

Reintegration of the Formerly Incarcerated

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## Introduction

Each year 48,183 people on average are tasked with the challenge of reintegrating back into communities across the United States after being incarcerated (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2019). The reentry process is described by Hall, Wooten and Lundgren (2016) as a three-stage process. This process begins by addressing treatment and employment needs while incarcerated followed by the structured release and then community reintegration. During the third stage, community reintegration, formerly incarcerated individuals face many barriers that make successful reintegration more challenging to achieve. Such barriers include limited access to decent housing, fewer educational opportunities, limited employment prospects, strain on interpersonal relationships, mental health issues including addiction, social isolation, and post-incarceration policies (Hall et al., 2016; Keene, Smoyer, & Blankenship, 2018). Formerly incarcerated individuals can overcome these barriers to reintegration by utilizing their strengths, such as resilience, and interventions such as transition planning, case management, and narrative therapy. When these barriers are not addressed, individuals can fail to successfully reintegrate especially by recidivating (Baillargeon, Hoge, & Penn, 2010; Hivaka, H., Wheelock, D., & Jones, R., 2015; Valera, 2017).

Recidivism is defined as reoffending within three years after being released from incarceration (National Institute of Justice, n.d.). The United States is known to have high rates of recidivism. According to Alper, Durose, and Markman (2018) 44% of released prisoners between 2005 and 2014 reoffended within the first year after being released, and 68% within three years. Of those arrested within the first year of release, 44.9% were male and 35.1% were female. The majority, 51.8%, were 24 years or younger. As indicated by the data, younger males were more likely to recidivate in comparison to females and older males. Statistics such as these have

encouraged researchers to examine why recidivism occurs, and most cite that the barriers to reintegration negatively affect recidivism rates (Alper et al., 2018). For instance, Hall et al. (2016) states that formerly incarcerated individuals who attend treatment less often after release, have health conditions, or experience social isolation are more likely to recidivate. Furthermore, on the micro-level, individuals who are young, male or a minority are also more likely to recidivate (Alper, et al., 2018). Unemployment, homelessness, or having no means of transportation are also barriers to successful reintegration (Hall et al., 2016; Keene, et al., 2018).

Employer stigma is often cited as a reason for unemployment among the formerly incarcerated and unemployment is a barrier to successful reintegration (Keene et al., 2018). With employers instituting regular background checks and seeing it as a legal exemption to bar formerly incarcerated individuals from being employed, these individuals' pasts are constantly brought to the present. Keene et al. (2018) states that focusing on past offenses activates stigma and discrimination for this population. Between landlord stigma and unemployment, formerly incarcerated individuals also face the inability to afford adequate housing and often are forced to reside in shelters, or on the streets (Keene et al., 2018).

Furthermore, structural stigmas are also barriers to successful reintegration for this population. Structural stigmas such as cultural norms and institutional policies constrain opportunities and resources for formerly incarcerated individuals (Hall et al., 2016; Keene et al., 2018). The implementation of post-incarceration policies such as limiting welfare assistance, revoking driver's licenses and voting rights, and preventing individuals with a felony to gain housing assistance such as Section 8 threatens the prevention of recidivism (Hall et al., 2016; Keene et al., 2018). In addition, this population also faces challenges obtaining adequate health

care and as a result, their physical and mental health issues can go untreated which could lead to recidivism (Baillargeon, et al., 2010).

### **Quantitative Data/Research**

According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons (2019), there were 1,044,085 individuals released from incarceration in the United States between 1992 and November of 2019. Of these, 48,550 were released to New York State. Within the last ten years, 481,829 individuals were released from prisons in the United States. Of those, 20,513 were released to New York State. This is an average of 2,052 individuals released to New York State each year. In comparison to other states, New York ranks fourth in the highest number of those released thus far in 2019 with 1,638 individuals reintegrating. Florida comes in third with 2,323, California second with 3,231, and Texas is first with 4,606 individuals reentering in 2019. These statistics show that this is a nationwide population, with significant numbers of individuals reintegrating (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2019).

Globally, the United States is known to have the highest incarceration rates, despite only having about five percent of the global population. The United States has about five to ten times more individuals incarcerated than other democracies. The National Research Council's study in 2014 noted that the lowest incarceration rates were in Finland with 58 people incarcerated per 100,000 people. In comparison, the United States had 707 people incarcerated per 100,000 people (Collier, 2014).

Locally, there were 22,828 individuals in New York State county jails in 2018 (New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, 2019). Of these, there were 42 in Yates County Jail and 72 in Tompkins County Jail. The county jail with the most individuals in 2018 was Nassau

County. In addition to jails, there were individuals incarcerated in prisons across New York State. In 2018 there were 47, 459 individuals in New York State prisons. In comparison to previous years, this is a substantial decrease. This report dates back to 2003 when 66, 110 individuals were incarcerated. This decrease in incarcerated persons follows the national trend of decreasing incarceration rates. This is significant because lowering rates of incarceration means an increase in the number of individuals being reintegrating into the general public. This once again emphasizes the significant need to address the barriers that thousands of individuals face during reentry (New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, 2019).

### **Qualitative Data/Research: Field Interviews**

Formerly incarcerated individuals need a variety of services to help with the reentry process. One such service is educational programs. Jennifer Gray, of Cornell Cooperative Extension Tompkins County, is a community and family educator who facilitates two programs with formerly incarcerated participants. One program is called healthy family relationships and occurs during day reporting. Day reporting is when individuals on probation or parole, or those waiting to be sentenced, report to an office where they meet with correction officers and attend educational services. Healthy family relationships is an educational program based on research that shows that supportive and healthy interpersonal relationships with family members and close friends are a significant part of successful reintegration for formerly incarcerated individuals. Gray stated that in general more men attend the program than women, and on average more white males attend compared to other persons. She stated that some of the individuals are waiting to be sentenced and that many choose being incarcerated over probation because they do not want to be under extreme supervision and possible end up incarcerated anyways. Gray is helping meet the needs of educational programs for this population by facilitating healthy family relationships. This

program has trauma-informed aspects and strength-based approaches such as encouraging individuals to understand how their past has affected them in negative ways but also in positive ways such as gaining resilience. Gray's recommendations for this population is to expand mental health services. She stated that there is a forensic psychologist that runs a meditation group and journaling group but she believes that there is a need for more than one individual to work with mental health services for this population. Gray further recommended a need for housing for formerly incarcerated individuals. She stated that there is inadequate housing for when they are released and that they have often burned bridges with family and friends and do not have them to rely on for shelter. She stated that there is also a need for housing for men with children. These services would further help provide support for maintaining employment and sobriety. Although Gray's educational background is not in social work, her role as a community and family educator closely resembles a social work role and uses similar strength-based and system theory approaches to see the individuals as being resilient despite challenging pasts and to understand the complexity of how a change in one system affects change in other areas of their lives. Furthermore, Jennifer Gray stated that her interactions with this population have been positive, and feels that this program is helpful for them. She also began the interview by stating that although she had never been incarcerated, she has never felt like the individuals she interacts with are different than her. She stated that she has always felt like there was never a "them" and "me" separation (J. Gray, personal communication, November 15, 2019 ).

A community leader was also interviewed. Dianna Gemmell worked as a probation officer for thirty years. She stated that her duty as a probation officer was to supervise them [the formerly incarcerated individuals], to enforce the court order and make sure they are going to their appointments. Gemmell noted a number of barriers that this population faced during the time they

were on probation and reentering society. Such barriers included finding employment, especially since they needed to get a signature from prospective employers to prove their whereabouts. Gemmell further noted that one of the most significant issues was the lack of personal identification such as a social security card, driver's license, birth certificate, etc. She stated that without these documents the formerly incarcerated individuals could not take steps toward successful reintegration because they needed proof of identification for employment, housing, and various other aspects. Gemmell stated that although her role as a probation officer was to supervise them, she often found herself having to do a social work role by helping them obtain identification. She stated that the population she worked with was in a rural area and was primarily white males, and disproportionately consisted of more drug offenses than any other type of offense. Gemmell recommends needing job services such as job readiness and outreach to employers that are willing to hire formerly incarcerated individuals. She also recommends that this population has access to social workers who can help them obtain their identifications, as well as offer counseling. She said that all of these recommendations are necessary to gain and maintain employment (D. Gemmell, personal communication, November 15, 2019).

### **Intervention Strategies**

Given the prevalence of barriers to successful reintegration for formerly incarcerated persons, practitioners and service providers have aimed to develop interventions that appropriately address this social problem. Researchers define these interventions in various ways. For instance, Valera (2017) defines four key ingredients to successful reentry. The four key ingredients include linking individuals to society prior to release, institutional and community anchors, social supports, and personal epiphany. These key ingredients can be implemented through interventions such as case management, transition planning, group counseling with a narrative therapy approach, and

working from a systems theory and a strengths approach. Case management assists individuals with finding needed resources and can be used to help address the barrier of needing decent housing and employment to keep housing (Baillargeon, et al., 2010; Keene, et al., 2018; Hall, et al., 2016; Valera, 2017). Early transition planning can help connect individuals to necessary services outside of prison or jail prior to reentry and can help prepare them for release (Baillargeon, et al., 2010). Group counseling can be used with a narrative therapy approach to develop narratives or stories of personal experiences with incarceration and reintegration and connect members of this population to others to form social support (Hlvaka, et al., 2015). Furthermore, the systems theory can be utilized allowing practitioners and service providers to respond to the way various systems effect the formerly incarcerated individuals' ability to reintegrate. For example, reintegration from a systems perspective may involve considering how unemployment affects housing and how housing impacts self-identity and self-sufficiency. In addition, the strengths perspective assists providers to move beyond the common societal stigma to recognize the individuals' strengths and utilize them to build their self-identity and support their reintegration process. A strengths perspective can also be useful for probation officers and other justice system persons to assist in a rehabilitative approach rather than rely on strict punishment and close supervision (Baillargeon, et al., 2010; Hlvaka, et al., 2015; Valera, 2017).

### **Ethical Dilemma**

An ethical dilemma that arises while working with this population occurs when a probation or parole officer has to make decisions on whether or not to report minor offenses. With the shift from rehabilitative toward punishment and supervision, community officers could find themselves having to face the decision of whether or not to report a violation of parole or probation (Valera, 2017). For instance, a formerly incarcerated person could violate parole/probation by staying out



late past the curfew limit because their job mandated they take a double shift. The parole/probation officer would have to decide whether or not they should report the violation that could possibly result in re-incarceration, or not report the violation and act from a desire to fulfill the duty to help successfully reintegrate the person into society (Wright, & Glifford, 2017). This dilemma could be solved by critically thinking through what the dilemma is, each possible choice of action, and the risks associated with each, and choose the least harmful approach to the client.

### **Recommendations**

A recommendation I have for working with this population is to integrate trauma-informed interventions including trauma-informed counseling within prisons because research shows that individuals who commit offenses often have had traumatic experiences (Hall, et al., 2016; Wright, et al. 2017). In addition, case management services need to begin earlier to allow time to make the necessary community connections to maximize the best possible chance of successful reintegration. Another recommendation is for more research on employer biases toward formerly incarcerated individuals and to develop trainings for employers to help them accept this population and understand the barriers they face (Baillargeon, et al., 2010; Valera, 2017).

### **Summary**

Overall, a decrease in incarceration rates has increased the reintegration rates of formerly incarcerated individuals. Meanwhile, there remains a need for interventions to address the barriers to successful reintegration. I have learned this social problem is far broader than I had previously known from my undergraduate studies of law. Conducting interviews and reviewing literature related to this topic has helped me understand the clients at my current field placement. I attend the educational program at day reporting with Jennifer Gray and most of the interactions have

included conversations regarding the reintegration experience, challenges, and “hoops” that need to be jumped through in order to be successful. In the future, I could see myself working with the formerly incarcerated through a case management or counseling role.

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