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

Emma Block

Bates College

Abstract

The Maine Prisoner Reentry Network (MPRN) is a statewide organization with the mission of supporting Maine's reentry community. In April 2020, MPRN began conducting remote meetings with incarcerated individuals prior to release, a practice that allowed for advance reentry planning and the opportunity to introduce returning citizens, people returning to the community after incarceration, to reentry supports. I was introduced to MPRN through the Bates Harward Center for Community Partnerships. MPRN strives to be equitable and sought a research partnership with a thesis student in hopes of expanding their reach and impact. My research is thus motivated by two questions: what are structural barriers that impact reentry experiences or curb access to reentry supports? How is MPRN able to meet the needs of returning citizens, and what role has conducting remote meetings prior to release played in the supports provided by MPRN? I conducted 28 interviews with returning citizens and reentry-related service providers across Maine. Findings suggest that given the challenges faced by returning citizens, these remote meetings should continue because they have positively impacted the process of reentry planning. Findings also document that most participants found the full range of material, instrumental, and emotional support provided by MPRN to be highly valuable. Suggestions for improvement include broader advertisement of MPRN, increased support for people with serious mental health challenges, more transparency around whether or not resources can be guaranteed, and prioritizing racial representation among leadership.

Introduction

> "In June of 2017, 5 people gathered together at the Catholic Charities office in Auburn, Maine to discuss how they might support citizens returning to the community after incarceration. Word that this discussion was happening spread, and within months, dozens of people from all over the state—people from nonprofits, the corrections system,

> social service agencies, faith-based organizations, law enforcement, recovery services, formerly incarcerated, and more—began attending and contributing to these monthly meetings."

This quote from the website of my community partner, the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network (MPRN), describes how the organization began five years ago. Visible in several places on their website is MPRN's logo, which depicts two silhouettes walking side-by-side, representing the idea that the organization accompanies returning citizens throughout their transition back to society. This logo demonstrates part of the organization's mission statement, also found on the website: "MPRN creates and facilitates connections." These connections are meant to combat the isolation, stigma, and limited resources often confronted by returning citizens as they transition from incarceration to the community. Most of MPRN's board members also have lived experience of incarceration; this type of representation is seen as vital to their mission.

My research is motivated by two questions: what are structural barriers that impact reentry experiences or curb access to reentry supports? How is MPRN able to meet the needs of returning citizens, and what role has conducting remote meetings prior to release played in the supports provided by MPRN? This project arose in the spirit of community-engaged research, from a question introduced by my community partner. Beginning in April 2020, as much of the world began relying on remote platforms to interact, MPRN has conducted hundreds of virtual meetings with incarcerated individuals whose release is upcoming, wherein they discuss the needs of the individual and introduce them to various reentry services. This practice of meeting remotely with incarcerated people had previously not been permitted by the Department of Corrections but was adopted due to circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. When I first connected with their executive director in December 2020, MPRN leadership hoped to examine how these remote meetings impacted reentry outcomes and how more returning citizens could connect with these supports. While these meetings were held remotely, the frequency and content of the meetings are the focus of this research, rather than the impact of remote versus in-person meetings.

Having done a great deal of research about this topic and worked previously with similar populations, I approached this project with some knowledge of the subject matter but not with the expertise others gain through lived experience. Throughout the year I worked on this project, I attended weekly meetings hosted by MPRN and spent hours listening to conversations about the challenges faced by this community. Because I do not have lived experience of incarceration and because many other parts of my identity do not reflect the population this organization serves, I was cognizant of the spaces and conversations it may not have been appropriate for me to be a part of. Throughout the process of conducting my research and building relationships with my community partners, I sought to find the spaces where I could be helpful while recognizing where I would not. I offer additional thoughts about this throughout the paper in my discussion of the principles of community-engaged research, my consideration of ethics in the research design, and my gratitude toward participants.

Literature Review

The U.S. incarceration rate is the highest of any country in the world, at approximately 600 incarcerated people per 100,000 residents (Miller & Khey, 2016; Bares & Mowen, 2020; Kjellstrand et al., 2021). From the 1970s until the end of 2000, the U.S. incarceration rate

increased from 90 to nearly 500 Americans in prison for every 100,000 free residents (Simon, 2007). This increase in incarceration rates coincided with the beginning of the War on Drugs, which dramatically increased the population incarcerated for drug offenses (The Sentencing Project, 2020) and changed prison demographics, which shifted from over 70% white in 1950 to almost 70% Black and Latinx by the end of the 1980s (Ortiz & Jackey, 2019). Many scholars place race at the center of their analyses of the prison system, arguing that the carceral state was established as an extension of slavery and segregation and that the evolution of the U.S. prison system cannot be separated from this country's history of systemic racism (Wacquant, 2005; Simon, 2007; Alexander, 2010; Brayne, 2013).

Research shows that marginalized populations are significantly overrepresented in U.S. prisons. In their literature review "Incarceration and Stratification," Wakefield and Uggen (2010) discuss the ways that the prison population reflects existing disparities in the U.S. and how incarceration both exacerbates and generates new disparities. They write that prisons "house the jobless, the poor, the racial minority, and the uneducated, not the merely criminal" (p. 393). Most incarcerated people enter the prison system with low levels of educational attainment and few job skills (Morenoff & Harding, 2014), and at the time of their arrest, the majority of incarcerated people were working low-quality, low-paying jobs (Wakefield & Uggen, 2010).

Given the extremely high incarceration rate in the U.S., millions of people have at some point had contact with the prison system, although most do not spend the rest of their lives incarcerated. Ninety-five percent of all incarcerated people are eventually released back into the community, with over 600,000 individuals released each year (LaCourse et al., 2019; Ortiz & Jackey, 2019; Bares & Mowen, 2020). The reentry process is plagued by a variety of challenges, including navigating the prisoner reentry industry, securing housing, employment, and other services, and limited social support. Nationwide, about one-third of people released from prison will become reincarcerated within the first year of release and over one-half will return to prison within a few years (Miller & Khey, 2016; Wallace et al., 2016; Bares & Mowen, 2020).

Many scholars have documented the rise of the prisoner reentry industry (PRI) (Clear, 2010; Ross, 2011; Thompkins, 2010; Link, 2019; Ortiz & Jackey, 2019). This industry includes federal, state, county, and city agencies, as well as the Department of Corrections and parole and probation. Rather than a mechanism of rehabilitation, scholars argue that the PRI is an extension of the prison industrial complex and, motivated by profit margins, is used to surveil, fine, and ultimately reincarcerate people. Ross (2011) discusses ways businesses have benefitted from mass incarceration: "The whole panoply of nonprofit organizations and for-profit businesses is able to capitalize on this insatiable need to incarcerate individuals and build prisons, ultimately to make money from the pain and suffering of others behind bars" (p. 176). The PRI is also linked to surveillance—essentially, if people are surveilled more intensely, they are more likely to be reincarcerated, meaning that there is "a ready flow of people entering into the web of the reentry industry" (Clear, 2010, p. 586). This cycle of incarceration, reentry, and reincarceration means that the PRI essentially creates its own demand. The current literature also documents the fees associated with reentry, including court, restitution, community supervision, and reentry programming fees, which some scholars argue are used as supplementary sanctions (Thompkins, 2010; Link, 2019; Ortiz & Jackey, 2019). This system often puts returning citizens into debt soon after release from prison, and the threat of reincarceration looms over this punitive, fees-based system. The PRI's presence is felt most acutely among poorer communities and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities in particular (Olusanya & Cancino, 2011; Ortiz & Jackey, 2019).

Obtaining safe and affordable housing is widely regarded as the biggest challenge faced by returning citizens and the most significant predictor of reincarceration (Helfgott, 1997; Wacquant, 2005; Bender et al., 2016; Kjellstrand, 2021). Research shows that landlords are more likely to reject applicants with criminal records (Evans & Porter, 2015; Zannella et al., 2020). Employment, health, and sobriety outcomes are all affected by a returning citizen's housing situation (Hamlin, 2020). Existing literature also highlights the challenges of securing employment post-incarceration (Miller & Khey, 2016; Moore et al., 2018; Sliva & Samimi, 2018). Employment post-release significantly reduces the likelihood of rearrest and is associated with more successful reentry outcomes (Miller & Miller, 2016; LaCourse et al., 2019; Ortiz & Jackey, 2019). Several studies have documented labor market discrimination against formerly incarcerated people, finding that people with criminal records are significantly less likely to receive callbacks from employers; again, these statistics are even more drastic for Black and brown people (Pager, 2003; Wakefield & Uggen, 2010; Nakamura & Bucklen, 2014).

Accessing substance use disorder or mental health treatment is another documented reentry challenge. Although a large proportion of incarcerated individuals face substance use disorder problems, relatively few people receive treatment while incarcerated, and drug use often continues during incarceration (Olson et al., 2009; Rowell-Cunsolo et al., 2016; Bares & Mowen, 2020). Returning citizens with substance use disorders are at a high risk of returning to drug use in the time immediately following release, and the risk of drug-related death is highest soon after release (Merrall et al., 2010). People who end up in prison tend to have more mental health issues than the general public, and time in prison usually exacerbates these health problems; mental health issues are also linked to an increased likelihood of reincarceration (Davis, 2003; Wallace et al., 2016; LaCourse et al., 2019). Having mental health symptoms is associated with less successful community integration, including a decrease in one's odds of becoming employed or married post-release (Moore et al., 2018). Much of the incarcerated population also has substantial physical health problems, which may be exacerbated by spending time in prison. Incarcerated people have very high rates of infectious diseases, including tuberculosis, hepatitis C, and HIV/AIDS, and some studies have also shown that incarceration is linked strongly to health problems later in life (Wakefield & Uggen, 2010).

Another reentry challenge relates to social support, which can have a profound impact on experiences and outcomes post-release (Bohmert et al., 2018; LaCourse et al., 2019; Bares & Mowen, 2020). Though peer support is linked to improved reentry outcomes, incarcerated people tend to have low rates of familial and social support compared to the general population (Wakefield & Uggen, 2010). One factor that often limits social support and community integration for returning citizens is perceived stigma (Kiczkowski, 2011; Bender et al., 2016; Kjellstrand et al., 2021). Perceived stigma—an individual's perceptions of the public's stigmatizing attitudes toward their group—is linked to negative reentry outcomes, including unemployment, income loss, depression, poor social functioning, low self-esteem, negative coping styles, and a decreased likelihood of seeking treatment (Moore et al., 2013). Given these challenges associated with reentry, this study examines an organization in Maine that seeks to improve reentry outcomes by connecting returning citizens with various resources across the state.

Methods

My qualitative methodology is framed by community-engaged research (CER). Strand et al. (2003) define this type of research as "a partnership of students, faculty, and community members who collaboratively engage in research with the purpose of solving a pressing community problem or effecting social change" (p. 3). This analysis legitimizes the knowledge of formerly incarcerated people, a marginalized population, and validates their expertise as a valuable form of data. With these principles of CER in mind, my community partner and I chose the following research questions: What are structural barriers that impact reentry experiences or curb access to reentry supports? How is MPRN able to meet the needs of returning citizens, and what role has conducting remote meetings prior to release played in the supports provided by MPRN? A qualitative methodology was identified as an effective way to document participants' powerful stories about their reentry experiences.

I conducted twenty-eight loosely-structured, qualitative interviews: fourteen with returning citizens and fourteen with service providers. Interviews were roughly thirty minutes in length. Each participant received a $20 grocery store gift card after the interview, funded by small grants from three Bates College sources: the Sociology Department, the Student Research Fund, and the Harward Center for Community Partnerships. My community partner provided me with contact information for individuals who met the criteria for the study and were willing to be interviewed. I also regularly attended a weekly virtual meeting hosted by MPRN, where I became acquainted with several members of Maine's reentry community and many people working at reentry-related organizations. I recruited several participants, primarily service providers, through these meetings. This population represents both purposive and convenience sampling because participants were recruited due to their unique position as returning citizens or reentry-related service providers, but interviews were conducted only with people within this purposive framework who agreed to participate and who were able to be contacted.

In interviews with returning citizens, I collected demographic information, then asked participants to describe how they found out about MPRN and their experiences with the remote meetings prior to release. Given the existing literature regarding employment, housing, and social support as challenges to reentry post-incarceration, I then asked about participants' experiences securing or not securing these resources. In interviews with service providers, I asked about referral processes, accessibility of services, and challenges related to supporting returning citizens. After conducting and transcribing interviews, I used NVIVO to code all transcripts and identify themes that emerged during interviews. I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Bates College for this study. Throughout the recruitment, consent, and interview processes, emphasis was placed on the voluntary nature of this research. Various measures were taken to protect the identities of participants; while I refer to quotes from interviews, all participants are identified via pseudonyms.

Analysis

All participants identified themselves as male. Participants had been released from all three state prisons in Maine. Almost all participants (twelve) had been incarcerated at least once prior to their most recent sentence. The length of each participant's most recent sentence ranged from just under one year to over ten years. Almost all participants (thirteen) were white, and only one participant self-identified as Black. The fourteen service providers interviewed represented a wide variety of reentry-related services and organizations, including housing, education and employment, advocacy groups, and Department of Corrections staff. Ten service providers were

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

In the following analysis, findings are centered around the interviews with returning citizens. Where appropriate, information from service provider interviews is included to supplement and reinforce data from the returning citizen interviews. The analysis is organized chronologically, beginning with pre-release reentry planning, followed by post-release experiences, and ending with participants' reflections about how MPRN supported them throughout their release and reentry.

Planning Reentry

Only three participants recalled feeling "good" or "excited" about their upcoming reentry. One of these participants attributed his positive feelings about reentry to the support he was receiving from the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network: "I felt good because I felt like I was being helped." The other two participants reported having relatively strong support networks and having secured housing and other basic needs prior to their release. Knowing these safety nets were available to them, which was not the case for every returning citizen, likely had a positive impact on these participants' feelings about their release.

Almost all participants recalled feeling high stress as their release date neared. One notable source of fear described by several participants was the feeling of not knowing what was going to happen upon release. Participants frequently used phrases such as "I didn't know what I was doing" or "I had no idea where I was going to end up." These statements reveal the low levels of social and material support that incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people tend to have (Wakefield & Uggen, 2010). Reentry anxiety was also particularly acute for those who had many previous incarcerations or who had served longer sentences. Steven, a participant who said he had too many previous incarcerations to count, recalled, "I'm always stressed out when I get to that point… I'm institutionalized to the letter… I'm more comfortable in jail than I am out here, so I have a hard time." Kevin, who had spent just over ten years in prison, said, "I had anxiety so bad it was crazy. Being in for ten years and then being released, the technology had changed so much." Here, Kevin explains the stress associated with having to quickly adapt to technological advances in a society he had been absent from for over a decade. Given the high stress levels associated with reentry, it is worth examining supports, such as MPRN's remote meetings with returning citizens, that have the potential to ease some of these fears.

As they began to contemplate reentry, participants learned about the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network through a patchwork of referral processes, although many referral methods required participants to have some type of resource or social network. The most common way people heard about MPRN was through word of mouth from other incarcerated individuals, with six participants being referred this way. Family members and other networks were also instrumental in connecting returning citizens with MPRN—three were personally familiar with MPRN's executive director, two had family members who found MPRN's website and contacted the organization, and one was referred to MPRN through another advocacy group. Only one participant discovered MPRN through their caseworker at the prison. This variation in the ways that participants discovered MPRN reflects inconsistencies in who is able to receive support from the organization and who is not, which raises concerns about equity of access.

When asked about their meetings with the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network prior to release, many participants described a trend of low expectations followed by positive experiences. Going into the remote meetings, over half of the participants described feeling doubtful that they would be particularly beneficial. Some participants credited this lack of optimism to feeling accustomed to being disappointed by the Department of Corrections or having previously heard false promises. Aidan, for example, explained that "my expectations were really low. Only because in my experience, nobody's just there to help you. They're not going to just give you things and not expect something in return." This sentiment, echoed by other participants, connects to some returning citizens' experiences with Department of Corrections staff. While some participants described positive or neutral interactions with their caseworkers, others recounted negative experiences, including being given false information about probation conditions, being told to "figure it out" when it came to obtaining housing for release, and being judged based on their type of offense. Multiple participants also expressed some discomfort at the idea of asking for or accepting help. Alex, for example, noted that "initially I was pretty weirded out… I don't like telling people my vulnerabilities or my problems and I don't like asking people for help." Comments like this one reflect narratives of personal responsibility and individual blame; this type of rhetoric has historically helped to increase public support for tough-on-crime policies that essentially criminalized poverty, addiction, and Blackness, while simultaneously decreasing public support for the funding of social welfare services (Martensen, 2020).

Although expectations were generally low, participants recalled that after they did meet with MPRN, their perceptions of the meetings were overwhelmingly positive, and every participant had some positive comments about these interactions. All participants described connections they made with various reentry resources and service providers through the remote meetings. Several people said they were given numbers to call or were connected directly with people associated with various services they needed, and that these connections improved how they felt about their upcoming release. Participants also mentioned becoming aware of several resources through these meetings that they had not previously known about. Richard, for example, spoke very positively about his interactions with representatives from MPRN: "It was great, it was just so helpful… he answered all the questions that I was looking for and had a lot more things to show me that Maine had to offer for us… I didn't think all that stuff was available." Through these interactions with MPRN, returning citizens learned about available resources not previously advertised to them. Participants also described the reassurance they felt just knowing that MPRN was a resource and support network that they could draw from, with one participant referring to MPRN as a "huge mental support." Especially due to the uncertainty most individuals felt surrounding their upcoming reentry, having a network of people available to answer questions proved invaluable.

One notable reason participants gave for trusting the people from MPRN is that many of the service providers were themselves formerly incarcerated or in long-term recovery. For example, Jeff explained, "I feel like a lot of them have been in the same position as me. And they have a little more experience with the recovery aspect of it, and they have a lot of good advice." Having this lived experience gives service providers a measure of credibility, which may encourage returning citizens to take their advice more seriously or to be less reluctant to accept the help they were offered.

While comments about the remote meetings with MPRN were overwhelmingly positive, it is worth noting certain suggestions for improvement made by some participants. One returning

citizen, Steven, expressed the opinion that MPRN had inadequate support for people with extreme mental health needs, saying, "I don't think they realized the magnitude of my mental illness going into it." Another participant, Andrew, raised a concern about an empty promise that was made during the remote meetings. Andrew was assured he would have a bed at a recovery residence upon release, but later discovered that these residences do not reserve beds; he described this realization as "devastating." Andrew's experience highlights the importance of transparency regarding which services can be guaranteed and which cannot. A final suggestion for improvement concerns racial representation. Jordan, a returning citizen who identifies as Black, discussed why he feels racial representation is important in the prison system and the reentry system: Returning citizens of color "need somebody that they can look up to and say, 'oh, you're doing well. That makes me want to do well.' But there has to be more diversity." MPRN's leadership overwhelmingly identifies as white; given the significant racial disparities in the prison system and the importance of representation highlighted by Jordan, working to diversify leadership is another way in which MPRN's services could be improved.

Experiencing Reentry

While reentry planning can start prior to an individual's release date, reentry begins in earnest after release. Interviews revealed that returning citizens faced several challenges associated with their reentry. Interviews also revealed ways that the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network provided valuable support throughout participants' reentries. Reentry barriers included recovering from the trauma and institutionalization associated with incarceration, challenges securing employment and housing, and limited social support.

A notable theme that emerged from interviews is how jarring it is to transition from the prison environment to the community. Richard confessed that since his release, "it's definitely been hard for me to even want to leave my house. It's like I'm stuck here." Alex, who had only been released for a couple of weeks at the time of his interview, admitted that he avoids most social interactions, especially crowds, saying, "I don't go much of anywhere." These impulses to avoid crowds and not leave the house are telling about the psychological effects of incarceration, which have major implications for reentry outcomes. One service provider who works in advocacy said that he believes one of the biggest challenges to reentry is the trauma, and that this trauma has significant effects on returning citizens' ability to reacclimate to society. When people are released, this service provider continued, they are usually expected to find employment and start working full-time immediately, either because they were released with no money or because employment is a condition of their probation: "There is a tremendous amount of stress placed on a person once they walk out the door, and not really enough time for that person to take stock… They've been through a lot. And they just don't know how to process it. And yeah, they're trying to hit the ground running but they're really suffering." The expectation that returning citizens start working immediately upon release means that they lack the time or space to process the trauma they have just endured, which can have adverse effects on their mental health and reentry success.

Obtaining employment was another significant reentry challenge reported by participants. About half of the participants were employed full-time; most of these jobs were at restaurants or shopping centers, with the exception of one participant who had been hired by the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network and one participant who resumed operating his business that he had run prior to incarceration. Most returning citizens who were not employed had been released more recently and were in the process of applying for jobs. Some participants were working part-

time, mostly doing physical labor such as roofing. The majority of participants recounted the challenge of securing a job as someone with a criminal conviction. Jeff, who had been released about three weeks prior to his interview, admitted, “I've applied to probably 15 jobs and I've been clean for two years now. And on the right track. I've got my Associate’s Degree… I'm continuing for my Bachelor's… and out of the 15 jobs that I've applied for, I've been turned down because of my background check on every single one so far.” Jeff’s and others’ experiences reflect studies documenting that people with criminal records are significantly less likely to receive callbacks from employers (Pager, 2003; Wakefield & Uggen, 2010; Nakamura & Bucklen, 2014). Service providers described how stigma and job discrimination limit the types of jobs returning citizens end up taking. A service provider who works in advocacy explained, “because you have to check a box or, you know, maybe your record comes up, you have to accept the lower-end jobs. So, you can’t even really access a job that’s really going to pay your bills.” Poor working conditions and low wages that returning citizens often have to accept have major implications for quality of life.

Participants also reported significant challenges related to securing housing upon release. Only three participants did not report struggling to find housing; of these three, one owned his own home, one had resumed living with previous roommates, and one was living with his parent. Eleven participants expressed that they struggled to find a place to live due to the lack of available housing, including recovery residences, in the state of Maine; participants frequently used phrases such as “there’s not enough places around.” Most service providers also emphasized the lack of available housing in Maine as a major barrier to successful reentry. Financial constraints were another housing-related barrier faced by returning citizens. John summarized the sentiments of many other participants: “I had no money. You can’t really get an apartment with no money.” Furthermore, for several reasons, landlords tend to view returning citizens as less favorable housing applicants. A service provider who operates various housing-, employment-, and recovery-related programs noted that when people are incarcerated, it is impossible to build good credit or establish a rental history, which exacerbates the challenge of being accepted by a landlord upon release: “Maine already has a housing shortage as it is… it’s a challenge even as a normal person to find an apartment… so when you have no rental history, your credit’s not that great, you don’t have any references, it’s almost impossible to find housing.” Given that employment, health, and sobriety outcomes are all affected by a returning citizen’s housing situation (Hamlin, 2020), an inability to secure quality housing can have profound implications for reentry outcomes. These profound challenges to reentry highlight the need for supports as returning citizens attempt to overcome these hurdles.

MPRN as a Support

Participants reported receiving material, instrumental, emotional, and social support from the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network. Almost all participants had received some type of material resource from MPRN, including clothing, food, hygiene items, cell phones, and transportation. One participant, Roger, recalled that one of MPRN’s board members had picked him up from prison on the day of his release, after collecting Roger’s belongings from where they had been stored. He then drove Roger to his new apartment, which MPRN had connected him to, drove him to the bank to open an account, took him shopping to get food and other necessities, and helped carry Roger’s belongings into the new apartment. Roger said that without the support of this board member, “I would have walked out the door with no idea where I was going, or even

how to get there." In terms of instrumental support, eleven participants said that MPRN had connected them to grants or programs related to education or employment. These grants covered equipment for jobs or college courses, including laptops, transportation, and clothing. Four participants were connected to their current housing through MPRN; two of these participants lived in apartments and two lived in recovery residences. All four of these participants spoke positively about their housing situations.

Participants also described MPRN as a source of emotional support. Most participants expressed that it was reassuring to have MPRN there to answer questions and provide support as issues or questions arose. Aidan spoke about the reassurance he felt knowing that he could draw on MPRN as a support network if he needed to: "If you're confused, you just call them up… It's nice to know that they're there, if I need them." Jordan recalled his surprise and appreciation upon realizing the sincerity of MPRN's support: "It was like, wow, man. These people, do they care? Is this what they're trying to tell me?" These quotes illustrate the valuable services, both tangible and intangible, that MPRN provided for many returning citizens. About half of the participants also described MPRN as a social support. Most returning citizens had met with MPRN board members at least once since their release from prison, and many said this had been a helpful support during the transition from prison to the community. A few participants said they sometimes contact someone from MPRN when they need advice or emotional support, and that this resource has been very helpful. These positive experiences described by participants illustrate the benefits of being part of a supportive group that can provide a broader community. Given the limited social networks and resources that returning citizens tend to have (Kiczkowski, 2011; Bohmert et al., 2018), the existence of the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network as a resource appeared to have a significant impact on the reentry experiences of many participants.

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

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

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

Conclusion

This project was made possible by the ability to conduct remote meetings with returning citizens prior to release, a practice that was adopted due to circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings from interviews with returning citizens and service providers suggest that these remote meetings should continue because they have positively impacted the process of reentry planning. Interviews revealed that as returning citizens neared their release dates, many felt high levels of stress about their upcoming reentry and had little success securing

housing, employment, and other necessary resources. Thus, most participants found the material and emotional support provided by the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network to be highly valuable. However, social capital and support networks often contributed to participants learning about the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network as an available resource, suggesting that broader advertisement could enhance MPRN's operations. Once participants met with MPRN, their experiences were overwhelmingly positive, with many participants connecting to housing, employment, grants, a supportive community, and other resources. Several participants directly attributed their reentry success to MPRN, expressing that this type of support had made a profound impact on their lives post-incarceration. Despite the support of MPRN, most participants encountered many challenges throughout their reentry, including stigma and limited social support, securing housing and employment, and the emotional toll of transitioning from prison to the community.

At the end of one particular interview, one of the returning citizens, Alex, said something that I immediately felt compelled to write down. He stated that MPRN had been encouraging him to do things he would not normally do: "Like talking to you, doing this interview is not something I would have normally done, right. It's very outside my comfort zone, but to do it is to progress, and to progress is the point, right?" When Alex told me this, I thought about how brave he was, and how honored I felt that he was willing to share this part of himself with me, a stranger to whom he owed nothing. I have a great deal of gratitude for Alex's and the other participants' openness and candor. Participants' willingness to share their vulnerabilities with me shaped the ways I wrote this analysis, as I felt accountable to them to produce a product that could honor their stories and hopefully improve the experiences of others like them.

As I conclude this analysis of prison reentry, a note on perspective feels necessary. In the very first interview I conducted, a service provider cautioned against letting the examination of reentry services become a distraction to the broader issue of mass incarceration in the United States: "We can't let the conversation around reentry and diversionary programs supersede the conversation around rolling back and reducing mass incarceration, whether or not we have the programs. We can't be arresting and incarcerating so many people for so long." While vitally important given the staggering number of people released from prison each year in this country, reentry supports are reactionary, and they do not undo the damage caused by the carceral state. Given the existing literature about the prisoner reentry industry and how it serves as an extension of the prison industrial complex, there is danger in viewing reentry services as the solution to the harmful effects of mass incarceration. To truly recover from the impacts of incarceration, the best path forward involves comprehensively redesigning the way punishment is conceptualized and enforced in our society. In the meantime, however, I argue that services such as the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network, which are not linked financially to the prison industrial complex and which are operated primarily by people with lived experiences of incarceration, are the best option for supporting people returning to the community after incarceration. While ideally people would not have to rely on these services in the first place, having an organization that will help provide this type of material, instrumental, and emotional support is necessary given the current realities of incarceration and reentry.

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