

REPORT

Learning life all over again: Reentry after long-term imprisonment

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Report highlights the experiences and challenges of 33 formerly incarcerated people released after decades of imprisonment in [California](#), [Colorado](#), [Louisiana](#), [Nevada](#), [New York](#), [Oregon](#) and [Washington, D.C.](#), as they attempt to rebuild their lives.

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Executive Summary

More than 450,000 people across the United States were released from prison in 2023, over four times the number 50 years ago. ¹

Today, a growing proportion of people are returning home after long-term confinement due to our nation's harsh sentencing laws.² **Black Americans, who are not only disproportionately incarcerated, but disproportionately incarcerated for longer periods of time, comprise a large share of this population.**³ As the sentencing reform movement scales back extreme sentences, it is critical to understand the obstacles to returning home after decades of imprisonment.⁴

Reentry, defined as the “process by which a person in corrections confinement prepares for release and transitions back into the community,”⁵ is often fraught with obstacles after shorter terms of incarceration. These challenges are compounded for people returning home after long-term imprisonment, because they have been isolated from their families and communities for prolonged durations.

For this in-depth study of reentry after long-term imprisonment, The Sentencing Project interviewed 33 people from seven jurisdictions: California, Colorado, Louisiana, Nevada, New York, Oregon, and Washington, DC. They served anywhere from 20 up to 43 years in prison and were 40 to 67 years old when they spoke with us. At the time of the interviews, they had been home as little as three months up to 42 months.

Based on a self-reported measurement of well-being, 45% were “thriving,” 33% “surviving,” and 21% “suffering.”⁶ Their stories give voice to and make visible the long and often challenging path to prepare for reentry after completing a long-term sentence – both during incarceration and as they

transitioned to life outside of prison. To illustrate their anxieties about coming home to an uncertain future, one participant who served 30 years in prison said: “To be honest with you, I was scared. Because I was coming to a new world, man. We talking about a long time... I was given another chance, you know, another chance to change the narrative about my life. But I was scared, man, like – and at times I’m still scared.” From our interviews, we learned:

- **Departments of corrections⁷ routinely limited or denied access to rehabilitative programming due to long sentence lengths, which led our participants to find alternatives to support their own personal transformations.** They faced long waitlists or were denied access to rehabilitative programming. Sentence length also excluded our participants from certain job opportunities, trade programs, and educational opportunities. Importantly, when sentenced to prison, 85% of our participants were “emerging adults” (aged 18-25) – a developmental period when people can be highly amenable to rehabilitation.⁸ Yet, rehabilitative offerings were denied or delayed.
- **Departments of corrections provided little to no meaningful assistance with reentry planning.** This included help accessing important documents such as birth certificates and Social Security cards, guidance on obtaining a valid state ID after release, and information or contact details for critical reentry needs, such as public benefits, employment, housing, and healthcare.
- **Social support networks – both in and outside of prison – contributed significantly to rehabilitation and reentry progress.** Participation in self-help and other groups run by incarcerated peers, programming offered by community organizations and volunteers, and

servicing as a volunteer played a vital role in building life skills and transforming identities. External social networks played a pivotal role in supporting our participants' reentry by providing basic needs like clothing, food, and financial support, and help in navigating the housing and employment landscapes.

- **Returning home with limited financial resources created financial instability and strain for many.** Gate money, or discretionary funds given by the prison to a person upon their release, helps with immediate needs such as transportation and meals. Despite the perpetually rising cost of living and inflation, over 50% of our participants were released with zero gate money. Our remaining participants received as little as \$32 to \$200 in gate money. Prison wages also failed to provide a foundation for financial stability.⁹ As a result, many participants faced, and some continue to face, immediate economic pressure as part of their ongoing reentry process.
- **Felony probation and parole travel restrictions created obstacles to employment and building social bonds with family.** Travel restrictions for those on felony probation or parole supervision – either due to logistic complications in requesting a travel pass or parole officer discretion – frequently interfered with the execution of job duties, including seeking out promotions. In-person contact with family members, an important contributor to reentry success, was also limited by travel pass restrictions.
- **Technology was the most discussed obstacle to navigating the world today.** The lack of access to evolving technology in prisons caused our participants to struggle in navigating today's digital society. Examples of obstacles they faced included the use of credit cards and touchless pay,

smartphones and apps, knowledge of computers and web-based programs, and the transition to a world heavily dominated by online applications and forms (e.g., healthcare portals).

According to national estimates, nearly one in five people – [20% of the U.S. prison population](#) – has already completed at least 10 years in confinement.

¹⁰ As sentencing trends reevaluating the efficacy of long sentences gain traction, opportunities for release for those previously thought to be destined to die in prison will also likely increase. To help support people undergoing reentry after long-term imprisonment, whose preparedness will be crucial,

[The Sentencing Project recommends the following:](#)

- **Remove the sentence length requirements for accessing rehabilitative programming** in prisons and expand access to rehabilitative, educational, and vocational opportunities. By immediately opening up and expanding access to programming, long-term incarcerated people can start their rehabilitation and reentry journey on day one. Immediate access matters for numerous reasons. [People who enter prison as emerging adults are in a developmental stage that increases amenability to rehabilitation.](#) Increasing educational opportunities, apprenticeships, career readiness programming, workforce development programs, and vocational training helps incarcerated individuals develop marketable, transferable skills and better prepares them for reintegration upon release.
- **Establish embedded institutional reentry services** within prison facilities. States and the federal government should follow the lead of places like [Virginia and Missouri that have embedded reentry services](#)

within their departments of corrections.¹¹ Washington state also created a resentencing unit with specialists to assist individuals with pre- and post-release reentry support who are released early through resentencing or commutation.¹² All long-term incarcerated people should be able to participate in comprehensive reentry services before leaving prison. This is particularly relevant for people who return home to rural areas where there is a comparative lack of access to service providers versus urban areas.

- **Create tailored reentry programming** specifically for individuals who have been incarcerated for 10 years or more that is responsive to their specific needs. One or more tailored programs in each prison facility should address the reentry needs of people who have been incarcerated for a decade or more. That these individuals have been absent from larger society for so long, in combination with the limited information streams within prisons, renders it essential that they participate in realistic and transparent discussions about social and cultural changes and more specific reentry obstacles. Participants also desired a focus on developing soft skills to navigate more varied and complex social interactions as well as technology training. This programming should include recognizing the unique reentry needs of women, older people (55+), people with disabilities, people with mental health needs, and those who face deportation.¹³ Tailoring reentry approaches for those who have served extreme sentences are fundamental to improving reentry outcomes, and would be an opportunity to confront and address the interconnecting cultural systems that create opportunity for some and disadvantage and oppression for others.

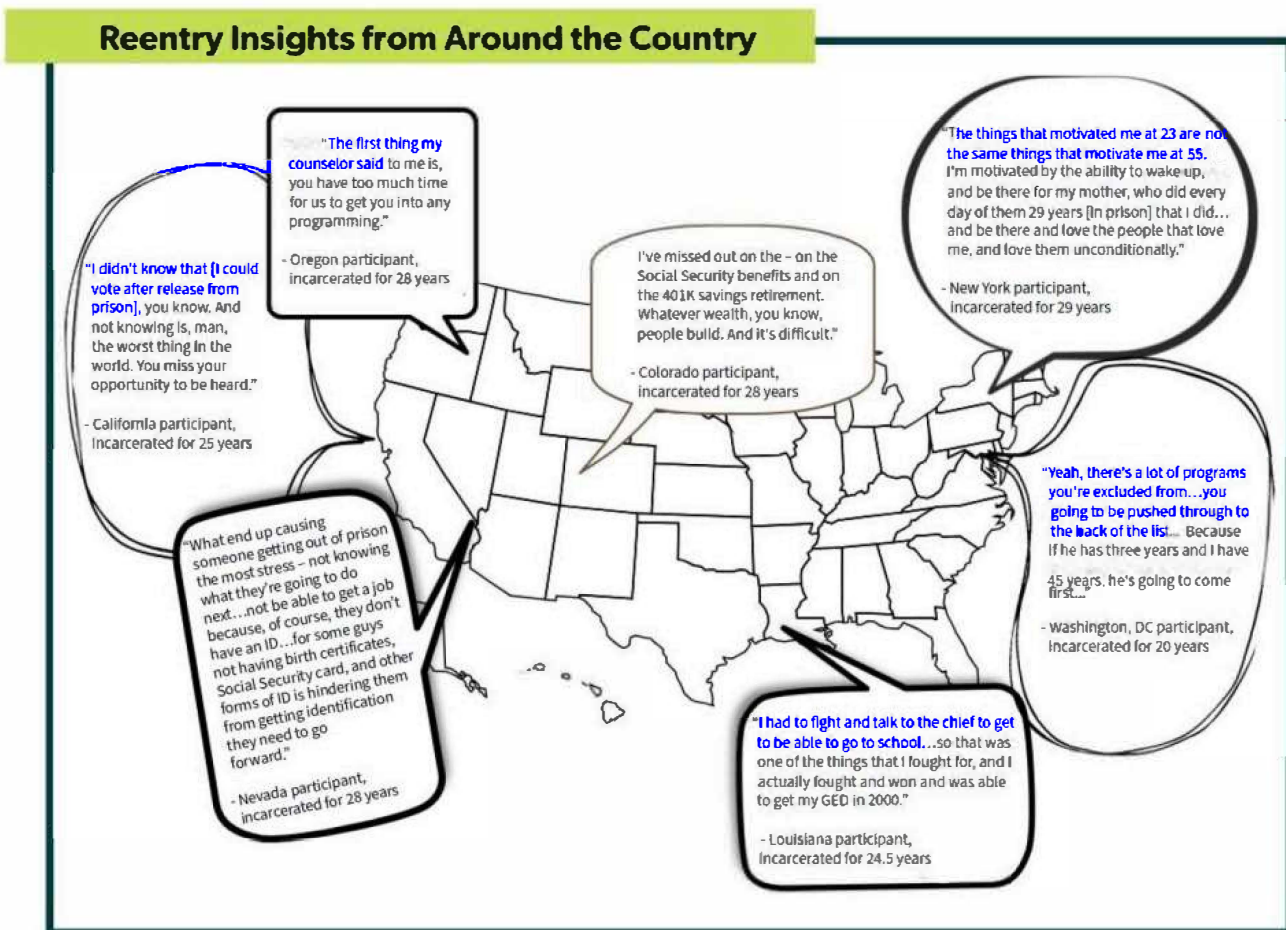
- **Expand access to social support networks during incarceration that contribute to rehabilitation and reentry progress.** **Social support networks played a critical role** in our participants' rehabilitation and reentry process after coming home from long-term incarceration. **Departments of corrections should not limit access for outside community groups and partners, including faith-based organizations,** that foster rehabilitative programming in prison facilities. Increasing communication between incarcerated people and prosocial networks, like family members and friends, would also assist in their transitions home. When people return home knowing that they already have these social support networks put into place, this can help alleviate what can be a very stressful transition to community, as well as bolster rehabilitation both inside and outside of prison.
- **Increase financial and economic stability upon reentry by paying non-exploitative prison wages and increasing gate money.** Investing in reentry should include an investment in the returnee's financial stability. After decades of imprisonment, most people are leaving prison with little to no financial resources to support their reentry transition. Without financial means, homelessness and other reentry challenges loom on the horizon. **Paying incarcerated people at least their state's minimum wage for the hours they work** will allow people to build savings to use upon release, serving as a long-term investment in successful reentry and their future stability. Gate money helps individuals with immediate needs upon release, such as transportation and meals, but it does not go far enough. Given the rise in prices for goods and services, gate money should continuously be adjusted to reflect the reality of current economic times and cover at least two weeks of expenses.

- **Streamline felony probation or parole policies and approvals for travel passes in order to limit interference with employment-related duties, career advancement, and rebuilding and creating new social bonds with family members.** Because maintaining employment and building positive social bonds with family are critical components to successful reentry,¹⁴ such opportunities should neither be delayed nor denied due to travel pass constraints.
- **Federal, state, and local governments must provide sufficient funding for both in-prison and community-based rehabilitation and reentry programs.** Since the passage of the Second Chance Act in 2008, there have been years of bipartisan support for funding state- and local-level programs for people returning home after incarceration.¹⁵ These resources improve public safety and recognize the human dignity of people whose lives intersect with the criminal legal system. Then, in April 2025, the Trump administration terminated hundreds of grants from the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs. It is critical that this funding be restored and this federal support be expanded.

The Sentencing Project advocates for a criminal legal system that prioritizes human dignity and racial equity. For those who enter prison, the presumption of release and reentry should be the default. All imprisoned people should have an opportunity, starting at the 10-year mark, for a sentence review.¹⁶ Maximum sentences should be capped at 20 years with few exceptions.¹⁷ Such benchmarks are critical and necessary given that research has consistently shown that lengthy sentences have a limited contribution to community safety.¹⁸ By eliminating long-term imprisonment, the resulting fiscal savings – our tax dollars – could then wisely be invested in social

interventions, rehabilitation, and adequately addressing reentry needs. ¹⁹

This type of investment benefits all of us, because it values each individual's life and inherent worth while fostering public safety and uplifting the common good.



Introduction

931 years in prison. Collectively, that is how long the **33 men and women who shared their stories** with us were confined within the United States penal system. Beginning in 2021, one by one, these individuals were released from prisons around the United States. ²⁰ Upon returning to life on the outside, the world had become vastly different from the one they had left. Behind prison

bars for decades, they missed the full thrust of the digital revolution, the widespread use of smart phones, the boom of social media, and technological advancements such as touchless payment. [The communities and cities they had once known felt and looked foreign](#) to them – for some, as a result of gentrification. [Others were released to places they did not know](#). As the years under confinement accumulated, connections had faded away, and family members and loved ones passed on. A few returned home utterly alone due to the length of their incarceration and age. In spite of all this, these 33 people remained hopeful for a better life ahead — a place in their communities, an opportunity to contribute, and a chance to heal, mend, and build relationships. As one Oregon participant so powerfully expressed after returning home from 28 years of incarceration: “Life is a gift. And I owe it. It does not owe me.” ²¹

According to the National Institute of Justice, reentry is a “process by which a person in correctional confinement prepares for release and transitions back into the community.” ²² This report details our research on reentry in an effort to better understand the experience of those returning to life on the outside after decades of confinement. Our findings stem from interviews with 33 people who returned home after long-term imprisonment, having been locked away from anywhere from 20 to 43 years (see Appendices 1 and 2 for methodology and a demographic overview of our participants). After being home for as little as 3 months up to roughly 3.5 years at the time of their interview, these 33 men and women are still navigating the complexities of the reentry process. ²³

What can we learn from their shared reentry stories in order to better support the success of those who will return home next?

As this report illustrates, and as human dignity demands, we must do better to prepare and support people as they transition from incarceration to community. The reentry process is a critical phase where freedom is gained, but [success on the outside depends on many factors, such as securing basic needs, like housing and employment.](#) ²⁴

Success also depends on social capital (e.g., social networks and supports), coordinated community and social services, attention to health and well-being, and the continued development of a positive identity. ²⁵ This is especially true for those returning home after decades of confinement in prison, which requires learning life all over again.

Intersectionality and Reentry Experiences ²⁶

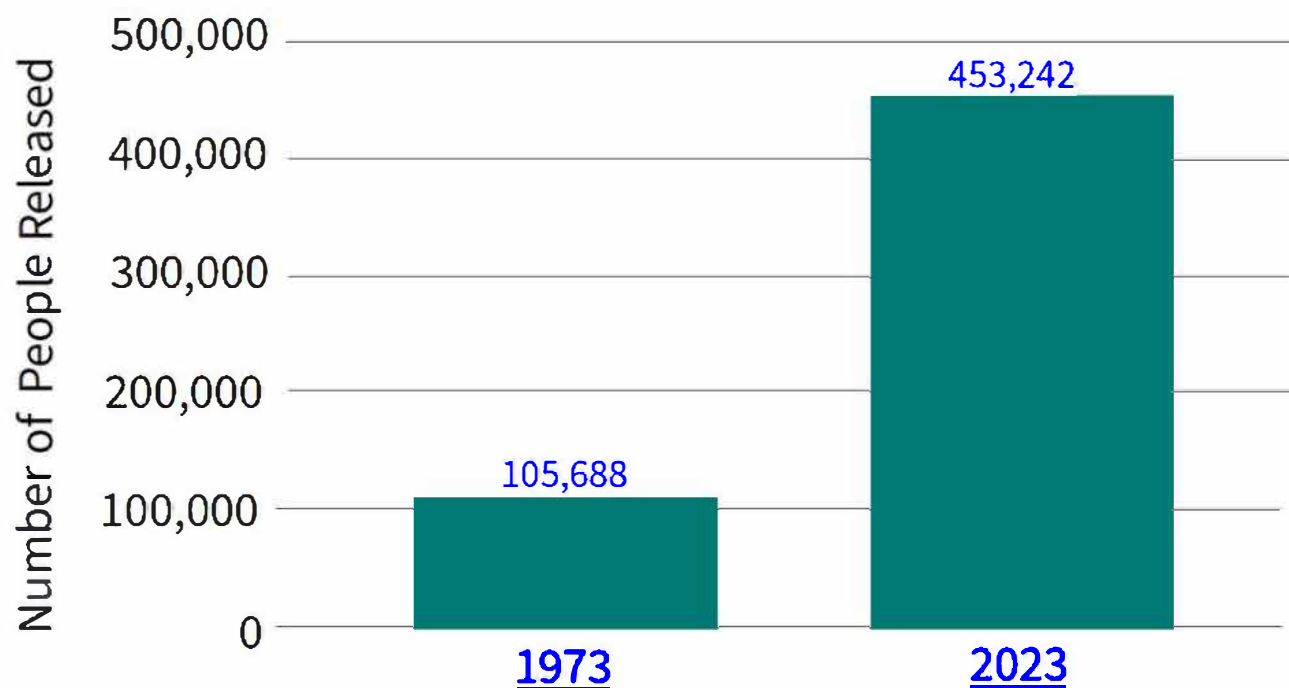
People's reentry experiences are influenced by interconnecting cultural systems that create opportunity for some and disadvantage and oppression for others. Social identities (e.g., race, gender, class, ability, citizenship), political and economic power (e.g., having the right to vote, employment), institutions (e.g., family, education, law), historical legacies (e.g., slavery, segregation), as well as access to resources and opportunities in a community all coalesce to create each person's unique reentry experience. Our human experiences are shaped by much more than our individual choices.

Individuals' lives are influenced by the larger social and structural forces among which we all live.

Reentry by the numbers

Due to the sheer scale of mass incarceration in America, a substantial portion of people exit prisons every year – all of whom, along with their families and communities, will undergo reentry.²⁷ This is especially true for [Black Americans who are disproportionately incarcerated and for longer periods of time](#).²⁸ To put the magnitude of reentry into perspective, in 2023 alone, over 450,000 people were released from state and federal prisons.²⁹ This is over four times as many people who made their reentry journey 50 years ago.³⁰

Number of People Released from Prison, 1973 vs. 2023



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics "Prisoner Series," digitized data for the year 1973.

The vast number of people who will experience reentry shows no signs of slowing down. [Post-Covid, although crime rates have hit record lows, the prison population is once again on the rise.](#) ³¹ Based on the latest estimates, over 1.2 million people were incarcerated in state or federal prisons in 2023. ³² Because the United States continues to rely on lengthy sentences and more time served before release, a growing proportion of people will be returning home after long-term confinement. ³³

33 Free: Thriving, Surviving, or Suffering

Because reentry is a significant life transition, especially after so many decades spent in prison environments, we wanted to get a sense of how participants assessed their lives and their circumstances in the present moment during their interview. To do this, we asked them to visualize a ladder (see Appendix 3 for the interview questionnaire). Step 0 was the worst possible life for them. Step 10 was the best possible life for them. We wanted to know on which step of the ladder they stood at the time of their interview.

³⁴

Table 1: Assessment of Present-Day Well-Being

Thriving	45%
Surviving	33%
Surviving	21%

Note: N=33 participants. Categories based on the Cantril Striving Scale. ³⁵

For those on **step 4 or lower** (the “suffering” category), **barriers to stability** were a prominent narrative thread. Barriers varied by person, although multiple **obstacles** existed for many, and included:

- the ability to obtain **legal documents** (e.g., birth certificates, Social Security cards);
- finding **employment** that paid a living wage;
- concerns about **housing insecurity** or the desire for alternative housing; and
- felony probation or parole **supervision** rules that limited travel (e.g., denials to see family).

To illustrate how one barrier to stability can impede progress during reentry, a participant from New York told us about their ³⁶ frustration trying to obtain their legal documents:

Well, right now my biggest challenge is, I’m waiting for my documents – *I’m waiting for my birth certificate in order to obtain my Social [Security card], so that’s really like obstacles that I’m fighting with right now.* Because without that, without my Social, I can only really do but so much because even if they [employers] hire me, how many jobs you know that are really gonna pay me checks, or they gonna create a way to pay me, do a cash app or something, you know? Like how many, how many jobs gonna do that? So I need my Social, and I need **my Social to be able to open a bank account** and get me

going, you know, and I also need my Social in order to be able [to get my place of residence](#).

Having legal documents would begin to “open doors for everything else,” yet, after five months of being home, obtaining them was still elusive (New York participant, incarcerated for 30 years).

Those on [step 5 or 6 \(the “surviving” category\)](#) reflected that there was **more room for them to grow, more progress yet to make**. “Well, I’ve come a long way from being at the very bottom of the rung, and I’m definitely not where I want to be yet. So I give myself that grace...there’s very, very definitive steps that I have to go through to get to the next rung on the ladder and to not hurry it” (Colorado participant, incarcerated for 32 years). There was a desire for [greater independence and financial stability – finding work or a better paying job](#), having their own source of transportation (a car, an electric tricycle or e-bike), and finding suitable and affordable housing, which included goals of future home ownership.

One participant, in addition to the desire to have a car and “my own place,” had a goal to “be off parole...being more totally independent. I could do whatever I want. I can go anywhere I want, you know, as long as I’m obeying the law” (New York participant, incarcerated for 43 years). One participant spoke about wanting a family, but financial stability was their first priority – “I think that would put me up higher on the ladder. But I want to be able to – be able to protect and provide for my family so that they’re always safe, you know. I can give them that safety net, and if I can’t provide that, then I’m not ready” (California participant, incarcerated for 25 years).

Of those on **step 7 or above** (the “**thriving**” category), several participants spoke about feeling like they were in a place of **financial stability**, such as having secure housing and employment. A few mentioned having their own source of transportation. One participant from Louisiana, who was incarcerated for 24.5 years, said, “I think I’m blessed where I’m at, you know. I’m able to have my own apartment, my own transportation, paying bills, you know, getting insurance, doing stuff the legal way. You know, I was 24 when I came in, so cutting curves was what we did, but just to do stuff the legal way and work hard, and just sit back and be able to look at all that I accomplished.”

Many discussed **rebuilding their relationships with family and loved ones**. In a heartfelt description about their mother, one participant living in New York relayed, “**The things that motivated me at 23 are not the same things that motivate me at 55**. I’m motivated by the ability to wake up, and be there for my mother, who did every day of them 29 years [in prison] that I did...and be there and love the people that love me, and love them unconditionally.”

No matter where they put themselves on the ladder, all 33 people demonstrated **resilience and determination** to succeed regardless of life circumstances – a desire for continued progress.

The Influence of Early Life Experiences

For a more in-depth picture of the people who were trusting us with their reentry stories, we began our conversations by asking questions about their early years. *Where were you raised? Tell us about your family. Tell us about the*

people who inspired you to be your best self. While some good memories were revealed, overall, the early life experiences that were shared with us were overshadowed and shaped by:

1. Parental **separation and divorce**
2. Parental **abandonment**
3. The **death of one or both parents** or the death of one or more siblings
4. Neglect and abuse (**emotional, physical, sexual**)
5. Households experiencing drug **addiction and alcohol** misuse
6. **Witnessing or** being a **victim** of household domestic violence or neighborhood violence
7. **Housing instability**
8. The incarceration of family members
9. Having **few or no positive role models** growing up

Participants reflected on and spoke about how the environments of their youth influenced their life trajectory. Many of their childhood experiences correspond to the *research that shows how early traumatic and adverse childhood experiences influence* the likelihood of criminal legal involvement in youth and adulthood.³⁷ It is against this backdrop of their powerful disclosures that we delve into where their reentry journey should have started – during their imprisonment. Yet, due to the length of their sentences, preparing for reentry on the inside came with its own set of obstacles.

The Prison Experience



*It [the **exclusion from programming**] influences [your reentry] a lot, because there are certain things in prison programs that you can actually take home with you and actually become a viable part of the community.*

New York participant

Incarcerated for 23 years

The vast majority of our returning community members said that the departments of corrections (DOCs) did little to support their rehabilitation, which led them to find alternatives to DOC programming due to blocked access. Neither did the DOCs provide meaningful assistance with reentry planning.

Blocked opportunities to participate in programming

When we asked the participants if they had any experiences of long waitlists or being excluded from participating in programming due to their sentence

length, 81% said yes.³⁸ One participant in Oregon, who spent 28 years inside, reported that “the first thing my counselor said to me is, ‘You have too much time for us to get you into any programming.’” They pointed out the irony that individuals with long sentences who may have had to go before a parole board that expected evidence of rehabilitation were excluded from participating in those programs specifically because of their long sentences.

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Many spoke about being put on waiting lists, because those closest to release, typically with five years remaining or fewer, always took priority. The waiting lists were often for programming that would have contributed to rehabilitation, such as identity transformation, addressing trauma, and learning life skills. It also affected Family Reunion Programs (i.e., the ability to spend time with family in a private setting),⁴⁰ certain jobs within the facilities, learning a trade, and educational opportunities including obtaining a GED or taking college courses.

Eventually individuals were able to participate in some programs. Doors opened as a result of self-advocacy and determination, as shown by one participant in Louisiana – “I had to fight and talk to the chief...to be able to go to school...so that was one of the things that I fought for, and I actually fought and won and was able to get my GED in 2000” (incarcerated for 24.5 years).

Some individuals developed good relationships with staff. Changes in security levels permitted more access to programming for some. Prison transfers also mattered – not all facilities offered the same programming or the same amount of programming. A prison transfer could become a blessing or a curse

with respect to access. A few people mentioned departments of corrections' (hereafter, DOC) rules started to change to allow more access, but such shifts did not come until they had already been incarcerated for a long time. Even with said changes, they still felt programming was too limited and that the DOC needed to do more.

In their own words: On programming waitlists and denials

"I was excluded, excluded from basically everything...even good quality jobs...even some of the college programs."

— California participant, incarcerated for 31 years

"They wouldn't let me participate in anything really. Yeah, every single class, group, whatever that I attempted, you know, to join. Put my name on the list. They shut the door on me. I couldn't. I couldn't attend. I could not participate...even a GED class."

— Colorado participant, incarcerated for 32 years

"I wanted to participate in the Family Reunion Program...We get a chance to spend approximately 48 hours with your family and loved ones in a – like, a trailer home...I wanted to participate with my family, my mother and my children, but I was told I couldn't participate in that unless I had ART [the Aggression Replacement Training program]. So, obviously **in 2000, I wasn't eligible** to go into ART at that time until the year 2020."

— New York participant, incarcerated for 24 years ⁴¹

“Yeah, there’s a lot of programs you’re excluded from...you going to be pushed through to the back of the list. They consider you but you never – basically you still excluded. Because if he has three years and I have 45 years, he’s going to come first....you excluded from a lot of stuff.”

— Washington, DC participant, incarcerated for 20 years

Missed opportunities to engage emerging adults in rehabilitation

Because there were such long waits, or sometimes, outright denials for participation in programming upon entering prison, DOCs very often missed a pivotal rehabilitation window. When they were sentenced to prison, the vast majority (85%) of participants in our study were “emerging adults.” ⁴² Within this unique developmental phase, typically up to age 25, individuals share more in common with their teenage selves versus the maturity of an adult – not yet having a fully developed prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that improves the management of impulsive and risky behavior. ⁴³ This period of time provides a ripe opportunity for intervention as the brain continues to develop in the areas of executive functioning, judgment, impulse control, and emotional regulation. As noted in a report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, **emerging adults are “uniquely amenable to rehabilitation.”** ⁴⁴ Yet, due to long sentences, many of these opportunities were systematically limited or denied by design.

Filling the DOC programming void

We heard story after story of personal transformation that occurred during decades of incarceration. These [profound personal changes were largely driven by participating in self-help and other groups run by incarcerated peers](#). One participant in New York, who served 37 years, said, “I had sixty-two-and-a-half-years-to-life, and I said that if I couldn’t come home, if I couldn’t get out, at least I can help prepare the men that was leaving to go out to become assets to their community instead of liabilities.” Community organizations and volunteers – faith-based organizations, education providers, non-profit organizations, and formerly incarcerated people – offered programming and played pivotal roles in building skills and transforming lives. [Involvement in programs and classes offered by outside entities \(e.g., Alternatives to Violence\)⁴⁵ and volunteering to serve in programs \(e.g., like the Youth Assistance Program, to provide guidance to at-risk youth\)⁴⁶ contributed to their personal growth.](#)

Without these opportunities, reentry would have become an even more onerous endeavor. These groups and programs allowed our participants opportunities for self-exploration, to build skills they could use on the outside, and, above all, to begin to implement new “transferable” skills they could use as they returned home and faced the challenges of reentry. Still, similar to difficulties with access to DOC-run programming, some people had more access to these types of opportunities than others did.

In their own words: [The importance of self-help groups and peer-led programs](#)

“Well, when I went to prison I felt like...I had a lot of issues, and I was kind of broken. And so I knew that I needed to use this time to figure out what was going on and fix it. I spent a lot of time trying to take different kinds of classes to own, to address my issues.”

— Louisiana participant, incarcerated for 27 years

“It changed my whole mindset being in the self-help group and helping people...I learned that I have to take my time. I have to use all the tools that I learned...to succeed out here...I had to really get into my feelings so that I won't do anything to jeopardize my freedom.”

— California participant, incarcerated for 34 years

“It [volunteering] gave me the experience to be able to deal with conflict resolution, to deal with different personalities. Because when you in prison, you're dealing with people...from different walks of life. So that gave me the skill to be able to deal with different attitudes...to meet people where they are, to learn different learning styles of people, because everybody's different.”

— Louisiana participant, incarcerated for 24.5 years

The Reentry Experience of Five Women



I can look back on my past, and that's one thing I can gather my strengths from is that the fight that it took for me to get here, to come home. It was a long, long fight, and if I can fight that fight in there, I can definitely do it out here.

Colorado participant

Incarcerated for 32 years

Although men and women in our study walked parallel paths through prison and reentry, the [women described experiences that were not commonly reflected in the men's accounts](#). This report features interviews with five women. What follows offers a glimpse into their reentry experiences in four states: [California, Colorado, Louisiana and Oregon](#). The women were sentenced to a range of 60 years up to life without parole. They were released after serving between 24.5 and 32 years in prison; their average age at release was 57. Many women discussed their history of substance use disorder and trauma, including early sex work and sex trafficking. Most of the women are mothers.

The prison experience

Although it took DOCs a long time to give people with long sentences access to programming, the door to these opportunities opened even later for some women than for men. “Oregon is not real excited to have peer-led programming, especially in the women’s institutions. Men’s institutions – they got clubs in 1968. The women’s institution just got a club in 2022.” When provided, programming was sometimes male-centered and failed to address their specific needs. As one woman from Louisiana noted, “When I moved to LCIW [Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women], they had a lot of programs, but it wasn’t geared towards women. They had like, well, culinary arts, you can say, and they had office systems technology, but for the most part it was stuff like horticulture, and that was geared towards what the men’s prison had.” Throughout their decades of incarceration, the women participated in just a few DOC-run programs. One woman, in discussing the limited availability, expressed disappointment in the DOC for not preparing women to release “with knowledge of their worth and potential.” Access to programming opportunities for these women came through classes led by other incarcerated women, as well as those offered by community organizations. Classes attended by the women included those focused on trauma healing, domestic violence, mental health, codependency, self-esteem, self-care, community building, and parenting – classes that helped them learn to treat themselves and others better.

Because of the low wages paid for prison labor, incarcerated women emphasized the importance of saving and financially planning for reentry early in their incarceration. “I am always trying to talk to people about successful reentry from the day you get incarcerated, because you need to start planning. Because \$77.90 [a month] is not a lot of money to save and buy tampons that are 10% of your pay and all of that... I’m trying to talk to all my

friends who are in prison. ‘Please save money. Please save money.’ You need it out here. You will not be able to function if you don’t have some money, and so, I just – that to me, was important. Because shit, you know, you want toilet paper. You want to be able to buy things. You have to be able to provide for yourself.” [Upon release, three out of the five women received zero gate money.](#) Their prison accounts varied from \$450 to \$4,000.

Returning to community

The women discussed their challenges in reentering the family unit and reconnecting with their children. In reflecting on whether there was anything she would have done differently in terms of navigating her return home after release, one woman said, “I would have got my kids more involved in, you know, my inception from when I got home to where I’m at now. Just to give them that because they lived on the outside of my incarceration for so long, you know, and coming home, I kind of navigated my release with them on the outskirts, you know, so I probably would have wanted them to be in that journey with me... But me and my daughter are changing that, so I’m kinda including her in my everyday stuff now.” In recognizing the unique needs of women coming home from long-term imprisonment, one woman suggested discussing the release process to become more familiar with what it entails. “Because there are so many different aspects, you know, for women who have children. For people coming out where someone has been controlling their home, and now they have to step back in and try to take – try to take control of their home. Like, you know, their finances – their financial homes. And somebody [else has] been running it for years.”

All participants emphasized the importance of support from other women – particularly formerly incarcerated women and women from outside organizations, such as A New Way of Life, Louisiana Parole Project, and the Oregon Justice Resource Center. In some cases, they received support from women within the prison system, including case managers, and also attorneys. They all described providing support to other incarcerated women and women returning home. Even with all that they have experienced, the women look forward with hope for a brighter future, with aspirations that include home ownership, travel, going back to school, owning a car, starting a family, having more fun, planning for getting older, and spending more time with their children.



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