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Reform or Revolution: How Organizational Ideology Impacts Community Building with Formerly Incarcerated Populations

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Abstract

The United States faces a crisis not only of mass incarceration, but also of mass disinvestment in formerly incarcerated individuals. The literature has demonstrated the importance of community and social capital in supporting individuals during the reentry process, but little is known about the ways in which organizations approach building these networks of community support. In this paper, I explore the question of how organizations' ideologies regarding the carceral system, whether abolitionist or reformist, affect their methods of developing community networks among those impacted by incarceration. Using a qualitative case study of four community-based organizations (CBOs) in the city of Chicago, including 13 semi-structured interviews, I find that organizations' ideologies affect their priorities for and approach toward individuals, relationships, power structures, and community. I argue that characteristics of these ideologies—including their orientation to the state, understanding of the source of participants' challenges, and vision for long-term success—lead to differences in how such organizations approach community building. These findings give insight into different approaches for balancing pragmatic, economic priorities with social-emotional and political needs, ultimately developing a useful typology for organizations and policymakers who value building relationships with formerly incarcerated people as a key reentry strategy.

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Introduction

About two million people in the United States live behind bars, an increase of approximately 500 percent over the past 40 years (The Sentencing Project). This system of mass incarceration creates a crisis of how to handle the large number of people exiting prisons each year. Over 600,000 people leave prison annually, and these numbers will only rise if current trends continue (US Dept. of Justice). This paper contributes to a body of literature which explores how the reentry process can better support those who have previously been imprisoned; however, unlike much of the existing research, I have chosen to approach this topic with a lens of communal responsibility and focus on lessons learned from how community-based organizations (CBOs) are already supporting this population through the development of social capital. In this paper, I use the case of reentry-focused organizations to ask the following question: how do organizations' reformist or abolitionist ideologies affect methods of community building to support those impacted by the carceral system?

Significant gaps exist in federal, state, and local policy designed to support formerly incarcerated citizens. From housing to employment to mental health services, those who have previously been incarcerated face structural barriers to their success. While there exist some policies to aid this population, such as job training programs and housing vouchers, these individuals' communities are often forced to fill the gaps where the government has not provided sufficient resources for a successful transition out of prison. For example, family members provide temporary housing, friends connect each other to job opportunities, and groups of formerly incarcerated people provide emotional support for one another. Amidst this landscape, CBOs are important players in service-provision, advocacy, and network-building to support formerly incarcerated people.

Much scholarship and media has explored the issues facing formerly incarcerated people through a moralizing lens of personal responsibility and failure. When an individual recidivates or otherwise demonstrates a negative reentry outcome, discourse has often focused on the ways in which individuals have failed to "redeem" themselves, proving their "criminal" character. In contrast, I approach this research with a lens of communal and political responsibility; I explore the work of organizations in Chicago to better understand how networks of community support are created and maintained to meet the needs of those directly impacted by incarceration.

Within the body of organizations who focus on mass incarceration as an issue, there are two primary ideological stances: reformism and abolitionism. Generally, while abolitionists seek to dismantle the carceral system, reformists seek to improve it, and in later sections I will elaborate on the details of these theories. Organizations' ideologies regarding the carceral system influence not only their broad ideals, but also their practical structures and day-to-day activities. While it is clear that both types of organizations develop social capital—a term which refers to webs of relationships, feelings of interpersonal trust, and resources gained through social ties (Poteyeva 2023)—there is a dearth of literature comparing these two approaches in the organizational setting, and this research seeks to begin filling this gap.

This paper explores the question of how organizations' ideologies regarding the carceral system, whether abolitionist or reformist, affect their methods of developing community networks and interpersonal relationships with those directly impacted by the carceral system. I argue that characteristics of these ideologies—including their orientation to the state, view of the source of the issues participants' face, and vision for long-term success—lead to differences in how they approach community building. If relational ties and social capital are essential components of successful reentry post-prison, and CBOs are a primary channel for the

development of these relationships, then research about the methods these organizations use for community building is essential for understanding how both organizations and policymakers can better support formerly incarcerated individuals.

I conduct a comparative case study of two CBOs with abolitionist views and two with reformist views, based on 13 semi-structured interviews with staff members, to evaluate the strategies and methods these organizations use to develop community networks and social capital. Understanding methodological differences related to organizations' ideology is important because it can bring attention to different approaches of working with formerly incarcerated community members. This can serve as a guide to other organizations and governmental programs interested in a community-centered reentry approach.

Ultimately, I find two overarching approaches to relationship building. The *reformist approach* is predicated on a view of formerly incarcerated individuals as engaged in a continual process of personal reform and emphasizes professional skill building. The *abolitionist approach* is predicated on a view of formerly incarcerated individuals as victims of state violence and emphasizes collective healing and activism. However, these are analytical generalizations, and there is nuance within this typology given the fact that carceral ideology exists on a spectrum. Within these umbrella categories, I establish five sub-typologies—viewing individuals as *reformed people vs. victims of the state*, developing *client vs. friend relationships*, working within *hierarchical vs. egalitarian power structures*, understanding the purpose of community as *changing behavior vs. healing and building power*, and empowering individuals through a *pragmatic vs. visionary approach*—which offer greater nuance and granularity to the overarching typology.

My research offers several contributions to the literature. This study is the first of its kind to use qualitative methods to compare organizations with different carceral ideologies as it relates to community building. Although there has been substantial research on the importance of social capital in the reentry process, there remain gaps in literature that explores the ways in which organizations build said social capital, and what variables, such as ideology, impact the methods of community building. This paper aims to fill this research gap and offers insights into the links between ideology and method, which can provide a useful foundation for comparative analysis in the field of incarceration-related organizing.

Background

Among those who identify mass incarceration as a problem in the US, there are those who advocate for prison reform and those who advocate for prison abolition as a solution. There is a spectrum of ideologies between these two poles, but for analytical purposes, I create a reformist-abolitionist dichotomy to classify individuals and organizations, with certain caveats. While imperfect, these categories serve as a useful analytic, operating as what Weber (2012) refers to as "ideal types." Weber argues that it is impossible to establish a concept that perfectly explains an empirical reality; however, the development of so-called ideal types allows social scientists to better understand an empirical reality, through a comparison of reality to the ideal type, which may lead to discoveries (Weber 2012).

Reformist Ideology

Reformism as an ideology relies on the idea that the prison system has fundamental benefits and utilitarian purposes and that the goal should be reforming and updating—rather than

abolishing and reconstructing—the criminal justice system. Advocates of prison reform highlight four primary purposes of prisons: deterrence, incapacitation, retribution, and rehabilitation (Mackenzie 2001). In other words, discouraging criminal behavior, depriving people of the capacity to commit crimes, punishing those who have committed a criminal act, and changing the thinking and behavior of incarcerated persons to prevent them from engaging in similar behavior in the future (Mackenzie 2001).

The idea of the prison as a setting for rehabilitation can be traced back to Enlightenment ideas. The carceral system reflected a belief in the potential for human progress at the level of the individual (Davis 2003). Historically, prison has been conceptualized by some thinkers as an opportunity for self-reflection. In *The State of the Prisons*, John Howard, a leading Protestant proponent of penal reform in mid-18th century England, advocated for imprisonment as an occasion for religious self-reflection and self-reform (Howard 1777).

A plethora of contemporary scholarship highlights potential methods and programs for improving the rehabilitative aspects of the prison system. Some scholars discuss the importance of rehabilitation related to positive personal change, focusing particularly on therapies designed to promote forgiveness (Day et al. 2008). Educational programs in prisons have been a common topic of discussion, including efforts to expand access to higher education and job training programs for incarcerated individuals in order to improve outcomes post-imprisonment (Pelletier and Evans 2019; Davis 2019; Gordon and Weldon 2003).

Prison reformists recognize serious flaws in the system as it exists, and advocate for the implementation of a variety of changes, including improving the quality of care in prisons, implementing sentencing reform, and increasing access to employment for formerly incarcerated people (Subramanian et al. 2020). Various prison reform efforts have seen some levels of

success, such as efforts to reduce the use of solitary confinement (Lartey 2023). People at different points on this ideological spectrum may advocate for different types and scales of reform, yet all agree that total abolition of the system is currently either undesirable or infeasible.

Abolitionist Ideology

Critical Resistance, a national organization founded by notable abolitionist thinkers Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, defines abolition of the prison industrial complex as "a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment" and as "both a practical organizing tool and a long-term goal" (Critical Resistance 2023).

There is no definitive agreement in existing research about the temporal origin of the abolitionist movement. However, the movement began to take hold more widely in the US in the 1960s when police and incarceration were increasingly used as tools of containment and control of Black radicals and Black communities in general (Taylor 2021). The prison abolition movement in the US claims to have roots in the movement for the abolition of slavery, as the institution of slavery and mass incarceration of Black Americans are genealogically linked (Davis et al. 2022).

Although there is a diversity of perspectives that fall under the broad umbrella of abolition, there are some specific values and goals that the literature has identified as key elements of the ideology. Abolitionist ideology rests on a criticism of the prison industrial complex, arguing that mass imprisonment is linked more to the agendas of corporations and politicians than to the persistence of crime (Davis 2003). Prison abolition is also closely linked to critiques of racism, positing that the prison system is inherently constructed in racist ways, and

the racialization of prison populations is structural, rather than coincidental (Davis 2003). Rather than implementing small-scale, individual reforms, abolitionists seek a large-scale abandonment of the carceral system as it exists, coupled with policy changes that eliminate the conditions, such as poverty and disinvestment, that are said to lead to incarceration.

Thinkers and organizations rooted in abolitionist philosophy imagine alternatives to the contemporary prison system that involve a mosaic of strategies and services such as revitalisation of the education system, a health system providing free physical and mental care, decriminalization of drug use and sex work, and a justice system based on reconciliation rather than retribution (Davis 2003). Rather than proposing a single "substitute" for prisons, abolitionist thinkers envision a society where prisons are unnecessary, one in which power and wealth is more equitably distributed and communities are accountable for supporting and rehabilitating those who have committed illegal acts (Waskow 1972). Gilmore, a geographer, organizer, and scholar, emphasizes that "abolition isn't just absence [...] Abolition is a fleshly and material presence of social life lived differently." In other words, abolition is not only composed of negative projects, such as the dismantling of the carceral state, but is also focused on constructive approaches such as expanding social services and building the power of organized labor (Gilmore 2022, 261).

Carceral Ideologies in Conversation

Abolitionists argue that the prison system is fundamentally broken and in need of dismantling rather than "reforming" or "improving." Nevertheless, most abolitionists acknowledge the need to create more humane prison environments in the short-term while working toward long-term decarceration goals (Davis 2003) as well as to implement "negative"

or “non-reformist” reforms, which are abolitionist in nature because they contribute to the goals of decarceration and the dismantling of the carceral state (Mathiesen 2014). Importantly, abolitionists argue that frameworks relying solely on prison reform (specifically “positive” or “reformist” reforms) ultimately bolster the prison system by rendering it more expansive, flexible, and legitimate (Byrd 2016). Meanwhile, reformists dismiss abolitionist ideals as “utopian” and highlight the need for immediate relief for those suffering under the carceral system (Shelby 2022). Reform-minded thinkers also question the lack of viable alternatives to the current prison system proposed by abolitionists (Bagaric, Hunter, and Svilar 2021).

Because ideology exists on a spectrum, abolitionists and reformists may share many critiques of the carceral system, and may be similar in as many ways as they are different. If individuals or organizations lie closer to the middle of the spectrum, they may integrate various beliefs and theories from both reformist and abolitionist thinkers. Fundamentally, these camps are distinguished by the fact that reformists believe in a need for some form of punitive carceral system, while abolitionists do not.

Literature Review

Challenges for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals

Formerly incarcerated people face extreme challenges as they work to find stability after surviving the prison system. The literature identifies the lack of stable housing as one of the central challenges for formerly incarcerated individuals. The homelessness rate for those who have been to prison is nearly seven times higher than the rate among the general public (Couloute 2018). In Chicago specifically, 60 percent of unsheltered men and 58 percent of women report being previously incarcerated in jail or prison (Metropolitan Planning Council

2019). Various structural impediments and policies, or lack thereof, contribute to this crisis, including discrimination from public housing authorities and private landlords as well as a general lack of affordable housing (Couloute 2018).

Another challenge identified by the literature is difficulty in securing stable employment. Individuals with criminal records have significantly worse employment outcomes than their peers who have never faced incarceration. One study estimates that formerly incarcerated people are unemployed at a rate of over 27 percent; this rate is nearly five times higher than the overall US unemployment rate and is higher than the overall US unemployment rate during any historical period (Couloute and Kopf 2018). This is, in large part, due to structural barriers to employment for this population. Not only do some employers discriminate on the basis of applicants' criminal records, but formerly incarcerated individuals also generally have less access to educational opportunities, life conditions that are conducive to stable employment, and networks of potential employers (Lindsay 2020). The impacts of a criminal record on employment affect those of various identities in different ways; formerly incarcerated Black women experience the highest unemployment levels, whereas formerly incarcerated white men experience the lowest (Couloute and Kopf 2018), demonstrating the intersectionality of gender and race with one's relationship to the criminal justice system.

Formerly incarcerated individuals also disproportionately experience poor mental health and quality of life outcomes. Quantitative findings have shown significant associations between incarceration and higher levels of psychological distress, increased severity of depressive and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, and delayed mental health treatment (Addison et al. 2022). In addition, a 2022 study found that suicide risk was 62 percent higher among formerly incarcerated individuals compared with the general population (Morgan et al. 2022).

Those leaving a prison setting face a variety of challenges—structural and otherwise—in obtaining quality healthcare, such as difficulty scheduling follow-up appointments soon after release, lack of insurance, reduced health literacy, stigmatization, and economic disadvantage (Eisenstein et al. 2020).

Community Ties and Social Capital Post-Incarceration

Numerous studies have demonstrated the importance of social ties in the experience of formerly incarcerated people. Strong family networks have been shown to improve employment outcomes for formerly incarcerated individuals, which may in turn reduce recidivism (Berg and Huebner 2011). Community organizations can also play similar roles. Connolly and Granfield (2017) have studied the role of religious organizations in providing services to formerly incarcerated community members, finding that, in the absence of strong family or friend support networks, faith-based organizations can play an important role in supporting formerly incarcerated individuals through the reentry process. These studies highlight how networks of community support—whether family-based or not—have positive effects on quality of life outcomes for those transitioning back into communities post-prison.

Community networks develop social capital, a term which is characterized by three dimensions: interconnected webs of relationships between individuals and groups, feelings of trust that characterize these ties, and resources or benefits that are gained and transferred through social ties and participation (Poteyeva 2023). Gittell and Vidal (1998) emphasize the importance of social capital for individuals in low-income and marginalized communities. Community organizations can create and mediate social capital, acting as links between individuals and various financial, technical, social, and political resources (Gittell and Vidal 1998), as well as

developing relationships and systems of emotional and material support within the organization. A study about Chicago-area reentry programs and experiences found that only 16 percent of formerly incarcerated research participants reported belonging to a neighborhood organization, such as a church group, peer support group, sports team, or recreation club (Visher and Farrell 2005). However, this research does not directly speak to the role of nonprofit CBOs, which are major players in providing services and building community among formerly incarcerated individuals.

Community Responsibility and Organizing

Some literature has criticized the individualistic approach that pervades reentry discourse in the US. Byrd (2016) highlights how discourse centered on ideas of personal responsibility posits reentry as a process in which the state "intervenes within the souls of the offender," teaching responsibility and economic productivity to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals. As an alternative, she offers a view of reentry as a "collective process of political struggle" — one which employs community accountability methods and takes into account structural and political barriers to successful reentry (Byrd 2016).

Reentry, as it is practiced in many organizations today, involves risk assessments to determine individuals' likelihood of criminogenic behavior and recidivism. In doing so, some argue that this keeps the system in a process of individual-level analysis, relying on the idea that crime is an issue "of individual pathology" (American Friends Service Committee 1971). Rather than considering the structural elements of inequality and poverty that contribute to the presence of criminal behavior, these elements are depoliticized and translated into "an individualized deficiency within the soul of the offender" (Byrd 2016).

Community building and organizing as a method to assist with reentry operates in an alternative paradigm, one in which collectives are able to influence individual outcomes and networks create interdependent systems of support (Fox 2016; Rojas Durazo 2011; Editors of *Social Justice* 2011). Organizing theorist Marshall Ganz describes “power to,” or interdependency, as an exchange that enhances two people or groups’ combined power (Ganz 2004). Rather than assessing outcomes in a purely individualistic manner, the literature has begun to create new paradigms of communal responsibility and organizing that operate through strengthening the resources, trust, and power of collectives.

Religious organizations have often been identified as a site of community building for formerly incarcerated people. In case studies of two faith-based civic groups in Chicago, Orozco Flores and Cossyleon (2016) found that these organizing spaces were able to reframe the problems faced by formerly incarcerated people from individual to collective and political. This ultimately changed the perspectives of members and facilitated political engagement for incarceration-related legislative reforms (Orozco Flores and Cossyleon 2016).

CBOs are also key sites for the development of power and social capital for those going through the reentry process. According to Davis et al. (2022), organizations are playing a major role in shifting power dynamics, developing new vocabularies, and imagining alternatives to the prison system as it exists today, in Chicago and beyond. CBOs are therefore a critical unit of analysis in order to explore methods of community-centered approaches to reentry.

Organizational Operations

The literature highlights the value in approaching organizations as a unit of study and notes the importance of structural analysis in understanding the functioning of these groups.

Organizations prove useful as a site of analysis due to their nature as not only contexts for the behavior of individual actors, but also as actors in their own right. Social processes, such as communication, socialization, and decision making, tend to be more highly formalized in organizations compared to other social groups. Therefore, studying organizations provides not only useful knowledge for understanding the operations of organizations themselves, but also for expanding sociological knowledge that can reveal insights about dynamics in other social groups and contexts (Scott 2003), including governmental processes.

Organizations are key actors for developing community capacity, a measure of "the interaction of human capital, organizational resources, and social capital existing within a given community that can be leveraged to solve communal problems and improve or maintain the well being of that community" (Chaskin et al. 2001, 7). To develop this community capacity, organizations serve a variety of functions, including producing goods and services, providing access to resources and opportunities, leveraging and brokering external resources, fostering the development of human capital, creating community identity, and supporting community advocacy and exertion of power (Chaskin et al. 2001). Organizations' ideology and self-conception can influence which of these functions are more central to their mission.

Organizational structure also has relevance for a group's activities and outcomes. In an experiment, Carzo and Yanouzas (1969) found that groups with a tall structure (more hierarchical) performed significantly better on performance metrics than groups with a flat structure (less hierarchical) and took less time to resolve conflict. However, the amount of time taken to complete decisions did not differ significantly between tall and flat structures (Carzo and Yanouzas 1969). There is a need for further research analyzing the impact of structure and hierarchy on other outcome variables, such as culture, community building, and inclusion.

The language and vocabulary prevailing in the organizational setting is an additional element relevant for understanding organizations' operations and ideologies. Bartunek and Moch (1987) discuss "organizational schemata" which, they argue, generate shared meanings or frames of reference for organizations. Organizational schemata are a shared epistemic resource, such as language, that enables goals and pursuits to be shared collectively (Bartunek and Moch 1987). Language can, therefore, have profound effects on organizations due to its nature as a channel for shared understanding and a tool for individuals' inclusion or exclusion in institutional knowledge and processes. Ideology is one of these shared organizational understandings that can shape, and be reflected through, language.

Organizational Ideology

Organizational theorists view ideologies as ideas shared among a group that cannot be fully understood without taking into account social and organizational contexts (Beyer, Dunbar, and Meyer 1988). Ideologies impact how social groups behave and are often maintained by a particular group or class, which may encompass the entirety of an organization, or may differ based on one's level of power. The literature suggests that ideology in organizations can be used to legitimize goals and authority, as well as to link individuals and the organization through shared beliefs and values (Hartley 1983). This means that ideologies are relatively stable and can have strong organization-level effects on priorities and methods, among other goals and behaviors (Beyer, Dunbar, and Meyer 1988).

Some scholars have begun to analyze how organizations' ideologies affect the ways they address the issue of mass incarceration. Zhandarka Kurti and Jarrod Shanahan developed the concept of the "carceral nonprofit" to refer to organizations which advocate to expand carceral

structures under the guise of reform. A substantial body of literature has explored the ways in which reformist organizations are in fact expanding the reach of the carceral system, such as advocating for the building of smaller and more "humane" prisons (Kurti and Shanahan 2021; Byrd 2016). In Discipline and Punish, Michel Foucault explains that the prison reform movement emerged alongside the prison itself, finding that "The movement for reforming the prisons, for controlling their functioning is not a recent phenomenon. It does not even seem to have originated in a recognition of failure. Prison 'reform' is virtually contemporary with the prison itself: it constitutes, as it were, its programme" (Foucault 1977, 234). Despite these links between reformist groups and the carceral system, some researchers point out the importance of organizations prioritizing short-term reform goals and meeting the immediate needs of formerly incarcerated people (Lehrer 2013) rather than over-emphasizing long-term abolitionist ideals.

Abolition-oriented organizations tend to approach their work in a way that utilizes community accountability methods rather than relying on the state to transform the conditions associated with incarceration, and brings those who have previously been imprisoned to the forefront of their movements (Byrd 2016). Because reformist organizations are working within the system as it exists today, they are more likely to have allies in positions of political power, and to receive government or foundation funding, than more radical abolitionist groups, which tend to rely on grassroots funding and mutual aid (Guilloud and Cordery 2007).

An organization's attitude toward fundamental questions about the role of prisons and other carceral structures influences not only which policies an organization advocates for, but also how they approach direct work with those impacted by incarceration. This, however, remains underexplored. The stated and unstated ideologies of organizations and community organizers may have important implications for the ways they approach community building, and

this is important to understand in the context of those working in the organizational space around reentry.

Research Design and Methods

Setting

This research explores the question of how organizations' ideologies regarding the carceral system, whether abolitionist or reformist, impact their community building approaches. I focus specifically on Chicago, a city with a rich history of organizing to resist and reform systems of incarceration and policing. Through focusing on organizations in this particular urban setting, I provide an in-depth case study in the context of a city which, in many ways, reflects the inequalities and incarceration-related traumas of the country as a whole, while offering a complex and active community organizing and nonprofit scene as a site of analysis.

Chicago has a complex history related to policing that has resulted in a highly active community organizing landscape related to the carceral system. Under Commander Jon Burge, the Chicago Police Department tortured over 120 people, predominantly Black men (Chicago Torture Justice Center). These incidents largely took place between 1972 and 1991 and were followed by decades of organizing by torture survivors' family members, lawyers, and community members to convict perpetrators of torture and to gain reparations for victims (Chicago Torture Justice Center). This history has contributed to the development of numerous community groups and organizations working to support those affected by systems of police violence and incarceration, making Chicago a particularly salient site of research into these community networks.

The murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 set into motion a series of protests, as well as looting and clashes with the police, across Chicago. As in other cities across the US, this period of unrest sparked greater individual and organizational engagement, across diverse populations, in efforts to resist systems of police and carceral violence (Fisher and Rouse 2022).

In terms of the carceral landscape of Chicago, the Cook County Department of Corrections (CCDOC) is one of the largest single-site jails in the country, occupying 96 acres and eight city blocks (Cook County Sheriff). The Metropolitan Correctional Center Chicago is an administrative-security level federal prison located in Chicago housing approximately 500 male and female inmates (Federal Bureau of Prisons). Many individuals convicted in the city are also incarcerated at facilities in other areas of Illinois (IL Dept. of Corrections).

In 2019, Cook County had an incarceration rate of 668 people per 100,000 residents ages 15 to 64. This was slightly higher than the overall Illinois incarceration rate, but lower than the nationwide average (Vera 2023). Black residents are disproportionately represented in the carceral system in Illinois: while Black people make up just 14 percent of the state's population, they comprise 53 percent of the state's imprisoned population (Prison Policy Initiative). Studies from The Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority Center for Justice Research and Evaluation found that Illinois' prisons and jails house a significant number of individuals with PTSD symptoms and prior histories of trauma (Adams, Houston-Kolnik, and Reichert 2017).

The city government in Chicago has prioritized reentry efforts both under Mayor Lori Lightfoot and Mayor Brandon Johnson, including appointing a Director of Reentry for the city and convening a "Working Group on Returning Residents" to discuss the challenges faced by formerly incarcerated individuals and to propose policy and programmatic recommendations ("About the City" 2023). The city offers some services, such as workforce training programs and

legal assistance, for formerly incarcerated individuals ("Resources for Reentry" 2023). However, non-governmental organizations and community organizing groups remain crucial sites of service provision and community building.

The choice to focus on Chicago as a research setting is a methodological one. Focusing on a single city allows for all participating organizations to share some history and characteristics. Chicago's past and present makes it a city that is uniquely active and engaged in prison industrial complex-related organizing, with a diversity of organizations of differing ideologies. Abolitionist literature points to Chicago as a hub of organizing against the prison industrial complex (Kaba 2021; Davis et al. 2022), and Davis et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of focusing on a particular location to surface the importance of small, local actions and networks and to document the ongoing impact of these collectives.

Methods

Between December 7 and February 28, I conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with staff at Chicago-based organizations with the intention of learning about their strategies and methods for building community networks and social capital among those impacted by the carceral system.

Participants

For this research I focused on four nonprofit organizations who work directly with people affected by incarceration. Two of these organizations—The REAL Youth Initiative and Abolition Collective—have a more abolition-oriented philosophy, while two—Teamwork Englewood and The Inner City Muslim Action Network—approach their work through a reform-oriented lens.

The criteria for an organization being included in my study was that it is located in Chicago, has been active for at least two years, and works directly with those impacted by incarceration.

In order to participate in this research, interviewees had to be currently or recently employed in these organizations in a capacity that involves working with those who have experienced incarceration. I interviewed two to four people from each organization, in consideration of the group's size and responsiveness to recruitment efforts (e.g. I interviewed two people from The REAL Youth Initiative, which has only three full-time staff, while interviewing four people from The Inner City Muslim Action Network, which has over 100 staff members).[1] Demographically, my interview participants were 69 percent Black, 15 percent white, 8 percent Asian, and 8 percent mixed race. In terms of age, 46 percent were adults between 18–26 years old, 23 percent between 27–39, and 31 percent between 40–60.

For confidentiality purposes, interviewees were given the opportunity to be referred to with a pseudonym; three of the 13 participants chose to do so. In addition, staff at one organization elected for the group to have a pseudonym in the final research product.

Organizations

Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN) – Reformist

IMAN was established in 1997 on the southside of Chicago, and has since expanded throughout the city as well as opening a new office in Atlanta, Georgia in 2016. They primarily serve residents of the Englewood neighborhood. Their Green Reentry program offers housing services and construction job training for returning citizens. They have over 100 staff members and receive funding through a variety of grants, including a $1 million investment from the city of Chicago to fund their Green Reentry program ("City Council Approves" 2020).

[1] A full list of interviewees is provided in the appendix.

Teamwork Englewood (Teamwork) – Reformist

Teamwork Englewood was established in 2003. The organization is located in the Englewood neighborhood, but offers reentry services—primarily employment and legal services—to any returning citizens in the Chicago area. They have over 30 staff members and receive funding through a variety of sources, particularly through grants from the city and state.

REAL Youth Initiative (REAL) – Abolitionist

REAL was founded in 2018 by two formerly incarcerated young people. The organization works with those who are currently incarcerated in Illinois youth prisons, as well as formerly incarcerated individuals returning to Chicago. They have three full-time staff members and receive funding from several foundations, as well as the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice.

Abolition Collective (pseudonym) – Abolitionist

Abolition Collective works with currently and formerly incarcerated individuals in the Chicago area. The group runs educational classes inside prisons, as well as arts and education programs on the outside. Other details have been omitted for the sake of organizational anonymity.

Procedures

I primarily used public information from organizations' websites to find interviewees who met my criteria. I recruited interviewees via phone and email, or social media when other forms of contact were not available.

I conducted 13 semi-structured interviews as my primary form of data collection, each of which lasted approximately 60–75 minutes. These were semi-structured because part of the

research goal was to evaluate which topics the participants themselves deem important (Mashuri et al. 2022). I asked participants questions from a loosely formatted list and asked appropriate follow up questions as needed. Interviews took place via Zoom, with both me and the interviewee in a private place, and were audio recorded, with consent.

I made space for participants to ask me any questions about my research so that they felt they understood what they were participating in. In an effort to disrupt the power hierarchy between researcher and subject, I aimed to remain open to answering questions instead of just asking them, attempting to develop a bi-directional flow of "power-knowledge" (Hughes 2018).

Following my interviews, I used Otter.ai software to transcribe and then reviewed and edited the transcripts by hand. I used Dedoose software to qualitatively code and analyze the interview data, coding key themes and ideas in each interview to identify patterns.

Qualitative Data

Rather than examining the breadth of the phenomenon of interest, I am interested in focusing on depth; I aim to acquire in-depth qualitative data that can illuminate the *how* behind organizations' community building efforts. Qualitative interview data is particularly relevant for answering *how* and *why* questions, establishing taxonomies or typologies, and unpacking complex processes, all of which are at play in my research (Rubin 2021). I adopt a case study logic, as distinct from a sampling logic (Yin 2002), in which the objective is saturation rather than representative generalizability (Luis Small 2009). In accordance with Mitchell (1983), I pursue extrapolation based on analysis rather than on representativeness. Instead of collecting a statistically significant sample size, I am interested in developing quality relationships with participants that generate rich interview data and, ultimately, illuminate the connections between

ideology, method, and the development of social capital in Chicago-based organizations that work with those impacted by incarceration.

Ethics and Positionality

This study was approved by the University of Chicago Institutional Review Board (IRB). I sent interviewees a consent form before the interview and, because all interviews were conducted over Zoom, I provided participants with a digital copy of the consent form, read it aloud, and obtained verbal consent. I explained that their participation is entirely voluntary, and offered the use of a pseudonym in the final research product.

I engaged in this research with the understanding that I occupy a position of power as a student at the University of Chicago. The university has a complicated history related to research and relationships with its broader Chicago community, including many instances of exploitation and extraction. With this in mind, I aimed to develop reciprocal relationships through asking participants what their organizations most need (volunteers, administrative support, etc.) and, if feasible, to support my participating organizations on their own terms.

Findings

My qualitative coding and thematic analysis has highlighted patterns that distinguish between how reformist and abolitionist organizations in Chicago approach community building. I start by analyzing the ideologies of participating organizations. I then describe and analyze several key findings regarding the ways in which ideology affects how organizations view the individual, build relationships, structure the organization and distribute power, approach community, and empower those impacted by incarceration. Characteristics of these

ideologies—including their orientation to the state, view of the source of the issues participants' face, and vision for long-term success—lead to differences in how they approach community building. Ultimately, I develop a typology of two overarching ways to approach the work of building community with those impacted by the carceral system.

Organizational Ideology

My interviews with staff members revealed each of the four organizations' ideological orientations. One of the two abolitionist groups self-identifies as such on their website, and staff members at both were explicit about their own abolitionist ideologies. The reformist groups do not self-identify as such in any of their public materials, perhaps because reformism is less of a cohesive political identity, and is often identified in contrast to abolitionism, but interviews with staff members made their reformist orientation evident.

As stated earlier, I use this dichotomy of reform and abolition as a useful analytical lens, with an understanding of the fact that carceral ideology is a nuanced concept that lies on a spectrum rather than a simple black and white dichotomy. Henceforth, when I refer to "reformist groups," "abolitionist organizations," etc., I am specifically referring to those participating in my research, rather than generalizing to all organizations of those ideologies.

In line with Davis' (2003) explanation of prison abolition, staff at abolitionist organizations expressed a desire to eliminate the conditions that lead to the existence of prisons and to build a new, non-punitive justice system. Sarah,[2] a staff member at Abolition Collective, said that everyone she has worked with in the organization "believes [prison] is not the way that we keep people safe." Similarly, Tommy, a staff member at REAL, expressed the belief that

[2] Pseudonym

"prisons shouldn't exist, that prisons operate a certain oppressive role in our society and are a tactic of violence used against oppressed people."

Those working in reformist organizations tend to criticize aspects of the criminal justice system, but also frame prisons as a necessary feature of society. Yahya, a staff member at IMAN, criticized the racial disparities and rigidity of the justice system, saying, "I just believe that the criminal justice system in America is very disproportionate. [...] From a policy standpoint, there should be more fluidity, and more flexibility, in charging as well as sentencing." Sa'ud, also a staff member at IMAN, described the organization as recognizing "the need for a criminal justice system" yet attempting to promote "fairness within the system." Some individuals were more critical of the prison system than others, but what unites reformists is a belief that there is some current need for a carceral system.

Greg, a staff member at Teamwork, described the prison system as being designed to "help rehabilitate" and put responsibility on incarcerated individuals to take advantage of the opportunities prison provides, saying, "It's like anything: what you put into it pretty much is what you're gonna get out." This reflects a position further on the reformist side of the spectrum, demonstrating a belief not only in the need for prisons, but also for their potential positive value. While interviews with staff at reformist organizations revealed that each individual occupies a slightly different position on the reformist-abolitionist spectrum, the fact that these organizations as entities do not advocate for the dismantling of the prison system places them in the "reformist" camp of my analytic dichotomy.

The ideology has to do not only with their views on prison, but also with their self-identity as an organization. Abolitionist staff members emphasized their desire for the organization to not exist; if the goal of abolition is achieved, there will no longer be a need for

the organization. However, reformist staff members did not express a similar goal. Because they accept the need for prisons, in their vision of society there will always be some need for their organization's work. This organizational self-conception could influence whether these groups are more focused on the sustainability of the organization as an entity or the sustainability of individual relationships that emerge from the group; this is somewhat reflected in later sections related to organizations' approaches to relationship building.

Ideology additionally affects organizations' access and approach to funding and social capital in the political and nonprofit landscape. The reformist groups participating in this research rely primarily on government funding. However, abolitionist groups, which explicitly advocate for the dismantling of some state structures and programs, may either refuse state funding or have a harder time acquiring it. Specifically, Abolition Collective does not receive state funding, and while REAL does receive funding from the Department of Juvenile Justice, staff like Denzel are actively interested in building a funding base "that wouldn't require us to be dependent in any way on the state to fund our program." Reformists' access to larger or more traditional funding sources, which may be hesitant to fund explicitly abolitionist groups, allows these organizations to have greater capacity and institutionalization (and, indeed, both IMAN and Teamwork have significantly larger staffs than REAL and Abolition Collective). However, staff members also spoke about how many traditional funding sources limit the organization's control due to restrictions that grants can place on organizational priorities and activities.

This difference in organizational capacity is significant: ideological commitments may restrain organizations from achieving some of their objectives. Sarah identified the two largest challenges faced by Abolition Collective to be capacity issues and burnout among staff. Similarly, Cameron,[3] a staff member at Abolition Collective, spoke of capacity issues and her

[3] Pseudonym

own experience with burnout due to the emotional challenges of doing this type of work as someone with personal experience related to the carceral system:

> I think capacity [is one of Abolition Collective's needs]—physical capacity, people in the room, and also emotional capacity. Like, as beautiful as this work is, it's draining as fuck. It's, I think for some people, retriggering. I've had moments that are really like, way close to home, that are hard to deal with.

The lack of funding faced by Abolition Collective and REAL leads to small staff sizes and a reliance on the labor of just a few people, as well as some unpaid volunteers, to carry out their work. These material constraints, which are in part coincident with the organizations' ideological commitments, complicate the groups' ability to serve as many people as they would like, or to support long-term sustainability.

As Chaskin et al. (2001) describe in their theory of community capacity, one of the roles organizations can play in a community is leveraging and brokering external resources. Reformist and abolitionist groups have differing access to external resources like government and foundation funding, and abolitionist groups may be particularly challenged in a funding capacity due to their criticisms of the state. However, both are able to use their unique funding networks to channel resources to those impacted by incarceration.

How individuals spoke about state funding and their organization's relationship to the state further demonstrated their general ideological orientation. Those in reformist groups largely spoke of state actors as partners and collaborators. For example, IMAN was a sponsor of one of the debates between candidates in the 2023 Chicago mayoral election and works closely with local government officials. On the other hand, those in abolitionist groups spoke about straddling a tension between criticizing the carceral system and needing to work with state actors in order to maintain access to prison facilities. For example, interviewees at abolitionist groups said they

may not be as vocal about their ideology as they would like to be, in order to maintain positive relations with prison administrators and the ability to teach classes inside prisons. This highlights the differences in organizations' orientation towards the state—enthusiastic collaboration vs. subversive cooperation—which is key in determining whether they fall into the reformist or abolitionist side of the analytic dichotomy.

How Organizations View the Individual

Organizations of different ideologies view formerly incarcerated individuals in different ways, which here I simplify to the *reformed person vs. victim of the state perspective*. How one views the individual is inextricable from what one believes about the carceral system. As described in the background section, many reformists view prison as serving a rehabilitative purpose, while abolitionists view prison as a form of violence and oppression. This has important implications for how organizations engage with formerly incarcerated individuals.

Reformists' belief in incarceration as an opportunity for personal reform extends beyond the time frame of incarceration and influences organizations' approach to reentry. They view the reentry process as an opportunity for people to continue reforming into "better people," become productive members of society, and give back to the communities which they have harmed. Sa'ud said:

> We don't necessarily care about what you did before you came. But we want you to capitalize on those experiences and walk away from IMAN a better person, a better man, a better thinker, a critical thinker, an active listener, someone who has a greater sense of family [and] a greater sense of community and responsibility.

One of the ways in which these groups cultivate this responsibility is by helping individuals find jobs, which also serves to render them "productive" members of society and

support them on a path free from criminal behavior. Ruthie, a staff member at Teamwork, said, "There's a lot of studies that show that middle aged residents who are coming out of incarceration [...] have a work ethic as good as or better than the average citizen. And part of this is that there's a very strong routine and discipline built into them from incarceration." This reflects a view of incarceration as somewhat beneficial, instilling positive traits into incarcerated individuals. Having "served their time," they are then able to build more stable, responsible lives as legally employed citizens.

On the other hand, for abolitionists, who view incarceration as a form of state-sponsored violence which differentially impacts the most oppressed members of society, the individuals they work with are not people in need of reform, but rather individuals deserving of healing and restoration. Tommy frames formerly incarcerated individuals as "victim[s] of oppression in an unjust society." Concurrently, staff at abolitionist organizations frequently pointed out the "dehumanizing" nature of the prison system. Sarah said, "For the people that I work with, prison is so dehumanizing. It strips you of your identity; you're a number. It strips you of autonomy; you can't move around the way that you need to. You can't get the things that you need." With a view of individuals as victims of the state's dehumanizing carceral system, abolitionists see those they work with as in-need of humanizing experiences.

Of course, those working in reformist organizations also understand the need for healing and humanization. IMAN in particular uses the language of "a holistic approach" which takes into account individuals' mental health needs during the reentry process and, because of their relatively high capacity, they are able to directly offer therapy sessions to participants—something that neither abolitionist group has the capacity to provide. However, none of the reformist interviewees used language like "victim," "state violence," or

"dehumanization." Although reformist groups acknowledge the mental health issues faced by those impacted by incarceration, their view of the formerly incarcerated individual is still largely that of someone who has "served their time" and is deserving of help to become a more responsible community member—a process which may necessitate mental health services—rather than as someone who is fundamentally a victim of a broken system.

How Organizations Build Relationships

All interview participants expressed the importance of interpersonal relationships in the experience of formerly incarcerated individuals. Each staff member has witnessed how relationships and networks are essential for meeting the needs of those affected by incarceration, both materially and emotionally. The differences in how reformist and abolitionist groups approach the cultivation of these relationships is ultimately a product of how they view individuals, as well as how they see their purpose as an organization (e.g. providing a formal service vs. creating space for informal relationships), all of which is impacted by ideology. Fundamentally, staff members at reformist and abolitionist organizations approach relationship building in different ways, which can be simplified to a *client vs. friend dichotomy***.**

In reformist organizations like Teamwork Englewood, it is typical to refer to the formerly incarcerated individuals who engage with the organization as "clients." Language like "help" and "service" are also common. Monica,[4] a staff member at Teamwork, described her goal when working with formerly incarcerated people as: "My main goal is to help. Help them get employed, help them do better, help them get better." This vocabulary reflects a professional, service-oriented approach to relationships between organizational staff and "clients."

[4] Pseudonym

In contrast, interviewees from both abolitionist groups participating in this research described their relationship with formerly incarcerated individuals as “friends” or “comrades.” Tommy explained his relationships with members of REAL as “relational in a way that’s akin to comradeship, or like a peer to peer relationship.” Abolitionist leaders specifically positioned themselves in opposition to the language of “clients,” citing that language as an example of the inequitable power dynamics and lack of reciprocity at play in relationships between “clients” and staff in many nonprofit organizations. Tommy stated:

> I hear a lot of people [...] in nonprofit industrial complex spaces talk about people's like, clients, [...] and I think that's so gross. I think it's a really weird way to approach spaces if you believe that you're not just providing some service or some kind of savior entering the space, but there's actually like a mutual endeavor or organizing process that's unfolding. And I think it's important for there to be some sort of reciprocity in the goals that you're setting.

Language can have powerful impacts on how people approach and understand their relationships in an organization (Bartunek and Moch 1987). A word like “client” implies the unidirectional provision of a service, while a word like “friend” implies a bidirectional flow of support and knowledge. Therefore, differences in vocabulary translate into tangible differences in practices; the organization’s mission and the language they use in carrying out that mission are mutually reinforcing. How these organizations conceptualize their relationships with formerly incarcerated individuals affects the type of community they develop.

In reformist organizations, there is an emphasis on maintaining professional relationships between clients and staff members. Ruthie of Teamwork said, “None of us has a super close relationship with our clients. There’s some clients who happen to come in more often that I have at least friendly relationships with, like ‘Hi, how are you? How is your family?’ That kind of thing. But we don’t have close relationships with them.” As reflected in the use of language like

"clients," which suggests a level of professionalism and formality, there is a degree of distance maintained in staff-client relationships in reformist organizations.

More than once, staff members from abolitionist groups became emotional in interviews when discussing their relationships with those impacted by incarceration. "I'm already getting emotional. [My relationships with the people that Abolition Collective works with] have been life changing, like, absolutely life changing," Sarah said. The fact that Sarah, a staff member, describes her relationships with currently and formerly incarcerated people as "life changing" reflects the mutuality present in these relationships. Sarah spoke of the educational work she does with incarcerated students as "a reciprocal exchange," and Tommy talked about his work with those impacted by incarceration as a "mutual endeavor." For those working in abolitionist organizations, they are not simply changing the lives of participants, but they are open to being changed through the experience of these relationships as well.

Staff at reformist groups also expressed the importance of relationships in their organizations, but placed less of an emphasis on reciprocity. Rather than language of friendship and mutuality, staff at IMAN used language of mentorship and being a "big brother" to participants. While relationships are central to their work, it is clear that these connections have more of a professional, asymmetrical nature than those in abolitionist groups. This ultimately seems to serve the differing purposes of each organization; more formal relationships support the goal of efficiently providing services and connecting individuals to external relationships, while more informal relationships support groups in building solidarity and learning from one another.

How Organizations Structure Power

These differences in approaches to relationship building lead to differences in the formality of relationships and distinctions between staff and participants. This is not only significant for individual relationships, but also for the structure of the organization as a whole. I describe this as a *hierarchical vs. egalitarian power structure.*

Both reformist groups have what interviewees described as traditional nonprofit structures, with clear hierarchies and formal divisions of authority. As Sa'ud described it:

> We have the executive director, we have the senior administrative body. Then we have first tier managers like myself; I'm the Associate Director of the housing program. And then from there, we have program managers [and] coordinators, so there's a hierarchy from a traditional organizational standpoint.

This classic bureaucratic structure may be beneficial for the sake of efficiency — important when attempting to meet metrics and maximize capacity, as well as for demonstrating capability to government and foundation funders, both of which are more important to reformist than abolitionist groups.

Abolitionists' interest in disrupting existing societal systems of power trickles down to how their organizations are structured on a practical level. Both abolitionist groups have less hierarchical structures, with an emphasis on dividing power horizontally. Cameron described Abolition Collective as having "a horizontal leadership structure" in which "we still have specific positions and stuff that take different scopes, but the ideation process and thinking through what work [the organization] does is pretty collaborative." Because abolitionists often do not center their organizational needs—and in fact ultimately desire for the organization to not exist—they can decentralize power in this way, building a broad base of collective power rather than maximizing organizational capacity.

In practice, at both Abolition Collective and REAL, this looks like having a small 3–6 person team of full-time staff alongside other part-time staff or volunteers (this is in contrast to the 30+ full-time staff members at each reformist organization). Staff members share responsibilities and employ collaborative decision making processes. While staff largely attribute the lack of organizational hierarchy to values and ideology, it is also likely inextricable from these groups' limited resources, which restricts the size and complexity of power structures needed to operate.

Inherent in this approach is a tension between ideological commitments and material realities. Staff at both abolitionist organizations are clear about their desire not to replicate overly formal, hierarchical systems of power, and this seems to be carried out effectively in their organizational design. Similarly, their ideology influences where they obtain resources from. However, holding fast to these ideological commitments comes at the cost of limiting the organization's reach and the number of participants they are able to accommodate. So, while staff members at these organizations criticize the traditional nonprofit structures and methods of reformist groups, there are clear trade-offs between the approaches.

Difference in bureaucratic structures also has implications for how much those directly impacted by incarceration are involved in the organization. In reformist groups, the primary way for directly impacted individuals to influence the organization is to formally become part of the organization's staff following a traditional interviewing and screening process. However, in abolitionist groups, due to the horizontal, less formal structure, there may be more of a blurred line between staff and participants, with some decision making processes involving those who aren't formally part of the organization's staff.

An important aspect of relationship dynamics in the organizational setting is the division of power and who is involved in decision making processes. All organizations involved in this study have people in staff positions who have personal experience with incarceration, which all interviewees identified as important. However, the reasons for this importance differed across organizations.

For reformist groups, including directly impacted people in leadership roles is an opportunity for participants to see role models who are leading "reformed" lives as well as for the organization to gain participants' "buy-in." Sa'ud stated:

> I also have a program manager who works under me, [...] he spent 28 years in prison for a murder he didn't commit. And although he came from kind of a sketchy background himself, he is completely reformed. So he's just one example of the people we have in place who are strategically picked and designed to have the ability to keep the attention of our participants, to help with the whole buy-in process.

Here, the staff member who is formerly incarcerated is explicitly referred to as "reformed," again emphasizing the reformed person view of the individual as described in an earlier section (this comment is particularly notable given that the individual in question was identified as having been wrongly convicted). In addition, his role in the organization is described as strategic, which suggests that the involvement of formerly incarcerated people in the power structure is primarily done in the interest of serving the organization's needs (i.e. "buy-in") and providing relatable leaders for participants to connect with.

For abolitionist groups, including directly impacted people in leadership roles is essential for allowing the organization to make decisions aligned with their values and steered by those most affected. At REAL, the two co-founders are both formerly incarcerated individuals, and currently and formerly incarcerated youth are involved in organizational decision making processes, curriculum building, and program development. Interviewees from both REAL and

Abolition Collective distinguished between tokenization and what they called inclusion or centering. Tommy criticized how some other organizations approach their participants:

> I think it's fairly common for organizations to tokenize or manipulate directly impacted people to serve as the face of an agenda that's already set out by experts that are kind of lurking in the background. Whereas I can fully say that REAL is entirely controlled by people who have been directly impacted through their own incarceration.

While these organizations emphasize the centering of those directly impacted by incarceration, inclusion is not the only consideration; individuals' alignment with the organization's ideology also plays an important role. Sarah said:

> Even as a formerly incarcerated person, it doesn't mean that you are an abolitionist, that you believe that prisons don't keep us safe. [...] So I think it's not enough to just, as an organization, say we want to hire people who are formerly incarcerated, [although] I think always those folks should be put front and center.

So, although the abolitionist organizations are committed to liberation for all those affected by the punitive system, when it comes to including those individuals in the organizational power and decision making structures, these groups place a high value on people sharing the group's fundamental view of the carceral system. Organizational leaders see hiring people who ideologically align with the group as a method of supporting its cohesion and longevity.

The types of power structures present in organizations influence who is building relationships as well as the nature of those relationships. Who has a seat at the table, and how decisions are made, also reflects organizational priorities and values. Ultimately, the relational power structures play a role in determining the community dynamics that emerge within these organizations.

How Organizations View Community

Across all interviews, the importance of community was a central and recurring theme, and staff across organizations agree that the social capital developed through community is essential for individuals in the reentry process. However, the purpose of community is different for organizations of different ideologies. I describe this distinction as the *changing behavior vs. healing and building power approach.*

The way that organizations view community is an outcome of how they think about the individual. For reformist organizations, community is seen as a channel for changing behavior, specifically for helping formerly incarcerated individuals become more responsible, productive, and engaged members of society. As Sa'ud put it, IMAN aims to get their members to a point of "valuing community and family and being responsible human beings." This reflects reformist theory in the sense that both the incarceration and reentry processes are seen as opportunities for individual reform.

For IMAN and Teamwork, community serves as a way to support individuals on this individual reform journey. In practice, this looks like community networks supporting individuals in finding jobs, getting to work on time, and developing other behaviors necessary for creating a stable life post-prison as a "responsible" professional. In describing how interpersonal relationships are important for supporting her clients, Ruthie of Teamwork said, "They're getting a lot of help from family like responding to text messages, responding to emails, filling out applications; and people who don't have that kind of help have more trouble staying at work. And then also a lot of times people need rides to work."

Relatedly, interpersonal relationships are described in these two groups as helping formerly incarcerated people think and act differently. Yahya, a staff member at IMAN,

described the organization's goal as being "to challenge [participants] to think differently." Greg explained the ways in which Teamwork aims to change participants' thought processes: "Don't go into a store to steal, go in the store just to pay for your items. It's the mindset. It's the thinking that we're really focusing on." Community plays an essential role in this process of encouraging different thoughts and actions. For reformist organizations, having staff and fellow participants lead by example and encourage reformed lifestyles is an example of how relational networks can play a role in the reentry process.

As formerly incarcerated individuals change their beliefs and behaviors, they are encouraged by reformist organizations to "give back" and contribute to their communities. Greg argued:

> You have to show your community that you've learned your lesson, of course. But now, how can I give back? How can I serve my community? You know, to make it better? So that's what we try to do. We [at Teamwork Englewood] try to give what we have. And then we would like [our clients] to share what we've given them to someone else.

This mindset reflects how these organizations value community engagement and support, as well as how they view formerly incarcerated citizens as responsible for paying a debt to these communities. Having potentially caused harm to their communities in the past, there is an emphasis placed on formerly incarcerated people having a sense of accountability and demonstrating their commitment to different behaviors in the future.

Abolitionist groups, in contrast, largely view community as a channel for healing. This naturally follows from the fact that they view formerly incarcerated individuals as victims of state violence. REAL organizes various community-based activities, such as a basketball league, which Tommy argues "provide a sense of safe recreational opportunity for young people to be alongside people with shared experience and feel that they can go safely, without needing to, you

know, watch their back in some way." Things like sports, art, and other informal community gathering spaces can serve a restorative and humanizing function, which these groups view as essential following the trauma and dehumanization of incarceration.

Beyond the restorative aspects, abolitionists see community as a means of building power. In practice, this looks like creating social spaces for discussing liberation and justice, handing out educational zines at recreational events, and engaging in activism. Abolition Collective also carries out educational programming inside prisons. Cameron describes this education as liberatory, saying, "To be able to get in prisons, and to [...] shape academic programming that gives you the opportunity to also push people to think about their own liberation, is really exciting and doesn't happen all the time." The idea of community as a place for imagining liberation pervaded many of my conversations with abolitionist staff members. This reflects prison abolitionist theories, which abolitionists regard as historically tied to the abolition of slavery and inextricable from ideas of freedom, not only for individuals, but also for communities at large (Lewis-McCoy 2020).

Because abolition as an ideology is fundamentally tied to its long-term goals of dismantling and reconstructing the justice system, this impacts how abolitionist groups engage with community in the short-term. Tommy said that he is conscious of "[moving] beyond just being friends, or creating this like alternative social environment, to [becoming] a group that's actually agitating for power and changing the dynamics that continue to harass and incarcerate people." This elucidates how the development of relationships is not only for healing, support, and connection, but is also regarded by staff as essential for building power in service of the group's long-term abolitionist mission.

The objectives of healing and building power are intimately connected in these organizations; recreation and connection in non-surveilled, non-punitive spaces is inextricable from organizations' mission to build power and reimagine alternatives to the justice system. As Tommy put it:

> Playing cards, playing basketball, was a form of creating that refuge [...]. I think those spaces of recreation are important to create that kind of breathing room for people to then be like, 'Oh, I see it as it is. Let's plan. Let's figure out how I don't need to be living constantly under conditions that are making me watch my back. And I can actually sit down, rest, get a meal, and make a plan to change the conditions that are creating that insecurity in the first place.'

This demonstrates how abolitionist groups see the creation of safe community spaces as places for "breathing room" which then act as channels for developing the "revolutionary consciousness" needed to change societal systems.

The length of time organizations are in relationships with their participants further illustrates the differences in community building methods between different ideological groups. At Teamwork, the relationships between clients and staff are intentionally short-term. Ruthie said:

> We don't develop super deep relationships with our clients, which is in part on purpose. Because our goal is like, come in, we'll give you a job, you go to the interview, we help you with whatever you need to start the job. And then that's it. Or like, if that doesn't work out, you come back, and then we just keep sending you out to jobs. Like, I'm not sitting down with them being like, 'what's your whole history?'

In some ways, this limits the extent to which community can be built within the organization. However, Ruthie believes that the purpose of Teamwork is not to build relationships between staff and clients, but rather to connect individuals to external communities, such as workplaces, where they can acquire the support they need to succeed post-prison. This suggests that perhaps one difference in approaches to community building is a focus on facilitating external

connections vs. developing internal relationships—two differing approaches to the same goal of building social capital.

At Abolition Collective, on the other hand, relationships are built to last. Cameron said, "I don't know anyone who actually, like, ever leaves. [...] I think I've watched a lot of people have lifetime relationships with each other out of this." Similarly, at REAL, although it has only been active since 2018, all formerly incarcerated people in their first cohort are still engaged with the organization. Interviews with staff members at these abolitionist groups suggest that the development of community and interpersonal relationships is at the center of their work, rather than simply a byproduct of other activities or services.

IMAN, which I argue occupies a place more towards the center of the reformist-abolitionist spectrum, also prioritizes long-term relationships. This is just one example of how variation exists within each ideological camp, and it is useful to conceptualize each analytical dichotomy, including that of short term vs. long term relationships, as more of a spectrum. At IMAN, participants tend to be formally engaged with the organization for about one year, but the organization hosts programming to keep people engaged after having completed their formal training or other reentry programs. However, the relationships are more formal, cultivated in structured gatherings like alumni dinners. Although relationships may be long-term in organizations of both ideologies, the ways that these relationships are maintained is still distinct, with reformist groups having more formal check-ins with participants and abolitionist groups having more informal, friendship-based relationships.

Ultimately, while all participating groups put a high value on the idea of community, the ways they think about that term differ. Reformist groups see community as a network of relationships that can support formerly incarcerated people to build skills, change their mindset,

and succeed professionally. These organizations may have shorter term relationships with clients as a result of prioritizing external job placement over internal relationship building. There are some exceptions, though, with staff at organizations like IMAN offering long-term mentorship for participants. Abolitionist groups, on the other hand, see community as a network of relationships that can provide safe spaces to connect, "breathe," and heal from the experience of incarceration while building social and political power in the pursuit of prison abolition. Long-term relationships are essential for this work; as Cameron put it, "The entirety of organizing has to be done in community; you're not going to tear down anything by yourself."

How Organizations Empower Formerly Incarcerated People

The methods by which organizations try to empower those impacted by incarceration is partially a product of how the organization views the individual and the community. While all participating organizations have a strong desire for their participants to have positive reentry experiences, and ultimately build fulfilling lives, abolitionist and reformist organizations prioritize different methods of empowerment. I frame this as the *pragmatic vs. visionary approach.*

Reformist groups tend to adopt the pragmatic viewpoint that empowering people economically will allow them to have a more stable life and stay out of the carceral system, leading these organizations to prioritize job training and job placement programs. At IMAN, this looks like operating a program for the development of trade skills. In explaining why their trade program was chosen as a priority, Yahya said, "We believe that if you give a guy a trade or a skill that enables him to take care of himself, it gives the participant the confidence to know that, okay, I can make this shift and take care of myself legally." Similarly, Sa'ud argued, "If we can

provide an avenue to build a skill set, this removes or minimizes the need for them to indulge in criminal activity." This reflects the earlier discussion of reformist groups viewing community as a channel for professionalization and behavior change; thus, employment is seen as a site and opportunity for continual personal reform.

At Teamwork, the relationships and social capital that the organization has built with employers serves as a channel for helping clients find employment. Teamwork operates as an intermediate vetting body, giving their clients greater legitimacy when attempting to find a job. Greg describes employers as being "willing to work with us after we assess the clients and see if they could fit with the partners that may have open positions. [...] Coming through us, they know they've already been assessed." In the interest of supporting their clients economically, Teamwork prioritizes job placement support and utilizes a network of employers, as well as their power to legitimize job applicants, to carry out this goal.

Abolitionist groups tend to adopt the viewpoint that meeting people's immediate, material needs is important, as long as it is carried out in ways that support the long-term vision of abolition. This leads these organizations to prioritize education, arts, and activism as channels for empowerment and societal change. Simultaneously, they may support individuals in their search for housing, employment, and food security, though those were not the primary programming focuses of the abolitionist groups in my study.

REAL runs educational workshops, book clubs, and discussion groups that cover topics like anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, and socialist thought and theory. Staff at REAL describe these activities as methods of "revolutionary consciousness building." Tommy said:

> The basis of our curriculum and revolutionary consciousness is learning with young people about the general conditions of society that target people for incarceration, oppress people at large, and make people unfree. To understand those general conditions, but also

> understand it in particular, to the situations that they're in. And then, based on that understanding, or education, organize to build power to overcome those obstacles and those oppressive systems that are making people unfree.

This focus on understanding both an individual's particular experience, as well as the general, systematic experiences of citizens within the carceral state, mirrors findings from Orozco Flores and Cossyleon (2016) regarding how organizations can serve to rearticulate the problems faced by formerly incarcerated people from individual to collective and political.

Abolitionist groups accordingly choose to focus on education because they view it as a community-based channel for building power. Tommy describes education as a way to transform agitation around injustice into a concrete plan for social transformation. Education is the short-term priority in service of the longer-term vision of reimagining and reconstructing the justice system.

Although REAL is cognizant of the immediate material needs of their members and seeks to support them with housing and employment when possible, the organization views simply providing services as counterproductive to their overall mission. Tommy expressed a desire to not replicate the ways that some other reentry organizations provide for immediate needs in a way that "directs attention and capacity away from the harder, revolutionary community building that is more based on education, but also a reevaluation of like, what is freedom, or what does it mean to be totally fulfilled." This reflects the "visionary" nature of their reentry approach, as opposed to the more tangible priorities of reformist groups.

Abolition Collective runs college classes inside prisons, as well as publicizes artworks by those impacted by incarceration. This focus on the arts is not unlike REAL's emphasis on creating safe recreational spaces for formerly incarcerated individuals. Spaces for art, recreation, and education, especially when they are outside of state systems of surveillance and punishment,

can allow those impacted by incarceration to "heal" and reconnect with their humanity. In regards to Abolition Collective's priorities, Sarah states:

> I think one piece is challenging the narrative that people who have been incarcerated don't deserve, right? They don't deserve access to art; they don't deserve access to education. And so I think what's fundamental about [our organization's] philosophy [...] is that at the very core, that these things are human rights, regardless of what may or may not have happened at some point.

She frames Abolition Collective's role in the broader mission of abolition as reconnecting individuals with their humanity and bringing their stories to a wider audience through art.

The cultivation of interpersonal relationships and community facilitates either (1) reformist groups to aid formerly incarcerated people in building professional skills and finding employment or (2) abolitionist groups to support these individuals' healing and education. These different priorities are informed by how organizations see individuals impacted by incarceration — as people engaged in a reform process as opposed to people suffering from state violence.

Discussion: Two Overall Approaches to Relationships and Community Building

My analysis of organizations' view of individuals, relationships, power structures, community, and priorities has brought to light two overarching organizational approaches to building relationships with those impacted by the carceral system. These are influenced strongly by ideology, so I categorize them as the *reformist and abolitionist approaches*, although there are nuances within the typology. The five sub-typologies established through my findings—viewing individuals as *reformed people vs. victims of the state*, developing *client vs. friend* relationships, working within *hierarchical vs. egalitarian* power structures, understanding the purpose of community as *changing behavior vs. healing and building power*, and empowering individuals through a *pragmatic vs. visionary* approach—provide the foundation for the broader *reformist vs.*

abolitionist typology and offer a more granular framework through which organizations can evaluate their approach. To develop these typologies, I draw solely from my data, which is focused on the specifics of four Chicago-based nonprofit organizations. However, this generalized analytic framing allows the specifics of my case studies to be useful for analysis in other settings and contexts.

Both of these approaches operate from a baseline of criticizing the current system of mass incarceration in the US. Organizations under both ideological umbrellas are interested in solving the broader problem of individuals facing a lack of resources, relationships, and stability after incarceration. However, the means by which they approach that problem, and their ultimate vision for justice, are distinct, which affects their approaches to relationships and community.

In the reformist approach, the purpose of community building is largely understood to be cultivating the relationships necessary for building a stable, self-sufficient life as an employed member of society. Social capital is developed through professionalization; organizations support individuals in building personal and technical skills to help them succeed professionally, and these groups can also act as intermediaries, using their own social capital as an organization to connect formerly incarcerated people to employment opportunities. Relationships tend to be formal, although this could look like a caseworker-client or a mentor-mentee dynamic. Within this framework, community building efforts are made in service of supporting individual success.

In the abolitionist approach, the purpose of community building is to mentally and emotionally heal from the trauma of incarceration through connection and recreation with other directly impacted individuals. Organizations develop social capital through education and the cultivation of interpersonal ties, ultimately creating networks of support and political power. Relationships tend to be informal, with staff and formerly incarcerated people connecting in a

reciprocal, non-hierarchical manner, and sometimes as friends. Community building is related to both healing and empowerment; these channels serve organizations' goal of developing revolutionary consciousness on an individual level, which could ultimately lead to transformation of the justice system on a societal level.

Of course, there are organizations that bridge these two frameworks, complicating the simplified typology. In my selection of case studies, IMAN stood out as a reformist organization that, without expressing a view that incarceration is a fundamentally violent and oppressive system, recognizes the need for recovery through community support and individual mental health services. Rather than viewing employment as the sole metric for success, IMAN aims to provide a holistic set of services that support both personal healing and professionalization. So, while they do still fall under the reformist paradigm in general—viewing individuals as engaged in a process of reform, prioritizing professional relationships and job placement, and structuring power hierarchically—they do incorporate aspects of the abolitionist approach such as developing long-term relationships and approaching their work through a trauma-informed lens. As society increasingly draws attention to the importance of mental health, and as alternatives to incarceration gain traction, the lines between these categorizations may continue to shift and blur to a greater degree, with more organizations finding a middle ground.

My results support other findings that show ideology pervades numerous aspects of organizations, from high-level goals and values to day-to-day priorities and behaviors (Beyer, Dunbar, and Meyer 1988). Ideology influences how organizations and their staff view individuals and their needs, which in turn affects how they approach relationship building and programmatic priorities. The types of relationships and power structures that exist in these groups determine whether and how a sense of community is created. Broadly, it is characteristics

of these organizations' ideologies, including their relationship to the state (i.e. enthusiastic collaboration vs. subversive cooperation), understanding of the source of the issues participants' face (i.e. individual mindset and behavior vs. state violence), and vision for long-term success (i.e. system- and individual-level reform vs. systemic abolition and individual healing) that lead to differences in how they approach community building.

Nevertheless, ideological values are in constant tension with material realities. My schematic distinction between these approaches is based largely on their expressed values, commitments, desires, and language; however, resource limitations, policy failures, and day-to-day realities may lead to an inability to achieve desired goals. For example, while both abolitionist groups aim to develop long-term relationships with currently and formerly incarcerated individuals, people are frequently transferred between facilities, and transportation access remains a major problem for those returning from prison, both of which disrupt the process of relationship building. Ideology therefore affects how and why organizations build community among those impacted by the carceral system, yet it is also evident that various factors restrict whether organizations are able to live up to their expressed ideals.

These typological descriptions can be used to analyze other organizations' reentry work and draw attention to ways in which ideology may be unconsciously influencing aspects of an organization. This paper brings awareness to the ways in which all of these elements are interconnected, allowing organizations to be more intentional about how they wish to approach their work. Because interpersonal relationships and social capital are such essential components of a successful reentry process, understanding the nuanced and varying roles that community can serve allows for organizations and government programs to engage with formerly incarcerated people in more thoughtful and impactful ways.

Policy Implications

Over a dozen interviews with staff at CBOs reveal how these groups are filling in gaps left by an absence of policies to support formerly incarcerated people. Gemali of IMAN stated:

> What we're doing is the government's job. If you're going to incarcerate somebody for an extended period of time, and the name of the department is corrections, you should be trying to build this person up in a way that will be positive and will leave them, for themselves and for society's sake, in a better position to sustain. But that does not happen.

The organizations participating in my research provide services to support individuals' employment, housing, legal, mental health, and social-emotional needs. Such a heavy reliance on these resource-limited nonprofits, and the informal support networks they create, is largely a failure on the part of policymakers to take ownership for supporting the reentry of those who have been locked in government facilities for months or years.

In addition, while those of different ideologies have some different critiques of the carceral system, both reformists and abolitionists agree that an expansion of government programs to support affordable housing, food security, education, and health services ultimately serves to keep communities safer. In particular, investing in impoverished and marginalized communities can gradually reduce mass incarceration, especially for over-policed Black and Brown populations. If policymakers can reduce the number of people being caught up in the carceral system in the first place, the need for reentry services will diminish over time.

This research also provides interesting lessons regarding the significance of community-centered approaches to reentry and policy more generally. All participating organizations approach their work with a fundamental appreciation of how communities generate social capital and offer support for those impacted by the carceral system. Rather than solely addressing individuals' issues, the organizations invest in systems and networks of support. For

other organizations and programs looking to employ a similar approach, this requires investing in staff's capacity and training, as well as building organizational structures which prioritize the development of relationships.

These implications extend beyond the context of incarceration and reentry. Nonprofits and government agencies working with any population can apply lessons learned about how to balance organizational capacity and sustainability with a commitment to long-term, reciprocal staff-participant relationships, as well as how pragmatic, material priorities can be considered alongside social and emotional needs for vulnerable populations. These case studies also offer insights into how organizations can approach tensions between ideology and material realities.

Conclusion

In this paper, I conducted a comparative case study of two abolitionist and two reformist organizations working with formerly incarcerated individuals in Chicago. Through in-depth interviews with staff members, I found that characteristics of organizations' carceral ideologies—including their orientation to the state, view of the source of the issues participants' face, and vision for long-term success—lead to differences in how they approach community building. Based on these findings, I developed a typology of two overarching ways organizations may approach the work of developing relationships and social capital with formerly incarcerated people: the *reformist and abolitionist approaches*. While these differing viewpoints and methods are strongly influenced by ideology, organizations have agency to consider how they wish to carry out the mission of supporting those impacted by incarceration. The consequent typology can serve as a descriptive framework for organizations and policymakers to better understand, and make more intentional choices about, their approach.

Given this analysis, I argue that CBOs, and the social networks they cultivate, regardless of their approach, are filling in policy gaps left by the government. Policymakers can draw on this analysis to see the different roles that relationships and community can provide for those impacted by incarceration, and ultimately create better policies and programs to support the development of these communities, as well as offer the fundamental services that informal networks are currently providing.

My analysis demonstrates that ideology plays a significant role in influencing organizations' views of individuals, relationships, power structures, the purpose of community, and the best way to empower individuals. Despite these many differences, some of the fundamental goals of each ideology are the same. In this paper, reformism and abolition are presented as two ends of an ideological spectrum. However, this spectrum is constructed within the subset of people who view mass incarceration as an issue. On a society-wide spectrum of carceral ideology, reformists and abolitionists are not oppositional; in fact, they share many similar goals. Furthermore, by taking different approaches and conceptualizing their institutional purposes differently, organizations of differing ideologies can provide a web of interlocking support and services for formerly incarcerated people. Rather than being seen as oppositional, their different approaches can be understood as mutually beneficial.

My in-depth interviews with those who work with formerly incarcerated people on a daily basis has revealed how the process of returning from prison is a communal one. Developing relationships with organizational staff, and other formerly incarcerated individuals, in the reentry process allows for those impacted by incarceration to acquire tangible resources as well as social and emotional support. These findings are a beautiful testament to the power of human relationships and social networks. Nevertheless, communities continue to struggle under

the weight of policy failures, which have left under-funded organizations as the key site of resources and social capital for formerly incarcerated individuals. Moving forward, policymakers and community organizations can collaborate to maximize the support offered to individuals returning home, while committing to long-term decarceration efforts.

Appendix

Interview Participants

Inner-City Muslim Action Network

Sa'ud	Associate Director
Gemali	Senior Case Manager
Yahya	Case Worker
Ameena	Program Manager

Teamwork Englewood

Ruthie	Grants Quality Control Manager
Greg	Community Navigator
Monica (pseudonym)	Senior Manager
LaShawn	Program Coordinator

Abolition Collective

Cameron (pseudonym)	Full-time staff
Sarah (pseudonym)	Intern
Alice	Board Member, Facilitator, and Professor

The REAL Youth Initiative

Tommy	Co-Director
Denzel	Co-Founder and Co-Director

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