



Summary: [Climbing a Frayed Rope Ladder](#)

Report of 2022 Focus Groups of Formerly Incarcerated People

Over the spring of 2022, Michigan Collaborative to End Mass Incarceration hosted seven focus groups with 54 formerly incarcerated people across Michigan to learn from them what is working with reentry services, what challenges they faced, and what changes they would recommend. Their experiences and insights help shape a vision to improve reentry in Michigan, enhance the wellbeing of people returning to their communities, improve public safety, and save public funds by preventing expensive reincarceration.

What Worked for Reentry

Community-Based Support that Began During Incarceration and Continued in Community

Participants who described the best reentry experiences had **community-based support that began while they were incarcerated and continued post-release**. Whether thanks to the support of the State Appellate Defender's Office (SADO), Calvin Prison Initiative, or family support, these participants described supporters who built **positive relationships with them during incarceration and supported their transition to the free world**. It is important to note that these are separate from the MDOC-led inreach and reentry services.

Comprehensive Post-Release Services

A common theme within the focus groups was the need to patch together resources for reentry, “go here for clothes, go there for bus tokens, go to another place for job placement.” The focus group participants that praised their reentry experiences tended to highlight the wrap-around nature of the services they received.

"Well, what's best helped me was 70x7. They handled it. They say they got you, they got you. I don't care what it is, which resources you need -- they got it. And that was a big step for me because getting out and not knowing and not having any resources -- they helped you with housing, clothing, work tools, work clothes. You name what you need, they got it. If they don't have it, they've got sources that will help."

–Grand Rapids Focus Group Participant

Barriers to Reentry

Stigma and Discrimination

Many participants described that the **stigma and discrimination they experienced given their criminal records were the biggest and most pervasive barriers in their reentry**. As they worked to find jobs and housing, they continually faced discrimination.

"I have been home for two and a half years and the words of my experience: absolute discrimination and war. That's the only way I can say it. It's been insane."

–Online Focus Group Participant

Parole Officers Sometimes Reentry Aids, Often Barriers

Participants sometimes described great relationships with their parole officers:

"Even my parole officer, she did an amazing job with making sure that I had my ID, my social security card. She hooked me up with the food stamps, my health insurance."

–Detroit Focus Group Participant

However, many participants described parole officer actions and attitudes that actively undermined their reentry.

"I felt like, when I first got out, there was some discrimination. They [parole staff] were really judgmental about what my charges were and thought that I was just gonna come home and do the same things... That was a little bit discouraging at first."

–Northern MI Focus Group Participant

Participants who were not on parole on release, such as exonerees and people former juvenile lifers who were discharged, fell through the cracks. One participant who was exonerated highlighted this challenge.

“It wasn't any [real] reentry [program]. What I did get from the state was health care. Outside of that, it was nothing. You would think they would have a success program for us. However, it wasn't that. It was like here, you know, ‘you did your time, get out of here.’ In my opinion, it wouldn't be fair even to do business with the Department of Corrections if I'm not under their supervision anymore.”

–Online Focus Group Participant

Access to Housing a Pervasive Challenge

In every focus group the challenges of finding housing came up. This reflects a statewide lack of affordable and attainable housing that harms families and economic health, as the [Michigan Statewide Housing Plan](#) highlights. For people who are formerly incarcerated, the problem is more acute. One participant described the dynamic well:

“I know most folks who come out, housing is a huge, huge issue. I mean, housing is a problem up here anyway, affordable housing especially but for people coming out of jail or prison, it's even 10 times worse.”

–Northern Michigan Focus Group Participant

Poor Service Navigation

Sometimes respondent's reentry journeys were impeded, not because of a lack of resources, but because they did not know about the services or how to access them. One common refrain was that the resource lists they received were out of date.

“I was in the prisons, [MDOC] gave me a list of resources out in the street. Everything I call[ed] was outdated. Nothing I called was in effect.”

–Detroit Focus Group Participant

Solutions From Those Who Know The Problems Best

Peer Support: An Underutilized Resource

In every focus group, participants supported each other by sharing advice, encouragement, and referrals for housing, employment, and nonprofit support.

“But you also make family connections on the inside, in which you have to find a covert way of connecting with people when you are released as well. You need to find a way to bring the information/reflections about your experiences to people back inside to ensure they can navigate things when they get released.”

–Online Focus Group Participant

Services Inside

Participants also showed concern for and uplifted the needs of those still incarcerated by advocating for quality services and humane conditions inside of prison.

“How can you come into prison with a drug habit, need counseling, and wait until your last six months before you go to a class? Programming should happen immediately, as soon as you go through the door.... So if I have an anger management problem, why not give me the tools to manage that anger? And your prisons will probably be safer.”

–Grand Rapids Focus Group Participant

Coordination of Services & Individualized Reentry Plans

Participants’ own experiences with the lack of coordination among reentry stakeholders and “cookie cutter” reentry plans led them to recommend improved communication and collaboration among reentry partners, including those who have experienced reentry:

“I believe that everyone has individual needs and individual causes, and should receive an individual care plan upon entry to the facilities and upon exit.”

–Women’s Focus Group Participant (paraphrased)

Ending Discrimination: Just Give Us a Chance

We ended each session asking what policy changes participants would ask of decision makers such as employers, landlords, the governor, or the MDOC director. The most common response was some version of “just give us a chance.”

“We’re not asking for a handout, we’re not asking for a gift. We’re asking for honest employment, decent wages, a decent place to live, a decent community. If you can’t convince society to allow us to have these things, they’re putting yourself in jeopardy, because what do you want us to do? We don’t want to return to the way we were before we went to prison.”

–Online Focus Group Participant