

A Fresh Start or the Devil You Know? Examining Relationships Between Release Location  
Choices, Community Experiences, and Recidivism for High-Risk Parolees

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### Abstract

This study investigated the effects of residential relocation in a sample of 282 high-risk male offenders paroled from New Zealand prisons. Initially we compared those returning to their old neighborhoods (*devil you know*) and those released to a new location (*fresh start*). This second category was then further divided: those released to a new location voluntarily (*fresh start-voluntary*), vs. those forced to start anew at the behest of the parole board that was releasing them (*fresh start-duress*). All three categories were then compared on the quality of their community experiences and recidivism. Results indicated that parolees returning by choice to either their old neighborhood or a new location each were reconvicted in the first year after release at approximately the same rate; however, parolees relocating to a new area at the direction of the parole board (under duress) were reconvicted at a higher rate than those in either of the voluntary location categories. Significant group differences in ratings of indices of community life quality were few, but there was some indications that compared to those choosing to return to a familiar location, making a voluntary residential relocation may lead to better parole experiences, particularly in terms of avoiding criminal peers, and that making a residential relocation under duress may lead to poorer parole experiences than for those returning to a familiar location.

**A Fresh Start or the Devil You Know: Examining Relationships Between Release Location Choices, Community Experiences, and Recidivism for High-Risk Parolees**

“Better the devil you know than the devil you don’t” (Titelman, 1996). So goes the 16<sup>th</sup> century Irish saying that asserts that known circumstances, even if negative, may not be as difficult to deal with as that which is new and unknown. But does this philosophy apply to release plans? In prison, people often report they want to desist from criminal activity (Polaschek & Yesberg, 2015; Serin & Lloyd, 2009) by making a fresh start when they are released. In planning for a good re-entry, some decide to return to areas where they have previously offended, with previous known risk factors. Others go farther, by planning their “start over” in a new location. This study examines whether “the devil you know” (i.e., a return to a place where one grew up or has ties to previous employers, family or friends) or a fresh start in a new place is associated with better experiences in the community and a lower rate of recidivism.

Recidivism statistics appear to tell a different story. In the US, around 30% of released offenders will be rearrested within 6 months of returning to the community (Petersilia, 2003). Within three years, two-thirds of people released from US prisons will be rearrested and half will be reincarcerated (Durose, Cooper, & Snyder, 2014). For those previously judged to be at high risk, these statistics are still more discouraging. New Zealand research shows that for high-risk offenders —approximately the top 25-30% of the prison population in terms of estimated risk of reimprisonment (personal communication with P. Johnston, September 2016)—the odds of returning to prison are as great as 60% within the first 100 days of release (Nadesu, 2007). One study found that on average their first reoffense leading to conviction occurred just three and a half months after release on parole, although most of these convictions resulted not in imprisonment, but in community sentences (Dickson, Polaschek & Casey, 2013).

These findings are unsurprising when we consider the many challenges ex-prisoners face re-entering the community. The reality of having to feed oneself, pay bills, and seek assistance can be extremely difficult for released offenders, who may find themselves “just exhausted trying to live outside” (Opie, 2012, p. 139). Released offenders are a vulnerable population, with widespread problems, such as poor education and employment histories, antisocial peer groups, and high rates of substance abuse and mental health difficulties (Andrews & Bonta, 2010; X et al., 2013; Gunnison & Helfgott, 2013). Releasing offenders into the community places strain on community resources and family ties (Seiter & Kadela, 2003). Often, treatment needs go unaddressed in prison, and offenders return to impoverished and high-crime neighborhoods (Petersilia, 2003). Prison disrupts an offender’s accommodation and social support networks, and the perceived stigma of going to prison can affect an ex-prisoner for some time after they are released (Moore, Stuewig, & Tangney, 2016).

Surviving re-entry from prison to the community is more successful when prisoners have better release plans developed prior to parole (Dickson et al., 2013). A comprehensive personalized release plan for factors such as accommodation, social support, and employment that includes specific strategies for managing challenges such as encounters with antisocial associates, and maximizing an individual’s protective factors may lead to better outcomes in the community (Dickson et al., 2013).

Whether ex-prisoners relocate to somewhere new following release, or simply return to an old, familiar neighborhood may be pertinent to their likelihood of recidivating. On the one hand, returning to a familiar area may enhance access to social support, employment and stable accommodation. However, it may also expose parolees to known gang and criminal peer associations and local knowledge regarding access to drugs and criminal opportunities; after all, this is usually an area in which they have previously offended. And on the other

hand, relocating to a new and unfamiliar environment may work to disrupt their pattern of criminal behavior by separating them from criminal associates and networks, and by reducing their exposure to criminal opportunities. Sampson and Laub's (2003) life-course theory of desistance supports this idea: residential relocation might act as a 'turning point' in an individual's life course of crime and put them on the path to desistance. Parolees voluntarily moving somewhere to start over might be more inclined to take advantage of opportunities afforded by the new location to break old offending habits and alliances. But moving away from one's original neighborhood can also introduce difficulties, such as lack of social support, low accommodation stability, and no one familiar to sponsor the parolee into employment. And there is always the possibility that in a low social capital environment, socially isolated "fresh starters" will seek out familiar higher risk types of environments to fill the void (Loeber & Ahonen, 2014).

Some research indicates that moving to a new area may lower an individual's risk of recidivism. Kirk (2009; 2012) found lower 12-month reincarceration rates for Louisiana ex-prisoners who moved away from their former parishes after the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina. The negative relationship between residential change and reimprisonment continued throughout a three-year follow-up period, implying that, rather than a mere 'quick fix', residential relocation could be a "catalyst for true behavioral change" (Kirk, 2012, p. 347). But it is not known whether ex-prisoners who moved were able to do so because of greater social capital outside the area. And the nature of the neighborhood itself also needs to be considered. A study of children showed that moving neighborhoods within Chicago was associated with greater rates of exposure to and perpetration of violence; and moving farther afield (out of the city) was associated with reduced levels of violent behavior and exposure to violence (Sharkey and Sampson, 2010). But these differences were explained by the quality of the school context and their engagement with it, perceptions of control over their new

environment, and fear of violence, highlighting the importance of considering the wider context associated with moving to a new location.

A recent pilot study used a randomized control trial (RCT) design to test whether voluntary residential relocation to a new city would reduce the likelihood of recidivism among former prisoners (Kirk, Barnes, Hyatt, & Kearley, 2017). The authors compared a ‘treatment group’ who received six months free housing away from their home jurisdiction with two control groups: one that received the same free housing within their home jurisdiction and a second that received no free housing. Although the study was a pilot and included a small sample ( $n=30$ ), the authors found preliminary support for lower rearrest rates among the treatment group compared to the two control groups, and lower rearrest rates among the control group that received free housing in their home jurisdiction compared to the control group that did not. The results suggest voluntary residential relocation may decrease newly released prisoners’ likelihood of recidivism, especially when it comes with free housing.

But what about enforced residential relocation; when offenders are *required* as a condition of release, to move to a new location? For sex offenders, residential restrictions are often imposed in the belief that they will reduce the risk of sexual reoffending by reducing access to victims. For general or violent offenders, residential restrictions may be imposed (as a condition or parole) to keep individuals away from known criminal associates, victims, or local knowledge regarding crime opportunities. But empirical evidence suggests this strategy does not work (Burchfield, 2011; Levenson, 2008; Nobles et al., 2012). Instead, dictating where offenders can and, more importantly, cannot live may actually heighten the risk of reoffending, by increasing hardship and causing friction in domains predictive of recidivism (e.g., accommodation, employment, and social support; Levenson, 2008). For example, in a survey of 135 sex offenders in Florida, 44% of those forced to relocate were unable to live

with supportive family members, and 60% reported emotional distress resulting from the residential restrictions (Levenson & Cotter, 2005).

Further research – particularly with non-sex offenders – is needed to ascertain the effect of returning to one’s previous neighborhood after release from prison, as opposed to making a fresh start (either voluntarily or non-voluntarily) in a new area. In particular, it is important to examine the resources associated with each option, and the quality of the life that is established as a result.

### **Introduction to the current study**

In the current study, we investigated the effects of residential relocation on the community experiences and recidivism rates of high-risk ex-prisoners released to the community from New Zealand prisons. Specifically, we examined the effects of returning to the *devil you know* (DK) versus making a *fresh start* (FS). We also tested whether making a *voluntary fresh start* (FS-voluntary) leads to better outcomes than making a *fresh start under duress* (FS-duress). Firstly, we hypothesize that over the first two months in the community, FS parolees will have significantly better community experiences than DK parolees in terms of avoiding criminal peers, using leisure time, accessing community support, and health. Conversely, we predict DK parolees will have significantly better experiences in terms of accommodation quality, prosocial support, employment and finances compared to FS parolees. Second, we hypothesize that residential relocation will predict reconviction, such that FS parolees will exhibit significantly lower recidivism rates than DK parolees; but this pattern will depend on whether parolees are making a fresh start voluntarily or under duress. We predict that those making a FS voluntarily will have significantly lower rates of recidivism than both DK parolees and those making a FS under duress.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

This study draws on archival data from the Parole Project. The sample for this project consisted of 304 high-risk male parolees who were released from New Zealand prisons between November 2010 and January 2014.<sup>1</sup> However, 22 participants were removed for the purposes of the current study due to having fulltime Restricted Accommodation (i.e., they were released to a heavily restrictive residential facility with limited scope to participate in the community), bringing the final sample for analysis to 282 high-risk parolees.

The average age of the sample was 32 years ( $SD = 9$ ); 65% identified as New Zealand Māori, 26% as New Zealand European, 6% as Pasifika, and 3% other ethnicities. Overall, parolees had an average 74% chance of returning to prison within five years, based on a static measure of risk described below ( $M_{RoC*RoI} = .74$ ,  $SD = .12$ ). Parolees had amassed an average of 69 prior convictions ( $SD = 53$ ) and 5 violent convictions ( $SD = 4$ ). Most participants (52%) were serving sentences for violent offences (such as assault, aggravated robbery or homicide) or dishonesty offences (33%, such as theft or burglary), followed by sexual offences (6%), drug or anti-social offences (5%), property damage (2%), and administrative offences (1%; e.g., failure to answer bail). The sample was sentenced to an average of almost four years in prison ( $SD = 31$  months) and were to serve an average of 11 months of community-based parole ( $SD = 7$  months).<sup>2</sup>

Approximately half of the sample ( $n = 135$ ) had completed a residential prison-based rehabilitation program at one of New Zealand's four High-Risk Special Treatment Units (or HRSTUs). The other half of the sample ( $n = 147$ ) were equally high-risk offenders, but were released either with no formal program involvement, or after one or more of a variety of alternative prison-based interventions. (e.g., a motivational program, individual psychological treatment, or an intensive substance abuse treatment program). All had sentence and personal characteristics that made them eligible for the intensive high-risk treatment, but a variety of reasons led to their not attending the HRSTU, including lack of time left in sentence,

disinterest, reluctance to sever geographical ties to family, employment, lack of awareness about program, and participation in other programs.

### **Categorizing Planned Release Circumstances**

**Plan development.** All prisoners in this study appeared to the national parole board prior to their release. Release plans are typically constructed by each prisoner with variable assistance from staff, their practical suitability is checked by community probation staff prior to the prisoner appearing to a parole board hearing, and in cases where a first application for release is declined, the original plan may then be refined in response to feedback from the board. In some cases, if a board appearance is the last possible appearance before the end of the prison sentence (i.e., release is inevitable), the parole board may require that aspects of the plan be changed (e.g., the release location). This change is usually due to the recent collapse of the planned arrangement or because the board does not approve what the prisoner proposes.

**Categorizing plans.** Evidence for categorizing release plan type came primarily from interviews conducted with participants prior to release, and file documentation (e.g., parole board reports, psychological treatment reports, sentence plans). Individuals' release plans were first categorized as either DK (*devil you know*) or FS (*fresh start*). Evidence for categorizing a plan as DK came from indications that an offender was returning to a familiar location, moving to a different suburb of the same city, or returning to his previous place of employment, or to family he previously resided with or near. If an offender articulated that he did not know anyone in his new area, did not know the town, was moving away from a gang area, or specifically articulated his plans to make a fresh start, this was considered evidence of a FS plan. For a fresh start, the new location needed to be far enough from the old one for travel between neighborhoods to be difficult. FS plans were then further classified as either *voluntarily* made, or imposed *under duress*. Under duress plans were distinctive for the

evidence that the prisoner felt he was being compelled to relocate – usually backed up by parole board reports which specified a change in location was a condition of their release – and frequently showed no commitment to the new plan. These offenders often reported they planned to move back to their old neighbourhood as soon as their probation conditions would allow.

**Inter-rater reliability.** Raters were blind to recidivism outcomes when coding for plan category. The first author (SR) first categorized all files. To calculate inter-rater reliability, a second rater independently re-coded 36 files (12% of the total sample). The overall unweighted *kappa* was 0.79 (with a 95% confidence interval of 0.57 to 1.00), indicating a substantial level of agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). A second rater also independently coded a subset of FS files into voluntary or under duress subgroups (20% of the total number of FS parolees). The *kappa* was 0.76 (95% CI [0.45, 1.0]), indicating a substantial level of agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Where differences occurred, they were resolved by discussion and the final agreed categorization was used for analysis.

### **Release plan quality**

Release plan quality (RPQ) was measured using a scale revised for this study, based on the original release plan quality coding protocol created by Dickson and colleagues (Dickson et al., 2013; Dickson & Polaschek, 2014). The revised scale contained a single item for each of the following: Accommodation, Employment, Prosocial Support, Antisocial Associates, and Idiosyncratic Risk Factors. Scores range between 5 and 20; a higher score indicates a stronger quality release plan. RPQ ratings were made independently of plan type categorizations. Inter-reliability was calculated based on 50 files that were scored by both raters. The overall linear weighted *kappa* was 0.79; 95%CI [.74, .85]). Differences were resolved by discussion to give a final score for data entry.

### **Quality of community experiences two months post-release**

Interviews were conducted with each parolee, and independently, with his parole officer at about 2 months after the prisoner had been released. Each interview was conducted by a fully trained member of the original project team, usually by telephone and at a time of the research participant's choosing. During the interview, interviewees were asked to make Likert scale ratings on a number of items measuring the quality of the parolees' community experiences, including: accommodation, employment, finances, personal support, community support, avoiding criminal peers, physical health, emotional health, and use of leisure time. Ratings were made on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 representing poor performance or low satisfaction on an item to 6 representing excellent performance or high satisfaction. For example, both parolees and parole officers were asked, "Rate overall how well your/their accommodation is working out so far?" on a scale from 1 being pretty bad/a big problem to 6 being great. These ratings were extracted directly from the project database for these analyses. Data were available for 193 people.<sup>3</sup> Not all participants answered all interview questions and results were calculated using valid responses only.

### **Risk assessment instruments**

**The Risk of Re-conviction X Risk of Imprisonment (RoC\*RoI).** The RoC\*RoI is an actuarial risk assessment scale based on static risk factors. It was developed in New Zealand and validated on two independent samples drawn from all those convicted of an imprisonable offence: each sample comprised 24,000 offenders (Bakker, Riley, & O'Malley, 1999). The RoC\*RoI score is the probability that in the next five years, an offender will be reconvicted for an offence resulting in an imprisonment sentence. Scores range from 0 to 1 and offenders are considered 'high-risk' if they have a RoC\*RoI score of at least 0.7. The static factors incorporated into the RoC\*RoI algorithm consist of criminal history variables such as number of previous convictions and demographic factors (e.g., age; Bakker, et al., 1999). Analysis during development showed the RoC\*RoI had moderate to high predictive

validity (AUC = .76; Bakker, et al., 1999). More recent analysis has shown the RoC\*RoI to have good predictive validity over three years post-release (Nadesu, 2007).

**The Violence Risk Scale (VRS).** The VRS (Wong & Gordon, 2000) is a 26-item staff-rated risk instrument that assesses 6 static (e.g., age at first violent offence) and 20 dynamic (e.g., criminal attitudes, impulsivity, interpersonal aggression) risk factors, particularly designed to measure change in custodial treatment. Scores over 50 on the VRS indicate a high risk of future violence, based on Canadian norms (Wong & Gordon, 2006). VRS scores have been found to predict general and violent recidivism, as have change scores (Lewis, Olver, & Wong, 2013; Wong & Gordon, 2006). Previous research from New Zealand has found VRS scores to be significantly predictive of recidivism (e.g., AUC = .73; Dickson et al., 2013).

### **Recidivism data**

Recidivism was defined as any new conviction following release. We collected data on any reconviction, reconviction for violence and reconviction leading to imprisonment. Violent reconviction and reimprisonment give an indication of seriousness of reoffending. Recidivism was measured at 6 and 12 months following release. Recidivism figures were extracted from the Department of Corrections' Integrated Offender Management System (IOMS) database in October 2014. In the 6 months following release, 38% ( $n=108$ ) of the overall sample was convicted of a new criminal offence: 10% ( $n=28$ ) were convicted of a violent offence, and 29% ( $n=82$ ) were reimprisoned for a new offence (not necessarily a violent offence). In the 12 months following release, 61% ( $n=173$ ) of the sample were reconvicted, 20% ( $n=57$ ) were convicted of a new violent offence, and 42% of the sample ( $n=118$ ) were reimprisoned.

### **Analytical strategy**

All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 20. First, we compared the two categories of those returning to their old neighborhoods (“devil you know”; DK) and those making a fresh start (FS) on demographic and risk related measures, using independent samples t-tests and chi-square tests of association. We then tested whether the community experiences of parolees returning to their old neighborhoods differed from those making a fresh start, using independent samples t-tests. We measured effect sizes for significant relationships using Hedges *g*. Next, we used Kaplan-Meier survival analysis to compare the recidivism rates of the two groups. Kaplan Meier survival analysis is a non-parametric method that takes into account time to recidivism and allows for censored data. For each group, a survival curve is created and significant differences across survival curves can then be tested. Finally, we split the FS group into voluntary FS (FS-voluntary) vs. those starting afresh under duress (FS-duress) and compared these three groups on the same outcome measures, using one-way ANOVAs (with Bonferroni post-hoc tests) and Kaplan-Meier survival analysis.

## Results

### Comparing Devil You Know vs. Fresh Start Plans

Over two-thirds of the sample (70%,  $n=197$ ) were categorized as having a DK plan and 30% ( $n=85$ ) made a fresh start. Table 1 compares these two groups on demographic and risk-related measures. As shown in the table, there were few differences between the two groups. Chi-square tests also showed that neither ethnicity ( $X^2[3] = 6.64, p = .084$ ) nor type of index offence ( $X^2[6] = 7.46, p = .281$ ) were significantly different between the two groups. However, FS parolees were significantly older than DK parolees at release (a small effect) and FS parolees had served more time in prison on their current sentence than DK parolees (a moderate effect). Neither age at release nor days served were significantly predictive of

recidivism, so we did not control for these variables in subsequent analyses. Levels of static and dynamic risk (RoC\*RoI and VRS) and the overall quality of parolees' release plans were equivalent for the two categories, as was the proportion of HRSTU completers between the two categories,  $X^2(1) = .032, p = .857$ , suggesting we did not need to take these variable into account.

Insert Table 1 here

**Two-month community experiences.** Next, we examined the first research question by comparing the community experiences in the first two months after release for parolees making a fresh start (FS) and those returning to their old neighborhood (DK). Comparisons for these two plan types are reported in Table 2, by informant (parolee or probation officer). Recall that we hypothesized specifically that FS parolees would do significantly better at avoiding criminal peers, using leisure time, accessing community support and health. Conversely, we predicted DK parolees would have significantly better experiences of accommodation, personal support, employment and finances.

Independent samples *t*-tests on parolee-rated community experiences revealed only one significant difference between the two groups. As predicted, FS parolees rated their success at staying away from criminal peers significantly higher than DK parolees (a medium effect). Probation officers' ratings of parolees' community experiences also revealed one significant difference between the two groups. Again, as expected, FS parolees were rated by their probation officers as having significantly better community support than DK parolees (a small to medium effect). No other hypothesized differences were significant. We also compared the stability of parolees' accommodation during the follow-up period (i.e., how many different addresses they reported living during their first two months in the community). There was no significant difference in accommodation instability between the

two groups,  $X^2(6) = 4.39$ ,  $p = .624$ . The majority of parolees reported living in only one place since release (78% for DK and 74% for FS).

Insert Table 2 here

**Recidivism.** To determine whether release destination predicted reconviction, we conducted Kaplan-Meier survival analyses comparing the recidivism rates of DK and FS parolees at each of 6- and 12-months post-release. As shown in Table 3, analyses indicated no significant differences between DK and FS parolees for any recidivism category.

Insert Table 3 here

### **Comparing Devil You Know vs. Fresh Start Plans: Voluntary and Under Duress**

Next, we classified FS parolees into those making a fresh start voluntarily (FS-voluntary) and those making a fresh start under duress (FS-duress) and re-ran the analyses. The FS-voluntary group comprised 22% of all eligible parolees ( $n=61$ ), and the plans of 9% of parolees ( $n=24$ ) were classified as FS-duress. We conducted one-way ANOVAs to compare parolees with the three types of plans, on the same demographic and risk-related measures as before (see Table 4). No significant differences were found between the three groups on any risk or criminal history variables examined.<sup>4</sup> However, there was a significant difference between the groups on the quality of their release plans. Post-hoc tests using Bonferroni adjustments revealed that FS-voluntary parolees scored significantly higher on total RPQ score than parolees with FS-duress plans. The average total RPQ score of DK parolees did not differ significantly from either FS sample.

Insert Table 4 here

**Two-month community experiences.** Next, we compared parolees with DK, FS-voluntary and FS-duress plans on experiences in the community, as rated by parolees and their probation officers. As reported in Table 5, ANOVA results indicated that the only experience in the community on which the three groups differed significantly was parolees'

self-reported success at staying away from criminal peers. Bonferroni post-hoc tests revealed that FS- voluntary parolees rated their success in avoiding criminal peers significantly more highly than DK parolees. Ratings of the FS-duress group on avoidance of criminal peers did not differ significantly from DK or FS- voluntary groups.

Insert Table 5 here

**Recidivism.** Finally, we compared parolees with each of the three types of release plans on recidivism. Proportions and Kaplan-Meier chi-squared statistics are reported in Table 3. Findings showed significant differences between the three groups for violent reconviction at 6 months, and for reimprisonment at 12 months (overall effect sizes were small; Cramer's  $V = .15$  and  $.13$ , respectively). Follow-up analyses indicated that significantly more FS-duress parolees were reconvicted than either DK and FS-voluntary parolees on these outcome measures. Specifically, a significantly larger proportion of FS-duress parolees than FS-voluntary parolees had been convicted of a violent offence by six months ( $X^2(1) = 4.47, p = .034$ ), and reimprisoned by 12 months ( $X^2(1) = 5.81, p = .016$ ).<sup>5</sup> Additionally, a significantly larger proportion of FS-duress parolees than DK parolees had been convicted of a violent offence by six months ( $X^2(1) = 6.40, p = .011$ ), and reimprisoned by 12 months ( $X^2(1) = 5.48, p = .019$ ). There were no significant differences between the recidivism rates of DK and voluntary FS groups for either violent reconviction at 6 months ( $X^2(1) = .02, p = .898$ ), or reimprisonment at 12 months ( $X^2(1) = .33, p = .564$ ). As can be seen in the bottom half of Table 3, although not all of the comparisons were significant at  $p \leq .05$  level, the trend in recidivism rates was for FS-duress parolees to have consistently higher rates of recidivism across all reconviction outcomes than either DK or FS-voluntary parolees.

## Discussion

This study explored the effect of the type of residential relocation plan a parolee makes on the short-term community experiences and later recidivism rates of high-risk parolees. We

asked, does making a fresh start in a new area following release from prison lead to better experiences and lower levels of recidivism than returning to one's old neighborhood?

We first divided a sample of high-risk male parolees into two groups: those returning to a familiar neighborhood (*devil you know* or DK) and those moving to a new area (*fresh start* or FS). Findings showed no difference in mean recidivism rates between parolees in these two groups. Plans were judged to be equal in quality prior to release, regardless of destination. Those who did return to their former home area rated themselves as significantly less successful in avoiding criminal peers, and their probation officers rated them as having less community support, but there were otherwise no differences in actual experiences in the domains measured in the first two months of parole. These findings are encouraging, particularly because external agents (e.g., release planners, parole boards) may be concerned that when a parolee is returning to their old neighborhood, it will be harder to avoid risk factors that previously were influential (e.g., criminal peers) and that increased risk of recidivism will result.

When FS parolees were divided into those moving to a new area voluntarily and those moving under duress, a slightly different pattern emerged. FS-duress men had significantly poorer release plans, possibly because their personal commitment to the plan was low. Their actual community experiences were not distinctively different from either DK or FS-voluntary men, except on self-ratings of criminal peer avoidance. But a significantly larger proportion of FS-duress parolees had been reconvicted of a violent offence by 6 months and had been reimprisoned by one-year post-release, than either of the other two groups. These men were not notably different on either of the risk estimates—the VRS, or RoC\*RoI—which predict respectively, imprisonment, and reconviction for violence. No other differences in recidivism rates were significant, although all showed the same pattern: parolees making a

fresh start under duress had consistently less favorable outcomes in the community across all recidivism indices than the other two groups.

These findings are consistent with research on the effects of enforced residential restrictions for sexual offenders, which suggests that being compelled to re-establish oneself in a new area may be associated with unfavorable outcomes including elevated recidivism rates (Burchfield, 2011; Nobles et al., 2012; Willis, 2010). Although sexual offenders and high-risk offenders are somewhat distinct populations—they have distinctly different predicted recidivism rates including types of offence leading to reconviction—our results tentatively suggest it would be valuable to conduct further research comparing these two groups. It is possible that dictating where offenders can, and, more importantly, cannot live may actually heighten their risk of reoffending. Our findings showed no significant differences in community experiences for the FS under duress group compared to the other two groups, but we also did not have detailed information on why the parole board insisted on relocation. For example, it could be the case that psychological factors (such as ‘reactance’; Brehm & Brehm, 1981) are at play. Forcing a given outcome upon an individual may result in that outcome becoming less attractive to that individual, and an alternative but unavailable outcome gaining in appeal. Or, it could be that structural characteristics about the new location has a greater impact (e.g., poorer social support, employment, accommodation). It is also possible that they were compelled to relocate because the parole board considered that these offenders were failing to recognize substantial inadequacies in their original plans, or showing a lack of commitment to avoiding future offending, compelling the board to do what they could to improve the likelihood of success by way of release requirements. Future research should examine the mechanisms that lead more FS under duress parolees to be reconvicted.

There were a number of limitations to this study. It suffered from low statistical power due, in part, to small and distinctly unbalanced group sizes. Some of the 282 original participants did not consent to be interviewed at two months post-release, and of those who did, not all answered every question. We do not have information on non-responding parolees' perspectives of how they were faring in the community. Probation officer ratings were available for many of the non-responders and the fact that there were few differences between probation officer ratings of parolees' community experiences suggests selective attrition is a less serious problem here than in some other studies (Shinkfield & Graffam, 2009). But it still may be, for instance, that those participants who failed to consent to be interviewed in the community were those who were struggling the most but their difficulties were not picked up by the supervising probation officer, or they may simply have been less committed to desistance. Consistent with the possibility of undetected differences in non-responders' community experiences, additional analyses did show that non-responding parolees were significantly more likely to reoffend on a number of recidivism indices than those who consented to be interviewed.

Finally, we also do not know exactly what prompted people to choose relocation vs. returning to more familiar surroundings. Although plan quality and actual experiences were similar for each option, we do not know how people's plans were developed in the first place, so we cannot definitively link planning and use of associated community resources with the outcomes here. Although previous research has emphasized the importance of relocation, the current study suggests that it may not be the fact of relocation per se, but the quality of the overall plan that matters, and whether the prisoner was willing to go along with it. It is plausible that those making a fresh start are committed to doing so because they know they have poor options in their former home areas, or have been offered opportunities in a new

area that are personally attractive. Our methodology was not suited to detecting these sorts of individual differences.

The relative levels of social difficulties and criminogenic characteristics of the neighborhoods may also be important (Sharkey & Sampson, 2010). Neighborhood factors can predict both self-reported and official rates of criminal behavior (Kubrin & Stewart, 2006; Sampson, Morenoff, & Raudenbush, 2005). We did not include indices of neighborhood characteristics in the analyses here. So, it may be that parolees making a voluntary fresh start relocated to relatively more advantaged areas than where they previously lived, whereas parolees returning to the devil they know came from neighborhoods that were relatively less deprived. The release destinations of parolees making a fresh start under duress could also have been more criminogenic neighborhoods. Recent research with this sample found that most release neighborhood characteristics, including crime levels, were unrelated to recidivism (Breetzke, Polaschek, & Curtis-Ham, 2019). But future research could investigate neighborhood characteristics for DK vs FS neighborhoods, especially to determine whether neighborhood disadvantage explains the difference in recidivism rates for released offenders making a fresh start under duress.

## **Conclusion**

Re-entry into the community after release from prison is a difficult time for ex-offenders and, even when the desire to desist from criminal activity is strong, recidivism is the norm for high-risk parolees. Kirk (2012) observed that “knifing off through residential change...may be a crucial first step in a sequence of turning points that characterize the process of desistance from crime” (p. 353). However, findings from the current study suggest residential relocation on its own neither helps nor hinder offenders moving towards a prosocial life, except when it is compelled by a parole board. Future research seeking to shed light on key determinants of re-entry success would benefit from a wider range of more

personalized individual, social and environmental factors. It would also be beneficial to follow parolees making different release location choices for a longer period.

### Endnotes

1. Despite not all prisoners being granted early parole (47% of men in the sample were granted early release on conditions, and 53% were released automatically at the end of their sentence), all were supervised by a community probation officer and required to comply with a variety of parole-board-imposed conditions for at least 6 months after release. The post-release supervision period is therefore referred to as “parole” and participants are referred to as “parolees”.
2. Thirteen participants were on life parole, meaning their parole conditions would apply for the rest of their lives. They were not included in these calculations.
3. Most of the 89 participants who did not participate in the community surveys either declined to take part (e.g. due to work or other commitments) or were unable to be successfully contacted (e.g. due to change of telephone number). If offenders returned to prison before the two-month survey, we conducted it in prison instead, asking retrospectively about their time in the community. There were no significant differences between respondents and non-respondents in terms of whether they returned to prison prior to the two-month survey. However, non-responders were younger and had served shorter sentences, and there were significant differences on a number of recidivism indices. Therefore, caution needs to be taken when interpreting the analysis using self-reported community experiences, because these experiences are based on a sub-set of high-risk parolees who are not completely representative of the wider group.
4. A significant difference was found between the groups on the Days Served variable; however, this analysis violated Levene’s test of homogeneity of variances. When robust tests of equality of means were examined, the difference between groups was no longer significant.

5. Release plan quality score did not significantly predict either of these outcomes and therefore we did not control for it in our analyses.

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Table 1

*Parolee and Prison Sentence Characteristics for Devil You Know (DK) and Fresh Start (FS) Plan Categories*

	DK (n=197) M (SD)	FS (n=85) M (SD)	t	p	Hedges g	95% CI
Age at parole	31.1 (8.1)	33.3 (9.5)	-2.05	<b>.041*</b>	0.268	.014, .524
RoC*RoI	.74 (.11)	.74 (.13)	-0.08	.935		
Violence Risk Scale static	12.9 (2.8)	12.9 (2.7)	-.02	.987		
Violence Risk scale dynamic	39.3 (7.3)	40.1 (7.6)	-.83	.410		
Violence Risk Scale total	52.2 (8.5)	53.0 (9.5)	-0.72	.471		
Age first conviction	16.2 (1.9)	15.9 (2.0)	1.35	.178		
Prior convictions	66.9 (54.3)	72.6 (48.5)	-.83	.406		
No. prior violent convictions	4.6 (4.3)	5.4 (4.7)	-1.23	.219		
Days on parole	319 (229)	315 (201)	0.15	.882		
Sentence length given (days)	1306 (878)	1521 (1034)	-1.76	.080		
Days served	1249 (1062)	1726 (2068)	-2.02	<b>.047*</b>	0.330	.075, .587
Release Plan Quality	12.0 (2.9)	11.9 (2.9)	0.27	.789		

Note. DK= "devil you know" or plan to return to former neighborhood; FS = fresh start, or residential relocation

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .005$

Table 2

*Comparison of DK and FS parolees' experiences at two months in the community*

Community experience	DK <i>M (SD)</i>	FS <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Hedges <i>g</i>	95% CI for <i>g</i>
<b>Parolee-rated</b>							
Accommodation	4.9 (1.2)	4.9 (1.2)	.06	194	.950		
Employment	5.0 (1.2)	5.1 (1.0)	-.15	59	.883		
Overall finances	3.7 (1.5)	3.7 (1.4)	.03	193	.978		
Personal support	5.1 (1.2)	5.2 (1.1)	-.33	187	.739		
Community support	4.7 (1.4)	4.6 (1.4)	.50	117	.618		
Avoid criminal peers	4.6 (1.7)	5.4 (1.1)	-3.58	150	<b>&lt;.001</b> **	.517	.260, .775
Physical health	5.2 (1.1)	5.2 (1.0)	.09	188	.928		
Emotional health	4.7 (1.2)	4.8 (1.0)	-.83	127	.409		
Use of leisure time	4.7 (1.3)	4.8 (1.2)	-.40	194	.691		
Overall time in community <sup>a</sup>	4.6 (1.3)	4.6 (1.2)	.12	191	.908		
<b>Probation officer rated</b>							
Accommodation	4.2 (1.5)	4.2 (1.4)	-.42	239	.675		
Employment	3.4 (1.4)	3.7 (1.5)	-1.40	216	.163		
Overall finances	3.7 (1.5)	4.0 (1.3)	-1.50	236	.134		
Personal support	3.5 (1.4)	3.5 (1.5)	.01	239	.991		
Community support	3.1 (1.4)	3.6 (1.6)	-2.25	233	<b>.026*</b>	.341	.170, .512
Avoid criminal peers	3.7 (1.5)	4.0 (1.3)	-1.53	144	.127		
Physical health	5.4 (1.1)	5.4 (1.0)	-.36	210	.722		
Emotional health	5.0 (1.1)	4.9 (1.3)	.53	107	.595		
Use of leisure time	3.6 (1.5)	3.9 (1.2)	-1.56	160	.121		
Overall compliance <sup>b</sup>	4.5 (3.7)	4.5 (1.1)	.13	236	.894		

<sup>a</sup> Only parolees rated the overall quality of their time in the community, concern about criminal thoughts, and seriousness of post-release criminal behaviour. <sup>b</sup> Only probation officers rated parolees' overall compliance.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .005$

Table 3

*Comparison of recidivism rates of DK and FS parolees, and for DK, FS-voluntary and FS-duress parolees at 6 and 12 months post-release*

Recidivism category	Percent reconvicted			$X^{2a}$	$p$	
	DK ( $n = 197$ )	FS ( $n = 85$ )				
Reconviction						
6 months post-release	39%	36%		0.16	.688	
12 months post-release	61%	61%		0.06	.814	
Reconviction for violence						
6 months post-release	9%	13%		1.19	.276	
12 months post-release	19%	22%		0.52	.473	
Reimprisonment due to reconviction						
6 months post-release	29%	29%		0.02	.890	
12 months post-release	41%	45%		0.35	.556	
Recidivism category	DK ( $n=197$ )	FS-voluntary ( $n=61$ )	FS-duress ( $n= 24$ )	$X^{2b}$ (Tarone-Ware)	Effect size (Cramer's $V$ )	
Reconviction						
6 months post-release	39%	33%	46%	1.92	.384	
12 months post-release	61%	57%	71%	2.70	.259	
Reconviction for violence						
6 months post-release	9%	8%	25%	7.06	<b>.029*</b>	.15
12 months post-release	19%	18%	33%	4.67	.097	
Reimprisonment due to reconviction						
6 months post-release	29%	25%	42%	3.60	.166	
12 months post-release	41%	38%	63%	6.63	<b>.036*</b>	.13

<sup>a</sup> $df=1$ ; <sup>b</sup> $df=2$ ; \*  $p<.05$ , \*\*  $p<.005$

Table 4

*Comparison of parolees with DK, voluntary FS and FS under duress release plans*

Characteristic	DK <i>M (SD)</i>	FS voluntary <i>M (SD)</i>	FS duress <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Age at parole	31.1 (8.1)	33.2 (8.8)	33.9 (11.2)	2.16	.117
RoC*RoI	.74 (.11)	.73 (.14)	.75 (.09)	.10	.906
VRS	52.2 (8.5)	51.8 (9.9)	56.0 (7.9)	2.13	.121
Age first conviction	16.2 (1.9)	16.0 (2.0)	15.7 (2.0)	1.15	.319
Prior convictions	72.1 (49.3)	73.8 (47.5)	68.6 (52.6)	.35	.702
Days on parole	319 (229)	314 (192)	318 (226)	.01	.986
Sentence length	1306 (876)	1565 (1047)	1412 (1017)	1.76	.174
Days served	1248 (1062)	1714 (1857)	1754.9 (2572)	3.25	<b>.040*</b>
Release Plan Quality	12.03 (2.89)	12.46 (2.80)	10.71 (2.87)	3.22	<b>.042*</b>

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .005$ .

Table 5

*Comparison of DK, voluntary FS and FS under duress parolees' experiences at two months in the community*

Community experience	DK <i>M (SD)</i>	Voluntary FS <i>M (SD)</i>	FS under duress <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
<b>Self-rated</b>						
Accommodation	4.9 (1.2)	4.9 (1.1)	4.7 (1.4)	.13	(2, 193)	.882
Personal support	5.1 (1.2)	5.3 (.98)	4.8 (1.5)	.77	(2, 186)	.467
Community support	4.7 (1.4)	4.8 (1.3)	3.8 (1.5)	2.27	(2, 116)	.108
Employment	5.0 (1.2)	5.0 (1.1)	5.2 (.84)	.07	(2, 158)	.935
Finances	3.7 (1.5)	3.9 (1.5)	3.3 (.90)	.71	(2, 192)	.492
Physical health	5.2 (1.1)	5.3 (.96)	4.9 (.96)	.62	(2, 187)	.541
Mental health	4.7 (1.2)	4.9 (1.1)	4.6 (.93)	.53	(2, 192)	.591
Use of leisure time	4.7 (1.3)	4.9 (1.2)	4.3 (1.0)	1.72	(2, 193)	.182
Avoid criminal peers	4.6 (1.7)	5.6 (.93)	4.8 (1.5)	6.20	(2, 190)	<b>.002**</b>
Time in community	4.6 (1.3)	4.9 (1.2)	3.9 (1.2)	2.89	(2, 190)	.058
<b>Probation officer rated</b>						
Accommodation	4.2 (1.5)	4.5 (1.3)	3.7 (1.4)	2.43	(2, 238)	.090
Personal support	3.5 (1.4)	3.5 (1.5)	3.2 (1.7)	.34	(2, 238)	.715
Community support	3.1 (1.4)	3.5 (1.6)	3.6 (1.6)	2.53	(2, 232)	.082
Employment	3.4 (1.4)	3.9 (1.3)	3.2 (1.7)	2.22	(2, 215)	.111
Finances	3.7 (1.5)	4.1 (1.2)	3.9 (1.4)	1.22	(2, 235)	.299
Physical health	5.5 (1.1)	5.5 (.82)	5.3 (1.2)	.16	(2, 209)	.851
Mental health	5.0 (1.1)	4.9 (1.3)	5.1 (1.2)	.80	(2, 209)	.451
Use of leisure time	3.6 (1.5)	4.0 (1.2)	3.4 (1.3)	2.36	(2, 238)	.097
Avoid criminal peers	3.7 (1.5)	4.2 (1.2)	3.8 (1.7)	1.56	(2, 225)	.213
Overall compliance	4.5 (3.7)	4.5 (1.1)	4.4 (1.2)	0.24	(2, 235)	.976

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .005$ .