The meaning of place and space for returning prisoners

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Neighborhood and place are key concerns in prisoner reentry and desistance literature. Residential change may serve as a turning point for those who want to desist from offending or minimize visibility as a “known” offender by law enforcement and neighbors. Yet choices of where to live are often dictated more by limited housing options than by preferred neighborhood characteristics. In addition, people are more or less stably housed upon release, and more or less socially tied to places. Still, much of our research relies on residential neighborhood as a construct, rather than looking at how people actually use and move about space. This paper draws on repeated interviews with men and women returning to the community from a county correctional facility in Boston. In this paper, I begin to pull apart the varying relationships that this group of returning prisoners has to place, and the varying ways they navigate space. Many of the people interviewed are homeless or tenuously housed and move frequently; some are more stable (often living with family). While some have very small activity spaces, largely traversed on foot, others move about large sections of the region, as they move and go about daily travel for work, programs and services, and supervision. Most rely on public transit and walking to get around, which exposes them to social networks, information, temptations, and surveillance. I discuss the implications of these patterns for how we think about the impact of neighborhoods on reentry.