It Starts with Reentry: Examining the Needs of Parolees in Illinois and the Actionable Goals of Prison Abolition

By: Danielle O'Connell

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Paper presented to:
Public Policy Studies Preceptor, Kelsey Berryman
Faculty Advisor, Professor Sorcha Brophy
Department of Public Policy Studies

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between the needs of formerly incarcerated individuals in Chicago and the actionable goals of prison abolition. It is important to note that the research intention of this paper is not necessarily to convince individuals of the merits regarding prison abolition, but it is rather to provide for abolition theorists and activists a blueprint of practical steps toward reentry that can ultimately assist their abolition project. Qualitative data to inform an analysis of the needs of ex-offenders and the goals of prison abolition was gathered through semi-structured interviews with parolees, reentry experts, and prison abolition activists, and quantitative data was gathered through the Chicago Public Data Portal. The paper’s data analysis found that some of the greatest hurdles to successful reentry are the restrictive nature of parole oversight, a lack of access to housing, mental health resources, and the Illinois Department of Corrections’ (IDOC) “violating at the door” policy. Following these findings, this paper recommends applying an abolition framework to advocating for reform of these reentry barriers, namely applying public pressure on reentry agencies and calling into question whether parole and reentry programs are actually assisting individuals in reintegration, or if they are instead perpetuating social and economic inequities among those touched by the criminal justice system.
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Introduction

At any one time, nearly 6.9 million people are on probation, in jail, in prison, or on parole in the United States (Alper et. al 2018; Cohen et. al 2020; Revoked 2020). At least 95% of all state prisoners will be released from prison at some point, and nearly 80% will be released to parole supervision (Alper et. al 2018; Revoked 2020). As of 2016, 4.5 million people were registered in parole and probation programs (Revoked 2020). A significant body of research has shown that successful integration into community spaces is essential to prisoner reentry, but ensuring ex-offenders are provided the tools and skills necessary to reintegrate into society following their time in prison is no easy task (Byrd 2020; Cohen et. al 2014; Ducksworth 2010; Hoskins 2014; Jannetta et. al 2014, Ruhl 2016; Siegal 2014). Upon release, prisoners face many challenges to reintegrate into their communities, to find stable housing, and to reenter the labor force. As of 2018, 68% of prisoners had been arrested for a new crime less within 3 years after release, and 79% of ex-offenders were arrested within 6 years after their release (Alper et. al 2018, Cohen et. al 2014).

Substantial literature seeks to understand the ways in which federal re-entry programs, specifically parole programs, support and fail to support formerly incarcerated individuals (Cohen et. al 2014, Confined 2019, Crime in America 2020, Lerman et. al 2014, Ortiz 2019, Revoked 2020). When offenders enter the prison system, they must forfeit many of their civil rights and liberties, including their right to societal protections, property, and even their own person (Byrd 2020, Stahler 2013, Travis 2000). Upon reentry, ex-offenders struggle to regain such rights, and there have been many debates among non-offenders and policymakers the extent to which ex-offenders should be granted the rights of citizenship following imprisonment (Hoskins 2014, Travis 2000, Siegel 2014).
The current prison reentry industry includes a collection of public institutions and private organizations that perpetuate the surveillance and control methods of the criminal justice system. The carceral state has been used in punishment and criminal justice literature to describe not only the criminal justice system, but also a system of surveillance composed of police officers, schools, and supervisory agencies that feeds oppression and mass incarceration in the United States (Lerman et. al 2014). Parole, a condition of release determined by a parole board that comes after at least part of a jail time sentence, has been found to ultimately feed mass incarceration rather than curtails it. Human Rights Watch conducted a data survey of federal prison admission in the United States and found that as of 2018, 28 percent of federal and state prison admissions come from parole and probation violations (Revoked 2020). These individuals have not been sentenced for new crimes; rather they are being re-incarcerated for violating the conditions of the parole, which are often extremely burdensome and bar ex-offenders from accessing the necessary resources for successful reentry (Alper et. al, Byrd 2020, Cohen et. al, Confined 2019).

According to abolitionist literature, current reentry reform relies on the benevolence of the same state that imprisoned ex-offenders to transform the social and economic insecurities of these individuals (Byrd 2020, Kushner 2019, Lawston 2020, Nine Perspectives). Though the prisoner may travel and live beyond prison walls, they remain subject to intense control and surveillance (Byrd 2020, Hoskins 2020, Travis 2000). Prison abolition activists seek to challenge the foundational logics of the U.S. carceral state that renders prisoners second-class citizens and reinforces racial and economic segregation (Byrd 2020, Kushner 2019, Nine Perspectives, Revoked 2020).
I interviewed reentry experts and abolitionist activists over the course of five months to examine the barriers ex-offenders face in the state of Illinois due to the state parole system as well as possibilities for applying an abolitionist framework to reentry reform efforts. These interviews were virtual, semi-structured, and each lasted approximately one hour. Interviewees were asked about their work, their perspective on the needs of ex-offenders, and how the reentry system can be reformed to improve the lives of individuals exiting prisons. Common themes that emerged from these interviews were the restrictive regulations of registries as well as the Illinois Department of Corrections’ (IDOC) policies that limit ex-offenders’ access to housing, employment, and mental health services. The impact of registries and limited access to housing, employment, and mental health services were further analyzed through a review of Illinois laws and court cases regarding registries and IDOC policy on the rules for prisoner release. The most significant barriers to reentry found in this paper were the restrictive rules of registries, the IDOC’s “violation at the door” policy, and the lack of essential resources for ex-offenders, including access to housing, employment, and mental health resources.

To address such barriers to reentry, this paper recommends abolitionists to center reentry reform as an essential step in their abolition project. These policy recommendations recognize that the goal of abolition efforts is not to make jails or prison any ‘kinder’ or criminal justice systems more viable. However, if prison abolition activists bring the formerly incarcerated individual to the center of their political project, they can work toward their end goal of abolition while also improving conditions for people currently suffering at the hands of the criminal justice system. Activism surrounding reentry reform must not just improve parole and reentry system, but they must also highlight the inequities of that system through public activism.
The practical steps toward prison abolition are widely debated, but there does exist a general consensus that investing in communities and the root causes of violence is essential to bringing about the end of mass incarceration. Investing in these communities is essential, but this paper seeks to argue that investment in individuals who are re-entering these communities is equally essential in order to stop the cycle of violence and recidivism within the criminal justice system. It is important to note that the research intention of this paper is not necessarily to convince individuals of the merits regarding prison abolition, but rather to provide for abolition theorists and activists a blueprint of practical steps toward reentry reform that can ultimately assist their abolition project.

**Background on the Emergence of Mass Incarceration and the Prison Reentry Industry in America**

*Mass incarceration since 1970 and the present*

The U.S. incarcerates more people than any nation in the world, and the rate of prison growth continues to rise each year (Grawert 2020, Ortiz 2019). Modern attitudes towards criminal justice and prisons began shifting in 1970 as politicians on both sides of the aisle increasingly advocated for extremely punitive policies to target crime (*Brief History* 2020, Grawert 2020). President Nixon’s 1971 “War on Drugs,” escalated the number of people incarcerated for drug offenses, and people of color were disproportionately arrested for selling and possessing drugs (*Equal Justice Initiative* 2020, Grawert 2020). In a 1994 interview, John Ehrlichman, Nixon’s domestic policy chief, admitted that the War on Drugs was designed to disproportionately target and criminalize the Black community, stating,

> The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and Black people . . . We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or Black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and Blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities” (*Equal Justice Initiative* 2020).
As black communities were devastated by over-policing and steadily increasing arrest rates, President Reagan exacerbated the War on Drugs during his terms, as he and Congress passed more zero-tolerance policies and mandatory minimums for possessions of small amounts of narcotics and drugs (Grawert 2020, Ortiz 2019). When Reagan was sworn into office in 1980, the prison population was 329,000. By the time he left office after serving two terms, that population had doubled to 627,000. Illinois’s prison population rates have followed the national trend. In 1980, Illinois’ prison population was 11,768. The population peaked in 2013 at nearly 50,000 incarcerated individuals, and today it stands at more than 30,000 (LaVigne 2003, Revoked 2020, Wagner 2020).

In 1994, President Bill Clinton added to the growing prison industry by passing the largest crime bill in history, which incentivized states to build new prisons and issue stricter criminal sentences (Brief History of Civil Rights 2020, Ofer 2019.). Laws like the 1994 Crime Bill granted funding to states to implement policies that expanded punitive sentencing for low-level offenses and quickly led to prison overcrowding. Democrat and Republican politicians utilized fear and racial rhetoric to push for increasingly punitive national policies, including truth-in-sentencing laws that both increased the length of prison sentences and reduced possibilities for early release (Chung 2019, Equal Justice Initiative 2020). The implementation of increasingly punitive crime policies, coupled with over-policing, increased length of prison sentences for all sorts of crime, and an expanding prison industrial complex has led to over 1.4 million people in state and federal prisons as of 2019 (Chung 2019, Equal Justice Initiative 2020, Grawert 2020, Kang-Brown et. al 2020, Ofer 2019).

Though the Crime Bill exacerbated the rate of mass incarceration nationally and within the state of Illinois, the Illinois state government has been making positive changes. Bruce
Rauner’s Commission on Criminal Justice in 2015 laid out a policy for a 25% reduction in the prison population over 10 years, which did allow the prison population to decline from 47,000 in mid-2015 to 43,000 in mid-2017 (Kang-Brown 2019, Lawis 2019, Ofer 2019). Additionally, nearly 4,000 state inmates have been granted early release from Illinois jails and prisons since March 1, 2020 in response to the danger of the COVID-19 pandemic in state penitentiaries. Though these steps toward prison reduction are promising, they are also quite slow-moving, and despite prison populations generally decreasing, the number of individuals on community supervision and public crime registries continues to grow (Goudie et. al 2020).

*Mass Incarceration in Illinois and Political Response*

In 2010, Governor Pat Quinn contributed to a common sentiment Illinois that the states’ prisons were not actually overcrowded, though there were 49,000 inmates housed in a prison designed to house 32,000. On a WBEZ-FM interview in 2013, Governor Quinn admitted that the prisons were “crowded,” but insisted that Illinois had an adequate number of beds for the inmates, thereby dismissing the reality of the dire situation of many in prison (Wildeboer 2013). One year following this interview, Governor Quinn lost his re-election campaign and was replaced by Governor Rauner, who stated in his 2015 State of the State address that current prison conditions are inhumane and unsafe for both inmates and corrections officers (Mackey 2016).

Rauner set a goal to cut prison populations by 25 percent, and by 2018, Illinois’ prison populations had already been cut by 7,000. Rauner gathered support by his policies by calling attention to the high expense of housing prisoners, as providing housing, medical care, food, and other services in prisoners was costing taxpayers $1.3 billion annually (Brady-Lunny et. al 2018). In 2018, J.B. Pritzker was elected to replace Rauner as governor, and his campaign
highlighted crime rates and mass incarceration as an essential focus of their administration. An important bill, signed by J.B. Pritzker, that seeks to follow through on the promises of his campaign is the Illinois marijuana legalization bill, which legalized recreational marijuana in Illinois and cleared thousands of more than 11,000 low-level marijuana convictions (CBS News 2019). This bill not only was approached by state senators and house members as an economic opportunity for high tax profits off the recreational use of marijuana, but also as an important piece of social justice legislation which highlighted Nixon and Reagan’s continuing War on Drugs that disproportionately imprisons black and brown individuals for low-level drug offenses.

In the fall of 2020, Pritzker also announced proposals to end cash bail, reduce theft and drug-crime sentencing, and improve opportunities to accessing rehabilitation programs (O’Connor 2020). These plans for reform are promising, but there does not exist much dialogue in current or past governors’ public statements on reentry and resources for individuals exiting prisons. According to a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice, nearly 40 percent of inmates across the country have reported being diagnosed by mental health professionals with a mental health disorder, but only half of these people have reported receiving treatment (Bronson 2017). In Illinois, accessing a mental health professional inside prisons or upon release has become increasingly difficult.

Former Mayor Rahm Emmanuel closed six mental health clinics in Rogers Park, Logan Square, Woodlawn, Auburn-Gresham, Morgan Park, and Back of the Yard in 2012 (Ford 2015, Quinn 2018). Following these closings, mental health resources for former inmates have become even more inaccessible to ex-offenders, and police have become the main response teams to mental health crises in neighborhoods lacking health clinics (Joravsky 2019, Quinn 2018). Emmanuel cited budget cuts as the reason for these closings; as a result, following his claims in
his 2018 campaign that he will prioritize behavioral health, Pritzker increased behavioral health funding in his first two budgets (Ormsby 2020). However, after Illinois voters failed to approve a new income tax policy in the 2020 election, the governor has predicted ‘painful’ budget cuts to come (Ormsby 2020). Illinois behavioral health advocacy groups have expressed concern that their mental health programs will not be given proper priority and funding. Access to behavioral health therapy is essential to prisoner reentry, and proper funding for reentry programs is essential in reducing mass incarceration and re-arrest among ex-offenders.

*Reentry industries*

The prison reentry industry denotes the network of state institutions with which ex-offenders are required to interact and comply, include parole offices, half-way houses, registry offices, and vocational and behavioral health programming. The prison reentry industry emerged following mass incarceration, and its origins are a direct product of the prison industrial complex, a term used to describe the system of surveillance, policing, and imprisonment used by government and industry (Hoskins 2014, Ortiz 2019, Siegel 2014). The goal of most reentry services and industries is to help formerly incarcerated individuals successfully reenter society as ‘law-abiding’ citizens (Byrd 2016, Ducksworth 2010, Hoskins 2014). In 2007, Congress passed the Second Chance Act, which aimed to improve resources for prison reentry programs by issuing federal grants (Ortiz 2019). Though this bill was largely symbolic and received little funding to implement its goals of expanding resources for ex-offenders, it did allow states to extend their presence in urban and poor communities through law enforcement, parole officers oversight, and other reentry service intervention (Byrd 2016, Ortiz 2019). Currently, reentry services remain concentrated in low-income urban communities and work with individuals from largely disadvantaged backgrounds, the same individuals who were targeted by Nixon’s “War on
“Drugs” and other administrations’ zero-tolerance policies (Hoskins 2014, La Vigne et. al 2003, Ortiz 2019).

There are currently more than 4.5 million adults in the U.S. under community supervision by parole and probation officers (Ortiz 2019). Contemporary activists have challenged existing models of reentry in America, arguing that reentry programs are focused more on surveillance of ex-offenders than in providing resources and assistance to facilitate successful rehabilitation and re-entrance into society (Byrd 2016, Ducksworth 2010, Siegal 2014). The high rate of re-incarceration for ‘technical violations’ supports these activists’ arguments as well as the barriers parolees face to full-time employment compounded by the constraints of parole appointment requirements (Byrd 2016, Ducksworth 2010, Hoskins 2014, Ortiz 2019). Full-time employment has been found to be one of the most effective approaches to reducing recidivism, but it is extremely difficult for formerly incarcerated individuals to find jobs with their criminal record and with the constant check-in meetings required by parole officers (Braga 2009, Ortiz 2019, Stahler 2013). Jennifer Ortiz and Hayley Jackey, authors of The System is Not Broken, It is Intentional, state,

“Parole departments often mandate parolees attend programming even if their charges do not justify the programming. These programs often occur during normal business hours, making gainful employment difficult” (493).

The system of mass incarceration and the reentry industry have become so endemic in our society that currently policymakers have become largely complacent in challenging the foundational logics that led to the expansion of the prison industry. There exists a gap in the literature explaining how prison abolitionist politics can be used to restructure current reentry systems to reduce re-incarceration and eventually end mass incarceration.
Theory
Models of Imprisonment

The continued growth of American prison populations is a well-known issue, but solutions to successful re-integration of formerly incarcerated individuals into larger society can vary among theorists (Braga 2009, Byrd 2020, Ducksworth 2010, Hoskins 2014, Siegel 2014, Stahler 2013, Travis 2000).

The theory of prison as rehabilitation has been contentious among criminologists, reformists, and penologists, as the idea of rehabilitation has influenced sentencing laws and justifications for mass incarceration has expanded in the United States for the past century (Ducksworth 2010, Campbell 2010, Siegel 2014). Penitentiaries, built during the American Jacksonian era, were constructed with the intention that felons would be contained in a solitary state, so that they may consider the consequences of their crimes and transform themselves through reflection. Prisoners were responsible for their own rehabilitation in this model, as the causes of crime were thought to result from individual immorality (Campbell 2010).

Following the Jacksonian era, the reformatory model replaced the penitentiary model of imprisonment in the 19th century, in which educational, vocational, and military training attempted to rehabilitate offenders through individualized programming. Offenders were assigned specific programming based on their crimes and their specific needs as determined by a judge. Prisoners progressed through graded stages of programming until their release, even being permitted to work toward early release (Phelps 2013 Campbell 2010).

The medical and therapeutic model of programming emerged following the reformatory model, and though this practice was widely considered more humane than the military programming before it, offenders were forced to undergo extraordinarily invasive medical procedures, and many therapy programs did not have specific end-dates, therefore requiring
offenders to remain in prison and undergo this prison programming until it was determined by a therapist or medical professional in the prison that they had been ‘rehabilitated’ (Phelps 2013, Campbell 2010). Prisoners are currently participants in a wide range of prison programming, and often prison administrators require programs such as anger management training, therapy, and parental guidance training as a term of their release (Phelps 2013). Prisoners are no longer necessarily responsible for their own rehabilitation, as programs have been implemented to assist them in their needs as determined by a judge or prison official. However, these therapeutic, military, and medical programs are not always caring for inmates in the manner they claim, and the rhetoric surrounding the rehabilitative nature of prisons and prison programming is often quite different from the reality of incarceration (Phelps 2013).

Theories of Reentry

Reentry activists agree that reentry and rehabilitation efforts must begin the moment a person enters jail or prison in order to support them upon their release (Braga 2009, Ducksworth 2010, Siegel 2014, Travis 2000). A large body of literature demonstrates that the more support a formerly incarcerated individual is given during imprisonment and upon release, the more likely they are to successfully reintegrate into society, including finding full-time employment, stable housing, and becoming a law-abiding member of their community (Byrd 2020, Hoskins 2014, Johnson 2012, Kusner 2019, Siegel 2014, Stahler 2013). Literature demonstrating the effectiveness of stable housing, employment, and access to medical care for successful reentry outlines the need for an expansion of such programs to support ex-offenders in accessing resources to address their needs.

Jeremy Travis, a researcher at the National Institute of Justice, argues in support of a common theory that the goal of reentry is to release a rehabilitated individual from prison who
has repaid their debt to society and demonstrated an ability to live by the rules of society (2000). The assignment of individuals to parole officers follows Travis’s theory of rehabilitation and rule observance, as the primary role of parole officers is to supervise ex-offenders and ensure they are adhering to the conditions of their release (Byrd 2020, Ducksworth 2010). However, many reentry activists argue that this demonstration of ability to live by society’s rules is rife with discrimination and unfair expectations of ex-offenders (Byrd 2020, Kusner 2019, Stahler 2013). The role of parole officers in detecting parole violations limits the possibilities for ex-offenders to reach the status of reformed citizen, as any small mistake could land them back in prison (Byrd 2020, Hoskins 2014, Siegel 2014, Travis 2000). The perspective of ‘earning a place at the table’ that Travis proposes reinforces a mentality that ex-offenders do not deserve to have access to the same rights and opportunities as the rest of the citizenry, even after they have served time in prison (Travis 2000).

General strain theory is a theory of criminology developed by Robert Agnew which examines the challenges that ex-offenders face when exiting the prison system and re-entering society (Agnew 1992, Johnson et. al 2012). Agnew’s theory asserts that “individuals commit crime as a result of frustration, anger, or other adverse emotions that occur when confronted with stressful situations” (Johnson et. al 2012). The process of re-entry is slow, and in many cases, it can be re-traumatizing and discriminatory (Braga 2009, Ducksworth 2010, Stahler 2013, Travis 2000). According to strain theory, stressful situations are most likely to result in crime when they are perceived as unjust, associated with low social controls, or associated with extremely high stakes (Agnew 1992). In the case of formerly incarcerated individuals, the stakes of re-entry could not be higher, as any parole infraction can result in re-incarceration (Byrd 2020, Siegel 2014, Stahler 2013). Keeping this theory in mind is important when examining the needs of ex-
offenders, as desperate situations are often the reason individuals committed crimes and were incarcerated in the first place (Johnson et. al 2012).

Prison abolitionists keep this general strain theory in mind when discussing the need to conceive of a world without prisons (Kushner 2019, Washington 2018). These theorists recognize the importance of reforming the systems that drove so many incarcerated individuals to committing crime and call for policies that target systems, not people (Lawston 2020, *Nine Perspectives*, Washington 2018). Ruth Wilson Gilmore, a leader in prison abolition, questions, “Instead of asking whether anyone should be locked up or go free, why don’t we think about why we solve problems by repeating the kind of behavior that brought us the problem in the first place?” (Kushner 2019, Washington 2018). Prison abolition activists advocate for individuals to imagine a world without prisons, a difficult concept for many, and then work to build that world (Lawston 2020, Washington 2018). This understanding of a world without prisons extends to focusing on the systems that keep ex-offenders under intense state surveillance and control, and prison abolition activism can work to challenge the unfair and discriminatory systems of reentry. Applying a prison abolition framework to reentry theory can emphasize the need for support and adequate resources for ex-offenders, rather than placing the burden on strained and traumatized individuals to ‘earn their place at the table’ (Byrd 2020, Johnson et. al 2012, Travis 2000). In sum, theories on the purpose of reentry diverge in their discussion of whether systems should work to support ex-offenders following their time in prison, or if the burden falls on the individual to prove to the outside world that they deserve a place ‘at the table.’

**Positive versus Negative Reform**

Criminal justice reforms are often categorized in two types: positive and negative reforms. Positive reforms include attempts to address problems within the criminal justice
system by expanding some part of the system (Byrd 2020, Lipson 2020, Travis 2000). These reforms refer to building new prisons to lessen the burden of overcrowding prisons, increasing programming within prisons, and the creation of more public registries for individuals with records to publicly join. Though these programs are often instituted with good intentions, such reforms tend to expand the state’s powers of incarceration, policing, and oversight within prisons and within communities that are already over-policed and surveilled (Lipson 2020). Positive reforms also perpetuate an idea that prisons only need a few adjustments or reforms to become safe, just, and legitimate institutions that benefit society overall. This idea fails to recognize the ingrained problems of the criminal justice system and the nature of how incarceration perpetuates systemic inequality in America. These supplements to incarceration, such as parole, probation, registries, and job/education programming, have been criticized bolstering the reach of the criminal justice system and presenting prisons and jails as a ‘good thing’ in the public eye (Lipson 2020). Often, positive prison reforms can divert focus and convince the public that the U.S.’s criminal institutions are being changed for the better and that prisons are an essential part of modern society.

When proposing prison and reentry reforms, policymakers often resort to positive reforms, including increasing funding to prison, instituting more programming for inmates in prison, and expanding registries (Lipson 2020). Such reforms tend to place a Band-Aid over much deeper problems with the criminal justice system and do not adequately solve the problems with the criminal justice system that community members want them to fix. Rather, policymakers and politicians tend to preserve policy reforms because they create an illusion that lawmakers are listening to community members and ‘getting things done;’ when in reality, they are allowing systemic inequities to worsen.
Negative reforms, on the other hand, more closely follow an abolitionist framework, in which reform efforts seek to remove the foundational and crucial elements of the current criminal justice system, such as reducing prison intake, decriminalizing marijuana, and ending cash bail (Byrd 2020, Lipson 2020). These reforms do not seek to convince the public that the criminal justice movement only needs a few reforms to fix the entire system and the structural inequities that it both produces and perpetuates. Negative reform efforts, as opposed to positive reforms, do not work to make jails or prisons any kinder; rather, they have been employed by activists to call attention to the ingrained, deeply structural racist and classist practices within the criminal justice system. Though they are not always as favored by policymakers and politicians, as these reforms are designed the lessen the hand of the state and criminal justice system in communities, such reforms tend to be more effective at responding to the needs and outcries of communities most touched by inequity at the hands of the criminal justice system. To recommend policy solutions, this paper will propose some applications of negative reforms to parole and reentry systems in Chicago that reduce the reach of a foundationally oppressive criminal justice system, rather than expand it through positive reforms.

**Methods**

*Data Sources*

The data in this study is sourced from interviews with leaders in reentry organizations, academic experts on reentry, and prison abolition activists in Chicago. Interviews were semi-structured, as participants were asked to answer questions from an interview script tailored to their background and area of expertise, and conversation flowed based on their answers. Interviews were conducted virtually over Zoom and by phone, and aliases were used for individuals upon request. A snowball sampling model was used to gather interviewees, meaning
interviewees recruited other participants for my research and provide them with my email address. I transcribed the notes of those who gave permission to record the interview and stored these notes on an encrypted file in UChicago Box.

Additionally, spatial mapping data is used in this paper to provide a visual aide when examining where parole violation arrests are occurring. I used data from the Chicago Data Portal to construct a map of Chicago in Arcgis. Chicago’s arrest database was filtered to only include parole violations, and these data points were uploaded to the map in Arcgis to examine in which neighborhoods these arrests occurred.

Interviews

Among those whose information I was given permission to share, I first interviewed Brian Nelson, the Prisoners’ Rights Coordinator at the Uptown People’s Law Center. The Uptown People’s Law Center is a non-profit organization located in the north side of Chicago, specializing in legal advocacy for prisoners, tenants, and disabled people denied public benefits. Brian is a former prisoner who spent 23 years in solitary, including 12 consecutive years at Tamms supermax prison. He works with individuals and community groups who have loved ones in prison, and he spends most of his time recording and responding to hundreds of letters from prisoners every week.

I also interviewed two individuals on parole for this paper, and their identities have been kept private. These individuals were released from prison in the past year, and they provided information on their experiences on parole in Chicago. They were not asked about their criminal records, but both did share information on their requirements associated with being placed on registries. I took measures to protect the identity of these individuals, including using pseudonyms and disguising identifying information. Finding other parolees who could
personally speak to their reentry experience was challenging, as many struggle with operating technology, given their extended stays in prison. I was not able to reach out to parolees over individuals, and the individuals I did speak with could not provide me with other parolee contacts to whom I could speak, as typically people on parole are discouraged from interacting with other individuals with criminal records.

Two individuals working in prison abolition also offered their insights for this paper, Durrell Washington and Hernàn Carvente-Martínez. Hernàn is the National Youth Partnership Strategist for the Youth First Initiative of No Kids in Prison. He is active in the prison abolition sphere and provided essential insight into the foundational goals of prison reform versus abolition through community intervention. The questions asked in these interviews centered heavily on policy recommendations and the basic principles of abolition. Reentry was discussed in both interviews, but the focus was most heavily placed on what prison abolition looks like to different communities, academics, and activists.

Limitations and Alternative Sources

Because I faced trouble finding parolees who can speak to the challenges of reentry, a thorough review of Illinois state laws and court cases regarding reentry proved quite useful. The review of one such case, Johnny Cordrey v. the Illinois Prisoner Review Board, was essential in my data analysis regarding the Illinois Department of Corrections’ ‘violation at the door’ policy of inmates who are scheduled to be released from prison but whose housing accommodations have not been approved by the IDOC. Court case filings and amicus curiae briefs provide an inside look into the perspective of a person on parole who is advocating to legally reform the challenges to reentry. Though there does exist bias when examining court case filings and briefs
from lawyers arguing a specific side of a case, the evidence presented was not challenged as biased or not factual, and the judicial decision presents the opposing perspective of the case.

Due to my personal convictions in left-leaning politics and support of prison abolition, it is important to consider a possible presence of bias in my study. To limit this bias, I drafted interview scripts (Appendix A) for each category of interviewee I will be using. These questions work to disguise my personal opinions on the current reentry system or prison abolition so interviewees had more space to share their true opinions, without being swayed by biased or leading questions.

*Interview Table*

A table of interviewees who agreed to have their names included in this paper are listed below. Not present are the two individuals on parole who were interviewed over the phone and who will remain anonymous.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Affiliation/Title</th>
<th>Where Interviewed</th>
<th>Date of Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brian Nelson</td>
<td>Uptown People’s Law Center Prisoners’ Rights Coordinator</td>
<td>Virtually, over phone</td>
<td>December 10, 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durrell Washington</td>
<td>PhD candidate at the University of Chicago Crown Family School of Social Work</td>
<td>Virtually, over Zoom</td>
<td>January 29, 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hernán Carvente-Martinez</td>
<td>National Youth Partnership Strategist for No Kids in Prison’s Youth First Initiative</td>
<td>Virtually, over Zoom</td>
<td>February 8, 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cara Smith</td>
<td>Cook County Circuit Court Judge</td>
<td>Virtually, over phone</td>
<td>February 11, 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Papachristos</td>
<td>Professor of Sociology and Director of the Northwestern</td>
<td>Virtually, over Zoom</td>
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Data Findings/Analysis

After conducting virtual interviews with abolition activists, reentry experts, and individuals on parole, four main barriers to successful reentry emerged. Further analysis of court cases and data mapping revealed the structural policies that allow these barriers to reentry to continue. This section will analyze the problems associated with parole oversight, the restrictive requirements of registries, limited housing options for ex-offenders, and a lack of necessary resources to re-integration using information gleaned from interviews, court case reviews, and mapping data from the Chicago Data Portal.

Parole Oversight Exacerbates Challenges to Re-integration: Officer Discretionary Power and the Difficulties of Meeting Parole Requirements

Parole oversight includes urine tests, ankle monitors, reporting where one lives and works, and other special requirements based on individual sentences. The Prison Review Board sets the parameters for parole in Illinois, but parole agents possess discretionary power in some conditions of parole, such as requiring specific individuals to wear ankle monitors. Parole agents also are responsible for scouting a parolee’s host site before they are released to ensure it meets the conditions of their parole. While individuals are on parole, their parole officer is responsible for reporting to the Department of Justice that they are meeting the requirements of their parole or have violated these requirements. If parolees are reported as violating the conditions of their parole, they face re-arrest.
Individuals are subject to wide discretionary power wielded by parole officers, most of whom are ex-correctional officers. Nelsons states, “Here is the catch when you sign your parole papers, right at the bottom of page, like, 170-something, it says ‘you will do what your parole officer says.’ So you’re screwed. But you’re signing that under duress because if you don’t sign it, then you don’t get paroled.” Signing this contract locks parolees into a system of subjugation and have no opportunity to challenge their conditions of parole. Ex-correctional officers are used to surveilling, disciplining, and correcting inmate behavior within prisons, often through violent and punitive means. Parole agents’ approach to parole is often no different. Nelson describes the hoops an average parolee must go through:

So an Illinois guy on parole. One, [parole officers will] want your pay stub as soon as you get a job. Two, you’re going to have to get a phone, and you have to call in weekly to check in. A lot of times you call in at 8am and are stuck on hold until 11am until someone gets around to answering you. But you have to call in on a certain day. If you don’t, it’s a violation of your parole.

Some individuals must meet with their parole officer in person, often during work hours. An individual currently on parole described the difficulties of meeting requirements of release as well as fulfilling the obligations of their job, stating, “I had to take an extra day off work because they told me you have to show up on this day or we put a warrant out for you. Now I got a mark on my work record so if I don’t show up any other day, I get fired.” There do not currently exist legal protections in Illinois for parolees who must miss work to meet with their agent. If they miss work, they risk being fired, but if they miss their parole meetings, they risk re-incarceration.

This risk of re-arrest weighs heavy on the minds of parolees. One ex-offender described the mental toll being of parole, saying,

When I got out, there was an anxiety in me over every move I made, that I wasn’t going to meet my parole officer in time or get my behavior therapy classes done soon enough. Did I get any assistance from my parole officer to help navigate through all this stuff? No. Once I met my [parole officer], once per week she asked, ‘How are you doing, did
you go to this program, do you have a job?’ And that was it, and she just sent me on my way.

Parole officers have the ability to add parole conditions via the document stipulation, signed by parolees upon release, that individuals must do what their parole officer says. If individuals want to complain to someone about their parole officer, they can complain to the parole officer’s supervisor. However, in Chicago, everyone in the parole office works together, often on the same floor. When a person calls in to complain about their parole agent, Nelson describes the risk that everyone in the office is likely to hear about it, stating,

Most guys don’t even bother [reporting their parole officer]. Because whoever you’re getting next is going to know you complained. And you’re probably going to pay for that . . . Parole officers are more concerned with us not making them look bad. If we run into problems, it falls on the officer and makes them look bad. So they tell us, don’t do anything stupid and make more work for me.

The two other parolees interviewed for this paper echoed this sentiment. To those interviewed, it does not seem like the parole oversight system in Illinois is concerned with their successful reintegration beyond what paperwork it might generate for them. This approach to reentry is hurting the individuals it claims to be supporting, and Nelson states that most ex-inmates only have each other upon which to rely:

The parole headquarters is right across from the juvenile detention center. They sit in there all day and don’t leave until 3pm when the day is done. They sit around there and just generate paperwork. There’s no help for us unless we help each other.

Individuals exiting prison have few others than people like Brian Nelson to seek for help and resources. Another formerly incarcerated individual described his path to finding the right programs to help him outside what his parole agent could provide, stating,

I ended up replacing a lot of the programs [my parole officer] recommended to me with ones that I found through my community and through my school when I went back to college. The programs I found that actually helped me were never a part of the reentry conversation to begin with. I had to seek them out myself.
Illinois’ current reentry system is forcing ex-offenders to rely on the goodwill of individuals or their own ability to find resources rather than providing the resources they say they need to re-integrate into communities.

_Registries as Tools of Surveillance and Re-arrest_

The imposition of registries in Illinois create significant barriers to reentry. Not only do ex-offenders struggle to find stable housing that complies with the rules of registries, but registries also severely limit the places ex-offenders can frequent or even walk past in their daily lives. According to the Illinois State Police Website, sex offender registrants found in public park buildings or “on real property comprising any public park” will be charged with a Class A misdemeanor (720 ILCS 5/11-9/4-1). In the city of Chicago alone, there exists over 500 parks and over 7,000 acres of parkland. These restrictive registries make almost every aspect of daily life difficult for registrants who already face extreme stigma following their release from prison. Registration laws tend to result in perpetual public shaming and make it nearly impossible for individuals for form a support system, much less find places to live and work (Siegel 2014, Steiber 1). The presence of registries has imposed significant hurdles to reentry for ex-offenders, as the possibility of re-incarceration due to violations of registry are significant.

In 1994, Bill Clinton signed the Wetterling Act in the same year he signed the controversial Crime Bill. This law required every state maintain lists and registries of sex offenders to be used as a tool for police to keep watch over particularly high-risk offenders. In 1996, Congress passed Megan’s Law, which required these sex offender lists to be made available to the general public. Public crime registries continued to expand as public surveys indicated that support for a public list of offenders was almost universal. Illinois is one of the
most zealous users of public registries, and the enforcement of registry requirements is a significant source of recidivism among ex-offenders.

In Illinois, ex-offenders are required to register for specific crimes they committed, determined by the state, even if these were not the crimes for which they were convicted. Ex-offenders are most commonly required to register for the sex offender registry, murder registry, arson registry, gun registry, domestic violence registry, and animal abuse registries (Nelson 5:14). If one fails to register their name and address to one or more registries, they face re-incarceration. For example, the Illinois Sex Offender Registration Act states, “Any person required to register under this Article who lacks a fixed address or temporary domicile must notify, in person, the agency of jurisdiction . . . within 3 days” (730 ILCS 150). If they do not register in time, the police will be alerted and individuals will be arrested.

The requirements for registries change often, including the fees that ex-offenders must pay out-of-pocket in order to register. Convicted murderers in Illinois were previously required to register for 10 years, but the state quietly changed the requirements to life (Nelson 38:14). No person has publicly stated when or how the requirements were changed, but convicted murderers, even if they were only convicted in civil courts, now are subject to life on a registry and have been given no information on why the requirements have been changed.

Not only can registries be lengthened, but Nelson discussed their retroactive nature, stating,

I’ve been out of prison for 11 years. I still have to register as a murderer, and there was no such thing as a murder registry when I got out . . . They made them retroactive. And that wasn’t even part of my criminal sentence, but they say they can put me on there because it’s civil. That doesn’t make any sense because if I violate the registry, I go to jail. I don’t get fined.
Ex-offenders are required to inform law enforcement of their current address, their car
description and license plate number, any identifying features, such as a tattoo, and with whom
they are regularly interacting. Nelson expands on the prevalence of registries, explaining,

    So a person gets out of prison, gets off parole, he buys a car. He gets into an accident and
gets a new car. If he doesn’t notify the police in 3 days about the new car, he violated the
registry and faces 2 years in jail.

Current Illinois law requires that even small changes, such as a new tattoo, a new car, or a
vacation, must be reported to the police or to one’s parole agent. Though this may not seem a
significant barrier, if individuals remain on registries for life, their opportunities for movement
are significantly limited. Even walking down the street is a risk for registrants who are not
allowed on the property of public parks, and the three-day time limit of registering license,
apartment, and car information imposes an undue burden on their right to privacy as well as a
constant fear of incarceration for minor, victimless rule infractions.

    Furthermore, registries impose a yearly financial burden for ex-offenders, who already
face challenges to accessing stable employment and accumulating wealth. Though the individual
fees are not typically significant, as Illinois law for the murder registry requires as $20 initial
registration fee and a $10 annual renewal fee, many ex-offenders are required to pay for multiple
registries, and the cost can quickly accumulate (730 ILCS 54). Nelson states,

    Then, I have to pay [the state of Illinois] to register, every year. If I don’t follow the rules,
I go to jail. If I get a tattoo removed or covered up, I have to go tell them. If I sleep for
three days at anyone else’s house without notifying them, I go back to jail. When I go on
vacation, I have to get a written paper with them for permission for me to go. I think,
wow, I’m being treated worse than a child.

Ex-offenders face strict limitations on where they are allowed to go, what they are allowed to do,
and who they are allowed to see, both during parole and once it has ended. The requirements of
civil registries force ex-offenders to continue to disclose all of their personal details to law
enforcement even after they have completed their sentence. Sex offenders face the strictest barriers to re-integration in society, as they cannot live near any place where groups of children may gather, including schools, parks, playgrounds, public gathering spaces, golf courses. A recent law even banned sex offenders from participating in public holidays after a Caseyville resident, whose roommate was a sex offender, decorated the outside of his home for Halloween (Sells 2014).

The map above provides a visual outline of the high concentration of daycare centers, schools, and playgrounds in Chicago. This map does not include the high concentration of parks
in the city of Chicago, where sex offenders are also not allowed to be near. People are required to register as sex offenders if their charge results in the following:

“(a) A conviction for the commission of the offense or attempt to commit the offense,

(b) A finding of not guilty by reason of insanity of committing the offense or attempting to commit the offense, or

(c) A finding not resulting in an acquittal at a hearing for the alleged commission or attempted commission of the offense” (isp.illinois.gov 1).”

As of 2019, Illinois has 34,010 registered sex offenders, and the number is predicted to increase following the high release rates of Illinois inmates due to COVID-19 (Antinori 2019). The presence of registries acts as a tool to keep track of the whereabouts of formerly incarcerated individuals who have been charged with one or multiple crimes. Once someone is put on a registry, it is nearly impossible to get off (Felton 2017). These public crime registries rarely decrease crime or increase the safety of residents; rather, they function as a system of surveillance of former convicts and significantly limits their possibilities for societal re-integration (CSG Justice Center 2019, Darko 2019, Felton 2017, Lind 2016, Prescott 2012).

Nelson emphasizes the difficulties inmates face in reintegration due to the lack of resources provided by reentry systems and the strict rules of registries, stating,

99% of prisoners in Illinois are coming home. And we’re coming home damaged. There’s no programs to help us. Then the registries make us jump through these hoops, and we pay them for keeping watch on us, not helping us.

Registries perpetuate the punishment and surveillance model of prisons through constant required check-ins for any kind of movement or small changes in registrants’ lives, limited access to housing and employment, and widespread system of public shaming that encourages hostility and fear towards registrants.
Illinois registries are hindering ex-offenders from feeling like they belong in their communities. Professor Reuben Miller comments on the impact of the criminal justice system on the family, stating,

It’s more than people in prisons or on parole, it’s the many millions of people touched by the criminal justice system . . . Once touched by the criminal justice system, your life is fundamentally transformed.

An individual’s entire social world is changed due to contact with the criminal justice system, such that when people are released, they still remain a part of mass incarceration and the carceral state, and their loved ones remain touched by the carceral state as well. Miller provides an allegory for the attitude ex-offenders face upon release, stating, “The kid who gets in trouble is now known as the kid who gets in trouble.” Reentry is not simply a problem of correcting behavior and giving individuals a chance to prove that they can follow society’s rules, but reentry systems are keeping individuals from truly belonging in communities. The presence of registries inhibits ex-offenders from integrating into communities or even being able to live or interact with their loved ones depending on their places of residence and personal criminal history. The issue of registries and reentry extends beyond parole and probation, and once a person is touched by the criminal justice system, they do not get their life back in the same way as before incarceration.

The process of re-integration never ends for individuals who are placed on registries for life, as they are continually treated as second-class citizens. The theory of reentry as an opportunity for offenders to ‘earn a place at the table,’ therefore, cannot even be applied in this scenario. Integration into society requires that offenders should act in accordance with the same laws that citizens behave, but the rules to which registrants are forced to adhere restrict
registrants’ civil rights so severely that they are fighting an uphill battle to reentry even before they exit prison.

The justification for registries has largely centered around the idea that the public ‘deserves to know who their neighbors are’ in order to remain safe in their communities. However, the presence of public registries has not been found to reduce crime by a significant number (Felton 2017, Prescott 2012, Sells 2014, Siegel 2014, Stahler 2013, Steiber). The institution of public registries has been demonstrated, however, to limit ex-offenders’ ability to live and move within communities, develop feelings of belonging and home in their communities, and for individuals to begin a life outside of prison. The institution of public registries, through bills such as Megan’s Law, may have been intended to increase public safety, but the presence of registries have not been found to significantly reduce crime in the areas in which registrants are living, and the harsh restrictions of registries are generating insurmountable hurdles for ex-offenders to start a new life and create a home for themselves outside of prisons.

*Barriers to Accessing Stable Housing: Amicus Brief of Johnny Cordrey*

Not only do registries and parole oversight create huge barriers to reentry, but an extreme lack of access to stable housing keeps some inmates from even leaving the prison building upon their release day. In 2014, a former prisoner named Johnny Cordrey filed a petition for the Illinois Supreme Court to declare the Illinois Department of Corrections’ (IDOC) policy of ‘turnaround’ or ‘violating at the door’ unconstitutional. The ‘turnaround’ policy describes the problem many inmates face of being turned back at the front gates of prison because the IDOC has not found a host site for them, or an individual’s parole officer has not yet scouted and approved their host site. In order for individuals to be released from prison on parole, a parole agent must approve their host site. If the parole agent does not approve the host site, they will
remain in prison. This process of approval can become quite difficult for inmates, as there are very limited spots at halfway houses and some inmates, sex offenders especially, cannot live at host sites that violate the rules of their registries (Daniel 2020).

Halfway houses are a critical feature of the criminal justice and reentry system, but very little data on them is available to the public. The term ‘halfway house’ is an umbrella that can refer to many different facilities, including sober living homes, restitution centers, and transitional housing. This paper focuses on residential facilities specifically hosting individuals leaving prison or jail on the condition of probation.

Johnny Cordrey was sentenced to 36 years in prison in 1993 for aggravated criminal sexual assault and a concurrent 30 years in prison for kidnapping (Amicus Brief in Support of Johnny Cordrey). Cordrey was also given a three-year term of mandatory supervised release (MSR). However, in November 2012, the Prisoner Review Board reviewed the terms of Cordrey’s MSR and imposed new anger management, sex offender, and outpatient mental health conditions on his MSR, which included a requirement for him to join the sex offender registry. Cordrey’s registration as a sex offender required victim notification and electronic monitoring throughout his MSR term.

Cordrey was scheduled to be released on April 12, 2013, but on this day, the IDOC released a decision that Cordrey had violated his parole because he failed to find a suitable host site that complied with the conditions of his MSR term. Cordrey filed a motion for leave to file a petition for habeus corpus relief, but conceded that individuals serving MSR in prison could not be granted habeus corpus. Attorneys from Northwestern University Law Center, the Uptown People’s Law Center, and the MacArthur Justice Center were given leave to filed an amicus
amicus curiae brief on behalf of 18 organizations. The purpose of an amicus curiae brief is to bring to the attention of the Court the position of interested parties outside of the case.

This brief argues that the IDOC’s policy “subjects citizens of this State who are no longer serving a prison sentence to months and even years of detention, without redress or remedy” (Amicus Brief 1). Individuals who have no reason to be in prison remain there directly because of the undue burden placed on them by the state. Because individuals have been placed on registries, especially the Illinois sex offender registry, their options for housing in Illinois, especially halfway housing, are extremely limited. Many housing sites that the IDOC deems adequate are not affordable to individuals exiting prison, and because there are very few halfway houses in Illinois compared to the number of people in prisons and jails, there are not enough places to parole (Nelson 32:37).

Nelson outlines this issue further, stating,

Most sex offenders will not get out on the day of their release because parole agents will not go and check their host sites. Going to check a host site means that 90 days prior to release, an inmate has talked to their counselor and given them information on where they’re going to parole to. They send their field agent to parole to check that place out and make sure it fits into the requirements distance from park, school, daycare, church, any place with children. They are not allowed to go to a house that has internet. They are not allowed smartphones.

Cordrey’s motion and the amicus curiae requested that the Court declare the practice of ‘turnaround at the gates’ unconstitutional due to its violation of due process and equal protection. Because individuals who could afford suitable housing were allowed to walk out the prison door, while people like Cordrey were kept in prison due to their inability to pay, the IDOC was granting freedom to one economic class and denying it to another. The Supreme Court denied the writ, writing that the Department of Corrections failed to provide placement for Cordrey due to his status as a sex offender rather than his status as an indigent. The court also noted a lack of evidence concerning a scarcity of housing options for Cordrey’s MSR.
Cordrey’s MSR status overshadowed his basic constitutional rights, a significant problem that many ex-offenders face. When one enters prison, her or she is required by law to give up certain constitutional rights, including rights to privacy and property, and they are not protected from warrantless searches. Once one completes their sentence and is released from prison, they should theoretically regain their rights once they reenter society. However, registries significantly curtail the rights of inmates, including their right to property, which includes access to stable housing. An interviewee currently on parole spoke to the extreme difficulty in accessing housing, stating, “I was supposed to parole to another place [than my halfway house], but a parole officer went to check it out and the lady next door smoked marijuana. They could smell it. And that was enough for them to not approve the site and I couldn’t go there.” Cordrey’s MSR status impeded him from being considered as a person in need in the eyes of the Court; rather, the Court dismissed his writ on the basis of his registrant status as a sex offender.

Another individual who had been recently released after 23 years in prison commented on the challenges of finding housing, stating,

When I was released, there was only one halfway house accepting anyone because of COVID-19. I was only supposed to be there for 60 days, but because I had been locked up for so long, I couldn’t get my social security card, birth certificate . . . it took a while because the computers online were telling me I didn’t exist.

It is significant that the Court would reason that not enough evidence exists to demonstrate that there is a scarcity of host site options for Cordrey’s MSR, as finding evidence that no housing options exist for inmates exiting prisons is crucial. Not only are housing sites unwilling to host ex-offenders due to their criminal record, but ex-offenders also struggle obtaining their state identification cards and papers upon release, especially if they were imprisoned before their 18th birthday. These forms of identification are essential to finding...
housing in Illinois as well as performing the necessary tasks of citizenship and livelihood in the United States, such as voting, opening a bank account, and applying for jobs. The influence of COVID-19 has severely limited access to halfway houses to an entirely new level, but even before the deadly pandemic, openings at halfway houses were scarce. Below is a map of halfway houses in the state of Illinois. The rest are located in the Chicagoland area, largely on the South and West sides. When compared to Figure 1, it is apparent that many of these halfway houses are located in the vicinity of daycares, schools, and playgrounds given the high incidence of such spaces in Chicago. These halfway houses are unlikely to even be accessible to individuals placed on the sex offender registry, which severely limits their opportunities to accessing stable housing and being granted release from prison.

Figure 2: Map of Halfway Houses in Illinois
These individuals are not even given the opportunity to test Jeremy Travis’s theory of the purpose of reentry as ‘earning a place at the table.’ Ex-offenders who have served their time and are unable to find housing deemed suitable by the IDOC cannot demonstrate that they are able to live according to the rules of society: even though they have served their time, some are not even allowed leave the prison gates.

Lack of Resources: Systemic Challenges to Meeting the Administrative and Medical Needs of Ex-Offenders in Illinois

When inmates exit prison in Illinois, they are given a bus or train ticket, and $10 (Nelson). The state government is meant to provide individuals with a temporary state identification card (ID), by law of the Illinois Identification Card Act, but no programs distributing these ID’s received adequate funding. Many people exiting prisons are provided a prison discharge slip or an Illinois Department of Corrections identification card, but neither are sufficient forms of personal identification to use when applying for a job, signing a lease, registering to vote, or other essential reintegration tasks (Steiber 1). Nelson describes the shock of exiting prison with so few resources, stating,

To get a driver’s license, you have to enter state ID. I went in when I was seventeen, and I came out when I was 46. I didn’t exist anywhere. I couldn’t even open up a bank account, and I’m standing there with $10,000 in cash, savings bonds from 1964-68, payroll checks from working. All I wanted was a debit card so I could get an I-Pass.

The lack of resources provided to inmates doesn’t end with state ID’s. Nelson continues,

So you get out of prison, you don’t have an ID, you have to fight to find you social security card, or you have to write and apply for one, you’re strapped to an ankle bracelet, and you’re not allowed to leave the house. How are you supposed to find a job? . . . You got guys like me who come out—I didn’t even know how to turn on a computer. I never saw a computer or a TV with all the remotes and stuff. 28 years in prison, 23 in solitary, and the shock of what is out here, was overwhelming.
The shock that Nelson describes is often traumatizing and debilitating for inmates, and many inmates without an established support system on the outside are unable to reintegrate to society. Because they cannot find the resources they need, many experience feelings of desperation and a need to return to some sort of familiarity. For some individuals who were convicted for gang-related violence, drug possession or distribution, or theft, this desperate search for familiarity could lead to re-arrest.

Nelson confirms, “There’s no reintegration at all. There’s nothing to help people coming out of jail.” When folks exit the prison system, they are in an extremely vulnerable position, and access to stable housing, employment, and mental health resources are a significant determinant of successful reentry. The trauma that individuals endure during prison, especially those who have been incarcerated for years, even decades, can be exacerbated upon release. These individuals often describe themselves as ‘institutionalized,’ having adapted to life in prison and unsure of what the outside world will bring. The process of reentry is difficult, frightening, and treacherous, as parolees’ strict rules, coupled with a lack of resources for their basic needs, often results in re-incarceration if they are unable to find a support system. Nelson describes his feelings during reentry and currently, stating,

I started feeling like I don’t belong out here, like I don’t fit out here. And I still go through that because there was nothing to help me adjust . . . There are no mental health plans for when we get out right away. If you don’t have resources to pay for [counseling] or a CountyCare Card, you’re in bad shape when you walk out. I went through six different places and couldn’t find a psych to do my reintegration evaluation. If I didn’t pass the reintegration evaluation, they were going to re-incarcerate me, for what they did to me in solitary . . . I ask myself all the time, ‘What did I do that you’re doing this to me?’

Nelson’s story echoes many first-person accounts of former inmates, who struggle with integration after being institutionalized to the extreme environment of prison. Former inmates must apply for a CountyCare Card online or via phone, a task that proves difficult for individuals
who are not guaranteed access to a phone or a computer upon release. Even individuals who receive a CountyCare card often face difficulty in finding a therapist or psychiatrist who is experienced in counselor former prisoners. Access to medical and psychological care is essential for individuals exiting prison to provide stability and a safe space to process both their time in prison as well as the challenges to reintegration.

There exists a large misconception of the physical and mental states of individuals in prison, as individuals in prisons are largely excluded from national population health surveys. Images of inmates spending hours working out with their peers have become part of a national consciousness, and in the Supreme Court’s 2011 *Brown v. Plata* decision, even a part of judicial dissent. In a long oral dissent, Justice Antonin Scalia challenged the case filed on behalf of mentally and physically ill individuals incarcerated in California prison’s (09-1233 *Brown v. Plata*). California’s prisons were at 200% capacity at the time, and the Court ruled that this overcrowding and inadequate medical care violated the Eighth Amendment, releasing over 30,000 people over a two-year time-span. Scalia dissented that most of these people would be “fine physical specimens who have developed intimidating muscles pumping iron in the prison gym,” not individuals suffering from the mental and physical effects of trauma from their previous lives and time in prison (Cohen 2013).

Despite Scalia’s claim that individuals in prison did not face physical and mental duress in prison, more than half of people in U.S. prisons and jails have been diagnosed with a mental health condition, often dually diagnose with drug or alcohol dependency (James et. al 2006). Many are exiting prisons and re-entering society with unresolved trauma. A 2019 survey interview conducted by Johanna Crane found that among the incarcerated people interviewed, all described a “slow erosion of their physical, mental, and/or social well-being over the course of
their imprisonment” (2019). Nelson’s account echoes this feeling of erosion, but reveals that the deterioration of an inmate’s well-being does not end with incarceration.

Upon re-entry, ex-offenders struggle to find counselors who are even equipped to treat the specific traumas they faced in prison. Nelson’s struggle to find a psychiatrist to perform his reintegration evaluation stemmed from the fact that he spent such a significant amount of time in solitary confinement. There are few psychiatrists in the entire world who are equipped with the tools and knowledge to assess Nelson’s mental and emotional well-being, much less provide treatment. Nelson is far from alone in the trauma he has endured, and his current position as the Prison Rights’ Coordinator for the Uptown Peoples’ Law Center is truly exceptional. Because parole and reentry systems do not nearly provide the support ex-offenders need when exiting the prison system, many individuals’ stories are quite different from Nelson’s. Nelson provides an example of the shock and fear associated with exiting prison, stating,

A man I know walked into a store and violated his parole by stealing stuff. He did it because he wanted to go back to prison, it says it in his parole violation papers. He said, ‘I tried stealing from other places, nobody was arresting me. I don’t understand it out here, I’m institutionalized, I don’t like it. I’m afraid out here. And nobody wanted to help him. He’s crying for help and you’re just going to throw him right back out [to society]? And when you do that, you’re pushing someone who’s terrified into a corner.

Parolees face an extreme lack of resources upon reentry. Not only do they face a ‘slow erosion’ of their health in prisons, but the shock of re-entering society with no safety net compounds this erosion, resulting in re-traumatization and feelings of desperation. Furthermore, the requirements of parole focus on detecting parolees’ mistakes, not providing holistic care and resources that can assist in their readjustment to society. Nelson states, “The Department of Corrections has no program to help people adjust on parole. Parole officers are there to check on you, to make you take pee tests, to make you abide by certain things that are put in your parole requirements.”
Parole agencies function to surveil parolees, not provide resources to the individuals who need it most.

The map below displays where individuals are being arrested for parole violations in the city of Chicago. This data was gathered through the Chicago Data Portal, and it is evident that most re-arrests are occurring in the South and West sides of Chicago, in neighborhood primarily composed of Black and brown residents. These areas of Chicago also tend to be the most over-policed and under-resourced, with little access to mental health resources, stable housing, or stable employment opportunities (Byrd 2016, La Vigne 2003). As discussed in above paragraphs, parole violations can be extremely minor and still lead to recidivism, and the incidence of arrest for parole violation in this map is staggering.

Figure 3: Incidence of Parole Violation Arrest in Chicago
Figures 4 and 5 provide a spatial demonstration of the lack of mental health resources for individuals exiting prisons. Most clinicians’ offices are located in the most affluent regions of Chicago, such as Oak Park and the Gold Coast, while the entire Southwest Side of Chicago has a significantly smaller proportion of clinicians per resident. Ex-offenders tend to reside in lower-income communities where mental health resources are scarce (Ford 2015, Quin 2019).

The lack of adequate mental health, medical, and practical resources for individuals exiting prisons significantly contributes to recidivism of ex-offenders in Illinois. Parole agencies and the city of Chicago are failing to address the mental and emotional needs of parolees, and there remains a severe misconception, exacerbated by judiciary officials as prominent as Justice Scalia, that individuals in prison are spending their time ‘pumping iron.’ The reality of many in prison tends to be much worse, and reentry systems must provide proper counseling, medical care, and other needed resources for inmates if they desire to even begin to address the physical
and emotional trauma that so many ex-offenders have been forced to carry due to an unforgiving and unequal system of governance and punishment.

**Discussion**

Ex-offenders face barriers to social reintegration in nearly every aspect of their lives. Feelings of belonging are essential to successful reentry in communities, but the harsh restrictions of registries, the burdensome requirements of parole, and the extreme lack of housing options limit opportunities for ex-offenders to find a home in their communities. As ex-offenders struggle to find this essential sense of belonging in the world outside prison, the dire need for improved access to mental health resources, community support, and systemic reform of Illinois’ reentry system has never been stronger. Though the needs of ex-offenders are great, the perception of ex-offenders as menaces to society limits individuals’ options for access to the necessary resources that may allow them to become the productive members of society that their communities wish them to be. To resolve these complicated issues regarding reentry, a multi-faceted policy approach must be adopted by prison reform and abolition activists.

**Policy Recommendations**

*Applying an Abolition Framework to Reentry Reform*

Transformative social change rarely occurs overnight, and this paper encourages abolitionists to consider advocating for reform that can improve the well-being and reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals more immediately than the transcendent change that can come from eventually abolishing prisons, though these more immediate solutions should each contribute to the ultimate goal of prison abolition. Hernàn Carvente-Martinez’s organization, No Kids in Prison, recognizes the need for practical steps that build toward the ultimate abolitionist project. He states,
I used to agree with that more extreme side of abolition that said we need to get rid of these institutions immediately, but now I’m saying yes, let’s get rid of them, but we need to make sure that the resources we’re saving from getting rid of these institutions are getting funneled back into the communities . . . Our campaigns for abolition are based on both ending confinement, but also reallocating resources to communities so they can decide for themselves what they need to improve local well-being and public safety.

Because abolition efforts do not seek to make prisons ‘kinder’ or current criminal justice systems more viable, the policy recommendations in this paper do not look to only improve current systems. Through community advocacy and bringing the needs of parolees to the center of the abolition movement, this paper aims to highlight the foundational inequities and failures of the current criminal justice system as well as encourage reform efforts toward more immediate solutions. The policy recommendations in this paper can be classified as negative reforms, which closely follow an abolitionist framework by taking away the influence and reach of the criminal justice system rather than adding to it. The negative reforms recommended in this paper are still grounded in practical, actionable steps of reform, rather than an immediate overhaul of the entire prison and parole system. By emphasizing the political, racial, and economic inequities of reentry systems while advocating for specific negative reforms, advocates can call into question what the purpose of reentry and parole is, what they are actually doing to individuals and communities, and whether these systems are truly necessary to public safety.

Reducing Registry Restrictions

To reduce recidivism in Illinois and provide ex-offenders with a real chance to reintegrate into society, abolitionist and prison reform activists should apply public pressure on policymakers to reduce the harsh rules and restrictions of registries. Current sex offender, murder, domestic violence, gun, arson, and other registries are creating insurmountable barriers to societal reintegration for formerly incarcerated individuals. Individuals are facing increasing
difficulty in finding host sites, employment, and accessing movement due to the harsh restrictions of these registries.

By pushing the negative reform of reducing the reach of public crime registries in Illinois, activists can both improve the lives of ex-offenders quickly, while also calling attention to deeply ingrained inequities of the system and removing a crucial element of the current criminal justice system. Registries legitimize extreme surveillance by the state of individuals in their communities long after they have served their time. People with records and others who have been touched by the criminal justice system never get to leave the criminal justice system. Individuals with records and on registries are not provided the opportunity to rise above a second-class citizen status, even though prisons purport themselves to be institutions of reform and rehabilitation.

Advocacy surrounding registries reform should center on the intention versus impact of registries. Initially, public registries were required by law as a means to increase public safety. By acknowledging why individuals may feel reluctant to support the curtailment of public registries, activists are more likely to achieve an understanding that the current impact of registries is not fulfilling the intention of increasing public safety. Through public questioning of whether registries are actually fulfilling their stated purpose, abolition activists can point to the fundamental flaws of the reentry system and criminal justice system as a whole. Grounding the abolition ideals of fighting racial injustice, imprisonment, and curtailment of rights in practical policy solutions can allow abolitionists to introduce their abolition project to the public in digestible, tangible examples of policy reform, rather than grappling with the difficulties of attempting to convince the public of an unfamiliar ideology that has not yet reached a consensus
among activists of buildable, practical steps. Then, activists may offer solutions for what they believe will actually be effective to reduce public safety.

By working to reduce the harsh restrictions and sheer number of people on registries, the funding allocated to maintaining public crime databases should be funneled straight into the communities that are most touched by the criminal justice system, specifically neighborhoods in which high proportions of ex-offenders reside. Additionally, the annuals fees once charged to ex-offenders’ account for registering will now likely be spent in communities, whether on rent, basic household necessities, or other needs. Increasing opportunities for ex-offenders to achieve economic independence is hugely important to their likelihood of successful reintegration, and by reducing the costs associated with reentry, as well as reducing the harsh requirements of registries, ex-offenders are more likely to have opportunities to build economic stability for themselves. If the costs of reentry, such as the fees associated with registries, are drastically reduced, the money ex-offenders currently possess can remain in their pockets, and a decrease in the size and publication of crime registries is likely to increase their chances of finding employment and reasonably-priced apartments. The less ex-offenders are limited in their ability to access housing, employment, and other essential reentry resources, the greater their opportunity for upward social mobility. Channeling the government-allocated funding for registries into community-based programming, such as mental health clinics, funding opportunities for entrepreneurs, or other programs supporting formerly incarcerated individuals, is more likely to increase overall public safety than registries (Lerman 2014, Lind 2016, Prescott 2012, Ruhland 2016).
Increase Public Advocacy for Improved Access to Housing, Administrative Needs, and Mental Health Resources

Access to a host site is another essential step in reentry. Current halfway houses are significantly limiting opportunities for resident movement by requiring inmates to wear ankle monitors, and half-way houses are also requiring unnecessary classes in finding a medical card, an item which ex-inmates should have already been provided by the state. In order to form social bonds, reconnect with family, interview for jobs, and meet with their lawyers and relevant reentry organizations, formerly incarcerated individuals must leave their host site and move freely about the world. Not only are halfway houses limiting movement, but current parole oversight and check-ins place undue burden on parolees’ movement to the point that individuals cannot see their families, are missing important interviews and opportunities for employment, and individuals feel like they are still undergoing incarceration by another name.

Activists should highlight the difficulties in finding housing as a person touched by the criminal justice system. If they are already emphasizing the abolitionist theory of the importance of belonging in a community for a formerly incarcerated individual, then their advocacy surrounding the need for greater access to stable housing should center around the idea that ex-offenders need to build a home in their communities to fully re-integrate. If there is nowhere for them to go, then there is no chance for them to reintegrate properly and find belonging in a community.

The parole system in Illinois is not prioritizing the needs of parolees. To provide support and resources for parolees, initiatives like the Second Chance Act, the Illinois Identification Card Act (15 ILCS 335) must be provided proper funding so that ex-inmates can actually access the resources they are guaranteed upon release from prison. When inmates are not provided a state
ID, they cannot register to vote, they cannot open a bank account unless their family still has access to their social security documents, and many face huge limitations to finding employment, as many do not even exist on paper. Though this is an example of positive reform, in which a government criminal justice program is expanded, this program is necessary to the ultimate goal of prison abolition and reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals. The funding for these programs should already exist for inmates to receive their ID immediately upon release. Among those interviewed for this paper, three ex-offenders stated that they did not exist in the state system upon release. This created huge barriers to opening a bank account, finding housing, or registering for necessary medical prescriptions and care. Funding for programs that provide ex-offenders with the state-sanctioned ID’s and forms necessary to their reintegration are an essential step to successful reentry and the ultimate abolition project of building communities that can support people exiting prisons.

Additionally, ex-offenders require better access to mental health resources. Though ex-inmates are guaranteed a medical care card by the state of Illinois, many are not provided this card upon release due to lack of funding for programs providing resources to ex-offenders. Parolees must be guaranteed access to medical care cards and professional mental health services immediately upon release, as the shock of reentry is often re-traumatizing for parolees. There already exist programs and infrastructure to support the medical needs of ex-offenders, but these programs require funding, and ex-offenders need to know how to access them.

Furthermore, activists should consider applying public pressure on policymakers and the Illinois Supreme Court to declare violation-at-the-door policies unconstitutional on the grounds of unequal punishment. Targeting this reform will in turn highlight the economic inequalities of
the reentry system and challenge the idea that our current reentry system of parole and registration is actually making our communities safer.

Conduct Open Conversations with Affected Communities to Determine Next Steps for Advocacy

Conversations with communities is essential in improving ex-offenders’ reintegration as well as achieving the ultimate goal of prison abolition. The abolition movement and conversation will look different locally, state-wide, and nationally. Community input is essential to finding further practical steps to reform and policy implementation for ex-offenders to develop a sense of belonging again in communities. Hernán Carvente-Martinez discusses the importance of community input, stating,

What works for New York is not going to work for Wichita, Kansas. Let’s have a real conversation with communities about finding solutions for public safety that don’t involve a locked-up setting. People need to come back to communities in supportive, loving ways, and when you ask community members about what is needed for that to happen, the answers are going to be very different from what the government will say reentry systems need.

Abolition work is rooted in open dialogue within communities and human-centered accountability, recognizing that the best policy recommendations come from people who are most directly affected by the issue. It is necessary for abolitionists to create lasting mechanisms to include community members in the conversation in order to reach the root of the change that needs to be made. The practical policy recommendations provided in this paper are a start to improving opportunities for ex-offenders to have a real chance at successful integration, but these formerly incarcerated individuals need communities pledging their support for reintegration if they are going to feel a sense of home and belonging after prison. This paper’s policy recommendations may provide individuals a better chance of successful reintegration on a practical, administrative level by providing ex-offenders better access to necessary reentry
resources; however, the essential feeling of belonging, mentioned in interviews with Brian Nelson, Hernàn Carvente-Martinez, and Reuben Miller, comes from the community.

Community reentry policy is tied up with public safety, citizenship, and belonging. Abolitionists should consider working with individual communities to create spaces in residential areas for people with criminal records. Attitudes toward formerly incarcerated individuals will likely shift following publicized pressure on abolishing registries, the IDOC’s “violating at the door” policy, and implementing more resources for ex-offenders. Such public pressure is essential to demonstrating to community members that so many ex-offenders are searching for a home, and after witnessing this public attention to the systemic inequities of the parole system, they may be more receptive to creating space for ex-offenders in their communities. By highlighting what the reentry system is currently doing and is failing to do for ex-offenders, abolitionists can emphasize the need for funding to be funneled community resources for mental health clinics, housing options for former inmates, and other community-based programming, rather than being reabsorbed by the state budget.

Limitations

Difficulties to implementing these reform efforts lie in Illinois policymakers’ willingness to fund these initiatives. Parole is a government system, and therefore reform must occur within government. Though prison abolition and reform activist pressure are hugely effective in spreading awareness and calling for change, outside non-profit organizations may not be effective enough on their own to improve reentry outcomes for parolees. Public pressure on policymakers and leaders of the IDOC are essential to accessing greater funding opportunities for reentry resources and reducing the harsh restrictions of registry and parole requirements. For this reason, prison abolition advocacy efforts in reentry should not come from an outside
emergent institution; rather, they should work within systems of governance to achieve negative reforms that highlight the inequities of parole and registry systems in Illinois and work toward an ultimate abolition project.

Conclusion

The U.S. incarcerates its citizens at a much higher rate than any nation in the world, and as prison and jail populations continue to climb, so does the number of people on parole and enrolled in reentry programs. Though theorists and politicians have claimed that reentry and parole provide individuals with a chance to ‘earn a place at the table’ and demonstrate their ability to live by society’s rules, the barriers to successful reintegration into communities are nearly insurmountable. Just a few examples of the barriers to reentry parolees face are the institution of registries, systems including the IDOC’s ‘violating at the door’ policy, and parole oversight without the necessary resources for reintegration. Each of these government programs bolster a stigma that ex-offenders and individuals with criminal records do not belong in our communities, as parolees continue to be treated as second-class citizens and are not given opportunities to make a home within communities.

As prison abolition theorists seek to build a society that does not need prisons through the redistribution of wealth and power from prisons and policing to communities, they should consider centering reentry in their abolition project. There are currently millions of individuals in prison, and if abolition is to be fully realized, they need the proper resources and community care for successful reintegration. Reentry programs such as registries and parole oversight recreate a system of incarceration by another name. Once touched by the criminal justice system, individuals’ lives and relationships with loved ones are never the same. The punishment for
crime continues long after prison and affects one’s ability to find stable housing, employment, or simply see their loved ones.

The practical steps to prison abolition begin with building an abolitionist movement within negative reentry reforms and advocating for improvements in the welfare for individuals oppressed by our current system. Abolition as a theory and a movement must be grounded within the realities of our current systems of governance and oppression. To advocate for systemic reform while also highlighting the inequities of the reentry system as a whole, abolitionists should consider working with community members to decipher what they need to ensure ex-offenders are welcomed into communities and can find places of belonging outside the reach of the criminal justice system.

Prison abolitionists should consider focusing their advocacy on policies providing ex-offenders with a real change to reintegrate into society. Each advocacy effort to improve the lives of ex-offenders should call attention to the inequities of parole and reentry systems as a whole to support the ultimate end goal of abolition. By centering these small steps of reform in an abolitionist framework, the public movement of prison abolition may gain more traction among communities and individuals wary of the theory, and these reforms can provide time to develop more policy solutions centered on building communities that do not need prisons.

People are coming out of prisons, and they are coming out in need of many resources that are not being provided. Not only must the basic necessities of housing, employment, mental health support be provided, but individuals must feel at home if they are ever to successfully reenter our communities. Individuals with criminal records are currently told all the places they are not allowed to be, and are constantly turned away from homes, jobs, and medical care clinics due to a lack of resources and the restrictive nature of parole and registries. These restrictive
rules have perpetuated a fear that individuals with criminal records are dangerous and, even after they have served their time, they still do not belong in communities. Ex-offenders require spaces in communities where they feel safe and welcomed, and by working for reform while collaborating with communities, prison abolitionists can start to build a world that does not perpetually punish ex-offenders who wish, just like most of the populace, to build a home and feel safe in their communities.
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Appendices

A. Interview Scripts

For Workers in Reentry

- I am using these conversations to examine where there are gaps in the current literature and articles and books regarding reentry, especially in Illinois, so I will begin with general questions about you and the Uptown People’s Law Center, and then I’ll get more specific with questions about reentry that I am trying to resolve.
- Can you tell me a bit about your career path and what led you to the position you’re in today?
- What is the mission of your organization?
- What type of service do you/your organization provide?
- Does your organization collaborate with other reentry programs?
- Does your organization work with or is in contact with any prison abolition activists?
- Who are you primarily working with (probationers, parolees, etc.)?
- Where are most of your clients living?
- Where are most of your clients working?
- What types of jobs do your clients occupy?
- Of your clients who have exited the prison system, are you working with individuals who have recently been released or individuals who were released years ago and still need help accessing resources?
- What are the most important needs of your clients?
- Does your organization provide these needs, or do they rely on other organizations?
- Do the needs of your clients include the needs of their families? If so, does your organization provide any kind of support or resources for families?
- Are there barriers to accessing these needs? If so, what are these barriers, and how are they preventing people from accessing resources?
- In your opinion, when does reentry end?
- I’ve been largely operating by word-of-mouth recommendations to find people to talk to, so is there anyone else you can think of that I should talk to?

For Parolees

- If you are currently on parole, how long have you been on parole?
- Do you have a parole officer? If so, how often do you see them?
- Does your parole officer put you in contact with any resources that you find helpful?
• Do you feel that your parole officer is working to support you in your re-entry process?
• If yes, why do you feel that way?
• If not, why do you feel that way?
• Do you have regular meetings with your parole officer?
• Are these meetings scheduled during work hours?
• Were there fees associated with your parole program that you have had to pay or are still in the process of paying?
• Are you currently employed?
• If so, did you have to disclose your criminal record when applying for your job?
• If not, are you currently applying for jobs?
• If so, do you have to disclose your criminal record when applying for these jobs?
• When exiting prison/jail, did you feel you have access to support to locating housing?
• If so, where did this support come from?
• If not, was there an organization that you wish you had known about during that process?
• If interviewee has still not accessed housing, has your parole officer intervened to support you in any way?
• In your opinion, when does reentry end?

For Abolition Activists:
• Can you tell me a bit about your career path and what led you to the position you’re in today?
• What is the mission of your organization?
• Does your organization have any associations with reentry? Do your organizations work directly with reentry organizations or formerly incarcerated individuals?
• In your opinion, how is prison abolition related to reentry?
• Do you consider reentry a primary focus of your organization?
• If not, why?
• What do you think are the most significant needs that newly released individuals face?
• Do you think these needs are being met by current reentry systems?
• Do you work directly with any parole or probation agencies? Have you in the past?
• If so, what services did these agencies provide?
• Were there any needs of formerly incarcerated individuals that you didn’t think were being addressed by these agencies?
• In your opinion, when does reentry end?