

APRIL 2023

Reentry Through the Lens of the Returning Individual

Roger Jarjoura | Brannan Mitchel-Slantz | Abigail Jefferys | John Kochanek



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Reentry Through the Lens of the Returning Individual: Highlights

The perspectives of people experiencing reentry are underrepresented in the field. This resource presents take aways from a project involving a partnership between the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) and JustLeadershipUSA (JLUSA). This project contributes to the reentry knowledge base by intentionally elevating the voices of those with lived experience in the justice system through a series of facilitated group discussions. We spoke with men and women from across the United States who were previously incarcerated, to better understand their experiences with reentry and gain their input on how to improve reentry services. The themes and recommendations discussed in this resource provide important information for reentry providers, correctional administrators, policymakers, and funders of reentry initiatives.

Housing

We invited the participants to tell us about their living situation at the time of their release, and whether they faced homelessness while trying to establish stable housing. Individuals in the group discussions explained what certain factors made it possible for them to establish stable and safe housing situations. At the same time, we asked them to describe any experiences when they were denied housing of any kind because of their criminal conviction status.

Living Situation When First Released

- The initial living situation after leaving incarceration often was with family, although this was not always a long-term solution.
- Transitional living facilities were a common destination for men and women after their release from incarceration.
- At the time of their release, the risk of homelessness is greater when individuals have limited options or if their criminal history is particularly serious.

Safe and Stable Housing Factors

- Transitional housing programs that offered comprehensive services were instrumental in setting individuals up for success.

- Family support was still key for many people who could not find or qualify for transitional housing services.

Barriers to Safe and Supportive Housing

- Although designed for emergency situations, shelters often had strict requirements that excludes many individuals.
- Obtaining a lease in your name when you have a felony conviction record does not appear possible in most locations.
- Individuals perceived the requirement for nonrefundable application fees as unfair given the almost certain outcome (denial) because of their felony conviction record.
- Those with a felony conviction record often are prohibited from living with other felons, which, for some, may include their family.
- Barriers to housing often mean that individuals who were formerly incarcerated will live in dangerous areas.
- Differences in the options for temporary housing for women and men often create more unsafe circumstances for women.
- Section 8 housing can be a solution, but individuals often experienced restricted access due to their felony conviction records.

Family Reunification

We asked those who participated in the group discussions how their family had changed since their conviction. We heard about many dimensions to the changes. Families were harmed in tangible ways, including estrangement while the family member was in prison. Being sent to prison created strains in relationships with family members, and sometimes there were divisions within families about whether to support the family member who was in prison.

How Families Changed

- Participants shared how their incarceration harmed their family members, especially their children.
- Other harms associated with the incarceration included the loss of their homes and the emotional pain experienced by family members.
- The death of family members became more difficult when incarceration meant the individual could not attend the funeral.
- During incarceration, and once released, there were costs for some family members to stay engaged and be supportive.
- Even after release, many persons continued to have only limited contact with family, sometimes by choice and sometimes as a condition of their sentence.
- The postrelease period often required a significant adjustment for family members as for the individual just released.

Improvements to Family Relationships

- For many individuals, improvement in familial relationships occurred across time.

Sample and Focus

During this project, staff from AIR and JLUSA held 15 separate group discussions with 83 individuals who have lived experience in the justice system (43 women and 40 men) from 23 states. We organized the themes according to the seven topics that emerged from participants' reentry experiences.

Housing

Family reunification

Employment

Healthcare

Mental health

Substance use

Community integration

For each topic, we also identify recommendations that align with the group discussions.

- To rebuild relationships with family, many credited the work they accomplished in treatment programs and their own growth and recovery.
- Reconciliation and forgiveness are key elements in the process of rebuilding relationships with family members.
- Among those who participated in the discussions, a few experienced effective family reconciliation and mediation programs.
- Some women must go through multiple steps to reestablish their parental rights and reunite with their children.
- For men separated from their children while incarcerated, rebuilding those relationships took time.

- The younger the children were at the time of incarceration, the greater the impact on the parent–child relationship.

Employment

We also asked those who participated in the group discussions to describe their experiences with employment. We asked about training programs that were available either before or after release. We invited participants to discuss the types of training and education that would help them prepare for a future career. We asked participants to describe employment challenges and, specifically, any forms of employment discrimination they experienced since their release. We inquired about the ways state licensing laws may be restricting eligibility and access to certain careers.

With or without employment assistance, those recently released from incarceration must navigate a variety of barriers, all of which interfere with the ability to find and maintain employment.

Training Program Availability

- Participants had varied experiences with training programs before and after release, with many prerelease programs limited by the number of slots available and the length of the prison sentence.
- On the other hand, many participants indicated receiving no training at all, had difficulty accessing training, or experienced poorly administered training programs.
- Participation in some training programs provided jobs during and after the period of incarceration.
- Involvement in training programs did not always result in finding related work after

release, and many felt misled in expecting a better outcome.

Employment Discrimination

- For some individuals, their history of criminal convictions was a barrier to securing employment.
- For some individuals, a history of criminal convictions also was a barrier to keeping employment if they were initially hired or being able to perform the specific duties of their position in the long term.
- Some individuals also reported unfair treatment by employers.

Reflections on State Licensing Laws

- Even though it was possible to enter training programs, state licensing laws could mean that those with felony convictions could not work in the field, or bureaucratic requirements might interfere with their plans.

Healthcare

Another topic addressed in the group discussions was healthcare. We heard from some participants about their experiences in having their healthcare needs addressed while incarcerated, and we asked several questions about getting their healthcare needs met since their release. These issues include having assistance to navigate systems, getting Medicaid benefits activated (or reactivated), and securing medications. We also invited a discussion about their experiences accessing their medical records from the period of their incarceration.

Healthcare Experiences Before Release

- When individuals became ill or were injured while incarcerated, they often went

untreated, or they waited a long time to receive appropriate medical care.

Healthcare Experiences After Release

- Individuals who participated in reentry programs (either prerelease or postrelease) had better success addressing healthcare needs, compared with those who did not participate in these programs.
- Individuals who experienced lapses in their medical coverage after release have had to endure periods of time without access to necessary prescriptions.
- Navigating healthcare systems can be a stressful, confusing, and frustrating process for many after release from incarceration.

Access to Health Records

- Although some participants in the group discussion mentioned having no issue accessing their health records after release, others could not access their medical records.

Mental Health

The next topic we covered focused on mental health issues that the participants may have experienced during or after their incarceration. We asked about helpful resources for dealing with mental health issues. We explored the role of peer mentors and learned about experiences that each individual had with various forms of peer support. Finally, we examined how it worked if they required prescribed medications to address their mental health issues.

Access to Treatment During Incarceration

- Many individuals described a variety of feelings—reluctance, disinterest,

opposition—that kept them from seeking counseling or therapy while incarcerated.

- If they desired counseling or therapy while incarcerated, most individuals reported on the barriers to availability.
- Yet some were able to find support outside traditional, clinical forms of mental health treatment.

The Trauma of Incarceration

- Incarceration is traumatic and can negatively affect the mental health of individuals even after their release.
- The adjustment process in the transition from incarceration to the community is stressful and anxiety inducing.

The Role of Treatment and Peer Support

- Receptiveness to seeking treatment or taking the initiative to ask for help is a sign of growth that happens across time, typically after incarceration.
- Finding a therapist who was a good fit for the individual client often was the reason for positive change.
- The participants rarely described treatment services that exemplified continuity of care spanning the period from prerelease to postrelease; instead, we heard more about the role of community-based organizations, including reentry programs, in connecting the participants with mental health treatment providers.
- Peer mentoring support, when available, was highly valued and effective.
- In the absence of formal peer mentoring programs, many took the initiative to develop programs or establish connections with informal mentors in their community.

Medication for Mental Health Issues

- Access to prescription medication for mental health issues while incarcerated was characterized by difficulties due to lengthy waiting periods to see a doctor and misalignment of care to previous diagnoses and prescriptions.
- It was common to have a 30-day supply of prescribed medications at the time of release, but this was not always coupled with referrals and connections to ensure no gaps in supply once they were back in the community.
- Access to correct medications for mental health conditions may be difficult to arrange, may not be easy to sustain over time, and appears to depend on where the individual is living after their release.

Substance Use

Participants in the group discussions were asked to share their experiences with substance use disorder and its impact on their reentry. Participants were asked about what treatments did or did not work, their pathway to recovery, their experience with medically assisted treatment (MAT) programs, and other unhealthy habits affecting them. Among those participants who discussed their experiences with substance use disorders, many reported struggling for years and continue to struggle. Although many participants explained that they reached a level of success in their own recovery, not all of them have found a pathway to recovery.

Substance Use Treatment (Prerelease and Postrelease)

- Participants found success with a variety of treatment types. Although many of their journeys looked similar, programs that worked well for some did not work well for others.
- The pandemic was a complicating factor that interfered with some of the incentives to refrain from using substances.

Pathways to Recovery

- Recovery involved individual experiences of growth and the acquisition of knowledge about the nature of addiction or the development of connections to faith or other forms of community.

MAT Programs

- When available, many found that MAT programs (both prerelease and postrelease) were critically valuable, and some still rely on these treatments to stay sober.

Other Unhealthy Habits

- Adjusting to life after incarceration might involve struggles with other unhealthy habits, such as dysfunctional relationships with eating, spending money, family connections, and sexual health.

Community Integration

In the final segment of the group discussions with people with lived experience in the criminal justice system, the topic turned to each individual's experiences with integration into their community. This segment was an opportunity for the participants to reflect on the reasons they were successful. It also was a chance to

identify the kinds of supportive services they felt were missing that would have been helpful. We also invited the participants to share whether they experienced any barriers related to a sense of stigma associated with their convictions.

Experiences With Community Integration

- Reentry is a process that can and usually does take years to successfully navigate.
- Adjusting to life after incarceration is about learning how to live without the structure of correctional settings and also catching up on technological advances.
- Many participants attributed their successful reentry to individuals in their lives who believed in them, guided and helped them access the necessary services and resources they needed, or opened doors to different opportunities.

Access to Services

- Reentry success was facilitated by access to critical services, but gaining access was much smoother for individuals with the support and guidance of resourceful program staff or probation and parole officers.
- Many individuals, however, did not have access to prerelease programming or even basic life skills preparation.
- For some individuals, the ability to connect to critical services was affected by factors such as whether the individual had internet access, reliable transportation, stable housing, telephone service, and proper forms of legal identification. The person's criminal conviction history also played a role.

Self-Efficacy and Identity

- The stigma associated with a conviction is reflected in discriminatory behavior by others and can affect interpersonal connections and a person's belief in their own success.
- Transformation of one's sense of self from negative to positive relates to having people in their lives who believe in them and help them believe in themselves.
- Several individuals who began working for or contributing in other capacities to the reentry community shared feelings of privilege, pride, and honor because of how they have given back.
- Opportunities to grow professionally, such as pursuing education while incarcerated or after release and securing employment since release, also are transformational for a person's sense of self and identity.

Recommendations

In their descriptions about how reentry works or how to improve conditions so that reentry success is possible, participants in the group discussions provided numerous recommendations that span the full reentry process from incarceration through community integration.

Prior to Release

- Prerelease programs need to be more comprehensive, last longer, and include orientation and onboarding supports for integration into the community.
- Everyone who is incarcerated should have access to prerelease programming to prepare for their reentry, regardless of the length of their incarceration.

- There is not enough attention to helping individuals heal from trauma while incarcerated. Many individuals experience trauma prior to incarceration, and most will have traumatic experiences while incarcerated. It is critical to offer effective services that bring about healing and improvement to well-being.
- There is a need to expand the availability of peer support services both prior to and after release to the community. People who have been incarcerated are influenced by their peers, and it makes sense that resources are in place so that peer support is positive, effective, and accessible.
- It would be helpful to have services within prisons to reestablish healthcare for everyone preparing to reenter their community prior to their release. Many participants shared that having someone inside prisons to help them reinstate their healthcare coverage prior to their release would help alleviate much of the stress and anxiety typically associated with reentry and reestablishing oneself in their community.

During the Transition from Incarceration to the Community

- The transition from a very controlled setting to an unstructured environment can be disorienting, stressful, and even overwhelming. Ideally, everyone would have holistic support so that they have a place to live; a way to support themselves and, if applicable, their family; access to resources to meet basic needs; and support and resources to address healthcare, mental health, substance use, and well-being issues.

- There is not enough attention on helping individuals understand how to identify and access supportive services. Providing accurate, up-to-date information is important, but this is not enough. It is important to facilitate the development of skills such as asking for help, making decisions, solving problems, and setting goals.
- It is usually not a surprise when a person will be released from incarceration, so there should be a lot more integrated planning to make the transition from incarceration to the community potentially seamless. For instance, is it possible to apply for subsidized housing early enough so that arrangements are already in place to allow a person to leave prison and move in that same day?

Establishing Stable and Safe Living Arrangements

- There is a need for more short-term housing options for women in reentry. The limited availability and/or the restrictions that exclude women if they are using drugs mean that many women fail to find safe housing.
- Similarly, women should not have to choose between supportive housing and reunification with their children. They also should not have to choose between treatment programs and living with their children. Rehabilitation for women with minor children should feature strategies to build their capacity as mothers and strengthen the relationships with their children.
- There is insufficient support in most places to provide safe and stable housing for

persons convicted of sex offenses. It is unfair that no matter how much effort these individuals brought to their treatment programs while incarcerated, and how hard they worked to become better people, their status as a convicted sex offender is a major barrier to successful reentry.

Strengthening Family Relationships

- Reduce barriers, as much as possible, to visits from family members prior to release. Provide structured options for family reconciliation, with a focus on shaping healthy expectations for the reintroduction of the individual into the family.
- When parents are incarcerated, there should be structured supports for the children who are left behind. We must minimize the harm that children experience while a parent is incarcerated. Perhaps there could be dedicated case workers or legal assistance to reduce the harm children experience due to the incarceration of their parents.
- While incarcerated or even while under community supervision, we need to find more ways for individuals to attend funerals when family members die.

Living-Wage Employment

- Employment programs need to be modernized, and correctional facilities should develop programming to engage individuals with technologies that they will have to use once they are living in the community, such as learning how to apply for jobs online and how to use email and social media for communications with potential employers.
- Demand is great for a variety of options so that each person can find the best fit in trying to secure meaningful living-wage employment. For some persons, a transitional jobs program will be valuable. For others, a vocational training program may be attractive if there are viable career opportunities in the community where they will be living. For still others, learning about entrepreneurship may be the best option.
- More needs to be done to ensure viable pathways to career opportunities for individuals while they are incarcerated. Training programs are important, but only if they lead to existing jobs for individuals when they return to the community. Direct-hire trainings, in which the organization providing the training also is doing the hiring, are popular where they are in place.
- There is not enough coaching available to prepare individuals for how to promote themselves to potential employers. This cannot begin early enough, to build a person's confidence for the following: How do you talk about where you've been with your employment? How do you talk about your felonies? Or how do you not talk about them? How do you get a job when you are a convicted felon?
- The kinds of supports that help a person navigate the barriers to securing and retaining a job in their chosen field should be expanded and enhanced, including case management, mentoring, and networking.
- There should be training on employment rights, for example, rights to challenge discriminatory hiring behavior, making sure they are paid for their work, and avoiding exploitation by employers.

Access to Evidence-Based Treatment Programs

- A specific type of peer support is that of peer recovery specialists. Expanding the preparation and availability of these specialists should be a priority.
- Expand the availability of culturally relevant and competent services. Resources should be provided to ensure that these services are responsive and accessible.
- The limited availability of evidence-based substance use treatment programs is a major obstacle to successful reentry for many. Expanding the implementation and accessibility of effective programs will be valuable.
- Participants were specific that it would be helpful if treatment and reentry providers used more trauma-informed approaches in their care.

Other

In addition to the previous factors, effective integration into the community involves the following:

- Connections to others is critical for effective community integration and successful reentry. More should be done to develop and nurture interpersonal connections and social supports.
- It is important to invest in transportation options that are accessible, affordable, and reliable.
- Many people who have transformed their lives and their identity are looking for ways to give back to society. As much as possible, we should remove barriers to allow these persons to contribute, for

example, in meaningful ways as volunteers and peer mentors.

Finally, reentry should be about authentic second chances:

- There is a lot of interest in emerging policies in some jurisdictions that after a certain length of time, a person's criminal history would no longer be held against them. Knowing that they would have a clean slate after some period of time (even as long as 7–10 years) after their conviction gives these individuals hope, something to look forward to, and something to work toward.
- Coupled with policies on a clean slate and expungement, it is vitally important to offer sufficient options for housing, substance use treatment, healthcare benefits, and transportation while a person's criminal record is still a limiting factor.
- Some suggested extending "ban the box" campaigns to include applications for rental housing and treatment programs.
- There should be protection against practices that unfairly affect those who are previously incarcerated, such as the following: "You have to make triple times the amount to get a house in your name."

Implications for Stakeholders

Based on what we heard from participants, we explore potential implications of our takeaways for reentry providers, correctional administrators, policymakers, and funders in this section. We offer high-level suggestions for all these stakeholder groups.

Reentry Providers

Based on what we learned from these group discussions, there are several takeaways for reentry providers. Most importantly, comprehensive initiatives are vital. Those in reentry need support in multiple ways:

- A continuum of employment programs from transitional job programs to entrepreneurship programs
- A continuum of housing options to offer the best fit for everyone in that jurisdiction returning to the community from incarceration, including short-term shelter options, Section 8 housing, and sufficient housing options for individuals convicted of sex offenses
- A continuum of care for mental health issues, including substance use disorders and treatment to address incarceration-affected post-traumatic stress disorder
- Equity of access for all gender, racial, and ethnic subgroups for all services
- Seamless continuity of care for those on medication
- Engagement of individuals in peer mentoring (as both mentors and mentees)
- Services to address family reunification, financial literacy, and healthy relationships
- Low-cost and accessible transportation
- Effective strategies to support the adjustment process as individuals transition from incarceration back to the community
- The development or expansion of systems to support the individuals on their day of release and ensure that everyone has a safe place to stay at the time of their release

- How to balance the needs for structure and accountability (by criminal legal agencies) with the support and flexibility necessary for an individual's success
- Encouragement and support for individuals in making contributions to the community by serving others

Correctional Administrators

The group discussions also produced several takeaways for correctional administrators, including the following:

- Thoughtfully examining the training programs offered, with a particular eye to viable paths to living-wage employment once individuals are back in the community
- Exploring how to expand the availability of vocational training and workforce preparation programs—in ways that a higher proportion of the incarcerated can participate in, including those who are close to release or not expecting long sentences
- Offering effective family reunification programs during the full length of a person's incarceration and working to remove barriers to connections between individuals and their families
- Offering better access to healthcare and mental health treatment for those who are incarcerated and ensuring access to health records for everyone
- Collaborations among state and federal agencies appear to be the best way to ensure that everyone leaving incarceration has the necessary forms of identification they will need to find work, find housing, and participate fully in the economy (e.g., banking, establishing credit).

Policymakers

The themes and recommendations from this project also point to ways that legislators and policymakers might improve the reentry experiences for those who were previously incarcerated. This includes expanding the enactment of expungement policies. Further consideration of ban the box initiatives for employment, as well as for housing and access to treatment services, might have an important impact. New legislation might provide ways to protect individuals from unfair exploitation practices related to employment and housing. Finally, it makes sense to review state licensing laws to reconsider unnecessary restrictions or

whose repeal would not have negative consequences.

Funders

Based on the conversations with men and women who were previously incarcerated, funders interested in building the capacity for effective reentry might consider investments for the following: transitional living facilities, including recovery programs, especially those that allow mothers to reunite with their children while staying in a supported living program; peer support programs, including peer recovery programs; and systems of care to ensure that children are not harmed by the incarceration of their parents.

Want to Learn More?

To read more about the individuals who participated in this project, see the [Description of Participants](#)

To read more of the in-depth discussions for each of the themes identified for the seven primary topics, see more detailed presentations on:

[Housing](#)

[Family Reunification](#)

[Employment](#)

[Healthcare](#)

[Mental Health](#)

[Substance Use](#)

[Community Integration](#)

Acknowledgments

The success of the group discussions was due to the high-quality facilitation by the JLUSA team: Alaina Combs, Hakim Crampton, Saad Soliman, Venus Woods, and Lester Young.

We wish to recognize Jacqueline Freeman and Ronald Simpson-Bey for their coordination of the JLUSA team.

We also wish to acknowledge the assistance of Second Chance Act programs across the U.S. for their assistance in identifying men and women with lived experience in the justice system who are reentering the community, and to express our profound gratitude for the generous contributions by all of the individuals who participated in the group discussions.



For more information, please contact
Simon Gonsoulin • sgonsoulin@air.org
Michelle Perry • mperry@air.org
or visit us at <https://www.air.org>