

## Report on Public Act 15-84 Outcomes

Reentry After a Life Behind Bars: A Participatory, Multi-Method Approach to Understanding the Experiences of Public Act 15-84 Beneficiaries in Connecticut after *Miller v. Alabama*



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In *Miller v. Alabama* (2012), the U.S. Supreme Court invalidated laws requiring a mandatory sentence of life without parole (LWOP) for juvenile offenders. Furthermore, it held that courts must consider the mitigating effects of youth – such lack of maturity, increased susceptibility to peer pressure, and limited time for character development – when deciding whether to impose an LWOP sentence on a juvenile.

In response, several states amended their laws to comply with the landmark decision. In Connecticut, the Sentencing Commission convened a diverse set of criminal justice stakeholders to develop a consensus-based response. After months of deliberation, the Commission endorsed two proposals to (1) introduce factors for courts to consider when sentencing juveniles and (2) establish new parole eligibility for individuals who were serving a lengthy term of incarceration for an offense committed while under the age of eighteen. These proposals were enacted by the Connecticut General Assembly as Public Act 15-84. As of January 2025, 123 individuals had been granted parole under the law.

Eight years later, the Commission recommended an additional proposal to expand the parole eligibility initially set forth in Public Act 15-84 to individuals who were under twenty-one at the time of their offense. An amended version of this proposal was enacted as Public Act 23-169.

Consistent with its statutory mandate to “evaluate existing sentencing statutes, policies and practices,” the Commission launched an evaluation to better understand the impact of these laws. The Commission asked Dr. Sukhmani Singh, Assistant Professor at the UConn School of Social Work, to lead the evaluation effort. Dr. Singh and her research team employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses to comprehensively examine outcomes under the laws. This research builds on an emerging body of scholarship tracking similar cohorts of parole recipients in California, Michigan, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The qualitative component featured in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eleven individuals who were granted parole under Public Act 15-84. In crafting the interview questions and protocols, the researchers relied on principles of community-based participatory research, which involved collaborating with a beneficiary of Public Act 15-84 as a co-researcher. Following completion of the interviews, the research team coded the data and identified patterns across five overarching thematic areas.

Participants addressed a wide range of topics, including their upbringing and life circumstances prior to incarceration; early interactions with the criminal justice system; experiences of incarceration as a young adult; sources of support in prison; access to educational services and other Department of Correction programming; hope and apprehension upon hearing about potential policy changes; experience with the 15-84 parole process; and challenges associated with reentry. These challenges included securing housing and healthcare, obtaining and maintaining employment, adapting to unfamiliar technologies, complying with parole requirements, and navigating relationships with loved ones.

The quantitative component analyzes data from the Board of Pardons and Paroles covering all individuals granted parole under Public Act 15-84 as of January 2025. The dataset includes three primary categories of information: historical legal processing, current legal status, and demographic information. Historical legal processing includes information such as total effective sentence received, sentenced charges, date of harm, expected end-of-sentence date, 15-84 parole hearing date, correctional facility, parole location, and assessed risk level. Current legal status data capture supervision completion, parole or probation violations, re-admissions to prison, and days spent in the community for individuals not re-admitted. Demographics information reports variables such as race, gender, education status, employment status, age at harm, and age at sentence.

Notably, as of January 2025, only 11% of Public Act 15-84 beneficiaries had recidivated, operationally defined as either absconding or being re-incarcerated. This figure is significantly lower than recidivism rates for the general prison population, as estimated by Connecticut's Office of Policy and Management.

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The United States is the only country where youth can be sentenced to life without parole for crimes committed under the age of 18 (Rover, 2023); a population known as “juvenile lifers.” Life sentences for juveniles can be understood in three ways: juvenile life without the possibility of parole (JLWOP), juvenile life with the possibility of parole (JLWP), and de facto life sentences that exceed the natural lifespan, typically 40 years or more (Abrams, 2024; Bennett et al., 2024; Nellis & Barry, 2025). The total number of people currently serving all types of such sentences is about 11,000 (Rover, 2023), and approximately 2,900 people were specifically serving JLWOP sentences prior to *Miller* (Bennett et al., 2024). Although several key Supreme Court rulings made it unconstitutional to impose mandatory life sentences on youth who committed their crime under the age of 18 (*Roper v. Simmons*, 2005, *Miller v. Alabama*, 2012 and *Montgomery v. Louisiana*, 2016), 22 states still permit the use of JLWOP (The Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth, 2024). Further, post *Miller* and *Montgomery*, implementation of second chance reform mechanisms have varied widely across states and over time, even in the same jurisdictions, there have been changes (Bennett et al., 2024). For example, Connecticut’s Public Act 15-84 granted parole eligibility for offenders sentenced to de facto life for crimes committed under the age of 18, and PA 23-169 raised the age to 21.

Nationally, youth who were sentenced to JLWOP sentences prior to 2012 were male (97.1%), disproportionately Black (61.1%), approximately 16 years of age at the time of offense (overwhelmingly first degree murder), and nearly sixty-two percent were given an average sentence of 25 – 40 years (Bennett et al., 2024; Rovner, 2023). There were stark racial disparities in JLWOP sentencing with Black youth receiving JLWOP sentences for a White victim (43.4%) at almost twice the rate of their arrest for such a crime (23.2%) (Nellis, 2017). As of January 2024, 1070 individuals have been released from prison after having served an average sentence of bringing the overall JLWOP population down by 36.8%. The average age of a juvenile lifer is 46 years (Bennett et al., 2024).

### Before Public Act 15-84

Over the last fifty years, the U.S. Supreme Court has faced the issue of whether such harsh sentences are constitutional. The Eighth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution outlines three clauses which limit excessive bail, the imposition of fines, and cruel and unusual punishment. The Supreme Court has relied on the clause prohibiting cruel and unusual punishment when evaluating the constitutionality of these sentences. The Court first examined the issue in *Thompson v. Oklahoma* (1988), where it held that execution is an unconstitutional punishment for a crime committed by someone under sixteen years old, and accordingly, vacated the defendant's death sentence.

#### *U.S. Supreme Court Jurisprudence*

Nearly two decades later, the U.S. Supreme Court revisited this issue in *Roper v. Simmons* (2005) after Christopher Simmons, a juvenile given the death penalty for committing a murder at seventeen, appealed his sentence on the grounds that it was unconstitutional. The court sided with Simmons, acknowledging a national consensus among the states against imposing

capital punishment on juvenile offenders (*Roper v. Simmons*, 2005). The opinion highlights three main factors that distinguish juveniles from adult offenders: lack of maturity and sense of responsibility; increased vulnerability to negative outside influences; and insufficient opportunity for character development compared to adults (*Roper v. Simmons*, 2005). Based on these differences, the Court determined that the death penalty for juveniles was disproportionately harsh and banned the imposition of this sentence on juveniles (*Roper v. Simmons*, 2005).

Five years later, in *Graham v. Florida* (2010), the Court considered the constitutionality of life sentences without the possibility of parole (LWOP) for juvenile non-homicide defendants. Graham, aged sixteen at the time of his crime, was sentenced to life imprisonment for armed burglary and attempted armed robbery, with no possibility of release under Florida's sentence structure at the time (*Graham v. Florida*, 2010). The Court stated that sentences must have a legitimate penological justification in order to be proper, and regarding LWOP for juveniles, concluded that “none of the goals of penal sanctions that have been recognized as legitimate -- retribution, deterrence, incapacitation, and rehabilitation... provides an adequate justification” for the imposition of such sentences (*Graham v. Florida*, 2010). As such, the Court determined that the Eighth Amendment prohibits LWOP for juvenile offenders in non-homicide cases (*Graham v. Florida*, 2010).

In the historic case of *Miller v. Alabama* (2012), the Court examined LWOP sentences for juveniles who committed a homicide. Miller, charged with arson and murder, had a tumultuous upbringing, but the court could not consider this due to the mandatory LWOP sentence that accompanied his charges (*Miller v. Alabama*, 2012). The Court reiterated holdings from *Roper* and *Graham*, namely that juvenile defendants are less culpable than adults, and that LWOP sentences are akin to death sentences for youthful offenders because they serve more years and a greater percentage of their lives than adult offenders who receive an LWOP sentence. The Court combines these holdings with the conclusions from *Woodson v. North Carolina* (1976) and *Johnson v. Texas* (1993), which both maintain that individualized sentencing is necessary when imposing the death penalty. Putting these strands together, the Court held that juvenile offenders must have an individualized process with full consideration of their circumstances for a LWOP sentence to be appropriate because the sentence is functionally equivalent to a death sentence (*Miller v. Alabama*, 2012). The Court also delineated a set of five factors, known as the *Miller* factors, for judges to consider at sentencing when deciding whether to impose LWOP on a juvenile: (1) the age and maturity of the juvenile; (2) their family and home environment; (3) the circumstances of the crime; (4) their prior dealings or challenges with the justice system; and (5) their potential for rehabilitation (*Miller v. Alabama*, 2012). Courts use these factors to distinguish between immature offenders and “the rare juvenile offender whose crime reflects irreparable corruption” (*Miller v. Alabama*, 2012).

After *Miller*, courts across the country faced the question of whether its holdings should be retroactively applied. In 1963, seventeen-year-old Henry Montgomery was sentenced to death for murder, which was later lowered on appeal to LWOP (*Montgomery v. Louisiana*, 2016). After *Miller* was decided, Montgomery filed a motion seeking collateral review of his sentence on the grounds that it was unconstitutional (*Montgomery v. Louisiana*, 2016). The Court agreed and determined that any juvenile who had been sentenced to LWOP was entitled to resentencing or a parole hearing, signaling that *Miller* applies retroactively (*Montgomery v. Louisiana*,

2016). However, the Court clarified that jurisdictions need not resentence or release every inmate that was sentenced to LWOP as a juvenile; they only need to give the inmate an opportunity for parole (*Montgomery v. Louisiana*, 2016). In extending its application, *Montgomery* reaffirms “*Miller*’s central intuition – that children who commit even heinous crimes are capable of change” (*Montgomery v. Louisiana*, 2016).

In *Jones v. Mississippi* (2021), seventeen-year-old Brett Jones was charged with murder and sentenced to LWOP in accordance with the mandatory sentencing scheme at the time. He was given a resentencing hearing, but the court found that LWOP was appropriate and upheld his sentence (*Jones v. Mississippi*, 2021). Jones appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, arguing that under *Miller* and *Montgomery* a sentencer imposing LWOP must make a separate and distinct finding that the defendant is “permanently incorrigible,” or provide an on-the-record explanation of the defendant’s incorrigibility (*Jones v. Mississippi*, 2021). The Supreme Court rejected this argument and stated that “[t]he Court’s precedents do not require an on-the-record sentencing explanation with an implicit finding of permanent incorrigibility” (*Jones v. Mississippi*, 2021). Jones’s sentence was proper under *Miller* and *Montgomery* because it “was not mandatory and the trial judge had discretion to impose a lesser punishment in light of Jones’s youth” (*Jones v. Mississippi*, 2021).

### ***Connecticut Supreme Court Jurisprudence***

The Connecticut Supreme Court first addressed *Miller* in *State v. Riley* (2015). According to the court, “*Miller* may be violated even when the sentencing authority has discretion to impose a lesser sentence than life without parole if it fails to give due weight to evidence that *Miller* deemed constitutionally significant before determining that such a severe punishment is appropriate” (*State v. Riley*, 2015). In other words, if the court did not consider age-related evidence as mitigation before giving a juvenile defendant LWOP, as required by *Miller*, the defendant is entitled to an opportunity for resentencing (*State v. Riley*, 2015). The Connecticut Supreme Court addressed a similar question in *Casiano v. Commissioner of Correction* (2015), affirming that *Miller* extends to lengthy sentences that are the functional equivalent of a life sentence.

## **Public Act 15-84**

### ***Legislative History***

Following *Miller*, the Connecticut Sentencing Commission convened two working groups to develop a legislative framework consistent with the updated constitutional requirements (Sentencing Commission, 2013). One group considered how to integrate the *Miller* factors into juvenile sentencing decisions; the other group addressed the reconsideration of lengthy sentences imposed on individuals who committed crimes before the age of eighteen (Sentencing Commission, 2013). Incorporating input from across the justice system, the groups crafted two proposals that upheld the constitutional rights of juvenile offenders, while also accommodating the interests of crime victims and the public (Sentencing Commission, 2013). The proposals were raised in the 2013 and 2014 legislative sessions but were not enacted. Identical proposals were raised in the 2015 session, and the subsequent bill, Senate Bill 796, ultimately became Public Act (PA) 15-84 (Sentencing Commission, 2014; Sentencing Commission, 2015).

In justifying the Act, lawmakers emphasized the disparity between adult and juvenile cognitive and behavioral development. During the House debate, Judiciary Committee Co-Chair William Tong noted that:

“... a child’s character is not as well formed as an adult’s [character]. His traits are less fixed and actions less likely to be evidence of irretrievable depravity. The Supreme Court [found] that when you sentence a child to life, you make a determination at the outset that the child is incorrigible, that there’s no way they can change. And we know that based on science and data, and our observation over the years that very few children are incorrigible, that most can be changed through therapy, through programs designed to assist them to become better human beings. And the Supreme Court emphatically made that judgment that under the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment we have to adjust the way that we sentence juveniles” (Connecticut State Library, 2015).

*Graham* and *Miller* provide safeguards to make sure juveniles are given proportionate and fair sentences, but they do not require individuals given lengthy sentences as juveniles to be resentenced or released; states must only provide a meaningful opportunity to achieve one or the other. (*Miller v. Alabama*, 2012; *Graham v. Florida*, 2010). As Judiciary Committee Co-Chair Eric Coleman explained in the Senate debate:

“what [the bill] does not do is guarantee that anyone will be released from incarceration, but rather it provides an opportunity for [an individual] to appear before the Board of Parole and to receive the benefits of the rules that have been developed for people who committed offenses when they were less than eighteen years of age” (Connecticut State Library, 2015).

Regarding how to incorporate the *Miller* factors, Rep. Tong stated:

“This bill provides an answer to the *Miller* case, a series of factors that a court in our state must consider any time they sentence a child in adult court to an A or B felony. This set of factors includes as I noted earlier in the *Miller* decision, a child’s lack of maturity, a child’s vulnerability to negative influences, a child’s increased capacity for change and rehabilitation, and a variety of other factors” (Connecticut State Library, 2015).

Lawmakers ultimately approved the following instructions for courts to follow when sentencing juveniles:

- “(1) Consider, in addition to any other information relevant to sentencing, the defendant’s age at the time of the offense, the hallmark features of adolescence, and any scientific and psychological evidence showing the differences between a child’s brain development and an adult’s brain development...
- (2) Consider, if the court proposes to sentence the child to a lengthy sentence under which it is likely that the child will die while incarcerated, how the scientific and psychological evidence described in subdivision (1) of this subsection counsels against such a sentence” (Public Act 15-84, 2015).

### ***Implementation***

The Board of Pardons and Paroles (BOPP) is a state agency housed within the Department of Correction (DOC) for administrative purposes (C.G.S. 54-124a). Appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the General Assembly, board members decide on paroles, pardons, and commutations (C.G.S. 54-124a). Regarding parole, the BOPP is tasked with managing hearings and creating regulations to properly balance the liberty interests of inmates with the safety and well-being of the public (C.G.S. 54-124a). An inmate must have a hearing in front of the BOPP before they can be released on parole; notice of the hearings must be given to family members of the applicant, as well as the public (C.G.S. 54-124a).

PA 15-84 established subsection (f) of Connecticut General Statutes 54-125a, which set forth a new category of parole eligibility for individuals who received at least a ten-year sentence for a crime they committed while under age eighteen. A person serving up to 50 years is eligible for a parole hearing after serving 60% of their sentence or 12 years – whichever is greater (C.G.S. 54-125a). A person serving a sentence of more than 50 years is eligible for parole after serving 30 years (C.G.S. 54-125a). Upon passage of the law, the BOPP identified forty-two inmates who became newly eligible for parole and gave each inmate a hearing date. The first 15-84 hearing was held on June 1, 2016 (Connecticut Board of Pardons and Paroles, 2026).

The BOPP may grant parole if (1) such release would be consistent with the acknowledgement that sentences should be just and proportionate, promoting public safety, rehabilitation, and respect for the law; and (2) “if it appears... that (A) there is a reasonable probability that such person will live and remain at liberty without violating the law, (B) the benefits to such person and society that would result from such person's [release] substantially outweigh the benefits to such person and society that would result from such person's continued incarceration, and (C) such person has demonstrated substantial rehabilitation...” (C.G.S. 54-125a). In the hearing, the BOPP may consider information like the inmate’s criminal record, age and circumstances at time of the crime, demonstrations of remorse and maturity, contributions to other persons and service, and any other facts they deem relevant (C.G.S. 54-125a). Board members may vote to go into executive session to discuss protected information (C.G.S. 1-231). Deliberation typically occurs in public, and at the conclusion of deliberations, the BOPP must explicitly articulate its decision and the reasons for its decision (C.G.S. 54-125a). Such decisions are made by majority vote and may not be appealed; if parole is denied, the inmate must wait at least two years before they can have another 15-84 hearing (C.G.S. 54-124a; C.G.S. 54-125a).

## **After Public Act 15-84**

### ***Connecticut Supreme Court Jurisprudence***

The Connecticut Supreme Court first addressed PA 15-84 in *State v. Delgado* (2016), and its companion case, *State v. Boyd* (2016). In *Delgado*, the defendant argued that his sentence, sixty-five years without option for parole for an accessory to murder conviction, was not in compliance with *Miller* (*State v. Delgado*, 2016). In *Boyd*, the defendant made the same argument regarding his fifty-year sentence (*State v. Boyd*, 2016). The court rejected both arguments and emphasized that PA 15-84 provides the defendant an appropriate constitutional

remedy, saying “[a]s a result [of PA 15-84], the defendant's sentence no longer falls within the purview of *Miller*. . . *Miller* simply does not apply when a juvenile's sentence provides an opportunity for parole” (*State v. Delgado*, 2016). The court further clarifies that “[t]he eighth amendment, as interpreted by *Miller*, does not prohibit a court from imposing a sentence of life imprisonment with the opportunity for parole for a juvenile homicide offender” (*State v. Delgado*, 2016).

Three years later, the Connecticut Supreme Court addressed *Miller* and PA 15-84 as a matter of substantive law in two companion cases: *State v. Williams-Bey* (2019) and *State v. McCleese* (2019). These cases involved inmates, both given a lengthy sentence as a juvenile, challenging the sentences on the grounds that 15-84 is an insufficient *Miller* remedy under the state constitution (*State v. Williams-Bey*, 2019; *State v. McCleese*, 2019). The court rejected these arguments, explaining that “parole eligibility under P.A. 15-84, § 1, is an adequate remedy for a *Miller* violation under our state constitution just as it is under the federal constitution” (*State v. McCleese*, 2019). It goes on to say that “ultimately, we do not believe that we are better situated than the legislature to strike an appropriate balance among these competing policies... Therefore, we do not conclude that the considerations identified by the defendant and the amici compel a particular constitutional rule beyond what the legislature requires” (*State v. McCleese*, 2019).

The Connecticut Supreme Court briefly revisited PA 15-84 in *Griffin v. Commissioner of Correction* (2019). While the focus of the case was on a separate issue, the court rejected the defendant’s request for modification of a sentence he received as a juvenile, reaffirming that PA 15-84 fulfills the requirements set out in *Miller* (*Griffin v. Commissioner of Correction*, 2019).

### ***Recent Legislation in Connecticut***

In 2023, the Connecticut Sentencing Commission submitted a proposal to expand the parole eligibility initially established in PA 15-84 to include individuals who were under twenty-one at the time of their crime (Sentencing Commission, 2023). The General Assembly enacted these changes in Public Act 23-169, but only for individuals who were sentenced on or before October 1, 2005. In the 2025 legislative session, there were proposals to remove this time restriction (House Bill 7133, 2025) and to raise the age of parole eligibility to twenty-five (House Bill 5464, 2025), but neither bill became law.

## **Procedures in Other States**

After the *Miller* ruling in 2012, several states began to both prospectively ban juvenile LWOP sentences and retroactively review lengthy sentences. At the time of the decision, approximately 2,900 individuals were serving JLWOP sentences nationwide (Bennett et al., 2024). In the years following *Miller*, the new opportunities for parole or sentence modification for these individuals resulted in the release of over 1,000 people (*Sentencing Children to Life without Parole: National Numbers*, 2024).

Prior to *Miller*, only three states prohibited LWOP for juvenile offenders (Cohbra, 2025). As of 2025, twenty-eight states and Washington, D.C. have abolished these sentences (Cohbra, 2025).

Furthermore, as of 2023, at least eight states had no individuals serving a LWOP sentence for an offense committed before the age of eighteen, even though their respective state laws still permitted such sentences (Rovner, 2023). Of the twenty-eight states that have outlawed JLWOP sentences, twenty-five states and Washington, D.C. have done so through legislation; the other three have eliminated these sentences through the judiciary (Cohbra, 2025). Iowa and Washington barred discretionary JLWOP sentences through judicial rulings in 2016 and 2018, respectively (*State v. Sweet*, 2016; *State v. Bassett*, 2018). Massachusetts established a ban in two separate cases: a 2013 case prohibited life without parole sentences for individuals under eighteen, and a 2024 case extended this ban to individuals under twenty-one, making Massachusetts the first state to outlaw JLWOP sentences for individuals older than eighteen (*Diachenko v. DA*, 2013; *Commonwealth v. Mattis*, 2024).

While Massachusetts is the only state to abolish LWOP for individuals up to age twenty-one, two other states have struck down laws that require judges to impose these sentences. Washington and Michigan prohibit mandatory LWOP for emerging adults under age twenty-one, though Michigan has not proscribed discretionary JLWOP sentences for any age group (*Matter of Monschke*, 2021; *People v. Taylor*, 2025; *People v. Czarnecki*, 2025).

In addition to banning or limiting JLWOP, many states have created mechanisms for sentence review or parole consideration for individuals sentenced as juveniles. At least twenty-five states and Washington, D.C. have adopted juvenile-specific second look policies, all enacted in the years since *Miller* (Cohbra, 2025). These policies vary by jurisdiction, specifically regarding the means of relief, whether the relief applies prospectively or retrospectively, the qualifying age at the time of the offense, the requisite time served before eligibility, and the offenses that qualify for relief (Cohbra, 2025).

## AN OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH ON JUVENILE LIFERS

The *Miller* and *Montgomery* rulings created a population of people incarcerated as youth who are now being released into community after having served decades in prison, particularly during adolescence, a developmental period marked by structural transformation in the brain (Abrams et al., 2023; Cavanagh, 2022). Subsequently, descriptive research on this population is burgeoning, albeit somewhat fragmented. Extant work seeks to investigate the life experiences of this population prior to their incarceration, their experiences during incarceration, and how they are navigating reentry across various jurisdictions (Abrams et al., 2020, 2023; Bennett et al., 2025; Daftary-Kapur et al., 2022; Nellis, 2017; Sbeglia et al., 2024).

### Life Before “Juvenile Life”

In the first national, comprehensive survey on the life experiences of 1,579 people sentenced to JLWOP Nellis, 2012 found that respondents had lived childhoods marked with deep structural disadvantages. For example, 79% of lifers shared bearing witness to violence in their homes, 54.1% had been exposed to weekly violence in their communities, 20.5% had experienced sexual abuse (77.3% of women reported sexual abuse), a third were raised in public housing, and 84.4% had been suspended or expelled from school. In her mixed-methods study on juvenile lifers in Michigan (one of the “Big Five” states housing more than 200 juvenile lifers each at the time of *Montgomery*), Brydon (2021) found *all* of her participants had experienced at least one traumatic event before the age of 17; notably, 84.2% had experienced three or more traumatic events like sexual abuse, the death of a loved one, parental incarceration, and witnessing violence while living in communities characterized by poverty prior to their sentences. Cavanagh et al., 2023 conducted a content analysis of letters that people who were incarcerated in adult prisons for charges when they were juveniles sent to the Campaign for Youth Justice (CFYJ). These letters were from 146 people incarcerated to lengthy sentences as adolescents from 32 states, and provide further evidence of lifers’ disproportionate exposure to community violence (witnessing homicides; drug deals), and violence within the home environment (death of a parent, domestic violence, sexual assault, child trafficking) prior to their sentencing. Daftary-Kapur et al., 2022 found 92% of their recently released juvenile lifers in Philadelphia (one of the “Big Five”) self-reported living in communities marked with high levels of poverty and violence; 70% had previous juvenile justice contact and 81% reported having been expelled from school at least once. Collectively, these studies paint a picture of the JLWOP population as those who have endured multiple structural harms (racism, deep poverty, community violence) and cumulative individual-level traumas (domestic violence, substance use, unstable housing, sexual abuse, death of loved ones, etc.) over the course of their childhoods prior to their incarceration.

### Experiences During Incarceration

Recent studies have sought to understand how juvenile lifers experienced their lengthy periods of incarceration. Abrams et al., 2020 conducted repeated, in-depth, life interviews with released lifers in California to examine how they articulated desisting from crime while serving their

sentences. The authors found three pathways towards desistance: (i) a gradual, non-linear pattern of learning to desist in an environment marked with racialized gang violence, exclusion from rehabilitative opportunities, and agonizing over the harm they had caused; (ii) desistance due to critical events such as mental health breakdowns in solitary confinement or witnessing senseless violence; and (iii) an immediate desistance that happened right after the crime or sentencing and the “desire to make meaning of a life behind bars by being useful to staff and fellow inmates” (p. 765). Abrams et al., 2020 note that while the pathways to desistance within prison were varied, the juvenile lifers they interviewed described wanting to contribute meaningfully and channeled that into the prisons where they were housed. They found ways to serve younger incarcerated people on how to navigate prison, work in the law library, seek all kinds of rehabilitative programming, and keep hope alive that they may yet be released at some point in life as senate resentencing bills were debated in California. Nellis’ (2012) seminal report on juvenile lifers confirms that while navigating violence in prison is certainly a reality, juvenile lifers also shared caring about the prison environment and actively strove to exercise some control over their surroundings whether it was through ensuring cleanliness, developing relationships with their wardens and correctional officers, and abiding by the rules. Indeed, Nellis, 2012 found approximately 60% of juvenile lifers who had served 21-30 years did not have a disciplinary report in the last three years of their sentence.

While desistance does occur, research also suggests that violence in prison is real. For example, in a comprehensive study of letters received from people sentenced for life as youth, Cavanagh et al., 2023 found the experience of being incarcerated as an adolescent in an adult facility for a lifer’s sentence is marked by both witnessing and enduring violence, including sexual and physical violence, and the pressure to join gangs within prison to ensure precarious safety (a finding echoed by Abrams et al., 2020). Brydon, 2021 corroborates this pattern finding that her participants endured an adolescence learning to survive a “hostile environment” (p. 93) made harder by the daily power and control corrections officers and counselors exercised over their lives. Their lives were marked with changes in their prison locations which also made maintaining their familial relationships harder due to travel burdens, “stretches of solitary confinement...as long as eight years” (p. 95-96).

Juxtaposed with the reality of cyclical and dangerous violence in prison, research also documents how juvenile lifers build and maintain “a surrogate family behind the walls of prison” (Bennett et al., 2025, p. 187). Through semi-structured interviews with released juvenile lifers in Philadelphia, Bennett et al., 2025 detail the relational landscape of juvenile lifers which includes isolation and loss of family and loved ones on the outside. Having to respond both to the human and adolescent need for connection whilst navigating a context where the threat of violence is incredibly tangible, juvenile lifers also developed meaningful, strong and familial relationships with others similarly sentenced behind bars. Given the intense hopelessness of confronting a life in prison, extant research in this area does suggest an admirable and awe-striking pattern of lifers wanting to make their prison environments better, seeking hope, and consistently articulating the desire for intellectual, spiritual, vocational and educational programming (Abrams et al., 2024). This is particularly poignant given research from California that sheds light on how lifers’ lengthy sentences and limited opportunities for familial engagement in prison strained familial ties and meant they were absent from important familial moments like births, deaths, marriages etc. (Washington et al., 2022).

In addition to understanding desistance from violence and relationships within prison, research on juvenile lifers also suggests that educational programming and training opportunities for rehabilitative programs are generally limited, particularly once people completed the equivalent of a high school diploma (Nellis, 2012; Brydon, 2021). Recent research on released juvenile lifers in Michigan and Philadelphia highlights that JLWOP sentences typically include initial periods where educational programming is initially available to lifers but their lengthy sentences are subsequently reasons for increasingly limited opportunities for training and educational services (Brydon, 2021; Daftary-Kapur et al., 2022). In her study on the concerns of juvenile lifers from the 15 states with the highest numbers of people with such sentences, Taylor, 2023 found access to educational opportunities and training programs were limited and even withheld from lifers early on in their sentences due to the very low chance they would ever be released from prison. However, due to the changes in sentencing post *Miller* and *Montgomery* and the increase in possibility that most lifers may be released, prisons across the country have expanded programming access to lifers. Daftary-Kapur et al., 2022 report 53% of lifers in Pennsylvania were denied participation in programming due to their sentences. However, the changing landscape of sentencing post *Miller* and *Montgomery* meant that close to their release, more were being offered access to educational and vocational programming like construction, plumbing, CDL licensing and so on; albeit, such opportunities are not universally available. Notably, Taylor (2023) also found 37% of juvenile lifers across states strove to create meaningful self-improvement opportunities for themselves and engaging in self-study on topics like real estate, launching businesses, and mathematics. This finding is also echoed by Brydon, 2021 who reveals that her participants sought intellectual stimulation and shared stories about becoming “obsessed with reading...a natural curiosity for learning,” and engaging in discussions with their peers about “economic structure and politics” (p. 100).

## Reentry

Since 2012, there has been a 44% decrease in the population of incarcerated people serving JLWOP sentences (Rovner, 2023). As more juvenile lifers are expected to be released, research has focused on understanding their experiences with reentry. In her work on understanding the concerns incarcerated juvenile lifers have associated with reentry, Taylor (2024) surveyed 424 lifers across 15 states on their preparation and concerns for release. She found participants reported being concerned with adjusting to being free after having been incarcerated for decades, the impact their status as a felon would have on securing employment, navigating a new world and doing well on parole. Preparing for release entailed navigating security custody levels to qualify for programming was challenging for participants given the severity of their sentences. Taylor (2024) reports that 37% of her participants reported seeking self-improvement, 23.6% shared either having completed or being enrolled in college courses/programs, 20% in vocational/job training programs. The expectation of receiving familial support with reentry was high as 80.5% shared they expected strong familial support with reentry with 56% of participants reporting that they planned on living with their families upon release. Brydon (2021) confirmed this pattern of planning on familial support for housing was shared by 92.3% of her participants in Michigan, and 85.7% of her sample were employed once released from prison.

Research on lifers' reentry experiences in Philadelphia suggests that employment and housing were the most challenging aspects followed by connecting with family (Daftary-Kapur et al., 2022). Notably, this work reveals that released lifers in Philadelphia want to be a part of the workforce; 37% had secured employment prior to being released, and 88% started seeking employment immediately upon release. Their reentry challenges also included having to navigate the complexities of procuring state identification, catching up on technological advances, learning to access healthcare to deal with mental and physical health conditions, and figure out transportation in a world that looks very different from when they were incarcerated decades ago. Released lifers reported familial support, stable housing, and employment as the three most helpful factors for their reintegration into society even though 96% were on lifetime parole. Through interviews with released lifers in California, Washington et al., 2022 found that though familial support is instrumental, navigating these relationships after a lifetime of incarceration is "awkward," and required people to "start from scratch" once on the outside of prison walls (p. 212). Some of these challenges were related to participants wanting to be seen by their families as middle-aged adults who were much different from the adolescents sentenced to JLWOP, navigating parole-related restrictions on their freedom such as confinement to particular geographic areas, and building new relationships with romantic partners (1 participant shared he had never kissed a girl). Brydon (2021) confirms the difficulty released lifers in Michigan reported in establishing boundaries with their families, being viewed as someone who has more than a "prison mentality" (114), and in establishing vulnerability and intimacy in romantic relationships. Other challenges settling into society entailed learning to manage anxiety in large spaces like malls, sleeping in the quiet, establishing credit, and tolerating the delay in moving forward with procuring health insurance, a driver's license, and public assistance post their lengthy incarceration. Daftary-Kapur et al., 2022 also report that accessing healthcare and obtaining state identification were rated as challenging by 38% and 23%, respectively, of their sample.

Importantly, research from Pennsylvania—the state with the highest concentration of juvenile lifers—finds a 1.14% reconviction rate 20 months post release from prison (Daftary-Kapur & Zottoli, 2020). In a follow-up study on the same population in Pennsylvania, Sbeglia et al., 2024 found that of the 287 individuals released from prison for almost 5 years, 9.1% had been charged with new offenses; 42% these people were charged with minor infractions like traffic violations, and 5% of all people released were charged with a misdemeanor or a felony.

The limited but burgeoning research on the reentry experiences of lifers suggests that they are a population that evidences very low recidivism rates and seeks to thrive as best as possible given their circumstances. Even though there are deep psychological, financial, technological, educational and structural challenges to their reintegration into society, this is a group of people, across the country, who are able to rely on their families for support, are working and contributing to society, building new relationships, and learning to navigate the greatly changed face of society post their incarceration. As most of this population seeks resentencing relief and awaits release into society, it is important that society works to provide these folks with "psychological assistance, employment support, technology support, housing, transportation and material supports, and paperwork" (Brydon 2021, p. 120) both pre and post release (6 months at least on each side of the incarceration experience).

## METHODS

### Research Design

We employed a participatory, multi-method, exploratory design to understand the lived experiences of Public Act 15-84 beneficiaries (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). We prioritized qualitative components—conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews to generate rich, contextually grounded data. We further analyzed secondary, quantitative data from the Board of Pardons and Parole to situate individual narratives within broader patterns related to release, supervision, and system contact.

### Overview and Researcher Positionalities

Our work is grounded in the principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR), reflecting a deep commitment to social justice, shared knowledge production, and collective action against systems of oppression (Freire, 2003; Nylund, 2022; Rose et al., 2024; Singh et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2025). These principles shaped a collaborative and democratic research praxis which involved working with a beneficiary of Public Act 15-84 in the capacity of a co-researcher (4<sup>th</sup> author). Our research team brought together complementary forms of expertise: the first, second, and third authors, as university-based researchers, contributed experience in participatory methods and interview facilitation, while the fourth author offered critical insights from legislative advocacy and long-standing relationships with directly impacted communities. These combined strengths enabled us to carry out the work with both methodological rigor and deep community engagement.

### Interview Protocol Development

With the ample support of our co-researcher, we undertook a collaborative process to ensure our interview protocol focused on unique experiences of this population and sought to understand the complexity of their navigating the relationships between-systems (Seidman, 1988). For example, our co-researcher highlighted the need to understand beneficiaries' experiences of accessing resources within and outside of prison, such as housing and employment which are deeply connected to the relations housing systems have with the carceral system. Through this collaboration, we identified five key areas of inquiry: incarceration at a young age (e.g., “What was it like to know you would be incarcerated for a long time at such a young age?”); experiences with programs and services during incarceration (e.g., “What programs/services did you receive?”); experiences with the parole hearing process (e.g., “What was preparation for the hearing like?” and “What information about the hearing did you receive and from whom?”); re-entry experiences (e.g., “What was your access to housing, employment, health services, etc.?” and “What would you say were the most important factors that contributed to your success since release?”); and recommendations (e.g., “What changes do you recommend to the 15-84 process?”). We further refined our protocol by asking participants about gaps in our inquiry, which resulted in the addition of questions regarding chronic illnesses post-incarceration.

We conducted eleven interviews (three were virtual to accommodate participants' access to transportation) which typically lasted between 90–180 minutes. Participants were given a \$50 gift card for their participation in the interview. All research activities were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Connecticut.

## **Recruitment and Participants**

We used snowball sampling to recruit for the study which we launched in September 2023. Our first participant, ultimately our co-researcher, had previously worked with the first three-authors on a research project and volunteered to participate in this study as well (Singh et al., 2025). He was vital to the recruitment process and put us in contact with other beneficiaries of Public Act 15-84. His long-lasting relationships with other beneficiaries of Public Act 15-84 helped to create trust, buy-in, and access between potential participants and the research team. Such connections would have been practically impossible without his involvement. The principles that guided this collaboration—centered on respect, reciprocity, and shared ownership—were communicated to every participant during the interview process. This framing was often met with expressed appreciation and all potential participants we connected with shared their enthusiasm to contribute to the project's goals on understanding the connections between different systems—housing, employment, reentry services, and so on—and how they shaped people's experiences outside of prison.

Additional and equally vital support for recruitment came from the efforts of a public defender who worked directly with many beneficiaries across the state. Although many beneficiaries are in close contact with one another, recruiting participants for the project proved to be very challenging. One reason for this was due to some expressing a lack of interest in revisiting their deeply traumatic experiences with incarceration. Another reason may have been a lack of established trust between the researchers and the pool of potential participants. The first six months of data collection proved to be the most challenging, in some cases with several weeks passing between interviews and little communication from participants. From September 2023 to February 2024, we interviewed five participants, with most interviews completed by the end of September 2023.

To address barriers to recruitment, the research team discussed expanding outreach to various Department of Correction (DOC) parole offices across the state. An IRB amendment that included a recruitment flyer was submitted and approved in March 2024 to support these efforts. The flyer was digitally distributed to different DOC and Board of Pardons and Parole offices with contact information and other relevant details that could be passed along to potential participants. Despite efforts, no additional participant recruitment resulted from these actions. The remaining six participants for the project were all recruited and interviewed during a two-month period between June – August 2024. In many of these cases, participants reached out to one of the authors directly to express interest in the project, having heard about it from other beneficiaries in their networks. It is possible that more participants began to express interest in the project after hearing directly from other beneficiaries' experiences with the interview process and the project's goals. Participants expressed eagerness to contribute to the project because it

offered an opportunity to advocate for necessary changes in the criminal legal system and the PA 15-84 process—ultimately aiming to improve the experiences of others who are currently or formerly incarcerated.

A total of 11 individuals from across Connecticut participated in one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. All participants were beneficiaries of Public Act 15-84, released to parole from prison, and not living in any court-mandated housing. Five participants were still under parole supervision at the time of their interviews. Participants were aged 31–52 (M=42 years); had been incarcerated between 9–30 years (M=22 years); and were all Black and/or Hispanic. Eight participants were Black and the remaining three were Latino. The genders of participants are withheld to protect confidentiality, given the very limited number of women released under PA 15-84.

### **Data Analysis of the Interviews**

The first three authors led the data analysis process using thematic coding. We began with a deductive framework derived from the five key domains in the interview protocol: early incarceration experiences, access to programs and services while incarcerated, the parole hearing process, re-entry experiences, and participant recommendations. To ensure methodological rigor, we engaged in an iterative process that included writing analytic memos, refining a shared codebook, and creating data matrices to support theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Levitt et al., 2018). We developed the initial codebook through repeated engagement with transcripts and audio recordings, aligning codes with our predefined domains. We coded each transcript in Dedoose, with two researchers independently coding each interview. During weekly meetings, we reviewed coding decisions, resolved discrepancies, clarified code definitions, and updated the codebook as needed.

Once we reached codebook saturation, we conducted an additional round of review for all interviews to ensure consistent and comprehensive application of relevant codes. Following the completion of all transcript coding, each member of the analysis team wrote analytic memos to identify patterns across the five interview domains. We drafted memos that captured common themes in how participants described their experiences with incarceration, access to services, the parole hearing process, re-entry, and recommendations. The full research team reviewed and refined these memos collaboratively, checking for resonance, accuracy, and consistency across participants.

## QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

In this section, we first present findings from the analysis of our qualitative data. Our themes are presented in chronological order where we (i) detail beneficiaries' experiences with incarceration particularly as young people sentenced to JLWOP or de facto life, (ii) contextualize their experiences with programming and services while incarcerated, (iii) describe how the *Miller v. Alabama* Supreme Court ruling, the passing of PA 15-84 and the subsequent parole hearing process was experienced within prison walls, and lastly (iv) illustrate beneficiaries' experiences with reentry. As is evident, our findings mirror the aforementioned national research on the JLWOP population.

### Beneficiaries' Experiences of Incarceration

#### *Introduction*

In the first sub-section, we provide a brief description of how PA 15-84 beneficiaries describe in broad strokes their early familial and community life, prior to incarceration. Poverty, community disinvestment, and instability are the context that grounds their early lives. Next, we quickly describe how nearly all beneficiaries had previous experience with the juvenile legal system as a young person prior to their ultimate lengthy sentence. In the following sub-section, we describe beneficiaries' early pretrial experiences. Several were held pre-trial for extended periods of time, often in adult prisons, solitary confinement, or in chaotic and violent youth facilities. Succeeding that, we provide an in-depth analysis of the developmental and psychological harms beneficiaries experienced due to their lengthy sentence at a young age. They describe an array of experienced harms due to the misfit between their developmental stages of young adulthood and their environment; specifically they name being in an environment lacking crucial socioemotional developmental supports, particularly to process the scale of their punishment, and being surrounded by older adults.

Although their experiences with programming and services are thoroughly examined in a later section, we briefly describe early attempts to secure programming. All beneficiaries sought education or skill-building programs throughout their time incarcerated, but many were denied access. Their experiences with programming and services is detailed more extensively in a following section. We then turn attention to the pervasiveness of "turning-points" in beneficiaries' incarceration, whereby they describe some element of significant self-growth and transformation. Transformation was often spurred by introspection, spirituality, education, and peer/family bonds. Growth was facilitated in spite of DOC and punitive environs, rather than because of it. In light of the prevalence of this phenomenon, we detail the ways beneficiaries describe DOC often standing in the way of individuals' growth, such as limiting access to beneficial programming and care. Beneficiaries' description of care under DOC illustrates an environment marked by neglect, harm, and disinvestment. Lastly, we describe the centrality of relationships for beneficiaries; participants with consistent support expressed more stability and emotional resilience throughout their incarceration. Those without family support built surrogate families through mentors, educators, and peers.

### *Beneficiaries' Early Lives*

Participants overwhelmingly described childhoods marked by instability, deprivation, and lack of support—conditions that shaped their early encounters with the juvenile legal system. While individual experiences varied, clear patterns emerged: exposure to community violence, economic hardship, neglect by caregivers, and the absence of protective structures were common. These early conditions were not isolated misfortunes but reflections of deep structural vulnerability, as many participants came of age in communities marked by concentrated poverty and state abandonment, and ongoing trauma.

Exposure to trauma and violence at home was a recurring theme. Some witnessed extreme events with little or no emotional support. Frank described a family tragedy that left lasting disarray: “I witnessed a murder-suicide in my family... it was just chaos after that. Nothing was stable.” Elsewhere, he elaborated on the compounded instability he faced: “It was 2 weeks after my 17th birthday I was arrested and at that point in my life, everything was already chaotic for me. Both my parents were murder-suicide. I grew up in a drug-infested home in the projects.” His experience underscores how early trauma often converged with systemic neglect, resulting in cascading consequences.

Material deprivation also figured prominently. Many participants grew up in poverty and began engaging in street economies to meet basic needs. Daniel, who began cycling in and out of juvenile detention at age 12, explained that he started hustling to shoulder responsibilities: “My mother stopped giving me stuff at 13. She said, ‘You’re in the streets.’ So my sneakers and my clothes—I bought... I took that burden off her.” Robert, reflecting on broader patterns of economic marginalization, emphasized:

So most of our crimes that we committed in the hood or in urban environments are... because we don't have money, right? I was already coming from a social and an economic strapped situation. I come from one of nine and my mother raised us on welfare... My brothers and sisters are still fighting the same situations they were 30 years ago when I was home.

Emotional neglect and lack of positive adult figures were widely reported. Participants like Nathan and Remy described growing up without anyone consistently looking out for their wellbeing. As Nathan put it: “I never came across anything that would foster anything towards motivation, self-esteem, or any of the important ingredients that someone in that age group needs in order to probably get to some sort of a self-actualization.” In some cases, the absence of care was compounded by direct abuse. Remy was raised by an abusive grandmother, and early home life led to legal system involvement by age 14. Remy shared:

Both of my parents were addicts. And I was exposed to a lot of that as a child... My grandmother raised me. She was very strict... she was abusive, so I didn't have any real interactions with adults or any type of authority figure that was positive.

Neighborhood violence and fear of victimization also shaped early decisions. Several beneficiaries described environments where violence was constant and normalized. Brandon, who was incarcerated at 15, recalled the atmosphere in his city during that time: “That whole

week in New Haven, there was a murder every day... traumatized at all the events happening at once... I didn't want to be a casualty of such." Charles, who entered the system at 17, similarly framed his actions as survival-based responses to a hostile context: "I was selling drugs in the street... low-income, poverty... Society was a very hostile place." In another reflection, he emphasized the entwinement of incarceration and community life: "America and prison, they're intertwined, because there's so many prisoners in our communities and so many of our families that's either in or out." John described these structural harms bluntly: "You have horrible housing, horrible food, horrible schools, horrible pay, horrible wage labor... [you are] surrounded by death... people are impacted by so much trauma in their community."

These were not exceptional experiences, but rather part of a larger pattern. "We all have the same story," Robert explained:

Because we're all coming from dysfunction. We're all coming from urban environments. All of our crimes were like crimes with economic [elements], we did what we did so we can get by. So it's not like we came from prestigious families that had a lot of money and did well for themselves.

The vast majority of participants described childhoods defined by structural vulnerability. These accounts highlight how early experiences of trauma, poverty, and disconnection laid the groundwork for later system involvement.

### ***Early Involvement with the Juvenile Legal System***

Nearly all beneficiaries—10 out of 11 (91%)—had contact with the juvenile legal system before receiving their adult sentence. Early arrests, probation involvement, and juvenile detention were common, suggesting that legal system contact functioned less as a course correction and more as an extension of the adversity they already faced. Initial contact with the system often occurred at a young age, with several participants entering juvenile detention between ages 11 and 16. For example, Daniel began getting arrested around age 11 and was incarcerated for the first time at 12. He recalled: "I've been getting in trouble since I was eleven, so I've been going in and out of junior facilities since I was like, twelve." Brandon was first incarcerated at age 15 and described a sense of inevitability to his detention, having already witnessed family members go through the system: "I had a small inkling of what goes on in detention... I had another family member at a younger age [inside] for murder himself." Charles, who caught his adult case at age 17, noted that he had been in and out of juvenile detention several times beforehand. His familiarity with the system contributed to a sense of resignation and normalized incarceration as part of life: "I was incarcerated more than once... I even went to juvenile detention centers before my homicide case."

Nathan, Robert, David, and Thomas also described entering detention as minors, often multiple times. For some, this included placements in harsh or segregated environments, even prior to conviction. The cumulative nature of these early contacts mattered. Multiple beneficiaries were arrested repeatedly as youth, even when not always detained. Nathan, for example, reflected on getting "in trouble a lot" before his adult case but never receiving meaningful support or redirection. System contact, in these instances, did not provide intervention or care—it merely recorded and escalated the trajectory of perceived deviance. In several cases, the line between

juvenile and adult custody was blurred, with long pre-sentencing detention periods beginning in youth facilities and continuing into adult prisons without interruption. Brandon, for example, was incarcerated from age 15 and remained continuously detained until his adult sentencing: “At no point in time did I ever get out of incarceration. It started from detention in 1992 all the way until I got out. At no point was I released on bond or anything.”

This continuity underscores how early contact with the system often marked the beginning of long-term incarceration rather than serving as a diversionary mechanism. Rather than functioning as a deterrent or rehabilitative structure, juvenile legal system contact appeared to normalize carceral supervision and failed to provide the stability or resources participants needed.

### ***Pre-sentencing Detention***

Several (46%) beneficiaries described being held in extended pre-sentencing detention while awaiting trial for the harms that ultimately led to their long-term incarceration. Often, this period spanned months, or even years, and was marked by harsh or isolating conditions. In many cases, this involved placement in adult prisons or punitive youth facilities that exacerbated existing trauma.

Remy, who entered the system at 14, remained detained for four years pre-sentencing, a strategy advised by Remy’s lawyer as part of a legal defense. While framed as strategic, this prolonged incarceration during formative years came with significant emotional and developmental costs. David was also held in pre-sentencing detention for an extended period: three years on 22-hour lockdown, due to suspected gang involvement. This level of isolation suggests that even before conviction, beneficiaries were subjected to the full punitive weight of the system.

Conditions of extreme confinement and violence during pre-sentencing surfaced in multiple accounts. Frank, and a few others, described early time in Manson Youth Institution (MYI) as terrifying and traumatic, particularly as a young person without prior incarceration experience. Charles recalled being placed in segregation immediately upon arrest, without explanation or access to support, for approximately two weeks: “I sat in segregation for maybe about two weeks... it was like being sentenced twice. I felt like I died that day.” Even though Charles’s time in segregation was comparatively shorter than other participants, it occurred at a crucial psychological juncture and contributed to feelings of disorientation, fear, and isolation. Lawrence, who entered MYI at age 16, reported being overwhelmed by the violence and chaos of the facility: “I had no frame of reference for what was going on. Everything was loud and violent... it was just survival.”

For many, pre-sentencing detention mirrored the harshest aspects of post-conviction incarceration, offering few opportunities for stabilization. Participants described these early carceral experiences not as liminal waiting periods, but as psychologically and emotionally decisive moments that shaped how they would navigate prison life going forward.

### ***Developmental Harms and Psychological Survival***

For our participants, incarceration during adolescence or early adulthood disrupted critical stages of identity formation, emotional development, and social learning. Their reflections point to the

profound psychological toll of serving decades-long sentences beginning in youth, particularly within environments that offered little support and constant threat.

Beneficiaries tended to react to their long sentences—often received in adolescence or early adulthood—with shock, denial, or confusion. Many struggled to mentally process the scale of punishment, especially given their developmental stage at the time. This psychological disorientation shaped how they adapted to incarceration in the years that followed. A number of participants described being unable to grasp the toll of their sentence. Brandon, sentenced to 50 years at 18, reflected, “You don’t believe you ever coming home... you have to just allow that to settle in your head... when they give [your sentence], it’s just literally to mentally break you down.” Daniel similarly recalled calculating the years of his sentence in disbelief: “I’d be 67 when I got out. My grandmother wasn’t even 67 yet. So [life] was over.” Nathan also described an inability to fully comprehend his sentence, reflecting that at the time, he “didn’t understand how long it actually was,” and it wasn’t until years later that the emotional weight of his sentence began to settle in. Remy, who entered the system at 14, struggled with the abstract nature of a decades-long sentence as a teenager: “I didn’t understand what it meant to do that much time. I just knew I wasn’t going home for a very long time.”

For many, the inability to fully comprehend their sentence was accompanied by deep emotional turmoil. Remy recalled, “Obviously, there’s times when you feel like, I’m never going to get out of here and you go into a depression and stuff like that, but I just could not come to terms with the fact that this is what my life is going to be forever.” Robert echoed that early disorientation, saying, “I was trying to escape the reality of it all.” John described how the emotional weight could become incapacitating: “Depression can hit you and flat lay you out with no repercussions. And so you don’t know how to get through that or deal through repercussions.”

For some, this emotional strain was intensified by the unresolved trauma surrounding the act that led to incarceration. Charles described the layered psychological burden of being a young person responsible for serious harm: “My experience going in, being age 17, having that type of crime... somebody losing their life, that’s a whole ‘nother level of anxiety, [being] scared, trauma, everything.”

This initial incomprehension—common across beneficiaries—underscored how young people were emotionally and cognitively ill-prepared to grasp the long-term consequences of their sentence. Without the emotional, educational, or developmental tools to make sense of their circumstances, many were left to navigate overwhelming punishment in isolation—an experience made more disorienting and harmful by the very conditions of their incarceration.

Frank vividly described the compounding effects of being young, unprepared, and unsupported in a system that offered no tools for reflection, healing, rehabilitation or growth:

I’m destined to come back to prison because of what you’re doing. You’re not giving me the schedule, you’re not teaching me anything. I’m hurting. I’m not dealing with the pain that I’m feeling. I’m not able to even understand it because I don’t have an education, because I don’t have experience, because I’m not an adult... I can’t figure out why I’m

being treated this way... My body was hurting me because my mind just couldn't take it... I think I was at my breaking point.

He later explained the breaking point more explicitly:

I started thinking about like, I gotta find a way out. I have to find a way out...the only thing I could think of was suicide, like I have to get out of here. I can't do this. My body was just hurting, I could feel these sharp pains, I couldn't eat, but I had to function because people were watching. So it's like... you don't really get to grieve your own life...you just have to go through it.”

Frank's reflection illustrates how the absence of developmental support, coupled with emotional neglect and institutional deprivation, left him unable to process his pain. Charles extended this theme, describing how incarceration forces people to confront deep pain, shame, and remorse—often without the emotional tools or support to process those feelings:

One thing you go through... is self-reflection. How did I get here? Do I deserve to be here?... People are ashamed of what they've done and it's people who are hurting and going through different things because of what they've done... Prison's a place that crushes spirits... people can have the best support, girlfriends, wives, mothers, sisters, and still the time can be too much for them and they collapse under the pressure.

Nathan reinforced the long and painful trajectory of this emotional struggle, explaining that even after years, chaos remained the emotional baseline: “It gets slightly better over time, but spiritually, physically, emotionally—[it's] still chaos.” He also noted how the adult men around him were “not the best example in terms of growth,” making it difficult to find aspirational models or developmental guidance.

Once incarcerated, participants consistently described prison as an environment that demanded emotional control and constant psychological adaptation. To survive, many quickly learned to suppress vulnerability, detach emotionally, or develop hardened personas. Robert described his entry into prison as “a culture shock” and being forced to “grow up overnight.” These were not one-time decisions, but ongoing strategies forged under chronic threat and surveillance. John described the pressure to mature quickly under threat: “I just matured faster because my environment demanded that I mature faster. I was surrounded by adult men who, if they wanted it, every day would have me defending my life.” These forced adaptations reflected the high-stakes learning curve many experienced early on in their incarceration.

A number of beneficiaries spoke directly about emotional numbing as an early survival tactic. Nathan shared, “I just shut down emotionally. That was the only way to not fall apart.” Frank similarly described needing to shut off feelings entirely during his first years inside: “If I let myself feel everything, I wouldn't have made it. So I just stopped feeling.” Robert reflected on how emotional control was necessary for safety: “You learn quick not to show emotion... People are looking for weakness, and I wasn't gonna be someone's target.”

Robert's comment underscores how prison operates through a logic of domination, reinforcing roles of predator and prey as mechanisms of control. This dynamic pushed many young people to perform versions of themselves that masked pain and signaled invulnerability. John explained, "I became who I needed to be to not be messed with. I wasn't that person before prison, but it's who I had to be inside." One participant explained that "They already didn't take me seriously. So I made sure they'd be scared to mess with me." Robert elaborated further: "You're taught to wear the mask and to make sure that the mask never falls off. So that's what I did." Eventually, even Nathan, who had once emotionally shut down, developed "a reputation for a person you don't really want to mess with."

Some participants contextualized their hardened behavior within the violence of their pre-incarceration environments. For them, prison was less a rupture than a continuation. John observed, "We come from a community where it's one solid threat. So, it's not a shift in mentality." Charles similarly explained, "my community was very hostile growing up. Very violent. Being in prison was similar... I was already in a hostile environment in society, so being in a hostile environment in prison, I was used to it already." Robert concluded, "the streets are a predatory environment already and going into prison is a predatory environment."

Other beneficiaries leaned toward self-isolation as a means of defense. Lawrence described withdrawal as an intentional shield: "I stopped talking to people, even my family. That way no one could use anything against me." Thomas explained, "I just stayed to myself. I didn't want to give anyone a reason to come at me." These strategies—emotional suppression, hardening, isolation—were all attempts to maintain psychological integrity in a context that offered no scaffolding for growth as a young person. While the form varied, the need to construct a defensive self was universal.

Charles, reflecting on his early months in prison, described the constant tension between detachment and collapse as walking a thin line: "That thin line was either I'm just going to give up and fall into the abyss... or I'm going to do everything I can to make myself better and figure it out." Similarly, Brandon and Nathan used the metaphor of "feeding the right wolf" or "feeding the right dog" to articulate the internal struggle between destruction and self-discipline: "You can do everything nasty and wicked possible, or you can build a day up with something productive." As John explained, "I just matured faster because my environment demanded that I mature faster. I was surrounded by adult men who, if they wanted it, every day would have me defending my life."

In this way, beneficiaries consistently characterized prison as a psychological battleground—one where survival required ongoing mental and emotional negotiation. Long-term incarceration during youth derailed normative developmental trajectories. Beneficiaries' psychological survival hinged on complex internal negotiations—between despair and discipline, vulnerability and self-protection. While coping strategies varied, all reflected the demands of a carceral environment fundamentally ill-suited to human development and especially harmful to young people.

### ***Program and Education Access***

Although beneficiaries' experiences with programming and services are explored in greater depth in a later section, their early efforts to access educational and skill-building opportunities offer critical insight into how ambition and self-determination often collided with systemic exclusion. Across the board, participants expressed a desire to engage in meaningful learning or job-readiness programming. Yet many were repeatedly denied access—most commonly due to the length of their sentence.

Frank recalled being excluded from virtually every rehabilitative or educational program early on: “I wanted to take classes, anything really. But they looked at my time and said no. If you’re not going home soon, you don’t get anything.” This exclusion wasn’t incidental—it reflected a broader logic within correctional systems that deprioritizes those with long sentences. Robert captured this sentiment bluntly: “They only helped the people they knew were going home. If you had a long sentence, you were invisible.” Remy faced similar denial—despite actively seeking opportunities to grow: “I applied to every program I could find, and every time it was the same: ‘You don’t qualify.’ I started to think it didn’t matter how much I wanted to change.”

Denied formal access, many participants carved alternative paths. Several became autodidacts, teaching themselves legal research, vocational skills, or literature with whatever materials were available. John described this self-guided pursuit of knowledge as both a coping strategy and a form of resistance to being neglected: “I couldn’t get into their programs, so I created my own. I read every book I could get my hands on. I taught myself how to think differently.”

Robert and David also turned to self-education as a lifeline. Robert, once a gang leader, transformed into a legal advocate through years of personal study and observation. David immersed himself in reading and legal writing, often supporting others with their appeals and grievances. In addition to self-education, many became mentors and facilitators—helping others learn even when they were barred from formal classrooms themselves. Daniel began tutoring younger men in the law library and saw this work as a moral obligation: “I challenged my sons to be better than me. So I had to live up to that. I had to be the person I wanted them to see.”

Nathan, Remy, and Lawrence similarly described informal teaching roles as one of the only meaningful ways to contribute and stay mentally engaged in the face of program exclusion. Lawrence, who eventually became a group facilitator, explained: “They wouldn’t let me in school, but I could still show up for the guys around me. That was how I kept my head straight.” Over time, some beneficiaries earned college credits, despite the barriers they faced. Frank, John, Thomas, and Remy each pursued higher education through scattered partnerships and correspondence programs. Still, access was never guaranteed and always precarious. Such experiences point to structural barriers, including, sentence length, discretionary rules, and opaque DOC priorities. Even when programs existed, access was rationed and politicized. Nonetheless, beneficiaries spoke to the importance of specific programming for their development and internal change. These themes, among others, are explored more thoroughly in a later section.

### *Carceral Harm and Neglect*

Beneficiaries described the numerous ways in which DOC actively prevented self-growth—this includes limiting access to beneficial programming, inadequate medical care and health conditions, and the creation of an environment of spiritual, psychological, and physical neglect.

Beneficiaries were universally barred from programming – both in an informal and formal capacity. Remy concisely described the issue as such: “If you have your GED and you have a significant sentence then the doors close. They're not gonna waste time on training for a vocational class. You can't utilize the training. My initial sentence was 50 years.” Remy continues by summarizing the sentiment by DOC as, “we're not gonna waste our time giving you a vocational course [because] you're not gonna go be a CNA or cosmetologist, or any of those things because the licenses expire in a certain amount of time.” Remy continued: “The only college courses between 18-25 that you can enroll in are federally granted and you can't have more than 5 years.” Remy concluded this point by highlighting the underlying issue, “because what are you gonna do with the education? So I didn't do anything, I didn't go to school for years of my bid.”

Nathan shared a similar understanding in his interview, “Because I had a lengthy sentence, it was very difficult to get in any program. I wasn't a priority. Rather the people who are closer to return to society, they're the ones who have that opportunity.” Nathan continued describing his experience by explaining:

The problem holding me back was my sentence. You gotta get to the guys who are going home in order. I get it when that's the only thing possible, but it's such a disservice to say, ‘Well, let's just wait right now. He has been here since he was 17. He's going through these young ages.’ Now we know that the brain is still developing. So, if you didn't want to offer me any of these type of opportunities until I'm 28 or 30... even at 30 years old, I was going to be 22 years away from home. It just doesn't make no sense, and that's probably the biggest problem.

Thomas echoed this issue, “I did not have access to any programs at Cheshire because the priority was people who were going to be out into community before me and I was sentenced for 29 years.” Here, beneficiaries universally describe logics of program exclusion that rely on priority for who will return from prison soonest. Of course, considering the administration of programming when resources are scarce across DOC is necessary. However, this systematic process described across participants has also resulted in years at a time of beneficiaries having deeply limited avenues for meaningful education and programming, essentially creating a warehousing effect.

Robert described in detail how this policy systematically excluded individuals with life sentences from useful programming, a dynamic that undermined both personal growth and parole readiness. His experience with the Department of Correction's Offender Accountability Plan (OAP) exemplifies this form of institutional disregard:

When the OAP came out... each inmate in the DOC had to sign it, and because I had life or I was considered a lifer at this time, I wasn't required to sign the OAP plan because I

wasn't gonna get an offender accountability plan, right? I was considered not to even think about getting on a waiting list for any programs... when I had to sign mine, the counselor just put lifer... It's so many people that don't get [programming], it's systemic. It's still going on to this day. It hasn't changed.

This categorical exclusion often set incarcerated people up for failure during parole review. Robert emphasized the structural contradiction in how parole boards assess "rehabilitation" by relying on access to programming that is withheld:

Our recidivism rate is the way it is because the individuals that need the programming can't get the programming. And then there's a thing when you go before the board and they ask you like, well, what program have you done? And you have to explain to them that you can't get programs from a service that they already should know that you can't get programs from. So why even bother to ask me what I've done if you notice services aren't available to me until I reach a certain point of my incarceration?

When asked whether the Board of Pardons and Paroles (BOPP) was aware of these barriers, Robert suggested that they are aware of these issues and still continue to operate from punitive assumptions about incarcerated people. Individuals are then blamed for their perceived lack of initiative, while the structural failures of the DOC are ignored. He continued:

I'm pretty sure they heard it so many times, but in their mind, they're coming from a mindset of people... 'oh you're trying to get over on the system. You just sat in prison all day and decided you weren't gonna do anything. So we're gonna tell you to come back in two years. We're gonna tell you to come back in three years, and now we're gonna mandate that you do these programs before you come back.' So now you've set somebody's life back from being with their family, becoming a tax-paying citizen, because they didn't meet the standards that you guys failed to provide for them, right? The only thing that you were required to do going into prison, pre-1584 was if you're under 21, you had to go to school. Once you become 21, they don't care what you do in prison. You can do everything under the sun in prison, but get help, if you're not within that range of coming home.

Robert's testimony illustrates the compounding nature of exclusion: those perceived as less deserving are denied access to programming, then punished for the absence of evidence of change. As a result, those most excluded from support are made to bear the consequences of the system's own limitations. Beneficiaries consequently internalized these experiences as being told by DOC they were of little value and could not demonstrate growth and development. This sense of institutional disregard was not abstract—it was conveyed through explicit denials that reinforced the message that transformation was neither expected nor supported. Frank described this internalization in vivid detail:

I got barred from programs. In the beginning, I was able to take a couple of programs. They stopped me because they said, basically, you're not going home. Basically you have a large sentence and when you get closer like, 5 years or under, we'll put you on some programs. I was like, that's 35 years from now, I don't know how that's going to work. So

they stopped me from that. I actually kept the request that the Deputy Warden signed and notarized. I still have it today because it was like telling me that basically you're just going to die here. Don't worry about anything positive, don't worry about bettering yourself, just sit here and wait until your day comes. That's it.

Just as beneficiaries were denied opportunities for growth, some also described being denied basic care—especially in segregated confinement or under conditions of extended incarceration. The same institutional logic that devalued their potential for rehabilitation often extended to the neglect of their physical and mental health needs. The denial of hygiene supplies and medical attention in solitary confinement often led to painful and degrading consequences. Remy recalled an experience:

They wouldn't give me toothpaste. I was brushing my teeth with the same soap that I was washing my body... I had blisters on my gums. One of the nurses came in and was like, what is wrong with your mouth? They haven't given me toothpaste in over a month. ... when I washed my hair that first day [out of segregation], the water was black [because] I hadn't washed my hair in 2 months. You don't get anything in here. It's really bad... the conditions in there were horrible.

Beyond isolated incidents, others reflected on the long-term deterioration of their bodies due to the poor quality of food and lack of preventive healthcare in prison. David commented:

My pancreas doesn't produce enough enzyme now. Sitting in jail for so long messes you up. You don't eat right, just food with starch and sugar. So having these health issues now, even though I worked out and different things of that nature, it doesn't surprise me if I'm honest with you.

Concerns also extended to environmental conditions within the prison itself. Brandon offered a sobering reflection on the lasting effects of toxic exposure:

The land was bad, so it made water bad. You can't fix the problem. How do you get something out the soil? You don't. It used to be wetlands. Wet lands suck up everything and anything. If you know anything about a little bit of topography and construction, you know that you can't get that out of the freaking land. We're no longer gonna use a well, but you've already affected decades of people that came through. I'm just praying that whatever it is don't run me down too soon... you might've got put in better conditions but we still [got] messed up. Whatever has already happened to them, their condition can only get worse, not better.

These accounts reveal a system not only marked by neglect, but one that routinely exposed people to acute and accumulated circumstances of harm, enabling medical deterioration. Taken together, participants' reflections illustrate how the DOC created not only conditions of material and medical deprivation, but an environment in which people's spiritual and psychological well-being were systematically eroded. Brandon captured this contradiction sharply when reflecting on the disconnect between DOC's stated values and the reality of life inside:

What is that they got on the wall [of the prison]? Their mission statement. They don't do none of that. It's a waste reading that mission statement on the wall, cause they ain't doing none of that.... it's insane, we should pull that off the wall because they don't do none of that.

Rather than being met with care or support, beneficiaries often found themselves spiritually isolated and deprived of meaningful relationships and human connection. Frank described the compounded pain of being denied access to family and peers who might have helped him reorient his life:

Had I had more access to these people, that could have been different. I could have changed my life years ago. Inside of prison, they denied me not only access to my family and not only access to anything that can help me, but they denied the access to the people that could have been my Christ, the people that are going through the same thing, that could [have] helped guide me out of this way of thinking earlier on.

Others described the psychological toll of incarceration as something cumulative and corrosive—a slow unraveling of one's sense of self. Charles noted, "I had to do the work myself, and I'm not saying it's a place where you can go and become this better person, because it's not. It's the opposite, it's the place where you go and lose yourself." Referencing his metaphor of prison as a thin line, which he had brought up before, he continued:

If you can, you can walk that thin line and sometimes it's luck, sometimes it's who you run into. 'Cause one bad trip, one bad incident can sometimes send you over to no man's land, or a point of no return. It's a lot of people that come home, they're let go, but mentally they're not there no more.

These reflections underscore that the harm of incarceration is not confined to physical deprivation. It is embedded in an institutional culture that withholds care, isolates people from sources of healing and accountability, and leaves beneficiaries who return home to grapple with deep spiritual and emotional wounds.

### ***Turning Points and Transformation***

As we detail previously, beneficiaries described their own and others' experiences being crushed by incarceration as a norm. During their interviews, they however described periods of profound internal transformation. These crucial turning points were not sparked by DOC programming or formal rehabilitative structures, but rather by long processes of reckoning, often under pressure. Such developments emerged through disciplined reflection, spiritual inquiry, personal study, and relational reorientation—typically in spite of, not because of, the prison environment so piecing them apart is challenging. More so, these transformative elements were rarely siloed and often happened in relation to one another. In recounting their experiences, beneficiaries do not romanticize their pains of incarceration into inevitable self-improvement. They instead detail how their resistance to the psychological flattening of incarceration was ongoing and intentional, and necessary to reconstitute themselves – whether they remained inside or by some grace were to be released prior to the end of their formal sentence.

Participants frequently framed transformation as a shift in how they managed their emotions—particularly fear, rage, and vulnerability. As previously detailed, many described learning to mask emotion as a strategy for survival. Over time, however, some began to interrogate that posture and its effects. For many, the idea of growth did not emerge immediately. Nathan recounted a long arc from confusion to agency: “As I grew, the only thing that mattered to me is how I conducted myself. And then you just learn how to just still live life according to your standard and not [how] everybody else is doing it.” Charles echoed a similar sentiment: “I had to really be and stand on who I was. I did not want to go home mentally broken or spiritually broken—it defeats the purpose for me.” This reorientation toward internal accountability—distinct from external control—surfaced across accounts.

Often, either formal or informal intellectual work—reading, writing, and studying—was key to these internal changes. Beneficiaries described these educational experiences not as just academic, but also as psychological. Such spaces – led by peers or in the context of specific university classes-- served as a scaffold for new ways of seeing oneself and the world. Frank described this change:

I pushed so hard that it changed who I was completely, changed me completely... how I spoke, how I operated on the everyday basis, how I interacted with people. I was able to think clearly about what's going on and every step of the way, like, it just helped me think so clearly and make sense of things that I was able to move around situations seamlessly without any confrontation, without any argument, I was just able to move around... It's just amazing to see, like, oh, all of that that I've done does matter, it does change things for you, it changes your perspective.

Frank highlights how such changes brought about new psychological and relational tools to address conflicts. These shifts were sustained by peer networks, as Frank credited those around him. He continued, “They made me want to be better. Whether they knew it or not, they made me want to be better because I watched them.”

These relationships—family, inside mentors, even strangers—became part of beneficiaries’ transformative arc. Remy spoke about the weight of being believed in by new outside peers: “These are people who are investing in me and they don’t even know me... I really didn’t want to disappoint them.” Robert captured a similar rebalancing, but in regard to his family. Narrating a period of time in segregation for covering for a friend inside, he described:

It opened my eyes to the fact that I’m more concerned about people that I really don’t know versus the people that have been giving me love and support while I’m in here... I had to weigh out who deserves more of a return on their investment.

He continued explaining how this experience, along with the urging of his family, encouraged change:

it's just the fact when you're calling a loved one, it's like, we can't even see you because you was in seg. Or why haven't you called in a minute? Because you're in seg. Did y'all bother coming up here to see me? I was in seg. And either two things can happen with

that. Either you're gonna lie to your family or you're gonna tell the truth. I chose to tell the truth in my situations. And because of that truth, they're like, why are we doing what we're doing if this is the only thing you're gonna give us? At what point does it stop? And then you ask yourself those hard questions. Why am I, why do I continue to put them through that? I had my son six months after I first came in. And it's like, damn, is this what I want my son to continue to see all his life? Or do I want him to see who I am by nature versus who I've become by situations and the circumstances in my life? Through poverty, through trauma and all these other things, you know what I'm saying? And I said, I want to I want to make a change. I just want something different.

Daniel cited his family—and his sons' questions in particular when visiting—for sparking his transformation:

As my sons was coming, they started asking questions, and because I don't lie no more, I had to tell them what happened. So in order for me to tell them what happened and to tell them to be better than me, I had to change my way.

Even something as simple as wanting to hug a mother inspired change, as Thomas described:

What really made me focus more on school, after I got my GED, they did graduation. My mom came up, they allowed me to hug her, sit next to me for a while, because you don't get those type of interactions with your family unless you have contact visits. The only thing you get is a hug in the beginning and hug when you leave. You can't hold hands, one another. So having that visit, that graduation, that was the best thing. So, once I got to touch my mom, now I was really focused on school and trying to stay out of trouble so I can get this contact again.

Thomas's narrative highlights the interconnectedness between education, relationships, and internal accountability. This symbiotic relationship was echoed by other beneficiaries. Brandon, for example, described a similar phenomenon experienced in the context of an anger management course:

I was doing anger management, and that was forcing me to talk more. It wasn't just about yourself, it's forcing you to interact with people you don't know. It's forcing you to think of different ways to resolve different situations, different ways for you to help somebody else, resolve different mindsets and situations.

Frank also traced his evolution from lacking, to developing, a coherent sense of self—with learning and meaningful peer relationships as his anchors:

I didn't know who I was as a person, what I liked. I didn't know anything. That took years, it took surrounding myself with people who went on those spiritual journeys or journey to academia, it just took me years surrounding myself with these type of people for me to learn.

This reframing of relational priorities often reshaped how participants understood their roles—as sons, fathers, mentors, and community members. But the transformation was not solely relational. It unfolded through the intertwined influence of peer and familial relationships, as well as formal and informal spaces of education. Growth most commonly did not arise from imposed “correction,” but through processes of self-reflection, emotional risk, intellectual discipline, and time. Participants did not describe their change as rehabilitation in the state’s terms. Rather, they framed it as a reconstitution of self—against the grain of the prison environment and the masks they once donned in need to survive.

### ***Support Systems***

Throughout the interviews, participants emphasized the sustaining power of relationships during incarceration. Whether through family, peers, educators, or surrogate networks formed over time, those with consistent relational support described greater emotional stability and a clearer sense of purpose. For many, relationships were both a source of motivation and essential to survival. Several participants described family as a lifeline—providing emotional, psychological, and at times material support across the span of their incarceration. David reflected:

I always stayed in contact my family members and close friends, they was always in contact. I was fortunate to have that. It means the world to you when you go into a situation like that, people that really love you, you go through stuff like that, people that really do love you, they're the ones that's gonna be around, at any time in life when you go through hardship and tough situations, you know, people show you their true colors and how they feel about you. I was fortunate to have family and friends that really stuck around with me here.

When later asked what kept him going during his lengthy sentence, David responded simply, “Just trying to get back to my family, that's about it. Not wanting to be in [prison] for the rest of my life.” Nathan similarly described the steady presence of his family as foundational to his survival and sense of self:

My family who was always by my side. Every single week they came to see me for 23 years. Unless there was an institutional locked down, I saw my family every week. Mostly my mom and my son, and obviously my siblings, whenever they can come up, but my mother always made sure that somebody came up. She kept my roles of being a human being alive when all that is taken away from you as soon as you walked through those prison doors. [My roles as a] brother, being a son, being a father, those central roles of human behavior human... responsibility. I would not be where I am, no question [without them]... I don't even want to explore that possibility. There's no question the connection with family matters.

Reflecting on his time in segregation, Nathan emphasized how the strength of his family ties extended beyond prison walls: “They were in seg all too.” The emotional weight of his incarceration became a collective burden, which underscores just how vital those connections were to his survival and sense of self. Other participants described striving to maintain contact even under restrictive conditions. The centrality of filial relationships completely reoriented some beneficiaries’ priorities. As Thomas stated:

My mom used to come up on a regular, but I didn't have contact [visits] at that time. I had to work towards to get those... I was behind the glass for a while. So, once I got to touch my mom, now I was really focused on school and trying to stay out of trouble so I can get this contact again.

This was similarly expressed by Robert, who talked about, “my family and my friends and my loved ones outside are working hard and supporting me with what they can send me, big or little.” Lawrence also described the importance of his grandparents, “I had my grandfather on my mom's side and my grandmother on my dad's side. So those two [were my support network]. I basically lost contact with everybody else.”

Even beneficiaries who longed for connection were often thwarted by poverty and policies that made relationships cost-prohibitive. This was only raised by Frank, who explained:

This is a problem for most of us in the city, we don't have money. Phone calls were \$5 for 15 minutes. Most of my family moved to Florida, so it costs more than that. You might even pay \$15 to talk to somebody for 15 minutes in Florida. Family didn't have money like that. You need to pay for envelopes. They can't visit. There wasn't Skype or FaceTime or any of that stuff, no tablets. None of that existed. So I sat in a cell for years without any mail or very few letters here and there, and I couldn't use the phone. And I had to go through that. Everything that I once knew was gone. The system charged you to have a relationship with your family. And I'm in jail for robbery. What the hell makes you think that I have money to afford that? You should know I don't have that. I don't have anything. My parents are dead. I have nothing. I have my sisters, my brothers who are all young. Nobody's an adult here with money. Everybody's out here, trying to figure it out and if you didn't have any money, how are you going to contact your family.

This framing reveals that emotional isolation was not just a byproduct of incarceration, but was partly produced by policies that monetized human connection. Consequently, the burden of maintaining relationships was placed on those economically disenfranchised.

While some beneficiaries were able to connect with family and find motivation through those bonds, others—cut off from familial ties—sought out connection in different forms. For them, surrogate relationships with mentors, advocates, or peers became just as vital in navigating incarceration and reclaiming a sense of purpose. For those with strained or absent family ties, support often came from unexpected places. Remy described building a surrogate family through writing, legal advocacy, and prison programming:

I received a letter from a lady that ended up reading [my writing]... she was a school teacher, and she was using a piece of my writing in one of her classes... We started writing [to each other] and we developed a relationship. At this point, she really is the mother that I never had. I think that just really helped, having that relationship with them and to have people in my life that chose to be there... they chose to be in my life when I really didn't have a strong connection with my family.

These surrogate figures—including members of a legal team, a former prison social worker, a pen-pal and her husband—each became anchors in an otherwise disconnected world.

Relationships with other incarcerated individuals also offered informal mentorship and aspirational models of growth. Frank described the subtle but powerful influence of others:

They made me want to be better. Whether they knew it or not, they made me want to be better because I watched them, I got to see what they were doing, and I just wondered like damn, I wonder if I can.

Such peer dynamics created a counter-environment to the institutional neglect and interpersonal violence participants otherwise experienced—one grounded in mutual support, encouragement, and influence. While inside networks were crucial for many beneficiaries, Lawrence uniquely described a coping strategy scaffolded around isolation. When asked about his support network inside, he said: “It was just really just me. You would have different cellmates, but they came so frequently you don't really get attached to them. But it was really just me. I didn't really have nobody in there.” His account underscored how, in the absence of meaningful connection, survival also required emotional detachment—offering momentary stability at the cost of deeper disconnection.

Educators emerged as another vital source of affirmation and care. As an example, two teachers were especially pivotal for Frank:

She taught me so much, she brought my level of writing just to a completely different level. I'm so thankful for that woman. And my math teacher. Those two right here were most influential for me. I love them like they were my family. They can never know what they did for me. They could never know.

John similarly expressed deep connection to a professor who not only supported his academic development but also advocated for him during parole: “I met some amazing professors. [My professor] is family to me... she also wrote this amazing character reference for my parole hearing.” John to this day remains in close contact with this professor.

Together, these narratives illustrate that relationships—whether with family, peers, mentors, or chosen surrogates—were essential to navigating incarceration and maintaining a sense of self. For many, these bonds provided emotional grounding, motivation for growth, and affirmation of their humanity in a system designed to erode it. Where family ties were unavailable, participants forged connection through educators, legal advocates, and peers, building alternative networks of care. At the same time, others faced profound isolation, either by choice or circumstance, often shaped by poverty, restrictive policies, or emotional self-protection. The presence or absence of meaningful relationships fundamentally shaped participants' experiences inside, revealing how survival often hinged not only on individual will, but on whether and how people were emotionally, materially, and spiritually supported by others.

### ***Conclusion***

We write this section to better call attention to the experiences of beneficiaries across the arc of incarceration—from their early efforts to make sense of long sentences as young people, to the development of coping and adaptive strategies for surviving within a hostile and dehumanizing environment, to moments of transformation or turning points later in their incarceration. These experiences unfolded within contexts marked by active neglect, psychological pressure, and profound emotional isolation.

While we do not assume that these experiences are unique to beneficiaries of PA 15-84, they are essential to understand. Doing so clarifies the structural and developmental conditions under which beneficiaries were either supported or stunted in their growth—conditions that shaped their capacity to engage meaningfully with programs, prepare for parole, and ultimately navigate reentry.

In this way, their experience of incarceration should not be viewed as separate or incidental to beneficiaries' later lives, but as deeply interwoven with how they come to understand themselves, build relationships, and envision a future beyond prison walls. More so, these experiences help illustrate the tangible ways beneficiaries were supported—or not—which indelibly impact their ability to secure release through PA 15-84. It is worth considering that these interviews reflect only the perspective of those granted release. What, then, have been the experiences of those denied? And what more might be learned from their perspectives? While their inclusion here is beyond the scope of this study, it remains a critical area for future analysis to better understand the full range of outcomes shaped by incarceration. The sections that follow take up this continuum by examining how their incarceration shaped beneficiaries' access to services, their preparation for 15-84 parole review, and their eventual return to community.

## **Beneficiaries' Experiences with Programming and Services**

### ***Education***

Participants had a variety of experiences with education while incarcerated, with differences seen in educational attainment, reasons for pursuing more educational courses, and in some cases, barriers to their pursuit of more education. All 11 participants received their GED while incarcerated, with time taken to complete it ranging from a few months to two years. One participant stated that after finishing their GED, they did not have another educational experience for the next eight years. While the specific reason for this was not mentioned, based on the experiences of other participants, it is likely that this was due to informal DOC policy of not offering educational courses to incarcerated people with sentences longer than five years. One participant highlighted this barrier by stating:

the problem, um which was holding me back was [my] sentence...it's such a disservice to say, well, let's just wait right now. He has been here since he was 17. He's going through...these young ages where now we know the science shows that the brain is still developing. It just doesn't make no sense and that, that's probably the biggest problem with having to incarcerate people.

Participants had several reasons for pursuing education beyond their GED, with many explicitly stating that they saw education as an avenue for self-improvement and personal growth. One participant highlighted this by saying, “Okay, well, I'm living in my incarceration. How can I best maximize growth every day? I would say primarily to me, honestly, and above all, [is] education. There’s no question about it, that growth has to come, but the genesis of it has to be education.” Another participant was motivated to pursue more educational opportunities after going through his GED graduation and being allowed to physically touch his mother. He said of this experience:

After I got my GED, they did graduation. My mom came up, they allowed me to hug her, sit next to me for a while, because you don't get those type of interactions with your family unless you have contact visits. The only thing you get is a hug in the beginning and hug when you leave. You can't hold hands, one another. So having that visit, that graduation, that was the best thing. So I'm thinking every graduation like this, so I started focusing more on school just 'cause of that.

Other participants shared that taking educational courses was a way to stay busy and get out of the cell, while also recognizing the benefits of gaining more knowledge. One participant highlighted this perspective by saying:

Like, you're sitting around doing nothing all the time and you've got all this downtime and you're just playing cards and all this other nonsense, so I just feel like going, it was a good thing to do...but learn also though. I mean, learn definitely, you want to take something, you want to learn too, hopefully that could be something you could potentially use in the field when you get out as far as when you try to find a job and stuff like that. Like I want to work with the youth or stuff like that so any of that type of knowledge for me was always beneficial.

Three participants earned their associate’s degree while incarcerated, with two of them earning it through Middlesex Community College. One participant, who was taking online courses through the Stratford Career Institute, could not afford to pay for their associate’s degree and instead received a diploma in psychology and social work. Another participant, who was not enrolled in a degree-bearing program, did not earn any degrees despite taking 22 different college courses. A second participant in a similar situation stated that the credits they earned while incarcerated “unofficially” amount to a degree in philosophy and English (unclear if that was an associate’s or a bachelor’s degree). Two additional participants who had been working toward their associate’s degree did not manage to complete it, though it was not clear why. Seven participants took courses from Wesleyan College at one point during their incarceration, which started offering philosophy and writing courses between 2005 – 2009 and expanded their program with the introduction of the Center for Prison Education in 2009. Other universities and colleges that were frequently named by participants include Quinnipiac and Yale.

Overall, every participant highlighted the importance of their educational journey during their incarceration and the transformational impact it had on their personal growth and future. Education provided participants with self-confidence, self-worth, and the motivation to be better. One participant attributed his successful parole hearing to his positive experiences with

education, which allowed him to feel prepared for the questioning and adequately articulate himself. He went on to describe how the professors he met during his incarceration helped him gain self-confidence:

[The professors] made me want to be smarter. So I had to put the work in. I had to start from zero. It took me a while. Got my GED. I signed up for Wesleyan. I didn't think I was going to make it in. I got in, um, I wasn't taking it serious at first. I just felt like I couldn't do it, but I didn't want to tell anybody and I was just trying to, like, wiggle my way through it just to look good. But I was being exposed slowly, but surely, I was being exposed, it was affecting me. The professors and the coordinators, and everybody was on my on my ass about it... not taking the work seriously, skipping class, I was being held accountable. I was on the brink of being kicked out. They were trying though to work with me. They'd seen something in me that I didn't see in myself.

### ***The Impact of Education on Interpersonal Interactions and Prison Culture***

Participants highlighted the profound impact education had on their ability to navigate interpersonal relationships differently—often referring to how this resulted in successfully avoiding conflicts and arguments—and to the overall prison culture. For some, this change started not through formal educational courses or programming, but by interacting with other incarcerated individuals who had dedicated their time to intellectually engaging activities, such as reading, political discussions, and sharing their knowledge with others. Frank described a group of such individuals and the impact they had on him:

Yeah, they were trying to do something that was positive and different from the block. Obviously it's not gonna be just embraced the way that I know that these guys had in mind, or even I had in mind, but I still participated. It was small and didn't grow and they didn't stop it, but these guys [were] trying to make a difference, and they did in my life. They made a difference in my life.

Thomas also described how a similar group of individuals impacted his perspective and motivated him to pursue more education:

Like my whole time, like, the beginning of my time was getting in trouble, playing basketball, basketball was everything. I mean, basketball is my stress reliever, my freedom inside of jail, so that's all I prioritized, but being around certain dudes like John and them who were going to school, was helping dudes get their GEDs and all that, after seeing that I was like, maybe I should do something else. Maybe I shouldn't give so much of my all into basketball? I mean, go to some schooling, get my GED, focus on my case.

Brandon further highlights how surrounding himself with people who value education and knowledge contributed to positive changes:

You're sitting there talking to certain people and you're like, I know people with photographic memories...He learning more than I'm learning...so this is where I'm getting a little, these are the people I'm around. I'm like, I gotta learn more, I gotta do more. It's like they said you're, you're measured by the companions you keep.

Robert, who did not receive any formal education beyond his GED while incarcerated, first came into his educational journey by discovering a passion for reading and using it as an escape from his incarceration. The more he read, the more he wanted to improve his literacy skills. One day, Robert spoke with one of his kitchen supervisors who emphasized the power that literacy has in prison:

And then I met one of my kitchen supervisors at the time, he had been written up by a guy, he pulled me to the side one day, he said, you know one thing people hate in this department. And I was like, what? He says that the fact that you guys can read and you guys can write. And he says especially if you can spell. And that resonated with me and I was like, you know what I gotta do? I need a dictionary...but I wanted the big Webster one. I wanted one with synonyms and antonyms and I wanted one that was gonna enhance my vocabulary. And once I started doing that, that took me to a place with what he said is, if you can read and you can write, that's the biggest threat. So I started challenging things in the institution because, one I wasn't doing anything wrong anymore, but I was gonna right all the wrongs that I saw that were affecting me. So it was nothing for me to put in grievances if the officers weren't letting me out on time or if the officers weren't doing what they were supposed to do in the unit... because everything is a code of ethics in there, you have to follow rules the same way you expect me to follow rules. You're gonna write me a disciplinary report? I'm challenging you to follow those rules that are written for you or I'm gonna write you up. And then it just spiraled to I started adjudicating law, and I started filing civil 1983s to correct what was being done to me.

These participants highlight a common experience of meeting other incarcerated individuals who emphasized the importance of education and the positive impacts it can have on someone's personal trajectory. Further, these incarcerated individuals, who were often seen as elders by participants, made it a point to share their knowledge and resources with others to support their goals with personal growth, their criminal cases, habeas corpuses, and other sentence modifications. These experiences often led to a "turning point" among several participants, which contributed to significant changes to their perspectives on their incarceration, past actions, and future goals. This turning point commonly resulted in more engagement with education—both formal and informal—and marked shifts in their interpersonal interactions and behaviors with other incarcerated individuals. Frank highlighted this impact:

[Education] changed who I was completely, changed me completely... how I spoke, how I operated on the everyday basis, how I interacted with people. I was able to think clearly about what's going on and every step of the way, like, it just helped me think so clearly and make sense of things that I was able to move around situations seamlessly without any confrontation, without any argument.

Nathan described his own journey with these behavioral changes by using the indigenous proverb of having two dogs inside of you, one that is good and one that is evil. He mentioned that while, sometimes, one dog is eating more than the other, he eventually made the decision to fully move away from the prison culture, regardless of the repercussions, which resulted in positive changes to the overall prison dynamic:

Once I made that decision, I just I was all in regardless of the, what I was going to get back. And I was surprised because there was a lot of people who were mad at me because I wasn't in the lifestyle the way they were, and then I got, eventually...a lot of genuine respect because I learned to navigate prison now with a, uh, a respectful demeanor. Um, sort of like a, you know an elder, even though I was still younger, but I was able to move in a way where people were now respecting me because of me, and not out of fear or what I did in terms of violence.

John, who went on to directly influence many other participants, also described a similar experience, “you know, I had guys who were, who really taught me just how to conduct myself to avoid a lot of issues.” For Lawrence, he learned how to navigate conflict without violence after taking a debate class that gave participants skills and tools for disagreements without using violence.

These examples uplift the role that both formal and informal educational experiences played in creating positive changes for individuals and the prison culture. In the cases of John and Robert, expanding their literacy skills contributed to self-growth, advocacy, and support for sentence modification, which they also shared with other incarcerated individuals. Over time, this drastic shift in their perspective and behavior led to four participants earning respect from others who started to view them as influential elders; at the core of this drastic and profound shift is education, and Nathan emphasizes the specific importance of education in prison:

You missed opportunity for the guys who are becoming men in there and then for the men who are becoming elders in there...And it comes to a point where now the mind is developed, where it's crystallized. So what are we supposed to do when, when you had an opportunity to teach them young but you felt like they weren't nowhere near close to being released [and were denied access to programs and educational opportunities]. So now they're older, and the only understanding that they have is the prison culture um, what do you expect? So we, uh, are we a country that corrects or are we a country that punishes, and that's obviously an ongoing issue with dialogue, with society.

### ***Programs and Services***

Participants engaged in myriad programs and services over the course of their incarceration, with every participant experiencing barriers to access at one point or another (expanded below). Similar to educational courses and opportunities, programs were seen as avenues for personal growth and as ways for participants to spend more time outside of their cells. The types of programs and services offered varied based on the carceral institution and the participant's security level, which often resulted in inconsistent access to programs and services.

Charles mentioned that he took every program he could to better himself, and he realized early in his incarceration that it was something that he needed to do:

for me, for myself, going into prison at 17 years old, that's how I was. I was dead. I was dead. I had my whole life that the system is about to do whatever with. I have no future, no diploma. I didn't know nothing. Barely could read or write, right? Didn't understand

nothing about the world I lived in. Was only here for 17 years. Knew nothing about myself. So that thin line was either, I'm just going to give up and just fall into the abyss, the nothingness and whatever, or I'm going to do everything I can to make myself better and figure it out.

Daniel, who was not interested in any programs or services during the first ten years of his incarceration, became motivated to take advantage of them after getting visits from his sons:

Yeah, so as my sons was coming, they started asking questions, and because I don't lie no more, that's a, something like this to tell myself, I had to tell them what happened. So in order for me to tell them what happened and to tell them to be better than me, I had to change my way, so that's what happened.

As participants had more opportunities to take programs and services, many started to see changes in their behavior and perspectives that paralleled those impacted by education. Brandon shared that:

You know, it wasn't just about yourself. It's, you know, it's forcing you to interact with people you don't know. It's forcing you to think of different ways to resolve different situations, different ways for you to help somebody else resolve different mindsets and situations.

Examples of programs that participants took include anger management, Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Alternative to Violence, anger management, sexual health, security risk group, domestic violence, and American Vet Society (Dog training for veterans coming home). Other programs include graphic design, dental lab assistant, autobody work, welding, home improvement, investing, cooking, peer support programs, the McDougal Barber Program, certified nurse assistant, the WORTH program, and a garden flower program, which was started by an incarcerated person.

### ***Barriers to Access***

Ten out of eleven participants experienced explicit barriers to accessing programs and services at some point in their incarceration. In most cases, this was due to their long prison sentences; some participants shared that priority was given to other incarcerated folks who were closer to their release date (usually around five years), while others shared they were denied access due to preferential treatment. While the eleventh participant did not recall experiencing barriers specifically due to their long sentence, they mentioned sometimes being put on long waitlists that resulted in him going several months up to a year without access to programs or services. Other participants also shared that programs and services had limited spaces and could not meet the demand and interest among the incarcerated population. Nathan highlighted the negative impact his long sentence had on access:

the problem, um which was holding me back was...[my] sentence. Yeah. Cause I get it. You gotta get to the guys who are going home in order that's just sitting here. I get it when that's the only thing possible, but it's a it's such a disservice to say, well, let's just wait right now. He has been here since he was 17. He's going through these ages, these

young ages where now we know the science shows that the brain is still developing. So, what if you didn't want to offer me any of these type of understandings and opportunities until the 28, 30. When even at 30 years old, I was going to be 22 years away from home. It just doesn't make no sense and that's probably the biggest problem with having to incarcerate people.

These barriers often resulted in participants going several months and sometimes many years without any meaningful programming or educational opportunities, which were also one of the few opportunities to spend time outside of the cell. After receiving his GED during the first nine months of his incarceration, John didn't have another educational opportunity for eight years, and Robert was unable to go to school for several years because of this policy. David underscores how the policy of barring incarcerated people with longer sentences is unfair:

If you had more than this time or that time you couldn't take these programs anymore. And it wasn't the program per se, it's just that the way DOC started doing it, DOC come up with rules, not the programs. There's a lot of them programs, they bring people who come from the outside and they volunteer to do these programs. So they don't have nothing to do with that stuff, they have nothing to do with that. I mean it's just policy, DOC just come up from out of nowhere, I guess. And it was not fair to people though because at the end of the day, no matter how much time you got, you don't know when you're gonna go home, you know what I'm saying? You got a hundred years today and then you go home tomorrow, so that's just literally how it works. So when they come up with them programs, it just doesn't seem fair. It's not fair at all.

Frank shared how denying him access to programs and services was a dehumanizing experience by saying, "it was like, telling me that basically you're just going to die here. Don't worry about anything positive, don't worry about bettering yourself, just sit here and wait until your day comes. That's it."

The lack of access to programs and services had further implications for the parole hearing process, which in part looks at the kinds of programs and services a person took over the course of their incarceration. Not having access to these programs and services, especially for extended periods of time, may negatively impact a person's chances of being granted parole. Robert described situations with other beneficiaries of Public Act 15-84 where members of their review board unfairly claimed that they had only started taking programs and services after federal laws changed (*Miller v. Alabama*, 2012) that might lead to their release, when in reality, they had always been barred:

it's not that, it's that we weren't getting programs, right? Like when they had changed the law where they had sent around all of these papers for program orientation and guys that had 50 years or more, they were saying "lifer." They were just writing lifer and telling you don't have to sign it because they knew that you weren't gonna get the program, right? And their intention was that you may die in prison before you're even eligible for programming...so it's like Robert, we'll see you in 45 years, we don't care how you make it through prison in 45 years, or you can be a tear man. You can be a hall worker. You can be a kitchen worker. But you can't do programs.

## Experiences with the 15-84 Parole Hearing Process

This section highlights the experiences participants had with the Public Act 15-84 parole hearing process. Participants discussed how prior to the passage of 15-84, information was shared among other incarcerated individuals about related Supreme Court (SCOTUS) rulings with implications for their sentence and possible release. The impact of these rulings, and the various ways in which participants engaged with them, are highlighted. The discussion of the 15-84 parole hearing process is broken down into the following sections: logistics of preparation for the hearing, experiences of the parole hearing process, and victim involvement at the hearing.

### *Related Supreme Court Rulings*

Prior to the passage of Public Act 15-84, six of our participants had heard about or were paying attention to various SCOTUS rulings with implications for individuals incarcerated as juveniles. These rulings included *Roper v. Simmons* (2005); *Graham v. Florida* (2010); *Miller v. Alabama* (2012); and *Montgomery v. Louisiana* (2016). Some of our participants—John, Nathan, and Robert—were part of a group of intellectuals who were actively following these SCOTUS rulings and developments and shared related information with other incarcerated individuals, including many of our participants. Participants often mentioned relying on these informal channels of communication for important judicial developments and shared that they never received such information from the Department of Correction or other carceral actors.

At least two participants started following these SCOTUS hearings as early as 2005, and in some cases knew about them before even reaching the SCOTUS. As members of this group of influential intellectuals, John, Nathan, and Robert were among the first of our participants to learn relevant information about the rulings. John, who had been following youth sentencing litigation early in his incarceration, pursued a habeas corpus based on unequal protection under the law following the major SCOTUS decisions. Nathan had become deeply engaged in reading developmental psychology literature that underpinned juvenile legal arguments and learned about the *Miller v. Alabama* decision prior to it reaching the SCOTUS. Robert was also following the *Miller v. Alabama* case prior to the 2012 decision and kept up with daily updates by watching television through a prison kitchen window. When it was officially passed, he learned about it from a cellmate who had seen the decision announcement on TV and shared that he was immediately elated and hopeful about it. As these cases started to reach the SCOTUS and eventually went into effect across the country, word about the decisions started to spread across the prison among incarcerated individuals, with John, Nathan, and Robert responsible for a significant portion of the dissemination of this information to our other participants (and likely other incarcerated individuals). Charles, who had built familiarity with legal professionals, also helped other incarcerated individuals with their legal processes during this time. Despite these SCOTUS decisions, participants had mixed feelings about the positive impact they might have on their sentences.

Thomas learned about the SCOTUS rulings directly from John, whom he described as a close friend and mentor. John would share related legal packets and updates with him throughout his incarceration, encouraging Thomas to read and learn about their impact on his incarceration. However, Thomas ignored this request and did not believe that the SCOTUS decisions would benefit people in Connecticut. He went on to say that the changes “ain’t coming our way,” and

shared that many other incarcerated individuals felt the same, specifically mentioning Connecticut's punitive reputation as the reason. Another participant, David, also heard about the SCOTUS rulings from other incarcerated individuals as early as 2008 but initially disregarded them as rumors. He shared that, "other guys was talking about it, and I didn't ever believe it, they're always exaggerating stuff," and didn't believe the legitimacy of their claims until calling his private attorney, who confirmed the SCOTUS decisions. Two participants, Remy and Charles, heard about these rulings from lawyers with whom they had previously been working. Charles, who had filed habeas corpus petitions prior to the passage of Public Act 15-84, first heard about significant changes to juvenile sentences from another incarcerated individual who had been following reforms in California. In 2014, a group of Yale Law students referenced *Roper v. Simmons* and told Charles to stay out of trouble because of the possible benefits from the changes. Remy, who had been working with lawyers for several years, was informed about the possible impact of SCOTUS rulings as early as 2010.

### ***Passage of Public Act 15-84***

Some of our participants started to hear about Public Act 15-84 prior to its formal passage and through the advocacy efforts around the legislative process. John first heard about it when Quinnipiac and Yale Law schools reached out to him directly for public testimony. Lawrence also heard about the Act when legislation was still being pushed while he was at Manson Youth Institute. Brandon first learned about 15-84 through the Jerome Frank Legal Services Organization at Yale Law School. Interns and professors from Yale started helping him prepare for the possibility of parole as early as 2016. Similar to the SCOTUS rulings, participants expressed mixed feelings about the potential for positive impacts on their sentences. When Frank first learned about Public Act 15-84 from peers like John, he expressed strong skepticism. He stated:

I didn't believe they were going to release a lot of us or any of us, really because we have serious charges. I just didn't believe it. I was like, there's gotta be some kind of fucking scam or something. They're doing something to get money or something.

Frank shared that many other incarcerated individuals felt similarly about Public Act 15-84, describing the general feeling as not wanting to put hope into something that will eventually collapse and claiming that he didn't believe the system would give them a second chance. Charles also shared a similar skepticism, expressing that he was "surprised and excited" but lacked confidence that Connecticut would follow through.

For three participants, particularly those who initially held beliefs that Public Act 15-84 would not impact them in any meaningful way, the effects of the law became more real when they started to see their peers go home. Frank shared that he started to gain more faith and excitement after seeing John get released, which shifted his and other incarcerated individuals' belief that Public Act 15-84 could be an avenue for early release. David also highlighted how seeing other incarcerated individuals get released renewed his sense of hope and motivation, which made the entire process feel more "real." He went on to describe this experience:

I mean, it's crazy to see dudes going home. It gives you that extra, I always had motivation, but I will say extra motivation I guess it just give you that, you know, that

more doors just finally started open, you know...actually seeing people leaving. I think that was the best thing for me, watching people leave. That was like the best thing, like I loved seeing, you know what I mean, just watching dudes go home.

While Public Act 15-84 presented a realistic avenue for early release for our participants—in many cases for the first time in their incarceration—the decision to pursue Public Act 15-84's parole hearing process over other options was not always clear. John was in the middle of a habeas corpus when 15-84 passed and had to decide which avenue would best support his early release, eventually choosing to withdraw the habeas corpus in favor of a parole hearing. He went on to describe that many other incarcerated individuals also decided to drop habeas claims, sharing that he saw the parole hearing process as a more pragmatic approach given Connecticut's judicial conservatism.

### ***Sentence Modifications and DOC Errors***

Other examples of Public Act 15-84 not being a clear-cut avenue for release include the need for taking additional steps for sentence modifications. Two of our participants, Remy and Robert, were not initially eligible for 15-84 due to having longer sentences and the law's requirement to serve 60% in prison before qualifying for release. A legal team supported Remy's pursuit of a sentence modification, which was granted in late 2020 or early 2021 and reduced the sentence by ten years, and rendered Remy eligible for 15-84.

Robert also pushed for a sentence modification to become eligible for 15-84, though he shared that the DOC failed to credit earned statutory good time of 14 years toward early release which would have made him eligible. With the support of a civil rights attorney he had met previously in his incarceration, Robert eventually received a sentence modification and became eligible for a parole hearing. Another participant, Daniel, experienced delays to his parole hearing process due to a DOC error that miscalculated his sentence by four years. He filed multiple habeas corpuses in response to this, and by the time the error had been corrected he had already served the additional four years. Daniel expressed frustration with the DOC and the system due to their lack of urgency in addressing the error until shortly before his parole hearing in 2022, which resulted in him needlessly spending an extra four years in prison.

Although Thomas was initially eligible for 15-84, he did not know about it until he reached out to a public defender's office in 2022 for support for a commutation to reduce his sentence. A public defender, who would later be his legal counsel, advised him that his eligibility for 15-84 was coming up and suggested pursuing that avenue instead of a commutation, which would require him to wait a year.

### ***Preparation for the 15-84 Parole Hearing Process***

Participants shared details about their preparation leading up to the parole hearing date, which involved several months of thorough questioning, paperwork, and other related preparation. Five participants were assigned public defenders, two of them hired their own private attorneys, and the remaining participants did not explicitly state what kind of legal counsel they received. All but one expressed feeling adequately prepared for their parole hearing. Legal teams prepared packets of information about the participant's trauma history, accomplishments, behavioral records, character references, and programs and services taken while incarcerated. Participants

often watched recordings of parole hearings to get a sense of the format and see examples of questions that might get asked. Honesty and authenticity were emphasized as key traits that participants needed to demonstrate to the parole board during the hearing.

Brandon shared that Yale interns and professors supported his preparation by asking difficult questions that helped him mentally and emotionally prepare for the hearing. He described the overall preparation process as intense but effective, which included seeing a psychiatrist and efforts from a legal team to paint a comprehensive picture of his life story and trauma history. Daniel was assigned his public defender as early as 18 months prior to his hearing date, whom he saw twice a week for a year. He described his lawyer as being dedicated and deeply engaged in his preparation. She supported Daniel by drafting, refining, and practicing his personal statement and preparing him for hard questions that the board might ask at the hearing. Daniel described how his attorney pushed him to reflect deeply and respond appropriately to questions:

...they kept going, they kept going, and we just kept going. And she kept asking questions. She kept trying to piss me off. She kept going ‘cause she acted like she was the [parole board]. She asked me questions that, if they ask this, what are you going to say?

The combination of intense preparation and his personal record during his incarceration—receiving only a few tickets over decades, completing all available programs, and demonstrating personal accountability—helped Daniel feel confident about the process. Other forms of preparation that participants shared include watching videos of other parole hearings to understand the format and kinds of questions asked; gathering character references; and thorough rehearsal of their personal statements. Thomas described the support he received for writing his personal statement by saying his legal counsel told him, “What to say, don't leave that out, put that in...I was practicing writing that letter, reading that letter 1000 times.” Lawrence, who received extensive preparation for about a year, also shared that much of his time was spent crafting a strong opening speech and anticipating possible questions from the parole board.

One participant, Frank, expressed more frustration than praise for his legal counsel. He criticized public defenders in general for being overworked, under-motivated, and indifferent, claiming that meaningful legal support usually only happens when individuals can afford to pay for private attorneys. Frank eventually self-advocated and took the lead on his own defense, and it wasn't until he started to make demands and requests of his lawyers that they “rose to the occasion” of offering him adequate support. This negative view of public defenders was shared by other participants as well, despite having positive experiences with the ones appointed to them. Thomas and Daniel shared that their positive experiences with public defenders contradict the widespread distrust others have toward them.

## **Experiences of the 15-84 Parole Hearing Process**

Participants described the parole hearing process as nerve-wracking, emotional, and stressful, with the majority emphasizing the stress and anxiety it produced. Charles described his nerves as so intense that he was visibly shaking during the day of his parole hearing. These intense

emotions and the high stakes of doing well were shared by many participants. Frank summarized this sentiment by saying:

you can never truly prepare for that moment. Either you're going to sink or swim and you just have to figure it out because your nerves are going to be jumping. You're going to be scared, you're going to be excited, and that can cause confusion in understanding the questioning.

Despite the nerves and anxiety, participants were grateful for the thorough preparation they had received and did not feel surprised or caught off guard by any of the questions asked by the parole board. Participants highlighted the importance of being genuine and truthful with their responses to the board's questions. Frank described:

I went in there and had to represent me... that it was the truth. He asked me about everything in my packet and I had to answer for all of it. Because it was me that went through it. I just had to make sure I answered it truthfully, even if it didn't look the prettiest, I had to answer truthfully.

### ***Victim Involvement***

Nine of our participants' parole hearings had victims' families present, with most of them opposing the release of participants. Participants who had their victim's families against their release stated understanding why they felt that way and respected their decision. Remy highlighted this by saying:

I understand it. You know what I mean? I, I can't, in the perfect world, they could forgive me, but this is not a perfect world and they lost somebody that they loved and was important to them. And so it's, it's not—just because I want another chance, it's not for me to say, like, you guys should forgive me or get over it or grieve...those are your emotions and your loss to process how you want you know what I mean?

Two participants did not have the victim's family present and did not submit any material for or against their release. Only two of our participants had victims' families explicitly support their release.

### **Experiences with Re-entry**

In this section, we detail how participants talked about their experiences with re-entry into parole and into community. We highlight ten areas discussed across interviews representing participants' experiences across the following domains: housing, procuring documentation, employment, parole, technology, health, relationships with loved ones of the victim, and experiences with re-entry programs in the community. Our descriptive sub-themes are organized in this way as they highlight areas that participants discussed more prominently than others.

## *Housing*

All participants had access to housing upon release to parole supervision, and we noted three patterns of release to housing: housing directly with family, sent directly to halfway housing; and choosing halfway housing. We describe each of these below. However, it is critical to note John's words around housing for returning citizens. Poignantly, he pointed out the structural challenge of housing stock and how it impacts re-entry:

There's no system of housing. There's no system of education. There's really no system of return, you know, like, no one, even today, I feel like re-entry is such a hustle. Because it's this nuanced space that just really appeared over the last 8 to 9 years where people have dumped money into, so, you know, we'll, we'll flock into it, but it's not real because no one's produced any systems. ...People get money from the city and no one has put pressure or, no organizations are coming together because organizations are competing for the same pools of money. The same relationships. To say that you're doing this work the best in the State but no one can name a housing system. No one can name a fluid transition into housing system. No one has pushed or passed legislation to increase housing for returning population. No one has negotiated with the city, any of their properties that... and the cities have them, cities have the property.

**Housing Directly with Family.** Of all the housing patterns, being released into parole and going straight into housing with family was the most prevalent. Six of our participants (54.5%) went straight from prison to living with family members, and one of these six went directly to live with a spouse even though at least two of our participants were married at the time of their release. Participants were invited to live with grandmothers, spouses, aunts, uncles, and siblings. Clearly, family networks served as an invaluable resource for such a critical need, but it is important to note that going from prison to live with family is laden with challenges that are both logistical and emotional. Remy described that the process of going straight to a family's residence included both 15-84 beneficiaries individually "figuring out where I was going, [and] them [the assigned parole officer] inspecting the house" of the family member who was offering housing. Nathan shared that before his release parole went to his family's residence to verify "they already had a bedroom...make sure the house is suitable."

Individuals shared how critical the family support around housing was for them and people varied in how long they actually lived with their families. Lawrence shared that he stayed with his aunt "a little over a year, almost 18 months, and then I got my own place. I just moved out." Nathan shared that he "only stayed with them [his family] for two months," and Remy lived with an uncle for five months. Living with family, however, was not always a smooth experience. Remy described how having been incarcerated meant having to struggle with "dying to be a member of the family," and feeling "alienated, like, they don't know me and I don't know them" even though "I know that they care about me, and I know that they love me." Having been incarcerated in adolescence also meant family dynamics for participants like Remy, where family members "still looks [original spelling] at me as a child" and do not "trust my judgement, my opinion." Robert articulated how living with this wife was difficult initially because she "wasn't used to sharing her space...I'm used to things a certain way because I've been structured in a certain way for the last 30 years and conditioned to place things a certain way."

**Choosing to be Released to a Halfway House.** The next most prevalent pattern of release into housing was to halfway houses from prison, but where the beneficiaries shared *wanting* to be released into halfway housing. Three of our participants (27%) shared this experience. Frank, in particular, stated he wanted to be release straight into a halfway house “because I thought it was going to be good for me...because of the resources that were available, at least what they show on the brochure, it sounds extravagant”. He also shared the difficulties of living there naming halfway houses “a joke.” About the staff at halfway houses he shared:

They're just there to pass the time. They're on their phones. They don't really care what you do, and if they catch you doing something, then everybody's getting written up or they're losing their passes, nobody's getting the 12 hour pass or the weekend pass to go see their family. Nobody's getting that. And you'll go months without it, or we wasn't even getting outside rec, right? Like, we wanted to go outside in the halfway house to play basketball with and they wont to let us out. They won't let us out. Nobody's going out. “These dudes didn't do their chores.” So now because some dude that I don't know who lives on the first floor didn't do his chores, nobody's going outside and I'm stuck in this house, but I'm supposed to be free. I'm supposed to be working on my transition, making sure that I'm established in society. But that isn't the case. They didn't help me find a job. They didn't have me do anything. I was actually reaching out to my family who will go online and help me look for jobs. And when you try to talk to them, they would give you attitude cause they don't want to work. They don't want to work.

Frank described that when he arrived at the halfway house, he was placed:

in a room with 4 guys. One is a raging addict, who is smoking all day and night, breaking every rule you could imagine. Putting me at risk every day. And they wouldn't do anything. They're [the staff] just allowing that. People smoking crack in the bathrooms, but even the way that the house was kept, the most disgusting thing you ever seen. The bathroom, the floor was all broken up. It was like living in an abandoned house. It was terrible. Terrible showers, filthy, cigarette butts everywhere. Like, it was the most disgusting thing. It was actually cleaner for me in prison. It was actually cleaner and more structured in prison than it was out here. ... It was like living in the projects. Nobody really cared, the halfway house is a joke.

Eventually, Frank was asked to leave the halfway house at the four-month mark and that was a struggle. He described the challenges associated with trying to find an apartment without a rental history and without a long employment history:

They want to make sure that you've been working here for over a year at a job, or you have rental history, just somebody they can trust they want in that department, that you're not some crackhead that is going to turn it into a trap house. They're trying to make sure these things... and I just didn't have any evidence to prove that I was different. It's just that I haven't been home long enough. I don't have anybody to vouch for me. ... They say 6 months is your max. Now, they could extend it for, like, specific circumstances... they could extend it for a month, but they can't really... if you get an extension, it's only gonna be 30 days, but it's a 6 month program. But after the 4th month, they expect you to move

out. That's when they're pushing you every day - did you find an apartment? Did you find an apartment? I'm like, bro, how to fuck am I going to find an apartment? Like, how am I going to find an apartment bro? Do you understand? Do you see these prices? Not only is the price crazy. That's like my whole check. I'm going to be done. I'm going to be broke as fuck... I gotta pray and hope that my job doesn't lose electricity for a week or something, because then I'm going to be skipped out of a check for the week. And then what am I going to do? You know, I could potentially be homeless at that point. I wish it was a joke. It's just, it's difficult. It's difficult. You really got to have people to have your back out here because if you don't, then you're screwed. You're screwed. You're screwed hard, you're screwed. That's how it is. It's difficult.

He spoke poignantly about how housing, employment and the potential for further incarceration are linked and how precarious it is to be in such a place and how, eventually, his aunt became the tangible resource that he needed:

Yeah, that whole re-entry thing is a joke. It's a joke. They really need to fix it, they need to restructure how they do everything and get some people that care that's going to really do their job. It's not a hard job. You're not building a house. It's not science. It's not something that takes that much thinking. It's kind of easy. Like, I know these centers have the information. I know they can do a lot more than what they're doing. They just don't do it. It's really up to you, whether you're going to make it out here or not. And if you're going to put that work in. Because these people, they'll work you until your eyes bleed, that physical labor is serious and then they'll pay you pennies just enough that you can survive. Soon as you pay your bills and you got a little bit of food in your fridge, you'd be broke again, you'll be eating cereal for dinner for like 2 weeks. It could be like that if you don't have any support, like family and stuff. I just got lucky. I have my aunt, my brother and sister, they send me some money and stuff, and my aunt had this place to live and I pay some of these bills and I put food in the fridge and I got a couple dollars for myself just to save it and hope for a better life one day. If it wasn't for her, I don't know, they probably would have had to send me back to a halfway house because I would have nowhere to go.

For our other two participants, Thomas and John, going to a halfway house was a choice because they did not want to impose on their families. Thomas shared that he was not mandated to live at the halfway house but that he “didn't want to impose on my mom and my family, I wanted to be at the halfway house to stack my money so that once I got out, I got my own apartment, my own car, and be straight.” He shared that he found the halfway house where he stayed for about five months as having “good people there, like the staff was helpful.” The halfway house was also important as an option for Thomas even though all his family “wanted me to come,” because since his release into parole he is “just now starting to get used to big crowds so I started out slow.” The halfway house he stayed in had both “a house and a cottage” and he stayed in the house for two months and the cottage where there was more freedom for three.

John described halfway houses as “technically a level one prison” and his decision to go there was because he felt like “I've been here [in prison] since I was a kid, there's no way I could just walk out of prison, I need time to transition.” He stayed in the halfway house for six months and

described it as a place that “make[s] their money on being able to cycle through beds, [and] because I had an address, you know, to leave to, I was in there six months.” He went from the halfway house to his own apartment but described the predatory housing landscape of halfway houses and rooming houses that returning citizens had to navigate, and how such precarity actually is a feeder system for some to end up back in prison. There are approximately “3000 people a year returning” from prison, John shared

...but there's no system, like, the only like, housing was so predatory, when I was in the halfway house, most guys were ending up in the rooming houses, and they were paying an exuberant amount of money on a week-to-week basis. And then winding up unhoused within 3 months, because in a halfway house, it's easy to say, I saved enough money to get in this rooming house. Because it's like, \$125 a week.

Rooming houses are

...basically a halfway house. Like, you have a shared kitchen. You have a room, you have a shared bathroom and you have a room. ... They [rooming houses] just keep cycling through who was staying in the halfway house, cycle through people and it's just a money maker for them. And so. That was like, that's all private ownership so that was like, halfway houses and, you know, they, they'll promote their house to the halfway house because they know what they need these guys to...to know that they can...you know the same way the halfway houses getting money from the state and the feds to keep these beds flipping. It was a bad cycle. Really predatory, and then, um. But, you know, uh, every city has property that they're sitting on. Nobody's pushing any cities. None of these (indecipherable) cities are saying, well, what, if they are land trusted to organizations?

**Being Released to Halfway Houses.** The last pattern of release into housing was to halfway houses from prison. Two of our participants (18%) experienced this, although for one of them, Brandon—this release to a halfway house was because the Department of Correction had not done their due diligence in ensuring that he was released to his sibling's apartment. He described how he had worked to set things up “a month or whatever it was before I went home...I already had a sponsor from my sister, was already on the lease.” He shared that DOC instead “act like I wasn't on the lease, that's why they sent me to the halfway house...but I had a sponsor and I didn't find none of that out until my sister passed away and I got the paperwork [and] found out that I never should have went to halfway house, should have went straight home.” He described having no choice in which halfway house he was going to be dropped off sharing that DOC “could have send me to Mexico if they liked” and that this drop-off was similar to his experience of incarceration since “they've [DOC] been sending me and shipping me all over the place while I was in prison and you get accustomed to wherever they drop you off.” When asked for an explanation around what he thought happened and why he was dropped off to the halfway house instead of his going to his sister's apartment, he shared “all I know is they hid the information that I was on the lease, that it was legitimate.” Brandon stayed at the halfway house for “ten months” after which he transitioned to another federally funded halfway house “where you got your own apartment, it had two or three floors, two buildings, you got your own apartment,” and he got to “pay no rent, for the next for six months to a year” and was able to “stash most of [his] money” but the rule was that “you can't have no company.” He

remained grateful that his sister “set up her apartment for me” because “many people have told me that they see my background to see my charges and don't give me the apartment.”

For the other participant who was released straight to halfway houses, Charles stayed at one for “six months,” and then transitioned to a “sober house” where he was “happy as hell I couldn't tell the difference between, you know, sober house and renting a little room.” Charles found it tough to be released in New Haven even though his family was in Hartford.

### ***Documentation and Experiences with the DOC***

In this section we delineate the challenges around procuring documentation like social security cards, state IDs, and birth certificates. The majority of our sample, 73%, named how difficult, confusing, and arduous the process of receiving these documents actually was for them. Only one participant, Lawrence, shared that DOC was “easy, I just went and signed a form and then I had to pay...I don't know, like \$10 or something like that” and they helped him procure his ID and birth certificate. For two of our participants, Brandon and Charles, a family member and a community organizer were key in securing their documentation. Brandon discussed how DOC did not offer him any resources around readying his documents for release. “They [DOC] always say they're gonna have your ID, birth certificate. Know what they did they be having? Nothing. You know, they supposed to take you over to Walker. They take me nowhere,” he shared. He talks about how pervasive the issue is, sharing “I've also heard on top of that that some folks who did receive their birth certificate or social security number, the last name was wrong, the social security number was wrong, like lots of errors it seemed like on top of that.” He was lucky that his family was able to help him with his documents and he also points out the usurious nature of the task sharing that DOC

...they charge you for a task. You have the money not to charge me, but you still insist on charging me for something, I ain't got. ... Every person that has left that I have checked on in the last two to five years has left the same way. No ID, no credentials, nothing. That don't make sense. It has never made sense. And they still continue. I don't know if they're keeping the gig money, keeping the funding for IDs and birth certificates, but not many people get it on the way out, no matter how much prep.

The documents are important and necessary and Brandon pointed out that DOC should have the capacity and the foresight to work on people's documentation as they know the dates of people's expected release. Luckily, his sister had a copy of his birth certificate and he now shared that he always carries a “wallet size” of it around. He also found the halfway house that he was initially released into to be very helpful and that they assisted him with the DMV which was a challenging experience because he had never filled out paperwork before and “never had a car, so I never really had to go to the DMV unless I was with a parent.”

For Charles, who also was released into supervision to a halfway house, a woman who worked in “community release for guys that's coming home” helped him procure his documents including his birth certificate, state ID and social security card. Daniel shared the “prison they messed up my social security number. They, they had a wrong social security number, so when I went home I thought that was a social security number. They gave you a paper to give so you could get a husky. But the social security number that they that was on the paper that they released me with

wasn't the social security. So I couldn't get my husky, now I gotta get my real social security” which created problems with Husky and paying for healthcare for him. Robert, when interviewed shared a deep frustration around how common it is that DOC makes errors with paperwork:

The law just changed that nobody should come home without an ID. I get calls every day guys coming home with no IDs. And that law got passed last year and went into effect I think October 1<sup>st</sup> or 1 July of last year but individuals are still coming home with no IDs. When all the DOC has to do is take you to Walker, take a picture, and produce the ID for you. You still can't. It's a state ID. They don't take you to motor vehicle or nothing. It's all in one system, but individuals are still like ‘I gotta sit in a halfway house, I gotta wait for my ID. I gotta wait for the DOC to send me my birth certificate, my social security card,’ why aren't these guys leaving with this if the DOC knew it? You're stifling individuals' reentry but at what cost, right? At what cost? Taxpayer dollars because if someone gets out and they can't find a job and then someone at the halfway house that's punitive decides, you know what? You can't go nowhere until you get your ID. Can't really have no business until you get your ID. Stay in the house until you get your ID. We're not gonna give you any family passes until you get all this stuff. You're just sitting there making somebody frustrated about being home. This is why you see guys leave the halfway house. ... Why isn't your stuff leaving with you when you leave the DOC? That's why they have reentry coordinators in there, discharge planner, you know who's leaving, you know, right? It's all on the computer, it's all on a feed. It's all on a algorithm. You get it when it comes down. But people are being passed over but I mean it's the game that they play.

### ***Employment***

**Procuring employment.** All of our participants were engaged in the workforce during the time of their interviews. We noted three patterns of participants' procuring employment: through family and friends and connections from inside prison (82%); through their own efforts (9%); and through the halfway house (9%).

Participants named a range of ways in which family relationships were critical to their procuring employment whether it was through navigating technology and seeking jobs on phones, setting up family businesses while participants were still in prison, and inviting participants into their businesses (45%). Others found employment through their connections with friends who had also been in prison and had become successful when in community or through connections like educators from universities who offered education in prisons (36%). “My grandfather, he owns a [redacted] company, so I went and started working for him. I did that for like maybe a year and a half, just learning from him, learning business, and then he retired and I, that's what I do now. I just took the business over,” shared Lawrence. Some of the changes Lawrence described making to the company were bringing it into “the modern era” since his grandfather was “real old school...did everything word of mouth, off the handshake.” It was Lawrence who helped the company grown “three times since I took over” and he did that through watching “a lot of podcasts, a lot of audiobooks” and engaging in “marketing at a different level that it was.” David joined his brother who “builds all this stuff” and now David “put[s] the finish into it.” He shared how his brother had this company set up before David was released. David also gained experience working “at advanced auto parts for a year and some change,” but was employed with

his brother at the time of our interview. Daniel shared how he and his wife had launched a business while he was still incarcerated and immediately upon release he had a job “driving deliveries” for their business. Daniel shared how instrumental his wife had been in his preparation for release and how deeply she encouraged him to be reading about “CDL books...reading the credit books...trucking business” and also exploring options like being a “PCA...personal career assistant.” Only one participant, Brandon, shared that he actually did have a job with his brother who had a “used tire spot,” and how much he was looking forward to being able to “learn every avenue of his business.” However, the halfway house Brandon was assigned to told him “you can’t actually work there” and he ended up working a factory job “which was mill for barrels or the cheese factory...it was work but archaic.” His experience there was that “you’ll be paid almost minimum of what you’re worth.”

Other participants shared how friends and networks they had formed while in prison were critical in helping them find employment as soon as they were released into parole. Robert shared how he ended up calling a friend who was in real estate and who “was like, you have a job, just meet me here,” and within a week of release, Robert was working. Additionally, for Robert, relationships established with faculty from universities while he was incarcerated helped with procuring work that he found especially meaningful. Robert shared how he benefited from relationships established within prison and his own community service work which meant that people recognized him. Referencing how so many people incarcerated come from the same overpoliced communities, he also shared “majority of us spent decades together and we’re like in a cluster, so we’re being very supportive of each other, behind the scenes that people don’t see, like we’re taking calls and it’s like girl, you gotta be easy, like be patient, you know, continue to look for something, you’re gonna find something or we’re networking amongst each other like, do you know anybody that’s hiring?” Similarly, Nathan shared his experience of connecting with a friend, on the outside, who had been incarcerated with him for decades as well and how that friend surprised him with a job with his real estate business. Nathan shared he had come home “on Wednesday, I started working Friday.” John also shared how connections he had made while inside prison in a “lifer’s program” turned into an “internship that turned into a position” that was paid.

Only one participant articulated finding employment on his own; Charles talked about ending up “two jobs while I was in the halfway house” naming a young “lady” who worked in “community release for guys that’s coming home” and she did the work of “helping me find jobs.” Furthermore, only Thomas shared that he had found work because the halfway house found him a job; notably, it was “a job under the table, but it was a job just to help me through.”

**Maintaining employment and its purpose in life.** Procuring employment was one hurdle; however, maintaining that employment in the face of the intractable and structural nature of poverty was completely another. Four of our participants poignantly highlighted the challenges associated with having spent decades in prison, a traumatic event on its own, the lack of skills/outdated skills/lack of educational opportunities in prison, and the cycle of poverty set up by this structure. Frank shared how he how was just “five credits short of finishing up my bachelor’s degree,” which is something that he wants “so bad, you have no idea, it’s killing me.” He is constrained by having a to work a lot and is consumed with a life where “I pull about 50 hours a week...work about 10 hours a day” and feels that “everything [is] killing me with these

bills.” He wishes he were a “millionaire” so that he could go ahead and finish his education and shared that “unfortunately, that’s not my life.” He discussed the hard labor jobs that are rendered available to people with his experience and life story which are “a hard ass job, low pay, like \$650 and it’s labor. You work in the rain, you working in the heat, it’s hard, you’re lifting up 40-pound poles and you’re working and there is no clock out time.” He named how the compensation for his labor was incommensurate with being able to afford housing which is “like my whole check” and how a lack of housing, poor wages, lack of educational opportunities all render an impossible reality. “How am I going to find an apartment, do you see these prices,” he shared? Eventually, he has to live a life where what he does is “pray and hope that my job doesn’t lose electricity for a week or something because then I’m going to be skipped out of a check for the week...I could potentially be homeless at that point.” He described a vicious cycle of low wages and poverty lamenting that jobs for people with his life story are those where “they’ll pay you pennies, just enough that you can survive. Soon as you pay your bills and you got a little bit of food in your fridge, you’d be broke again, you’ll be eating cereal again for dinner for like two weeks...if you don’t have support like family and stuff.” For Frank, working so many hours and navigating traveling to work and back home meant that he was often depleted and his quality of life meant the only time he was able to make for himself was limited to playing “some grand theft auto” and staying “in the house all day” since “outside this house I don’t feel safe.” Frank’s commentary on societal structures, particularly the connections between housing, poverty, jobs and what that means for quality of life were incredibly philosophical, poignant and stirring:

I'm not asking to let me have enough money to buy a mansion, I'm just saying, let me keep a couple of dollars in my fucking pocket so I could buy some food and clothes for myself, to wash my clothes. I gotta go to the laundromat every week down the street. We don't have a washing machine dryer here. We have to go pay for that. I gotta pay for the gas. Just take it easy on me. Like, they need some sort of assistance, and if you don't want to assist me, just take it easy on me with all these damn bills. Take it easy. That's it. Do you need all of my money? I'm not rich here. If somebody got millions, you could go get a little extra money from them. You can't get a little more from me because if you get a little more from me, then you're gonna leave me in a bad position. And if I'm in a bad position, that's going to leave you in a bad position. Because you're going to be dealing with a higher crime rate. That's what people are doing out here. Everybody out here is doing something illegal, something to make ends meet, at least around this area, around Bridgeport. And I'm not saying all people, but I'm just saying there's a large amount of people out here that's doing something they're not supposed to be doing to make ends meet. I've seen people take toilet paper from my job. People are doing the craziest shit, they're just trying to make ends meet because they need. They need. I've seen a guy take toilet paper. That shit doesn't make sense to me. You're working full time bro and you need to steal toilet paper. You just need to care a little bit more, just care about people a little bit more. I care about people. I don't like seeing people struggle. I see these panhandlers, and I see what's going on. I know that because they're homeless doesn't mean that they're an addict, or they're a bad person. It doesn't mean any of that. It just means that they don't have. They don't have. It's fucked up. It's fucked up. You got people out here with millions and millions of dollars and 4 or 5 mansions and all kinds of shit like that. And then you got somebody out here who don't got a pair of pants. Why is it

like that? It's fucked up. It's fucked up. ... I was in a situation where I wasn't coming home, where I was going to be 57 years old before they even let me out. With no skills, never had a job. Never had a house. Never had anything in my life and you're just going to throw me into the wilderness and figure it out at 57. Which probably wouldn't have worked out for me at all, but there was good people out there that seen something different and they fought. They fought and made it happen. Because I didn't fight. I would know how to argue for what they did for us. So, they fought and we made some headway, and I see things are changing. I just think that we need a little more compassion here, especially from the policy makers, man, they definitely need to figure something out because what they're doing isn't working. And if you care about crime and you care about people, and you don't want to see any of that happen, and you truly don't want to see that happen, then fix it bro, fix it. Just a little less, a little less, give them a little more. People are hardworking. I work every day. I'm on time every day, like clockwork, every day, like clockwork, and when they need me for extra shit I show up. I was even working on Saturdays. Ask my aunt, I was working 6 days a week because the job needed me. I'm trying to be the best employee out here and I need the money. And It's still not enough. What kind of fucking life is that? I feel like all I do is work. What kind of life is that? I can't enjoy my family. I can't enjoy a vacation.

Similarly, David shared how working “50-60 hours a week” to pay his bills meant that “just making time for family and friends...that’s like the biggest challenge.” Remy, in line with Frank’s structural critique, shared how there were no buses near Windsor Locks and how it is hard to get to work “if you’ve never been on a bus, never rode the train,” and there is a lack of public transportation combined with the reality that procuring state ID and getting set up for driving licenses was not the easiest road for participants [see aforementioned section].

Lawrence, who brought his grandfather’s business successfully into the modern era, shared the embarrassment he felt having to wear the ankle bracelet while he went to clients’ houses for work, and how much of a toll that took on his mental health:

I never broke curfew, I never gave them dirty urine, and I had to stay on the bracelet for the whole time which was trash. ...If I’m working till 6:00 and we’re 45 minutes away, I’m really just waking up, going to work, come home...I can’t even go out to dinner and have a dinner date if I wanted to. I can't even run to the store if I forgot to buy milk, you know what I mean? I can't do nothing. So, it's just inconvenient... and then not to mention the fact like it's embarrassing. I had a big ass bracelet on, like the thing is huge on my ankle, I can't even wear shorts, it’s hot out and I'm not gonna show up to a client's house with a huge ankle monitor on to do work, even though it's 90 degrees, I mean it's embarrassing, very embarrassing.

### ***Relationships with Parole***

In this section we detail participants’ experiences with their parole officers, what they were hearing from others re: 15-84 parole hearings, and requests for early termination of parole.

**Parole officers.** Almost half of our sample talked about their relationship with their parole officers (45%). Three of our participants shared that they had empathic parole officers.

Charles, someone who was one of the earlier people released under 15-84, referenced how “timing affects a lot of your success with things...specifically it was perfect timing where they were, uh, accommodating, they were, uh. They [parole officers] had empathy.” Naming the zeitgeist of empathy surrounding parole at that time that he was released, he shared “as an institution, it [parole] is what it is. But, you know, if you luck out and get a decent parole officer, or someone who understands so I had a lot of empathy, uh, with my situation, and support.” Similarly, Thomas shared he had a parole officer who “let me be me”, told him “as long as you doing what you supposed to be doing, you got a job, you employed, I don’t need to worry about that, you see me less and less,” and sent him information on “some temp agencies” to help with seeking employment. As another example, Remy also shared that the assigned parole officer was “nice, she hasn’t given me a hard time” but also that parole’s “job is to make sure that you’re not getting in trouble,” and not to connect 15-84 beneficiaries with jobs and needed resources like housing etc. Remy also shared that it is rare to find a parole officer who was “willing to go above and beyond.” There was variability in how participants felt about their parole officers with Nathan sharing that his parole officers “was respecting me and all they did was push for the parole to end.”

**Shifting Political Winds and Their Impact on 15-84 Hearings and Denial of Early Release.** In line with Charles’ aforementioned observation that he had been released into parole during a time when parole had more empathy, participants (45%) referenced a change in zeitgeist around 15-84 hearings. Robert shared his analysis of the BOPP as a political entity. He referenced the “former chair of the BOPP” who was “removed last year [2023]” and

According to them, he [former chair] was allowing too many people to go free on the commutations. After he was commissioned by the governor to revamp the communications system. He did was he was hired to do. Not only that, he's a former police officer and his accolades supersedes him, but, like, if I hired you to do a job, like I did my research, I know you're qualified for the job, you had an interview for the job with state legislators and everything, and we all agree that yo, this is our guy for the job. But then when you get the job, it's like, you know what, you're using your expertise wrong, we didn't ask you to give these guys the opportunity that they've earned. We want you to keep them locked down. We want you to play a part of the game. We didn't actually want you to, we didn't really think that you were gonna stop and let them out, so they can work, and so that they can take care of their families, so that they can help decrease violence in the community because this is all these guys are coming home, this is what they're doing.

Robert also articulated how the people the former BOPP chair had supported releasing on 15-84 and commutations were “thriving” and that he worried about what this change meant for people currently still incarcerated and who were eligible for 15-84. Remy shared the impact of the “controversy about the chairman” meant that now applications for early release could be submitted “if after two years, if you’ve done well, not recidivated, you can apply for release.” That, however, had changed. Four of the 11 participants who applied for early release post their two-year mark on parole shared that they had been denied early release from parole.

David, for example, shared how parole is simply “somebody else looking over their shoulder” instead of any real help around connecting people to resources. He shared how he was seeing more people not being released on parole after their 15-84 hearings and also how early release after 2 years of parole was also being denied. The chilling effect of this for David was that his parole officer “didn’t put mine [early request] in right now...if they’re denying people, it’s just a waste of time.” In naming how politics is played out, particularly during elections time, David names:

Right now what they're telling dudes to do is come back in three years. So it's supposed to be a two-year program, but what they're saying basically now it's a five-year program. And I don't see why, I haven't heard about those cases and nobody that came home under 15-84 getting in big trouble. So why all of a sudden they're denying dudes? I don't know if it's because of it's the time of the year with the politics and all that. I know that's what it is at the, the end of the day, I've been incarcerated a long time. You see how that stuff plays out, it has to do with the elections and all that stuff, so I don't know. Now you denying everybody, so you keep supervision even longer. After they've already done 25-30 years, two years on parole aint enough, now you want 5 years on parole, makes no sense. ... It don't matter what side of the aisle you believe in or you on, it always becomes about politics this time of the year, whenever that time comes, everything always slow down, things change. It's always like that. Even with judges when they got to get reelected and all that stuff to the bench and stuff like that, you always see them stop granting cases, they stop doing certain things like that, it's always like that.

Robert, too, shared being denied early release from parole even though his parole officer tried to advocate for it but “was met with resistance to the point where they said don’t put it back in.” Daniel (whose application for early parole termination had also been denied) named that with the changed political winds now “they want us guys to do a little bit longer, so I guess I got caught in the wave of the five-year wave now.” Brandon, also denied early parole, shared his analysis of this pattern as one that is about “keeping the animals at the farm so you can run the farm. ... Without it, the prison, without inmates the prisons don’t run. ... The moment they lost a lot of amount of facilities, they had to reallocate COs and others they pink slipped you until further notice, which is crazy, but they did. All those that were rookies, that kicked and bullied, the other were moved out of facilities and jobs, you know, it was all about maintaining the jobs. It's never about the inmates, even though without the inmates you don't have a job.”

### ***Health***

An overwhelming majority of our participants, 73%, talked about struggling with health: both mental and physical as a part of their re-entry experience. Both Remy and Nathan discussed how being incarcerated “put a number on my lungs” (Nathan). Nathan described how prisons have “heavy dust...the ventilation is not maintained...going outside is a premium and you weren’t allowed to do that very often.” He articulated the connection between the physical and the mental sharing that both the poor ventilation within and the “stress, the depression, the inflammation in the body carries over, regardless of what you do to make peace with yourself,” and emphasized “why health care is so important for those men coming home.” Remy shared how post incarceration “I was having a lot of respiratory issues” to the point where “I got very ill” which interfered with Remy’s ability to work and remain employed. Brandon talked about his worry of

emergent health care issues since the prisons “used to be wetlands” and because “the land was bad, so it made water bad.” He shared his awareness that were lawsuits going on in the state around this very issue, but felt worried that whatever had been thrown on that land during construction would have “already affected decades of people that came through...I’m just praying that whatever it is doesn’t run me down too soon.” David talked about living with pain and how his “pancreas doesn't produce enough enzyme now. Sitting in jail for so long messes you up. You don't eat right, it's nothing to eat right, just food with starch and sugar.” He also shared that it was only upon being released and going to a doctor outside prison that he found out he needed “carpal tunnel surgery.”

Others talked about their ongoing struggles with mental health. For Thomas, even sleep was hard. He articulated struggling with sleep and shared that “my sleep hours are crazy out here now” and that he does not get “enough sleep” because he is mostly worried “if I fell asleep I would wake up back in jail.” In Daniel’s experience, “mood swings” were challenging to navigate. In a similar vein, Frank talked about struggling with “joint problems...shoulders messed up, my leg hurts a lot.” In addition to physical pain, he also shared struggling with “my trauma” and how “sometimes I get overly emotional even by myself, I just got to cry, I’ll need to pull over to cry, I got to pray.” Poignantly, he shared what it feels like to be in his own mind on any given day:

There are people that are going through worse, so I have to be grateful, but sometimes I stress. Sometimes I just feel overwhelmed. Sometimes I feel I'm not going to make it, but I have to fight those thoughts. I have to fight them. I mean, I know it's the result of prison. I'm scared I'm gonna go back to prison. I'm scared somebody's going to kill me or hurt me. I'm scared all the time and I fight those feelings too. Every day. We got to fight them every day. Sometimes I have a panic attack when I'm around a lot of people. I get nervous. What are people going to think about me when they hear about my charges? They don't understand the circumstances of what happened, all they know that you did something and they automatically think that you're a monster like that. That you was just so angry that you're just in a fit of rage. You went crazy. And that's never the case for the majority of us. It's just not the case. They don't really know that I was just a scared kid with a gun, that was broke and thought this was the best way to make money. They don't know that I didn't mean it. They don't know that I regretted it. They don't know that I still regret it and I carry that shame. They don't know any of that stuff. They don't know my story.

### ***Technology***

Over half the sample, 54.5%, shared technology as a key challenge in navigating re-entry, and named, in particular, how the DOC and halfway houses setup was not geared towards supporting their re-entry into parole. Brandon decried how poorly he was set up for technology while he was incarcerated:

You can’t have nobody who’s gone for five years, let alone 20 and 30 come out of here with not some education or enlightenment. ... They [DOC] don’t even put a piece of paper in front of us until, ‘this how this phone works.’ Now that they got the tablet, they could put a phone on it and let a dude play with it and understand that technology has

changed drastically. I know a guy who've been in there over 50 years, he's still alive. He don't know what a cell phone that was hooked to car look like, let alone you got a super computer that changes every four to six months, it's better. That information needs to be learned taught, massaged into the brain of people.

Daniel shared that he had prepped for his own re-entry while incarcerated by talking to “young guys teaching me about the phones...they teach me everything about the phone cause remember I don't know what that is. ... They 2020-day kids, but they're teaching me the technology stuff, right? And I'm listening. You know, and what's Instagram? What's Facebook, what's this?” For Thomas, technology “is a struggle.” He talked about how much technology had advanced since his incarceration and “it's a lot of technology you need to learn. Even with a car...so technology is a definitely gonna be a struggle when you come out.” He did not find his experience with the tablet he had while incarcerated helpful. Lawrence shared that he found a “learning curve” with technology but persevered through it and spent time watching and listening to a “lot of podcasts, a lot of audiobooks” to push himself to learn technology and support bringing his grandfather's business into the modern era. Both John and Remy also shared that they found they “don't know how to use the phone,” and that “technology, cell phones, tablets...it's a learning curve.”

### ***Relationship with the Victims' Loved Ones***

Only two of our participants shared connecting with the families of the loved ones they had harmed through their actions. For both, this experience was touching and transformative and both engaged in it with humility. Daniel discussed how the victim's family “spoke out at the hearing, they said let him go, forgive him.” He shared that the “pardons and the parole board started crying.” The victim's family invited him to church when he was released and he went sharing that his “Godly self said if ...they want to sacrifice me, they wanna use me, they wanna do something to me, for taking the life, I accept it.” and that when he came home the victim's family “became a family” to him. The interaction at church ended in him receiving forgiveness from the victim's sister and Daniel took the opportunity to apologize to the father of the victim as well. Robert talked about how hard it was for him to interact with the victim's family and that he really struggled with making that decision. At the time of our interview, the daughter of the victim had “reached out to the counselor...saying that she wants to set some dates up to see if we can meet.” Robert articulated “it's hard for me, and I just gotta do it...because I want to bring that family closure, they're suffering.” Even though he knew that this meeting will be a lot of “raw emotion,” Robert reflected on its importance:

when you're faced with a charge like I have, you only have the prosecution's theory. The only person that really knows the truth is the individual that's deceased and the perpetrator of that crime that really knew what took place that day. The information that they gathered from witnesses or from individuals that may have seen what happened... they can only tell what they saw. They don't actually know what transpired, that led up to the actual event. So I don't think a theory brings closure, I think the truth brings closure. I think what the prosecutor has put on paper, in theory, isn't what happened, isn't the reasons, but he put together a story that he had to prosecute. And I think that the only way closure can come about is if I'm able to speak with the family, tell them what happened, and ask for their forgiveness.

### *Experience with Re-entry Programs in Community*

One of our participants, Daniel, shared actually engaging with a re-entry organization and finding that helpful. Daniel talked about Project M.O.R.E in New Haven and how he had “participated in the \$500 a month program” which he used to “get a car” and found that he could “spend it [the money] as I want.” He articulated gratefulness for the being able to “take the cash out...they helped me out with a lot of bills.” Remy shared the reality there is “nothing in place really” in the re-entry space and when you go to there “the re-entry center is giving you a backpack, you know, a voucher to go to Burlington Coat factory when you ain’t got no car to get there.” Remy also highlighted how “211 is not up to date” suggesting “there needs to be a singular database that people can go to for up to date information, whether you're recently coming home or if you're just in the community to know what kind of resources are available, why is all this information being passed, like word of mouth?” Robert lifted how:

there’s re-entry services here, but they’re not giving anybody anything that's tangible. I'm hearing the same story. ‘Oh I go there and it's just leaflets.’ I was hearing that story when I was incarcerated. ‘Yo, they’re not doing anything. We go there, there's nothing there for anybody.’ He's like you pick up a leaflet for the American job center when you can already go to the American job center. You know what I'm saying? All they're doing is making you aware of services. They're not providing the actual services that are needed in these hubs that we have.

He named how people being released wanted to come specifically to New Haven and shared how Project M.O.R.E is “the number one re-entry programming for the city.” He criticized the Welcoming Center articulating how cities need to think about doing a better job of offering critical re-entry services if the intention is really to not have people recidivate:

if we've served time, and paid our debt to society, and we're returning citizens of the city of New Haven, I think the city should be more welcoming to those that have paid their debt to society and are willing to come back into the community and do some of the right things. But you have to be able to assist people in that transition. If you're not willing to assist people in that transition, you're just setting them up with failure. So they're not helping people, they're not. I can write that, tell them for their face, they're not. Because I've seen too many guys come back to prison because they don't have reentry services. And now that I'm out, I see guys that are going back to prison because they don't have reentry services.

In Hartford, Robert and John named SCRIP as a program that they felt they could attest to. Robert discussed how SCRIP offers “trauma therapy services...to help guys address their issues as they’re transitioning.” John, in discussing, SCRIP, shared his appreciation for how that organization and its founder have “figured out how to work through trauma,” how there is a “sober house where he’s putting up guys and women into this house who will have come doing really long sentences,” and noted the important availability of “a sexologist you know, because these are needed conversations when you come home for doing decades in prison and with a nutritionist.” While John applauded SCRIP, he also raised how overall in Charles “there’s no system of housing” and how broken re-entry really is for people who are returning home. “No

one can name a fluid transition into housing system, no one has pushed or passed legislation to increase housing for returning population,” he shared.

## QUANTITATIVE METHODS AND FINDINGS

### Methods

The dataset utilized for the quantitative analyses detailed in this report was received from the Connecticut Board of Pardons and Paroles (BOPP) and includes information on the 123 individuals released under Public Act 15-84 as of January 2025. This is a point-in-time analysis, meaning the data reflects beneficiaries' statuses as of a specific moment rather than tracking changes over time. Two staff members from BOPP have regularly updated information pertaining to the ongoing statuses of beneficiaries. Data received falls across 3 primary domains pertaining to beneficiaries: historical legal processing, current legal status, and basic demographic information. Historical legal processing data includes variables such as total effective sentence received, sentenced charges, date of harm, expected end-of-sentence date, 15-84 parole hearing date, prison, parole location, and risk assessments while incarcerated. Current legal status details if beneficiaries have completed supervision, (e.g., under parole, probation, or discharged entirely), violations of parole or probation, re-admissions to prison, and number of days in community for those who have not been re-admitted. Finally, demographics provided include race (Black, Hispanic, or white), gender, highest education level, age at harm, and age at sentence, and current employment status.

Each variable was examined using exploratory data analysis strategies (Velleman & Hoaglin, 2012). We primarily report frequencies of categorical variables and, where appropriate, descriptive statistics for numerical variables such as age, years incarcerated, and time in the community. In some cases, we also conduct cross-tabulations and chi-square tests to explore relationships between variables.

For the most part, we present the data as received, with minimal manipulation or reorganization. The primary exception is the "sentenced charges" variable, which included multiple charges listed together. To facilitate interpretation, we recoded this variable to reflect the most serious charge of those listed for each person, allowing for clearer categorization. Additionally, in cases where charges included both a "criminal liability" or "conspiracy" offense and an underlying offense (e.g., conspiracy and felony murder), the underlying charge (e.g., felony murder) was used for the primary classification.

### Findings

#### *Race and Gender of Beneficiaries*

Similar to the national landscape, the beneficiaries of PA 15-84 are overwhelmingly men of color. Most of the individuals in the dataset are Black males (66.7%); 30.1% are Hispanic, and 3.3% are white. Because we do not have access to data on the full population of individuals historically eligible for release under Public Act 15-84, we are unable to assess whether there are racial or gender disparities in who has been granted release. However, it is likely that the figures presented here reflect significant historical racial disparities in long-term sentencing practices.

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Male	122	99.2
Female	1	0.8
Total	123	100

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Black	82	66.7
Hispanic	37	30.1
White	4	3.3
Total	123	100

### ***Sentenced Charges***

As stated previously in the Methods section, beneficiaries were sentenced with multiple charges. Charges were recoded to reflect the most serious charge of each person.<sup>1</sup> The most common convicted charges of individuals released under PA 15-84 were murder (32.5%) and manslaughter (26%). Another 17.9% were convicted of felony murder, and smaller percentages were sentenced for assault in the 1<sup>st</sup> degree (5.7%), robbery in the 1<sup>st</sup> degree (4.9%), and sexual assault in the first degree (4.9%). Only a small number were sentenced for crimes such capital murder (2.4%), home invasion (2.4%), kidnapping in the 1<sup>st</sup> degree (1.6%), and arson (0.8%). Notably, 20 beneficiaries (16.3%) had charges that explicitly referenced the use of a firearm, indicating the prevalence of firearm-related conduct among this group.

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Arson 1st Degree	1	0.8
Assault 1st Degree	7	5.7
Capital Murder	3	2.4
Felony Murder	22	17.9
Home Invasion	3	2.4
Kidnapping 1st Degree	2	1.6
Murder	40	32.5
Manslaughter	32	26
Robbery 1st Degree	6	4.9

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<sup>1</sup> Charges were grouped in the following manner: Arson - Arson 1<sup>st</sup>; Assault - Assault 1<sup>st</sup>; Capital Murder - Crim. Liability/Capital Murder, Murder/Capital Murder, Capital Murder/Kidnapping 1<sup>st</sup>; Felony Murder - Felony Murder; Home Invasion - Home Invasion, Home Invasion/Crim. Liability; Kidnapping - Criminal Attempt/Kidnapping 1<sup>st</sup>, Kidnapping 1<sup>st</sup>; Murder - Murder, Criminal Liability for Another/Murder, Crim. Liability/Murder, Crim. Liability/Murder/Crim. Poss. of Pistol, Crim. Liability/Murder/Poss. of Pistol w/o Permit; Manslaughter - Manslaughter 1<sup>st</sup>, Manslaughter 1<sup>st</sup> with Firearm, Manslaughter 1st with Firearm/Illegal Carrying w/o permit/Tampering w/ evidence, Manslaughter 2<sup>nd</sup> with Firearm, Assault 1st/Manslaughter 1<sup>st</sup>, Crim. Liability/Manslaughter 1<sup>st</sup>, Crim. Liability/Manslaughter 1<sup>st</sup>; Robbery - Robbery 1<sup>st</sup>, Conspiracy Felony 1st /Robbery 1<sup>st</sup>, Conspiracy Felony 1st Deg./Robbery 1<sup>st</sup> Deg., Assault 1st/Attempted Robbery 1<sup>st</sup>, Criminal Attempt/Robbery 1<sup>st</sup> /Assault 1<sup>st</sup>, Home Invasion/Conspiracy to Assault 1st/Robbery 1<sup>st</sup>; Sexual Assault - Sex Assault 1<sup>st</sup>, Sex Assault 1<sup>st</sup>/Burglary 1<sup>st</sup>, Home Invasion/Conspiracy/Aggravated Sex Assault 1<sup>st</sup>; Other - Criminal Attempt/Sale of Illegal Drugs/Assault 1<sup>st</sup>/Robbery 1<sup>st</sup> w/ Deadly Weapon.

Sexual Assault 1st Degree	6	4.9
Other	1	0.8
Total	123	100

### ***Age at Offense***

On average, beneficiaries were 16.8 years old (SD = 0.9) at the time of their offense. Ages ranged from 14 to 17.9 years.

### ***Total Effective Sentence (TES)<sup>2</sup>***

Beneficiaries received an average total effective sentence of 29.7 years (SD = 13.5). Sentences ranged from a minimum of 11 years to a maximum of 80 years of incarceration.

### ***Mental Health Needs Score***

Nearly all (92.6%) beneficiaries had a Mental Health Needs score of 1 or 2. This suggests that these individuals either had no assessed history of mental illness or were currently stable and not in need of active treatment.<sup>3</sup> Only a small fraction of beneficiaries (7.4%) had higher scores, ranging between 3 and 5. This distribution suggests that the majority of individuals released under 15-84 were rated as having minimal to no current mental health treatment needs at the time of their release.

	Frequency	Valid Percent
1	42	34.1
2	72	58.5
3	6	4.9
4	2	1.6
5	1	0.8
Total	123	100

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<sup>2</sup> Total effective sentence (TES) is the total length of sentences imposed for all offenses, after factoring in whether these will be served cumulatively or concurrently, but before the non-parole period has been set.

<sup>3</sup> The Charles DOC employs a five-point Mental Health Needs Score to classify individuals based on their mental health status:

- 1: No history of mental illness; no current need for mental health services.
- 2: History of mental illness, currently stable; no active treatment required.
- 3: Moderate mental health needs; requires some level of treatment.
- 4: Serious mental health condition; necessitates ongoing treatment.
- 5: Severe mental health disorder; requires intensive treatment and possibly specialized confinement.

This classification system is utilized to coordinate mental health care provision within the correctional system and does not constitute specific diagnoses under the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

Source: Connecticut Sentencing Commission. (2022). Memorandum on Mental Health Care Need Classifications in Connecticut's Incarcerated Population. Retrieved from <https://ctsencingcommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Mental-Health-Memo.pdf>

### ***Sex Risk Assessment Score<sup>4</sup>***

The sex risk classification aids in determining housing, supervision levels, and treatment needs within Charles DOC system. The vast majority of 15-84 beneficiaries (88.6%) had no known history of sexual offenses. Only a small proportion (11.4%) had any classification related to sexual offending, with 8.9% currently classified as sex offenders and 1.6% designated as high-risk requiring specialized management. This suggests that individuals with sexual offense histories represent a small minority of those released under 15-84.

	Frequency	Valid Percent
1	109	88.6
2	1	.8
3	11	8.9
4	2	1.6
Total	123	100

### ***Risk Level***

Each individual is assigned a Risk Level by DOC Classification. This level reflects the assessed risk the beneficiary poses in terms of facility management, such as the level of security and supervision they have been deemed as required while incarcerated. The Risk Level is determined by assessing seven main factors: escape profile, severity or violence of the current offense, history of violence, length of sentence, presence of pending charges or detainers, disciplinary history, and security risk group membership. Each factor is rated independently, and the highest individual score across these areas determines the person's Risk Level. This classification is intended primarily to guide housing, supervision, and security—not to measure growth or parole suitability. Levels range between 1 (low security risk) and 5 (requiring administrative segregation).<sup>5</sup>

The majority of beneficiaries (70%) were assessed at Level 1; they were considered to pose minimal risk within the correctional setting. Just under 30% had levels of 2, 3, or 4, suggesting elevated risk levels requiring more restrictive housing or oversight. The relatively lower number of Level 3 and Level 4 classifications further reflects a general pattern of lower institutional risk among those released under Public Act 15-84. Notably, no beneficiaries were rated at Level 5, as assignment to that level requires special administrative approval and is typically associated with Administrative Segregation.

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<sup>4</sup> The Charles DOC employs a classification system to assess and manage individuals with sexual offense histories. This system considers factors such as the nature of the offense, risk of recidivism, and treatment needs. The classifications are as follows:

- 1: No known history of sexual offenses.
- 2: History of sexual offense; not currently classified as a sex offender.
- 3: Currently classified as a sex offender.
- 4: High-risk sex offender requiring specialized management.

Source: Connecticut Department of Correction. (n.d.). Classification Manual. Retrieved from <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DOC/Pdf/PDFReport/ClassificationManualLibraryCopypdf.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Source: Connecticut Department of Correction. (n.d.). Offender Classification Manual. <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DOC/Pdf/PDFReport/ClassificationManualLibraryCopypdf.pdf>

	Frequency	Valid Percent
1 (low risk)	87	70.6
2 (moderate risk)	7	5.7
3 (high risk)	23	18.7
4 (very high risk)	6	4.9
Total	123	100

### ***Treatment and Program Assessment Instrument (TPAI)***

The Treatment and Program Assessment Instrument (TPAI) is a risk assessment tool used by the Connecticut Department of Correction to evaluate an incarcerated individual's readiness for parole or community release. The TPAI considers factors such as criminal history, institutional behavior, programming participation, and risk of reoffending. Scores typically range from lower values (indicating higher risk or less preparedness for release) to higher values (indicating lower risk and greater readiness).

TPAI scores for beneficiaries released under Public Act 15-84 ranged from 2 to 8. Most beneficiaries received moderate scores, with the majority scoring 4 (39%), 5 (26%), or 6 (22%). Together, these scores account for 87% of the dataset, suggesting that most individuals were assessed as presenting a moderate level of readiness for community reintegration. Very few beneficiaries scored at the extremes: only 0.8% scored a 2 and 2.4% scored an 8. This suggests that release decisions were not strictly confined to individuals deemed the “lowest risk,” but rather included a range of moderate readiness profiles.

Score	Frequency	Valid Percent
2	1	0.8
3	6	4.9
4	48	39
5	32	26
6	27	22
7	6	4.9
8	3	2.4
Total	123	100

While tools like the TPAI are intended to introduce standardized, data-driven decision-making, ongoing research has demonstrated notable limitations—particularly when used to assess readiness for release among individuals serving long sentences imposed during their youth. Most significant for this population, risk assessment instruments often reflect institutional behavior and programming access, both of which are shaped by structural factors such as facility resources, racial bias in disciplinary practices, and availability of rehabilitative programming (Hannah-Moffat, 2013; Vincent et al., 2012). As a result, individuals with higher scores may not necessarily be “more ready” for release in substantive terms, but may have simply had greater access to programming or fewer infractions. A second notable finding indicates that tools like the

TPAI may be poorly calibrated for individuals incarcerated since adolescence or early adulthood. Static, unchanging indicators (e.g., age at admission, criminal history) account for a high proportion of risk items; the over-emphasis on these items can easily undermine the developmental change, long-term institutional maturity, or insight gained by potential and actual beneficiaries over decades in prison (Bell, 2019; Schwartzapfel, 2015). This exact phenomenon was noted by a beneficiary in our interviews who has led valuable advocacy both within and outside prison, and received a “moderate-to-high” risk score for readiness and recidivism:

When I went to parole, they rated me moderate-to-high risk to re-offend...I was actively in the TRUE re-entry program when I had my parole liaison coming to see me. But I was still rated moderate to high risk, which means they thought...coming home, that I would be in prison anywhere between 90 days and nine months...but I still was rated moderate-to-high risk to recidivate. And everything that I told the parole board that I would do when I went home, I am doing currently.

Finally, risk tools tend to encode existing biases, particularly along racial lines. Scholars have cautioned that assessments can reproduce systemic disparities under the guise of objectivity, often penalizing Black and Brown individuals for factors linked to structural disadvantage (Angwin et al., 2016; Hannah-Moffat, 2019). While we do not have access to data on the full population of individuals historically eligible for release under 15-84—and therefore cannot determine whether racial disparities exist in who is granted release—the fact that the overwhelming majority of those who have been released are people of color makes this especially concerning. In this way, reliance on tools like the TPAI can quietly constrain decarceration efforts—even in sentencing reforms like 15-84 that are explicitly intended to offer second chances to those sentenced as youth for an extended length of time.

### ***Age at 15-84 Parole Hearing***

At the time of their 15-84 parole hearing, beneficiaries were on average 36.6 years old (SD = 7.1). Ages ranged from 25.4 to 55.6 years.

### ***Release Prison***

Beneficiaries under Public Act 15-84 were released from a range of prisons across Connecticut, but the majority came from just a few facilities. Most notably, Osborn (21.1%) and Cheshire (20.3%) together account for over 40% of all releases. These, along with MacDougall (15.4%), Robinson (9.8%), and Enfield (8.9%), make up the top five release sites—collectively representing 75% of all 15-84 releases. Beneficiaries who participated in our interviews described being transferred between multiple prisons over the course of their sentence. However, the dataset received from BOPP did not include information on the full incarceration history for each individual—such as which facilities they were housed in or how long they spent at each. This limits our ability to confirm the significance of any single facility in the release process. Still, the concentration of releases from a small number of prisons suggests that certain facilities may have played a more active role in preparing individuals for release under 15-84. Possible contributing factors may include facility characteristics (e.g., housing long-term or adult male populations), greater administrative capacity to handle parole hearings, or internal policies and programming that support parole readiness. It may also reflect institutional differences in how cases were prioritized for review, or practical factors like the housing of individuals serving long

sentences in specific facilities. The remaining 25% of releases were spread across seven other institutions, each accounting for less than 7% of the total. Only one beneficiary was released from York—the state’s prison for women—consistent with the fact that all but one 15-84 beneficiaries were male.

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Brooklyn CI	8	6.5
Cheshire CI	25	20.3
Corrigan CC	3	2.4
CUSCOM to DE	1	0.8
Enfield CI	11	8.9
Garner CI	8	6.5
MacDougall CI	19	15.4
Northern CI	1	0.8
Osborn CI	26	21.1
Radgowski CC	4	3.3
Robinson CI	12	9.8
Willard-Cybulski CI	4	3.3
York CI	1	0.8
Total	123	100

### ***Parole Release Location***

Beneficiaries were primarily released to a small number of locations across the state. The majority were released to Hartford (26.9%), New Haven (22.7%), Waterbury (13.4%), Bridgeport (10.9%), and the Special Management Unit (SMU) (7.6%). Together, these five locations account for 82% of all 15-84 releases. The BOPP dataset does not specify why individuals were assigned to specific release locations, nor whether these reflect geographic return, risk assessment outcomes, or resource availability in each region. As such, while the pattern points to important institutional and geographic dynamics, further data would be needed to fully interpret the drivers behind release location assignments.

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Bridgeport	13	10.9
Hartford	32	26.9
Immigration	5	4.2
Interstate	2	1.7
MHU	3	2.5
New Britain	1	0.8
New Haven	27	22.7
Norwich	4	3.4
PARCOM	3	2.5
Residential	3	2.5

SMU	9	7.6
Waterbury	16	13.4
WRU	1	0.8
Missing	4	3.3
Total	123	

### ***Years Reduced from Estimated Sentence Due to 15-84***

To estimate how much time was effectively cut from each beneficiary's sentence due to release under Public Act 15-84, we calculated the difference between the original projected sentence end date (had 15-84 not been applied) and the date beneficiaries were released to parole. On average, beneficiaries had 7.9 years (SD = 6.4) cut from their sentences. The reduction ranged widely—from less than one year to as much as 40 years. The most common sentence reductions fell between 1 and 10 years, with approximately 70% of all beneficiaries falling within that range. Some individuals experienced substantial reductions, with 4 beneficiaries having 20 or more years removed from their projected sentence. This wide range reflects the variability in both original sentence lengths and the timing of parole hearings under 15-84. The data underscores the meaningful relief this policy has provided for many serving long sentences imposed in youth, while also illustrating that the degree of time reduction varied significantly across cases.

Years Reduced	Frequency	Valid Percent
> 1	7	5.7
1	13	10.7
2	7	5.7
3	3	2.5
4	9	7.4
5	10	8.2
6	8	6.6
7	10	8.2
8	6	4.9
9	7	5.7
10	9	7.4
11	3	2.5
12	8	6.6
13	1	.8
14	6	4.9
15	2	1.6
16	5	4.1
17	2	1.6
18	2	1.6
20	1	.8
22	1	.8

35	1	.8
40	1	.8
Total	122	100

### ***Recidivism***

As of January 2025, only 14 of the 123 beneficiaries (11.4%) released under PA 15-84 had recidivated, meaning they had either been re-incarcerated or absconded. In contrast 40.7% remain under supervision and 39% have been fully discharged from DOC oversight. We emphasize that an 11% recidivism rate is remarkably low. For context, the Connecticut Office of Policy and Management (OPM) has reported significantly higher three-year recidivism rates among the general prison population: 49% for a 2017 cohort, 44% for a 2019 cohort, and 43% for a 2020 cohort (OPM, 2024). Additionally, the last public OPM study to focus specifically on individuals convicted of violent offenses found a 65% re-incarceration rate three years post-release (OPM, 2009)—though the length of time those individuals had been incarcerated was not reported.

Comparatively, it appears that individuals released under 15-84—who were all convicted of serious violent offenses as youth—are not continuing to engage in violent behavior post-release at anywhere near the rate seen in broader DOC populations. This aligns with prior research showing that people who serve long-term prison sentences, particularly when incarcerated from a young age, tend to have lower recidivism rates upon release (OPM, 2015). In that study, recidivism rates were analyzed by length of incarceration. Individuals who served more than three years had the lowest recidivism rates, while those serving shorter terms—regardless of exact length—had comparably higher rates. However, that analysis was not disaggregated by offense type or severity. Taken together, these findings provide compelling, if preliminary, evidence that individuals released under 15-84—despite the severity of their original offenses—pose a lower risk to public safety than is often assumed.

Most of the cases involving beneficiaries' recidivism entailed compound violations, where a single event led to multiple charges (e.g., resisting, firearm possession, and drug trafficking). Among the 14 beneficiaries who recidivated, firearm involvement was the most common theme, appearing in half the cases. Four individuals absconded from supervision, while others returned on drug- or violence-related charges. Only one returned on a technical violation alone.

Category	Count	Brief Description
Absconding	3	Re-incarcerated solely for absconding from parole/supervision.
Assault / Weapons	1	One case with multiple charges including assault 2nd, escape, illegal weapon (not gun); one with threatening and Breach of Peace.
Drug	2	Positive drug, possession, or distribution—no other charges.
Firearm / Absconding	1	Emergency warrant issued—absconder with multiple pending gun charges.
Firearm / Sex Violence	1	Charges include gun + sexual violence
Firearms	3	Charges limited to illegal firearm possession or use.

Category	Count	Brief Description
Firearms / Drugs	1	Convicted of criminal possession of firearm + narcotics (WITS).
Firearms / Drugs / Driving	1	Arrested in ME with charges: drug trafficking, firearm possession, unlicensed driving.
Procedural Violation Only	1	Interfering, failure to appear, and probation violation (no new crimes).

### ***Time in Community (n=91)<sup>6</sup>***

Among beneficiaries who have not recidivated, the average time spent in the community is 57.5 months (approximately 4.8 years, SD = 26.7). Time in community varies widely, ranging from a minimum of 2 months to a maximum of 101.4 months (8.5 years). When disaggregated by race, white beneficiaries have spent the most time in the community on average (M = 75.2 months, SD = 13.3), followed by Hispanic beneficiaries (M = 60.8, SD = 28.9), and Black beneficiaries (M = 54.1, SD = 25.6).

### ***Employment Status***

Nearly three-quarters of beneficiaries (74.7%) had documented employment following their release. An additional 14.6% were marked as unemployed, and 1.6% were unemployed due to a disability. For 8.9% of beneficiaries, employment status was unknown.

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Employed	92	74.7
Unemployed	18	14.6
Unemployed (Disability)	2	1.6
Unknown	11	8.9
Total	123	100

### ***Housing Supports***

Personnel at the BOPP have kept notes on the ongoing living arrangements of beneficiaries. The research team scrubbed the notes for mentions of whom beneficiaries have been living with, as a way to corroborate the financial burdens of housing and the hesitancy of landlords to rent out their apartments to formerly incarcerated people. Please note that these percentages do not add up to 100% because individuals released have had a variety of housing arrangements. Immediate family members have provided crucial housing for beneficiaries; 43.1% of beneficiaries have lived with family (e.g., a parent, cousin, sibling, etc.) since their release. Similarly, 15.4% have lived with a romantic partner (e.g., spouse, girlfriend, etc.). 13% have lived in halfway housing or supportive housing at one point. And another 13% have either lived alone or in independent housing.

<sup>6</sup> These data are only available in the dataset for those who are still in community. This analysis excludes those who have not been re-incarcerated, and a number of beneficiaries whose time in community data are missing in the dataset received from BOPP.

### ***Recidivism Status Associated with Different Risk Scores***

To explore whether system-defined “risk” scores are associated with recidivism outcomes, we examined four variables: Mental Health (MH) score, TPAI score, Sex Offense Flag, and Total Score included in the administrative dataset received. All four variables violated assumptions of normality, so we first conducted Mann-Whitney U tests as a nonparametric alternative to independent-samples t-tests. Results indicate that recidivated individuals had significantly higher MH scores ( $U = 450, p = .004$ ), Sex Offense Flags ( $U = 562, p = .004$ ), and Total Scores ( $U = 490, p = .007$ ) compared to those who remained in the community. TPAI scores, however, did not differ significantly between the two groups ( $U = 552, p = .078$ ). These findings suggest that system-assigned markers of mental health needs, sex offense risk, and cumulative risk are more elevated among those who were reincarcerated. In other words, beneficiaries who have been reincarcerated tended to have higher MH, Sex Offense, and Total Scores than those still in community. Only TPAI scores did not differ between those still in community and those who have recidivated.

To confirm these findings and assess the magnitude of differences, we also conducted independent-samples t-tests. These largely reinforced the results of the Mann-Whitney tests: MH scores ( $t(121) = -2.65, p = .009$ ) and Total Scores ( $t(121) = -3.04, p = .003$ ) were significantly higher among those who recidivated, with medium-to-large effect sizes (Cohen’s  $d = 0.67$  and  $0.93$ , respectively). The Sex Offense Flag was marginally significant in the t-test ( $p = .016$  assuming equal variances,  $p = .093$  when variances are unequal), whereas it was clearly significant in the nonparametric test. Because this variable violated normality and showed a significant Mann-Whitney U result, we interpret that test as more reliable. TPAI scores were not significantly different between groups in either test ( $t(121) = -1.43, p = .154$ ), further confirming the Mann-Whitney U result.

### ***Recidivism Status Across Parole Locations***

We heard consistently in our interviews that the geography of 15-84 beneficiaries’ social networks—as well as the presence of organizations that support them—varies considerably across regions in Connecticut. Many participants emphasized a strong preference among beneficiaries to be released to specific areas, such as New Haven, where community support is more robust. Based on these insights, we sought to test whether recidivism rates varied by parole release location to assess whether this preference might be reflected in available quantitative data. However, the low number of releases in many counties made formal statistical testing unreliable. Among the 13 parole regions, only four—Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven, and Waterbury—had at least 10 individuals released, which is generally the minimum needed for valid chi-square testing. As more individuals are released over time, this question should be revisited with greater statistical power.

Foregoing statistical testing for the full set of locations, and because we believe geography remains a meaningful element in beneficiaries’ outcomes, we calculated the recidivism rate for those four counties with at least 10 releasees and compared each to the overall recidivism rate.<sup>7</sup> Despite the lack of statistical significance, we continue to treat parole geography as an

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<sup>7</sup> We do not have locations for 2 people so while 14 of 123 (11%) have recidivated, only 12 of those are counted in this analysis (10%)

analytically important dimension—particularly because the social, material, and organizational supports available in a region likely impact a beneficiary’s wellbeing and ability to avoid re-arrest or re-incarceration.

Parole Location	Recidivism Rate	Difference from Overall
Bridgeport	0.0%	−10.1% (lower)
Hartford	15.6%	+5.5% (higher)
New Haven	7.4%	−2.7% (slightly lower)
Waterbury	12.5%	+2.4% (slightly higher)

Among the four counties with at least 10 releasees, recidivism rates varied. Bridgeport had a 0.0% recidivism rate—10.1 percentage points lower than the overall average—while New Haven also had a slightly lower rate (7.4%, or 2.7 points below the overall rate). In contrast, Hartford (15.6%) and Waterbury (12.5%) had rates moderately above the overall average by 5.5 and 2.4 percentage points, respectively. Although not statistically significant, these differences suggest that regional variation in community infrastructure and support systems may play a role in post-release outcomes and should be explored further as more data become available.

### ***Recidivism Status Across Employment Status***

Stable employment is widely recognized as a critical resource for people returning from incarceration. Employment not only offers income but also a viable alternative to illicit work that many turn to when excluded from formal labor markets. This is particularly important for beneficiaries of 15-84, many of whom were incarcerated as teenagers and thus have limited formal work experience, credentials, or access to recognized job training programs. At the same time, individuals with felony convictions face significant structural barriers to employment due to background checks, licensing restrictions, and stigma. We therefore hypothesized that employment status might be associated with differences in recidivism outcomes.

Initial descriptive analysis supports this hypothesis. Beneficiaries who were unemployed had a recidivism rate of 27.8%, nearly four times higher than the rate for those who were employed (7.6%). Although the overall chi-square test across all employment status categories (including those unemployed due to disability and those with unknown status) approached significance ( $\chi^2(3) = 6.68, p = .083$ ), the small cell sizes for these additional groups likely compromised statistical power. We then re-ran the analysis, but excluded **those with unknown job status and those unemployed due to a self-reported disability** due to small cell sizes to see if relationship is stronger. When we restricted the analysis to only the two main categories—**Employed** and **Unemployed**—the association between employment status and recidivism became statistically significant ( $\chi^2(1) = 6.30, p = .012$ ; continuity-corrected  $p = .036$ ; Fisher’s Exact Test  $p = .026$ ).

This pattern is both substantively and statistically meaningful. Among the 14 people who recidivated, over 40% were unemployed, despite unemployed individuals making up only 16% of the sample. Meanwhile, the employed made up 75% of the overall sample but only 58% of those who recidivated. While causality cannot be inferred, these data suggest that lack of access to stable employment may increase the likelihood of returning to custody—underscoring the need for employment support, credentialing, and transitional job opportunities as part of broader

reentry strategies. Given the high-stakes consequences of unemployment and the structural barriers many face post-release, investment in equitable employment pathways should be seen as foundational to successful reintegration.

### ***15-84 Beneficiary Release Rate Per Prison***

We also examined the rate at which individuals eligible under 15-84 were released from specific prisons.<sup>8</sup> This analysis was prompted by interview participants, who frequently referenced the disparities in programs and services across different facilities. Importantly, many participants emphasized that their participation in programs and services throughout their incarceration—despite facing ongoing systemic barriers to access—was one of the most significant factors considered by the Board of Pardons and Paroles (BOPP) in granting release under 15-84. Although the administrative dataset we received does not include each beneficiary’s full incarceration history, we were able to identify the facility where they were housed at the time of their parole hearing and subsequent release. While this does not capture the entirety of their time in prison, it provides a useful proxy. To explore facility-level patterns, we calculated the number of 15-84 releases per 100 incarcerated individuals at each prison, using a multi-year facility average population as the denominator.<sup>9</sup> While this metric does not account for the number of eligible individuals at each site—information we do not have access to—it offers a rough indicator of which facilities may provide better release opportunities, potentially linked to their programming environment. The release rate was calculated by dividing the number of 15-84 releases by the average incarcerated population at that prison, then multiplying by 100.

Facility	Years Beneficiaries Released	Total Releasees	Population Dates	Avg. Prisoner Population	Release Rate
Brooklyn CI	2016-2024	8	2009-2025	438.5	1.8
CUSCOM to DE	2023	1	N/A	N/A	N/A
Cheshire CI	2016-2024	25	2009-2025	1305.6	1.9
Corrigan CC	2017-2023	3	2021-2025	662.7	0.5
Enfield CI	2016-2018	11	2009-2018	663.5	1.7
Garner CI	2017-2024	8	2009-2025	556.9	1.4
MacDougall CI	2017-2024	19	2009-2025	1914.8	1.0
Northern CI	2018-2018	1	2009-2021	244.6	0.4
Osborn CI	2016-2024	26	2009-2025	1524.2	1.7
Radgowski CC	2018-2022	4	2009-2021	1376.9	0.3
Robinson CI	2016-2022	12	2010-2025	1256.8	1.0

<sup>8</sup> All historical prison population data were accessed through Connecticut DOC’s Quarterly Average Facility Population dataset available on the Charles Open Data Portal - [https://data.ct.gov/Public-Safety/Department-of-Correction-Quarterly-Average-Facilit/f8ar-pgu4/about\\_data](https://data.ct.gov/Public-Safety/Department-of-Correction-Quarterly-Average-Facilit/f8ar-pgu4/about_data). Population data pertaining to Robinson CI were absent from the Quarterly Average Facility Population dataset, and were instead scraped from Charles DOC Monthly Statistics Reports - <https://portal.ct.gov/doc/report/monthly-statistics>.

<sup>9</sup> For each prison facility, we averaged all available quarterly population figures within each year. For example, if Brooklyn Correctional Institution reported quarterly populations of 455, 456, 497, and 500 in 2011, the annual average would be  $(455 + 456 + 497 + 500) / 4 = 477$ . We then computed a multi-year average by averaging these annual figures across the years with available data. The benefit of this approach is that it smooths out intra-year fluctuations, accounts for missing quarters, and provides a consistent denominator for normalizing release rates.

Willard-Cybulski					
CI	2016-2020	4	2009-2025	938.1	0.4
York CI	2021	1	2009-2025	943.8	0.1

The above table presents data on individuals released under Connecticut's Public Act 15-84, broken down by correctional facility. It includes the number of 15-84 releasees, the time period during which releases occurred, the years of available population data, the average incarcerated population per facility over time, and a release rate.<sup>10</sup> Cheshire CI has the highest release rate (1.9 per 100 incarcerated people), with 25 individuals released between 2016 and 2024. Brooklyn CI follows closely with a release rate of 1.8, despite having fewer total releases (8), due to its much smaller average population. Osborn CI and Enfield CI both show moderately high rates of 1.7, with 26 and 11 releases, respectively. Notably, Enfield CI shuttered in January 2018, so its high rate reflects a concentrated number of 15-84 releases over a relatively short period of time. Facilities like Garner CI (1.4), MacDougall CI (1.0), and Robinson CI (1.0) fall in the middle of the distribution. Though MacDougall had 19 releases, its large average population (~1,915) lowers its release rate. Radgowski CC, Willard-Cybulski CI, and Northern CI show very low release rates, between 0.3 and 0.4.<sup>11</sup> Finally, York CI, the state's primary women's prison, has the lowest release rate at just 0.1, with only one documented 15-84 release during the time period.

While variation in 15-84 release rates across prisons is clear, we are unable to conclude the precise reason. While one might expect a prison's security level to influence the likelihood of release—since higher-security facilities typically incarcerated people serving longer sentences, potentially making them less likely candidates for parole—the data do not support a consistent pattern.<sup>12</sup> For instance, Level 3 and Level 4 facilities appear across both high and low release rates, indicating that other individual and institutional factors are likely more influential, such as parole readiness, programming access, administrative discretion, or institutional culture around release support. Notably, several of the facilities with higher rates—like Cheshire, Brooklyn, and Osborn—are known to have more structured or longstanding program offerings, as noted by interview participants. Meanwhile, low-release facilities may lack these supports or have served as short-term or overflow housing during parts of the timeframe. While this analysis cannot control for the number of individuals eligible for 15-84 at each facility, the normalization by average population offers a useful approximation of where beneficiaries are more or less likely to be released from at the time of their hearing—and raises questions about the institutional conditions that support or constrain release opportunities.

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<sup>10</sup> Release rate could not be calculated for the one beneficiary who was serving an out-of-state sentence in Delaware (i.e., "CUSCOM to DE"), as no facility-level population data were available.

<sup>11</sup> Northern CI closed in June 2021 due to decarceration.

<sup>12</sup> Security levels for prisons in this analysis are as follows: Level 2 – Willard-Cybulski CI; Level 3 – Brooklyn CI, Enfield CI, Osborn CI, Radgowski CC, Robinson CI; Level 4 – Cheshire CI, Corrigan CC, Garner CI, MacDougall CI; Level 5 – Northern CI; and Levels 2–5 – York CI. Security level for CUSCOM to DE is not applicable.

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