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GET OUT OF JAIL FREE? NOT SO FAST: THE LONG-LASTING IMPACT OF INCARCERATION

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Abstract

This study examines the experiences of former prisoners through their involvement with the criminal justice system. Specifically, we focus on the impact of parole, in-prison and reentry programs, and other systemic influences on reentry. The US currently has the highest rate of incarceration in the world and the rate of recidivism is alarming at 76.6% within 5 years. Existing literature provides some evidence that the criminal justice system itself may not be conducive to successful reentry. In this qualitative research project, former prisoners share their experiences with prison programming, parole, and reentry. Their narratives are a testimony to the challenges of navigating a convoluted and inconsistent system. This study highlights the need for more research on the efficacy of systemic reentry programs and for major reform within the prison system to promote rehabilitation.

INTRODUCTION

On June 12, 2020, the world watched as 27-year-old Rayshard Brooks, an African American man, was fatally shot by Atlanta police officer, Garrett Rolfe. Earlier that year, in an interview with a group called Reconnect, Brooks shared the difficulties he faced while navigating the outside world after being released from incarceration. His story revealed the realities of social stigma, financial ruin, and declining mental health upon release. Notably, he also highlights the limited systemic guidance that released prisoners receive to set them up for successful reentry. Brooks states, "You have court costs, probate, probation, just a lot of, a lot. You would have to have a lot of money [to succeed], and I'm fresh out of jail." (Newsource, CNN, 2020).

Brooks' story is not unique. In the past four decades, the rate of imprisonment in the United States has more than quadrupled. The American criminal justice system currently holds almost 2.3 million people, making it by far the country with the highest rate of incarceration in the world (Enns, 2016). Perhaps more troubling, it has been found that five out of six state prisoners released in 2005 across 30 states were arrested again within nine years following their release (Alper & Durose, 2018). While there is significant research that has delved into factors that contribute to recidivism, little attention has been given to how structural components of incarceration and release can affect the reentry experience. These structural components include programs offered to help prisoners rehabilitate both in prison and upon reentry, as well as parole and probation, which is perhaps one of the most influential factors in a person's return to society.

The New York State Department of Correction and Community Supervision currently has 52 state facilities that house over 42,000 inmates with an additional 35,905 on parole (Department of Correction and Community Supervision, 2020). In prison, inmates spend much of their time working (Richmond, 2014). However, educational programming is also offered in some prisons. About half of all inmates are mandated to attend some kind of vocational training class while five percent of inmates voluntarily enroll in a college course. These classes are often privately funded by outside universities and are offered in less than half of prisons (Izaguirre, et al., 2017). In addition to educational programs, sometimes rehabilitation programs are also offered. Some examples of this include Comprehensive Alcohol and Substance Abuse Treatment, which targets those suffering from alcohol or substance abuse (NY State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, 2018), and Rehabilitation Through the Arts, a program that aims to help prisoners realize their potential through art skills (Rehabilitation Through the Arts, n.d.).

Once released from prison, inmates are subject to the supervision of parole. In New York state, inmates are scheduled for a parole release interview conducted by the Board of Parole one month prior to the expiration of the minimum period of imprisonment. The decision to give an inmate parole release is ultimately determined by the Board of Parole according to a set criteria depending on the individual's specific situation (Division of

Parole Rules and Regulations On the Web, 2018). According to the 2018 Annual Report from the Committee of Corrections in New York state, "only 8.6% of parolees return to incarceration within 3 years of their release for a felony new offense" (The Annual Report from Committee on Correction, 2018). Thus, New York state has a relatively high rate of success of parolee reintegration compared to the rest of the country.

In addition to parole, New York inmates are faced with a myriad of programs upon their release, some of which are mandatory, while others are optional. In 2005, the Division of Criminal Justice Services developed a task force to coordinate and strengthen these community programs which aim to help offenders remain crime-free as they make their transition from prison (Offender Reentry, n.d.). Examples of programs offered include anger management classes and job application assistance.

In spite of all these resources being poured into the criminal justice system, little research has been conducted on the efficacy of such programs. In this article, we take a closer look at how parole and programs prisoners participate in while in prison and upon reentry impact the experiences of prisoners released from New York state facilities.

Review of Literature

Historically, there have been four main justifications for punishment in society: retribution, deterrence, incapacitation, and rehabilitation (Marson, 2015). In 1975, James Q. Wilson published his book *Thinking about Crime*, which focused on retribution, lending an academic justification to new crime policies at the time, with a focus on punishment (Wilson, 2013). In contrast, rehabilitation is a more modern strategy which typically focuses on preventing future crime through programs designed to resolve underlying contributors to criminal behavior. In theory, rehabilitation should reduce crime through therapeutic means, resulting in lower rates of incarceration (Marson, 2015). However, interest in rehabilitation decreased in the 1970s. Recently, new attention has been directed on rehabilitation with the development of modern tactics such as restorative justice (Zehr, 2012).

While new efforts have been made in the form of programs, government funding has not kept pace with rehabilitation ideas. According to a survey conducted by Vera in 2015, a total of $43 billion was spent on state prisons among 45 responding states. Of this amount, 68% of that expenditure went to corrections employees while only 17% was devoted to a catchall category that included facility maintenance, programming costs, debt service, and legal judgments (Mai & Subramanian, 2017). In New York State, where our study was conducted, "program services" accounted for only 10.2% of full-time employment among annual salaried positions in 2020 and just 8.9% of total spending (Division of the Budget). Thus, in spite of modest efforts to rehabilitate, the cycle of incarceration in the US has not slowed; in fact, some would argue it has soared.

In the United States, incarceration has reached five times the historic average, leading the world in incarceration rates (Raphael, 2011). In 2010, Michelle Alexander

famously declared mass incarceration the new Jim Crow, citing new tough on crime policies, beginning with President Nixon's "War on Drugs" campaign in the 1970s (Alexander, 2012). Nixon declared, "drug abuse was public enemy number one," at a time when crime levels in the US were on the decline. Consequently, as a result of the policy, 1/3 of young African American men are currently under the control of the criminal justice system. In 2006, data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics revealed that African American men numbers have declined. However, African American men still outnumber white men in prisons (Alexander, 2012), revealing historically deep rooted racial and social injustices in society.

Furthermore, despite limited data, the US is one of the leaders in recidivism rates, with 45% of released inmates returning to prison (Fazel & Wolf, 2015), and 68% rearrested within 3 years (Alper & Durose, 2018). Federal prisons also report a recidivism rate of 49.3% over an 8 year follow up period (US Sentencing Commission, 2016). The US Sentencing Commission also found that state prisoners had a higher rate of recidivism compared to federal prisoners, reporting the shocking reality that 84.1% of state prisoners under 24 years old were rearrested within 5 years (US Sentencing Commission, 2017). Thus, the rehabilitative function of prisons has been seriously called into question.

To evaluate the true rehabilitative effect of the criminal justice system, we must begin with examining how prisoners spend their time while in prison. For most inmates in New York, a significant amount of time is spent working in a prison industry. However, the data evaluating the efficacy of such employment in reducing recidivism is highly variable. Some correctional studies have shown little difference in recidivism between offenders who worked while incarcerated and those who did not (Maguire et al., 1988), while others have shown that prison employment may reduce recidivism (Saylor & Gayes, 1997). Additionally, for some inmates, prison programming takes up a large portion of daily life. These programs include educational programming, which has been shown to increase post release employment, but have mixed results in recidivism (Duwe, 2017), and forms of cognitive behavioral therapy, which have had more generally positive effects on recidivism (Petersilia, 2007; Rosenfeld et al., 2005; Duwe, 2017). Finally, programs specifically geared toward re-entry have shown that they can be effective, but their efficacy varies depending on unknown characteristics (Jacobs & Western, 2007; Wilson & Davis, 2006). Overall, a meta-analyses funded by the US Department of Justice found a modest 20% reduction in recidivism rate among adult offenders who participated in rehabilitative programs (Lipsey, 2019).

Once released, it is well established that former inmates face a myriad of obstacles in reintegrating. These obstacles most commonly include finding employment, finding housing, social integration coupled with minimal access to medical facilities to alleviate their mental health issues, and substance abuse (Visher & Travis, 2003). For many ex-offenders, these obstacles may have already existed prior to incarceration, though it has been extensively argued that incarceration compounds these obstacles (Harding et al.,

2014; Visher & Travis, 2003). Additionally, some literature has shown that this compounded disadvantage may make it more difficult to desist from crime, contributing to high recidivism rates (Bushway et al., 2001; Laub & Sampson, 2001). Thus, contrary to the rehabilitative justification for imprisonment, it can be argued that obstacles resulting from incarceration make it more difficult to refrain from behavior that is deemed 'criminal' by the criminal justice system.

Nearly 80 percent of those released from prison will be released to parole supervision (Hughes & Wilson, n.d.). The purpose of parole is to rehabilitate offenders and to help them reintegrate back into society (Parole & Probation, 2019). Practically, parole imposes several restrictions on parolees, including where they can live, and what they can do, and requires parolees to report to their parole officers regularly (Parole and Probation, 2019). Since the 1980s there have been major changes to parole as an institution, shifting away from its rehabilitative origins (Petersilia, 2011). Recently, it has been found that those released under the supervision of parole have higher rates of recidivism (Petersilia, 2011; Zehr, 2012), especially parolees under parole officers of high supervision intensity and low tolerance for deviance (Grattet et al., 2011). Therefore, it has been argued that parole may impose unnecessary obstacles upon reentry and serve as a driver for mass incarceration rather than a preventive measure against reincarceration (Petersilia, 2003; Reitz and Rhine, 2020).

In addition to parole, there are a plethora of reentry programs (BJA, BJS, NIJ, OJJDP, OVC, and SMART) provided by the Office of Justice Programs that are meant to reduce recidivism upon release, some of which are mandatory, while others are voluntary. These programs include practical assistance with employment and housing, cognitive behavioral therapy, and programs targeted to certain groups such as sex offenders, and drug offenders (Office of Justice Programs, n.d.). Despite millions of dollars poured into these programs, there have been few studies conducted regarding their efficacy (Duwe, 2017). Data that does exist suggests that many of these types of programs can be extremely helpful in reducing recidivism and improving reentry outcomes (Duwe, 2017; Mize & Abrams, 2019; Severson et al., 2012), but it is essential that the programs are individualized and targeted to specific needs (Gill and Wilson, 2016). Some programs have also shown no difference in outcomes between those who are enrolled and those who are not (Farabee et al., 2014; Lipsey & Cullen, 2007). There are also several individual characteristics that make dropping out of programs more likely including being unemployed and not residing with family (Listwan, 2008).

Overall, despite moderate efforts to add a rehabilitative aspect to incarceration in the form of in prison and reentry programs, as well as parole, the recidivism rate in the US remains high. There is extensive literature surrounding what is driving high recidivism rates and who is at higher risk of recidivating. Studies have shown that diminished social capital is a major risk factor for returning to prison (Hattery & Smith, 2010; Rosenfeld et al., 2005). Additionally, the environment of release plays a role in reintegration outcomes

(Kubrin & Stewart, 2006; Metraux & Culhane, 2004; Stahler et al., 2013; Sung, 2010). However, there are also structural elements at play that may influence recidivism. For example, Lynch and Sabol argue that though the size of the re-entry population has increased, funding for supervision has not kept pace, which may contribute to the cycle of offenders going in and out of prison (Lynch & Sabol, 2001).

Despite the extensive literature described, very few studies have specifically examined how released inmates themselves feel about their incarceration experience and whether they have found correctional programming and parole to be helpful in reintegration. In this article, we describe the lived experiences of fourteen former inmates and their views on the reality of rehabilitative incarceration.

METHOD

Fourteen interviews with former inmates were conducted over a period of three months. All respondents were recruited from "House of Hope", a nonprofit community organization in the Hudson Valley region that assists released prisoners with their transition into the community. House of Hope provides both individual assistance and a variety of re-entry programs aimed at helping clients find housing and employment as well as readjust socially to society. Participants are either mandated to come by their parole officers or come voluntarily seeking resources. In collaboration with House of Hope's program director, fourteen respondents were selected based on their willingness to share and openness to being interviewed. Each respondent was compensated $20 following their interview.

The respondents included one woman and thirteen men; ages ranged from 29 to 71 years old. Of the fourteen individuals five identified as white, eight as African American, and one as Hispanic. One male grew up in Boston but was arrested in New York and the remaining grew up in the Hudson Valley region or New York City. All had been incarcerated in various facilities in New York state. All interviews were conducted in a room in the community organization site. The first six interviews were directly typed as the interviewee spoke. The remaining eight interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Narratives presented are direct quotes, lightly edited for readability. Some unnecessary filler words such as "uh" and "um" are omitted.

The interviews lasted from one to two hours and consisted of three parts. The respondents were first asked questions regarding their early lives, including their family members, upbringing, and education. Ten respondents out of fourteen reported growing up with one or both parents missing from the household. Two respondents grew up with grandparents. Six respondents reported not graduating from high school prior to imprisonment, while three attended some form of post-secondary education following high school.

Then, the respondents were asked about their actual imprisonment experiences including the number of times they had been arrested, their ages at each arrest, the duration of their sentences, and the crimes for which they were arrested. The duration of each respondent's time spent in prison or jail ranged from a few months to 33 years. Many had been arrested and sentenced multiple times. Only three had been arrested just once. The respondents had been arrested or sentenced for a range of crimes including murder in the second degree, possession of a murder weapon, sex crimes, drug possession, grand larceny, drug trafficking, burglary, manslaughter, and armed robbery. They were then asked to describe their day-to-day activities in prison, the programs they participated in, whether they participated voluntarily or because they were mandated, and whether they had visitors while in prison. All reported participating in at least one program while in prison. They were then asked to reflect on how their time in prison and the programs they attended affected them.

Lastly, the respondents were asked about their lives following release from incarceration. They were first prompted to reflect on their feelings upon returning to society and their immediate concerns. Then, they were asked about the support they received from the criminal justice system, society, and family or friends. Lastly, they were asked about their experiences with parole and their participation in reentry programs. Specifically, they were asked to describe how these programs have impacted their lives and whether they have helped or hurt them in their reentry experience. The parole sentences for the respondents ranged from no parole to a life sentence on parole. All respondents reported participating in at least one reentry program following release.

In the following results, all participant names and organization names have been changed to protect anonymity.

RESULTS

Time in Prison: Experiences with Education and Counseling Programs

Seven participants reported taking higher education courses or getting their GEDs while in prison. Nearly all participants mentioned participating in counseling, or voluntary programming during their time behind bars. When asked about how these programs affected them, a prevalent theme among respondents was that the opportunities in prison offered were pivotal in changing their lives. "Sam", a 48-year-old African American male imprisoned for 17 years for manslaughter was asked if he found the programs offered to him in prison to be helpful. He explains how he was impacted by outside volunteers and a college program:

> *Very much. Only because outside of the vocational programs, a lot of*
> *what helped me were those that I volunteered for myself.… I met a lot*

of good people, people who were civilians coming in as volunteers who also became a part of my support network at some point in my transition. Um, so for me, programs like that, um, were most beneficial for my development and the college program of course. Yeah, so that was [a] game changer for me in terms of what was possible once I got out. Um, unfortunately when I got my associates the following year, they took the college program away so I couldn't get my bachelor's at that point. But um, at that time, uh, Governor Pataki was in office and there was some strong pushback from the upstate areas about why should we have to pay for college for our children while these inmates are getting it for free. . . .It was one teacher in particular, he's my sociology teacher. He had an immediate impact on me because of his world view. So, we became like an indirect mentor so to speak. Um, 'cause his presentation, his delivery, his classwork was always uplifting, eye opening, and empowering.

In his response, Sam highlights the impact that educational and civilian run programs can have in prison. Importantly, his experience reveals one of the key factors that make prison programming so valuable: providing prisoners with opportunities to interact with positive influences. Both the civilian volunteers he connected with and his sociology teacher serve a critical role in guiding him toward successful reentry into society, inspiring him to stay positive and supporting him in times of need. His story highlights the need to study specific factors that make certain prison programs successful and unsuccessful. Although there has been extensive research delving into "what works" among existing programs in reducing recidivism (Aos et al., 2006; Gill, 2016; Lattimore, 2009), few studies identify what characteristics make certain programs successful. The failure of the innovative Project Greenlight, an evidence based comprehensive reentry program (Wilson, 2006), highlights the need to look deeper into individualized resources for prisoners with differing needs.

"Mike", a 42-year-old African American male respondent, who served 22 years for murder in the second degree, also discusses how educational opportunities specifically impacted his life:

I always say that prison saved my life and made me realize my potential. But I just wish I could have discovered that before I went to prison. Like instead of prison saving somebody's life, save them before they get that far. Before I went to prison, I was a 9th grade drop out with a 6th grade education. In prison I got my GED, my BA, and then I got halfway through my MA degree. It's sad that I had to realize my potential in prison.

Mike's story reflects the reality of educational disparities in the US. It is well accepted that education is an important indicator of a person's ability to move up the socioeconomic ladder. However, among formerly incarcerated people, more than half hold only a high school diploma or GED while a quarter hold no credential at all (Coulette, 2018). In 1991, nearly 14% of individuals in state prison and nearly 19% in federal prisons, had taken a college course. In 1994, the crime bill cut prison college courses in half and the number of prisoners taking college courses and earning college degrees diminished substantially (Coulette, 2018). With proper education, Mike's story reflects the potential life-altering value of education, supporting existing literature on the impact of educational opportunities (Kim & Clark, 2013), and provides evidence for the need to increase educational resources for high-risk youth and to individuals who have already been incarcerated.

Despite his own success with educational programming, Mike acknowledges that these opportunities are not available in most facilities and are only effective if the prisoner is properly motivated. When asked if his experience was shared among his peers, he states:

> *It depends on what prison you're in. At first, I was in a prison where the majority of the prison was warehoused and there was not a lot of opportunity. People would just be working and making just enough money to take care of yourself. Forty cents an hour was considered good. When I came to Sing Sing it was different from all the other prisons and had lots of rehabilitation programs. I did Rehabilitation through the Arts where we perform plays inside the prison and outside. Because it's close to the city so there's more volunteers. There's nothing up north in the mountains. Really good programs are few and far in between. Even at Sing Sing, a lot of people just hang out in the yard which is like hanging out on the streets. Anything you do in the streets you can do in the yard like get high and gang bang. I'd say it both has to be made available and the person had to be smart enough to take advantage of them.*

His view on the importance of motivation was also shared by several of the respondents and stretched beyond education and civilian programming. In prison, many respondents were able to get therapeutic group counseling for substance abuse or mental health issues. "Dan", a 63-year-old African American man who had been incarcerated for 33 years for murder in the second degree discusses how his mindset changed after going through the same anger management programs throughout the course of his time in prison:

> *The one thing about doing the programs is going in with an open mind as opposed to going in and saying, I don't need the program. You can get*

anything out of everything that you're involved in. You just gotta be, um, resolve to say I want to see something different happen instead of going in with a closed mind. I've done this before. I don't need it. You're going to miss out on everything like that. Even though you already did the program. Different people, different ideas, different group of folks, it's going to be different things. You look at a painting a thousand times and see something different all the time.

Dan admits that going through programs with the wrong mindset will not be a helpful experience, it is only when one is receptive to what the programs are trying to teach that the experience will be beneficial. Another respondent also chose to discuss his experience in a therapeutic prison program, the Comprehensive Alcohol and Substance Abuse Treatment Program (CASAT). "John", a 46-year-old white male, who had been arrested 10 times and spent 3.5 years in prison for burglary shared his feelings about CASAT programs. He states:

The counselors don't really do anything, it's all inmate run. It's not really structured. Not a lot of guys are there for the right reason. The guys that are there they're doing it because they want to go home. They don't really want to stop using.

Mike, Dan, and John's reflections reveal another key factor in shaping successful in-prison programming: willingness to change. While providing program opportunities and mandating counseling sessions can be helpful for some, it is far more important to properly motivate inmates to take advantage of what they are offered. John's response shows that the structure of some prison programs could contribute to a lack of enthusiasm to participate while Dan's response reveals that many inmates are not yet ready for change when they enter prison. Further studies and programming should focus on investigating internal motivation and how it can be fostered and encouraged.

Time in Prison: Religion and Spirituality

According to the ACLU the First Amendment protects the right of a prisoner to practice his or her religion while incarcerated (Religious Freedom in Prison, n.d.). In 2012, the Pew Research Center conducted a survey of prison chaplains in all 50 states and found that nearly 73% of chaplains believe religious programs in prison are "absolutely critical" to successful rehabilitation of inmates (Heimlich, 2012). Several respondents discussed the important role of religion and spirituality while they were serving their time in prison.

When asked to describe other influential factors contributing to his growth in prison, Sam discussed his faith and the prison system's role in facilitating spirituality. He states:

I think one of the things that helped me is kind of reaffirming spirituality. I think for many of us, that is a something that is untapped by many organizations. I know other organizations have numbers and that kind of stuff, but for many of us in one form or another, there was some kind of spirituality that helped a lot of us not just get through incarceration but sustain our faith once we got out. . . . .That's the thing, I don't think [prison] allowed it. I think we create a space for that ourselves. I think that's the major difference. So of course they allowed us to meet, if, for example your faith was on a Sunday or Friday, whatever it was, but a lot of us transformed it ourselves into a sacred space. So whether we was out or in, there was this awakening, that we control and I think that makes a difference. Um, so by virtue of the fact that many of us realize and recognize how relevant and important spirituality was, we kind of went above and beyond, created a safe space inside of ourselves for self-discovery.

"Chris", a 54-year-old African American man who had been incarcerated for a total of 15.5 years for various crimes, also describes how discovering religion in prison influenced his mindset:

I've educated myself spiritually this last time. I became Muslim. I met individuals that I was rather close with in facilities that I was at, they talked to me about certain things, asked me who my lord was and I couldn't answer these questions. As I got further into their studies, I just knew this is for me. I'm not gonna say that it was hard. You get what you put into it. If you really go all the way to adapt, you're gonna be successful. The doors are gonna open, you just gotta be patient and let the doors open for you. I allowed my faith, my way of life to do that for me [change way of thinking].

These respondents reaffirm the sentiment expressed by prison chaplains of the value of spirituality while in prison, a concept that is also supported by the limited research that has been conducted regarding the efficacy of prison-based spirituality programs (Mowen et al., 2017; Petersilia, 2003). The benefits of discovering and exploring faith continue once the prisoner is released. Sam and Chris both reveal the long-lasting influence religion has had on them in changing their long-held mindsets and providing a positive outlook through obstacles. The few faith-based reentry programs that have been evaluated also affirm the value of spiritual connection as guidance throughout the reentry process (Roman et al., 2007; Stansfield, 2017).

Given the disproportionate effect of mass incarceration on the black population, it is also important to consider the implications of religion in the African American community. Through slavery, Jim Crow, and persistent oppression, religion has been the cornerstone in sustaining black communities. The Pew Research Center (2014) found that 83% of blacks in the US believe in God in comparison to 61% of whites. The importance of religion amongst African Americans is well established in the literature (Chatters et al., 2008), and represents a potential untapped resource for rehabilitation in prison that could be implemented systemically.

Preparing for Release: Parole Board

Before release, prisoners must go through the parole board, which makes the ultimate decision about whether or not to release an individual into the supervision of parole. Many respondents mentioned the parole board being a major stressor while they were in prison due to the uncertainty of the outcome.

When asked about the obstacles he faced while in prison, Dan discussed his frustration with the system after the members of the parole board denied his release from prison several times. He states:

> *So [in] 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, [and] 2014 all those times I was hit and then finally 2014 it goes to the board and they do something they shouldn't have done. They continued to hit me for the nature of the incident offense, but they also say you're not being released because of community opposition. People saying that they didn't want me home. There was no community opposition. The only person that was opposing my release was the DA. I had one ticket since I've been in. I'm the guy that you want to put up on a poster, I'm the guy.*

Another respondent, "Joseph," a 47-year-old African American man who spent an additional 18 months on top of his 25-year sentence for murder and armed robbery, describes how the parole board impacted him:

> *I was hit with 18 months before I was released and being hit with 18 months, what it did it almost destroyed me. And when I say it almost destroyed me, this is exactly what I mean. I mean there are people who are incarcerated and they do 25 years, 30 years, some people do 40 and when they go to the parole board, they keep, they give people two years because that's the max they can give them, or they'll tell you to come back in 12 months or 8 months. (...) What they'll do is they'll tell you the nature of your, because of the nature of your crime or the nature of the seriousness of your offense, we need you to reflect on how serious*

> *what you've done has affected the society that you're asking to be returned to. It was the hardest 18 months I ever had to do because I had to explain to my family members who believed that at the time, I was sentenced 25 years is the time that I had to do. And in a majority of the cases, this is what family members are all led to believe. Even though a lot of prisoners don't tell, or a lot of ex-felons don't tell their family members that this doesn't mean that I'm coming home at this time. This means that there's a possibility of me coming home at this time.*

Dan and Joseph's responses both reveal the ambiguity associated with the parole board. Their stories reflect the desperation for release of prisoners who have long been held behind bars. When hope for release is given, then taken away, the added stress of disappointment can be devastating for prisoners as well as their families. Already in a fragile state from years of imprisonment, continuous denial of parole by the board can have a significant impact on prisoners' mental and emotional health.

Their responses also reveal the injustice behind parole board decisions, with Dan's release being prevented despite his good behavior and Joseph being denied release for the "nature of his offense", something he did not have the power to change. The potential for bias in the parole board is overwhelming, similar to a jury, the parole board can make subjective decisions that do not reflect the prisoners' growth and potential (Morgan & Smith, 2005). This injustice was brought to the world's attention in a New York Times investigation in 2016, which drew on 60,000 disciplinary cases in New York state prisons over a 3 year period, finding that 1 in 4 white inmates were released compared to fewer than 1 in 6 (Schwirtz et al., 2016). Racial bias within the criminal justice system is well established, and the parole board represents another example of how it is manifested, with potentially devastating effects for prisoners and having long lasting impact on their eventual reentry.

Preparing for Release: Phase 3

After the decision to release a prisoner is made, participants begin to prepare for release. The New York prison system follows a three-phase program for incarcerated individuals. After completing Phases 1 and 2, which respectively consist of the preparation phase and bulk of time incarcerated, all participants move on to Phase 3, which is designed to help inmates prepare for release. According to the New York Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, Phase 3 involves the development of a portfolio and six-month job search plan. Once participants enter Phase 3 they begin to work on this plan instead of their usual prison schedule (DOCCS, n.d.). Nearly all interview respondents discussed Phase 3 and, interestingly, most had very similar views of the program.

"Matthew", a 53-year-old African American man who was incarcerated for 1.5 years describes his experience with Phase 3:

> *Yeah, I did Phase 3. That's like where they try to prepare you to come home. (...) A lot of these programs in jail you have lifers, people who been in there for 20, 30 years that's totally totally out of tune with the outside world. And if you look at the copyright on the paper it might say 1979. (...). They tell you do this do that. And once you get out that stuff don't exist. But if you see the sincerity and the passion that they have to give you this information, you'd be astonished.*

"Tim", a 45-year-old white man who was incarcerated for 25 years for homicide also reflects on whether Phase 3 was helpful for him:

> *I found it helpful but then after coming home found out how grossly inadequate it is. Here it is in 2016 your reference manual is from 2009. Your resources have stuff that reaches in the early 90s. The intent isn't to prepare a person to come home. We would have to have family members or counselors bring us updated material. It's supposed to be for 30 days. Most people don't do that. Because at random the state might throw a guy in Phase 3 two weeks before they go home.*

Both Matthew and Tim reveal the inadequacy of the reentry assistance they were provided. They reveal the disappointment in the program and question the true intent behind it. Tim specifically brings up the seemingly random way the state would determine when to send someone into Phase 3. Many of his peers did not complete the full 30 days of Phase 3 and most were sent out ill-prepared for reentry.

Sam was one of the above described former inmates who facilitated Phase 3, he explains his experience and admits to the drawbacks of the program that Matthew and Tim reveal:

> *One of the downsides is, um, for many of us where we, for a long time, we didn't experience being outside. We didn't experience being home. So, when it came to topics, even though it was theory, we didn't have the practical knowledge because some of us never experienced being free before. So, I think it's one of the downsides of it that we people who've been in for a long time. It's kind of difficult to get the practical information that we need to really transition home because if you've been inside for so long and you haven't made the transition yourself, and most of the people that facilitate them are people in jail for a long, long time.*

Sam's response supports Matthew and Tim's negative view of Phase 3. Overall, testimony from both participants of Phase 3 and facilitators of Phase 3 suggest that having inmates themselves facilitate Phase 3 is not effective. While the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision boast of their reentry assistance, to date there have been few studies that have validated its efficacy. Our respondents demonstrate that in order for Phase 3 to be a useful resource, the information offered must be kept current and an active effort must be made by the state to ensure all released prisoners have adequate time and resources to prepare for reentry.

Initial Reflections of Reentry

Though some respondents expressed relief and excitement upon being released, a prevalent theme that was discussed by participants was overwhelming fear and anxiety upon initial reentry. Tim, who spent 25 years behind bars, describes his first few weeks out of prison:

> *It was awkward. When it came to me there was this indescribable fear that I carried with me. Part of it was from the stigma of incarceration, what I was incarcerated for. Overthinking what people would view me as. Add to that the conditioning of being accustomed to always being told when to move, when not to move. It took me a month to leave the house by myself. I couldn't build up the courage to do it. My wife used to have to ask me lets go out. I GPSed the nearest Shop Rite and walked almost two miles and got three items. Struggled with the self-checkout and went home.*

Sam, who had been imprisoned for 17 years and facilitated Phase 3 for other inmates, discusses a similar fear that he felt upon being released from prison. He states:

> *At the moment [it] was fear, because when the door initially opened, there was no one there. So, I didn't know what I was supposed to do. So, the reaction was, like, okay what's this about? Um, a few minutes later she pulled up, which was good, but the initial reaction was fear, not knowing what to expect, not knowing where to go. In spite of the fact that I've taught transition services for many years, the real effect of being released was totally different. So initially was fear and then joy.*

Tim's experience reflects the difficulty of readjustment for those who have spent decades behind bars. In prison, you are told what to do, where to go, and when to move. Making the sudden change to having the freedom to make your own decisions can be a major change and a struggle that is not acknowledged by the criminal justice system. Sam's

experience also reflects the uncertainty and feeling of unpreparedness that prisoners face. Both respondents felt dependent on family members to help them navigate the world. Similar sentiments of difficulties in social integration are reflected in other qualitative studies of prisoner reentry experiences (Hattery & Smith, 2010; Western, 2018). Future studies should delve deeper into the psychological impact of long-term prison sentences to investigate how these burdens can be alleviated prior to reentry to promote successful reintegration upon release.

Another source of anxiety that was widely cited by respondents was the fear associated with being sent back to prison. Joseph, who had initially been given an additional 18 months in prison by the parole board, describes this fear before release:

> *I was scared and the reason I was scared is because I thought he was going to tell me to come back and they made a mistake. All the way up until the day I was nervous, and I didn't, I didn't want to call anybody. I was scared to get on the phone. I was scared to do anything.*

The fear of leaving prison after decades of imprisonment is real for these respondents. In addition to dealing with a new environment with little preparation, the fear of being sent back to prison follows those who have been behind bars for decades. Sam's testimony, as a Phase 3 facilitator makes clear that the Phase 3 program does not adequately prepare these new parolees with the more nuanced skills needed to tackle the feelings of anxiety and overwhelming negative feelings upon release.

After discussing the fear and anxiety that they felt upon initial release, participants were asked to talk about their concerns during readjustment. Respondents named a wide range of topics. In particular, parole was mentioned as a major contributor to stress for many participants.

Mike, who was granted clemency after 22 years in prison, describes the pressure he felt to satisfy the rules and regulations of parole. Upon being asked his main concern during readjustment, he states:

> *Satisfying parole. I was hoping to get someone who wants to see you do well and not wanting to put me back in. I heard a lot of stories about parole officers that sent you back for no reason. I always wanted to make sure I was doing the right thing. There was a lot of pressure on me for people still in prison. Because they just brought back clemency it got a lot of people's hopes up. I don't want to mess it up for anybody else. I had to be reassured by my parole officer that he's not sending me back to prison but it's hard to trust that. I heard stories about parole officers that said people violated parole when they didn't and sent them back for minor things.*

Mike's response reveals the impact of parole on anxiety about being sent back to prison. Rather than viewing his parole officer as a resource to turn to for help, he saw the system as out to get him, and feared returning to prison. He is not alone in his fear. The anxiety and stress that respondents feel about the parole board, the actual day that you are released on parole, and the parole officer that you are assigned while you readjust to living in society creates an overwhelming degree of emotion for new parolees.

"James", a 30-year-old African American man who was imprisoned for 13 years, shares his own concerns about parole:

> *I wanted to get parole immediately. I went to parole right away. I went to see my family, um, uh, try to find my programs. I went to the programs to the hospital to have a physician or the primary. Um, and then I spend time with my wife and been with her ever since.*

The parolees have shared their experiences dealing with the parole board and reentry. However, it doesn't end once they are released from prison. The stress of living on parole is another layer of anxiety for these men and women.

Living on Parole

In 2001, Lynch and Sabol's study of prison reentry revealed that though the size of the reentry population as increased, funding for parole supervision has not. Thus, this calls into question the efficacy of parole as a facilitator of successful reentry. Our respondents were asked to give their thoughts on how parole affected them. Interestingly, though parole was a major source of initial stress, responses to parole itself were highly varied. Most participants viewed their parole officers positively. Though the words "strict" and "demanding" were brought up, most respondents felt their parole officers were fair and wanted to see them succeed. Many respondents felt that parole provided structure that they needed upon reentry.

When asked about how the limitations of parole has impacted him, John, an African American man who had spent 13 years in prison, describes how parole has impacted his life:

> *Well, um, it has impacted, but at the same time it has helped me because I'm not out there looking for friends or having to go see the friends that I had that were negative and things like that. And it worked because I stay away from those people. And now the only friend I have is my wife. That's it. And that's all I need. I'm good.*

Chris, an African American man who spent 15.5 years in prison discusses similar feelings of parole providing positive structure in his life:

Definitely been good for me. I no longer see it as all bad. There's good in it even though you're being monitored. Keeping yourself on straight. It is a structure. Because when I first came home, I had to report every two weeks. You got to work yourself up. It was always on my mind. Even here today it's on my mind. From time to time I call her just to check in. I would say it limited me because I see people that I grew up with still out here, doing the same thing, getting high, things I don't wanna see myself do. I find it hard to try to avoid them. If I wave at them, I keep moving. I don't give them time to try to hold me down. I don't go out.

John and Chris reveal the value of parole in maintaining structure for those who were recently released. Their sentiments were also shared by other respondents who described parole as important for keeping them on the right track. The rules, regulations, and practices that accompany parole are similar to the structures that these men and women grew accustomed to when they were incarcerated. It's familiar and it can provide them with the transition they need to ensure that they don't get rearrested and return to prison. However, these sentiments are not shared by all respondents that are on parole. Some respondents had negative views of parole and its limitations.

"Nick", a 49-year-old white man who was incarcerated for seven years for a sex crime, describes how the limitations set by parole prevents him from living a normal life. He states:

No internet. No cameras. The whole world is run by internet now, they're gonna stop making the phones. 4G phones all have wifi on it. Now they're gonna have to do something about that. (…) It's harder to do a lot of things. When you go for job interviews, parole has to know about it. They look at background checks then they don't want to hire you because of that. Can't go here and there. Can't have use of computers. We're going back to almost 30 years ago in our lives. It's like we're living in the 80s. You gotta get permission for everything. Took me almost two years for me to drive. I got a job a few months ago but parole said it's not a good idea because it was carpentry work in people's houses. . . . I had to adjust.

As a sex offender, Nick's restrictions were particularly strict upon release. Without access to the internet or a phone, he felt limited in his ability to integrate with the modern world. With the added challenge of satisfying parole requirements, finding a job has been near impossible. His experience calls into question whether these parole restrictions are

necessary or whether they hinder former prisoners from achieving the financial independence needed to maintain crime-free lives.

"Susan", a 60-year-old white woman who was incarcerated for 32 months discusses similar feelings of limitation upon reentering due to the supervision of parole:

> *My anxiety level was through the roof. I had to come home first knowing that I did not have my own house anymore and I had to live with my son. To me that was… I was the one that always took care of everybody else. I was married but I wasn't allowed to live with my husband because he lost the apartment at first. Then he got an apartment, but I wasn't allowed to live with him for a while. Everything has to be approved by parole, since I didn't go home to my own house again that's the protocol. I feel like they kind of live in their own little world. They make their own rules and they think the whole world goes by their rules. Like me, I had to ask her permission… My driver's license was expired. I have to wait until she says I can get a license. As an adult it was hard for me to sit back and take orders from someone to do basic life stuff. I was also cleared by [organization[for the state job that I wanted, they hired me but since I don't have my driver's license they have to hire someone with a license because in that job title, you have to be able to take clients and take them to appointments if they can't get there.*

She goes on to say that parole may have actually made her transition back into society more difficult:

> *My thing is anytime in my life that I needed to make more money I just did it and got a better job. Here I have to go by everybody's rules in the process. Without the rules and without parole it would be an easier transition. . . . I had to acclimate myself again. I would normally go out and find a job. I had to sit back and learn how they wanted me to do it. I had to change my whole mindset. Gave me another way of thinking.*

Susan's experience reaffirms Nick's, providing further evidence that parole restrictions may make it harder to find suitable employment and achieve successful reintegration. Her experience also highlights the impact of incarceration and parole limitations on family. She was not able to live with her husband, and had to rely on her son for housing, which had a major impact on her mental health. Nick and Susan's experiences reflect the ways parole can disrupt everyday lives, interfere with independence and autonomy, and limit individuals from fully integrating back into society. For these

respondents, being back in the outside world but now constrained by the rules of parole can be a difficult adjustment.

Matthew, an African American man described earlier who had been incarcerated for 1.5 years, also discusses how parole impacted his family. He describes how he was forbidden from living with his 1-year-old son, stating:

> *So I went to parole one day and I'm pretty happy because I'm about to see my son for the first time because they're about to come visit me. They came here and they didn't want to fly so I asked permission to go get them from [transportation center]. And [PO] said, yeah but they can't live with you. So, I tried to explain to her like [PO] the only reason they coming to New York is to be with me like they've never left their state. But she said they can't live with you.*

There are an increasingly number of men and women that are released from prison and are living with rules of parole that prevent them from living with and caring for their children.

Nick, Susan, and Matthew's experiences reflect the structure of parole, which imposes limitations that could send individuals back to prison for non-criminal activity. There is some evidence that shows that the rate of recidivism for parolees is higher than non-parolees due to parole violations (Petersilia, 2011). Our respondents described violations such as staying out after 8 pm at night, being in the company of another person on parole, and driving a car without permission. In the lives of individuals not on parole these actions are not considered criminal activities. Currently, there is no evidence to support that these limitations are important for successful reentry. Thus, future research should focus on investigating which parole limitations are necessary, and which may hurt parolees.

It's important to note that all the respondents that expressed negative views of parole in this study served short sentences, while those that expressed positive views of parole served sentences greater than 10 years. Thus, it is clear that parole can have both positive and negative impacts, depending on the individual in question, which is a concept supported by quantitative studies (Solomon et al., 2005). Based on our data, it may be that parole is more beneficial for people who had been incarcerated for longer periods of time, as they need the extra support to help them readjust. In contrast, those who were only incarcerated for a few years or months view the additional supervision while on parole to be a hindrance. Future studies should be conducted to evaluate the efficacy of parole in different groups and evaluate which groups would benefit from parole, and which should be excused.

Support Systems

Amidst the uncertainty and stress of release, respondents discussed the importance of having a support system in place to aid in their re-entry. This support included family, friends, and programs.

Matthew, who had been incarcerated 3 times, recalls his experience the last time he was released:

> *Thank god I have an uncle up here. He used to come pick me up every morning [from the shelter]. What I would do, 'cause I was scared to get in the showers up there. (…) To me it's like if you go in there you might be worse off than you were before getting in there. Lucky for me I had my uncle and I had a sense of normalcy. What I mean by that I would go to his house I would take a shower, sit down, eat. And then he would drop me off at the end of the day. My main objective was to get out of there as soon as possible. I could never see myself, I couldn't see myself making a career out of the shelter. It's just too much that goes on. People overdosing, popping pills, mental health issues. I don't understand why they put parolees over there because then they just going back.*

He continues by reflecting on the implications of how the system of parole treated him:

> *It's crazy because the minute that you get out after they lock you up where do they expect you to go? To the same place that you just left. It's like a recovering alcoholic going to sit at the bar every day.*

This analogy of an alcoholic sitting in a bar full of alcohol is a powerful comparison. It's a clear expression of the stress that accompanies living in the same environment that contributed to the individual's initial arrest. With so many released prisoners returning to these environments, Matthew's testimony provides a powerful explanation for high recidivism rates in the US.

James, who met his wife in prison, and was released after 13 years shares a similar sentiment regarding the importance of family, reflecting on how the loyalty of his wife has been essential to his efforts to stay out of prison. He states:

> *She never left me. She never left my side. She never let me down. And when I got home, she's been there ever since. Hasn't left me. Hasn't led me down and believe it or not, I have made some very bad choices, some many very bad mistakes, bad decisions, but I have overcome them. I*

have changed my life and she sees it. I still have a lot of work to do, but
I'm working on it because I want to not only perfect my life, not go back
to prison, but my main priority is to perfect my relationship with her and
not lose her because she's awesome.

Matthew and James' responses both highlight the impact of family support upon reentry. Because of their supportive families, both were able to have a safe place to go upon release. Housing security was invaluable in keeping them away from past environments that may cause them to return to prison. Having loved ones to turn to for emotional support also provides the psychological security needed to set themselves up for success.

In contrast, the respondents in this study without support systems in place share the horror of their experiences in homeless shelters. The conditions at shelters are extremely rough, with some comparing it to being back in prison. When asked about his initial experiences coming out of prison, "Alex", a 32-year-old white man incarcerated for two years states, "My first night at the shelter, for the first three weeks I would rather be locked up than stay at this place. Everyone was doing drugs, getting into fights. At least in prison, I had a room where I could close the door." Similarly, Dan, who spent 33 years behind bars described his first night out of prison as he made the transition to shelter housing:

I went to the [center]. It's for the people that have to go to shelters and
have to wait there. The stench that was in there was horrifying. The
people just gathered in there waiting to go to housing. And there was a
moment that I had a thought that I'd rather be back in prison than to
deal with this situation.

These lived experiences highlight the inadequacy of state provided support upon reentry. Without the support of family and friends, released prisoners must undergo tremendous stress and inadequate housing. Alex and Dan both endured traumatic and unpleasant experiences upon reentry, adding another layer of complication to a difficult reintegration process. Matthew's analogy of an alcoholic sitting in a bar is reflected in their testimonies. The environments they were released into were not supportive of successful reentry. Studies show there is a detrimental effect of inadequate housing among newly released prisoners which may increase the rate of recidivism in these individuals (Lutze et al., 2013). It is clear that our respondents, along with their peers, were not adequately supported by the criminal justice system and require further support to successfully reintegrate.

For those that lack familial support, another potential source of support is through outside programs. There are many programs that are offered to prisoners upon release to assist with the reentry process, including both voluntary and parole mandated programs. Overall, respondents felt that these programs were helpful in their transition. Specifically,

respondents mentioned the importance of having a safe environment to be in. This was the primary reason mentioned for voluntarily going to programs. Specifically, our respondents mentioned the organization the interviews were conducted in, "House of Hope" as a helpful resource.

John, who was imprisoned three times, shares the difficulties of living in a shelter and the impact of House of Hope on his daily life. He states:

> *This time has been tougher because I paroled to the shelter. Because you only sleep at the shelter and then you're on the street all day long. I can come here [House of Hope] sometimes and use the phone and stuff and hang out so that helps.*

This sentiment was shared by Joseph who was released from prison without anything but the clothes he was wearing. He states:

> *In most cases people can't do 30 minutes incarcerated because they're stripped of everything that they own and the realization of, oh my god, I got to start from scratch all over again, hits them, and they don't know where to look for help and coming home. I'm lucky that I have places like House of Hope and other places that do outreach for people who are coming home after doing such a long time, because there are times when I sit home and I'm almost in tears because I can't believe that I'm free.*

John and Joseph both express gratefulness for House of Hope, highlighting its role in providing a safe and supportive environment during a time of uncertainty and instability. As with family, programs may also help facilitate successful reentry outcomes by providing a support system for released prisoners who need a sense of security. With an abundance and variety of reentry programs with varying efficacy (Lipsey & Cullen, 2007; Raphael, 2011;), providing a safe environment and community may represent an easy and effective avenue for future programs to explore and incorporate.

Long Lasting Effects of Incarceration

In 2014, the Bureau of Justice published a study showing that 76.6% of former prisoners were rearrested within 5 years of release (Durose, 2014). These rates are alarming, revealing that for the vast majority of prisoners, time in prison is not rehabilitative. From our respondent's testimonies, we can see how difficult it is to change behaviors upon release from prison. The social inequality in society contributes to parolees falling prey to the habits that contributed to their initial arrest and incarceration. The initial feelings of elation because they are free, coupled with the fear of being rearrested, are

exacerbated by the long-lasting negative impact that incarceration has on the lives and minds of ex-prisoners. The change from living behind bars to living in the outside world comes with unique obstacles. Specifically, respondents discussed readjusting to normal socialization and day to day life.

Sam, who was incarcerated for 17 years, discusses how prison impacted the way he socializes and communicates with others:

> *On the inside [of prison], I'm a natural introvert. I love to be by myself. And then, when you come home, um, there's an expectation of communication. You know, I text you, you text me back. I email you, email me back. (…) I'm like wait, wait, wait. I need some time to process this. I think communicating, being comfortable, trusting, um other people. Because in that environment you're not very trusting right? So allowing people close enough to open up and just share a little bit of who you are personally and then professionally, um, you know the demands of human service.*

Sam's story is not unique, other respondents reported similar feelings of social awkwardness upon reentry. His description of his social interactions is extremely revealing, reflecting the drastic differences between life in prison and life on the outside. The changes in social habits that lead to this disconnect with outside contacts is rarely described in the literature. Many newly released prisoners have to relearn how to communicate with family, friends, and the people in their communities. The environment, expectations, and norms for socialization are all major factors to readjust to upon reentry, and is yet another nuanced skill that is neglected by Phase 3 and other reentry centered programming.

In addition to social adjustment, many prisoners described long-lasting mental health issues created by their time in prison. Tim, who was released after 25 years in prison, discusses the trauma that prison caused him, and describes how it continues to affect his life even three years after being released:

> *I rarely go out because I still don't feel fully comfortable around a lot of noise or a lot of people together. Maybe that's some kind of post-traumatic stress. I was in the mall Saturday and I'm constantly looking at people coming too close to me. I'm not used to that proximity. This is three years after I've been out. I went to a play in June and I was good until a young lady that was sitting next to me slipped in her seat. There are still things that make me feel uncomfortable.*

The toll of incarceration on mental health was also described by Joseph, who, after 28 years behind bars, has been left with long lasting psychological distress:

> *Like I get up in the morning at 5 o'clock in the morning and I have like uncontrollable OCD. I have uncontrollable OCD with me where everything has to be cleaned up and placed in certain areas. And I live in a house with four kids and a husband and a wife and it's and it's odd to me cause I get up at 4 o'clock in the morning, I washed the dishes additionally outside the dishwasher. I just shovel the snow, clear off their cars, clear out, they have a back deck, I cleaned that off. I cleaned all the snow off of that and then I'll go back upstairs and jump in the shower, get ready for the rest of my day. It's just that I have, I have to stay active. And I know this is gonna sound odd because you're sitting right in front of me, but I'm scared to talk to women. It's just that in most cases [when I saw them] they were always in a position of authority. And I was scared to say something to them that might be inappropriate or sound disrespectful. Almost in every case behind in prison. It's like, cause we're, we're told not to be reckless or highball anybody, or even stare at somebody too long. If you're talking to somebody, there are times where I heard officers tell me, listen, put your eyes down when you're talking to me. Stop looking at me like that.*

The experience of incarceration impacts almost every facet of these respondents daily lives. The psychological burden these released prisoners are left with after release make everyday tasks difficult and make it nearly impossible to achieve a sense of normalcy. For both Tim and Joseph, experiences in prison left them with symptoms of PTSD, leaving them afraid of everyday encounters such as crowds and women. Their testimonies call into question the true rehabilitative function of prisons, and whether long term incarceration is the best course of action for offenders.

Despite extensive literature covering the prevalence of mental illness in prison (Prins, 2014) and the impact of mental illness on recidivism (Wallace & Wang, 2020), very few studies have investigated the effect of long-term incarceration on mental health. Our respondents indicate that psychological damage can be a direct result of incarceration. As a result of this psychological burden, reentry can be made more difficult given the direct link between mental health and recidivism (Bakken & Visher, 2018). Thus, mental health issues arising from long term incarceration and the implications of these issues on reentry outcomes must be further explored to determine how these prisoners can be supported before and after release.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Before delving into our conclusions, we must acknowledge the limitations of our study. Firstly, all respondents recruited were from "House of Hope", a nonprofit reentry program. Because of the program, most of our respondents were relatively successful in their reentry, as the population that frequents the nonprofit are self-motivated to reform. Additionally, our study population included mostly men, thus we are unable to examine the gender differences in reentry outcomes or draw conclusions regarding the differential treatment of women in the criminal justice system. Despite our limitations, the testimonies of our respondents were powerful, and their voices and stories allow us a firsthand look into the experience of incarceration and release.

The purpose of our study was to examine whether the systemic aspects of incarceration serve a true rehabilitative function through the perspectives of former prisoners who experienced the system in full. Our data show that in-prison educational and therapeutic programming have the potential to be life-altering for inmates who were not given these opportunities outside of prison. We also show that religion and spirituality offer potential avenues for further programming that can be effective for many prisoners. We find that Phase 3, a program implemented by New York State as part of the prison process is inadequate in preparing prisoners for reentry. We find that parole as an institution is complex and may be helpful for certain groups of released prisoners but not others. Finally, we show that many aspects of the criminal justice system, rather than being rehabilitative, serve as obstacles to successful reentry. These include stress of parole board uncertainty, inadequate state provided housing, and long-lasting trauma from incarceration.

Given the high rate of recidivism our country continues to face, as well as the deep rooted racial biases within the criminal justice system, our findings indicate a need for extensive reforming of the reentry process to better rehabilitate offenders. From beginning to end, programs must be in place to fully support prisoners through their journey to becoming productive members of society. In-prison educational, therapeutic, spiritual, and reentry programming must be increased, reformed, and better tailored to the needs of the population. Prisoners released after long term sentences must be provided with mental health support in addition to parole guidance. Further research must be conducted to evaluate the efficacy of parole, and identify aspects that are helpful and aspects that are detrimental. Without these changes, prison will never serve the rehabilitative function that it is intended to serve.

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