

DEFINING SUCCESS IN POST-INCARCERATION REENTRY
PROGRAMS IN OREGON

by
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With 1.9 million people currently incarcerated, the justice system in America has resulted in mass incarceration that leaves many exiting adults in custody facing the daunting task of reentering society after their prison sentence is complete. Annually in Oregon, about 143,640 men and 45,181 women are released from the state's jails and prisons, many encountering obstacles that make a successful reentry difficult. Societal reentry programs assist in helping people overcome the barriers that come along with a past prison or jail sentence. Reentry programs mainly assist with housing, employment, building interpersonal skills, and mental health/drug treatment. The main research questions for this study are: What defines "success" for reentry programs? How do reentry programs reduce rates of recidivism and promote positive change for those previously incarcerated? What methods do different organizations use to establish "success" for the people utilizing these resources? This study is based on qualitative analysis of four semi-scripted interviews with Oregon-based reentry programs as well as a comparative analysis between prior literature and the topics discussed during the interviews.

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Introduction	5
Literature Review	8
Barriers to Reentry	8
Reentry Program Design	11
Housing	13
Employment	13
Interpersonal Skills	14
Public Support for Reentry Programs	14
Methodology	17
Results	19
Stability and Sustained Success	21
Self-efficacy and Agency	22
Healthy Practices and Regaining Humanity	23
Discussion	25
Conclusion	27
Appendix A	28
Bibliography	29

Introduction

Mass incarceration leads to crowded prisons with thousands of people moving in and out of the American carceral system. This model of incarceration is unique to the U.S. and is ineffective in providing a path forward for those who experience it on the inside. Roughly 1.9 million people are currently incarcerated in the U.S., many of whom will be released in the next few years into our communities (Sawyer & Wagner, 2024). Annually in Oregon, about 143,640 men and 45,181 women are released from the state's jails and prisons, with many encountering barriers that make a successful reentry difficult (Wang, 2024). In many cases, incarceration does not have the projected effect of reducing criminality for offenders, making their return challenging (Jonson & Cullen, 2015). Successful reentry after release can aid in ending the cycle of re-incarceration through assistance with housing, drug and alcohol treatment, education opportunities, employment, and skill building. A successful reintegration into society benefits both prior AICs (adult in custody)¹ and community members, as it contributes to safer and more supportive communities.

Each year, about 600,000 individuals are released from state and federal prisons, and about 9 million people cycle through local jails (*Incarceration & Reentry*, 2024). Upon release, these individuals typically return with nothing, having little to no resources to improve upon their situation. As a result, about 1 in 4 people released from prison are rearrested and reincarcerated shortly after, displaying the need for reentry services that help in ending this cycle (Freeman, 2003; Sawyer & Wagner, 2024). Maintaining the current justice system is expensive,

¹ Adult in Custody (AIC): Any person under the supervision of the Department of Corrections who is not on parole, post-prison supervision, or probation status (*OAR 291-062-0110 Definitions*, 2021). Ex-AICs or prior AICs is referring to those who are no longer in the prison or jail system and in the process of reentering.

and there is over 80 billion dollars² invested in public correction agencies (prisons, jails, parole, probation) (Wagner & Rabuy, 2017). Without proper reentry and rehabilitative services, these numbers are likely to continue to increase, leading to an expansion of the already massive system we currently have. Reentry programs can be a way to end the cycle of reincarceration and lower the number of people imprisoned.

Reentry programs are community organizations which help assist those who are exiting the prison and jail system in overcoming the barriers that make reintegration into the community challenging. These barriers prevent people reentering from possessing basic societal necessities—such as housing and employment—compelling many to pick up a criminal way of life and returning to prison or jail quickly after release. Having a criminal background is highly stigmatized, which creates difficulties for individuals living post-incarceration to move forward in a positive way. Internalized shame and guilt can also inhibit one's adjustment back into the community and can result in reduced motivation and self-efficacy to put effort into reintegrating into society (Moore, Stuewig, & Tangney, 2016). Oftentimes, the punishment of a crime follows a person indefinitely, even after release.

Reentry programs provide these resources for prior AICs who may have a hard time navigating society after release. However, with the variety of services and techniques used by reentry programs, it is difficult to determine a consistent definition of success. People outside the field of reentry typically view the sole marker of success as low recidivism rates. The National Institute of Justice defines recidivism as “person's relapse into criminal behavior, often after the person receives sanctions or undergoes intervention for a previous crime” (*Recidivism*, n.d.). I

² The cost of public correction agencies is just one small part of the total cost for the criminal justice system. Taking into account other costly aspects—such as policing, public employees, health care, food, utilities, judicial and legal spending, etc.—the annual total to fund the criminal justice system is estimated to be around \$182 billion (Wanger & Rabuy, 2017).

propose that a “success story” is a result of more than simply avoiding a return to prison.

Focusing only on recidivism rates oversimplifies the true complexity of reintegration. While recidivism is a justified overarching measure, it does not reflect the multitude of barriers that people exiting prison must face and the complexities that go into someone being “successful.”

This investigation into how reentry programs define success will focus on these research questions:

1. What defines “success” for reentry programs?
2. How do reentry programs reduce rates of recidivism and promote positive change for those previously incarcerated?
3. What methods do different organizations use to establish “success” for their clients?

Literature Review

Barriers to Reentry

The social stigma surrounding ex-offenders is widespread, impacting ex-AICs' ability to effectively reintegrate into society. Many people hold the belief that those who have committed crimes do not deserve to have a second chance, and a prison sentence has been compared to a "badge of inferiority...that relegates people for their entire lives to second-class status" (Alexander, 2019). Race is an additional barrier for those post-incarceration and can often have influence on a person's ability to get employment, housing, and education opportunities. For instance, Black men with a criminal record are highly stigmatized and looked down upon, and their odds of getting an interview callback after applying for a job is 125 percent lower than their White counterparts (Decker et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2019). In Oregon specifically, Black people are incarcerated 5.4 times higher than White people, despite Oregon being a mostly White state (*Oregon Profile*, 2024). Mass incarceration is racialized, and disproportionately impacts communities of color, who already face large-scale disadvantages in the U.S.

Employment & Criminal Records

For many ex-offenders, the reluctance of employers to hire individuals who have served jail or prison time is a difficult barrier to overcome. Many times, having a criminal history will immediately disqualify a candidate for a job, even if the person has shown little to no risk of committing further criminal acts (McDonald, Dyou, & Carlson, 2008; Aukerman, 2003). However, reentry programs can assist with providing ex-offenders with resources to increase their chance of being employed. Some organizations teach "soft skills" such as time management, communication skills, or professionalism. To an employer, these skills demonstrate

reliability, as jobs typically value a worker who is responsible, has a strong work ethic, and has good communication skills (McDonald, Dyous, & Carlson, 2008). Additionally, some reentry programs can advocate for their participants and encourage employers to hire a specific candidate along with positive steps they have taken to become a participating citizen again (Aukerman, 2003).

Housing Discrimination

A criminal background may also prevent some people from finding affordable housing, making rehabilitation and reintegration challenging. Most people finishing their sentence do not have the financial resources to afford housing, and federal regulations allowing landlords to deny housing based on a person's criminal or drug history furthers the struggles felt by ex-AICs (Aukerman, 2003). The importance of stable housing cannot be overstated, as it is often the first step to life returning to the norm. Shelter is a basic necessity every person should have, and the lack of vital necessities may cause ex-offenders to see no other option than to fall back on illegal activities as a way to meet their basic needs (Cannonier, Burke, & Mitchell, 2021). Some reentry programs have connections through outside public housing or have their own housing facilities for their participants to utilize.

Support Systems

Social support is an important contributor to a person's reintegration into community because it provides a network of possible resources. Familial support can contribute to a successful reentry, typically encouraging non-criminal behaviors and enhancing feelings of belongingness and acceptance (Mills & Codd, 2008). Additionally, one's family can be a resource for housing and financial support, lessening the burden of finding housing and a job immediately after release (Naser & La Vinge, 2006).

Friends and peers can also be a positive source of support. However, in many cases, a person's friends are part of their criminogenic circle, which can have negative results on their ability to reenter successfully (Kras, 2019). Cobbina et al. (2012) found that men's risk of recidivism is strongly related to if they associate with people who engage in criminal activity, displaying the significance of the nature of the peer relationships. Parole Officers provide a more formal source of social support through supervision guidelines and building a rapport with their clients (Kras, 2019). A strong and caring relationship between a PO and individuals on supervision deters deviant behaviors and provides motivation to stay out of prison or jail (Kras, 2019). Overall, support systems are an important part of the reentry process and can be sources of strength during a difficult transition.

Gender-Responsive Programming

While the populations residing in prisons are mostly male, women make up a significant number of AICs in prisons around the country. Because many prior AICs utilizing reentry resources are men, there are very few gender-responsive programs available for women. Women who have been to prison face unique challenges as they return to their communities. First, many incarcerated women are parents to children under the age of 18, typically having sole custody of their children prior to their sentence (Miller, 2021). As the sole caregivers of these children, many women plan to return to a parenting role after they are released, and reentry programs can be a tool to provide supervised parent-child interactions as well as parenting classes when needed (Miller, 2021). Additionally, gender-responsive treatment accounts for the differences in criminal behavior in men and women and utilizes different interventions for a successful reentry. Women in the criminal justice system are likely to suffer from a mental health disorder as

compared to men, meaning their reentry programs may be more focused on mental health treatment rather than building interpersonal skills, for example (Miller, 2021).

Reentry Program Design

Existing literature focusing on how reentry programs should be designed highlights who to target, what to target, how to target, and how well the program is implemented. A well designed and successful program should include aspects from these key ideas.

Who to target

First, programs should aim to target “high-risk” offenders³, meaning those who are most likely to reoffend after they are released from prison (Latessa, 2008; Jonson & Cullen, 2015). In contrast, “low-risk” offenders are those who are less likely to reoffend due to the presence of positive influences in their life, such as lack of substance use, strong family relationships, or good school performance (Latessa, 2008). This is not to say that low-risk individuals are not as deserving of these services provided by reentry organizations, only that it may be more beneficial for them to participate in programs with less extensive requirements or services (Jonson & Cullen, 2015). Further, research found placing low-risk offenders in extensive programming actually increased their chances of reoffending by an average of 5% (Latessa, 2008). In contrast, the same study found that high-risk offenders in extensive programming had a 9% decrease in recidivism rates (Latessa, 2008). Participants who are considered “high risk” are the target demographic for reentry programs and may be the group that will benefit the most from intensive rehabilitation efforts.

³ “High-risk” offenders are those who have a higher chance of reoffending and returning to prison after their release. These individuals may have significant barriers that make the process of reentry especially difficult, such as criminal charges that make it unlikely to find housing.

What to target

It is important for successful reentry programs to target and reduce factors that lead to an increase in crime. These factors can include substance abuse, anti-social personality traits, and poor self-control skills (Latessa, 2008). Building regulation skills can help ex-offenders find jobs, create positive social support networks, and change their general attitudes about life. In addition, organizations assist with housing, employment, building interpersonal skills, and other various aspects of life that are impacted by having a justice history.

How to target

The methods used in reentry programs can vary in design and result in different areas of success for participants. One effective method of rehabilitation includes the use of action-oriented interventions, such as cognitive-behavioral based programs (Zhang et al., 2019; Latessa, 2008). Cognitive-behavioral interventions change unhelpful ways of thinking through clear and observable behavioral outcomes achieved through changes in the way an individual perceives and reflects upon their life circumstances (Wilson, Bouffard, & Mackenzie, 2005). Some programs take on a mentorship model, where people involved with the program foster a relationship with the reentering individual, building a sense of community and healthy social connection during a time of transition.

Program Implementation

Oregon SB 267 was passed in 2003, requiring correctional prevention, treatment, or intervention programs receiving state funds to be evidence-based (Latessa, 2008). SB 267 ensures state-funded programming involves practices that are proved to be effective, resulting in better outcomes for reentering people. Latessa (2008) found that programs scoring low on integrity and program effectiveness were associated with a 19% increase in recidivism,

demonstrating the importance of implementing and funding programs that align with practices that are proven to help those reentering.

Housing

Finding stable housing for those reentering society after a prison sentence is an important aspect of reentry and returning to a conventional lifestyle. Having a safe and stable home is a fundamental aspect of societal engagement, as a permanent address can allow formerly incarcerated people to apply for employment, establish strong social and communal connections, and reduce rearrests for violation of laws that criminalize homelessness (Zhang et al., 2019). One New York based organization found that those who had housing within a month after release were estimated to be one-third less likely to become homeless in the future (McDonald, Dyou, & Carlson, 2008). Additionally, without a permanent address, it may be difficult to receive a photo ID—a document that is often required for employment, banking, or government assistance programs.

Employment

Research on societal reentry has shown that maintaining gainful and legal employment straight out of prison is an important aspect of returning to the community. People who remain unemployed after their release are more likely to return to crime as compared to those who are employed (Decker et al., 2015). This is sometimes because without necessary funds to support themselves, people may turn to illegal methods for survival, putting themselves in a position to possibly return to prison. Maintaining meaningful and gainful employment can provide a pathway for prior AICs to build pro-social relationships and community, develop a sense of self-worth, and invest in society and conformity (Latessa, 2012).

Because employment is crucial in escaping the cycle of reincarceration, many reentry programs have resources available to help former AICs secure a job through vocational training, interview practice, or providing direct advocacy through letters of explanation regarding a person's past. Reentry programs may also provide a list of employers who offer fair and equal job opportunities to those with a criminal background. Having the monetary resources available to support oneself is valuable in long-term sustainable success and returning to a normal life.

Interpersonal Skills

In addition to employment assistance, developing interpersonal skills such as anger management, time management, impulse control, goal setting, and parenting can contribute to one's success when participating in a reentry program (Zhang et al., 2019). These "soft" skills have been identified as being important aspects of rehabilitation post-incarceration. Building (or perhaps relearning) these skills can be a way to move forward and strengthen other parts of the rehabilitation process. Oftentimes, these interpersonal skills are essential in maintaining a job and being a reliable worker. For example, having strong time management skills is necessary for attending work on time, which is usually required to hold employment.

Public Support for Reentry Programs

Understanding the public's support patterns for reentry services can influence policymakers' political backing, funding methods, and community acceptance (Altier, 2021). Research into the public support of reentry programs shows that people are likely to support programming that produces a "desired result," or a successful transition back into society (Garland, Wodahl, & Cota, 2016). Krisberg and Marchionna (2006) conducted a national public opinion poll about American attitudes towards the rehabilitation of reentering prisoners and found that 70% of people reported feelings of support for reentry services in prison and after

release. In the same poll, a majority of participants considered that access to job training, drug treatment, and mental health services are “very important” to ensure a successful reintegration after imprisonment (Krisberg & Marchionna, 2006). A poll conducted in 2010 found that a majority (over 80%) of Oregonians support providing rehabilitation services to former prisoners including mental healthcare, housing support, education, job training, and drug treatment (Sundt et al., 2012).

While the support for reentry programs is generally high, research outlines that certain groups may support reentry services more than others. People who have interpersonal contact with someone who is justice-involved are found to hold more supportive and positive feelings towards reentry efforts (Garland, Wodahl, & Cota, 2016; Rade, Desmarais, & Burnette, 2018). This finding demonstrates the possibility that humanizing and interacting one-on-one with ex-AICs can lead to higher support for services that would help them overcome barriers. Additionally, people who are female, hold liberal political beliefs, or have a bachelor’s degree are more likely to support rehabilitative efforts and transitional programming (Garland, Wodahl, & Cota, 2016; Rade, Desmarais, & Burnette, 2018). It should be noted that these traits do not directly predict a person’s support for reentry services, but highlight a trend in who may be more or less inclined to support certain programming.

Public support is found to decrease depending on how the reentry process is explained. While most people support the addition of reentry programs in their communities, only about 25% of people support raising taxes to improve reentry services (Garland, Wodahl, & Schuhmann, 2013). This shows a conflict in personal beliefs and the value of self-interest. Further, many take on a NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) stance—where one opposes certain public programs due to perceived consequences to their neighborhood, such as declining

property values—when considering the support they feel for public programs (Dear, 1992; Garland, Wodahl, & Schuhmann, 2013). Support for transitional housing programs in one's own city drops by half when it is proposed that the housing unit will be placed in one's own neighborhood (Garland, Wodahl, & Schuhmann, 2013). Individual support for reentry programs may be conditional on the imagined negative effects it may have on one's life.

Methodology

I answer my research questions using qualitative research methods. My main strategy is completing a set of semi-scripted interviews with staff members involved in reentry programs in Oregon. The information gathered in these interviews serve as a baseline for understanding how each individual organization categorizes success within their program. The methods outlined have gone through the IRB exemption process.

I recruited interview participants by reaching out to a total of eight organizations based in Oregon via email inquiring if they would be willing to be a part of my research. In the end, I conducted a total of four interviews. All interviews were voluntary, and the interviewees had the option to skip any questions they prefer not to answer. The identities of the participants are anonymous, but the title of their organization is used to organize and differentiate the information received from various organizations. The interviews examine if the idea of success remains consistent through organizations, or if different programs view success in different ways.

While I acknowledge the importance of exploring the first-hand perspectives of previously incarcerated individuals, this project solely focuses on the insights provided by reentry program employees. If this project were to be expanded upon in the future with further time, effort, and resources, perspectives of those who have experienced, or are currently experiencing, the process of reentry would be one of the first additions. For the sake of the given time and tools I have at my disposal, I primarily focus on the functions of reentry programs and in what ways employees define success for their clients.

The interview questions mostly focus on general ideas about what success looks like in the organization. A list of questions asked during every interview to all participants can be found

in Appendix A. Additional questions asked during the interview were dependent on the specific program and differed between interviews. Participants explained how their organization guides their participants towards this goal of success. All interviews were held over Zoom and were audio recorded for my reference throughout my project. Another portion of my research is utilizing various sources to understand the complexity of defining success in prisoner reentry programs. The goal is to use relevant literature that discusses how success is defined in reentry programs for people who are post-incarceration.

Results

I conducted interviews with four reentry programs across the state of Oregon. These programs included the Marion County Reentry Initiative, the De Muniz Resource Center, Sponsors, Inc., and East Cascades Works. All programs interviewed work directly with previously incarcerated people and assist with their transition back into society.

The Marion County Reentry Initiative is part of the Marion County Sheriff's Office Community Corrections Division, focusing on helping former AICs with housing, transportation, treatment, mentoring, family strengthening, and employment services. The MCRI works to rebuild lives through reducing crime and recidivism through a collaborative effort with community corrections, education, law enforcement, and health and non-profit agencies. The MCRI organizes "reach-in" workshops that AICs attend 6 months before their release which inform them of the resources available to help them during their reentry. The Marion County Sheriff's Office hosts the Student Opportunity for Achieving Results (SOAR) program, which is a 12-week intensive transition program involving cognitive-based treatments, substance abuse treatments, and employment programming.

The MCRI is partnered with the De Muniz Resource Center which serves as a centralized location for ex-AICs to connect with resources out in the community. Anyone with a criminal conviction is eligible to receive help from the De Muniz Resource Center, and individual navigational coaches help with identifying the barriers their clients face and how to overcome them. Resources include education assistance, employment resources, transportation, legal assistance, recovery services, obtaining identification, food and basic needs, and many more. De Muniz also conducts classes focusing on "soft skills" such as problem solving, emotional

regulation, identifying thinking errors and overcoming them, identifying one's strengths, building pro-social life skills.

Sponsors, Inc. is based in Lane County, Oregon and offers various reentry services including transitional housing, permanent supportive housing, employment services, mental health counseling, and mentoring. Sponsors, Inc. has supported a total of 23,806 individuals in their reentry journey, including over 1,300 mentor-mentee matches, and providing 242 beds across seven transitional and long-term housing sites in Lane County. Additionally, this organization has a resource center, where anyone in Lane County with a conviction history is welcome to seek assistance with finding housing, employment, receiving Social Security and disability benefits, discussing higher education options, and more.

East Cascades Works houses the WorkSource Oregon Reentry Program and serves 10 counties in central Oregon, focusing on education and training that leads to living-wage jobs thriving careers. They connect with AICs between 90-180 days before release working to create employment plans and information about the transition from incarceration to the workforce. This includes resume and cover letter writing assistance, interview preparation, and how to talk about their convictions with employers. The WorkSource Oregon Reentry Program helps their clients get what they need to be employable immediately after release. Before the AICs sentence is up, WorkSource may help with getting one's GED, certifications, apprenticeships (plumbing, electrician, etc.), resume, and cover letter before they leave prison, lessening the barriers directly after release.

Connections Between Interviews

Stability and Sustained Success

Common success requirements among reentry organizations include securing a stable income, securing long-term housing, and being drug and alcohol free. These are common aspects of parole guidelines, and all reentry programs interviewed highlighted that following these guidelines encompasses the baseline of success in some way. However, most programs acknowledge that there can be successes that fall outside of post-prison supervision, displaying the complexity of a “successful” participant in these programs.

Many programs simply want to see long-term stability for their clients, and a return to normalcy as much as possible. One interviewee reflects, “For me, somebody with personal lived experience, once I had the life skills...it really helped me move away from the criminal lifestyle that I was living and become more of a productive member of society. So, when I had people like peer support and other nonprofits giving me a helping hand instead of continuing to beat me down, that was really successful for me...We know that when we help people and surround them with the support they need, it improves the likelihood of their success.” (East Cascades Works). Reentry programs provide former adults in custody with tools to create their own success as they reintegrate back into society. To do this, some programs may connect them “with the resources out in the community that don’t go away once they’re off supervision...that they can continue to go to” (Marion County Reentry Initiative).

Additionally, most organizations pointed out setbacks—that is, the individual returns to prison, picks up new criminal charges, is unable to live independently, continues to rely on drugs or alcohol, etc.—is not a failure. While it may seem so for someone on the outside of the world of reentry, those actively involved in the work understand setbacks like the ones mentioned are

just that, a setback. Experiencing setbacks, even with the support of reentry services, does not mean that an individual will be unable to reintegrate back into society in the future. The odds are stacked against justice-involved individuals, and reentry employees understand this and make room in their idea of success to accommodate for the possibility that some of their clients may return to prison or jail more than once. Part of this is understanding that short-term setbacks do not hold a person back from achieving long-term, sustained success.

One interviewee takes a different approach to the topic of failure vs. success by acknowledging that if an individual does not have any means of upward mobility (in terms of career path, education, etc.), they would not consider that a success. The goal of many reentry programs is to give the previously incarcerated individuals the tools to be able to rebuild a meaningful and fulfilling life, despite society labeling them as a “throwaway person” (Sponsors, Inc.). Because of the stigma surrounding incarceration, reentry programs are sometimes one of the only sources of positive support one might receive in their reentry journey.

Self-efficacy and Agency

A common theme among the interviews was explaining how “success” is accomplished when the formerly incarcerated individuals can live independently without supervision and build a conventional life. Small successes, such as getting an Oregon ID, can create momentum and contribute to building a sense of self-efficacy and agency, and are vital in giving program participants the tools to return to the community. One interviewee highlights the importance of empowerment, one of their organization’s core values, defining it as “the idea that we are not doing for, but walking alongside and supporting” (Sponsors, Inc.). Reentry programs provide resources to former AICs, so that “when the time comes for you to really make a change, you’ve

got the empowerment that comes with all that process that you've been through...at that point it's much easier" (De Muniz Resource Center).

AICs experience a dramatic transition from prison and jail, a highly structured institution that emphasizes control over the inmates, to a life where one must make their own decisions and find a path forward. Reentry programs serve as a transition point between the controlling environment of prison and the freedom of choice one experiences as they reenter their community, "There's something really important to us about helping people explore this space where they have so many options and they're not used to having so many options and that's scary to some people because sometimes the last time they had a lot of options, they made some choices they didn't feel good about or it's just overwhelming" (Sponsors, Inc.). Some reentry participants relearn how to make their own decisions, usually after years of being stripped from making basic choices over their own life.

Reentry programs are "Getting them through the threshold and started in this process where they one day may really come to a point where it's like 'I got this now. I got what I need to make this change'...and they close a chapter in their life and move on because they become empowered in a new way" (De Muniz Resource Center). One interviewee from a county sheriff's office stated frankly that a complete success would mean that, "we don't ever see them again...not in a way that has to be holding them accountable for something." (Marion County Reentry Initiative). Reentry workers want to see the people who went through their program living out in the community.

Healthy Practices and Regaining Humanity

Creating a healthy support system outside of reentry sphere with friends and family can help contribute to long-term success when the reentering community members move on from

needing the reentry programs' help. One interview participant explained how after reentering individuals complete their parole, they begin asking what the next steps are and where to go after they are finished. It is up to the reentry organizations to teach and help previously incarcerated individuals "create those outside supports because life is going to go on, and they are going to have stressors...and how do you deal with it and who can you go to when that happens?"

(Marion County Reentry Initiative) Additionally, these healthy support systems should not be involved in the criminal justice system, as being around drug-involved and justice-involved individuals may result in the person returning to prison.

A different organization reflects on the importance of building healthy thought patterns, stating, "having a sense of self-worth is often connected to feeling connected to others...that's why we really try to foster principles of dignity and respect" and "if somebody leaves here and they're feeling better about themselves as a human, I think that's a positive thing...and there's something really valuable about that" (Sponsors, Inc.). There is more to a successful reentry than simply following parole guidelines, part of it is building healthy mindsets.

One organization holds cognitive classes based around building success skills, focusing on three emotions that contribute to feeling successful in life. These emotions include gratitude, kindness, and healthy pride. Further, these emotions "put gas in your tank. If you feel proud, you go out and do more things that kind of build pride...So, doing something that says, 'look at what a great job I did' or an act of kindness makes you think...the world is not a mean, cold, dark place, I can shed light." (De Muniz Resource Center). Guiding reentering individuals in creating healthy ways of thinking is incredibly powerful, especially as those who have been to prison are often dealing with trauma from their life before, during, and after their sentence.

Discussion

Whereas the general public defines “success” as a cut and dry concept, typically focusing on recidivism rates, reentry programs tend to hold more flexibility in their definition. Reentry programs understand the difficulty of moving from a highly structured context, like prison, to a context with little to no guidelines. Organizations that focus on reentry services are a bridge between the lack of control one feels in prison and the process of regaining normalcy for years to come after release. Focusing only on recidivism rates does not capture the full essence of success, as there are more subjective measures, such as personal growth, well-being, personal feelings of success, relationship building, that provide more insight into what it means to be truly successful. People outside of the field of recidivism define success in the short-term, while reentry organizations understand that one’s success should last in the long-term.

A pattern throughout the interviews was the focus on building long-term behaviors, attempting to set their clients up to maintain these habits for the rest of their lives. Reentry programs not only want their participants to find employment, but they encourage their clients to strive for long-term and gainful employment. Relapses in drug use, losing a job, or breaking parole guidelines may seem like a failure to most, but in the larger context of reentry, these are seen as setbacks. Reentry programs empower individuals to overcome these setbacks and stressors, ultimately striving for their clients to fully reintegrate to a lifestyle that is productive and healthy.

In defining success, reentry programs consider the entirety of a person’s context, not just how many times they go to prison or jail. Reentry programs uphold a flexible mindset in the way they view success, as they understand the barriers one faces as they exit prison or jail. For example, someone outside the world of reentry might see a reentering person using drugs and

immediately categorize that as a failure. In contrast, reentry programs may understand that a relapse in drug use is a common part of recovery and does not erase all the prior work and effort to maintain sobriety. This flexible mentality is one that many of the interviews explored—an understanding that success is not always a forward trajectory and may involve many steps in the “wrong” direction before progress is made. Some programs see the same clients’ multiple times after different periods of incarceration and still provide the same amount of support as those who have only served one sentence. Small victories such as getting a job, finding housing, or reuniting with family after incarceration are an important part of success, and should not be overlooked in discussions of reentry. Success stories are not always perfect, and reentry organizations leave space in their definition to account for imperfection. Reentry programs reframe the concept of “success” not through rigid endpoints, but as an ongoing goal towards stability in a conventional life.

Conclusion

The concept of reentry is closely tied to the trend of mass incarceration in the U.S., as millions of people are impacted annually by their own or a loved one's release from jail and prison (Wang, 2024). Mass incarceration is a ubiquitous part of the United States criminal justice system, resulting in thousands of inmates returning to their communities without the necessary support to ensure their transition is successful. Often barred from finding gainful employment, housing opportunities, and drug and alcohol treatment, these people may struggle to regain a sense of humanity and successfully return to a conventional life. Once a person is deemed a "criminal," they are forced to live with constant reminders of their past actions, even after they serve their given sentence in prison. About 1 in 4 of those released from prison succumb to the "revolving door" of the criminal justice system, where they are re-arrested and re-incarcerated shortly after release (Freeman, 2003; Sawyer & Wagner, 2024).

Overwhelmingly, the public supports reentry services and want to strengthen the rehabilitation and reintegration of returning community members. To break the cycle of reincarceration, there must be a greater investment into the community, not the prison system (Sawyer & Wagner, 2024). Every year, around 80.7 billion dollars are invested into public correction agencies (prisons, jails, parole, probation), outlining the immense cost of maintaining a system that does little to reduce crime rates (Wagner & Rabuy, 2017). While prison may not be an effective deterrent for crime, reentry organizations may be better suited to address the needs of ex-AICs and provide guidance on how to remain outside of prisons. The reentry process affects everyone, and every year, millions of people are released into our communities. It is important to find how organizations define success within the context of reentry to know what services and methods most benefit their clients.

Appendix A

1. What is your role within the organization? How did you become involved in this line of work?
2. What programs and services do your organization offer?
3. What are the most common challenges or needs your clients face upon reentry?
4. What does funding look like for your organization?
5. Do you feel like you're well-funded for the work you do? If you had additional funding, would you have a higher success rate?
6. How do reentry programs reduce rates of recidivism and promote positive change for those previously incarcerated?
7. What kind of long-term support or follow-up services does your organization provide to ensure sustained success?
8. Are there any new initiatives or pilot programs currently in development?
9. What is one area you think your organization (or reentry programs in general) can improve on?
10. What is the biggest challenge for your organization (or reentry programs in general)?
11. How does your organization define the concept of "success"? How do reentry programs contribute to successful transitions into society?
12. Do you measure your program's success rates in any way? If yes, what metrics are used?

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