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## **“These People, Do They Care?” Facilitating Connections to Post-Incarceration Reentry Supports**

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“These People, Do They Care?” Facilitating Connections to Post-Incarceration Reentry Supports

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Sociology

Bates College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By

Emma R. Block

Lewiston, Maine

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## ABSTRACT

The Maine Prisoner Reentry Network (MPRN) is a statewide organization with the mission of connecting and supporting Maine's reentry community. In April 2020, MPRN began conducting remote meetings with incarcerated individuals prior to release, a practice that had not previously been allowed by the state Department of Corrections. This allowed for advance planning around the needs of returning citizens and the opportunity to introduce them to various reentry supports. MPRN strives to be equitable and sought a research partnership with me in hopes of further expanding their reach and impact among returning citizens in Maine. My research is thus motivated by the following questions: what are structural barriers that impact reentry experiences or curb access to reentry supports? How is MPRN able to meet the needs of returning citizens, and what role has conducting remote meetings prior to release played in the supports provided by MPRN? Working in collaboration with MPRN, I conducted 28 interviews with returning citizens who met remotely with the organization prior to their release, as well as with reentry-related service providers across the state of Maine. Findings from interviews suggest that given the many challenges faced by returning citizens, these remote meetings should continue because they have positively impacted the process of reentry planning. In addition, findings document that most participants found the full range of supports provided by MPRN to be highly valuable, not just the material supports but emotional supports as well. Findings further raise some concerns about equity of access to MPRN's supports, which suggests that broader advertisement of the organization could enhance their operations. Other suggestions for improvement include increased support for people with serious mental health challenges, more transparency around which reentry resources can be guaranteed and which cannot, and prioritizing racial representation among leadership.

Key Words: Maine Prisoner Reentry Network, reentry supports, reentry challenges, community-engaged research.

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## INTRODUCTION

“In June of 2017, 5 people gathered together at the Catholic Charities office in Auburn, Maine to discuss how they might support citizens returning to the community after incarceration. Word that this discussion was happening spread, and within months, dozens of people from all over the state—people from non-profits, the corrections system, social service agencies, faith based organizations, law enforcement, recovery services, formerly incarcerated, and more—began attending and contributing to these monthly meetings.”

This quote from the website of my community partner, the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network (MPRN), describes how the organization began four years ago. Since its inception, MPRN has expanded and evolved, particularly throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Visible in several places on their website is MPRN’s logo, which depicts two silhouettes walking side-by-side. This logo demonstrates part of the organization’s mission statement, also on the website:

“MPRN creates and facilitates connections.” These connections are meant to combat the isolation, stigma, and limited resources often confronted by returning citizens as they transition from incarceration to the community.

This thesis arose in the spirit of community-engaged research, from a question introduced by my community partner that I then expanded. Beginning in April 2020, as much of the world began relying on remote platforms to interact, MPRN has conducted hundreds of virtual meetings with incarcerated individuals whose release is upcoming, wherein they discuss the needs of the individual and introduce them to services that can support them throughout their reentry. This practice of meeting remotely with incarcerated people had previously not been permitted by the Department of Corrections but was adopted due to circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. When I first connected with the executive director of MPRN in December 2020, these meetings were a relatively new operation. MPRN leadership was looking to examine how holding these remote meetings impacted reentry outcomes and how more

returning citizens could connect with these supports. Thus, based on this need identified by my community partner, my research is motivated by two questions: what are structural barriers that impact reentry experiences or curb access to reentry supports? How is MPRN able to meet the needs of returning citizens, and what role has conducting remote meetings prior to release played in the supports provided by MPRN? In addition to this thesis, I collaborated with my community partner to produce a video explaining the work MPRN does and the tangible and intangible supports they provide to returning citizens. I also wrote an executive summary outlining the findings from this project and created a list of quotes from interviews I conducted. These materials were created with the hope that MPRN can use them for advocacy purposes, to promote their organization and illustrate the ways their work has benefited returning citizens.

To address my research questions, this thesis progresses through five chapters. In the following chapter, I review literature about reentry and the marginalization experienced by returning citizens. I briefly review scholarship about the history of the carceral state, mass incarceration in the contemporary U.S., and exclusionary policies for those currently and formerly incarcerated. This section also describes the ways that mass incarceration is tied to institutional racism and neoliberalism, leaving marginalized populations significantly overrepresented in the prison system. I then outline a series of challenges associated with reentry, including systemic barriers, community integration, and securing resources such as housing. Here, I contextualize why reentry is so taxing and why outside supports are needed given the realities of the existing system in the United States. Following this review of the literature, in chapter three I explain my methodology and justify my choices of community-engaged research and qualitative methods, given the benefits of each approach and their relevance to the current

study. Here, I also introduce my community partner in more detail and discuss the process of conducting 28 interviews with returning citizens and service providers.

In chapters four and five, I turn to the stories of returning citizens and the ways their experiences provide insight into both the barriers faced by this population and the potential of an organization such as the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network to serve as a support throughout the reentry process. Chapter four focuses on the process of planning reentry while participants were still incarcerated and looking towards their upcoming release. This section also considers the equity, or lack thereof, within the processes by which participants connected with reentry supports. Chapter five describes participants' experiences post-release—challenges they faced as well as ways they benefited from existing supports such as the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network. In the final chapter, I summarize findings, propose suggestions based on feedback from interviews, and offer final thoughts about this country's existing system of punishment.

Before this thesis begins in earnest, I feel it is appropriate to situate myself within the research I conducted and the partnerships I benefited from. Having done a great deal of research about this topic and worked previously with similar populations, I approach this thesis with a knowledge of subject matter but not with the expertise others gain through lived experience. Throughout the past year, I have attended weekly meetings hosted by the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network and spent hours listening to conversations about the challenges faced by this community. That being said, because I do not have lived experience of incarceration and because many other parts of my identity do not reflect the population this organization serves, I was cognizant of the spaces and conversations it may not have been appropriate for me to be a part of. Particularly for college students working in collaboration with community partners, certain identities or backgrounds may have inherent value in their community engagement, and students

like myself who do not share those backgrounds must determine how to navigate that tension. Throughout the process of writing this thesis and building relationships with my community partners, I sought to find the spaces where I could be helpful while recognizing where I would not.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

“Why do we take prison for granted?” This fundamental question, posed by scholar and activist Angela Davis in her book *Are Prisons Obsolete?* challenges the reader to consider why it is so difficult to imagine a world without prisons, why these institutions feel like an “inevitable fact of life” (Davis 2003, pg. 15). People try to distance themselves from the realities produced by prisons, Davis argues, dismissing incarceration as a “fate reserved for the ‘evildoers’” (pg. 16). Viewing prisons in this way exonerates individuals from feelings of guilt or responsibility to act, allowing them to avoid thinking critically about the toll that prisons take on our communities or doing the work to envision what a world without these institutions could actually look like. To understand the ways in which prisons impact society in the U.S., we must examine which populations disproportionately end up in prison and analyze the lived experiences of individuals both during and after incarceration.

This literature review seeks to outline the context of the reentry process and the marginalization experienced by returning citizens. First, I will focus on how the increasing rate of mass incarceration in the United States and the white supremacist foundation of the carceral system have culminated in extremely high recidivism rates and exclusionary policies for those currently and formerly incarcerated. I will then examine the ways in which the reentry process is defined by a series of challenges and systemic barriers that inhibit successful reentry. I will conclude by turning to the current study and the ways it is framed by the existing literature.

### **I. Mass Incarceration in the Contemporary United States**

The United States incarceration rate is the highest of any country in the world, at approximately 600 incarcerated people per 100,000 residents (Miller & Khey 2016; Bares & Mowen 2020; Kjellstrand, Clark, Caffery, Smith & Eddy 2021). A great deal of literature has

documented the history of the U.S. carceral state (Davis 2003; Wacquant 2005; Simon 2007; Alexander 2010; Rowell-Cunsolo, Szeto, McDonald, & El-Bassel 2016; Sliva & Samimi 2018; Ortiz & Jackey 2019). State penitentiaries resembling the ones seen in the contemporary U.S. were first introduced in the 1830s; almost immediately, recidivism was identified as an issue (Simon 2007). Prison was used as a symbolic way to banish people from their communities and to assert the state's power by excluding those who violated norms (Wacquant 2005).

Around the 1970s, the incarceration rate in the United States, already relatively high, began to climb, although this increase had little or no effect on official crime rates (Davis 2003; Wakefield & Uggen 2010; Brayne 2013; Miller 2013; Morenoff & Harding 2014). From the 1970s until the end of 2000, the incarceration rate increased from 90 to nearly 500 Americans in prison for every 100,000 free residents (Simon 2007). This increase in incarceration rates coincided with the beginning of the War on Drugs, which led to growing racial disparities in imprisonment. During this time, the percentage of the population incarcerated for drug offenses experienced a sharp increase—while 40,000 people were incarcerated for drug-related crimes in 1980, in 2019 that number exceeded 430,000 people (The Sentencing Project). This spike in incarceration also dramatically changed prison demographics, which shifted from over 70% white in 1950 to almost 70% Black and Latinx by the end of the 1980s (Ortiz & Jackey 2019). Prison sentences in the U.S. are markedly longer than in countries with comparable prison admission rates, largely the result of 'three strikes' laws and mandatory minimums (Brayne 2013). The prison industrial complex ranks among the fastest-growing U.S. industries.

Some scholars discuss ways the carceral state reflects neoliberalist ideologies (Miller 2013; Martensen 2020). Martensen (2020) writes that neoliberal rhetoric helped to increase public support for tough-on-crime policies that essentially criminalized poverty, addiction, and

Blackness, while simultaneously decreasing public support for the funding of social welfare services. Similarly, reviewing literature on race, hyper-incarceration, and urban poverty policy, Miller (2013) considers the intersection of criminal justice and social welfare policy along with the ways neoliberal ideologies have shaped both of these policy trends. Miller (2013) writes, “the state’s commitment to rehabilitate prisoners through education and social programs was unseated by commitments to deter crime and incapacitate ex-offenders” (pg. 575).

In addition to neoliberalism, many scholars place race at the center of their analyses of the prison system, arguing that the carceral state was established as an extension of slavery and segregation and that the evolution of the U.S. prison system cannot be separated from this country’s history of systemic racism (Wacquant 2005; Simon 2007; Alexander 2010; Brayne 2013). These scholars argue that in a way unparalleled by other countries, the timeline from slavery, to sharecropping, to the Jim Crow regime, to ghettos and prisons, demonstrates a series of government-run institutions designed to subordinate and confine Black and brown people (Davis 2003; Wacquant 2005; Alexander 2010; Ortiz & Jackey 2019). Black, Indigenous, and Latinx Americans are represented in U.S. prisons at disproportionate rates (Davis 2003; Olson et al. 2009; Wakefield & Uggen 2010; Kiczkowski 2011; Rowell-Cunsolo et al. 2016; Miller & Khey 2016; Martensen 2020). Black people comprise about 13% of the U.S. population, but 38% of people incarcerated in state and federal prisons are Black (The Sentencing Project; BOP statistics). The number of Black American men under 40 years old with prison records is twice the number of Black men with college degrees, and one in three carry a criminal record (Wakefield & Uggen 2010). Simon (2007) writes that “[a]t this level of ‘participation,’ prison is for young African-American men a more important institution for integrating them as subjects into adult roles than higher education, the military, or marriage and is comparable to the labor

market” (pg. 472). Morenoff and Harding (2014) also compare prison to the school system or labor market in the way that it shapes the lives of young Black men particularly. The deeply racialized nature of this country’s criminal legal system and prison industrial complex must be considered when evaluating incarceration and reentry experiences.

Closely related to this discussion of race and the prison system, research shows that marginalized populations are significantly overrepresented in U.S. prisons. In their literature review “Incarceration and Stratification,” Wakefield and Uggen (2010) discuss the ways that the incarcerated population reflects existing disparities in the U.S. and how incarceration both exacerbates and generates new disparities. They write that prisons “house the jobless, the poor, the racial minority, and the uneducated, not the merely criminal” (pg. 393). Similarly, Uggen (2007) writes, “[t]hose we punish do not represent a random draw from the general population of those committing crime. Instead, those we punish are overwhelmingly poor, disproportionately men of color, and disenfranchised in both the literal and figurative sense of the word” (pg. 467). Most incarcerated people enter the prison system with low levels of educational attainment and few job skills (Morenoff & Harding 2014), and at the time of their arrest, the majority of incarcerated people were working low-quality, low-paying jobs (Wakefield & Uggen 2010). Scholars have also examined the relationship between geography and reentry. The majority of incarcerated people come from and return to concentrated areas in specific counties and neighborhoods (Morenoff & Harding 2014). These areas, which are usually cities despite the fact that most prisons are located in rural areas (Hamlin 2020), tend to have higher concentrations of poverty, fewer job opportunities, heavier police presences, less social capital and fewer opportunities in general. Given these findings, research unsurprisingly shows that recidivism

rates are higher for people who return to disadvantaged areas compared to more stable ones (Morenoff & Harding 2014).

Prominent scholar Loïc Wacquant outlines three ways that incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people are excluded from society. Wacquant (2005) argues in *Race as Civic Felony* that mass incarceration causes civic death in the same way that slavery caused social death. Restrictions for incarcerated people on certain federal grants deny cultural capital to this population by making it extremely difficult to obtain a college education. While incarcerated, individuals are also denied forms of public aid such as welfare payments, disability support, veteran's benefits, and food stamps on the grounds that they receive adequate resources and care from correctional facilities. People with a criminal record often are banned for life from certain forms of public aid, have limited access to public housing, and have their parental rights curtailed. In addition to the denial of cultural capital and public aid, voting rights policies restrict political participation to varying degrees for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. These forms of exclusion, Wacquant argues, are driven not by what is practical but by the "political imperative to draw sharp symbolic boundaries that intensify and extend penal stigma by turning felons into long-term moral outsiders akin in many respects to an inferior caste" (Wacquant 2005, pg. 135). Thus, these policies which deliberately target people of color and poor people have increased the stigma associated with incarceration and ultimately limited returning citizens' abilities to meet their economic, social, and political needs.

Given the extremely high incarceration rate in the United States, millions of people have at some point had contact with the prison system, although most do not spend the rest of their lives incarcerated. Ninety-five percent of all incarcerated people are eventually released back into the community, with over 600,000 individuals released each year (Kim, Bolton, Hyde,

Fincke, Drainoni, Petrakis, Simmons, & McInnes 2019; LaCourse, Johnson Listwan, Reid & Hartman 2019; Ortiz & Jackey 2019; Bares & Mowen 2020). As discussed in the following section, the reentry process is plagued by a variety of challenges, from navigating institutional constraints, to securing basic needs, to coping with the stigma that accompanies a criminal conviction. Given the difficulties associated with reentry, it is unsurprising that nationwide, about one-third of people released from prison will become reincarcerated within the first year of release, and over one-half will return to prison within a few years of their release date (Miller & Khey 2016; Wallace, Fahmy, Cotton, Jimmons, McKay, Stoffer & Syed 2016; Bares & Mowen 2020).

## **II. Reentry Challenges and Barriers**

Incarceration is thought to have a “cumulative negative impact on one’s social and institutional bonds in the community” (Moore, Gregorian, Tangney, Folk, Stuewig & Salatino 2018, pg. 976). Reentry—leaving prison and returning to the community—and reintegration—reconnecting with the institutions of society—are usually extremely challenging processes defined by a series of adversities including systemic barriers and limited supports (Visher & Travis 2003; Kiezkowski 2011; Moore et al. 2013; Bender, Cobbina & McGarrell 2016; Wallace et al. 2016; Northcutt Bohmert, Duwe & Kroovand Hipple 2018; LaCourse et al. 2019; Bares & Mowen 2020; Hamlin 2020; Kjellstrand et al. 2021). For the purposes of this literature review, reentry outcomes, a term commonly used in reentry literature, will be used broadly to include employment, housing, mental and physical health, social support, substance use, finances, and recidivism. In this section, I first examine the obstacles for returning citizens put in place by agencies that comprise the prisoner reentry industry. Next, I describe the ways that social support, or lack thereof, can profoundly impact reentry outcomes. Finally, I will outline

challenges associated with securing resources such as employment, housing, and mental and physical health treatment.

### *Prisoner Reentry Industry*

Many scholars have documented the rise of what has become known as the prisoner reentry industry (PRI) (Clear 2010; Ross 2010; Thompkins 2010; Link 2019; Ortiz & Jackey 2019). The PRI includes federal, state, county, and city agencies, as well as the Department of Corrections and parole and probation. The PRI also includes both not-for-profit organizations and for-profit companies that have contracts with federal and state agencies to run programs such as drug treatment and anger management (Thompkins 2010). Rather than a mechanism of rehabilitation for formerly incarcerated people, scholars argue that this industry is an extension of the prison industrial complex and, motivated by profit margins, is used as a way to surveil, fine, and ultimately reincarcerate people.

A number of scholars point out the ways in which economic interests are linked to both the prison industrial complex and the PRI (Clear 2010; Ross 2010; Thompkins 2010; Ortiz & Jackey 2019). Private organizations and businesses that provide reentry programming are constantly opening and growing. Clear (2010) explains that prison growth produces reentry growth, and high recidivism rates facilitate the growth of the prison industry. Ross (2010) draws on authors who have popularized the notion of the prison industrial complex and the ways businesses have benefitted from mass incarceration: “The whole panoply of nonprofit organizations and for-profit businesses is able to capitalize on this insatiable need to incarcerate individuals and build prisons, ultimately to make money from the pain and suffering of others behind bars” (pg. 176). Thompkins (2010) found that people who work in the business of running programs such as drug treatment actively pursue returning citizens as clients because

these individuals have to be present for classes or risk reincarceration, and because the companies can charge the returning citizens' bills to Medicaid, which guarantees a profit. Some PRI agencies receive massive amounts of funding and have staff who are paid very high salaries. According to Thompkins (2010), "If those organizations in the business of facilitating prisoner reentry were successful at providing the services they argue they provide, members of the organizations would work themselves out of a job" (pg. 597-8).

Thompkins (2010) also documents how developing and facilitating programs and services for formerly incarcerated people has become a lucrative money-making industry. He argues that this industry does "little to link the formerly incarcerated person to the social capital and human skills necessary to become a 'citizen'" (pg. 590). Similarly, using a critical race theory lens to examine the emergence of the PRI, Ortiz and Jackey (2019) found that many correctional institutions either do not offer reentry programming during incarceration or limit eligibility to these programs, which service providers agree hinders successful reentry. They argue that "[u]nderfunded prison programs exist to mediate the state's culpability for high recidivism rates by providing the illusion that the PRI is dedicated to rehabilitation" (pg. 492). Ortiz and Jackey (2019) further claim that reentry services are set up to fail because it sustains the PRI and ensures continued profits at the expense of the most marginalized populations.

Scholars also explain the ways that the prisoner reentry industry is linked to surveillance (Clear 2010; Ross 2010; Thompkins 2010; Ortiz & Jackey 2019). Essentially, if people are surveilled more intensely, they are more likely to be reincarcerated, meaning that there is "a ready flow of people entering into the web of the reentry industry" (Clear 2010, pg. 586). This cycle of incarceration, reentry, and reincarceration means that the PRI essentially creates its own demand. Clear (2010) explains the economic benefits of high incarceration rates and the financial

interests served by surveilling formerly incarcerated people. Also examining the role of surveillance in the PRI, Ortiz and Jackey (2019) note that parole and supervision post-release are extensions of the prison industrial complex. Post-incarceration supervision forces conditions and expectations on people that are difficult or unrealistic to meet, including avoiding contact with other felons and mandating attendance at certain programming, even if it meets at the same time as the person's job.

Thompkins (2010) conceptualizes the PRI as part of the social control industrial complex. He frames the time following prison release as the post-prison supervision phase, which is when most reincarcerations happen. Thompkins (2010) puts into perspective the size of the social control industrial complex: by the end of 2008, over five million people in the U.S., or about one in every 45 adults, were under community supervision (only 16% of this group was on parole). During this supervision phase, legal barriers are also in place to prevent returning citizens from accessing certain resources such as employment and housing. Also discussing the surveillance associated with reentry, Ross (2010) references Ducksworth (2010), a scholar who argues that in the U.S., we use reentry programs to extend surveillance and punishment for longer than is justified.

Existing literature also documents the fees associated with reentry, which some scholars argue are used as supplementary sanctions (Thompkins 2010; Link 2019; Ortiz & Jackey 2019). These include court fees, restitution, jail and prison fees, community supervision fees, and reentry programming fees. Arguing that these types of sanctions reflect the neoliberalist ideologies that the criminal legal system adheres to, Ortiz and Jackey (2019) explain that costs related to post-incarceration supervision and rehabilitation programming are largely the responsibility of the returning citizen: "the formerly incarcerated person's marginalized position

in society is further reinforced by a punitive fee-based reentry system that places the financial burden of reentry services on the offender” (pg. 490). This system often puts returning citizens into debt soon after release from prison, and the threat of reincarceration looms over this punitive, fees-based system.

Link (2019) used quantitative methods to examine criminal justice-related debt among formerly incarcerated people and found that nearly half of the sample reported owing criminal justice-related debt; the average amount owed was \$872. This legal debt poses an additional challenge to reentry for an already disadvantaged population, and debt burdens are associated with probation violations and reoffending. Ortiz and Jackey (2019) write that “[f]ees create a motive for either absconding from parole or reoffending, thereby ensuring that we maintain a permanent underclass of citizens incapable of developing the financial and social capital necessary to rise out of poverty” (pg. 497). Debt also limits opportunities for upward mobility by making it nearly impossible to apply for and receive a loan. These debts are particularly difficult to pay given the limited opportunities for returning citizens in terms of securing quality employment. Criminal justice-related debt can also lead to drivers license suspensions, low credit scores, limited housing options, and extended observation periods, which increase the likelihood of reincarceration. Many agencies also employ late fees, which can affect the size of the debt owed. Criminal justice-related debt does not have the same relief mechanisms, like declaration of bankruptcy, as other forms of debt (Link 2019).

The PRI’s presence is felt most acutely among poorer communities and BIPOC communities in particular (Olusanya and Cancino 2011; Thompkins 2010; Link 2019; Ortiz & Jackey 2019). Link (2019) found that Black returning citizens tend to struggle more to pay off criminal justice-related debts than white returning citizens. Explanations for this finding include

disparities in the financial resources of social networks, lower-quality job opportunities based on where people live, and disparities in the ways that BIPOC offenders are burdened with financial sanctions compared to white offenders. Olusanya and Cancino (2011) argue that Black returning citizens may be more heavily impacted by the negative consequences of having a criminal conviction due to the social and economic disadvantages associated with being a Black person in the U.S. Olusanya and Cancino (2011) write of white people, “even though they may have burned a few bridges, several bridges will remain intact” (pg. 352). By contrast, for Black formerly incarcerated people, “it is possible that their social isolation will exacerbate the adverse effects of a criminal conviction” (pg. 352).

Social conditions such as poverty and race have a significant impact on people’s likelihood of reincarceration. Ortiz and Jackey (2019) argue that the PRI is “an intentional form of structural violence perpetuated by the state,” which is meant to ensure that underserved and oppressed groups remain at the margins of our society (pg. 484). They conclude that high recidivism rates indicate that the PRI is working exactly as designed: “Reentry has become but a mere extension of a racist justice system that utilizes law enforcement, the courts, and other state actors to control the most ‘undesirable’ among us” (pg. 499). This framing of the PRI as a method of social control that targets marginalized groups, some scholars argue, is central to understanding the motivations steering this industry.

Existing literature documents the ways in which the prisoner reentry industry has emerged as an extension of the prison industrial complex. The PRI, which scholars argue is a form of structural violence, is a major money-making industry for certain agencies that provide reentry programming. Scholars argue that surveillance of formerly incarcerated people, which can ultimately lead to reincarceration, is a significant part of the PRI. Fees are also used as

supplementary sanctions for returning citizens, and this criminal justice-related debt poses an additional challenge to reentry. BIPOC populations and other marginalized groups tend to be most heavily impacted by this industry.

### *Social Support and Community Integration*

Social support is another aspect of reentry that can have a profound impact on experiences and outcomes post-release (Kiczkowski 2011; Wallace et al. 2016; Northcutt Bohmert et al. 2018; LaCourse et al. 2019; Bares & Mowen 2020). Though peer support is linked to improved reentry outcomes, many returning citizens lack this type of support, and incarcerated people tend to have low rates of familial and social support compared to the general population (Wakefield & Uggen 2010). Conducting interviews with recently released sex offenders, Northcutt Bohmert et al. (2018) found that 75% of participants reported weak to moderate levels of social support leaving prison. Findings from interviews conducted by Kiczkowski (2011) illustrate the ways in which healthy family dynamics can serve as a valuable source of social support and a stabilizing force throughout the challenging process of reentry. However, support networks are not always positive. Wallace et al. (2016) found that an increase in negative familial support is associated with worse mental health outcomes post-incarceration. Giordano, Cernkovich and Holland (2003) study the notion of desistance from crime by analyzing shifts in the influence of friends and spouses of offenders. They examine ways in which strong attachments to spouses and friends who engage in criminal behavior among formerly incarcerated people are unlikely to help desistance efforts.

One factor that often limits social support and community integration for returning citizens is stigma (Simon 2007; Kiczkowski 2011; Moore et al. 2013; Bender et al. 2016; Northcutt Bohmert et al. 2018; Moore et al. 2018; Kjellstrand et al. 2021). Moore et al. (2013)

differentiate between different types of self-stigma. Perceived stigma—an individual’s perceptions of the public’s stigmatizing attitudes toward their group—is linked to negative reentry outcomes including unemployment, income loss, depression, poor social functioning, low self-esteem, negative coping styles, and a decreased likelihood of seeking treatment. While many people with a criminal conviction agree that the public stigmatizes formerly incarcerated people as a group, research suggests that the perceived stigma of formerly incarcerated people is often significantly higher than the actual stigmatizing attitudes of the general public (Moore et al. 2013). Furthermore, Bender et al. (2016) found that due to stigmatization, those identified as being at a higher-risk for reoffending, such as gang-involved individuals, may choose to associate with the same people post-release, making them more susceptible to reoffending. To explain this phenomenon, some scholars of stigma draw on labeling theory, the theoretical framework suggesting that people will come to view themselves in a way that reflects the way they are viewed by others and will subsequently act in a way that reflects those views (Brownfield & Thompson 2008; Asencio & Burke 2011; Kroska, Lee & Carr 2017).

The majority of incarcerated individuals are also parents, and incarceration has proven to significantly impact parent/child relationships (Wakefield & Uggen 2010). Over two million children in the United States have an incarcerated parent. Research shows that even short periods of incarceration tend to permanently harm fathers’ relationships with their children (Swisher & Waller 2008). Incarceration also often leaves parents unable to support their children financially (Wakefield & Uggen 2010). Incarcerated parents often have their parental rights limited, including speedier termination of their parental rights (Wacquant 2005). Challenges related to reunifying with and supporting children may significantly impact returning citizens’ reentry experiences.

Given the positive impact social support can have on reentry outcomes, some programs have been developed with the primary goal of providing this support to returning citizens (Pratt & Godsey 2003; Duwe 2013; Northcutt Bohmert et al. 2018; Kjellstrand et al. 2021). Kjellstrand et al. (2021) evaluated a one-on-one mentorship program for people recently released from Oregon state prisons. Findings indicated that mentors can serve as valuable resources, providing both companionship and emotional, instrumental, and informational support. Northcutt Bohmert et al. (2018) conducted in-depth interviews with program volunteers and returning sex offenders who participated in a restorative justice reentry program called Circles of Support and Accountability (COSAs). The purpose of the COSAs program was to provide social support to offenders who may not otherwise have much or any, with the goal of improving reentry experiences and reducing recidivism. Offenders who participated in COSAs overwhelmingly reported greater social well-being as a result of their participation. Despite these positive experiences, however, nearly half of participants returned to prison, demonstrating that COSAs did not necessarily provide enough support to overcome personal or structural barriers such as substance use disorder, housing, or financial challenges.

#### *Securing Employment, Housing, and Other Services*

Obtaining safe and affordable housing is widely regarded as the biggest challenge faced by returning citizens and the most significant predictor of reincarceration (Helfgott 1997; Wacquant 2005; Bender et al. 2016; Moore et al. 2018; Hamlin 2020; Kjellstrand 2021). Employment, health, and sobriety outcomes are all affected by a returning citizen's housing situation (Hamlin 2020). Research shows that landlords are more likely to reject applicants with criminal records (Evans & Porter 2015; Bender et al. 2016; Zannella, Clow, Rempel, Hamovitch & Hall 2020). Sometimes parole conditions place additional restrictions on housing by not

allowing parolees to live with others involved or formerly involved in criminal activity; this may disqualify friends or family members from offering housing (Petersilia 2003; Bender et al. 2016). Each of these policies places additional stress on the task of securing housing. Studies also show that securing housing is especially challenging for BIPOC individuals—scholars have linked housing market discrimination to applicant names that sound Muslim or African American (Olusanya and Cancino 2011).

Existing literature also highlights the challenges of securing employment post-incarceration (Wakefield & Uggen 2010; Bender et al. 2016; Miller & Khey 2016; Moore et al. 2018; Sliva & Samimi 2018; LaCourse et al. 2019; Ortiz & Jackey 2019; Kjellstrand et al. 2021). Employment post-release is associated with more successful reentry outcomes, significantly reducing the likelihood of rearrest (Miller & Miller 2016; LaCourse et al. 2019; Ortiz & Jackey 2019). The majority of people leaving incarceration have low levels of education and lack the work experience and skills that would make them more competitive in the job market, and many people struggle to obtain the identification documents sometimes necessary for the job search process (Bender et al. 2016; LaCourse et al. 2019). Incarceration pushes people out of the labor market and reduces employment prospects because it creates gaps in individuals' employment histories and removes people from social networks that may help them secure employment (Wakefield & Uggen 2010; Morenoff & Harding 2014). Scholars have attempted to estimate the wage penalty for incarcerated individuals and have placed this value at around 10-30 percent; this rate is disproportionately higher for BIPOC individuals (Wakefield & Uggen 2010). Several studies have documented labor market discrimination against formerly incarcerated people, finding that people with criminal records are significantly less likely to receive callbacks from

employers; again, these statistics are even more drastic for Black and brown people (Pager 2003; Wakefield & Uggen 2010; Nakamura & Bucklen 2014).

Scholars examining employment outcomes of returning citizens have often reported grim findings. Of the ten returning citizens interviewed by Northcutt Bohmert et al. (2018), none had secured employment upon release. Bender et al. (2016) found that even reentry programs that provide employment assistance are sometimes insufficient to obtain employment because of structural barriers and stigma that contribute to a reluctance to hire ex-offenders. Formerly incarcerated people are also banned from jobs in certain industries (Wacquant 2005). Even those who work for external corporations while incarcerated will usually find themselves unable to secure employment from the same agency post-release because the same industries that benefit from prison labor generally do not hire people with felony convictions (Sliva & Samimi 2018).

Several obstacles exist within the coordinating and administering of services for returning citizens that can pose challenges to the transition out of prison (Olson et al. 2009; Bender et al. 2016; Miller & Khey 2016; Miller & Miller 2016; Kim et al. 2019). Seeking to identify opportunities to better coordinate care and services for recently released veterans with both mental health and substance use disorders, Kim et al. (2019) found that when individuals are released from prison, their treatment regimens and healthcare providers change; this abrupt transition poses challenges to the delivery of treatment and services post-release, especially when multiple organizations and providers are involved. The ability to share health records is also limited. Kim et al. (2019) found that services are often highly specialized, with different agencies attending to housing, medical care, mental health care, and other areas. Some programs rely on funding from grants, which can lead to abrupt starts and stops in a program's ability to provide services, posing an additional challenge to the administering of consistent, reliable care.

Similarly, Miller and Miller (2016) examined barriers to effective, sustainable treatment for offenders dually diagnosed with mental health and substance use disorders. Barriers they identified include a lack of specialized resources in correctional settings, resource shortages, inadequate identification or response to mental health disorders by law enforcement, arbitrary participant selection processes such as “cherry-picking,” inadequate transportation, and treatment administered by low credentialed staff. In rural areas specifically, there are usually few treatment providers to choose from, meaning that providers have more generalized expertise and pricing is monopolistic. Travel in rural areas is also more time-consuming and therefore more expensive, leaving providers with less time to meet with patients which leads to a heavier reliance on group treatment settings and dosage intensification.

Although a large proportion of incarcerated individuals face substance use disorder problems, relatively few people receive treatment while incarcerated, and drug use often continues during incarceration (Mumola & Karberg 2006; Olson et al. 2009; Miller & Khey; Wakefield & Uggen 2010; 2016; Rowell-Cunsolo et al. 2016; Kim et al. 2019; Bares & Mowen 2020). Returning citizens with substance use disorders are at a high risk of returning to drug use in the time immediately following release. Rowell-Cunsolo et al. (2016) conducted a cross-sectional study with formerly incarcerated Black Americans in New York City and found that 29.8% of participants had used drugs within one day after release. Within two weeks, half of participants had used drugs, and the median amount of time for drug use after release was 14 days. Similarly, the risk of drug-related death is highest soon after release, possibly because individuals have a decreased tolerance from being in prison where drug use may be less frequent or drugs are of lower purity, or because people may “celebrate” upon release. Merrall, Kariminia, Binswanger, Hobbs, Farrell, Marsden, Hutchinson and Bird (2010) conducted a meta-analysis on

the risk of drug-related death after release from prison, measured in weeks since the individual's release. The authors found a three- to eight-fold increased risk of drug-related death in weeks one and two compared to weeks three through twelve. Drug-related causes accounted for 59% of deaths within three months of release and 76% within two weeks of release. Findings from both Rowell-Cunsolo et al. (2016) and Merrall et al. (2010) demonstrate a major challenge to reentry faced by individuals with substance use disorders.

Returning citizens with mental health issues are faced with an additional obstacle to their reentry process, and mental health issues are linked to an increased likelihood of reincarceration (Davis 2003; Wallace et al. 2016; Moore et al. 2018; LaCourse et al. 2019). People who end up in prison tend to have more mental health issues than the general public, including higher rates of schizophrenia, psychosis, PTSD, and anxiety, and time in prison usually exacerbates these health problems (Wakefield & Uggen 2010; Wallace et al. 2016). Research suggests that between 15% and 26% of formerly incarcerated people have some type of mental health diagnosis (Wilper, Woolhandler, Boyd, Lasser, McCormick, Bor & Himmelstein 2009), and prisons are regarded as “the largest institution housing the mentally ill” (Wallace et al. 2016, pg. 4). Individuals who struggle with mental health issues while in prison are highly likely to continue to struggle with post-release mental health (Wallace et al. 2016). Having mental health symptoms is associated with less successful community integration, including a decrease in one's odds of becoming employed or married post-release (Moore et al. 2018).

Much of the incarcerated population also has substantial physical health problems, which may be exacerbated by spending time in prison. Wakefield and Uggen (2010) synthesize research about the ways in which incarceration affects health. Incarcerated people have very high rates of infectious diseases, including tuberculosis, hepatitis C, and HIV/AIDS. Some studies

have also shown that incarceration is linked strongly to health problems later in life. These health problems have broader implications for returning citizens because infectious diseases can be spread to families or communities upon release (Wakefield & Uggen 2010).

A great deal of scholarly literature examines the U.S. prison system and its implications for returning citizens' experiences post-release. A number of scholars write about the criminalization of poverty, addiction, and Blackness, noting that marginalized populations are significantly overrepresented in U.S. prisons. After returning citizens are released, institutional barriers and limited resources tend to significantly impact their reentry experiences. The prisoner reentry industry, stigma and limited social support, and lack of access to resources such as employment, housing, and treatment are among the largest obstacles identified by scholars. Given these challenges associated with reentry, this study examines an organization in Maine that seeks to connect returning citizens with various resources across the state with the overall goal of improving reentry outcomes.

## METHODS

Using a community-engaged framework for my research, I conducted interviews with 14 returning citizens and 14 service providers across the state of Maine. In this section I further introduce my community partner, the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network. I then define community-engaged research (CER) and the function it served throughout this thesis. Next, I explain the details of my recruitment and interview processes. Finally, I discuss the consideration of ethics as it relates to my research design and end with a statement about my positionality.

### **I. Maine Prisoner Reentry Network**

My community partner is the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network (MPRN), a statewide organization with the mission of connecting Maine's reentry community and providing services by and for incarcerated people, returning citizens, and individuals in long-term recovery from substance abuse. Most of MPRN's board members have lived experience of incarceration and are themselves in long-term recovery; this type of representation is seen as vital to MPRN's mission. As noted in the introduction, beginning in April 2020, shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic hit Maine, MPRN has adopted the practice of conducting virtual meetings with incarcerated individuals prior to release. Previous Maine Department of Corrections (DOC) policies had not allowed remote meetings to take place with incarcerated individuals, and due to the locations of the various correctional facilities in Maine, MPRN previously lacked the bandwidth to conduct these types of meetings in-person with the same frequency.

Typically present at these meetings are the executive director of MPRN, other MPRN board members, and various service providers throughout the state of Maine who have been identified as potentially helpful for the individual's reentry. These service providers include potential employers, college access counselors, and people who operate recovery residences,

among others. Family members of the releasing individual are also sometimes present at the meetings. During these meetings, parties engage in conversations about the returning citizen's reentry goals and needs. These remote meetings, a practice that began under the unique conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, present a compelling new reentry support worthy of examination.

## **II. Community-engaged research**

My qualitative methodology is framed by a community-engaged research (CER) approach to data collection, also referred to as community-based research (CBR). Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, and Donohue (2003) define this type of research as “a partnership of students, faculty, and community members who collaboratively engage in research with the purpose of solving a pressing community problem or effecting social change” (pg. 3). CER focuses on social action and differs from both traditional academic research and types of service learning centered around charity, a form of community work sometimes promoted by academic institutions. In his book *Liberating Service Learning*, critiquing service learning as a practice in higher education, Stoecker (2016) writes that “institutionalized service learning starts with student learning, moves through a mostly charity form of service, neglects defining the concept of community that is supposedly its target, and lacks any developed thinking about social change” (pg. 96). CER, on the other hand, must engage community members and those traditionally excluded from the research process in all stages of knowledge production, thereby expanding who has the power to create knowledge (Stoecker 2016).

Strand et al. (2003) provide three reasons why community-engaged research has gained popularity as a research method. The first reason stems from criticism that higher education institutions are disconnected from the communities where they are located: “What is the purpose

of higher education, they ask, if not to reach out so as to provide something useful to society, starting with the communities that surround them?” (pg. 2). The second reason is due to concerns about a narrow, elitist definition of research that values certain types of knowledge above others. In contrast to this narrow framing of what constitutes research, CER “challenges conventional assumptions about knowledge itself: what constitutes valid knowledge, how it is best produced or acquired, and who gets to control it” (pg. 13). CER centers the experiences and expertise of community members and marginalized persons in the knowledge creation process, asserting that these types of knowledge are inherently valid and valuable. The third reason is the concern that higher education institutions may not prepare students to be active and engaged democratic citizens. CER is seen as an appropriate response to this concern because it requires reciprocal, respectful relationships between the university and the community, and it exists in an environment where “everyone in the group is regarded as both a researcher and a learner” (pg. 10). This research method challenges the monopolistic tendencies of academic institutions in terms of the dissemination of knowledge and the interpretation of research results.

This thesis seeks to examine the experiences of individuals returning to the community after incarceration, and this type of analysis would be impossible without, at all stages of the research process, drawing on the knowledge and expertise of those with lived experience of incarceration. Thus, this thesis legitimizes the knowledge of returning citizens — a marginalized population — and validates their expertise as a valuable form of data. With these principles of CER in mind, I asked my community partner what kind of research would be most helpful for the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network, and we worked in collaboration to settle on the following research questions: What are structural barriers that impact reentry experiences or curb access to reentry supports? How is MPRN able to meet the needs of returning citizens, and what role has

conducting remote meetings prior to release played in the supports provided by MPRN? We agreed on a qualitative approach to data collection because my partners at MPRN saw this as the most effective way to document participants' powerful stories about their reentry experiences. The hope was that gathering stories from returning citizens would allow MPRN to use the results, as well as any other products produced as a response to this research, both to examine and refine their own practices and also for advocacy purposes. This collaborative approach can be helpful to community members because the knowledge or resources from the university can encourage community members to consider new approaches to solving problems. This decision process, which honored the request of the community partner, was essential in remaining consistent with the principles of community-engaged research.

### **III. Interviews**

I conducted 28 loosely-structured, qualitative interviews with returning citizens and service providers. Interviews were roughly thirty minutes in length and each participant received a \$20 grocery store gift card after the interview. I applied for and received grants from the Harvard Center for Community Partnerships, the Sociology Department, and the Student Research Fund, all of which are grants available to Bates College thesis students, to cover the costs of these gift cards. Strand et al. (2003) explain that research approaches such as informal interviews or open-ended questions, which are “particularly sensitive to discerning the voice and perspective of participants,” tend to be a popular method for community-engaged research (pg. 12). Qualitative research is designed to “capture social life as participants experience it rather than in categories the researcher predetermines” (Chambliss & Schutt 2016, pg. 200). This methodology is contextualized by human interactions and the relationships between social circumstances. Intensive interviewing is a qualitative method often used to give the researcher

insight into the thoughts and feelings of participants. This type of research “relies on open-ended questions to develop a comprehensive picture of the interviewee’s background, attitudes, and actions” (Chambliss & Schutt 2016, pg. 215). Because my data seeks to analyze both the barriers to and benefits of tangible and intangible reentry supports from multiple perspectives, in collaboration with my community partner, I determined intensive interviewing to be the most effective qualitative method for the purposes of this study.

My community partner provided me with contact information for individuals they identified who met the criteria for the study and were willing to be interviewed. This process was used mostly to recruit returning citizens, although a few service providers were also recruited in this way. We found it helpful for a representative from MPRN to reach out to the participant before I contacted them because MPRN had an established relationship with them and I did not. Throughout the year I worked on this project I also attended a weekly virtual meeting hosted by MPRN and attended by service providers, Department of Corrections staff, advocates, returning citizens, and some currently incarcerated individuals throughout the state of Maine. Through these meetings I became acquainted with several members of Maine’s reentry community as well as many people working at reentry-related organizations. I used this meeting as a way to recruit participants, primarily service providers, by explaining the study and asking if anybody who met the criteria was willing to be interviewed or knew others who may be. I then collected the contact information of everyone who expressed interest. I attempted to recruit a wide variety of service providers, including people sometimes present at MPRN’s remote meetings with returning citizens, Department of Corrections staff, and advocates from outside organizations. This population represents both purposive and convenience sampling because participants were recruited due to their unique position as returning citizens or reentry-related service providers,

but interviews were conducted only with people within this purposive framework who agreed to participate and who were able to be contacted. This method of sampling may also have implications for the study's validity because all returning citizens I spoke with were in a stable enough position to meet with me. However, my community partner attempted to avoid cherry-picking by recruiting participants who had experienced varied degrees of success or deterioration throughout their reentries.

Contacting returning citizens proved to be more difficult than initially anticipated. In several cases, contact information was out of date because phone numbers or addresses had changed since the person was released, a byproduct of the instability often associated with reentry. Because it tended to be easier to contact people who were released fairly recently and therefore had had recent contact with MPRN, several participants I interviewed had been released from prison just a few days or weeks prior to the interview. Thus, some patterns that emerged in interviews may be more generalizable to returning citizens released relatively recently. Despite this somewhat unequal distribution of time out of prison at the time of the interview, as shown in the analysis section, participants represented a range of release dates, which strengthens the study's generalizability.

Furthermore, since all of the service providers I interviewed were in some way affiliated with MPRN, they may view the organization more favorably than others who do not work with MPRN, meaning their testimonies may differ from those of other service providers across the state of Maine. However, MPRN meetings are open to all who wish to join, with new people joining each week, and MPRN has many connections with service providers across the state. Thus, it is my assessment that the recruitment of service providers does not compromise the validity of the study. This sampling methodology was deemed appropriate by the researcher

because the study's purpose was to identify effective elements of MPRN's work, as well as ways in which this organization could be improved. By interviewing individuals with first-hand experience with this organization and its partners, this population of service providers presented a uniquely valuable perspective in examining the efficacy of MPRN's work with returning citizens.

With input from my community partner, I decided to interview only returning citizens who had been released from a men's prison facility since April 1, 2020. Maine has only one women's correctional facility and this institution differs significantly from the other prisons in the state. MPRN also works with many fewer female-identifying than male-identifying returning citizens. Ultimately, we decided that it was beyond the scope of this study to include returning citizens released from the women's facility and that interviewing only people released from men's facilities in Maine would allow the study to be more specific to the gender identity group to which the researcher had greater access. A parallel study of female-identifying returning citizens will thus be left for future research.

All interviews followed the same format, although questions for returning citizens differed from questions for service providers. At the beginning of each interview, I introduced myself and explained that I was working in partnership with MPRN, specifically with the executive director. I further explained that I was trying to help MPRN evaluate their organization by examining ways their work has benefited people, as well as where there may be room for improvement within their operations. I also noted that I was hoping to hear their opinions about aspects of the criminal legal system in Maine that make reentry experiences better or more difficult. After this introduction, in interviews with returning citizens, I collected demographic information including age, race, length of sentence, the facility where the participant had been

incarcerated, the participant's number of previous incarcerations, their release date, and the county they were currently living in. I asked participants to describe how they found out about MPRN, what their understanding had been of what MPRN might be able to do for them, and their experiences with the remote meetings prior to release. Given existing literature about employment, housing, stigma, and social support as challenges to reentry post-incarceration, I then asked about participants' experiences securing or not securing these resources. I also asked participants to share their thoughts about whether or not policies within the Department of Corrections set returning citizens up for reentry success. I ended interviews by asking each participant what reentry success looked like to them and asking if there was anything else they wanted to tell me.

In interviews with service providers, after introducing myself, I collected information about which organization the service provider was affiliated with along with their title and role within that organization. I then asked about their organization's referral process, how people access services, and the processes through which the organization's programs are evaluated. I also asked about challenges the organization faces in terms of offering services to returning citizens. Next, I asked about their relationship with the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network. I then asked about their thoughts regarding how the Department of Corrections prepares returning citizens for release. I concluded by asking if there was anything else they would like to share. While the purpose of this study was to address the specific needs of MPRN, the results may have implications for similar organizations and could be generalizable for returning citizens more broadly.

After conducting and transcribing interviews, I used NVIVO to code all of my interview transcripts. I created separate coding categories for interviews with returning citizens and with

service providers. Categories for returning citizen interviews included initial information, perceptions of remote meetings, perceptions of MPRN, and reentry experiences, with subcategories for each. Categories for service provider interviews included initial information, challenges to offering services, relationship with MPRN, and relationship with the Department of Corrections, again with subcategories for each. Along with coding for these categories, which parallel questions I asked during interviews, I also coded for various themes from the literature. Subcategories for the reentry experiences category, for example, included housing, employment, social support, and mental and physical health treatment.

#### **IV. Ethics**

Understanding that returning citizens present a particularly vulnerable population, I took several precautions when designing my research methodology. Because the study involved sensitive subjects such as substance use disorder, criminal behavior, and traumatic experiences associated with the prison system, it was especially important that I obtain approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Bates College. Throughout the recruitment, consent, and interview processes, emphasis was placed on the voluntary nature of this study. Participants were informed that they were welcome to skip any questions they preferred not to answer and to end the interview at any time if they wished to do so. I designed questions to be open-ended so that participants could answer each as they saw fit, and I took care to avoid questions that would be triggering. I also ensured that my community partner, who has much more experience with this population, approved of the interview questions before conducting any interviews.

Confidentiality and privacy were also central to my research design. Various measures were taken to protect the identities of participants. Interviews were video- or audio-recorded over Zoom and transcribed via the Zoom function; after the interview recording was used to double-

check the transcription, the recording was destroyed. A few participants were unable to interview via Zoom, so I conducted their interviews over the phone but still used Zoom to record them. I ensured that the typed transcript for each interview did not contain the participant's name or any other identifying information except a code number that I used to keep track of the interviews. Names and code numbers were linked only in a separate document available solely to me as the researcher and were kept strictly confidential. Participants were assured that in any presentations or written documents resulting from this research project, I would not use any identifying information. While I refer to quotes from interviews, all participants are identified via pseudonyms, and I never use any other uniquely identifying information about the participant's occupation or background. I created two different consent forms, one for returning citizens (see Appendix A) and another for service providers (see Appendix B).

## **ANALYSIS PART 1: PLANNING REENTRY**

The following analysis chapters describe findings from interviews with returning citizens and service providers. All participants are referred to with pseudonyms. To honor their knowledge and unique perspectives, findings are centered around the interviews with returning citizens. Where appropriate, information from service provider interviews is included as well, mostly to supplement and reinforce data from the returning citizen interviews. The first analysis chapter will analyze demographic information, returning citizens' feelings about their upcoming reentry, and experiences with the remote meetings with MPRN. The second analysis chapter will analyze both barriers and supports that impacted participants' reentry experiences, including housing, employment, and social support. The chronology of these analysis chapters is intentional, as participants tended to tell their stories in chronological order and organizing findings this way was determined to be the most logical way to understand how participants' stories unfolded.

### **I. Demographic Information**

Analysis of demographic information reveals a sample of returning citizens that is diverse in some ways and homogeneous in others. Because of the predetermined scope of the study, all participants were male-identifying. Among the fourteen returning citizens interviewed, participants ranged in age from 31 to 72, with half being in their 30s. Participants were currently residing in seven of the 16 counties in Maine, with most participants living in the more populous counties, and participants had been released from all three state prisons in Maine. Almost all participants (12) had been incarcerated at least once prior to their most recent sentence, whether in state prison or in county jail; this reflects existing statistics about high recidivism rates (Miller & Khey 2016; Bares & Mowen 2020). The length of each participant's most recent sentence

ranged from just under one year to over ten years, and half of the participants had most recently served sentences between two and three years in length (see figure A). Participants had been released from prison between five days and 13 months from the time of their interview, although half of participants (7) had been released for one month or less at the time of the interview. Thus, there was a relatively wide range among participants in terms of age, home county, length of sentence, facility released from, and time since release.

Almost all participants (13) were white, with only one participant self-identifying as Black. Maine is a predominantly white state; however, BIPOC individuals are overrepresented in the prison system at extreme rates. While about two percent of Mainers identify as Black, two percent identify as Latinx, and one percent identify as Indigenous, in 2017, Black people made up nine percent of the prison population, Latinx people made up five percent, and Indigenous people made up three percent (Vera Institute of Justice). My community partner reported that only about one percent of the returning citizens referred to MPRN are BIPOC-identifying. Especially because of literature that highlights the differences in post-incarceration experiences for BIPOC individuals compared to whites (Olusanya and Cancino 2011), this disparity has implications for the generalizability of this thesis, because the sample is not necessarily representative of the entire population of returning citizens in Maine or in the rest of the U.S.

Figure A: Length of Each Participant’s Most Recent Sentence

Sentence Length	0-2 years	2-3 years	3-4 years	4+ years
Number of Participants	2	7	3	2

The fourteen service providers interviewed represented a wide variety of reentry-related services and organizations, from housing, to education and employment, to advocacy groups, to Department of Corrections staff. Ten service providers were men and four were women.

Twelve were white, one identified as Black, and one identified as Indigenous. Four service providers I interviewed were formerly incarcerated and five were in long-term recovery from substance use disorder.

## **II. Feelings About Upcoming Reentry**

Almost all participants recalled feeling high stress as their release date neared. One notable source of fear described by several participants was the feeling of not knowing what was going to happen upon release. Participants frequently used phrases such as “I didn’t know what I was doing” or “I had no idea where I was going to end up.” One participant, John, recalled, “I fully expected to walk out of the prison... and be going to find a snowbank to live in, because I had no clue what I was going to do.” These statements are telling about the low levels of social and material support that incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people tend to have (Wakefield & Uggen 2010). Especially for returning citizens with limited support networks and financial resources, this anxiety about the unknown poses a significant challenge for incarcerated people facing reentry. A few of the service providers I interviewed also mentioned this theme of fear of the unknown. A caseworker at one of the prisons noted that he had noticed especially high levels of nervousness among his clients during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic due to uncertainty about the state of the world and what to expect upon release. Another service provider who operates various housing- and employment-related resources for formerly incarcerated people explained that many returning citizens he works with feel anxious about securing basic needs including food and shelter, because they do not know how they will be able to obtain these essential resources. Limiting concerns around securing basic needs, he explained, leads to better reentry outcomes because it limits triggers for returning to substance use, which many returning citizens face and which can be exacerbated by reentry stress.

Furthermore, reentry anxiety was particularly acute for those who had many previous incarcerations or who had served longer sentences. Steven, a participant in his mid-fifties who said he had too many previous incarcerations to count, recalled how he felt about his upcoming release: “I was pretty stressed out, because I’m always stressed out when I get to that point... I’m institutionalized to the letter... I’m more comfortable in jail than I am out here, so I have a hard time.” This description supports research that prison exacerbates mental health problems including anxiety, in a population that already struggles disproportionately with mental health issues (Wakefield & Uggen 2010; Wallace et al. 2016). Kevin, who had spent just over ten years in prison, said, “I had anxiety so bad it was crazy. Being in for ten years and then being released, the technology had changed so much that it was unreal.” Here, Kevin explains the stress associated with having to quickly adapt to technological advances in a society he had been absent from for over a decade. Service providers also mentioned how adjusting to society after incarceration tends to be more difficult the longer someone was incarcerated. Someone who works at a probation office said, “just depending on the amount of time one of our clients was incarcerated, some of the challenges is obviously technology changes, the communities change.” Similarly, someone who works in advocacy noted that “things change a lot and particularly the longer a person has been in, you know, the more changes they encounter.” As these returning citizens and service providers articulate, returning to the community after being incarcerated for a number of months or years tends to be profoundly challenging, and a great deal of stress can be associated with this transition.

One of the service providers I interviewed is the director of an organization that does advocacy work for system-impacted people and their families. This service provider, who identifies as Black, explained that he has witnessed stress among BIPOC-identifying returning

citizens related to the lack of racial representation in Maine’s Department of Corrections. He said that when Black returning citizens are being released from prison, he sometimes tries to communicate with them before their release so that they can make contact with another person of color: “even being involved in some of the communications prior to them being released, it feels like it, you know, it lessens the anxiety folks inside may have, because there’s a lot of anxiety when it comes to getting ready to get out.” Here, he identifies a source of stress specific to returning citizens of color, which speaks to the importance of racial representation among Department of Corrections staff, service providers, and other reentry-related leadership, especially in a predominantly white state with a disproportionate percentage of people of color incarcerated.

While almost all participants expressed feeling some measure of stress when their release from prison was nearing, only three participants recalled feeling “good” or “excited” about their upcoming reentry. One of these participants, Jordan, attributed his positive feelings about reentry to the support he was receiving from the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network: “I felt good because I felt like I was being helped.” The other two participants who recalled feeling positively about their upcoming releases had secured housing and other basic needs prior to their release, and both participants reported having relatively strong support networks. Knowing they had these safety nets available to them, which was not the case for every returning citizen, likely had a positive effect on the way they thought about their release and reentry.

### **III. Remote Meetings with MPRN**

Given these high stress levels associated with reentry, it is worth examining supports, such as MPRN’s remote meetings with returning citizens, that have the potential to ease some of these stresses. When asked about their meetings with the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network prior

to release, participants described a range of experiences, many of which included a trend of low expectations followed by positive experiences. This section first describes how participants learned about MPRN, then examines participants' experiences with the remote meetings. Perceptions of these meetings largely fall into three categories: expectations going into the meetings, positive feelings about the meetings, and suggestions for improvement.

### *Connecting with MPRN*

As they began to contemplate reentry, participants learned about the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network through a patchwork of referral processes, although many referral methods required participants to have some type of resource or social network. The most common way that people heard about MPRN was through word of mouth from other incarcerated individuals, with six participants being referred to MPRN this way. David did not find out about MPRN via word of mouth but he did tell others about the service:

“Before I left I told other inmates about MPRN and they actually talked to their caseworker about it and their caseworkers had set them up for it. So, I think that maybe it'll be used a lot more effectively now that one person used it. I mean, I didn't know anyone prior to me that used it... To me, in anything I think word of mouth is key, you know, to growing anything.”

Here, David describes his views on the importance of communicating about MPRN via word of mouth, because other residents who he told about MPRN followed through with his suggestion to meet with them. In this quote, David also raises a concern that not enough incarcerated people were aware of MPRN and the services they provide.

Family members and other networks were also instrumental in connecting returning citizens with MPRN. Three participants were personally familiar with the executive director of MPRN because he used to regularly visit one of the county jails to assist with church services, and one participant was referred to MPRN by another advocacy organization in Maine. Two

participants had family members who found MPRN online and contacted the organization; from there, a representative from MPRN contacted the individual's caseworker to set up a remote meeting. While this method was effective in the case of these two participants, not all incarcerated individuals had this type of outside support, or had family members with the resources to find MPRN online.

Access to the Internet while incarcerated was another resource one participant used to learn about MPRN. David had a tablet and access to the Internet because he was enrolled in college courses, and through these resources he discovered MPRN online while incarcerated. While David had a positive experience finding MPRN this way, depending on the facility where they were incarcerated, not all participants had access to the Internet. Kevin noted that the Internet was not available for residents at the facility where he was incarcerated, "so when it comes to looking for housing when I got out, I couldn't do it. Looking for a job before I got out, couldn't do it." Kevin explained that access to the Internet differs across the different prisons in Maine and is not necessarily dependent on the security level of the facility.

Only one participant discovered MPRN through their caseworker. Whether or not a caseworker refers a client to MPRN is up to their discretion, although if the client asks for a meeting with MPRN, the caseworker is required to schedule one. I interviewed a caseworker who has a particularly communicative relationship with MPRN. He explained that he tells all of his clients about MPRN when they are about nine months away from release and asks them if they are interested in meeting with the organization: "I always start out with 'okay, there's this group of people who help individuals getting released. It isn't anything that you have to do, but do you think that you might be interested in that?'" If the individual expresses interest in meeting with MPRN, when their release is three or four months away, this caseworker begins scheduling

remote meetings. When asked if other caseworkers employ this same system, he said he does not believe that everybody mentions MPRN to their clients, and he suggested that caseworkers should utilize MPRN more: “The only thing that I could say that could be improved is within the caseworkers are ourselves, promoting it more, like getting everyone on board, because if it’s good for one it should be good for all.” Thus, whether or not a returning citizen is referred to MPRN from their caseworker is largely dependent on which caseworker they are assigned to.

This variation in the ways that participants discovered MPRN reflects inconsistencies in who is able to receive support from the organization and who is not. Participants found out about the organization either through some type of connection or resource they had at their disposal, such as social networks or access to the internet while incarcerated, or through their caseworker, a process that appears to be somewhat arbitrary. Thus, participants’ descriptions of how they learned about MPRN raise concerns about equity of access.

Once participants connected with MPRN, the number of times each person met remotely with the organization prior to release varied greatly; these inconsistencies are reflective of the nature of the existing referral system. Participants met anywhere from one time to more than six, although over half of participants had between two and four meetings. While some participants had begun meeting with MPRN months prior to their release, others did not meet until their sentence was nearly finished. This variation is due in large part to discrepancies in when people found out about the organization. For example, Max described meeting with MPRN several times: “I contacted them when I had about six months left and they were like on point ever since then... they set up a meeting every month, made sure my plan was still set for when I got out.” Jeff, on the other hand, reported meeting with MPRN only once prior to release because “I hadn’t heard of them until I was almost out.” David, who met with MPRN twice while

incarcerated, said he would have liked to have more meetings but he did not find out about them in time: “I wasn’t aware of MPRN. I would have, you know, they like to hook up with people you know, six months to a year so they can have a solid plan for people.” Here, David expresses that his reentry plan could have been more “solid” if he had met with MPRN for a longer period of time prior to his release. As David suggests, the number of meetings and length of time over which individuals met with MPRN may have had implications for each person’s quality of release planning, which raises further concerns about equity of access to these services.

### *Expectations About Meetings*

Going into the remote meetings, over half of participants described having few expectations or feeling doubtful that they would be particularly beneficial. Some participants credited this lack of optimism to feeling accustomed to being disappointed by the Department of Corrections or having previously heard false promises. Aidan, for example, explained that “my expectations were really low. Only because in my experience, nobody’s just there to help you. They’re not going to just give you things and not expect something in return.” Similarly, Kevin explained, “you gotta understand, they can’t guarantee anything... nothing’s written in stone and a lot of people expect an organization to hand them everything.” These types of statements, which subscribe to notions of personal responsibility, connect to some participants’ experiences with Department of Corrections staff. While some participants described positive or neutral interactions with their caseworkers, others recounted negative experiences including being given false information about probation conditions, being told to “figure it out” when it came to obtaining housing for release, and being judged based on their type of offense. Coming from these types of interactions, it is logical that some participants would not have been particularly hopeful that MPRN would offer them anything positive.

Multiple participants also expressed some discomfort at the idea of asking for or accepting help. Alex, for example, noted that “initially I was pretty weirded out because I’m not really a social person, I don’t like telling people my vulnerabilities or my problems and I don’t like asking people for help.” Comments like this one from Alex reflect narratives of personal responsibility and individual blame; this type of rhetoric has historically helped to increase public support for tough-on-crime policies (Martensen 2020). Referring to returning citizens, a service provider who runs an advocacy group said, “we’re setting them up for failure and then saying it’s their fault that they couldn’t do it.” Here, this service provider challenges the neoliberal ideologies associated with incarceration and the reentry system by turning the blame away from the individual and on to the system. This idea that it is the individual’s fault that they ended up incarcerated, and that it is solely their responsibility to figure out how to be successful in reentry despite its many challenges, persisted across many interviews I conducted. This theme provides one explanation as to why returning citizens tended to feel doubtful or pessimistic going into their meetings with MPRN, and why they felt reluctant to ask for or accept help.

### *Positive*

Although expectations were generally low, participants recalled that after they did meet with MPRN their perceptions of the meetings were overwhelmingly positive, and every participant had some positive comments about these interactions. All participants described connections they made with various reentry resources and service providers through the remote meetings. Several people said they were given numbers to call or were connected directly with people associated with various services they needed, and that these connections improved how they felt about their upcoming release. Explaining why he found the meetings reassuring, Kevin said,

“The biggest thing is guidance and a lot of people. There’s a lot of things that are available to individuals that you wouldn’t normally know... I felt like I had the information there for me so I suppose it would’ve been a lot worse if I didn’t have anything, to have come out blind... There was just so much anxiety about being released. I’m sure it was reduced because I knew some things were set.”

Participants also mentioned becoming aware of several resources through these meetings that they had not previously known about. Richard, for example, spoke very positively about his interactions with representatives from MPRN: “It was great, it was just so helpful... he answered all the questions that I was looking for and had a lot more things to show me that Maine had to offer for us... I didn’t think all that stuff was available.” As noted earlier, one common source of stress around reentry was that of not knowing what was going to happen upon release. Through these interactions with MPRN, returning citizens learned about available resources not previously advertised to them. The fact that participants were unaware of existing reentry resources, however, raises questions of how the Department of Corrections advertises services that could assist with reentry.

Participants also described the reassurance they felt just knowing that MPRN was a resource and support network that they could draw from. One participant, Jeff, referred to MPRN as a “huge mental support,” saying that “if you have a question with anything you can ask them that question and I don’t think I’ve asked them any questions yet that they didn’t actually have an answer to.” Especially due to the uncertainty most individuals felt surrounding their upcoming reentry, having a network of people available to answer questions proved invaluable. Max expressed a similar sentiment: “It was good, just being able to know that there’s people out there you know that are willing to help people like me get out and find the right resources to better help our chances to succeed, you know, and not mess up and go back, so you know it’s a good

feeling.” As Jeff and Max explain, in addition to the actual services MPRN connects individuals with, the mere presence of the organization substantially reduced reentry stress for some people.

Notably, a few participants described feelings of surprise or disbelief at their positive experiences with MPRN. Aidan told a story about picking up a cell phone from the executive director of MPRN upon release:

“I get out of prison, they’re like hey we got a cell phone for you, just come pick it up at the office... And sure enough, he’s got a phone with a card. He’s like, ‘Here you go.’ I’m like, ‘So what do you need from me?’ He’s like, ‘Nothing. You just got out. Enjoy yourself, call me in like two weeks or something to check in.’ I was like, ‘Wait, seriously? You’re giving me a cell phone, and I don’t have to pay for this?’... That was it, I was like, alright, these guys literally just gave me a cell phone and helped me get all this crap set up and they don’t want anything from me. That was a little hard to accept at first... My expectations were really blown away.”

Here, Aidan expresses disbelief at the notion of unconditional help. This type of reaction to being given a phone with no strings attached is consistent with participants’ low expectations going into the meetings. This reaction is also telling about the limited support from Department of Corrections staff described by many participants.

One notable reason participants gave for trusting the people from MPRN is that many of the service providers were themselves formerly incarcerated or in long-term recovery. For example, Jeff explained, “I feel like a lot of them have been in the same position as me. And they have a little more experience with the recovery aspect of it, and they have a lot of good advice.” Similarly, David said, “it seems like they were in the same situation prior, so they understand the supports people need when they get out. So yeah I believe that they were very trustworthy.” Having this lived experience gives service providers a measure of credibility, which may encourage returning citizens to take their advice more seriously, or to be less reluctant to accept the help they were offered. A few participants also said that it is difficult to explain to someone without lived experience of incarceration what reentry is like. Thus, meeting with people who

have already lived through the reentry process, participants did not have to convey how they felt or what they needed in a way that may have been necessary with people who lacked this lived experience.

Many service providers also discussed the importance of lived experience. A caseworker said that when he tells his clients about MPRN, he likes to specify that many people who work with the organization are previously incarcerated and know what it is like to get out of prison, in the hopes that mentioning this will encourage his clients to engage with the remote meetings. Another Department of Corrections employee who identified as being in long-term recovery from substance use said, “there’s a more natural connection with people who have that lived experience.” As noted by this service provider, shared lived experiences help to build a rapport between returning citizens and service providers. This rapport, which fosters trust, is crucial given the feelings of pessimism or doubt that most returning citizens felt going into the remote meetings. Andrew, a participant who met remotely with MPRN prior to his release from prison, now works with MPRN and attends the remote meetings as a service provider rather than a returning citizen. Andrew described his observations of the positive effect his lived experience has on returning citizens he meets with:

“[MPRN will] have zoom meetings where I’m not there and guys are just off the wall stressed out, freaked out. After five minutes with me in the meeting talking to me you can watch the stress fall off of them because they know me, these guys all know me, they can relate to me and they know I’m not gonna lie to them. I think we need more of that. We need people who have lived this experience hands on, give them opportunities for employment.”

Here, Andrew emphasizes the importance of hiring formerly incarcerated people for this line of work, given both the positive impact he has had on returning citizens he meets with and the challenge of securing employment as someone with a criminal conviction.

Lived experience of incarceration or recovery also shapes the way that service providers engage with their work. Speaking about the advocacy group he directs, one service provider explained how he thinks about his work as a formerly incarcerated person: “For me, this is not just work. I spent 20 years [in prison] with people, saw what they were going through, saw many people return over and over and over again... and I was exposed to the trauma... I’m living in a place of perpetual torture. And I just couldn’t in good conscience and still can’t in good conscience leave people in a state like that.” This service provider’s experience as a formerly incarcerated person drew him to the work he now does. His lived experience of incarceration also gives him a deep understanding of the pain associated with the prison system and the ways returning citizens may process their trauma after they are released from prison. This type of insight about how to try to support people while they attempt to heal from the trauma of incarceration is extremely valuable.

Overall, interviews revealed that returning citizens had many positive comments about their experiences meeting remotely with MPRN. Participants made connections with various reentry supports, learned of resources available to them that they had not previously known about, and gained access to a large support network, which for many people helped to decrease some nervousness around their upcoming release. Some participants recalled feeling surprised about how positive their experience with MPRN was. Several participants also recounted that meeting with service providers who shared lived experiences of incarceration or recovery contributed to their positive experience in the remote meetings. All of these favorable assessments indicate that MPRN’s practice of meeting remotely with incarcerated people prior to release has been beneficial for returning citizens.

### *Suggestions for Improvement*

While comments about remote meetings with the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network were overwhelmingly positive, it is worth noting certain suggestions for improvement made by some participants. One returning citizen, Steven, expressed the opinion that MPRN had inadequate support for people with extreme mental health needs, saying, “I don’t think they realized the magnitude of my mental illness going into it.” Steven continued by expressing that he felt a great deal of pressure from MPRN to connect with specific resources that he did not feel comfortable with: “It felt like they were pushing me towards some, these things that I didn’t want to do, you know, that I wasn’t ready for.” Steven gave the example of a recovery residence that MPRN attempted to connect him with. While Steven conceded that this housing situation would have worked well for many returning citizens, he said the idea of going to a place like this made him nervous because of his social anxiety: “I just know that I’m gonna have mental issues being around people that I don’t know.” Steven’s case was unique to other interviews I conducted in that he sounded significantly more distraught than all other participants. At one point, Steven admitted, “I would rather be back in prison for 33 months than to live the next seven days that are coming my way.” Steven’s reentry experience reveals that the support of an organization such as MPRN is not always sufficient to address people’s reentry needs, especially people with serious mental health issues. Steven’s case reflects literature that individuals who struggle with mental health issues while in prison are highly likely to continue to struggle with post-release mental health (Wallace et al. 2016), and that having mental health symptoms is associated with less successful community integration (Moore et al. 2018).

Another participant, Andrew, raised a concern about an empty promise that was made during the remote meetings. Although Andrew spoke overwhelmingly positively about MPRN,

he did mention a notable negative experience related to securing housing for his release. Andrew met with MPRN for several months and was told that he would have a bed at a recovery residence upon release. When Andrew's release was just one week away, however, he was told that the recovery residence MPRN had connected him with had no available beds:

“They always told me not to worry about anything. I said I want to come to a recovery residence sober house and they were like, don't worry about nothing, you'll have a bed... I'm like all right, so I'm not worried about where I'm going to go. And then I got a week from my release, and now there's no bed. They're like, 'oh, we're sorry, there's no beds anywhere.' And that was like devastating, you know... I got mad at them but I mean it wasn't their fault. Unfortunately, that's the way it works in recovery residences, they don't hold beds.”

The devastation described here by Andrew speaks to the damage that can be done by making promises that are not necessarily possible to fulfill. Andrew, who ended up finding a different recovery residence to live in, is now familiar with the reentry planning process because of the nature of the work he secured upon his release. He expressed that he now understands this is the way things work in Maine, although he would have appreciated more transparency about the fact that recovery residences are unable to reserve beds for people and therefore cannot always guarantee a place to live upon release.

A final suggestion for improvement concerns representation. As discussed earlier, most of MPRN's board members and many service providers associated with the network have lived experience of incarceration and recovery, and prioritizing this type of representation has been highly beneficial for many returning citizens who connected with MPRN. While MPRN does an exceptional job with this type of representation, other types of representation are important as well. All of MPRN's board members are white-passing, most service providers that make up the network are white-passing, and most of the returning citizens who connect with the network are also white. As noted earlier, Maine is a predominantly white state; however, BIPOC individuals

are overrepresented in the prison system at disproportionate rates. Research also shows that due to lower social capital as a result of systemic racism and social stratification associated with being Black in the United States, Black formerly incarcerated people are “more vulnerable to the collateral consequences of a criminal conviction” than white people, meaning Black people are more likely to have worse reentry outcomes (Olusanya & Cancino 2011, pg. 345). In Maine, these disparities are especially salient given that Department of Corrections staff are almost exclusively white.

Jordan, a returning citizen who identifies as Black, discussed why he feels racial representation is important in the prison system and the reentry system: “[Returning citizens of color] need somebody that they can look up to and say, ‘oh, you're doing well. That makes me want to do well.’ But there has to be more diversity.” Here, Jordan identifies diversifying the population of people who work in reentry as something that could improve outcomes for returning citizens of color. Also describing the importance of having service providers of color to support BIPOC-identifying returning citizens, a service provider who works in advocacy and identifies as Black told me, “even though I’m a director and I got a whole lot of things on my plate, I’ve had to take the time to stop and do a pickup of somebody at the gate... There are times when I get involved in some of those cases because I feel like my identity makes it a little bit easier for the person coming out.” These statements illustrate the ways that racial representation within the reentry system can improve the reentry experiences of returning citizens of color, and how the lack of diversity among Department of Corrections staff and reentry-related service providers can have adverse effects on BIPOC-identifying returning citizens.

Having identified reasons why racial representation is important in reentry-related work, it is worth considering challenges to diversifying the staff at MPRN and similar organizations. Expanding on his statements above, the same service provider explained that certain resources are often necessary in order to diversify leadership:

“Many people that get involved in this type of work... do it because of the passion they feel about the work... they might be in an economic place where they can do that. I mean, and so many people of color, and Black people, system-impacted Black people in particular, don’t have that luxury to just, to devote so much time to reentry... this is a Black-led organization... But, it’s because we have a value around compensating people for their work and I don’t think that MPRN is in a place right now where it can offer any kind of real compensation for, you know, folks to be able to start doing the work and being compensated for it, which is a value that I hold.”

As this service provider explains, if the only people who work in reentry are the ones who are in a financial position to do so, the population of people able to engage with this work is severely limited. Increased compensation of employees may be a way to increase the diversity of board members, service providers, and returning citizens who connect with the organization, although this requires resources that are likely not readily available to an organization such as MPRN.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Interviews with returning citizens revealed the high levels of stress associated with release and reentry. Certain factors including long prison sentences, many previous incarcerations, fear of the unknown, and a lack of racial representation among Department of Corrections and reentry-related service providers may exacerbate this anxiety. Ways that participants discovered the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network varied and often relied on resources or networks not readily available to all returning citizens; this revealed an inconsistent referral process that likely excludes many returning citizens who may have wanted to meet with MPRN had they been aware of the organization. Going into the remote meetings with MPRN, many participants described feeling initially doubtful about the organization or reluctant to ask for

help. Despite these initial apprehensions, all participants described some positive experiences with MPRN, including connecting with resources they had not previously known about, having a support system that could answer questions and decrease some anxiety about reentry, meeting with service providers who were themselves previously incarcerated or in long-term recovery, and feeling surprised about the “no strings attached” nature of the support they received. Some participants also raised suggestions for ways MPRN’s operations could be improved, including having increased supports in place for people with more serious mental health issues, being transparent about what can and cannot be guaranteed, and prioritizing racial representation among leadership and service providers who are associated with the organization. Having in this chapter discussed the reentry planning process, which happens while returning citizens are still incarcerated, the following chapter will describe participants’ experiences since being released from prison.

## **ANALYSIS PART 2: EXPERIENCING REENTRY**

While reentry planning can start prior to an individual's release date, reentry begins in earnest after release. Interviews with returning citizens revealed two major categories: barriers that inhibited successful reentry and supports that promoted successful reentry. The first section of this chapter, reentry barriers, will outline a series of challenges that participants faced throughout their reentries. The second section, reentry supports, will examine the various safety nets that some participants were able to access and the ways in which these supports impacted their reentry experiences. This second section includes a discussion of ways in which the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network positively impacted the reentry outcomes of participants.

### **I. Reentry Barriers**

Each participant recounted a variety of challenges associated with their reentry. Major themes that emerged from interviews were the toll of recovering from incarceration, obstacles related to securing both employment and housing, and operations within the Department of Corrections that participants felt inhibited their reentry success.

#### *Recovering from Incarceration*

A notable theme that emerged from the interviews is how jarring it is to transition from the prison environment to the community. Richard confessed that since his release, "it's definitely been hard for me to even want to leave my house. It's like I'm stuck here, you know what I mean, it's like after being in jail and you're stuck there, I almost feel like I'm in jail at my house now, but I'm free to do whatever. So, it's a pretty strange feeling." Richard's hesitancy to leave his house illustrates how disconcerting the abrupt transition from the prison environment to the home environment can be. Alex, who had only been released for a couple of weeks at the time of his interview, admitted that he avoids most social interactions, especially crowds: "I

don't go much of anywhere. I go to the grocery store right down the hill from us when I need to buy something, but if it's too full I'll leave directly." This sentiment was echoed by a service provider who was formerly incarcerated, who recalled, "for a long time I couldn't go in a place where there was huge crowds." These impulses to avoid crowds and not leave the house are telling about the psychological effects of incarceration. Similarly, Aidan described how he felt after he was released: "I literally didn't feel like myself for the first two months of my release. It felt weird, I felt like it was going to end at any time, I had high anxiety all the time, my stress was through the roof." Responses to incarceration such as high stress levels upon release or a feeling of discomfort associated with leaving home or being in crowds can have major implications for reentry success, and therefore must be carefully analyzed.

One service provider who works in advocacy said that he believes one of the biggest challenges to reentry is the trauma, and that this trauma has significant effects on returning citizens' ability to reacclimate to society. This service provider described the trauma that incarcerated people are exposed to in the carceral setting. In the prison environment, he explained, "you don't show weakness. So you kind of just swallow it and swallow it and swallow all of this trauma." Aidan also mentioned this inability to show weakness as part of the prison setting: "If you are not strong-willed, you will get picked on, you will get beat up, you will get abused, and it happens all the time." Given this traumatizing environment, adjusting to life in the community can be extremely challenging.

When people are released, this service provider continued, they are usually expected to find employment and start working full-time immediately, either because they were released with no money or because employment is a condition of their probation: "There is a tremendous amount of stress placed on a person once they walk out the door, and not really enough time for

that person to take stock... They've been through a lot. And they just don't know how to process it. And yeah, they're trying to hit the ground running but they're really suffering." Multiple service providers flagged this trauma as a cause of recidivism, with one person categorizing trauma as "the number one thing that brings people back [to prison]." The expectation that returning citizens start working immediately upon release means that they lack the time or space to process the trauma they have just endured, which can have adverse effects on their mental health and reentry success.

Participants mentioned difficulty with daily tasks as another product of the institutionalization fostered by the prison setting. Nearly half of returning citizens expressed that they felt institutionalized in some way or struggled to adjust to what was expected of them upon release. Alex said, "I'm still not used to it... the fact that I can make choices, like, I'll be asked what I want for dinner, and I don't know." This example from Alex speaks to the profound differences of life in versus out of prison—in prison, individuals have very little agency because they are controlled almost completely by the carceral system. Thus, the transition away from this environment is understandably challenging. This notion of institutionalization also extends to skills such as time and money management which, while necessary for most people, are not required of prison residents. A service provider who rents apartments to formerly incarcerated people noted that the length of time an individual has spent in prison tends to affect their ability to do certain tasks upon release: "If they've been in prison for very long, they lack the skill set of being able to budget money, actually pay rent, pay their bills." In this way, the carceral setting does not prepare returning citizens for reentry success.

Many returning citizens and service providers spoke about trauma and institutionalization as major challenges to transitioning from the prison environment to the community. When

analyzing reentry outcomes, one must keep in mind the traumas many returning citizens have endured from their time in prison and the ways these traumas may profoundly impact reentry experiences. Having discussed the trauma and institutionalization that make recovering from incarceration a significant part of the reentry process, the following sections will examine the challenges of securing employment and housing.

### *Employment*

Participants discussed how limited resources exacerbated the challenge of securing employment or furthering their education. When discussing their employment statuses, transportation was one hurdle mentioned by many participants. Several participants did not have drivers licenses, either because their license had expired or been revoked and they did not have the resources to get it back, or because they had simply never gotten their license. Most participants also did not have cars and many did not live in a place where public transportation was readily available. Roger explained that although he is looking for something to supplement his income from social security, his job search is restricted by the bus schedule: “I don't have reliable transportation except what the bus does. And there are limits to its schedule.” Another participant, John, tried to bike to work but “couldn't ride it from here to the end of my driveway without my knees hurting.” A service provider who works in a probation office explained that much of this lack of resources for returning citizens is due to the infrastructure and geography of the state of Maine. He noted, “Maine is a very rural state. So transportation's an issue, housing's an issue, employment's an issue.” Transportation is another resource that many returning citizens lacked or struggled to secure, and for several participants, housing and employment were impacted by limited transportation options.

Access to the Internet was identified as another obstacle related to education. A service provider who assists returning citizens with debt forgiveness and college access raised internet access as a major challenge in the work she does. The processes of applying for financial aid services and defaulting loans are both conducted almost fully online. Although there are ways to complete these processes via mail, she noted, “it takes three or four times as long.” Among the returning citizens I interviewed, internet access was not raised as a major issue. However, this may be because the majority of interviews were conducted over Zoom, which requires internet access, and every participant had an email account; therefore, the sample may have been inherently limited to individuals with at least partial internet access. Thus, it is probable that lack of access to the Internet is a more common problem among formerly incarcerated people than this sample demonstrated.

About half of participants were employed full-time. Most of these jobs were at restaurants or shopping centers, with the exception of one participant who had been hired by the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network and one participant who resumed operating his business that he had run prior to incarceration. Most returning citizens who were not employed had been released more recently and were in the process of applying for jobs. Some participants were working part-time, mostly doing physical labor such as roofing. The majority of participants recounted the challenge of securing a job as someone with a criminal conviction. Jeff, who had been released about three weeks prior to his interview, admitted that he had applied for and been rejected from many jobs because of his criminal conviction: “I’ve applied to probably 15 jobs and I’ve been clean for two years now. And on the right track. I’ve got my Associate’s Degree at [university name]. I’m continuing for my Bachelor’s in [program name], and out of the 15 jobs that I’ve applied for, I’ve been turned down because of my background check on every single one so far.”

Despite the work Jeff had done to get clean, earn his Associate's Degree, and apply for over a dozen jobs, his criminal record profoundly affected his job search success. Other returning citizens expressed similar sentiments about their attempts to secure employment. These experiences reflect studies documenting that people with criminal records are significantly less likely to receive callbacks from employers (Pager 2003; Wakefield & Uggen 2010; Nakamura & Bucklen 2014).

Service providers also discussed the challenge of securing employment with a history of incarceration. Someone who does post-incarceration case management explained that “being able to present with a solid resume is a challenge,” because incarceration leads to gaps in individuals’ employment histories and thus makes them typically viewed as less favorable applicants. This quote echoes literature on how incarceration pushes people out of the labor market, thereby making them less competitive applicants (Wakefield & Uggen 2010; Morenoff & Harding 2014). Several service providers also mentioned the stigma associated with a criminal conviction and how this limits job opportunities. Someone who works for a cultural-based nonprofit organization and manages a recovery residence explained that one of the biggest reentry challenges is “coming out and facing the stigmas that exist in, you know, especially the workforce.” Elaborating on this discussion of barriers to securing employment, service providers described how stigma and job discrimination limit the types of jobs returning citizens end up taking. A service provider who works in advocacy explained, “because you have to check a box or, you know, maybe your record comes up, you have to accept the lower-end jobs. So you can’t even really access a job that’s really going to pay your bills.” Similarly, another service provider who rents apartments to formerly incarcerated people described the poor working conditions in a factory located near the apartments that hires people with criminal records: “Many of the tenants

have told me that after like two weeks there they don't want to work there anymore. I can't blame them, because it's a sweatshop." As these service providers explained, the poor working conditions and low wages that returning citizens often have to accept have major implications for quality of life.

Related to participants' difficulties securing employment with a criminal conviction, almost all participants described feeling stigmatized as formerly incarcerated people. David described being judged by a fellow employee: "I was very upfront with them about my criminal history. And the other person who worked there, she wasn't really accepting... And she wouldn't work with me so they actually let her go instead of me, which is pretty crazy." While this story has a relatively happy ending, it nevertheless demonstrates the stigmas that formerly incarcerated people encounter in many different spaces including the workplace. Another way this stigma manifested was people making jokes at the returning citizen's expense. Aidan recounted interactions with people who did not have lived experience of incarceration: "Okay, here's a joke that never gets old: Did you drop the soap in prison?" These types of comments about prison demonstrate stereotypes many people hold about incarceration and the ways formerly incarcerated people must navigate the ignorance of some people who are unfamiliar with the realities of incarceration. This stigma exists in employment, social, and other settings.

### *Housing*

Housing outcomes varied considerably among returning citizens, although most participants' experiences securing housing were influenced by several constraints. Eleven participants expressed that they struggled to find a place to live due to the lack of available housing, including recovery residences, in the state of Maine. Participants frequently used phrases such as "there's not enough places around" and "the renter's market is impossible."

Given that employment, health, and sobriety outcomes are all affected by a returning citizen's housing situation (Hamlin 2020), an inability to secure quality housing can have profound implications for reentry outcomes.

Most service providers also emphasized the lack of available housing in Maine as a major barrier to successful reentry. A service provider I interviewed who operates a recovery residence spoke about the massive housing shortage in Maine and the limited number of recovery residences like the one he operates. He also noted that his recovery residence is open to people releasing from both the state prisons and from county jails. Due to the high demand for and low supply of this type of housing, their residence remains full for the most part, meaning they have to turn people away when there are no available beds. Another challenge to accessing housing mentioned was the moratorium on evictions, a product of the COVID-19 pandemic. A service provider who does release planning for individuals at one of the county jails in Maine explained that because landlords are not allowed to evict tenants, this "makes landlords with vacancies less likely to rent to someone at this point, especially someone who might be considered high-risk like our population is." This eviction moratorium, a response to the unique conditions of the pandemic, is another factor that contributes to the lack of available housing for formerly incarcerated people.

Another housing-related barrier faced by returning citizens was financial constraints. The majority of participants reported challenges affording first and last month's rent and security deposit as an impediment to obtaining housing. John summarized the sentiments of many other participants: "I had no money. You can't really get an apartment with no money." Nearly all returning citizens expressed concerns about their finances. Service providers also noted the lack

of affordable housing as a major issue, frequently expressing sentiments such as “housing is extremely expensive” and “there’s not many cheap places to live in general.”

Furthermore, for several reasons, landlords tend to view returning citizens as less favorable housing applicants. A service provider who operates various housing-, employment-, and recovery-related programs noted that when people are incarcerated, it is impossible to build good credit or establish a rental history, which exacerbates the challenge of being accepted by a landlord upon release: “Maine already has a housing shortage as it is... it’s a challenge even as a normal person to find an apartment... so when you have no rental history, your credit’s not that great, you don’t have any references, it’s almost impossible to find housing.” Aidan echoed these sentiments, adding that housing expenses and having a criminal record pose additional challenges to securing housing: “Housing is a super huge issue, because most people getting out of prison don’t have \$2,100 to drop on an apartment, let alone find someone that will rent to a felon who just got out of prison.” Aidan’s quote reflects literature showing that landlords are more likely to reject applicants with criminal records (Evans & Porter 2015; Bender et al. 2016; Zannella et al. 2020).

Participants with sex offenses faced additional challenges securing housing due to the constraints of the sex offender registry and their probation conditions. John noted that only two shelters in Maine house people with sex offenses, summarizing his housing search by saying, “there’s nothing out there.” Kevin, who had also been incarcerated for a sex offense, said he had to move to a different county because there was “no housing” where he was released. John also reported receiving inaccurate information from Department of Corrections staff regarding what housing he was and was not eligible to live in. John said that he was told by his caseworker that he could live in an apartment he had found. One week after he had moved in, he was informed

by the police that the apartment actually did not fall under the regulations of the sex offender registry because it was too close to a city park, and he was forced to move. John expressed frustration about this experience: “He [the caseworker] was giving me all kinds of false information that would have got me just thrown back in jail and arrested on new charges.” This quote illustrates the distrust John felt towards his caseworker. John’s and Kevin’s experiences are reflective of existing literature on how housing options are especially limited for individuals convicted of sex offenses (Bender et al. 2016).

As Aidan and other participants discussed, affording housing is a major challenge for returning citizens. This inability to pay for housing is due in part to the fact that most prison residents are unable to save much money while incarcerated. Maine has a few work release programs, where prison residents are taken via bus to work sites each day; this program allows residents to make money that they can save for their release if they choose to do so. Aside from these work release programs, participants said there are few opportunities to save money for release. Phil voiced his opinion about the work release program and its implications for successful reentry: “I think, no matter what, you should be able to get at least three months of work release, to get money. Because if I was walking out the door with \$50... [I would think] I don’t have anything so fuck it, I might as well just go do drugs... that’s setting them up for failure as soon as they walk out.” Another participant, Andrew, agreed that the work release program should be open to more prison residents, explaining that this would ease the transition from prison to the community. Andrew said that under this program, after someone is released, “it’s a little bit easier for him to adjust because he’s got money saved.” Phil and Andrew each spoke of the work release program as a way for incarcerated people to save money which, they agree, could help reduce recidivism. This discussion of the work release program segues into the

next section, which examines the ways that policies associated with the Department of Corrections can create institutional barriers to reentry success.

### *Department of Corrections*

Also speaking about the work release program, Richard claimed that prison residents are required to take classes through the Department of Corrections, such as domestic violence or drug treatment courses, before they are eligible for work release. Richard voiced his disdain for this policy, saying that he believes the reason is that the Department of Corrections profits off of having residents take these classes: “They tell you oh you can’t [sign up for work release], you’ve got to do this class, this class, and this class... They [prison residents] want to get to work release and save money... so making them do that is just a waste of time. I know to them [the DOC] it’s not because it’s money in their pockets because of the government funding they get.” Similar to Richard’s assessment of the programming offered or required by the Department of Corrections, Aidan expressed frustration about the classes not being useful after release: “Their programming is a joke. Literally every single thing they teach in prison does not help you... When you get out, you can take all those little certificates of completed programming and show your probation officer and he's gonna laugh in your face. He’ll be like, that don't mean anything to me.” Richard and Aidan do not mince words in expressing their disapproval of the programming offered in prison. It is worth noting, however, that some participants did express that the classes they took in prison were helpful. Andrew completed the substance abuse program, which he said gave him a “broader view of substance use disorders and... hours of training and classes.” Andrew is now a substance abuse counselor, and he expressed that this course was helpful in securing him his current job. A few participants also spoke very highly of the college classes offered while they were incarcerated.

Similar to John's experience, discussed in an earlier section, of receiving inaccurate information from his caseworker about housing, Kevin raised another example of miscommunication with Department of Corrections staff that posed an additional challenge to his reentry. Kevin was required to complete a sex offender treatment program upon release. Each class costs between \$45 and \$90; given the financial constraints typically faced by formerly incarcerated people, paying this fee is likely a strain for many returning citizens. Kevin was told by his caseworker that MaineCare, a form of insurance used in the state of Maine, would not pay for the class. Eventually, however, Kevin learned that in most cases MaineCare actually does cover these classes. Kevin also noted that when he was trying to sign up for these mandatory classes, "I wrote to the head of the probation and parole... and asked for a list of sex offender treatment providers, and that list is so outdated, most of the people on there don't even exist anymore." These examples of inaccurate information disseminated by the Department of Corrections demonstrate a disconnect between returning citizens' needs and what is sometimes provided by the state Department of Corrections.

Four participants expressed the opinion that caseworkers are stretched too thin, which impacts their ability to effectively work with each returning citizen on release planning. Some participants expressed sympathy for the heavy caseloads of caseworkers. For example, Andrew asked, "how is one guy supposed to help 100 guys release?" and Kevin noted, "you've got 20 people, 30 people all getting out within the next 30 days, you're trying to keep things straight and figure out who needs what help." Participants suggested that because of their overwhelming number of cases, caseworkers lack the time to effectively support all of their clients. Jackson said, "maybe that's why they don't try to sign everybody up for everything, because they never have time to see everybody." A few participants even suggested that the overwhelming number

of clients leads some caseworkers to pick favorites. Jeff said, “when you’re a caseworker and you have 80 people on your schedule, you know, you’re going to look at the people that are trying to do something and trying to better themselves before you look at somebody that lays around in the bunk all day long and gets in fights and, you know, doesn’t do anything to try and better themselves.” Richard, who agreed that some caseworkers exercise favoritism, suggested that they pick favorites based on the nature of each resident’s offense: “I honestly think it’s because of like the charges that some of those people had gotten in there and [the caseworkers] know of those people and what they did so they hold like a judgment over them, based upon you know what they’ve already been judged and sentenced for.” Other participants mentioned that they felt they were either chosen by their caseworker as a favorite or judged by their caseworker due to the nature of their offense. As several participants suggest, overwhelmingly heavy caseloads may contribute to disparities in the time, attention, and support given to each client.

Reentry obstacles associated with probation are also worth noting. A service provider who works at a probation office discussed challenges with the traditional probation model in terms of the time commitment required of returning citizens who are on probation. He said, “When you’re asking a client who’s trying to reenter into the community that ‘you’re going to be at my office at nine o’clock in the morning, and then you’re going to the counseling session on a Tuesday at ten o’clock, and then you’re going to go meet with this person at one,’ it’s like you’re putting roadblocks up in front of this person by having all of these appointments.” He further said that the jobs returning citizens often have are not particularly flexible. He used the example of a job flagging in the street: “I don’t know how many flagging companies are going to allow someone to drop the flag at 10 o’clock in the morning, run over to a probation office, and then have the probation office say ‘well, you’ve got to go to your substance abuse counselor at one

o'clock.” This service provider’s concerns about the “roadblocks” associated with probation connects to literature about how people on probation or parole are sometimes mandated to attend certain programming, even if it meets at the same time as the person’s job (Ortiz and Jackey 2019).

Barriers associated with reentry included having little space to recover from the institutionalization and trauma associated with incarceration, difficulty securing housing and employment, and limits to the ways the Department of Corrections prepares returning citizens for release. Housing, financial resources, and transportation were the major resources participants noted lacking access to, and employment options tended to be lower-quality. Given these profound challenges to reentry, it is necessary for returning citizens to have some supports in place to help them scale these hurdles.

## **II. Reentry Supports**

Although returning citizens’ reentry experiences were defined by a series of obstacles, certain safety nets eased the transition for many. This section examines the supports that were or were not in place for returning citizens throughout their reentry and both the benefits to and limits of them. Safety nets described by participants primarily fell into three categories: state supports, social capital and social support, and the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network as a support.

### *State Supports*

The four state supports mentioned by participants were the Bridging Rental Assistance Program, General Assistance, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and social security. The Bridging Rental Assistance Program (BRAP) awards vouchers which last 120 days and are meant to help people with substance use disorder and mental illness obtain transitional housing by providing rental subsidies (Department of Health and Human Services). A few participants

had applied for and received BRAP vouchers while in prison, although none had been successful in finding housing with their voucher. Aidan, for example, was approved for his BRAP voucher two months before his release, and the 120 days began as soon as he was approved. Therefore, he “burnt out 60 days in prison unable to find an apartment.” As discussed in an earlier section, given the severe housing shortage, finding a place to live in this relatively short period of time is often challenging. Aidan applied for renewals, which have since expired, and he is in the process of reapplying. Other participants with BRAP vouchers also struggled to obtain housing despite this added support. Jackson, for instance, was living with family members because “I went after the BRAP program, which I’ve been unsuccessful in finding a place.” Finding landlords who will rent to voucher holders is also challenging because many landlords do not accept BRAP vouchers. Thus, this voucher program, while intended to provide financial support for housing, has for several reasons not always led to returning citizens successfully securing housing.

In addition to BRAP, General Assistance, which is available to varying degrees in about half of U.S. states including Maine, is another program meant to support people considered to be very low-income. General Assistance, which is intended as a last resort for people who do not qualify for other forms of cash assistance, is “generally the only cash assistance for which poor childless adults can qualify” (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities). Two participants were receiving General Assistance benefits to cover housing costs, and they each expressed relief at having these benefits available to them. One of these participants, John, had been donating plasma to survive until he secured a minimum-wage job at a restaurant. John had his rent paid by General Assistance for a period of time, which served as a lifeline while he was “bleeding to get food every week.” John also mentioned that because he was taking online college courses, he was not eligible for food stamps. The United States Department of Agriculture website confirms

John's ineligibility for SNAP benefits: "students attending an institution of higher education... more than half-time are not eligible for SNAP unless they meet an exemption."

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) was another government agency that provided some support. Only one participant, Kevin, was receiving assistance through the VA, but he spoke highly of his experience with this department. Kevin had "several conversations" with the VA prior to his release and recalled gratefully that "the VA came through" by providing him with a cell phone after he was released from prison. The VA also completed the paperwork for Kevin to apply for General Assistance and paid for his housing until his General Assistance began; Kevin was living in an apartment at the time of his interview. These services, which Kevin considered to be extremely helpful, were not available to any other participants that I interviewed.

Lastly, three participants were either receiving or waiting to receive social security benefits. These three participants were all older or disabled and were either unemployed or working part-time to supplement their income from social security. Thus, several participants' living conditions were improved by state subsidies. These benefits were limited, however — several participants were unsuccessful in finding housing despite the extra financial support, and participants still struggled to afford basic needs such as groceries.

### *Social Capital and Social Support*

When securing housing post-release, several participants benefited from their social networks. Six participants were living with a family member or friend at the time of their interview; for some, this was a temporary plan while they searched for other housing accommodations, while others planned to remain in this living situation permanently. Of the participants who did not move in with friends or family or own their own house, three were

living at recovery residences, three were living in apartments, one owned his own house, and one was homeless, having chosen not to go to a recovery residence upon release. Only three participants did not report struggling to find housing; of these three, one owned his own house, one had resumed living with previous roommates, and one was living with his parent because he had been released on home confinement (home confinement requires a sponsor, and his parent was serving this role).

Speaking about the challenge of securing housing for returning citizens with limited social support, a service provider who does release planning noted that “if a person doesn’t have an established residence to reenter to, trying to find housing at this point in time has become much worse than it ever has been in my career.” This quote demonstrates the advantages of social networks and the ways they may tie to reentry outcomes. Given that incarcerated people tend to have low rates of familial and social support compared to the general population (Wakefield & Uggen 2010), it is unsurprising that many returning citizens did not have this network to draw on when securing housing. Jackson, a returning citizen who had moved in with a family member after his release and was attempting to find housing with a BRAP voucher, spoke particularly insightfully about the advantages associated with social capital: “As far as housing, I mean not everybody has the resources. Not everybody knows what to do, you know what I mean like they don’t know people, they don’t know about sober housing, they don’t know about General Assistance, they didn’t know to ask for BRAP.” Here, Jackson identifies a gap in who has knowledge about and access to resources and who does not.

Related to social capital and knowledge of resources, many participants had quite limited social networks, which is notable because social support and connection can have a significant impact on reentry experiences (Kiczkowski 2011; Northcutt Bohmert et al. 2018). Almost all

participants described having at least one person they could rely on for social support, primarily family members or long-time friends. A few participants were divorced, and none mentioned being married. About a third of participants mentioned having children who they had some sort of relationship with. Two participants disclosed that they had had their parental rights terminated while incarcerated; they each expressed a measure of anguish about this happening.

When asked about their social lives, several participants used phrases such as “nonexistent” or “zero.” Several participants said they were too busy to be particularly social, with Andrew noting, “I haven’t really had the luxury to have much of a social life.” About a third of participants’ descriptions of their social lives echoed existing literature about desistance (Giordano et al. 2003). Aidan, for example, said that he has one close friend and “other than that I don’t have the desire to have a bunch of friends because the last time I had a bunch of terrible friends, it kind of got me in trouble.” Similarly, Alex noted, “The small support system is better than a million fake friends. I don’t need a million fake friends, I’ve had that when I was a drug addict.” Jeff contributed to this discussion as well, saying that after you are released from prison, “the things that you have been out of is things you really don’t want to go back to anyway” and that he felt it was time to “build new relationships.” Here, Aidan, Alex, and Jeff expressed a shift in how they think about their social lives and what they prioritize.

About half of participants expressed that the recovery community had been a social support for them through their release and reentry, likely due in part to the fact that people in recovery tend to have similar lived experiences and thus are less likely to judge or stigmatize one another. When describing his social life, Jackson said, “I pretty much hang out with people in the recovery community.” A few participants had either secured jobs in the field of recovery or volunteered at a recovery center. Andrew, who had experienced a great deal of tragedy and loss

in the time surrounding his release and reentry, said he volunteers at a recovery center “just to keep myself busy,” and that this has been a helpful coping mechanism. These positive experiences described by participants illustrate the benefits of being part of a supportive group that can serve as a broader community, especially in light of the limited social networks of many participants.

Similar to the recovery community as a social support, about half of participants felt that the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network served as a social support for them. Most returning citizens had met with MPRN board members at least once since their release from prison, which many participants said had been a helpful support during the transition from prison to the community. A few participants said they sometimes message a board member of MPRN when they need advice or emotional support, and that this resource has been very helpful. Notably, Jordan said he appreciates the accountability that he feels to MPRN because of the services they provided him, and that this feeling of accountability has had positive implications for his reentry outcome.

Jordan said,

“I think that’s another reason why I’m doing so well now too, because I feel like I have people I can’t let down. Even with the job, you know, I haven’t quit the job because I believe I’d be letting someone down if I didn’t keep the job even though I don’t like the job... When you’re a kid you’re accountable to your parents. You try to make them proud. Me, I just have a bigger network of people I need to make proud.”

Here, Jordan describes a feeling of responsibility to keep his job and continue to be successful on behalf of MPRN. Jordan’s perception that he would be “letting someone down” by quitting his job is telling about the connection he feels to the people at MPRN who supported him throughout his reentry experience. This quote from Jordan connects to the next section, which discusses the ways MPRN served as a support throughout participants’ reentries.

### *MPRN as a Support*

Almost all participants had received some type of material resource from the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network. Eleven participants said that MPRN had connected them to grants or programs related to education or employment. These grants covered clothing or other equipment for jobs, laptops, transportation to work, college courses, and other job-related training. Four participants were connected to their current housing through MPRN; two of these participants received help finding apartments and the other two were connected to recovery residences during the remote meetings. All four of these participants spoke positively about their housing situations. MPRN had also provided some participants with cell phones, and a few participants with extremely limited resources had received clothing, food, or hygiene items from MPRN.

With the help of grants that MPRN connected them to, about half of returning citizens were taking or planning to take college courses or other types of job training. These classes ranged from computer programming, to recovery coaching, to trades such as welding. A few participants spoke highly about the way that people from MPRN encouraged them to think beyond their immediate need to make money and towards the type of work they actually wanted to do. Aidan, for example, explained the way MPRN shifted how he thought about his job after release: “My plan for my release was to get out and get a job. That’s all I had going for me for three years. And then I met these guys, and they’re like well that’s great but what else do you want to do? And then when I told them what I’d like to do, they’re like, we can do that. I was like, really?” The surprise Aidan felt at being given the opportunity to think beyond securing his basic needs is telling about the mindset he originally had about his reentry and the circumstances around the development of that mindset. Alex described a similar experience with MPRN: “They helped me flesh out goals, like things that I would like to do.” Alex decided he wanted to become

a recovery coach, and MPRN connected him to a grant that would help him pay for the classes required to hold this position. MPRN also helped Alex think about how he can link his talents to the work he wants to do: “I’m a musician too and they’re talking about how like, how can you use your music in recovery. And it’s like, they gave me lots of good ideas and lots of feedback and that was pretty cool.” A service provider who works for a workforce development agency that awards grants to people for employment training and education spoke about prioritizing what each returning citizen feels passionate about: “We absolutely want the person to tell us what they want to do. We want this to be about their goals, their dreams, what they want to do.” As Aidan and Alex describe, helping returning citizens think creatively about how to apply what they care about to their work is a significant service that MPRN has provided.

Transportation was another service that MPRN provided to some returning citizens who needed it. One participant recalled receiving a ride to church from one of MPRN’s board members. This same board member picked up another participant, Roger, from prison on the day of his release, after collecting Roger’s belongings from where they had been stored. He then drove Roger to his new apartment, which MPRN had connected him to, drove him to the bank to open an account, took him shopping to get food and other necessities, and helped carry Roger’s belongings into his new apartment. Roger voiced a great deal of appreciation for the support this board member had provided: “Everything came into focus because of his attention, care, concern. I would have walked out the door with no idea where I was going, or even how to get there... it would not have been anything like what it is without the help of [this board member].” This quote from Roger illustrates the massive positive impact MPRN had on his reentry experience.

In addition to Roger, a few other participants directly attributed their reentry success to the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network. Richard said, “You know, the only reason that it was successful for me was because I got to meet with people like [MPRN board member] and people from that corporation.” Similarly, David recommended in no uncertain terms that every returning citizen meet with MPRN prior to their release:

“If I hadn’t used them, I wouldn’t have, you know, I felt, been successful or set up in the right, you know, path to be successful... I believe that if inmates have an opportunity to meet with MPRN and they have goals and, you know, and they want to be successful, to get out, I think that MPRN would definitely help anybody that is in need and wants to be successful when they get out.”

Roger, Richard, and David each attest that the support they received from MPRN impacted their reentry in profoundly positive ways. Given the barriers returning citizens tend to face and the extremely high rates of recidivism in the United States, testimonies like these deserve thoughtful consideration.

Most participants also expressed that it was reassuring to have MPRN there to answer questions and provide support as issues or questions arose. Aidan spoke about the reassurance he felt knowing that he could draw on MPRN as a support network if he needed to: “If you’re confused, you just call them up... It’s nice to know that they’re there, if I need them.” Kevin recalled gratefully that one of MPRN’s board members had provided him with a list of sex offender treatment program classes offered in the area he was living in: “You come up with a need and they come up with the information that will help you.” Jeff also expressed a great deal of gratitude for MPRN, saying, “I know I can call them any time I have an issue, any time I have a question, any time I’m struggling with anything, they’re somebody that I know I can call.” These quotes illustrate the supports, both tangible and intangible, that MPRN provided for many returning citizens. Given the limited social networks and resources that returning citizens tend to

have, the existence of a support such as the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network appeared to have a significant impact on the reentry experiences of many participants.

### **III. Conclusion**

Interviews with returning citizens reflected existing literature about the challenges formerly incarcerated individuals face in terms employment, housing, and social support. Participants especially noted the shortage of available housing, reluctance to rent to or hire people with criminal records, limited financial resources, and limited social networks as barriers to successful reentry. Despite these limited resources and institutional barriers, participants described various safety nets that had impacted their reentry experiences. These types of supports included state supports, social capital, and the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network as a support. Participants' positive experiences drawing on these safety nets, and their experiences with MPRN in particular, demonstrate the benefits and enormous potential of an organization such as MPRN that can provide a variety of supports for returning citizens with extremely limited resources.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis sought to answer two questions: What are structural barriers that impact reentry experiences or curb access to reentry supports? How is MPRN able to meet the needs of returning citizens, and what role has conducting remote meetings prior to release played in the supports provided by MPRN? In this conclusion I first briefly review key findings from interviews. I then consider various tangible and intangible definitions of reentry success, considering participant responses of how they view successful reentry. I close by suggesting avenues for future research and by considering some bigger-picture questions about the prison system.

### *Summary of Findings*

This project was motivated by the ability to conduct remote meetings with returning citizens prior to release, a practice that had previously not been permitted by the Department of Corrections but was adopted due to circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings from interviews suggest that these remote meetings should continue because they have positively impacted the process of reentry planning. The 28 interviews I conducted with returning citizens and service providers revealed that as returning citizens neared their release dates, many felt high levels of stress about their upcoming reentry and had little idea how to secure housing, employment, and other necessary resources. Thus, most participants found the material and emotional support provided by the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network to be highly valuable. Participants especially appreciated that many people at the remote meetings had lived experience of incarceration and therefore were familiar with the stresses associated with the transition from prison to the community. The ways returning citizens connected with MPRN, however, were inconsistent at best and inequitable at worst—social capital, support networks,

and other resources often contributed to participants learning about the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network as an available resource. Once participants met with MPRN, their experiences were overwhelmingly positive, with many participants connecting to housing, employment, grants, a supportive community, and other resources. Several participants directly attributed their reentry success to the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network, expressing that they had never received this type of support and that it had made a profound impact on their lives post-incarceration. Despite the support of MPRN, most participants encountered many challenges throughout their reentry, including securing material resources, stigma in both social and work spaces, and the emotional toll of transitioning from prison to the community.

While feedback about meetings with the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network was overwhelmingly positive, it is worth noting some suggestions that could enhance the way the organization operates. To reach more returning citizens who may not hear about MPRN given the existing advertisement strategies, MPRN could consider developing new referral processes such as sending letters or flyers to prison residents explaining what the organization does, having a more structured system whereby incarcerated people tell other residents about MPRN, or convincing more caseworkers to refer all of their clients to MPRN. Other participants commented on MPRN's inadequate resources or expertise to support people with severe mental health challenges and unclear communication about which reentry resources could be guaranteed and which could not. While each of these concerns was only raised by one or two participants, they nonetheless may deserve some examination. Another suggestion for MPRN involved the lack of racial representation among board members and service providers, particularly given the significant racial disparities within the U.S. prison system. The majority of MPRN's board and many service providers associated with the network are formerly incarcerated, and this type of

representation is vitally important to the work MPRN does; however, other types of representation are meaningful as well. As one of the service providers I interviewed suggested, one reason why diversifying leadership in this type of organization can be a challenge is because most BIPOC returning citizens face financial constraints that may restrict them from working in the field of their choice. While most returning citizens have limited financial resources and face barriers in the labor market, research shows that these barriers are particularly acute for BIPOC returning citizens (Olusanya & Cancino 2011). Thus, prioritizing the compensation of people in leadership positions at MPRN and continuing to prioritize employing people with lived experience of incarceration, something MPRN already does exceptionally well, could be a way to maintain and increase the diversity in identities of people in leadership. However, increasing compensation of leadership requires financial resources that MPRN may not currently have.

Another takeaway from interviews was that returning citizens encounter a massively jarring transition when they leave prison, and they are usually given very little time or space to process the weight of this moment. Rather, they typically are expected to immediately secure a full-time job, find housing, and resume fulfilling all other expectations associated with life outside of the prison setting. This abrupt transition, coupled with the traumatic nature of spending time in prison and the fact that most incarcerated people had lower levels of education, fewer job skills, more mental health issues, and more limited social support prior to incarceration compared to the general population, makes reincarceration highly probable. These seemingly impossible circumstances that many returning citizens are thrust into reflect research about the prisoner reentry industry and how, due to financial motivations, institutional barriers are set up to increase the likelihood of recidivism, which in turn facilitates the growth of the prison industry.

As I demonstrated in the literature review, populations already on the margins of our society bear the brunt of these barriers implemented by the prisoner reentry industry.

### *Tangible and Intangible Aspects of Reentry*

In literature evaluating reentry programs, successful reentry is often measured using data on recidivism rates. This narrow definition, relying primarily or solely on whether or not someone returns to prison, fails to consider returning citizens' quality of life or hopes for the future. Hoping to adopt a richer framework for reentry success, one question I asked participants during each interview was, "what does successful reentry look like to you?" In response, most participants mentioned something along the lines of securing housing and employment, having a strong support system, remaining successful with their recovery, and avoiding reincarceration. Some also discussed wanting to support their children and make them proud. In addition to these goals, some participants defined reentry success in more abstract terms. Jeff, for example, defined successful reentry as finding the "resources to rebuild yourself," and "having changed the circumstances that you were in before." Here, Jeff reflects on his life before and after incarceration and the ways he hopes the latter will be different from the former. Richard emphasized the importance of "stay[ing] balanced" and not "trying to make up for all the time you've lost." While this quote acknowledges the profound effect incarceration had on Richard's life, I interpret his view as somewhat optimistic in the way he focuses on the present and the future without agonizing over the past. Alex said, "Going outside your boundaries is successful and doing things that will further you and feed your soul are successful." Here, Alex describes the full life he hopes to live, the way he wants to feel throughout his reentry in addition to the basic needs he knows he must secure. These definitions of successful reentry, which are difficult to quantify, provide a fuller picture of what organizations like the Maine Prisoner Reentry

Network are striving to help returning citizens achieve. These answers demonstrate the importance of the intangible supports provided by MPRN such as the sense of community and the encouragement to explore what you are passionate about, as well as the tangible supports such as cell phones and grants.

At the end of my interview with Alex, he said something that I immediately felt compelled to write down. When I asked him if there was anything else he wanted to tell me, he said that MPRN had been encouraging him to do things he would not normally do: “Like talking to you, doing this interview is not something I would have normally done, right. It’s very outside my comfort zone, but to do it is to progress, and to progress is the point, right?” I could analyze the neoliberalist rhetoric within this quote, the ways that underlying Alex’s statement hide notions of personal responsibility and progress. But my response to Alex telling me this was thinking how brave he is, and how honored I felt that he was willing to share this part of himself with me, a stranger to whom he owed nothing. I have a great deal of gratitude for Alex’s and other participants’ openness and candor. Participants’ willingness to share their vulnerabilities with me shaped the ways I wrote this thesis, as I felt accountable to them to produce a product that could honor their stories and hopefully improve the experiences of others like them.

#### *Suggestions for Future Research*

Given the limitations of this thesis, future research could replicate this study with a larger and more diverse sample size. Interviews with people released from women’s correctional facilities, as well as interviews with a more representative range of race, ethnicity, ability, citizenship status, and other identities could yield a richer variety of reentry experiences. Future research could also more closely examine reentry outcomes based on the amount of time someone had been out of prison, which could provide valuable information about which points

of the reentry process are particularly challenging and why. Conducting a longitudinal study to examine reentry experiences over a longer period of time would be a useful method to answer these types of questions. Additionally, it could be valuable to conduct follow-up interviews with all of the returning citizens I spoke to one year or even five years from now, to examine the longer-term impacts of receiving support from the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network.

Broadening the scope of the study to focus on reentry experiences in a different U.S. state or nationwide could also give insight into the challenges associated with life post-incarceration, the supports that may benefit returning citizens, and how this varies state to state. Future scholars could also conduct a comparative study of organizations in other states that provide supports similar to that of the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network. Future scholars could also test the effectiveness of various advertisement strategies for reentry supports—for example, are returning citizens more likely to seek assistance from a group like MPRN if they hear about them from another incarcerated person or through their caseworker? Finally, attention should be given to which returning citizens are least likely to connect with an organization such as MPRN—for example, if mental health challenges, language barriers, or other factors contribute to a reluctance or inability to meet with service providers the way that participants in this study did.

### *Closing Thoughts*

As I conclude this thesis, a note on perspective feels necessary. In the very first interview I conducted, a service provider cautioned against letting the examination of reentry services become a distraction to the broader issue of mass incarceration in the United States: “We can’t let the conversation around reentry and diversionary programs supersede the conversation around rolling back and reducing mass incarceration, whether or not we have the programs. We can’t be arresting and incarcerating so many people for so long.” While vitally important given the

staggering number of people released from prison each year in this country, reentry supports are reactionary, and they do not undo the damage caused by the carceral state. I return now to the question posed by Angela Davis: “Why do we take prisons for granted?” (Davis 2003, pg. 16). A related query is, why do we take reentry services for granted as the solution to incarceration? Especially given literature about the prisoner reentry industry and how it serves as an extension of the prison industrial complex, there is danger in viewing reentry services as the answer to the harmful effects of mass incarceration. To truly recover from the impacts of incarceration, the best path forward involves comprehensively redesigning the way punishment is conceptualized and enforced in our society.

In the meantime, however, I argue that services such as the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network, which are not linked financially to the prison industrial complex and which are operated primarily by people with lived experience of incarceration, are the best option for supporting people returning to the community after incarceration. MPRN provides a community for returning citizens and people in long-term recovery, which participants expressed is impactful given both the stigma they have encountered and the prosocial, recovery-focused culture they were looking to surround themselves with. MPRN also employs formerly incarcerated people, giving them the opportunity to do meaningful work in a field in which they are an expert. Having board members pick returning citizens up from prison and get them settled into their new homes, as in Roger’s case, is not a service provided by the Department of Corrections or any other organization. While ideally people would not have to rely on these services in the first place, having an organization that will help provide these types of supports, both tangible and intangible, is necessary given the realities of incarceration and reentry as they exist in our society today.

It is also worth considering why MPRN lacked the bandwidth to conduct reentry planning meetings in-person before the meetings transitioned to a remote setting. Prisons in Maine, as in most other U.S. states, are located in rural areas (Hamlin 2020), places where most people do not regularly see these facilities. One result of, or likely reason for, this placement is that it hides the suffering that goes on in prisons from public view. This placement thus allows the community to avoid confronting the damage that happens in prisons. While this type of philosophical analysis of the use of space within the prison industrial complex is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is nonetheless important to consider this research within the context of where prisons are located and why. Building these facilities in remote areas means the general population, and particularly populations not at the margins, do not have to confront the reality of what happens inside of them. Here, I connect again to Davis (2003), who writes that people dismiss incarceration as a “fate reserved for the ‘evildoers’” (pg. 16), a thought process that leads us to feel satisfied with the way our criminal legal system works and not consider ourselves responsible for taking any sort of action. This dismissal of the harms caused by the prison system and the ways people are impacted both during and after incarceration is beyond insufficient, and we owe our neighbors and our marginalized communities far more than that.

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## Interview Agreement

As part of a Sociology thesis at Bates College, I am exploring reentry experiences among people released from jail or prison in Maine in the last year who connected with the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network prior to release.

This form is designed to ensure that we talk about the procedures to be used in this interview, and that you have a chance to ask any questions you may have. An extra copy of this agreement has been sent to you, and your interviewer will ask for verbal consent during the recorded interview.

### Outline of procedures:

- Interviews will be video and audio-recorded, preferably over Zoom, and transcribed; after the interview recording has been used to double-check the transcription, the recording will be destroyed.
- You are welcome to skip any questions you would prefer not to answer, or to end the interview at any time if you decide you would like to do so.
- Confidentiality: I will ensure that the typed transcript for your interview will not contain your name or any other identifying information except a code number that I can use to keep track of the interviews. Names and code numbers will only be linked in a separate document available only to me as the researcher, and will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law.
- In any presentations or written documents resulting from this research project, I will not use any identifying information. I may refer to quotes from your interview, but at no time will either your first name or last name or any other uniquely identifying information about your occupation, background, etc. be attached in any way.
- Information disclosed in interviews will not be reported unless the participant expresses an intent to harm themselves or others, in which case I will contact Bruce Noddin, who will evaluate the situation.
- You will be compensated for your time with a \$20 grocery store gift card.
- If you have any questions about the procedures now, I will be happy to answer them. If you have any questions later, please feel free to contact either myself (Emma Block, 734-780-1830 or eblock@bates.edu), or the professor advising this thesis, Professor Emily Kane, at Bates College, Department of Sociology (207-786-6192 or ekane@bates.edu). Please also feel free to contact Bruce Noddin ([brunoskis317@gmail.com](mailto:brunoskis317@gmail.com)).

TO BE SIGNED BY INTERVIEWER: I have discussed these procedures with the participant, who has verbally agreed, and will conduct the interview in accordance with them.

\_\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_ Signature date

TO BE SIGNED BY INTERVIEWER: I have discussed the recording process with the participant, who has verbally agreed to have the interview recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_ Signature date

## Interview Agreement

As part of a Sociology thesis at Bates College, I am conducting interviews with stakeholders and service providers across the state of Maine who work with incarcerated people and returning citizens.

This form is designed to ensure that we talk about the procedures to be used in this interview, and that you have a chance to ask any questions you may have. An extra copy of this agreement has been sent to you, and your interviewer will ask for verbal consent during the recorded interview.

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- In any presentations or written documents resulting from this research project, I will not use any identifying information. I may refer to quotes from your interview, but at no time will either your first name or last name or any other uniquely identifying information about your occupation, background, etc. be attached in any way.
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