"You're in a room full of addicts!" Prisoner reentry as a social institution and the "making up" of the ex-offender

Reuben Miller

Keeping pace with the swollen U.S. prison census, the number of former prisoners living in poor urban neighborhoods has increased precipitously, transforming urban poverty in the United States. High rates of recidivism mean that a cycle of arrest, incarceration, reentry, and re-arrest is a normative experience in many low-income neighborhoods, making prisoner reentry a key social institution in the life worlds of the urban poor, and the reentry program, an important, yet under-examined organizational form. Drawing on a three-and-a-half year ethnographic study of prisoner reentry on Chicago’s near west side, I show how the process of reentry and the legal, institutional and organizational arrangements that support and maintain it, in part produce the "ex-offender" as a novel social class emergent in the age of carceral expansion. Using the reentry program as a case study to demonstrate one way this novel social arrangement is expressed, I trace the processes of classification at work during reentry, revealing how classifications of the ex-offender are produced, altered, internalized and resisted. I conclude with a discussion of reentry's broad implications for how race, poverty and criminality are embodied and understood in the United States.