tied to local contexts. This highlights that arrest, incarceration, and reentry are all relational activities, not something limited to the individual incarcerated.

NEIGHBORHOOD CONTEXT OF REENTRY

Research documenting people’s experiences upon exiting prison has demonstrated that many are concentrated in a small number of typically disadvantaged neighborhoods (La Vigne et al. 2003; Brooks et al. 2005; Simes

2018). For example, the men and women comprising Bruce Western's Boston Reentry Study sample moved to under half of Boston's census tracts, which tend also to have higher levels of disadvantage (Simes 2018; Western 2018). There are at least three dimensions through which scholars raise important questions about neighborhoods and prisoner reentry. The first is where people move upon their release from prison. To what extent are people with criminal records concentrated in a small number of neighborhoods? What is the distribution of people across urban, suburban, and rural areas? How do people's post-prison neighborhoods compare with their pre-prison neighborhoods? A second set of questions involve the influence of neighborhood context on offending or reincarceration. Do neighborhoods shape people's post-prison likelihood of offending or of reincarceration? How? What dimensions shape their experiences with offending and desistance? When we talk about recidivism, we often mean the likelihood that a person reoffends. But recidivism is usually measured by arrest, conviction, or incarceration. So, to what extent is a "neighborhood effect" of recidivism a measure of offending behaviors of people released from incarceration or of surveillance and control by law enforcement, probation, and parole officers? Third, how does neighborhood shape people's post-incarceration experiences? For example, can they access public transportation? Is their neighborhood walkable? Do they have existing or can they develop new social networks within their neighborhood? This book is primarily concerned with this third question, though it is helpful to situate it within the literature on the first two questions.

Both in terms of neighborhood attainment and outcomes related to neighborhood context, neighborhoods can be framed both as physical places and as an expression of social networks (Harding, Morenoff, and Wyse 2019). Perspectives on how and why neighborhoods matter in prisoner reentry are typically premised on social interaction within the neighborhood. For example, residential change is a potential turning point, in which a move sets a person on a new path, in this case, away from offending (Abbott 2001). One reason residential change is posited as an important turning point is because it can disrupt existing social networks that may contribute to offending (Laub and Sampson 2003; Kirk 2012). If people leaving prison move to a new neighborhood than they lived pre-prison, they presumably have less contact with their existing criminogenic social networks. For those living either in a neighborhood in which they have such networks, or in a high crime neighborhood, this might contribute to reoffending or

to an intentional distancing of oneself from others in their neighborhoods, to avoid temptation, victimization, and surveillance (Harding et al. 2019; Leverentz 2020b).

Sociologists David Harding, Jeffrey Morenoff, and Jessica Wyse (2019) conducted an extensive study of reentry experiences in Michigan, involving analysis of administrative records and repeated interviews with a sample of men and women released from Michigan prisons. They divided their sample's neighborhoods and neighborhood engagement into four categories that incorporate both the relative level of crime and disorder in the neighborhood and a person's connection to place. "Chaotic detached" was the most widespread type of neighborhood engagement among their sample. Chaotic detached neighborhoods were high in crime and violence, but the person in question was new to the neighborhood, or all neighbors tended to keep to themselves to keep themselves safe. As a result, people living in chaotic detached neighborhoods felt little responsibility or connection to their neighborhoods and typically defined the neighborhood in negative terms. In contrast, those living in "chaotic connected" neighborhoods were also living in impoverished neighborhoods, but with family. Crime was prevalent, but people were familiar with others in the neighborhood, and they felt they could successfully navigate life in the neighborhood. In neighborhoods classified as "safe detached," people were relatively detached from others in the neighborhood, and it was quiet. Those living in "safe connected" neighborhoods were typically returning to live with middle- or upper-middle-class families and were at least tenuously connected to neighborhood organizations or otherwise connected to social networks in the neighborhood. Key to navigating life in the neighborhood were not only characteristics of the neighborhood itself, but also the level and nature of one's engagement with it.

In addition to neighborhoods as social networks, Harding and colleagues (2019) emphasize the role of neighborhood as a spatial location, including access to transportation, employment, and social services. Many returning prisoners have neither a driver's license nor the funds to afford a car. Only some have friends or family who can drive them, and driving without a license leaves them at risk of arrest and possibly reincarceration if on probation or parole. A spatial mismatch between people and jobs is exacerbated by a lack of access to transportation and is less of a concern for those who can travel to job-rich areas (Sugie and Lens 2017). For many recently incarcerated people, these jobs are low wage, and the hours involved in working and traveling to and from work leave little time to look for other work (or

anything else). People also may face both individual and community deficits in transportation accessibility (Bohmert 2016). On an individual level, people may have poor physical health, making transportation less accessible. At the community level, they may live in inaccessible areas, making public transportation less accessible and making them more reliant on social supports for transportation.

Access to transportation also highlights another important dimension of neighborhood context: that people often do not spend all their time in a residential neighborhood. The concept of activity spaces can expand how we think about returning prisoners' navigation of space and how neighborhood and place matter. Activity spaces are the subset of all locations with which an individual has direct contact as the result of routine activities (Horton and Reynolds 1971; Browning and Soller 2014). Most people spent time outside of their residential neighborhood for daily activities, like work, socializing, and to access services (Cagney et al. 2020). These patterns of movement are shaped by individual characteristics and access to resources and transportation. It is thus important to consider how people move about space, and how they engage not only with their neighborhood but also other commonly traveled areas (Farrall et al. 2014). The people in this study have varying levels of connection to their residential neighborhood and have smaller and larger activity spaces that are shaped by where they live, what they need, and how readily they can travel.

Studies addressing the effects of the neighborhood context of people returning from prison suggest that those living in lower-crime, less disadvantaged neighborhoods have lower rates of reoffending or reincarceration, though there may be variation across offense types (Kubrin and Stewart 2006; Hipp et al. 2010). Individual factors do matter, and segregation patterns and the concentration of returning prisoners in some neighborhoods may mean that some neighborhoods experience higher levels of offending because of who lives in that neighborhood. However, neighborhood effects scholars (e.g., Kirk 2020; Harding et al. 2019; Kubrin and Stewart 2006) document that neighborhood also has an independent effect on reoffending and reincarceration. Daniel Mears and colleagues found that men released from prison to resource-deprived areas were significantly more likely to be convicted of violent crimes, but less likely to be convicted of subsequent property or drug crimes (Mears et al. 2008). There also were significant race and neighborhood segregation interaction effects. In part, Mears and colleagues speculated whether the lower likelihood of new drug convictions

among “young minority males” in segregated neighborhoods reflected differential enforcement rather than differential behavior (Mears et al. 2008).¹² Access to resources also affects reincarceration. John Hipp, Joan Petersilia, and Susan Turner (2010) found that people on parole were less likely to be reincarcerated when they lived near social services; this effect was particularly pronounced for Black people. However, when the demand for those services went up, so too did reincarceration (Hipp et al. 2010).

Offending, reconviction, and reincarceration are central concerns to people coming out of prison, correctional agencies, and the public. While the public is concerned for public safety, people being released from prisons or jails also hope to stay out of prison. This desire shapes the behavior of people who have been incarcerated and affects multiple areas of their lives in both direct and indirect ways, including how they navigate life in their neighborhoods. In an earlier study of women being released from Illinois prisons to Chicago neighborhoods, I found that while some women were afraid to move back to their old neighborhoods because of possible “temptations,” others wanted to, because of the social ties and familiarity they had for that neighborhood (Leverentz 2010). Some believed they could be an asset to others in the neighborhood because of their history of addiction and offending, demonstrating the possibility of change. Others emphasized their own agency in choosing to not use drugs, regardless of the context they were in. Some also had learned from previous experiences that “that’s like they say in that book, that shit doesn’t work.”¹³ Excuse my expression, but it don’t work, that geographical thing. If you want to find it, you’re going to get it” (Leverentz 2014: 165).

This may be particularly pronounced when one moves within a city or region, where returning to old neighborhoods and people is easier (Kirk 2009; Sharkey and Sampson 2010), but Abra, the woman quoted here, had moved across Illinois and still had the experience and knowledge to develop new networks. This leaves people to also learn how to manage temptations and to regulate movements to protect themselves. Among the Chicago women I interviewed, that often meant framing their neighborhood as a neutral force or as a positive place for redemption (Leverentz 2010). On the other hand, a response to feeling surveilled leads many people to stay indoors as much as possible and to be careful about whom they are seen with, not only to avoid any peer pressure to engage in illegal activity, but also to avoid the *impression* that they might be engaged in illegal activity or to otherwise draw attention of law enforcement (Leverentz 2018, 2020b; Fader 2021). Of

course, other factors also shape people's engagement with neighborhoods and places beyond a fear of rearrest. People need to go to work (or look for work), go to medical appointments, seek out additional services and supports, and otherwise live their lives. Doing so involves navigating space, both in those activities and in transit. And again, both physical spaces and how they shape and are shaped by social networks are important.

MOBILITY AND NEIGHBORHOOD ATTAINMENT

Beyond characteristics of neighborhood context, moving to a new neighborhood upon release may also shape neighborhood engagement and reentry experiences. Moving, and sometimes moving frequently after release, are common experiences among returning prisoners. Approximately a quarter of the Boston Reentry Study (BRS) sample moved back to their pre-prison census tract (Simes 2018). Claire Herbert, David Harding, and Jeffrey Morenoff (2015) found that, according to administrative records, the average person on parole in Michigan moved 2.5 times per year for their first two years post-release and nearly all (over 90 percent) of the people they tracked moved at least once. These moves included—in decreasing order of frequency—moving to an intermediate sanction (e.g., drug treatment facility), to a different private residence, to go on the run from parole, to treatment, to prison, or to the street. Forced moves accounted for over half of the moves (Herbert et al. 2015). Similar patterns occurred in the Boston Reentry Study. A large proportion of the BRS sample moved frequently and sometimes had no stable address to provide. Over 60 percent of the total sample lived in more than one place in their first-year post-release, nearly 40 percent lived in more than one place in their first week, and approximately 16 percent either lived in institutional settings or stayed in different places every few days (Simes 2018).

The frequency of moves and the neighborhoods to which people return reflect both the impact of incarceration and larger patterns of inequality. Herbert, Harding, and Morenoff conclude that while the predictors of housing insecurity among a general population (e.g., mental illness, drug use, prior experiences with incarceration and homelessness) also predict housing insecurity among people on parole, so too does involvement with the criminal legal system. Using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79), sociologists Michael Massoglia, Glenn Firebaugh, and Cody Warner (2013) found that those who had been incarcerated lived in more disadvantaged