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# "Can I be something more than the worst thing I had ever done?": The Difficulties of Reentry after Incarceration in Kentucky

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"Can I be something more than the worst thing I had ever done?":

The Difficulties of Reentry after Incarceration in Kentucky

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By

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"Can I be something more than the worst thing I had ever done?":

The Difficulties of Reentry after Incarceration in Kentucky

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Abstract description: This thesis focuses on the difficulties that people face upon reentry after incarceration in Kentucky. An ethnographic background was used to understand the current situation of incarceration and reentry in Kentucky. Mass incarceration, Kentucky incarcerated population demographics, high costs of incarceration, and Kentucky politics on incarceration are covered in the ethnographic background. A literature review was used to give context to difficulties that people face such as clothing, disenfranchisement, education, employment, family relations and social support, housing, transportation and basic needs, mental health, religion, and stigma. Ethnographic research methods, which consisted of semi-structured interviews and participant observation, were used to gather qualitative data. The semi-structured interviews differed depending on how the participant related to reentry after incarceration. Participants include people who have previously been incarcerated, people who have a family member that has been incarcerated, and people who help those who have been incarcerated. The methods also include analyzing the findings using theories including everyday violence, symbolic violence, and structural violence. The findings from the ethnographic research include sections for nuance difficulties, differences in difficulties depending on men, women, and people convicted of sexual offenses, change of heart, competition between provider organizations,  language, and "can I be something more than the worst thing I have ever done?".

*Keywords and phrases*: reentry, recidivism, incarceration, Kentucky, ethnography.

## Introduction

Mass incarceration has been an important and controversial topic in the United States. The topic has been discussed in several books, documentaries, and new articles such as *The New Jim Crow*, *Just Mercy*, and *13th*. There has been a recent change within the culture of the United States and the tough on crime policies. Throughout the 90's, there were still many tough on crime laws on the national and state level, including Initiative 593 in Washington State in 1993 and the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act signed in President Clinton in 1994 (Nelson, 2016). It was not until the early 2000's that there are changes starting to address mass incarceration. In 2008, President George W. Bush signed the Second Chance Act to increase federal funding for reentry programs (Nelson, 2016). As the 2000s continue, we see influential works being published such as *The New Jim Crow* in 2010, and many states begin changing their policies to lower the rate of mass incarceration and recidivism such as Proposition 47 in California, which reclassified some crimes to misdemeanors (Nelson, 2016). A very recent change on the federal level includes the First Step Act signed in by President Trump in 2018 (Holliday, 2018). The First Step Act aims to reduce recidivism and refine harsh penalties and sentencing laws (Holliday, 2018). Though changes are being made across the nation, there are still many difficulties that people face after incarceration during reentry, which refers to the transition from prisons or jails back into the community (Offender reentry/transition, 2019). These difficulties include access to professional clothing, disenfranchisement, education, employment, family relations and social support, housing, transportation and basic needs, mental health, religion, and stigma.

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to identify difficulties to reentry in Kentucky using semi-structured interviews and participant observation with the individuals and organizations that work with the reentry process. The research contributed a different perspective on the difficulties that people face through its focus on qualitative rather than quantitative data. The ethnographic research suggested that there were difficulties that were brought up in the research, which were not discussed extensively throughout the academic literature. In this study, I refer to these difficulties as nuance difficulties. There were also differences between men, women, and people who were convicted of sexual offenses upon reentry. Employment, family relations, housing, and stigma were the main differences between these three groups. Other findings included the need for resources that allow for "change of heart," competition between resources and recognition, language, and the social stigma that contributes to people not being able to be something more than the worst thing they have ever done.

Throughout the research there was an emphasis on language choice. I specifically chose not to use words such as "ex-con", "felon", "ex-felon", or any related terms. Throughout this article, people will be referred to as people first. I made this decision after the influence of Sokoloff and Schenck-Fontaine (2017) "College programs in prison and upon reentry for men and women: a literature review" which briefly discusses the use of labels. I believe it is extremely important to consider how labels and language choices can reinforce social stigmas in academic literature. Academic literature has a large influence in sharing knowledge and ideas. Academic scholars need to consider the harm that can be done when defining and labeling people as their conviction, and how it impacts society when we consider academic resources with those labels as knowledge.

For this research, I want to humanize the topic and my participants. I wanted to refer to them as people first and not define them as their conviction, because I do believe people can be better than the worst thing they have ever done.

## Methods

### Procedures

Ethnographic research methods were used to conduct this honors thesis. The ethnographic research consisted of semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Semi-structured interviews cover a list of topics and generally follow a script but is also open ended (Russell, 2011). There are many definitions for participant observation, but it can simply be described as getting close to people so that they are comfortable with your presence and you can observe and record their lifestyle (Russell, 2011). Though is sounds like an odd research method, it is very beneficial for gaining qualitative data on participants, and it is used throughout the social sciences. Participant observation typically involves fieldwork and extensive field notes (Russell, 2011). I conducted five semi-structured interviews and four events of participant observation from May to October 2019. The interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes to an hour depending on the variety of topics covered and the insight that the participant was willing to give. I chose to use semi-structured interviews because it allowed me to cover the necessary topics and compare the interviews. It also gave me the flexibility to cover other topics or personal subjects that came up during the interviews. Examples of some of the questions I asked included what resources were available to you after reentry, did you have social support from family and friends after incarceration, and what difficulties did you face after incarceration when reentering society. Notes were taken throughout and

immediately after the interview. Participant observation occurred at meetings or with

organizations related to incarceration such as Goodwill and the Bluegrass Reentry

Council. I was able to meet more people, spend more time, and gain further insight

during participant observation. Events of participant observation would typically have ten

to thirty people and the time varied from one hour to five hours. Extensive field notes

were taken during and after any event of participant observation. The participant

observation was extremely beneficial as there were discussions between many people

about the difficulties of reentry that Kentucky faces. Furthermore, the participant

observations helped me connect with people and contributed to the snowball sampling,

which consists of existing subjects recruiting future subjects from their acquaintances

(Naderifar et al., 2017). The procedures for this research were approved by the Eastern

Kentucky University Institutional Review Board.

**Participants**

The interviews and meetings included people who have been incarcerated, who

have a family member that has been incarcerated, or who work with people that are

incarcerated. As previously stated, I recruited participants through snowball sampling,

which originally started with my own network and reaching out to organizations that I

knew helped with reentry. I decided not to limit my interviewees by demographic factors

such as gender, race, parenthood, age, or others as I wanted to learn about the difficulties

of reentry from as many voices as possible. As an undergraduate student, I also did not

know how many people would be willing to discuss reentry and incarceration with me as

it can be a sensitive topic, and I do not have any experience related to incarceration. The

choice to not limit interviewees by demographic factors proved to be useful as the variety

of people allowed me to learn from different perspectives about incarceration and reentry.

I was able to learn how the difficulties of reentry impact various groups such as women,

men, and people convicted of sexual offenses tend to have different difficulties after

incarceration. The only exclusions I made for my interview participants is that they (1)

had to be over 18, (2) they live in Kentucky, and (3) could not currently be incarcerated.

**Analysis**

The overall purpose of the methods was to gain qualitative data that captures

information from various people associated with incarceration ranging from program

directors that help the previously incarcerated, to family members of the people who were

incarcerated, and hear firsthand stories of people that dealt with difficulties after

returning to society. The numerous perspectives helped paint a full picture of the

difficulties experienced throughout the process of reentry. I was also able to further

understand factors that contribute to different experiences after incarceration. I analyzed

the qualitative data by finding reoccurring subjects and patterns that were talked about

throughout the various interviews and participant observations (Ryan and Bernard 2003).

Interviews and field notes were analyzed using questions suggested by the literature as

well as broader theories from Scheper-Hughes (1996), Bourdieu (2000), and Farmer

(2003). I combine their ideas to discuss the board range of violence that people face upon

reentry.

**Scheper-Hughes**. Throughout her career and her work, Nancy Scheper-Hughes

has emphasized the importance of everyday violence. She examines how structural and

political violence can contribute to violence in people's daily life. Her perspective can be

used throughout this study to consider the everyday violence that people in Kentucky

face after incarceration when reentering society. There are many difficulties in everyday

life that stem from the socioeconomic and political structures in the United States.

     **Bourdieu.** Pierre Bourdieu focuses on symbolic violence and specific

mechanisms that lead people to mistake inequality for natural order and blame

themselves for their place in social hierarchies. His theory is relevant when considering

how some of the participants took full responsibility for their actions and did not consider

how society and institutions have contributed to their situation.

     **Farmer**. Anthropologist Paul Farmer has discussed structural violence and refers

to the political and economic institutions in society that harm vulnerable groups of

people. Structural violence includes societal factors that contribute to suffering and

oppression. Structural violence relates to this research, because of the political and

economic policies and institutions that continue to oppress and outcast people even after

they have served their sentences in incarceration.

## Ethnographic Background

**Mass Incarceration in Kentucky**

     Currently there are over 41, 000 people from Kentucky behind bars (Kentucky

Profile, n.d.). According to The Sentencing Project, the exact number is 42,739 (State by

state data, 2017). The prison population makes up 23,539; jail population is 19,200; the

probation population is 52,266; and the parole population is 16,536. (State by state data,

2017). The incarceration rates in Kentucky's jails and prisons have grown drastically

between 1978 – 2015 (Kentucky Profile, n.d.). There were less than 300 per 100,000

people in jail in 1978; the number in 2015 was 620 per 100,000 people. The incarceration

rate in Kentucky is higher than the national average in the United States, which has the highest rate of incarceration in the world.  Kentucky has the ninth highest incarceration rate in the nation (Bole, 2019). Kentucky has had three straight years of the highest incarcerated populations in the state's history (Cheves, 2019). In 2018, the United States incarceration rate was 698 per 100,000 while Kentucky's rate grew to 869 per 100,000 (Kentucky Profile). Though other states have produced legislation that reduce prison populations, Kentucky's incarceration rate has continued to rise (Boles, 2019).

**Kentucky's Incarcerated Population Demographics**

Gender and race can also be considered when looking at the incarcerated population in Kentucky. There is an overrepresentation of minorities in Kentucky's incarcerated population. African Americans make up 8% of Kentucky's population and about 29% of Kentucky's incarcerated population. Latinos compromise 3% of Kentucky's population and 5% of Kentucky's incarcerated population. Whites are underrepresented as they are about 86% of Kentucky's population and only 64% of Kentucky's incarcerated population (Kentucky Profile). There are 20,518 men and 3,021 women in prison as well as 510 juveniles in custody (Sentencing Project, 2017).

It is also important to consider the family dynamic when looking at the incarcerated population. Roughly one in four women who enter prison are either pregnant or have children ages 1 or younger (Cheves, 2017). Over 70 percent of female state prisoners were mothers compared to 59% of male prisoners who were fathers (Meador, 2018). The number of parents in incarceration contributes to many children having to live with relatives.  When analyzing census data, Kentucky ranks first in the nation for the

number of children living with relatives. Mass incarceration and addiction of parents are key contributors (Meador, 2018).

## High Incarceration Comes with High Costs

The constant increase of incarceration in Kentucky comes with a cost. The total state facility average cost is about $27,708 per year. The total state inmate average cost is $56.12 per day and $20,283 per year (Cost to Incarcerate 2019, 2019). Kentucky is spending an all-time high on the Department of Corrections as it is expected to spend $628 million on Department of Corrections in the 2019 fiscal year (Cheves, 2019).

## Kentucky Politics of Incarceration

During the past several years, mass incarceration has become an extremely important topic in United States policy, resulting in many recent changes in policies throughout the United States. One major change is the First Steps Act, which President Trump signed into law (Lopez, 2019). The First Step Act impacts the federal prison system, which holds about 181,000 people, and allows thousands to earn an earlier release and cut prison sentences in the future (Lopez, 2019). There have been laws and policy changes at the state level as well. Kentucky has not had significant legal changes that impact the high mass incarceration in the state.

During Governor Matt Bevin's term, mass incarceration in Kentucky reached an all-time high. As previously stated, the last three years have set records for the number of prisoners in Kentucky's history. Though there were many talks about reform while Matt Bevin was governor, not enough was done to show results in Kentucky's correctional facilities and in the budgets. Though Bevin did not build more prisons during his time as

governor, prisons have been overcrowded and the state is spending record high on

corrections at $628 million in 2019 (Barton, 2019). Kentucky could see more reform

changes with Governor Elect, Andy Beshear. Previously, Democratic Attorney General

Andy Beshear discussed the need to decrease the prison population. He also expressed his

belief that the state is locking up too many people for drug convictions and believes that

people with addictions need treatment rather jail time (Barton, 2019). Another change

that may occur under Beshear's term is that people, who have been convicted of felonies

and completed their term, could gain back their right to vote (Lopez, 2019). Kentucky is

one of two states that has a very strict lifetime ban from voting for those convicted of a

felony, unless they get a special reprieve from the state government (Lopez, 2019).

Beshear could restore voting rights to more than 100,000 people with felony records

(Lopez, 2019). This could be the beginning of very influential prison reform in Kentucky.

It is important to not only know the impact of mass incarceration by knowing the

number of people impacted, but also knowing individual stories of those who were

incarcerated. The rest of this thesis explores the difficulties that face people after

incarceration during reentry. Understanding personal difficulties is beneficial for creating

and implementing programs that address key issues. Understanding culture is extremely

beneficial for the implementation because it allows programs to adjust to the lifestyle of

the participants. It allows participants to be more involved and can lead to more

productive and better results. These difficulties and a lack of resourceful programs can

contribute to a high rate of recidivism, which refers to a relapse in criminal behavior and

results in rearrest or reconviction. It is estimated that the rate of recidivism after 3 years is

68%. It increases to 79% within 6 years, and 83% within 9 years (Alpher & Durose,

2018). This would suggest that recidivism is extremely impactful when considering mass incarceration. Recidivism is also important when considering the difficulties that people face upon reentry. High rates of recidivism bring up many questions such as (1) why are there so many people going back to prison, (2) what difficulties do people face upon reentry that contribute to recidivism, (3) what policy changes need to be made to reduce recidivism, and (4) what policies need to be changed to reduce recidivism.

## Literature Review

Scholars identify the following as primary difficulties to reentry throughout the United States: clothing, disenfranchisement, education, employment, family relations and support system, housing, transportation and basic needs, mental health, religion, and stigma. My goal was to understand how these difficulties played a role in my participants' lives and if there were any prevalent difficulties that were not discussed.

### Clothing

There are very few articles throughout the academic literature that discuss the importance of clothing after reentry. Clothing can be very impactful to people who were previously incarcerated because it impacts their identity. Clothing strips people of their individuality during incarceration as they are expected to wear the same thing as everyone else. The clothing during incarceration gives them the identity of a criminal and defines them by their criminal actions. After incarceration, new clothing can represent new life to those who were incarcerated (O'Brien, 2001). Smiley and Middlemass argue that that clothing can represent loss of identity, reclamation of identity, and creation of identity (2016). Loss of identity occurs when individuals must rely on clothing provided

by the Department of Corrections upon release. Using clothing from the Department of

Corrections often still associates them with their criminal record. Reclamation of identity

consists of individuals who obtain previous clothing or clothing that is associated with

their identity prior to incarceration. Lastly, creation of identity applies to those that have

the social capital or support to gain new clothing and create a new identity for themselves

(Smiley and Middlemass, 2016). Overall, clothing is a crucial aspect of one's identity

after incarceration. There needs to be more research focused on clothing and ways to

make clothing more readily available after incarceration.

**Disenfranchisement**

Disenfranchisement is a topic that is covered countless times throughout academic

literature. Disenfranchisement varies state to state, which presents different barriers to

reentry. Though the right to vote if often discussed this can also include the right to hold

public office and serve on a jury (Campagna et al., 2016). Disenfranchisement for voting

affects approximately 5.3 million Americans, who are not able to vote because of a

felony conviction (Wood, 2009). Disenfranchisement brings up the question, if someone

has broken the law, are they no longer able to have the right to vote. Voting is very

interesting in particular, because it represents democracy and giving people a voice.

When people lose their right to vote, their voice in democracy is taken away. Miller and

Spillane studied fifty-four men, who have previously been incarcerated. They found that

the men could be separated into four different perspectives on how disenfranchisement

impacted them. They included the direct impact group (15%), indirect impact group

(26%), low impact – engaged (37%), and low impact – disengaged (22%). The direct

impact group believed that disenfranchisement had a direct impact on successful

reintegration. The indirect impact group felt that not voting combined with other factors made successful reintegration difficult. The low impact – engaged group wanted to be politically engaged but did not think it had a strong effect on reentry. The low impact – disengaged were not concerned about voting and did not see a connection between voting and recidivism (Miller & Spillane, 2017).

Though disenfranchisement regarding voting, holding public office, and serving on a jury can be impactful to the difficulties of reentry, they were not my focus for my research. I was interested in finding nuance difficulties because they are not discussed often in the literature such as obtaining an ID upon reentry.

**Education**

Education can be a very powerful factor for employment for anyone, but especially for those who have previously been incarcerated. Slightly over 40% of people who have been incarcerated have some high school education or less, about 23% have their GED, about 22% have their high school diploma, and about 12% have postsecondary education (Harlow, 2003). The education attainment of people who have been incarcerated is lower compared to the general public. In the United States, 88.4% of people age 25 and older have high school or more, 58.9% have some college or more, 32.5% have a bachelor's degree or more, and 12% have an advanced degree (Ryan & Bauman, 2016, p. 2). There are limitations to using the data as they both come from different sources and one of the articles presents older data. None the less, there is a large discrepancy between the educational attainment of the incarcerated population and general population. Many people who have been incarcerated will have a difficult time if they want to obtain education after reentry. There are colleges and universities that do not

accept people with a criminal background. One way to work towards changing the

discrepancy is by offering education programs for people in incarceration facilities.

Education in incarceration facilities allows people to further their education, gain new

professional opportunities, and reduces the rate of recidivism. Sokoloff and Schenck-

Fontaine argue that people in prison, who participate in college education are less likely

to recidivate and more likely to become employed after incarceration (2017). They

evaluated various college programs offered in correctional facilities. Programs vary as

some lead to a degree while others are several college classes that do not lead to a degree.

Furthermore, only a small percent of the incarcerated population are given the

opportunity to even take college classes. In 2016, only 35% of state prisons offered

college courses nationwide and the programs served only 6% of incarcerated individuals

nationwide (Bender, 2018). There is a lot of important evidence and reasoning that

supports the use of educational programs in correctional facilities to improve contribute

to a successful reentry (Oakford, 2019). People can have a smoother transition into

society if they are able to professionally and personally develop through educational

programs in correctional facilities.

**Employment**

Research suggests that a criminal record imposes impediments to employment,

which furthers economic disparities and contributes to recidivism (Mueller-Smith, 2015).

Even though employment is crucial for a successful reentry, finding employment is a

difficulty after incarceration. One study specifically considered career-related

experiences of nonviolent felony offenders, who were returning to the workforce (Shivy,

et al., 2007). Urgent basic needs before employment can include housing, food, and

transportation (Shivy et. al., 2007). Employment can be very helpful to maintaining these needs. It can also contribute to having social support, which can be found in the workplace; however, it can come with anxiety for those that do not have social skills (Shivy et al., 2007). The workforce reentry is very stressful. Childcare can also make reentry more stressful especially when childcare responsibilities are given before housing or employment is secured (Shivy et al., 2007). Overall, employment is not considered an urgent basic need, but it is critical to a successful reentry. A job can come with a lot of anxiety, stress, and responsibility as well.

**Family Relations and Support System**

There are many studies that evaluate family relations and support after reentry. Research suggests that family support and connections with others are beneficial to reentry. Specifically, some research lists helpful family members or connection with others as one out of five themes that contributes to a successful reentry (O'Brien, 2001; Heidemann et al., 2016). Another study focused on African American fathers found that many fathers wanted another chance after incarceration and they acknowledged the poor decisions they made in the past (Dill et al., 2016). After incarceration, it can be difficult for one to support the family by finding employment. If they do find employment, they may not find a job that pays well. Furthermore, the study emphasized the importance of social support for reentry and the difficulties that come with stigmatization, stress, and isolation. Family relations are extremely important to consider in Kentucky, because of the amount of families that are impacted by addiction and mass incarceration.

**Housing, Transportation and Basic Needs**

Housing, transportation, food, and other basic needs tend to be the most urgent upon reentry. Many of these needs are not provided once someone is let out of incarceration and can be extremely difficult to come by. Housing can be extremely difficult to secure because of barriers to employment, lack of family support, parole restrictions, off-limit public housing and housing vouchers, and reluctant landlords (Couloute, 2018; Wiltz, 2019). Stigmatization of offenders is also very common regarding housing (Evans & Porter, 2014).

Transportation is also among the urgent needs upon reentry. Many times, transportation is not available unless one already had transportation prior to incarceration. It is also very hard to obtain if one does not have financial resources upon reentry, even being able to find money to ride a bus can be stressful. Flatow tells the story of a man that had to humbly ask for transportation upon reentry (2015). Upon reentry, the man was dropped off at a metro stop, but he had no money. He had to confide in and humbly ask two bus drivers to give him rides to a shelter (Flatow, 2015). There are many stories similar to this where people have to go to extreme extents to meet basic needs. Many of them contemplate committing small crimes of meet their needs as it would be easier than trying to overcome the difficulties of reentry, especially when resources are not provided.

**Mental Health**

Mental health is extremely important to study as it can impact a successful reentry to society. Mental health conditions can impact employment upon reentry. Those with mental health conditions are less likely to report being employed after reentry (Bakken & Visher, 2018). Furthermore, mental health can contribute to criminal behavior. Women with mental health problems are twice as likely to report criminal behavior after reentry

(Bakken & Visher, 2018). There are many other negative impacts that can come from mental health conditions. If the United States wants people, who are incarcerated to reenter society and become productive citizens, there is a need for mental health resources in and outside of correctional facilities.

**Religion**

Religious programs can be extremely beneficial to reduce the rate of recidivism (Stanley, 2016). The church can be very beneficial to adjust to society (Stanley, 2016). Stanley specifically study the importance of the church to African American women after incarceration (2016). The same idea can still apply to other races, religions, and genders as the church can be a support system that people may not have from their family. Furthermore, collaboration amongst faith-based programs, businesses, college and universities, and communities could provide opportunities for people after incarceration (Bates, 2018). The religious programs for the literature for the review were not limited to Kentucky; however, there are religious organizations that serve the incarcerated population throughout Kentucky.

**Stigma**

Stigmatization is a large factor that contributes if people feel accepted in society after incarceration. Stigmatization can be very harmful in one's identity and can assume the worst after incarceration. There are some studies that suggest that many people do not feel they will be stigmatized as a result of their incarceration and expect to be reintegrated into society (Benson et al., 2011). Others would suggest that stigma is the root of many of the difficulties that people face after incarceration in regards of a

successful reentry. Stigma contributes to difficulties in finding employment, having social support, pursing an education, finding housing, and various other factors. The United States has an unforgiving justice system, which has impacted other institutions in our society, according to Forman (2017). After incarceration, people convicted of crimes become outcasts and the time of their punishment exceeds the time they spent in incarceration (Forman Jr., 2017).

## Findings and Discussion

Firstly, I discuss nuance difficulties, which were not discussed extensively throughout the academic literature review but were brought up through the ethnographic research. Furthermore, I analyze difficulties including employment, family relations, housing and stigma with three categories: men, women, and people who were convicted of sexual offenses. These three categories formed throughout the interviews and participant observation as many participants made distinctions between men, women, and people who were convicted of sexual offenses. People who have committed sexual offenses were referred to as "SOs" in many of my participant observations, and I used continued to use the abbreviation in this discussion. Programs that allow people to have a change of heart are also discussed. The competition of resources and recognition in Kentucky became prevalent. Also, language came up many times. The discussions about language were similar to the perspective I gained about not using labels. Lastly, "can I be something more than the worst thing I had ever done" evaluates stigma in the lives of the participants.

**Nuance Difficulties**

When I first began my research, I would explain that I was trying to study the difficulties of reentry in Kentucky, and I wanted to know about nuances or difficulties that were not as apparent in the academic literature. Nuance difficulties relates to everyday violence that comes from structural and political systems. I told this to Bob, who helped people after their incarceration find employment. He told me the story of a man, who had recently reentered society:

> We were trying to help one of our individuals get an I.D. This particular
> gentleman had been denied an I.D. three times at the DMV even though he had
> the necessary documentation (paperwork from his release from jail with his social
> security number and picture, birth certificate, and a piece of mail addressed to
> his). Each time he went to the DMV he was denied an I.D. for a different reason. I
> ended up calling the DMV and they said he could get an I.D and so I drove him
> there, and they again denied him because they said he needed a social security
> card. So we went out into the parking lot and I called again and they told me he
> could get one based on the documentation he had. So we went back in and I had
> to advocate on behalf of him and they allowed him to get his I.D. made. These are
> the types of barriers and struggles that individuals returning from incarceration
> are faced with in their daily challenges. He had walked and taken the bus three
> times to the DMV and each time was denied an I.D. for NO VALID REASON at
> all.

I heard the ID story very early in my research process. It was eye opening, because it allowed me to gain some insight on the daily struggles after incarceration. More nuance difficulties can be discussed by distinguishing how men, women, and

"SOs" are impacted by each difficulty in different ways. These difficulties include employment, family relations, housing, and stigma.

**Employment**

Employment is extremely crucial to a successful reentry. It allows people to learn to support themselves, develop soft skills, help support their family, learn responsibility, and be a productive citizen in our society. Higher rates of employment can lead to lower recidivism rates after reentry. The difficulties that people face to find employment stems from various forms of violence in our society. It can be considered structural violence as political and economic organizations impact policies on employment and discriminate against people, who have convictions (Farmer, 2003). Employment is also a part of everyday violence as people are not able to find employment and meet their basic needs after reentry (Scheper-Hughes, 1996). It can be seen in the everyday lives of these participants. From my interviews and participant observations, men, women, and people who were convicted of sexual offences experienced the difficulty of obtaining employment in different ways.

**Men.** I did not learn of any difficulties for men that did not apply to women or people who were convicted of a sexual offense. Men did report many of the problems which were discussed in the literature including clothing, disenfranchisement, education, employment, family relations, housing, language, mental health, rehabilitation, religion, stigma, and transportation. Throughout my research, men had an easier time finding employment mainly because they were able to work labor intensive jobs. Men were also able to be paid more than women, because of the types of jobs they would work. While men would be in labor intensive jobs like construction and making $16/hour, women

would be working in the fast food or restaurant industry and making closer to minimum wage, which is $7.25 in Kentucky.

**Women.** Women had a more difficult finding employment than men. Furthermore, women experienced disparity in the amount of pay. Women typically were paid less for entry level jobs compared to men. Minimum wage is not nearly enough to build a life especially when facing other difficulties after incarceration.

**"SOs".** People convicted of sexual offenses also had a harder time with employment. It was harder for "SOs" to reintegrate into society once others found out about their conviction. From my research, they were outcasted more than other men and women, who have previously been incarcerated. This affected all aspects of their life. With employment, it could be very detrimental to keeping them from getting a job. Nonprofit organizations were the key resource for helping all three groups find jobs.

## Family Relations

**Men.** Some men throughout the research opened up about how their time in incarceration or their crime impacted their family. One participant discussed the difficulties he faced with his son after missing his son's early childhood. He knew his sentencing and time away had negatively impacted his son. He reported that his son smoked a lot of weed, and he believed that his absence contributed to his son's habits. The way he took responsibility for his actions and the actions of his son suggests that he believed it was completely his fault. It contributes to the idea of symbolic violence because he recognized inequality as normal and blamed himself (Bourdieu, 2000). None

of the men reported reentry programs or resources to help improve relationships with family.

**Women.** Family relations for women could be difficult, especially being a mother. One woman, who worked at a reentry program discussed the stigmatization of mothers in our society. She suggested that women are expected to put their children first and that it is frowned upon when they do not. From her interview, it can be suggested that the gender norms in our society contributes to the difficulties that women face after incarceration.

**"SO's".** Family relations were also affected by sexual offense convictions. There negative impacts on marriage and the immediate family. One man, who was convicted of a sexual offense, discussed the difficulties of his marriage, and his wife choosing to stay with him. He was brought to tears as he discussed the strain that his conviction put on his family and the extreme impact stigma had on his life.

**Housing**

**Men.** There were no instances found when men had a harder time finding housing compared to other groups. Housing was easier to find upon reentry when one had social support. They could return home to their family or friends; however, one problem that came up with returning home was returning to the same activities that lead to a conviction. This could be from hanging around the same influences.

**Women.** The housing situation for women was very similar to men. It was not necessarily harder to find housing just because one was a woman. Social support could be beneficial to securing housing but could also be a negative influence if it puts one back in

a negative situation. For women, the situation at home could be problematic, because of the high rates of sexual trauma that incarcerated women experience in their life.

**"SOs".** Though "SOs" were impacted by various difficulties, housing was one of the most impactful. In Lexington, they had a very difficult time finding housing because there are so many restrictions about where they can live. They also had a difficult time staying updated on the restrictions as many of the resources they found were not updated. Furthermore, even if they found housing in an area that fit the city restrictions, the landlord could choose not to let them live there. This was the story of many of the participants that I heard from. Their stories demonstrate the destruction of structural violence on these individuals' lives.

**Stigma**

**Men.** Men faced stigma for their convictions. Stigma tends to be the basis of all the difficulties that people face. Stigma is the reason that men would have difficulties with employment, housing, family relations, and everyday difficulties. Stigma was not worse for men than for any other group in the study.

**Women.** Women faced more stigma than men in my research. For example, one of the interviews discussed rehabilitation services upon reentry. The participant worked with people who needed rehabilitative services. She suggested that mothers who are incarcerated often face intense stigma. Society shames them for choosing drugs or crime over their children. The stigma can make it harder for mothers to reach out for help and find resources prior to and after incarceration such as the organization she worked for.

Overall, some of the difficulties for women were more extensive than the ones men faced.

**"SOs".** People who were convicted of sexual offenses also dealt with a lot of stigma. They were often severely socially outcasted. Their family relations would also be estranged. The stigma usually came from people being defined by their conviction. They are treated like a threat to society.

**Changes of Heart**

Many participants emphasized the need for programs that "change one's heart". One man suggested that people who just participate in programs for "points" or to get out of incarceration quicker will not be successful and will probably go to jail again. People who have a change of heart are the ones that do something better for themselves. One the participants I observed expressed that people "need changed hearts and renewed minds for most success." Faith based programs were often suggested to bring change of heart. One of the participants suggested that involvement in faith-based programs during and after incarceration would lead to lower rates of recidivism. Welcoming religious programs could give social support and set an example. Social support comes from the community within the church or organization. There could have been bias about the benefits of religious organizations as many of the participants were a part of religious organizations.

**Competition Between Provider Organizations**

One of my participants fell into all three categories for participants. He had been previously incarcerated, he had family members that were previously incarcerated, and he

currently worked to help people after incarceration during reentry. Many of my contacts

for participants came from him. One interesting topic that he had was that organizations

competed for resources and recognition. He would explain that some organizations

competed for resources and frowned up other organizations that duplicated services. My

participant had a different opinion. He believed that the problem with reentry was so

great that it is beneficial for organizations to offer the same services to people after

reentry. He viewed everyone as being on the same team and fighting the same problem.

He would say, "If I have an AK 47 and you have an AK 47, we need both of them. We're

both shooting at the same enemy." The AK 47 is the example of the duplicated resource

and the common enemy is the problems with reentry and lowering the rate of recidivism.

The competition for resources and recognition is problematic as it gets in the way

of helping those in need. Throughout my research, it appeared that there could have been

more collaboration with organizations around the state. There are some organizations

such as the Bluegrass Reentry Council that allow for people to collaborate from different

organizations and focus on reentry. Increased collaboration could lead to less competition

between organizations and more successful contributions to reentry.

**Language**

As discussed before, language was very impactful in constructing my interview

questions, participating in discussions, and writing my honors thesis. The influence of

language was from the Sokoloff and Schenck-Fontaine (2017) article; however, the topic

of language also came up throughout my participant observations. There were two

specific instances.

At one of the meetings, there were about twenty people. Towards the end of the meeting the members discussed the harm is using "ex-felon" and "ex-con" in society and specifically in programs in reentry. "Words matter", the leader of the discussion said. They further discussed other harmful words used in reentry such as "second chance employment", which limits the idea that people only deserve a second chance and that the second chance will be their last chance. The leader of the discussion suggested using words such as "transformational employment". These words can be very beneficial for changing the way reentry is thought about in society.

The second instance where language was discussed was in another meeting with a guest speaker. The guest speaker was talking about the labels of convictions, specifically with "SOs". "If we label someone as a sex-offender, what do we expect them to be doing throughout the day? Committing sexual offenses…", the speaker emphasized. He was referring to the idea of job labels. In the United States, we often define people by their job because that is what they do throughout the day. This can be detrimental when labeling people after incarceration and only imagining them as an "ex-con", "ex-felon", sex offender, or other harmful labels.

**"Can I be more than the worst thing I have ever done?"**

During a group meeting, one of the guest speakers discussed the idea of being greater than the worst thing he had ever done. He did not believe society gave him a chance to become something bigger than his past. He knew he had made a mistake, and he did not want to do it again. He was working hard in law to better society, but he still faced many difficulties because of his past. There were a plethora of opportunities he was not allowed to have because of his prior record, even though he would have been

qualified by his other credentials. How can we expect people to change when we do not give them the opportunity to change, when we make their circumstances harder, or when we define people by the worst thing they have ever done?

**Conclusion**

We live in a society that continues to punish and stigmatize people after they have already been incarcerated. We have accepted and enforced laws that make it harder for people to become integrated into society after incarceration. Instead of looking at them as people first, we define them by the worst thing they have done in the eyes of the law, and we do not give them a chance to prove otherwise.

However, there is evidence to suggests that the culture is slowly changing in the United States. We are seeing a shift in states around the country to allow people to gain their voting rights back, be released from prison, many marijuana convictions are being turned over, and other legislation changes to allow people to reintegrate into society and have a better chance at life. These changes are necessary to address mass incarceration and the high rate of recidivism.

The high rate of recidivism is very much related to the difficulties of reentry after incarceration. Many people turn back to the same difficult situations or home life, and they do not have a way out because of the restrictions against them. It will be important to see how the recidivism rate drops over time with all of the policy changes happening in the United States. Specifically, in Kentucky, there could be incarceration policy changes seen with Governor Elect Andy Beshear.

The ethnographic research demonstrated the everyday, symbolic, and structural violence that people face after incarceration in Kentucky. If there are policy changes in the future, they will need to address the difficulties such as the ones throughout the literature review and in the findings and discussion section. Programs that address these difficulties could contribute to successful reentries for people in Kentucky.

Lastly, it is important to note that sometimes the only difference between someone reading this honors thesis to learn about the difficulties of reentry and someone who has actually experienced the difficulties of reentry after incarceration is that the reader has never been caught.

**Acknowledgements**

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