

From Inside to Insiders:

**The Unique Social and Human Capital Formerly Incarcerated People in Chicago Bring to,
and Barriers they Face in, Criminal Legal System-Related Fields**

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Abstract

This paper draws from qualitative interviews with Chicago-based formerly incarcerated individuals (FIIs) who work in criminal legal system-related fields (e.g., law, reentry, policy advocacy, education, etc.) to examine the unique human and social capital FIIs bring to their roles. Previous literature largely centers around employment barriers faced by FIIs, the effectiveness of violence prevention organizations, and peer work, with few studies exploring the relationship between incarceration and qualities relevant to criminal legal system-related work. This study finds that FIIs in these fields possess knowledge, technical/soft skills, resilience, connections, credibility, and relatability derived from their lived experience. It also finds that they face an array of work-related barriers and challenges such as limited facility access; parole, probation, and supervision restrictions; difficulty striking a work-life balance; re-traumatization; and tokenization, exploitation, and under-compensation. The paper concludes by recommending barriers be removed and opportunities be expanded to help FIIs further engage in this work.

Keywords: Formerly Incarcerated, Social Capital, Human Capital, Barriers, Challenges, Chicago.

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Introduction

Historically, the majority of the general public has held overwhelmingly negative views of currently and formerly incarcerated individuals (FIIs)¹ (Moore et al., 2013). Yet in recent years, there has been a growing recognition among scholars, policymakers, and organizations that individuals in and returning from prisons have much to offer society, including ambitious and creative aspirations, strong emotional intelligence, and a diverse array of skills that many hope to bring back to their communities and employ toward transforming individuals and institutions (Smith, 2020; Swift, 2023; Binnall, 2022). For example, it is now, for the most part, widely accepted that FIIs can play a critical role in work that directly pertains to their experience with the criminal legal system (LeBel et al., 2014; Binnall, 2022; Corburn et al., 2021).

Whether it be on the ground as violence interrupters, outreach workers, reentry coordinators, or other intervention personnel; in administrative positions, where they oversee community organizations, education and reentry programs, or whole city government initiatives; or in law offices and policy organizations working as case managers, policy directors, and paralegals, FIIs can increasingly be found working in roles that directly pertain, in some way, to their incarceration experience. Notably, in 2022, the Biden Administration allocated billions of federal dollars to community violence intervention (CVI) programs and reentry services, expanded federal job training/shadowing programs for justice-involved youth and adults, and

¹ *A Note on Language:* Throughout this paper, I intentionally refer to individuals who have spent any amount of time in prison or jail as “formerly incarcerated” “individuals,” “people,” and “folks” in an attempt to accurately categorize and humanize a group of people that are often labeled with harmful language. Per the recommendations laid out in The Berkeley Underground Scholars’ *Language Guide for Communicating About Those Involved in The Carceral System*, I refrain from using terms such as “offender,” “criminal,” “prisoner,” and “inmate,” despite the prevalence of these terms in scholarly literature. These terms are not only dehumanizing and make a temporary status seem permanent (e.g. “prisoners” are not “prisoners” forever) but are often used inaccurately (e.g. not all people who are incarcerated are “criminals” or “offenders,” as many individuals who have been held in prisons and jails were wrongfully and/or are not yet convicted). I also opt to use the term “criminal legal system” over “criminal justice system” because, for many who touch this system, there is no “justice” in it (Cerda-Jara et al., 2019).

brought on two new “Second Chance Fellows,” signifying a nation-wide commitment to supporting formerly incarcerated people (The White House, 2021).

However, despite this support and recognition of their skills and value, the 600,000 plus individuals who are released from federal and state prisons annually still face tremendous employment barriers and stigmatization (Sawyer, 2022; Moore et al., 2012). Moreover, while these barriers have been well-documented, and while there is a growing body of literature on some of the fields of work FIIs engage in following their release (e.g. community violence intervention, peer work, legal work, organizing and activism, etc.), there is little available research on what particular knowledge, skills, attributes, connections, and relational traits FIIs bring to criminal legal system-related work more generally, as well as the specific challenges and barriers FIIs face while doing this kind of work. As an increasing number of FIIs engage in and lead criminal legal system-related work nationwide, it is important for policymakers and employees to understand the specific kind of value they are bringing to this work, as well as how to best support and meet the needs of these individuals given the unique challenges they face.

This paper seeks to address this policy problem and begin to fill the gap in the literature. Relying on qualitative theme-coded data obtained from 21 interviews with Chicago-based formerly incarcerated people working in city government and at community organizations, non-profits, and law firms as policy advocates, organizers, artists, violence prevention workers, researchers, program directors, and more, this paper aims to explore, in the words of Bourdieu (1986) and Schultz’s (1961), what forms of “human” (knowledge, skills, and attributes) and “social” (trust, credibility, connections) capital FIIs who are employed in fields related to their incarceration bring to their work. It also examines some of the complications and barriers that formerly incarcerated people who work in these criminal legal system-related fields face.

This paper finds that formerly incarcerated people working in criminal legal system-related fields possess a diverse array of human capital—which includes insider knowledge of how “the system,” “the streets,” and public policies function in practice; technical (e.g., legal, research, writing, advocacy) and soft skills (emotional intelligence, conflict mediation, emotional regulation, etc.), and resiliency—derived from their lived experience. It also finds that formerly incarcerated people bring a great deal of social capital (e.g. relationships/connections, credibility, and relatability) to their work and their clientele, which enables them to access hard-to-reach individuals and spaces and more easily advance the goals of their organizations.

In addition to the social and human capital formerly incarcerated people bring to their roles, qualitative interview data also revealed that even despite the relative accessibility of criminal legal system-related work to formerly incarcerated individuals, there are numerous unique barriers, challenges, and complications FIIs face whilst engaging in this work. These barriers, challenges, and complications include being unable to do their jobs due to restricted facility access and parole, probation, and supervision-related requirements; struggling to strike a work-life balance; being retraumatized by their work; and being inadequately compensated, tokenized, exploited, and barred from true leadership positions by their employers. With these barriers in mind, along with the recognition by many study participants that they have benefitted from unique employment and educational opportunities that enabled them to work in an FII-friendly industry and overcome many of the employment and record-related barriers faced by FIIs more broadly, this paper concludes with the recommendation that several of these barriers, particularly collateral consequences, be removed. It also suggests that opportunities be expanded to support a greater number of formerly incarcerated people seeking to engage in criminal legal system-related and other work.

Literature Review

As of 2018, there were over 5 million formerly incarcerated people living in the United States (Couloute & Kopf, 2018; Shannon et al., 2017). Combined with the nearly 2 million people incarcerated and on parole today, almost 7.5 million people have served or are currently serving prison and jail time in the U.S. (Couloute & Kopf, 2018; Sawyer et al., 2023).

Even when they are no longer held behind bars, formerly incarcerated people serve “sentences” that extend far beyond their release from prison due to their permanent criminal records. In addition to having to endure the psychological and physical harms caused by incarceration (Dumont et al., 2012; Massoglia & Pridemore, 2015), most FIIs face political disenfranchisement, health care, and housing restrictions, and intense employment discrimination while trying to re-enter into society (Smith & Kinzel, 2020; Miller, 2022). Miller and Alexander (2015) and Miller and Stuart (2017) call this distinct form of political membership experienced by and enacted upon FIIs via legal and extra-legal sanctions “carceral citizenship.” Others, such as sociologist Loïc Wacquant termed it “civic death” (Wacquant, 2005).

The employment discrimination experienced by formerly incarcerated people living in a state of “carceral citizenship” has been well-documented (Decker et al., 2015; Pager, 2003). Today, according to Couloute and Kopf (2018), the unemployment rate for formerly incarcerated people is 27%. This rate is nearly five times higher than the overall U.S. unemployment rate and substantially higher than the employment rate during the worst years of the Great Depression (Couloute & Kopf, 2018). At any given moment, it is estimated that 60% of formerly incarcerated people are jobless (Wang & Bertram, 2022). According to the Center for Economic and Policy Research, this equates to a loss of 1.7 to 1.9 million workers per year, or \$78 to \$87 billion in annual GDP (Bucknor & Barber, 2016). On an individual level, people who have spent

time in prison experience subsequent annual earnings reduced by an average of 52 percent. This equates to nearly half a million dollars less over their careers than they might have otherwise earned had they never been incarcerated (Terry-Ann Craigie et al., 2020)

Formerly incarcerated people respond to the employment barriers and discrimination they face in various ways. Some turn to entrepreneurship (Hwang & Phillips, 2020). Others rely upon work and education credentials obtained while incarcerated to signal employability to potential employers (Lindsay, 2022). Others still attempt to acquire credentials following their release from prison via temporary, precarious, or undesirable jobs with the hope that these positions will materialize into stable employment opportunities (Lindsay, 2022).

Stable employment opportunities, however, are few and far between for FIIs. Many of the jobs that are available to formerly incarcerated people tend to be low-skill, “temporary,” seasonal, part-time, or “secondary” jobs that involve poor working conditions and provide little chance for advancement (Rucks-Ahidiana et al., 2020). They provide low, sub-poverty-level wages and limited, or no, benefits (Reichert et al., 2023). Moreover, not only are formerly incarcerated white people more likely to be employed than formerly incarcerated Black people, but white FIIs are more likely to land “primary” labor market jobs associated with “relatively high wages, good working conditions, [and] chances of advancement,” while Black FIIs tend to have to settle for “secondary” or temporary labor market jobs (Rucks-Ahidiana et al., 2020). Ultimately, most formerly incarcerated people go to work in one of five major “felon-friendly” industries: administrative support/waste management and remediation services; accommodation and food services; construction; manufacturing; and retail trade (Carson et al., 2021).

While most formerly incarcerated people find employment opportunities in these more “traditional” sectors, a small portion of FIIs are able/choose to work in social service, political,

or other fields that directly pertain to their experience(s) with the criminal legal system (Carson et al., 2021). Formerly incarcerated folks employed within these fields hold a wide array of jobs and positions spanning the private, public, and non-profit sectors. Examples of common focus areas include advocacy, reentry, policy, community development, leadership development, education, and legal aid (Sturm & Tae, 2017). Importantly, individuals who work in these fields do not experience “carceral citizenship” to the same extent as the average formerly incarcerated person because their lived experience is seen as a valuable part of, rather than a detriment to, their employability (Miller and Alexander, 2015).

As more and more people recognize the problems of mass incarceration, the number of formerly incarcerated people hired to work in fields adjacent to their experiences with the criminal legal system has grown. In recent years, policymakers have been making substantive efforts to include the voices of FIIS in their policy discussions (Smith & Kinzel, 2020) and more and more formerly incarcerated people have begun taking political office (Glasgow, 2022). At the same time, professional organizations led and staffed by formerly incarcerated activists and advocates have emerged (Smith & Kinzel, 2020; Burton & Lynn, 2017; Sturm & Tae, 2017) as well as an increasing number of formerly incarcerated legal professionals (Simmons, 2017; Binnall, 2022). Moreso now than ever before, organizations that actively hire FIIs are increasingly highlighting the “expertise” of their employees, claiming that their records are representative of their “authenticity,” rather than detrimental to their credibility (Flores, 2018).

Though the fields of law and policy may only now be catching up, “peer work”—which includes “peer support,” or “peer mentorship” programs—is one field of work that has long recognized the value of employing individuals who have “expertise” derived from “lived experience” (Matthews, 2021; Lopez-Aguado, 2012; Mead & MacNeil, 2004). Qualitative and

quantitative studies of substance use, mental health, gang violence, and reentry-focused peer support programs have all shown promising results in employing those with such “real-world” knowledge (Matthews, 2021; Cheng, 2017; Lopez-Aguado, 2012, Tracy & Wallace, 2016).

Community violence intervention (CVI), or “violence prevention” is a specific peer work-oriented, criminal legal system-adjacent field that relies heavily upon the employment and expertise of FIIs. Policymakers are increasingly calling for expanded investment in CVI, which has become the predominant non-policing strategy for addressing urban gun violence in the U.S. (Hureau et al., 2022). For example, President Biden’s 2021 Build Back Better Act included an unprecedented \$5 billion investment in CVI programming (The White House, 2021). And in 2022, Chicago allocated \$50 million to community violence reduction efforts (Mayor's Press Office, 2021). With each year, state, local, and federal municipalities are increasingly turning to CVI and other non-punitive, community-led approaches to gun violence reduction.

Formerly incarcerated CVI workers are tasked with “preventing retaliatory shootings, mediating gang and interpersonal conflicts, monitoring and responding to flash points for community violence, and mentoring those at highest risk of violence and connecting them to crucial social services” (Hureau et al., 2022). There are numerous city-specific and global organizations that employ FIIs as “outreach workers” and “violence interrupters” to do CVI work. These organizations rely heavily upon FII’s knowledge, credibility, and lived experiences (Butts et al., 2015; Corburn et al., 2021; Bhatt et al., 2023; Prochaska, 2014; Carbonari, 2018).²

² Except for a few minor changes, the preceding three and a half pages of writing first appeared in the literature review of a paper I wrote in Spring 2023 titled “Formerly Incarcerated and Fighting Violence: The Unique Knowledge, Skills, Characteristics, and Attributes Formerly Incarcerated People Bring to Violence Prevention and Other Social Justice Work in Chicago.” While the findings and analysis of this present study and my Spring 2023 paper largely differ, the general subject matter of the two is similar enough that some of the discussion of relevant literature did not warrant re-writing. As such, there are a few additional instances throughout this present paper in which I borrow my own language, but in the interest of transparency, all will be acknowledged with a footnote.

The knowledge, skills, and expertise CVI workers and other FIIs gain from their experience interacting with the criminal legal system and later bring to their criminal legal system-related roles are examples of what economist Theodore W. Schultz would refer to as “human capital”—a non-economic form of capital that affects a person’s “capabilities for productive work and output” which can be gained from education or experience (Schultz, 1961). Researchers first began recognizing the human capital incarcerated people gain whilst in prison during what was known as the “New Careers” movement in the mid-twentieth century (LeBel et al., 2014; Grant & Grant, 1967). At the time, it was hypothesized that FIIs could use their “knowledge about crime and its problems” and their “life experiences [and]...geographic, cultural, and functional similarities” to other incarcerated people to aid corrections personnel as well as those reentering into society (Empey, 1968; LeBel et al., 2014). While the New Careers movement fizzled following the advent of mass incarceration, there have been numerous contemporary acknowledgments of the knowledge, skills, and expertise (e.g. human capital) formerly incarcerated people leave prison with, both as a result of education and vocational training obtained while incarcerated (Sturm and Tae, 2017; Giles & Le, 2009; Flatt & Jacobs, 2018) and their lived experience (Matthews, 2021; Hureau et al., 2022).

In addition to their human capital, formerly incarcerated people leverage their “social capital” — i.e. “networks, norms, and social trust” — for mutual or their own benefit (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000). This “social capital” results from “institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” and can take the form of “credential” (credibility), “rights,” “respect,” or other “durable obligations subjectively felt” (Bourdieu, 1986). In a more modern context, social capital has also been defined as “the social resources that evolve through social networks or structures characterized by mutual trust” (Hwahng et al., 2021). Different kinds of

social capital have also been widely observed and discussed, including “bonding” (intra-community), “bridging” (inter-community), and “linking” (inter-power/authority level) social capital (Putnam, 2000; Hwang et al., 2021). Sturm and Tae (2021) specifically detail how formerly incarcerated leaders employ these forms of social capital “as an engine of mobility for those affected by mass incarceration” and “as a vehicle for catalyzing change.” Other researchers have found that formerly incarcerated college students and job-seekers also possess and mobilize unique forms of social capital (Collom, 2019; Smith, 2018).

While there has been extensive research conducted on the effectiveness and success of peer support programs (Matthews, 2021; Cheng, 2017; Lopez-Aguado, 2012; Tracy & Wallace, 2016) various CVI organizations (Butts et al., 2015; Corburn et al., 2021; Bhatt et al., 2023; Prochaska, 2014) and the employment and other barriers and challenges FIIs face following their release from prison (Miller 2021; Decker et al., 2015; Pager, 2003; Smith & Kinzel, 2020), little research exists on the specific ways in which FIIs contribute to criminal legal system-related work and the barriers and challenges they face whilst engaging in such work. The growing prevalence of FIIs engaged in reentry, violence prevention, policy, law, and other social/criminal justice work indicates that there is a shared understanding held by employers, policymakers, and others of their value, yet the knowledge, experience, skills, and connections FIIs bring to their work remain largely unrecorded.

Therefore, building upon Sturm and Tae’s (2017) comprehensive report on the qualities and attributes shared by formerly incarcerated leaders, Matthews’ (2021) study of peer-focused prison reentry programs, and Bourdieu’s (1986) and Schultz’s (1961) work on human and social

capital,³ I examine the ways in which FIIs in Chicago can/do engage in criminal legal system-related work. Specifically, this research aims to uncover what unique knowledge, skills, and attributes (“human capital”) and connections, networks, and social trust/norms (“social capital”) FIIs bring to this work given their experience interacting with the criminal legal system. Moreover, this paper seeks to determine what unique challenges and barriers FIIs face despite working in a field that sees their lived experience as an asset, rather than a detriment. With a growing appetite amongst policymakers, advocates, and the general public to make strides in criminal legal system reform and violence/crime prevention, this research should help policymakers and employers see the value in hiring formerly incarcerated people, collaborating with organizations staffed/led by them, and trusting formerly incarcerated people to solve major policy problems they themselves are/have been impacted by, while actively working to meet and be accommodating of their unique needs.⁴

Background

Illinois is no stranger to the practice and aftereffects of mass incarceration. It is estimated that in Illinois, roughly 3.3 million adults alive today have been arrested or convicted of a crime since the national advent of mass incarceration in 1970 (Escobar-Schulz & Buitrago). Considering that around 20,000 people are released from Illinois state prisons annually (the fifth most of any state), this number will only continue to grow with time (Sawyer, 2022; Asiegbu & Martinez-Smiley, 2023).

³ I draw from social and human capital literature because, at its core, this is a sociological and economically grounded paper about a particular job industry (criminal legal system-related fields), its employees, and the value these employees bring to the industry. A social and human capital framework provides a helpful analytical basis from which to highlight the unique knowledge, skills, attributes, connections, and credibility FIIs bring to their work, and has been utilized by other scholars of formerly incarcerated workers and students, such as Sturm and Tae (2017), Flatt & Jacobs (2018), Collom (2019) and Smith (2018).

⁴ This paragraph borrows language from Manley (2023).

As of December 2023, there were more than 29,000 people incarcerated in the Illinois Department of Corrections' (IDOC) 28 state prisons, though this number has declined in recent years. 54.28% percent of those currently in IDOC custody are Black, and 12.45% percent are Hispanic (Illinois Department of Corrections, 2023). For a full list and map of Federal and state carceral facilities in Illinois (excluding jails and immigrant detention centers) see **Appendix A**.

Though Illinois' incarceration rates are not among the highest in the nation, Illinois has the third highest percentage of Black adults who are formerly incarcerated out of any U.S. state. It also has over 1,200 sanctions or "collateral consequences" enumerated statewide statutes that collectively constrain these FIIs' access to housing, employment, education, and other opportunities (Escobar-Schulz & Buitrago, 2020). Of those constraints, 77 percent impose restrictions on convicted felons' employment, occupational licensing, and business activities, while the other 33 percent affect individuals' "personal activities." Most of these restrictions are mandatory, automatic, and permanent (Mock, 2016). Examples of Notable Illinois policies that create "collateral consequences" for people who have already served their time in prison include the Illinois Murder Registry, Illinois' Mandatory Supervised Release (MSR) program, and Illinois' ban on people with records from holding municipal or local office (Chicago Torture Justice Center, 2023; Gruschow, 2022; Vinicky, 2023).

Beyond its incarceration and post-incarceration statistics, the state presents a unique site in which to study the experiences, attitudes, and opinions of FIIs working in fields related to the criminal legal system. Ironically, in addition to its numerous statutes that enact collateral consequences upon FIIs, Illinois is also known for its progressive Governor's Office, pioneering criminal justice policies, and robust network of criminal legal system-related organizations.

Meanwhile, the city of Chicago specifically is known as the exoneration capital of the country, as well as the birthplace of numerous violence prevention organizations and initiatives.

During his first term between 2019 and 2022, Governor Pritzker used his executive clemency powers to grant 225 pardons and 96 sentence commutations to incarcerated people and people with criminal convictions in Illinois (Silvergleid, 2024). For comparison, between 2005 and mid-2021, New Hampshire's governor granted just one commutation and Connecticut's granted just five (Awan & Quandt, 2022). Governor Pritzker also has signed numerous sweeping pieces of criminal justice reform legislation into law, including the Cannabis Regulation and Tax Act, which established the Restore, Restore, Reinvest, and Renew (R3) grant program⁵; the Safety, Accountability, Fairness and Equity-Today (SAFE-T) Act, which abolished cash bail and reformed pretrial jailing practices in Illinois; and most recently, Senate Bill 423, which reforms Illinois' MSR system. Additionally, Lieutenant Governor Julianna Stratton currently oversees a statewide initiative called Justice, Equity, Opportunity (JEO), which seeks to "shift the state's justice system from unsuccessful or punitive approaches and toward just and equitable—and more restorative, inclusive, and cutting-edge—practices and programs" and employs several formerly incarcerated individuals in her office (Stratton, n.d.). Together, Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker and Lt. Governor Stratton are known nationally as criminal justice reform leaders.

Illinois is also the home of a robust network of nonprofit, and specifically criminal legal system-related organizations. While there is no official count of the number of criminal legal system-related organizations in the state, since the implementation of the Cannabis Regulation and Tax Act in 2020, Lt. Gov. Stratton, JEO, and ICJIA have provided over 400 different

⁵ The R3 program, which is administered by the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, is designed to facilitate the re-investment of cannabis tax revenue back into communities that have been "ravaged by violence and disproportionately impacted by historical criminal justice system overuse" (Weisner, 2021).

organizations from across the with R3 funding for civil legal aid, economic development, reentry, violence prevention, and youth development projects (Adams, n.d.). Though not limited to criminal justice organizations, the IRS lists 74,029 active tax-exempt non-profit organizations currently operating in Illinois (Roberts et al., 2013).

More specifically, Chicago as a city is at the forefront of addressing numerous criminal legal system-related issues, both locally and nationwide. Since 2019, for example, it has led the nation in exonerations. In 2022 alone, Cook County recorded 124 overturned convictions (Cherone, 2023; The National Registry of Exonerations, 2024). Additionally, Chicago has struggled with high homicide and violent crime rates. Since 2016, for example, the city has seen no fewer than 500 homicides per year (Masterson, 2024). Largely as a result of this violence, Chicago is the birthplace of numerous violence prevention organizations and initiatives, including (but not limited to) Cure Violence, Advance Peace, READI Chicago, Becoming a Man (BAM), and Chicago CRED (Creating Real Economic Destiny) all of whom employ FIIs as “outreach workers” and “violence interrupters” to do CVI work (Butts et al., 2015; Corburn et al., 2021; Bhatt et al., 2023; Prochaska, 2014; Carbonari, 2018). Especially recently, Chicago-based CVI initiatives have begun expanding across the country. For example, on February 9, 2024, the White House hosted the inaugural graduating cohort of the University of Chicago Crime Lab’s Community Violence Intervention Leadership Academy, which trains CVI leaders from dozens of major U.S. cities (The White House, 2024).

It is because of Illinois’, and more specifically Chicago’s, robust criminal legal policy landscape, supportive government, vast network of organizations staffed by formerly incarcerated individuals, and complex history that the city is an ideal location in which to ground a study concerning formerly incarcerated people who work in criminal legal system-related

fields. Had the study not been conducted in Chicago, participants may have been more difficult to find and recruit, for example, due to a city or state-wide culture of stigmatization or a shortage of organizations that do criminal legal system-related work. Moreover, as a student researcher based in Chicago who, during my four years living here, has become familiar with the city's network of criminal legal system-related policies and organizations, it is possible that this research benefitted from my own localized knowledge.

Finally, it is important to note that this project was first conceived out of another qualitative interview-based study of formerly incarcerated people in Chicago conducted in Spring 2023. In this previous study, I sought to understand the unique knowledge, skills, and attributes FIIs bring to CVI and other justice work given their experience interacting with the criminal legal system, as well as why and how these attributes make them well-suited for CVI and other anti-violence/justice-related jobs. I did so by interviewing five formerly incarcerated individuals from Chicago, as well as three academics research on FIIs. Feeling as though my previous study only scratched the surface of what I have since found to be an array of social and human capital FIIs bring from their lived experience to their jobs, I set out to conduct the present study, which greatly adds to, expands upon and/or reframes the preliminary findings on and policy recommendations related to this subject I shared in my 2023 study.

Methodology

To better understand the unique knowledge, experience, attributes, and skills formerly incarcerated individuals bring to criminal legal system-related work, I conducted qualitative interviews with 21 formerly incarcerated people (who subsequently will be referred to as “research participants” or “participants”) who currently work in reentry, violence intervention, organizing/activism, policy advocacy, legal/law, and other fields that somehow directly related to

their experience with the criminal legal system. Each of the participants I interviewed met the following criteria: (1) they were 18+ years old, (2) they were able to speak and understand English, (3) they have experienced incarceration for any length of time (in jail or prison), and (4) they currently work in a criminal legal-system related field (broadly defined, a field that involves incarcerated populations, populations at-risk for incarceration, or formerly incarcerated populations, and/or legal, art, policy or advocacy work related to the criminal legal system).⁶ All recruitment and interview processes were approved by the University of Chicago Institutional Review Board (Protocol No. IRB23-1742).

Participants were recruited via email, text, phone, in-person, LinkedIn private message, and through snowball sampling. Because this paper was born out of another qualitative interview-based research project on a similar subject matter, I first reached out to previous interview participants and asked for their verbal or written consent to use anonymized previous interview data in this present, or if they would be interested in partaking in another interview. Interview participants marked with an asterisk (*) are participants who I interviewed last spring who consented to be included in the present study. I then reached out to FIIs I know or found online who work at local Chicago-based organizations to see if they would be interested in participating. Each participant was sent an information sheet detailing the purpose, risks, and potential benefits of participating, and after interviewing, each participant was asked to pass along information about the study to additional individuals.

⁶ Inclusion criteria were chosen to: (1) ensure participants were consenting adults, (2) remove the need for and cost of an interpreter, (3) focus on incarceration experience rather than one's criminal record (i.e. not all formerly incarcerated people have records) as a common factor of analysis, as well as (4) assess whether the skills, connections, and attributes FIIs derive from their lived experience and the barriers FIIs face more generally, are applicable in a variety of industries directly related to their experience.

All interviews were recorded with participant consent either in-person at a mutually agreed-upon location (e.g. in a Chicago Public Library study room) or virtually on Zoom or via phone and lasted between twenty-five and ninety minutes. Interviews were semi-structured to allow for the exploration of unanticipated yet “pertinent ideas” that came up during the interview (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Interviewees were asked pre-prepared questions and probes, as well as questions crafted in response to statements made during the interview. Pre-prepared interview questions were crafted with the goal of capturing each interviewee’s unique background and centered around understanding the following: (1) what forms of human capital (skills, knowledge, attributes, and experiences) and social capital (connections, networks, social norms, credibility) formerly incarcerated individuals who are employed in criminal legal system-related fields bring to their work; (2) what makes formerly incarcerated individuals well-suited to working in criminal legal system-related fields; and (3) what complications or challenges arise for formerly incarcerated people working in these fields.

Questions were organized around themes such as “Demographic/Background Information,” “Incarceration/Criminal Legal System Experience,” “Work Experience,” and “Policy Implications,” though were not necessarily asked in that order. Some sample questions include: (1) “Tell me about yourself and your work, (2) “How did you come to the job you work in now?” (3) Are there any barriers you have faced that prevent you from doing the work that you do?” (4) “What makes you well-suited to your current role?” and (5) “To what extent does your experience with the criminal legal system influence the work that you do today?” Questions were asked with the goal of having participants organically discuss their work and qualifications, so as not to “lead” participants into speaking about their work from a human or social capital framework specifically. If, however, participants mentioned a type of human or social capital

(e.g. knowledge of the system, relationships, etc.), I would follow up with probing questions to gather more information. For a full list of interview questions, see **Appendix B**.

Zoom recordings were transcribed using Zoom’s built-in AI transcription software and minor corrections were made when necessary. In-person interview recordings were transcribed by 3PlayMedia. All transcripts were de-anonymized and all personal identifiers (e.g. place of work, names, etc.) have been removed from transcripts and this paper to ensure the privacy of participants. Interview data was analyzed using a qualitative theme-coding procedure like that employed by Sturm and Tae (2017). The process involved “axial coding,” whereby interview excerpts were clustered into thematic groups; and then “conceptualization,” which involved an inductive process of “mapping and remapping concepts and themes and their interrelationships until a logical narrative grounded in both the interview data and existing literature emerged” Sturm and Tae (2017). For a full list of codes included in my “codebook,” see **Appendix C**.

Importantly, my position as a researcher ought to be acknowledged. While social science tradition encourages scholars to approach their work from a “critical distance” (Miller, 2022), this paper was born out of my proximity to its subject area—I decided to write about formerly incarcerated people working in criminal legal system-related fields because I so greatly admire these people that I have met in my day-to-day life who fall into this category. While I am a white woman in college who has not herself experienced incarceration or what it is like to live with a criminal record (i.e., I am in a different “social category” than many of my participants), I am also someone who has spent considerable time working and volunteering in law firms and at organizations alongside FIIs. I have taken classes inside prisons, led writing workshops in youth detention centers, and advocated on behalf of those in jails. I have sat in courtrooms supporting incarcerated peers and worked in community with organizations led by system-impacted folks. I

also often find myself in the streets or on social media echoing formerly incarcerated leaders' calls for change. In other words, I have taken the advice of Bryan Stevenson, who suggests that if we are willing to get "close" or "proximate" to those in social situations different from our own, "we might learn, in a deep and meaningful way, about the lives of others" (Miller, 2022).

Methodologically, this paper treats "getting close" as a gift and builds upon what I have learned about the lives of others from being in proximity to them (Miller, 2022). For example, many of my participants are people who I have worked with or met during my time as a student of Chicago's criminal legal system. I doubt I would have had the slightest idea of where to look for participants or who to reach out to if it weren't for my involvement in this sphere. I believe I also have my relative "proximity" to thank for helping me establish credibility and build trust with participants—oftentimes, participants would mention a name or organization I am familiar with, I would ask follow-up questions about it, and they would be pleasantly surprised to learn I knew what they were talking about (Massoud, 2022). Similarly, some participants who I reached out to via LinkedIn said they agreed to participate in my study because of my previous work. While I do not claim to understand or be able to fully empathize with the lived experiences of the participants in this study, I at least can say that I've seen firsthand their importance to the work that they do, as well as, to an extent, the kinds of systems and treatment they have experienced.

That said, there are a few limitations to this study worth noting. First, my research could have been strengthened by additional interview data. Second, my research could have benefitted from a more diverse array of perspectives, for example, from second-chance employers, friends and family members of FIIs, as well as additional stakeholders who interact with FIIs following their release, such as state and government officials, police and probation officers, community members, and more. It could have also benefitted from a more varied array of participants. Most

participants are between the ages of 40 and 70, and an overwhelming majority of them are Black men. I would have ideally liked to interview a greater number of women and nonbinary folks, as well as white, Hispanic/Latino, Indigenous, and AAPI individuals. In addition, I would have liked to include the perspectives of currently incarcerated people in this research, but there are significant barriers to communicating with these individuals, especially as a student researcher.

Finally, I acknowledge that the ideas, experiences, and opinions shared by the individuals I interviewed represent a small microcosm of formerly incarcerated people's ideas, experiences, and opinions more broadly. Most FIIs have not been afforded the same programming, educational opportunities, connections, and resources that many of my participants have been able to access that helped them get to their current system-related roles. Others still may have been prevented from engaging in this work for numerous reasons that will later be discussed. And, as Oscar (one of my participants) astutely noted, there are many FIIs are more than qualified to do criminal legal system-related work, who have actively chosen to not engage in it and try to leave their incarceration experience behind them instead:

There's [...] a lot of people who qualified to do this work, who not doing this work! [...] Who, instead of sitting here, having an interview, is working in a *factory*, standing on their feet for 10 hours a day, instead of reliving this experience! I'm telling you, people have the capacity, very capable people, and they *refuse* to do this work. They *refuse* to relive this (Oscar, 2/12/24).

It is therefore that, in addition to the aforementioned limitations, this research may have benefitted from the perspectives of formerly incarcerated people who, for whatever reason, are not engaged in criminal legal system-related work.

Despite these limitations, this approach provides a firm qualitative foundation needed to assess the unique knowledge, experience, and skills FIIs bring to criminal legal system-related work. **Table 1** lists the pseudonyms of my research participant, the general industry they work in, their race and gender, interview length, and the date on which I interviewed them:

Table 1: Research Participants

Pseudonym	Current Industry	Race	Gender	Interview Date	Interview Length
Aaron *	Violence Prevention	Black	Male	3/23/23, 4/27/23	[01:03:00], [26:48]
Benny *	Violence Prevention	Black	Male	4/21/23	[59:12]
Carter	Policy Advocacy/Organizing	Black	Male	1/17/24	[40:21], [01:25:38]
Daniel	Policy Advocacy/Activism	White	Male	1/23/24	[53:29]
Emmanuel	Education/Reentry	Hispanic	Male	1/29/24	[01:23:50]
Frank	Policy Advocacy/Activism	Black	Male	2/12/24	[52:01]
Gloria	Reentry/Support/Policy Advocacy	Black	Female	1/30/24	[01:18:43]
Henry	Policy Advocacy/Activism	Black	Male	2/2/24	[48:09]
Ian	Legal/Policy Advocacy	Black	Male	2/5/24	[01:08:24]
Jacob	Education/Reentry	Black	Male	2/6/24	[01:20:29]
Kiara	Reentry/Policy Advocacy	Black	Female	2/22/24	[01:07:24]
Lucille	Organizing/Legal	Mixed	Female	2/1/24	[01:09:24]
Martin	Violence Prevention	Black	Male	2/16/24	[57:09]
Nasir *	Violence Prevention	Black	Male	4/26/23	[48:07]
Oscar	Policy Advocacy/Activism	Black	Male	2/12/24	[01:02:22]
Pedro	Reentry/Activism	Black	Male	2/12/24	[01:19:18]
Quincy	Research/Policy Advocacy	Hispanic	Male	2/8/24	[49:42]
Roberto	Research/Art/Education/Reentry	Hispanic	Male	2/20/24	[58:40]
Sean	Economics/Organizing/Art	Black	Male	2/20/24	[43:36]
Tyrell	Art/Media/Entertainment	Black	Male	2/16/24	[52:35]
Unique	Reentry	Black	Female	2/26/24	[01:13:40]

The 21 individuals I interviewed have spent nearly **400** total years (or, more than **3 million hours**) incarcerated in a range of Illinois state prisons, county jails, federal prisons, and juvenile detention centers. The average number of years each participant spent incarcerated was **18.6** (162,490 hours), with a low of **2** and a high of **42** years. While I will not share the exact number of years each of my participants was incarcerated for privacy and identification reasons, I share these average and total numbers to shed light on the sheer amount of collective lived incarceration experience my 21 participants have. As one participant, Frank, noted: “So they say [...] you're considered an “expert” after 10,000 hours or something? [...] Well I definitely got more than 10,000 hours in the Department of Corrections” (Frank, 2/12/24).

76% of my participants are Black, and 80% are men. While this means that I have an overrepresentation of Black men who participated in my study, this overrepresentation likely reflects, at least in part, the disproportionate impact the criminal legal system has on Black men, especially in Illinois. While Black people represent 13.8% of the adult population in Illinois, they represent 28.9% of the people arrested or convicted of crimes in the state. Moreover, 45.3% of people with felony convictions in Illinois since 1979 were Black and an estimated 14% of Black adults in Illinois were currently or formerly incarcerated as of 2010, compared to 3% of adults overall. Notably, as of 2020, Illinois had the third-highest percentage of Black adults who are formerly incarcerated in the nation (Escobar-Schulz & Buitrago, 2020).

The average length of my interviews was 60 minutes and 57 seconds.⁷ Each participant was interviewed only once, except for two participants, one of whom was first interviewed in a group setting, then by me individually; and another who was interviewed twice due to technical difficulties with the first interview. Most of my interviews were conducted via Zoom. One was conducted over the phone and three were conducted in-person at mutually agreed-upon locations.

Although interview respondents came from a broad range of recruitment sources and work in a diverse array of criminal legal system-related fields, the constraints of a small sample ($n = 21$), a non-representative sample by gender and race, and snowball sampling suggests the findings in this paper should not be considered as wholly representative of the average formerly incarcerated person in Chicago who works in a criminal legal system-related field.

⁷ Calculated based on the length of 23 interviews conducted with 21 unique participants.

Findings

I. Human Capital: Experiential Knowledge, Technical/Soft Skills & Resilience

When asked what kind of knowledge, skills, capabilities, and/or attributes (i.e. human capital) they bring to their current roles from their lived experience (which includes their incarceration experience, as well as their pre- and post-incarceration experiences), the majority of my participants mentioned at least one of the following three things: (1) intimate **experiential knowledge** of the way “the system” (which includes prisons, the criminal legal system more broadly) and “the streets” work as well as how system-related policies affect system-impacted people on the ground; (2) **technical** (such as how to do legal research, write, advocate for policy changes, etc.) and **soft skills** (which includes the ability to read people, communicate effectively, listen, negotiate differences, stay calm in high-pressure social scenarios, etc.) that they developed (often out of necessity) and/or honed while in contact with the system; and (3) **resilience**, or, the ability to persevere through trying circumstances, face rejection, see goals to completion, and a dedication to showing up again and again. In the following section, I break down each of these three types of human capital as well as highlight a few of the ways in which my participants rely on these forms of human capital in their everyday work.

“I Exist as a Body of Research”

More than two-thirds of the formerly incarcerated people I interviewed discussed how their lived experience provides them with a vast wealth of knowledge that they draw from in their various roles, whether that be working with prison officials, interacting with at/high-risk⁸

⁸ In the context of Community Violence Intervention programs, “at-risk” or “high-risk” is defined as those who are “at the highest risk of being victims or perpetrators—or both—of violence” (Dholakia & Gilbert, 2021). Often, high or at-risk individuals are gang-involved, a major player in a drug or street organization, have a violent criminal history, have recently experienced incarceration, have a reputation of carrying a gun, are a recent victim of a shooting, and/or are being between 16 and 25 years of age (Butts et al., 2015).

and system-impacted individuals, or advocating for policy changes. This kind of knowledge ranges from how prisons and the criminal legal system function, to the real-world effects of policies, to who important system stakeholders are, to where one can go wrong when navigating the system. Participants expressed how, while it is possible to study and learn about the criminal legal system as an outsider, lived experience provides one with an entirely different level of insight as to how the system works and impacts people.

Oscar, who works for a statewide policy advocacy organization, emphasizes that there are some things that only people with lived experience will tell you. When asked why employers should hire people with lived experience, he said:

They're your most valuable asset! [...] **They are what one would consider those wartime reporters, the person who's giving you a report from ground zero. From the battlefield.** They the one's who's gonna let you know what's going on! [...] **There's just some things that books aren't going to tell you, seminars not going to tell you, elected officials not going to tell you, people who are part of the prison system, as far as representatives of the system, they're not going to tell you!** You need people with lived experience to do this work (Oscar, 2/12/24).

Here, Oscar's implications are twofold. On one hand, he stresses that educational resources like "books" and "seminars" only provide so much insight as to what goes on in prisons. Another one of my participants, Lucille, echoed this sentiment as well.

Lucille described to me how, over the twenty years she was incarcerated, she counted the number of roommates she had, a number that amounted to "well over two thousand." Once she was released, however, she found that people in her organizing circles called this number into question, to which she replied:

You can't be in this motherfucker talking about [prison reform] in Illinois and da da da, and using Cook County as an example when you know how many people cycle through Cook County jail in a motherfucking month and a year and shit! I was in Cook County jail for 2 and a half years, right? When I was in Dwight [...] I had one to two roommates a week for a fucking year! Like I was locked up for 20 years bro. I have lived in dorms... in 6-man dorms, 8-man dorms, 10-man dorms, and 20-man dorms [...] **So yeah, I've had well over 2,000 roommates.** And so, when I say *I exist as a body of research in this*

⁹ *A Note on Quotations:* I use bracketed ellipses to show where I have deleted sections of text. Regular ellipses denote that the speaker paused or trailed off. Quotes have been lightly edited for repeated words and filler words/phrases (e.g. "like," "you know," "right," etc.).

work? That me and other formerly incarcerated folks exist, and presently incarcerated folks exist, as entire bodies of research in this work with the depth of experiential scholarship mother fuckin' academia can't fuck with? **I mean that shit** (Lucille, 2/1/24).

Like Oscar, Lucille emphasized that her experience provided her with a wealth of knowledge regarding how the criminal legal system functions in practice, or as she calls it, “experiential scholarship.” Earlier in our interview, she explained that just because the “motherfucking centuries of wisdom” currently and formerly incarcerated people have “never got cataloged,” doesn’t change the fact that it still “*exists*, and it exists outside academia” (Lucille, 2/1/24).

To further expand upon Lucille’s point, I’ll share the following interaction I had with Emmanuel, who works at an organization that provides educational resources for people who are incarcerated. When I asked if people without lived experience could do his job, he tried to demonstrate to me that there are limitations to the kinds of information people without lived experience know and can learn about the system:

Emmanuel: **Can anybody else do this? [...] No. Nobody else can do this.** No average person can do this. And here's why [...] Natalie, you're doing this report, right? [...] How many prisons are there in Illinois?

Natalie: The exact number? Oh, gosh! I don't know. More than...20? I would guess?

Emmanuel: There's 28. [...] How many people were released in 2022? [...]

Natalie: Ten- mmm. Like? Five thousand? Three thousand.

Emmanuel: 16,000 people released in 2022. *I know this because I was in there* [...] So no, nobody can just walk off the streets and provide the counsel that I'm providing my bosses. There's certain things I just, I know personally. What's so bad about North House Pontiac, Natalie?

Natalie: North House in Pontiac? I don't know.

Emmanuel: [...] See, that's the thing, like, people don't know. The terrible thing about North House is that, that's where they keep all the, let's just call them “problem people.” So, they don't have them behind bars, they have a locked behind solid doors, and they pop this chuck, and they feed you through the chuck hole. Right? There's usually a fire or a flood, or something going on over there. **And the funny thing is like, I tell you this thing now, and it might be this is just a little anecdote, but it could be something that my boss needed to know because she was going to do something at Pontiac, or because whatever!** And I just so happen to know. I remember I asked my dad cause at that point I had, I'd been to like, so into in totality, I've been to eight different prisons in Illinois. **I remember asking my dad like, “Why the hell do I have to go through all this?” And he's like, “Because someone's gonna have to know that stuff [...] They're going to need to know what you saw.” And he was right** (Emmanuel, 1/29/24).

Interestingly, while the very specific information that Emmanuel cited regarding the number of people released in 2022 and the number of prisons in Illinois is something that anyone who looks

up the numbers could know, contrarily, the information he shares regarding North House in Pontiac, is not something one would find in a book or a “seminar,” as Oscar said. Though I did not know the two statistics Emmanuel cited, they, unlike Lucille’s record of the 2,000 roommates she’s had, are publicly available data points. Thus, Emmanuel’s response raises questions about what kind of information can exclusively be *derived* from lived experience, versus information that is merely *important* to those with lived experience. Regardless though, as Emmanuel stresses, this sort of detailed knowledge, especially the insight he shares regarding Pontiac, is *valuable*. It’s the kind of thing that comes in handy when going into prisons to work with incarcerated folks, or, in Oscar’s case, when talking to politicians to try and convince them to pass new policies.

This brings me to Oscar’s second point, that some stakeholders, namely, prison officials, simply *won’t* tell you what goes on in prisons, even if they too have witnessed it firsthand. This could be because, as Arnold (2005) and McKendy et al. (2021) show, correctional officers (COs) are largely desensitized to the violence and suffering they witness daily in prisons, but also because they do not have the same direct interest in detailing these abuses to policymakers as formerly incarcerated people do. For example, Oscar shared with me how, recently, in his effort to help try and pass Senate Bill 2257 in Illinois, which would limit the time a person can be placed in solitary confinement, he has been sharing his own experience with solitary:

I tell a story about a friend of mine. When I first got to Stateville, [...] I got a job in the kitchen and [...] **I ended up befriending a guy, [...] Blue. And we became real cool** [...] We worked in the kitchen, lived in the same cell house [...] went to the yard every day together, worked out together, and one day [...] Are you familiar with Tamms? Super maximum security prison downstate Illinois? Yeah. It’s since been shut. It was a *super max, extreme* isolation facility. Every cell’s designed to isolate a person from any human contact with anybody else. So anyway, they sent him to Tamms [and] I was transferred to Menard [...] So fast forward four years down the line, they release him from Tamms and I saw him at Menard! [...] I saw that man *every day*, and when I saw him, I tapped him [and said], “Blue what’s up?” I put out my hand to shake his hand... **and the man looked at me like he ain’t know who I was!** I *see him* asking me! I see him *searching* like trying to figure out *who I was*, and he couldn’t really- he never really fully remembered who I was! Every time I saw him after that? [...] There was always just like this blank stare in his face. It got to the point where I’d see him and I didn’t even speak to him. **Solitary confinement. That’s what it does to**

people [...] So when I go have conversations with legislators about limiting the use of solitary confinement? I tell them that story (Oscar, 2/12/24).

For Oscar, the effect solitary confinement has on people is *personal*. He has an intimate understanding of what it can do to a person. He then uses this knowledge, and his story, in his policy advocacy work.

Other participants also shared how their real-world experience provides them with an understanding of how policies function in practice in prisons, something that, as Oscar previously mentioned, prison stakeholders won't tell you. When asked why it's important to have system-impacted people doing policy work, Kiara, who runs her own reentry and policy advocacy organization, explained:

There are loads of examples of legislation [...] where people who have not gone through the system come up with it, and they have the *best* intentions [...] but they don't know what they don't know [...] I'll give you a perfect example. So we eliminated prison gerrymandering in the State of Illinois. So, for the next census, people will be counted [...] at their home address. IDOC does an intake process. All prisons have an intake process where they have you complete this paperwork, you put information down, and they take information like what's your primary residence, birth date, all of this, all the relevant stuff. And then that stuff is supposed to be stored somewhere [...] IDOC was saying they didn't have addresses for people, and I'm like "they absolutely do [...]" First of all, 95% of the people in IDOC go home. So how do you not have an address? Because you have to release them to an address." And then the other part is, *I went through an intake*. I know what they asked me! But there was nobody in that [policy] coalition that had lived experience. So they actually thought that IDOC didn't have addresses! And when I came in and I said, "Well, who told you that?" And they were like "IDOC," I said, "**They lied to you**. Because they have addresses!" So I give that as an example of blind spots. Like, [...] **they gave the system the benefit of the doubt, because who would think that someone in this system would actually not tell the truth!? Right? Like you just wouldn't think that! I do. I know it. But, but they didn't. And so, having that lived, experience was, I was able to say no** (Kiara, 2/22/24).

As Kiara's story shows, not only do people who have been incarcerated know how policies work in practice, but with this knowledge, they are able to call the bluff of powerful entities like IDOC, who otherwise would get away with lying to politicians and policy advocates.

She later shared another example in which the knowledge and input of individuals with lived experience helped counter IDOC's narrative:

In January of last year [...] [IDOC] put the notice out, saying, "You can access your master file." [But] when people started requesting their master files, they were denying the request because they weren't "on the right form." Well, they *never made the form!* [...] And so what they were publicly saying is that people were requesting them, but they weren't using the right form, but what they failed to *mention* is that the form

didn't exist, so there was no “right form” to use. So this became a loophole [...] and our [incarcerated] coalition partners on the inside was like, “This is what's going on, we don't have a form.” And then we started talking to the electeds and was like, “This is what's happening.” [...] And [...] that put pressure on them to create the form. But then they create the form and they put it on the *website*. They didn't make it available to people on the inside! So family members had to go to the website, download the form, and mail the form inside. So again [...] these are all intentional decisions. It's not like, “Oh, man, we made a mistake.” No. You *knew* you weren't making these forms available to the people on the inside [...] See, **people who do policy work don't get that piece. Because they have never lived that piece. We've lived it. We saw it firsthand. And so we can bring that perspective into the room, into the space, into the solution. So that solutions aren't theoretical but are practical** (Kiara, 2/22/24).

Again, Kiara emphasizes, the “loopholes” created by the IDOC are exactly the kind of thing policymakers without lived experience tend to overlook but are glaringly obvious to people who have found themselves caught in them time and time again. This example also highlights the importance of not only including the perspectives of formerly incarcerated people, but people who are currently incarcerated as well, who are experiencing the effects of policies in real-time.

While Kiara and several other participants expressed how they used their knowledge of the system when interacting with policymakers and drafting legislation, others talked about how their knowledge of the “system” or the “streets” helped them work within carceral systems and with system-impacted people directly. For example, Emmanuel shared how he uses his knowledge of which IDOC staff are friendly to his cause to help him bring educational programming to incarcerated people:

What tends to happen [...] is [people will say], “**All these people are bad.**” **Whether it's the guards, whether it's the inmates, whatever, right? And then you start breaking down like, “Not all of them, and I'm gonna tell you *who* are the ones that you can count on.** But because you made that general statement, you were just willing to [...] sweep everybody with the same broom and you missed out on an opportunity to build a relationship with somebody who could actually help you do what you what you needed to do. I was at a conference in Atlanta and a buddy of mine was with me, and someone asked us about the Department of Corrections, to which he got up, and he said, “They hate us. They all hate us!” [...] **And then I started rattling off names of directors and personnel who are actually very much for us** and are trying to go against the current of punitive incarceration to a more sort of restorative aspect. **Because I've had this conversation with these people.** I see what they want to do (Emmanuel, 1/29/24).

This is exactly the kind of hyper-specific knowledge that, had Emmanuel never been incarcerated, he would not know.

Similarly, Aaron, who works in the violence prevention space, also relies on his lived experience navigating “the streets” of Chicago when working with at-risk youth. He explains how he and other violence-prevention workers use their knowledge of where they went wrong to help and influence the younger generation and steer them in the “right” direction:

[People with lived experience make some of the best workers] because they've been through a lot of it [...]. **Allegedly you've been to jail for shooting somebody or maybe killing somebody[...], and they know how the gangbanging was back then, they know how it is now.** They was in prison gangbanging and things like that. **They know the ins and outs. They know the consequences and repercussions. They know the do's and the don'ts.** So they more level-headed” (Aaron, 4/27/23).

Here, Aaron emphasizes how violence prevention workers in particular use the knowledge they have from their prior experience in the streets and “level-headedness” that has come from that experience to reason with and offer practical advice to people who are still “gangbanging” today.

Nasir, who also works in the violence prevention space, **similarly** emphasizes that he shares insights he gained from **the mistakes he has made throughout his life** with the individuals he works with on the streets. He says,

I been where they headed. I've been down the road from where they headed [...] **I can tell them where I went wrong at, and how maybe I was misled.** And tell them the truth...That don't necessarily mean they gon' listen [...] But one thing they do know is, Imma always tell them the truth (Nasir, 4/26/23).

Again, this quote from Nasir shows that knowledge of the road ahead, in other words, “the streets” and “the system,” proves useful to him and other violence prevention workers in their everyday jobs. These sentiments were shared by many of my participants, who described using various kinds of experiential knowledge to their own ends, and to the benefit of others, in their criminal legal system-related work.

“Learned by Necessity”

In addition to the depth and breadth of knowledge they have acquired from their lived experiences interacting with the criminal legal system, several of my participants also expressed how they developed and honed both **technical** (e.g. legal, research, writing, etc.) and **soft** (e.g.

emotional intelligence, communication, listening) skills, often out of necessity, while inside and/or during their reentry journeys. For example, when asked if there were any skills he developed from his lived experience that he brings to his work today, Ian, who works in the policy department of a non-profit legal organization, said:

I think my knowledge and understanding of the law is something [...] If you asked me as a teenager what I wanted to be, I would have told you a mechanic. I was good with my hands. **Prison totally changed the trajectory of my life, obviously, for you know, sending me to prison for 25 years, but also, I learned the law. I learned by necessity there.** I learned that I *understood* it. I could apply it making arguments. So reading people's cases and identifying legal issues, they call that issue spotting, I was able to do that. And then be able to, effectively, I've never said I was at the skill of a lawyer, but I was able to do it to an extent that I was able to get people back and forth or make it clear what their issue or problem was (Ian, 2/5/24).

As Ian explains, he learned the law *by necessity* so that he could fight his and others' cases. Now, he uses the legal advocacy skills he developed while inside in his policy work. He says that "being a person who was a paralegal" while incarcerated allows him to come at his policy work from a different angle than he otherwise would if he didn't have legal skills (Ian, 2/5/24). He also emphasizes how learning the law "changed the trajectory of his life." Currently, in addition to serving in his policy role, Ian is enrolled in law school, where his legal skills also come in handy. And he is not the only aspiring lawyer I spoke to.

Quincy, who is currently working as a research assistant for a university professor, also hopes to go to law school someday. He explains how his interest in legal work began while he was in prison and that he developed his legal skills enough to achieve some major wins for other folks he was incarcerated with:

While I was in prison, I studied the law, and I was able to get some victories for individuals. I got two individuals fully exonerated from the work that I did. I didn't follow it all the way through, let me be clear, I was the one that initiated the petitions which eventually led to a council doing it, but it was my work that was the *catalyst* to get them to where they needed to be. And I'm very proud of that! But I had other victories. I got guys through trials, sentence reductions, and I also did civil law. I helped people win settlements, or awards for being, you know, harmed in the prison, whether they were denied medical care, or physically assaulted, etc., and so forth (Quincy, 2/8/24).

And, Quincy emphasizes, he honed his legal research skills while he was incarcerated without the help of technology, learning instead how to do it "the old-fashioned way." As someone who

was recently released, Quincy explained that while he does feel a bit technologically behind now, he believes that his ability to do “in-depth research just by using [his] mind” is a skill that will serve him well as a future lawyer, and currently serves him well as a researcher (Quincy, 2/8/24). Others, like Lucille, have had their writing published in a law journal. She too, emphasized that “depending on how we're situated in the joint, we (incarcerated people) learn a lot about the law” (Lucille, 2/1/24).

While legal skills were the most common technical skill participants spoke about, they were not the only ones. Others, like Oscar, spoke of writing skills more generally. He says:

I really taught myself how to write. That was just a byproduct of me, having the time to read and to practice the craft. You can log onto our website [... and] you will be able to see, I have a couple of essays that I have written that's posted up there. So those are the skills I was able to develop and hone while I was in prison. Then I bring that to work. I write essays and they post them on the blog (Oscar, 2/12/24)

Here, Oscar explains the direct throughline of his learning to write well to his current work doing policy advocacy—writing is a skill his employer uses to his organization’s advantage. He also touches on another key experience shared by many of the folks I spoke with—having time to learn. A number of my participants discussed spending a considerable amount of time reading and/or participating in educational programming while incarcerated, which taught them useful comprehension, writing, and analytical skills. It also greatly informed their “politics,” as well as their understanding of their lived experience and the criminal legal system as a whole. “I've had thousands of roommates [and] we've all read thousands of books,” Lucille said (Lucille, 2/1/22). Others, like Henry, read “over 100 books in one year” while incarcerated (Henry, 2/2/24). Others still, like Oscar, emphasized how books like *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander, totally transformed their worldview: “Boom! Threw the roof off my thinking,” he said (Oscar 2/12/24). For a full list of similar books that participants mentioned in their interviews, see **Appendix D**.

Less common, but still prevalent, were the skills participants learned from mentors, prison education, or some type of program designed specifically for formerly or currently incarcerated individuals. Carter, who works as an organizer, describes how a mentor of his taught him how to use sound bites when interacting with the media. He explains:

I created my own skills. Sound bites. I can tell you what will make the news and what won't make the news. I learned that from a person [...named] Father Flagger [...] I told him: "My man, listen here, I have to steal your style, due to the fact that the media is more open to that type of style." And as an activist, your whole goal is to get media to cover, and then, once they cover, now [...] you got to be able to irritate them. If you don't irritate them. Hell! They may as well give you a paycheck because you really have not done anything (Carter 1/17/24).

Other participants mentioned skills like public speaking, podcasting, entrepreneurship, and policy advocacy that they learned from mentors, through education, or in programs both while incarcerated and/or on the outside. For example, Frank, who currently works as a policy associate for a statewide advocacy organization, joined a mentorship program at the organization soon after his release. He says: "The good thing about [it] was, it was, it was an integrated program, and I learned from staff. I was able to talk to staff, learn from staff. [...] I'm learning about nonprofits, I'm learning from my communications manager, I'm learning outreach, I'm doing everything" (Frank, 2/12/24).

In addition to the more technical skills participants learned and/or developed while inside, many participants also spoke of more interpersonal-type or "soft" skills. Participants, particularly those who do more person-centric work, stressed the importance of being both a good listener and communicator. Aaron explained that, to do violence prevention work, "you have to be a people person [...] and you have to be able to communicate [...] and be able to listen and understand what's going on" (Aaron, 4/27/23). Likewise, Benny, who runs his own organization for at-risk youth, says:

The best leadership quality I think anybody can have is the ability to communicate [...] and then also being able to listen. Hearing is one thing, but listening is totally different. So when I'm working with young people, and we're in a group setting or something, I say, instead of saying, "Yes," I say, "Tell me,

did I hear you correctly? Is this what you said?" So when I repeat what they said, that mean I'm listening to 'em. (Benny, 4/21/23).

Here, Benny emphasizes the importance of not only communicating with and listening to the young folks he works with but also demonstrates his interpersonal skills by explaining how he ensures that his clientele *knows* he's really listening.

Nasir, who also works with at-risk youth, similarly stressed the essentiality of ensuring that the individuals he works with know that he is listening and that he cares. He explains:

One of the leadership skills I developed was just listening to people, not judging their solutions [...] not having a negative attitude. Because I always understood, we came from a really bleak place. I understood that. So I always tried to lead and give people the positive side of things and be an empathetic ear, just showing people that I care. **And I knew people don't care about how much you know, they care about what you how much you care** (Nasir, 4/26/23).

Again, Nasir, like Benny, describes how he actively listens and engages with what his clientele says, but he also notes how a lot of the time, the young people he works with aren't looking for advice. In other words, sometimes listening is all one needs to do to support the person or people they are trying to help. For example, Gloria, who works at a reentry organization designed specifically for formerly incarcerated women, also considers herself to be a good listener:

I'm supportive. I am a good listener. I [...] listen in a way where I don't give the answers. [...] A person could be talking and they're struggling or going through something, and they have the answer all the time! If you just keep letting them talk! Like the answer is there! You just kind of like, let them talk, and you don't figure it out for them. You don't give suggestions in that moment, but you kinda listen, and you jot things down, and it's like, "Hey, do you realize you just answered your own question or just figured it out by yourself!?" [...] I'm a good listener in that way (Gloria, 1/30/24).

Part of the art of listening, as Gloria explains, is showing people that they already have the answers to their problems. It's important not to "give the answers" or offer unsolicited advice or, as Nasir says, show people "how much you know," something that Aaron, Gloria, Nasir, and Benny all understand, thanks to their interpersonal skills.

In addition to listening and communication skills, participants spoke of other interpersonal skills, like being able to "read the room" or "read people" —skills that many of them developed while they were incarcerated. Lucille describes how, in prison:

You get [emotional intelligence] in extreme. You get it at an [excessive] level. [...] We're shrunk down to the point of being in this whole other world, and that whole other world is super fucking full and intense. Like you have to know, with pretty much a *look*, whether or not your roommate, who's been diagnosed as schizophrenic but probably is *misdiagnosed*, and they probably just, I don't know, in the middle of some kind of neurodivergent breakdown, or whatever, but anyway, you gotta know, *Ah- they're going to go off*, and how to avert that so that we don't have 5,011 police on the deck tearing up all our shit and traumatizing everybody more than we already are. We're experiencing reality [...] to the nth mother fucking power. You gotta know when the CO comes on the deck, whether or not he gonna be on some bullshit that day, and all you gotta do is see that motherfucker come through for count, like, *Ope, it's gonna be a day. It's gonna be a day* (Lucille, 2/1/24).

Here, Lucille emphasizes two things repeatedly. First, prison is an incredibly intense and emotionally fraught environment in which the slightest outburst can have drastic consequences for those who are incarcerated there. Second, because of this extreme intensity, people who are incarcerated develop the ability to read even the slightest change or difference in people's emotions, so that they might have a chance to prevent or prepare themselves for the trauma that is about to be inflicted on them.

Oscar also explains how living in a prison environment forced him to be able to “read people” as well as how to mediate conflict and cooperate with others. He says:

I lived in a cell. I lived in a space, a room, that's the size of the average parking space for 26 years with somebody else. So you learn things about yourself and you learn how to really deal, socialize, and cooperate with other people when you living in a space that small with somebody else. So you know how to **read people**. [...] But when you in a space that tight with somebody? **You have become an expert at body language**. If somebody in a *bad mood*... Cause you don't always have no good relationship with these people! So **you begin to be more understanding. You begin to really think before you speak**. And when you feel anger rise in you? When that frustration or aggravation, that irritation rise in you? You just can't start off about that. So you start *processing* it in different ways. [You come up with] strategic ways to go about addressing this issue. **So it's a lot of people skills that I had learned throughout my time in prison because the repercussions of not being able to control your emotions? Those repercussions are instantaneous**. Ain't no court process. Ain't no appeals. They instantaneous. There was real consequences for being emotional, there was real consequences for not thinking things through and just acting, in prison (Oscar, 2/12/24).

Like Lucille, Oscar stressed that in prison, there are “real consequences for being emotional,” so while you're incarcerated, you “become an expert at body language.” He also touched on how you really learn to regulate your own emotions, or “think before you speak,” a skill that several participants expressed comes in handy now that they're out of prison.

Gloria, who, in addition to working at a reentry organization for women, also does policy advocacy work, explains how she uses emotional regulation while interacting with legislators:

Oftentimes legislators don't know what's happening, but then you'll run into some of them who [...] may feel that what we're working on isn't a human right, [that] we're not deserving. [...] But these conversations need to be had, and they are tough conversations. Especially with people who don't get it. **The hardest part is *me* restraining or composing myself to have candid conversations when I know sometimes these people don't even care. That can be really tough. It can also be traumatizing. And I get triggered. I've grown so much where I've learned to just like not say what's on my mind. [...] I've learned to restrain myself**, but then my face shows what I want to say. So I'm learning to relax my facial muscles and not be so, “Ughhh I just wanna strangle this person!” That is hard. But it's a practice. And I'm learning to lead with love even though folks don't understand (Gloria, 1/30/24).

For Gloria, emotional regulation is both a skill she has learned and developed throughout her life and one that she is still working on. It is also one that she regularly relies on while doing criminal legal system-related work.

Other participants also described how they use their ability to read people in their everyday work. When asked if there are any skills or traits he has carried through from his lived experience, Henry, who runs his own policy advocacy organization, replied:

Yeah. I think emotional intelligence, being able to like read people. The ability to read moments. A lot of the awareness that's needed when you living in the streets is the same, but now it's legislators! Like when I'm talking to a legislator I can tell if they're listening, or if they're trying to walk off. And so, when I notice the body language, I sort of shift the pitch that I give. Like, if I see that they're trying to move off, I give them a 30-second pitch. If they seem interested, then I give them the 2-minute, 3-minute pitch. And then also when folks say, “I'll look at it,” or, “Look, give me some time to take a look,” I don't just automatically take that as, *Oh, they said, yes, they'll support us!* I read that moment to say, *I don't know if they quite there, we may need to follow up and have a different conversation* just based on their responses. **I think a lot of it I just developed growing up and being in the streets and having to read what was happening around me. The same things apply** (Henry, 2/2/24).

Like Gloria, Henry relies on the people skills he developed “in the streets” while interacting with legislators. In his case, however, he utilizes his ability to read people, as opposed to the ability to regulate emotions like Gloria described.

Quincy is another participant who explained how he uses his ability to read to people in his everyday work. In addition to working as a researcher, he also gives a lot of talks in front of audiences for an issue-based advocacy organization. While giving these talks, Quincy stresses

the importance of being able to read his audience, a skill he uses to then adjust what he says accordingly. He explains:

You gotta read the room, or in another sense, know your audience. [...] One of the skills I learned while in [prison] [...] is being able to, and I don't want to say code switch or code meshing, but being able to talk to people where they understand you [...] [W]hen I'm speaking to people about parole, I gotta know who I'm talking to because everybody doesn't want to hear that. Statistically, people of color are going to be affected by crime in some form or fashion. And if you're coming in there with a pro-prisoner agenda to people who've been either victimized or had someone they loved being a victim, it's gonna be a hard sell to tell them that. So you have to kind of relate [to them in] other ways. In other words, let's look at the bigger picture, let's look at these systems of oppression, let's look at [...] public schools, healthcare, whatever the case may be, *and then* make the connection to prisons, and how they are intertwined with all these other systems, then you'll be able to draw them in. So [...] I had the ability to quickly read who I'm talking to and see their reaction and be able to convey whatever message that I'm trying to give (Quincy 2/8/24).

In other words, Quincy emphasizes both the importance of reading the people he speaks to *and* being able to adjust what he says accordingly to have the effect he desires. This ability to read people is just one of the “soft” skills, in addition to the more technical skills, participants described bringing to their criminal legal system-related work from their lived experience.

“You Can Tell Me ‘No’ All You Want”

The last major form of human capital that participants spoke about in their interviews is their work ethic, or resiliency. While resiliency is not typically named as a form of human capital, it is increasingly being recognized as a valuable trait in employees and leaders. Malone (2023), for example, showed how the “fortitude, resilience, and perseverance” minority CEOs bring to their work from their lived experience “distinctively serve as a human capital advantage for organizations.” Similarly, many of my participants spoke about how their lived experience with the criminal legal system helped them develop the ability to persevere through trying circumstances, face rejection, see goals to completion, and show up again and again.

Benny, who began working in criminal legal system-related spaces as a volunteer as soon as he was released from prison, describes how he just “kept coming” until he was accepted everywhere he went:

Here's what I did. When I came home. Instead of going out and buying Air Jordans and Gucci stuff, I bought me five suits, five shirts, five ties, and two pairs of shoes. And I got a briefcase that had that done did it. And I used to go into these meetings around reentry. And I was listening to what people were saying. [...] I don't go in just saying I know it all. I went in, and I listened. And then I'd say: "You guys making decisions about people like myself." And nobody knew that I was I had been incarcerated, I had only been out, you know, 30, 60, 90 days. And when they did [find out ...], you'd have thought a Russian spy had it had infiltrated the Defense Department! **But [...] those are public meetings. You can't tell me I can't come, right? So I kept coming. And I started bringing friends. [...] I kept coming. I kept coming. And by being consistent, they approved of me** (Benny 4/21/23).

Here, Benny describes how, despite ironically not being welcome in reentry spaces at first, especially once people in the room found out he had recently been released from prison, his decision to keep coming back to meetings enabled him to eventually become accepted. It is because of his resiliency and commitment to volunteering, participating in public meetings, and showing up again and again that he was eventually able to build his career in reentry and violence prevention.

Earlier in our interview, Benny explained how what he experienced in prison led him to develop this resilient mindset. He says:

You can tell me "no" all you want.... That's not going to bother me. You can say I'm not a good fit for your company. That doesn't bother me. Because I got to look back [at] where I was... See, **I remember being in a cell, being told to get up, when I could go to the shower, when I could wash my clothes, when I could eat, when I could go to the barbershop.** See, I remember that. All of that. **Now, you say no. And I can still go to the other side of the town. I can go to another place and interview...** But you know what? Most people don't do that. I will tell you, I believe the conflict resolution book we wrote and I was teaching helped prepare me for that. Right? It helped me prepare for rejection and denial and prejudice [...]. **So I didn't care because I had my freedom restored** (Benny, 4/21/23).

Here, in addition to explaining how the lack of autonomy he faced while inside led him to shift his perspective on rejection, Benny also touches upon the fact that while he was incarcerated, he and his peers wrote a book on conflict resolution, which he says further helped him learn how to deal with rejection, denial, and prejudice.

Other participants also mentioned that their lived experience helped them develop resiliency. Daniel, who works at a statewide policy advocacy organization says:

What do I bring from [my lived] experience? [...] **What I've been through has created a resilience and grit and loyalty in me that makes me a very good employee and a good worker.** And I think that that is proven through quite a bit of research to be statistically true across the board (Daniel, 1/23/24).

Here, Daniel argues that the resiliency, grit, and loyalty he developed while incarcerated make him a good employee and worker. He also cites the fact that there is research to back up his claim, which there is. In his book *Untapped Talent* (2021), for example, Jeff Korzenik finds that “second-chance” employers (i.e. employers who are committed to hiring people with records) notice one consistent trait amongst their formerly incarcerated employees: grit. Throughout *Untapped Talent*, Korzenik profiles several different second-chance employers. Jeffery Brown, CEO and president of Brown’s SuperStores, is one such employer, who said of his formerly incarcerated employees, “They’re accustomed to challenges that others are not and are prepared to manage through risks” (Korzenik 2021, p. 105).

While Korzenik’s analysis is largely conducted from the perspective of the employers of formerly incarcerated individuals, many of my participants recognize their own grit and resilience, as well. When asked why he is good at what he does, Henry replied:

I understand that in this work, things won't always be happy moments. [So] I approach this work, from more of a strategic lens [...] **I'm not easily offended, or shortsighted in a sense to where, when we're told, “no,” that I'm like, “Oh, that's it. Let's quit.” And so I would definitely say the resiliency that I have helps** (Henry, 2/2/24).

Like Daniel, Henry emphasizes that his resilience plays a key role in the policy advocacy work he does today. Like Benny, he specifies that it helps him withstand rejection, something that is common when working with legislators and working on policy reform.

To summarize, because of the traumatizing conditions that formerly incarcerated people experience while in prison, many of them, like Benny, Daniel, and Henry, were able to develop resiliency, a quality they now rely on in their everyday work. In addition to their resiliency or strong work ethic, other kinds of human capital that my participants described bringing from their lived experience to their work in criminal legal system-related fields include both soft (e.g. the ability to read people, mediate conflict, and work well with others) and technical skills (e.g.

legal, research, writing, and advocacy skills), and an intimate knowledge of how the criminal legal “system,” “the streets,” and criminal legal system-related policies function in practice. In the following findings section, I transition away from a discussion of the human capital formerly incarcerated people bring to their work to a discussion of the importance of social capital as it relates to criminal legal system work.

II. Social Capital: Relationships, Reputation, Credibility, and Relatability

Most of my participants mentioned, in some shape or form, at least one type of social capital that they bring to their work. There are three distinct categories of social capital that participants discussed: (1) **relationships and connections**, (2) **credibility and trust**, and (3) **relatability and success modeling**. In the following subsections, I break down each of these three types of social capital and highlight the ways in which my participants rely on these forms of capital in their criminal legal system-related roles.

“You Have to Have Connections”

The most-cited form of social capital that participants discussed was that of relationships. While, as aforementioned, Sturm and Tae (2021), Putnam (2000), and Hwahng et al. (2021) identify three main forms of relationship-based social capital—bonding, bridging, and linking—for the most part, my participants only spoke of the latter two: “bridging” and “linking” relationship-based social capital. “Bridging” social capital refers to the relationships individuals leverage between different communities, in other words, inter-community relationships (e.g. if a participant who works for a policy advocacy organization has a relationship with other policy advocacy organizations). “Linking” social capital refers to the relationships that span across unequal levels of power and authority (e.g. relationships with politicians, or people who have

more or less power and influence than you do). Participants spoke of leveraging both kinds of relationships in their everyday work.

One field that is particularly dependent on formerly incarcerated people's "bridging" social capital, or in other words, relationships with people in a variety of different social circles and communities, is violence prevention, otherwise known as "community violence intervention" (CVI). Aaron, who works at a violence prevention organization, described how important it is to have relationships you can rely on when a potentially violent situation is imminent that needs diffusing. He explains:

I don't know everybody, but I can make two or three phone calls to get the information that I need... I mean, because... the dynamics changes. The business changes. The age of the shooters change. **So you have to be able to have connections with mothers, people from other blocks, people in the community, people just doing this work and working at organizations. You have to have those connections who you could call** and who get to the situation and are like, I know somebody that knows somebody that knows somebody. And before you know it, 15 minutes later you get a phone call, like, yeah I know who that is, what you need me to do?... Those relationships go a long way (Aaron, 4/27/23).

In other words, one person can't do it all. For Aaron and other violence prevention workers, relationships with "mothers, people from other blocks, people in the community" and people working at other organizations are essential when trying to stop violence from happening in real-time. Aaron's network is extensive enough that "within 15 minutes" he can get someone on the phone who knows the high-risk individual in question and may be able to intervene in the situation more effectively as it unfolds.

Other participants also shared that even if they can't fulfill a need, or perform a task, they know someone else who can. Emmanuel says:

We're a network of formerly incarcerated men and women who really have our hands in many, many organizations. So even if I'm not able to provide someone with clothing, I know someone who's in the network that can, because that's his job. Or someone who works in, you know, job placement." (Emmanuel, 1/29/24)

Here, Emmanuel emphasizes that there is a vast network of formerly incarcerated people working at a variety of organizations he can reach out to when he himself can't help someone.

This finding is supported by the fact that despite working in different fields at different organizations, many of my participants referenced one another, as well as each other's organizations, partnerships, and multi-organization coalitions. They often spoke to me about attending different events hosted by organizations other formerly incarcerated people work at and/or stressed the importance of showing up for and being "in community" with one another.

One of my participants, Kiara explained this importance as follows:

Oppression happens when we are divided and fighting against each other, or when we're siloed, right? [...] So I am *very* intentional, and our coalition is very intentional about fighting against that. **We do this work in community. Our motto is "by community, for community, in community."** [...] **It's important to me that we build these relationships and maintain these relationships and that we do this work in community** [...]. Your issue may be different. But we need to figure out how we can support one another in those separate missions and things like that. Because the problems are *massive*. The oppressive systems are *huge*, and they have been in existence for hundreds of years, so that this dismantling of them takes all of us, and so, it may look different, we may be working on different issues, but we should all be in the same rooms, having the same conversations, talking about the same goal of liberation. [...] **It's meetings. It's conversations. It's support. It shows up in different ways. I'm big on just being there for each other** (Kiara, 2/22/24).

In other words, Kiara describes the necessity of inter-community relationships and coalition building, or, "bridging" social capital to the work that she does. She shows how it is particularly important to criminal legal system-related work, largely because of the power and problems inherent in such an "oppressive" system.

In addition to discussing the importance of inter-organization and community-based relationships, many of my participants also discussed how they have been able to leverage relationships with individuals, institutions, and organizations that span across unequal levels of power and authority, i.e., "linking" social capital. Similarly to how they leveraged "bridging" relationships with those in their communities and professional circles, several of my participants discussed leveraging relationships with powerful figures and institutions to best help their clientele and/or meet their organization's goals. Aaron, for example, discussed how he relies on

different kinds of relationships with everyone from famous rappers to incarcerated fathers to try and stop shootings. He says of his violence prevention organization:

We have a lot of relationships. One of the guys who I have trained and he's one of our best violence interrupters, is Little Dick's uncle, real uncle. And of course, we all have connections with Chief Keef and things like that. So we use our relationships that we have throughout the city [...] But we definitely had to leverage those relationships. **With this work, if you don't have those relationships, and those things like that, it's gonna be hard to really like, reach people,** we had to reach people from all over, especially prison, cause a lot of these guys' fathers in prison, we reach out to them: "can you please to talk to your son about such and such?" And things like that (Aaron, 3/23/23).

Here, Aaron makes clear that in addition to relying on the relationships his organization has with community members, mothers, and people working at other violence prevention or social service organizations, he also relies on relationships he has with potentially more influential figures such as famous Chicago rappers Little Dick and Chief Keef and incarcerated fathers (who Aaron later explains, often held prominent positions in major street organizations). Because these figures have a certain celebrity or hierarchical status, their word is sometimes more powerful than that of Aaron's or other violence prevention workers.

Other participants spoke to me about how they rely on relationships they have developed with prominent political figures, journalists, and other influential and well-connected individuals to further their policy or organizing goals. Several participants highlighted or named key figures who helped them "get in rooms" or access resources they would have otherwise been unable to.

For example, Benny, who has spent time working as a consultant for the Chicago Police Department and other Chicago entities, explained:

There's a big guy [...], a light-skinned guy. Princeton grad. Got his law degree from Penn. And he worked in the mayor's office. He got me in the rooms. Because he believed in me. **When he came through the door, I had to come through the door. So it's all about relationships**" (Benny, 4/21/2023).

Here, Benny highlights how thanks to his relationship with one well-connected, academically credentialed individual, he was able to get a "seat at the table" so to speak.

Similarly, Carter, who works as an organizer, explains how he leverages the connections he has with media, young people, and political figures to spread the word about his political initiatives and open doors that would have otherwise been closed to him. He says:

“You've got to be very creative [...]. If you ain't sitting back and talking to the Senators and the Congressman to get the contacts within his oval office? Then guess what? You're not going to get a seat at that table. **Someone has to be the door opener. The door opener is the individual who takes your request to this next source of individuals and say, “Well, this person here wants to have a meeting with you.”** [...] So you have to be creative, and you have to recognize who your friends are in the media forces to be able to achieve, or else you just, you lose out. You know we have a reporter [...] in Tennessee [...] She can make things happen here. You know, “Hey, this is what I need did [...], I need you to expose this to your contacts of the Washington Post, and I need you to do this and to do that.” And if they're willing to do that, it opens doors. Young people! I've known young people who have been our interns. We have two of them work with ABC Channel 7 news! So to just pick up the telephone and to call those people and those people knowing you, and they say, “Well, uh oh! What's wrong?” You know they can tell from your voice. And they say, “Well, tell you what, [...] Imma contact this source, and Imma see about getting you into that space or into that room.” It's [also] very important to build contacts with Alderman. It's very important to build contacts with certain mayors. All of those get you into the settings of these places that Black people were denied for so long (Carter, 1/17/24).

Carter lists numerous powerful individuals (whom he calls “door-openers”) with whom he has built relationships and relies to get him into different spaces and rooms. He stresses that without these connections, he and many other Black people are often denied access to these closed-door places or the media.

While Carter and Benny both highlighted relationships they developed with prominent figures in the period following their incarceration, some, like Quincy, were able to develop these relationships inside, largely thanks to educational and other prison programming. Quincy who currently works in academia largely thanks to the connections he made inside, explains:

While in prison, I made a lot of connections. I was able to be with [my] prison education program. I also was in a think tank which was like an incubator of reimagining so many things [...] **So making these connections has allowed me, when I got out here, to get these opportunities to work at various colleges!** I *love* academics, that's something. Some people even told me I should go farther, and try to get a master's in education, or some type of Ph. D. and do teaching. [...] I TAed for some professors while I was incarcerated towards the end before I got out. [...] So during the summer and the fall, I was TAing for two different professors, and that was a wonderful experience [...] But yeah, **education is the key that got me these connections** (Quincy, 2/8/24).

Here, Quincy's experience, as well as Carter and Benny's experience, shows how connections made both inside and outside of prison are often essential to creating opportunities and opening literal and metaphorical doors for people who have experienced incarceration.

In all three of these examples, Quincy, Carter, and Benny not only rely on their social capital and connections to achieve their goals and access hard-to-reach individuals and spaces, but they serve as the beneficiaries of others' social capital, which they access by building relationships with the individuals that hold it. Sturm and Tae (2017) found these relationships are "crucial," because they lead to the "interventions of people who use their own social capital," which in turn enabled formerly incarcerated people "to succeed in the face of biases that often stand in the way of opportunities for people with criminal records" (pp. 73).

Importantly, in addition to emphasizing that relationships help afford them opportunities that aren't traditionally available to those with incarceration experience, Carter and Benny (who are both Black) also acknowledge race and colorism in their explanations of why relationships and social capital are important to the work that they do. For Carter, the powerful contacts he has in his corner allow him to access "places that Black people were denied for so long." For Benny, the fact that the man who "got him in rooms" was "light-skinned" was to note for him. Other participants also acknowledge how they as Black formerly incarcerated people are at times multiply discriminated against, which makes the connections and linking social capital they bring to their roles all the more essential. Brondolo et al. (2012) corroborate this acknowledgment, finding that peer relationships can help mediate the effects of racism on economic opportunity, health, and well-being.

Finally, while Carter, Benny, Quincy, and several other participants I interviewed relied on the social capital of those they established connections with to help them gain access to gate

kept spaces, some interviewees also described utilizing their own social capital to do the same for others. For example, Frank, who does policy advocacy work, explains how he uses his connections with state legislators to help those he knows who are still incarcerated gain an audience with them. He says:

Now **I'm the bridge between guys that I still talk to that's incarcerated and these legislators** and I love it because I get the chance to explain [things to] the guys when they have questions and let them know if their questions are right or if their questions are wrong. And I also have the opportunity to tell these legislators that, "Hey, if you, if you go down to this facility, it's guys that's worthy of talking to." And then for that to happen, that has literally happened. **I've talked to legislators about certain individuals at certain facilities, and then the opportunity presented itself, and I was able to introduce that legislator to that individual that I was talking about** (Frank, 2/12/24).

Here, Frank uses his social capital to "link" currently incarcerated folks he knows to legislators. This reflects Sturm and Tae's finding that in addition to being the beneficiaries of linking social capital, formerly incarcerated people themselves act as "linkers," or individuals who hold "linking social capital" (Sturm & Tae, 2017). They add that "linking social capital connects people with justice involvement with individuals and institutions in positions to make institutional and public policy and to shape public opinion" (Sturm & Tae, 45).

This phenomenon also closely resembles what Patrick Lopez-Aguado (2012) calls "street liminality." Though his research primarily focuses on "gang intervention" workers, Lopez-Aguado's analysis can be extended to formerly incarcerated individuals more broadly as well. He found that the gang interventionists he studied were "positioned between social spheres, enabling them to use their connections to estranged populations to appeal to different priorities" (Lopez-Aguado, 2012). "Street liminality" is the term Lopez-Aguado uses to describe this "positioning between social worlds," as well as articulate how "interventionists embody this position through their lived experiences and utilize its potential to address community needs" (Lopez-Aguado, 2012). In other words, Frank's ability to introduce legislators to people he knows who are still

incarcerated is just one example of how FIIs use their “liminality” to address the needs and wants of their communities.

To summarize, most of my participants stressed that relationships and connections in some shape or form are a major part of what they do. Some explained how they rely on “bridging” or inter-community relationships to stop shootings, provide resources to people, and challenge oppressive systems while others discussed “linking” relationships (i.e. relationships that span across unequal levels of power) and how these relationships help them access hard-to-reach people and places. Participants also described how they act as both the beneficiaries and the benefactors in relationships, as well as how relationships enable them and other formerly and currently incarcerated people to overcome record and race-related barriers and discrimination. In the following subsection, I discuss two other forms of social capital: credibility and trust.

“They See Me as an Insider”

While social capital is often thought of in terms of relationships and connections, it can also take the form of “credential” (credibility), “rights,” “respect,” “reputation,” “social status” or other “durable obligations subjectively felt” (Bourdieu, 1986; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). As such, in addition to stressing the importance of relationships and connections, several participants, especially those who engage in person-to-person or “peer work” like community violence intervention and reentry, shared that their lived experience and the reputation that comes with it helps them establish credibility and build trust with the individuals they work with.

Some participants revealed that much of the credibility they have with the system-impacted and “at risk” individuals they work with is a result of their *reputation* or *status* as someone who has been incarcerated and/or participated in street life. It is this reputation and status, they explained, that helps them then go on to build more personal mentor-peer or peer-

peer relationships. Aaron, who has spent decades working with at-risk youth, describes the credibility his reputation afforded him when he came home from prison. He says:

When I came home, a lot of the population that I was dealing with didn't even know me... they only heard the stories of me. So that kind of made it good when I came home, that they was like: “Ah that’s who they was talking about, that’s the big homie!” **So I was able to build relationships with them, because of my reputation.** I used you know, the negatives, to build positive relationships with them. And that way I was able to deal with them” (Aaron, 3/23/23).

Here, Aaron explains how his reputation preceded him among the population he works with as a violence prevention worker, as well as how he was able to use his reputation and the credibility that came with it to build lasting relationships.

Similarly, Gloria, who among other things, provides reentry services for formerly incarcerated women, also shared how the fact that she has lived experience makes her seem more trustworthy to and build relationships with both the women her organization serves and her coworkers. She explains that if she didn’t have lived experience, women who are struggling, particularly those she employs, would not feel comfortable being vulnerable to her. When asked how her relationship with her coworkers would change if she were someone who had not experienced incarceration and substance use, Gloria replied:

People tell me bits and pieces? They may not tell me everything, but I know they're struggling. And just figuring out how to best support and address whatever it is that they're struggling with [is hard]. **But if it was somebody in my position who didn't have lived experience? Oh, they wouldn't tell them anything! I wouldn't tell anybody that I'm struggling!** I just wish that people, you know, if this happens, folks wouldn't be afraid of losing their job if they tell me they are struggling (Gloria, 1/30/24).

In other words, while her position as a supervisor over her organization’s staff complicates her relationship with her coworkers, Gloria recognizes that her reputation as someone with lived experiences helps counter this power imbalance and allows her coworkers to feel like they can trust her and be vulnerable with her when they are “struggling.” Importantly, she stresses that if she did not have lived experience, nobody would ever tell her they were struggling.

Roberto, who in addition to working in art, education, and research-related roles also does some reentry work, helps explain why those without lived experience elicit very different responses from system-impacted folks than those who have experienced incarceration. He says:

It takes us to really understand what we went through. [...] And when we get in front of spaces like reentry spaces and I see somebody like yourself? You can't identify me. **I see a white woman who I'm in front of who's gonna commoditize me like I've been throughout my whole life.** [...] **I may have a problem that you have a solution to, but I won't even entertain it because you look exactly like the judge. You look exactly like the jailer. You look exactly like the counselor. You look exactly like the pre-trial guy. You look exactly like everybody who railroaded me through this process.** So what I'm gonna do is I'm gonna sit here, imma be quiet, because you know why? You might have me do anger management and do this other stuff, and anything I say is gonna be one of those things. [...] **[But] then, when we see somebody like ourselves,** we say, "Hey man, listen bro, I got this thing..." [...] **Now we're more welcome. Because you know what? You know what I know** (Roberto, 2/20/24).

Here, Roberto very clearly emphasizes not only how people who have experienced incarceration are more likely to open up to others who have also experienced incarceration, but that when forced to interact with a "white woman" such as myself, formerly incarcerated folks might "be quiet" and simply refuse to entertain whatever solutions I present to them because of the ways in which they have been traumatized and harmed by other people who look like me (e.g. the "counselor," the "jailer," the "judge," etc.) throughout their journey through the criminal system. In other words, shared lived experience helps establish trust and encourages receptiveness, while traumatic interactions discourage it. This finding is supported by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998), who find that where relationships are high in trust, individuals are more willing to engage in social exchange and be "vulnerable to another party" (p. 254).

Other participants similarly discussed how their lived experience not only enables them to build trusting relationships and establish credibility but also gives them a distinct level of authority over the populations they work with that those without said lived experience aren't afforded. Like Roberto, Benny, who works in the violence prevention space, also stressed that someone like myself—a white, female college student from the suburbs—would not be able to elicit any sort of behavior change from, say, at-risk youth. He explains:

If I am a young person in the street carrying a gun, and you, for instance, try to tell me, “No, you shouldn't be carrying that gun.” Well, **you have no credibility with me, right? Cuz in my mindset: Oh, she's a white college student. She don't know nothing about what I've been through!** She don't know nothing about living on these streets! I got to watch out for this gang and that gang... **But now, here I come. And I tell you the same thing, but also tell you I shot somebody in high school, I tell you, I spent 25 years in prison for selling drugs. I'm now, I'm telling you something that resonates with you now.** Then I say, you either can change the course of your life and make change now, or you can go and get in trouble and make change after you've been in trouble. That choice is yours, right? (Benny, 4/21/23).

In this excerpt, Benny clearly illustrates how someone like himself, especially after revealing he has a past peppered with a wide range of criminal activity, would elicit a completely different response from a young person carrying a gun than someone without this lived experience. Benny attributes this hypothetical response to my lack of credibility, which, as aforementioned, is an essential characteristic that formerly incarcerated people like Benny bring to CVI work.

In addition to describing how their reputation and lived experience enable them to interact with and elicit a positive response from individuals, several of my participants shared how being seen as credible, or an “insider” also functions at the community-wide level. Martin, who serves as a program director at a Chicago-based CVI organization, explains how his lived experience enables him to work in communities all over the country. He says:

What makes me able to go in *any* community all over the country is because they see me as an *insider*, somebody who has been impacted by violence and somebody who's suffered an injustice from the legal system. Somebody who is a freedom fighter trying to liberate people from death and pain. So all of those things are valuable” (Martin, 2/16/24).

Here, Martin makes the case that the fact he has been “impacted by violence” and “suffered from injustice” enables him to access a broad array of communities. While other participants similarly stressed that the credibility they derive from their lived experience enables them to work with whole communities and not just select individuals within those communities, this credibility, or what some called their “License to Operate” is not always universally applicable to all communities in the way Martin describes.

While there is no formal definition of a “License to Operate” (LTO) in the literature, participants described how this unofficial “license” reflects a combination of certain unofficial credentials—based upon lived experiences, existing relationships, and one’s reputation in the community—that make the individuals who have it seem more trustworthy and credible than other potential actors (e.g. police, people from outside the community, etc.). For example, when asked what makes him good at his job, Nasir, who works in violence prevention, replied:

I have LTO and I'm very credible. So, LTO, meaning, "license to operate" in the hood. Meaning that, to go inside the hoods and do the work we do, you must have a license to operate. Meaning that, you must have relationships with the high-risk individuals or the individuals likely to be shot or shoot somebody or a different individual that has influence in particular neighborhoods. [...] So with that being said, I was able to navigate a lot of neighborhoods because I know a lot of guys previously from past gang times and criminal lifestyle. **And I was always told I was a stand-up dude, a fair dude, and even-keeled, dude. So that helped me get in the door of a lot of situations. And I was able to navigate through some of the roughest neighborhoods in Chicago** (Nasir, 4/26/23).

Here, Nasir emphasizes how his LTO is a product of both relationships with “high-risk” individuals, as well as his reputation as a “stand-up,” “fair,” and “even-keeled” person. It is because of his LTO, he explains, that he was able to “navigate through some of the roughest neighborhoods in Chicago,” or in other words, work within certain communities that might have otherwise been unreceptive to his presence.

Though LTO is not an official term used by violence prevention scholars, the importance of the qualities that contribute to one’s “LTO” to one’s ability to reach at-risk community members have been well-documented. For instance, Gary Slutkin, the founder of Cure Violence—a Chicago-based violence prevention—corroborates the significance of LTO credentials such as credibility and trust in violence prevention work. He explains how violence intervention workers (like Nasir, Aaron, Benny, and Martin) who engage with at-risk individuals, should be people who “have credibility and access to the population that you need to talk to” (MacGillis, 2023). This “access” which Phillips and Slutkin both refer to, is often granted by a worker’s incarceration/former gang member status, their perceived fairness, and/or the trust they

have built in the communities they serve. In a comprehensive study of the effectiveness of Cure Violence, Butts et. al. (2015) found that many CVI workers are “former high-level or popular gang members who have changed their lives—often after a stint in prison” who “know about the daily routines of people who are involved in criminal lifestyles” and are not “judgmental or be perceived as outsiders.”¹⁰

The essentiality of credibility, trust, and having the “License to Operate” that comes with lived incarceration experience was continually underscored by participants. Some, like Nasir and Aaron, went so far as to explain how they seek out these qualities in their hiring processes.

Aaron explains:

Our hiring process [...] is very strenuous. We do a pre-screening. [...] **We take you through the community first. So if you're not comfortable in the community or if these people don't know you in a community, if they're not walking up to you, if you don't have no respect in the community, then you're not going to even make it to our hiring panel.** [...] When you go through the community to walk through to actually be around the guys you're gonna service? That's when the rubber hits the road. **You can't fake it out there in the street** (Aaron, 4/27/23).

Similarly, Nasir, who trains and hires new violence prevention workers for his organization also described assessing community reception and one’s LTO during his hiring process. He says:

To check their LTO, I check they street resume. I see what the streets say about them. And I may do things such as walk them through the neighborhood that they from to see, do people know them? Ask former colleagues about the individual, and then I ask certain questions that pertain to the field and based on how they respond to that question, I can deem if they suitable or credible for that position. [...] I may ask, “How long you been in the neighborhood? Who are the key individuals in the neighborhood? What would you do if this situation occurred? Are you open to being neutral? Have you ever been part of a street organization?” (Nasir, 4/26/23).

Both Nasir and Aaron emphasize that not just anyone can engage in CVI work. As they and other participants demonstrate, working with system-impacted and at-risk individuals often requires credibility, the trust of potential clientele, and shared or lived experiences. Without these characteristics, the likelihood that the system-impacted and/or at-risk folks will be receptive to interacting with social service, reentry, or CVI workers is lessened. In the following subsection, I

¹⁰ Language borrowed from Manley (2023).

transition from a discussion of experience-based credibility and trust to how formerly incarcerated folks rely on their lived experience to relate to others with similar experiences as well as model what successfully overcoming incarceration looks like.

“Relatability is Everything”

Finally, in addition to stressing the importance of relationships and connections, as well as credibility, trust, and having LTO, several interviewees expressed how having similar experiences to their clientele makes them easy to relate to and therefore effective role models. Other participants added that even when they are interacting with those who have vastly different experiences than they do, they can tell stories about their own lived experiences that resonate with people, and in doing so, similarly act as models by challenging commonly-held stereotypes regarding formerly incarcerated folks.

Like credibility and trust, relatability and the ability to model “success” are important components of one’s social capital. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) find that identification with a group or individual (i.e. feeling as though you can relate to them), “enhances concern for collective processes and outcomes” and helps facilitate “information sharing, learning, and knowledge creation” (p. 256). In other words, because of their lived experience and relatability, formerly incarcerated folks are uniquely suited to working with other system-impacted individuals. For example, Tyrell, who teaches business and entrepreneurship in prisons, explains how his relatability makes the incarcerated individuals he works with more open and receptive to what he has to say, and more likely to retain the information he shares with them. He says:

The reason why [...] people may look at me as being effective is because the live experience I have. Case in point: last year I was part of a workshop. We went across like 5 different states, 20 different institutions, and we did these workshops for entrepreneurship. [...] And **one of the first thing that people asked was like, “Hey, have you been in prison before?” And it’s like, “Yes, I have.” And once they hear that it automatically *disarms* them. And so now they are more receptive.** [...] But then, of course you have to come with something, but that at least lets the guards down initially. Then you’re able to kind

of teach them whatever you're teaching them and they're more open to it. So [...] I operate from our lived experience. That's that relatability that someone else may not be able to provide to them (Tyrell, 2/16/24).

Here, Tyrell shows how once the individuals he works with feel they can relate to him, they “let their guard down,” and become more willing to hear and engage with what he has to say. While he does emphasize that his lived experience alone is not necessarily enough to leave a lasting impact, he recognizes that it enables him to get his point across more easily.

Nasir, who works with at-risk youth, also stresses the importance of relatability, and in particular, shared traumatic experiences. He says:

We gravitate towards people that we relate to [...]. Say, you know, if you come from the farmland, and I come from the urban, gritty streets of Chicago [...], we maybe really can't relate because our personalities and the way we are [is] shaped by the vibe that we grew up in. So you may be laid back, you may have a different outlook on life because of what you see growing up as opposed to me because of the trauma that I went through or experienced around me. They (referring to the at-risk and system-impacted individuals he serves) have me, with different things that I may suffer from. So **I may have a different outlook on life than you. So relatability is everything** (Nasir, 4/26/23).

Here, Nasir demonstrates how relatability helps draw in the individuals he works with, as they “gravitate” towards him, making it easier to build lasting relationships. Earlier in our interview, Nasir shared additional reasons why this relatability and shared lived experience is important:

We inspired from people that we can really relate to. So most of the individuals that I work with, are high-risk, or at-risk, or guys who have just found out who they self is, and who may just need a little inspiration, a little nudge, or someone they could look up to and say, **“Okay, here's the path, I see the path he went. And we come up from several similar situations, I could relate it. If he can make it out. I can make it out”** (Nasir)

In other words, relatability becomes even more impactful when those we can relate to also model success or can act as relatable role models. Nasir shares how, because he has similar past life experiences as them, the individuals he works with are able to see the “path” he took from where they are now (i.e. heavily involved in street life) to where he is (out of prison, with a stable job, and no longer involved in street life).

Aaron, who, like Nasir, works in the violence prevention space, also highlighted the importance of being able to serve as a testament to the possibility of successfully surviving prison for at-risk youth:

Unfortunately, **when you go to prison, you have some type of reputation.** [...] **Prison's accepted,** you know what I'm saying? It's accepted. **You could almost put that on your resume, "Hey, I've been to prison!" And usually, when guys come home from prison they're perceived to have some type of little more knowledge, because they've preserved, got their life together, were able to think, and now they've been drug-free and things like that. But I think they have a bit of a story to tell because they survived it.** They survived. Especially those who was out there in it, that was involved heavily in gang violence. Their reputation precedes them. So you may have a generation that may not know him but if I've heard of him: "Oh that was the dude that did that? Or that was the dude that..." You know what I'm saying? [...] They be great assets to this work right here (Aaron, 4/27/23).

Here, Aaron shares how people who come home from prison are perceived and have reputations among at-risk youth are perceived to have more knowledge because they “got their life together.” As Nasir emphasized, individuals with similar life experiences are drawn to those who successfully “survived” prison and are interested in the knowledge those who “survived” might have gained from their experience.

Patrick Lopez-Aguado explains the importance of lived experience to mentorship in his ethnographic study of gang intervention (GI). According to Lopez-Aguado (2012), GI workers are “teachers who are down.” When describing one GI worker, “Jorge,” Lopez-Aguado writes:

His history in the neighborhood enables Jorge to form meaningful mentoring relationships with these youth, not only because he can understand what they go through, but also because it establishes him as a relatable role model for them. These shared cultural identities and experiences with public criminalization give the interventionists an advantage that few others can duplicate (Lopez-Aguado, 2012).

In other words, it is because of their lived experiences that formerly incarcerated people are able to truly understand their clientele and establish themselves as “relatable role models,” a status, as Lopez-Aguado astutely notes that “few others” can achieve.¹¹

For Jacob, who helps facilitate educational programming inside prisons, one of the best parts about his job is, “being able to present myself as a *testimonial* to those people that we

¹¹ Language borrowed from Manley (2023).

serve,” or in other words, serve as a relatable role model of someone who was successfully able to survive and overcome incarceration. He adds, “I express to them that no matter what they've experienced, they can overcome that and be happy and successful upon their release” (Jacob, 2/6/24). Tyrell corroborates Jacob’s assessment and similarly emphasizes the importance of relatable role models for folks who are currently incarcerated. He says:

While you're incarcerated, [...] you don't have the opportunity to see other people that are successful but had once been impacted by the system directly. And so again, **that relatability is like, “Oh, wow! If he can do it, I can do it!” Because I'm living proof.** While I was incarcerated, I loved to see outside visitors come and talk to us. [...] **To find someone had been directly impacted by the system? They had spent time in prison or jail? And to hear this story is like, Oh, wow, okay, I could do the same thing. It gives some kind of a glimmer of hope.** [...] If you don't see it, it's hard for you to believe that you can achieve it. And it just kinda helps with the morale and that. [...] **But even talking to the men and women as I go back inside, it's like, they don't get a chance to see it at all. They only see people coming back in that violated parole or probation and they got their stories on why they're back.** But never really someone who has been impacted directly (Tyrell, 2/16/24).

Just as Aaron and Nasir serve as relatable role models to at-risk youth, both Jacob and Tyrell serve as relatable role models to folks who are currently incarcerated. This role, they argue, is especially important for them to play given the limited access currently incarcerated folks have to FIIs that have successfully transcended their incarceration experience.

Though less contingent on relatability, several participants also stressed the importance of modeling their successes to non-system-impacted individuals as well. In this case, participants described how they seek to challenge dominant narratives that portray people who have experienced incarceration as irredeemable or likely to recidivate. Oscar explains:

There’s this narrative about recidivism and about people being incorrigible, or the inability to change or reform. And we know that not to be the case. We know that's not true! So I think for those of us who have undergone the process of self-rehabilitation, **it's important for us to be out front serving as examples of, We are impacted people. We are returning citizens. And look how we doing?** And we not exception, there are many more people, hundreds of people, if not thousands of people who are incarcerated, who are ready, you know, to return to society, [to] be restored to useful citizenship. They ready, they prepared to do it! [...] **It's important that we use our voice, and serve as examples, [...] cause we know the danger of a single narrative, right? So we need multiple narratives.** So along with that narrative [...] we're it's being spouted, the high recidivism rate, the people being incorrigible without the ability to change, we also need this narrative of, *Look at [Oscar]! Look at X and X [...], just look at these different people who have spent X amount of years and prisons, who have returned home, and who are doing well!* (Oscar, 2/12/24).

While the kind of dominant narrative-challenging storytelling and success modeling Oscar describes is not necessarily considered a type of social capital, narrative storytelling is generally accepted as a *means* by which social capital is developed. For example, in his book *Fire in the Heart* (2010) Mark Warren finds that Former President Obama's narrative storytelling during his presidential campaign helped build his social capital among apprehensive white voters.

Relatedly, in their comprehensive study of 40 formerly incarcerated leaders, Sturm and Tae (2017) found that narrative sharing was a "crucial dimension" of formerly incarcerated folks' ability to "reach people" and "profoundly impact" those in the room with them, adding that leaders continually cited the importance of "'counteracting the dominant narrative' with their own realities" (pp. 55).

In sum, participants repeatedly stressed the importance of social capital to the work that they do in criminal legal system-related fields. They shared how they rely on relationships and connections (i.e. bridging and linking social capital) as well as serve as connectors or "linkers" for others, which allows them to stop shootings, advocate for policy reform, meet the needs of those reentering into society, and more. Participants also emphasized the role that the credibility and trust that comes with their lived experience plays in their interactions with those who are system-impacted or at-risk. Finally, participants explained how relatability and success modeling allow them to reach their clientele and change the hearts and minds of apprehensive stakeholders more effectively. In my third and final findings section, I share how, even despite the tremendous social and human capital they bring to their work, many formerly incarcerated folks I spoke to still face work-related barriers and challenges related to their lived experience.

III. Beyond Capital: Barriers and Challenges Faced by FIIs in System-Related Roles

While the kinds of barriers and challenges formerly incarcerated people face whilst trying to find employment are well-documented (e.g. hiring and employment discrimination-related challenges), not all of these barriers and challenges affect formerly incarcerated people working in criminal legal system-related fields. This is because, as Emmanuel explains, having been incarcerated is considered an *asset* to many criminal legal system-related employers and organizations, whereas most other employers see it as a detriment. When asked whether his incarceration experience or the fact he has a criminal record ever acts as a barrier, he replied:

No. But then again, **this is what I chose to do**, right? I work within the prison. **I got this job because I was able to sit there and explain to them everything that I learned while I was incarcerated about the system, and how everything sort of works and the pitfalls, the disconnects, the log jams, everything.** So because I've chosen this field, it hasn't (Emmanuel, 1/29/24).

Here, Emmanuel explains how his knowledge of the system is something that is valued by his current employer, and that he got his current job because of it. If, he seems to imply, he had chosen to work in a different industry, he may not have been able to get a job so easily.

That said, just because FIIs who work in criminal legal system-related fields do not face the same degree and kind of employment challenges and barriers as individuals who work in other industries, this does not mean they do not face any barriers at all. In the following subsections, I seek to go beyond a human and social capital framework and highlight several of the unique challenges and barriers my participants spoke about facing in our interviews. While some of these challenges and barriers are also faced by folks with records more generally, participants shared how these challenges and barriers uniquely affect them and other FIIS who work in criminal legal system-related fields. Though a non-exhaustive list, the most-mentioned barriers and challenges faced by my participants include (1) **restricted facility access**, (2) **difficulties related to parole and supervision**, (3) struggling to strike a **work-life balance**, (4)

coping with work-related **trauma and re-traumatization**, and (5) **being exploited, undermined, and tokenized by employers.**

“[They] Don't Allow Ex-Offenders into Their Facilities”

When asked whether their record or incarceration experience ever acts as a barrier that prevents them from doing their job, several participants described being barred or unable to enter or work at certain facilities because of their criminal record. For the most part, these facilities include prisons, jails, and schools. For example, Aaron described the difficulty he faced trying to do violence prevention work in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) where many of the at-risk youth he works with spend their weekdays. He says:

Unfortunately, **Chicago Public Schools don't allow ex-offenders into their facilities. And 90% of people who are doing this, who are violence [prevention workers], are ex-offenders who have lived experience.** [...] So when a school is in an uproar, [...] *then* it will call us, but just initially having to contract with them [would be better]. Some schools are starting to loosen up now because now this is very public and everybody's in the space of [intervention] and outreach work. [But] CPS is a hard bargain. They rules... they stick to they rules until it's uncontrollable (Aaron, 3/23/23).

In other words, Aaron acknowledges how CPS recognizes the value of violence prevention workers (they call them when the “school is in an uproar”) but won’t allow them, because of their criminal records, to proactively work with CPS students in schools to prevent violence.

Other participants also mentioned being unable to work in schools because of their record, regardless of whether their record had anything to do with children or was “violent” in nature. Martin, who runs his own violence prevention training program, corroborated Aaron’s experience. When asked whether he has experienced any record-related barriers, he replied:

Yeah, you experienced barriers! For example, **many people say even with a PhD I wouldn't be able to work in a school because you can't have a felony and work in a school.** And I mean in CPS. So I couldn't even be a *janitor* there because I have a felony, **even though it's nonviolent, it has nothing to do with children, I don't pose a threat to staff or students.** I *still* would be prohibited from working at CPS, which is interesting because every Federal agency... I could work in. **Every Federal agency I've worked with, but I wouldn't be able to work with CPS.** And in many cases, I'm prohibited to work in other spaces for the city of Chicago, which is *insane* (Martin, 2/16/24).

Here, Martin not only highlights the barrier in place that prevents him from working in schools and other city agencies but also the irony of this barrier. Even as someone with a PhD, whose record is “nonviolent” and “has nothing to do with children,” he is not allowed to work in CPS. Moreover, he shows how non-uniformly policies that target people with criminal records are applied. Martin acknowledges how it’s “interesting” that he can (and has) worked with almost every *federal* agency but is not able to work at *city* agencies.

Like Martin, Unique also expressed frustration with the fact that her criminal record prevents her from being able to work in schools. More specifically, however, she takes issue with the fact that mandatory background checks often mean that people with records are uniformly excluded from positions in places like schools despite making it through an interview process and being otherwise qualified. Meanwhile, people “without backgrounds” or records who may present a real threat or danger to children are hired without a second thought. She explains:

People without the fuckin’ backgrounds be in schools doing shit to kids and we pay for it! Like I have a background, but it's an old creepy man in the school doing something with teenagers who doesn't have a background! [...] Like, **the background doesn't always give you everything that you need for someone**, but we pay for *everything* with [our] background. Everything. [...] People have gone into schools without a background and killed 30 people! So I just think the policy has to be where we hold people accountable on all levels in a different way. Like, I don't get the job because you found out I had a background, but you hire someone without a background, and they're an embezzler! Ha! Like, shouldn't it be the Martin Luther King the content of my character? [...] **So you saying me being qualified and interviewing well is not what you're looking for?** [...] Because if my crime has nothing to do with children, I understand that some places [exclude] people who have child-related cases ... I get that. [But] **if my case has nothing to do with children, I'm not a bank robber, I don't have theft, you would still not hire me, based on the fact that my conviction is 32 years old?** I haven't had a parking ticket [since then]! [...] So we end up working in factories (Unique, 2/26/24).

In other words, if, Unique argues, schools and other facilities and agencies were genuinely interested in keeping people safe, they would recognize that whether someone has a “background” is not a fool-proof nor catch-all way to ensure employees will not harm people. Instead, she suggests, employers should take interest in the nature and timing of someone’s background, if applicable, as well as whether they interview well and are otherwise qualified.

In addition to schools, a few participants also described being unable to access other facilities, such as prisons and transitional centers. Jacob, who provides educational programming for currently incarcerated people, explains how being randomly denied from certain facilities because of his record prevents him from being able to effectively do his job. When asked if he faces any barriers because of his incarceration experience or criminal record, he replied:

“The biggest barrier I’m facing with doing my job *currently* is not having *full access* to the facilities that I work with. [...] So each spot, by them being secured facilities, I have to pass security. I have to be *cleared* to go in [...]. **And I currently am not cleared for the North Lawndale Adult Transition Center. [...] And the reason I was told that they didn't give me clearance was there was something to do with my past gang affiliation. **But [...] the ironic part is, I'm approved for Cook County [Jail], I'm approved for Fox Valley, [...] Kewanee, [...] Logan Correctional Center.** [...] So I'm approved *here*, or approved *here*, but not approved *here*. **And there's no consistent rationale as to why I wouldn't be approved at a particular place.** Yeah, it's like, “Oh, you used to be a gangbanger!” Like, *that was well over 20 years ago. My conviction was almost 30 years ago. I've been home 10 years without incident. What are you talking about?* [...] It would be understandable if their rationale was logical, if I could understand *why* you said, “No.” **But there is no logical rationale. It's just a mishmash of, “You can go here but you can't go there and you can talk to these people [but] can't talk to those people.” And that stuff has real-world effects on my life and my ability to do my work** (Jacob, 2/6/24).¹²**

Like Unique and Martin feel about schools and federal/city agencies, Jacob feels that the way in which he is restricted from certain IDOC facilities but not others is illogical and arbitrary. One would think, he argues, because the facilities he works in are all run by the same agency, that the clearance approval process would be uniform, but this is not the case. Moreover, like Unique, Jacob also stresses that his conviction and former gang affiliation are still being held against him decades after his incarceration, which, he explains, has “real-world effects” on his life and work. In the following section, I discuss how, like restricted facility access, parole, probation, and supervision policies and practices also prevent FIIs from effectively doing their jobs.

¹² For a full list and map of IDOC facilities, see **Appendix A**.

“It’s At [My Parole Officer’s] Whim”

While the ways in which probation, parole, and supervision¹³ present a vast array of barriers and often insurmountable challenges for formerly incarcerated folks is becoming increasingly recognized and understood by both researchers and policymakers, several of my participants shared specific ways in which they, because of the nature of their criminal legal system-related work, are uniquely hindered by probation, parole, and supervision-related policies and practices. Daniel, who does policy advocacy work and is currently on parole, was one such participant. He succinctly shared three main ways in which he is hindered from doing his job because of the conditions of his supervision, which I present herein as a case study.

First, Daniel acknowledges how he and other FIIs are usually not allowed to associate or interact with other people who have been convicted of felonies while on parole. Fortunately, his parole officer has been rather lenient about this condition, and as someone who worked in the for-profit corporate world before his incarceration, he was able to meet it for a time. He explains:

Coming out of incarceration, I spent my first 3 years going back to work in the for-profit world, partially, or mostly because I was pushed to do so by my parole officer because **hidden in the conditions of most parole or supervision is that you cannot associate with other people convicted of felonies which, if it were to be enforced, would preclude most people from working in criminal justice reform.** So often, parole officers ignore this or don't enforce it. In the case of people convicted of sex offenses though, our phones, our computers, tend to be monitored and watched very carefully. So there's less leeway there, less gray area for the parole office, and in particular, they seem much more interested in enforcing rules about association with other felons. [...] At this point I'm actually able to ignore that rule, but only under my United States parole officer's discretion, because she's saying she just doesn't care at this point, and she's satisfied with me doing this work and meeting people through this work who have been formally incarcerated. **But if my parole officer were to change, or she were to get mad at me for something and want to go after me? My whole life could be turned upside down based on the gray areas in supervision and parole** (Daniel 1/23/24).

¹³ Though similar and often referred to interchangeably, probation, parole, and supervision (in Illinois, supervision is known as “MSR” or “Mandatory Supervised Release”) are not the same thing. Probation is a sentence (usually a type of community service) given in place of incarceration. Parole refers to when individuals are released early from their prison sentence, usually for “good behavior” or after showing they are “reformed.” Critically, MSR only occurs after an individual has served their entire prison sentence (Gruschow, 2022).

Here, Daniel shares a key barrier that could easily prevent or discourage formerly incarcerated individuals on parole or supervision (as it initially prevented him) from working in criminal legal system-related fields: not being able to associate with other people with records. While he does acknowledge that there tends to be some leeway with this rule, it is entirely in the hands of parole and probation officers to decide whether they want to enforce it. He also acknowledges how, for people (like himself) who have been convicted of a sex offense, there is less of a discretionary “grey area” when it comes to enforcing the conditions of supervision and parole.

Kiara, who also does policy advocacy work, similarly shared how parole, supervision, and probation policies can prevent individuals from being able to do criminal legal system-related work. When asked what, if any, barriers she faces because of her incarceration experience, Kiara responded:

I have a conviction on my record. So I have barriers every day. [...] **Thankfully, because of my advanced degree and because of the work that I was trying to get into—so, advocacy work in the criminal legal space—my lived experience was a *benefit*.** But I've had friends with advanced degrees that have to work at Kohl's because every job that they tried to get [...], their probation told them, “No, they couldn't take those jobs.” So there are definite obstacles. I did not personally experience those obstacles, and I think it's because of the area that I was trying to work in, but **I've also had friends who wanted to get into advocacy work, and their probation officer told them they could not because they would then be in contact with people with criminal records**, which is ridiculous and crazy! (Kiara, 2/22/24).

While, like Daniel, Kiara acknowledges that she herself has not been prevented from doing criminal legal system-related advocacy work because of her record—which she attributes to the fact she has a law degree and how her lived experience was seen as an asset in the criminal legal space—she does share that many of her friends have been barred from doing the work because the field is heavily staffed by other formerly incarcerated people.

A second way Daniel shared he is prevented from being able to fully do his job as a policy advocate is that his parole officer, even though the law says otherwise, does not allow him to use any social media other than LinkedIn. He elaborates:

My United States Parole officer [...] does not allow me to use social media other than LinkedIn. Even though the Supreme Court has ruled that that is unconstitutional, my United States Parole Office just conveniently ignores that ruling. And then, even if she were to allow me and say, “Yes,” Facebook has a policy against people convicted of sex offenses. They don't publish it, but they publish instructions for people to report if they see someone on Facebook who has been convicted of a sex offense, and then they remove them. **So [...] a lot of communication and digital organizing is happening over social media, and I'm locked out of all that except for LinkedIn. So I have to do a lot of that work through proxy.** My executive director is the one who has to repost stuff I create on those platforms (Daniel, 1/23/24).

Here, Daniel shows how parole officers have a tremendous amount of discretion when it comes to restricting the actions of their parolees. Even though the Supreme Court has ruled otherwise, Daniel, because of the nature of his conviction, is not able to access social media, which, as he mentions, is a key outreach and advocacy tool. Instead, he is forced to waste valuable time and energy feeding social media content through his organization's executive director.

The third parole-related barrier that prevents Daniel from being able to fully do his job is the restrictions placed on his travel. Whether or not he can travel downstate to Springfield for a legislative session, for example, is entirely up to his parole officer's discretion. He explains:

I need permission from my parole officer to leave the Northern Illinois district, which she gives me, but again it's at her whim. At any point she could say “No,” and I don't have a recourse. If I ask her four days before a Springfield trip for permission to go, and she says, “No,” that's not enough time for me to get into court and get that trip approved. So that also is a barrier (Daniel 1/23/24).

Like the restrictions that prevent people with records from working in certain facilities, in this excerpt, Daniel highlights how the travel restrictions placed on him can be decided arbitrarily. Moreover, he shares how there is often little time or room for recourse if his parole officer decides she doesn't want to approve urgent travel.

Yet even though Daniel must get approval to travel, he acknowledges how his parole officer generally “gives” him this approval. She is also, as was mentioned earlier, rather lenient about the fact that he works around other people with criminal records. Other participants were not so lucky. Jacob, who described his experience on parole following his release from prison, shared how his parole officer (PO) actively stood in the way of him getting a job. He explains:

I ended up... I found a job [...]. It was like a midnight job. And this was after *numerous* attempts at other places, filled out multiple applications and whatnot. So this was basically my first “yes.” And I was ecstatic. **But my PO that I had at the time was like, “Nope, that's too late at night. I don't want you outside that late. You can't have that job.”** And I was like, *wow*. You know? Like I was, I was shocked! Cause you would think, *so wait a minute, you're supposed to promote employment* (Jacob, 2/6/24).

In other words, Jacob’s experience serves as a reminder that while Daniel’s experience provides helpful insight into how parole, probation, and supervision uniquely impact formerly incarcerated individuals who work in criminal legal system-related fields, his experience is by no means universal. Everyone’s experience with probation, parole, and supervision is different, largely due to the tremendous amount of discretion parole, probation, and supervision officers have. That said, Daniel’s experiences helpfully show how probation, parole, and supervision policies and practices can prevent FIIs who work in criminal legal system-related fields from accessing people, places, and platforms that are central parts of the work that they do. In the following subsections, I transition away from a discussion of barriers to a discussion of the unique challenges and complications formerly incarcerated people experience whilst doing criminal legal system-related work.

“We Don't Know How Not to Do This”

In addition to the barriers imposed upon FIIs by restrictive and exclusionary policies and their parole, probation, and supervision officers, there are other difficulties and challenges many of my participants described facing that are more so related to their lived experiences and the nature of the criminal legal system-related work they do than to local policies and the practices of state actors. One such challenge is trying to strike a work-life balance. Participants described how they struggle to find time to spend with their families and experience feelings of exhaustion and burnout, all while feeling like they can’t say “no” or stop doing the work that they do because they know what it’s like to suffer as the individuals they serve are suffering.

When asked what the hardest part about the work that he does is, Pedro, who works with individuals who are reentering society, responded:

I'm only one person, one individual. And you only can have so many people in service at one time. So yeah, I think that's just one of the toughest things because I'm always like, "Hey, listen, I can do this," or, "I can figure this out and help you in this." And **the difficult thing is trying to find that balance, not overdoing it to where you're stretching yourself thin,** to where it becomes a burden upon you, when it cuts into your family time, when it comes to taking time for yourself to be able to regroup. Because a lot of the times, **when people are sharing stuff with you and you're helping to support them, you're carrying some of that load.** So that's the toughest thing. [...] **I've had people call me at 2 o'clock in the morning** and I'm like, "Hello, what's going on? What do you need?" (Pedro, 2/12/24).

Here, Pedro demonstrates how he finds it difficult to balance his work (i.e. constantly saying "I can do this" to the individuals he serves) with his personal life, which includes spending time with his family and taking time to practice self-care. He also highlights how there are no set work hours in his role. When, he explains, people call at 2:00 am, his response is not to ignore the call and deal with it in the morning, but to answer and ask, "What do you need?"

Similarly, Gloria, who also works in reentry, discussed feeling as though she is "stretched thin," or in her words, "can't be everywhere." Like Pedro, she emphasized how trying to do so tends to come at the cost of her mental health and time for self-care. She says:

I [struggle to say "no"], too. But I just told somebody "no" the other day. I'm like, "**I can't do everything. I can't be everywhere.**" And **sometimes you just have to say "no"** to certain things and certain events, and **that doesn't mean that you're not supportive of it, or you're not supportive of them, but [...] I gotta take care of myself and my heart, my mind, just like, how am I feeling** (Gloria, 1/30/24).

Here, Gloria specifically describes feeling as though she can't say "no" to the individuals she works with. This is something, she explains, she is learning to practice more frequently and accept as a viable option but still struggles to do. After sharing that she told someone "No" the other day, for example, she seems to attempt to justify her decision and remind herself that sometimes you "*have to say 'no'*" and that doing so "*doesn't mean you're not supportive.*"

Other participants also shared this sentiment, indicating that even in non-work-related scenarios where the line between work and leisure should theoretically be clear, they still

struggle to say “no.” Emmanuel, for example, shares that in school—what is supposed to be a “safe haven” for him—he still finds it difficult to say “no” when asked for help. He explains:

So I'm a student. [...] And I thought, *Okay, I get to shut everything off and just go to school, right?* Wrong. Cause I took a re-entry class, and I love my professor, but he's like, “[Emmanuel], you probably got more up-to-date information than I do, why don't you help me out with this?” So I'm like, *This was supposed to be my safe haven. I was supposed to escape from work and everything else, and just... and there I am in class, sort of help teaching the class [...]. There is no compartmentalizing.* And that's where I sort of get exhausted because it feels like it's just one, this one long, continuous day, month, year, you know? (Emmanuel, 1/29/24).

When I then asked if he ever says “no,” Emanuel laughed nervously and replied:

No, I don't. I don't. I don't. I'm not that smart yet. And you know what's funny is I will be the... **I'm kind of a hypocrite in that regard because it's: “You gotta take care of yourself. Self-care is so important. Blah blah blah blah blah!” And then they look at me like, “What about you?” Like, “We're not talking about me right now.** We've gotta focus on getting you better!” (Emmanuel, 1/29/24).

Here, Emmanuel recognizes the need for self-care, and even goes so far as to say he preaches it to other people, but when it comes to his own well-being, he, and to a lesser extent Pedro and Gloria, are generally willing to put their mental health on the line for others.

Why is this the case? Participants provided numerous different reasons as to why they find it difficult to say “no” to their work and the people they. For some, like Sean, who runs his own organization that supports formerly incarcerated workers, constantly working and feeling burnout is just “the nature of the work.” He says:

I've seen a lot of elder movement folks who are burnt out by the time they're like in their mid-forties and just never rested. So I think there's this room for rest. [...] I'm not great at resisting it because it's kind of like the **nature of the work**, but the other thing is like practicing, saying, “no.” [...] **I actively try to say “no”** (Sean, 2/20/24).

In other words, while Sean actively tries to say “no,” to a certain extent he seems to also just accept that the organizing and movement work that he does is unavoidably demanding.

Carter, who works as an organizer for an organization that also provides reentry and mental health services for formerly incarcerated people, describes how people he works with are overwhelmed by the sheer number of individuals they serve. He explains:

This is a hard task. **We treat over a thousand people a year for a clinic that was only established for 57 people.** So you figure it out. That means you have to be doing a lot of work! I just left the clinicians, and that's what they're complaining of... sleep! Can't get no sleep. They can't rest. You know the opportunities that they get to hang out, they got to be real creative, like putting time that they spend with their family on agenda and say, "Yeah, baby. Okay, we'll spend time from 7 PM...Uhh, we'll make that 8:30. At 8:30 we gotta cut it off!" See, because **it's so much work and a lot of people don't talk about the work levels that comes with this type of stuff** (Carter).

Here, Carter emphasizes that his organization is understaffed and overworked to the point where clinicians' family time is compromised. What he seems to be saying, however, is that such "work levels" "come with" the job of being a clinician. He recognizes that what he and his organization are trying to do is a "hard task," but one that needs to be done.

Earlier in our interview, Carter explained the similarly demanding nature of organizing work to me. He shared:

Well, it's sacrificing your family. And the time? It just goes with the job. [...] You're taking away a lot of time from your family. [...] **Because as an activist, something can happen right now. So if something happens right now that requires the people to hit the street, and you now saying that you can't do it? The only thing you do is you open the door up for one thing, and that's to get that pink slip that you don't want.** So in reality, as an activist, your job is to be successful, to be respectful, and man, to *win*. [...] And that's not a pretty life. And [...] you're asking your family to kind of like, you know, "Just be patient, just be patient, just be patient" [...] **It wipes you out. And most people don't see this.** They only see, well "You wasn't around on this date, or you wasn't around..." [...] It's almost like being an attorney, [but] even the attorney get a break! Because about 5 PM, the attorney go home. See? The activists may be still stuck out in these harsh conditions. And especially when they killed the young boy, Laquan McDonald in Chicago? *Man*, we were in the streets much as 12 to 14 hours! So when you get home and you get a little sleep and get something in your system [...] uh oh! You back out in the streets! (Carter, 1/17/24).

For Carter, having to "sacrifice your family," work flexible hours, and devote a tremendous amount of time to being in the streets just "goes with the job" of being an activist. He acknowledges how this can create tension among activists and their loved ones who feel as though they are being stood up or canceled on, but for Carter, when something like the murder of Laquan McDonald happens "right now," there's no question that you immediately drop everything and "hit the street." In other words, from Carter and Sean's point of view, at least part of the reason why people who work in criminal legal system-related fields feel obligated to work

long hours and constantly say “yes” is because this is what their work demands of them. Other participants, however, indicated that the reason may be more complicated.

Like other participants, Tyrell, who facilitates talks and workshops inside of prisons, flagged that he struggles to strike a work-life balance, but this is not necessarily because his work demands long hours from him. He shares:

[You have to learn] how to *turn off working* or trying to get success [...] and just spend time with family and do all those things that you missed out on. Because sometimes we may think that we're making up for time like, *I gotta go do this, I gotta do this, because I was incarcerated for close to a decade and I'm behind an 8 ball*, so to speak. [But] finding that work-life balance is important because that can cause resentment in your household. Your kids haven't been with you for X amount of years, and **you work, work, work because you feel like you have to get back to it because you spent so much time incarcerated, you want the finer things in life, or you want to feel important or valued**. So for some people, it's, *I have a point to prove, I want to show people I'm a great earner, I can get back to my lifestyle that I had prior to my incarceration*. And that could be potentially detrimental (Tyrell, 2/16/24).

For Tyrell, part of the reason he works so much and finds it difficult to carve out time to spend with family is because of this feeling that he has to “get back to it” and “make up for time” and potential financial advancement prison took away from him. He describes having to balance the desire to feel important or valued financially with the need to make up for lost time with his kids.

Similarly, Sean—who as aforementioned, thinks that at least part of the reason why he finds it difficult to take time away from work and combat burnout is because of the “nature of the work” —also agrees that another part of the difficulty of saying “no” comes from having been told “no” all his life. It is because of this “unhealed trauma,” he explains, that he actively tries to resist the urge to unequivocally say “yes” and instead say “no” more often. He elaborates:

I [...] often feel like there's a consequence in the “no.” And yeah, so I actively try to say “no.” I actively work on healing me, because I think at the end of the day a lot of our unhealed trauma plays a part in our inability to say no. So whether it be, **I've been ostracized and boxed out of a community so much that I finally get invited, so how do I have the right to say no, right?** [Or] I've been... you know what I mean? **And so once doors start to open up for you, you feel like this kind of overwhelming demand to be in the “yes,” kind of posture**, and I think that over the years you have to settle into the idea of the “no.” And that **you have the agency to say no, and it doesn't hurt people when you do** (Sean, 2/20/24).

In other words, Sean points to the fact that when you—like many formerly incarcerated people, because of their records—have been “boxed out” of a community or job or level of prestige and

respect for long enough, you feel like you don't have a right say "no" when "doors start to open up for you." Like Tyrell, he points to a kind of obligation to say "yes" that is felt because of how prison or having a record prevents you from accessing opportunities or generating wealth. Moreover, he also mentions feeling like "there's a consequence in the no" and having to learn that "it doesn't hurt people" when you do say "no."

While Sean says that over the years he has learned to challenge the idea that there's a "consequence in the no," other participants described still feeling pressured by the potential consequences of their "no's," which they explain drives them to constantly say "yes" instead. Emmanuel, for example, describes how so much of his time and labor isn't even devoted to his 9 to 5 job, but rather goes to other causes and/or checking in on, helping out, and saying "yes" to his formerly incarcerated peers. He explains:

90% of what I do is not part of my job, right? I'm not gonna get paid for it [...] I'm also a member of [an advocacy organization], an ambassador for [a legal organization], yeah. I don't get paid for being a coordinator [...]. Do you know what I mean? It's like, I'm involved with all the other organizations, none of which are part of my 9 to 5. And, the funny thing is **there's no scheduling out, right?** [...] I might have a Wednesday where I got nothing to do, and it's great, but Saturday from 8 to like 12 at night, you're going to events, or you're calling people on the phone asking if they're okay, or they're calling you up. **I had a buddy of mine call me up at one in the morning because he wanted me to help set up his printer.** And I'm like, "Bro! It's one in the morning!" He's like, "I know, but I really need to print this out for school." And he's also formerly incarcerated and he'd been gone over 20-something years. **I know he don't know what he's doing with that printer.** And he's got to hook it up to his wi-fi and everything else. And that's just part of it. I'm not gonna get paid for that. That's not part of my 9 or 5. [...] And the thing is, for you, you're like, "it's just a printer like, I'll talk to you tomorrow." **But for that person, it's his entire world right now at this moment, and he has to get it done. And it's exhausting to make other people's important thing your important thing** (Emmanuel, 1/29/24).

Here, Emmanuel not only demonstrates how there is no work-life balance or "scheduling things out" for him but also how he understands what those who ask for his help are going through. What may seem like "just a printer" to the average person, he explains, is his friend's "entire world" at that moment. For Emmanuel, what makes it so hard to say "no," yet so exhausting about always saying "yes," is his tendency to make "other people's important thing [his] important thing" again and again.

Later in our interview, I asked Emmanuel to further explain why he doesn't say "no." He responded by sharing a Bible story and several anecdotes from his childhood:

What a shepherd used to do to a sheep was, [...] it would take olive oil, and it would rub it all over the face of the sheep and in the nostrils specifically, because if a fly got in there [...] the flies would go up, and they would continue to travel and get up into their brain and the only way a sheep would get sort of satisfaction, or just to get rid of this would be smashing its head up against the rocks. **I've always felt that sort of responsibility when someone calls and says, "Can you please help me?" It's like I can prevent a person from smashing his head up against the rocks due to frustration, fear, shame, or whatever they're going through at that moment.** Even when I was a kid, prior to incarceration, because my parents came to this country illegally, they didn't really know the language. So as a child, I'm the one that's translating for them, right? Because I would see the frustration on their faces, and I was really the only person that could translate for them. As I got a little bit older, my cousins would ask me like, "Man fill out this job application for me." I'm like, "Bro, you're- you're 18! I'm 14! I don't know anything about a job!" They're like, "Go to the mechanics with me." Like, like "I don't, I don't even have a driver's license!" **But I was constantly asked and asked and asked, and I'm like, *Okay, well, if I don't help them, I don't know where they're gonna get the help. And it's a desperate sort of feeling to need help and you just can't even think of anyone to call. So if someone decided I'm gonna call [Emmanuel], then I wanna at the very least be there for them. That's kind of why I don't say no*** (Emmanuel 1/29/24).

In other words, because he knows from firsthand experience that "it's a desperate sort of feeling to need help" and not know who to call—just like Sean knows what it's like to be repeatedly "boxed out of a community" and Tyrell knows what it's like to be unable to provide for his family from a prison cell—Emmanuel feels obligated to say "yes" when others ask him for help. While helping his friend fix his printer or his professor teaching about reentry may not be part of his job, by saying "yes" to such requests, the line between labor and leisure time for Emmanuel blurs. It is because of this blur, the obligation they feel to constantly say "yes" to and help others, and the demanding nature of criminal legal system-related work that my participants find it so difficult to strike a work-life balance and rest. Put another way, as Emmanuel said in our interview, "I think a lot of us that do this work are exhausted. But we don't know how not to do this" (Emmanuel 1/29/24). In the following subsection, I transition from a discussion of how FIIs face exhaustion and burnout, to a discussion of how they handle trauma and retraumatization.

“The Work in Itself is Traumatizing”

Perhaps the challenge that most uniquely affects formerly incarcerated people working in criminal legal system-related fields compared to FIIIs more generally is the often re-traumatizing nature of their work. Because the work that they do relates directly to their lived experience with violence, prisons, the criminal legal system, and/or the streets, participants described feeling triggered at work, the necessity of going to therapy, and having to be mindful not only of *their* trauma and triggers but those of their coworkers as well.

When asked what the most difficult part about his job is, Carter, who as an organizer, spent time speaking to individuals on death row, replied:

It’s reliving trauma! [...] Once you close the door on trauma, most people try to come up with different steps to get around it to make sure that it don't spring up. **But what happens when you are employed, and you're dealing with so many different people that draws off levels of trauma?** [Like] sitting down and talking with someone behind the prison wall where you come from, and they're faced with the death penalty, and you may believe that they're innocent? **That puts a scramble in your body** (Carter 1/17/24).

Here, Carter acknowledges that most people, once they have experienced trauma, try to take steps to “make sure it don’t spring up.” For formerly incarcerated people who work in criminal legal system-related fields, however, the work, by nature, tends to involve potentially traumatizing places (like prisons) as well as individuals who are undergoing their own traumatic experiences (like the man on Death Row Carter mentions) and/or working through their past trauma. As Carter explains, having to face these individuals and places “can put a scramble in your body,” or in other words, trigger a trauma response.

Sometimes, even just speaking about past trauma in a work environment can be incredibly traumatizing for folks. Oscar, who does policy advocacy work, which tends to involve sharing his story and personal experiences with legislators, acknowledges how being “open” and “vulnerable” about past traumatic experiences can be triggering. He says:

The work in itself is traumatizing! Retelling these stories is traumatizing! Reliving this experience of incarceration is retraumatizing! Every time you allow yourself to be *open*, you allow yourself to be *vulnerable* telling these stories? That's re-retraumatizing. So I understand when people who have the capacity, do *not* choose to do this work. Cause they want to put this, you know, their incarceration, as far behind them as they can! (Oscar 2/12/24).

What Oscar acknowledges here is twofold. First, being vulnerable and sharing stories about what it was like to be incarcerated with strangers, or, as Oscar says, having to relive the experience of incarceration, is traumatizing. Second, not everyone is willing to relive the incredibly traumatizing experience of being incarcerated by doing work that is directly related to that experience every day. In other words, it takes FIIs who are willing and able to deal with the traumatizing nature of criminal legal system-related work to do this work.

Moreover, working in a criminal legal system-related field as a formerly incarcerated person often requires more than just dealing with your own trauma. Gloria, who works alongside and with other formerly incarcerated women, described the difficulty of having to work with people who are still struggling or who are dealing with trauma of their own. She explains:

[It's hard], working with people that you love, that you've grown to love, and they haven't totally healed. Not saying that I've totally healed, but I do take accountability for my healing process. And what does that look like? And how do I show up as a leader? [...] People come home after serving so much time and prison isn't a place for healing, and it's a lot of us in this space who have been hurt, and of course, they don't have the capacity to heal us all. And then we come home that same person and are doing this work and [...] **you don't want to trigger anybody.** [...] I'm not a therapist and I may say the wrong thing, and how am I gonna bring them back if [...] I'm trying to hold them accountable for their actions and I just send them to a place that isn't right? So do you just not say anything and enable these people to keep going on? Or do you just...? Yeah, that's what I've been struggling with (Gloria 1/30/24).

As someone who is a leader in her organization, Gloria highlights the difficulty of trying to hold her co-workers accountable for their actions while also being mindful of their triggers and traumas. She acknowledges that when people come home from prison and begin working, they aren't fully healed, and wonders aloud about what the best way to support these individuals is.

Several participants recognized the fact that they, like Gloria describes, are not fully healed, but shared the steps they and their organizations are taking to help ensure that their trauma doesn't negatively interfere with their ability to do criminal legal system-related work.

For example, Quincy describes how he is excited to start therapy and begin making himself “whole” in the wake of his traumatic incarceration experience. He says:

But the trauma can be... it's probably always gonna be with me. I'm not going to try to hide that fact I'm going to be starting to get therapy. I suggest anyone that does even a decade in prison get the therapy [...]. **You are harmed in a way that psychologically, you're in an abnormal setting. And to try to think that that doesn't affect you would be naive.** And so, yeah, I look forward to talking to someone, airing out some of these thoughts and feelings that I have. [...] Because **if you're not whole, you can't do any good to yourself, to others, and the type of work that I wanna do** (Quincy).

Here, Quincy argues that in order to be able to do good to himself, others, and the kind of work he wants to do (law), he needs to air out some of his thoughts and feelings in therapy.

Like Quincy, Pedro emphasizes the importance of having a place or space to unload and process his trauma to be able to effectively do his job. He explains:

I feel like I've come to learn to do my job without being traumatized. That's because I'm consistently taking care of myself in the process. Before, not so much. But during the process, **you have to remember, you're carrying other people's stuff that can be triggering. So you have to remember to be supportive to yourself, to make sure that you have a place where you can unload that and offload that so you can be an asset to someone else.** Other than that, then it's almost everything that a person is going through or experiencing will be triggering for you. **And one of the things that I love about [this organization] is that we're very supported.** “Hey, you know what? You're dealing with something? Take a load off. Take today off. Go home. Reset. Come back. Let's live to fight another day.” **To me, that's big because that means that you want to talk. You want to take care of the people who are assets to your company, to your business, to your workforce** (Pedro, 2/12/24).

Here, Pedro, who works primarily with individuals who have recently been released from prison, stresses the importance of being able to offload the second-hand trauma he carries so that he can then “be an asset to someone else.” He also explains how his organization is incredibly supportive of his mental health and self-care needs. This is “big” for Pedro because it means his organization sees *him* as an asset they want to take care of.

Other participants also described how the organizations they work with support them and their mental health needs. Emmanuel, for example, shared how when he was about to quit his job, his bosses suggested he try therapy first. When asked whether he feels supported by his current employer, Emmanuel replied:

I am absolutely supported. [...] In fact, here's how supportive my community is at work: I was stressed out, fed up, just done. I was done. And I came in and I told [my bosses], I said, "I'm done. I want to quit. I don't feel good." And both of them, at separate times, but they both came up, and they're like, "**Why don't you please just go talk to someone? If you go talk to someone, and you still want to quit, we'll let you go. But do us this favor and go talk to someone.**" [...] So] I'm like *fine*. I didn't expect anything to come from it. I was gonna go, and I was gonna come back, I was gonna quit, and I was gonna work at a factory somewhere. And I went. I was fortunate enough to be referred to a therapist [...] and after a couple of sessions, it was revealed that I had PTSD. I told my bosses about it and because they both work in the same field, they weren't surprised. They're like, "Man you served 23 years of your life! Unfortunately, you weren't going to come out unscarred!" And you know, having that realization, having that understanding of what was happening with me made everything better, but that's the kind of support I have here, professionally (Emmanuel, 1/19/24).

In other words, Emmanuel, like Pedro, stresses the importance of therapy and having a supportive, caring employer to his ability to continue to do criminal legal system-related work instead of going to "work at a factory somewhere." In general, while participants described having to deal with trauma and traumatization at work, they also shared how these feelings can be mitigated with the help of therapy, a strong work support network, and self-care. In the final subsection, I discuss how many of my participants expressed frustration with being tokenized, exploited, and undermined by their employers.

"Put Me on the Payroll and Let Me Work!"

The final work-related challenge my formerly incarcerated participants described experiencing is not being given full agency, autonomy, or say in their organizations, even though their employers claim to value their experience and expertise. Moreover, participants expressed discontent with how organizations "use" them, their ideas, and their stories, without adequately compensating them or putting them in positions of power. Lucille, for example, acknowledged how criminal legal system-related work broadly speaking is built around helping system-impacted people, yet does not allow these people to "determine the work of [the] organization" they work at. She explains:

'Cause for real, for real? **There's a whole ass motherfuckin' community [...] around this kind of shit that does not include us. People build whole careers and jobs and everything around us, right? But we get to be the 20-hour ambassador or part-time community organizer, or some shit like that. You**

know what I'm sayin'? **Or maybe we do have a fancy title at an organization, but we don't determine the work of that organization, right?** (Lucille, 2/1/24)

In other words, Lucille stresses that it is not enough for an organization to give FIIs a part-time role or “fancy title” if neither comes with the ability to have a say in what the organization does. She also takes issue with the way many criminal legal system-related organizations do not fully include FIIs like herself even though they are built around “helping” them.

Roberto also expressed dissatisfaction with how organizations exploit FIIs and their ideas yet fail to actually hire those with direct experience. He says:

We're called in to get ideas of what the problem is right? [...] **They call [...] us in and be like, “Hey, what was re-entry like?” We'll give them solutions, they'll run off, create programming [...] and [...] have been getting millions of dollars for this.** They don't hire any of the people who created these ideas. **They don't hire anybody with those direct lived experience to have these ideas, or even be part of ‘em. Or you may be part of it, but you'll be [...] out of the way, and then they'll come to you for more answers! And I feel like that's being used.** If folks are really looking to join in partnership, we should be looked at as equal partners, not just as some sounding boards (Roberto, 2/20/24).

Here, Roberto agrees with Lucille that people who aren't system-impacted and who work at criminal legal system-related organizations tend to “use” FIIs and their ideas to create programming without actually hiring them or allowing them to take part in program development. Instead, Roberto suggests, FIIs should be looked at as “equal partners” in the work.

Similarly, Ian, who has worked at numerous different criminal legal system-related organizations both in Illinois and across the country, expressed that he would rather have a formerly incarcerated person “lead” an organization than just serve as a consultant or “sounding board” as Roberto says. When I asked what the difference is between having an FII consult for an organization versus leading it, Ian replied:

I mean, [with] consulting you don't really have a say so in what's going on? Like you can consult with me and get me my ideas about what I may want or what my experience was, and then it's really up to you to decide what to take from that, what to use, what not to use, what's important, what's not! Whereas, if it was me directly, I already know that. I know what's important. I know what I need to do. And a lot of times, I'm not gonna deviate from that. Most of the time, probably 99% of the time. I'm not gonna deviate from it. I'm gonna come in with a mission, I'm coming in with a vision about what I know needs to change based on my own personal experience and things that I witnessed. And I'm gonna fight it out and try to get the best result I can. Whereas, **I think that someone who hasn't had that experience may be**

more willing to compromise. And not saying that compromise can't happen. It definitely happens. And I will do it as well. But I think that where you draw the line that may be different. **I mean, it's appreciated that you at least came and asked me? But if you really want my thoughts and input, make me a part of the team and let me lead the thing. You don't just come and ask me when you need me! Put me on a payroll and let me work!** (Ian, 2/5/24).

Here, Ian stresses the importance of having FIIs in leadership roles as opposed to merely being asked for their input or ideas. He explains how when FIIs are not put in charge, organizations tend to deviate from, compromise on, or can easily ignore what they've been told by their consultants. He acknowledges that while it's nice to be asked for his thoughts and opinions, if an organization really cared about them and were interested in executing them, they would “put [him] on a payroll and let [him] work.”

Ian, Roberto, and Lucille were not the only participants to emphasize the difference between organizations that give FIIs agency in their decision-making processes and organizations that merely want their support, thoughts, and insight, with no guarantee that their ideas and requests will be honored. Sean, for example—who, before starting his own organization, served as the director of a non-profit organization focused on procurement—discussed the difference between what he felt was an incredibly toxic and problematic work environment and the values and practices of his own organization. He says of his previous job:

I did a lot of work in between labor and local government. And it was a very toxic kind of racist, classist work environment. [...] So for me, it was like, *Okay, well, how can [we] do this work [so that] formerly incarcerated people can have agency in it?* Cause I was treated kind of like: *You're lucky to be here. Even though I graduated top of my class, I had a whole history of organizing experience and success behind me, I was still looked at like, you should be happy that you got this job. And I'm like, “Nah Bro. I'm good.”* So I left and started [my own organization] in 2018. [...] [At my previous organization] I was the fetcher, right? And so that meant that I could go out, and I could find people who had similar lived experiences and [...] **they could create the demand for the intervention to be implemented, but they had no hand in creating the intervention itself. And so that was super problematic in that oftentimes when the policies that we would get advanced would get advanced, they didn't have a hand in drafting it, but it was declared as: “This is the need for these people,”** right? So it was like this consistent curiosity by, I think, a lot of Progressives and Liberals as to what the solutions needed to be for poor people, but very little opportunity for people from low-end, low-income communities to actually have a hand in developing those solutions right? [...] **It was a consistent presentation of the pain and the suffering of our people with the absence of our agency in the solution-making process** (Sean 2/20/24).

Here, Sean shows how his previous organization had little interest in giving the people most impacted by the policies they were advocating for a hand in drafting and developing them. Sure, he explains, Progressives and Liberals are “curious” as to what solutions need to be for poor people (e.g. are interested in hearing them out) and are more than willing to “present” their pain and suffering to advocate for reform, but when it comes to actually giving agency to directly-impacted folks like Sean, they are silenced and told they are “lucky” to even be there. Lucille, who has also been repeatedly told to “be grateful” by her employers, feels as though this is employers’ way of “*acknowledging* the power dynamic” at play and “telling you to *stay in your place*” (Lucille, 2/1/24).

Like Lucille and Sean, Kiara also acknowledges how employers at criminal legal system-related organizations tend to exploit FIIs. Exploitative employers, she explains, will act as though they are doing FIIs “a favor” just by employing them, whereas more welcoming organizations will treat FIIs as valuable team members. When asked if she could elaborate on the difference between an exploitative and welcoming employer, Kiara replied:

Exploitative is that “*I’m doing you a favor, so whatever the conditions are, [...] it doesn’t matter, [...] you should just be happy you have a job.*” So whether I’m verbally abusive, or I’m not giving you good hours, or whatever it is, it’s that you know I’m patting myself on the back for being a good guy and giving you a job, and that’s the attitude that I bring into the workspace, right? **Whereas welcoming is like, “No, we’re all here on this team, and we welcome the value that you’re going to bring to our organization. And we’re all doing each other a favor by being here and contributing our knowledge, our skills, our time, all these things that are valuable. We’re all contributing collectively to the success of this organization.”** [...] Unfortunately, a lot of employers feel like, [...] “I just wanna say that I hire people with arrest or conviction records, but I don’t talk about the conditions that I force them to work under, because, I’m just giving myself all of these accolades for just doing the hiring” (Kiara 2/22/24).

In other words, it is not enough, Kiara explains, for employers to simply hire folks with records and “pat themselves on the back” for doing it. If, she argues, you hold the fact that you are “doing them a favor” over their heads while you verbally abuse or give bad hours to your formerly incarcerated employees, the work environment becomes exploitative.

While participants described how some employers will directly exploit them or refuse to give them agency or a say in their organization outright, others shared how employers would more subtly do so by undermining their expertise, questioning their knowledge and talents, and/or using them solely for narrative storytelling purposes. Ian, for example, shares how at the organization he worked for before his current role, his boss would constantly “second-guess” him and override his decisions, which made him feel like he was being under-utilized.

Meanwhile, at his current organization, he feels trusted and secure in his decisions. He explains:

[At my other job, my boss would] second guess me. He would tell me, “Oh I don't want to do it that way. I don't think you should do it.” And [...] I kind of feel like I couldn't have showed my authentic self, because I felt like when I was making *decisions*, it wasn't necessarily decisions that I would have made. I'm thinking about, *Okay. What does he want me to do? [...] What, what would make him happy?* And I was making decisions that way, and I kind of felt a disconnect. **But my boss now, I've been going to her about stuff like, “Hey, how do you want me to handle this?” She's like [...] “You take the lead on it. You do it the way you want to do it.” [...]** And to me that's a big difference, because now [...] I feel better knowing that she trusts me to make my own decisions and that if I make a decision I won't necessarily be second guessing myself, wondering like, *Is she gonna approve this? Or not? [...]* **So I think that that's one way that you get me at my fullest potential because you get *me*. You get me thinking, using my experience, using my knowledge and stuff as opposed to trying to guess what you want me to do or what's going to be acceptable to you** (Ian, 2/5/24).

As Ian demonstrates, sometimes even when FIIs are given titled positions and a job description that seems to give them agency in their organization, they are still not fully included or trusted in decision-making processes. When organizations (like Ian's current organization) *do* give them full decision-making power, Ian argues, FIIs like himself are able to live up to their “fullest potential” because they can draw from their knowledge and experience without having to appease those who do not have lived experience and/or who doubt FII's abilities.

Other participants, Like Henry, described how, when he first started doing criminal legal system-related work, his employer would parade him around and ask him to “tell his story” over and over again, despite the fact that he felt as though he had more value to contribute to the organization than just his story, which wasn't even, he feels, the “sad story” his employer was looking for him to tell. He elaborates:

When I first started [...] I felt like I was being exploited! Like people saw that I was passionate, so people were like, “[Henry], come, tell your story over here, come over here and tell your story!” And it became like, *Woah, wait a minute, I'm more than just my story, like, I can contribute and bring value in other in other ways, like, why are you just steady asking me to tell my story? And then I started realizing that the story they wanted me to tell wasn't my story! Like, did I have some hardships while I was incarcerated? Yes.* But [...] every job that I that I had I was recruited for. Like I never put in an application and was told “no.” [...] The first place I moved to when I got out of the halfway house was my auntie's house for a *month*, and then me and my wife at the time, we rented a house and South Holland, and then we rented from another from an incarcerated person! **So [...] my story wasn't a *sad story of coming out of incarceration, [but] it seemed like that's the story they wanted me to tell* (Henry 2/2/24).**

Here, Henry acknowledges how his passion for the work was taken advantage of, especially after he was first released from prison. Instead of allowing him to “contribute and bring value in other ways,” he explains, he was just “steady” asked to tell his story. Moreover, he explains, he felt as though he was being made to tell a story that wasn’t true to his experience.

In addition to being exploited for their labor, participants also spoke of how, because they are formerly incarcerated, they are financially exploited by their employers and organizations, or, at the very least, are not compensated in a way that takes their decades-long incarceration into account. Lucille, for example, highlights the fact that while “mainstream activists” receive a “living wage paycheck,” formerly incarcerated folks are not so lucky. She says:

Okay, so you know how a lot of us will complain like it's damn hard to get an actual motherfucking paycheck, a living wage paycheck in this work, so that you can motherfucking live and vibe and pay your bills, and possibly have a little leftover for fucking groceries and some health insurance, right? Yeah. Most of the mainstream activists in this space *have that*. Most of us formerly incarcerated folks *fucking don't*. That's just facts, right? It's hard to get those jobs *for real*, you know? **But what we do get is the invitations to show up for this panel, or this panel, or this panel, right? Or this community event, or this community event, or whatever, for two, or three, or \$400. You know? [...] And so we talk shit about that all the time because we can't live off of that! (Lucille 2/1/24).**

In other words, it is not enough, Lucille argues, for formerly incarcerated folks to live off the meager \$200, \$300, and \$400 stipends they get from doing panels and community events where they, as Henry mentioned earlier, are just invited to tell their story. Instead, she points out, that what formerly incarcerated activists really need is a steady paycheck and some health insurance.

Like Lucille, Jacob also acknowledged how there is a disparity between those who get paid well at criminal legal system-related organizations and those who “don’t see a lot of funds.”

The difference, he argues, lies in who is doing direct service work. He elaborates:

I love being in restorative justice, but I also have to earn enough for my family's sake! And that's not always an *easy* thing to achieve. Cause **most folks who work in this realm don't see a lot of funds. Especially the *direct service people*, you know? It's a different story about those higher-titled people, lead executive directors and whatnots, and the people of that *ilk*. They tend to get paid pretty well** (Jacob 2/6/24).

Here, Jacob emphasizes that in criminal legal system-related fields, “higher-titled people” like “lead executive directors” “tend to get paid pretty well.” Folks like himself who do direct service work, however, find it difficult to earn enough to support their families. He knows this because, as he shared earlier in our interview, he’s been on both sides of the aisle. Before his current role, he worked as a part-time consultant for a criminal legal system-related tech company and made \$200 an hour, which, he explains, “just kind of cemented it for me, although the money was great, [...] that the large bulk of the money typically tends to stay at the top and very little gets filtered down to the bottom where the real work is being done” (Jacob, 2/6/24).

While participants like Jacob and Lucille acknowledged the pay disparities between employees at criminal legal-system organizations, others, like Carter and Ian, acknowledged that FIIs are uniquely disadvantaged when it comes to non-salary compensation, like benefits, because of the amount of time they have spent in prison. Carter shares how, because many folks come out of prison “old,” they have to work “like a dog” to match the pension savings of someone who has had “decades to prepare” for retirement.

In most instances, [people have] decades to prepare for a pension. So now [...] **you coming out of prison old! And you look at your pension and it amounts to nickels** compared to their pensions. So to establish a livelihood, I hate to say it, you have to work almost like a *dog* to get this stuff done (Carter 1/17/24).

Similarly, when asked if there is anything he wishes his employer did better, Ian replied:

I mean I wish they gave more to my retirement account! [...] And that weighs on my mind a lot. Like even though I've been home for 7 years, you know, I was working in Starbucks part-time, so I did

have an account there, and they contributed very generously, but it was very generously of a very small income, anyway, you know. And then [another organization] I worked for [...], they matched like 3, 4, 5%, which was awesome. **[My previous organization] didn't even contribute to a retirement fund.** [My current employer] does contribute a nominal amount yearly, it's not a percentage is more like an actual amount that they contribute to our retirement accounts. **But that's the nature of nonprofits, though. [...]** **They kind of struggle with that part of it because [...] most of the money they have goes to the actual program [or] salaries itself. They can't afford to contribute 3, 4, 5% to employees' retirement accounts** (Ian, 2/5/24).

Here, Ian acknowledges how “even though he’s been home for seven years,” because of the time he spent incarcerated without making an income, saving for retirement “weighs on his mind a lot.” Yet part of the nature of doing criminal legal system-related work at a non-profit, he explains, is that they “can't afford to contribute 3, 4, 5% to employees’ retirement accounts.” While he understands why this is the case, it means formerly incarcerated folks take on a unique burden when they come out of prison and begin working at an organization that doesn’t help them save for retirement, or as other participants have stressed, pay them a living wage.

To summarize, in addition to the unique social and human capital they bring to their work, formerly incarcerated people working in criminal legal system-related fields also experience unique barriers and challenges due to their records, incarceration experience, and the nature of their work. These barriers and challenges include the inability to access certain facilities; parole, supervision, and prohibition-related restrictions; difficulty striking a work-life balance; work-related traumatization; and being undermined, exploited, tokenized, and unfairly compensated by their employers.

Future Research

The findings contained within this paper represent only a fraction of the insight, knowledge, ideas, expertise, and experiences my 21 participants shared with me during our interviews. In addition to describing the various social and human capital they bring to their criminal legal system-related roles, participants also shared their reentry experiences, their motivations for getting involved with criminal legal system-related work, specific policies that have impacted their experience with the criminal legal system, their hopes for the future and more. All these topics would be worthy candidates for future research.

Moreover, while I was able to address some of the unique workplace-related barriers and challenges formerly incarcerated working in criminal legal system-related fields experience in my final findings sub-section, learning that these kinds of challenges (e.g. tokenization, exploitation, unfair compensation, etc.) affect FIIs who do this kind of work was a completely unexpected finding and therefore ought to be explored further in future research specifically designed to understand these issues. Doing so is particularly important, I argue, because as more and more formerly incarcerated people are welcomed into criminal legal system-related roles, employers and organizations ought to be aware of the unique challenges and barriers they face at work, as well as mindful of how they treat, compensate, value, and support the work of their formerly incarcerated and system-impacted employees.

Additionally, though doing so was not possible due to the time and logistical constraints of this study, I conclude with the suggestion that future research ought to be conducted not only *on*, but *in collaboration with* formerly incarcerated and system-impacted people. Several of the participants I spoke with discussed their own work as researchers, and their desire to research issues related to their experience with the criminal legal system. These individuals ought to be

collaborated with. Others emphasized that while researchers may know how to properly conduct studies and analyze data, for example, FIIs may have a better idea of what kinds of research questions should be asked and who should be spoken to in order to answer those questions. These individuals, as well, should be integrated into the research process. Participants expressed dissatisfaction with how, in general, there is a tendency among researchers to dismiss the expertise, knowledge, and insight of formerly incarcerated folks and see them merely as research subjects. Instead, I suggest, formerly incarcerated and system-impacted folks should be incorporated as equal and valuable partners in the research process.

Finally, I conclude with the acknowledgment that future research ought to be conducted in other cities with a more diverse array of participants who span across, race, age, gender, incarceration type and length, and work industry to better understand the unique human and social capital formerly incarcerated folks bring to, and barriers they experience working in, criminal legal system-related fields nationwide. Additional perspectives from employers, family members, and policymakers should also be included in future studies. Moreover, while qualitative studies are useful in that they allow participants to share their perspectives, experiences, and insights, quantitative studies on the number and demographics of individuals working in criminal legal system-related fields, the industries they work in, their salaries, etc. could also prove useful to policymakers and employers.

Policy Recommendations

While all my participants should be commended for surviving incarceration, successfully navigating the reentry process, and/or engaging in important criminal legal system-related work, many of them cited various opportunities, mentors, friends, programs, and policies that played a significant role in helping them arrive where they are today. For example, Daniel acknowledged:

I'm lucky that ultimately prison was a positively transformative experience, and not in any way because of anything the system provided intentionally, but really because of the people that I was incarcerated with and the paths that they were on and that they helped me to walk” (Daniel 1/23/24).

In other words, Daniel, as well as several other formerly incarcerated folks I interviewed recognize that it is not because they are necessarily more exceptional than others who are incarcerated that they have been able to succeed, but because of the opportunities they were afforded and despite the barriers in their way while navigating a system that is designed to make it not only improbable but nearly impossible for those touched by it not to “fail” (e.g. fail to find housing, employment, stay out of prison, etc.) (Smith & Kinzel, 2020).¹⁴

Thus, if policymakers and advocates, violence prevention organizations, law firms, and others in criminal legal system-related fields hope benefit from the unique skills, attributes, connections, and knowledge shared by many FIIs, **barriers** (such as collateral consequences) that often prevent FIIs from engaging in and doing such work need to be removed, and **opportunities** (e.g. education, training, employment, and leadership) that enable and empower them to develop their skills and pursue criminal legal system-related work ought to be expanded. In the following subsections, I go into greater detail about what these recommendations would entail, as well as how they would help support FIIs who work in criminal legal system-related fields and those who have experienced incarceration more broadly.¹⁵

I. Reduce Barriers: Abolishing Permanent Punishments

When asked, “If you could change one policy or common practice surrounding the work or reentry experiences of formerly or currently incarcerated or system-impacted people, what would you change and why,” more than any other type of policy, participants stressed the need to

¹⁴ Language borrowed from Manley (2023).

¹⁵ Language borrowed from Manley (2023).

abolish “permanent punishments,” or, “collateral consequences” related to having a criminal record. Perhaps Henry explained it best when he said:

There should be no such thing as a *permanent* punishment. Regardless of the conviction, there should always be a pathway for people to be free. When a person is arrested and convicted, the punishment is: you go to prison or you get some type of parole or probation [...]. But when people come out, there is no *full* restoration period where you feel like you've been restored [or] like the mistake of the past no longer exists, because **there's hundreds of policy barriers that say [...]: *You can't live here. You can't work here. You can't run for public office. You can't bury your father or your mother because you can't be the executor over the state.*** There's all of these laws that create this permanent sort of caste system that shouldn't exist. So, to me, if there was one policy that I would like to see is that *everybody* should have a pathway! Again, that pathway could be contingent upon your conviction, there may be stipulations, but **there has to be a point when a person can say, “I'm done”** (Henry, 2/2/24).

The “permanent punishments” Henry is referring to include more than 40,000 collateral consequences of having a criminal record that exist in the form of U.S., state, and local “laws, ordinances, and organizational rules, policies, and procedures” that create “barriers to employment, housing, college admission, student loans, professional licenses, government benefits and services, voting rights, and more” (Miller et al., 2021). In Illinois, for example, there are 1,200 “collateral consequences” enumerated in state statutes that collectively constrain access to housing, employment, education, and other opportunities (Escobar-Schulz & Buitrago, 2020). Of those constraints, 77 percent impose restrictions on convicted felons’ employment, occupational licensing, and business activities, while the other 33 percent affect individuals’ “personal activities” (Mock, 2016).

While employment-related collateral consequences have received considerable attention and been the subject of major policy reforms in recent years (e.g. national “ban-the-box” and “fair chance” laws), due to the fact that FIIs who work in criminal legal system-related fields are generally hired *because of*, rather than *in spite of* their records, participants primarily took issue with non-employment-related collateral consequences. These “permanent punishments” include restrictions on access to public housing and housing on county, city, or state property; lifetime

bans on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits; and laws that forbid people with records from accessing federal student loans, voting, and more (Miller et al., 2021).

While these barriers are not exclusively faced by formerly incarcerated people who work in criminal legal system-related fields, many of them force individuals to enter what my participant Gloria calls “survival mode,” which she explains, looks like “living paycheck to paycheck” or having to resort “back to how you were used to surviving in order to just make it. [...] It could be going back to selling drugs, it could be going back to hustling, it could be going back to prostitution...” (Gloria 1/30/24). In other words, when you are in “survival mode,” Gloria explains, you can’t focus on doing meaningful criminal legal system-related work. Removing collateral consequences that prevent FIIIs from finding housing and receiving financial support, for example, would better enable them to engage in criminal legal system-related work, avoid having to enter “survival mode,” and/or, as Pinard (2010) shows, refrain from recidivating following their release from prison.

On top of collateral consequences and employment barriers broadly speaking, FIIIs also face specific legal barriers that directly prevent them from engaging in work relevant to their incarceration experience. For example, certain laws exist that disallow current prisoners and parolees (who make up a substantial portion of at-risk and system-impacted populations, as well as those who work at criminal legal system-related organizations) to be mentored by and interact with those who have criminal records (Smith, 2020). In Illinois, for example, people with records are not allowed to run for local public office or serve on City Council, something many of the individuals I spoke to who do policy-related work expressed frustration over. Other professions my participants aspire to, such as lawyering, require that all individuals undergo a character and

fitness assessment both to attend law school and pass their state bar exam, which discourages and prevents many FIIs, despite being otherwise qualified, from being able to practice law (Binnall, 2022). Moreover, requirements of parole, probation, and supervision often prevent formerly incarcerated individuals from being able to fully do their jobs by restricting their travel and social media use, which are essential components of organizing and advocacy work. Thus, for formerly incarcerated individuals to truly have the greatest impact on those with similar lived experiences as them and fully engage in criminal legal system-related work, laws and restrictions that impart permanent punishments on people with records should be loosened.

II. Increase Opportunities: Education and Employment

In addition to leading to a wide variety of post-incarceration barriers, prison time has also been found to diminish individuals' social capital, which is detrimental to one's ability to find housing and employment during reentry (Office of The Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2020). Fortunately, prison programs such as higher education, counseling, and vocational and other training can help bolster social capital, providing incarcerated individuals with meaningful skills and connections that prove useful following their release (Sturm & Tae, 2017). Moreover, programs run outside of prisons by individuals and organizations with existing social capital, if made accessible, can further support people who have experienced incarceration (Sturm & Tae, 2017). As Quincy said in our interview, for example, "While in prison, I made a lot of connections. [...] **Education is the key that got me these connections**" (Quincy, 2/8/24). In other words, according to Quincy and several other participants, FIIs, especially those who go on to work in criminal legal system-related fields, greatly benefit from social and human capital-boosting educational and vocational programming.¹⁶

¹⁶ Language borrowed from Manley (2023).

That said, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, while over 50% of incarcerated individuals had low-paying prison jobs in 2016, less than 20% were partaking in educational programming, and less than 10% were receiving some form of job training (Wang, 2022). As such, policies ought to be implemented that encourage organizations and individuals rich with social and economic capital (e.g. large-scale nonprofits, government agencies, businesses, philanthropists, etc.) to train and employ newly-released FIIs. Additionally, with the help of resource-abundant higher education institutions and the cooperation of state and federal departments of corrections, high-quality college education, training, mentorship, and programming that provide opportunities for incarcerated folks to develop and bolster their unique knowledge and skills, should be offered inside prisons.

Though prison-based education and training recourses are important when it comes to setting up currently incarcerated individuals for success post-release, all my participants, as well as hundreds of thousands of formerly incarcerated people nationwide, have already been released from carceral facilities. Thus, in addition to increasing educational and training opportunities in prisons, participants expressed how there is also an immediate need for more meaningful, sustained employment and leadership opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals, especially in criminal legal system-related fields. Employment opportunities are the first step, but as several participants, like Sean, pointed out:

Formally incarcerated system-impacted people have to be in leadership. [...] I mean, even if you assume that we don't know how, then we have to learn how, right? **So the solution is developing leaders that can take on the complexity that is policy advocacy work. Developing leaders who can do the research to devise [...] solutions. That means investing in, system-impacted leadership, training, all of the things that everybody else had in order to become who they are within the sector.** Just investing in system-impacted people and just kind of stepping back and watching the result (Sean, 2/20/24).

For Sean, employers not only need to step back and provide their formerly incarcerated employees with the opportunity to lead, but also invest in them, train, them, and give them access

to the kinds of learning and development opportunities “everyone else in the sector had to become who they are.” Lucille corroborated Sean’s recommendation, saying, “Invest in us, right? [And] the shit that we don't know how to do? Help us motherfucking learn!” (Lucille, 2/1/24). In other words, Lucille, Sean, and several other participants agreed that employers at criminal legal-related organizations ought to provide FIIs with meaningful employment opportunities to exercise their knowledge and expertise (e.g. more than just token, story-telling related roles), as well as learning and training opportunities.

Moreover, participants stressed the need for organizations that employ FIIs to pay them “what they’re worth” given the “wealth of knowledge and strength and resiliency they bring” (Gloria, 1/30/24). In other words, an employment or leadership opportunity can only provide so much if it doesn’t pay a living wage. Additionally, FIIs who work in criminal legal system-related fields need stable employment. As Lucille emphasized, “invitations to show up for this panel, or this panel [...] or this community event, or this community event,” for a few hundred dollars each are not enough to sustain someone financially. Thus, criminal legal system-related organizations and employers should consider the value that FIIs bring to their work and rather than exploit them for their knowledge and expertise without giving them any say in the work of their organization, pay them as they would a full-time, non-formerly incarcerated employee. It is only when FIIs can live comfortably out of “survival mode” that they will be able to contribute to criminal legal system-related organizations most readily.

Conclusion

Overall, this paper explores the “human” (knowledge, skills, and attributes) and “social” (trust, credibility, connections) capital FIIs who are employed in fields related to their incarceration bring to their work. This paper has shown that FIIs’ experiences afford them with

unique array of human capital—which includes insider knowledge of how “the system,” “the streets,” and public policies function in practice; technical (e.g., legal, research, writing, advocacy) and soft skills (emotional intelligence, conflict mediation, emotional regulation, etc.), and resiliency—derived from their lived experience. It also finds that formerly incarcerated people bring a great deal of social capital (e.g. relationships/connections, credibility, and relatability) from their lived experience to their work and their clientele, which enables them to access hard-to-reach individuals and spaces and more readily advance the goals of their organizations. Additionally, this paper finds that FIIs who work in criminal legal system-related fields experience unique barriers, challenges, and complications whilst engaging in criminal legal system-related work, such as restricted facility access; parole, probation, and supervision-related requirements; difficulty striking a work-life balance; traumatization; and not being tokenized, exploited, barred from true leadership positions, and not adequately compensated by their employers. Finally, this paper concludes with the recommendation that barriers be removed, and opportunities expanded to allow more FIIs to engage in this work.

While the list of the kinds of qualities, attributes, characteristics, and knowledge FIIs who work in criminal legal system-related fields possess presented by this paper is extensive, it is in no way exhaustive. Further research is needed to affirm and expand this list, as well as to understand what kinds of programming, support, resources, and opportunities best assist and encourage formerly incarcerated people who hope to engage in this work.

Finally, I would like to conclude with a call to action. When asked how employers could best support FIIs, one of my participants, Unique, who works in reentry services, responded:

Hire them! And if you can't? Teach them something. You may not be in a position to hire me, but what you can do is say, “[Unique], I have created on the third Wednesday of every month, a class for formerly incarcerated women, to teach them how to write their own memoir!” How to how to blog! Cause I'm a writer! You know? Whatever! **There is always something that you can do.** You can create a list of places that are willing to hire justice-impacted people and reach out to them and say, “Hey, I come in contact with

quite a few people. Are you willing to hire?" [...] People can always do something. [...] Everybody thinks they have to do the very top of the line. No. What you have to do is what you can do at 100%. And if you can ask a few people, are they willing to hire justice-impacted people? You hold that. And then you call me and say, "[Unique], I know three people at the mall [...] they are willing to hire [...] My father knows somebody who has an apartment building, who is willing to have one apartment for a formerly incarcerated person." **You can always do something. And I challenge people to always do something. If you can do it, you do it. But if you can't do it, do something** (Unique, 2/26/24).

While the question I asked was geared toward employers, I think Unique's response applies to everyone: "You can always do something." Whether it be helping FIIs acquire human capital through teaching and learning opportunities or using your own social capital to help them find employment or housing, as Unique says, "there is always something you can do." So, I leave all my readers with Unique's challenge: do something. Support formerly incarcerated individuals and those who are working to better our criminal legal system in any way you can.

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Appendix A: Carceral Institutions in Illinois

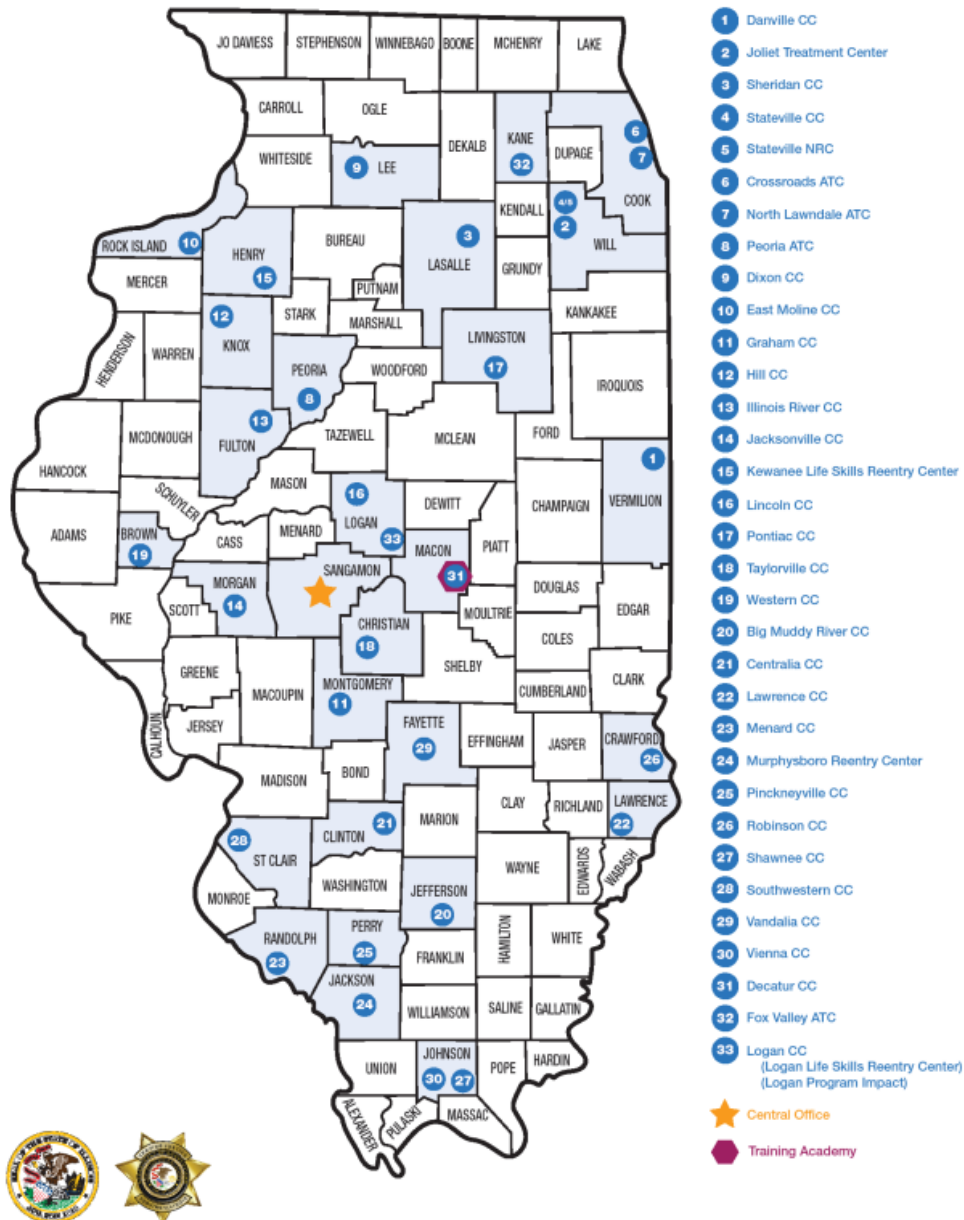
Table 1: List of Illinois Department of Corrections Facilities

Facility Name	Facility Type	Facility Location
Big Muddy River Correctional Center	Medium Security Adult Male	Ina, IL
Centralia Correctional Center	Medium Security Adult Male	Centralia, IL
<i>Crossroads Adult Transition Center</i>	<i>Transitional Security Male</i>	<i>Chicago, IL</i>
Danville Correctional Center	Medium Security Adult Male	Danville, IL
Decatur Correctional Center	Minimum Security Female	Decatur, IL
Dixon Correctional Center	Medium Security Adult Male	Dixon, IL
East Moline Correctional Center	Minimum Security Adult Male	East Moline, IL
<i>Fox Valley Adult Transition Center</i>	<i>Transitional Security Female</i>	<i>Aurora, IL</i>
Graham Correctional Center	Medium Security Adult Male	Hillsboro, IL
Hill Correctional Center	Medium Security Adult Male	Galesburg, IL
Illinois River Correctional Center	Medium Security Adult Male	Canton, IL
Jacksonville Correctional Center	Minimum Security Adult Male	Jacksonville, IL
Joliet Treatment Center	Multi-Security Treatment Facility	Joliet, IL
<i>Kewanee Life Skills Re-Entry Center</i>	<i>Life Skills Re-Entry Center</i>	<i>Kewanee, IL</i>
Lawrence Correctional Center	Maximum Security Adult Male	Sumner, IL
Lincoln Correctional Center	Minimum Security Adult Male	Lincoln, IL
Logan Correctional Center	Multi-level Security Female	Lincoln, IL
Menard Correctional Center	Maximum Security Adult Male	Menard, IL
Menard Medium Security Unit	Medium Security Adult Male	Menard, IL
<i>Murphysboro Life Skills Re-Entry Center</i>	<i>Life Skills Re-Entry Center</i>	<i>Murphysboro, IL</i>
<i>North Lawndale Adult Transition Center</i>	<i>Transitional Security Male</i>	<i>Chicago, IL</i>
<i>Peoria Adult Transition Center</i>	<i>Transitional Security Male</i>	<i>Peoria, IL</i>
Pinckneyville Correctional Center	Medium Security Adult Male	Pinckneyville, IL
Pontiac Correctional Center	Maximum Security Adult Male	Pontiac, IL
Pontiac Medium Security Unit	Medium Security Adult Male	Pontiac, IL
Robinson Correctional Center	Minimum Security Adult Male	Robinson, IL
Shawnee Correctional Center	Medium Security Adult Male	Vienna, IL
Sheridan Correctional Center	Medium Security Adult Male	Sheridan, IL
Southwestern Illinois Correctional Center	Minimum Security Adult Male	East St. Louis, IL
Stateville Correctional Center	Maximum Security Adult Male	Joliet, IL
Taylorville Correctional Center	Minimum Security Adult Male	Taylorville, IL
Vandalia Correctional Center	Minimum Security Adult Male	Vandalia, IL
Vienna Correctional Center	Minimum Security Adult Male	Vienna, IL
Western Illinois Correctional Center	Medium Security Adult Male	Mount Sterling, IL

**** Note:** *Facilities in italics are special facilities that are not technically considered “prisons” or “correctional centers” by IDOC. All other facilities listed are classified as state prisons. The following are former Illinois prisons that have since closed: Alton Military Prison, Camp Butler National Cemetery, Camp Butler (Chicago), Carthage Jail, Joliet Correctional Center, Knox County Jail, Mercer County Jail, Rock Island Arsenal, Tamms Correctional Center.*

Figure 1: Map of Illinois Department of Corrections Facilities (IDOC, 2023a)

Illinois Department of Corrections Facility District Map



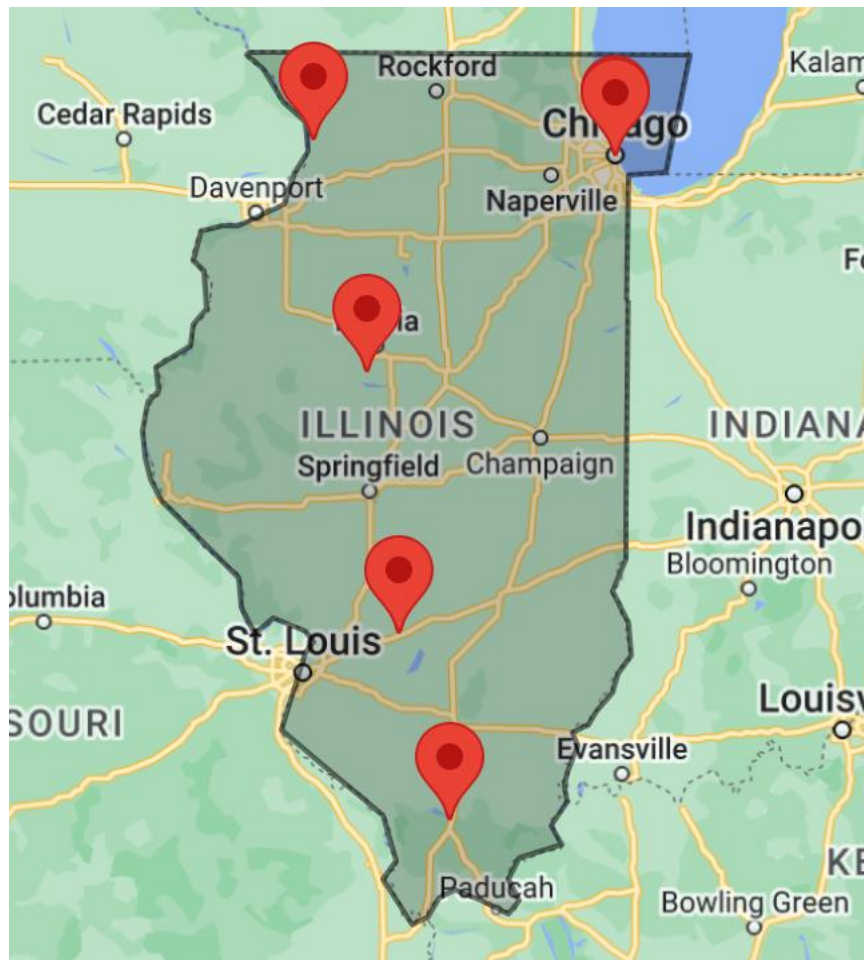


STATE OF ILLINOIS
ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS
Printed by the Authority of the State of Illinois ICDCI 23-0810

Table 2: List of Federal Prisons in Illinois

Facility Name	Facility Type	Facility Location
Chicago Metropolitan Correctional Center	Administrative Security Male/Female	Chicago, IL
Greenville Federal Correctional Institution	Medium Security Male/Female	Greenville, IL
Marion United States Prison	Medium Security Adult Male	Marion, IL
Pekin Federal Correctional Institution	Medium Security Male/Female	Pekin, IL
Thomson Federal Correctional Institution	Low Security Adult Male	Thomson, IL

Figure 2: Map of Federal Prisons in Illinois (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2024)



Appendix B: Interview Questions

*The following questions were included in my interview guide. Questions in **bold** were asked of all participants, while the non-bolded sub-questions were sometimes asked as probes. In some cases, I asked questions that are not listed here based on unique participant responses.*

Demographic/Background Information:

1. **Tell me about yourself and your work.**
 - a. How old are you?
 - b. What is your race/ethnicity?
 - c. What is your gender?
 - d. Where did you grow up?
 - i. What was it like to grow up there?
 - e. Where do you live now?
 - f. What do you do for a living?
 - g. What previous jobs have you had?

Incarceration/Criminal Legal System Experience:

2. **Talk to me about your journey from being incarcerated to your release.**
 - a. What was your experience like being incarcerated?
 - i. How many years were you incarcerated for?**
 - b. What was the hardest part about your reentry journey?
 - i. What was the best/most rewarding part about it?

Work Experience:

3. **How did you come to the job you work in now?**
 - a. What got you interested in criminal legal system-related work?
4. **Tell me about where you work.**
 - a. What do you like about your job?
 - i. What do you dislike about it?
 - b. What is the goal or mission of the organization you work at?
 - i. Does this goal/mission resonate with you? Why or why not?

5. **What does your day-to-day at work look like?**
 - a. Walk me through a typical day in your life...
 - b. What individuals/systems/entities do you typically interact with in your current role?
 - c. What kinds of things are you responsible for?
 - d. How are you evaluated/assessed at work?
 - i. What does it mean for you to be doing good work?
6. **What is the hardest part about your job?**
 - a. **What is the best part about it?**
 - b. **Do you feel that there are any ways in which you are prevented or hindered from engaging in the work that you do? How so?**
 - i. Are these barriers in some way related to your record or incarceration experience? Please explain...
7. **What motivates you to do the work that you do?**
 - a. Why did you start doing it?
 - b. Why do you continue to do this work today?
8. **What makes you well-suited to your current role?**
 - a. **Why are good at it?**
 - b. **What do you contribute to your role that the average person wouldn't/couldn't?**
 - c. **What skills or talents do you think you bring to the work that you do?**
 - d. **What kind of knowledge or information (from lived experience, some sort of education, etc.), if any, do you bring to or rely on while doing your work?**
 - e. [*If interviewee mentions trust or credibility:*]
 - i. Why does your clientele trust you?
 - ii. What makes you credible?
9. **In your view, to what extent does your experience with the criminal legal system and/or its aftereffects influence the work that you do today?**
 - a. **Is it important for people in your role to have experienced incarceration?**

- i. Why or why not?**
 - b. What do your co-workers with think/feel about your incarceration experience?
 - i. Are many of your co-workers formerly incarcerated as well?
 - ii. To your knowledge, what do your clients think/feel about it?
 - c. To what extent does it matter to your employer that you have a record and/or spent time incarcerated?
 - i. In your opinion, should it matter? Why or why not?
- 10. If you weren't working in a field related to your experience with the criminal legal system, what, if anything, would you want to do instead?**
- a. Why are you working in your current role and not the job you just mentioned?
- 11. What kind of support, if any, do you get from your employer as a formerly incarcerated person?**
- a. Do you feel supported at work? Why or why not?
 - b. Do you feel that because of your experience with the criminal legal system that you are in need or additional support at work? Why or why not?
 - c. What could your employer do to better support you and other folks who are formerly incarcerated?

Policy Implications:

- 12. If you could change one policy or common practice surrounding the work experiences or reentry experiences of formerly incarcerated folks, what would it be?**
- a. Are there any other policies or practices you would change? What are they?
- 13. Is there anything you would like to say to organizations or employers in criminal legal system-related fields about hiring people who have been incarcerated or who are system-impacted? If so, what would you say?**

Concluding Questions:

- 14. We've come to the end of the interview. Is there anything that I missed that you would like to tell me about?**
- a. Is there a question that I didn't ask that you were expecting me to or a question that you think I should be asking but I didn't?

Appendix C: Codebook

Human Capital

- Knowledge of the System/Streets
- Legal Skills
- Education/Mentorship-Based Skills
- Emotional Intelligence/People Skills
 - Communication Skills
- Lived Experience/Narrative Story

Social Capital

- Relationships
 - Bonding
 - Bridging
 - Linking
- Trust
- Credibility
 - LTO/Street Cred
- Genuineness
- Relatability
 - Modeling Success
- Understanding of Social Norms
 - Relevancy
- Resilience/Determination

Capital (Ism)

- Leadership/Corporate Hierarchies
- Tokenization
- Compensation/Benefits
- Non-Profit Industrial Complex

- Economy of Favors

Beyond Capital

- Trauma/Therapy
- Barriers
- Challenges
 - Work/Life Balance
 - Family, Friends + Romantic Partners
- Motivations
 - Books
 - Mentors
 - Other System-Impacted People
 - Family/Children
 - Desire to Give Back
- Aspirations/Goals

Demographic Data

- Age
- Race
- Gender
- Years Incarcerated
- Years Since Release

Policy Recommendations/Best Practices

- Removing Barriers
- Increasing Opportunities

Appendix D: Reading List

- *Man-Child in the Promise Land* by Claude Brown (Nasir)
- *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander (Oscar)
- *Blood in My Eye* by George Jackson (Oscar)
- *Theater of the Oppressed* by Augusto Boal (Lucille)
- *Untapped Talent* by Jeff Korzenik (Daniel)
- *Gracie: A Love Story* by George Burns (B)