Formerly Incarcerated Adults in Higher Education: A Life-History Study of a Restorative Approach to Prisoner Reentry

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FORMERLY INCARCERATED ADULTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
A LIFE-HISTORY STUDY OF A RESTORATIVE APPROACH TO PRISONER REENTRY

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2018

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TITLE OF DISSERTATION: FORMERLY INCARCERATED ADULTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A LIFE-HISTORY STUDY OF A RESTORATIVE APPROACH TO PRISONER REINTEGRATION

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ABSTRACT

The U.S. is the world’s “leading jailer” with both the highest incarceration rate and the largest number of prisoners. Each year more than 700,000 inmates are released from prison and re-enter their communities. The majority of prisoners who are released from prison lack the necessary education, work experience, and life skills to successfully reintegrate back into society.

One alternative to the retributive standard of justice used in the United States is a restorative justice strategy. A restorative approach to prisoner reintegration seeks to re-establish community support and acceptance for criminal offenders in order to allow them to become beneficial members of society. The literature on prisoner re-entry and reintegration suggests that the formerly incarcerated are more apt to successfully re-enter society when they attain education and employment and maintain familial and community associations.

Presently, there is a lack of knowledge about what the formerly incarcerated experience after they are released from prison and participate in post-secondary education. The central research question for this qualitative multi-case study was: What effect has participation in higher education for the formerly incarcerated had on their experiences of reintegration back into their communities? The study further examined the barriers to higher education encountered, the social and human capital attained, and former prisoners’ experiences during both incarceration and higher education.

Six participants were invited to tell their life stories in order to make meaning of their experiences as both prisoners and as higher education students. One of the life stories was an auto-ethnographic account of the researcher’s own experience as both a former
inmate and, presently, a doctoral candidate. Qualitative interviews were used to collect data from the other participants. Life-story and phenomenological methods were employed to collect and analyze these data. A cross-case analysis was conducted to compare and contrast the individual cases.

Findings indicate that participating in higher education had a positive impact on the reintegration experience of those formerly incarcerated individuals that participated in the study. The participant’s life-stories suggest that higher education played an important role in restoring and creating relationships within the community, and enhanced their human and social capital.
DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to all the courageous formerly incarcerated people that are participating or have participated in post-secondary education after their incarceration. Their perseverance and commitment toward the goal of achieving a college/university degree is truly extraordinary.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research would not have been possible if my good friend and the finest police officer in San Diego, Sergeant Jeff Pace, had not believed in me and supported my efforts to start this research. He encouraged me to examine with an experienced eye the effects of incarceration and the possibilities with alternative, restorative justice strategies for prisoner re-entry. Jeff has been a friend for over twenty-years; he visited me in prison in Colorado, and he set in motion the critical meeting I eventually had with Dr. Alan Mobley at San Diego State University shortly after my release from federal prison. Jeff is the epitome of a police officer who believes and practices restorative justice on the streets as a career cop. He is one of the really good guys.

I would like to thank and honor each of my dissertation committee members for their guidance, wisdom, and friendship throughout my doctoral studies at the University of San Diego. Dr. Bob Donmoyer is the reason that I began my doctoral journey, and he stayed with me even when my studies were interrupted for twenty-eight months while I was incarcerated. He is a remarkable friend, a phenomenal editor, and a caring and compassionate educator. Likewise, Dr. Fred Galloway taught me the importance of research design and challenged me to ask the right questions. Fred also was always available to discuss any ideas about my research, and more importantly, he always wanted to make sure all was “ok” in my life whenever we met. Dr. Terri Monroe has a very special place in my heart. She believed in me when I returned to the University of San Diego after my incarceration. Her compassion and love supported my journey as I began the difficult process of reintegrating back into the community at the University of San Diego. I am grateful for her mentorship, love, and continued support. Dr. Alan
Mobley, was unknown to me until after my incarceration. As a criminologist, he patiently supported and encouraged my research, and he guided me on my own journey to understanding and now applying restorative justice practices to support other students. Alan has become a good friend, and like Bob, Fred, and Terri constitute my panel of wise and loving elders.

I would like to extend my gratitude to the many formerly incarcerated students and graduates that supported this study, most notably Ryan Rising, Jason Bell, DeAndre Brooks, Rena Alspaw, and Martin Leyva. Their support provided a rich tapestry of knowledge about the experiences of incarceration and post-incarceration higher education. Many of the formerly incarcerated students have had a heroic journey from prison to colleges. I hope they will persist in successfully breaking through the many barriers that face the formerly incarcerated and continue to mentor and set an example for others to follow. I would also like to recognize the support I received from all the students and staff, most notably Dr. Dan Stacy, from Project Rebound at San Diego State University. The Project Rebound Students provided inspiration as I collected data for this study and subsequently began the arduous process of writing the research findings.

This research has been at the center of my life for fifteen months. My Mom and Dad who both live with us, along with my wife and four children all lovingly supported my commitment to earning my doctoral degree and this research in particular. My wife, Colette, is an astonishing person in so many ways, and I remain the luckiest man on the planet because I am the recipient of her devotion and love. Colette, Mom, Dad, Brendan, Caitlin, Kelly, and Eric thank you for your love, and I hope this work honors the sacrifices you have made for me as your son, husband, dad, and step-dad. Finally, if I
individually named all of my family and friends that supported me, this research, and my education then the reader would surely be exhausted before ever reading this study. I am grateful to all of my tribe for “lifting me up” and allowing me to be the best version of myself. My own “better angels” have been re-born because of your support and unconditional love.
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CHAPTER 1
BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Introduction

There are more than ten million incarcerated people throughout the world, and 2.3 million of those incarcerated are in the United States alone (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2016). The U.S. has the highest number of people incarcerated among all nations, and the second highest rate of incarceration in the world right behind the Republic of Seychelles, a small island nation in the Indian Ocean. The U.S. contains five percent of the world population but, astonishingly, comprises twenty-five percent of the world prisoner population (MacKenzie, 2010). The economic and social impact of mass incarceration in the United States has become an important concern for lawmakers and policymakers.

The U.S. prisoner population, which includes juveniles and adults in both state and federal jails, prisons and other detention facilities, was stable for most of the twentieth century (Blumenstein, 2011). However, the prisoner population increased more than five-fold from 1970 through 2008 (Beddoes, 2017) due to a mix of “tough on crime statutes,” the “so-called war on drugs,” and other offender focused, punitive measures at both the federal and state levels. Historically, the policies and statutes that led to mass incarceration in the Unites States have had bipartisan support across several presidential administrations. For instance, in the early 1970’s the Nixon Administration initiated the “war on drugs,” and the Reagan Administration in the 1980’s supported both the “war on drugs” and other tough on crime measures that ushered in the era of mass incarceration. Further, under the Clinton Administration, the Violent Crime Control and Law
Enforcement Act of 1994 became the largest crime bill ever passed and provided for the single greatest increase in prison funding (Hartmann, 2007).

The incarceration rate for most of the last century in the United States was approximately 100 per 100,000 adults (MacKenzie, 2010); the current incarceration rate is over 700 per 100,000 adults (Blumenstein, 2011). Further, until the beginning of the current decade, the prisoner population and rate of incarceration grew substantially every decade as policy makers established more laws, stricter sentencing guidelines, and in some jurisdictions minimized judicial discretion for low-level, first-time offenders. Taken together, government expenditures to support prisoners, parolees and probationers exceeds over 80 billion dollars a year (Beddoes, 2017). More significantly, annual budget increases in the last thirty years in support of incarceration has far surpassed increases in many other domestic spending programs including education (Meiners, 2009).

Although the negative economic consequences of mass incarceration in the U.S. in general has garnered attention by lawmakers, the greatest social harm is being carried out by the criminal justice system against minority communities. The prisons in the United States are generally filled beyond designated capacity with predominantly minority males (Mobley, 2011). Although female prisoners as a group have significantly increased in the last two decades chiefly due to tougher sentencing guidelines for drug offenders (Cobbina, 2010), females still comprise less than ten percent of the overall prisoner population. The U.S. is a nation in which the prison population is principally occupied by men of color, largely African American and Hispanic males.
The overrepresentation of minority males has had a considerably negative impact on the communities from which these men hail (Fox, 2012). It is no trivial matter that residents in lower-income minority communities are subject to a stricter application of criminal justice, and more often receive harsher punishment in the form of longer prison sentences than residents in similar socio-economic white communities (Chen, 2013; Massoglia, Firebaugh & Warner, 2012).

Under the Obama Administration it appeared that the era of “mass incarceration” was coming to an end with proposed criminal justice reforms surfacing from both Republican and Democratic lawmakers (Travis, 2014). In fact, criminal justice reform is one issue which has significant support from conservative and liberal lawmakers and advocates; supporters, in fact, include such diverse individuals as George Soros and the Koch brothers (Dickinson, 2015). The Trump Administration under Attorney General Sessions appears to be attempting to reverse progress regarding justice reform from the previous administration, and the impact on incarceration rates is as of yet unknown. Regardless of federal initiatives, policymakers in many U.S. states, both liberal and conservative, who have jurisdiction over the majority of the prison population, have begun to roll-back some of the laws and policies that have made the U.S. the world’s “leading jailer” (Blumestein, 2011). Currently, there is uncertainty as to whether “mass incarceration” has peaked or if higher rates of incarceration are still yet to come.

The U.S. criminal justice system itself is retributive in nature, and focuses on proportionate punishment and sanctions against the criminal offender (Zehr, 2015). The U.S. criminal justice system stands in contrast to the justice systems of many other developed nations, such as Norway, Canada, and France, that employ a more
rehabilitative or restorative model of justice. In a recent cover article in The Economist, the author concluded that America’s approach to incarceration is an “expensive failure,” and has ultimately led to making released offenders more inclined toward criminal activity as a result of incarceration (Beddoes, 2017). Countries such as Norway, Germany and Japan have incarceration rates up to eighty percent less that the U.S., yet they also have lower recidivism and lower overall crime rates (MacKenzie, 2010). The literature uniformly supports the fact that the U.S. leads the world in incarceration but also continues to have higher crime rates than most developed nations. Not surprisingly, there are viable alternatives to the U.S. punitive system of justice which cost less and provide better outcomes for all stakeholders.

A restorative justice model is a leading alternative to the retributive justice model. In addition to rehabilitation of the offender, restorative justice is a community led approach that pursues repairing harm done to the victim. Restorative justice, as the name applies, seeks to restore relationships between the three stakeholders affected by crime – the victim, the offender, and the community (Zehr, 2015). Restorative justice has a long history with the indigenous peoples of North America, and in the last few decades has been utilized to a greater degree in numerous developed countries. The U.S. system of justice is “offender” focused, while restorative justice focuses on the victim and simultaneously considers the needs of the offender and the community (Carson & Bussler, 2013). Put simply, restorative justice, when applied properly, may lead to reconciliation and forgiveness by the victim who was harmed and the offender who committed the harm. Restorative justice also provides an opportunity for the offender to
fully reintegrate back into society with support from the community (Bazemore & Maruna, 2009).

Restorative justice does not negate incarceration as a part of the process of restoration and holding an offender accountable, but incarceration and punishment are not the primary goal and can often be an ineffective remedy to the harm done. Admittedly, there are some offenders who commit crimes and possess anti-social behavior that require segregation and incarceration from the rest of society in order to protect others. However, in the U.S. criminal justice system, far too many people are incarcerated because the citizenry and state are angry at their alleged criminal behavior as opposed to reserving incarceration for offenders that are a threat to public safety (Zehr, 2015). Many prisoners in the U.S. do not represent any continued threat to other persons or society as a whole. Mass incarceration in the U.S. is the result of failed policy over decades, and it has resulted in a racially discriminatory prison industrial complex that is no longer affordable (Mears & Cochran, 2015). Mass incarceration has caused harm to marginalized communities and families (Fox, 2012) and has not provided healing for victims and communities nor rehabilitation for offenders (Zehr, 2015).

Much of the literature on restorative justice theory and practice in the U.S. is focused on understanding and changing outcomes through alternative sentencing for offenders, especially juveniles. There is a small body of restorative justice literature that examines a model for restorative justice prisoner re-entry and reintegration back into the community. A restorative justice community reintegration strategy that focuses on elements of successful prisoner reentry, particularly participation in higher education, has not been developed or studied to any significant extent or in much detail.
Statement of the Problem

The era of “mass incarceration” has resulted in today’s period of “mass re-entry” of prisoners back into their communities. The vast majority of those incarcerated, over ninety-five percent, will be released back into their communities once their sentence is complete (Petersilia, 2004). Over 700,000 prisoners are released from U.S. jails and prisons every year, and the number of prisoners released annually is expected to grow in the next decade (Lattimore & Steffey, 2010). Additionally, there are over six million people under some form of judicial supervision that includes home confinement, living in residential re-entry centers, parole and probation (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2016). The vast majority of those prisoners who are reentering society lack the necessary social, work, and life skills to successfully reintegrate back into their communities (Petersilia, 2003).

Prisoner re-entry and reintegration as a broad topic has been studied, and the literature continues to expand regarding re-entry and reintegration. A review of the literature reveals that employment, family support, education and access to medical care are some of the most important components necessary for prisoner reintegration (Bowman & Travis, 2012). Unfortunately, the research on the formerly incarcerated concludes that many do not possess these components for successful reintegration, and the result is a return to criminal activity and high recidivism rates. The economic and social costs of incarceration, however, provide significant incentives to find and promote successful prisoner reintegration back into their community (Woods, Lanza, Dyson & Gordon, 2013).
Education generally and post-secondary education specifically provides expanded economic and social opportunities for those who participate (Brown, 2014). The currently incarcerated and the formerly incarcerated encounter significant barriers to participate in higher education (Pryor & Thompkins, 2013). The data available for the formerly incarcerated participating in higher education is sparse, and the research on the experience and effects participation in higher education by the formerly incarcerated is very limited. While higher education is a transformative life experience for many, unfortunately the opportunity for higher education for the formerly incarcerated rarely exists. Even where it does exist, there is a gap in the knowledge of the effects higher education has on the formerly incarcerated in terms of successful reintegration. There is a need to study the effects and the experience of participating in higher education by the formerly incarcerated with an eye toward determining if and how such experiences can contribute to successful prisoner reintegration.

**The Purpose of the Study**

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the effect participation in higher education had on the experience of reintegration for formerly incarcerated adults back into their communities. The study also investigated the following: (1) the similarities and differences in the experiences of incarceration and higher education for the formerly incarcerated, (2) the barriers the formerly incarcerated have encountered in participating in higher education, (3) the effects participation in higher education for the formerly incarcerated had on the restoration of relationships within the community, and (4) the social capital realized within the community, and the human capital attained when the formerly incarcerated participated in higher education.
Education and training are two components in the prisoner reintegration process. The objective of this research was to garner a greater understanding of prisoner re-entry and reintegration as it related to formerly incarcerated adults participating in higher education. The literature predominantly concludes that the current state of the U.S. criminal justice system to include reintegration strategies for released offenders needs to be reformed. Mass incarceration followed by mass reentry has been a costly failure in the U.S. (Mears & Cochran, 2015). The “revolving door” of inmates being released from prison and subsequently re-entering prison is expensive and remains an ineffective means of reducing criminal behavior (Beddoes, 2017). Restorative justice is one alternative strategy for the current punitive model in the U.S. Specifically, a restorative approach to re-entry and reintegration for the formerly incarcerated with components such as participation in higher education requires more study.

**Research Questions**

The study was guided by one central research question:

RQ1. What effect, if any, has participation in higher education for the formerly incarcerated had on their experience of reintegration back into the community?

In addition to the central research question the following related sub-questions further directed the study and the collection and analysis of data:

RQ2. What barriers to participation in higher education did the formerly incarcerated face both while incarcerated and post-incarceration?
RQ3. How, if at all, has participation in higher education for the formerly incarcerated led to a restoration of their relationships with others and the community?

RQ4. How has participation in higher education changed the formerly incarcerated study participants’ human capital, as well as their social capital within the community?

RQ5. What are the similarities and differences in the experiences of incarceration and higher education for formerly incarcerated adults who have participated in post-secondary education?

Additional research questions did emerge as data was collected and analyzed as is wholly appropriate due to the qualitative character of this study. These emergent research questions will be discussed in the findings and discussion chapters of this study.

**Methodological Overview**

The research was designed as a series of phenomenological life stories organized as single case studies. This qualitative study was centered on the collection and analysis of data assembled from six life stories from selected adults who have been previously incarcerated and subsequently participated in post-secondary education. The participants were selected from the State of California, and the sample was purposefully chosen to include at least one female of any race, two African American males and two Hispanic males. One of the narratives was an auto-biographical account of the researcher’s own experience as a formerly incarcerated adult who is currently completing his doctoral degree and has participated in higher education both pre-incarceration and post-
incarceration. The oral narratives focused on the participants’ lived experience as both a prisoner and as student in order to make meaning of the two experiences, and how they potentially relate to one another.

Each life story was preserved as a separate case study for a collection of six distinct case studies. A phenomenological research method was used as the underlying method in the case studies due to the importance on the experience and perspectives of all participants to include the researcher. The individual case studies were analyzed and categorized for emerging themes and coded as appropriate. A phenomenological cross-case analysis was utilized as the primary research method to compare and contrast the individual case studies created from the “life stories” of the participants. The findings and the discussion concentrates on the shared experience of all participants, with a comparison of the themes, the differences, and the similarities of the five cases.

**Delimitations and Limitations of the Study**

This study was limited in scope, and the sample population was rather small (n=6). The larger population of formerly incarcerated adults who have not participated in higher education was not studied. Rather, the target population of this study was the much smaller population of formerly incarcerated adults who chose to pursue post-secondary education upon their release from prison. The target population and the selected sample population most likely was not able to provide any definitive knowledge regarding the overall formerly incarcerated population. Additionally, the qualitative multi-case study approach in comparison to either a broader qualitative approach or quantitative methodology was selected in order to better understand the phenomena and experience of incarceration and participation in higher education. The selected methods for this study
did not intend to measure effects between education and community reintegration for former inmates. Thus, the choice of a small and very specific sample size and the qualitative-only nature of the study which excluded the larger population of formerly incarcerated adults were the primary delimitations of the study.

As is the case in all research, the researcher must make choices based on the time to research, available resources, and the knowledge to conduct the study. Qualitative research generally, limits the researchers’ ability to obtain a larger sample size, and this was certainly the case with this study. A qualitative approach to the central research question was the most appropriate methodology in order to investigate the extent to which higher education affects former prisoners’ reintegration success; the choice of a qualitative only approach, however, did reduce the potential that the findings were transferable to the larger population of formerly incarcerated adults.

The nature of collecting oral life stories as method necessitates that the participants own version of their stories are truthful and accurate. Self-reporting one’s story through their private recollection was a limitation imposed on this qualitative approach. The data collected was from personal narratives where the story may not have been completely factual based due to time passing and each participants own bias about self, others and the broader environment in which their story unfolded. The study centered on the experience of the formerly incarcerated, and as such may not have captured more objective data if an alternative methodology was employed. Further, the use of a cross-case analysis as the primary method used to determine similarities, differences and themes assumed that the data reflects the completely accurate lived experiences of the participants. Lastly, my own experience as a formerly incarcerated
adult who has also participated in higher education was a limitation that may have influenced the overall research; this researcher bias was recognized, but it was not necessarily completely controlled, and consequently was a notable limitation.

**Definitions of Key Terms**

A cumulative review of the literature was utilized to define key terms that were used throughout the study. The following definitions are an important reference for the reader, and they are defined from a restorative justice perspective, which may differ from other frequently used definitions. The following terms are defined as a readily accessible resource for readers:

**Crime:** Crime is a violation of people and relationships. It creates obligations to make things right (Zehr, 2015).

**Retributive or Punitive Justice:** Retributive justice is a crime theory that promotes proportionate punishment inflicted for its own sake, rather than for rehabilitation or deterrence.

**Restorative Justice:** Restorative justice involves the victim, the offender, and the community in a search for solutions which promote repair, reconciliation, and reassurance (Zehr, 2015).

**Offender:** The offender is the person, group or entity that is responsible for the harm associated with the crime.

**Victim:** The victim is the person, group or entity that has been harmed by a crime.
Community: The community is the environment and the people living in the environment where the crime has occurred, the victim lives, and the offender lives. The community could be one environment or multiple environments.

Recidivism: Recidivism is the propensity for an offender to reoffend, commit new crimes or engage in new criminal activities.

Human Capital: Human capital refers to the sum of knowledge, education, skills, and social and personality attributes embedded in labor that produce economic value.

Social Capital: Social capital refers to the connections among individuals and social networks that lead to reciprocity and trust that arise with such networks.

Stigma: Stigma is a label, attached to offenders, which labels them as outcasts. Stigma often results in society permanently rejecting criminal offenders as members of the community which affects their opportunities for employment, housing, and access to benefits to name just a few.

Shame: Shame is a feeling of regret or sadness that an offender feels as a result of his crime and incarceration, and can result in an inability to heal from the pain and humiliation of incarceration. Shame can be positive if it is managed and supported by the community as part of an offender’s accountability and reintegration back into society (Braithwaite, 1989).

**Significance of the Study**

Prisoner re-entry and reintegration is one of the most critical issues facing the U.S. criminal justice system today. A detailed investigation into the effects higher education has had on prisoner reintegration back into the community should contribute to an
enhanced understanding of the success or failure of the experience of prisoners transitioning from incarceration to free society. The unique lived experiences, especially what appears to be a deep contrast between the experiences of incarceration on the one hand, and higher education on the other, of this distinctive population required further research. This study began to fill the knowledge void in regards to the formerly incarcerated population and their challenges with re-entry and reintegration.

The objective of the research was to gain a greater understanding of prisoner re-entry and reintegration as it related to formerly incarcerated adults participating in higher education. The literature predominantly concludes that the current state of the U.S. criminal justice system needs to be reformed, especially in terms of the systemic mass incarceration of offenders (Mears & Cochran, 2015). The “revolving door” of prisoners exiting and subsequently re-entering prison is costly and remains an ineffective means of reducing criminal behavior (Beddoes, 2017). Restorative justice is one alternative model for the current punitive model in the U.S. Specifically, a restorative approach to re-entry and reintegration for the formerly incarcerated with components such as participation in higher education requires more study.

The research on the formerly incarcerated in higher education should be beneficial to two key constituencies. First, policy makers and all stakeholders involved in the criminal justice system agree that reintegration back into the community is an important element in the overall system (Petersilia, 2003). A better understanding of the key components of prisoner re-entry and reintegration, specifically involvement in higher education in this study, should also serve as a guide for a more comprehensive understanding of
reintegration for criminal justice practitioners, policymakers and all other stakeholders in
the criminal justice system.

Second, this research should be valuable to higher education administrators, faculty
and student affairs professionals who often possess limited knowledge regarding this
marginalized, student population that is expected to grow as more prisoners re-enter
society. Most higher education institutions seek to recognize and support disenfranchised
populations, most notably minorities, and this study should provide beneficial insight into
the formerly incarcerated student population who are more often from disadvantaged,
minority communities.

Lastly, this study was intended to raise awareness regarding mass incarceration in the
United States, and optimistically enhance citizens’ understanding of some of the
challenges former inmates face when they reenter society. Nelson Mandela once said “It
is said that no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation
should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones.” The
citizenry of the U.S. could benefit by understanding and empathizing with the formerly
incarcerated population that continues to be marginalized and stigmatized long after they
have paid their debt to society.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This literature review will examine the issues and outcomes associated with formerly incarcerated adults participating in higher education. The relevant literature will be reviewed in three broad areas: restorative justice theory and practice, components of prisoner reentry, and the experience of formerly incarcerated adults in higher education. The literature review will evaluate the research pertaining to the theoretical framework of restorative justice and practice as it relates to formerly incarcerated adults. The review will also incorporate an investigation of the prisoner re-entry elements that are associated with effective outcomes. An investigation examining the previous research conducted on adult felons who have enrolled in higher education will conclude the literature review.

This examination of the literature will commence with the theoretical constructs associated with restorative justice and successful prisoner re-entry and, close with the fundamental area of interest – formerly incarcerated adults in higher education.

Restorative justice theory and practice will provide the primary theoretical lens for the literature review and subsequent research.

   Restorative justice theory and practice is a broad field that encompasses a large group of justice-involved juveniles and adults, as well as practices used in primary and secondary schools and universities for disciplinary programs. The nucleus of the restorative justice literature review will be adults who have been incarcerated and successfully transitioned back into society. Likewise, the fundamental components of prisoner re-entry are an expansive category within the field of criminal justice research;
the focus of this review will be on the most effective re-entry factors as they relate to the adult former prisoner population. The literature on adult felons who have participated in higher education does not constitute a large body of existing research, but the available data will be reviewed as exhaustively as practicable.

The principal scope of the literature review will predominantly consist of research drawn from published articles in scholarly journals in the last two decades. Restorative justice theory and practice in the United States is a relatively new construct. The vast majority of the research has taken place since 2000 when the U.S. criminal justice system began to re-evaluate the effects of mass incarceration and mass prisoner re-entry back into society (Mears & Cochran, 2015). The key word search used for all three sections of this paper include the following: restorative justice theory, restorative justice practice, components of prisoner re-entry, effective prisoner re-entry principles, and formerly incarcerated adults in higher education. Further, the phrase formerly incarcerated adults will be used interchangeably with the terms felon, ex-convict and former prisoner – as these terms are often substitutable in the literature.

This literature review will pursue the parallels that may exist between the construct of restorative justice theory and practice with the elements of adult prisoner re-entry, and with the experience of formerly incarcerated adults who are participating or who have participated in higher education after re-entry. There appears to be a significant gap in the literature between restorative justice theory and practice and the actual application of successful re-entry when former prisoners participate in higher education. The first section of this paper will outline the theoretical underpinning of restorative justice theory and practice.
Restorative Justice Theory and Practice

Howard Zehr, considered by most criminologists to be the grandfather of restorative justice theory, first wrote “Changing Lenses: Restorative Justice for Our Times” in 1990 (1st edition). At the time of Zehr’s groundbreaking publication introducing restorative justice theory there was little known about the field or the practical application of restorative justice in the U.S. criminal justice system. Zehr subsequently wrote three more editions, updating and revising the emerging theoretical and practical context of restorative justice. In this first section of this review, definitions for restorative justice and other terms related to restorative justice theory will be delineated along with the history and background of the theory. The section will then address the literature connected with the three stakeholders who interact in restorative practice – the victim, the offender, and the community. Lastly, the section will consider the practices most often employed in a restorative application of justice.

Definitions

There seems to be a lack of definitional clarity (Harris, 1998) as well as some confusion concerning the theory of restorative justice versus the practice of restorative justice (Morrison & Ahmed, 2006). A definition for restorative justice for this review is offered from the founding theorist himself, when he writes: “Crime is a violation of people and relationships. It creates obligations to make things right. Justice involves the victim, the offender, and the community in search for solutions which promote repair, reconciliation, and reassurance” (Zehr, 2015, p.183). The common thread for all variations of the definitions regarding restorative justice is that there are three leading stakeholders associated with the theory: the victim, the offender, and the community.
The victim constitutes the person, persons, or entity that was harmed from a crime. The offender is the person or persons that perpetuate the wrongdoing, while the community is identified as the area in which the crime occurred and is affected by it (Zehr, 2015). Lastly, a definition of restorative justice requires a reference to the three core principles of restorative theory which are to repair harm, reduce risk and empower the community (O’ Brien, 2007).

The system of justice most commonly employed in the United States is retributive justice, and is defined as justice in which punishment is doled out to right wrongs and deter future wrongdoing (Stout and Salm, 2011). The key distinction is that retributive justice focuses on punishing the offender as opposed to reconciliation between the victim and offender, which is the restorative model (Zehr, 2015). The retributive standard is offender focused, with the state as the primary actor compared to the restorative paradigm, which focuses on the victim with the offender and the community as the stakeholders. Restorative justice may lead toward reconciliation, restoration, and perhaps, even transformation (Zehr, 2015). In the retributive archetype, crime is committed against the state, and the state represents the victim to bring justice against the offender.

Crime has generally been defined in terms of violating the law, and crime is tackled in the U.S. criminal justice system by punishing illegal behavior. A restorative approach defines crime as a violation of people and relationships (Choi, Gilbert & Green, 2013). In the restorative model, crime is a violation against the person; the offender, the victim and the community work toward restoring or transforming the harm caused to the victim (Escholz, 2003). In a restorative lens, crime is chiefly defined as breaking relationships
(Escholz, 2001; Zehr 2015), and restorative justice’s main goal is to restore the broken relationships (Carson & Bussler, 2013).

**History and Background**

Although the contemporary use of the term and the theory of restorative justice is relatively new – since Zehr’s “Changing Lenses”, the practice can be traced back to the earliest human nomadic tribes as a means of resolving conflict (Sivasubramaniam, 2012). Restorative justice was exercised in ancient indigenous societies (Carson & Bussler, 2013), and the roots of today’s restorative justice theory and practice is inextricably linked to both the Old Testament and New Testament of the Bible (Zehr, 2015). Restorative justice practice remains a utilitarian way of resolving conflict and addressing community needs among indigenous groups in North America and around the globe. Restorative justice practice may have been the dominant form of justice in ancient times in the Western World until the rise of Imperial Rome, when the state assumed the primary role of settling disputes and addressing crime. The United States, likewise, employs the state as the chief actor in the criminal justice system. Although restorative justice theory may have its roots in Biblical tradition, all major world religions possess many of the core components found in restorative justice principles (Fritz, 2005).

Howard Zehr offers that the foundation of restorative justice is in the Old Testament of the Bible. Vengeance was replaced with proportionality in the Bible, as the well-known dictum of “an eye for an eye” in the Book of Exodus, sought to introduce proportionality vice vengeance. More importantly, the Jewish belief of Shalom, living in Peace, is at the heart of a restorative and reconciliatory model of justice (Zehr, 2015).
To live in Shalom means that people live in peace, without enmity (but not necessarily without conflict!). The Bible makes it clear that this includes living in a just economic and political relationship with one another. Over and over the Bible makes it clear that oppression and injustice are contrary to shalom, and they do not represent right relationships, and they must not be allowed to exist (Zehr, 2015, p.143).

The notion of restoring relationships is the essence of restorative justice where crime damages relationships, and restorative justice pursues healing those damaged connections.

Admittedly, the Bible provides many examples of retribution and vengeance; however, reconciliation and restoration are more robustly represented in the many stories and books of the Bible (Sarre & Young, 2011). Biblical justice is mostly directed toward restoration rather than retribution (Zehr, 2015). The New Testament with the teachings of Jesus Christ, center on forgiveness, reconciliation and making relationships right with each other and God. Forgiveness is at the heart of Christianity as first written in The New Testament. Understandably, forgiveness may not be possible in all situations in which someone has been victimized. Nonetheless, it is a goal that remains open in the restorative model.

In modern western culture, restorative justice practices have a mixed history. Surprisingly, Sir Winston Churchill, proclaimed support for restorative justice in the British Parliament when he spoke:

We cannot impose these serious penalties upon individuals unless we make a great new effort to rehabilitate men who have been in prison and secure their
having a chance to resume and secure their places in the ranks of honorable society. (Churchill, 1910)

In the Amish and Mennonite Christian Communities in North America for instance, restorative justice is often practiced as intended, considering the needs of the victim, offender, and community (Sarre & Young, 2011). Zehr’s foundational model for restorative justice can be traced to the ancient western world and the most influential book in the west – the Bible. However, it is relevant to reiterate that all major world religious writings have significant elements of restorative justice practices contained in their beliefs and writings.

The Victim

The victims of crime in the United States are not the center of interest in the criminal justice system. Rather, the offender receives the most attention by the state and often the community; the victims of crime are frequently overlooked and neglected in the justice process (Zehr, 2015). Restorative justice theory places victims in the center of resolving the dispute and correcting the harm done to them. It is important to note that much of the research conducted regarding restorative justice favors the impact on the offenders, and their potential for successful reintegration into society (vice the victims). Researchers have been unable to quantify the impact that restorative justice practices have had on the victims (Bazemore & Green, 2007). Moreover, victim participation is voluntary (Kay, 2001), which may not account for many of the potential restorative justice successes.

Restorative justice practice is not limited to specific types of crime, and may be just as beneficial for crimes of violence as well as petty theft (Zehr, 2015). Domestic violence is one area that has been studied, which restorative justice may be particularly suitable for
healing the victims of such crimes. It is important to note that the offender of domestic violence is most probably known to the victim, and very often is a family member. Current legal remedies in domestic violence cases frequently fail both the victim and the offender (Elias, 2015). Further, restorative justice applications in domestic violence cases regularly provide the opportunity for the victim and the offender to negotiate some form of reconciliation, restoration, or restitution for the harm done to the victim. Restorative practices such as victim-offender mediation, family group conferencing or a peacemaking circle may be employed to reconcile victims and offenders in a domestic abuse dispute (Elias, 2015). Moreover, restorative practices may be most appropriate in domestic violence cases, where reconciliation is a real possibility, since more often than not the victim and offender share a familial or intimate relationship that needs healing.

The research on the impact to victims when applying restorative justice practices is scarce (Strang, 2002). One particularly noteworthy study conducted by Sherman and Strang in 2005 compared the effects of restorative justice practices on victims utilizing randomized control trials (RCT’s). The findings revealed that in almost all cases those victims who participated in a restorative model had a higher level of material and emotional healing as compared to those victims who remained in the status quo criminal justice system (Sherman, Strang, Woods & Barnes, 2005). These findings are noteworthy because the RCT methodology is a methodological approach that allows causal inferences; in other words, a group of victims receiving interventions in a restorative model is compared to those who remain as non-participants and did not receive an intervention in the justice system.
The majority of the research focused on victim impact and outcomes does suggest that restorative applications are more beneficial to the victim than court or adversarial proceedings (Bazemore & Green, 2007). Even though researchers may agree that restorative practices tend to derive more benefit to victims than the current adversarial-offender focused system; there is little agreement on what principles of restorative justice have the most impact. There is also the question of whether restorative practices are good or if the court process is so bad that any alternative might be better (Leonard & Kenny, 2011).

Bazemore and Green in 2007 proposed three core principles of restorative justice that can be used to measure victim success in the restorative justice model: repair harm, stakeholder involvement, and community transformation. Much of the literature concludes that restorative justice is a more favorable arrangement for addressing the needs and harm done to victims of crime (Clark, 2008). However, there appears to be a requirement for additional research to understand if victims participating in restorative practices have a higher level of satisfaction as compared to the current criminal justice system.

The Offender

The offender is the predominant actor in the adversarial criminal justice system exercised in the United States. Once the state with the government prosecutor as its surrogate determines a law has been broken and a guilty party (the offender) exists, then all available resources are employed to serve justice to the offender. More often than not, regardless of the nature of the crime (violent vs. non-violent), incarceration is the prevalent form of punishment (Zehr, 2015). Punishment with offenders receiving their
“just desserts” in the form of a prison sentence supposedly commensurate with their crime is what justice demands in the U.S. criminal justice system (Mears & Cochran, 2015). It is therefore no surprise that the number of incarcerated persons as well as the incarceration rate in the U.S. remains the highest in the world (Pager, 2006) – far surpassing more repressive regimes such as China, Russia, Saudi Arabia and North Korea. Yet, researchers continue to find that lengthy and harsh prison sentences do not correlate with reduced crime or deter criminal activity (Mears & Cochrane, 2015).

The restorative justice model seeks to repair harm created by crime and is victim centered; the offender in the restorative paradigm must be held accountable, but harming or punishing the offender is not the desired end-state. Even in a restorative approach there are times when incarceration is necessary (Zehr, 2015) to protect the victim and segregate the offender from society. However, alternative sentencing, which is sentencing other than incarceration is the preferred method. In a meta-analysis of several studies that included such diverse geographies as Israel, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States, community service programs resulted in reduced recidivism for offenders who participated in those programs (Bazemore & Boba, 2007). It is relevant to note, however, that many of the offenders who participated in community service programs also received some length of prison sentence. Nonetheless, many criminologists note that the experience of incarceration does more long-term harm to the offender and the community, and does not reduce the rate of recidivism for offenders (Leyva & Bickel, 2010).

Although the research on recidivism for offenders who receive alternative sentencing (less punitive and more restorative) remains sparse, a few studies have provided mixed
findings. One such study conducted with the State of Vermont Department of Corrections (VDOC) examined offenders convicted of misdemeanors and minor felonies. The participating offenders received alternative sentencing (other than incarceration) through a community board process where the offenders had the opportunity to “tell their side of the story”, repair the harm, and make restitution for their crime. Although recidivism or crime rates were not measured in the Vermont study, it was found that offenders regained a “sense of self”, and they accepted responsibility for their behavior as they were held accountable for the harm they caused (Cohen, 2001).

Prison is a humiliating and harmful experience for most, and prison yields little opportunity to repair harm the offender has committed against the victim or the community (Barak, 2000; Leyva & Bickel, 2010). Alternative forms of accountability such as community service provide the offender with the opportunities to repair harm, be held accountable, build a relationship with the community, and rebuild the offender’s own social and human capital (Bazemore & Boba, 2007). For offenders in the restorative archetype, security and empowerment are rebuilt which enables the offender to achieve future success and realize that nothing is gained through a life of crime (Leonard & Kenny, 2011). The offender, like the victim, has the opportunity to regain his dignity and sense of “self” under the restorative justice umbrella.

Gender and race play a pivotal role when considering offenders in the United States. Offenders are overwhelmingly male (greater than 90%), and correspondingly the punishment for non-whites is often far more punitive than for whites (Mears & Cochrane, 2015). Minority males make-up over sixty percent of the U.S. prison population even though they comprise less than twenty percent of the U.S. populace. The disparity in
racial demographics of U.S. offenders may be explained in terms of both socio-economic and social justice inequalities, which are inherent in minority communities (Barak, 2000). The less politically powerful minority communities seem to have less influence on the current criminal justice system (Alexander, 2012).

The Community

“Central to all restorative justice theory and practice is the fundamental idea that direct contact between offenders and victims, under the protective cover of safety by the community is essential” (Cohen, 2001, p. 212). Crime harms not only the victim but directly harms the community; crime is a violation of individuals and communities. In the U.S. adversarial system the state controls the justice process, and the community, like the victim, is rarely directly involved. Operating with a restorative approach implies that the community has been harmed as well, and community and family play a significant role in resolving the harm (Zehr, 2015). The community is also the nexus in the relationships between offenders and victims. The community must be a central participant in restorative justice (Kay, 2001). The challenges associated with the communities rests with their diverse nature, scarce available resources, demographics and crime rates.

Like the victim, the community must voluntarily participate in the restorative process. There are a myriad of benefits to the community when it is an active part of the resolution. Research has detailed that community involvement results in enhanced social capital of participants, the establishment of collective ownership, and the increased capacity for the community to join in future actions (Bazemore et al., 2007). Community participation in restorative justice has been linked to building increased capacity for civil
society and the practice of democracy (Morrison & Ahmed, 2006). One study found that community participation enhanced capacities in three areas: community efficacy, empowerment and education (Dzur & Olson, 2004). The community generally “knows more about” what is going on and how to resolve conflicts than state actors, which translates into the most suitable outcomes (efficacy). The community is a key resource (Bazemore & Boba, 2007) that provides support for the process, the victim and the offender. Community involvement may also reduce the burden of the state system of justice which is chronically backlogged.

Successful community patronage requires resources, consensus and voluntary participation (Kay, 2001). It is no surprise that minority communities and lower socio-economic communities with scarce resources may not have the impetus for exchanging the restorative approach with the retributive approach. Unfortunately, these low-income communities are often the most affected by crime. The community involves all stakeholders to include community leadership, families, neighbors and friends of both offender and victim (Umbreit, Coates & Vos, 2007). Thus, the community is strengthened through participation in the system of justice (Stout & Salm, 2011).

If restorative justice is transformative, then the community may have the most aptitude for transformation (Bazemore & Boba, 2007). The community is often best equipped to support both victim and offender through support and accountability. The community supports the restorative process, the victim and offender, but it also receives “the necessary healing” from the “broken relationships” which occurred within its boundaries (Zehr, 2015). “The influence of the community can thus be understood as both an independent variable – impacting the capacity of the offender and his/her supporters to be
successful in reintegration – and a dependent variable to be acted upon in the intervention context” (Bazemore & Boba, 2007, p. 29). Community involvement places ownership where it is most appropriate – the community that has been harmed and provides the space for healing for the victim and accountability for the offender. The community is often better equipped than the courts to address both crime and punishment (Dzur & Olson, 2004).

**Restorative Justice Practice and Application**

Restorative practices assume many different applications – often dependent on the target population such as juveniles, students, adults, and minor or serious offenders. Restorative advocates recognize three broad applications using restorative justice: victim-offender reconciliation programs, family group conferences, and circle processes. A fourth practice, community mediation, often referred to as alternative dispute resolution may also be included in some of the restorative justice literature (Stout & Salm, 2011). It is notable that other practices may be labelled restorative because they contain elements of restorative justice, but this review will be limited to the three most widely used practices. Although reconciliation and repairing the harm done to the victim and the community is the objective, outcomes are not the crucial goal in restorative practices. The lack of emphasis on outcomes has resulted in a paucity of studies that measure results or impact (Umbreit et al, 2007).

Victim-offender reconciliation programs (VORP) have several monikers to include victim-offender mediation (VOM), victim offender dialogue (VOD) and victim-offender dispute programs (O’Brien, 2007). Victim-offender reconciliation programs are the oldest and most utilized of the principal restorative practices. Victim-offender
reconciliation programs involve a dialogue between the victim and the offender, with both having a support group to advocate for them; a trained mediator or facilitator sets the boundaries and moderates the dialogue (Umbreit et al, 2007). Boundaries for a successful mediation include a safe environment, respectful interaction and positive energy (Umbreit et al, 2007). The process and a recognition of the “voices” of all participants are essential elements of VORP. Victim-offender reconciliation programs often work independently of the criminal justice system; the process facilitates a safe environment for the victim and the offender to meet face-to-face, and engage in a dialogue often with the offender having the opportunity to ask for forgiveness (Fritz, 2005). The focus of the offender-victim interaction is to find a resolution and begin to repair the harm caused by the crime.

Family group conferences (FGC’s) are another established practice within the restorative practice model. These conferences have their historical foundation in the New Zealand juvenile criminal system as an alternative means to the state system for the indigenous Maori population (Zehr, 2015). The emphasis of the family group conference is for the offender with the support of his family to propose a plan to repair the harm, often with a restitution component to those harmed by the crime (Stout & Salm, 2011). Family group conferences are meant to be as inclusive as possible, and often involve a large element of the offender’s extended family. The offender’s family is the key element in successful family conferences (Zehr, 2015). The issue of guilt is not part of the conference, rather repairing the harm to the victim and reintegrating the offender back into the community are the leading goals. There is a lack of documentation of the
success or outcomes associated with family group conferencing, but evaluations that have been collected suggest that the process is fair and therapeutic (Roche, 2006).

Circle processes also known as sentencing circles have their origins in the Native American people of North America. Circle processes existed long before restorative justice was a concept or theory. Circles were used by indigenous American people to address a multitude of community and individual concerns (Zehr, 2015). The focus of the circle process is on relationships – building, maintaining and repairing relationships (Pranis, 2005). The community takes the collective responsibility to repair the harm caused by the crime by nurturing the victim, as well as providing accountability and reintegration for the offender. In a circle application, justice and resolution is truly a collective process (Salm & Stout, 2011).

In most circle processes there are four relational elements: meeting and getting acquainted, building trust and understanding, addressing issues, and developing plans (Pranis, 2005). The concept is to empower the community to resolve the dispute or harm and provide a resolution to meet the needs of all stakeholders. A key element of most circle processes is storytelling, and storytelling has been observed to be both empowering and healing for those that participate (Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009).

**Summary of Section**

Restorative justice and practice is a relatively new theory in the broader criminology and social justice fields. Restorative justice seeks to repair harm, reduce risk and empower the community. Three key stakeholders compose the central players in the effective application of restorative justice – the victim, the offender and the community.
Restorative justice is a voluntary process where all stakeholders willingly participate to resolve the dispute and seek reconciliation. Research on the effective outcomes of restorative justice is limited, but studies continue to emerge as restorative justice gains acceptance as an alternative to the traditional, state monopoly in addressing crime and punishment. Restorative justice practices include victim-offender reconciliation processes, family group conferences, and circle processes. The few existing studies on the most effective application of restorative justice practices suggest the victims, communities and offenders all benefit from the restorative process.

**Prisoner Re-entry and Reintegration**

Ninety-five percent of all incarcerated adults will be released back into the community at the completion of their sentence (Dennis & Abreau, 2010). Each day seventeen hundred inmates are discharged into neighborhoods throughout the United States (Lattimore & Steffey, 2010). The U.S. criminal justice system focused much of its resources on incarcerating offenders as part of the “tough on crime” mantra in the eighties and the nineties (Settles, 2009). In the first two decades of this century, the justice system has begun to reevaluate “mass incarceration”, and has provided more resources for prisoner reentry. Offenders who were ill equipped to be integral members of society prior to incarceration may be even less prepared to reintegrate back into their communities when released from prison (Petersilia, 2003).

This section will review the pertinent literature applicable to prisoner reentry and reintegration back into their communities. The concepts of reentry, shame, stigma, and reintegration will be defined. A cursory appraisal of current reentry preparation while incarcerated will be examined. This section will spotlight the literature on the
components of successful reintegration to include family support, employment, housing, medical care, substance abuse treatment, access to benefits, and the support of probation/parole agencies. The section will conclude with a consideration of what a restorative reintegration model may look like, as stakeholders are just beginning to consider a future strategy for reintegration.

Definitions

Reentry is best understood as a process (Gideon, 2009; Petersilia, 2004), and occurs when an inmate transitions from a life in prison to a life in the community (Datchi, Baretti & Thompson, 2016). There is a notable distinction between the process of reentry and reintegration. The community involvement in reintegration means disapproval of the harm or crime committed, but not disapproval of the individual (Fox, 2012). Reintegration occurs when a formerly incarcerated adult not only reenters society, but also becomes a wholly functional, contributing member of society. Reentry is the process, whereas reintegration involves acceptance and ultimately healing of the offender and the community.

Shame and stigma are two impressions that form a sizable part of the offender’s identity, especially when he returns to the community. Shame is an intense negative emotion connected with the damaged self, resulting from feelings of failure (Gilbert & Andrews, 1998). Although shame is a negative emotion, shaming can have positive, integrative qualities when used judiciously to hold offenders accountable while simultaneously welcoming them back into the community (Braithwaite, 1989). Shame used properly by the community to denigrate the crime but not the individual, may lead to reintegration and desistance from crime by the offender in the future (Braithwaite, 1989).
Stigma refers to the extreme disapproval of a person based on a characteristic or behavior. The formerly incarcerated have a stigma associated with them as a result of serving time in prison, and this stigma reduces opportunities for employment, housing and access to benefits (Travis and Visher, 2005).

**Reentry Preparation While Incarcerated**

There are two parts to reentry: reentry preparation while incarcerated, and release and reintegration post-incarceration (Severson, Bruns & Veeh, 2011). This section will briefly scrutinize the reentry preparation of inmates while still in custody. From the 1950’s through the 1970’s prisons attempted to prepare prisoners for community life. As a result of Robert Martinson’s claim in 1975 that “nothing works” regarding prisoner rehabilitation, many reentry preparation programs were terminated (Settles, 2009). Since the start of this century there has been a gradual attitudinal shift in once again resourcing programs to prepare prisoners for reentry.

Joan Petersilia (2004), considered one of the foremost experts on prisoner reentry, found after reviewing the evidence on reentry that the following programs do lead to more positive outcomes: vocational and work release programs, living in a halfway house toward the conclusion of one’s sentence, and residential drug treatment programs. Yet, it is important to account, that less than one-third of all inmates participate in vocational training, drug rehabilitation or educational programs (Petersilia, 2003). Thus, there remains a gap in what the evidence suggests may lead to successful reentry outcomes and what is available and utilized by the currently incarcerated population.
Two federal initiatives, the Second Chance Act (2007) and the 2002 Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI), dedicated funding and grants to facilitate programs to establish prisoner reentry programs (Severson, Bruns & Veeh, 2011). However, a comprehensive evaluation or study on all of these initiatives has not occurred. The research on reentry programs, for the most part, has been sporadic. One multi-site evaluation of SVORI programs did find that program participants had better outcomes in terms of housing, substance abuse and employment (Severson et al., 2011). Inmate participation in prison reentry programs remains low, and the difficulties inmates faced prior to and during incarceration are likely to remain when they are released into the community (Petersilia, 2003).

**Components of Successful Reintegration**

In his 2004 State of the Union Address, President George W. Bush said “America is the land of the second chance, and when the gates of the prison are open, the path ahead should lead to a better life.” It is perhaps the only time in U.S. history where the subject of prisoner reintegration was submitted in serious dialogue by a sitting president to Congress. Unfortunately, progress since 2004 toward more positive outcomes for former prisoner integration has been stalled in the worst case, or significantly slowed in the best of circumstances. The literature does generally agree that no one component or intervention regarding prisoner reintegration works, but rather multiple components must be applied together (Severson, et al., 2011; Mears and Cochrane, 2015). Additionally, the issue of public safety needs to be assessed. Recognizing that 95% of all inmates ultimately return to the community, there needs to be a balance between insuring the
community remains safe with the needs of the returning prisoner (Travis and Visher, 2005).

**Family support, employment and housing.** The availability of family support is perhaps the leading indicator regarding successful reintegration back to the community for the offender (Datchi, et al. 2016). A solid family support network increases the offenders social capital (Lyons and Lrigio, 2010), which leads to greater outcomes for the other components of successful reintegration to include employment and housing. An empirical review of the literature found that families are the primary source of emotional and financial support for the returning prisoner, and a key factor to successful prisoner reentry. In regards to family support, three systemic principles play a pivotal role in productive results: preservation of family bonds while incarcerated, maintenance of pre-prison family roles and identity during incarceration, and support-care for families during the reentry process (Datchi, et al., 2016).

Most researchers agree that families provide the major source of support for prisoner reentry, while concurrently acknowledging that there has been little research on family support and its’ impact on successful reentry (Martinez, 2006). One family support program in New York City, “La Bodega de la Familia” includes family support for former prisoners in their substance abuse treatment programs. An evaluation of the “La Bodega” program by the Vera Institute of Justice found that families played a major role in changing the former prisoner’s behavior, and resulted in an overall reduction in substance abuse when compared to former prisoners not receiving family support in the “La Bodega” program (Martinez, 2006). One longitudinal, quantitative study on the effect of fatherhood found that former prisoners who assumed a family role as a parent
upon release led to positive reentry outcomes (Visher, et al., 2013). The main critique of the very few studies on family support and roles as related to prisoner reentry is the limited scope of such studies, as well as the influence other variables may have played in the outcomes.

Employment is another key component of successful reintegration in that it provides financial support and social capital to the formerly incarcerated person. The literature indicates that employment may be the single most important factor in whether reentry is successful for the former prisoner (Lattimore & Steffey, 2010; Bowman & Travis, 2012). Employment also creates a new social network, and enables the formerly incarcerated to make fresh connections not associated with their criminal past (Bowman & Travis, 2012). According to much of the reentry literature, an unemployed former prisoner has a much higher incidence of recidivism and re-incarceration. “Research has empirically established a positive link between job stability and reduced criminal reoffending” (Petersilia, p. 112, 2003).

Of course, it would be beneficial to the offender and the community if a job were waiting for the offender upon release from prison. Unfortunately, there is a variety of barriers to obtaining a job for the former prisoner. In one survey administered to over 3000 employers, sixty percent of employers would not hire someone with a criminal record (Petersilia, 2003). Most prisoners have a spotty work past and poor educational histories, which coupled with a felony conviction makes meaningful employment difficult to obtain (Mears & Cochrane, 2015). In some instances, the formerly incarcerated are permanently barred from certain jobs that require licenses, work with children or other environments where a criminal history precludes employment. These
employment barriers have created a permanent stigma and disenfranchisement for the formerly incarcerated seeking to reintegrate fully into the community.

The available data on prisoner reentry indicates that up to eighty percent of recently released prisoners initially live with a family member (Martinez, 2006). The same family support that often assists with employment correspondingly assists with the housing needs of the formerly incarcerated. Employment, housing and family support are all interrelated and necessary to enable former prisoners to reengage with society (Walker, Hempel, Unnithan & Progrebin, 2014). Although housing is an important ingredient to success, living with a family member in the same neighborhood before incarceration creates risk of exposure to the same criminal activities that led to incarceration (Bowman & Travis, 2012). The former inmate’s housing needs must be met immediately; without adequate housing, there are fewer opportunities for employment and an increased incidence of substance abuse (Walker, et al., 2014). Success in reentry often starts with housing, in conjunction with familial support and employment.

Substance abuse, health care and access to benefits. It is estimated that as many as seventy-five percent of all prisoners have a history of substance abuse (Martinez, 2006; Woods, et al., 2013). Less than one-third of all prisoners receive drug or alcohol addiction treatment during incarceration; a summary of the research concludes that intensive treatment while incarcerated, followed by post-release care can reduce addiction and recidivism (Petersilia, 2003; Sung, Mahoney, & Mellow, 2013). Inmates with drug addictions have significantly increased in the last three decades, as drug crimes led to a higher incarceration rate with longer, mandatory sentences. “The challenge during reentry lies with continued treatment or with accessing treatment when relapse
occurs. In many communities, few resources exist to meet the demand for drug treatment among ex-prisoners” (Mears and Cochrane, 2015, p. 137).

Another characteristic of the currently and formerly incarcerated are the substantial mental and physical health challenges. Sixteen percent of all inmates, of which one hundred thousand reenter their communities each year, have some form of mental illness (Dennis & Abreau, 2010). Unfortunately, treatment while incarcerated is inadequate for most mentally ill inmates. Since the closing of many mental health hospitals in the 1970’s under the policy of “deinstitutionalization”, the prison population for inmates with mental disorders has risen dramatically. Most prisoners with mental disorders will be released back into the community (Petersilia, 2003), often without access to necessary treatment and medication.

The inmate population has also aged significantly in the last three decades, and consequently, prisoners reentering the community have greater health needs. A comprehensive, qualitative study on prisoner reentry, The Connecticut Building Bridges Initiative, found that providing a continuum of health care from incarceration into the community decreased recidivism considerably (Woods, Lanza, Dyson & Gordon, 2013). The sample population for the Connecticut study included inmates from two minimum-security prisons. It can be assumed that minimum-security inmates have less severe health issues and a reduced rate of recidivism compared to higher security inmates. Health care benefits are most likely linked to employment, and as previously discussed there are many inmates who struggle to find employment. Acquiring benefits including Medicaid, is essential to any reentry plan (Dennis & Abreau, 2010). Unfortunately, many of the same legal barriers that preclude employment and housing often disqualify former
prisoners from receiving state and federal medical benefits. Substance abuse treatment, providing health care, and access to medical and social security benefits are all necessary elements to support effective reentry.

**Parole and probation.** Parole and probation are periods of supervision following incarceration. “Supervision serves two goals: to help offenders make the difficult transition from confinement to the community, and early detection of noncompliance with conditional terms of release with swift sanctions to prevent offenders from committing more serious offenses” (Travis & Visher, 2003, p. 107). Parole and probation may range from being highly restrictive with significant control measures to less restrictive with a focus on supporting the former inmate (rehabilitation versus surveillance). Some studies indicate that prisoners released from prison without supervision have lower rates of recidivism (Walker, et al., 2014). One quantitative study for female inmates found that a supportive parole officer was a key element of reentry success, while a non-supportive parole officer often led to reentry failure (Cobbina, 2010). The main critique of this study was that the sample population were female and more than ninety percent of all incarcerated persons are male. It is also important to note that parole or probation violations constitute over thirty-five percent of inmates returning to prison (Mears & Cochrane, 2015). Post-release support via the responsible agency, parole or probation, is an imperative element of successful reentry.

**A Restorative Model for Reintegration**

Prisoner reentry and reintegration parallels, for the most part, the retributive nature of the U.S. criminal justice system. Reentry is a process, and reintegration involves healing and acceptance by the community for the formerly incarcerated. Ex-prisoners need to
establish a non-criminal identity (Mobley, 2014), and the primary components of successful reintegration should be part of a complete support package for the returning prisoner. Although a restorative justice strategy for reentry has not been fully developed, there are a few examples where a restorative approach is being used (Bazemore & Shadd, 2009). Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) is a community support restorative practice being utilized by communities in both Canada and Vermont, with data that suggests decreased recidivism among participants (Bazemore & Shadd, 2009). Ohio also has a program, Ohio Citizen Circles, which is a community-based approach to support offender reintegration (Fox, 2012). Unfortunately, there is currently a void in program evaluation of these few programs.

A quantitative study in Missouri examining the Greene County Jail found that family, friends, and the community are the best sources of control and reintegration for the former inmate (Hass & Saxon, 2012). The Greene County Jail study involved a series of eight focus group sessions with community participants as well as offenders. The inmates voiced the experience of survival as the number one concern regarding reentry. The findings of the focus groups suggest re-incarceration is a result of a failure to reintegrate into the community; the primary reason for failure to reintegrate was the social stigma that results from incarceration and a feeling of isolation from the community (Hass & Saxon, 2012). Other restorative reentry practices include using family group conferencing and reentry mediation programs with community volunteers. More research is essential to learn what impact restorative reentry practices have on the offender and the communities.
What would a fully established restorative reentry strategy look like? Ideally, a restorative reentry stratagem would include both the offender and the community (and if appropriate the victim) in developing a plan for reintegration. Communities suffer when the formerly incarcerated reoffends or simply fails to reintegrate (Fox, 2012). Bazemore (2009) argues that restorative justice is most appropriate at reentry when communities have the opportunity to transform the former prisoner from a liability to an asset within the community.

**Summary of Section**

There are several components necessary for the formerly incarcerated to successfully reintegrate back into the community. Many of these components are the same measures that make all citizens successful – housing, employment, family support, and health care. The unique challenge for the formerly incarcerated are the systemic barriers, which preclude easily obtaining many of the elements necessary for leading a successful and crime-free life. The current recidivism rate continues to be between fifty and sixty-five percent; perhaps it is time for a different re-entry tactic. A restorative model that facilitates reintegration for the former inmate back into society may include a community plan to facilitate housing, education, employment, medical care, etc. The research indicates that no one reentry component leads to success or failure, but rather a complete network of support results in the most promising outcomes.

**Formerly Incarcerated Adults in Higher Education**

The literature on formerly incarcerated adults in higher education does not constitute an expansive body of research as compared to restorative justice theory and prisoner re-
entry and reintegration. As deliberated in the previous section, education plays a prominent role in successful re-entry for formerly incarcerated adults (Linton, 2011). In this section, adult inmate literacy and educational attainment along with instructional opportunities while incarcerated will be reviewed. Further, the value of higher education for the formerly incarcerated will be assessed taking specific note of beneficial outcomes for those adults who have been incarcerated and subsequently participate in the higher education experience. The barriers, available support and specific benefits of attaining post-secondary education for former prisoners will be considered in detail. The breaches in knowledge and research regarding higher education and the formerly incarcerated will conclude this section.

**Literacy and Education for the Formerly Incarcerated**

It is generally acknowledged that the majority of prisoners and former prisoners have a low-level of educational attainment (Owens, 2009). In fact, most of the literature portrays the typical prisoner as a male, minority with a lower socio-economic status and less education than his non-incarcerated peers. Prisoners have less education than the general population (Brown, 2014), for example, less than twenty percent of the youth in some state prisons do not have a high school diploma (Abrams & Franke, 2013). The initial challenge for the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated population rests with completing a high school diploma program or successfully passing a General Education Development (GED) test. Less than five percent of the incarcerated population has participated in higher education (Pryor & Thompkins, 2013).

Higher education in the context of inmates and the formerly incarcerated can be viewed as any education experience with the goal of achieving a degree beyond a high
school diploma, such as an associates, bachelors or graduate degree. Vocational training, life skills training, GED attainment, and functional literacy education are all considered correctional education (Pryor & Thompkins, 2013). Correctional education is offered in varying degrees throughout the state and prison systems. Higher education often referred to as post-secondary education in the literature is a very small portion of the education offered to prisoners. The reasons for such paucity of higher education opportunities will be expanded upon in the next sub-section. It is sufficient to note that prison education in its current state does provide some programs in basic academic skills (e.g. GED) in order to succeed in higher education (Fuentes, Rael & Duncan, 2010). Generally, the majority of opportunities for higher education exist post-incarceration, and not while serving time in prison.

**History and Current State of Inmate Education**

Education and other reentry support services offered while incarcerated ideally are meant to prepare the offender for release and reintegration back into society. Education, especially post-secondary education, clearly has a dimension of rehabilitation for the prisoner (Linton, 2011). In fact, most correctional educators agree that higher education leads to the highest potential for reentry success (Linton, 2011). The more education in prison leads to less recidivism when the incarcerated reintegrate (Ryan, 1995). Unfortunately, as already noted, higher education specifically, and often education in general, is not available to the majority of the currently incarcerated. It is necessary to provide a brief history of prison education and the changes over the last few decades.

The U.S. prison system evolved from the nineteenth century all the way through the decade of the 1970’s as a relatively progressive system with rehabilitation as one of the
goals for the prisoner population. Consequently, inmates had increased opportunities for education, most notably in the decades of the sixties and seventies (Ryan, 1995). The decade of the eighties ushered in a more punitive philosophy toward crime, which ultimately culminated in the passage of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (VCCLEA) of 1994 (Meiners, 2009). Among other more stringent crime measures, VCCLEA eliminated eligibility for prisoners to apply for Pell Grants to assist with tuition for higher education (Lagemann, 2011). Notably, less than one percent of all Pell Grant funding was appropriated to the incarcerated (Meiners, 2011). As a result, higher education opportunities for the prisoner population greatly diminished (Connor & Tewksbury, 2012). As the U.S. prisoner population doubled in the eighties, and again doubled in the nineties, access to higher education became almost non-existent in the nation’s prisons.

In addition to eliminating funding for inmates to pursue higher education, other barriers remain to receiving post-secondary education while incarcerated. The delivery method for distance education is primarily via online, and the incarcerated population does not generally possess online access (Linton, 2011). Ohio State University does have degree opportunities by mail for current prisoners, but the prisoner must find the funding to pay for every class, which makes participation for most unrealistic (Escobar, Jordan & Lohrasbi, 2013). Most prisons are in remote, rural areas that require significant travel and expenses for instructors to deliver on-site and regular periods of instruction. Further, many prisoners are subject to transfers within the prison system which leads to a discontinuation of their enrollment in higher education classes (Pryor & Thompkins, 2013). Additionally, resources for higher educational opportunities within the prison...
system remain fragmented (Fuentes, et al. 2010), and with a continued emphasis on punishment as compared to rehabilitation, funding is likely to remain scarce for higher education prospects within the prison walls. Finally, very few incentives exist for inmates to participate in higher education because prison staff and administrators do not incentivize participation in higher education programming.

There are, however, a few on-site prison higher education opportunities available to the currently incarcerated. The Bard Prison Initiative (BPI) sourced by Bard College provides prisoners in six New York State prisons with the chance to obtain an associate’s or bachelor’s degree while incarcerated. The BPI is a highly competitive program with an admission rate of less than ten percent with approximately two-hundred and fifty students currently enrolled (Lagemann, 2011). The BPI provides college degrees for some violent offenders, offenders serving long prison terms, as well as, inmates scheduled for release in the near future. There is a high degree of prestige among prisoners accepted into the BPI; the curriculum is challenging and leads to a bachelor’s degree in liberal studies. The program has been hailed as one of the most successful courses for reducing recidivism in New York state prisons (Lagemann, 2011).

The Prison University Project (PUP) at San Quentin State Prison is the only degree-granting program in the largest state prison system in the United States – California. Similar to the BPI, incarcerated students at PUP enroll in a highly competitive program with the goal of attaining an associate’s degree. San Quentin, in close proximity to many universities in the San Francisco Bay Area, draws volunteer professors from such prestigious universities as Stanford, UC Berkeley, University of San Francisco and San Francisco State University. The PUP in San Quentin and the BPI in New York,
unfortunately are not replicated to any significant extent elsewhere. Prior to the elimination of Pell grants for prisoners, forty-five states had some form of higher education programs for the currently incarcerated (Ryan, 1995). In the last two decades most states increased spending on prisons and corrections at six times the rate they increased spending for education for the general public (Meiners, 2009). The increases in corrections spending, however, was allocated to support the expanding prison population and the prison facilities to house a fourfold increase of the incarcerated population since 1980. Funding for higher education for the incarcerated, which the literature uniformly suggests, has the highest impact on reducing recidivism (Custer, 2016) essentially does not exist.

A meta-analysis of prison education conducted by the RAND Corporation in 2012 concluded that inmates who participated had lower rates of recidivism when released from prison and greater opportunities for employment (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013). The data collected by the RAND study provides one of the more comprehensive examinations of the outcomes associated with in prison education. In the last five years, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation has begun to offer more post-secondary education programs to its inmate population. This positive trend in inmate education opportunities has also corresponded with renewed advocacy to once again offer Pell Grants and other financial aid to prisoners who wish to pursue higher education prior to release.

**Higher Education Post-incarceration**

The dearth of higher education opportunities while incarcerated leads to the core of this section which are the experiences, barriers and value of higher education for formerly
incarcerated adults. It is first important to realize that many universities have formerly incarcerated students on campus, and both fellow students and faculty have no idea who these students are (Copenhauer et al., 2007). In fact, there is no data on the rates of enrollment for felons in higher education (Abrams & Franke, 2013). Perhaps due to privacy concerns as well as many admissions processes not requesting a criminal background history, the data may never be accurately available. As previously examined in the prisoner reentry segment of this review, former inmates carry significant stigma as part of their self (Braithwaite, 1989), and former felons who enroll in higher education may maintain a “hidden identity” (Copenhauer et al. 2007).

The literature on the experience of the formerly incarcerated in higher education is limited perhaps because they simply wish to move forward with their lives and not continually identify as a former prisoner. Undeniably, there is not enough research about ex-convicts writing about their prison and post-prison experience (Leyva & Bickel, 2010). An autobiographical or ethnographic approach that gives voice to both institutional experiences – prison and higher education is lacking in the literature. A qualitative study which focused on the stigma of felon-students was conducted in 2007 (Copenhauer et al. 2007), and the researchers concluded that most felon students keep their stigma a secret. Stigma is a perception that the formerly incarcerated continue to grapple with throughout their lives regardless of post-incarceration experience (Owens, 2009). In some cases, former-prisoners may even stay in school to avoid a job search that inevitably will include a revelation of a criminal record (Connor & Tewksbury, 2012).

Some of the same barriers facing the currently incarcerated also confront the formerly incarcerated endeavoring to participate in post-secondary education. The majority of
prisoners enter prison with a history of poor academic performance (Abrams & Franke, 2013), and their academic records generally do not improve while incarcerated. However, obtaining a GED is a common occurrence if the inmate pursues it as a goal. Truncated academic levels in basic skills, low college persistence rates and a lack of adequate support services all infringe on the potential success of the formerly incarcerated pursuing higher education (Fuentes, et al. 2010). A significant legislative barrier is that anyone convicted of a drug offense is barred from receiving federal student aid (Meiners, 2009). This financial barrier makes higher education unattainable for almost half of all formerly incarcerated persons. In many cases, former prisoners simply refuse to apply because they fear a criminal background check as part of the admissions process (Custer, 2016), or they want to avoid the stigma of being a felon on campus (Copenhauer et al, 2007). The realization that higher education opportunities are few while incarcerated may lead former prisoners to believe that higher education is just not available to them after their release.

In most colleges and universities, additional support is available for specific and often previously disenfranchised groups. For example, institutional support is available for veterans, first generation college students, and most minority groups, but support for formerly incarcerated students is nonexistent (Meiners, 2009). One of the most vulnerable student groups, formerly incarcerated students, often remain invisible due to stigma and shame, have little institutional support and often find it difficult to integrate into the university environment. Further, many of the probation and parole agencies that still have a supervisory role over some of the former prisoner students provide little encouragement and support as these agencies would rather see the probationer or parolee
working as opposed to learning (Pryor & Thompkins, 2013). Student affairs professionals should have an active role in facilitating success for the formerly incarcerated student population (Escobar, Jordan & Lohrasbi, 2013). Without institutional support for the formerly incarcerated, student success is less likely (Leyva & Bickel, 2010). Thus, there are initial admission barriers as well as ongoing structural impediments for the formerly incarcerated pursuing a post-secondary education.

The Value of Education for Former Prisoners

Scholars and practitioners alike agree on the multitude of benefits associated with higher education. As examined in the prisoner reentry section of this review, a steady, living-wage job equates with a greater likelihood of successful reentry and reintegration for the formerly incarcerated. Most former prisoners are released at a significant economic disadvantage with little prospects for attaining a living-wage job. Higher education provides innumerable social and economic benefits to both the individual and society (Malveaux, 2003). The completion of a bachelor’s degree in the United States equates with higher earnings throughout one’s career as well as a greater participation in civic society (Malveaux, 2003). In addition to the economic benefits, higher education markedly increases individual human and social capital (Jamieson et al. 2009).

The literature concerning formerly incarcerated persons likewise concludes that higher education increases cognitive ability, enhances social networks, and increases social capital (Owens, 2009). Since formerly incarcerated persons reenter society with such significant social and economic disadvantages, higher education may be a source of promise and equity for successful reintegration. Some suggest that higher education is a way for the formerly incarcerated to get away from past associations and the criminal life
(Leyva & Bickel, 2010). In a qualitative review of existing data, education was found to be a crucial component of reentry success (Pryor & Thompkins, 2013). Perhaps most importantly, education leads to individual change and growth (Owens, 2009) which is a critical component for successful reintegration and acceptance back into society.

Many criminologists have purported that low education levels are a factor that often leads to crime (Ryan, 1995). The contrasting argument would therefore be that higher education reduces crime. More research is necessary to make a definitive correlation between higher education and recidivism (Owens, 2009). However, the existing literature and research concludes that those former prisoners that participate in higher education have lower recidivism rates than those former prisoners who do not attempt to further their education. There is growing optimism that there is a positive relationship between post-incarceration education and labor outcomes as well as reduced recidivism (Brown, 2014, Davis et al, 2013). Some data suggests that recidivism rates decrease from twenty to sixty percent when formerly incarcerated adults are enrolled in post-secondary education (Escobar et al, 2013). Recidivism rates seem to be reduced most significantly when the former prisoner actually earns a degree as opposed to merely being enrolled.

Barriers for successful community reintegration for the formerly incarcerated may very well still exist after completing a post-secondary degree. A prison record often equates to civil death (Meiners, 2009), a loss of benefits and lifetime sanctions. The prison experience does real harm, and unfortunately former prisoners must contend with employment discrimination because of their criminal past (Owens, 2009). A formerly incarcerated adult may begin to heal and increase their human capital through earning a post-secondary education degree, but may still face barriers in the labor market because
of a criminal record. It is hopeful that discrimination against the formerly incarcerated, especially those who achieve success in the classroom, will diminish as awareness and understanding about this disenfranchised population becomes better understood.

**Summary of Section**

More research is required to understand the experience and the consequences of formerly incarcerated adults in higher education. The currently incarcerated adult population has very few prospects for post-secondary education due to a lack of funding and support from both the prison systems and federal financial aid programs. Notably, two exceptions to a lack of higher education opportunities in the prisons are the Bard Prison Initiative in New York and the Prison University Program in San Quentin, California. Both programs have been lauded as successful in reducing recidivism and enabling the transitioning prisoner a better chance for successful reentry. Significant barriers, however, remain for the current and formerly incarcerated adults who choose pursue post-secondary education. Post-incarceration higher education studies are very limited, but the available data does indicate that recidivism appears to be reduced for those former prisoners who do attain a degree. Further, in addition to enhanced cognitive abilities, the formerly incarcerated develop enriched social and human capital – all factors necessary for successful reintegration back into civil society.

**Conclusion**

Restorative justice and practice provides an alternative to the current punitive approach applied in the U.S. criminal justice system. The restorative method seeks to repair harm and re-establish relationships between the offender, the victim and the
community. A restorative strategy of reintegration for the offender involves community participation and support; the community has a stake in the successful reintegration of the formerly incarcerated back into society. The current system of “mass incarceration” followed by “mass reentry” has failed as measured by the high recidivism rates as well as the low rates of full reintegration among the formerly incarcerated.

There is no one component that leads to successful prisoner reintegration. Rather, the many known components of successful reintegration to include family support, housing, employment, access to health care and substance abuse treatment must all be available to the former prisoner transitioning back to the community. A broader issue is that our society needs less prisoners and more students. “What makes our democracy flourish is when our schools and colleges are full and prisons and jails are empty” (Meiners, 2009, p.47).

Post-secondary education for the formerly incarcerated provides an alternative, restorative means to enhance employment opportunities to obtain a living wage. Higher education also provides a way for the formerly incarcerated to transform themselves from a life associated with few opportunities other than crime, to a life of choices and possibilities. There are currently a small percentage of formerly incarcerated people who participate in some form of higher education, and the research on those who are or have participated in higher education is insufficient. The story and the experience of former prisoners who have transformed their lives via higher education is a story worth knowing with all the cultural and personal details, in order to understand how some successfully reintegrate back into the community and others do not.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

There are currently more than two million adults incarcerated in prisons and jails, and an additional six million under some form of correctional supervision (parole or probation) in the United States (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2016). Each year more than 700,000 prisoners reenter society after some period of incarceration. The majority of incarcerated adults leaving our nation’s prisons lack the necessary job skills, education or work experience to seamlessly and successfully reintegrate into society (Petersilia, 2003). Most formerly incarcerated adults do not have the opportunity to participate in higher education. For the small minority of former prisoners who do participate in post-secondary education very little is known about their experience, especially the experience as it relates to their reintegration back into their communities. Restorative justice theory, specifically as applied to prisoner re-entry and reintegration, was the primary theoretical lens used to guide the research. The central question that guided this study was: What effect, if any, has participation in higher education for the formerly incarcerated had on their experience of reintegration back into the community?

This chapter begins with an overview of the research design, including a discussion of the rationale for the particular qualitative research design. The rationale for the research design outlines the case study organizational construct and the two specific methodological choices: life history research and phenomenological research. This chapter includes the specific methodological procedures for the study to include the procedures for the selection of participants, the positionality of the researcher, data collection, and data analysis procedures. The data collection section outlines the exact procedures used for interviewing participants to include a reiteration of the research
questions that guided the data collection phase of the study. The data analysis section details data organization, coding strategies, and the cross-case analysis approach. Lastly, ethical considerations and potential moral issues were examined recognizing the unique characteristics of the participants, and noting that all study participants had experienced trauma because of incarceration.

**Overview of and Rationale for the Research Design**

The intent of this study was to better comprehend the experience of participation in post-secondary education for formerly incarcerated adults. Qualitative methods make it possible to study issues like this in depth and detail (Patton, 1990). Consequently, a qualitative approach for this study supported the research because depth, meaning, and connections were sought in order to make sense of the experience of post-incarceration higher education. Qualitative research methods provided a certain degree of freedom in the exploration of unanticipated knowledge as it emerged during the data collection and analysis phases of the study.

There are many forms of qualitative research, of course. The design of this study used case studies to organize the data and versions of life history and phenomenological research as specific qualitative methods. A qualitative design was most appropriate in answering the main research question and sub-questions of this study, and provided a particular level of freedom to investigate emerging and unanticipated themes.

**A Case Study Organization of the Data**

Case study research is an empirical inquiry that investigates a particular phenomenon in depth and within a real world context (Yin, 2014). A case study may involve a single
person, a group of people or any type of organizational entity. A case study is not necessarily a methodological choice, but rather a choice of what is to be studied (Patton, 2002). The case study enables the researcher to choose the approach to the study, such as a phenomenological approach, which best addresses the research questions. The case study structure allocates time for the researcher to concentrate on each individual for a period of time (Stake, 1995), and then compare the cases to attain new, somewhat more general knowledge about the phenomenon being studied. Each participant in this study constituted a single case, and the cases were initially treated as distinct from one another. In addition, the case study approach permitted the organization of data drawn from each individual case for a cross-case analysis (Patton, 2002).

Various methods can be employed to do case study research (Glesne, 2006). A more in-depth discussion of the procedures used for studying the individual cases and for conducting the multi-cross case analysis is provided in the data collection and analysis sections of this chapter. In this more general discussion of the research design, however, I will describe two general approaches to data collection and analysis: life history and phenomenological research.

**Life History Research**

Life history research is sometimes referred to as life story or biographical interpretive research and uses the life stories of particular individuals to shed light on the experiences of a whole culture or a group during a particular period of time (Glesne, 2006). The life history method has been used for sociological and criminogenic research since the inception of life history methodology. The method seems especially appropriate for studying individuals who were formerly incarcerated because such persons’ stories are
frequently hidden. Populations such as the formerly incarcerated often conceal their life stories from the larger community, due to their own shame and the stigma associated with incarceration (Braithewaite, 1989). If a researcher using life history methods can break through this wall of shame, new insights can be revealed. Later parts of this discussion will detail both why such a breakthrough did occur and the methods that were used which increased the likelihood that a breakthrough would occur in this study. To summarize, a life history or oral narrative version of qualitative methods allows participants to tell their stories as they see situations from her own perspective (Glesne, 2006). The life history method employed in this study was especially suitable for participants who had distinctive and complex life stories to tell.

It was anticipated that the life stories of former inmates in higher education would generate new knowledge regarding one of the components, i.e., education of prisoner reintegration back into society. The major focus of each participant’s life story was during the period in his or her life when incarcerated and subsequently when they participated in higher education. Although each life history was organized in chronological order from each participant’s early life through the present, particular weight was given to those events that led to the misfortune of incarceration and the subsequent opportunity for higher education. Incarceration and participation in higher education, it is supposed, seemed to be antithetical events in a life story, and the journey to both experiences was studied by empowering the participants’ to tell their stories as they see them. The life story of each participant made up each case and the cases, subsequently, were compared and contrasted during the cross-case analysis phase.
**Phenomenological Research**

Phenomenological research seeks to describe the meaning of individuals’ experiences more than explain them, and, in fact, the research begins without hypotheses or, to the extent possible, preconceptions (Husserl, 1970). The purpose of the phenomenological approach is to highlight the specific phenomenon as it is experienced by the research participants (Lester, 2014). Phenomenology seeks depth and meaning in the studied phenomenon, especially as the experience is perceived and told by the participants. The fundamental question that guides phenomenological research is: What is the meaning and essence of the lived experience for the people being studied? (Patton, 2002). This study primarily sought to understand the meaning of two life events as they were experienced by the participants – incarceration and involvement in higher education. These two phenomena have not been studied together in any detail, and a phenomenological mode provided increased depth and clarity in understanding both life events.

Phenomenology emphasizes subjectivity and discovery of the essence of experiences, and it derives new knowledge from the re-telling and the analysis of those lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The central research question in phenomenological research are all experiential in character; the research questions sought primarily to understand the totality of experiences, in this case, the experiences of incarceration, reintegration back into the community, and the restoration of relationships in the context of being a higher education student. The lived experience as a student and a former inmate undoubtedly were both profound and not normally mutually compatible. A deeper understanding of the essence of the experiences of the participants rendered a
phenomenological method, whereby participants had the opportunity to provide their life stories organized as a single case, as a wholly appropriate design for this research.

**Specific Procedures**

**Research Participant Selection Procedures**

I selected a purposeful sample because purposeful sampling will support discovery, understanding, and greater insight from a sample in which the most can be learned (Merriam, 1998). The target population of formerly incarcerated adults is overwhelmingly male (above 90%) and disproportionately from disenfranchised minority communities (Cochran & Mears, 2015). Consequently, my goal was to select a group of participants who demographically represented the larger target population. I also wanted to choose participants who were current or former students and, ideally, had been involved, in some way, with some advocacy work for the formerly incarcerated student population. My rationale for including the later criterion was wanting participants who had thought about their experiences and who had viewed their experiences alongside the experiences of other formerly incarcerated individuals.

Purposeful sampling requires access to key informants in the field, which can facilitate the identification of information rich cases (Suri, 2011). I had access to a group of diverse and well-informed potential participants as part of my involvement with Project Rebound, a California State University organization that supports justice-involved and formerly incarcerated students. A sample size of six adult participants was purposefully selected with the intention of selecting one female, two Hispanic males, two African American males, and one white male. The participants were all previously incarcerated
and were either currently participating or had participated in post-secondary education after release from prison. All of the participants had at least some experience in advocacy, mentorship, or support for former inmates in higher education.

In short, the participants were selected based on not only their own experience but also their knowledge regarding the experience of others as they had provided patronage and encouragement for other former inmate students. I was one of the participants in the study who had the experience of incarceration and higher education, and more specifically enrolled in higher education both before and after a period of incarceration. My own positionality as a researcher and participant will be discussed in detail in the next section of this chapter.

**Positionality of the Researcher**

Patton (2002) has written, “The only way for us to really know what another person experiences is to experience the phenomenon as directly as possible for ourselves” (p. 106). Patton highlights that phenomenological research may be most suitable for researchers who have lived a similar experience to the experiences of participants in a study. I have had the experience of higher education, earning an undergraduate and graduate degrees as a young adult, as well as studying for a doctoral degree where this research completed the last step of my doctoral studies. I had also been incarcerated as a federal inmate for a period of twenty-eight months as a result of being found guilty of financial crimes related to my ownership in a small business. Upon release from prison, I almost immediately resumed my doctoral studies with the objective of completing my doctoral degree in leadership studies with a concentration in nonprofit management. I
was, therefore, a participant in the research, as well as the primary researcher in this study.

I used a form of life history methodology sometimes called *autoethnography* to detail my own life history. Autoethnography involves telling one’s own story about one’s life experiences (Denzin, 2014). My story was one of the life stories included in the study; for producing this study, I was not only the researcher, but I was also an informed participant with a set of life experiences that were, in some crucial respects, similar to the experiences of the other participants in the study. My unique positionality was both a blessing and a curse for the research. It is accepted by many criminologists and social care providers that working with the formerly incarcerated is most effective when others have the shared experience of incarceration. My own experience provided a level of “street credibility” that I believe could only be possessed through the prison experience.

It is important to note, however, that my own experience had the potential to bias the collection and analysis of other life stories in the study. The potential for bias was recognized and required management throughout the study. I wrote several personal reflective summaries of my own emotions and thoughts after each interview with selected participants. My personal reflections about my own feelings, assisted in controlling and acknowledging my own potential bias and partiality in the research. I also participated in a weekly formerly incarcerated student support group at San Diego State University that facilitated a deeper understanding of my own experiences as student and as a former prisoner. It was important to recognize that my experience was but one case in a collection of cases, organized as a multi-case study of life stories utilizing a phenomenological lens for understanding and analysis.
Data Collection

The data collection phase lasted approximately sixty days from mid-October 2017 through mid-December 2017. The primary technique for the collection of data was interviewing each of the other five participants and, as I just indicated, the use of an auto-ethnographic approach to life history research in the case of documenting my story. The interviews, by design, had very little structure and were closely aligned with what Patton (2002) calls an informal-conversational approach. In the initial interviews for each participant, I provided a timeline sheet (Appendix C) for the participant to use in order to organize his thoughts to tell his story. The goal, in short, was to elicit the participants’ life stories as they saw them.

The use of an informal conversational interview strategy, sometimes referred to as an ethnographic interview, affords the most flexibility and allows information to emerge naturally as part of the interview process (Patton, 2002). In phenomenological studies, a general rule is that minimum structure and maximum depth is the aim in order to enable participants the freedom to tell their stories (Lester, 2014). In this study, the interviews were conducted with the goal of generating the necessary information to write a brief life story of each participant highlighting life events around the phenomena of incarceration, reintegration into the community, and participation in higher education. A semi-formal interview guide (Appendix D) was used for the second interviews for each of the participants to ensure key issues were addressed relative to their life stories as well as the research questions.

Two interviews were conducted for each participant – an initial interview and a follow-on interview. Both interviews afforded the participants an opportunity to tell their
life histories and generate the sort of data that allowed me to explore the meaning of their experiences of incarceration, higher education, and the links between both. Although an interview guide was not necessary, the guide proved to be helpful even when a semi-informal-conversational approach was utilized as the primary interview strategy (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I chose to use an interview guide for each of the second interviews. Consequently, each interview attempted to use the same basic format to empower participants to tell their life stories. The prompts and initial questions included several background and demographic questions. There was no expectation that the participants would tell their stories chronologically, as I summarized each case chronologically when organizing the data. As presented in Chapter 1 of this study, the research questions guided the interviews and the collection of data.

The prompts and questions in the interviews centered on addressing the central research question and sub-questions as they related to the participants lived experiences with incarceration and higher education. The following central research question (RQ1) and subsequent research questions (RQ2 through RQ5) guided both the initial and follow-on interviews:

RQ1. What effect, if any, has participation in higher education for the formerly incarcerated had on their experience of reintegration back into the community?

RQ2. What barriers to participation in higher education did the formerly incarcerated face both while incarcerated and post-incarceration?
RQ3. How, if at all, has participation in higher education for the formerly incarcerated led to a restoration of their relationships with others and the community?

RQ4. How has participation in higher education changed the formerly incarcerated study participants’ human capital, as well as their social capital within the community?

RQ5. What are the similarities and differences in the experiences of incarceration and higher education for formerly incarcerated adults who have participated in post-secondary education?

Several additional questions emerged during the data collection phase. I selected one add-on question to analyze and interpret; I considered the question to be connected to both the literature reviewed and the data collected for this study. The additional question (RQ6) that emerged after the data collection phase was as follows:

RQ6. Does participation in higher education function as a restorative justice strategy for prisoner re-entry and reintegration back into the community?

The initial interviews averaged ninety minutes for each participant, and the follow-on interviews averaged 60 minutes for each participant. There was approximately one month between the initial and follow-on interviews for each participant. All ten interviews were face-to-face interviews, and I travelled to San Francisco twice during the data collection phase to interview the one participant living outside of San Diego County. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. Transcription was completed by a professional online service. More than seven-hundred minutes of
audio was collected from the interviews; more than three-hundred and fifty pages of text was transcribed from the audio.

**Data Analysis**

**Case records.** Upon completion of all interviews for all participants, as well as the completion of the autoethnographic work I completed alone, a case record was compiled for each participant. Transcribed interviews and, in my case, autoethnographic data was the primary information contained in each case record. Additional field notes from my attendance at the weekly support group for formerly incarcerated students at SDSU as well as field notes from my attendance at the National Conference of Higher Education in Prisons in November 2017 was included as well.

The raw data from the case records was reviewed and analyzed so that each case could be written as a life story from the perspective of the participant. The single case life stories delineated the significant events found in early life, life during incarceration, life during community reintegration after incarceration, and participation in post-secondary education. Each case life history is a six to eight page life history of each participant as part of chapter four of this study.

**Phenomenological coding of individual cases.** Patton (2002) has noted, “Phenomenological analysis seeks to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or people” (p. 482). The phenomenological approach in this study assisted in identifying the essential themes associated with the significant life events being studied in order to make meaning related, initially, to the individual participants’ life experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Eventually,
as will be discussed below, the individual stories were compared and contrasted to
generate a form of collective or shared meaning.

Initially, then, the significant elements of each participant’s story was categorized
(Lester, 2014) to identify important statements and interpret those statements in order to
offer an understanding of what each participant experienced. Codes were generated to
match the significant life events the study sought to understand in five broad categories:
early life, incarcerated life, community reintegration, higher education life, and present
life.

**Cross-case analysis.** New understanding or knowledge can sometimes be derived
from generalizing across different cases (Donmoyer, 1990). When two or more cases are
used as part of the same study, then the analysis and the findings tend to be more robust
(Yin, 2014). During the second phase of data analysis, the six stories encased in the six
individual case studies were compared and contrasted to ferret out common experiences
and the participants’ shared interpretations of similar events. Coding categories were
generated inductively by repeatedly reading each case, and these categories were
transformed into themes that cut across the cases. Chapter 5 of this study principally
presents the cross-case analysis and interpretation of the life-histories.

**Ethical Considerations**

This study abided by all ethical standards as demanded in any qualitative research
project involving human subjects. The ethical code of conduct of the University of San
Diego further guided this research study. This study involved human subjects and all
possible steps were undertaken to eliminate or mitigate any potential harm to the
participants. Of course, participation in this study was completely voluntary. Participants were each provided, in writing, the overall purpose of the study, an informed consent document (see Appendix A), and a pledge of confidentiality for all the information obtained as part of the research. It was important to recognize that the participants in this study had all experienced trauma because of their incarceration. As the researcher, I remained very much aware that certain triggers exist which could have had a negative impact and provoke a negative reaction from this sample of formerly incarcerated adults in this study.

Pseudonyms were used for all the participants, with the exception of me as the researcher. The use of pseudonyms was initially offered as a choice for each participant. However, after deliberating with my dissertation committee I made a decision to err on the side of caution. Although the formerly incarcerated are not a protected population by IRB guidelines, like children and prisoners, they are nonetheless a very vulnerable population. The use of pseudonyms adds, I believe, a necessary layer of protection for each participant from intentional and/or unintentional harm that could occur when the research is published and becomes accessible to the public.

Thoughtful ethical consideration had been deliberated for this research to include the purpose of the study, the formulation of research questions, the research design, and the methods employed to include interviewing participants. Data collection and interviews commenced only after approval by the University of San Diego’s Institutional Review Board in early October 2017. The interview process had the most potential to cause harm to the participants. It was understood that interviewees might have shared information that they later regretted sharing (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). All participants had the
opportunity to review, clarify, change or delete statements they made during each interview. Each participant was provided a written copy of each transcribed interview and a draft copy of his or her life history to review for accuracy. A last note on self-care and self-awareness regarding my own positionality and experience with the research topic, and that is that I was fully aware that I had experienced the same trauma as the participants. I stayed mindful of my own emotions and triggers during the data collection and analysis phases of this research. My personal reflections, which were not reported as part of this study, were very helpful in supporting my own self-care as well as managing the inherent biases I acknowledged as the principal investigator of this study.
CHAPTER 4

LIFE HISTORIES OF FORMERLY INCARCERATED ADULTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Introduction

This chapter contains six individual case studies, also referred to as the life histories of the participants in the study. The first five life histories were derived from the interviews conducted during the data collection phase. The sixth life history was my own account of my story. Each interviewee was interviewed initially for approximately ninety minutes. During the first interview, each participant was provided with a handout (Appendix B) that specified the five broad categories the study aimed to include as part of the individual life histories. The follow-on interviews all lasted approximately one hour, and a semi-formal interview guide (Appendix C) was utilized to ensure all relevant information on each participant was gathered in a generally uniform manner.

Throughout all the interviews, space was provided for the participants to tell their stories in their own manner and with authenticity. More than seven-hundred minutes of audio recordings were collected from the interviews; this resulted in more than three-hundred and fifty pages of text after transcription. Each life history provides a brief introduction or life overview of each participant followed by a chronological history of each person’s life. The aggregate meaning of the participants’ shared experiences will be detailed in chapter 5 as part of the discussion/interpretation of the findings of the study. A brief personification of each participant as well as his or her future aspirations was included in each life history.
This chapter concludes with a brief summary of the data collection phase of the study that includes a discussion of my own participation during the data collection, in eight formerly incarcerated student support groups at San Diego State University (SDSU). It also included my reflection on my participation in the National Conference for Higher Education in Prisons (NCHEP) in Dallas, Texas in November 2017. The support groups, coupled with my participation at the NCHEP, contributed to my own reflections and analysis for this research in part because these events occurred during the data collection phase of this study.

Robin Peters

Robin Peters is a 40 year old Caucasian woman. Robin grew up in the San Jose, California metropolitan area. During her childhood she was the victim of abuse by her stepfather, and she lived in a number of foster homes. At the age of 16 she was incarcerated for the murder of an abusive ex-boyfriend, and she remained incarcerated for twenty-one years. Robin was released from prison in 2015; she currently is a student at San Diego State University studying social work.

Robin’s Early Years

Robin’s childhood was not an easy one. She was raised primarily by her mother and stepfather. Her stepfather was both emotionally and physically abusive to her and her sister. She spent a part of her early years in foster care because of the abuse she endured from her stepfather. She did not have a close relationship with her biological father; her biological dad left Robin’s mother before she turned three years old. Her biological
father was physically abusive to her mother and was also an alcoholic. One of Robin’s earliest memories is of her father coming home drunk and beating up her mom.

Personal physical abuse, including beatings from her stepfather, also were early childhood memories, as she was exposed to violence as early as she can remember. Robin explained, “So there was just a lot of physical abuse. He (her stepfather) always had weapons to punish me and my sister with. Not that it was necessary, because he didn’t hesitate to just make a fist and sock me like a man.”

Robin first went to a foster care home when she was five years old; the only birthday party she ever remembered was the one she had with her foster parents when she turned six. After her sixth birthday she returned home to live with her mother and step-father. She spent the next several years as a victim of abuse from her stepfather and neglect from her mother. At times, her stepfather would sexually assault her. Meanwhile, despite an unhappy home life Robin did very well in school, and she consistently brought home good grades. She was also in classes for gifted and talented students (GATE). School for her was a safe place where she did very well and felt the reprieve of the abusive environment she endured at home. “I loved to learn,” Robin declared during one of the interviews: “I always excelled, and I always got really good grades. School was my safe place.”

When Robin was 14, one of her teacher’s in junior high school suspected she was being physically abused at home. Child Protective Services interviewed Robin about her abuse, and, as a result, she was once again placed in foster care. Unfortunately, her sister did not disclose her own abuse from her stepfather, and her relationship with her sister suffered as a result. Robin and her sister endured the shared trauma of abuse, but Robin
was placed in foster care while her sister remained in the family household. While Robin was in foster care, she began high school, and once again, she did very well academically and continued to enjoy school.

After spending about six months in foster care, Robin was asked to leave the foster home because, she indicated, the foster parents did not deem her a “good fit” for their home. She was placed back in a children’s shelter, and she ultimately was placed with her biological dad and stepmother who were living in Madera, California. Living with her biological father was a temporary arrangement, and, by the time Robin was sixteen, she was living on her own after filing for emancipation. During this time, she also successfully passed the California High School Proficiency (CHSP) examination, and was complete with her high school education. It was during this period that she met Samuel Stintson, whom she eventually started an intimate relationship with. Samuel had previously been incarcerated for torturing and killing animals, but Robin did not know this initially. Samuel was four years older than Robin, and their relationship quickly became physically abusive. Largely because of this abuse, the relationship was short-lived. However, Samuel continued to stalk Robin.

Robin shot and killed Samuel after an intense argument in which Robin felt physically threatened. Robin recalls that the moment before she killed Samuel, “All the anger and all the rage that I had inside, not having a relationship with my mom, my stepfather, not being able to fight back ever, it was like, you know I’m tired of this.” Robin ultimately was found guilty of the murder of Samuel and was sentenced to 25 years to life in prison. She was 16 years old when the sentencing occurred, but she was tried as an adult. Initially, while awaiting trial, she was incarcerated in a juvenile facility, but after her trial
and when she turned eighteen, she was moved to an adult facility. She spent a total of twenty-one years in prison.

**The Incarceration Years**

Robin went to prison when she was still an adolescent and all of her adult life, until recently, was spent in prison. Robin, however, never gave up hope that someday she would be free and that justice would prevail in her case. During Robin’s trial, her defense was unsuccessful in using the “battered woman’s syndrome” as a defense. Unfortunately, she was also tried as an adult even though she was only 16 and not legally considered an adult in the State of California.

As already noted, Robin spent the first two years of her incarceration in a California Youth Authority prison, and then was transferred to an adult prison. She spent the next ten years of her life at Valley State Prison for Women (VSPW) in Chowchilla, California. When she arrived at VSPW, she was just eighteen years old and the youngest prisoner in the facility. She was known as “the baby” when she arrived at VSPW, and initially was placed on a yard with the highest level of security. Her first prison job was as clerk for one of the correctional officers, and, according to Robin, many correctional officers as well as inmates viewed her more as a victim than as an offender.

For the most part, Robin avoided prison politics and abstained from criminal behavior within the prison walls. She did have one intimate relationship in her early years of incarceration, and that relationship got her into some minor trouble with the correctional staff. As Robin recounted, “I did get in some trouble. In that bitterness I was preyed upon and I found myself repeating my pattern because I didn’t know anything different. I
ended up in a relationship with a woman that was extremely abusive. It was like Samuel all over again.” Fortunately, the relationship ended, and Robin garnered some valuable wisdom about herself and her proclivity to get involved in abusive relationships, i.e. something that had been a pattern for most of her life up to that point.

During this period of Robin’s incarcerated life, she participated in several vocational and educational training programs. For example, she participated in a program called Joint Venture Electronics, which enabled her to create a savings plan as well as pay all court ordered restitution that she owed. She also began taking college courses via Coastline Community College. She volunteered with the college coordinator, which gave her access to the required books for her courses at Coastline. The books were the primary expense of the Coastline college courses, and inmates created a revolving library for participating students to use the books while enrolled in a particular course. As in her pre-incarcerated life, she continued to consider school her “safe place.” Robin, as evidenced by her own account as well as her prison record, was a model inmate while a VSPW, and she was very serious about taking every opportunity to participate in the programs and educational options available to her.

In 2007, Robin was transferred back to the county jail. She went back to court during this period on a habeas petition focused on her standing as a victim of battered women’s syndrome. In the intervening years, battered women’s syndrome had been redefined as intimate partner battering and its effect. This redefinition enabled Robin to petition the court to reconsider her case. She remained in the county jail until 2010 while her case was appealed. Robin was initially awarded a new trial, but that decision was overturned on appeal by the prosecutor.
While at the county jail, Robin completed her associate’s degree at Coastline Community College. It was also during her time at County jail that she gained more clarity and conviction in her spiritual life. Robin described her spiritual transition: “There was a softening in my heart and it [my pain and anger] was just received in a different way, and then that’s…when I met the Chaplin, Lou Ann. She nurtured me [spiritually] in my three years there [county jail].” Robin was finally at peace in her incarcerated life.

When Robin returned to VSPW in 2010 she had attained her associate’s degree, and she was at peace with the fact that her case was not retried. She still had hope, and she believed that someday she would be paroled and re-enter society as a free woman. She also believed that the environment had changed in a constructive way at VSPW in her absence. The staff and the inmates seemed to be more positive. She attributed the encouraging change to the culture of programming at VSPW as well as her own transformation. In 2012, she was transferred from VSPW to the Central California Women’s Facility (CCWF) as a result of VSPW being closed for female inmates.

As is the case for all prisoners who are either lifers or serve very long sentences, there is a great deal of work that is required to be eligible for and then to successfully be released on parole. Robin was granted parole by the parole board and the governor in 2015. Her journey to being paroled was a remarkable twenty-one year trek with many challenges as she entered the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) as a 16 year-old girl and emerged as a very wise thirty-seven year old woman. Robin remains a positive role model and ardent supporter of the many women who she knew her while she was incarcerated.
Robin’s Release and Reintegration

Robin’s transition from prison to society actually began while she was still incarcerated. Robin said, “I was very active in prison. I worked 40 full-time hours as a substance abuse counselor. I was involved in classes; whether it was Coastline; whether it was self-help, there were things that I was involved in. The equivalent of that out here would be working full-time, going to school, and still being involved in volunteer projects.” She prepared herself through education, participating in programming, attaining work experience, and as noted becoming a certified drug and alcohol counselor. Moreover, she became a deeply spiritual woman, and she ardently believes that her prison experience serves a purpose in her life and others’ lives.

When she was first incarcerated as a 16 year-old girl, she met a prison counselor named Mr. Wilson. Mr. Wilson instilled in her the hope that would be necessary to endure and grow during her twenty-one years in prison. Robin believes that Mr. Wilson was her “prison angel.” When you listen to Robin tell about her encounter with Mr. Wilson, and the hope he provided for her that helped her understand her experience, then you believe it was divinely inspired. Robin acknowledged all the anger she was holding in her life, and accepted full responsibility in taking the life of another. She admitted, “It took me a long time to come out of the bitterness and to really comprehend that I had taken somebody’s life and what that meant and the consequences and the ripple effect of that was.”
Robin’s Present Life

Robin is a truly beautiful soul who radiates with compassion, empathy, and a sense of purpose to support others who have been affected by the criminal justice system. She re-entered society in 2015, and since then her life story has been an inspirational narrative of successful reintegration. Since Robin’s release from prison, she completed another associate’s degree at Mesa Community College. She now works part-time at Mesa College as a counselor, and, as has already been noted, she is continuing her education at San Diego State University (SDSU) majoring in social work. Robin plans to graduate in 2019, and she is looking forward to continuing her education with a graduate program in social work. Robin is an active participant in SDSU’s Project Rebound, a student support group for formerly incarcerated adults.

Robin’s re-entry into the community was not without challenges. She suffered through multiple employment rejections because of her felony conviction. As in her incarcerated life, Robin never gave up hope, and she always trusted that there is a reason for everything. Her spiritual life and her own personal relationship with God have moved her to a space where she can successfully manage the many struggles facing the formerly incarcerated. The essential ingredients of successful prisoner re-entry i.e. employment, housing, and transportation have been available to Robin. She owns her own car without any monthly payments, and she lives in a safe home with other women. She has had both full and part-time employment since 2015, and she has been a full time student first at Mesa College and now at SDSU. One of Robin’s life goals is to be able to live on her own with her own bathroom, a luxury that she has not experienced during the prior 23 years.
Robin is an active volunteer with the Tariq Khamisa Foundation (TKF). The foundations’ primary mission is promoting restorative justice practices with the goal of bringing together victims and offenders to create a space for reconciliation and forgiveness. Robin is very aware of the harm she caused to another family when she took Samuel’s life. She hopes and prays that someday reconciliation and forgiveness will be available to her with Samuel’s family. One of the reasons that Robin chose to be paroled in San Diego as opposed to the Bay Area was to provide space for her own victim’s family who still grieves Samuel’s murder. She acknowledged, “I knew I needed to give Samuel’s family their space [so they could decide if reconciliation was possible] for them and for me. So going back there [San Jose] was never an option.”

Remarkably, Robin’s heart is full of love and forgiveness for those who harmed her when she was very young. She is not a bitter or angry person, but rather a humble and wise soul with a big heart. Although she does not have a strong relationship with her mother, she does all she can to maintain that relationship in a true spirit of love and forgiveness. Unfortunately, she does not currently have a relationship with her sister. Both her father and stepfather have died.

Her extended family includes many of the women that she met and befriended while incarcerated. As a former lifer, she has been granted permission via CDCR to visit one of her long-time friends who is still incarcerated. Robin is working to facilitate a request for her parole, and eventual release. Robin’s reintegration is ongoing, and the positive successes she has achieved in the last few years are indications that she will continue to be a true asset to the community.
Alvaro Garcia

Alvaro Garcia is a 45 year old Chicano male. He currently is a graduate student at California State University San Marcos (CSUSM), and he expects to complete his master’s degree in sociology in 2018. He grew up in Santa Barbara, California in a lower income neighborhood. He has been incarcerated several times in both juvenile and adult facilities. He was last released from prison in 2007, and since his release, has had a remarkable level of success as a student, counselor, community leader, and advocate for at-risk youth.

The Early Years

Alvaro was born in 1972, and he was raised by his mother and stepfather. He did not meet his biological father until he was eight years old. During his early childhood years, he was raised in an environment that included violence, alcohol abuse, and weekend drug use. At the time, he believed that his early life was completely normal, and he did not recognize that substance abuse and violence were not a “normal” part of growing up. Alvaro explained:

Early life, everything…life in a sense was normal. For a lot of people, it wouldn’t look normal, but I grew up in an impoverished community around…my family life, and thought it was normal. There was a lot of drinking, drug use, and a lot of violence. And when I say normal, it’s just the way it was. It’s not normal, but for me the way I looked at it and the way I looked at other people in my community, my friends, it was normal.
By the time Alvaro was twelve years old, his stepfather had left the house, and he was already drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana. His primary male role models were his two uncles, both of whom were in prison. Growing up on the west side of Santa Barbara in an impoverished community was challenging. Alvaro struggled in school, but found acceptance on the streets. The first time he had a “run-in” with the law he was just 14 years old, and he was placed on a year of probation.

Alvaro dropped out of school in the ninth grade. He essentially lived on the streets working low-paying jobs to support himself. He spent time in juvenile detention facilities. As Alvaro admits, he grew up very quickly: “I knew what jail and prison was at a young age, I knew what drug use was before I started using, and I had no role models in my life telling me not to do negative things.” By the time, he was 17 he had completely moved out of the house where he had lived with his mom and two sisters. Although his mom had struggled with alcohol abuse, she was completely sober by the time he was 16 years old. Alvaro, however, was drinking and using illegal drugs. His first daughter was born when he was 18 years old. At the age of 19, he began using his drug of choice, heroin. He was arrested several times for DUI’s, public intoxication, and probation violations. His “rap sheet” was beginning to get longer and the crimes listed on it more severe.

**Early Incarceration Times**

Most of Alvaro’s early periods of incarceration were for less than six months. He would periodically rob people, and now says, “That is one of the ‘guilts’ I have now, even back then I hated the thief, but I stole out of necessity.”
Ironically, Alvaro’s family found some relief when he was incarcerated; Alvaro explained, “My mom used to like it when I was in jail, because at least she knew where I was sleeping and eating. I understood it, you know? I worried my mom.” He did manage to obtain a GED during his periods of incarceration. He participated in the GED program because, while in county jail, it was a way to fill up time in an otherwise monotonous existence.

Alvaro was never a gang member, but he was well known in Santa Barbara’s west side, and he admits to participating in gang activities. As Alvaro tells it, “I was doing it; I was playing the part, it was so gangster.”

When Alvaro was 24, he was arrested for gun sales and sent to state prison for two years. This was the first time Alvaro went to “real prison.” He served his prison time at Wasco State Prison and Chino State Prison for Men. While incarcerated in the state prison, as well as during his previous stints in county jails, Alvaro was clean and sober.

**Back on the Streets**

When Alvaro was released from Chino Prison in 1999, he met his wife. He started his own business as a tattoo artist, and his second daughter was born in 2000. He initially was not using drugs or abusing alcohol after his release from prison. However, he explained, “Being a tattoo artist was an unhealthy employment choice because the environment was rife with drugs and alcohol.” Consequently, he started using illegal drugs (mostly heroin and cocaine) once again. Initially, his wife was unaware of his drug use, but his wife eventually discovered his drug use, and in 2001, she and Alvaro’s young daughter left to live in Hawaii.
After Alvaro’s wife left, he shuttered his tattoo business and began participating in criminal activities once again. Alvaro believes this was the period of his life where he really went “amuck.” Alvaro said during one of his interviews for this study, “When she [his wife] left I just got right back in the mix. I did a year in county jail. I was on the run from probation. I was just very irresponsible.” He spent that year in the county jail for a probation violation for failing to report to his parole officer at the designated time.

**Back to Prison**

In 2004, Alvaro was back on the streets, and he committed a strong-arm robbery at a local bank. He was arrested and was expecting to spend at least 12 years in prison. Fortunately, Alvaro’s family hired an attorney, and he was able to negotiate a plea bargain to just three years in prison. Alvaro believes that his bank robbery was a plea for help, and his last period of incarceration became a transformative time in his life. As noted, Alvaro was sentenced to three years in prison, and he served his time at Wasco State Prison, North Kern State Prison, and Chino State Prison for Men. While in prison, Martin identified as a member of the Indian Power (IP), and he spent his initial time during this period fully engaged in “the prison life”. While at North Kern, he discovered that his biological father’s son, Alvaro’s half-brother, was working as a correctional officer. As a result, Alvaro was moved out of North Kern, and the last part of his sentence was at Chino.

Alvaro was very fortunate during his final years in prison to have mentors and elders that supported both his spiritual and intellectual journey; this support ultimately changed him. The positive role models in prison urged him as he remembers to “never return to prison again” and “walk a different path” when released. He became a regular participant
in “sweat lodge” events for Native Americans in the prison. He began a spiritual journey in prison, and he began to understand that, although his life was challenging because of the circumstances in which he grew up, that he could indeed, “walk a different path.” He stayed out of trouble in his final year in prison, he became a voracious reader, and he was ultimately released on his scheduled date in 2007. He credits his last stint in prison as a “life-saving event” for him since he believes that the drugs or the violence in the street ultimately would have killed him. Alvaro’s reintegration began in prison when he decided that he was going to live a life that did not include a future of being locked-up in prison or jails.

**Returning Home**

In Alvaro’s family, one of the traditions is to celebrate with a big family party when one of the male family members returns from prison. Alvaro had been the celebrant of such parties in the past, but in 2007 he decided to not participate in the “family tradition” but rather just have dinner with his immediate family. He told his family, “I don’t want to have a barbecue, I don’t want to talk about…I don’t want to do this. I want to go home and take a hot shower, I want to get a good night’s sleep, and I want to find a job.”

Alvaro began traveling his new path as soon as he arrived home. He starting working at various temporary agencies, and, after each initial period, he was offered a permanent position. Unfortunately, each time the background check was complete the employer would rescind the job offer because of his criminal record. Alvaro was very discouraged during this early period of his reintegration. His initial re-entry goal to stay out of prison could prove difficult without steady employment.
In early August 2007, Alvaro’s niece, a student at Santa Barbara City College, suggested he attend community college as well. Alvaro had not given much thought to post-secondary education, and the first day he went to visit the campus he left panic-stricken, fearful that he did not belong on a college campus. He described his first day on campus during his first interview for this study:

I stood there, literally I stood there frozen, my feet planted on the ground just looking at the buildings, started pacing back and forth thinking I can’t do this, I am terrified. The next bus pulled up I just got on the bus and took off.

Nonetheless, through the support of his niece, he eventually met with an academic counselor, and he enrolled at Santa Barbara City College. The college became Alvaro’s life and his safe space. He ultimately completed a program in drug and alcohol counseling at City College. Most importantly, as Alvaro tells his story, he began to think critically about himself and his own environment.

During his time in community college, Alvaro remained very self-conscious about his past, and he detailed his level of self-consciousness as he explained, “I always wore a beanie to cover up because most of my tattoos were on my head, and I always wore long sleeve shirts.” It was also during his time at City College that Alvaro began to tell his story in public settings, and his ability to tell his story led to his own growth and empowerment. During an interview, Alvaro recalled his first time telling his story: “I shared my story and it felt empowering because I felt like this is not just my story: this is the story of so many other people.” Further, he regularly started seeing a counselor for his own development, and he continued personal counseling for more than four years.
Present Life and Higher Education

Alvaro spent as much time as possible on campus, and he completely embraced college life. It was common for him to arrive on campus at 7:30 in the morning and stay on campus until 8:30 in the evening. He worked on campus, and he secured an unpaid internship as a drug and alcohol counselor. During this time he was still on parole, but he maintained the support of his parole agent because he did everything that was required of him as a parolee. After his parole ended and Alvaro completed his program at City College, he was working for a nonprofit organization supporting under-privileged high school students. He was now a certified drug and alcohol counselor, and he decided to work full-time for one year in lieu of further education at this time in his life.

He returned as a student to Antioch University, which has a campus in Santa Barbara. He graduated from Antioch University with a bachelor’s degree in liberal arts and psychology in 2014. The degree program he was enrolled in at Antioch emphasized supporting emotional intelligence and social justice; it was a perfect fit with the work he was already doing in the high schools. At this point, Alvaro also had a few academic mentors, including Dr. Chris Brock and Dr. Juan Sanchez who he had met while at Santa Barbara City College. They were now both faculty members at California State University San Marcos (CSUSM). Both Chris and Juan encouraged and supported Alvaro’s pursuit of a graduate degree. Alvaro applied and was accepted at CSUSM as a graduate student in the sociology department.

Alvaro expects to complete his master’s degree in May 2018, and he is interested in pursuing either a Ph.D. or Ed.D. He currently has a fellowship at CSUSM that helps support him financially in his current life as a graduate student. Alvaro is also a recent
recipient of the President’s Student Champion for Inclusive Excellence and Diversity Award at CSUSM. Alvaro’s academic journey from ninth grade dropout to graduate student to applying for doctoral programs is both extraordinary and inspirational. He remains connected to his community in Santa Barbara, and he is a noble example of a man who selflessly gives back to the under-served communities like the one in which he once lived. Further, Alvaro has a depth of wisdom and humility, which makes him a man you instantly like and wish to connect with.

Alvaro described himself as “a drug addict and an alcoholic that does not use drugs or alcohol.” He is mindful that he is an addict, but he has remained sober and clean for over a decade. He has two daughters, and he has a life partner who loves and supports the work he is currently doing. He has maintained a good relationship with his mom and his extended family. He keeps a very close circle of friends, and although he loves many of his friends and family back in Santa Barbara he does maintain a boundary so as not be exposed to any activities which could get him in any sort of legal bind.

Higher education has been a part of Alvaro’s life for the last decade since he was released from prison in 2007. Education has also been a source of healing for him. He is a profoundly spiritual man who identifies with Native American spiritualism. He understands that his walk, which has been successful for the last ten years is a walk in support of all Chicano men. He plays his role as mentor, role model and leader in his community with a genuine heart. He knows that others in his community and beyond are watching him, and his success can be a beacon of hope for others in the Chicano community as well as the many community members impacted by the criminal justice system. Alvaro said of his continuing pursuit of higher education as it relates to his
identity and community as follows: “People know my story, people have heard my experience. If I get that PhD there’s somebody going to be watching [in my community] that’s also going to get that PhD. To me, that’s priceless.”

Alvaro often shares his story with economically under-privileged groups, and he is especially interested in helping at-risk youth. Alvaro is very aware of the challenges that many people from minority and poor neighborhoods face, and the significant barriers that members of these communities must overcome to become successful and self-reliant. Alvaro’s own experience as a formerly incarcerated person informs his work as a sociologist and gives him a tangible, lived experience from which we can all benefit.

**Tyler Wilson**

Tyler Wilson is a thirty-one year old African-American male. He was born and raised in San Diego, California. He is a former West Coast Crips gang member. He spent almost a decade in prison for a street fight in which he was not present. He is currently an undergraduate student at San Diego State University (SDSU) majoring in sociology and criminal justice. He plans to graduate from SDSU in 2019. He is also a small-business owner, Spotless Cleaning Company, with his partner. He is an active community leader; most recently, he was appointed to the San Diego Gang Prevention Intervention Commission by the San Diego Police Chief. He recently became a father of a baby boy.

**Early Life**

Tyler grew up in the City Heights neighborhood of San Diego during the 1990’s in a single-parent household. His father was in and out of prison for selling drugs during
most of Tyler’s childhood. His mom was a victim of the 1990’s crack epidemic and was incarcerated for part of his early childhood. As a result, Tyler was raised in group and foster homes where he was separated from his siblings. At a very early age, he turned toward the gang lifestyle and eventually became an active gang member with the West Coast Crips. His group of friends that were involved in the gang lifestyle had similar circumstances of broken-homes, single-parent households, and parents either incarcerated or victims of drug abuse. Like his friends, Tyler grew up fast, and he spent his early years being educated on the streets of Southeast San Diego. Tyler recounted in his first interview for this study: “We all had some of the same things going on. We didn’t know how to channel that energy. We ended up channeling it through gangbanging and committing crimes, and doing things that we shouldn’t have been doing.”

When Tyler’s mom was released from prison, his younger siblings were able to move back in with her, and they re-established a familial network. Tyler, however, did not move back with his mom. He spent part of his teenage years in juvenile detention facilities because of adolescent criminal activities. He was just thirteen when he first went to a juvenile detention facility, and afterwards he lived with his grandmother and in a children’s center. It was also during his early teenage years, as he was shuttled between juvenile detention facilities, relatives’ home, and group homes, that he began selling drugs. Tyler’s circumstances as a young boy and adolescent made him ripe for gang recruitment and criminal activity.

**Incarceration**

When Tyler was 17 he was questioned by the police regarding an assault on a rival gang member. Tyler was not present during the assault, and the police initially accepted
and trusted that Tyler was not present during the assault. Tyler was cleanly dressed and there was no evidence that he had recently been in a fight. However, once the police identified Tyler as a known West Coast Crip gang member, they pressured him to either admit to the crime or identify the assailant. As is customary for loyal and righteous young men involved in street gangs such as the Crips, he chose to remain silent. Tyler explained during an interview: “I ended up not snitching or telling at all, and I ended up doing ten years of my life in prison for a crime that I didn’t do and wasn’t even there when it was committed.” As a result, he was charged with assault, his second strike, and he was sentenced as an adult to eleven years in prison.

Tyler was still 17 when he was sentenced, and, due to his age, he remained in a juvenile facility until he turned 18. After sentencing, therefore, Tyler was placed in an Administrative Segregation Unit (ASU) in the maximum-security facility for youth offenders. Administrative segregation is also known as “always shackled” because any movement of ASU inmates is with shackles and chains. At age 17, Tyler was placed in solitary confinement for a crime he maintains he did not commit. One bright spot during this time in the ASU, Tyler did take full-advantage of taking available high school classes. He graduated from Saint Anthony School while still at the California Youth Authority detention facility.

On April 21, 2004, which was his eighteenth birthday, he was transferred to a California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) adult prison. Tyler’s time in prison began and ended as part of the gang that both protected him and made him vulnerable while incarcerated. He was just an 18 year-old kid when he went to adult prison and was initially incarcerated in Northern California where San Diego inmates
were sparse. He recalled his early and vivid memories in adult prison: “You start seeing people getting stabbed and helicopters on the yard airlifting guys out of there and I’m like, this is really the real shit.” After one year, he was transferred to Pleasant Valley State Prison in Fresno to a high security (Level III) yard. At the time, Pleasant Valley was a hotbed for gang violence. Tyler was involved with the violence, riots, and batteries that seemed to be an everyday occurrence at Pleasant Valley. He was eventually transferred back to a maximum-security prison yard (Level IV) at Corcoran State Prison in Kings County.

According to Tyler, the level of violence at Corcoran was more severe than any of the other prisons he had been as an inmate. In an interview, he described life at Corcoran: “Always being constantly locked down, being treated cruelly. Just a lot of violence. That shit…it made where I came from with all those young guys at Pleasant Valley look like Camp Snoopy.” While at Corcoran, Tyler experienced being on lockdown for up to twenty-two hours a day. Lockdown is when inmates are confined to their cells, meals are brought to them, and any form of recreation is either minimal or non-existent. It was during this period, that Tyler began to think about his future, and how he could possibly extricate himself from his living hell. This was about halfway through his sentence, and he was angry, lonely, and wanted to make some changes. He was very aware that he was a convicted felon with two strikes by the age of seventeen. He began to read all types of literature, and he ultimately enrolled in correspondence course via Coastline Community College.
Higher Education in Prison

Tyler’s older sister had graduated from the University of California at Berkeley, and she provided some financial support so he could purchase books for his community college courses. In his first five years, he only had two visits from his family due to the long distances from San Diego to the prisons in Northern and Central California. At the halfway point of his sentence, he was once again transferred to a Level III high security prison, Centinela State Prison in the Imperial Valley. This was the first time in five years that family visits were realistically possible and affordable. He continued his education with Coastline College, and he began to have regular visits from family and friends. Tyler refers to this time at Centinela as his “in between time” where he is taking classes and reading to educate himself but at the same time still involved with the prison gangs and prison politics.

Tyler’s walk between trying to make a future for himself through education and still walking in the gang lifestyle was taxing. He explained in his first interview for this study about the balancing-act he was living at Centinela:

I’m reading everything I could get my hands on, I’m still like…I was in between. It was weird, because I wanted to be real, real smart [and learn]. I wanted to be well read, and I wanted to be a smart individual, but I was still heavily into the prison gangs and the politicking and that. So it was like a combination.

He was a young man, and he was not ready at this point to make a clean break from the gang life that he had known since the age of thirteen. He also needed to survive in prison, and he could not simply “walk away” from his gang. He was involved in another
battery incident while at Centinela which resulted in him being transferred back to a maximum-security prison (Level IV), Calipatria, also in the Imperial Valley.

Life at Calipatria was relatively calm. The incident at Centinela served as a “wake up” to Tyler, as he fully understood that if he had been charged with an assault it would have been his “third strike” and the result could have been a life in prison without the possibility of parole. He recalled thinking about the battery incident: “I could get my third strike. You know? Without even getting a chance to get started, so. I was sitting up there thinking you can’t keep putting yourself in these types of situation.” He was very well aware of how tenuous his situation was behind bars and having daily exposure to violence or potential violence. He spent his final two months in prison on lockdown, and he was grateful for the final days of lockdown since it mitigated his exposure to potential violence. He was paroled from Calipatria in 2013.

**Re-entry and Reintegration**

In 2013 Tyler was released from prison, and since that time he has had one success after another success. As he recalled his story of his release from prison, “When I got home, I just told myself this life is not for me anymore.” He was a known gang member, and although he spent ten years in prison for a crime he insists that he did not commit, he did everything that he was expected to do while incarcerated to support his gang membership. When Tyler came home, he chose a different path for himself and became a role model for his family. He started work immediately, and stayed away from criminal activities. His first job after his release was with the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO).
It was at CEO that one of the counselors encouraged Tyler to continue with his college education; he already had thirty-nine credits with Coastline Community College. He enrolled in San Diego City College, received financial aid, and worked part-time to support himself. It was also during this time that many of the West Coast Crip members in Tyler’s neighborhood were arrested and sent to prison. Most of his former gang associates were either in prison or had died a violent death. The gang life was in Tyler’s past at this point, and he was left alone by other current gang members. He had served his time in prison and was now living a life without crime.

His initial education goal was to get an associate’s degree at City College and then begin working. While at City College, however, he decided to get an associate’s degree that would transfer to a four-year institution. He received financial aid and worked part-time while at City College. He studied sociology while at the community college, and applied to San Diego State University (SDSU) for transfer. He was accepted by SDSU, and he began at State in the fall of 2017, studying both sociology and criminal justice. Tyler should graduate in the spring of 2019, and he would like to go to graduate school at some point in his future.

Tyler is a role model for success after being incarcerated, but his reintegration back into the community was not without challenges. He was incarcerated when he was 17 and did not re-enter society until he was 27. Some tasks that we take for granted such as using an ATM, a cell phone, or pumping gas were tests of patience for him as he came back into the community. He had a very disappointing experience in his search for work including one rescission of a job offer in which the entity wanted to hire him but was
prohibited by the State of California because he had a criminal record. After this employment disappointment he recalled thinking:

I’m like what the hell? I had a moment thinking do I continue to move forward or do I just say fuck this shit and a lot of people would’ve ended up being like fuck this and continuing right back on that downward spiral. But, I just continued to push forward through all of those things.

Fortunately, he did eventually secure a job as a case manager with Metro Community Ministries that provided him with both a living wage and the ability to expand his own human and social capital while still going to school. He characterizes his job with Metro as his first professional job where he worked with professionals every day.

**Community Leader**

Tyler has been active in his community since his release from prison. He sets an example for his family, especially his younger nieces and nephews simply by going to work and going to school. He understands that he has become a mentor and a shining example of how to break free from the cycle of gang associations, poverty, and substance abuse, which are still prevalent in the neighborhoods in which he was raised.

Tyler did not do all of this alone, of course. He was fortunate enough to make a connection with a local non-profit, Paving Great Futures, which assists disenfranchised communities with creating their own economic opportunities. Paving Great Futures helped Tyler write a business plan, and as a result, he started his own business. His business, Spotless Cleaning Company, is now maturing in its second year of operation,
and the revenue stream and flexibility of his work hours has supported him as he pursues his bachelor’s degree at SDSU.

In 2017, just four years since he left prison, Tyler was appointed a commissioner for the San Diego Commission on Gang Prevention and Intervention. He sits on equal ground with the San Diego Police Chief, City Council members, and the San Diego County Sherriff to name just a few of the other commissioners. He is the voice for those young men and women in San Diego who have been faced with few choices and end up caught in the gang life. His social capital in the community of San Diego continues to rise, and he attributes much of his success to pursuing higher education at both City College and SDSU. He believes his college success has opened and continues to open many doors for him. He summarizes his current life by explaining:

I know a lot of people in underprivileged communities that don’t think these certain types of things [college and a living wage job] are possible or don’t realize that once you get the ball rolling it really happens and it comes together. Once you get a glimpse of that potential, you see how easy things are.

Tyler has a big presence, both physically and intellectually, and his warm smile is infectious. He still has a wonderful relationship with his mom and his siblings, and they admire him for his many successes. He recently became a father, and he and his partner are raising their newborn while he continues to go to school and run his business. He is a spiritual man who believes in a higher presence. He does not display any bitterness for the systemic injustice that he endured as an inmate for ten years for a crime he did not commit. Rather, he is intent on making a positive difference on the community in which he spent his own youth. He has accomplished much in the four years since his release
from the custody of CDCR, and he has not squandered a moment or an opportunity to promote change for his own family and his community.

Richard Rodriguez

Richard Rodriguez is a thirty-four year old Mexican-American man. During his childhood and adolescence, he lived in Nevada, Montana, Idaho and California. He spent a significant part of his teenage years in juvenile detention facilities. As an adult he was incarcerated for seven years in several California State Prisons. He is a member of the Surenos or Southsiders street gang. He is currently a student at San Diego City College, a community and campus activist, public speaker and published author. He plans to transfer to a four-year college and eventually go to graduate school. Richard is a devoted father of three children and a caring son to both of his parents. Richard’s nickname is Rapido, and his friends and family call him Rapido.

The Early Years

Rapido was raised by his Mom, and one of his earliest memories is when he was six years old. At age six he almost drowned in a Jacuzzi while living in Laughlin, Nevada with his mom; he was subsequently put in a medically induced coma for a few months. He did make a full recovery. Somewhat later, however, he was diagnosed with ADHD, and he was on medication for his ADHD as far back as he can remember. In elementary school, he was often isolated from other kids, and he admits that he became very aggressive and bullied other kids at school.

Rapido started using illegal drugs including marijuana and cocaine when he was ten years old. He recounts his pre-pubescent criminal life: “By the age of 11, I’m getting
caught by the cops for robbing houses, stealing from stores. Now I’m really rebelling. I’m taking off to the streets, running away.” He was arrested for the first time when he was 11, and was first locked in a juvenile detention facility at age 12. He was introduced to the Surenos gang when he was in the juvenile detention facility the first time, and he subsequently became an active gang member.

While in the custody of the California Youth Authority, Rapido, who was 13 at the time, was transferred to the Idaho Youth Ranch in Rupert, Idaho. He was away from his family and very unhappy, and he eventually escaped from the ranch with two older friends. He described the whole escape ordeal during his first interview:

We went on the run. We stole a van. We stole a bunch of guns. We robbed a bunch of houses. We ended up in Oregon. In Oregon, we ended up carjacking a guy. We ended up robbing another store. We ended up in a high-speed chase [with police]. In the high speed chase, I ended up going through the windshield.

He was caught in Oregon by the police and arrested for grand theft auto. He returned to the ranch and was ultimately sentenced as a juvenile offender to two years detention. He was transferred to the Youth Authority (YA) facility in Boise, Idaho. A few months after his 16th birthday he was released from YA custody and began living with his mom in Missoula, Montana.

In Missoula, Rapido was one of the local drug dealers and did not assimilate to life in Montana. He summarized his time in Montana: “So now I’m dealing drugs. I’m like the local drug connection. I’m in the game and I’m doing it.”
When Rapido was seventeen and still in Montana, he was arrested for aggravated burglary. He was facing being tried as an adult, and, if that happened would potentially be sentenced to up to ten years in prison. He spent some time in county jail, and when he was released on bond he absconded and left Montana. He was on the run for more than four years. He was dealing drugs in both California and Oregon during his hiatus from Montana. When he was 22, and more than four years since he left Montana, he was arrested for an unrelated drug and gun charge. He was eventually sent back to Montana for the aggravated burglary charge. He wrote a heartfelt letter to the judge in his Montana case, and the judge showed great leniency. Rapido was sentenced to a year in prison deferred, which he meant he did not have to serve time in prison as long as he maintained a clean record for the entire year. This was a very big break for him, and after six months, he was able to transfer his case to Houston, Texas where he reignited his criminal activities.

**Crime Spree**

Rapido’s time in Houston proved to be very lucrative. He was dealing drugs and was operating several massage parlors and escort services. As a Southsider from California, he was considered an outsider by rival Texas gangs. His operations eventually became a target from competing gangs, which led to turf battles and violence to achieve local supremacy. He decided to leave Texas as the business situation became very messy and unpredictable. He detailed his situation in Texas:

It started getting...street warfare started taking place. Next thing I know, some tit for tat shit ‘cause I’m a Southsider from LA and SOCAL. Out there they don’t
fuck with us. Texas has their own (rules). They don’t mess with us. So, I’m out there, and it’s all-out street warfare.

He had spent over two years in Texas before he left, and then he briefly returned to Montana. His first child, a daughter, was born while he was living back in Montana.

Rapido left Montana for Southern California, and landed in San Diego. He was dealing drugs and engaged in other nefarious activities in Southern California. He was eventually arrested in San Diego for carjacking, and was also suspected of committing a bank robbery. Richard was 24, and he recognized that his luck may have run out, as he appeared to be potentially facing a very long prison sentence. His girlfriend was also pregnant with their second child when he was arrested in San Diego.

**Incarcerated Life**

Richard was initially detained at the George Bailey Detention facility in San Diego. He pled guilty to the carjacking, and his attorney negotiated a six-year prison sentence. He was transferred to Donovan State Prison, also in San Diego, for processing and reception into the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR). In California state prisons, you must declare your race and ethnicity for both safety and survival. Rapido identified himself as Mexicano and as an active Surenos gang member. His father is Mexicano, and his mother is of Irish decent. Rapido’s skin color is white which made him feel that he always had to prove that he was Mexicano. Life as an inmate at Donovan was no different for Rapido, as correctional officers and some inmates initially challenged him about his Mexican heritage. These challenges to the legitimacy
of his Mexicano heritage, according to Rapido, made him hyper-macho and if necessary ready to fight to prove it.

While at Donovan, Rapido went on his first mission as a Southsider on the inside, attacking and stabbing a fellow Surenos gang member because it was discovered that the stabbing victim was a convicted rapist. In Richard’s own testimony he reflected on how vicious prison life could be, and that he had to prove himself even more as a blond-haired, blue-eyed, fair-skinned Southsider.

Shortly after his first prison mission, he was transferred to Ironwood State Prison in Blythe, California in the Mojave Desert along the Arizona border. It was 2008, and there were very few educational or other program opportunities at Ironwood or other CDCR prisons, for that matter. During an interview Rapido described his second mission (in prison) while at Ironwood: “There was a dude snitching to the guards. So I had to handle him. I stabbed him six times and I ended up beating him to a pulp. Kicking him in the face. I was shot with a block gun twice.”

As a result of the stabbing and beating incident, Rapido was moved to the special housing unit (SHU), or solitary confinement, for fifteen months; he was sentenced to an additional two years for his role in the stabbing/beating at Ironwood.

Rapido was then transferred to Salinas Valley State Prison in Soledad in 2010. While at Salinas Valley, there was a massive prison riot between the Surenos and the Nortenos or Northerners, and he was involved in that riot. One inmate was killed, and several inmates were charged with murder. This was at the same time that the CDCR began its Public Safety Realignment Initiative (or simply realignment) program to move inmates
Throughout the state prison system and also to county jails in order to reduce overcrowding.

Rapido was moved to New Folsom State Prison located just north of the state capital of Sacramento in 2011. Initially New Folsom had relatively few Southsiders, but the Surenos numbers increased quickly as a result of the realignment. He was involved in another prison riot in December 2011. It was an experience where he almost was shot twice by prison guards and an experience that left him dealing with indelible trauma. After the 2011 riot, things started to change at New Folsom and for Rapido.

**Community College in Prison**

Lassen Community College began offering courses for the inmates at New Folsom Prison, and overall programming began to increase as a result of the realignment. As Rapido admitted during an interview: “I was tired of watching the same TV shows for years. I was sick of it. I thought, ‘What do I have to lose’ [by pursuing education].” At age 28, he began to want more than the violent existence he had been living as an inmate in custody with CDCR. In his words, he became a “sponge for knowledge.” Although he already had a GED and had received a high school education within the juvenile criminal justice system, he knew that his education was rudimentary at best.

He dedicated himself to improving both his education and his capacity for learning. All of the courses offered through Lassen College were via correspondence courses. The inmates at New Folsom Prison began a creative writing class, and that class led to Rapido’s participation in spoken word recitations. As Richard explained, “Inmates from different races and affiliations began talking about which papers they were writing, the
books they were reading or the math problems they were working.” When Rapido was paroled in the summer of 2015, he left New Folsom with forty-three credit units and thoughts of potentially going to school on the outside.

**A New Beginning after Prison**

Rapido travelled via bus from New Folsom back to San Diego. He arrived at the Greyhound bus stop in San Diego’s East Village after midnight one August evening in 2015. He had two hundred dollars, no housing prospects, and the requirement to meet his parole officer within twenty-four hours. His first night of freedom was spent sleeping on a bench in front of San Diego City College. When he met his parole officer later in the day, he told him he wanted to go to school. He was surprised that the parole officer approved of his plan to start school, and he further helped him with housing, first at Nosotros Recovery Home and then at a sober living facility.

Richard enrolled at San Diego City College and began taking classes in the eight-week session in the fall 2015. He has remained at City College, completing most of his required core classes as well as taking classes for his own personal growth. He plans to transfer to a four-year school to complete his bachelor’s degree and eventually pursue graduate school.

Rapido was on parole for two years, until the summer of 2017. He is now free and clear of the CDCR and any form of supervision. He has led an extraordinarily productive and purposeful life in the two and a half years since his release from prison. He does not smoke cigarettes or use illegal drugs, and in fact, he has maintained a drug-free lifestyle. His natural high is attained through his continued participation in higher education, and
helping other formerly incarcerated men and women enroll and participate in post-secondary education. He reflected on his life as a student during his second interview:

College has been a builder of my mind and it’s helped build me up. It’s helped me find my voice. It’s helped me speak out for what’s right. It’s helped me learn to build a network, how to do social capital. How to talk with people.

Rapido co-founded the Urban Scholars Union, a program and support group at City College that assists formerly incarcerated students at City College. He also is a founding member of Together as One, a local group that supports the formerly incarcerated as they reintegrate back into their communities. He is an active volunteer at the San Diego non-profit, Inspired Innovation, which fosters opportunities for the formerly incarcerated to pursue higher education. Rapido is a busy man, working and creating real change within his community.

Rapido now lives with his dad, and his dad has significant health issues. Rapido’s dad is proud of his son’s community work as well as his school achievements. He maintains a 3.7 GPA, works on campus as a Student Outreach Ambassador, and willingly speaks publicly about his criminal past and the challenges he has endured from life in the streets to life as a college student. Rapido graciously speaks about his past; he owns his past, and he is using his experiences to create a brighter future for himself and his children. He summarizes his current life: “I am a father. I do take it serious. But I want my kids to follow something better. I’m showing them that education is important. That’s the legacy they’ll follow.”
He recognizes his own trauma from the violence he encountered on the streets and while in prison, and he knows that life will continue to present challenges, challenges he knows he will meet. His two oldest children live with his mom in Montana, and he hopes to eventually create a life with them together. His youngest son lives in San Diego County and was born after his release from prison. He is grateful that he can be there for his youngest son as he grows up. However, he is just as devoted to his older children in Montana, even though he is unable to spend as much physical time as he would like with them at this point in his life.

Richard should complete his studies at San Diego City College in 2018. He would like to attend the University of California at Berkeley or San Diego State University. He is a very humble man, and his commitment to be active in his community to effect change is truly inspirational. He is both a mentor and a mentee within the tight population of formerly incarcerated college students and educators in California. Richard aspires to one day go to graduate school and attain a PhD. If you get to know Rapido, then you soon realize that he is a man with a big heart and large aspirations; you know he will achieve a great deal in the future as he focuses on helping others in the community.

**Anthony Harris**

Anthony Harris is a forty-six year old African-American male. He grew up in the East Bay area of the San Francisco Bay region. He was raised in an intact nuclear family with mom and dad present for his entire childhood. At the age of 20, he was arrested and convicted of attempted murder as the result of a fight that took place at a party. He spent almost a decade in prison. Today, he holds both a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree from San Francisco State University (SFSU). He is the Regional Director of
Project Rebound for the California State University system that supports formerly incarcerated students in nine California State Universities. He is also a lecturer at SFSU. He is married and has two children.

**Early Life**

Anthony was raised by his parents along with his younger sister. His dad worked for the state of California, and his mom worked at a school for blind children. He has two older stepsiblings as well. His parents grew up in Oakland, California, but they moved their family to the suburbs when Jason was very young. His parents did not attend college, and he did not believe that college was even an option for him when he was an adolescent. He explained during his first interview: “I had my difficulties coming up. There was a lot of racial discord out there [Oakland/East Bay] too, and I had to learn to navigate.” As an African-American teenager, this racial disharmony had an impact on him and his choices.

Anthony was diagnosed with a learning disability at an early age, and he received special education support in school. He remained in school throughout his younger and adolescent years, eventually graduating from high school. Anthony did very well in athletics, and also enjoyed all the social aspects of going to school. He admitted during an interview, “I was rather physically intimidating as a youth, and this physical prowess earned me respect, but also led to me getting into some trouble.”

Anthony was not involved in any gang activity when he was growing up, and during high school he was not particularly thinking about his future beyond leaving school. He did not use drugs, and his only real vice was drinking alcohol. He did have problems
with fighting and violence in school that led to some time spent at a juvenile detention facility. He had more than a few skirmishes, which created a record that would later follow him as he got into more serious trouble. He graduated from high school when he was 18.

**Arrest, Trial, and Incarceration**

When Anthony was 20 he was involved in a fight at a party that escalated into serious violence. One of Anthony’s friends was badly beaten with a tire iron, and Jason shot one of the attackers. Anthony recalled his fateful day: “At age 20 I found myself going from having fun at a barbecue to facing a life sentence. I did not wake up that day thinking, ‘This is the day I want to go to prison’.” He did go to prison that day, and he spent the next decade of his young life in the custody of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR).

The plea bargain offered to Anthony was for a life-sentence, which really was not much of an offer. Anthony was fortunate to have family and friends who were able to hire a lawyer for him, and, as a result, he took his case to trial. Anthony considers himself lucky in that he received a 17 year sentence, and he would be able to serve half of that time, assuming he was a model prisoner. Anthony was, in fact, a model prisoner, and his life as an inmate was a time for him to learn about himself and the social system that contributed to the circumstances that led him to prison.

Anthony was initially sent to San Quentin State Prison in Marin County. San Quentin was the prison all inmates with sentences greater than ten years were initially processed into the state prison system. It was at San Quentin that he read about John Irwin, a PhD
Sociology Professor at San Francisco State University (SFSU), who founded Project Rebound in 1967. Project Rebound was established to assist the formerly incarcerated with enrollment and support while attending SFSU. Dr. Irwin was, himself, formerly incarcerated before earning several graduate degrees.

The notion that formerly incarcerated men or women could earn college degrees, including the Ph.D. degree, planted hope for Anthony and his own future after prison. He vividly recalled:

I read a little bit about his [John Irwin’s] story how he paroled at one point in the 60’s, and went on to get his PhD. So it interested me. So it interested me; I didn’t even know what a PhD was, but it sparked my interest. I began writing to Project Rebound.

Anthony’s interest in Project Rebound and higher education led to regular correspondence from Anthony while incarcerated to the folks at Project Rebound and Dr. Irwin at SFSU.

By the early 1990’s, there were very few opportunities in the California prison system for higher education for inmates. Anthony already had a high school diploma, and he believed that additional education would be necessary for him to have a chance when released from prison. His interest in sociology after reading about John Irwin, set in motion his tangible pursuit of higher education while incarcerated. Higher education was actually possible in his mind as he thought about his future.
College in Prison and Early Release

While incarcerated Anthony enrolled in a correspondence college degree program via Ohio University. Ohio University offered four-year degree programs via correspondence to prisoners, and although it was relatively expensive, it was one of the only degree programs available to inmates during the 1990’s. Anthony was able to afford one or two courses per year, and when he paroled, he had twenty-eight credits that were transferrable to another four-year higher college or university. His education while in prison was a transformative experience for him.

After his initial entry into the prison system at San Quentin, Anthony was transferred to Calipatria State Prison, a maximum-security level IV prison. He spent almost four years at Calipatria before his classification score dropped, and he was sent to a level III higher security prison, Salono State Prison. He spent another three and a half years at Salono until his classification score once again dropped, and he was transferred to a medium-security level II prison. Anthony’s downward progression in classification scores was a testament to his life as a model inmate who focused on leaving prison as early as possible and having a future. In order to get his sentence reduced by half he was not only a model prisoner, but he also worked and participated in programming while in prison. Anthony even had one position as a teaching assistant in the prison’s drafting school, a position that somewhat paralleled his overall interest in education and learning.

Anthony was studying sociology while in prison, and as he recounts his education while incarcerated, “I used the whole institution as my analytical research field. I mean, I studied, I was just learning about people, and it made me see things differently.” He would often dedicate two hours per day to studying, and his commitment to learning was
noticed, and sometimes emulated by other prisoners. He navigated the difficult path of avoiding prison politics and gang violence, while setting a respectful example of what can be achieved with education even behind prison walls. He found that his last couple of years in a lower security prison, in some ways, to be the most challenging, as the prison was full of young and often undisciplined inmates that did not understand what it meant to serve “hard time.”

**Release and Reintegration**

Anthony was paroled in the summer of 2001, and due to his persistence in maintaining contact with Project Rebound, he was enrolled at SFSU by the fall of 2001. The first decade of his adult life was spent behind prison bars, and the second decade of his adult life was spent as a student at SFSU. He was in school until 2011, and, during that ten-year period, he was awarded both a bachelor’s and master’s degree and remarkably only missed three days of school for an entire decade. He spent his first three years after his release on parole, and although there were some challenges with parole being supportive of his pursuit of education, he did everything that was required of him in order to gain his complete freedom. He described his life as a student during one of the interviews:

I was a full-time student, definitely, but I was fortunate enough to get a landscaping gig during the day that helped me keep a little money in my pocket. But my objective was to get through school. If you do school right out of prison, you are eligible for the financial support that you need to get through it, but you’ve got to make sacrifices.
Anthony’s focus was to get his education, and he made sacrifices along the way to include delaying obtaining a living wage job at an earlier time in his reintegration. Anthony’s drive and single-mindedness as both an undergraduate and graduate student earned him a great deal of respect in the SFSU community, and it was no surprise that he was offered a job to work on the campus.

**Supporting Formerly Incarcerated Students**

Anthony earned a bachelor’s degree in sociology, and when he finished his undergraduate studies in 2005, he was offered and accepted the position of the Director at Project Rebound SFSU. He earned his master’s degree in counseling in 2011. His graduate degree was a sixty-plus credit program that included a two-year internship, and he was going to graduate school while working and leading at Project Rebound.

Anthony also got married and had his first son during his time in graduate school. He acknowledged that life was demanding for him as he learned to be a husband and a father, while working and continuing as a student. He recalled the challenges of family life coupled with being a student and working:

> The responsibility is stressful, but the reality of it, I don’t give a damn about the most stressful day out here. It’s not my worst day. It’s just not. I think I can deal with anything that this world has to offer out here. As long as I can maintain my freedom and continuously be around supportive folks and good people, and also be in a position where I can help others.

He confesses that the hardest day on the outside is easier than any day inside the prison walls. Anthony loves to learn, and he especially loves being around like-minded people
who also love to learn. He attributes his life-long learning mindset as to why he has stayed at the university.

Anthony has been a mentor to at-risk youth as well as kids that are already in the juvenile justice system. He has used his own voice and influence to guide others towards the possibility of higher education. Anthony believes that there needs to be more positive role models for the young people in minority and under-served communities. Too often, Anthony thinks, role models in under-represented communities are rap musicians and professional athletes, and there needs to be more minority scholar role models visible within their communities. Many of the young people he has worked with do not consider or trust that there is a path to higher education for them, and that group includes the formerly incarcerated youth and adults. Anthony sets an example that it is possible to be a scholar and receive an education even when you may hail from the most under-served communities.

Anthony had a vision to expand Project Rebound beyond the campus at SFSU, and in 2016, his vision became a reality. The Opportunity Institute, a Bay Area based nonprofit organization, provided the funding to expand Project Rebound to an additional eight California State University (CSU) campuses. Project Rebound is now active at CSU Bakersfield, San Diego State, CSU Los Angeles, CSU Fullerton, CSU Long Beach, CSU Pomona, CSU San Bernardino and Fresno State. Additionally, Anthony is working to support seven additional CSU campuses with a Project Rebound chapter. The goal is to have a Chapter Rebound chapter at all twenty-three CSU campuses providing support to all CSU formerly incarcerated students.
The expansion of Project Rebound has changed Anthony’s role and title, and he is now the Regional Director for Project Rebound for the California State University system. The story of Project Rebound is a critical component of Anthony’s own story. His reading about Project Rebound and Dr. John Irwin while at the reception center at San Quentin planted a seed in Anthony that ultimately led to his academic and professional success two decades later. He explained his discernment about his own future during his second interview:

I kind of want that PhD, but for now, what’s happening with me is I’m lecturing. I always like to be in this learning environment, specifically, so I can be connected to people that are learning, and learn as much more as I can myself.

In addition to assuming the role of Regional Director at Project Rebound, Anthony is a lecturer at SFSU in the criminal justice, sociology, and the counseling departments. He strives to teach at least one or two classes a semester. In one of his criminal justice classes, he provides a vignette of a person who has a criminal past but has been successful and has a family in the present. He asks the students if they would hire such a person, and after the students discuss the answer to his question, he then reveals that he is the person being discussed. It is an interesting academic exercise, but he also remains guarded about his own past. Anthony has two middle school aged children now, and he has not yet talked with them about the time he spent in prison. Anthony is the professional and visible voice of formerly incarcerated students at SFSU as well as students at other CSU campuses, but he still maintains a degree of privacy and anonymity regarding his own personal life.
Anthony is very humble and unassuming when you first meet him, and he is a man with much wisdom and deep compassion, especially for those who have been impacted by the criminal justice system. He has been a beneficiary of Dr. John Irwin’s efforts to establish a pipeline for formerly incarcerated men and women to pursue higher education. He is also a leader in the movement to ensure that formerly incarcerated people know that there are opportunities for them to go to college, earn a degree, and use a degree to break away from the revolving door from prison to the streets and back to prison. Anthony wishes to pursue his PhD at some point, but life is busy for him right now, as he raises his family and leads the expansion for Project Rebound throughout the state of California.

My Story

I am a husband, father, son, brother, and friend. I am a retired United States Marine Corps Officer, a one-time small-business owner of a defense contracting firm, a doctoral candidate at The University of San Diego, and a convicted felon. I hold several identities, and I have taken up a myriad of roles in my life. My professional identity has most often been associated with my twenty years as a career Marine; my personal identity is rooted in my life as a child of God, husband, father, and son. I am a good friend to many, and have been blessed with an abundance of friends with whom love and support is continuously reciprocated.

In a professional sense, I was very successful throughout my military and post-military career. However, because of poor judgment, arrogance, greed, and a bit of bad luck I became the target of a federal investigation in 2011. In 2012, I was indicted by a federal grand jury, and in 2013, I stood trial for conspiracy to commit wire fraud, bribery, and money laundering. I was found guilty of one count of conspiracy and one count of
bribery. I was immediately remanded after my trial and later sentenced to three years in federal prison. In total, I spent 807 days in prison, 39 days in a residential re-entry center, and 106 days in home confinement. I also received three years of federal probation often referred to as supervised release. My probation ends on October 13, 2018. As a result of the federal investigation, my business assets were “frozen” which ultimately resulted in my company filing for bankruptcy; personal bankruptcy followed later as a result of guarantees on corporate loans. The loss of freedom, money, and personal reputation have changed me and my family in the most profound way. This is my story.

Early Life

I was adopted by the two most amazing people, Richard and Elizabeth Ehnow, as an infant via Catholic Charities in Wilmington, Delaware. I do not remember my time as an orphan and being adopted has never been much of an issue for me. I have two loving parents, a loving brother, and a devoted and supportive extended family. I grew up in a middle-class neighborhood in suburban Philadelphia, a town named Oreland, Pennsylvania. The town was a balanced mixture of white-collar and blue-collar families predominantly white Catholics and white Protestants. The term “white privilege” was not a moniker of the seventies, but I certainly was a product of that privilege. My very early life centered around the Catholic elementary school, the local Catholic Church (Holy Martyrs), playing sports, neighborhood friends, and of course, family.

I was a good student at Holy Martyrs Elementary School. I enjoyed school, and I enjoyed learning. I was a leader in my class both academically and in athletics. I had a paper route at the age of ten; I worked at a country club cleaning golf clubs when I was
thirteen, and I was industrious enough to make money cutting lawns throughout my teen years. At Bishop McDevitt High School, I was a good student, and I played three sports. I also competed nationally on the debate team for all four years of high school, and I was the president of the student body and my senior class.

I was generally well liked by my peers and teachers. I also was loved and felt cherished by my immediate and extended family and had a celebrated group of friends throughout my adolescence and teen years. I did, however, also have a mischievous side and, participated in adolescent acts of vandalism in my early youth. At the time, I would drink alcohol, often excessively. Mine was not a “perfect childhood”, but it was nearly perfect.

After the elementary and high school years, I attended Villanova University just outside of Philadelphia and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in economics in 1988. During my freshman year at Villanova I worked at the Law School as part of a work-study grant, and then worked at a Greek restaurant for the next three years delivering pizzas. I was a “B” student at Villanova, and I was very social. I was an active member of a local fraternity, Lambda Kappa Delta, and was elected fraternity president at the end of my junior year and served in that role during my senior year.

At the beginning of my junior year, I decided to become a U.S. Marine Officer and enrolled in the Platoon Leaders Class (PLC) at Villanova. I attended Officer’s Candidate School in the summer of 1987 in Quantico, Virginia. I was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Marines after graduating from Villanova in 1988.
Professional Life

I became an active duty Marine after graduating from Villanova. My first duty station was at Quantico, Virginia where I attended The Basic School. The Basic School (TBS) is a training regime all Marine Corps officers attend; the emphasis is on basic infantry tactical skills, leadership training, and Marine Corps history and traditions. After TBS, I was assigned to flight training at Naval Air Station Pensacola on the Florida panhandle. I spent almost a year in the flight-training program, completing primary flight training, but, ultimately, I did not complete flight training. I was reassigned at Pensacola for aircraft maintenance and logistics officer training. While at Pensacola, I became engaged to Molly Keogh, a young lady I met while stationed in Virginia. After my time at Pensacola I was ordered to the operating forces with Second Marine Aircraft Wing at Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Cherry Point, North Carolina.

In August 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, and the United States ultimately sent several hundred thousand soldiers and Marines to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain. When I arrived at MCAS Cherry Point I was assigned to an A6E Intruder squadron, VMA (AW) 533 which was already forward deployed to the Middle East. In a hastily prepared ceremony I was married to Molly at the MCAS Chapel and, days later, on Christmas Eve 1990, I was flying to the Middle East with several hundred other Marines.

My squadron was based at Shaik Isa Airbase in the Gulf Nation of Bahrain. I was a 24 year old first lieutenant; it was my first time in a combat zone and it felt like a big adventure. I was too young and immature to understand the potential dangers, as war with Iraq was imminent. One of the most memorable times in my early USMC career
was on January 17, 1991, when I watched over one hundred fully loaded attack and fighter aircraft takeoff at three in the morning to bomb Kuwait and Iraq. My squadron was part of the initial bombing of Baghdad, and for the next forty days, my squadron dropped more bombs and ordnance than any other squadron in the Navy and the Marine Corps. We were subject to a few SCUD missile attacks, but those of us that remained on the ground in Bahrain mostly remained out of the direct fire of the enemy.

My squadron returned to North Carolina in the early spring of 1991 to a “hero’s welcome.” I now settled into living in North Carolina with my wife, and, within a year my son, Brendan was born. I stayed busy with squadron life and participated in several short deployments in the U.S. and Europe. In 1993, I was assigned to the Naval Air Station, Atsugi, Japan, just outside of Tokyo. My family spent the next three years in Japan, and I had the opportunity to travel all over the Far East to include South Korea, Hong Kong, Guam, Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand. Our daughter, Caitlin, was born in 1994, and we were living a very exciting life with two young children on the Kanto Plain, the most populous area on the planet.

During my time in Japan, I also completed a master’s degree in public administration via The University of Oklahoma which maintained a satellite campus on the Camp Zama Army base. This was an idyllic family time for me as a young man, and I still have fond thoughts of our time in Japan.

After three years in Japan, we moved to Virginia. Molly’s family lived in Northern Virginia, and I was assigned to Headquarters Marine Corps in Arlington, Virginia. After being away from extended family for three years, it was great to be close to our parents and the kid’s grandparents. We bought our first house, a four bedroom with a wooded
back yard, in Springfield, Virginia. I had a very demanding job that involved a great deal of travel throughout the United States and East Asia. I also started to get very serious about my running, and I ran in several competitive races including three marathons. I was also drinking very heavily, and the work demands, coupled with the excessive partying, took a toll on my marriage; the relationship started to show signs of fracturing.

In 1999, I was ordered to San Diego to MCAS Miramar as a squadron operations officer. I drove across the country for the first time with my dad on an epic road trip through the southeast and then across Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. Molly and the children came out a few months later. Although I was succeeding in every way in the Marines, my relationship with Molly continued to deteriorate. In 2001, shortly after I was reassigned to MCAS Camp Pendleton as a squadron executive officer, Molly filed for divorce, and my idyllic family life changed. By all appearances I had a great life, a solid career, and a beautiful family, but my priorities at the time were focused on professional success and not necessarily family life. My wife and I were operating from different priorities. The divorce was ugly and painful, and the whole family suffered.

A Single Dad and a New Beginning

I became a single-dad, and in the spring of 2002, I bought a forty-seven foot yacht and lived at the San Diego Marriott Marina. I also bought a brand new Mustang 4.6L Sports car. I suppose I was living through a premature mid-life crisis.

Both Brendan and Caitlin spent three weekends a month and half of their school vacations with me on the boat. I was the “fun dad”. However, in January 2003 I deployed to the Middle East as the Commanding Officer of three hundred and twenty-
five Marines on the SS Curtis (TAVB-4). We spent the next six months in the Arabian Gulf in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. We returned to another “hero’s welcome,” not foreseeing at the time that the U.S. military would remain in Iraq for another decade. I would deploy to Iraq two more times in my military career.

In August of 2003 I met the most incredible human being on the planet, and she became my girlfriend, then fiancé, then wife and remains my best friend. I always knew that I would have to meet someone who “could handle me,” and Colette and I are truly a match made in heaven. At the time, she was finishing her ophthalmology residency at the San Diego Naval Medical Center as an active-duty Navy physician. She, too, was a single parent, raising two young children, Kelly (age 4 at the time) and Eric (age 3 at the time). Our family became a “blended family” in November 2004 when we got married. We had all the challenges that you read about or see on the Dr. Phil television show regarding a “blended family,” but through the Grace of God and a lot of love, we endured those early years as a new family.

My last four years in the Marine Corps were spent essentially in command leadership positions. As noted, I deployed to Iraq on two more occasions, including a thirteen-month deployment to Al Asad airbase during 2007 and 2008. I was responsible for over one thousand Marines, and I was at the pinnacle of what I thought was success as a Marine Corps officer. Colette left the Navy in 2007 and began to work at Kaiser Permanente, and I retired from the Marine Corps in 2008 with twenty years of service. I loved the Marine Corps, but I was also eager to make money and be successful in the business world. I was very arrogant and over-confident about my abilities.
We purchased an industrial tool and supply distributorship in Poway, California for one million dollars. The company had some pre-existing defense contracts, and it seemed to me like making lots of money would be relatively easy. Colette was supporting my enthusiasm in running a business, and I was clearly focused on making as much money as possible. The business hummed along with ever increasing revenues and profits for the next three years. The only bad news in my life during this period was that I was diagnosed with a rare blood disorder, malignant systemic mastocytosis. As a result, I have to take several medications for the rest of my life and maintain a special diet, but I am fortunate that the medication has mitigated the progress of the disease.

Investigation, Indictment, Trial and Incarceration

My life and the life of my family changed in January 2011 when twenty-five federal agents raided both my house and my business. I became the target of a federal investigation, our corporate bank accounts were seized, and the company declared bankruptcy six months after the government seized its assets. I became a very angry, and a very lost soul. Colette was in shock, as well, and we both just hunkered down not knowing what the future would bring.

I always enjoyed school, so I decided to enroll in a single graduate course at The University of San Diego (USD). Eventually I applied to and was accepted in the Leadership Studies PhD program at USD.

I initially cooperated with the federal investigation believing that I had nothing to hide. I had made some poor business decisions, but I had never intended nor did I believe that I had defrauded the government. When it became clear that the government
only wanted to construct the story to fit their own narrative, I hired a trial lawyer. I was indicted in August 2012, stood trial at the San Diego Federal Courthouse in February 2013, and was found guilty of conspiracy to commit wire fraud and a single count of bribery. I was incarcerated after my trial on March 4th, 2013. I was sentenced to 36 months in federal prison. I spent the next twenty-eight months in prison followed by five months in a community re-entry center and home confinement.

I was initially incarcerated at the Federal Detention Center in downtown San Diego. In my first week at the detention center, my cell mate was stabbed in the jugular vein with a pen and nearly bled to death. I was on the eleventh floor, a floor that housed medical patients as well as the mentally ill – it was no picnic. After my sentencing, I was moved via Con Air to Oklahoma to the Federal Transfer Center, and then after one week later moved via Con Air to the Federal Prison Camp Florence in Colorado. In a bit of irony, on my way to Florence, I was shackled to the number two bomber of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, Ramzi Yousef.

Once I was checked-in at the camp at Florence, I was assigned a job, and the days, weeks and months moved briskly along. I taught leadership, management, and small business courses to fellow inmates. I read voraciously, and I got in the best physical shape in years. I prayed diligently and co-founded a Catholic prayer group at Florence that still exists today. Friends, family and, of course, Colette all visited me regularly; Colette visited me more than twenty five weekends in the two years I was in Florence.

I left Florence and resided in a halfway house in San Diego for a month in May 2015; then I spent the next four months under house arrest. I restarted my PhD program in August 2015 while still under house arrest. Going back to graduate school and working
toward a PhD has made the transition back into society much easier for me. The education coupled with a tremendous amount of support from my wife, children, family, and friends has lessened my own shame associated with going to prison. My own graduate school experience has been very healing for me, and it has given me a renewed purpose in life: serving others much less fortunate than me.

A New Life

My life experiences did not prepare me for the public humiliation of going to prison, but my faith and renewed spiritual life played an important part in my own healing. When I was a Marine, I always felt like I was part of something bigger than myself. When I owned my own business and made more money than my family or I needed, I lacked a sense of true sense of purpose. I now realize “how small I was” just focusing on the proverbial bottom line.

I am now working with the formerly incarcerated student population in several different venues. I believe that most people are good and deserve a second chance, and, too often, our society does not provide enough space for second chances. My current education and my spiritual life have allowed me to gain the capacity to aspire to serve others who need access to second chances. The formerly incarcerated population of juveniles and adults need to know that they can still live a meaningful, purposeful, and productive life as citizens of our country.

Although I never thought I would go to prison, and I regret the suffering my going to prison caused my family and friends, in many ways it was a blessing. I asked my wife Colette in the summer of 2017, “What is different about me since I returned from
prison?” She did not hesitate in her response to me when she said, “You are more loving, more empathetic, and more spiritual than you were compared to before you went to prison.” And if it took me going to prison to be the better person that my wife sees every day, then I accept the suffering and am grateful for the new life.

**Reflections during the Data Collection Phase**

I began attending the weekly formerly incarcerated student support group for Project Rebound at San Diego State University (SDSU) in early October 2017. I attended a total of eight student support groups at SDSU during the data collection phase of this study. The number of attendees in the weekly support group meetings ranged from ten to fourteen students and staff. The support groups always had at least one trained faculty facilitator. Each support group meeting usually met for ninety minutes, and it was an opportunity, in a very safe space, for students to “check-in” both in terms of their academic progress and life progress. I was an equal participant in the group, as I had the shared experience of incarceration and presently was a university student, albeit at the University of San Diego and not SDSU.

The themes which most often resonated in the group were the student’s commitment to their education, the campus as truly a safe space, and the gratitude that there were other formerly incarcerated students available for support. Formerly incarcerated students at SDSU Project Rebound face the same challenges as other prisoners during their reintegration phase of re-entry – adequate housing, employment to support themselves, family care and support, substance abuse treatment, and concern about access to financial aid and health care. Formerly incarcerated students at SDSU do not always advertise
their criminal past, and the support group was a time when the students understood they could speak about their past without judgment or shame.

My attendance at the student support groups was not a part of the original design of this study, and I did not seek permission to write about the participants’ own stories that were shared in the groups. My participation in the support groups was intended for my own healing and reintegration, and for playing a role in supporting other students in their own journeys in education and reintegration. My attendance coincidentally began at the same time as the data collection phase of this study, and it helped clarify the questions I wanted to answer in my research.

In early November 2017, I attended the National Conference of Higher Education in Prisons (NCHEP) sponsored by the Alliance for Higher Education in Prisons (AHEP). This four day conference took place in Dallas, Texas and was attended by over three-hundred students, educators, researchers, and non-profit professionals. There were at least seven doctoral students that attended who, like myself, were formerly incarcerated individuals. Similar to the student support groups at SDSU attendance at this conference was not intended to be a part of the design of this study. However, like the student support groups, the attendance at the NCHEP informed me of the larger body of research that is currently taking place with education inside the prison walls and in the universities and colleges that are starting to support the formerly incarcerated student population. The student support groups and the conference have strengthened my own lens in terms of the restorative potential that higher education can provide to the current and former prisoner population.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

Introduction

This study initially sought to answer one central research question along with four supplementary research questions. The central research question (RQ1) which directed the entire study was:

RQ1. What effect, if any, has participation in higher education for the formerly incarcerated had on their experience of reintegration back into their communities?

The following four research questions also guided this study:

RQ2. What barriers to participation in higher education did the formerly incarcerated face both while incarcerated and post-incarceration?

RQ3. How, if at all, has participation in higher education for the formerly incarcerated led to a restoration of their relationships with others and the community?

RQ4. How has participation in higher education for the formerly incarcerated changed their own human capital as well as their social capital within the community?

RQ5. What are the similarities and differences in the experiences of incarceration and higher education for formerly incarcerated adults who have participated in post-secondary education?
As is often the case with qualitative studies, additional research questions emerge during the data collection phase of the study. In this study, one additional, prominent research question surfaced. The add-on research question (RQ6) in this study was:

RQ6. Does participation in higher education function as a restorative justice strategy for prisoner reentry and reintegration back into the community?

All six of the research questions helped structure the discussion and interpretation of each of the individual life-history cases presented in the previous chapter. The cases also were compared and contrasted within a framework built around the six research questions. The lenses used for the summary of findings and interpretation of the results included both a phenomenological methodology and a restorative justice component where lived experiences of each case participant was compared with all the other participants. This chapter begins by summarizing the results of the cross-case analysis.

**Cross-Case Analysis Results**

**Overview of the Participants**

The six participants in the study all served time in prison. All participants either completed a higher education degree or are currently working toward completion of a degree after being released from prison. The five males and the one female (Robin) participant come from diverse backgrounds with four of the participants identifying as a minority; in this respect, at least, the small group of participants is representative of the U.S. prison population but less representative of the U.S. college/university population. Table 5.1 provides a brief summary of some of the major events in the early life of each participant. Every participant had at least one significant life-challenge at an early age,
whether it be parent incarceration and/or substance abuse, being placed in foster care and/or juvenile detention, or their own substance abuse. These early life experiences were a significant part of each participant’s life story, and may have some relationship to later criminal activities.

Table 5.1

*Early Life Challenges Associated with Each Participant*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Parent Incarcerated</th>
<th>Parent Substance Abuse</th>
<th>Time in Foster Care</th>
<th>Time in Juvenile Detention</th>
<th>Identified as Substance Abuser</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Robin</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No*</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alvaro</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyler</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Robert was adopted as an infant from foster care facility.*

Each participant had spent at least two years in prison with a range of incarceration from twenty-eight months (Robert) to twenty-one years (Robin). Three of the participants have either graduate degrees or are completing their graduate degrees. Two of the participants are at a four-year university working toward a bachelor’s degree, while one participant was currently enrolled in a two-year community college at the time of this
study and planned to transfer to a four-year university in the next year. Robert is completing his terminal degree, and all other participants have expressed some desire to pursue a doctoral or terminal degree. Lastly, each participant is involved in various formal and informal organizations in their respective communities in support of at-risk youth, re-entry programs for formerly incarcerated persons, and gang prevention, to name a few.

Table 5.2 summarizes the study participants’ educational, professional, and volunteer participation information.

Table 5.2

*Current Life of Study Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Robin</td>
<td>Enrolled 4-year University</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>Enrolled 2-year College</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Enrolled in PhD Program</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No, terminal degree</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alvaro</td>
<td>Enrolled in Master’s Program</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As previously noted, all of the study participants, except Robert who was in a Ph.D. program during this study, expressed the intention of continuing with their journey as a student in higher education, with all expressing the desire to potentially earn a doctoral degree. All participants either spend or have spent a considerable amount of time volunteering within their communities, most especially in supporting programs for at-risk youth and the formerly incarcerated adult population.

**RQ1. What Effect Has Participation in Higher Education for the Formerly Incarcerated had on Their Experience of Reintegration Back into their Communities?**

This and the subsequent subsections in this part of the chapter are framed around one of the research questions listed above, and each of the six cases is compared with the other cases within the context delineated by the particular study question on which the sub-section is focused. The focus here is on the formerly incarcerated participants’ experience in higher education and their own reintegration back into the community.

Each participant made a deliberate decision to participate in higher education after being released from prison. As the literature indicates, only five percent of former prisoners do participate in higher education (Pryor & Thompkins, 2013), so clearly, the participants in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tyler</th>
<th>Enrolled 4-year University</th>
<th>Independent Business owner</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>Completed Masters Degree</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
this study are part of an outlier group. Their decision to participate in post-secondary education after release may suggest that those former inmates may have a higher level of both motivation and self-awareness regarding the transformative effect of higher education. Richard associated his education to “building him up,” while Alvaro expressed, “Education helped me manage my emotions.” According to each participant, the education component of reentry played a significant part in their effective transition from prison back to society and into a community. In all cases, participants placed pursuing higher education upon release from prison as a higher priority than immediately obtaining a living-wage job.

**The decision to participate in higher education.** Three of the participants (Robert, Robin, and Anthony) began planning for the post-incarceration pursuit of higher education while still incarcerated. The aforementioned participants also all enrolled in post-secondary education classes while incarcerated, primarily through community college correspondence courses. Further, Tyler and Richard both took college classes while in prison, and at least contemplated participating and were prepared to start post-secondary education upon release. Alvaro did not have a plan for higher education while incarcerated nor did he take college classes while in prison. However, before Alvaro was even released, he had already decided that when he left prison he “would begin a different walk” from his criminal past. My own re-entry plan included going back to graduate school to complete my degree program that was interrupted when I was incarcerated. I returned to my graduate studies three months after my release while still on home-confinement. All six participants began post-secondary education within a year of being released from prison.
The shared experiences of all six of the study’s participants suggest certain elements are required in order to participate in higher education, namely housing and employment or, at least, a predictable income stream for financial support while in school. All six participants secured housing shortly after release, either with family, with the assistance from a community organization, or through the support of their parole/probation officer. Alvaro, Robert, Anthony, and Tyler initially lived with family and had other elements of family support. Robin did not have family assistance for housing, but she did have the support of her parole officer in assisting her with finding affordable housing. Richard had both family support and assistance from his parole officer; he initially lived in a sober living facility and subsequently moved-in with his dad.

All six participants received and/or were receiving financial aid at the time of the interviews to pay for tuition, books, fees, and assist with housing/living costs. Additionally, all participants worked or are working at least part-time to augment financial aid awards to contribute to housing and living costs. The ability for each participant to support himself/herself via family support, financial aid, and part-time work made it possible for them to enroll in or continue in college/university. Lastly, living in affordable and safe housing provided the necessary structure for participation in higher education.

**Education as a foundation for re-entering society.** In each participants’ life story, education was the foundation for reintegration back into the community. Anthony described his university experience as follows: “Once I found something that I could aim for that was positive, it worked. People received me differently, too.”
A common theme among all participants was the notion of school as a “safe place.” Being released from prison means letting go of all that was familiar on the “inside” – your prison home, your gym, your friends, and your work. Each participant spent additional time on campus, beyond class time, because school was relatively safe and less chaotic than other aspects of their post-incarcerated lives. Alvaro was very candid about what reentry would be like for him if he had not pursued higher education when he said, “Honestly I don’t know if I would have survived [on the streets without pursuing education].”

**A restorative experience of re-entry.** The current statistics on recidivism and re-incarceration provide a bleak picture for former prisoners’ prospects for successful reintegration. The literature indicates that more than sixty percent of prisoners will return to prison within three years of release (Petersilia, 2003). The experiences of the admittedly small number of participants in this study support the claim that prisoner re-entry and reintegration may be more successful and less traumatic for the small population of former inmates that become students. All six participants were in some way traumatized by the experience of prison. Richard summarized his prison experience in one word, “humiliating.” Unfortunately, the reintegration experience for most returning prisoners is one of failure and eventually returning to prison and/or substance abuse relapse. Being a former prisoner is a social stigma that tends to stick.

Higher education for all six participants in this study changed the expected outcome of failure into one of successful reintegration. All participants also shared a success that goes beyond being successful in school. Community members, according to the participants’ own stories, have provided praise and support for their academic pursuits
and success. It is important to note, however, that Robin, Robert, and Richard all were released from prison about two and a half years before interviews were conducted for this study. Re-entry and reintegration are still a significant part of their lives, as compared to the other participants that were released from prison several years before this study began.

To summarize, higher education served as a restorative mechanism for prisoner reintegration. Each participant was supported by the state in terms of financial assistance to attend college/university. Thus, society i.e. the greater community, financially invested in each former inmate student’s success. Further, individual communities as well as family members provided other re-entry components that included in different cases housing, substance abuse treatment and support, and emotional support. In the case of the six formerly incarcerated study members, society and their communities were declaring, “you are worth the investment.” It was not just the motivation of the participants’ that led to successful reintegration, but also the fiscal and emotional support of the community that enabled such success. Without community support that included financial and housing subsidies, the outcomes for re-entry for these six participants may have been much different, and participation in higher education may not have even been possible.

RQ2. What barriers to participation in higher education did the formerly incarcerated face both while incarcerated and post-incarceration?

The literature informs us that it has been quite difficult for prisoners and former prisoners to pursue higher education, particularly with a lack of funding for higher education programs inside the nation’s prisons. Remarkably, five of the six participants
enrolled in some form of post-secondary education while still incarcerated. Robin was the most accomplished of the group, obtaining an associate’s degree from Coastline Community College. Likewise, Richard and Tyler both earned significant credit hours from Coastline Community College while still incarcerated. Anthony enrolled in Ohio University during his time in prison, and he earned enough credit hours to successfully enroll directly into San Francisco State University upon his release. I already had a bachelor’s and master’s degree when I was incarcerated, but nonetheless obtained twenty-five credit hours from Anoka Technical College as a part of a vocational prison education program for general contracting management. Alvaro did not enroll in any college courses or receive college credit while in prison.

**Barriers experienced inside prison.** The cost for tuition of Coastline Community College within the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) is absorbed by the CDCR budget. The cost of books for classes are the responsibility of the inmates. In Robin’s case, she benefitted from establishing a “book bank” for Coastline courses in the prison library, while Tyler and Richard had some financial support from family members to purchase books to support their education while incarcerated. Anthony, on the other hand, was enrolled in Ohio University, and he had the burden of paying for tuition and books. In Anthony’s case, even with family financial support, he could only afford to take one or two classes a year. In my case, the Federal Bureau of Prisons at Federal Prison Camp Florence offered a few vocational training courses that also earned college credit (25 credits in two years for me).

Financial support was necessary, to some degree, to earn college credits while incarcerated for those who participated in-prison higher education. Money or lack
thereof, was one of the barriers of pursuing higher education for the participants, but it was a barrier that was for the most part, overcome.

As discussed in the literature review, starting in the late 1970s prison programming to include college/university courses inside the prisons began decreasing significantly. By the early 1990s opportunity for college courses all but disappeared. In Anthony’s case as an inmate in the 1990s, Ohio University’s correspondence courses were the “only game in town”. Similarly, Robin was first incarcerated in the 1990s and opportunities for higher education were largely unavailable to her. Coastline Community College began as an option in the last fifteen years at CDCR, and as Richard noted, “things began to change after the [CDCR’s] realignment (in 2011).”

The barriers for in-prison education were more significant for both Anthony and Robin, (and, I suppose Alvaro during his first time in prison) as compared to Richard and Tyler who were in prison in the late 2000s when college courses to inmates began to be offered once again to inmates. My own experience as a federal prisoner was also different from those incarcerated under CDCR. I was in a prison that had an average population of five-hundred inmates, and the opportunity to take college courses was limited to less than forty inmates at any one time. It also appeared to me that the same inmates remained in college, and there was little direction or incentives from prison staff to either offer more programs or expand the pool of inmates who could possibly participate in the community college courses offered. It was a recurring concern, prompted by comments from prison staff, that the community college courses would be eliminated after each quarter.
Barriers to higher education experienced post-incarceration. When a prisoner is released, the primary concern normally is housing and financial support i.e. employment. As previously discussed, each of the participants had to have financial support and housing in order to pursue higher education. Those potential barriers (housing and financial support) for the participants’ were not a significant issue due to the community/state resources and family assistance provided to them.

Alvaro’s story is somewhat unique compared to the other members of the study, however, Alvaro did not plan to go to college when he was released; rather, he wanted to obtain a “living-wage” job, refrain from criminal activities, and stay “clean and sober.” It was by chance that Alvaro’s niece encouraged him to go to Santa Barbara City College after the job market continued to reject him simply because he had a criminal record. Higher education for Alvaro, initially, was an opportunity to gain a certification as a drug and alcohol counselor and was possible because of the financial aid he received in conjunction with the part-time employment at the college. After Alvaro succeeded at the community college level, he then enrolled in a four-year university, and finally, in a graduate program. Alvaro’s case could be summarized as “success begets more success.”

Each participant developed a relationship with his/her parole/probation agent. After release from prison, support from parole/probation is essential to be successful in any prisoner’s reintegration. In my case, my federal probation officer wanted me to have employment, and I did work for a friend for the first year of my supervised release (i.e. probation). My probation officer also supported me going to school, and after one year working part-time, I was permitted to attend school full-time without being required to be employed. It is important to note that I received a substantial stipend from the
Department of Veteran’s Affairs (VA) via the Post 9/11 GI Bill, as well as a pension as a retired military officer, which made it possible for me to attend school on a full-time basis.

Richard, Tyler, Robin, and Alvaro had the support of their parole officers for them to pursue higher education. Richard’s parole officer also assisted him with suitable housing that supported his student schedule and life. Anthony’s experience was a mix of support and supervision from his parole officer, as he recalls that “there were a few hiccups.” Anthony had one experience where his parole officer wanted him at his house at a certain time to conduct a “house check,” and the time conflicted with a mid-term test at San Francisco State. Anthony had to negotiate with his parole agent’s supervisor in order to take his mid-term test, and then reschedule the home visit. Parole/probation support for a parolee/probationer’s higher education goals is necessary, and without it obtaining the degree while on parole/probation may be very difficult to achieve.

The last obstacle to be discussed for post-incarceration education revolves around the shame and stigma that all six of the formerly incarcerated students carried with them. The campus environment is filled with students of privilege, both economic and social privilege. In addition, most undergraduate students tend to be in the traditional age range of eighteen to twenty-four years old. In contrast, formerly incarcerated students are for the most part, adult learners, who may have been in prison while their student peers enjoyed the uninterrupted advantage of a traditional education.

Richard recalled his first experience in class at San Diego City College: “In class I felt like everyone was staring at me.” Alvaro similarly recalled that when he started at Santa Barbara City College, “I felt like an ex-convict…I can’t stand that word. Ten years ago
[2007 at City College] it’s all I thought of. I’m an ex-convict.” Both Alvaro and Richard have several visible prison tattoos, and an informed person would know and understand that they were at one time incarcerated. In short, because of their tattoos, their identity as formerly incarcerated students was most probably easy to identify.

Robin’s answer regarding the question, “Do I belong on a college campus?” is less about shame and stigma, and more concerned with the age and experience difference between her and most of her classmates. She does, however, carry the stigma of committing a capital crime at an early age, and she remains guarded about identifying herself as a formerly incarcerated student. Tyler expressed less shame and stigma around his incarceration, and has used his experience in a positive way to mentor others and set an example within his community. Tyler and Anthony, both African-American men, recognize that they remain unfamiliar faces on most college/university campuses, and they recognize they have been given an opportunity to set the example for others to follow.

Finally, my own experience with shame and stigma as a barrier to success in higher education is somewhat mixed. I have found that the more I “open up” about my experiences the less shame I carry with me, and I believe the more acceptance I have garnered with students and faculty at my own university. Personal shame and stigma, financial resources, and a supportive relationship with the parole/probation departments all present substantial barriers for the formerly incarcerated participating in higher education. The members of the study group were all able to successfully manage these barriers in order to succeed in their post-incarcerated lives.
RQ3. How has participation in higher education for the formerly incarcerated led to a restoration of their relationships with others and the community?

Individuals who are incarcerated are separated from their families and communities, often for a very long period. Personal and community relationships are frequently completely severed when someone is incarcerated. Crime itself, when defined in restorative terms, is an act of breaking relationships (Zehr, 2015). In this study, the participants provided powerful testimony about the loss of some relationships as well as the restoration and formation of other relationships, often as a result of participating in higher education.

Creating, restoring, and abandoning relationships. In my own experience, I was fortunate that my family and most of my friends remained supportive throughout my period of incarceration and were also integral in supporting my own reintegration. I had frequent visitors, family and friends, while incarcerated, even though I was in prison fifteen-hundred miles from my home. Likewise, I had the support of many organizations in my community, most prominently my church that genuinely provided support and patronage for my re-entry back into my community. After twenty-eight months of incarceration, my wife, children, and parents welcomed me back. In addition, The University of San Diego (USD) re-admitted me in their doctoral program, and the support and trust that university faculty provided to me was a key component in my successful reintegration. My experience with post-incarceration higher education enabled me to regain a sense of belonging and purpose throughout my community.

Alvaro’s re-entry, in contrast to mine, involved making choices regarding which relationships to keep and which ones would not be maintained because they were
unhealthy for him. He spoke of his severed relationships regarding his past life in his second interview for this study: “This world that I’m in right now sometimes can get really lonely. I’ve got my partner; I’ve got some great people, but I do miss my friends. I do miss my family.” He opined that he had become “somebody different,” and that has meant severing or at least maintaining a distance from some of his past relationships. He does continue to have a great relationship with both of his daughters as well as his mom. Alvaro’s pursuit of higher education has not led to a restoration of relationships from his old life, but it has provided opportunities to establish new ones in the community through his work as an advocate, counselor, and mentor.

Tyler and Richard are both former gang members, and their participation in higher education has created and restored many relationships in their communities. Tyler does not associate nor have contact with former gang members except in his capacity as a Commissioner on the Gang Prevention Task Force for San Diego. Richard participates in outreach and advocacy for many of his fellow gang members. He still identifies as a “Southsider,” but he is no longer involved in any criminal activity. He sees one of his roles as a community leader as demonstrating and giving voice to the idea, that there is a different path through education to break out of the cycle of neighborhood violence and substance abuse. Richard has a saying about what the Southsiders should be doing for each other: “We should be here to make a homie, not break a homie.” Richard is also very comfortable describing himself as a “gangster nerd” as he continues his forward path in higher education.

Tyler and Richard both have re-established healthy and solid relationships with their families, most significantly, their parents. Both of these men have expressed how their
families are very proud of the path they have chosen after their release from prison; higher education is an important element of their post-prison chosen path. Tyler does believe that for some members of his family and members of his community, there may be some jealousy regarding his successes. His one brother has sarcastically told Tyler, “You know that you are mom’s meal ticket. You’re her million dollar baby.” Thus, successful re-entry can be “double-edged” in some communities and with some relationships; successful reintegration for the formerly incarcerated can be a source pride for some in the family/community and a source of envy for others. On balance, however, higher education seems to be a positive catalyst for restoring relationships and creating new, positive relationships for both Richard and Tyler.

**Forming new relationships.** Robin spent over two decades in prison, and the family of the victim of her crime has not been able to forgive her for their own loss. She does not have a relationship with her sister, but both her dad and step-dad have died. She does maintain contact with her mom, but as she admitted in her second interview, “I would not say that my relationship with my mom is restored, although it’s sometimes ok.” She further recalled in the same interview, “While I wouldn’t say that I’ve had relationships restored, I will say that God [her spirituality] has brought healthy people in my life that have replaced those relationships that were not always healthy.” Higher education for Robin is less about restoring or mending relationships than about establishing newer, healthier ones. This scenario is similar to the relationship stories in Alvaro’s case.

Anthony has been either a university student, lecturer, or administrator since his release from prison almost two decades ago. Anthony maintains very good relationships with his family, including his parents and siblings. Anthony does have an older brother
that he spoke about in his last interview: “He [his brother] has dedicated himself to the lifestyle [i.e. the criminal life]…and he is on the lifelong installment plan [in and out of prison].” Anthony has a wife and young children, and his post-prison life is quite different from his life as a young man and obviously as an incarcerated person. Participation in higher education, both as a student and as faculty/staff, has enhanced Anthony’s relationships, generally, and like Robin and Alvaro has produced new opportunities for new relationships.

To summarize, higher education has been a factor in restoring some personal and community relationships, most notably for myself, Tyler, and Richard. Alvaro and Robin both lost many of the relationships from their pre-incarcerated life, and Anthony lost some relationships because of their continued pursuit of criminal activities or because they were victims of crime. Higher education is a transformative experience for most, and transformation has led to the many opportunities the participants described as “new relationships.”

RQ4. How has participation in higher education for the formerly incarcerated changed their own human capital as well as their social capital within the community?

Personal and community relationships may well align with and even promote opportunities to enhance an individual’s human and social capital. The literature reviewed in this study indicated that most prisoners are minority men with diminished work and life skills who often have little connection with their community and sometimes with their own families. Higher education is a key element in enhancing human capital. Each of the participants, with the exception of myself, was released without a four-year
degree. Robin earned an associate’s degree while incarcerated and earned a second associate’s degree after she was released. Robin and Tyler are both now juniors at San Diego State University, a four-year university. Anthony earned both a bachelor’s and master’s degree after he was released, and Alvaro earned a bachelor’s degree after his release and is currently completing a master’s degree. Richard is completing his associate’s degree, and his intention is to transfer to a four-year college/university.

**Human capital.** The degrees earned and being earned by the study participants are enriching their own human capital. Robin and Alvaro have worked as certified drug and alcohol counselors. Similarly, Anthony has counseling certifications. Robin actually became a certified drug and alcohol counselor while still incarcerated. These additional certifications were all the result of post-secondary education programs and recognize the specific occupational skills they obtained in their degree programs. Clearly what happened to participants in this study suggests that when formerly incarcerated individuals participate in higher education, the result is greater human capital for the participants and perhaps, additional prospects to further increase their human capital as a result of degrees awarded.

**Social capital.** Social capital complements human capital and requires a “network of relationships” to be built. Most inmates released from prison do not initially possess any positive network to use to construct social capital. Additionally, the formerly incarcerated are often paroled or released back into lower-income communities where social capital is sparse or non-existent. The experience of higher education, however, often brings college/university students into contact with an immense network of students, faculty, staff, and alumni that would be otherwise inaccessible. In my own
experience as a doctoral student, I am a part of a network of high-achievers with noteworthy intellectual talents from a diverse group of students. Although it appears that I possessed greater social capital than other participants in the study due to my military and business career prior to incarceration, in reality my incarceration and felony record diminished much of the social capital I accumulated in a twenty-five year professional career. My graduate education as part of my reintegration has provided a second chance for me to re-build my social capital, and I believe (hopefully) demonstrates to others that I can continue to be both productive and trustworthy.

Alvaro has built-up his social capital in large part due to his continued pursuit of higher education. He recounted the following during his first interview: “In sharing my story, teachers at the high schools, community colleges, and universities value what I bring to the table.” Further, even in his work with law enforcement and parole/probation departments, he has enhanced social capital due to his successful reintegration and his success as a higher education student. He does aspire to earn a doctoral degree, and he declared that earning a doctoral degree is as much about improving his own standing in the community as well as the standing of other Chicano men who may use him as an example to follow than it is about enhancing his education and knowledge.

Tyler and Richard both started their post-incarceration higher education journeys at San Diego City College. They both have been very active in advocating for higher education for the formerly incarcerated as well as advocating for gang members to pursue a different path from the one “on the streets.” Tyler attributes his continued desire for higher education and generally wanting to putting his life “on the right track” to the recognition that both goals made attaining a living wage possible. Further, his success at
City College and SDSU led to his appointment as a commissioner for San Diego’s Gang Prevention Task Force. Tyler summarized the impact higher education has had on his employability in his first interview, “I would never even had the job opportunities I have had without education.”

Similarly, Richard is very active in the community, and has been hired by San Diego City College to perform outreach throughout the community. Tyler and Richard, both former gang members with significant prison time, have been able to harness their experiences into joining and being accepted into positive social networks throughout the community. The benefit of their earned social capital may provide benefits to the community that are not easily measured at this point in their lives, but nonetheless present in their respective communities.

Robin is the one “lifer” in this study, and her twenty-one years in prison essentially stripped her of many of her previous family and community connections. She earned her associate’s degree and her drug and alcohol certification while incarcerated, and thus increased her human and social capital within the prison walls. She spoke about creating her network while incarcerated during her second interview:

My networking started before I ever got out. I used to network in prison to get things done in prison, to get my needs met, and to create new programs that did not previously exist. I am no stranger to networking, and I understand the value and importance of it.

Robin has harnessed her networking skills since incarceration to secure meaningful employment, continue her education, and work in the community to create positive
change for the formerly incarcerated. She has now has two associate’s degrees and is completing her bachelor’s degree, and she believes that higher education has been instrumental for her acceptance back into the community. She recalled in an interview, “In higher education, I have greater freedom to effect change.”

Anthony has been out of prison for the longest time of the participants in the study, and thus has had the greatest opportunity to accumulate social capital. Anthony’s accomplishments in higher education as both student and educator are impressive. His role as the Regional Director of Project Rebound has created many opportunities for him to meet with leaders within the criminal justice system, higher education, and legislators. Anthony’s journey post-incarceration has been longer than the other participants, and his story provides an example of how higher education provides a foundation to garner and continue to accumulate social capital.

**Final thoughts on human and social capital.** All six participants have enhanced both their human and social capital because of participation in post-secondary education. It seems that opportunities are more available for those former prisoners that pursue higher education, but there is a caveat. It appears that most of the accrued social capital is centered on the criminal justice system and higher education, and there is little evidence in this study that social capital may be expanded to the larger private sector, for example. In addition, there is a common thread among all participants that when “telling their stories” to a receptive audience it is well-received, and their stories create other opportunities for them. Richard spoke of his own experience with storytelling:

I got put in a book called *Reclaiming Our Stories*. I go read my story. I’ve read it at San Diego State; I’ve read it at UCSD, Cal State San Marcos, Harvard, and
Berkeley. I’ve been just going everywhere reading my story, and I’m building social capital.

**RQ5. What are the similarities and differences in the experiences of incarceration and higher education for formerly incarcerated adults who have participated in post-secondary education?**

Prisons and colleges/universities are both bureaucratic institutions that serve a purpose for the communities they serve. Both institutional structures are supported by the collection of taxes (prisons and public universities) or receive subsidized, public financial support (private prisons and private universities). However, prisons and institutions of higher education, according to the literature, generally are quite different in terms of the communities they impact. Higher education institutions have become much more racially diverse and have more female students than ever before. By contrast, females only represent ten percent of the adult prison population, although their numbers have grown significantly in the last two decades.

**The demographics of higher education and prison.** Young people with economic and/or social privilege still generally constitute the majority of students in our nation’s college campuses. In contrast, men of color, particularly African-American and Hispanic men, comprise the majority prison population in the U.S. Tyler described his own minority experience in higher education: “I don’t see a lot of individuals that look like me. A lot of times I’m in class, and I’m the only black male inside the class.”

All participants in the study confirmed that the main difference between the experiences in higher education compared to the experience of incarceration is the
personal, physical freedom felt with participation in higher education. All six participants were enrolled for at least some time in post-secondary education while still on either supervised parole or probation. In my case, for instance, I remain on federal probation and will earn my degree while still on probation. It is noteworthy that I am on a low-risk probation and do not have any current restrictions other than travel outside the United States. Robin is the only other participant that remains on active supervised release, in her case, state parole. The other four participants are no longer on parole, but they were on parole when they each first began their post-incarceration enrollment in higher education.

**Participants’ perceptions of the two types of institutions.** Anthony saw at least one similarity between prison and San Francisco State University (SFSU):

> These places [prisons and universities], the things that make things work is knowing the key people in key area. In the mainline [in the prison yard], you got to immediately figure out who’s who. You got to know who works in the kitchen. Who is cool to go to and who you probably need to stay away from. The same thing in this institution [SFSU], you want to know who’s in admissions that is kind and friendly for example. Navigating the terrain and figuring that out is the same survival techniques that I used there [in prison].

In Anthony’s case, his education and current work intersect as part of the administration and faculty at San Francisco State. And very much like prison, Anthony articulated, “the real power might not be at the higher levels.” Both prison and a large university require knowing who to speak with and network with to “get things done.”
Alvaro saw many of the same power dynamics between prison and institutions of higher education. He compared the structure of the two institutions during his second interview:

You have to look at this institution [university] as the same thing [prison].
You’ve got a president, which is like a warden; you have the administrators, which are like prison captains. Then you have teachers and professors who are like guards, and you have the students who are like inmates.

Alvaro also compared his own status as a graduate student with an authority role found inside prison: “Like in prison, you’ve got your key holders, the inmates who’ve got power. Being a grad student, I feel like I’ve got [some] power.”

Alvaro spoke of the institutional roles of both prison and university from his own lived-experience, and he recognized that two bureaucracies with a much different missions share some of the same structures and policies.

Tyler saw both similarities and differences between the two institutions, in addition to the obvious differences in personal freedom. Tyler spoke about the opportunities in both settings: “They both [prison and school] offer you an opportunity, if you’re open to it to focus on yourself and think critically about some things. They [may] develop you for better or for worse.”

Tyler did admit that there are far more positive and healthy-minded people in higher education than in prison. Nonetheless, like all the other participants, he recalled many of the remarkable people that he met in prison. My personal experience echoes Tyler’s recollection in his final interview when he said, “I met some individuals that could run a whole country, heavy readers that could speak [on any topic]. I’ve had conversations that will never leave me.”
Robin has had experience at both a community college and a four-year school since her release. She described her experience at Mesa Community College as follows: “Mesa is a truly welcoming environment, a supportive environment.” In contrast, she has had some experiences at San Diego State that made her feel like a prisoner because of the large bureaucracy at SDSU. Robin recalled one example of her “higher education prisoner experience” during her second interview:

At State, my experience is being just another number. The perfect example of that was myself and a couple of Project Rebounders all took our WPAR writing placement assessment exam the same day. It was a very ugly experience. Here we are at eight o’clock on a Saturday morning standing in line with over five-hundred people. It was like being in prison again. Prison is known for standing in lines, but the treatment [at SDSU]. Everybody involved staff wise in that whole testing process, it was demeaning. They’re just yelling, “Get in line! Have your ticket out! I need to see your ticket” Don’t make me ask you again!”

Robin’s experience speaks to the lack of compassion that may manifest itself in large bureaucracies such as a university or a prison.

Richard did not see many similarities between prison and community college. His experience in prison as both a juvenile and adult was about “breaking men” and causing harm. He viewed college and education as an opportunity to build up members of the community. He spoke to the purpose of community college during his second interview: “I honestly believe that community college’s main mission is to build up the community members around that college. It’s there to build up people to become productive community members.” Richard’s experience, like the experiences of all the participants,
is very personal, and incarceration caused great harm to him. Education has been a process of healing and providing a pathway for a viable second chance.

**RQ6. Does participation in higher education function as a restorative justice approach for prisoner reentry and reintegration back into the community?**

The literature review for this research investigated three broad areas, which facilitated the design of the study and formulated research questions. The three areas in the literature review were: (1) restorative justice theory and practice, (2) prisoner re-entry and reintegration, and (3) participation in higher education by the formerly incarcerated. The literature review revealed that higher education for the formerly incarcerated as a restorative re-entry component had not been studied to any great extent. The notion that participation in higher education for the formerly incarcerated can be viewed as a restorative justice strategy emerge as an additional research question, as the study participants noted their own restoration and acceptance throughout their communities.

**Higher education as a strategy and model of restorative re-entry.** Restorative justice in its most successful application may lead to restoring relationships in the community, including possibly with those individuals and families who were harmed and, perhaps, may lead to a transformation of the criminal offender. In the case of this life history study, it appears that higher education has played a transformative role for all of the participants. Further, the participants have been embraced, and in most cases, become a source of pride for their communities as they have sought a different path from their past lives. In my own experience, higher education has provided me with a renewed sense of purpose within my community. Many in my community have spoken of the satisfaction they have as a result of my own reintegration and pursuit of a doctoral agree.
Family and friends have expressed delight that I have not “given up” and continue to be a “life-long learner” (as pursuing another graduate degree confirms). My participation in higher education after my release from prison has enabled me to begin the healing from the trauma of incarceration and has provided me with the capacity to seek reconciliation and forgiveness from friends and family.

“I’ve become somebody different. I never intended to use education as a means of healing; It just happened,” recalled Alvaro an interview. Alvaro is unsure if he would be back in prison if he had not pursued higher education. However, he is fairly certain that higher education has provided him with the aptitude to think critically, and that ability informs his life decisions today. Anthony, like Alvaro, has been out of prison for more than ten years, and they both have been or are attending graduate school. The research indicates that recidivism is significantly reduced the longer a former prisoner remains free from incarceration. Both Anthony and Alvaro, from the telling of their own stories, seem to be fully reintegrated and restored back into their communities and with their families. Higher education has been a central part of their reintegration from almost the very beginning of their release from prison.

**Reintegration as a continuing process.** Richard’s reentry has been less than three years, and he indicated that higher education has been the most important part of his reintegration. His relationships with his parents, children, and friends have blossomed because of his scholarly pursuits. He has restored and created relationships in the community. He is no longer on parole, but his parole officer continues to identify Richard as a role model for successful reintegration, highlighting his academic success. Richard recounted his parole officer’s comments about him, “’Wow, you are the role
model’. He [parole officer] tells other parolees, ‘You know Rapido’ [Richard]? He is getting a 3.7 GPA going to college at City College. If you want to be successful go holler at him.’” Richard freely admitted that if he had not enrolled in San Diego City College there would have been a good chance that he would have “gone on the run” and eventually returned to a life of crime.

Tyler recognizes that as an African-American male with “two strikes” against him he cannot afford to make mistakes. He is a model for what a restorative ideal of reentry should look like. The community has fully embraced his pursuit of higher education, and his higher education has been a catalyst for more opportunities for employment and attaining social capital. Tyler explained the enormous contribution education has made for him:

So my whole big break for me, what I would push on anybody is always just education. I mean that’s what I’ve been able to just wrap my mind and my thoughts around and put my faith in, and it hasn’t let me down yet.

In Tyler’s case, higher education has provided a foundation for success, re-established positive ties with his community, and created possibilities that he would never have thought possible just four years ago.

Robin is still on active parole, and like Richard and myself, has been out of prison for less than three years. Her post-incarceration higher education, both at Mesa College and SDSU, has provided space for her to heal, grow, and reintegrate into society. She does regret not being able to heal some of her past relationships to include her immediate family and the family of her victim. Education, however, continues to provide her with
the capacity to understand and accept others where they are at the time. Most people have accepted her in her community, both in the workplace and in school. When people get to know her she may then reveal, “Oh, by the way, I’m also on parole after serving twenty-one years in prison,” as she disclosed in her last interview. Education for Robin has provided healing, understanding, and opportunities she would not otherwise have without it.

This last research question that emerged during the data collection phase of the study is connected not only the literature (and the theory), but to the other research questions as well. The experience of successful reintegration, attaining social and human capital, restoring relationship, overcoming obstacles during re-entry are all part of a restorative framework for prisoner re-entry. This study may not conclusively substantiate that higher education is the best or only approach for a restorative re-entry model. However, it documents this phenomenon in six cases and consequently, provides enough data from the life histories of participants to warrant further study and investigation.

**Summary of Case Analysis**

The six life histories presented in this study center on the experience of prisoner reintegration back into society while pursuing post-secondary education. The lived experiences of the six participants and the re-telling of their stories suggest that higher education played a pivotal and positive role during their reintegration after incarceration. Higher education was a re-entry component that each participant sought; they all had differing degrees of support for the other necessary components of successful re-entry to include housing, employment, financial assistance, familial support, parole/probation support, and access to other benefits. Higher education may not have been a viable
The barriers that the members of this study faced regarding their pursuit of higher education were significant, but resources and support for each of them was available. Higher education was a component that began while still incarcerated for all participants with the exception of Alvaro. Ironically the same government that has constructed a far too punitive criminal justice system in which the participants were impacted by, also provided the necessary support for the participants to pursue higher education i.e. government housing and financial aid. The personal barriers of shame, stigma, and personal guilt may be restored, as higher education seems to have provided a therapeutic and restorative experience for the participants.

Some relationships were restored and other relationships were formed because of the participants’ higher education experience. This was not the case for all study members, especially Robin and Alvaro, who lost some relationships or chose not to renew others. Human and social capital was built up as a result of participating in higher education for all the members. Accumulating human capital as a result of earning a degree seems to be fairly obvious, but attaining social capital throughout the community was a common experience for all members as well. The accrued social capital that may be most useful was primarily centered in either the higher education and/or the criminal justice system networks, which is also where the participants focused their educational and professional goals.

A restorative approach to prisoner reintegration may very well include restoring relationships, forming new relationships in the community, and attaining the required
human and social capital for a formerly incarcerated person to have the greatest chance for success during his transition from prison to society. Higher education, from the experiences of this study’s members, seems to be a re-entry component that may be a restorative approach. It may not be the only restorative approach, and it may not be viable without other essential re-entry components in place as well. Higher education does support alternative and constructive choices for the returning prisoner where new social networks can be formed. Higher education does not necessarily support the framework for reconciliation between offenders and victims that is a crucial part of a restorative justice model. However, higher education may indeed provide a former offender with the capacity to successfully participate and be accountable in the restorative process if the opportunity becomes available.

**Implications for Future Research and Practice**

This study was designed to be limited in both scope and purpose. The scope was limited to the experiences six individuals lived through as they were released from prison and re-entered society while they were enrolled in either a two or four year institution of higher education. The experience of prisoner re-entry and reintegration for the formerly incarcerated participants was the principal focus of this study. The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the effect, if any, participation in higher education had on the experience of reintegration for formerly incarcerated adults back into their communities.

**This Study is a Beginning**

The literature on formerly incarcerated higher education students is currently meager. Significantly, there is not a notable body of literature on the lived experiences of formerly
incarcerated college/university students. This study represents a first-step in learning more and gathering some data about what it means to be a college/university student after being released from prison. Remarkably, there seems to be a positive trend in increased awareness about the population of formerly incarcerated persons in our communities. Incarceration rates and the overall incarcerated population has decreased slightly since its high water mark in 2013. However, it is just too early to predict if a long-term downward trend in incarceration rates is occurring. The current political environment is certainly unpredictable, and, unfortunately, the American population has had a long history of demanding “tough on crime” policies.

The current literature on prisoner re-entry and reintegration does not include higher education as a necessary component for successful reintegration. Perhaps participation rates in higher education are so low for the former inmate population that higher education has not been given sufficient consideration as a re-entry component. This limited study indicates that higher education for the formerly incarcerated participants has had a positive effect on their re-entry and reintegration experience. Further research that provides more data confirming the positive effects higher education has on prisoner reintegration may provide a basis to begin to include post-secondary education as a viable re-entry component in the literature.

Among most criminologists and policymakers, there is general agreement that housing and employment are the two key components necessary for successful prisoner reintegration. In this study, all of the participants did in fact have both housing and employment, or at least financial support, while enrolled in post-secondary education. The question about whether higher education is a necessary component of higher
education should continue to be a subject for future research. The data in this study along with the scant literature on the subject at least suggests that higher education should be considered as an available and perhaps successful component of prisoner re-entry and reintegration. Certainly when the definition of post-secondary education is expanded to include vocational training and other functional work-skills training then it should be included as a key element for re-entry success.

**The Benefits of Higher Education for the Formerly Incarcerated**

Human capital in terms of life skills, job skills, and education are greatly diminished in the incarcerated population as most of the literature reviewed indicates. Post-secondary education, in some form, is a key component of rebuilding prisoner and formerly incarcerated persons human capital. The literature on social capital for the formerly incarcerated population is also inadequate at best. This study provided the first step to study former prisoners may attain social capital. For the vast majority of the U.S. population social capital begins in early life either as a student in a college/university or when first employed, and one’s social network tends to expand later in life if he or she becomes successful in a chosen field. Most prisoners are released with little if any social capital. The opportunity to attain social capital after a prisoner is released remains dim due to limited social networks and the stigma of a criminal record. Participating in higher education and achieving a degree, significantly created and enhanced the social capital of the study participants.
Limitations of the Study Sample

The participants in this study were all from California; five of the participants resided in San Diego County in California, while one participant resided in the San Francisco Bay area. The participants were all from California because it was convenient and cost-effective to collect the data from the participants from the area in which the researcher lived and studied. The sample size was deliberately small because depth and a complete life history was more important for the purpose of the study than breadth of experiences from a larger sample. As a researcher in the field for the last eighteen months, it has been my understanding that the experiences of the formerly incarcerated student population in California are not at all unique when compared to the formerly incarcerated students I have collaborated with in Texas, Washington, New Jersey, and New York, for example. Thus, there may be some similarities between former inmate student experiences in this study when compared to similarly situated students in other parts of the country. Nonetheless, future research should include more participants from diverse regions throughout the country.

The next consequential step for researching formerly incarcerated students could be to identify a larger, more diverse sample to conduct a more detailed qualitative study. This study, of course, does not fill-in all the gaps in knowledge regarding formerly incarcerated higher education students. This study starts the process of informing researchers about what the experience of higher education in the context of re-entry and reintegration may look like. A larger study with a sample that is spread across the country and has a longitudinal component may be necessary to capture the most
meaningful data, and perhaps with the right sampling strategy, make some generalizations about the formerly incarcerated student population.

One of the major challenges with the formerly incarcerated student population is actually identifying current students and graduates. As the literature reminds us, formerly incarcerated students often do not readily identify themselves as former prisoners (Copenhauer, Edward-Willey & Byers, 2007). An accurate database would be very helpful in advancing the research on formerly incarcerated higher education students. Relying on data or attempting to mine data from the institutions of higher education or parole/probation departments is fraught with privacy issues and perhaps accuracy issues as well. Fortunately, a partial database that has been created by formerly incarcerated students is now available. A Facebook network of “Formerly Incarcerated College Graduates” was established and currently has more than six-hundred members. In conjunction with a Facebook network, a few research organizations have been informally, without full institutional support, been established to study the formerly incarcerated student population.

Collaboration Opportunities for Research on Formerly Incarcerated Students

The University of Washington at Puget Sound now has a research group, the Post-Prison Education Research Lab (PERL), which dedicates resources to studying the former prisoner student population. The Alliance for Higher Education in Prisons (AHEP) continues to grow, and their focus has expanded beyond prison education to include post-incarceration education. An annual symposium is hosted by AHEP, which I attended in November 2017, which provides several opportunities for both the academic community as well as practitioners to present their research, some of which is now
centered on the formerly incarcerated student population. The conference hosted by AHEP and other academic conferences are just now emerging as appropriate venues to identify and then advance a research agenda related to formerly incarcerated students.

Project Rebound at San Diego State University (SDSU) is in the process of creating a research group that will specifically study the formerly incarcerated student population. I hope to be a part of this group’s effort to advance and broaden a research agenda in support of formerly incarcerated students. Access to the current student and alumni formerly incarcerated population is essential to perform quality research. Organizations such as Project Rebound at SDSU and the Post-prison Education Research Lab initiated at the University of Washington at Puget Sound are poised to conduct such research.

The New School of Convict Criminology was established almost twenty years ago, and it is a group of formerly incarcerated PhD’s and aspiring PhD’s who provide a different perspective and conduct research on corrections and criminology. They provide a viewpoint from the experience of being formerly incarcerated and now teaching and researching in colleges/universities. Most of the criminology literature was and continues to be from the vantage point of law enforcement, the judiciary, parole/probation, and academics that have never experienced life behind bars. Convict Criminologists provide an alternative perspective as they have had the experience of incarceration and then earned a terminal degree post-incarceration. As more formerly incarcerated adults enroll in post-secondary education, and the possibility of sharing research goals and agendas continues to grow, then research centered on formerly incarcerated students will hopefully begin to proliferate.
The good news is that interest in researching the former prisoner populations seems to be expanding. Various sites to include the aforementioned, hopefully, will present future opportunities to share research goals and collaborate in further research on the formerly incarcerated student population.

Measuring Outcomes is Future Research

This document acknowledged in the literature review section that quantifiable data regarding formerly incarcerated students does not exist to any great degree. There has been some limited data collected regarding former inmates enrolled in higher education and a corresponding reduction of recidivism rates. The most prominent quantitative research regarding in-prison education was the 2013 Rand study discussed in chapter 2. The RAND study concluded that in-prison education significantly reduced recidivism rates for those inmates that did participate. However, there are no conclusive data as of yet to correlate participation in higher education for the formerly incarcerated with lower rates of recidivism. Recidivism is the result of many factors, and too often policy makers and researchers solely focus on recidivism rates as the sole indicator of the success or the failure of a program or re-entry component. Nonetheless, it is prudent to work toward a research agenda that either may confirm or may reject some relationship between recidivism rates and participation in higher education.

As this research field for formerly incarcerated students matures, I believe that valid and reliable quantitative studies will emerge in greater numbers that will address the current quantitative research deficiencies. A future research agenda should include qualitative studies utilizing random sampling from an identifiable population of formerly incarcerated students and graduates. The primary goal of including valid and reliable
quantitative data ought to be to complement and support the qualitative data that is just beginning to emerge.

**Higher Education as a Re-entry Component Requires Support from Practitioners**

The stakeholders working throughout the criminal justice system may better serve the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated population by supporting higher education programs. State legislators in conjunction with prison administrators and staff ought to advocate more post-secondary education programs inside the prison walls. Programs such as The Prison University Project (PUP) in California and the Bard Prison Initiative (BPI) in New York remain exemplary prison education programs, and may be used as models for future programs. In California for example, there is some positive support for more two-year and perhaps four-year programs inside the state prisons. This study has uncovered that inmates may have some access to community college courses, but the courses do not easily lead to a degree or a useful certification once a prisoner is released. The ideal may be for a prison higher education program to resemble in most respects the same programs offered outside the prison walls.

Post-secondary education programs like PUP and BPI have college preparatory classes, an admissions process, use a cohort model, use a developed curriculum, and award the same degree as would be awarded if not incarcerated. The BPI and PUP approach are two examples that seem to work, and policy makers that want to expand prison programs may want to consider such successful approaches and be intentional in purpose that they are not just offering college courses with no clear cut-end-state for the inmate students. Academic advising is another critical factor for success for all college students, and should also be considered an essential component for prison education
programs. The main point is that higher education prison programs should resemble as much as practical, post-secondary education programs offered for students outside the prison walls.

I thought it necessary to expound on prison education programs because five out the six participants in this study had all participated in post-secondary education programs while incarcerated. It seems to be the case that the pursuit of higher education for the formerly incarcerated begins long before a release date from prison, and ideally should begin while still in prison. As more resources are provided for prison education programs, it is important that the best choices be made (e.g. curriculum development, academic counseling, etc.) in order to provide the optimal experience and results for inmate students. Ultimately, as prisoners are released they have either a degree or certification or the credits earned on the inside that are readily transferrable to a degree granting institution on the outside.

Ninety-five percent of all prisoners are released after a period of incarceration. A re-entry plan is a necessary component for inmates seeking parole. In this study, for example, Robin who was a “lifer” spoke about the importance of planning and preparing for re-entry in order to be a successful candidate for the parole board. A re-entry plan, ideally, should be created as early as possible in the inmate’s period of incarceration. Re-entry plans typically include housing, employment goals, and substance abuse care and support. Post-secondary education is a considerable commitment for anyone and perhaps more so for those being released from prison that have to meet their immediate needs of housing and employment. Prison counselors should possess all the necessary information and training to facilitate those inmates that wish to continue or begin participation in
higher education. The data collected in this study suggests that many inmates may not be aware, for example, that financial aid is available when inmates are released.

Parole agents and/or probation agents play a critical role in the re-entry success for released prisoners (Petersilia, 2003). As some of the literature reviewed suggests, parole/probation agents often take the position that their job is to monitor and supervise parolees and not necessarily provide support to the parolees. In the case of this study, parole and probation did provide support and in some cases, particularly with Richard, offered much encouragement for participating in higher education. It is, therefore, crucial that parole and probation departments and their agents recognize that there are parolees and probationers that are suitable candidates for higher education. Parole and probation must approve requests to enroll in school, and that most likely will not be the issue if the released prisoner is accepted by a higher education institution. The element of more importance, however, is that parole and probation officers are able to support the student’s success as was the case with both Ryan and Rena.

**Concluding Thoughts on Future Research and Practice**

We most probably do not know how many formerly incarcerated students are on college/university campuses. Perhaps we may never know, but we could make an educated guess because we do know that seven-hundred thousand inmates are released each year. We also know that about five-percent of those released inmates enroll in some form of higher education. That means as many as thirty-five thousand formerly incarcerated adults are likely to enroll in higher education each year. The issue, then, is not that we cannot estimate how many formerly incarcerated students there are on campuses, but, rather, that we do not know who they are and how an institution of higher
learning can best support their needs. Veterans, African-Americans, and the LGBT communities, to name a few, all have programs and support groups on college campuses throughout the nation; support groups for the formerly incarcerated are rare, at the very least.

The formerly incarcerated student population most probably also belongs to other under-served populations, i.e. many are men and women of color from lower-socio-economic communities, and, as such, may be simultaneously supported by other campus programs. However, this research and previous research indicates that the formerly incarcerated student population has experienced trauma from imprisonment; also, they frequently, carry their own shame from incarceration. It is important to recognize that support and resources specifically tailored to the formerly incarcerated student population be made available on campus. Student affairs professionals, faculty, and administrators all play a vital role in student success, and they should be made aware and educated about the special needs of formerly incarcerated students.

Social justice is a prevalent and laudable ideal embraced throughout institutions of higher learning. Institutional support for special and under-served populations has increased significantly in the last three decades. Support for formerly incarcerated students to include recruiting qualified students is just beginning to gain traction. Organizations such as Project Rebound within the California State University system and the Underground Scholars Initiative at the University of California Berkeley have been established and grown in just the past few years. The discussion ought to begin on college and university campuses about the potential, the experience, and the diversity that formerly incarcerated students can bring to the campus.
Former prisoners were released from prison because they served their sentences, and in most accounts, were no longer deemed a threat to public safety. Higher education institutions can better serve themselves, their own values, and the community when they welcome citizens who have been impacted by the criminal justice system to include those who were incarcerated. If open, free, and liberal higher education institutions do not provide an opening and a second chance for former prisoners, then what institutions will?

**Post-Research Reflections**

This research had a fundamental degree of bias that was unavoidable because my own participation and story was so much a part of the study. The study was indeed a modest, first-step toward additional and hopefully more rigorous future research. The purpose of the study, the research questions, and the findings possibly will provide more context for future researchers as they examine higher education experiences and programs regarding the formerly incarcerated. This research was very personal for me, and it has been a transformative experience as both researcher and participant. It was also very challenging for me to balance both roles, researcher and participant.

**The Impact on Me**

I retired from the U.S. Marine Corps ten years ago. In the past decade, I owned and operated a company, I filed for corporate and personal bankruptcy, I was indicted, tried and convicted for financial crimes, and was incarcerated for two and a half years in a federal prison. I also began my doctoral studies during this period, and expect to complete my graduate work in the next few months. When I was initially released from prison in May 2015, I pledged to move forward and put my incarceration experience in
my “personal rear view” mirror. I was certain that I did not intend to write a dissertation around a topic that centered on incarceration or formerly incarcerated subjects. As a military veteran, I thought I would do research that addressed veterans issues, which I deemed a “nice, safe, topic.”

Eventually, however, I wanted to tell my story about incarceration, and I wanted to understand what others were experiencing as they emerged from prison and courageously took positive steps to better themselves through higher education. At first, I was afraid to tell my story. Like other participants in this study, I did not want to be judged, and I held a lot of shame regarding my experience leading up to and then going to prison. Clearly, I was able to bracket those feelings.

Prison in the United States causes great harm to those who are incarcerated, their families, and their communities. Yes, people commit crime, and they need to be held accountable for their misdeeds. Public safety is always the priority, but, in my own experience, incarceration and imprisonment seemed to be the most prevalent method of addressing crime or wrongdoing. In addition, the literature and my own experience points to the inequalities in the current criminal justice system, as men of color receive far harsher sentences and represent the majority of inmates in our prisons. We can and should do better to serve our citizens and our communities. I am convinced that a retributive system of justice is outdated, does not lead to decreased crime rates, and hurts our communities of color disproportionately. A restorative justice strategy for our criminal justice system represents a viable alternative where public safety is still vital, and the victims, offender, and the community have all their needs addressed. This small
study suggests that higher education has a role to play, at least for some formerly incarcerated individuals, in a restorative re-entry strategy.

**What Can We Do**

This study never intended to effect change throughout the criminal justice system. The study did intend to examine different and perhaps more restorative approaches for prisoner re-entry and reintegration. I hope that this study will add to the current dialogue taking place in our society about how criminal justice reform is necessary and how we, as a society, support prisoners returning home. Indeed, we all must begin and participate in the conversation about the effects of “mass incarceration,” and offer and discuss alternatives that balance public safety, personal accountability, and reconciliation. Our country, I believe, remains a compassionate and forgiving one, and our criminal justice approaches need to reflect our values.

It may be a “bridge too far” to have a majority in the U.S. support alternative sentencing and attempt to dismantle the “mass incarceration” criminal justice system, and all the consequences that result from such “tough on crime” policies. Perhaps a more limited but still consequential step will be to begin the dialogue and subsequently create policies that recognize that once a prisoner is released, we in the community all have a role in his or her success. This dissertation study suggests that higher education institutions have a role to play, in this regard. Policies which continue to punish, marginalize, and segregate a prisoner reentering the community have had predictable results – a sixty-five percent re-incarceration rate within three years of release from prison. Policies that produce failed outcomes need to be re-considered and changed.
Learning from Successful Stories

My own story is one of continual family and community support, and my experience is a positive model for what needs to be in place for successful re-entry. I had and still do have a supportive family, safe housing, access to medical care and other benefits, a steady income, and a supportive probation officer. Unfortunately, most returning prisoner citizens do not have all of the necessary re-entry components to support a successful transition from prison to community. Initially, former prisoners need the basic elements of housing and steady employment just to meet their fundamental needs. Fortunately, these basic needs can be initially met via support from the government to include housing and assistance in obtaining employment. Even when basic needs are initially met, however, at some point a formerly incarcerated person should be provided the opportunity to enhance his or her human and social capital, and without some form of training or education those opportunities do not readily exist.

As I previously wrote, I did not intend to study the incarcerated or formerly incarcerated population as part of my doctoral research. However, once I made a commitment to study formerly incarcerated adults and their experiences in higher education I was “all in.” What I reflected on most as I completed this study was how much the research affected me in a positive and healing manner. The research has not only empowered me to comfortably tell my own story, but to participate and bear witness to others’ stories. When I compare my story to the other participants’ stories as well as those stories I have learned about through this research and my work in the community, then I recognize that I have been very fortunate. Unlike the vast majority of those
incarcerated, I went to prison during my middle age and not during my youth. I am white, I am wealthy, and I returned from prison with my family and friends waiting for me.

My own spirituality was a part of my experience and it has guided a large part of this research. Yes, I could have chosen a “safer topic” in which to complete my doctoral research. However, about two years ago I began to realize that my experience of incarceration represented several issues for me. Incarceration was a great blessing for me spiritually. Although, I have practiced my Catholic faith my entire life, more often than not, I did not live by the ideals that I set for myself and the ideals expected as a Catholic man. “In prison, you have time to work on yourself,” as Robin spoke about during one of her interviews for this study. I had the same experience, and my spiritual life was planted on a solid foundation during my eight hundred and seven days of captivity. I took up the role of leading a nightly Catholic Rosary prayer group, was the lay minister for Sunday worship services, and was the Catholic representative at a weekly Protestant Bible study group.

The twenty-eight months of incarceration, the five weeks at a residential re-entry center, and the four months in home confinement were a part of my doctoral education experience. I began my doctoral studies before I was indicted, tried, and incarcerated. My formal studies were interrupted by my incarceration/confined experience, and they were a part of my education. Perhaps I am not that unique, but my experience in prison now informs my research to include this study, and has provided a new worldview for me. It is no longer possible for me to ignore the systemic inequalities in our criminal justice system, specifically, or our economic and political system generally. My own
prison experience has not been so much a “wake up call” for me but rather a “call for action” to live a just, righteous, and purposeful life.

A Shared Experience

This study brought me into close contact with five other formerly incarcerated adults that are or have been enrolled in post-secondary education. I believe the relationships I have formed with my participants are profound, and acknowledge the bias that it has generated. This study was not intended to eliminate bias but to acknowledge it, and then work with it. The life-stories of Robin, Anthony, Alvaro, Tyler, and Richard are heroic. In my opinion, each one of the participants are heroes, and as a society, we would do well to celebrate their success. Each participant has also made a commitment within their communities to facilitate change and aid others who may encounter circumstances that involve them in the criminal justice system.

Alvaro is a heroin addict that does not use. He spends a lot of his free time supporting under-privileged youth. Richard, likewise, is a substance abuser that does not do drugs anymore. Richard is so active in the community working toward change and supporting others that I sometimes worry he does not have enough time for himself and his own family. Tyler is working to give young men an alternative to the gang lifestyle throughout San Diego. Robin is active at the San Diego Re-entry Roundtable for Prisoner Re-entry, several advocacy and reconciliation groups, and supporting fellow formerly incarcerated students. Anthony has dedicated his entire adult life since his release from prison supporting disadvantaged youth and formerly incarcerated students throughout California. This woman and these men are now heroes!
This study was indeed distinctive because the research was conducted where the lines were blurred between the researcher and the participants. The participants, in a certain sense, conducted the research with myself. I purposefully and experientially immersed myself in the field. During the data collection phase, I not only collected data via interviews, but I also participated in student support groups for the formerly incarcerated students at San Diego State University. I was not intentionally collecting data during these periods of group participation, but rather was working on my own understanding of my own experience behind bars and learning as a higher education student. The data collection phase of this study, I believe, improved my own capacity for understanding and empathy. I began to think and feel my experience not as just a personal journey, but rather as a journey that I shared with others with the same experiences of incarceration and post-incarceration education.

What is Next?

The general literature on prisoner re-entry and reintegration is quite abundant. In addition to detailing the significant components of re-entry such as housing and employment, the subject of shame and stigma is deliberated throughout much of the previous research. The shame that the formerly incarcerated carry with them can be quite debilitating. I have found through my own experience and my participation in this study that telling my story and listening to other’s stories has been a powerful antidote for healing the shame from imprisonment. The stigma of incarceration and subsequently having a criminal record generally remains with the formerly incarcerated for the rest of their lives. In very rare cases, someone with a criminal past may get his or her record expunged or pardoned, but for the most part such good fortune does not occur.
The formerly incarcerated that do succeed in their reintegration do so through continued perseverance and overcoming obstacles. Employers, government agencies, and even the most supportive communities often remind prior offenders of their criminal past through required background checks, curtailment of some civil rights, and being barred from certain activities. A truly compassionate and enlightened society needs to fully embrace and provide all the necessary conditions for success for the returning prisoner.

A post-incarceration lifetime of punishment and marginalization does not serve the offender who has ‘paid his debt’ or the community in which he wishes to return as a citizen. The ideal for the formerly incarcerated is to be offered a path for a full return of civil rights with the same opportunities as all other citizens. If society and the criminal justice system itself provide a second chance for offenders when they are released from prison then opportunities for success must be made available.

**Conclusion**

Higher education is the primary experience that directed positive life changes and resulted in desistance from further crime for the participants in this study. The participants had early life challenges that may have inevitably led to crime and incarceration. Remarkably, each participant credits their participation in higher education as the primary impetus for their successful re-entry and reintegration back into their communities.

The goal of earning post-secondary education degrees only tells part of the story. The participants seemed to understand that participating in higher education would change
them, and provide them with the critical thinking skills and discipline to make the best
life choices. The degrees that they earned or are being earned just provide the added
motivation for personal change. Each participant has taken a path in their re-entry from
prison that is different from the vast majority of prisoners who return home. Fortunately,
the participants in this study all have embraced informal ambassador roles for support of
participating in higher education for the formerly incarcerated population. The
participants are engaged in being success stories for others to emulate and providing
encouragement to bring others along the higher education journey. The life stories
disclosed in this study are profound, inspirational, and heroic.

This modest study should be a helpful guide to proceed with further and more detailed
research that advances knowledge and understanding of the experiences of higher
education for the formerly incarcerated population. The human and social capital that
higher education provides for the former prisoner may not be readily realized in other
settings. I hope that even greater numbers of returning prisoners will be afforded the
chance to seek and will take advantage of opportunities to participate in higher education
and lead productive, crime free lives.
References


Appendix A – Consent Form

University of San Diego
Institutional Review Board

Formerly Incarcerated Adults in Higher Education: A Life-history Study of a Restorative Approach to Prisoner Reintegration

I. Purpose of the research study

Robert Ehnow is a doctoral student in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study he is conducting in fulfillment of his dissertation requirements. The purpose of this research study is to better understand the experience of formerly incarcerated adults participating in higher education as it relates to their reentry and reintegration back into society. The study will examine the barriers to higher education, the social and human capital attained, and the relationships made when former prisoners participate in higher education. There is limited research on formerly incarcerated adults participating in higher education as it relates to their reintegration into the community. Hence, the results of this study will contribute to a better understanding of the experiences formerly incarcerated adults have when participating in higher education.

II. What you will be asked to do

If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to be interviewed for two in-person interviews. It is anticipated that the first interview will last approximately 90 minutes; it is anticipated that the second interview will last approximately 60 minutes.
III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts

It is expected that participation in this study involves no more risk than the risks you encounter in daily life. However, it is understood that discussing past trauma especially as it relates to incarceration may be difficult, and as a result, research participants can end participation in this study at any time.

IV. Benefits

While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating in this study will be knowing that you contributed to a better understanding of the phenomenon of former inmates participating in post-secondary education.

V. Confidentiality

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher’s office for a minimum of five years. Your actual name will only be used if your request it, otherwise, a pseudonym will be used for data collected from the interviews. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings.

VI. Compensation

You will receive no compensation for your participation in the study.
VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to participate, and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

VIII. Contact Information

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:

1) Robert Ehnow
   Email: ehnowrm@sandiego.edu
   Phone: 760-518-3977

2) Robert Donmoyer, PhD
   Email: donmoyer@sandiego.edu
   Phone: 619-260-7445

I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have had an opportunity to ask questions regarding the study and my participation. I received a copy of this consent form for my records.

________________________________________
Signature

__________________________
Date
APPENDIX B – INITIAL INTERVIEW PROMPT

I would like to give the opportunity to tell your life story. You may begin chronologically or you may start where you feel most comfortable. Ideally, I would like you to describe your story considering five broad periods. The five broad periods of your life may be categorized as follows:

- Early Life/Childhood/Young Adult/Pre-incarceration

- Incarcerated Life – juvenile detention/jail/prison

- Re-entry/Reintegration – back into the community/employment/school/family relations

- Life as a College/University Student – undergraduate/graduate studies

- Current Life – family/employment/activities/aspirations for the future

These five periods may overlap. For example, your current life and life as a college student could be the same. If you feel that there are other periods of your own life-story that are not included feel free to include them as you tell your story. Please begin whenever you feel ready and comfortable.
The central research question which guides the study as well as the interviews is:

What effect has participation in higher education for the formerly incarcerated had on their experience of reintegration back into the community?

The following additional questions guides the research and the interviews:

1. What barriers to participation in higher education did the formerly incarcerated face both while incarcerated and post-incarceration?

2. How has participation in higher education for the formerly incarcerated led to a restoration of their relationships with others and the community?

3. How has participation in higher education for the formerly incarcerated changed their own human capital as well as their social capital within the community?

4. What are the similarities and differences in the experiences of incarceration and higher education for formerly incarcerated adults who have participated in post-secondary education?

Each life-story was divided into 5 periods: 1) early life/pre-incarceration, 2) incarceration, 3) reintegration/re-entry, 4) participation in higher education, and 5) present life. These five periods may over-lap in many instances.

The following questions and prompts were be used to facilitate the participants’ re-telling of their life story and to address the central research question as well as the sub-questions.

Prompts (Based on participants’ story)

- Tell me about your early life, childhood, teen years?
- What level of education did you have before prison? Were you a good student?
  Did you like school?
- Do you have a history of substance abuse?
- What led to your incarceration?
- How long were you incarcerated? How many times were you incarcerated?
- How long have you been out?
- Were you enrolled in higher education while incarcerated? Was it available on the inside?
- What other type of programming did you do while in prison?
- While incarcerated did you want to go to school when released?
- Tell me about your higher education experience?
- Has participating in higher education helped you with re-entry and reintegration?
  In what way?
- What do you hope to do after completing your degree? Or what are you currently doing with the degree you earned?
- What barriers to reintegration did you face or are still facing?
- What was your biggest challenge when you were released?
- Did you have family support, housing or employment during your re-entry?
- What would re-integration look like without higher education as part of your experience?
- What does your current social network look like? Old life, new life, combo?
- How are your current relationships with family and friends?
- Do you have a spiritual life? Inside prison? Currently?
- What do you think are some of the similarities and differences between prison and higher education?
- Can you tell me about some of the opportunities you have as a result of higher education?
- Do you plan to continue with additional education?
- What does your future look like?
Sep 27, 2017 10:47 AM PDT

Robert Ehnow
Sch of Leadership & Ed Science


Dear Robert Ehnow:

The Institutional Review Board has rendered the decision below for IRB-2018-18, Formerly Incarcerated Adults in Higher Education: A Life-History Study of A Restorative Approach to Prisoner Reintegration.

Decision: Approved

Selected Category: 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Findings: NOOne

Research Notes:

Internal Notes:

Note: We send IRB correspondence regarding student research to the faculty advisor, who bears the ultimate responsibility for the conduct of the research. We request that the faculty advisor share this correspondence with the student researcher.

The next deadline for submitting project proposals to the Provost’s Office for full review is N/A. You may submit a project proposal for expedited or exempt review at any time.

Sincerely,

Dr. Thomas R. Herrinton
Administrator, Institutional Review Board