Thoughts Beyond Stigma- Implications for Change Reflected in the Voices of Previously Incarcerated Citizens

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ABSTRACT

More than six hundred thousand people are released from state and federal prisons annually, with nearly ninety-five percent of those returning to the communities in which they resided prior to incarceration, albeit frequently with discomfort and marginalization. Programs to foster reintegration inhere in almost every locale, yet recidivism still remains at an unacceptable level. With the surge of interest and empirical study of this topic, the voices of returning citizens can further enhance significant theory and knowledge to inform successful reentry and adjustment. The purpose of this study was to advance theory regarding the nature of stigma from the perspectives of informants who have been incarcerated, and who have spent varying lengths of time back in their communities following their completion of a term of incarceration. In the process of the study, unexpected, illuminating insights beyond the intended aim of the research were revealed.

Introduction

According to contemporary research, one of the main barriers to successful acclimation to community following release from incarceration is stigma. Negative stereotypes and public mistrust are often ascribed to the “ex-convict,” hampering successful reentry. Although perhaps unintended, discriminatory and rigid policy and practice lead to limited employment and housing opportunity, estrangement from family and friends, rejection from communities and increased recidivism. These circumstances create a maelstrom of barriers to successful reentry, and deny the opportunity for far too many formerly incarcerated citizens to become productive participants in their communities.

Systemic change is critically needed to disrupt not only the recidivistic process, but more expansively, the toll to human life and community cohesion. Of particular importance to tailoring responses to enhance successful reentry is a rich and textured knowledge of the lived experiences and perspectives of formerly incarcerated individuals. Through a systematic inquiry relying on semi-structured interview and analysis, this study endeavored to learn about the experience, stigma and subsequent life challenges encountered by returning citizens as the basis for theory and knowledge development.

Literature review**The Scope of the problem**

More than six hundred thousand people are released annually from state and federal prisons in the United States, and nearly ninety-five percent return to their communities (Sinko et al., 2020). Yet the large majority do not remain. Depending on circumstance, nature of the initial crime, years from the date of release, and geography, recidivism rates range from 31%-83% (Clarke, 2019).

The impact of having a criminal record on an individual's ability to reengage in community is a recurring theme documented by research in multiple dimensions of life. Formerly incarcerated citizens are often viewed with contempt, perceived as threatening, or considered to have failed as citizens (Ricciardelli and Mooney, 2018). It is therefore not surprising that mistrust often is ascribed to individuals with a history of incarceration, irrespective of the reasons for their confinement. This pervasive view is further reflected in policies which unilaterally deny access to viable employment, transportation and housing (Ashcraft and Flint, 2017; Celinska, 2000; Epperson, Pettus-Davis, Grier & Sawh, 2018; Li, 2018). In theory, following the completion of a term of incarceration, an individual should have earned the right to participate in life on an equal basis with those who have not been similarly detained (Celinska, 2000); yet, formerly incarcerated citizens are often viewed as lost causes, inept or deserving of ongoing, harsh judgement and punitive attitudes (Ashcraft and Flint, 2017).

The Policy and Programmatic Quagmire

Completing a sentence does not necessarily result in a restoration of rights. Multiple policies illustrate. For example, an offender can be excluded from voting, jury duty, adoption, foster care, particular types of employment, housing and education (Ashcraft and Flint, 2017).

Policy allows non-equivalent privacy for "ex-cons," when compared to that afforded to the average citizen. Potential employers have unrestrained access to records of convictions or justice-system involvement (Ashcraft and Flint, 2017) ostensibly to use these data in best hiring practices to ensure safe workplaces for all of their employees (Ashcraft and Flint, 2017). Thus, remaining employment options for returning citizens are typically limited to opportunities utilizing less stringent background checks, often for jobs requiring a low level of skill. At this level of employment, benefits are rarely available, nor are opportunities for advancement or promotion (Li, 2018). In a majority of states, past drug or felony convictions render one ineligible to receive federally funded public assistance and food stamps, even when formerly incarcerated citizens have served their time, successfully overcome addiction, asserted commitment to their recovery, attained additional education, and/or completed rehabilitative or vocational

programming (Li, 2018). Limited financial resources and restrictive housing policies further lead to disproportionately high degrees of poverty and homelessness respectively following release (Li, 2018). As such, policies after release are not conducive to restoring life necessary to render unlawful acts uninviting.

Accompanying and often guiding policy are inadequate or misdirected reentry programs. A large percentage of fiscal and human resources are focused on control in the form of parole surveillance. The excerpt below, a critical analysis of Illinois' Mandatory Supervised Release (MSR) program (Gullapalli, 2019), illustrates:

The report's conclusion is that it functions almost exclusively as a form of surveillance rather than as a support system. "In working with young men following their release from prison," says the report, "we did not see any evidence that MSR works effectively to improve public safety, either by assisting law enforcement in detecting or preventing new crimes, or providing the young men with support and rehabilitative resources to aid in their reentry and reduce the likelihood of recidivism (para. 11)."

In efforts to reveal the reasons for programmatic failure, multiple studies have been conducted using diverse methodologies. Park and Tietjen's (2021) work focused its boundaries on the stigma management in the Midwest, acknowledging the contextual limitations of their findings. More broadly, a meta-analysis (2018) of qualitative studies of post-incarceration programs, although founded on varied theoretical frameworks and aims, produced only eight studies meeting rigor and content criteria (Kendall, Redshaw, Ward, Wayland & Sullivan, 2018). Similar to Park and Tietjen's (2021) study, the results revealed three themes common to the eight studies; structural context, supportive relationships and continuity of care. Structural context referred both to the availability of resources and professionals to run interference so to speak. Stigma and discrimination were highlighted as major structural as well as social barriers to be eliminated in large part by case workers. The boundary between the three themes was unclear however, given that all three themes focused on the case manager-client duo, its processes and outcomes.

Criticizing designs which do not seek to test existing theory as the basis for generalization, Muhlhausen (2018) asserted that too many investigators rely on inadequate evaluation research design, indicting quasi-experimentation and qualitative inquiries as incomplete and intermediate.

Quasi-experimental designs that employ scientific methodology, but do not use random assignment frequently fail to account for individual differences that affect program outcomes. This failure leaves open the possibility that the underlying differences between the groups of former inmates receiving and not receiving reentry services, not the program, caused the observed impact.

Curiously, despite the recognition of diverse needs for successful reentry, Muhlhausen (2018) prescribes an evaluation approach with a single, primary, outcome variable, recidivism reduction. Thus, the fiscal eye, and thus, the post-incarceration program evaluation inquiry should be on the long-term-prize, recidivism incidence, with indicators such as housing, employment and other resources held in abeyance as secondary covariates. Muhlhausen (2018) advocates for true experimentation in which random sampling and assignment are central to the reduction of systematic and sampling bias (DePoy & Gitlin, 2020). In such designs, the theory and variables are selected by the researcher and tested for group differences. Interestingly, as far back as the early nineteen-eighties (Maruyama, 1981), knowledge development about a population who perceives themselves as at punitive disadvantage is best served by methods that rely on the voices and even methodological planning of the members of that population.

A second methodological consideration is the difficulty of measuring recidivism prevention, given that the variable has not yet occurred. However, from a retrospective stance, theory-based elements that have already been shown to predict successful reintegration into community have been inscribed in post-incarceration programs. While reasonable to assume that such programs will meet the long-term goal of recidivism reduction, the research illustrates that this assumption has not been actualized in numbers.

Thus, as supported by Park and Tietjen (2021) and Kendall et al. (2018), context is critical to consider and thus the value of retrospective, nomothetic studies based on existing theory may be limited in informing programming in diverse geographies and time periods. As stated by Goger, Harding & Henderson (2021), “the need to reimagine reentry during this pandemic provides an opportunity to remove barriers to successful reentry” (para. 4).

Given the high level of recidivism and contextual embeddedness of program content and success, it seems cogent to develop new theory to guide responses to newly released individuals. Exploring the complex, contemporary nature of stigma discrimination and how it is uniquely experienced holds promise for understandings

necessary for innovative and efficacious, “one-size does not fit all” programmatic response.

Stigma

Stigma commonly occurs when there is an intersection of bias, discrimination, labeling and stereotyping. Within this broad understanding, multiple theories and definitions of stigma have been proposed, some specific to formerly incarcerated persons and some more general. Perhaps best known is the theory proposed by Goffman (1963a, 1963b) through which he posited that stigma is an “attribute that is deeply discrediting.” Building on Goffman’s groundbreaking work, Link and Phelan (2001) expanded stigma conceptualizations beyond individuals interacting to abstract notions of power relations that rationalizes discrimination, exclusion and inequality. Over the past several decades, theorizing about stigma has complexified not only with regard to its nature, but also its causes, consequences and contextual implications (Clair, 2018; Tyler & Slater, 2018).

Specific to previously incarcerated persons, due to its dominance over personal identity and opportunity, stigma has been studied in numerous ways from its nature to strategies to manage it (Park & Tietjen, 2021). According to Sinko et al. (2020), stigma can significantly diminish an individual’s sense of worth and thus render the subject powerless to process or combat its effects. A longitudinal study of 180 incarcerated persons conducted by Moore, Stuewig & Tangney (2013) supported this claim. Over sixty percent of participants agreed that “people on the outside think once a criminal, always a criminal” and that “people on the outside think criminals are bad people” (Moore et al., 2013). The realization that an individual belongs to a cohort that is not valued has a negative effect perpetrated on one’s post-release life. This diminished sense of value or worth is often evident in an individual’s struggle with mental health and coping and negatively influential on motivation, communitarian behavior and interaction within one’s social environment (Moore, Stuewig & Tangney, 2016). Individuals experiencing internalized stigma, defined by Link and Phelan as the acceptance of social devaluation and integration of a denigrated self (2001), often make deliberate efforts to avoid situations or places where they expect to encounter this toxicity; internalized stigma decreases the likelihood of pursuing employment and leisure occupations in one’s community (Park & Tietjen, 2021; Sinko et al., 2020).

The effects of stigma form barriers that are easily applied by the powerful and deeply felt by the stigmatized (Moore et al., 2013). Thus, studies of the manner in which diverse understandings of stigma effect the reentry transition have potential to inform

programmatic change on many levels. (LeBel, 2012). To better understand the high rates of conviction and recidivism characteristic of the United States, the “stigmatizing conditions” that might have been a precursor to an individual’s justice-system involvement may reveal important information on which to refashion and improve the success of reentry programs (Tyler and Brockmann, 2017).

As noted above, stigma is not only experienced by the person against whom it is perpetrated. Other studies have primarily explored the topic of stigma with family members of incarcerated citizens (Park & Tietjen, 2021; Gueta, 2018; Saunders, 2018; Tadros, Fye & Ray, 2020), and distinguished between groups of currently incarcerated women (Bove & Tyron, 2018; Kellett & Willging, 2011), and gender specific groups of men and women, at a similar stage in their reentry process (Bahr, Armstrong, Gibbs, Harris & Fisher, 2005; Celinska, 2000; Gunn, Sacks & Alexis, 2018; Riccardelli & Mooney, 2018; Willging, Nicdao, Trott & Kellett, 2016). These studies texturize the stigma tapestry, further illuminating the understanding of this unfortunate phenomenon as the basis for its circumvention, diminution, or its elimination.

Given the centrality of stigma in erecting barriers to successful reentry and enduring community dwelling, considering the call for alternative, multiple, context-specific methods of evaluation as the foundation on which to reduce recidivism and improve flourishing of previously incarcerated persons, this study sought to examine the nature of stigma as experienced by those who share the experience of having been incarcerated.

Methods

This research, relying on mixed method techniques was initially designed to examine queries about the nature of stigma and its effects on reentry into home, community productivity, and civic participation.

Informants

The study took place in a reentry organization in a Northern New England community. Participants included all genders, 18 years of age or older, who had completed their terms of incarceration, and were not currently on probation. Participants were recruited by an emic researcher from a single nonprofit organization designed to create a network for individuals to share resources, develop relationships and form connections with organizations, volunteers, allies, advocates and service providers involved directly or indirectly in reentry efforts. Typically, network meetings are held

weekly and include community organizations, agencies, nonprofits, employers, formerly incarcerated citizens, recovery coaches, students, law enforcement personnel, district attorneys, representatives of the Department of Corrections, and several currently incarcerated citizens completing terms of incarceration within the state.

Participant ages varied, from twenty-seven to seventy-five years old. Of the fifteen participants, three identified as female, with the remaining twelve identifying as male. The length of participants' term of incarceration ranged from one to thirty years, with an average of seven years incarcerated. The average amount of time participants had been back in their communities following their release from correctional facilities was six years, with lengths varying from one to eighteen years. All participants were current residents of the state in which the program resides. Those who volunteered for the study were asked to participate in an interview, with the possibility of follow-up member checking and clarification of constructs revealed in the analysis.

Data Collection

Data collection, conducted by one of the researchers and two student research assistants, relied primarily on semi-structured interview followed by an open ended question with additional probes. The semi structured questions sought to collect demographic information, knowledge about community adjustment and comfort, and the role of stigma indicators derived from contemporary understandings of stigma discussed in the literature review. To assure that participants were afforded full voice, open ended questions were included in the interview protocol.

Table 1-Interview questions

1. *What is your current age?*
2. *How long were you incarcerated?*
3. *How long have you been released?*
4. *How has your history of incarceration impacted your relationships with family members?*
5. *How has your history of incarceration affected your relationships with non-family members (e.g., romantic partners, friends, co-workers)?*

6. *How has your history of incarceration affected your interactions with your community?*
7. *How has your history of incarceration affected your ability to obtain housing?*
8. *How has your history of incarceration affected your ability to obtain employment?*
9. *How has your experience of stigma changed over time since you have been back in your community?*
10. *What do you think about the resources that are available for different genders?*
11. *Is there anything else you might like to add?*

Analysis

Thematic analysis, combined with reflexive analysis to identify and bracket researcher bias, comprised the data analytic method. Analysis was conducted independently by each researcher, coded for themes and then negotiated for differences. One researcher was emic to the re-entry organization, having attended weekly meetings and participated in organizing activities. The others were etic, having limited knowledge of criminal justice, but bringing an understanding of stigma theories to the analysis. Each examined verbatim transcripts of the interviews, inductively derived themes and coded the transcripts by theme. A taxonomic analysis resulted in the multi-directional relationships reflected in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Findings

As is often characteristic of naturalistic inquiry (DePoy & Gitlin, 2020), while the initial areas of focus were centered on the nature of stigma, the effects of barriers, and the incidences of bias that formerly incarcerated citizens encounter as they navigate their way back into communities, the interviews revealed much richer and complex knowledge about the personal, historical and current life experiences of informants. Researchers obtained data illustrating consistency with existing literature on perceived and perpetrated stigma, but additional understandings of post-incarceration experience and insights into the failure of current programming to curtail discrimination and barriers to full reentry were derived.

As represented in the taxonomy in Figure 1 above, the themes are presented from proximal, or close to the individual, to distal, referring to the realm of policy and programmatic change (DePoy & Gilson, 2009).

How I got to this point

While the questions did not ask respondents about factors leading to their incarceration, many shared these details during the course of their interview. Of the respondents who participated in the study, substance abuse disorder (SUD), family dysfunction, and instability of childhood home environments were reported as primary factors contributing to one or more episodes of incarceration. Of particular note, and

thematic throughout historical and current experiences, incarceration was not a vehicle through which lives improved. Two comments illustrate:

“You know. It’s all drugs now, or drug related, or drug and alcohol related. Keep sending me into the same situation looking for a different result, it just doesn’t—it sounds like insanity if you ask me.”

The second time I went to prison, it was for just about three years, I stole two pumpkins and twenty dollars in change. Swear to God. You can look it up. It is public record. So, two pumpkins and twenty dollars in change and I got almost three years in prison, when all I...it was like a cry for help, I just needed a detox. I needed to clean my shit up.

According to the informants, the criminal justice system does little to disrupt and repair the repetitive influences leading to and perpetuating incarceration. Each of the themes that follow, while not temporally linear, presents effects of the current system of punitive arrest and containment.

Fractured Families

This theme contains the diversity of perceived and actualized interactions experienced by returning citizens within their immediate and extended families, frequently part of an ongoing cycle. All of the respondents reflected on the negative impact of incarceration and subsequent frequent communication gaps, misunderstandings, missed histories, lost closures due to the missed death of relatives, and guarded or absence of trust afforded to returning citizens by their family members. Some acknowledged their own responsibility in the discord as well. Restoring trust, if at all, was an arduous and long-term process. Not unexpectedly, efforts, such as earning a degree and sustained recovery from substance use, on the part of the returning citizen, facilitated acceptance.

You aren’t the only one doing time when you are inside, your family is suffering too. Especially if it’s your first time in, your family doesn’t know if you’re going to get stabbed or what will happen to you in there. They hear stories, you know, and it can be really scary for them. It really affected my kids, my significant other and my mother and my little brother before he passed away. That’s the ones that it really, really affected, but it also affected my cousins too.

I destroyed my family relationships, especially with drugs and alcohol and crime life, and all of the above. My mom did too. It started with my mother and I kind of

followed in my mother's footsteps and there was really a lot of damage done to my family for a long time.

I mean, uh, nobody trusted me for a long time—for a very long time. I mean even trusting me, you know, taking my daughter and being around at family functions, there was that—the element of trust was gone, so I would show up and be around, and it would be uncomfortable because I didn't know if they wanted me there—and even if they wanted me there, you know they couldn't trust me to be alone in their house, so it was rough.

In addition to emotional and social consequences, economic strain took its toll on families, including the extremes of surrendering house deeds as collateral for bail to all out bankruptcy. Incarceration seemed to place new hurdles into an often long history of difficult family dynamics rather than addressing and resolving previous conflict or strain, particularly in light of linear public policy and service response designed to protect children, but perhaps with unintended results.

“My kids' father was in prison and DHS stepped in and took my kids because I did thirty-three days and you can't have both parents incarcerated.”

Geography Matters: Sheltering in Places

Moving more distally, a number of informants found that relocation was more tolerable and/or growth producing than attempting to reinsinuate themselves into pre-incarceration communities. Returning posed a delicate confluence among shame, temptation, and support.

I had to geographically relocate. I wouldn't be able to go back from where I am from and get sober. I would've been surrounded by the same people and the same police who were gunning for me, it would be a nightmare.

It's different depending on where I am. You know, like downstate, when I was living in the Rockland area, uh, people knew that I was incarcerated, but they didn't really see me that way because when I came out, I was going to school and I opened up a sober living house and I was doing case management for free at the jail and I was involved in the church and community events, so people—I don't think it really affected them.

Even after time had passed returning was not necessarily viable.

When I moved back to my hometown, even after everything that I have accomplished, you know I still get that iffy feeling from most folks. Most people don't even know what I do for work, like I've been building a home on the lake, and uh, you know usually people stop by, and that's the first thing they ask is like how the hell can you afford this? You know, because they think maybe I am still that person that was on drugs and in jail, and because I went through that you know [they assume] I can't afford to do good things or have nice things for myself if that makes any sense.

Barriers to Reentry Regardless of Place

Pervasive barriers to successful reentry across geographies were duly noted, particularly housing and employment. Dissolution or discomfort in pre-incarceration family residences, cost, and legal exemptions from citizen rights to privacy conflated to limit opportunity in these two essentials.

Specific to housing

Uh yeah, nobody wants to rent to a violent felon. Background checks, that's one thing, then you have the lack of steady employment that's another, um it's another thing that you face. Yeah, you are doubly screwed right there, you can't get a job, you can't get a place, you're out on the streets doing whatever you can, what you did before.

In efforts to circumvent the heightened background checking that ultimately results in rejection by affordable housing rental companies, reentering citizens, even a number of years past release from prison, are forced to seek housing from private renters whose properties are typically more costly and unstable than those offered by larger corporate entities.

"It has been twenty years, but I still...I'm looking to move now and I pretty much don't even bother trying to apply for a place where it is being run by a management company—I don't get past them..."

"You know, individual people can just decide to toss you out."

Specific to employment

Employer human resource policies create significant barriers for returning citizens in the workplace. In an effort to ensure safe workplaces and reduce liability exposure for employers, their legal and talent teams frequently create wide-ranging restrictions

which filter out a job candidate's incarceration or criminal history regardless of the nature of the offense or the time passed since release, and in doing so, eliminate the opportunity of a reentered citizen to compete fairly for a role he or she might be qualified to obtain.

One respondent recognized that he carried around with him a long shadow of his criminal history, which is accessible to potential employers by way of background checks, and evident because of his physical appearance:

Uh employers, I mean, I have a criminal record—I have a felony criminal record—I've done state time, it's all violence, I've got prison ink all over my face, I have these huge gang tattoos all over me...prospective employers are few and far between.

Respondents were equivocal about compliance with background checks, and several were able to use creative strategies to obtain employment.

"I was hired five times and un-hired during the qualification process."

I didn't disclose that I was a felon and I was like okay well let me just go ahead and once again, through example, let me show them my work ethic and maybe that will make the difference, and then three weeks into the job I got called into human resources and they had my files and they said can you explain this and I was like well unfortunately, I can and I told them I did not disclose that I was a felon because I knew that I wouldn't have an opportunity with this company and I said I wasn't trying to be you know, dishonest, it's just the nature of the beast and that's how it has always worked out for me and I wanted you to see me for who I was, not for who I am on paper—because there are two different truths. And you know, they appreciated it and they were like you are a great employee we had hopes to move you up into management, but unfortunately, our contract prevents us from hiring felons. The next thing you know, I was being walked out of the building.

I purposely went for small companies. I didn't try to apply at Wal-Mart or Home Depot or someplace where nobody that was going to make the decision was going to see my application. I figured if you can give your application directly to the owner and meet the owner at the same time and let them see you, and have a good first impression then you have a lot bigger shot [at being offered a job].

Branding the Unworthy

According to participants, the prison system administers justice as a form of punishment, but at the end of a sentence, punishment shapeshifts rather than terminates. Restitution while rhetorically acknowledged is simply rebranded as perennial worthlessness.

“...once you go to jail, you are basically labeled a criminal your whole life.”

In one way or another it affects just about everything that I do. My employment options are shall we say, vastly different, I encounter a lot of stumbling blocks and road blocks. There are some things that I don't even try to do because of the potential complications of having to deal with my history should it come out. So, it prevents me from say for example, getting involved in the theater too heavily or even like thinking about serving in a political capacity, like as a campaign manager for somebody or even as an envelope stuffer for somebody. I have to think to myself, well, is it going to hit the news if I do something positive for that campaign and some reporter decides that my criminal history is somehow relevant to that person's candidacy.

“They look at you like a lesser person. And it doesn't matter what you're in there for, it could be for driving, which I've been in there for before, and you're still nothing.”

Like I said before, actions speak louder than words. So, I just have to, I keep my head down. I stay quiet. I don't go out too much or see too many people, but when I do go out, you know, I try to volunteer once or twice a month at the food pantry and help deliver food, you know, I tried to join the church up here and a couple of other little organizations, the Knights of Columbus, I was in the army, so you know joining the Legion, and different things like that to try to show people that you know, I'm not that person anymore, and it's starting to come around. I don't think people look at me like I'm an addict/criminal as much anymore, but as soon as, I know—as soon as something small happens, and if it's like a speeding ticket, or as soon as something happens, then all of that is all over with—all the years of hard work—and the one mistake I might make would affect all of the good things that I've done, if that makes any sense.

Taking the Reins

This theme refers to the strategies that respondents used to regain legitimacy and worth. Engaging in recovery coaching, substance use and peer support and serving as

community liaisons, managers of sober living residences, and other relevant volunteer activity with reentry at county jails created employment, volunteer and “pass forward” opportunities for formerly incarcerated citizens.

I think one of my biggest reasons why I want to help people who are leaving the jail is because—even with women in prison, you know, I’ve gotten to see this, some women don’t have a choice, they either go back to their drug dealer, or back to their abusive boyfriend or their mother or back to something that wasn’t healthy, because they never really had the strength to be able to stand on their own two feet and be told that you know, maybe they could do this, you know, you could do this. Even if you get a second in your head that you think you can make it, you think, well nobody is going to help me. So, people think, I might as well go back to what I was doing—that type of thing.

“It’s become abundantly clear to me that in my work through legislative advocacy and when I go to testify, and in relationships I’ve built with lawmakers, that going in and speaking about these topics breaks down the barriers of stigma.”

Participant comments point to the need for profound reconsideration of what the criminal justice system proposes to accomplish. Dangerous and violent offenses should be dealt with in a way that ensures the safety of the larger community, but individuals causing that degree of harm represent less than half of the incarcerated population in so many locales (Carson & Golinelli, 2013). Many are sent to jail as a result of an underlying substance use disorder, that on occasion, presents itself as a misdemeanor or felony, the crime actually representing only a symptom of an unaddressed mental health or social problem. And when courts choose to punish the symptom, instead of addressing the cause, they effectively issue a sentence without end for the subject, for his/her/their family and members of the community, all of whom are condemned by incarceration and are impacted for the rest of the subject’s life.

The taxonomy

Clearly the themes are not mutually exclusive or linear in nature. The taxonomic analysis presented in Figure 1 reveals the multi-directional, permeable boundaries of each theme and its sub-themes.

Conclusions and Implications

Methodologically, the context-embedded nature of this study is noteworthy. Contrary to Muhlhausen’s (2018) recommendation for true experimentation, the insights revealed

by investigating place-based voices of those who are most proximal to the current system were extremely productive in developing new knowledge necessary to inform reform and provide innovative direction for profound systemic change. The knowledge and theoretical tenets developed exceeded the initial aim of the study to detail the nature of stigma. Such research is critical for local through national rethinking and system redesign.

Two mechanisms from the thematic findings above illuminate areas for change: non-example and innovative insight. Non-example refers to forensic analysis, a careful and detailed analysis of what is or went wrong and thus did not happen on the failed way to goal attainment of recidivism reduction. This method of analysis has been used by multiple fields including criminal justice, but perhaps not for the purposes of redesigning systems and policies that have not met their asserted objectives (DePoy & Gilson, 2021), in this case, successful and enduring reentry.

An important lesson articulated by the respondents as well as illustrated by their lived - example is the ill-fated outcomes of criminalizing of substance use disorders and rendering the term “corrections” oxymoronic. Relegating substance use to crime not only ignores its potentially correctable social, economic, and familial causes, but serves to invite and amplify other types of criminal behavior such as theft and violent crimes into the already troubled lives of the user.

Cogent approaches that surfaced repeatedly in interviews included four major proximal to distal alternatives to punitive incarceration and post-release surveillance: diversion and restorative justice programming, mental health and SUD treatment, community education, and major policy revision.

Program Revision

The value of restorative and diversion programs that focus on addressing interpersonal conflict, substance use, mental health or inadequate housing through methods other than incarceration cannot be understated given the power of respondent non-example in unearthing the failure of punitive, containment strategies. There was consensus among respondents that non-violent offenders should be provided opportunities to connect with resources to address these needs prior to, or in lieu of their involvement with the criminal justice system. Looking distally, respondents acknowledged the broad economic and moral benefit of strategies to beget a useful and productive approach to non-violence and reparation within their home communities.

Restorative Justice measures, diversion options and public safety programs to intercept non-violent offenders can keep young people and adults out of the criminal justice system refocusing on attenuation of the root causes of offending behavior including mental health issues. Similarly, and crucial to this effort, is the provision of treatment for substance use disorder.

Informed by the respondents' articulation of ongoing, unsolved challenges related to employment and housing, programmatic innovation is warranted. As example, combining housing employment and previous experience in residential sobriety programs can provide the opportunity to circumvent stigma while developing employment skill and experience while also contributing to community.

Policy

Said succinctly and directly by an informant about the failure of the criminal justice system:

It has been my experience that um, there's a certain logic in focusing on the recovering inmate when it comes to reentry because obviously, well let's not sugarcoat it, they did something wrong and that's how they ended up locked up... {But} the current incarceration assistance really isn't that good at helping them figure out where they went wrong, so reentry—in a triage sense—focuses on adapting their behavior to society, getting them on the right track, um, we are not doing anything really to change the minds of society with regards to these people. ...unless we actively change the way that the community responds to them, I don't think we are going to get very far. And um, that's been my experience, we take these people who are doing the wrong thing and we start getting them to do the right thing—they are still being treated as if they did the wrong thing anyway and then they are just like what the heck did I reform for, I might-as-well go back to what I was doing, you know, nobody checks my resume before I sell them cocaine or whatever negative behaviors got them in trouble in the first place and sometimes people just gravitate to new negatives just because. In order to convince reentrants that being part of society is worth it, we have to make being a part of society worth it.

Clearly, completing one's sentence is now met with policy that fosters ongoing sequelae of the initial reason for arrest. While expecting the punishment to fit the crime, informants articulated the insight that within the current context of containment for behaviors that are unlawful but not injurious to others and community,

release from incarceration is in no way accompanied by restoration of opportunity for reform, and successful reentry. To the contrary, differential privacy policies, failure to eliminate maligning mass media, continued surveillance over support, and stigma inherent in contemporary policy set the praxis stage for discrimination and recidivism.

The words of the respondents in this study have been powerful in revealing ruptures and thus policy and praxis in need of major revision. By non-example or by reported experience, alternatives, such as “nip in the bud” policies that can address the causes of incarceration before one ever moves to that tipping point, fair housing, innovative employment and education efforts for both offenders and communities in which they reside emerged in this study. Beyond its initial aim to examine stigma, this study highlights the need for further research and carefully evaluated program and policy change as well as the theoretical and applied value of context-embedded, participatory studies.

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