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“It’s hard to reenter when you’ve been locked out”: Keys to offender reintegration

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ABSTRACT

Using constructivist grounded theory, we conducted 15 semistructured interviews of men and women with criminal justice backgrounds, and three focus groups to examine group level offender reentry strategies. Participants comprised 20 formerly incarcerated men and women who were incarcerated in a New York state prison or at Rikers Island, New York City’s main jail complex. This study revealed four keys to offender reintegration: (a) linking offenders to society; (b) institutional and community anchors; (c) social supports; and (d) personal epiphany. The keys to offender reintegration provide an opportunity to interrupt patterns of relapse, rearrest, and recidivism.

KEYWORDS

Criminal justice; grounded theory; offender re-entry; release planning; support

Introduction

Despite trends of correctional facility closures (Carson, 2015), the number of men and women in the correctional system remains high. An estimated 6,851,000 men and women were under some form of correctional supervision at the end of 2014 (Kaeble, Glaze, Tsoutis, & Minton, 2016). With such a large population in the correctional system, a high volume of offenders are returning to their communities. An estimated 700,000 offenders are released annually (Cuellar & Cheema, 2012), and almost 12 million people move through jails each year (Minton, 2013).

In New York the prison population has declined by 28% since 1999, from over 72,000 inmates to an estimated 52,000 inmates (New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, 2016). Since 2011, the state of New York has closed 13 correctional facilities and eliminated more than 5,500 prison beds (New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, 2016). As incarcerated men and women return to the community, there are challenges associated with reentry and recidivism.

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We defined prisoner reintegration as a dynamic process experienced by the offender during their release from prison or jail (Griffiths, Dandurand, & Murdoch, 2007).

Incarceration impacts the lives of those held in the correctional system well after they return to the community. Issues related to criminogenic needs and the neighborhood characteristics whereby inmates return affect both recidivism and reincarceration (Clear, Rose, Waring, & Scully, 2003; Morenoff & Harding, 2014; Petersilia, 2001; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Valera, Bachman, & Rucker, 2016; Wang et al., 2008; Wilper et al., 2009). Commonly cited factors contributing to recidivism include addiction and drug abuse, reoffending (i.e., committing a new crime) or violating parole and probation, negative social and neighborhood influences, lifestyle behaviors, personality characteristics, unemployment, deep poverty, and mental illness (Schnittker, Massoglia, & Uggen, 2012; Visher, La Vigne & Travis, 2004; Wildeman & Muller, 2012). In addition, formerly incarcerated individuals suffer disproportionately from higher rates of chronic and infectious disease, substance abuse, and serious mental illness than the general adult population (Braithwaite, Treadwell, & Arriola, 2008; Dumont, Allen, Brockmann, Alexander, & Rich, 2013; Valera & Kratz, 2014). Adding to this, formerly incarcerated men and women might lack knowledge of seeking outside assistance from social institutions and community resources (Brown & Bloom, 2009).

Because of the high rate of racial and ethnic minority individuals who have been incarcerated, these vulnerable groups are disproportionately affected by the lack of collaborative efforts between the justice system and the social and institutional counterparts that might assist with reentry (Petersilia, 2004; Schnittker, Massoglia, & Uggen, 2011). Additionally, those reentering to society often lack the proper identification needed to apply for social services, food stamps, and public health insurance. In several states (i.e., Alabama, Alaska, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Mississippi, Nebraska, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, and West Virginia) they are barred from certain public benefits, especially if the offender was convicted of a felony (Wang et al., 2008; Wilper et al., 2009).

In addition to social and community barriers related to reentry and reintegration, rates of recidivism among returning offenders remain high. In a study of 30 states, the Bureau of Justice Statistics found about 67% of offenders were rearrested within three years of their release and 77% within five years of their release (Harrison & Beck, 2005). The New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (2014) found 42% of offenders were taken back into custody within three years of their release. Of those who were reincarcerated, over 75% of offenders violated the terms of their parole, and about 20% were convicted of a new felony (New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, 2014). Fortunately, the negative

impact of health disparities coupled with problems related to prisoner reintegration can be mitigated by increase coordination and collaboration between academic institutions, correctional agencies (“institutional anchors”) and community health providers (“community anchors”) during and after their incarceration (Armstrong et al., 2016; Draine & Herman, 2007; Ferguson et al., 2016).

Preventing recidivism and supporting successful reentry

It is well established that institutional anchors and community anchors (defined here as nonprofit service organizations, public and private colleges and universities, offender reentry agencies, support groups, local libraries, and health care services) supporting the release of offenders to the community reduces their risk of relapse (Armstrong et al., 2016; La Vigne, Davies, Palmer, & Halberstadt, 2008; Small & McDermott, 2006). With this in mind, prerelease planning is crucial to offender reintegration (La Vigne et al., 2008). Prerelease and discharge planning can be achieved through multiple institutional and community anchors. A study conducted by Armstrong and colleagues (2016) described institutional anchors that provided reentry programming to previously incarcerated inmates in New York. These institutional anchors included Columbia University Medical Center and the NYC Department of Probation, which serves as the lead agency for several Young Men’s Initiatives. These collaborations have succeeded, in part, because they adhere to three characteristics of successful collaborations (Armstrong et al., 2016). These characteristics, essential to effective and sustained partnerships, are: (a) trust and respect, (b) shared resources with interpersonal and group level members of the offender with interpersonal and group-level members, and (c) mutual recognition of strengths (Armstrong et al., 2016).

Trust and respect

Trust and respect requires sustained engagement and effective collaboration at all stages of interaction between a justice program and community partner (Armstrong et al., 2016). Sharing resources between the justice system and community programs can prove challenging, but is a necessary component of collaboration. Ensuring partners respect one another’s agendas, financial pressures, and time constraints through ongoing assessments (from inception to conclusion) of whether partners believed that projects were benefitting their programs and clients, is an important first step in sharing resources (Armstrong et al., 2016).

Shared resources and interpersonal and group level support

Interpersonal and group level members include the formerly incarcerated family, friends, mentors and role models, and peers. In particular, formerly

incarcerated individuals have been shown to rely on the support of “kin relationships” consisting of biological families and stepfamilies; their children and grandchildren; their romantic partners and the partners’ families; peers, friends, and acquaintances; and God (Valera, Chang, Hernández, & Cooper, 2015). Interpersonal support is essential for formerly incarcerated individuals because of its positive effects on one’s mental and physical health and their ability to share resources (Uchino, Cacioppo & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996).

“Primary” social groups include “significant others” (e.g., family) with social ties that are informal, intimate, and enduring (Valera et al., 2015). The presence of supportive relationships with one’s family members and romantic partners has been shown to be a “key factor” for reducing recidivism and improving prisoner reentry success for women with histories of incarceration (O’Brien & Young, 2006).

Mentors, probation officers, and other staff members in the criminal justice system are in a unique position to assist formerly incarcerated individuals to establish successful collaborations with institutional anchors and community anchors.

Mutual recognition of strengths

Recognizing each partner’s strengths and abilities to contribute toward a collaborative effort is a very important element of successful collaboration. Providers, clients, and community residents can advise one another about what services they need and how those services should be delivered. Engaging in this type of community practice will assist institutional anchors and community anchors in recognizing each other’s strengths, celebrating one another, and learning from each other, all in an effort to build successful collaborations to assist formerly incarcerated individuals.

Proposing a reentry model

As the number of offenders return to the community continues to grow, a model for successful prisoner reentry is critical to address the barriers they face reintegrating in a changing society. This study explored the key ingredients to offender reintegration among formerly incarcerated individuals. Specifically, the study was framed by the research question, “What are the support ingredients associated with successful offender reintegration?”

Methods

Overview of the study

A total of 20 racially and ethnic minority men and women with criminal justice histories participated in this study. The purpose of this study was to

identify the support ingredients to successful offender reintegration. Three focus groups were conducted to examine group-level offender reintegration strategies, and 15 semistructured interviews were carried out to describe individual-level reintegration planning activities. Participants were compensated with a \$20 money order for their research participation. To partake in the study, eligible individuals had to meet the following inclusion criteria: (a) must be 18–65 years old; (b) must be a New York resident; (c) must have been incarcerated; and (d) must agree to the interview and focus group discussion being audiotaped. Potential participants were excluded and referred to a health care provider if the first author determined through an in-person screening that a language, cognitive, or psychiatric impairment would interfere with the informed consent procedure. Participants also completed a sociodemographic questionnaire that included specialty health care questions. The Institutional Review Board at Columbia University approved the research procedures of the study.

Procedures

Data collection was conducted in 2014. Members of the research team included the primary author who has a social work, cancer health disparities, and HIV-prevention background; two master's degree level public health students; and two individuals with criminal justice backgrounds trained in recruiting vulnerable and hardly reached populations and qualitative research methods. A number of research strategies were used to recruit eligible study participants. Members of the team approached institutional anchors in the correctional setting. In addition, the first author collaborated with a criminal court organization that held bimonthly reentry support group meetings for newly released men and women. Several participants were also recruited through flyers and advertisements placed in criminal court buildings and social service agencies frequented by individuals involved in the criminal justice system. In addition, a digital flyer was circulated to an electronic listserv exclusively for people affected by the criminal justice system. As a result, the convenience sample comprised of twenty formerly incarcerated men and women.

Measures

Sociodemographic information

Sociodemographic information was assessed using a 16-question, fill-in-the-blank questionnaire. Participants were asked the following items: gender, age, employment status, income, race/ethnicity, number of children, marital status, age when they left school, which borough they lived in before incarceration, age of first incarceration, length of incarceration, type of facility

released from, years released from correctional facility, released to which borough, current residence, and specialty care, if any.

The interview and focus group instrument

Interviews ranged in length from 30–60 min, and were conducted in English or Spanish. The focus group discussions were approximately 60–120 min, and were carried out in English only. All interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in a private meeting space. The interview and focus group protocols were developed by the first author. [Table 1](#) describes the interview and focus group instrument.

The data collected were based on several important topics: returning to society (e.g., “Tell us about your coming home story”; “Were any appointments in the community made for you before your release? If so, what or who made this work or not work?”; and “How was your transition from prison to community?”); support received and expected (e.g., “Who did you ask for help when you were released?”; “What support did you expect before you came home?”); advice and suggestions to give to inmates who are about to return to society (e.g., “What do you wish you had known before you left prison?”; “What would you tell someone coming home for the first time?”); introspection (e.g., “What and when was your ‘a-ha’ moment?”); and coping strategies (e.g., “How did you cope?”; “Where did you receive help from?”) Additional probes were used to elaborate on major topics.

Semistructured interviews with each participant provided information on the challenges and barriers of offender reentry as well as insights to establishing healthy relationships and triumphs of successful return. To reduce any

Table 1. Semistructured interview and focus group instrument.

Topic	Question
General background	When did you come home (e.g., year)? Tell us about your coming home story?
Prerelease and postrelease planning	Who did you ask for help when you got out? [Prompt: “Did you receive support from friends, professional workers or family members to help you with this transition?”] Were any appointments in the community [prompts: medical care, mental health, social worker] made for you before your release? If so, what made this work ... or not work?
Supports	What do you wish you had known before you left prison or jail?
Personal epiphany	What support did you expect before you came? At what point did you decide you had to change? [Probe for a-ha moment.] Was it difficult? How was the transition? How did you cope (e.g., support group, tobacco use, relapse)? Did you have support? Where did you get the help from?
Advising others returning to the community	What would you tell people just coming home?

variation of the individual facilitator style, the first and third author conducted all three focus groups. Focus group discussions comprised of three to five study participants who either took part in the interview portion or were referred by another participant as someone who the researcher would not normally consider (Bernard, 2012). The focus group discussions allowed men and women to collectively delve deeper into the challenges of offender reintegration. The focus group discussions enabled participants to expound on each other's ideas (Krueger, 1994) and those discussions provided additional information about the meaning and strategies of offender reentry. Data saturation was reached by conducting multiple semistructured interviews and focus groups discussions. Findings from these multiple perspectives were then synthesized and triangulated to strengthen validity of the data (Denzin, 2012).

Qualitative coding and analysis

Digital recordings were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist, then transcripts were deidentified and uploaded into NVivo 10. Constructivist grounded theory approach was used to code and analyze the data (Charmaz, 2006). Open coding, theoretical, and constant comparative coding procedures were used to analyze the data (Glaser, 1992). Team members were immersed in the data and they coded the transcripts line-by-line or used the open coding strategy as the initial first step to identify codes. This process provided an opportunity to construct codes, identify those that overlapped with one another, collapsed them into unifying codes, and develop codes into categories (Charmaz, 2006). The codebook "offender reentry and support" was created which included the definitions of each category based on the appropriate use of the code. In terms of developing and refining the offender reentry and support codebook, team members read a handful of the interview and focus group transcripts and noted codes that remained constant across the transcripts. The team met several times to discuss their coding process, assess the level of coding agreement and examine any discrepancies that may have resulted. From this point forward two coders (the second and third author) coded all the interviews using the final version of the offender reentry and support codebook. When disagreements took place between coders, discrepancies were discussed with the first author until consensus was reached.

The next level of coding included theoretical coding; this process was used after codes were selected (Glaser, 1978; Holton, 2007). By using theoretical coding, relationships between the categories and major themes were identified. (Glaser, 1978). Theoretical saturation was achieved with the constant comparative method and used to compare interview data to focus group data (Glaser, 1992). This procedure confirmed codes, identify discrepancies between coders and created new codes that emerged from the study.

Lastly, team members used memo writing to capture initial thoughts and to develop a conceptual model of the study (Holton, 2007).

Trustworthiness of coding and analysis

Trustworthiness of the coding and data analysis procedures was achieved in several ways. First, multiple coders were used to code the same handful of transcripts and codes were reviewed at each staff meeting. Each coder identified common codes and any disagreements were discussed with the first author. Second, themes were reviewed with team members with criminal justice histories to confirm that the interpretation and presentation of the findings reflected the interviewees' realities thus minimizing bias in the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schutz, 1967). Third, coders wrote memos during data analyses that described their preconceived notions and assumptions about the data (Holton, 2007).

Findings

Offender reintegration is both complicated and a dynamic process. Using a constructivist grounded theory analysis, the data revealed the following multilevel ingredients or keys to offender reintegration: (a) linking offenders to society; (b) institutional and community anchors; (c) social supports; and (d) personal epiphany. In addition, we describe the keys to offender reintegration model to further illustrate the dynamic pathway from incarceration to release.

Sample characteristics

Participants comprised twenty men and women who formerly were incarcerated in a New York state prison or at Rikers Island, New York City's main jail complex. Most people in the sample were single (65%), with a mean age of 52 years old (range = 42–60). Four participants (22%) were unemployed; their income ranged from no income to \$87,000, with an average income of \$29,000. Fifteen identified as Black/African American, and five identified as Latino/Hispanic.

The length of incarceration varied from less than 2 years of jail time to 28 years in a state prison. Majority of the sample had been released for close to 12 years. In terms of health status, 5% reported receiving treatment for the following health care conditions: HIV, Type 2 diabetes, mental illness, hypertension, and sleep apnea.

Key 1: Linking offender to society

An increasing number of correctional facilities are striving to connect outgoing offenders with reentry programs that provide health care linkages and social

support services. Frequently, this means collaborating with community anchors such as reentry programs and community providers to schedule important appointments for the inmates before they are released. Unfortunately, prerelease planning was not done for the majority of the participants. One African American female participant (age 52; incarcerated nine years ago; served almost three years in jail), noted the following:

Researcher: Were there appointments in the community like medical care, mental health, social worker made for you before you were released?

Participant: No. None of them.

Researcher: None of them?

Participant: The only appointment that was made for me was parole. Show up to parole. Yeah, that was one of the issues that was most pressing. Not having any of those in place and having to wait for 45 days. I had parole stipulations that required me to go through a treatment program then find a job.

Another African American male, age 57, who spent less than two years in prison 13 years ago noted:

There was no discharging plan for me, nothing. An[d] each time I came home things got harder, and each time I came home I learned something different for the next time I came home 'cause it just became like a revolving door.

Overwhelmingly participants noted that no appointments (such as medical, mental health, or other social services) were set up prior to release, and almost all had community supervision requirements that mandated them to seek out those services immediately. A majority of the participants struggled with returning to the community creating a “revolving door.” Although it is known that collaboration between institutional and community anchors are effective in supporting offender reintegration (Armstrong et al., 2016; Small & McDermott, 2006), we know very little about comprehensive models for reintegration that would assist the criminal justice system and community partners in fostering collaboration to enhance prerelease programmatic activities.

Key 2: Institutional and community anchors

Offender reintegration has emerged as a pressing public health issue. Congressional leaders have begun applying criminal justice reform to reduce the large numbers of offenders incarcerated in federal, state, and local correctional facilities. In every state, practitioners, policymakers, and community stakeholders are considering how institutional and community anchors play an important role in facilitating the reintegration process of formerly incarcerated people (Nussbaum, 2011).

In this study, institutional and community anchors provided significant support to the participants who were released from prison or jail. For instance,

several women who were incarcerated at Rikers Island noted that they received support from social service agencies immediately upon release to the community. One participant described in detail how community anchors referred her to agencies that serve women affected by family violence. Those agencies manage her court proceedings and provided community referrals for drug addiction treatment. She stated, “After I came home I was pretty much given a lot of referrals, you know, and it all started through getting help from Agency A” (African American female, age 52, incarcerated 9 years ago and served almost 3 years in jail). Another participant indicated that a work release program provided financial security: “I was released to work release. So I came home, got a job working in a fast food restaurant” (African American male, age 55, length of prison 25 years and less than 3 years released).

A strong collaboration from institutional and community anchors is needed to create positive pathways for formerly incarcerated individuals (Armstrong et al., 2016). Participants noted that the New York City welfare office provided benefits, social services, and resources upon release to the community. One participant noted:

I took advantage of what the system could offer me. Like for example, the Department of Welfare and other programs that was in place showed me, because I knew I couldn't do it by myself. I knew the way I was living my life, I didn't know another life, how to change it, so I just listened and did what they asked me to do. ... I consider myself lucky in that sense. (Latino/Hispanic male, age 53, incarcerated in prison for 3 years and spent 1 year in jail; 11 years out of prison or jail)

Increasingly, institutional and community anchors engage in activities to advance criminal justice reform, promote access to employment and social service programs, and most importantly, improve the circumstances faced by individuals release from correctional facilities (Armstrong et al., 2016; Fontaine, Taxy, Peterson, Breaux, & Rossman, 2015). However, efforts are needed to intensify prerelease planning to ensure that the basic needs of returning offenders are met to reduce the possibility of recidivism.

Key 3: Social supports

Participants described supports that they expected and received during the period of reintegration. Participants indicated that they did not expect support from anyone, but wound up receiving support from multiple groups and social networks. Among those that received support, participants noted heavy reliance on family members, friends, mentors, and peers. Being able to connect with family members and friends aided their return to the community.

In Focus Group 3, one African American male, age 55, was going through the reintegration process for the first time after spending 25 years in a state prison. He stated that the first day of his released was still ingrained in his

mind. He described his reintegration as traumatic because he was homeless and released to his parole officer. Nonetheless, his family provided emotional and financial support. As he noted:

Well my support really came from my nephew and my younger brother, along with my immediate family. My nephew, my sister, and my two twin brothers that I have. They were there the entire time, as far as my first few weeks and months home. They were my support.

Another participant stated:

Majority of my friends work at agencies and ... we all meet together ... so basically I have friends all in the field, they're all successful. Even the people that I know from the prison system, they're all successful. Most of us are already off parole (African American male, age 42, spent 19 years in prison and 8 years in jail, less than 3 years of released from prison)

While an overwhelming number of the participants received support from family, friends, and peers, four interviewees expressed concern that they did not have any significant support during the initial months of reintegration. They were released without meaningful preparation to help with transition. For instance, this African American female, age 55, who spent 2 years in prison and 2 years in jail and has had no police contact for nearly 14 years, said:

I got caught with a dirty urine and the reason why was because, like, when I came home I wasn't connected to nothing. I mean, I just came home, I was in work release, and I was just back in my neighborhood. I had no support, nothing. It was just going to work release. I came home and just winded up back—right back where I started at. So, I relapsed and I went back upstate.”

Another interviewee noted that he did not have any support because most of his immediate family members passed away while he was in prison. He continued to say, “Everybody in my family on my mother and father’s side, my family—they like kind of shunned me away, so I really didn’t have nobody. I was on my own when I came out” (African American male, age 50, 25 years in prison and one year in jail and almost 25 years released). That being said, returning to the community from a correctional facility is a complicated transition for majority of the participants. Offenders without adequate social support and prerelease discharge planning are likely to struggle with this process and might be at great risk to recidivate.

Key 4: Personal epiphany

“Ah-ha”! The moment of epiphany that ignites the decision to change could be essential to understanding why some returning offenders are able to change their lifestyle and reintegrate successfully. One participant described

the affect epiphany had on his life: “Even today I still remember those moments, those ah-ha moments in life when you say wow this is different, and I’m different” (Latino male, age 55, incarcerated for 25 years and released less than 3 years ago). Upon reflection, all participants discussed how challenges of returning to society after long periods of incarceration spurred powerful realizations about lifestyle and identity.

For instance, one participant described his ah-ha moment in a time of desperation and homelessness. After being homeless he surrendered and asked for help from his brother, his daughter, and members of Narcotics Anonymous. He stated, “I had to recover from going to jail, too—not only from drugs, but from going to jail too” (African American male, age 57, spent less than 2 years in prison and 13 years since last incarceration). In addition, participants indicated that the moment of awareness was when they began to listen and pay attention to the daily struggles of reentry. One participant noted:

They had me training this person who was going to be my supervisor because I couldn’t apply for the job—all I had was a high school diploma so when I trained my supervisor that right there was like the straw that broke the camel’s back. (African American male, age 55, 25 years of prison and less than 2 years released)

Another African American male participant, age 49, who spent close to 2 years in jail and has had no police contact for 10 months, stated, “My aunt’s boyfriend, she wanted to change her life from prostitution and he beat her to death and I watched it. And I didn’t yell, scream, throw nothin’ at him before he delivered that death blow to her” was his ah-ha moment this was his reference point to change his life for the better. The majority of the participants experienced extreme hardships, several men noted that homelessness, drug addiction, family violence, and poverty were their personal hardship. In addition to personal epiphanies, in [Table 2](#) participants shared what they wish they would have known before leaving prison. In addition to [Table 2](#), [Table 3](#) provides suggestions or advice to those returning from prison or jail. By sharing their life lessons, participants hoped returning offenders could learn from their experiences, heed their suggestions, and avoid missteps along the way that could facilitate reincarceration.

The keys to the offender reintegration model

[Figure 1](#) demonstrates an offender reintegration model grounded in the perspective and lived experiences of previously incarcerated men and women. Perspectives from offenders who have reintegrated to the community are represented qualitatively as keys to reintegration. This model provides an opportunity to understand the dynamic and cyclic process of incarceration, release, and reentry.

Table 2. Prerelease planning: What do you wish you would have known before you left prison?

Participant no.	Response
1	I wish I would have known that living this lifestyle was more productive than trying to beat the system. I could've utilized the services prior, you know, because once I started doing positive things, doors started to open.
2	I wish I would have known that the whole process of trying to get HRA, training, and probation and recovery programs would be a mess.
3	I would say computer skills. Computer skills 'cause technology is the big thing out here.
4	A lot of things, you know. I wish I knew it; it would have been an easier transition if I knew where to go when I came out. You know like, I was homeless because my mother left, and I wish I knew where to go. It took me a long time to know where to go for help. I wish I already knew where to go.
5	I would tell the person who's going to get out to prepare himself. I think this thing is about being prepared. Some of us are ill prepared when we come out, some of us have some unrealistic expectations.
6	I wish I would become educated and to seek support.
7	That the reintegration barriers weren't going to be a piece of cake.
8	Well actually, I wish I would have held on, even when a lot of stuff happened because the harder I worked it seemed like nothing was working and I had to hold on.
9	If I had known that I was going home the first shot then I would have prepared more instead of just sitting around—going to programs, you know, going to school.
10	I wish I would have had everything set up.
11	I wish I would have known that there were a lot of myths running around and—when it came to the reentry process.
12	I wish I would have knows that after five year period of time incarcerated, there were numerous services that I needed. And, the first thing I needed was someone to talk to because I was exposed to people beating my self-worth out of me on a daily basis for a long period of time.
13	That I had a problem with drugs. I didn't understand that concept that I had a disease.
14	I wish I would have known that even though I felt like I paid my debt to society that it was going to follow me for the rest of my life. I wish I would have known that.
15	I wish I had never went there [prison] in the first place. It was the pits. What in the heck was I doing here? Oh my god, I didn't even believe they were really gonna open the gate. It seemed like a bad dream.
16	I wish I would have know that while I'm in there, it's dead thinking time. They had some educational stuff going in, but it's dead time. I don't know what to look for when I'm coming out because at this time you didn't expect to get anything.
16	I wish I would have known that a murderer or rapist or something like that yeah follows you and that everywhere you go you got to talk about.
17	Well I wish I could have known that life wasn't as complicated as I had made it. See I was in a denial state.
18	I wouldn't know what was normal.
19	I wish I knew what I know now. That's what I wish I knew. I wish I knew that I didn't have to mask my feelings through drugs. I wish I knew like what I needed to become fully self-supporting instead of just taking stuff from people that—that worked hard for their stuff. I mean, it's just a whole big—I don't know.
20	I wish I would have known the impact it would have on my future.

Illustrated in [Figure 1](#), support and programming needs ought to begin at the point of incarceration, extend throughout the release process, and be available to offenders long-term during the reentry process, so that permanent community reintegration could be possible. The keys to offender reintegration model allows institutional and community anchors to understand the cyclic process of incarceration and to address the barriers that lead to relapse, rearrest and recidivism. The pathway includes three phases of support,

Table 3. Advice for returning offenders.

Theme	Advice	Participant
Don't bend the rules	To get out of prison I had to convince myself that I needed to be in line with the rules that govern society, I needed to do what everyone else is doing.	Latino male; age 60; incarcerated 3 years and 6 months in jail
Become self-supporting	Become fully self-supporting instead of taking stuff from people that—that worked hard for their stuff 'cause if I worked hard for my stuff, I would know how it felt if it was taken away.	African American male; age 55; incarcerated 25 years
Focus on your legacy	I started to say if I had died today—if I die today, I said, how many people have I really touched in my life?	Latino male; age 60; incarcerated 3 years
Help others	Being a returning citizen and being profitable to other, helping others, especially those who are returning from prison and anyone else, male and female, to help people.	African American male; age 55; incarcerated 25 years
Be patient	I learned how to be patient to know that it takes time. One thing I learned, that all the people told me a lot but it was like you became who you become little by little, so you have to change little by little. So I learned that I had to take my time. I could not have everything when I wanted.	Latino male; age 53; incarcerated 3 years in prison and 1 year in jail
Desire to change	That's when I made a conscious decision to want to change that 'cause I didn't want—I didn't want my life to be meaningless.	Latino male; age 60; incarcerated 3 years and 6 months in jail
Break the cycle	I wanted to be a better individual—I knew I could be a better individual and I just put forth the effort to being that. I wanted to try to break that chain so when I came home I was like, "Okay this is it, I'm not going back to jail, I'm not getting high, I'm not doing none of this, this is ridiculous. This is just a waste of life." I realized while I was there was that it wasn't for me, I didn't belong there, I had been taught prior to going to the penal system instantly kicked in. I cried, I cleaned myself of all what I did and that's when I started seeing—living life on life's terms. That's when I started seeing things for what they are.	African American male; age 49; incarcerated 23 years in prison and 22 months in jail African American female; age 55; incarcerated 2 years in prison and 2 years in jail
Find mentors	They were assistant directors. They were directors. They were teachers. They were HR supervisors. I mean they all had really good jobs and they had cars and they had condos and so I made up my mind at that point and said okay, and all these women been in prison?! So I was like whatever they doing, I'm sticking with them and I'm going to do what they're doing so I can get what they got and that was my motto and so I stuck there and now I'm here.	Latino male; age 52; incarcerated 28 years African American female; age 52; incarcerated 2.5 years in jail African American male; age 60; incarcerated 2.2 years in prison and 7 months in jail

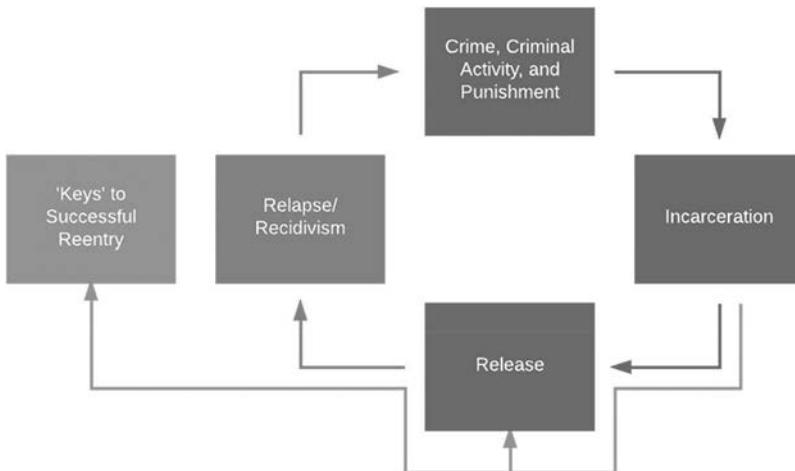


Figure 1. The keys to successful reentry model.

(a) incarceration, (b) release, and (c) permanent reintegration. Based on the qualitative findings, this pathway may be used to interrupt patterns of relapse, rearrest, and recidivism leading to risk-taking behaviors, potential for criminal activity, punishment, and, ultimately, reincarceration. Because successful and permanent community reintegration is complicated and dynamic, the keys to offender reintegration model is an extension of the literature on incarceration, release, and recidivism (Armstrong et al., 2016; La Vigne et al., 2008; Small & McDermott, 2006; Visher & Travis, 2003).

Discussion

This study interviewed male and female offenders who were between the ages of 42 and 60 to gather information about the types of reintegration tools that were helpful to them. Interestingly, the mean age of the participants was 52 years, indicating a small subsample of the correctional supervision population that are relatively older than those who are currently entering correctional supervision. On average, men and women who are under parole or probation are likely to be younger than this sample. Because the sample is considered older, this study confirms that middle age and older individuals returning to the community after an extensive period of incarceration may face additional burdens toward successful reintegration (Valera & Kratz, 2014).

The keys to offender reintegration model is most applicable to middle and older formerly incarcerated men and women because of the heavy reliance on community anchors that begins while in prison or jail, continues during the release process, and extends long term (Armstrong et al., 2016; Ferguson et al., 2016). Moreover, the findings revealed the following four keys to

offender reintegration: (a) linking offender to society; (b) institutional and community anchors; (c) social supports; and (d) personal epiphany.

Substantial research has shown lack of access to education, unemployment, and homelessness are factors that contribute to relapse of criminal behavior, leading to rearrest and recidivism (Dumont et al., 2013; Golembeski & Fullilove, 2005; Petersilia, 2001; Schnittker & John, 2007; Schnittker, Massoglia, & Uggen, 2011; Wilper et al., 2009). This study found institutional anchors provided critical foundation for, and improve the circumstances faced by, individuals released from correctional facilities. Given the stigma associated with incarceration and the difficulty returning offenders have securing housing, being gainfully employed, and seeking educational and vocational opportunities, those institutional and community anchors provide initial support and services upon release giving offenders a footing in the community. This study builds upon existing literature extolling the value of strong collaborations between the justice community and institutions outside prisons and jails in order to assist formerly incarcerated individuals (Armstrong et al., 2016; Windsor, Benoit, & Jemal, 2014). It is well established that programs and institutional policies supporting offender reintegration reduces the chance that they will relapse into criminal behaviors and commit additional crimes after their release (Angell, Matthews, Barringer, Watson, & Draine, 2014; Petersilia, 2001; Small & McDermott, 2006; Swaroop & Morenoff, 2005; Windsor et al., 2014) Building on this literature, this study identified features of a successful model to assist formerly incarcerated individuals. The study is unique in that it identifies the key components to offender reintegration by interviewing the individuals directly impacted by the correctional system: the offenders themselves.

Similar to findings from previous studies related to reentry and release (Armstrong et al., 2016; Valera et al., 2015), social support and meaningful relationships with family, friends, peers, and mentors were critical to connecting offenders to their community. Interestingly, support from family and friends was emphasized during incarceration and upon release, but relationships with peers and mentors who had been previously incarcerated and successfully reintegrated into society was emphasized as key motivation and support in the long term. We found that personal epiphanies were keys that helped most participants break from a cycle of reincarceration; however, the circumstances under which the participants experienced their personal epiphany varied widely. Some described epiphanies when they reached their “bottom” or moments of extreme struggle, while others described a positive and meaningful event triggering inspiration. Similarly, some experienced epiphanies while they were incarcerated, while others experienced them after released. Additionally, a personal epiphany seemed to be the most important indicator or key that enabled participants to successfully become a productive

member of their community, regardless of other burdens and barriers they faced.

Strengths and limitations

This study had several strengths and limitations. The strengths included the following: the methods and data collection procedures used in this study produced reliable and trustworthy findings. Data saturation was reached by conducting multiple semistructured interviews and focus groups. Findings from multiple perspectives were synthesized and triangulated to strengthen validity of the data (Denzin, 2012). A constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), was used to code and analyze the data, with the creation of a codebook over several team meetings. Trustworthiness of the coding and data analysis was achieved in several ways under the advisement of a strong and diverse research team.

The diversity of the research team was another strength of this study. Members of the research team comprised a social worker, public health practitioners, and two individuals with criminal justice backgrounds. Another strength of the study included interviewing participants following a period of release and after a certain amount of time, in order to fully capture the individuals' ongoing and changing needs postincarceration (Leverentz, 2006).

In terms of limitations, this study had a small sample size, with only 20 formerly incarcerated men and women. This small sample size and the absence of younger formerly incarcerated individuals precludes generalizations. Another limitation in this study was its gathering of data from jails and prisons in only one location—New York. The focus on one location makes it difficult to generalize the findings to former inmates returning to communities outside of New York. Correctional settings in other areas of the United States are likely to have different criminal justice policies for inmates during and after incarceration.

Implications for further research

Future research ought to focus on other settings such as rural communities and younger formerly incarcerated individuals, as those studies would provide additional insight into expanding the reintegration model further. In addition, other research studies could focus on compiling additional key ingredients for offender reintegration, combining it with innovative research methods (e.g., daily diaries, social network strategies), and perhaps studies involving inmates in other areas of the United States. Additional research is needed to implement this model into practice with formerly incarcerated individuals, and subsequent studies should be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness (what works for whom, when does it work, and what does not work) of the

model from the perspectives of the former inmates, justice community staff, and community leaders/collaborators.

Conclusion

In conclusion, gathering information about successful offender reintegration from the perspective of the individuals most affected by repeated criminal activity and recidivism—the offenders themselves—is an important and unique contribution to understanding the path through the criminal justice system.

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