Ramapo College of New Jersey

Family Reintegration

Sylvie Weiner

Senior Capstone

Professor Serban

May 10, 2025

Table of Contents

Abstract

This study examines the social and structural barriers experienced by ex-incarcerated individuals when attempting to reintegrate into society. The study emphasizes how social stigma and institutional discrimination shape one's post release outcomes. The study uses an auto-ethnographic method grounded in qualitative research, drawing first-hand family experiences, including the incarceration and reentry of my father. The literature review and methodology both demonstrate how stigma is perpetuated through employment and housing discrimination, relationship strain, limited access to federal benefits, and media portrayals that criminalize rather than humanize. The auto-ethnography also proves the psychological and relational toll on both the incarcerated individual and their family. It emphasizes how affordable communication would have eased the strain and damage. Key findings indicate that stable employment, accessible communication, and family connection significantly reduce recidivism, yet current systems remain structurally unsupportive. Policy recommendations suggest that Ban-The-Box hiring reforms, federal housing and welfare accessibility, prison education, and improved communication should be implemented. This research finally argues that reintegration should be seen and treated as a right rather than a privilege. There should be guaranteed access to fair opportunities and resources for an individual's successful reintegration.

Introduction

The journey of reintegration for formerly incarcerated individuals comes with many obstacles. Social stigma is deeply rooted in these challenges and fueled by the way incarceration is talked about and how the media portrays it. While this stigma shapes public perception, it also embeds itself in systemic barriers such as housing, employment, and social belonging. In addition to these barriers, incarceration can put a strain on personal relationships with partners, children, and family, whether they're close or not. This paper tackles the depth of these challenges by using a qualitative research method called auto-ethnography with support from historical analyses. These personal narratives from close family members and the ex-offender himself provide insight into the emotional and societal aspects of reintegration. This approach allows for a more intimate examination of these realities that are often overlooked in policy discussions. The sections discuss employment both inside and outside of prison, the role and importance of family and social connections and examine policy recommendations such as "Ban-theBox," therapy programs, and changing public perception. Ultimately, advocating and sharing effective approaches is crucial for individuals attempting to reintegrate into society.

Historical Context

A. Introduction

In this section we will define incarceration, the historical aspects of the penal system as well as the current, including types of prisons, the costs associated with inmates and security levels, and the stigma behind the reintegration of offenders.

B. Defining Incarceration

The United States has over 6,000 correctional facilities including state, federal, and private prisons, local jails, juvenile, and immigration detention centers. There are three types of security levels in prison; minimum security which houses nonviolent offenders who have fewer restrictions. Medium security: these prisoners pose a moderate risk and have more restrictions than minimum security. Maximum security inmates pose the highest risk to society. Some of those are dedicated to white collar crimes, which would be considered minimum security. Incarcerating an individual starts with a sentencing, then processing, assignment, parole and lastly release. Incarceration rates in the United States are at an all time high, with almost 700 individuals imprisoned per 100,000 people. However, it is important to note that this number has increased immensely since the 1970's where there were about 100 individuals in prison per 100,000 people. Incarceration rates can be measured by crime, amount of time an individual serves, and recidivism rates. Shortly after, in 1971, President Richard Nixon declared the War on Drugs and the idea received more attention when President Ronald Reagan stepped into office. According to an analysis from an article by the Brennan Center for Justice, *The History of Mass Incarceration*, "When Reagan took office in 1980, the total prison population was 329,000, and when he left office eight years later, the prison population had essentially doubled, to 627,000" (Cullen). Another important note is that minorities made up most of these numbers. This can be described as one of the largest increases of prison growth to ever happen. If the two presidents weren't already a factor of incarceration growth, the 1994 Crime Bill or the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act wasn't of any help either. President Bill Clinton signed this bill into law, which is known as one of the driving forces for incarceration, as well as Governor

Rockefeller's 1973 New York State's Rockefeller Drug Laws which made mainly marijuana possession result in a 15-years minimum in correctional facilities. Drug laws and prosecution practices are firmly entrenched in the United States criminal justice system and play a significant role in how it operates.

The rise of incarcerated individuals is undoubtedly an important aspect. Still, when looking at the amount of money that goes into this process, it leaves an uneasy feeling that spending high amounts to incarcerate individuals holds more importance than making sure they reintegrate successfully. All correctional facilities must encompass security, programming, and administration, which necessitates adequate funding. In 2015, prison spending in the United States was approximately $43 billion, making it home to the highest number of prisons worldwide. The United States also coined the term 'average cost per inmate,' similar to many states that currently use 'price per patient.' According to the Vera Institute of Justice, "among the 45 states that provided data, the total cost per inmate averaged $33,274" (Mai and Subramanian p. 4). The relationship between the cost and overpopulation of prisons is closely correlated. When more individuals are sent to prison, prices of incarceration rise, and often, crowded conditions can lead to more tensions between inmates, which would then lead to more security or doctors for potential hospital needs.

C. Prison Context

This section provides an overview of prison and jail statistics using updated information from the Federal Bureau of Prisons and Prison Policy Initiative. Ages 36-40 holds the most number of inmates with 27,189 inmates. As stated, prison security levels range from minimum to

high. As of April 12, 2025, there are 22,276 inmates in minimum security, 51,213 inmates in medium security and 19,068 inmates in high security, which totals to 154,435 inmates in prison. There are 55,692 inmates in low security and 6,186 inmates unclassified. Drug offenses are the highest offense with 62,502 inmates then weapons at 31,631. 603 inmates have been released from prisons in New Jersey since 2024 (Sawyer and Wagner). As of March 2025, there were 665,000 individuals in jail and 105,000 were convicted to prison. The difference between prisons and jails is that prisons are institutions under state or federal control where convicts serve their sentences. Jails are institutions under city or country control where individuals wait for their trial. More people are in jail because they cannot afford bail (Sawyer and Wagner). This will be emphasized later on in the methodology research section but the subject of my research explains how jail is more of a waiting game for individuals but prisoners are aware of their exact sentence. In his perspective, since he was held in jail, not knowing when you were going to be released was more of an uneasy feeling than if he was aware.

D. Reintegrating Into Society and its Importance

"My sentence really began the day I was released," which was quoted from *Social Injustice and Public Health*. When a person commits a crime, they are sent to a correctional facility to serve their sentence to society. After completing their sentence, they are faced with additional challenges. Correctional facilities can be harsh in the United States compared to other regions, therefore successfully reintegrating into society holds great importance. The significance of this topic requires thorough study. Reintegrating into society as someone who served time in a correctional facility presents significant challenges. While there is a wide range of issues, some

challenges upon release include employment and housing discrimination and social stigma including probationary restrictions and expungement of criminal records. Each year, over 700,000 individuals are released from prison across the country, and many face significant societal and legal restrictions due to their criminal records. Supporting reintegration programs has been inconsistent due to the common belief that it is ineffective. This creates a conundrum as to where the ex-offender should be. Achieving successful reintegration is crucial in reducing the likelihood of individuals returning to prison or correctional facilities. One of the ways to achieve a successful reintegration is to have the rules and regulations to accommodate the ex-offender. One helpful idea for this study is to view reintegration as an inherent right. According to the article *The Right To Reintegration,* "reintegration invokes certain positive obligations of the state to not simply 'remake' an offender but to re-stitch them into the ordinary patterns of civic life" (Yankah, p. 95). This highlights the state's role in facilitating a supportive and growing environment. America justifies punishment according to two theories: the deontological theory, which emphasizes ensuring punishment is warranted; and consequentialism, which justifies punishment to prevent future crimes. However, neither theory adequately addresses what happens after punishment is administered.

Two essential theories of punishment contribute to the reintegration of individuals into society: rehabilitation and restorative justice. Rehabilitation and restorative justice are two essential theories that actually contribute to the reintegration of individuals. Rehabilitation services include providing educational programs, therapy, and vocational training. Restorative justice focuses more on the harm caused by criminal behavior. These theories aren't exact solutions, but both approaches equip individuals with essential skills and support, which can also

be helpful for their own transformation. Reentry programs can focus on preparation, connecting services, and providing long-term support and supervision. The first few weeks of adjustment tend to be easier than the process of long-term reintegration. To maintain successful reintegration, it is important to understand what programs work. Coincidentally, researchers from the University of Maryland introduced the "what works" literature. This was used to identify systems and programs that are effective for reentry. Being employed is described as one of the most important systems for an individual to be a part of civil society. Next is substance abuse treatment, education, mental health, and housing. The Department of Labor established the Young Offender Reentry Demonstration Grant Program to allocate funds for reentry initiatives aimed at offenders aged 14 to 21. This program includes the Work Opportunity Tax Credits initiative, which offers tax incentives to businesses that hire former offenders, as well as the Federal Bonding Program, which provides insurance coverage for those offenders. The Office of Vocational and Adult Education under the Department of Education provides programs for reentry such as The Grants to States for Workplace and Community Transition Training for Incarcerated Youth Offenders which fund postsecondary education for people under the age of 25. The Department of Housing and Urban Development can ration their funds to provide housing for individuals previously incarcerated. Lastly, the Department of Health and Human Services funds many programs. One program is the Recovery Community Support Program that helps people and families recover from drug abuse and addiction.

Social Stigma

A. Introduction

This section will mainly discuss the context of social stigma while focusing on the social stigma an ex-offender may experience when reintegrating into society. It will begin with defining social stigma and a slight contrast of stereotypes. This will move on to the institutional barriers ex-offenders face such as housing, employment and civic discrimination. Then the section will discuss relationships inside and outside of prison. Lastly, this section will discuss the psychological aspects and the importance of maintaining relationships for ex-offenders.

B. Defining Social Stigma

Social stigma and stereotypes can often be confused when defining the terms. Nonetheless, both of these terms have a significant influence on society. Social stigma refers to the phenomenon where an individual's social, physical, or mental condition affects how others perceive or interact with them (Crawford and Brown). Although this research won't go into depth about social stigma in its entirety, it is important to recognize the three main types which include public, systemic, and self. Public social stigma refers to the discrimination and belittlement by others. Systemic social stigma is the diminished access to care and resources as a result of incarceration. Self-social stigma involves the internalization of harmful stereotypes. Other types of social stigma can include enacted and anticipated stigmas (Tennessee Government). According to the textbook, stereotypes are "a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing" (Open Learning). What society views as 'normal' could be contradictory to the stereotype of the released offender. Analyzing these two definitions, it can be seen that stereotypes are beliefs that can be negative or positive, while social stigma highlights the attitudes, prejudice, and discrimination. Mass media

ranks among the most powerful and influential entities globally, shaping the thoughts of individuals within any society. Additionally, the media significantly influences how the public perceives crime. Coverage and focus on 'criminals' and violent acts often dominate mainstream media narratives. This exposure allows the media to create misleading impressions of offenders, leading the public to form ignorant opinions about these individuals (Vaz, p. 19-21). Even when looking at mainstream services covering extreme crimes, there is always a glorifying aspect that tends to overshine the seriousness and feelings of not only the families but also the offenders themselves. There is a lack of emotion and trauma shown of these individuals during the crimes committed. The same emotion and trauma are also never shown post-mainstreaming. On more prominent platforms like Hulu's Gypsy Rose Blanchard documentary, which solely covers the context of the crimes, was watched by almost 10 million people. In contrast, the individual's more personal platform that involves self-experiences has yet to reach 300,000 viewers. This statistic highlights the glorification of the crimes itself rather than the emotional and traumatic experiences faced by the individual and family.

C. Institutional Barriers

Media portrayal can perpetuate the social stigmas faced by ex-offenders, and institutional barriers can also be considered one of these factors. Housing, employment, and civic discrimination are factors that are extremely important to emphasize because these too, perpetuate social stigmas. Institutional discrimination makes it challenging for ex-offenders to reintegrate into society. This kind of discrimination has left ex-offenders feeling helpless about the roles they can take on in their communities. Some Members of Congress even consider drug

offenders inhumane or "non-citizens," basically saying they've lost all the legal rights and protections that others have. While people who've been convicted still technically have citizenship in the United States, ex-offenders deal with ongoing legal barriers that prevent them from working, voting, serving in the military, owning guns, and getting involved in other social and political activities (Thornton p. 6). Avoiding incarceration is particularly difficult for individuals who have previously been imprisoned, and securing employment can significantly aid in lowering the chances of reoffending. Getting a job offers many benefits for people who have been involved with the justice system, like boosting self-esteem, building a positive identity, and ultimately living a more stable life away from crime. Plus, hiring former inmates is a win for employers, too. It shows they're committed to fair hiring practices, might make them eligible for tax breaks and bonding services at no cost, gives them a bigger pool of applicants, and helps cut down on training costs, especially if they hire folks who completed specialized job training while they were imprisoned (Parker).

Obtaining housing is essential for ex-offenders reintegrating into society; however, most ex-offenders find themselves with limited means to secure housing after their release or conviction. Having stable housing is often a prerequisite for employment. Studies indicate that local housing authorities commonly exercise their discretionary authority to bar ex-offenders from public housing, often for long or even indefinite durations (Thornton p. 14-15). Housing initiatives for rural communities are mainly funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development (RD), along with other agencies. HUD is the main federal funding source for low- and moderate-income housing, while USDA RD specifically

targets rural housing needs, though it receives a smaller share of federal housing funds (Housing Assistance Council p. 12). The HUD also coined the "one strike and you're out" policy, which allowed public housing to evict all members of the household from criminal activities committed by any member of a household. This policy can make friends and family skeptical or worried about letting ex-offenders stay in their homes. It can be anticipated for an ex-offender to become homeless, which ultimately makes them susceptible to arrests for quality-of-life offenses. Being homeless, panhandling, loitering, and engaging in vagrancy are categorized as some of these offenses (Thornton p. 16). Many ex-offenders are often arrested and incarcerated for minor offenses because they struggle to secure housing or employment. Having stable housing is crucial for an ex-offender to successfully reintegrate into society and lead a law-abiding and productive life. The presence of these structural obstacles can significantly impede an ex-offenders ability to re-enter society successfully.

D. Relationships Inside and Outside of Prison

Friends and families encounter numerous challenges when dealing with ex-offenders. It would be unjust to say that relationships are uniquely crucial in the lives of ex-offenders, as they are essential for everyone. Everyone has parents, hopefully friends, social networks, and potentially spouses and children. For ex-offenders, having these relationships can serve as a therapeutic outlet. Before delving into the significance of these relationships, it is important to address communication barriers, as effective communication is a vital factor in maintaining relationships and mental sanity. Suicide is actually the leading cause of death in local jails and they hardly have access to counseling. People who suffer with mental health issues are often

thrown into solitary confinement without supervision (Sawyer and Wagner, 2025). Corrections officials have consistently created significant barriers for incarcerated individuals to keep their family and community connections, and they persist in doing so in ways that can be cruel, damaging, and irrational. Families continue to pay high costs merely to communicate with their imprisoned relatives, while corporations profit significantly and find new strategies to extract money from those who are least able to pay. Rising costs and attempts to phase out physical mail jeopardize an essential bond between those who are incarcerated and their families (Prison Policy Initiative). One fundamental right that belongs to everyone, including inmates, is the First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of speech. Without the ability to speak freely, other fundamental human rights could be at risk. The speech of incarcerated individuals is understandably limited because of the constraints of the prison setting (Frank p. 133). Having a family member in prison influences various aspects of life, including financial difficulties, family relationships, and emotional health. The absence of an adult family member can lead to a decrease in financial support from that person. For children, losing a parent to incarceration can cause emotional distress and burden them with adult responsibilities, such as earning income for the family or caring for younger siblings (PubMed Central). Children encounter ambiguous loss when a parent is imprisoned; the parent is not permanently absent but is absent from the child's everyday life, and the parent's identity and role within the family have changed significantly. Typically, there are large distances that separate children from their incarcerated parents. Women are usually located in prisons about 160 miles away from their children, while men are around 100 miles distant. These distances act as an obstacle to family members visiting inmates. More than half of incarcerated parents indicate they have never had a personal visit from their children.

Communication through phone calls and letters often presents challenges as well. The number of calls or letters allowed per prisoner is usually restricted by correctional policies. The steep costs of collect phone calls due to surcharges from telephone companies or the correctional facilities themselves can make this mode of communication quite costly (Travis et al., p. 1). Individuals may feel the need to conceal the fact that a partner or parent is in prison, especially when interacting with people like employers, social workers, teachers, and others who may not belong to communities that are significantly affected by incarceration (PubMed Central).

E. Family Stress

"Prisons fail entire families - and society more broadly - by separating millions of children from their parents, and by enforcing harmful policies that perpetuate cycles of poverty and disadvantage" (Wang). Incarceration comes with immense stress for both the individual and their family. This process causes impacts on relationships with their partners, family members, and children during the process and when the individual reintegrates. In 1997, Congress passed the Adoption and Safe Families Act, which states with federal funding for child welfare must end parental rights if children have been in foster care for a significant amount of time. While this act was used to establish a place for foster children to go, this unintentionally stripped parental rights of the incarcerated individual. Incarcerated parents often face the termination of their parental rights (5,000 out of 32,000), even without evidence of abuse (Okoh and Coronado, p. 7). Communication and financial strain also comes with these challenges. Families spend around $2.9 billion per year on prison fees including phone calls and commissary. About 113 million adults have immediate family that has been incarcerated. (Prison Policy Initiative). Social stigma

haunts the families of the incarcerated. The Federal Bureau of Prisons' inmate statistics are updated weekly and currently 93.5% of inmates are men and the remaining is women. Fathers are often classified as the 'breadwinner' in a household and when one becomes incarcerated, family income drops significantly.

When an individual gets incarcerated, their partners are left to adjust their day to day lives. In a meta-synthesis study from the *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology,* researchers studied six themes regarding the perspectives of an incarcerated individual's partner which includes role transitions, loss, stigma, prison systems, silver linings, and new ways of coping (McDonnell et al. p. 1160-1163). This qualitative research targets direct sources to gather information from genuine and personal experiences however, it provides more of a female perspective. The first theme discusses the insecurities of partners especially when one has to parent alone, more specifically when a woman has to fill the shoes of the father. Some partners or parents also shield their children from the truth and trauma and others serve as a key factor with child and parent communication. The second theme talks about how some women feel that when their partner is incarcerated, their social status is negatively affected. Others also face pressure from their social circle to end their relationship with the incarcerated individual leading to the feeling of loneliness. Next, sometimes partners feel the guilt of the trauma themselves and feel they are viewed as criminals. The fourth theme talks about the breach of privacy when sending letters or making phone calls to their partner in prison (McDonnell et al. p. 1160-1163). The last two themes aren't necessarily important to this study but the research discusses an optimistic view of the effects of prison on their partners. Some individuals felt freedom when their partners were incarcerated and others felt the institution provided them with new skills

(McDonnell et al. p. 1162). The different perspectives in this study provides important insights to the stresses families face when someone close to them is incarcerated.

Children also undergo many challenges when a parent is incarcerated whether it's their mother or father. Similar to the challenges faced by a partner, children can feel isolated and lonely. Over five million children have experienced parental incarceration. Parental incarceration is defined as a childhood experience where a mother or father is removed from the household and day to day life. According to a 2011-2012 report, 65,000 children experienced parental incarceration in New Jersey while California had 503,000 (Annie E. Casey Foundation p. 5). A child can face psychological, behavioral, social, economic, and developmental effects when a parent is incarcerated (Annie E. Casey Foundation p. 5). The trauma that comes with these events can linger throughout a child's life and increase the chances of incarceration for themselves (Difilippo). The severity of these effects vary depending on the age and sex of the child or young adult. For example, Parke and Clarke-Stewart (2001) explain how younger children can express more anger towards babysitters or siblings and school-aged children may put themselves in situations where suspension or expulsion is on the line. Nonetheless, the challenges any child faces when a parent is incarcerated is a study by itself however, according to an article titled *More Than 5 Million Children Have Had an Incarcerated Parent,* majority research boils down to the fact that these children are a leading factor in changing the United States legal system (Vera Institute of Justice).

Families play a crucial role in providing support during and after incarceration; as a result, it's important to involve them in discussions about visitation and communication policies before any decisions are made (Mass Incarceration). Having personally experienced parental

incarceration at the age of ten, visiting my parent in jail was never an option. Therefore, the desire to visit was never considered. There were no phone or video calls, and while letters were written by both sides, none were sent or received. This might have been a way for my parent at home to protect the harsh realities. The financial stress and social stigma that families face should be widely recognized, and states must improve their support to address these challenges. Two suggestions from *The True Cost of Incarceration on Families* suggest that increasing accessibility, affordability, and frequency of visitations and phone calls is crucial for sustaining relationships, lowering recidivism rates, and enhancing the likelihood of successful reintegration DeVuono-Powell et al. (2015).

Auto-Ethnography Data Collection

A. Introduction

This section will include the data collection for this research which is an auto-ethnography approach. It will begin with discussing the overview on what an auto-ethnography is including the history, its relevance to research, benefits, and challenges. After this discussion, the section will move onto the context of my auto-ethnography. This will dive into the details and processes of this data collection, the connection between the auto-ethnography and research, challenges faced, my analyses, and conclusions.

B. Introducing Auto-Ethnography

Autoethnography is a way of collecting data that looks at personal experiences to better understand cultural experiences. The phrase “autoethnography” first came about in the 1970s. Heider (1975) referred to “auto-ethnography” as the way cultural members share their insights about their culture (Adams et al. p. 1). In the 1980s, during the rise of postmodernism, there was

a push to change social sciences. Researchers realized that stories are intricate and can teach us about morals and ethics while helping us figure out ourselves and connect with others. In the 1990s, the approach of "autoethnography" gained popularity as a method for exploring personal experiences and self-reflection in relation to cultural experiences, particularly within the realm of communication (Adams et al. p. 2). Scholars began using autoethnography to get valuable feedback on research methods, focusing on creating research that is meaningful, relatable, and deeply connected to personal experiences. This kind of research aims to improve empathy towards people who are different from oneself. Autoethnography blends elements of autobiography and ethnography; however, when writing an autobiography, the author recounts a subject's past experiences. When doing an autoethnography, the researcher carefully selects and examines specific experiences for analysis.

Autoethnography helps both the people involved and the writers. Writing helps one understand their personal experiences, lighten emotional burdens, and relationships. It challenges biases, encourages you to take responsibility for your actions, and allows you to express yourself. Most importantly, it gives people a chance to share their stories and be heard. For participants, taking part in autoethnography can be therapeutic, just like it is for writers. Writing helps make sense of experiences, ease burdens, improve understanding of relationships, reduce prejudice, promote personal responsibility, and importantly, give people a voice. There are several different types of autoethnography, including native ethnographies, narrative ethnographies, reflexive interviews, layered accounts, interactive interviews, community autoethnographies, co-constructive narratives, and personal narratives. Interactive interviews provide an in-depth and intimate understanding of people's experiences with emotionally charged

and sensitive topics. This form best describes the approach of this autoethnography (Ellis et al., p. 1-8).

C. Auto-Ethnography Details

Using several scholarly articles and journals, the last piece of this study includes an auto-ethnographic approach. These interactive interviews provide experiences and perspectives from direct sources. The point of this auto-ethnography is to explore some of the societal challenges and social stigmas ex-offenders face when reintegrating into society. Since auto-ethnography isn't a standard interview, some of the themes explored and talked about include relationships with other inmates, relationships with people outside of jail, prison programs, jobs inside of prison, and transitions into society. My father was the best option to gather this information as he served his time in jail and was released into society. He is a clear-cut example of a resilient, motivated man trying to rebuild his life and relationships. My father was previously incarcerated for a minor offense about twelve years ago. As daunting as it was then, I have been able to experience my father navigate his life after his release. While there was more direct information on social stigma in scholarly articles, this auto-ethnography provided a plethora of information on prison conditions, communication, mental health, and employment barriers, which allowed me to draw plenty of connections. I also feel it is important to emphasize race plays an important factor on ex-offenders reintegrating into society, therefore, I think it is important to add that he is a white man. Graciously, my grandparents were able to provide me with information through interviews regarding their experiences from an outside lens

of their son's incarceration. During the process, I was able to keep a journal to record their answers about their experiences.

D. Auto-Ethnography

It is a fact that these events were not taken lightly to the immediate family so there were some topics more challenging to talk about. Starting with a parental scope, during their interviews my grandparents were asked questions like "What was it like to communicate with someone in jail, and what were the prices and challenges?" were brought up. They were also asked if they faced any stigma during or after his incarceration. Communicating to someone inside of prison was something my grandparents have never experienced before. My grandmother actually notes that her only reference was TV shows of inmates reaching out to families by phone. They explained that there were already problems in the family going on but this event was unexpected. My grandmother first communicated to my father through collect phone calls. Her experience was negative. She says, “One particular painful phone call was when a bail bondsman who called and asked for me said ‘what kind of mother are you that you wouldn’t help your son.’” My father’s response also says, “what I didn’t know was they [the bondsman] saved and used the numbers I called for their own purposes…they would call and harass my parents to bail me out and make comments to my mother like ‘what kind of mother are you to let your son sit in jail, and stuff like that.” On the other hand, my grandfather initially communicated with him on a phone behind a glass partition in the jail. After those events, my grandfather decided not to answer any phone calls going forward. When asked about social stigma, my grandparents both noted that yes, his arrest was public but they had great support

from friends and family. Since these events and experiences aren't recent, the three of them have had time to rebuild their relationship. My grandmother says, "our relationship is now rock steady," and my grandfather says, "I have my son back, the love we had when he was younger has returned."

The auto-ethnography with my father presented a lot of information. The experiences left him with a lot of trauma and sadness, which was often shown in his responses. The main themes we discussed were communication, relationships, and employment. As mentioned earlier, communicating with an inmate was a challenging and invasive process for the individual and family. An inmate needed a commissary to make a phone call. "Calls were expensive, and getting people to put money on your books wasn't easy. Other inmates sometimes hogged the phones, and the wait time would be hours long," according to my father. As previously stated, effective communication is an essential factor in relationships, which is crucial to one's mental sanity. My father says, "Inside relationships were significant for sanity, sharing and trading food, books, newspaper...I knew a handful of people and made a couple of friends, but I keep in touch with no one except for one." Since my grandparents chose to not answer anymore calls, my father was forced to communicate and rely on the relationships he made inside jail. The lack of activities and time outside played a role in his sanity because a lot of his free time was used for cleaning. "I [my father] was also experiencing withdrawal symptoms from doctor-prescribed medicine...I even had a few minor seizures, which was so scary." When asked to elaborate, he explained that there was rapid mental health screening, medical attention was minimal, and he was given ineffective medicine. Relationships became important when the woman in the infirmary was someone he went to school with and could give him more effective medicine. Another important

connection he had in jail was a family friend with whom he found comfort. She was able to give him books that weren't so outdated, and she was a woman who gave my father advice. Prison conditions also played a role in my father's mental health during his experience. He mentions, "One inmate had to tell me to get my plastic spoon out of the trash after throwing it away because that's the only one you get for your entire stay." There is no privacy, hot water, or custodians to clean the showers. There was mainly discussion of reform when discussing employment and higher education. There were only programs for inmates that would potentially be there longer and hardly any options to advance in anything for inmates with a shorter sentence, even though in both circumstances, the individual comes out with a criminal record.

E. Key Findings

This auto-ethnography stirred a lot of knowledge and emotion for everyone participating. Some of the initial things I noticed were eagerness to express personal perspectives, especially with my father's responses. As someone who was normally outspoken, it appeared that my father wanted to tell his story. It's been about twelve years since his release and finding employment has been difficult to say the least. Despite his minor offense, many employers don't reach back out despite getting certifications. To be more clear, my father wants to work with children and is unable to because of the record he has, even though his offense has nothing to implicate that ability. I drew this to Hannah E. Wissler's point: all criminal records fall under one category. Without differentiation, employers can assume the worst or unlikely, the best. Before my father's sentence, he worked a casual job as a driver for a wealthy family and he explained that the bondsman called the family, harassed them, and dramatized the reason for sentencing. There is

an overall need of improving communication systems in jails and prisons. Getting people to money on your calls or commissary was a challenge my father faced when attempting to communicate. Being someone with a parent who was incarcerated at the time, holidays, birthdays, even parent-teacher conferences were difficult. My mother also played the role as a messenger if there were any phone calls or messages, during and after his incarceration. Unfortunately, she also played a huge factor in the relationship strain by putting restraining orders on my father and not allowing him to visit. Financial strain is a challenge my grandparents faced for some time after his release. Luckily, they had the means to help him get a place to live, to help support my younger sister as well as my twin, and to get a new car. While some topics were more challenging to talk about than others, it is evident that jail communication needs to be improved, programs for employment or continuing education need to be enhanced, medical and mental health programs should at least exist (in this context), and overall prison conditions need improvement.

Reducing Reintegration Challenges

A. Introduction

As previously mentioned, the social stigma an ex-offender faces creates a significant amount of challenges for an individual attempting to successfully reintegrate into society. To reiterate, these challenges are, but not limited to, institutional barriers, rebuilding relationships, and aiding mental health. Knowing this, it is now crucial to discuss measures to reduce reintegration challenges. It is also crucial to understand the connection between a successful reintegration and recidivism rates. This section further goes into depth about reintegration

programs, links to recidivism rates, potential policy and community solutions to this matter, and changing public perception such as media portrayal.

B. Jobs Outside of Prison

Based on my auto-ethnography and further research, it is extremely evident that jobs are one of the most important parts to a successful reintegration yet little is done for offenders to achieve employment outside of jail or prison. As discussed earlier in Chapter Two, “securing employment can significantly aid in lowering the chances of reoffending.” It also boosts an individual's self esteem, identity, and creates stability (Chapter Two). According to an article from a law office titled “The Impact Of a Criminal Record on Employment Opportunities In New Jersey,” “approximately one in every three Americans has a criminal record.” An arrest record, criminal charges, or a conviction are some of the categories that make up a criminal record. Any of these categories create challenges in securing employment or pursuing advanced training for better job opportunities (Robert J. DeGroot Legal Team). An important takeaway from this is: no matter what category an ex-offender may be under, whether it’s a major or minor offense, it appears on any (legal) form as one criminal record category. According to the *Journal of Labor & Employment Law,* a journal titled, *Overlooked and Undervalued: Ex-Offenders in the Employment Market*, the author says social stigma is one of the leading factors why employers refuse to hire ex-offenders. More importantly, the unfavorable traits commonly linked to having a criminal record are usually quite extensive, resulting in employers assuming these traits apply to all offenders, regardless of whether they are relevant to a specific individual or circumstance." (Hannah E. Wissler p. 101-102). "Individuals with criminal records are fifty percent less likely to

receive a callback from an employer. About sixty percent of employers said they 'probably wouldn't' or 'definitely wouldn't' hire someone with a criminal record (Hannah E. Wissler p. 95-96). The fact that ex-offenders are potentially hard working when given an opportunity to do so and employers or companies, in some cases, receive benefits such as tax credits when hiring an ex-offender, it is striking to still witness the amount of discrimination and stigma towards an individual looking to work.

To add, the author talks about a study done at the University of California-Los Angeles that researched the influence on employers, whether it's company reputation or social stigma. In sum, there were three findings. The first finding was that employers are less likely to hire an individual with a drug conviction than one who posted on social media about it. The second was that employers already have the expectation that ex-offenders will have adverse outcomes in the future. Lastly, employers are also less likely to hire an ex-offender in customer service or office jobs despite the risk of negligent hiring suits. The researcher of this study then concluded that social stigma certainly plays a role in the hiring process for an ex-offender. When attempting to achieve a better and more fair hiring process for ex-offenders, a movement called 'Ban-the-Box' is essential to this conversation. Ban-the-box is a movement that advocates for the criminal record question to be removed from job applications. States and local governments were unhappy with ex-offenders' protections under the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Hannah E. Wissler p. 103-104). The Civil Rights Act of 1964, enacted by President Lyndon Johnson, banned discrimination in public settings, advocated for the integration of educational institutions, and rendered employment discrimination unlawful (National Archives Article). Since the first statute in Hawaii was passed in 1998, over thirty states have included some part of this ban in their

systems. Ban-the-Box gained great popularity and wound up at the federal level. Due to President Obama's administration, federal agencies were now banned from asking applicants about their criminal backgrounds (Hannah E. Wissler p. 103-104). While there are many benefits to this approach, such as employers no longer being able to discriminate against individuals for criminal records or simply not looking at an application because it has one, there are still challenges with this approach. For one thing, many states have done their best to protect ex-offenders; however, the individuals that reside in areas with little to no protection, such as Kansas, where Ban-the-Box was only applicable for applications to the state, government positions suffer immensely.

C. Jobs Inside of Prison

As described in my auto-ethnography, jobs in prison can be different for everyone and there are many opinions. There is a difference between jobs and a way to make money. This is an important distinction to highlight because in jail or prison, jobs were mainly menial without financial benefit. The aspects of making money in an institution vary across the country. One of the only ways to make money in this particular facility was if an individual was participating in community service. As described, this type of community service puts inmates to work all day collecting garbage. For some, this was therapeutic because it allowed them to leave the institution for the day. Others like my father found jobs like this pointless and degrading because it was free labor. At the time, inmates only received just about a dollar for their timely work which, in that institution, could only buy a three minute phone call. According to a blog titled *How Much do Prisoners Make in Each State,* now in New Jersey, inmates can make up to two

dollars when working in prison (Kent State Online). As my subject was speaking, there was mention about how inmates who are in prison or jail longer, actually receive more benefits than someone who is there for a shorter duration. To the subject's understanding, this happens because it is deemed that the people who are there longer will need more help in finding jobs. This is a challenging idea especially because individuals who are released from an institution end up with a criminal record regardless of the amount of time or the severity of the offense. These job programs also can be lengthy so someone who was incarcerated for a longer time, would have the means to complete it. Again, this is challenging because job programs ideally should be accessible and productive for everyone incarcerated. This is not to diminish the social stigma one may face for more serious crimes, however, because criminal records don't go into detail on job applications, as stated, everyone is grouped together. There can be programs for short term inmates like there are for long term ones.

D. Proposals

The Hamilton Project provides a policy proposal to better aid reintegration. Cities hold the most released prisoners causing high crime rates and few jobs. Since these are the conditions, The Hamilton Project argues a post-prison employment and support system would help rebuild communities and reduce incarceration rates. This program would comprise four elements: improved and expanded in-prison correctional programs like education and work training, transitional employment after release, parole reform to support the effectiveness of transitional jobs, and the elimination of limitations on specific federal benefits for those with criminal

records. The program would allow all reintegrating individuals to receive employment, housing assistance and substance abuse treatment (Solomon et al., 2004). My subject also highlighted how he was going through withdrawals which also impacts one's mental health. Currently, the Federal Bureau of Prisons have provided substance abuse programs for inmates for over twenty years and the Residential Drug Abuse Program is one of the most effective programs in this area (U.S. Department of Justice, 2023). In the article, the council says, "if half of all parolees need work immediately upon release, the transitional employment program would need to supply approximately 245,000 jobs annually" (Solomon et al., 2004). It's expected that participants in this program would participate in community service at minimum wage. This would also give individuals valuable work experience. An additional point made in favor of this policy is that re-incarcerating former offenders for technical violations-nonviolent parole breaches that typically do not result in imprisonment-impedes their capacity to build work skills and develop the social behavior essential for successful reintegration. Another suggestion the council has is eliminating bans on federal benefits for people with criminal records. As stated before, access to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families are at risk when a criminal record is on the table (Solomon et al., 2004). Another article also states, "In April of 2021, congressional representatives introduced the Making Essentials Available and Lawful (MEAL) Act, which would lift SNAP and TANF restrictions for people with felony drug

convictions" (The Sentencing Project). While this is limited to only those individuals with specific offenses, this is certainly a start in the right direction. The state's Department of Corrections should also be prepared to resolve uncleared warrants and fines and they should provide ID cards (Solomon et al., 2004). Expunging records means "the extraction, sealing, impounding, or isolation of all records on file within any court, detention or correctional facility, … of an offense within the criminal justice system (Restoration of Rights Project, 2024). On top of that, the council suggests shifting funds from the costs of incarceration to community supervision and support programs, which usually end up being cheaper. This will result in a decline in crime rates due to better reintegration, increased lifetime income for former offenders and their families, a decrease in prison populations, and enhanced public services.(Solomon et al., 2004).

The United States Department of Justice also provides a plethora of recommendations to reduce recidivism rates. Their reforms are meant to address the core behavioral issues that result in re-offending either while they're incarcerated or after their release. The first outstanding recommendation is building a school district in federal institutions. The Federal Bureau of Prisons would build 'semi-autonomous' schools and will provide programs for adult literacy, high school diplomas, post-secondary education, and expanded opportunities for individuals with learning disabilities (U.S. Department of Justice, 2023). As discussed in my auto-ethnography,

aiding mental health issues was an area institutions lacked in. My subject explained how there was no one to speak to about emotions and it made his experience more challenging, especially because he had experienced therapy before. Another recommendation from the Department of Justice is to prioritize these mental health needs. There are programs already in place with a number of ‘secure mental health step-down units,’ which provides housing and treatment for inmates with mental health and launched a pilot program to provide dedicated mental health staff within restrictive housing units.

Conclusion

Reintegrating into society after incarceration can be a tough and complicated process that often stigmatizes individuals. Social stigma against an ex-offender is a challenging idea to understand and a topic to research. It's hard to put 'social stigma' into numbers, so the best way to view this theory is to look at how ex-offenders are failed by communities, federal institutions, and ultimately recidivate back to prison. This study provides a background of incarceration, the ongoing negative social stigmas that ex-offenders face, and the various hurdles that are extremely difficult for an individual to successfully reintegrate. Alongside scholarly sources, using personal experiences also showed how being incarcerated affects more than just the individual themself - it sends shockwaves through families and communities. Children, partners, and parents all deal with severe emotional, financial, and social stigma that can last for a long time after someone close or related is incarcerated. The auto-ethnography employed for further

data emphasized the barriers-limited to my subject-to a successful reintegration: employment discrimination, relationship strain, and civic disenfranchisement. There is a need for additional solutions to eliminate social stigmas and better aid prison communication to families, federal benefits, and there is a need to better the chances for an ex-offender to be employed, find housing, and reconnect with society to successfully reintegrate into one.

Works Cited

Adams, Tony E., et al. *Autoethnography - Adams - Major Reference Works - Wiley Online Library*, onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/9781118901731.iecrm0011. Accessed 11 May 2025.

AECF, assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/aecf-asharedsentence-2016.pdf. Accessed 11 May 2025.

Bryant, Erica. "More than 5 Million Children Have Had an Incarcerated Parent." *Vera Institute of Justice*, www.vera.org/news/more-than-5-million-children-have-had-an-incarcerated-parent. Accessed 10 May 2025.

"Children of Incarcerated Parents." *The Annie E. Casey Foundation*, 19 Apr. 2016, www.aecf.org/resources/a-shared-sentence.

"Civil Rights Act (1964)." *National Archives and Records Administration*, National Archives and Records Administration, www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/civil-rights-act. Accessed 10 May 2025.

"Communication." *Prison Policy Initiative*, www.prisonpolicy.org/communications.html. Accessed 10 May 2025.

Crawford, P., and B. Brown. "'Like a Friend Going Round': Reducing the Stigma Attached to Mental Healthcare in Rural Communities." *Health & Social Care in the Community*, U.S.

National Library of Medicine, pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12193166/. Accessed 10 May 2025.

Cullen, James. “The History of Mass Incarceration.” *Brennan Center for Justice*, 12 Mar. 2025, www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/history-mass-incarceration.

“Defining Stereotypes.” *Open Learning*, www.open.edu/openlearn/languages/defining-stereotypes. Accessed 10 May 2025.

DeGroot, Robert J. “The Impact of a Criminal Record on Employment Opportunities in New Jersey.” *Robert J. Degroot Law*, 18 Jan. 2025, robertjdegrootlaw.com/the-impact-of-a-criminal-record-on-employment-opportunities-in-new-jersey/.

DiFilippo, Dana. “Incarcerating Parents Punishes Families, Watchdog Group Warns • New Jersey Monitor.” *New Jersey Monitor*, 12 Aug. 2022, newjerseymonitor.com/2022/08/12/incarcerating-parents-punishes-families-watchdog-group-warns/.

Edited by Barry S. Levy and Victor W. Sidel, *Social Injustice and Public Health*, ndl.ethernet.edu.et/bitstream/123456789/65592/1/50.pdf.pdf. Accessed 11 May 2025.

Edosomwan, Stella, and Kirt Baab. *Forgiven-Ministries*, www.forgiven-ministries.org/mt-content/uploads/2017/08/pa-reentry-manual.pdf. Accessed 11 May 2025.

Ellis, Carolyn, et al. “Autoethnography: An Overview.” *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, vol. 36, no. 4 (138), 2011, pp. 273–90. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23032294. Accessed 13 Mar. 2025.

“Federal Bureau of Prisons.” *BOP Statistics: Prison Security Levels*, www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics_inmate_sec_levels.jsp. Accessed 10 May 2025.

Ghandnoosh, Nazgol, et al. *Parents in Prison*, www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2022/09/Parents-in-Prison.pdf. Accessed 11 May 2025.

“How Much Do Prisoners Make in Each State?” *Kent State Online*, 18 Jan. 2025, onlinedegrees.kent.edu/blog/how-much-do-prisoners-make-in-each-state.

Initiative, Prison Policy. “Both Sides of the Bars: How Mass Incarceration Punishes Families.” *Prison Policy Initiative*, www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/08/11/parental_incarceration/. Accessed 10 May 2025.

Lee, Hedwig, et al. “Consequences of Family Member Incarceration: Impacts on Civic Participation and Perceptions of the Legitimacy and Fairness of Government.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 1 Jan. 2014, pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4501034/#S1.

Mai, Chris, and Ram Subramanian. “The Price of Prisons: Examining State Spending Trends, 2010-2015.” *Vera Institute of Justice*, www.vera.org/publications/price-of-prisons-2015-state-spending-trends/price-of-prisons-

2015-state-spending-trends/price-of-prisons-2015-state-spending-trends-prison-spending. Accessed 10 May 2025.

"Mass Incarceration: Punishing the Families." *Mass Incarceration: Punishing the Families | Jane Addams College of Social Work | University of Illinois Chicago*, socialwork.uic.edu/news-stories/mass-incarceration-punishing-the-families/. Accessed 10 May 2025.

McDonnell, Darren, et al. *Wiley Online Library | Scientific Research Articles, Journals, ...*, The experience of having a partner in prison—A systematic review and meta-ethnography, onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/casp.2450050405/epdf. Accessed 11 May 2025.

Okoh, Clarence, and Isabel Coronado. "Clasp." *Relocating Reentry: Divesting from Community Supervision, Investing in "Community Repair,"* www.clasp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/2022.9.7_Relocating-Reentry.pdf. Accessed 11 May 2025.

Parke, Ross D., and K. Alison Clarke-Stewart. *Effects of Parental Incarceration on Young Children*, aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/migrated_legacy_files/42331/parke&stewart.pdf. Accessed 11 May 2025.

Parker, Kelly. "Employment after Prison: The Importance of Supporting Workers Who Are Seeking Work after Incarceration." *NCDA*,

www.ncda.org/aws/NCDA/page_template/show_detail/476831?model_name=news_article. Accessed 10 May 2025.

Powell, DeVuono. *Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families.*, static.prisonpolicy.org/scans/who-pays%20Ella%20Baker%20report.pdf. Accessed 11 May 2025.

"Prison Reform: Reducing Recidivism by Strengthening the Federal Bureau of Prisons." *Department of Justice Archive*, 29 Nov. 2023, www.justice.gov/archives/prison-reform#recentandongoingreforms.

Reducing Stigma, www.tn.gov/behavioral-health/stigma.html. Accessed 11 May 2025.

"Restoration of Rights Project: State-Specific Guides to Restoration of Rights, Pardon, Expungement, Sealing & Certificates of Relief." *Collateral Consequences Resource Center*, ccresourcecenter.org/restoration-2-2/. Accessed 10 May 2025.

"Restoration of Rights Project: State-Specific Guides to Restoration of Rights, Pardon, Expungement, Sealing & Certificates of Relief." *Collateral Consequences Resource Center*, ccresourcecenter.org/restoration-2-2/. Accessed 10 May 2025.

Restoration of Voting Rights for Felons, www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/felon-voting-rights. Accessed 11 May 2025.

Restoration of Voting Rights for Felons, www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/felon-voting-rights. Accessed 11 May 2025.

Sawyer, Wendy, and Peter Wagner. “Mass Incarceration: The Whole PIE 2025.” *Prison Policy Initiative*, www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2025.html. Accessed 10 May 2025.

Solomon, Amy L. Edited by Jeremy Travis and Elizabeth McBride, *Families Left behind: The Hidden Costs of Incarceration And ...*, www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/50461/310882-Families-Left-Behind.PDF. Accessed 11 May 2025.

Thornton, Deborah Gaye, and McMullen, Mike. *The Effects of Institutional Discrimination on the Successful Reentry of Ex-Offenders*, *The University of Houston-Clear Lake*, University of Houston-Clear Lake, 2018.

Vaz, Marshniel. “Uottawa.” *“The Truth Behind the Headlines”: Media Portrayals and Their Impacts on the Relatives of Sex Offenders*, ruor.uottawa.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/bf3c1287-7852-4243-a65b-993a976c1793/content. Accessed 11 May 2025.

Widra, Emily. “Ten Statistics about the Scale and Impact of Mass Incarceration in the U.S.” *Prison Policy Initiative*, www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2023/10/24/ten-statistics/. Accessed 10 May 2025.

Wissler, Hannah E. *Ex-Offenders in the Employment Market*, www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/aba_journal_of_labor_employment_law/v37/no-1/jlel-37-1-6.pdf. Accessed 11 May 2025.

Yankah, Ekow N. “The Right to Reintegration.” *New Criminal Law Review*, dx.doi.org/10.1525/aa.1972.74.3.02a00190. Accessed 11 May 2025.