



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

Sukhmani Singh, Ph.D.
Fernando Ricardo Valenzuela (they/them/el/elle), MSW
Joshua G. Adler
James Jeter*



School of Social Work | University of Connecticut

*Full Citizens Coalition

U.S. SUPREME COURT RULINGS



Miller v. Alabama (2012)

Mandatory **life without parole sentences** for **homicide offenses** are **unconstitutional** for youth under 18

Montgomery v. Louisiana (2016)

Miller must be applied retroactively to individuals sentenced to life without parole/release as children



1 out of 7 serving a life sentence

Unnecessary for public safety—individuals typically age out of criminal behavior by early adulthood (Bersani &

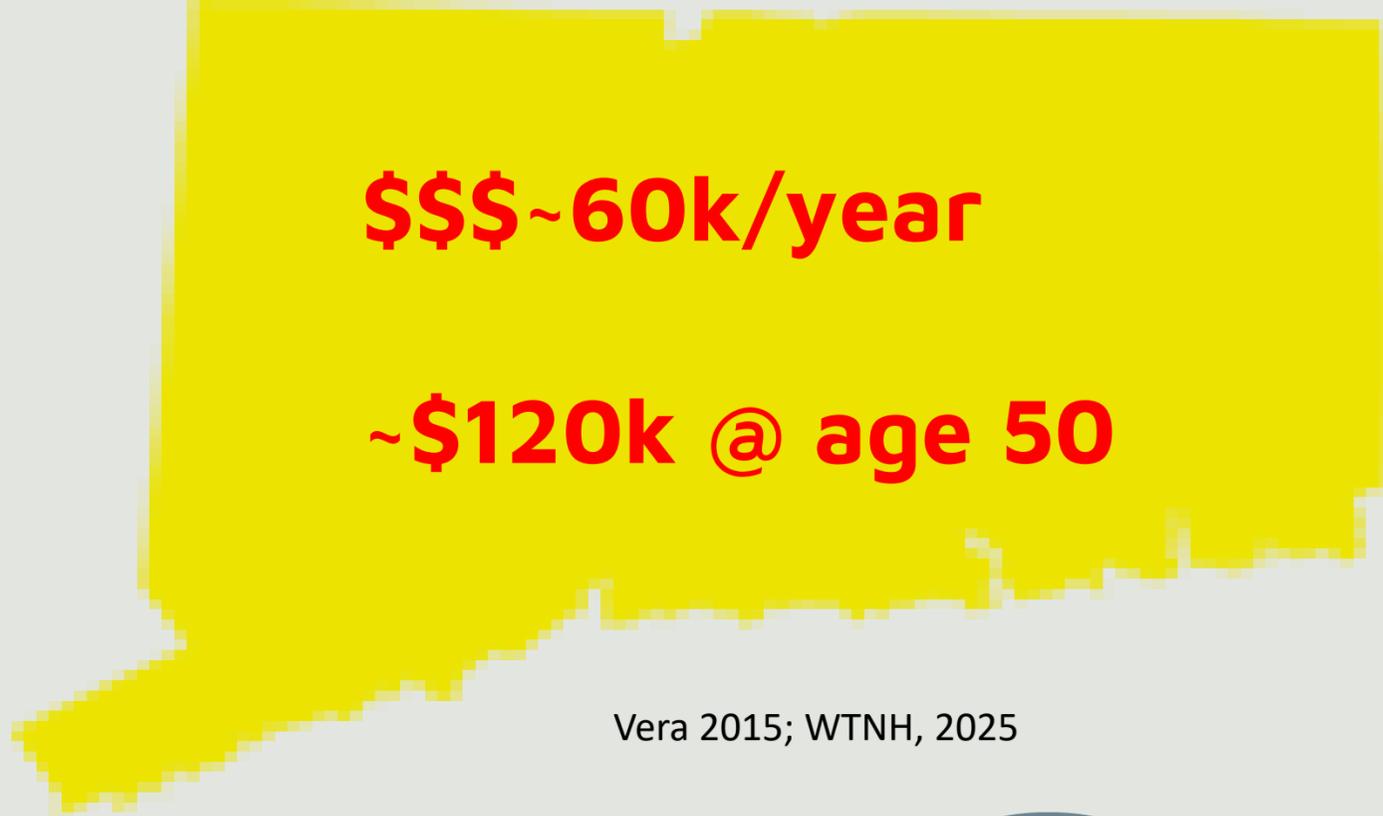
Doherty, 2018; Sampson & Laub, 2005)



~\$33k/year

\$2.25 million for a 50 years sentence

Rovner, 2023



\$\$\$~60k/year

~\$120k @ age 50

Vera 2015; WTNH, 2025

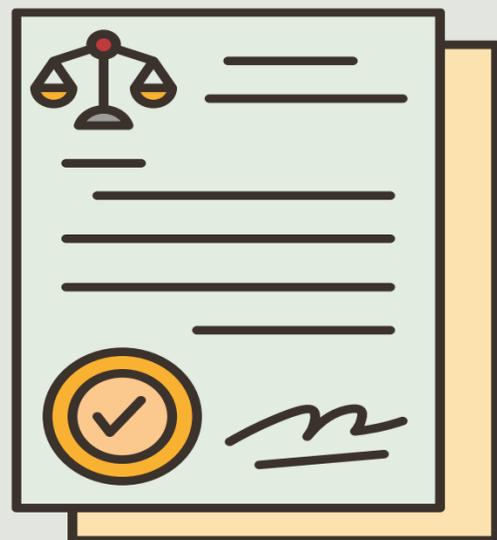
28 states post-*Miller* ~~JLWOP~~

5 states no one is serving JLWOP



Only nation that sentences children to life in prison

(Rovner, 2023)



SECOND CHANCE REFORMS

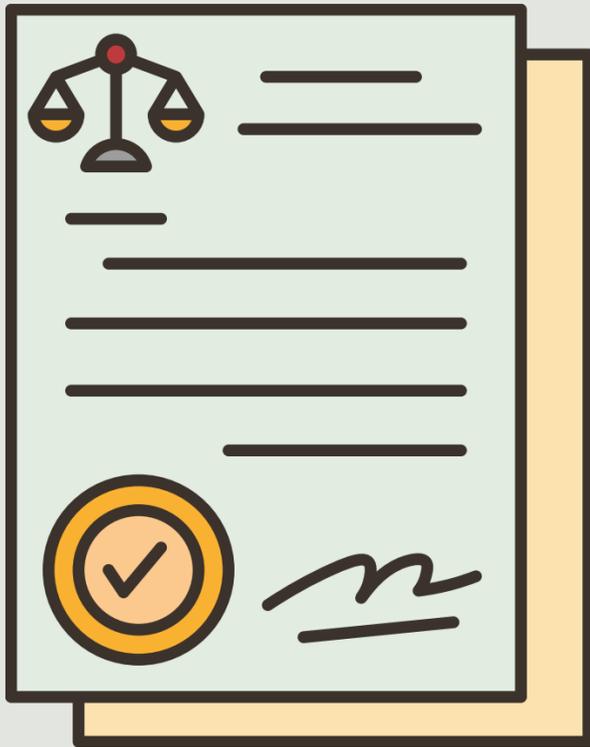
California: under 26 parole eligible youthful offenders (2017)

Massachusetts: prohibit life w/o parole > 21 (2024)

DC: extended *Miller* to under 25 (2020)

Washington State: under age 21 (2021)

**JLWOP population is a defacto test for
safe & equitable decarceration efforts!**



Public Act 15-84

- Established new eligibility and process for parole for individuals who committed offense **under the age of 18**

Public Act 23-169

- Expanded eligibility for parole established under Public Act 15-84 to **21, for persons who committed the crime while under 21 years of age and who were sentenced on or before October 1st, 2005**

NATIONAL LANDSCAPE

Pre-Miller: ~12,000 people across **44** states serving “de facto” life sentences; 2904 individuals sentenced to JLWOP

IN 2020

8632 still in prison serving “de facto life” for crimes committed >18

AS OF JANUARY 2024

1070 released (36.8% of the JLWOP population)

JUVENILE LIFERS: WHAT WE KNOW

- **Childhood trauma, violence & victimization pre-incarceration**
 - Domestic violence, victim of a crime, weekly neighborhood violence, unstable housing, physical and sexual abuse, **poverty**, > 50% attending school at time of offense; 85% suspended or expelled from school; 3rd in public housing (Brydon, 2021; Nellis, 2012; Daftary-Kapur et al., 2020)
- People experience **deep moral reckonings**, are remorseful, **recognize the harm** they levied and **desire deeply to contribute to society** (Abrams et al., 2023; Cavanagh et al., 2023)
- Navigate violent conditions and abuse while “growing up” in prison: **antithetical** to developmental needs (Cavanagh et al., 2024)
- Cycles of physical violence can be necessary to show **survival in prison** and harm mental health; **education**, access to books, **programming and jobs** offer **personal growth and support rehabilitation** (Abrams et al., 2020; Brydon, 2021)



JUVENILE LIFERS: WHAT WE KNOW

- **Incarceration** & shuffling around prisons disrupts familial bonds (Brydon, 2021; Bennett et al., 2025)
- **Sexual violence** is a constant threat and is navigated while youth are **forming meaningful relationships and familial bonds in prison** (Bennett et al., 2025; Brydon, 2021; Cavanagh et al., 2024)
- **62%** not engaged in prison programming **because of state policies; excluded from rehabilitation** opportunities because of sentence length; **desire education and programming** (Daftary-Kapur et al., 2020; Huppert et al., 2025; Nellis et al., 2012; Taylor, 2024)
- Re-entry is hard in a very deeply changed world:
 - Challenges receiving needed paperwork (SS card, ID, birth certificate) (Brydon, 2021; Daftary-Kapur et al., 2020)
 - Missed developmental milestones (marriage, jobs, college, opening bank accounts) and family events (births, deaths) (Abrams et al. 2023; Bennett et al., 2025; Taylor, 2024)
 - Family supports extremely important especially around housing (Brydon, 2021; Daftary-Kapur et al., 2020)
 - Feeling misunderstood by family & difficulty in intimate relationships (Brydon, 2021; Taylor, 2025)
 - Job discrimination even though people do find employment (Brydon, 2021)

JUVENILE LIFERS: LOW-RISK TO PUBLIC SAFETY!

- 688 juvenile lifers, who were under 26 years at time of offense, from the 2018-19 release cohort in **California**:
 - Overall: **41.9%** conviction rate of the ~36K people released that year
 - **3.1%** conviction rate within 3 years following release; **21 out of 688** (CDCR, 2024)
- Recidivism rate [*charged with firearm possession*] in **Michigan is .55%** or 1 out of 181 (SJM, 2023)
 - **\$94,135,920.83**: Estimated savings to MDOC in reduced incarceration costs (SADO, 2024)
 - Overall, 23.6% recidivism rate
- Reconviction rate in **Philadelphia is 1.14%** (2 out of 174) 2 years post release (Daftary-Kapur et al., 2020)
 - **\$9.5** million in savings over the first decade
 - Follow-up of all 287 individuals released from **2016-2023** in PA (Sbeglia, 2024)
 - **9.1% (26)** charged with a new offense; **5.2% (15)** convicted of a misdemeanor or felony



15-84 BEYOND BARS STUDY:

**PARTICIPATORY, MULTI-METHOD
EXPLORATORY DESIGN**



James Jeter, Community co-researcher

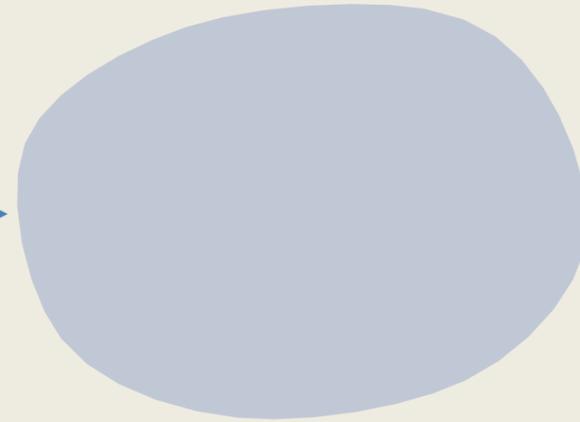
- Co-founder and Director of Full Citizen's Coalition
- Community leader & organizer
- Vital contributor from conceptualization of project
- Co-created the protocol
- **Key support** for participant recruitment



Study Timeline



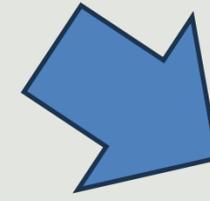
Sept. 2023



November 2025

Qualitative

- 1: 1 interviews with beneficiaries of 15-84 ($N = 11$)
- Interview protocol focused on:
 - experiences with incarceration
 - P.A. 15-84 parole hearing process
 - re-entry



Quantitative

- Administrative data, BOPP ($N = 123$)
- Beneficiaries released as of January 2025
- Domains:
 - Basic demographic information
 - Historical legal processing
 - Current legal status

THANK YOU! Staff at BOPP



BOPP DATA: An Overall Look at 123 Beneficiaries

Point in Time Analysis



Demographic Characteristics

Sex	N
Male	122 (99.2%)
Female	1 (.8%)
Total	123

Race/Ethnicity	N
Black	82 (66.7%)
Hispanic	37 (30.1%)
White	4 (3.3%)
Total	123



This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-SA-NC](#)

Age at offense = 16.8 years (range: 14-17.9)

Historical Legal Processing



Most serious charge	N
Murder	40 (32.5%)
Manslaughter	32 (26%)
Felony murder	22 (17.9%)

Total effective sentence =
29.7 years (range: 11 – 80)



Parole & Release

- 15-84 hearing: 36.6 years old
- Sentence reduction: 7.9 years (most common between 1-10 years)

Top 5 release sites (75% of all releases)

Osborn (21.1%)

Cheshire (20.3%)

MacDougall (15.4%)

Robinson (9.8%)

Enfield (8.9%)

Parole Release Locations

Hartford (26.9%)

New Haven (22.7%)

Supervision & Time in Community

Under DOC supervision	40.7%
Fully discharged from DOC oversight	39%

Time in community (Race/ethnicity)	Months
Overall	57.5 (2 – 101.4 months)
White beneficiaries	75.2
Hispanic beneficiaries	60.8
Black beneficiaries	54.1

Employment & Housing Status

Employed	92 (74.7%)
Unemployed	18 (14.6%)
Unemployed (Disability)	2 (1.6%)
Unknown	11 (8.9%)
Total	123

Lived with family	43.1%
Romantic partner	15.4%
Halfway housing	13%
Lived alone	13%

Recidivism: Re-incarceration OR absconding

14/123 = **11.4%** OR 1 out of 10

10/123 = **8.1%** OR 1 out of 12

65% re-incarceration rate 3 years post-release for people convicted of violent offenses (OPM, 2009); OPM 2017: **49%** recidivism rate 3 years post release

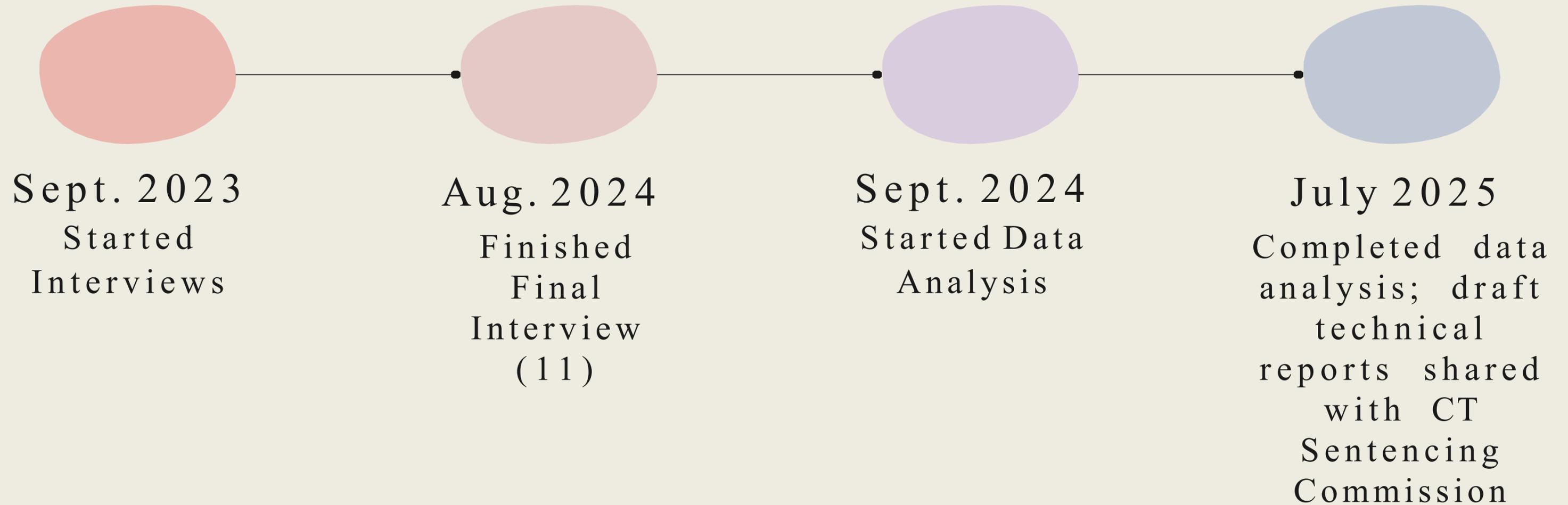
Category	Count	Brief Description
Absconding	3	Re-incarcerated solely for absconding from parole/supervision.
Assault / Weapons	1	One case with multiple charges including assault 2nd, escape, illegal weapon (not gun); one with threatening and Breach of Peace.
Drug	2	Positive drug, possession, or distribution—no 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.
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).



Qualitative Data: Interviews with Beneficiaries



Qualitative Data Timeline



Participant Demographics

N=11 (10 men, 1 other):

- Not living in court-mandated housing
- 5 under parole at time of interview
- Ages: 31 - 52 (M=41.36)

Race:

- 73% Black
- 27% Hispanic

Incarceration:

- ~9 - 30 years (M=21.1 years)
- Avg. age of incarceration: 16 y.o.
- Avg. age of release: 39.4 y.o.

Educational Attainment:

- ~18% GED/H.S. diploma
- ~55% some college
- ~27% associate's degree

Current Housing Situation:

- 9 renting
- 1 staying short-term with Family/friends
 - 1 staying long-term with family/friends

Interview Protocol

Four Areas:

Sample Question

Early Life
Experiences

"Tell me about your experience with incarceration as a young person."

Life During
Incarceration

"What programs and services did you take throughout your incarceration?"

Experience of P.A. 15-84 Parole
Hearing

"What was the parole hearing process like for you?"
"What was preparation like?"

Re-entry
Experiences

"How were you prepared for release?" *"Tell us about your access to resources (housing, employment, etc.)."*



01. LIFE DURING INCARCERATION



Navigating Prison Culture & Long-term Incarceration

"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...I just matured faster because my environment demanded that I mature faster. I was surrounded by adult men who, if they wanted it, everyday would have me defending my life."

-John

"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." -Charlie

"You can do everything nasty and wicked possible, or you can build a day up with something productive ." -Brandon



Long-Term Carceral Neglect re: Programs/Services

"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." -Frank

"They only helped the people they knew were going home. If you had a long sentence, you were invisible." -Robert

"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."

-Nathan



Self-Education & Mentorship

"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...they made a difference in my life." -Frank

"I got...a lot of genuine respect because I learned to navigate prison with a respectful demeanor, sort of like an elder, even though I was younger...people were now respecting because of me and not out of fear or what I did in terms of violence." -Nathan

"you know, I had guys who were, who really taught me just how to conduct myself to avoid a lot of issues." -John



Turning Points & Transformations

*[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 confrontations, any argument.**"*
-Nathan

*"They [mentors] made me want to be better. Whether they knew it or not, **they made me want to be better because I watched them ."** -Frank*



Turning Points & Transformations

*“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*



02. RE-ENTRY



Areas of Re-entry

01

Document
Procurement

02

Health

03

Housing

04

Relationships

05

Employment

06

Experiences w/
Re-entry
programs

07

Parole

08

Technology

Documentation Procurement

73% of participants experienced challenges

- social security cards, state IDs, and birth certificates

“[DOC] always say they're gonna have your ID, birth certificate. **Know what they did they be having? Nothing...**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.**” -Brandon

Documentation Procurement

"prison...messed up my social security number. They, they had a wrong social security number, so when I went home...the social security number that...was on the paper that they released me with wasn't the social security. So I couldn't get my husky [insurance], now I gotta get my real social security"

-Daniel

Documentation Procurement

"The law just changed that nobody should come home without an ID. I get calls every day, guys coming home with no IDs...all the DOC has to do is take you to Walker, take a picture, and produce the ID for you... 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...'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...

You're just sitting there making somebody frustrated about being home. This is why you see guys leave the halfway house."

-Robert

Housing

Three patterns for re-entry housing across participants:

- housing directly with family (6 participants)
- sent directly to halfway housing (2)
- choosing halfway housing (3)

Experiences with Halfway Housing

"[I] 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." -Thomas

*"[I got to] pay no rent, for the next for six months to a year" and was able to "stash most of my money."
-Brandon*



Experiences with Halfway Housing

"[whatever you] need to make a smooth transition into society, you're told the halfway house will do that for you" by "lawyers, the parole board...but that's not the case...you go in there and the people that work there...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."

-Frank



Housing Landscape

"housing is so predatory...There's no system of housing. There's no system of education. There's really no system of return...I feel like re-entry is such a hustle...no organizations are coming together because organizations are competing for the same pools of money...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." -John

"They say 6 months is your max...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." -Frank

Employment

~82% (9) received employment from friends/family/personal connections inside prison

- others found it on their own (1), or through a halfway house (1)

"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."

-Lawrence

Employment

*"majority of us [previously incarcerated folks] 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?" -Robert*

Employment

'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...**there's a large amount of people out here that's doing something they're not supposed to be doing to make ends meet...People are doing the craziest shit, they're just trying to make ends meet...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?..."**

Employment

"I just think that we need a little more compassion here, especially from the policymakers, 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...then fix it...give [previously incarcerated people] 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 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." -Frank

Employment

"[Working] 50-60 hours a week...[and] just making time for family and friends...that's like the biggest challenge." -David

"A friend of mine took me to a job interview...[then] I had to figure out how to get an Uber account [to get to work]...there's no bus. Yeah, there's no bus." -Remy



Re-Entry Programs in Community

"[SCRIP offers] trauma therapy services...to help guys address their issues as they're transitioning." - John

"[Project M.O.R.E.] and the \$500 a month program...helped me out...They helped me out with a lot of bills." -Daniel



Re-Entry Programs in Community

"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."

-Robert

Re-Entry Programs in Community

"[there's] nothing in place really...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...211 is not up to date...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?"

-Remy

Re-Entry Programs in Community

"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..."

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."

-Robert



RECOMMENDATIONS



RECOMMENDATIONS: Legislative

Expand parole eligibility by raising the age to 26

- Determine eligibility by age at offense
- Remove October 1st, 2005 date
- Clear picture: **negligible** recidivism rates; **not a threat** to public safety.
- Saves taxpayer **\$\$\$\$\$!**
 - **\$60k/year** in CT is a conservative estimate

RECOMMENDATIONS: Administrative

Support re-entry with documentation

- Social security cards, state IDs, and birth certificates

Invest in and **further build** prison education programs & other educational & mental health programming

- Agnostic of sentence length
- Education supports re-entry, benefits the state in increased tax revenues

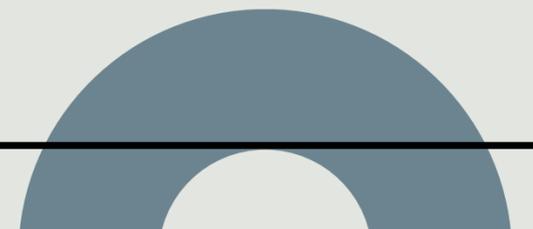
Support maintaining familial bonds while people are incarcerated

- Calls to family and the ability to interact with their loved ones when they visit
- Supports desistance within and re-entry

RECOMMENDATIONS

Support local organizations & non-profits run by community leaders/impacted people and organizers to address violence (Sharkey et al., 2017)

- Nationally, 10 additional organizations in a city with 100,000 residents = 9% reduction in the murder rate
- NLEP, FCC are examples of such organizations!



RECOMMENDATIONS

SOCIETAL & PREVENTATIVE

- Increase affordable housing and improve housing infrastructure
- Increase economic opportunities; summer youth employment programs, better availability of jobs, employment barriers for people with records, etc.
- Create better built environments: vacant lots become parks etc...
- Increase investments in our schools and education
- Invest in historically divested neighborhoods
- Expand access to healthcare and SO ON...(Barber, 2024; CAP, 2024; Desmond, 2023; Sharkey, 2018)



Thank You

Acknowledgements

Funder: CT Sentencing Commission, IMRP

Alex Tsarkov & Rich Sparaco

