June 2025

What Matters Most for Reentry:

Lessons from Transformational Prison Project

By B. ARNESON and BRIDGET CONLEY

World Peace Foundation

TRANSFORMATIONAL PRISON PROJECT

Contributors

The Research Team

The **Transformational Prison Project** was created by incarcerated men in 2013 and is now led by three formerly incarcerated men. Its mission is to encourage healing and accountability by facilitating restorative dialogue between those responsible for harm, those who have experienced harm, and the broader community. Staff members Noble Williams, Bobby Iacovelli, Kentel Weaver, Kevin Keo, and Zoe Young, with George Hutchins contributed to this project.

The **World Peace Foundation** was founded in 1910, and today, seeks to redefine peace through research, advocacy and engagement that creates pathways for nonviolent futures. It is affiliated with the Fletcher School of Global Affairs at Tufts University. Staff members B. Arneson and Bridget Conley worked on this project.

People interviewed:

Anonymous
Joseph (Joey) Bebo
Christina Bernbaum
Joshua (Hamza) Berrios
Jody Boykins
Jonathan Caban
Viengsamay Chaleunphong
Rome Chacon
Jovon Coward
David Delvalle
Tim Deal
Victor Davila
Ricardo Feliciano
Walid Hartani
Terri-Anne Henry
Jefferson Hudson
Angelia (Angie) Jefferson
Thomas Koonce
Patrick Lys
Sidney McGee
Daniel Pinckney
Jesus Pizarro
Michael Ruiz
Tari Richardson
Paul Robinson
Demetrias Salley
Jamal Spencer
Jean-Marie (Twin) Thebaud
Chiteara Thomas
Blandine Williams

Acknowledgements

This report would not have been possible without the generous time, trust, and insight offered by the people who agreed to be interviewed and share their reentry stories, helping us understand the importance of the Transformational Prison Project's restorative and peer-led approach to reentry. We are deeply grateful for your willingness to share your experiences, reflections, and hopes with honesty and vulnerability. The stories, wisdom, and critical perspectives you shared illuminated the complexities of reentry, accountability, healing, and systemic harm in ways no statistics ever could. We recognize the emotional labor involved in revisiting personal experiences, and we hold deep respect for the courage it takes to do so in service of broader change. Thank you for allowing us to learn from you, and for the work you continue to do in building more just, compassionate communities.

TPP would like to thank their community, partners, and supporters.

WPF would like to thank two research assistants who contributed to the report, Shaheed Abdullah and Ingrid Lundberg. Shaheed provided thoughtful contributions to the initial literature review that informed this report. His research provided a strong foundation for our inquiry and helped shape the direction of our analysis. In addition, Shaheed generously shared insights grounded in his lived experience, which deepened our understanding and enriched the perspectives reflected throughout this work. We also extend our gratitude to Ingrid for her research on restorative justice organizations across Massachusetts, which contributed to the development of this report.

Both organizations would like to express gratitude to our colleagues who were not directly involved as part of the research team, but whose labor, ideas and practices always make our work better. For WPF, this includes Lisa Avery, Alex de Waal, and Emily Ruhm; for TPP, this includes Armand Coleman, Stacia Silva, Sarah Loughlin, Bianca "B" Santana, Taylor Kirkwood, and Hamza Berrios.

We are extremely grateful to outsider readers for their thoughtful and constructive feedback on an earlier draft, including Catherine Besteman, Linda Small, Erin Kelly, Anjuli Fahlberg, and Erika Gebo. We particularly want to thank Elaine Donnelly, Director of the Tisch College Community Research Center at Tufts University, for her careful review of the draft and steadfast support and guidance for the project.

Tufts UNIVERSITY | Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life

This project is supported by the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University. Tisch College prepares students for a lifetime of engagement in civic and democratic life, studies civic life and its intersections with public and private institutions, and promotes practices that strengthen civic life in the United States and around the world.

Published June 2025 by World Peace Foundation at The Fletcher School, Tufts University

World Peace Foundation
114 Curtis Street
Somerville, MA 02144
worldpeacefoundation.org

Table of Contents

Part 1: Introduction **1**

Part 2: Context: Restorative justice, the evolution of an organization, and a research challenge **4**

A. TPP at the Beginning 4
B. Restorative Justice 5
C. TPP Outside the Prison 6
D. The Research Challenge: Assessing the impact of informal reentry support 8

Part 3: Methodology **10**

A. Participatory Action Research and Restorative Justice 13
B. Overview and Key Data Points from the Thirty Individuals We Interviewed 15

Part 4: What Helps Someone Achieve Successful Reentry Following Incarceration? **15**

A. Defining Key Terms: "Success" and "reentry" 15
    i. What is success? 15
    ii. What is reentry? 18
B. What Hurdles and Supports impact Someone's Success? 21
    i. Material and practical issues 23
    ii. Social and emotional issues 24
    iii. Where does help come from? 25
    iv. How TPP provides support 27
C. How Does Lived Experience Matter to You? 29
D. What Role Does Restorative Justice Play in Your Reentry Process? 33
    i. Defining restorative justice 33
    ii. Taking responsibility for harm 34
    iii. Self-healing 35
    iv. Healing community 36
    v. A way of life 37
    vi. RJ as reentry: tensions and transformation 38

Part 5: Conclusion: The relevance of this research **40**

Part 6: Policy Recommendations **42**

Appendix A, Interview Script **43**

Part 1

Introduction

This report is the outgrowth of a collaboration between the **Transformational Prison Project** (TPP) and **World Peace Foundation** (WPF), that sought to assess the impact of TPP's informal supports to people experiencing reentry. TPP was created by incarcerated men inside MCI-Norfolk, as a restorative justice (RJ) initiative to support men to recognize the harms they have experienced, take responsibility for the harms they have caused, and work to repair community relationships. In 2019, TPP began to transition to an organization outside prison led by formerly incarcerated men with the goal of continuing their RJ work to end cycles of incarceration. Today, they advance this goal through formal programs including RJ circles, mentoring, and a digital literacy course, offered to three target audiences: currently incarcerated youth and adults, people who are professionals or students within key sectors that influence the criminal justice system, and people experiencing reentry.

For people in reentry, TPP also provides informal or unstructured support, including addressing immediate needs as someone gets out, mentoring about how to access material and practical resources from service-providing organizations, offering guidance on how to manage probation and parole requirements, providing social and emotional support, and engaging in community-building activities. They are also available as needed, only a call away regardless of the day or time. To assess the impact of these informal supports, TPP and WPF invited 30 people who received support from TPP to be interviewed for reentry oral histories that help us understand the role TPP played within their reentry journeys.

The findings presented below reflect the complex, non-linear nature of reentry as described by individuals navigating life after incarceration. Rather than a clearly defined process with a beginning, middle, and end, reentry emerges as an ongoing negotiation between structural barriers, personal transformation, and community connection. People interviewed for this study shared experiences that highlight not only practical challenges—such as securing housing, employment, and identification—but also the deeper emotional, mental, and social dimensions that shape their lives in reentry.

The insights underscore the transformative potential of RJ practices that contribute to self-understanding, accountability, and repairing relationships as someone is (re)building a life after incarceration. The research also points to the impact of TPP's work as a peer-led, community-based organization. The expertise TPP gained through their own reentry experiences enables them to provide timely, trusted, and personalized guidance for people starting on reentry. Through TPP, people access not just services, but understanding,

meaningful friendships, healing spaces, and a sense of belonging that endures throughout their journeys into reentry. The centrality of community-building in TPP's restorative approach invites people to see themselves not only as needing support, but also capable of giving it to others. Community, in this sense, is rooted in reciprocity and recognition of one's own value.

The following analysis introduces RJ through the lens of TPP's evolution as an organization and outlines the research challenge of assessing the impact of their informal reentry support. It then explains the methodology of participatory action research (PAR) that guided the project. The next section addresses findings from the interviews related to what helps someone achieve successful reentry following incarceration, and definitions of "success" and "reentry." For "success," we adopt TPP's definition, as it is the measure they set for evaluating their programs. For "reentry" we asked people we interviewed to define the term, and they offered nuanced and varied measures of what it is, including when it begins and ends. The robust definition given by people who experienced reentry becomes the starting point for understanding how and why TPP's informal supports are so impactful.

We provide in-depth analysis of key themes from the interviews, focusing on the obstacles, where people find help, and how TPP supported them. We examine responses to questions about whether receiving support from someone with lived experience of reentry was important, an inquiry that received a resoundingly positive response from all 30 interviewees, and explore how and why lived experience matters. Finally, we share what people told us about the significance of RJ practices, which all 30 people interviewed engaged with through TPP, in shaping their reentry experiences.

The report concludes with **four key takeaways**.

1. *Reentry is not composed of a clearly defined beginning, middle or end. Rather, it means learning to live – for many people we spoke with, for the remainder of their lives – in a grey zone of challenges and opportunities. Reentry is life after incarceration.*

2. *Commonly known barriers to reentry (getting an ID, housing, employment, and family reintegration) were cited as challenges. But equally important, people highlighted mental, emotional, and social factors that impact how they navigate life in reentry. People need to feel supported, heard, and cared for in order to overcome hurdles, envision and pursue new possibilities, and face the often-daunting challenges of reentry with the confidence that their community understands and supports them.*

3 *When support comes from someone who has experienced a reentry process, it enables more honest and direct communication, provides a relatable model for success, lends greater credibility to advice, and creates a more humanizing connection that better situates individuals for success.*

4 *Restorative justice plays four primary roles: provides a forum for meaningful accountability for harms perpetrated, helps people heal from past harms, serves as a springboard for healing relationships with community, and, for many, becomes a daily practice. In the context of reentry, RJ helps people see themselves as valuable contributors to their communities and empowers them to choose communities that appreciate and support them.*

We conclude by arguing that TPP's informal support for people in reentry is successful, consistently integrating restorative and community-building approaches across all their interactions. The staff of TPP present models of success, while providing practical guidance and social-emotional tools that empower their program participants to envision and achieve success in their own lives. Throughout, TPP creates opportunities for community-building by embracing individuals as valued members, inviting them to events, encouraging volunteerism with other organizations, and inspiring them to realize their potential as leaders in community repair.

Part 2

Context: Restorative justice, the evolution of an organization, and a research challenge

A. TPP at the Beginning

TPP was born out of a crisis—a violent incident in 2010 inside MCI-Norfolk, a medium security prison in Massachusetts— that left a young man with life-threatening injuries. In the aftermath, the prison was taut with tension and simmering grievances.[1] Influenced by a documentary about Sonya Shah's work at California's largest prison, San Quentin,[2] men at Norfolk began to consider how they could develop RJ practices. As Noble Williams, Interim Executive Director of TPP, explains:

> The main goal was to make the prison safe. To do that, we had to learn how to communicate in a healthy way. But before we could get there, we needed to understand why our communication had become so negative in the first place—and that reason was trauma. Once we understood the trauma, the goal shifted to identifying the root causes that led us down the paths we were on.

Violence decreased in the prison and the number of participants in the RJ activities grew.[3] They began formalizing programs by holding RJ circles that addressed both the harms people had experienced and those they had caused, along with eight-week reading groups that introduced participants to restorative principles and practices. Building on growing interest and success, they eventually hosted large-scale retreats in collaboration with volunteers from outside the prison. They facilitated meetings with victim surrogates[4]—people

1 Interview with Nobel Williams, June 3, 2025; see also Dina Kraft, "By Talking, Inmates and Victims Make Things 'More Right,'" *New York Times*, July 5, 2014.

2 "Sonya Shah," *Yerba Buena Center for the Arts*, https://ybca.org/artist/sonya-shah/ (accessed June 3, 2025).

3 Interview with Nobel Williams, June 3, 2025.

4 Survivor-led organizations include Ladies Involved in Putting a Stop to Inner-City Killing (LIPSTICK), the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute, and Legacy Lives On. They are referred to as "surrogates" because these individuals were not directly harmed by the men incarcerated at MCI-Norfolk; Massachusetts law prohibits direct

who are not the direct survivors/victims of harms perpetrated by men at Norfolk, but who experienced a similar harm themselves or were the loved one of a victim/survivor. For many men at Norfolk, these encounters were transformative, changing the depth of their empathy for victims, and their ability to understand how their actions harmed individuals and entire communities. What began as an effort to improve communication and safety within the prison evolved into a regular practice for many men at Norfolk—supporting them in confronting their trauma, taking accountability for the harm they had caused, and working to repair relationships within the community.

B. Restorative Justice

RJ a form of accountability rooted in Indigenous practices[5] that emphasizes rehabilitation, reconciliation, and healing over punishment. It can take many forms, and is generally premised on, as Danielle Sered has written: "(1) acknowledging responsibility for one's actions; (2) acknowledging the impact of one's actions on others; (3) expressing genuine remorse; (4) taking action to repair the harm to the degree possible [...]; and (5) no longer committing the harm."[6]

RJ practices have traditionally centered around three primary practices, each with distinct goals[7]:

- **Victim-offender dialogue/conferences** offer a space for the person harmed to express their feelings and needs, and for the responsible party to acknowledge the harm and take accountability.
- **Family group conferences** bring together a broader support network for both the person harmed and the responsible party. These are often used in cases involving families to develop plans that protect children and promote their well-being.
- **RJ Circles**—TPP's area of expertise—involve gathering participants in a circle where each person speaks one at a time, often using a talking piece. These circles are designed as a "safe container," where participants honor a shared agreement

contact between survivors/victims and those who caused them harm.

5 The Māori in New Zealand, Native American communities, and African tribal societies.

6 Danielle Sered, *Until We Reckon* (New York: The New Press, 2019), 96. See also David O'Mahony and Jonathan Doak, *Reimagining Restorative Justice: Agency and Accountability in the Criminal Process* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2017), https://doi.org/10.5040/9781509901074; Gordon Bazemore and Shadd Maruna, "Restorative Justice in the Reentry Context: Building New Theory and Expanding the Evidence Base," *Victims & Offenders* 4, no. 4 (2009): 375–84, https://doi.org/10.1080/15564880903227446; Alana Saulnier and Diane Sivasubramaniam, "Restorative Justice: Underlying Mechanisms and Future Directions," *New Criminal Law Review* 18, no. 4 (2015): 510–36, https://doi.org/10.1525/nclr.2015.18.4.510.

7 "Restorative Justice Practices and Models," Restorative Justice Colorado, accessed June 7, 2025, https://rj-colorado.org/restorative-justice-defined/practices-and-models/.

of confidentiality and respect. Circles aim to build trust, share personal stories, acknowledge harm, and foster collective healing and decision-making. They can be used preventatively, in response to harm, or to support reintegration following incarceration or social exclusion. Key elements include a grounding breathing exercise, check-in, guiding questions, check-out, and a concluding breathing exercise.

These processes may take place formally or informally, and either within, parallel to or completely outside the criminal justice system. In some jurisdictions, diversion programs allow individuals charged with a crime to avoid prosecution by participating in a RJ process. While research has found that RJ reduces recidivism[8], it is better understood, as researchers Gordon Bazemore and Shadd Maruna write, on its own terms, "as a different way of 'doing justice' by repairing the harm caused by crime in a nonadversarial process that invites offenders to 'take responsibility' rather than simply take their punishment."[9]

C. TPP Outside the Prison

Starting in 2019, leaders within TPP began to leave the prison and envision a new phase of the work. Today, TPP is led by three formerly incarcerated individuals who participated in RJ programming while at MCI-Norfolk, and seven of the organization's eleven employees are formerly incarcerated.

TPP's activities target three broad audiences. First, they work with professionals and students in university programs related to criminal justice, law, social work, and healthcare, to educate them about RJ principles and the trauma caused by carceral systems. For this group, TPP runs circles and staff have co-taught or given guest lectures in courses at, for example, Columbia University, MIT, Northeastern University, and Harvard University.

Second, TPP facilitates RJ circles and/or reading groups within carceral institutions. They have offered RJ circles through the Suffolk County Court's Roxbury CHOICE Program, which serves emerging adults on probation. They are working with the Massachusetts Department of Youth Services (DYS), where they currently operate across two regions, three facilities, and six units, serving both boys and girls. Their weekly programming includes RJ circles, and individualized

8 James Bonta, Suzanne Wallace-Capretta, Jenifer Rooney, and Kevin Mackanoy, (2002). An outcome evaluation of a restorative justice alternative to incarceration. *Contemporary Justice Review*, 5, 319–338; Jeff Latimer, Craig Dowden, and Danielle Muise (2005). The effectiveness of restorative justice practices: A meta-analysis. T*he Prison Journal*, 85, 127–144; William Nugent, Mona Williams, and Mark S. Umbreit. (2003). Participation in victim-offender mediation and the prevalence of subsequent delinquent behavior: A meta-analysis. *Utah Law Review*, 1, 137–167.

9 Gordon Bazemore and Shadd Maruna, "Restorative Justice in the Reentry Context: Building New Theory and Expanding the Evidence Base," *Victims & Offenders* 4, no. 4 (2009): 375–84, 376.

mentorship and guidance for young people in detention centers. TPP also leads RJ circles and 8- to 12-week reading groups at the South Bay House of Corrections for incarcerated men and women.

Starting in 2024, TPP, in partnership with Legacy Lives On, a nonprofit ministry that offers ongoing support to families affected by homicide and street violence, was contracted to provide RJ services as part of a pilot diversion program[10] initiated in the Suffolk Superior Court, Roxbury Municipal Court, Plymouth Superior Court and Brockton District Court. This pilot program became possible following Massachusetts' major criminal justice reform legislation passed in 2018.[11] The legislation empowered the state's Supreme Judicial Court to establish a Committee on Restorative Justice[12] to develop, implement, and oversee pilot programs to incorporate RJ practices in selected criminal cases in the Massachusetts courts. The pilot program requires that the prosecutor, person harmed, and responsible party agree to RJ. As of June 1, 2025, only one individual had been referred to TPP through this program.

Additionally, TPP writes letters of support for parole or probation for people they worked while incarcerated, attesting (when they feel confident that they can) to a participant's personal growth and commitment to accountability. TPP staff attend parole hearings and bring other community members with them to support the person asking for parole and demonstrate that they will be welcomed home.

Third, TPP provides support to people experiencing reentry. Initially, their reentry efforts focused on individuals who had participated in RJ practices while incarcerated at MCI-Norfolk, but over time, the scope of referrals expanded to include: individuals from other Massachusetts Department of Correction (MDOC) prisons who have engaged in RJ practices during incarceration; people identified as "transformational youth," individuals incarcerated as children or emerging adults (up to age 21), and are now on lifetime parole; and people who participated in their programs while incarcerated (i.e., DYS and South Bay Correctional Center).

This project focuses on TPP's reentry support.

10 "Massachusetts Trial Court – Restorative Justice Pilot Program," accessed June 10, 2025, https://www.mass.gov/doc/massachusetts-trial-court-restorative-justice-pilot-program/download.

11 Representative Jamie Eldridge with others introduced restorative justice legislation every year, starting in the 2011 – 2012 session; it finally passed as part of the 2018 criminal justice reform package.

12 Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, "Supreme Judicial Court Committee on Restorative Justice," accessed June 10, 2025, https://www.mass.gov/info-details/supreme-judicial-court-committee-on-restorative-justice.

D. The Research Challenge: Assessing the impact of informal reentry support

The precise forms of reentry support that TPP offers have varied over time, including formal programs, like a paid fellowship program and access to justice-informed clinical mental health support and social workers. Both these programs relied heavily on short-term grants and were financially difficult to sustain. Other programs, like RJ circles and a digital literacy course (offered in partnership with Maverick Landing Community Services),[13] have been offered more consistently since 2020. But perhaps their most important contribution is the informal support they provide for people in reentry. This includes the below supports, all of which are informed by TPP staff's own experiences in reentry and grounded in a restorative approach that centers on addressing harm and repairing community relationships:

- **Immediate support** as someone leaves a prison or jail, support may include buying clothing, taking them out to eat, helping them navigate transportation and appointments, and assisting them in managing the overwhelming emotional impact of the first hours and days outside a prison.
- **Mentorship** focused on helping people access programs offered by other organizations that best fit their specific reentry needs, and wherever possible, provide stipends. Reentry needs are specific to individuals, and not all organizations are equally equipped to support everyone. TPP guides individuals toward the organizations best suited to meet their distinct needs.
- **Community-building activities**, including making sure that people are invited to attend events and activities sponsored by other organizations, including volunteering to help staff events or participate in fundraising efforts. Examples include partner-led initiatives like the Back-to-School Backpack Giveaways and the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute Mothers' Walk for Peace. TPP also hosts social events, like nature walks, kayaking, holiday events, and biannual food distributions for individuals reentering and the wider community. The goal of these events is both to support individuals in reentry and to create opportunities for them to support others.
- **Guidance** on managing relationships with parole or probation officers and navigating restrictions and reporting requirements.
- **On-demand**, sometimes 24-hour and seven days a week, social and emotional support for individuals navigating the reentry process.

13 Initially, this work was funded through a grant secured by Maverick Landing. Currently, TPP independently fundraises to sustain the program. Coordination of the classes is shared between Maverick Landing and TPP, with TPP also providing stipends to participants in recognition of their time and engagement. The intention was to create an inclusive space open to all, where, even if only temporarily, individuals were free from engaging in harmful behaviors, such as selling drugs, inflicting harm on others, or carrying weapons, thus fostering a moment of safety and nonviolence.

TPP has program evaluation data from people who participated in their formal programs, but they ran into a challenge when it came to documenting these informal supports and the overall impact their work has on people in reentry.

This project aimed to assist TPP with assessing the impact of their approach and informal support provided to people in reentry.

Part 3

Methodology

This research project adopted a participatory action research (PAR) approach, grounded in RJ practices, and included conducting 30 oral history interviews with formerly incarcerated people (over age 18) who engaged with TPP as part of their reentry process.

A. Participatory Action Research and Restorative Justice

A PAR approach to research rejects the assumption that expertise belongs to researchers with scholarly credentials, and that communities of directly impacted people are mere sources of raw data. Instead, PAR guides us to recognize that knowledge production is a shared endeavor where all contributors to a project bring distinct and equally valued insights, sets of skills and analytical frameworks.[14] PAR requires a reflective process from conception through dissemination, to assess the positionality of each researcher who is involved in a project, and how their assumptions, experiences, and knowledge shape their contributions. PAR also values the production of knowledge that moves beyond critical analysis to a change agenda.

Reflecting this commitment, this project adopted a PAR approach from its earliest stages through dissemination. WPF and TPP began collaborating on research starting in 2022, and in February - March 2024, both members of the WPF team for this project underwent a RJ training with TPP. The research question for this project -- seeking to assess the impact of TPP's informal assistance for people in reentry -- was developed in conversation during the process of crafting the initial grant proposal (April 2024). After receiving the grant, it was further refined in two focused workshops with members of the research team from TPP (Noble Williams, Bobby Iacovelli, Kentel Weaver, Kevin Keo, and Zoe Young, with George Hutchins) and WPF (B. Arneson and Bridget Conley). Among the research team, four TPP members were formerly incarcerated, and one WPF member has experienced the incarceration of several immediate family members.

Once the project goal was established, the research team co-developed the interview script and protocols [see Appendix A, Interview Script], including how RJ practices would guide the interviews.

14 Fiona Cornish et al., "Participatory Action Research," *Nature Reviews Methods Primers* 3, no. 34 (2023): 1–14; Lori M. Vaughn and Fernande Jacquez, "Participatory Research Methods – Choice Points in the Research Process," *Journal of Participatory Research Methods* 1, no. 1 (2020), https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.13244.

The foundation of RJ provided a shared framework of trust and accountability, along with a common vocabulary and set of practices for the research team. Because all of TPP's programs are rooted in a restorative approach—and all interviewees had participated in these programs—this shared framework also extended to those being interviewed. The TPP part of the team led on developing protocols for the inclusion of RJ practices into the interviews. All interviews began with a grounding (breathing exercise), check-in and icebreaker. The interviewers began by explaining why the research was personally important to them, to highlight the interviewers' positionality vis-à-vis the research and to bolster transparency. Each interview ended with a check-out and breathing exercise. The interviewers also invited people to reflect on the interview process and followed up with them in the days afterward to check on how they were doing. While some formality was unavoidable—the interviews followed a script, with one primary interviewer and one respondent (though interviewees did ask questions that we answered)—the team collaborated to establish protocols that fostered a familiar, conversational, and humanizing space for reflection, drawing on RJ practices.

People invited to the interview process were identified by TPP members of the research team, with the goal of diversifying the balance of formal and informal programs that interviewees participated in, how much time had passed since they initially engaged with TPP, and their age, race/ethnicity, and gender. This is a purposive sample, where interviewees are identified by researchers based on their knowledge, experience, availability and willingness to participate in research.[15] Once someone agreed to be interviewed, the WPF team members followed up to schedule and conduct the interviews.

Interviews lasted between one and two hours and were conducted either in person—at a location chosen by the interviewee or via Zoom. Tari, who was interviewed at WPF's offices on Tufts University campus, enjoyed the opportunity, stating, "it's dope to be on Tufts University ground, and having a real-life conversation, because most institutions got nothing against the school of hard knocks, but it's not the norm to talk about what we're talking about." The interviews did collect some basic "data points" about people, but primarily consisted of open-ended questions inviting reflections on their reentry process, the hurdles they faced, how RJ impacted their journey, and specifically the role TPP played. The people interviewed were each paid $150, a practice consistent with TPP's commitment to offer stipends whenever possible.

15 Lawrence A. Palinkas et al., "Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research," *Administration and Policy in Mental Health* 42, no. 5 (2015): 533–44. The article's authors argue that purposive sampling strengthens research findings when combined with other methodologies. We agree and believe this project offers valuable insights for future large-scale research on the impact of restorative justice and peer-led reentry support. However, expanding research efforts would first depend on the availability of more reentry programs that implement these approaches.

Each interviewee was asked if they wanted to be identified by name or have their comments anonymized. Only one person, who had an open legal case, asked that we protect their identity. Aside from this one person, all names in the report are the person's real name. People told us that they wanted their thoughts on and analysis of reentry to be attributed to them.

The research team was encouraged when, at the end of each interview, we asked how they felt, and received no negative responses. Several people told us that they were excited to be part of a research project, and people shared that they felt: valued, grateful, emotional but relieved, trusting, relaxed, reflective, connected, inspired, and happy to be asked about the positive things they are doing today.

Jonathan, who had been out for several years, said the interview provided an occasion for him to reflect on his path: "I'm actually glad to have had this conversation, because it's something I believe that I needed. It's been a while since I've spoken about my incarceration and everything I've gone through." Viengsamay told us that the interview reinvigorated him in his current work, helping at risk young people in Lowell, MA: "You're my energizer for today, this interview is going to definitely help me move throughout my whole day." A response that was particularly important to the research team came from Daniel, who said that, "I feel like my trauma was valued. [...] My perspective on how I went through all this stuff was valued, and if it pans out that it helps somebody else, then I'm grateful that everything I went through was for something of value and for research that is going to help other people."

Interviews were transcribed and the initial analysis was led by the WPF portion of the team, identifying themes across responses (using an approach called 'grounded theory,' which begins with data collection combined with ongoing analysis to develop or inform theory, rather than pre-existing theories[16]). These initial findings were discussed and refined in a workshop with the entire research team.

The study has several limitations. The open-ended nature of our questions means that we did not direct people's replies in a way that would ensure that everyone addressed the same issues. For example, instead of asking everyone directly about their housing situation post-release, we asked about the hurdles they experienced and allowed them to decide which challenges were most important to discuss. Given the small number of people interviewed, we cannot extrapolate larger trends, and the research team did not attempt to uniformly assess correlations between people's responses and factors like their race, gender, time

16 Barney G. Glaser, "Conceptualization: On Theory and Theorizing Using Grounded Theory," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 1, no. 2 (2002): 23–38; Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1967).

incarcerated, or time since they began reentry. There are, however, a few places these factors were self-evidently important in someone's response and are noted in the research findings.

Additionally, our use of a purposive sample along with the small study group size, limits the generalizability of the results. The study also relies on self-reported data, which could be influenced by recall bias, as people reflected on their past experiences, potentially shaping their memories based on current perceptions or emotions. Further, there may be a social desirability bias, given that the people we interviewed knew their stories would be shared with TPP and published in a report.

B. Overview and Key Data Points from the Thirty Individuals We Interviewed

The majority of people interviewed (at least 21) were incarcerated in Massachusetts state prisons; however, one individual had been held in a federal prison, while several others experienced detention in jails (pre-trial) or Houses of Correction, which typically accommodate individuals sentenced to terms of 2.5 years or less per offense. Our numbers are imprecise as we did not directly ask about where they served time, but the information came up in conversation. One person had been incarcerated out of state before being moved to a prison in Massachusetts.

The people represented a range of stages in the reentry process; some had released from prison only weeks or months prior to the interview, while others had been reintegrating into society for several years. The duration of time spent incarcerated among participants also varied significantly, with the shortest period being 3 months and the longest being 52 years. The average time spent incarcerated was 206.66 months, or 17.22 years. Altogether, the total time served by everyone we interviewed amounts to roughly 518 years and 9 months. People ranged in age from 20 to 77 years, with an average age of 41.8 years. Six people were women, and 24 were men.[17]

The group of people interviewed represented a diverse array of racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds. Fifteen identified at African American/Black (including mixed Black identities), 8 as Latino/Hispanic, 4 as White, 1 as Cape Verdean, 1 as Laotian/Asian, and 1 as North African. As a whole, the group underrepresented white people and overrepresents Black people, relative to the overall population of incarcerated people in Massachusetts' prisons.[18]

17 TPP's programs on the outside built on their work inside, which was only in men's prisons. They have since expanded and have women on the staff and offer more programming that includes girls and women as well.

18 The Massachusetts Department of describes its population as: White (37%), Black (30%), Hispanic (29%),

In terms of religious affiliation, 9 people identified as Christian, 8 as spiritual, 7 as either having no religion or being agnostic, 2 as Muslim, 2 as Buddhist, 1 as adhering to the philosophy of the Nation of the Gods and Earths, and 1 as following a belief system labeled "Love."

At the time of the interview, 11 people were on lifetime parole, 4 were on parole supervision with the possibility of eventual termination, 3 were on probation, and 2 were under both probation and parole. Six people had no legal supervision, while three had unspecified legal statuses (some replied simply, "yes" to whether or not they were on probation, parole, or both, but did not further clarify). One person still had charges pending. Probation allows someone to serve their time in community instead of incarceration, and parole is when someone is released from incarceration before serving their entire sentence. In both cases, the person is supervised by a parole or probation officer and must abide by other terms of their release. The high proportion of people on lifetime parole may partially explains some of the responses related to when reentry ends (see Part 4, A, ii).

Asian or Pacific Islanders (1.7%), Unknown (.8%) and American Indian or Native Alaskan (.6%). Massachusetts Department of Correction, *Prison Population Trends Report, Calendar Year 2024* (2024), 17, accessed June 10, 2025, https://www.mass.gov/doc/prison-population-trends-2024/download.

Part 4

What Helps Someone Achieve Successful Reentry Following Incarceration?

A. Defining Key Terms: "success" and "reentry"

In the majority of policy discussions and scholarly literature, the concept of "successful reentry" is limited by two factors: the reduction of "success" to a binary outcome, typically measured solely by recidivism (i.e., whether an individual returns to incarceration); and second, a limited exploration of what constitutes "reentry." Here, we briefly explore these key terms before discussing the definition of success that guides this study and TPP's work. We then turn to the perspectives of our interviewees to define what reentry means to them. Their answers provide insight into how reentry is experienced and lay the foundation for understanding the value of restorative, peer-led support.

i. What is success?

The most widely used metric for "reentry success" is actually a measure of failure: recidivism. Recidivism rates nationwide have been recorded as high as 83% over 9 years following release.[19] In Massachusetts, the most recent report on recidivism, published in 2019, recorded a three-year recidivism rate of 26% for individuals released from state prisons, representing a decrease from 29% in 2018.[20] Over the same period, the rate dropped even further for women, from 28% to 23%.[21] It is important to note that the majority of people (64%) who are released from Massachusetts prisons do so through parole, with 34% finishing their sentences entirely; and in 2022, the latest year for which data is available, 1,091 people were released from Houses of Correction through parole.[22]

19 Matthew Alper, Matthew R. Durose, and Joshua Markman, "2018 Update on Prisoner Recidivism: A 9-Year Follow-up Period (2005–2014)," U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, May 2018, accessed June 10, 2025, https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/18upr9yfup0514.pdf.

20 Executive Office of Public Safety and Security, *Massachusetts Department of Correction Three-Year Recidivism Rates: 2019 Release Cohort* (August 2024), 2, accessed June 10, 2025, https://www.mass.gov/doc/three-year-recidivism-rates-2019-release-cohort/download.

21 *Ibid.*

22 Massachusetts Parole Board, 2023 Annual Report (July 2024). 33, accessed June 12, 2025, https://www.mass.gov/doc/2023-annual-report-2/download.

Many complications hide within this deceptively straightforward idea of "recidivism."[23] In the first instance, people who are on probation or parole may face (re)incarceration for acts that are not criminalized for the general public. Any violation of parole or probation conditions can result in reincarceration, such as returning home late after curfew, missing or being late for appointments, or any police encounter, regardless of whether the accusations are substantiated or even if the police ultimately clear the individual of wrongdoing. Additionally, recidivism rates track instances of returns to incarceration, not individual people – hence, if there are a few people who are really struggling and are reincarcerated multiple times, their experiences can skew the overall numbers.[24]

Second, the binary nature of recidivism fails to capture positive change that might be happening even if one is re-incarcerated. Recognizing this limitation, researchers have developed a different measure: *desistance from criminal activity*.[25] Desistance aims to capture a process through which people who previously engaged in criminal acts change these behaviors.[26] According to Kristofer Bret Bucklen, "desistance" can be measured in terms of deceleration (decreased frequency), de-escalation (reduced seriousness) and cessation (complete ending).[27] Guided by this concept, researchers have found that desistance from crime frequently occurs outside the criminal justice system, primarily within a supportive community environment.[28]

As a concept, "desistance" is a more nuanced measure than is recidivism, but it is not without problems. It overemphasizes personal agency and is a negative measure of success (halting criminalized behaviors). A sobering study by Susan Sered, which followed 47 women released

23 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *The Limits of Recidivism: Measuring Success After Prison* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2022), https://doi.org/10.17226/26459.

24 Shawn Bushway and Michael Dever, "The Myth That Most People Recidivate," *The Criminologist* 51, no. 2 (2025): 1–7.

25 Kristofer Bret Bucklin, Desistance-Focused Criminal Justice Practice (Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, 2021), 3, https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/301501.pdf; Joan Petersilia, *What Works in Prisoner Reentry? Reviewing and Questioning the Evidence* (Los Angeles: UCLA School of Public Policy and Social Research, 2004); Marina M. Trotter and Christine Tosh, "Narratives of Desistance: Exploring the Role of Identity," *Probation Journal* 52, no. 4 (2005): 401–17; Matthew A. Koschmann and Bryan L. Peterson, "Communication Infrastructure in an Institutionalized Community Reentry Program: A Case Study of Project Safe Release," *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 41, no. 2 (2013): 128–47.

26 Kristofer Bret Bucklin, *Desistance-Focused Criminal Justice Practice* (Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, 2021), 3, https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/301501.pdf.

27 *Ibid.*

28 Stephen Farrall, "Why Do People Stop Offending?" *Scottish Journal of Criminal Justice Studies* 1, no. 1 (1995): 51–59; Joan Petersilia, *What Works in Prisoner Reentry? Reviewing and Questioning the Evidence* (Los Angeles: UCLA School of Public Policy and Social Research, 2004); Marina M. Trotter and Christine Tosh, "Narratives of Desistance: Exploring the Role of Identity," *Probation Journal* 52, no. 4 (2005): 401–17; Matthew A. Koschmann and Bryan L. Peterson, "Communication Infrastructure in an Institutionalized Community Reentry Program: A Case Study of Project Safe Release," *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 41, no. 2 (2013): 128–47.

from prison in 2007 and 2008 into the Boston area over a ten-year period, highlights these limitations. She found that all the women "self-medicated" with legal or illegal substances.[29] Whether deemed a "persister" (picked up new charges or engaged in criminal activities) or "desister" (no new charges)[30] from criminal activities, was less about individual choices on self-improvement than about who could avoid having their coping strategies exposed to surveillance. She writes:

> ...the older recidivism literature did not sufficiently recognize diverse forms of agency exercised by prisoners and former prisoners, the more recent desistance literature tends to err in the opposite direction, attributing unrealistically high levels of agency to individuals whose agency is limited by structural inequalities, discriminatory laws, poverty, homelessness, outstanding warrants, parole supervision, criminal records, poor health, and substance abuse.[31]

Success from a restorative perspective, as embraced by TPP, includes some ideas within desistance, but goes further. It focuses on whether someone embarks on a journey to face the harms they have experienced and the harms they have caused, actively working to repair relationships and to improve their community. It is important to emphasize that this definition of success does not define an end point – a goal that is definitively achieved and put to rest – it is an open-ended practice. As TPP's Noble Williams, states: "success is a continuation of the practice, growing and learning about yourself and living a better, restorative life. RJ is a practice."[32] For Bobby Iacoviello, TPP's Director of Community Outreach, success must be understood in relation to where individuals are in their journey. He explains that sometimes success simply means choosing to spend a few hours in a restorative space rather than engaging in harmful behaviors (e.g., going to a digital literacy class).[33]

Williams offers an illustration. During the time he was doing RJ work inside prison, a man told him that he hadn't spoken to his daughter in 10 years, but through the vulnerability and accountability he witnessed in an RJ circle, he decided to reconnect with her. Williams explains, "That's success, because a father connected with his daughter, and they now have a relationship. She now has a father, even though he's incarcerated, now communicating, which gave him hope and something to live for." He continues:

29 Shadd Maruna Sered and Melissa Norton-Hawk, "Beyond Recidivism and Desistance," *Feminist Criminology* 16, no. 2 (2021): 165–90, 174.

30 *Ibid*., 172–73.

31 *Ibid*.,168.

32 Interview with Noble Williams, June 3, 2025. All quotes from Williams cited below are from this interview.

33 Interview with Bobby Iacoviello, June 4, 2025.

> A lot of people don't get healing, they go somewhere and climb under a rock and spend the rest of their life there out of fear, not because of rehabilitation. And they're successful? They are still hurt and they are still in pain, which still opens up doors for future harms to take place.

Success is a daily practice, Williams explains: "every day we're interacting with human beings, every day we might feel traumatized and see things that affect us, and [RJ means] having the tools to how to deal with it and cope with it." For TPP, these are not only individualized tools, but also a shared set of practices where people come together to address trauma and harms. Community-building is inherent in the practice. Williams clarified, "We do it in community."

The research team chose to use TPP's definition of success, because it is their benchmark for whether their programs make a difference and our goal was to understand if their informal reentry supports achieved their goal. But when it came to defining the other key term, reentry, we wanted to understand how people experiencing life after incarceration defined the process.

ii. What is reentry?

We now turn to insights gleaned from the 30 people we interviewed. We asked them to define reentry, including when it begins and when it ends. The term may appear to be self-evident, as in definitions like that offered by the National Institute of Criminal Justice, which defines reentry as "the transition from life in jail or prison to life in the community."[34] However, many people we spoke with offered more complex definitions and parameters. They framed reentry in relation to resources, uncertainty or new challenges, a return to normalcy, and new opportunities.

Among those who identified reentry as a system or network that would help them access resources when they were released from incarceration, several described specifically what they needed: resources for jobs, housing, mental health support, financial support, and practical life skills. However, most noted that such a support system does not exist. Demetrias, for example, stated that "'reentry' is just a buzzword," explaining that he had to rely on his own research and networking, not a formal reentry support system.

Nine people defined reentry in relation to challenges, expressing caution and noting obstacles. For example, Jefferson stated that, "we don't look for reentry, we just look to be safe and not to have problems." Several people discussed feeling overwhelmed by new responsibilities, loneliness, or the struggles of getting a job, finding housing, getting their

34 National Institute of Justice, "Reentry," accessed May 10, 2025, https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/corrections/reentry.

identification in order and so forth. People also told us that they still weren't free because of parole or probationary surveillance and requirements. In an eloquent summary of the challenges of reentry, David told us that:

> Reentry is like being born all over again. It's like learning how to walk in a world that is designed for you to stumble. It's like pushing against impossible odds and trying to jump 44,000 barriers at the same time [...] if everybody else is walking on a regular flat plane and we're going uphill.

Five people defined reentry as a return to conditions from before incarceration. They phrased it as getting back into a normal routine, on their feet, or into society. But more commonly, we heard about new opportunities. For example, people described being a citizen instead of an outcast, a do-over, a chance to live differently, or exploring a new world. Offering additional insights into reentry as a new opportunity, Jody, who had been out for just over one year, described how he was making different decisions:

> [...] learning boundaries, like self-love, like self-care. Like, yes, I can love people, but also not hurt myself to love them, right? Like, it's just like learning how to take care of yourself before you're worrying about taking care of somebody else. Reentry is just community, right? Like, you got people around you who actually care about you.

In one of the most optimistic expressions we heard, Patrick stated that, "positive reentry is what gives you wind, that's what allows you to fly and you can go whatever direction you want with it, having the necessary people in your life so you can elevate through your reentry."

When we asked people to identify when reentry begins and when it ends,[35] we discovered significant diversity related to the beginning and a surprising majority of people said that it never ends. Six people described a beginning in relation to a mental shift: when you start working on yourself, prepare yourself, or when you feel "whole." However, most people defined a beginning in relation to different points in the criminal justice process. Answers included the day that someone was: arrested (2 responses), sentenced (1 response), entered prison or jail (8 responses, including two who suggested this is when it should happen, not when it does), knew they were going home (5 responses), or actually got out (3 responses). One person thought it was two years before you get out and another identified two to three months after you're out, "when you can breathe." One person said it's when life feels out of control. Two people did not answer this question.

35 The idea for this question came from reading J. Ducksworth, "The Prisoner Reentry Industry," *Dialectical Anthropology* 34 (2010): 557–61.

Twenty-one people stated that reentry never ends. As noted above, TPP prioritizes people who are "transformational youth," that is, they were sentenced as juveniles or very young adults (age 21 or under) to life without parole under mandatory minimum sentences. People in this group only received the possibility for parole through recent changes in the law.[36] All of them have lifetime parole, including eleven people within our interview group.[37] Some noted how this changed their perception of when reentry ends, for example, Angie said, "As long as I'm on parole, I think I'm always going to feel like I am reentering."

Among those who had spent decades inside prison, other people emphasized the degree to which society changed while they were incarcerated. We also note that they grew up inside prison, and were experiencing society as an adult for the first time as 40- or 50- year olds. They felt they would never stop learning how to live in the world. Victor told us:

> When I was a kid, with my brothers and my sisters, we used to have a little fish swimming hole. I went there, that shit ain't there! This fucking kind of condominiums and whatever. The trail was gone. Damn, it broke my heart, but it was good while it lasted. That trail lasts a lot here in my head. But everything changes. It's just a change that you gotta try to adapt to."

Ricardo, who spent 20 years incarcerated, stated:

> I spent most of my life in prison, so now I'm being reborn at the age of 52. Reentry for me is re-entering the world as rehabilitated citizen who has learned to learn to live a good life. Me? My vehicle is a '52 grand, fully loaded, but with real low mileage.

Of the remaining responses, only one person had already hit the mark that they described as an ending. Blandine described returning to a community that wanted to forget she was ever incarcerated. For her, finding a community through TPP where she could talk about her experience in prison was the first step to ending reentry. Others expressed hope for a future ending: one person, Joey, referenced data about recidivism rates stating, "What did they say? It's like 85% people come back within three years, or something that recidivate. So, I guess it's making it three years...".[38] Another person suggested shortening that period to two years.

36 In a 2012 decision, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that juveniles (under age 18) could not be sentenced to life without parole as a mandatory minimum sentence (see *Miller v. Alabama*, 567 U.S. 460 [2012]). More recently, in *Commonwealth v. Mattis*, 493 Mass. 216, 221–22 (2024), the Massachusetts Court extended this protection by raising the age threshold for mandatory minimum life without parole sentences from 18 to 21.

37 We did not ask participants about their sentences or parole and probation conditions because our focus was on their reflections rather than treating them as data points.

38 See above discussion of the limits of recidivism.

Two people thought it would come when they were stable or at peace with themselves, one person simply wasn't sure, and two people did not reply to this question.

These responses warn us to pay attention to the way that incarceration changes peoples' lives, creating new hurdles and leaving scars. It can impose lifelong challenges for people, redefining the terrain of their lives and impacting their ability to integrate into communities. Notably, for people who are on lifetime parole, the prospect of unending surveillance alters their view about when reentry ends. For people who served long sentences, their life pathways are shaped by prison. But across the replies from the 30 people we spoke with, reentry is not understood as completely negative or solely defined by difficulties, they see opportunities as well. In the next section, we discuss factors that impact the balance of negative and positive possibilities.

Reentry encompasses complex expectations, challenges, and varying understandings of the beginning and ending. This insight illuminates the importance of reentry support that nurtures individuals' capacities to confront the harms they have experienced and caused, to strengthen interpersonal and community relationships, and to build lasting communities that extend well beyond any fixed timeframe labeled as "reentry."

TAKEAWAY 1:

Reentry is not composed of a clearly defined beginning, middle or end. Rather, it means learning to live – for many people we spoke with, for the remainder of their lives – in a grey zone of challenges and opportunities. Reentry is life after incarceration.

B. What Hurdles and Supports Impact Someone's Success?

When it comes to supporting people who are reentering society after incarceration, there is no proven recipe for successful reentry, however defined.[39] There are well-documented ingredients that contribute to success: stable housing, meaningful employment, reliable access to medical and mental health support, and a sense of wellbeing that includes building and remaining active within social networks (including family, friends, colleagues, community engagement, and so forth).[40] However, there is considerable variation in individuals' highest

39 Jennifer L. Doleac, *Strategies to Productively Reincorporate the Formerly-Incarcerated into Communities: A Review of the Literature*, IZA Discussion Paper No. 11646 (June 2018): 403-407, https://www.iza.org/publications/dp/11646/strategies-to-productively-reincorporate-the-formerly-incarcerated-into-communities-a-review-of-the-literature.

40 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *The Limits of Recidivism: Measuring Success After Prison*(Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2022), 6, https://doi.org/10.17226/26459;

priority needs, when they require specific types of support, and their hopes and aspirations for the future they are creating. These differences in needs and ambitions are hardly unique to formerly incarcerated people—the same could be said of anyone. What sets apart the conditions for people in reentry apart are the additional barriers they must overcome.

Hurdles for people in reentry can include pre-carceral challenges, including statistically high rates of poverty, communities that are over-policed and under-resourced, experiences of violence, trauma and victimization, structural racism, addiction and mental health illness, low access to education, job opportunities and networks for civic or communal engagement, and limited access to medical and mental health support.[41] Incarceration intensifies many of these challenges, and reentry protocols invariably create new ones -- what researchers Ortiz and Jackson refer to as "collateral consequences of conviction."[42] People return, often to the same challenges they faced before incarceration, and without new tools to manage life. As Jamal told us: "when you're talking about rehabilitation, you're talking about return to a former state. You never even asked me what my former state was, but you're trying to rehabilitate me, right? You're trying to put me back into the same place, in the same environment, when I was doing so much to escape that place and environment." And many people face new challenges imposed by the system. For example, formerly incarcerated people often face restrictions related to housing[43] and employment,[44] many of which have greater negative

Harvard University Institute of Politics Criminal Justice Policy Group, *Successful Reentry: A Community-Level Analysis (*December 2019), https://iop.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/2023-02/IOP_Policy_Program_2019_Reentry_Policy.pdf, 16 – 21, accessed June 12, 2025.

41 Marshall B. Sutton and P. Wesley Routon, "Poverty, Inequality, and Incarceration: Estimates from State- and Prison-Level Data," *Journal of Poverty* 28, no. 5 (2024): 436–53; Brandy Henry, "Typologies of Adversity in Childhood & Adulthood as Determinants of Mental Health & Substance Use Disorders of Adults Incarcerated in US Prisons," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 99 (2020): 1–9; Kim M. Blankenship et al., "Structural Racism, the Social Determination of Health, and Health Inequities: The Intersecting Impacts of Housing and Mass Incarceration," *American Journal of Public Health* 113 (2023): S58–S64, https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2022.307116; D. E. McNiel, R. L. Binder, and J. C. Robinson, "Incarceration Associated with Homelessness, Mental Disorder, and Co-Occurring Substance Abuse," *Psychiatric Services* 56 (2005): 840–46; G. A. Greenberg and R. A. Rosenheck, "Jail Incarceration, Homelessness, and Mental Health: A National Study," *Psychiatric Services* 59 (2008): 170–77; R. J. Coley and P. E. Barton, "Locked Up and Locked Out: An Educational Perspective on the U.S. Prison Population," Educational Testing Service, February 2006, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED496101.pdf.

42 J. M. Ortiz and H. Jackey, "The System Is Not Broken, It Is Intentional: The Prisoner Reentry Industry as Deliberate Structural Violence," *The Prison Journal* 99, no. 4 (2019): 484–503, https://doi.org/10.1177/0032885519852090.

43 Lucius Couloute, *Nowhere to Go: Homelessness Among Formerly Incarcerated People* (Northampton, MA: Prison Policy Initiative, August 2018), https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/housing.html; L. A. Jacobs and A. Gottlieb, "The Effect of Housing Circumstances on Recidivism: Evidence From a Sample of People on Probation in San Francisco," *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 47, no. 9 (2020): 1097–1115; Faith E. Luze, Jeffrey W. Rosky, and Zachry Hamilton, "Homelessness and Reentry: A Multisite Outcome Evaluation of Washington State's Reentry Housing Program for High Risk Offenders," *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 41, no. 4 (2013): 471–91; Prison Policy Initiative, *Nowhere to Go: Homelessness Among Formerly Incarcerated People* (Northampton, MA: Prison Policy Initiative, August 2018), 84, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/housing.html.

44 Shawn D. Bushway, Michael A. Stoll, and David F. Weiman, eds., *Barriers to Reentry? The Labor Market for*

impacts on Black people.[45] As noted above, many people also face heightened surveillance; parole or probation supervision requirements can trigger re-incarcerated for acts that are not criminalized for the general public. Re-incarceration, even if for only a short time period, frequently results in losing one's job, housing and any resources gained: it means starting all over again.

In this section, we explore what the 30 people we interviewed told us about hurdles they experienced. We left the question open-ended for them to discuss what they felt were the most difficult challenges. While we heard about material and practical hurdles, people also spoke at length about social and emotional challenges. They also told us about where they found help, and the specific role that TPP played in supporting them.

i. Material and practical support

Of the 30 people we spoke with, many spoke of commonly known and researched barriers to success, like finding employment (15 responses), housing (11 responses), family reunification (10 responses), getting legal identification cards (5 responses), and general access to resources (4 responses). Another hurdle that people discussed with us was transit (9 responses): not always lack of access to transportation, but often extremely stressful experiences. For some, it was an issue of (re)gaining driving skills, and, in the case of one person, a combination of fear of retribution from people related to his crime and not knowing who he might encounter on public transportation. Seven people noted challenges with managing their finances, as a separate issue from getting a job. Several spoke about the challenges of having many appointments and/or requirements related to their parole or probation supervision.

We heard about particularly overwhelming challenges for the people who are "transformational youth." Learning how to use technology (14 responses) was high on their list, but they also detailed the difficulties at just about every point of life. One person told us that the basics of managing everyday life, like knowing when to eat, was a hurdle. Several people told us they felt like the entire world had changed. Paul said: "My biggest barrier is basically adjusting to everything outside now. I mean, everything has changed."

Released Prisoners in Post-Industrial America (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007); Simone Ispa-Landa and Charles E. Loeffler, "Indefinite Punishment and the Criminal Record: Stigma Reports among Expungement-Seekers in Illinois," *Criminology* 54, no. 3 (2016): 387–412.

45 J. M. Ortiz and H. Jackey, "The System Is Not Broken, It Is Intentional: The Prisoner Reentry Industry as Deliberate Structural Violence," *The Prison Journal* 99, no. 4 (2019): 484–503, https://doi.org/10.1177/0032885519852090.

Five people spoke about how reentry challenges return in cycles. For example, someone spoke about finding a good job, losing it (not related to their performance), and having trouble finding a new one because of his criminal record. This response highlights how people in reentry must not only overcome hurdles once, but repeatedly over the course of their post-incarceration lives. It provides new insight into the response that reentry "never ends," emphasizing how the material hurdles of reentry can re-emerge at any point across one's life. It also sheds light on the additional difficulties formerly incarcerated people face in building "successful" lives. For example, losing housing can undermine a person's ability to maintain employment. With a criminal record, securing new housing often takes longer, extending the period during which someone must try to keep a job while unhoused, unlike those without a record. One setback can quickly become an overwhelming crisis. The potential for cycles of reentry hurdles also points to the need for a reentry community approach, where someone is already known and support can be provided quickly before a setback becomes a crisis.

ii. Social and emotional support

People highlighted social and emotional challenges of reentry, many of which exacerbated pre-existing traumatic life events. In this, the group of people we spoke with reflect the broader experiences common among those impacted by the criminal justice system.[46] Twenty-two people had been incarcerated several times, with the initial incarceration frequently occurring when they were children. Ricardo spoke about the harmful impact of his first experience of incarceration, and how it led to a subsequent conviction: "I was released worse coming out than what I went in." Several people also spoke of serious early childhood trauma,[47] including witnessing the murder of a parent, physical or psychological abuse, or being placed in foster care. Our questions did not probe these experiences, but asked people specifically about how their experiences of incarceration stayed with them as they reentered.

More than half of the thirty people interviewed (18 responses) discussed feeling anxious, and ten described feeling hypervigilant. Ten individuals noted that being in crowds and loud sounds trigger them. Twelve people spoke about mistrust in relation to medical systems, police, and within personal relationships. A woman we spoke with specifically noted mistrust of men. Nine people told us about how memories of witnessing violence inside continue to

46 Joshua P. Mersky and James Topitzes, "Comparing Early Adult Outcomes of Maltreated and Non-Maltreated Children: A Prospective Longitudinal Investigation," *Children and Youth Services Review* 32, no. 8 (2010): 1086–1096; Nancy Wolff, Jing Shi, and Jane A. Siegel, "Patterns of Victimization Among Male and Female Inmates: Evidence of an Enduring Legacy," *Violence and Victims* 24, no. 4 (2009): 469–484; Dominique Roe-Sepowitz, Laura E. Bedard, and Karensa Pate, "The Impact of Child Abuse on Dissociative Symptoms: A Study of Incarcerated Women," *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* 8, no. 3 (2007): 7–26.

47 Throughout the report, we use the term "trauma" in a nonclinical fashion, to indicate adverse experiences. Our question was open-ended, and people were free to respond with whatever information they chose to share with us.

haunt them. Six people talked about fear of failing, including getting picked up even if they are not doing anything wrong. Daniel told us that he feels "wary and nervous" that police will target him, regardless of his actions. Jefferson said, "I was afraid that I couldn't do it. I was afraid. I was so scared that every corner, every step I took, people was watching me." Six people noted difficulties sleeping. Others discussed learning how to talk about being incarcerated, feelings of self-doubt and low self-esteem. As Terri-Anne said: "it's been five years now since being home and I'm still working on my self-esteem and my self-confidence and my self worth."

Many people described difficulties related to their communities. Ten individuals talked about the pain of coming to terms with the *death of loved ones*, immediately before, during or after their incarceration.[48] Six people told us that *they fear for their lives* on the outside, due to revenge or gang-related threats. Jonathan, who spent 19.5 years inside prison and has been out for two years, said that he is always on his guard: "So now coming home is like the lifestyle that I lived. I still have it on my mind, and I'm like, who wants to do harm to me? From back then. Does my victim's family want to do me harm? "

Five people, notably some of the younger people we spoke with, said they were lonely, because they had decided to cut off former friends in an effort to avoid being around people who were engaging in harmful or self-destructive behaviors. Several spoke about continued grief in relation to missing the communities they built inside: Jody, who spent three years inside and built a community there that he trusted, said: "a piece of my heart is forever behind that wall. [...] I didn't realize how much I missed my guys. [...] I still don't even think I fully came home, you know what I mean? Because, like, a piece of my heart will forever be behind that wall."

iii. Where does help come from?

As mentioned above, at least one third of the people we spoke with had re-entered after incarceration within the state prison system. The MDOC claims to take a proactive, structured approach to reentry, beginning planning as soon as an individual is committed and intensifying efforts within six months of release.[49] It states that reentry support is developed in partnership with the incarcerated person and the Institutional Reentry Committee to address

48 Pettus-Davis, Renn, and Kennedy found that 47% of their study participants experienced at least one traumatic event in the 8 months after their release from incarceration, including directly experiencing or witnessing violence or death, learning of the serious injury or death of a loved one, and suffering a life-threatening illness or injury. Carrie Pettus-Davis, Tanya Renn, and Stephanie Kennedy, *Trauma and Loss During Reentry* (Tallahassee, FL: Institute for Justice Research and Development, Florida State University, June 18, 2020), https://ijrd.csw.fsu.edu/sites/g/files/upcbnu1766/files/Publications/Trauma_During_Reentry.pdf.

49 Massachusetts Department of Correction, "Reentry Planning," accessed June 11, 2025, https://www.mass.gov/info-details/reentry-planning.

specific needs such as housing, health care, employment, identity documentation, registration with MassHealth (enabling individuals to access medical, mental health, and substance use treatment upon release), along with other supports.[50]

However, eighteen people we spoke with did not report receiving even basic support from institutional sources before leaving a jail or prison, like access to legal identification or registration for healthcare.[51] The twelve individuals who did receive assistance were released from an HOC or one of the state's minimum or pre-release prisons.

This lack of institutional support made informal and community-based networks all the more essential after release. When we asked people who they turn to for help, many said their families filled this gap. For some, however, this wasn't easy. Viengsamay, who had spent 21 years in prison, shared his challenges speaking with his parents because they are Laotian, and he lost his Laotian language skills during the decades he spent in prison. Others said their first call was to a romantic partner or friends, including friends from when they were inside prison.

People also referenced organizations that helped them along the way, including Haley House, Tufts University Prison Initiative of Tisch College (and its Tufts Education and Reentry Network program, MyTERN), Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, ROCA, Partakers, a reentry house in Charlestown, counselor/therapist, or a navigator with Messengers. A few people who had been out for longer time periods mentioned how many more resources are available today than when they got out and how attitudes towards incarcerated people have changed. For example, Chiteara told us:

> So back in that time too, there was no reentry. People coming home really had to fend for themselves, and that's why recidivism was so freaking high, because there was no resources or opportunities for anything. I thought I was coming home to that. […] The story that I used to be so ashamed of is what people are really noticing me for, you know? And that's why I try to tell anybody that I'm around that's coming home. I'm like, Yo, get out there and tell your story. Everybody wants to hear what the hell we've been through. Yo, everybody wants to hear.

50 *Ibid.*

51 Many of the people we spoke with released before the inauguration of a 2023 program focusing on remedying the lack of IDs when people release. See, Massachusetts Executive Office of Public Safety and Security, "Enhanced State ID Program Promotes Successful Reentry for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals, Issuing Over 1,250 IDs Since Launch," accessed June 11, 2025, https://www.mass.gov/news/enhanced-state-id-program-promotes-successful-reentry-for-formerly-incarcerated-individuals-issuing-over-1250-ids-since-launch. Nevertheless, many people still release directly from medium or even maximum security prisons, rather pre-release or minimum facilities.

Eleven people said someone from TPP was their first call when they needed help. Below we address the range of ways that TPP supports people's practical and material, and social and emotional needs during reentry.

iv. How TPP provides support

Many people provided examples of how TPP's interventions helped them address practical concerns. Fourteen people took advantage of a digital literacy course that TPP offered in collaboration with Maverick Landing Community Services. For some, this was a turning point. Christina recounted, "I did the digital literacy class with them that I was compensated for, which that was like, fresh of me coming off of house arrest. So that was really, really helpful [...] And it just it got me back into life." Christina's words speak to how TPP's programs bridged the gap between confinement and active participation in the world, equipping people with both skills and confidence to reengage. As noted above, this program was also extremely helpful to the people had spent decades inside prison and did not have access to technology.

Understanding that reentry is often a time of extreme poverty and any additional funds can make an enormous impact in someone's life, TPP seeks whenever possible given the availability of funds, to offer stipends or honorarium to people involved in their programs. They also refer people to others' programs that similarly provide stipends as part of the engagement, or that directly assist with meeting material needs. Twenty-seven people reported that TPP helped them connect with other individuals and organizations that provided resources for their reintegration.

Five people highlighted the assistance they received from TPP in the first hours or days after release from prison, such as food, clothing, and financial support. This urgent care helped to ease the transition from incarceration to life outside prison, offering practical resources at a time of vulnerability. Twin described this support, saying,

> We went out to eat, we shopped. And, oh, they took me to the dressing room, right? And, like, they literally had, like, mad clothes in their hands. They're like, we [are] just going to try mad stuff. And I'm sitting here, like, I'm looking at the price, right? And I'm like, I'm a frugal person. I'm like, Nah, don't work. We got this. Yo, man, we got this, bro.

What stands out in Twin's account is not only the provision of clothing and meals, but the sense of joy and care infused in the experience. For many, TPP's role in addressing urgent needs concerned more than material goods—it was about being affirmed and celebrated at a moment when the world often felt indifferent or even hostile. This type of tangible support

appears to have been instrumental in fostering a sense of security and belonging in the early stages of reentry.

The concept of reentry support that is grounded in friendship, rather than service provision, marked a key distinction in how people described their experience with TPP. Jovon stated,

> [TPP] plays a huge part of my life [...] just from coming home to helping me get involved in Tufts. [When] we was locked up, B-Nut (Bobby) used to tell me to go to school, to go to Boston University and I never did, and like me going to school, just having that experience, like the MyTERN [Tufts University's Education Reentry Network], only came about because of TTP [...] It just put me in a better predicament.

His story illustrates how TPP nurtured long-term aspirations, helped people see and move toward a future they may have previously thought was inaccessible, and facilitated the connections to realize their goals.

Additionally, 21 individuals described TPP as a family, community, and support network. David expressed, "TPP, they're like family. I love them like more than anybody. Anytime I see them, it's like it feels like a family reunion. It feels like I'm with a bunch of people who understand me." This sense of belonging was especially significant for those who had been isolated or lacked family connections after their release from prison. One participant, who wishes to remain anonymous, said:

> I don't like people. I never had close friends like that, because I really don't like people. But once I got into that class that Bobby got me into, it was more of like I'm starting to like people now. So that helped me get out of my shell a little bit and just get me into a community that support not only themselves, but other people that they might not even know [...]

This unexpected transformation—from social withdrawal to relational openness—was echoed by others. For instance, Terri-Anne told us that, "They helped me to remember to stay connected, and it's a daily thing, an absolute daily thing."

People used personal, familial language to describe TPP staff, underscoring the depth of these relationships. Sidney stated, "Noble was like my brother from another mother. You know, I go through something, I call him, I reach out to him." The depth of these relationships also is clear in that people felt they could call on TPP when they needed help, regardless if it fit someone's work schedule. Michael shared, "Who do I call? When I came home, I called nobody, really, but then I contacted Bobby, because I've known him since DYS and he's always helped me.

And then he pointed me in the right direction…" Walid, stated that, "I can't even explain how much Zoe has been here for me." Such expressions reveal the emotional significance of these relationships. The feeling that someone genuinely cared and would show up in times of need was a lifeline.

For the people we spoke with, TPP staff weren't just professional contacts or service providers—they were long-standing friends or chosen family members who had built trust through consistency, empathy, and presence. These comments underscore the importance of established, trusted relationships in the reentry process, as someone encounters practical and emotional hurdles, often at the same time. The power of TPPs work is not merely that they provide insight, services, or recommendations, but that they approach their work with people as coming from within a shared community, based on restorative principles, and, as discussed below, informed by their own lived experience of reentry.

TAKEAWAY 2:

Commonly known barriers to reentry (getting an ID, housing, employment, and family reintegration) were cited as challenges. But equally important, people highlighted mental, emotional, and social factors that impact how they navigate life in reentry. People need to feel supported, heard, and cared for in order to overcome hurdles, envision and pursue new possibilities, and face the often-daunting challenges of reentry with the confidence that their community understands and supports them.

C. How Does Lived Experience Matter to You?

Research suggests that programs run by individuals with lived experience is an effective way to support someone going through a reentry process.[52] The people we spoke with agreed wholeheartedly. When we asked about the importance of finding reentry support from

52 Anita Brown-Graham, Phillip W. Graham, Laura Erickson, Sofi Martinez, Sara Lawrence, Maureen Berner, and Sherri Spinks, "Peer Support as a Social Capital Strategy for Programs Serving Individuals Reentering from Incarceration and Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence or Human Sex Trafficking," Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, accessed May 14, 2025, https://aspe.hhs.gov/reports/peer-support-social-capital-development; Anne-Marie Bagnall et al., "A Systematic Review of the Effectiveness and Cost-Effectiveness of Peer Education and Peer Support in Prisons," *BMC Public Health* 15 (March 25, 2015): 290, https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-015-1584-x; Nora Wikoff, Donald Linhorst, and Nicole Morani, "Recidivism among Participants of a Reentry Program for Prisoners Released without Supervision," *Social Work Research* 36, no. 4 (2012): 289–99, https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/svs021; E. Matthews, "Peer-Focused Prison Reentry Programs: Which Peer Characteristics Matter Most?" *Incarceration* 2, no. 2 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1177/26326663211019958; Thomas P. LeBel, Matt Richie, and Shadd Maruna, "Helping Others as a Response to Reconcile a Criminal Past: The Role of the Wounded Healer in Prisoner Reentry Programs," *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 42, no. 1 (2015): 108–20.

someone who has also experienced reentry, all thirty people said it was crucial. As Tim noted, "... to choose between talking to somebody who's been through something I've been through, or somebody who hasn't? It's a no-brainer." Across replies we heard several explanations for *how* lived experience matters.

Having shared experiences enables people to quickly understand each other. Angie told us, "If you've never been in that position or impacted by that situation, how can you sit with me and say, 'Well, I'm here. I understand what you're going through.' You can't understand what I'm going through." This experiential disconnect can exist even within close and supportive relationships, if they lack the shared lived experience of incarceration. Incarceration is obviously intended to be punitive, but it is also traumatizing with, as noted above, lifelong impacts. Jonathan highlighted how important it is to work with people who understand this fact: "it's easy to talk to them, because they understand what the real struggle is." Walid especially noted that people with lived experience believe your stories of trauma from inside, "most people, when you tell them the police[53] people and there be, like, abusing and hitting you and all that, they wouldn't believe it until you've really been through it." As Paul said: "Well, after you spend so many years in prison, right? It doesn't matter if they Black, white, yellow, green, whatever. It's just you get this bond together, right?"

People going through reentry felt less judged with someone who was also formerly incarcerated, and that eased the process of opening up and speaking honestly about challenges they faced.

For others, working with formerly incarcerated people meant being treated like a valued community member. Viengsamay described how, within the prison system and into post-release parole or probation, you're a number. "Coming home," he said, "you shouldn't have to go through again." People with similar experiences, he continued, see "you as a human being, as one brother to a brother, or a brother to a sister." Chiteara used similar language, referencing a brother and sisterhood. Rome described how his community, which included TPP and other people with lived experience, rallied to help him and the difference it made even in relations with his parole officer:

> We're going to rally around you. You're not alone. And I didn't feel alone. That's huge. They started making the phone calls, and then for the first time, my PO (probation officer) knew I wasn't alone, that I had loving people in my corner that were going to stand by me [...]

53 Although he uses the term "police" instead of correctional officer or guard, it is clear he is clearly referring to events that occurred during his incarceration.

We also heard that having lived experience made someone's advice more believable and their positive example more inspiring. Demetrias also explained that people with direct experience were more trustworthy: "they don't make promises, they don't make statements that they know they can't live up to [...]". As Blandine stated: "you're more apt to listen to that person because they know they've been there, done that." Similarly, Jesus said, "just knowing that they was able to go through it, that enough is a motivation. Like, okay, I'm feeling this way, but if he did it, I know I can do it, you know? Let me see how he did it and let me see why." Part of what makes the advice of someone who has gone through reentry believable is that they set an example of success. As Jefferson discussed:

> When I first came out, I had my brothers, I watched them. I watched them carefully. And if you want to say, I mimicked, yes, I did. And there's nothing wrong with that, no, because they was doing the right things. They was happy, and that's what I wanted. I wanted happiness. I didn't want to just feel good. I wanted happiness.

We heard about how people came to better understand their own reactions in discussion with someone who had lived experience. Chiteara said:

> I was looking for answers, like for the way that I was feeling, and the only people that could answer those questions were people that were returning themselves or have returned. Yeah, they were the only ones that had the answers to help me really cope and understand.

Similarly, Twin told us about how he tried not to burden his family when he felt depressed inside prison. He didn't want to expose them to his dark days, and tried to maintain this shield when he came home. But one night he felt overwhelmed at dinner, and he, "just started crying. I grabbed my mother, I hugged her. I started like, I'm I usually hide my tears from her, so like to be able to let it out in front of her [...]". Confused by his emotions, he called a friend at TPP, who assured him that his response was normal, and he would be ok. People in reentry, as noted in the previous section, often rely heavily on their families for support, but Twin's story reminds us that even in a loving familial relationship, barriers can arise because of incarceration. Having a support network that includes people who have also experienced incarceration can help someone overcome or at least manage the impact of these barriers.

Several people we spoke with also described their own efforts to support others who are getting out. Many now had jobs that enabled them to play a role in reentry support networks. Jody said, "What got poured into me. Now I feel like it's completely my duty to pour into the next like, you know what I mean? Like, pour into the next one, and then they pour into the next one." He continued, "that's what success looks like to me. It's not the money, it's not

the promotions, it's not any of that. It's just being somebody that would have protected my younger self." As we discuss in more detail in the below section on RJ, being a valued part of a community means receiving help when you need it, and feeling empowered to give support to others.

Encompassing many of the ideas about why lived experience is so important, David told us:

> My fellow comrades in reentry, the people who had came out before me and have been successful and have paved the way, and are my therapists. They're my comrades. They're my community. They're like everything, because I can talk to my family or friends, but they are never going to understand the pain and the trauma that I still carry with me every single day. These individuals who have been out and are successfully re-entering are people who I can connect with. I can talk about my pain, and I can have like a space that is safe to talk about the survivors' guilt that we feel when we left those people were serving life sentences, like just the trauma that comes with being incarcerated. Like you don't want to talk about that with somebody who necessarily didn't go through it, because they may not understand.

And Twin argued that regulations that prohibit people with felony records from interacting with each other outside of programming were counterproductive. While Massachusetts law does not ban such contact outright, the Parole Board can impose this restriction on a case-by-case basis.[54] "They need to change some of the old [laws], because now they're saying, on parole, you can't be around other felons. But what about the felons that help you become the person you are... I am today? I can't be around my support system?"

TAKEAWAY 3

When support comes from someone who has experienced a reentry process, it enables more honest and direct communication, provides a relatable model for success, lends greater credibility to advice, and creates a more humanizing connection that better situates individuals for success.

54 Under Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 127, Section 130, the Parole Board is authorized to grant parole "upon such terms and conditions as the parole board shall prescribe." This broad authority allows the board to tailor conditions to individual cases, which can include restrictions on associating with certain individuals if deemed necessary for public safety or the parolee's rehabilitation. Massachusetts General Laws ch. 127, § 130, available at: https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXVIII/Chapter127/Section130, accessed June 9, 2025.

D. What Role Does Restorative Justice Play in Your Reentry Process?

Everyone we spoke with experienced RJ practices with TPP, but those experiences varied considerably. Twenty-five people engaged with RJ practices while they were incarcerated, and the remainder encountered RJ post-release. Thirteen people began practicing RJ while they were incarcerated at MCI-Norfolk, alongside the leaders of today's TPP. This group had years of experience with RJ practices and ideas. A few of them are today using their RJ-skills as part of their professional work with at-risk youth or other community-based programs. Others had only recently begun to practice RJ with TPP. We asked everyone to define what RJ meant to them, and how it impacted their reentry experiences.

i. Defining restorative justice

People offered a range of definitions of and purposes for RJ. For analytical clarity, we draw out the distinctions, but note that even when people emphasized one aspect or another, often they viewed the ideas and practices of RJ as interwoven. As Twin noted: "It's not just one thing."

When asked to define RJ, people tended to speak about how they experienced it, but a few people spoke in more conceptual terms. People spoke about how it differs from retributive justice. As Rome stated: "all these years that I could sit in a cage having committed a crime that cost someone their life, and where is the restoration in just leaving me in the cage?" They explained that RJ offers a holistic approach to harm, rooted in Indigenous practices, that emphasizes personal responsibility and community repair. People described it as: what justice should be, making amends, healing, vulnerability, and connecting people. One of the most robust definitions we heard came from Thomas, who said:

> It was how they held people accountable in the tribal councils, and the victims, the responsible party got a word. The community gets a word. [...] It brings all the parties together to find the resolution talk about accountability, responsibility. All the things that's needed to make a person or persons whole, or at least try to make them whole, and to try to bring a resolution to the harm. It gives everybody a voice.

Other responses highlighted distinct aspects of RJ, like taking responsibility for harms, self-healing, healing community, and how it becomes a way of life. People also acknowledged the challenges involved in practicing RJ.

ii. Taking responsibility for harm

Many people we interviewed foregrounded how RJ gave them a way to take responsibility for the harms they caused. Twin described how in RJ one uses "I" statements, as starting point for taking responsibility. Jesus talked about the transition from a posture of defending your actions, which is a necessary part of retributive criminal justice, to taking responsibility regardless of extenuating circumstances:

> I was being robbed, and I got stabbed. I took the knife from the guy, and I stabbed him back. Throughout most of my incarceration, I was feeling that I was a victim. Through restorative justice, I realized the once I had the knife in my hand, I had control of the situation. I didn't have to stab him and kill him. I had to take accountability and responsibility for my crime. [...] I was able to see and realize, that violence is never an option no matter what.

Several people participated in programs where surrogate victims, particularly mothers of homicide victims, met with them. They described how these encounters transformed their ability to empathize with victims and to speak about the weight of guilt. Demetrias told us:

> [...] even though it wasn't my victim's family, but learning from hearing victims speak and share with you how much pain you caused, it was mind blowing. It helped me understand. When I went before the parole board this time, and I was able to look at my victims to truly understand what I did. I was able to express in a manner that I couldn't express before, because I understood it now.

Communicating with their victims or the victim's family was a crucial step in self-healing for many. Angie explained that she wrote a letter to the family members of the man she killed. While the family was not supportive of Angie's parole request, it was important to her that she express her profound and sincere apology for the hurt she caused:

> The letter [...] that I wrote to them, just expressing to them how for years I wanted to reach out to them, to let them know that I was sorry for what I did, for the pain that I inflicted on them [...] all the things that I wanted to say to them I got a chance to say to them once I was out, so that part of my restorative justice was really cleansing.

Taking responsibility and engaging with victims changed people's approach to reentry. Tim spoke of being forgiven by the mother of the person he had killed, and his vow "to honor that level of forgiveness" in his life. Victor reflected on this dynamic: "You can never bring the dead back, but you can make amends and hope for the best [...]". And Chiteara said:

> What my victim's family doesn't understand, and probably something that they'll never know, is I do this for them. I mean that in the sense that given the opportunity to come home, I can't mess this up. I know there was a lot of mixed feelings about me coming home, but I feel like it would be more of a shot to their face if I came home and messed up.

Their replies clarify the linkage between taking responsibility and how one approaches the challenges of reentry. At its core, accepting responsibility for harm caused (both to others and to oneself) acts as a psychological and moral pivot point that enables formerly incarcerated individuals to reframe their identities and actions in ways that support reentry. In describing this impact, the people that we spoke with confirmed other research findings about how RJ supports someone in redefining who they are.[55]

iii. Self-healing

A cornerstone of TPP's work is that "hurt people hurt people, healed people heal people." This vision of RJ foregrounds self-healing as part of taking responsibility echoed across peoples' comments. As Viengsamay explained, "I can't really be able to be in the space where I can be to help others if I haven't worked on myself." And Jovon said: "RJ helped me understand that [...] sometimes you have to reveal your hurtness, you have to open up, to break those barriers."

Walid and Viengsamay emphasized how RJ circles created a safe place that allowed them to confront long-suppressed traumas and rebuild relationships. Viengsamay reflected: "When anybody is coming back home to a community from behind the wall, we should create a space for them to be themselves [...] " Rome noted that, "TPP circles are special, because you could feel like you could trust everybody and say whatever is true in your heart without being afraid that you're going to be hurt with that information."

People described RJ as helping them overcome the corrosive impact of shame and guilt, emotions that research demonstrates can negatively impact reentry.[56] As Demetrias said, "For a while, I did not stay in contact with anyone outside because I was embarrassed about the crime I had committed." Others emphasized the healing they received related to traumas they experienced in their own lives, including violence suffered in their youth, incarceration, and grief at the deaths of loved ones. David said:

---

55 T. P. LeBel, M. Richie, and S. Maruna, "Helping Others as a Response to Reconcile a Criminal Past: The Role of the Wounded Healer in Prisoner Reentry Programs," *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 42, no. 1 (2014): 108–20, https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854814550029.

56 For more on overcoming shame, see L. S. Abrams, K. C. Canlione, and D. M. Washington, "I Wouldn't Change Who I've Become": Released Juvenile Lifers on Joy, Shame, and the Journey to an Integrated Self," *Crime & Delinquency* 69, no. 2 (2022): 367–91.

> Restorative justice has helped me process all the pain that I've been through. My adverse childhood experiences, my trauma in prison, my trauma upon reentry. I never had words to identify that until I've sat in a circle and learned. What it meant to dehumanize yourself, and to learn vulnerability, learn empathy, learn how to put these things into practice.

Through RJ, people spoke of gaining "maturity," "clarity," and "emotional regulation" skills. Hamza told us he "went from a hurt, lost, confused person to a person that is on the journey of self-healing, self-growth." Jefferson described RJ as "rebirth." Their accounts reveal that RJ fosters lasting self-awareness, emotional clarity, and self-worth—essential skills that individuals carry with them to navigate the ongoing challenges of life after incarceration.

iv. Healing community

Across responses, people spoke about repair and defined "community" in a variety of ways: the individuals they harmed (discussed above), their own families and support systems, their broader neighborhoods or cities, those they participated in RJ processes with, and more broadly, anyone they interact with—reflecting how some view RJ as a way of life (described below).

Demetrias described how RJ helped him re-engage with his family. Before undertaking RJ, and while he was incarcerated, he did not stay in contact with them, "because I was embarrassed about the crime I had committed. So, I had intentionally not written, not called anyone, including my own mother, and it pissed a lot of people off." But as he began to practice RJ, he realized that "at some point you've gotta have to start the process of trying to heal yourself." He also clarified that conditions in prison make this process more difficult, "[...] prison does destroy you in a way [...]".

Several people specifically referenced "community" as the neighborhood or city where they now live or work. Victor spoke of how he engages with kids in his neighborhood, encouraging them to stay out of trouble. Daniel described how RJ could improve community relations, including between police, people doing "bad stuff," and people impacted by those actions. He said RJ could help people coexist, "to get everybody on the same page, to make it a better place and be accepting of each other and figure out how to make the community work." Daniel described RJ as "trying to figure out how to just make the community work." Jonathan saw it as "trying to help your community out in the best way you can." Rome put it simply: "restoring the community." Tari said, "Nothing is more powerful than the movement of a community [...] if you could just identify with both sides from a different angle, you can also give the power back to the people and restore justice."

For some people, the "community" that was important to them was one built through RJ. As example, Christina, who first encountered RJ during reentry, told us that the practice helped her move beyond feeling isolated in reentry, to finding a community: "Instead of feeling like you're alone with these feelings and like you're the only one going through it, you know that there's other people that are as well, and kind of figuring out where you go from there." This comment reflects the emphasis that TPP places on welcoming the people they work with into their community.

Across responses to our questions, people spoke about importance of being valued within a community, not only in relation to having one own's needs met, but also in terms of animating an ethical approach to how one engages with and shows up for others.

v. A way of life

Many people told us that RJ changed how they live their lives, both by providing a guiding philosophy and helping them develop practical skills. If we understand "reentry" as a process without a clearcut beginning or ending, then the significance of RJ as a way of life gains new importance.

People described how RJ shaped a way of thinking, relating to others, and navigating the world. Jesus clarified, "It's not a program, it is a lifestyle. It's a belief of living and a style of living." Blandine said it is, "acceptance and accepting the responsibility of moving on and knowing that you could fight for other people and you have a voice, and that you can get involved and feel part of the community and help people." Jovon emphasized this holistic approach, saying, it helps him "understand why people do things, the impacts, understanding people's upbringings. Sometimes, we don't understand why we hurt each other in our communities."

Others emphasized how RJ gave them tools to manage everyday challenges. For example, Walid described how he gained problem solving skills. And Jefferson spoke of RJ as a way to ground himself: "I just say to myself every single day...I'm gonna try to do something good for someone..."

Several people discussed how they were becoming restorative leaders through their roles within communities. Jesus, who current works with a reentry organization said: "We're doing restorative justice here in the city. It's spreading like gasoline on fire." Patrick told us that seeing himself as a valued part of a community, made him want to expand that embrace:

> I want to be able to save my brothers, my fellow brother, or like the youth. Let me embrace you. Let me bring you in. Let me show you. This a bigger purpose in this

> world. Now you're not indulging with some of the violence that you was indulging in. And now you know the people that you look up to aren't the local drug dealers or the next person that's applying violence to the community. Now you're looking up to somebody positive.

The movement from one's own hurt, to the harms one has caused, to interpersonal repair, and then to community repair reflects the transformative potential of RJ as part of reentry. TPP's approach both provides a model for and encourages people to see themselves as leaders within and contributors to the communities they inhabit. This approach aligns with what researchers Gordon Bazemore and Jeanne Stinchcomb call a "civic engagement" model of reentry, which emphasizes the importance of civic service (getting involved in community activities), especially when grounded in restorative practices.[57]

vi. RJ as Reentry: Tensions and transformation

We note that RJ is not without challenges. Blandine told us about her experience prior to working with TPP, in what felt like an insincere and counterproductive form of RJ. Her negative experience came while she was incarcerated, during a program led by men who were not system-impacted with women who were incarcerated. She found the dynamics extremely uncomfortable, and it made her wary of RJ until she started working with TPP.

Jody noted, that while RJ is a way to heal from loss, that: "I feel like my life has not been the same since then. I feel like I am too aware." His reflection hints at the costs of awareness and transformation—it can be painful, even if ultimately grounding, to face one's past experiences of being harmed and harming others. Thomas discussed his pain when his victim's family did not accept his accountability efforts, as evidenced in their lack of support for him returning to the community.

Some of the younger people we spoke with who had more recently become involved with TPP appeared to have a less fully developed understanding of and commitment to RJ as a concept. Michael, who first encountered TPP circles while in DYS, initially dismissed them as "just a circle," describing activities like sharing feelings and playing games. However, he later acknowledged their impact, admitting, "Everything they said to me was true—no bullshit."

---

57 G. Bazemore and J. Stinchcomb, "Civic Engagement and Reintegration: Toward a Community-Focused Theory and Practice," *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 36 (2004): 241–86; G. Bazemore and R. Boba, "'Doing Good' to 'Make Good': Community Theory for Practice in a Restorative Justice Civic Engagement Reentry Model," *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 46, no. 1–2 (2007): 25–56. Both articles focus on how communities are more willing to accept formerly incarcerated people who are seen as contributing to the common good. Here, we emphasized the value of seeing oneself as an asset to community, capturing the way that community engagement during reentry is part of finding resources and contributing to others' journeys.

Overall, peoples' reflections on RJ as they encountered it with TPP, described a lived ethic grounded in belonging, accountability, and hope -- a path toward personal and collective renewal. Taken together, these narratives affirm[58] that RJ's power in reentry contexts depends not only on programmatic access but also on the sustained emotional and relational work it demands. At its most powerful, RJ is not a supplement to reentry -- it is reentry as the process through which individuals return to themselves, their communities, and the ongoing work of collective transformation.

TAKEAWAY 4*:*

Restorative justice plays four primary roles: provides a forum for meaningful accountability for harms perpetrated, helps people heal from past harms, serves as a springboard for healing relationships with community, and, for many, becomes a daily practice. In the context of reentry, RJ helps people see themselves as valuable contributors to their communities and empowers them to choose communities that appreciate and support them.

58 For a case study detailing the positive impact of another RJ reentry program, see Precious Skinner-Osei and Peter Claudius Osei, "Integrating Restorative Justice Principles into Reentry Programs and Recidivism Measures Using the C.A.R.E. Model," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* (November 27, 2024): 1–13.

Part 4

Conclusion: The relevance of this research

This project sought to explore the impact of TPP's informal support reentry, including how it is led by directly impacted people and grounded in restorative practices. In the process, we heard about experiences of both suffering and inflicting harm, and the scarring, dehumanizing and isolating impact of being subjected to the carceral system. We also heard about the importance of friendship, kindness, empathy, accountability, trust, and community.

We learned that for people experiencing reentry, there is no predetermined beginning, middle or end. In fact, for many people, "reentry" is simply life after incarceration. Because of this, reentry support requires a multilayered approach: including formal programs to address immediate and possibly recurring discrete needs, like employment, housing, mental health and physical health needs. These supports need to be available in a way that people can access help at multiple points over time.

Addressing discrete material needs is necessary, but insufficient. People's social and emotional needs are just as important. They benefit from guidance that is informed by lived experience, nonjudgmental, honest, accurate, believable and humanizing. People need tools for self-reflection, problem solving and emotional stability. They need assistance in developing or continuing to use the skills they've acquired to address the traumas they experienced before and during incarceration, and the fears and anxiety they may face upon returning home. They need support to repair their relationships with self, the person they have harmed, and with their communities, both at the interpersonal and social level. These tools are more readily wielded if they are tailored to the specific experiences of people who have been incarcerated.

Above all, we heard how people thrive when they are welcomed home by a community that believes in their ability to succeed and shares the joys and challenges along the way. People also told us about the importance of tapping into their ability to help others. Someone who is returning home needs more than case management or compliance checks; they need to feel seen, heard, and valued within a community.

The people we spoke with described how TPP helps them address these needs. This research affirms that TPP's support for people in reentry is more impactful than might be captured in a

simple summary of what it does. As the people we interviewed told us, the beneficial impact of TPP's work is not simply *what they do*, it is *how* they do it. With a support system composed of RJ, peer mentorship, and programming, each component reinforces the other, and creates a community rooted in trust, accountability, and shared experience.

TPP's defines success for their work as: when someone responds to the invitation to begin a restorative journey, including examining the harms one experienced, the harms one commits, committing to repair, and ultimately giving back. This measure of success is humble, born out of understanding the profound difficulties people face in rebuilding life after incarceration. It is an approach to success that meets people where they are and tries to build from there. TPP's informal or unstructured supports to people "succeed" because the staff model success through their practices and consistency, they invite and repeat the invitation for people to start a restorative journey at every step. They introduce opportunities to repair, build, and contribute to community throughout their engagements with people. Grounded in RJ and informed by lived experience, every engagement with TPP includes an invitation to start or continue succeeding.

Part 4

Policy Recommendations

This report has three primary implications for policy and donor leaders in the arena of criminal justice:

Recommendation 1:

Peer-led, restorative justice practices should be instituted across the criminal justice system, including:

- Further support for restorative justice practices throughout the criminal justice system, from the first point of contact through reentry. Guarantee access to RJ opportunities for all, with particular attention to majority Black and Brown communities.
- Ensure that restorative justice programming led by peer mentors is available to all incarcerated individuals who wish to participate—including those in the Department of Youth Services, as well as every jail, House of Correction, and prison.
- Expand support for peer-led, restorative justice programming as part of reentry processes.

Recommendation 2:

End the prohibition that prevents formerly incarcerated individuals with felony convictions from spending time together.

- In practice, this prohibition does not prevent such gatherings; instead, it criminalizes the ability of individuals to rely on their support networks—particularly those who spent decades in prison and for whom the community they built inside served as family throughout their adult lives.

Recommendation 3:

End lifetime parole.

- Parole termination should be a right for individuals who have demonstrated a sustained commitment to building a positive life after incarceration. For many, reentry is not a temporary phase but a lifelong process, marked by ongoing challenges in securing housing, employment, and navigating the social and psychological impacts of incarceration. Prolonged surveillance only worsens these conditions—it's costly, unnecessary, and unjust for those who have shown they can successfully reintegrate and contribute to society.

Appendix A

Interview Script

Project information and consent form

Before we get into the substance of the interview, we will go over the project and consent form, do a grounding and check-in, and an icebreaker.

Project overview:

- This project is collaboration between the World Peace Foundation and TPP. If you have any questions or concerns, you can call me or my colleague [B. Arneson or Bridget Conley]
- We're trying to understand the role TPP plays in peoples' reentry processes**.**

Consent:

- Read the consent form and ask them for a verbal yes or no, and make sure to clarify if they want attribution or anonymity (if interview conducted over Zoom).
- If in person, have them sign the consent form, and make sure to clarify if they want attribution or anonymity.

Describe why this project is important to you.

Grounding and check-in

As part of this interview, we will be incorporating a restorative justice practice to foster a reflective and intentional space. We will begin with an optional grounding exercise, offering a brief moment to center ourselves, followed by a check-in where you can share how you're feeling or what you are bringing into the space today.

This practice is entirely voluntary. For those who wish to participate, I invite you to close your eyes and take three deep breaths, allowing yourself to settle into the moment before we begin.

"Let's take three deep breaths together, inhaling deeply through the nose, and exhaling slowly through the mouth. I'll guide us through the breaths."

"Take a deep breath in and out." *(Pause for breath)*
"Another deep breath in and out." *(Pause for breath)*
"One final deep breath in and out." *(Pause)*

Ice breaker Question

- What is your favorite snack?
- My favorite snack is: [interviewer answer the question].

Background

- How long have you been incarcerated?
- How long have you been a part of the system?
- Are you still on probation and parole or were you when you reentered?
- Date of birth:
- Race:
- Sex/gender:
- Age:
- Religion/spirituality:
- Where were you born and raised?
- What city, town, or neighborhood did you reenter into? Why?

Across the Walls

- Did you receive support inside before you reentered? (e.g., ID, referral to case worker/ navigator, information for reentry services, Medicaid/MassHealth, etc.)
- What trauma did you experience inside that followed you when you reentered? (e.g., medical/dental distrust, violence, navigating systems, etc.)

General Reentry

- Can you tell us what reentry means for you?
- When does reentry begin and end?
- What were your biggest barriers for reentry?
- Who do you call when you need help navigating your reentry process?
- What reentry programs, organizations, or projects helped you? Which ones didn't?
- Did you participate in RJ programming inside?

TPP, RJ and Reentry

- What support/resources did you receive from TPP?
- How do you define restorative justice? What does restorative justice mean for you?
- How many people have you been in contact with from TPP?
- Is working with people with lived experience important to you? Why?
- Did TPP connect you to other helpful individuals or organizations?
- How has TPP played a part in your life?
- Are you still in contact with TPP? If so, what kind of contact?
- Have your family or friends noticed a difference in you after receiving support from TPP?
- Can you share a highlight from your experiences with TPP? Can you share any negative experiences that you had with TPP?
- Describe your community today. What role did TPP play in your community-building?

Check-out and grounding

As we near the end of our time together, we want to close with a brief check-out and grounding exercise to help us transition out of this space mindfully. This is an opportunity to reflect on the conversation, how you're feeling, or any thoughts you're carrying with you. Our goal is to leave feeling more centered and present.

I invite you to briefly share one word or sentence that captures how you are feeling right now or something you are taking away from today's discussion. If you prefer not to share, that's perfectly fine as well.

Now, we'll move into a short grounding exercise. If you feel comfortable, I invite you to close your eyes or soften your gaze. Take a moment to bring your attention to your body and your breath. Notice any areas of tension or discomfort, and with each exhale, try to release that tension.

Let's take three deep breaths together, inhaling deeply through the nose, and exhaling slowly through the mouth. I'll guide us through the breaths."

"Take a deep breath in and out." *(Pause for breath)*
"Another deep breath in and out." *(Pause for breath)*
"One final deep breath in and out." *(Pause)*

Thank you for your participation and for being present in this space. As we leave, I encourage you to carry forward whatever feels meaningful from today and take time for self-care, as needed. Feel free to stay in this space for a few more moments, or leave whenever you're ready.

World Peace Foundation

World Peace Foundation at
The Fletcher School, Tufts University

114 Curtis Street
Somerville, MA 02144

(617) 627-2255

TRANSFORMATIONAL PRISON PROJECT

Transformational Prison Project

50 Milk Street, 16th Floor
Boston, MA 02109

(978) 318-3447