

**Life After Incarceration**

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April 16, 2023

## **Introduction of the Incarcerated Community**

The United States has the most significant number of people incarcerated in the world, according to information released from the World Prison Brief in October of 2021; the United States has more than 2 million prisoners nationwide. (2,068,880 to be exact)(Walmsley) In our country, there are currently 1,566 state prisons, 98 federal prisons, 3,116 local jails, 1,323 juvenile correctional facilities, 181 immigration detention facilities, and 80 Indian country jails, as well as military prisons, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals, and prisons in the U.S. (Wagner) The prison system, is supposed to have four significant purposes Retribution, Incapacitation, Deterrence, and Rehabilitation.

Deterrence, and Rehabilitation. Retribution is punishment for crimes against society; thus, convicted criminals lose their freedom for their crimes. Incapacitation describes efforts to protect society by removing criminals from it to keep innocent people safe. Deterrence refers to preventing potential future crimes by showing people the consequences of committing crimes to dissuade people from doing them. Lastly, rehabilitation speaks to the efforts to change the criminogenic behavior of individuals through specific activities, such as teaching job skills and providing educational opportunities and counseling. The last purpose of prison (Rehabilitation), we believe, has been severely lacking when it comes to preparing individuals to be released back into society.

Yearly, over 650,00 formerly incarcerated individuals are released back into their communities in hopes that they can assimilate into society. As more incarcerated people transition from jail, the societal barriers and limitations they face grow numerous. From challenges securing employment, gaining access to medical care, and receiving public benefits to

federal regulations restricting access to public housing, they are set up for failure and possibly recidivism the moment they reenter society. The goal for those formerly incarcerated once they return to their communities is to create stability and opportunities that would deter reentry back into the criminal justice system.

An important factor in creating that stability is housing. Before being released from prison back into the community, these individuals must provide an address that they are returning to. Most of the time, they provide a family member's address, which, more times than not, they can stay there once they are released, but it is not often a permanent solution; thus, they will eventually have to find somewhere else to stay. Usually, that means residency in the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) shelters. Those living in imprisonment are drastically more likely to become homeless than the rest of the population: Of those who left the state prison in 2021 and came to New York City, approximately 40% ended up in a shelter or a similar placement. (Zevallos, 2022). This affects communities of color more, as Black and Latin X individuals are overrepresented in the prison population. The likelihood of returning to the prison system is higher if these individuals cannot access permanent housing, amongst other factors.

A critical factor that plays a significant role in homelessness among the formerly incarcerated is the federal regulations that influence public housing authorities to consider the criminal history of applicants for public and assisted housing. These regulations permit most public housing authorities to conduct blanket screenings and background checks to verify the applicant's criminal background, which in most cases leads to the rejection of their application. (2017) Coincidentally, statistics have shown that 79% of formerly incarcerated people were ineligible or denied public housing due to criminal history (2019).

Another factor that contributes to formerly incarcerated individuals in the ability to secure housing is the lack of employment opportunities that are available to them. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, about 60% of formerly incarcerated individuals struggle with unemployment. (Wang & Bertram, 2022) Employment opportunities are challenging for formerly incarcerated individuals as they are not eligible to work for all employers due to legal restrictions. Individuals with a criminal record commonly cannot obtain employment in education, state and federal government, medical, and security fields. Most occupations that require a license, such as real estate agent, barber, or accountant, also require a clean criminal background. (Kopf & Couloute, 2018). If there are no opportunities for formerly incarcerated to gain employment, then it would be difficult for them to afford to pay rent for housing. Thus, the likelihood for these individuals to return to criminal activities to acquire capital is higher, thus increasing their likelihood of returning to prison. Thus, the cycle that destroys families and communities continues unless solutions are created to address this issue.

### **Engaging the Incarcerated Community**

The current increase in incarceration statistics has impacted the criminal justice structure in the United States. As a result, the demand for social specialists in the federal justice sector to assist those detained or just freed has skyrocketed. Social workers can involve the public in the execution of the player's proposals and the evaluation of the effectiveness of the initiatives. This essay will go through how social workers can interact with the community, including those who are imprisoned and those who have recently been released, to put the team's suggestions into practice and how they can assess the effectiveness of the interventions.

To work towards the execution of the team's suggestions, social workers might include the community in various ways. By linking inmates and those who have lately been liberated from prison with neighborhood groups and resources, including faith-based initiatives and community-based assistance programs, they can build a structure of assistance for people currently in jail or prison (Griffiths, Dandurand, & Murdoch, 2022). This can lessen the chance of recidivism and give people access to services enabling them to lead fulfilling lives. Moreover, social workers can offer academic programs to assist people behind bars or who have just been released from prison, such as work experience, basic skills seminars, and drug misuse treatment.

Social workers might also consult with the local community to assess the effectiveness of the treatments they have given. For instance, they can conduct surveys and interviews to gauge how the treatment affects people and the neighborhood. To estimate the success of the programs, they might also use recidivism rate information. Social workers can also gauge the effectiveness of interventions by evaluating how program participants' conduct and perspectives have changed.

The community, including those who are incarcerated and those who have recently been released, should be encouraged to work toward implementing the team's suggestions and assessing the efficacy of the interventions by social workers. Social workers can assist people in reintegrating into society, lower recidivism rates, and foster safer and more effective communities by offering supplies, assistance, and education programs. In general, every person has a role in ensuring peaceful coexistence in society for everyone to allow easier and faster reformation of the released incarcerated persons. This attitude should assist them in reform and not fear them based on their pasts.

## **Assessing Structural Barriers**

The incarcerated population in America has skyrocketed in recent years, and approximately 1.9 million people are incarcerated in America. That is at 579 per hundred thousand people a year. America, for some reason, has become an incarceration nation. But why? The criminal justice system in America is why. There needs to be justice reform. Prisons should reduce crime and incarcerate the offenders, and they should be punished, although this has to be by the letter of the law or the constitution. Minorities already have a target on its back, coming from poor SES and broken family relationships.

Barriers that this population faces upon reentry can be many. Reentry from prison can affect how you can access housing and employment and government assistance. The stigma of incarceration can affect a person's mental health and have a great chance of recidivism. This will keep a revolving door of repeat "customers" that the justice system gets to push money out of the system.

Law enforcer play has a role to play in the barriers leading up to incarceration. While incarcerated, minorities face other challenges. According to the Oxford Dictionary, racial profiling refers to using race or ethnicity as grounds for someone committing an offense. Statistics from NAACP.org state that It is five times more likely that a black person will be stopped without cause than a white person. Also, a black man is twice as likely in this population to be stopped than a black woman. Sixty-five percent of black adults have felt targeted by their race. Also, 35 percent of Latinos and Asians have felt the same.

With jails as of 2020 at 80.6 capacity, this is a growing epidemic in the incarceration nation. A dozen states, while incarcerated, do give pretrial assessments, which are basically to see if the inmate is a flight risk. This statewide acceptance of risk assessment tools raises concern

that systemic bias may impact their use. In 2014, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder said pretrial risk assessment tools "may exacerbate unwarranted and unjust disparities that are already far too common in our criminal justice system and society." While incarcerated, many inmates do not get the physical or mental treatment they need. Your race should not affect the treatment you deserve under the law.

Local and state policies vary far and wide from state to state that affect felons' reentry into society. From being unable to vote, not serving on a jury, federal or state grants, public housing assistance, or SSI. These can severely affect an already vulnerable population. ACLU.org states, "A patchwork of state felony disenfranchisement laws, varying in severity from state to state, prevent approximately 5.85 million Americans with felony (and in several states misdemeanor) convictions from voting. Confusion about and misapplication of these laws de facto disenfranchises countless other Americans".

### **Impact on human well-being/Oppression**

Nearly 700,000 people are released annually, and an estimated 9 million are released from prison. According to the National Institute of Justice, almost two-thirds of them are arrested again within three years. Reentry and recidivism seem like something that go hand and hand; in society, we face a semantic system that will not hire felons for employment to get housing. An urban institute report states that "criminal record can also be a significant barrier to employment, with a 2009 study finding that 28 percent of applicants without a record got a job callback, compared to only 15 percent of those with a record".

The tides may change with nonprofit organizations trying to advocate for the rights of incarcerated and reentry felons. These nonprofits are trying to reenter this population into society and see them as viable by working. The initiative, called Reentry 2030, is a collaboration among

the Council of State Governments Justice Center, the Correctional Leaders Association, and the advocacy group Just Leadership USA. It started with the support of the Justice Department.

Reentry 2030 wants to drop the recidivism rate drastically by 2030. The internship I work for now is an excellent place for the reentry population to come for employment, document retrieval, and treatment. These tiny steps can eventually help the Reentry population achieve autonomy and freedom through non-prejudicial processes.

### **Interventions**

I propose several interventions that will assist newly released inmates with a successful transition into their communities and society. I believe homelessness is a major barrier to their productive reentry back to society. Apartments should be set aside for newly released inmates, in the Public Housing Authority, low-income housing on Housing Connect, Camba, and other low-income housing programs. A percentage of Emergency Housing Vouchers should also be allocated for the newly released inmates to maintain their housing. One of the negative effects of homelessness is increased incarceration. According to the article, new insights on homelessness and violence, when it came to the frequency of non-violent crime, Fischer and his team found no difference between street homelessness and sheltered homelessness, but they did find that people who were homeless and were moving around from shelter to shelter were more likely to commit violent crimes, such as robbery and assault (Price, 4/16/2023).

Another possible intervention is participation and successful completion of a job readiness program. Inmates should be mandated to participate during the last few months of their sentence. The job readiness program will assess whether a person is mentally and/or physically able to work. If the person can work, they will participate in resume writing, interview prep, and workshops that will teach them how to submit their resumes and complete

job applications online. Prior to their release they will receive referrals to obtain professional attire. Job interviews will also be scheduled in advance. Weekly follow-ups from a Case Manager, Job Coach, and/or Parole Officers will be mandated. For those who are medically or mentally unable to work, assistance will be given to apply for Social Security Disability benefits or other benefits, for example Public Assistance benefits.

In addition, the inmates will undergo a comprehensive medical examination and complete a Biopsychosocial assessment. A treatment plan will be created to follow-up on all medical and mental health concerns. Prior to the person's release they will be connected to a therapist, psychiatrist and/or medical doctor. According to Heather Stringer's article *Improving mental health for inmates*, about 37 percent of people in prison have a history of mental health problems, according to a 2017 report from the U.S. Department of Justice. More than 24 percent have been previously diagnosed with major depressive disorder, 17 percent with bipolar disorder, 13 percent with a personality disorder and 12 percent with post-traumatic stress disorder. The numbers are even higher for people in jail, where one-third have been previously diagnosed with major depressive disorder and almost one-quarter with bipolar disorder (Stringer,4-17-23).

Assuring education is available in the prison system is another intervention method to prevent reentry back to the prison system. According to Lyle May's article, *A prisoner describes his and other inmates' struggles for access to higher education* (opinion), the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act eliminated prisoner access to federal Pell Grants for postsecondary correctional education, most college-in-prison programs disappeared. Today, in 25 states, no college programs are available to prisoners. A few states, like California and Indiana, have continued to fund college programs in prison, while a few offers limited non-degree-bearing programs. Other states have provided no funding but allowed nonprofit organizations

and philanthropists to establish highly selective degree programs in prison, the most notable being New York's Bard Prison Initiative. All in all, a handful of accredited universities that offer correspondence courses to prisoners, regardless of sentence or custody level, are left to fill the gap in higher educational services. I know of only two -- Adams State University and Ohio University -- that offer correspondence degree programs (May 2020). The average national recidivism rate is roughly 65 to 70%; prisoners who participate in postsecondary correctional education programs are 43 percent less likely to reoffend than those who do not. The less education a person has, the less likely he or she is to commit a crime (May 2020).

The last intervention I believe will be useful is assisting the inmates with creating and fostering a support team. This support team can consist of family members, friends, mentors, sponsors, or religious leaders. This support team will be established before the person is released. Although participation is not mandated, I believe reassuring everyone of the support system's importance will promote participation. An article published in August 2012 in *Corrections Today*, a publication of the American Correctional Association, titled "The Role of Family and Pro-Social Relationships in Reducing Recidivism," noted that "Family can be a critical component in assisting individuals transitioning from incarceration because family members provide both social control and social support, which inhibit criminal activity. In contrast, those without positive supportive relationships are more likely to engage in criminal - behavior (Lowering Recidivism Through Family Communication Prison Legal News 4-12-23,).

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