

# FOCUS ON PAROLE

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**A research report on improving the parole system  
and a call to action.**

By the Future Justice Lawyers of Chicago

## **Introduction**

In Illinois, what is commonly referred to as “parole” is, in most cases today, Mandatory Supervised Release (MSR), a system distinct from traditional parole but rooted in the same concepts and legacies. While the state first adopted parole laws in 1895, which allowed prison wardens wide discretion in releasing individuals based on behavior and external sponsorship, this model was gradually reshaped throughout the 20th century. In 1978, Illinois formally abolished discretionary parole and adopted determinate sentencing, replacing the traditional parole model with MSR.<sup>1</sup> Under this newer framework, individuals are automatically released after serving a fixed prison term, and then subjected to a mandatory period of supervision imposed by statute. Unlike the earlier system, MSR is not a conditional early release from a sentence, but rather a required supervisory term after a sentence has been fully served in custody.<sup>2</sup> Violations of MSR can still result in reincarceration, though only for the remainder of the supervision term and not the original sentence. Despite the legal distinction, the term "parole" remains widely used in Illinois by the public, the press, and even some state agencies, leading to persistent confusion between past and present systems.

At the federal level, parole was once a standard part of the sentencing structure but was effectively abolished for most offenses by the Sentencing Reform Act of 1984, which introduced determinate sentencing and created the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines.<sup>3</sup> This Act was largely a response to growing concerns about the inconsistencies and perceived unfairness of discretionary parole decisions, which were seen as overly subjective and lacking transparency.<sup>4</sup> Federal parole still applies to individuals sentenced before 1987 and a few narrow exceptions, such as military or D.C. Code offenders.<sup>5</sup> Unlike Illinois’ MSR system, traditional federal parole involved a parole board’s discretion to release individuals before the end of their sentence based on behavior, rehabilitation, and perceived risk. This distinction between discretionary parole and automatic supervised release is central to understanding how parole functions today across state and federal systems.

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<sup>1</sup> Grushchow, K. O. (2022, June 2). *Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority*. ICJIA. <https://icjia.illinois.gov/researchhub/articles/parole-and-mandatory-supervised-release-in-illinois>

<sup>2</sup> *Mandatory supervised release (MSR)*. Illinois Prisoner Review Board. (n.d.). <https://prb.illinois.gov/op-and-hearing-info/mandatory-supervised-release--msr-.html>

<sup>3</sup> H.R.5773 - 98th Congress (1983-1984): A bill to reform Federal criminal sentencing procedures, and for other purposes. (1984, October 12). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/98th-congress/house-bill/5773>

<sup>4</sup> *The Sentencing Reform Act and U.S. Sentencing Commission: 40 Years of evolution*. American Bar Association. (2024, July). [https://www.americanbar.org/advocacy/governmental\\_legislative\\_work/publications/washingtonletter/july-24-wl/sra-0724wl/](https://www.americanbar.org/advocacy/governmental_legislative_work/publications/washingtonletter/july-24-wl/sra-0724wl/)

<sup>5</sup> Fulwood, I. (2003, May). *History of the Federal Parole System*. U.S Department of Justice. <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/uspc/legacy/2009/10/07/history.pdf>

## **Parole's Objectives**

Parole, then, is best understood not as a single, fixed policy, but as a mechanism that has adapted to shifting priorities over time, whether they are rehabilitation, public safety, or cost. While the balance among these has changed, the core goals remain the same.

Parole was originally introduced with the idea that people could change and that the state had a responsibility in facilitating that change. While early models focused primarily on supervision and control, the broader aim was to create a structured pathway back into society.<sup>6</sup> At its best, it provides the conditions for individuals to rebuild their lives with some structure: finding housing, securing employment, accessing mental health care, and reconnecting with family or community.<sup>7</sup> These supports are rarely available in prison, but they are critical after release because the transition home is often marked by instability, isolation, and limited access to basic resources— all of which increase the chances of re-offense.<sup>8</sup>

Its structure is also meant to protect the broader community. The period of supervision after release allows the state to monitor behavior and enforce certain conditions, ideally catching signs of instability before they escalate. In theory, this creates a safer path back into society for the individual and the public around them.

But the reality is that all systems have to function within budgets. Parole, in many ways, has endured because it offers a financial alternative to long-term incarceration. Supervising someone in the community is significantly less expensive than housing them in prison, and lowering recidivism rates brings long-term savings across courts, jails, and public services.<sup>9</sup> These economic pressures have shaped parole policy for decades, sometimes more directly than moral or rehabilitative aims. But when reentry support is underfunded or unavailable, that cost-saving potential is lost. According to the Illinois Sentencing Policy Advisory Council, each instance of recidivism costs the state over \$150,000 in direct and indirect expenses.<sup>10</sup> In 2022, Illinois allocated more than \$1.7 billion to operate its prison system, while less than \$50 million went to reentry programs and life skills centers.<sup>11</sup> This gap in funding is significant, especially given that one of parole's intended functions is to reduce recidivism. When it is funded effectively, parole can help interrupt costly cycles of incarceration by supporting people during the most vulnerable phase of reentry.

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<sup>6</sup> Caplan, J. M. (2006). Parole system anomic: Conflicting models of casework and surveillance. *Fed. Probation*, 70, 32.

<sup>7</sup> Lyons, C. L. (2013, October 7). Parole: Evidence of rehabilitation and means to rehabilitate. Boston Bar Association. <https://bostonbar.org/journal/parole-evidence-of-rehabilitation-and-means-to-rehabilitate/>

<sup>8</sup> Hawken, A., & Kleiman, M. A. R. (2016, October). *Smoothing the transition from prison to community*. Hamilton Project. [https://www.hamiltonproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/graduated\\_reintegration\\_policyproposal.pdf](https://www.hamiltonproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/graduated_reintegration_policyproposal.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> *The public costs of Supervision Versus Detention*. United States Courts. (2025, June 5). <https://www.uscourts.gov/data-news/judiciary-news/2025/06/05/public-costs-supervision-versus-detention>

<sup>10</sup> *The High Cost of Recidivism*. Illinois Sentencing Policy Advisory Council (SPAC). (2018, Summer). [https://spac.icjia-api.cloud/uploads/Illinois\\_Result\\_First-The\\_High\\_Cost\\_of\\_Recidivism\\_2018-20191106T18123262.pdf](https://spac.icjia-api.cloud/uploads/Illinois_Result_First-The_High_Cost_of_Recidivism_2018-20191106T18123262.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Martinez, A.-S., & Asiegbu, G. (2023, February 13). *Homecoming*. Injustice Watch. <https://www.injusticewatch.org/criminal-courts/reentry/2023/reentry-illinois-first-hand-solutions/>

## **Why Parole Matters Now: Economic and Social Dimensions**

In order to obtain an accurate picture of where parole stands today in Illinois and the United States, we have to look beyond the legal structure as it is important to view parole through economic, social, and political lenses. Quite possibly the most important lens to view parole today is economics. As incarceration costs rise and the fiscal burden continues to be high on state systems, parole continues to be considered the cheaper alternative to long-term imprisonment. The American Action Forum documents that the U.S. incarcerates billions of dollars annually, with billions in savings possible through heightened use of parole and reentry programs.

In addition to reducing prison numbers, good parole policy can also generate long-term cost savings. These result from lowered incarceration costs, less recidivism, and fewer pressures on public services. In many studies, they show how states investing in smart parole policies can save funds by not imprisoning individuals unnecessarily and by making sure that individuals transition back into society effectively.

### **Economic Benefits and Drawbacks of Parole**

From a financial standpoint, parole is much cheaper than imprisonment. As calculated in research by Danielle O'Connell, the expense of reentry is still considerable, paying for everything from housing, job training, identification papers, and medical care, but it is still much less costly than keeping an inmate in prison for decades.<sup>12</sup> These initial investments have the potential to save money in the long run if parolees do not recidivate and can give back to their communities.

However, economic benefits are extremely dependent on the manner in which parole is carried out. If parolees lack any access to resources, like job training, drug rehabilitation, or housing, they will merely cycle back through the system, canceling out the savings and intents of the system. In Illinois alone, recidivism costs over \$150,000 per person when including court costs, policing, incarceration, and lost economic productivity.<sup>13</sup>

There is also a hidden economic price to the current system of corrections. As an article in the Justice System Journal study argues, prison policy ignores the long-term expense to state budgets, especially when it fails to invest in rehabilitation or the community.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> O'Connell, D. (2021, April). *It Starts with Reentry: Examining the Needs of Parolees in Illinois and the Actionable Goals of Prison Abolition*. The University of Chicago.  
[https://humanities-web.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/college/chicagostudies-prod/s3fs-public/2021-07/19\\_Chicago\\_Studies\\_WEB\\_V2.pdf](https://humanities-web.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/college/chicagostudies-prod/s3fs-public/2021-07/19_Chicago_Studies_WEB_V2.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> O'Connell, D. (2021, April). *It Starts with Reentry: Examining the Needs of Parolees in Illinois and the Actionable Goals of Prison Abolition*. The University of Chicago.  
[https://humanities-web.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/college/chicagostudies-prod/s3fs-public/2021-07/19\\_Chicago\\_Studies\\_WEB\\_V2.pdf](https://humanities-web.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/college/chicagostudies-prod/s3fs-public/2021-07/19_Chicago_Studies_WEB_V2.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Caruso, V. (2018, August 15). *Report: Recidivism to cost Illinois more than \$13B over next 5 years*. Illinois Policy.  
<https://www.illinoispolicy.org/report-recidivism-to-cost-illinois-more-than-13b-over-next-5-years/>

## **Fiscal Demands of Reentry**

Even after release, parolees face extreme financial hardship. The majority leave prison without basic documents like a state ID, a Social Security card, or even a place to call their own. Without these basics, it is very difficult to gain employment, housing, or public benefits. Thus, the majority of parolees are locked into patterns of poverty that increase the risk of recidivism.

An article on the University of Chicago's Humanities Web describes how the system sets up parolees to fail by underfunding the reentry process. The burden naturally falls to non-profit organizations, religious groups, or families, assuming those support systems even exist.<sup>15</sup> Rather than preparing individuals for success, this approach reinforces the reliance on emergency services and shelters, further stretching the public system.

In the meantime, parole programs like “Illinois' PreStart” show that transformation is possible. PreStart prioritized social service referrals over outright supervision. Its early data showed lower recidivism rates compared to previous models of parole enforcement, emphasizing the budgetary windfalls of supportive reentry in the long term.<sup>16</sup>

## **Social and Economic Trade-Offs**

Aside from the financial expense, there are real human costs when parole is not conducted efficiently. On the one hand, parole can be the key to enabling persons to return to their families, obtain employment, and launch new lives. On the other hand, when parole is poorly administered, it increases stress, uncertainty, and the likelihood of being sent back to prison for minor technical violations.

In Illinois, probation or mandatory supervised release (MSR, the state's version of parole) subjects individuals to keeping a curfew or reporting to supervising officers at set times, but this is case-specific and not necessarily by automatic rule. While the law does prohibit contact with members of organized gangs, there is no blanket prohibition from contact with anyone who has a criminal record. These policies, portrayed as protective, are more likely to be destabilizing and damaging. Reports by the Pew Trusts and the Urban Institute observe that this kind of enforcement turns parole into a punishment system rather than a rehabilitation system.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, critics like Petersilia and Travis argue that parole too frequently penalizes people for poverty or addiction rather than allowing them to heal or grow. Due to the absence of these sorts of support, parole merely constitutes an additional layer of punishment rather than a second

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<sup>15</sup> Gill, C., & Wilson, D. B. (2016a). Improving the success of reentry programs. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 44(3), 336–359. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854816682048>

<sup>16</sup> O'Connell, D. (2021, April). *It Starts with Reentry: Examining the Needs of Parolees in Illinois and the Actionable Goals of Prison Abolition*. The University of Chicago. [https://humanities-web.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/college/chicagostudies-prod/s3fs-public/2021-07/19\\_Chicago\\_Studies\\_WEB\\_V2.pdf](https://humanities-web.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/college/chicagostudies-prod/s3fs-public/2021-07/19_Chicago_Studies_WEB_V2.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Castellano, T; Soderstrom; Ringel, C. (1995). *NCJRS Virtual Library*. Evaluation of the Illinois Department of Corrections PreStart Program, Executive Summary | Office of Justice Programs. [https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/evaluation-illinois-department-corrections-prestart-program?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/evaluation-illinois-department-corrections-prestart-program?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

chance. Researchers Joan Petersilia and Jeremy Travis validate this suspicion, noting that employment and stability in the community are among the strongest predictors of successful reentry, but these must be invested in and planned for.<sup>18</sup>

The slope in which parolees are able to benefit from parole is not a linear one. Parolees often have long criminal histories accompanied with their incarcerated lifestyle of a structured routine, making life beyond the cells hard to adjust to. The circumstances don't make their situations easier as they are on constant watch for possible violations. For example, Katherine Montoya, a parole officer in Connecticut says "A lot of people think that being on parole is like you're free. They're not free, but there's going to be a measure of freedom that is going to be afforded to you."<sup>19</sup> However, for others parole can be the path towards a second chance. Another individual, Omari Amilli, spent time in prison and was later released with a hope to better his life. He stated that "people warned me there would be no opportunities waiting for me on the other side, that a criminal record is something you can't come back from."<sup>20</sup> Despite public criticism, Omari didn't let this pose as a barrier as he worked towards turning his is now an educator, public speaker, and an author working towards advocating for those impacted by the criminal justice system.

### **Success and Shortcomings alongside Social and Political Influences**

When looking at parole, there are often advantages and disadvantages influenced by a number of factors. Limited expenditure on prerelease preparation, substance abuse treatment, job training, and skill-building programs in prison decreases the chances of an individual successfully reintegrating into the community upon release.<sup>21</sup> Parolees are often released to their home communities or neighborhoods, with little to no money, and without the necessary identification needed to receive employment opportunities or public assistance. More than 40% of those released return to prison within three years, a phenomenon known as the "revolving door."<sup>22</sup> Parolees are also subject to petty violations, including disregarding mandatory curfews, associating with other offenders, having a positive drug test, and not reporting to their assigned parole department. When re-entering the community, individuals are given a new period of parole supervision, which can extend the parole supervision period because of frequent violations. As a result, parolees find themselves absentmindedly falling into an extended cycle of release, arrest, and reincarceration<sup>23</sup>—a lifestyle that doesn't make the transition from prison to the free world easier to obtain.

Many states across the country have attempted to reduce the rate of recidivism, including Illinois with the introduction of the PreStart Program. PreStart is a fundamental reshaping of the parole system in Illinois that, as mentioned, aims to prepare the inmates for life after prison and then

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<sup>18</sup> Solomon, A., Osborne, J., & Winterfield, L. (2008). Putting Public Safety First. *The Urban Institute: Justice Policy Center*.

<sup>19</sup> *Life on Parole*. *Frontline*, PBS, 18 July 2017, [www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/life-on-parole/transcript/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/life-on-parole/transcript/).

<sup>20</sup> Kane, Peter. "After Prison: 10 Stories of Second Chances." *University of Washington Magazine*, June 2019, [magazine.washington.edu/feature/after-prison-10-stories-of-second-chances/](http://magazine.washington.edu/feature/after-prison-10-stories-of-second-chances/).

<sup>21</sup> Travis, Jeremy, and Joan Petersilia. "Reentry Reconsidered: A New Look at an Old Question." *Crime & Delinquency*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2001, pp. 291–313. *NCBI*, doi:10.1177/0011128701047003001.

<sup>22</sup> Petersilia, Joan. "When Prisoners Return to the Community: Political, Economic, and Social Consequences." *Sentencing & Corrections*, no. 9, Nov. 2000. *NCBI*, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4288962/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4288962/).

<sup>23</sup> Lynch, James P., and William J. Sabol. "Prisoner Reentry in Perspective." *Crime Policy Report*, vol. 3, 2001, pp. 1–26.

help them to adjust to the community following release. This initiative was funded by the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority and expanded to the state prison system in 1991<sup>24</sup>. PreStart was unique from traditional parole because it deemphasizes the surveillance and supervision functions of parole for most offenders and instead emphasizes referrals to social services that might help releases integrate into society and avoid recidivism.<sup>25</sup> Restart rates within one year of release were somewhat lower for inmates released under the PreStart program (40%) than for inmates released before PreStart's implementation.<sup>26</sup>

Programs implemented on the state level have done an appropriate amount of work towards addressing the issues within parole enforcement and implementation. The success rate of parole seems to be dictated on a higher level, in this case, by the actions of the federal government. From the start of its implementation, parole has endured drastic changes as a result of evolving political climates. In the 1980s, under the Reagan administration, there was a shift in the philosophy and practice of parole supervision with an emphasis on monitoring, surveillance, and control.<sup>27</sup> The rehabilitative framework started to crumble as the "law - and - order" rhetoric upheld by Barry Goldwater transitioned into the "get-tough" policies of Ronald Reagan's administration.<sup>28</sup> The "War on Crime," the "War on Drugs," and the "Three-Strikes and You Are Out Laws" ushered in more severe penalties toward people exposed to criminal justice adjudication.<sup>29</sup> State agencies and legislators from the political spectrum further entrenched systemic discrimination against people of color, especially towards Black Americans.<sup>30</sup> According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 28% of people on probation and 38% of people on parole are African Americans.<sup>31</sup> In 2007, resident George W. Bush signed the Second Chance Act of 2007 to foster safer communities by aiding incarcerated individuals with reintegration into society through drug treatment, mentoring, and transitional services in partnership with local corrections agencies, faith-based, and community organizations. The Obama administration passed the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act of 2015, which mirrored some of the parole policies implemented by the Bush administration by providing adult reentry education grants, arrest guidance for public and Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Assisted Housing, and expanding technology training and jobs.<sup>32</sup> Despite the variation in initiatives produced and

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<sup>24</sup> Olson, David E., and Arthur J. Lurigio. *An Evaluation of the Illinois PreStart Program: A Program Designed to Prepare Inmates for Reentry and Reintegration*. Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, 1996, [archive.icjia.cloud/files/icjia/pdf/ResearchReports/IllPreStartProgram1996.pdf](https://archive.icjia.cloud/files/icjia/pdf/ResearchReports/IllPreStartProgram1996.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2020, July 31). *Revoked: How probation and parole feed mass incarceration*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/07/31/revoked/how-probation-and-parole-feed-mass-incarceration-united-states>

<sup>28</sup> Scheingold, S. A. (1984). *The politics of law and order: Street crime and public policy*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

<sup>29</sup> Porter, Lauren C. "Parole in the Era of Mass Incarceration: Evidence from the States." *Federal Sentencing Reporter*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2021. *SAGE Journals*, [journals.sagepub.com/reader/content/188bed7334b/10.1177/07340168211020811/format/epub/EPUB/xhtml/index.xhtml](https://journals.sagepub.com/reader/content/188bed7334b/10.1177/07340168211020811/format/epub/EPUB/xhtml/index.xhtml).

<sup>30</sup> Hinton, Elizabeth. *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America*. Harvard University Press, 2020; Porter, Lauren C. "Parole in the Era of Mass Incarceration: Evidence from the States." *Federal Sentencing Reporter*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2021, pp. 93–102; Hinton E. (2020). *From the war on poverty to the war on crime: The making of mass incarceration in America*. Harvard University Press.

<sup>31</sup> Moyd, Olinda. "Racial Disparities Inherent in America's Fragmented Parole System." *The Appeal*, 2021

<sup>32</sup> The White House. "FACT SHEET: President Obama Announces New Actions to Promote Rehabilitation and Reintegration for the Formerly-Incarcerated." *Office of the Press Secretary*, 2 Nov. 2015, National Archives,

implemented by each presidential administration, they all work in unison towards ensuring that the path of progression towards successful reentry and assimilation into society is in reach.

## **Looking Forward at Possibilities**

To address the issues identified in the current parole system, we propose two possible reforms that could serve as the initial steps toward further alleviating the challenges faced by parolees. Our research demonstrates that increased funding for housing support and mental health services for parolees could simultaneously reduce recidivism rates, enhance community safety, and decrease the overall costs imposed on the criminal justice system.

## **Housing Support**

Through our research, we found that stable housing is an important element in the successful reentry of parolees. When individuals do not have access to secure housing, it significantly increases their risk of reoffending because people without stable housing face serious material hardship that can push them towards increased criminal behavior as a way to improve their circumstances. Research shows that the negative impact of housing instability is particularly clear among lower-risk offenders through its ability to encourage an escalation in previously minor criminal behavior, showing that secure housing can actually prevent people from getting deeper into the criminal justice system through property crimes, minor offenses, or supervision violations.<sup>33</sup> However, parolees face substantial barriers when trying to secure housing despite its importance in successful reintegration. Many parolees encounter financial obstacles since they often leave prison with limited resources and may struggle to afford deposits, rent, or meet basic income requirements that landlords typically demand. Additionally, relationships with family and friends who might otherwise provide temporary housing are often strained due to events that occurred before or during incarceration.<sup>34</sup>

While Cook County's Just Housing Amendment offers some protection by prohibiting landlords from considering convictions older than three years when screening and rejecting potential tenants, this safeguard does not protect parolees with more recent criminal histories.<sup>35</sup> Though Cook County has taken steps to address these housing challenges through programs like Cook County Reconnect, which allocates \$23 million specifically for rental assistance to support individuals reentering their communities,<sup>36</sup> these efforts represent just the beginning of what is needed to meaningfully impact parolee outcomes. Given the research demonstrating the connection between stable housing and reduced recidivism that we came across, expanding these rental assistance programs could generate significant and beneficial outcomes not only for individual parolees but for community safety and public spending overall. Therefore, we believe

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obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/02/fact-sheet-president-obama-announces-new-actions-promote-rehabilitation.

<sup>33</sup> Jacobs, L. A., & Gottlieb, A. (2020). The Effect of Housing Circumstances on Recidivism: Evidence From a Sample of People on Probation in San Francisco. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 47(9), 1097–1115. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854820942285>

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> *Just Housing Amendment Information for Landlords*. (2024). Cook County. <https://www.cookcountyil.gov/content/just-housing-amendment-information-landlords>

<sup>36</sup> *Justice Advisory Council Reentry Services*. (2023). Cook County. <https://www.cookcountyil.gov/JACReentry>

that Cook County should consider increasing funding and broadening eligibility for housing support programs.

## **Mental Health Support**

A large part of the rehabilitation success of people on parole is dictated by their decision-making and lifestyle choices, both of which are highly influenced by mental health. Mental health inequality is a long-standing issue that continues to go unaddressed, prohibiting rehabilitation and adding to the rates of reincarceration.<sup>37</sup> “The prevalence of mental health conditions among individuals in contact with criminal justice systems is disproportionately high.”<sup>38</sup> Two core identifiable problems for people on parole regarding their mental health are a higher percentage of substance abuse problems and higher mortality rates.<sup>39</sup>

For many individuals on parole, while incarceration might have taken the substance away, it did not teach them how to navigate substances practically. This discrepancy cannot be ignored as a prevailing issue, as three out of every ten people on parole struggle with a substance abuse problem.<sup>40</sup> Adapting to life outside of the highly regulated prison environment and not knowing how to navigate substances creates heightened risks to a successful rehabilitation process. Additionally, in many cases, mental health issues get so severe that they result in a higher rate of suicide.<sup>41</sup> Both of these problems need treatment options that take finances and support that people on parole are not receiving. These inequalities must be addressed with the financial support necessary to provide these individuals with the guidance they need for successful rehabilitation. A successful rehabilitation allows individuals on parole to not only come back to society, but to have the tools they need to be a stable and productive member of society.

## **The Long-Term Vision**

Reincarceration is a significant financial investment in the erosion of human rights and humanity itself. Including the legal, criminal law policing, public correctional agencies, and public employees, “the actual total cost of imprisonment in the country amounted to US \$182 billion a year.”<sup>42</sup> Higher reincarceration rates can be avoided through effective rehabilitation during parole. Rehabilitation starts with rehumanizing. To assist people on parole with the tools they need to transition into their own productive space in society, they must first be seen as humans. Humans that need community, humans that need support, humans that need OUR support.

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<sup>37</sup> Widra, E., & Jones, A. (2023, April 3). *Mortality, health, and poverty: The unmet needs of people on probation and parole*. Prison Policy Initiative. [https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2023/04/03/nsduh\\_probation\\_parole/](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2023/04/03/nsduh_probation_parole/)

<sup>38</sup> Otto, D. H. (2021, August 25). *Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority*. ICJIA. <https://icjia.illinois.gov/researchhub/articles/an-analysis-of-risk-factors-for-suicide-among-justice-involved-illinois-violent-death-decedents>

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Widra, E., & Jones, A. (2023, April 3). *Mortality, health, and poverty: The unmet needs of people on probation and parole*. Prison Policy Initiative. [https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2023/04/03/nsduh\\_probation\\_parole/](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2023/04/03/nsduh_probation_parole/)

<sup>41</sup> Otto, D. H. (2021, August 25). *Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority*. ICJIA. <https://icjia.illinois.gov/researchhub/articles/an-analysis-of-risk-factors-for-suicide-among-justice-involved-illinois-violent-death-decedents>

<sup>42</sup> Brooker, C. (2023, January 31). *The role of probation in Mental Health Support - new recommendations in Europe*. Penal Reform International. <https://www.penalreform.org/blog/the-role-of-probation-in-mental-health-support/>

## **Application**

Parole has, and will continue to, play a formative role in Illinois' criminal justice system. Historically, parole allowed parolees to return home to a supportive community and better access to future employment opportunities. However, in the 1980s, parole's rehabilitative structure was largely diminished, with the federal government citing a lack of transparency and unfairness in parole decisions, leading to a shift towards more punitive measures in the legal system. Additionally, as financial restraints and economic pressures grew in the prison system as a whole, parole and other reentry programs received less and less financial support. As a result, parole shifted to focus less on supported rehabilitation and more on a systematic checklist that officers had to cycle through.

In the present day, many parolees have faced discrimination post-release, with people emphasizing the stigma around employers hiring people with past criminal records. Such a criticism only demonstrates one of the many obstacles that parolees face. Whether due to a lack of financial and mental support, insufficient education and on-the-job training, substance abuse, or frequent minor violations of parole terms, many parolees find themselves in difficult situations that result in a cycle of release, arrest, and reincarceration. The gap that exists between the idealized image of parole and the system of parole in practice remains big, and it is a difference that continues to demand attention and necessitate reform.

Many steps can be taken in order to best implement the potential reforms that we have proposed. For example, to advocate for the increase of funding in housing support and mental health support, we can donate to organizations such as Reform for Illinois, which allows voters to address where and how money is spent politically in Illinois; the Joyce Foundation, which aims to redefine the justice system's response to the incarceration of young adults convicted of nonviolent gun offenses; and the Chicago Community Trust, which works to advocate for equity across the Chicagoland.<sup>43</sup>

People are also able to volunteer with organizations such as Restore Justice and the Chicago Justice Project, both of which aim to ensure equity in Chicago's justice system.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, we can also dedicate our time and voices as voters to the implementation of parole in a healthy, fair way to parolees.<sup>45</sup> Writing letters and calling Illinois Congressional representatives, state officials, and mayoral offices can help Chicago and Illinois representatives to understand what voters want in regards to parole. Whether calling the offices of Congressional representatives like Sen. Tammy Duckworth, Sen. Richard Durbin, Rep. Janice Schakowsky, and Rep. Mike Quigley, or Illinois Governor JB Pritzker, we can use our voices to influence programs, especially on a federal level, that go towards assisting parolees re-enter communities fairly and smoothly.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Reform for Illinois, <https://www.reformforillinois.org/>.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> "States in the Senate: Illinois," United States Senate. <https://www.senate.gov/states/IL/intro.htm>.

Talking to political leaders gives them a better understanding of what their voters want, and through their office, these representatives have the ability to implement bills and legal change to improve the parole system. Through voicing our thoughts in reforming the parole system using letters, calls, donations, and volunteering, we hope to not only to reform a flawed system, but also emphasize the importance of humanization parole and rehabilitation. Amongst the implementation of programs focused on stable housing, sufficient mental health support, and proper resources to return into their community, we must recognize that parole, at its foundation, should start as a support system aimed to set our community members up for future success.

Ultimately, parole does not act as a singular step in the system. By taking action to decrease reincarceration rates and increase effective rehabilitation, we highlight how, and why, parole should be implemented as a path forward. Parole should affirm the humanity and morality of our community, seeking to rehabilitate, reform, and restore, and it is up to us to raise our voices to ensure that parolees receive the support they deserve.



Chicago Appleseed Center for Fair Courts is a collaborative 501(c)(3) non-profit organization advocating for fair, accessible, and anti-racist courts in Chicago, Cook County, and across the state of Illinois.



The Chicago Council of Lawyers is Chicago's public interest bar association, advocating for the fair and effective administration of justice.

This report was researched and written collaboratively by the members of the Future Justice Lawyers of Chicago.



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