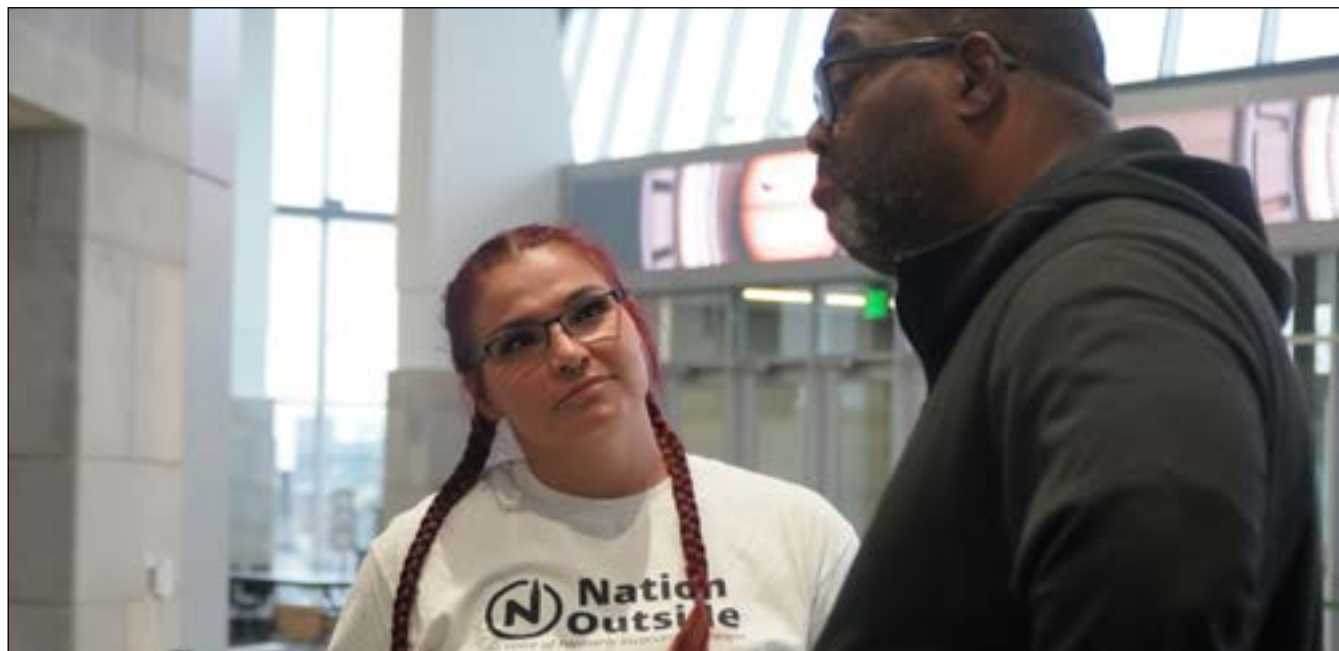




Climbing a Frayed Rope Ladder

Report of 2022 Focus Groups of
Formerly Incarcerated People





Nation Outside Expungement Fair

During Spring 2022, Michigan Collaborative to End Mass Incarceration hosted seven focus groups with 54 formerly incarcerated people across Michigan to learn from them what is they-working with reentry services, what challenges faced, and what changes they would recommend.

While respondents universally shared challenges they faced in reentry, some participants shared success stories of comprehensive support pre- and post-release. Most, however, shared stories that ranged from disjointed support to active undermining of their reentry both pre- and post-release. 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.

LEARNING FROM WHAT WORKS

Human services are commonly described as a social safety net, and the power of the net metaphor is that it highlights the importance of multiple types of support working together. The housing strand needs to intersect and work with the employment, healthcare, training, and other strands to hold people up. It is not enough for a single service to be present; all services must be present and coordinated to provide needed support.

A formerly incarcerated person's reentry journey is not like sitting passively in a net, however. It is more like actively climbing a rope ladder. The supports still need to be there and be coordinated, but the journey from incarceration to release to successful reentry is an active

If respondents described positive reentry experiences*, several themes emerge:

They had community-based support that began while they were incarcerated and continued post-release. Some were serving juvenile life without parole services and had support from their legal team at the State Appellate Defender's Office (SADO). Others were students in the Calvin Prison Initiative. Still, others had families that remained active and provided resources throughout their incarceration and reentry. Regardless of the program, they had community partners who built 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.**

Key to the value of these supports is that they are built on **positive relationships** with people who care about the success of the person released from prison and who can help them navigate the challenges they face post-incarceration.

For example, in our Grand Rapids focus group, Robert Dukes reported that he "didn't go through [a] reentry program" but as a former juvenile lifer he credits the support from his legal team at SADO for his successful reentry. When prompted to discuss what supports he received, he shared:



"If I just had to look at a support group, then I would have to use my lawyers at SADO. The lawyers I had [were] more than lawyers, they [were] like family. These women, they fought tooth and nail... To me, they went beyond the call of duty."

Likewise, a Calvin Prison Initiative participant reported, "I'm what reentry should be," based on the comprehensive support he received from Calvin University during incarceration and post-release.

They had comprehensive reentry services post release: 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.

¹ We held four in-person focus groups, one in Flint and Grand Rapids, and two in Detroit. We also held three online focus groups, one as open participation, one focusing on northern Michigan, and one focusing on formerly incarcerated women. Each focus group was facilitated by a formerly incarcerated facilitator. Participants received a stipend for participation. Thank you to the Center for Employment Opportunities, 70x7, and Nation Outside for partnering to coordinate focus groups.

² Our standard protocol is to maintain confidentiality of focus group participants. Robert Dukes requested that we share his name. After spending much of his early life in truth, he requested that we "let them know I'm doing good."

³ Quotations have been edited for length and clarity.

“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

Participants still faced challenges of stigma and discrimination, out-of-date job skills, unhealed trauma (whether from incarceration or pre-incarceration life events), and economic precarity. Their climb up the rope ladder is still difficult, but comprehensive, relational, and continuous relationships make a successful climb of the ladder more likely, benefiting both the individual and community.

LEARNING FROM CHALLENGES

These success stories were the exception, however. When were asked people to share three words that described their reentry experience, participants often shared words like pain, frustration, anxious, war, and stressful.

Sometimes, these frustrations come from barriers that impede a person’s successful climb: the stigma of a criminal record or a parole agent’s actions that impede reentry were commonly-referenced weights.

Also leading to frustration are **holes** in the rope ladder support system where services are not present or inadequate. This was most commonly shared around housing.

Finally, people’s reentry experiences were hampered by **blindfolds**. Services and supports were available to them, but they were not able to access them due to receiving out-of-date referral lists or lack of coordination among providers.

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

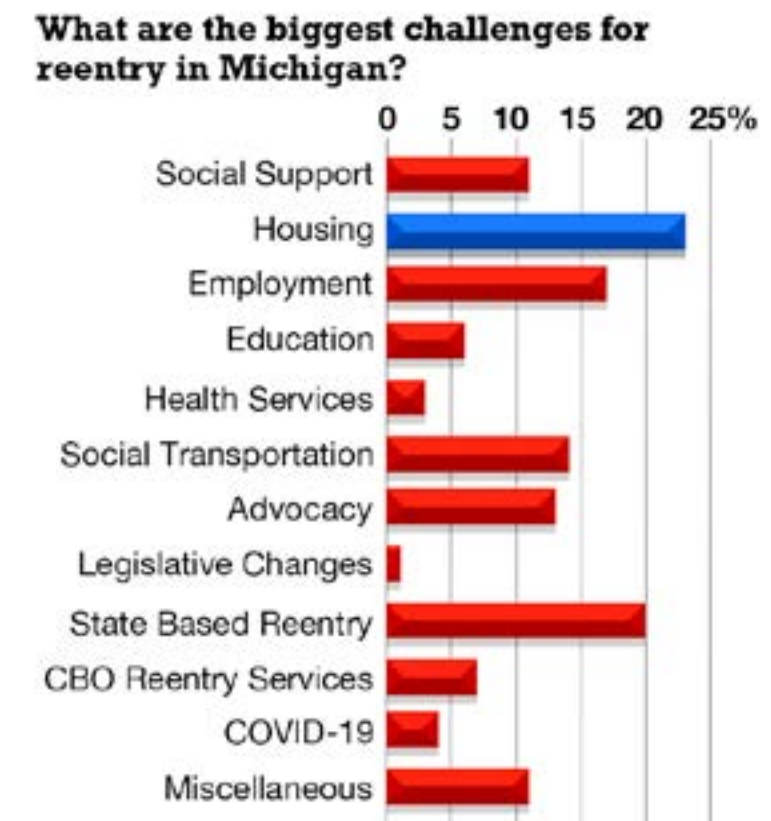
“The background check has been the bane of my existence. I mean, I’ve had background checks that were for the wrong person. I’ve had background checks that were scandalous, that made me look like a monster. I’ve been hired and, when the background check came back, I’ve been shown the door and they locked door behind me.”

– Online Focus Group Participant

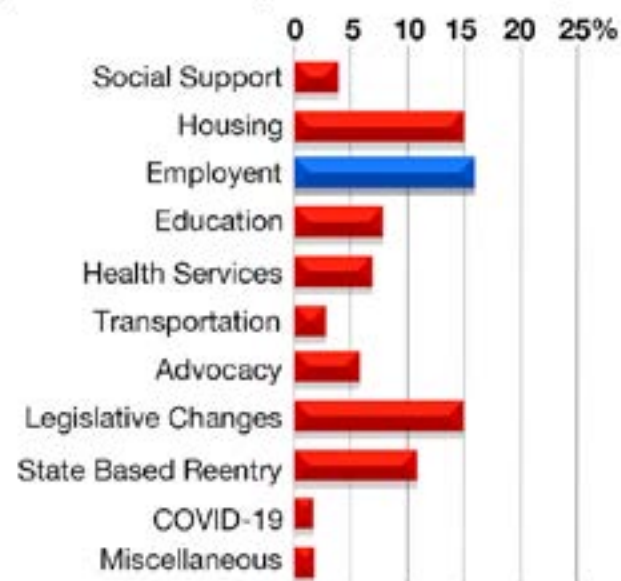
“For me, the main problem has been discrimination and isolation. Like people are treating you differently, like they are afraid of you. And I think that, in addition to that, on finding a job, we have to do a background check. And when they find out you are a convict it’s hard to get a job.”

– Northern Michigan Focus Group Participant

When focus group participants were asked, “What are the biggest challenges for reentry in Michigan right now,” the top concerns were housing, state-based reentry services,



What policy or practice changes would you like for reentry services in Michigan?



and employment⁴. As shown above, stigma and discrimination were major contributing factors to these challenges.

Likewise, they were most likely to suggest policy changes such as fair chance housing, ban-the-box policies in employment, and other policies that mitigate the discrimination they face.

PAROLE AGENTS

When we prompted participants to reflect on the support they received from their parole officers, many participants described parole officer actions that actively undermined their reentry. This sense that some parole officers' attitudes impede successful reentry was broadly felt. In our Flint focus group, when prompted to share what supports they had received, from their parole officers, one participant replied:

"I felt like, when I first got out, there was some discrimination. They 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

"Nope, they counting on you to go down."

– Flint Focus Group Participant

Another participant in the Flint focus group, after describing the barriers his parole officer put regarding accessing programs like the M.A.D.E. Institute or Nation Outside, summarized:

"I understand that the system literally is designed for you to fail, period."

– Flint Focus Group Participant

This sense that some parole officers' attitudes impede successful reentry was broadly felt.

Sometimes the challenges with parole officers were out of a failure to provide support. One of the online focus group respondents reports:

"When you parole, like we go to parole officers, they don't provide you with anything. A lot of these services and these organizations that a lot of us are talking about, a lot of us we had to find this on our own, or through word of mouth."

– Online Focus Group Participant

Other times, parole officers actively impeded a person's reentry. For example, one person in our women's focus group described serving multiple terms in jail or prison. She recognized that staying in her home community with the "same playground, same playmates" contributed to her recidivism, but her parole officer initially resisted her requests to relocate from Wayne to Jackson County.

Another respondent shared multiple barriers that their agent created for their reentry:

"I originally was expecting to stay with my parents, immediately out of prison. A week before I went home, the parole agent went and checked it out and decided that that was not an acceptable placement, because the neighbors was too rich or whatever, and they might complain. And so the parole agent did not want to have to place a felon in that neighborhood."

But then, my parents, my mom in particular, scrambled and was able to find an apartment that she rented for me in Ypsilanti, I believe from the only landlord in Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti that was willing to rent to people with a felony record. So I did have a place, but only thanks to family."

So the biggest challenges were actually dealing with my parole agent. The parole office, in general, made it hard to find housing."

I got two job offers, my first one, my agent told me, 'No, you can't work there.' The second one, the agent called up the employer and convinced the employer not to hire me, after she had offered me a job."

– Online Focus Group Participant

⁴A team of three undergraduate and graduate research assistants coded focus group responses based on the number of focus group participants referring to a certain theme. Therefore, even if a single participant mentioned a particular theme multiple times, it will only count as one participant mentioned in the coding. The coders used and adapted an initial coding framework developed for the MI-CEMI survey of reentry service providers.

Fundamentally this shows the challenge of having the people and organizations responsible for supervision and surveillance also in charge of support and service. 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

The most common “hole” in the support network participant’s shared was housing. This reflects a statewide lack of affordable and attainable housing that harms families and economic health. As the Michigan Statewide Housing Plan highlights, “about 50% of our state’s renters, and 25% of its homeowners pay too much for housing.”

For people who are formerly incarcerated, the problem is more acute. One participant described the dynamic well:

“I’m a coach for a couple of guys who recently got out of jail in Grand Traverse County, and housing has been their biggest problem... 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

The personal challenges of housing were reflected in every focus group:

“My biggest issue was housing.”

– Flint Focus Group Participant

“The biggest thing for me, the biggest concern was housing.”

– Online Focus Group Participant

“My challenge is still housing. So I’m in a transitional house on the eastside of Detroit. And, everybody in it smokes. I’m allergic to smoke. I’ve now officially diagnosed with asthma. I never had asthma in my life... [Describing applying for an apartment] My issue was, two apartments I had to pay \$50 for each application. The minute it came back one said I don’t have credit. The others came back and said I don’t have credit and I’m a criminal.”

– Detroit Focus Group Participant

One participant described particular challenges for women in transitional housing:

“I did an extra [redacted] months also because they don’t have nowhere for females. And the places that they do have for females, they need to do a check on them, because the first one they took me to was an abandoned building. Okay, we pulled up and I’m like, ‘What is it?’ Grass hadn’t been cut, boards up on the windows, you name it. Then they took me to the trap house. The girl that runs the house, runs in and out at all hours of the night doing drugs and God only knows what else. Stealing food, stealing this, stealing that. So what I think they should do is to do a little bit better check and find better places to put females because you have nowhere to put females at all. There’s one house that is, you know, independent living, in Detroit. That’s it. There is none in Muskegon. There’s none in [redacted] and that’s where actually I’m from. They put me all out of my element. I’ve never been to Detroit in my life. Until the day they dropped me off, was getting ready to drop me off at an abandoned building. So they need to do a little bit better check on these places. Because you’re setting people up for failure.”

– Detroit Focus Group Participant

SERVICES ARE THERE BUT UNKNOWN

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

Respondents frequently bemoaned the lack of guidance to help them know what resources are available to them:

“There should be some type of manual or instructions like alright, day one, bam, go here and you can get your driver’s license, you can get your birth certificate, you can get housing, you get a vehicle like the sister talked about. So information is the key to this.”

– Online Focus Group Participant

These individual experiences by people who are formerly incarcerated point to a lack of coordination and communication among reentry service providers. While the current MDOC reentry model includes regional reentry steering teams, clearly the experiences of respondents in our focus groups indicates that these bodies are inadequate to provide up-to-date and accurate information about available services to formerly incarcerated people and to those who support their reentry efforts.

SOLUTIONS FROM THOSE WHO KNOW THE PROBLEMS BEST

As Glenn E. Martin, founder of Just Leadership USA, observes, “those closest to the problems are closest to the solutions and farthest from the resources.” Throughout our focus groups, women and men offered meaningful and actionable insights into how to improve the reentry system.

PEER SUPPORT

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

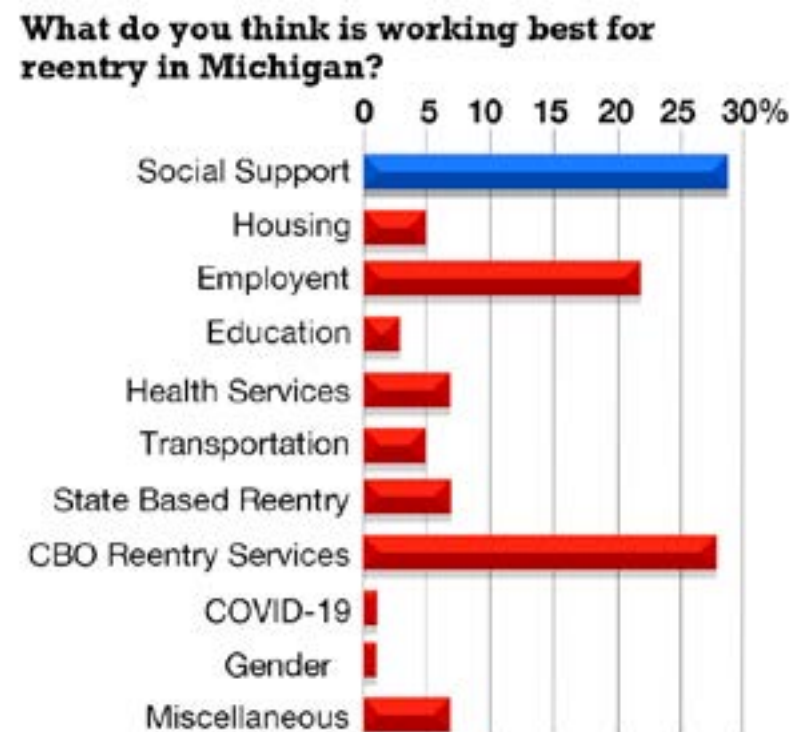
People with lived experience already informally mentor and assist each other in their reentry processes both pre-and post-incarceration, similar to the way substance abuse treatment programs use peer mentors.

“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

The concept of expanding peer support is built on the existing assets that formerly incarcerated people already identify as working well. When asked “what do you think is working best for reentry in Michigan right now,” social support was the most frequently mentioned asset, followed by support from community benefit organizations and employment.

Among social supports, family was the most common support, mentioned by 20 of 54 of the respondents, with peer support coming in second with 12 respondents. “Employment resources” was the second most-frequently mentioned subcategory.



SERVICES INSIDE

Just as focus group participants supported each other in the sessions, they also showed concern for and uplifted the needs of those still incarcerated by advocating for quality services and humane conditions inside of prison.

“When you get sentenced, they say they want to reform you, they want you to change while you’re in prison. But yet they don’t provide no programming. There’s no longer any programming in the Department of Corrections, unless when you go to RGC [Reception and Guidance Center], it’s part of your recommendation. And if it ain’t on there, you ain’t taking it.

Because I just did three and a half years, and I didn’t take a single class. I can’t take a self help group. Granted, you can try to go to AA, but other than that, if you ain’t super motivated to change who you are, and start from within, or have the resources, family support, or some organization that could send you some type of literature, it’s really difficult to grow and to learn the skills and the strategies to plan out how you’re going to be successful once you are released from prison.”

– Grand Rapids Focus Group Participant

“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:

“On process, I think it’d be really important and very powerful if MDOC and the prosecutors and all those folks could sit down with people from different reentry agencies, and people like us who have been in there and know what it’s about, to have conversations. I think that’s how policy’s gonna get made and changed, is for them to hear what’s going on.”

– Northern Michigan Online Focus Group Participant

“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

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.”

The individuals we spoke with in our focus groups were eager to succeed in the free world, and frustrated by the ways their success was hindered by discrimination—especially in housing and employment.

“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