

Parole

Parole allows incarcerated people to be released, under police supervision, after serving a minimum portion of their sentences. The rationale is that the person has behaved well in prison, indicating a readiness to be released early; the fear is that someone who seems ready in a parole board hearing may once again be a danger to society upon release.

The process is fraught in a number of ways. First of all, parole is at the discretion of the state parole board, who are not necessarily experts nor impartial. “States almost always staff [parole] boards with political appointees, who are extremely vulnerable to the wrath of public opinion... Two-thirds of the states have no professional qualifications for parole board membership.”⁴⁵²

A person granted parole still faces obstacles. Any violation of the often strict parole rules can result in return to jail or prison. For instance, in New York State, people under parole must report any contact with law enforcement to their parole officers. In 2012, Brendan Cochrane, who had successfully turned his life around after serving a prison term for attempted murder, found himself back in prison for six months when he failed to report three traffic tickets.⁴⁵³

Other rules commonly bar parolees from associating with other people of known criminal histories. This can mean that getting together with family might be reason for being sent back to prison. Sex offenders, who face strong restrictions on where they may reside, often end up in the Catch-22 of having no place to live other than with other sex offenders, with whom they are not permitted to associate.⁴⁵⁴

Finally, a look at the allocation of correctional dollars raises questions about how our system supports returning citizens. The majority of people under correctional control are on parole or probation, and not in prison, yet the majority of money goes to prisons. In a study of eight states, the Pew Center on the States found that prisons accounted for one-third of growth in correctional control from 1983 to 2008, but absorbed 88% of new spending on corrections.⁴⁵⁵ This means spending more money on locking people up while spending relatively much less to support and

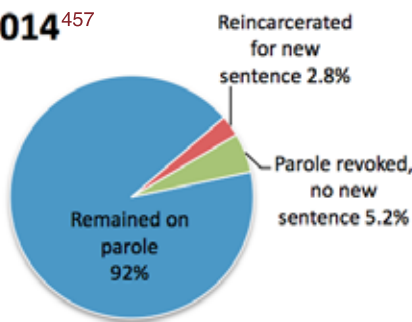
supervise people who could be rebuilding their lives on the outside. Shrinking budgets for parole supervision have left parole officers managing much larger caseloads than reasonable, which means that each officer has less time and attention for each person on his or her docket.⁴⁵⁶

Early Release

[On whether to shorten the sentence of someone who has been excommunicated for a crime, but seems ready to do *teshuvah*] If by cancelling it, he will return to being good, and will accept the punishment of *kaparah* [restitution] as is appropriate, you may lift the decree which you have decreed upon him so that he may do *teshuvah*, and so he will not go astray to a life of evil—neither him nor others on his behalf. For in the case of all sinners who sinned and then repented, we accept them forever, as it says “Return my backsliding children.”

- Ritva 159 (Rabbi Yom Tov Ishbili, Spain c. 1250-1330)

People on Parole in 2014⁴⁵⁷



⁴⁵² Gottschalk, p. 190

⁴⁵³ <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/05/rating-a-parolees-risk-before-a-return-to-prison/>

⁴⁵⁴ <http://www.thenewyorkworld.com/2015/03/18/housing-unwanted/>

⁴⁵⁵ <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/about/news-room/press-releases/0001/01/01/one-in-31-us-adults-are-behind-bars-on-parole-or-probation>

⁴⁵⁶ See, e.g., <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-parole-agents-caseloads-20141105-story.html>

⁴⁵⁷ <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ppus14.pdf> p. 7. These are national aggregate data, which obscure variations from state to state.

For a look at conflicting opinions about parole-revocation rates and public safety, see this 2011 analysis from the Boston Globe:

http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2011/06/19/paroled_lifers_pose_high_risk_of_new_crimes/?page=1