

From the Facilitated Group Discussions: Community Integration

When you're trying to change your life, some people just still look at us [as] the addicts and the alcoholics and the criminals that we were and don't want to give us a chance, even though we're trying to change our life around. But we have changed our life around—a lot of people just judge us . . . they don't open the book and read it. They just turn their back and read the cover. If they don't like it, they never opened it up at all.

In the final segment of the group discussions, the topic turned to each person's experiences with integration into their community. This segment was an opportunity for the participants to reflect on the reasons they have been successful as well as 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. Here we present a series of themes that emerged from the participants' collective responses. Each theme (a bulleted statement in boldface) is supported by direct quotes from the participants.

Experiences With Community Integration

- **Reentry is a process that can and usually does take years to successfully navigate.** Despite several individuals having been released 5 to 10 years or more prior to their participation in the group discussions, many of them still struggled with overcoming barriers that individuals who were released only a few months prior described, such as difficulty obtaining stable housing or establishing a career. As one individual shared, “It takes a good 10 years to transition from prison back to society.” As many participants shared, reintegration “doesn't happen overnight” given the reverberating effects of incarceration. Among those responding to the poll questions, an overwhelming 89% said it would be helpful if a community member was there prior to release to help with community integration.
- **Adjusting to life after incarceration is about learning how to live without the structure of correctional settings and catching up on technological advancements.** For example, one participant stated:

I think a couple days later [after being released] I was in my own apartment. . . . And it was 12:00, which would be the normal count time. And then, I went in my room, and I sat on my bed, and it took me 10–15 minutes to realize nobody is coming around to count you. So, after that, I made it a point not to be in the house at 12:00.

. . . I had to learn how to eat, to enjoy my food. I didn't have to shovel it down my throat in 15–20 minutes.

Other participants shared experiences of having difficulty reacclimating to vastly different environments and behaviors when they reentered society compared with what they experienced in prison:

It's ironic that they incarcerate you and then tell you to behave, but they put you in an environment based on aggression and violence. And, so, you live in that environment for a long time. You tend to adapt both personality wise and aggression wise, and when you come out to society, that is certainly not the behavior that is acceptable.

Another participant shared as follows:

I served 15 years from the time I was 17 to the time I was 32. The whole world was different. Everything was different . . . I went in 1995, and I came home in 2010. So, the world was completely different. There weren't no such thing as an internet. There weren't no such thing as cell phones. Everybody was doing paper applications. It was an entirely different world.

- **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.** Although the composition of individuals' support systems varied, common supports included family, friends and peers, mentors and coaches, reentry programs or other living communities, probation and parole officers. When asked why they have been successful in their reentry, one participant shared:

My family . . . They've actually been behind me a hundred percent to see me do better. And if it weren't for my wife being so uplifting and telling me that she knows I can do it, I don't think I would've had the power to keep going and pushing myself.

Another participant had this to say about their reentry program:

So just given the opportunities, whether it be having somewhere to stay rent free or . . . the opportunity to get back on your feet and get a job and do all these things, for me, made it a lot easier to have confidence to continue doing it when I'm done [with the program].

Others shared similar sentiments:

I think having such an amazing support network has been huge for me . . . I was out literally 24 hours, and my mentor through the [American Indian Prison Project]

picked me up and was, like, “Okay, let’s get you some things that will make this transition a little softer for you.” . . . It was those small little gestures that made such a huge impact on who I am today, five and a half years later.

Finally, one participant acknowledged that “probation and parole [are] actually helping guys make the transition with getting jobs, getting the supplies that they need for jobs, and just being a help, a real big help . . . in your transition and your release.”

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.** Individuals who participated in reentry or transitional programs reported being connected to the services they need, such as applying for or reactivating Medicaid, accessing food stamps if they are eligible, obtaining valid government identification, connecting to mental health treatment providers, engaging in substance use disorder treatment, and accessing medical prescriptions. In addition, as discussed earlier, some participants shared that their probation or parole officers have served in a similar role, assisting them with or providing them with helpful resources for accessing necessary services.
- **Many individuals, however, did not have access to prerelease programming or even basic life skills preparation.** Several participants, especially those who served lengthy sentences, wished they would have had more guidance about basic life skills upon release. One participant shared:

And a lot of people who’ve never been [incarcerated] don’t realize that what you take for granted, everything from your phone, your phone bill, to clothes to shopping, we’re not familiar with that process. We’re not familiar [with] how to use a cell phone at the time or the internet or a credit card.

Others shared that the facilities that they were incarcerated in either did not have prerelease programs or offered prerelease programming only to select individuals. One participant stated, “So I never qualified for [prerelease programming] because you had to be sentenced to a certain amount of time, and then get to two thirds [of the sentence]. And most people in the facility never made it to those two parameters.” Those who have not received prerelease planning and programming often shared that this process has been exceedingly difficult, and they have had to overcome many obstacles in their efforts to meet their needs. This was especially true for participants who shared that they had little knowledge of where to even start in terms of searching for the right services to meet their needs.

- **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.** One participant shared:

How do you put down on an application your address when you’re homeless? Or how do they contact you when you don’t have a phone? I mean, how do you take that next step to get your life going when you don’t have the resources or ability?

Another stated:

It was hard only because where the sober house was; it was more in a suburban area, so it was no transportation. I didn’t even have a license. . . . If I had transportation, I could probably get around more, but it was hard for me to just even find the resources.

Many individuals also shared challenges in their ability to confirm their identify to access services. For example, one participant shared as follows:

I didn’t have an ID to cash my check . . . I worked my butt off in prerelease, and I was able to save \$10,000 . . . I was determined not to come back, but for somebody who doesn’t have their ID, how do you cash your check? I had nothing to say who I was except my Jail ID, which was nothing. Yeah, it was a challenge.

Several individuals explained that food stamps might be restricted because of their conviction(s). One participant shared, “Because I’m a seven-time convicted drug felon through the years, no matter if you go to treatment or not, they will not let me get housing in this state or get food stamps, and a number of other things.”

Self-Efficacy and Identity

- **The stigma associated with a conviction is reflected in discriminatory behavior by others and also can affect interpersonal connections and a person’s belief in their own success.** When we asked how individuals experienced any stigma perceived to be associated with their convictions, one participant shared:

The stigma is real as far as external, but it is also an internal thing, especially as a sex offender. I think we wear the scarlet letter of this generation. And, so, you not only have the felony, but the nature of your felony . . . I think every felon realizes when you’re out the gate now you’re in second prison because of the things you can’t do and the places you can’t go.

Many participants shared that the judgment and rejection from others took, and for some continues to take, a toll on their self-confidence and belief in themselves and, in turn, their

willingness and desire to meet new people and connect authentically with them. For example, one participant shared as follows:

Even walking around in churches, people can't help but look at my tattoos, and it just creates more shame and more shame. . . . But even looking back and processing it, the way family members or other people treat you under the basis of your past can easily cause me to, oh, shut this cell door on myself again.

Similarly, another participant expressed the following:

When you have those kind of people with that kind of thinking, it creates a hostile environment, and it has the potential to make a man or woman who was formerly incarcerated shrink back and not kind of rise to the occasion of wanting to be successful and wanting to be healthy. I should not be looked at according to my past. That should not define who I am, especially if I present myself in a different kind of way.

- **Transformation of one's sense of self from negative to positive relates to having supportive people in their lives who believe in them and help them to believe in themselves.** Several individuals noted how their belief and feelings of self-worth changed since being connected with people who expressed a belief in them. When discussing their relationship with their mentor, one participant shared:

She has seen things in me that I did not see in myself coming out. I didn't feel worthy to be out in society. I thought I was just a horrible human being for losing custody of my kid and for being an addict and all those kind of things. But really what society tells you are, if you've been to prison, you have a felony, you're X, Y, and Z. And then to have somebody tell you that those things aren't true and that you can be successful in life . . . So, I think that's really what's gotten me on the path that I'm on today and have been on since I got out.

Similarly, another participant shared:

Honestly where the turning point was for me was having someone finally tell me that they believed in me, and that I could do it, and that they made all these promises about this life that I could have that was beyond my wildest dreams—that no one had ever in my whole life ever told me that that was possible, And now, all of a sudden, I had this, not just one person, but a team of people with lived experience that had been there.

- **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.** Most participants shared that since their release, they have been giving back in one way or another to individuals who are currently or formerly incarcerated. In

fact, some have even established their own nonprofit organizations and communities or programs of support to serve the reentry community. One participant shared:

I ended up coming out with a lot of other people like myself over the last five years, not just juvenile lifers but also a lot of long-term lifer guys that I had essentially either grown up with or they had helped mentor me while I was in prison. And so, what we ended up creating was a community of people to help support us as we transitioned out. And I think that was a major thing. . . . We reach out [men and women] on their way home. We're trying to make their landing as soft and as welcoming as possible, so they don't experience even further trauma trying to come home and create a life for themselves.

Most of these participants described how rewarding and honorable it has been for them to give back, which has given them a sense of hope and purpose. One participant shared:

I'm sitting at tables with probation, parole, judges, law enforcement who are talking about systematic racism, and we're all at the table. . . . I'm so encouraged to see even meetings like this and us here, us at the table—I'm just blown away. I mean, I couldn't imagine my reentry to go as well as it did. . . . I grew a little community of the people I've worked with. We go on outings together. Being in a room with each other, having people that understand, being able to talk about the stuff we do, that's what helps.

Another participant shared:

I had an opportunity today to talk to county commissioners on behalf of reentry and what it looks like from a returning point of view. It has been one of the greatest opportunities since I've been home. . . . My personal mentor, my life coach, my mentor, she is the county commissioner assistant. And because she has resources in the community, whenever she goes somewhere, she always brings me and has me to speak on behalf of returning citizens.

- **Opportunities to grow professionally, such as pursuing education while incarcerated or after their release and securing employment since release, are also transformational for a person's sense of self and identity.** Many participants described feelings of pride for what they have been able to accomplish since their release, such as education and meaningful employment. For example, when asked to share one thing that they are particularly proud of with regard to their reentry experience, one participant had this to say:

One of the things that I'm really proud of is that I'm able to be a facilitator within the parole office as I'm actually still walking my time down with parole. I have been home for nine years. I also do go back in with a program that I was a part of while I was incarcerated. It's a great honor and privilege to be a part of it.

Many participants never imagined that they would be where they are now. One participant shared:

I wouldn't have expected myself to be doing the stuff I'm doing today, getting myself ready to get my CADC [Certified Alcohol and Drug Counselor] and being a recovery coach working out of the jails and reentry systems, helping the guys. I would've thought I would've been dead. I actually came close to it. So, yeah, it's a big help.

Another stated that they were proud to be an adult "for the first time in my life." One participant shared:

One of the things that I can say that was most helpful in my transition, as far as my training, obtaining two college degrees while being incarcerated, being a social mentor, as well as a teacher while being behind bars, it helped in my transition with jobs. I mean, I came out, hit the ground rolling as far as jobs, and it's just been successful ever since in my transition.

Another participant has been able to continue finding avenues for growth:

So since I've been out, for 19 years, I have an MBA . . . certified family life educator through the National Council of Family Relations. . . . So I have quite a few certifications behind me; . . . I just published my first book last month.

Recommendations

In their descriptions about how reentry works or how to improve conditions so that reentry success is possible, individuals in the group discussions provided numerous recommendations related to 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.

During the Transition from Incarceration to the Community

- The transition from a very controlled setting to an unstructured environment can be disorienting, stressful, and 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 life 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 seamless.

Other

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.

Implications for Stakeholders

Based on what we heard from participants, we explore potential implications of our takeaways for reentry providers, correctional administrators, and policymakers.

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:

- Equity of access for all gender, racial, and ethnic subgroups for all services.
- 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. 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 these discussions 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.

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