Like thousands of other young men, Kenny Jackson departed Coxsackie wearing his “State-O” suit, issued to released prisoners, and carrying his “State-O-20”—the twenty dollars (and bus ticket) the reformatory provided. A prison car drove Jackson to the bus depot on a rainy Wed., where the driver left him with a mocking “so long for now.” “I had only one fear,” Jackson recalled, “fear that now you had to make good on all the talk you’d given yourself in the yard all those years, and that dreams weren’t going to come true.” Many other accounts of leaving Coxsackie describe the same mix of hope and fear. Abubadika Sonny Carson looked around at the familiar faces of the reformatory, “and felt an unexplainable emotion: a reluctance to leave them.”

Young men leaving Coxsackie now found themselves “home,” only to find that home was not exactly the one they had left behind. Prisoners without family connections were released to living arrangements ranging from upstate farm families to a New York City YMCA. More often, prisoners returned to their old homes, where families, neighborhoods, and social networks had changed since they had departed. A former reformatory inmate marveled at the differences in his Bronx neighborhood of Morrisania: “The Third Avenue elevated subway line had been completely demolished; the area was now dominated by two massive new housing projects . . .  everything in my life before then was like a dream. Now, I was another person in another place and time.” The challenges of reintegrating into communities were obvious to friends and family. Claude Brown wrote of his friend Alley Bush, who departed Harlem for Coxsackie at 16 and returned three years later: “He seemed real backward, as though he hadn’t grown any . . .  seemed to think that the world had just waited for him, just stood still while he was in Coxsackie.”
Ex-prisoners were all too aware that the reformatory had scarcely delivered on its promise to return them to their communities with the kind of education and training they would need to make a future for themselves. As Howard P. left Coxsackie for his Bronx neighborhood, he offered some wry reflections on what the reformatory had taught him: “During my stay here I have learned many useful things, such as how to shoe a horse and to bend steel into all different angles . . . I have learned how to mind my own business and leave other people alone.” Imprisoned at 16 for stealing a Buick to joyride, released just after his 18th birthday, Howard returned to New York City to live on his own, eventually taking a job as a hospital maintenance worker before his parole supervision period ended when he was 19.5

Case files and other sources offer a rich picture of the short-term transitions involved in coming home from the reformatory. They provide ample support for the conclusion Leonard Harrison and Pryor McNeill Grant reached back in 1938: “However broken a boy may be by what he has been through [in the reformatory], his release finds him full of hope for the future. Yet possibly the aftermath of a prison sentence is more discouraging and embittering than what has gone before.” They argued, “There is a veritable conspiracy of frustration to defeat the boy released from prison.” These young men were out of the reformatory, but they were still criminals.6 Thirty years later, this same conclusion would lead Kenny Jackson to become one of the first counselors of the Fortune Society, dedicated to aiding newly released prisoners. During the intervening thirty years, however, more than ten thousand young men departed Coxsackie for the uncertain future that lay ahead.

The Release Decision

Most inmates arrived at Coxsackie on what prisoners called a “zip-three”—by which they meant a reformatory sentence that carried with it a maximum term of three years, with no minimum. The average time served was a comparatively short sixteen months, which meant that Coxsackie released nearly as many prisoners every year as it held on any given day. Excluding parole violators, the number of prisoners held for their maximum term was small, less than 5% of the case file sample.7 For most reformatory prisoners, the route to release was the parole board.

During the reformatory’s first decade, it had its own institutional parole board and associated parole officers. After 1945, Coxsackie’s parole functions were consolidated into the State Division of Parole. In both cases, parole authorities
had nearly unlimited discretion to hold or release an inmate. Sixteen-year-old Paul Glowacki, sentenced to Coxsackie on a petit larceny charge, challenged his indeterminate zip-three sentence in 1940, only to have the appellate court vigorously affirm the release powers of the reformatory: institutional authorities “should be in a position to determine when, in [the offender’s] own best interests as well as the interests of society, they should be released. Some criminals reform for life, before they have even been convicted. For others, the first sentence is the formal and recorded social noting of a series of disasters. Only those in the institution can tell when release is wise in one case and unwise in another. The sentencing court certainly cannot.”

The court in Glowacki’s case was deferential to correctional expertise, as most mid-century courts were, but no one attending a Coxsackie parole hearing would have been impressed. The public dimension of a typical case involved a cursory review, featuring the sorts of brief, random exchanges between inmates and officials that led historian David Rothman to characterize parole as a game of chance. This exchange, between parole head William Cashin and William B. (an 18-year-old from Harlem, convicted as a wayward minor), from a 1944 hearing, is typical:

q: [Inmate name], have you attended the pre-parole classes?
A: Yes, sir.
q: Do you understand what parole is?
A: Yes, sir.
q: What is it?
A: Trust put on us boys to go out and try to do the best we can.
q: Do you think you can do that?
A: I will try to do it.
q: What will happen if you don’t?
A: I will be brought back.
q: If you are brought back you will probably serve more time than you have served this time. Do you understand that?
A: Yes, sir.
q: Are there any questions you want to ask concerning parole?
A: No, I haven’t any, Mr. Cashin.
q: You are recommended.
A: Thank you, sir.

The next month, the parole board’s consideration of the case of Louis V. (a 17-year-old from rural Tompkins County, convicted of driving a car without a
license while on parole from a juvenile reformatory), consisted of the following dialogue:

q: Louis, have you attended the pre-parole classes?
A: Yes, sir.
q: What do you understand parole to be?
A: Chance to get out and start a new life.
q: You have to live up to the rules and regulations of the institution and do what your parole officer tells you. Do you think you can do that?
A: Yes, sir.
q: If you had straightened out you probably would have been home before this. If you violate we will bring you back and you will serve more time than you have this time. Any question you want to ask?
A: Could I go to see my brother if my father goes with me?
q: You will have to get permission from your parole officer.
A: Yes, sir.
q: You are recommended.
A: Thanks a lot.¹⁰

And so it went. For a time after World War II, inmates attended a pre-parole class and prepared essays to accompany their parole cases. The essays can most charitably be described as exercises in telling institutional authorities what they wanted to hear. Murray C. declared, “I sincerely promise to do what is expected of me, and live the life of a respected citizen,” while Warren W. affirmed that, “I will be honest with my parole officer. I will also to the best of my ability try to become an honest and trustworthy citizen.”¹¹

These short exchanges and rehearsed essays are simply artifacts of the parole ritual, and historians should not take them as an indicator of how release decisions were actually made at Coxsackie. Parole rituals usually ended in affirmation of a decision regarding release already made by an institutional program committee. The program committee included, at various times, the superintendent, assistant superintendent, director of education, guidance supervisor, physician, psychologist, parole officer, and chaplains. Their first meeting with a prisoner took place four months into his sentence, at which point the committee could certify for a parole appearance, or set a date for reappearance before the committee.

The decision making of the committee, though less superficial than the official parole hearing, was still quite predictable. Every aspect of a young man’s institutional life had been carefully documented and made available to the
committee, but conduct trumped everything else. Even when school grades were good and shop work satisfactory, cases were still held up with admonitions like “your behavior needs improvement,” “you have not got along well with other people,” “stop the fooling around,” “[stop] trying to be a big shot.”

Oscar M. went to more than one Coxsackie committee hearing armed with good grades in the reformatory school and the tailor shop, along with job offers and letters from his church, the Brownsville Neighborhood Center, his parents, and his lawyer. Despite all the assurances of work, family, and community support, he was held until the maximum expiration of his sentence, for being “in constant trouble with the colored boys.”

Of course, reformatory prisoners still had to make an appropriate show of contrition and cooperation at a parole hearing. The program committee warned Clinton P. that he would be required to provide evidence concerning his role in the armed robbery that sent him to Coxsackie:

q: Your record has been good enough here. One point should be cleared up. Who was the leader of the gang?
A: If there was a leader, I would tell you.
q: Don’t hedge. There has to be a leader where nine boys are involved.
A: I had a lot to say. I guess I was something like a leader.
q: The parole board is likely to ask you the same questions. If you can’t answer them, they will likely hold you.

Drug-using inmates at Coxsackie were specifically reported to NYC authorities upon parole, and an effort was frequently made to persuade parolees to become informants. Parole boards demanded correct answers to questions like, “Are we to believe that you are remorseful for your behavior and ready to handle the pressures of civilian life?”

Over time, as some prisoners became more self-consciously political, parole questions did as well, with young men being asked to disavow their identification with the Black Muslims or the politics of black nationalism. When correct answers were not forthcoming, neither was parole.

**Parole Supervision**

Once released on parole, Coxsackie prisoners faced a brief but critical period of supervision. Since most had been sentenced to three-year maximum terms, serving an average of sixteen months, the usual period of parole supervision was just over one year. Like the reformatory itself, time spent on parole supervision pro-
duced inspired successes and terrible tragedies. Two 19-year-old parolees—one released in 1937 and one in 1938—illustrate the ends of the parole spectrum.

The experience of Martin E. shows the possibilities of constructive, supportive post-release supervision. Released to his parents in Brooklyn in 1938, Martin was described in his Coxsackie case file as “one of the most emotionally maladjusted persons ever in the institution,” with eighteen disciplinary reports at the reformatory. Still, Martin had been interested in the trumpet while at Coxsackie and had been encouraged in this interest by the institution’s music teacher, who provided him a recommendation for a job giving music lessons after release. His parole officer took a keen interest in Martin’s music, discussing jazz and classical music during their meeting, providing him with tickets to a Carnegie Hall recital, and arranging an appointment at the Cotton Club with Benny Davis (then responsible for the club’s popular Annual Revues). The parole officer even spent some time counseling Martin’s younger brother about his grades in school and praised him when those grades improved. Although Martin’s parole supervision ended in 1939, a brief note from 1952—when Martin was 33—found him married with two children, living in Queens as a “respected member of the community.”

The case of Cornelius N., in contrast, shows the extent to which young lives could be destroyed by the experience of imprisonment and parole. Cornelius was released to his hometown of Rochester in 1937, following twelve months in the reformatory for burglary. Bullied and abused by other inmates while in Coxsackie, Cornelius had been “badly damaged by his incarceration,” according to reformatory officials, who recommended his release back to his parents and to his previous job at a city junkyard. Once home, Cornelius requested permission from his parole officer to obtain a driver’s license in order to get to work. As was common practice for parolees, the request was denied—most parolees were ineligible for a driver’s license. So Cornelius spent the next few weeks walking along the highway to and from the junkyard each day—until he was struck by a car and died from the resulting skull fracture one month before what would have been his 20th birthday.

For most inmates, the experience of parole supervision was a routine of trying to satisfy the state’s demand that they find appropriate work and residence as well as demonstrate good behavior. Arriving home, parolees were instructed to meet with their parole officers, hold a specific curfew, maintain their current residence, remain gainfully employed, and “not to frequent hangouts, candy stores, and street corners.” Initial weekly reporting could later be changed to
semi-monthly and even monthly reporting, depending on how well parolees were adjusting. By the 1950s, young men from Coxsackie were being assigned varying levels of supervision from the outset of their supervision period, based on prospective risk assessments.

Parole supervision itself could be quite intensive, as parole officers sought to keep young men attached to work and family and away from negative influences. This was particularly true during the institution’s first decade, when it employed its own officers. One officer, on his way to visit Sylvester T. at the bakery where he was employed, spotted the young man hanging out in a candy store with his friends. Waiting until the boys left, the officer found Sylvester hiding in the back of the store; questioned about his job, Sylvester appeared evasive and was promptly returned to the bakery. Antonio S., whose case file paid some attention to his “sexual confusion,” was returned for violation of parole after making a series of “lewd phone calls” in which he arranged to meet the subject of the phone calls in Times Square, where he was taken into custody by his parole officer. Antonio was furious, claiming that the officer was “out to get him.”

Despite the close level of surveillance, the actual practice of parole supervision was quite flexible in avoiding revocations of parole. Parole officers were encouraged to continue young men on parole if they could. When Binghamton police arrested Charles F. for standing and talking with someone who had stolen some junk—a technical violation of parole—his officer declined to send him back to the reformatory. Seven years later, Charles was happily married with children and working as a machinist (the trade he had been taught at Coxsackie); he was released early from his ten-year period of parole supervision at the request of his parole officer, who wrote that this “was an example of what this institution can do for a boy who has the desire to rehabilitate himself.” In similar fashion, when Irving T. was located after disappearing for nearly two years, his officer simple noted, “If as the report indicates he is on relief and has no prospect of employment, he should be returned . . . if he should be employed and living a decent law abiding life, consideration should be given to continuing him on parole.” Time and time again, parole officers sought to protect those who appeared hard working, cooperative, and conforming, even when they violated the technical rules of parole.

Still, parole officers returned approximately one in every six prisoners released from Coxsackie for violations of their parole. Why did so many fail this period of supervision? The desire of these young men for freedom of movement frequently led to parole violations, and no condition of parole seems to have
grated more than the routine denial of a driver’s license. The lure of the automobile and the conditions of release were fundamentally incompatible. Raymond M. was sent back to Coxsackie for the unlicensed operation of a motor vehicle, violating curfew, leaving town without permission, and purchasing an auto without permission. Similarly, Ronaldo C. was returned to Coxsackie from Spanish Harlem for having obtained a driver’s license without permission, leaving New York State without permission, staying overnight away from his approved residence, and associating with persons of questionable character.

Freedom of movement, of course, went hand in hand with freedom of association. Here, too, Coxsackie parolees found themselves repeatedly in trouble. Parole reports carefully monitored young men who spent too much time loaﬁng or lounging with their friends. Indeed, occasional parole violations were for nothing more serious than “corner lounging with six other youths” and “staying out late” but more often involved actual arrest for more serious criminal charges. William D. was a concern to his parole ofﬁcer almost immediately, after he left his post-release job through the Works Progress Administration (WPA) after just three weeks. Reassigned to an NYA position, William was dismissed because of his venereal disease and from that point on spent “most of his time loitering around the streets of Harlem, drinking and associating with low moral characters.” Held as a material witness in a murder case, William was sent back to Coxsackie largely for his refusal to engage in respectable patterns of work or association.

Some parole revocations simply reveal young men with a simmering post-release anger that occupied a complicated borderland between criminal activity and activism. Peter B., the son of West Indian immigrants to New York City, had been sent to the reformatory in 1940 for having snatched a camera. He spent nearly his full term at Coxsackie, for Peter was constantly ﬁghting with authorities and twice placed in solitary conﬁnement. Peter’s disciplinary violations suggest the extent to which he resisted reformatory authority: disobeying orders; shirking work; being disrespectful, disorderly, and insolent; causing a disturbance; cursing loudly; breaking rules; possessing contraband; ﬁghting; and more. In August 1943, on parole from Coxsackie, Peter found himself swept up in the Harlem rioting. Police found Peter with a knife in his possession, “near a location where stores had been broken into.” Apparently his location and his knife were sufﬁcient to be returned as a parole violator to Coxsackie, where he was cited nine more times for disciplinary violations before being re-paroled in 1944.

Employers played a critical role in supporting parole supervision. Upstate farm families, for example, often agreed to take in Coxsackie parolees and
provide frequent updates on their character and conduct. One farmer contacted the parole office whenever he needed new boys to work on his farm, “accustomed to milking cows, in preference.” A regular farm in Schuyler County regularly accepted Coxsackie parolees when their families refused to take them back, or when they wished not to return home. Farmers’ complaints about parolees sounded common notes: “keeping company with a girl . . . keeping late hours, he is not able to get up in the morning when he should and can not do his work satisfactorily. He also apparently has the attitude that he does not have to do as his employer orders unless he so desires.” The demands of employers clashed with the desire of young men for leisure—where the clashes were too great, revocation of parole could provide the needed lesson in the importance of steady labor.

Family members played an important role in parole supervision as well. Sons had a way of disappointing families with their behavior, and families looked to the parole officer as an ally. One mother wrote to her son’s parole officer, asking him to “intimidate” the young man, who had begun spending time with his former “bad associates.” A father, whose son was “running around with a gang,” went to the parole officer to demand that the boy be returned to Coxsackie; another father wept in the parole office, telling stories of a son who refused to work and stayed out late at night, asking the officer to help direct the boy into the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). When family expectations for work and association meshed with parole rules, family members were another critical part of the process of post-release surveillance.

Home

Coming home most often meant returning to the parents or relatives with whom parolees had lived prior to Coxsackie, sources of both support and conflict. The case files certainly reveal instances of families who intended to assist young men in making a better life. One farmer wrote a poignant letter to a soon-to-be-paroled youth from rural Cortland County: “We know it isn’t going to be too easy to come back here and sometimes I wish the farm was a hundred miles from Cuyler instead of four but we’ll stand by to help in any way we possibly can because we want you to show the real stuff we know is there in you.”

Just as often in the case files, parolees appeared to be going back to precisely the sort of poor home situations that had preceded their commitment to the reformatory. One young parolee wrote to his parole officer in 1937 that he was again fighting with his father, who “throws me out of the house and calls me names . . . please take me back there I can’t stand it any longer.” Parole officers
spent a great deal of time simply trying to persuade family members to open their homes to paroled sons, grandsons, brothers, and nephews—and then persuading parolees to stay. Paul G. “conducted himself poorly at home,” according to his parole officer, and had “been miserable in his attitude toward his parents.” After persisting in a “questionable” association with a 14-year-old girl, ignoring instructions to save some money, changing jobs without permission, and failing to report, Paul’s parole was revoked five months after his release.

For those without family connections, a patchy network of institutions housed recently released prisoners. The Chrystie Street House in New York City, since well before Coxsackie had opened, operated as a home for “young men who have neither the right kind of family or friends to receive them when they leave prison.” The YMCA was another go-to institution for paroled reformatory inmates without homes to return to, or for those who were barred from contact with their homes as a condition of their release. Where those institutions failed, some former prisoners settled instead into a lonely and vulnerable existence. Wendell M. arrived at the small upstate town of Avon, New York, released to the supervision of a local farmer. He knew no one at all—his family was in Wisconsin, and he had run away to New York City, where he had largely hung around Times Square. Not long after he arrived in Avon, Wendell left the farm and began working at a local diner. That summer, the police arrested him for peeping in a house window. Although his parole officer felt that “he may just have been lonely,” he was returned for violation of parole “because of prejudice in the community.”

Coxsackie parolees were also beginning to form their own families after their release from the reformatory. Benjamin G. came to Coxsackie in 1936 to serve a fifteen-year term for robbery (despite the sentence length, Benjamin served only a year). After his release, he enrolled in the CCC, and after his discharge from that work program, he met and married a young woman in his hometown of Troy. The parole officer was impressed with her as “straightforward who would undoubtedly have a good influence.” Benjamin’s wife “claimed that the marriage was a happy one,” and the parole supervision was suspended when he enlisted in the army in 1943. Not infrequently, parolees in the case files sought permission from their parole officers to marry after getting a girlfriend pregnant.

New families could also be the source of turmoil for former prisoners. Several parolees in the case file sample, for example, were arrested for physically assaulting girlfriends or wives. An East Harlem parolee was given permission to marry his pregnant girlfriend, but she was soon writing to his parole officer,
“My husband has very bad conduct . . . doesn’t come home nights. He beats me. Every time things don’t come his way he argues with me and beats me up. He do it very often and I can’t stand it, was acting that way ever since I got married to him . . . We don’t love each other, I don’t want him no where around me because I am not safe around him.”41 As had been true before they were sentenced to Coxsackie, the young men’s family ties remained substantial sources of frustration and conflict as they moved further, yet uncertainly, toward adulthood.

**Work**

Reformers hoped that the New York State Vocational Institution would provide young men the sort of training that would enable them to secure skilled employment upon release, but in the short term, this was rarely the case. Only 30 percent of inmates in the case file sample sustained regular postrelease employment during their period of supervision, no better than the proportion of young men employed before the arrest that led to their reformatory sentence. What employment parolees did secure was rarely skilled or leading to skilled work and even less often directly connected to specific Coxsackie vocational training programs.

While the Great Depression spurred the public works programs that helped build the reformatories, it also provided a bleak economic backdrop for the first groups of released prisoners. The mother of one Coxsackie parolee complained that “jobs are very hard to get . . . now that the law is that a boy should have a job when he gets out then the state should find jobs for these boys.”42 Albert M., recently laid off, wrote to his parole officer about his steady girlfriend, complaining, “I feel like a heel not being able to take her to a movie or to a dance at least once a week.”43 Rearrested for stealing scrap metal, Albert was promptly returned to Coxsackie, where he served fifteen more months. Craig U. returned home to Massena in 1936 to find that the one industrial plant in town was calling back only those who had been previously laid off—and there was little off-season farm work to be had.44 Benjamin G. wrote in 1939, “Everything seems to be at a standstill here in Troy as far as work is concerned and it is a very difficult thing to find.”45 Chief parole officer George Quinn acknowledged that Coxsackie was “confronted with the serious difficulty in securing employment as a result of present economic conditions.” He observed that “many boys have been obliged to take whatever employment was offered regardless of their trade training.”46

Faced with the great shortage of available work, Quinn relied heavily on the work programs of the New Deal, which served as a safety net for parolees from Coxsackie. Some went on WPA work projects while living at home, including...
National Youth Administration work assignments. By far the most common work program, however, was the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). Of the inmates in the case file sample released from Coxsackie between 1936 and 1941, 15 percent (19 of 128) spent some time working in a CCC camp. Perry R., an “essentially normal kid,” was released on the day before Christmas, 1938. His parole officer, observing that “no offer of employment” had been secured, and that it was “not likely that one would be forthcoming,” arranged for Perry to spend eighteen months in the CCC. Coxsackie parolees went to camps across the United States, and most of the case files suggest a positive experience. One wrote to his parole officer from his CCC camp at Niagara Falls: “I like it here because the views of Niagara Falls and other falls are something to see . . . I’ll have something to talk about when I come home.” When the CCC moved to bar parolees and probationers from entering the corps, Coxsackie parole officers simply advised released prisoners to avoid mentioning their parole status.

To be sure, some reformatory inmates in the case file sample secured work in the trades for which they had trained at Coxsackie. Peter F. learned printing and, on his 1937 release from the reformatory, married and eventually found work as a printer—he wrote that it was exactly “the kind of work that I wanted.” A number of machine shop graduates in the case file sample found work as machinists. Max N. had chosen the machine shop “because I think there is greater possibility for me securing a job at home,” and he found just such a position on his return to Buffalo. Barry I., whose machine shop instructor described him as “one of the best prospects” he had ever seen, quickly secured work at a machine works in his hometown. An electric shop graduate, Donald S., confessed, “When I think of the trouble I have caused my people and the money they have spent on me I realize that I have been a jerk; I don’t want to be a jerk anymore.” He embraced electrical work at Coxsackie and, after his release home, in Manhattan, where he secured work as an electrician’s helper. Even some semiskilled training could connect young men to employment. Nicholas C. had trained in the kitchen, “which is semi-skilled and which offers the prospects of a job at a Rochester restaurant,” which he secured while on parole; his work record was excellent—“he will eventually become a good cook”—and he contributed money to his parents and to his local Greek Orthodox Church.

Trade training was no magic bullet, no guarantee of employment. Coxsackie inmates in the case file sample were frustrated by the limitations of their training in the outside world where more advanced certifications were required. Leonard J. secured a job in a tailor shop, thanks to a letter from his Coxsackie
instructor, but was let go after just four days because he was “too inexperienced for the type of work required.” Frederick K. wrote a discouraged letter to his parole officer: “I sent you a letter last week I told you about a job I might be able to get in the barber shop. I was given a try out but no soap. I couldn’t get on the electric clippers. You know at the Inst. we didn’t have electric clippers.” Edwin M. wrote to the Coxsackie director of education, asking for some assistance in securing work: “Since my release, I have been offered various positions in barber shops here in town but have no proof of training. I would very much appreciate it if you would send me some kind of written certificate stating that I did have barber training for said period.” The director replied in blunt terms: “I have looked up your school records which show that you are able to do good work on a helper’s level, but you are definitely not a tradesman. You are smart enough to know this. We do not furnish educational records to former pupils. However, we shall be glad to furnish a detailed report about you on request from an employer.”

New York’s liberal reform groups took seriously the job of placing young ex-prisoners in work situations. The Osborne Association, formed from the merger of Thomas Mott Osborne’s National Society of Penal Information and his Welfare League Association, continued the latter’s focus on aiding ex-prisoners. President Charles Osborne made clear in 1933 that traditional welfare agencies did not work well for young, single men just released from reformatories, “without definite family obligations.” Osborne argued that the gap between release and eventual employment was a critical one, and urged the association to try to bridge that gap and allow young men to “reestablish themselves.” The association’s employment and relief secretary labored hard to help ex-offenders but faced daunting challenges in the midst of the Depression. In 1934, the secretary interviewed 429 men (some more than once) but was able to secure just 33 work positions. In 1939, the Community Service Society of New York partnered with the association to pay for a director of placement position, first held by Graves Moore. At times, association staff vented their frustration at the barriers to work for ex-prisoners; William Cox, a longtime Osborne associate, condemned the obstacles that “block the path of sincere endeavor.” “Is this justice,” Cox demanded to know. Must the young ex-offender, he asked, “forever be deprived of the right of opportunity to live a useful life because of youthful folly?”

In March 1936, the association partnered with Viola Ilma to create a vocational demonstration project, in which Ilma would make regular monthly visits to the New York City Reformatory at New Hampton and choose five young men for “employment placement and vocational guidance as well as intensive follow
up work.” A preliminary report showed that thirty-two of fifty-three program participants were working and doing well, far above the typical results for reformatory inmates, but the association was forced to discontinue the project in 1937 for lack of funds. In 1941, Elmira Reformatory organized a placement bureau, in conjunction with the Prison Association of New York and other agencies. The bureau was to concentrate on inmates who had been through the educational program and were qualified for “specific work situations.”

Even the wartime boom in industrial employment hardly ended the problems of securing employment. The Osborne Association continued to see hundreds of job-seeking former prisoners, including many rated 4F for military service, skilled workers whose felony convictions were hampering their ability to secure work, and (by 1944) growing numbers of dishonorably discharged servicemen. The director of vocational placement for the association, Robert Hannum, noted the “variety and seriousness of the adjustments our men must make when they ‘hit the bricks,’” and hoped the wartime public would take the hard work of readjustment into consideration. Throughout the postwar years, Coxsackie and various social service agencies would continue to try solving the problem of finding work for young reformatory parolees.

The coming of World War II provided another option for young men pressed to find suitable work—military service. Of the young men in the case file sample released between the opening of the reformatory in 1936 and the end of the war in 1945, one in five (43 of 214) served in the military. For a few, volunteering was a way of expressing a sense of manhood and patriotic duty. One week after Pearl Harbor, Stanley M. begged his parole officer to let him enlist: “I see that all my friends are joining the Army and they think I’m scared and I would like to show them that I am not scared, and I am writing you to see if I can join the Army, I see that all the others are doing their part and I would like to do my.” More often, the case files show voluntary military service as simply another work option for young men in unsatisfying life situations. For Benjamin G., tired of looking for work in Troy; for Irving J., weary of cleaning cesspools in the Bronx; for Melvin M., no longer wanting to recondition oil drums in Schenectady; and for Allen D., fired from his job in Manhattan for failing to pay union dues, volunteer service in the army beckoned as a more promising alternative.

For other released prisoners, military service was a device by which they could be abruptly released from parole supervision. In September 1942, the superintendent wrote to all parolees, urging them to consider “how urgently our country needs every man who is capable of military service, to hasten the day of victory. The more each individual does, the sooner victory will come... if you
wish to enter the service, a release from parole will be granted if the official re-
quest is made directly to the institution." By 1943, prisoners could be paroled
directly into the military, and a branch draft board was set up at the reforma-
tory. Even a “hard case” like Alex A., who had been sent to solitary confinement
no fewer than seven times, was released to the army in 1943, after just fourteen
months at the reformatory.62

For many Coxsackie prisoners in the case file sample, their adjustment to
military life went as poorly as their adjustment to any other institutional set-
ting. At least one-quarter of those in the sample serving in World War II (11 of
43) were charged with a serious crime or desertion while serving. This figure
probably understates the total, for it includes only those instances where the
misconduct was reported to the reformatory.63

Crime

The experience of Coxsackie’s prisoners in military service is a reminder that
they were being released from the reformatory just at the point of accelerating
criminal careers. The reformatory was supposed to be an early and aggressive
intervention in criminal careers, but Coxsackie was more often simply a stop
along the way. Military enlistment during World War II competed with a poten-
tial return trip to the reformatory. The navy narrowly beat out Coxsackie for
Edgar G., released on parole in 1943 to his parents' home in Syracuse. Edgar
fought with his brother, stayed out all night, refused to pay board, and stole the
family car. With his parole officer looking for him, he chose to enlist in the
navy; his officer concluded, “From all indications it would seem a race between
the Navy and a Violation of Parole Warrant and the Navy won.”64 Coxsackie beat
the navy in the case of Neil K., paroled to his parents in 1942. Against the advice
of his parole officer, Neil moved out of his parents’ home into a residential hotel,
which became his home base for a series of drunken parties and sexual liaisons
with underage girls. Scheduled for induction into the navy, he was instead re-
turned to Coxsackie for the final six months of his sentence.65

Just how many Coxsackie prisoners continued some involvement in the
criminal justice system? The only systematic recidivism data comes from a
study of prisoners that had been through the Elmira Reception Center, released
in 1960, and the subject of a six-year followup conducted in late 1966. Table 6.1
shows that 60 percent of prisoners from Coxsackie were reconvicted in the six-
year period following their release, and fewer than one in four avoided any sort
of criminal justice entanglement.66
These numbers are consistent with the case file sample, in which 55 percent of the cases (205 of 376) give a clear indication of a subsequent arrest or return for parole violation. Of these cases, 128 were arrested, rather than being returned for parole violations (either because the offense was so serious or because it occurred after the end of parole supervision), with 105 sentenced to some period of confinement—ranging from short periods spent in local jails to long prison terms elsewhere. The case file sample understates the extent of subsequent criminal justice involvement from 1945 forward, for two reasons. First, parole supervision moved to a state-level agency rather than remaining an institution-based operation, and the reporting of criminal offenses during and after the end of parole supervision was not systematic. Second, and more important, Coxsackie officials began to send a prisoner’s entire case file when an inmate was transferred to another institution, or when he was subsequently sentenced to another New York prison. The pattern is quite striking: through early 1944, only 2 numbers were missing from a sample of 211 cases, but the sample of 161 subsequent cases included 92 missing case file numbers. Put another way, more than one-third (36%) of Coxsackie prisoners after mid-1944 are missing from the case files sampled. Since nearly all of those were missing because of disciplinary transfer or re-imprisonment, it is reasonable to assume the later files dramatically understate postrelease arrest and incarceration. Sorting the re-arrest numbers into pre- and post-1944 groups shows that 50 percent (105 of 211) of the earlier group recorded re-arrest, while only 14 percent (22 of 161) of the later group with missing files recorded a re-arrest. What is clear is that the level of criminality among ex-reformatory inmates was substantial and roughly comparable to contemporary rates of postrelease offending.

In looking at arrest and imprisonment as part of the postrelease histories of Coxsackie inmates in the case file sample, some patterns emerge. Most notable
are those cases in which low levels of employment and a pressing need for money resulted in new entanglements with the criminal justice system. Coming home at ages 18, 19, and 20, young men faced even more demands for self-support, and low-level criminal activity remained an obvious option. Entering the bottom rungs of illicit enterprise was one way to do this; a young Sonny Carson left Coxsackie and began running a craps game, later recalling the pleasure of having real money coming in. Ernest N., newly married and unable to hold any job for long after his release, took to working for a policy racket that operated from the hotel where his father worked. Mario F. wrote to another inmate about the “sweet little racket” that he and five other inmates from New York City had prepared when they all returned from Coxsackie.

Gang members faced enormous challenges returning to their old neighborhoods. Coxsackie itself had been no holiday from the pressure of gang loyalty and gang violence, but if returning prisoners hoped to escape it once they came home, they quickly found that old ties were hard to sever. Arthur, a 1946 Coxsackie parolee and a member of the Mysterious Fives gang, worriedly informed his parole officer that the gangs would be “after him,” and that, in his Bronx neighborhood, gang membership was essential to survival. After being accosted and shot in the foot by an “enemy gang” three months after his parole, he “resumed relations” with the Mysterious Fives. In December 1946, Arthur and other members of the gang held up a Long Island dry cleaners and a liquor store. In the latter robbery, Arthur pistol-whipped the owner. Two days later, the police stopped Arthur and his friends (they were riding in a stolen car), and Arthur was eventually given a fifteen- to twenty-year sentence for assault and robbery. Dhoruba Bin Wahad recalled a similar sort of pressure: “It happened fast, maybe a few weeks after I got out and was back in the Bronx. The simple fact was, I needed money. I had no job, nothing coming in. And I was back with my old cronies. And these brothers weren’t jitterbugging no more; they were now full-fledged gangsters. Somebody came up with the idea to stick up this after-hours club in the Bronx. Being back in the hood, running with the boys again, I was down for that.”

Heroin led some Coxsackie parolees into what could be a decades-long revolving-door relationship to the criminal justice system. John Mack described coming back to New York City from Coxsackie in 1950 to find that his neighborhood was “flooded with heroin, as though it were coming out of the pavement.” Jack E., sent to Coxsackie for gang fighting in Harlem with the Socialistic Dukes, was paroled in 1944, after just twelve months in the reformatory. Following his
release, Jack began using heroin regularly, and his postrelease record begins showing drug-related arrests and short-term incarcerations in 1948—five days in 1948, ten days in 1949, three months at Rikers Island in 1951, two years in state prison for felony possession with intent to sell in 1952, sixty days for possession in 1955, four months for petit larceny in 1956, five years in a federal penitentiary for narcotic sales in 1957, three heroin-related arrests in 1964 and 1965, six months for drug possession in 1966, and subsequent arrests in 1967 (possessing a needle), 1970 (drug possession), and 1976 (grand larceny)—at least twenty-eight consecutive years of drug-related involvement with the criminal justice system.

Drifting was another postrelease path and, again, one that made young men quite vulnerable to arrest. For some young men, the lure was the freedom of the road—a choice that almost invariably brought them back into conflict with the law. Edward B. vanished within two weeks of his release in 1937, telling his family that he was “headed west.” Later that year, police in Ohio picked up Edward as a vagrant, while he was riding the rails. Eventually, he made his way back to New Jersey, where he moved from place to place, and was jailed four times over the next five years. After a fifth arrest, for desertion, he vanished once again and was declared a fugitive. Richard F. arrived at Coxsackie a week after Edward and was released two months after him in 1937. Richard stayed at home for six months (acquiring and losing a job at Macy’s, and being rejected for military service by the army) before disappearing. He wandered around, looking for work in Pittsburgh, Johnstown, and Philadelphia, before being arrested for vagrancy in the latter city. Philip D. also lasted about six months at home, with his grandparents in Newark, before leaving his job and family for Boston. After some time in that city, he made his way to Manhattan, where a detective arrested Philip for “offering to commit an indecent act for three dollars,” for which he was returned to Coxsackie.

Still others simply lacked the judgment or ability to function well on their own. Gregory V., diagnosed as feeble minded but retained at Coxsackie, told the following story of postrelease trouble: Gregory and a friend were enticed by an older man they both knew to steal a car and hold up a store. On their way to the store in the stolen car, they stopped at a gas station. The attendant asked the two a few leading questions. Gregory and his friend became scared and hit the attendant over the head with the handle from a gas pump. They fled the scene but ran out of gas in a lonely spot. To attract attention and get a ride, the two lit a small fire but burned the car completely. Convicted of grand
larceny, Gregory went off to Napanoch, on the recommendation of the district attorney.\textsuperscript{77}  
In other cases, that same impulsivity and lack of judgment took terrible, tragic turns.\textsuperscript{78} John Bender and Harold Elling were both Coxsackie parolees from Rochester, with frequent run-ins with the police both before and after their time in the reformatory. Bender was paroled to his parents in 1939 and given a job with the NYA. Within two months, he had been rearrested, after getting drunk, stealing a case of whiskey, and stealing a car—for which, unsurprisingly, he was returned for violation of parole. Bender was reparoled to his parents and an auto repair job in April 1941. By October, he and Elling decided to go hitchhiking, armed, with the idea of holding up drivers who stopped and taking their cars. When Paul Skaritza stopped, Bender and Elling ordered him from the car—Elling marched him down the road, knocked him down with the gun, and shot him in the head (to hear the gun go off, he later testified). Elling was sentenced to death, Bender to life imprisonment in Attica.\textsuperscript{79}  
For these veterans of the reformatory, the departure from Coxsackie was simply a graduation to the world of the adult criminal justice system, grinding in and out of local jails, or serving long sentences in state prisons. Coxsackie frequently refused to take parole violators back, transferring them up to the state prison level. The Coxsackie superintendent lectured Albert D. on his return: “You thought you were going to give yourself up and come back here and we would be nice and easy and treat you like a welcome guest. You parole violators have no privileges of any kind. You understand that?” But at least Albert was allowed back to the reformatory. Peter Y., who had been involved a highly publicized series of burglaries in Rochester in 1938, was refused entirely and given a ten-year sentence instead. Humberto R. was dismissed by Coxsackie as a “typical gangster” and was given a new sentence to Sing Sing. In general, if parolees were no longer of an appropriate age for Coxsackie or for another reformatory, they would be subject not to the typical reformatory sentence but to the “regular” sentence for the new crime they had committed.\textsuperscript{80}  
Young men released from Coxsackie too often found in postrelease life a continuation (or even an acceleration) of the strains and conflicts that had preceded their time behind bars. Even when new criminal justice entanglements were avoided, family frustrations played havoc with the process of reintegration, while limited job opportunities mocked the promise of vocational training. For many others, patterns of everyday life intersected with policing to ensure continued arrests and imprisonments. Collectively, the experiences of reformatory prisoners offer an early echo of Shadd Maruna’s recent observation that “the
situation facing recidivist offenders is something like a brick wall. It is surmountable but is enough of an obstacle to make most turn around and ‘head back.’” Up against the wall while in Coxsackie’s yard, ex-offenders found themselves up against another, no less formidable wall, once they left the reformatory.81
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