

BLACK TABLE TALK



Summer Edition

2025



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Chairman's Thoughts

Before I Say "We," I Have to Say "Me"

Before I can talk about unity, community, or healing others, I have to confront myself-me. For a long time, I've been all talk and no action. Not because I didn't care or didn't want to act, but because I couldn't. I am disabled-not just physically, but emotionally, spiritually, and historically. And that matters. When I was a child-maybe six or seven years old-I was often punished, and not in ways anyone should be. One of the punishments that still lingers in my bones was starvation. My mother and stepfather would make me sit with my back to the dinner table, facing the corner of a wall, while everyone else enjoyed a meal. I wasn't allowed to eat. I wasn't allowed to speak. I was isolated in hunger and silence.

That experience taught me how to go without food for long periods. Days, sometimes weeks. But it also taught me how to fend for myself. How to search, to scavenge, to survive. I learned how to feed myself, and in doing so, how to think only of myself. When you're forced into survival mode at such a young age, it becomes hard to think beyond the moment-beyond me.

Self-satisfaction. Self-indulgence. Self-protection.

Eventually, these coping mechanisms start to look like selfishness. And maybe they are. But they were born from pain, not pride.

We often talk about building generational wealth-passing on something valuable to the next generation. But what about generational curses? What about the pain we pass down, the patterns we repeat, the

silence we inherit? I wasn't thinking about we. I was thinking about me, because I didn't know anything else. I was stuck in the echo chamber of self.

Now I see the same cycle in others-particularly in the clients I work with. I witness the same scars dressed in different skin. Selfishness. Self-centeredness. A deep resistance to giving, to sacrificing, to trusting. Not because people are inherently unwilling, but because they've been hurt. They've been taught, like I was, that the world is not safe. That food can be taken. That love can be a weapon. That punishment is what you get when you reach out.

But punishment doesn't heal. Punishment is for kings and rulers, for systems of control. It doesn't build character. It doesn't build family. It doesn't build community.

Healing does. Compassion does. Breaking the cycle does.

So before I say we, I have to say me. I have to confront the parts of myself shaped by pain, not love. I have to unlearn what survival taught me and relearn what connection requires. Only then can we begin to move forward-not just as individuals, but as a people. As a community.

~Courtney Stewart~

Feature Interview—Katie McConville



In this special episode of The National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens' Black Table Talk Podcast, we're honored to feature Katie McConville, Policy Counsel at the Council for Court Excellence (CCE). Katie brings a wealth of experience and a passionate commitment to legal system reform. At CCE, she works closely with staff, committee members, directly impacted individuals, and system stakeholders to shape research projects, drive policy solutions, and launch educational initiatives aimed at improving the fairness of D.C.'s legal systems.

Before joining CCE, Katie served as a Junior Associate at the Law Offices of Meagan K. Allen, handling a broad range of civil and criminal cases across D.C. and Maryland. With a background that includes leadership in the Juvenile Justice Society, clerkships with the Senate Judiciary Committee and NASA, and early work in Washington state supporting post-secondary education and reentry services for incarcerated individuals, Katie's voice brings both technical knowledge and human-centered insight to the policy conversation. Her journey and expertise shape the future of reentry and public policy in the District.



→ For more on this interview, listen in on our NRNRC Black Table Talk Podcast, or follow us on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and Tik Tok.

Our Team



My name is Riya Ashok, and I am an intern at the National Reentry Network for Returning citizens. Here, I primarily work on researching policy issues about the criminal legal system and take part in the community lead preventative model of engagement around the D.C. area. Outside of that work, I am a student and rising sophomore at the University of Virginia, where I plan on graduating with degrees in both government and economics. Afterwards, I intend on going to law school and furthering my education in either criminal defense or civil litigation.

"You must be the change you wish to see in the world." - Mahatma Gandhi



My name is Ethan Nichter. I am a rising senior at DePauw University and a political science major with a minor in history and Hispanic studies. I am part of the TFAS program and am in the Public Policy & Economic Track. I chose to intern at the NRRNC because of its focus on advocacy and efforts to bring about positive change for an overlooked demographic in this country. At the moment, I have primarily been working on researching topics for Black Table Talk. While I am still figuring out what I want to do once I graduate, I have a strong desire to help bring about positive change in this country.



Mason Hendricks, 13, is a student volunteer from School Without Walls. Mason is here with the National Reentry Network to complete volunteer hours with his school. Mason assists in projects such as stakeholder data entry and research.

Reentry Spotlight—Antoine Coleman



In our podcast interview with Antoine Coleman, we discuss his status as a returning citizen and how he both navigated the system and reentered into society.

Antoine agreed to come into our office to participate in our NRNRC Black Table Talk Podcast to speak to his own lived experience with the road back to balance post incarceration.

Born and raised in Southeast D.C., his journey towards reintegration is powerful. As a naturally interrogative person and quick learner, Antoine has a proclivity towards the English language. In this episode, he talks about how poetry, writing,

and reading helped him cultivate his own hope and happiness throughout his time in and out of the criminal legal system.


Antoine is a living example of how to successfully navigate the reentry process. Whether it's investing time and energy into his hobbies, working in the community, or participating in a variety of reentry services, he finds ways to persevere no matter the obstacle. As an active

advocate and poet, Antoine uses his voice to ensure that other justice-impacted individuals feel heard, seen, and most importantly, united.



→ For more on this interview, listen in on our NRRNC Black Table Talk Podcast, or follow us on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and Tik Tok.

Ready4Work: Program Overview



**THE NATIONAL REENTRY
NETWORK FOR RETURNING
CITIZENS**

**READY4WORK
PROGRAM**

- Job Coaching/ Searching
- Training Stipend
- DC Resident
- Business Attire Encouraged

MONDAY & THURSDAY
10AM-1PM

TUESDAY & WEDNESDAY
10AM-2PM


1200 U St NW
Washington DC 20009

202-584-1000

Monday-Thursday

**5 WEEK JOB
READINESS
PROGRAM**

APPLY HERE



On a crisp Monday morning in April 2025, a small group of determined individuals gathered at The National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens. Some had just recently returned home after years of incarceration. Others were several months into their journey, each carrying a story, a struggle, and a vision for something better. They were Cohort 45 of the Ready4Work Program, and they were ready—nervous but ready—to try again. At the heart of the Ready4Work Program is a belief in second chances—not just as a concept, but as a lived, structured, and supported process. This belief is rooted in the Networks mission: to build a strong, national network comprised of individuals returning from incarceration who support each other’s successful reintegration. We use a client-centered approach to identify basic needs and to create a continuum of care that can address barriers to reentry, promote restorative practices, and reduce recidivism. The program embraces core values such as empowerment, peer leadership, civic inclusion, and the redemptive power of community.

Each week in April, participants completed self-assessments, participated in interactive workshops, and engaged in group dialogues led by their facilitator, Thandor Miller, and guided by Project Coordinator Mr. Sellers. Through these sessions, they practiced how to present themselves in interviews, built resumes from scratch, and began articulating their goals with newfound confidence. For participants, April marked real achievement—they completed their resumes, honed their self-introductions, and prepared to begin applying for jobs. For others, the month was a mirror reflecting deeper barriers: unstable housing, limited internet access, childcare hurdles, and lingering trauma. The program didn't shy away from these truths. Instead, it leaned into them. Weekly evaluations measured growth in Employment Readiness, Personal Development, Program Engagement, and Challenges. The scores showed promise, but the real story unfolded in conversations between peers, in moments of quiet self-reflection, and in the brave act of asking for help. Clients shared openly in group circles: "I didn't think I could do a resume. Now I'm applying to jobs I never imagined." or "Getting here on time is still tough, but I've made it work four weeks straight." or "I just need someone to sit with me and go over this one more time."

Their goals were simple but powerful: finish documents, apply to at least three jobs a week, and build a professional online presence. Their needs were clear: more one-on-one coaching, access to mental health resources, and spaces for honest conversation. In response, the program planned new tools for May: Mr. Miller would like to incorporate a Resume Lab, a Digital Skills Workshop, and expanded job coaching to address complex barriers. Peer mentoring was encouraged, and those needing additional support were identified for targeted coaching. By month's end, the impact was undeniable. Despite real obstacles, Cohort 45 had taken meaningful steps toward self-sufficiency and reentry success. They left April stronger, more focused, and more united. And that's what the Ready4Work Program is about—not just job readiness, but life readiness. It's about honoring the truth of where someone's been while walking beside them as they move forward. Because at The National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens, we believe in redemption. We believe in leadership. And above all, we believe in them.

The National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens Address: 1200 U Street NW Washington, DC 20009 Telephone: (202) 584-1000 Website: TheNationalReentryNetworkForReturningCitizens.org For Returning Citizens Jarnese Harris, Executive Assistant jharris@thereentrynetwork.org Trone Harrington Outreach Coordinator/Job Coach tharrington@thereentrynetwork.org

Gallery



1) After setting out onto Minnesota Avenue or H Street for our community-lead preventative model, team members (in matching attire—coincidental) debrief in the conference room and discuss the interactions they had and the relationships they fostered with community members. These debriefs, which are posted to our social media pages, are an integral part of our preventative model, as they allow for us to reflect on shortcomings, correct them, and put our best foot forward in the community.

- 2) We attended The Tufts University Prison Initiative at Tisch College Rally for Reentry outside of the Capitol building.



During the rally, we witnessed a community that was motivated to create change in the reentry space. The Tufts University Prison Initiative at Tisch College (TUPIT) is a program that allows incarcerated individuals to obtain an abridged Bachelor's Degree in Civic Studies from Tufts University. It is an exemplary program to look to for precedence in prison education, and teaches the community the importance of advocating against barriers to reentry. The rally started with a circle gathering wherein members of our own staff discussed their own experiences with reentry and emphasized that there is no better time than now to act.



3) The National Reentry Network visits the D.C. Jail, observing the interactions and discussions taking place and bringing new conversations, resources, and encouragement for those awaiting release. During the visit, information about our Peer Navigator Program as well as about our Ready4Work program were discussed in detail to a crowd of interested and curious individuals.

It is important to note that D.C. does not have its own prison because of the passage of the National Capital Revitalization and Self-Government Improvement Act of 1997, which federalized the District's criminal justice proceedings, thus deferring them to the Bureau of Prisons. Due to the nature of these proceedings, individuals either awaiting trial or who have been indicted for misdemeanors are held in the local jail, which is currently operating with a high volume of incarcerated individuals.

4) The National Reentry Networks Letter Writing Campaign, aimed to increase correspondence to residents of the DC Jail, expressing solidarity and encouragement during turbulent times.



- 5) During our monthly community focus group, we gather to discuss the importance of community and how we can support one another better. At the reentry network, we believe in the power of the collective to inspire and incite positive change.



Record Sealing &

Expungement in D.C.



Record Sealing and Expungement in D.C.: Jasmine Mitchell

The “Second Chance Amendment Act of 2022” was proposed to the DC council, specifically the judiciary and public safety committee, in 2022. This act was passed through the mayor’s office in January of 2023 and Congress, making it an official Act No. 24-778. This law has gone into effect as of March 10, 2023. Through the implementation of this Act in the past couple of years, we have begun to see inconsistencies, barriers, and gaps within the law that need to be addressed. The “Second Chance

Amendment Act of 2022” attempts to provide relief to returning citizens and the barriers they face when returning home, accessing stable housing and employment through record sealing and expungement of a criminal record (Council of the District of Columbia, 2013).

It is no secret that returning citizens face a multitude of barriers when returning home, and DC is no exception to this rule; instead, it makes the situation worse. For returning citizens to reenter society as productive and contributing members, they need housing, employment, and support. Housing, employment, and peer support have all been shown time and time again to reduce recidivism and boost the success of returning citizens in society. This is because, for one, they can all reduce the strain individuals feel returning home, especially back to where they were before they got involved in the criminal legal space (Jacobs & Gottlieb, 2020). Not only this, but they also provide a routine and structure for individuals with less downtime to engage in indulgent behavior (Labriola, 2020). Even though we know that these services can impact a reduction in recidivism, boost public health, economic growth, and reunify communities as a society, we hold these individuals to their past mistakes.

The “Second Chance Amendment Act of 2022” was a good start, but it was not perfect. Individuals were still facing barriers to getting their records sealed or expunged, impacting their ability to start their new lives. One of the biggest barriers to this Act is the length of time an individual must wait to be eligible, depending on whether their conviction was a misdemeanor or a felony. Concerning the length of time, it can take to receive the sealing of your record or expungement is also impacted by when the waiting period begins. We know these services are crucial in the process of successful reintegration of returning citizens. We know that returning citizens are being discriminated against in

employment and housing due to a criminal record. So, why are we waiting so long to get these individuals the help they need?

The next barrier individuals face when attempting to receive a record sealing or expungement is the general eligibility granted based on offenses. There are a multitude of offenses that exclude an individual from being eligible to receive this benefit, many include violent offenses. This does a few things. First, it limits the possible extent of impact that a particular law or policy may have. Second, individuals who have been convicted of violent offenses have the lowest recidivism rates. Because a single act of violence does not define an individual as inherently violent, it often reflects the influence of societal factors and pressures that overwhelm a person in the given moment (Jones, 2020).

As of March 1, 2025, proposed amendments aim to address gaps in the Act caused by ambiguities in its language. Under D.C. Act 26-24, the Second Chance Clarification Emergency Amendment Act of 2025, two major "loopholes" are being addressed. These gaps stem from how the Act's original language was implemented. The first gap concerns a five-year period in the record sealing process. The original language of the Act specified that a portion of automatic record sealing would begin in 2027. However, due to the wording, it was interpreted that automatic sealing would only apply to convictions prior to the 2022 Act and those following the automatic sealing starting in 2027. This creates a five-year gap (2022-2027) during which convictions are ineligible for sealing. Additionally, the original Act stipulates that convictions meeting the criteria for automatic sealing will not be sealed until 2027. This delay prevents individuals from filing motions to seal their records before 2027, further extending the waiting time. The Council has recognized these discrepancies and the additional barriers they create for affected individuals. In response, the Council, through the Second Chance Clarification Emergency Amendment Act of 2025, has taken steps to correct the language. However, no further legislation has yet been passed to strengthen the Second Chance Amendment Act of 2022 (Council of the District of Columbia, 2025).

The second and most significant gap in the Second Chance Amendment Act of 2022 is its failure to include felony convictions in eligibility for sealing or expungement. In the District, the majority of returning citizens have felony records, meaning this law excludes a substantial portion of the population from opportunities to rebuild their lives and contribute meaningfully to their communities. While the city has made efforts to address this issue through resentencing initiatives like the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act (IRAA), these steps fall short. Comprehensive legislation that directly addresses felony convictions is long overdue. The reality is that many of these convictions are for non-violent offenses, and it's time we created space for an honest and necessary conversation around this issue.

In conclusion, while the "Second Chance Amendment Act of 2022" marked an important step forward in supporting returning citizens, it has become clear that there are still significant barriers that need to be addressed for it to be fully effective. The long waiting periods and restrictive eligibility criteria, especially regarding violent and felony offenses, continue to hinder many individuals from accessing the relief they need to successfully reintegrate into society. The changes provided in the Second Chance Clarification Emergency Amendment Act of 2025 are a crucial step in breaking down the barriers to employment, housing, and overall reintegration, ultimately supporting returning citizens in their efforts to rebuild their lives, reduce recidivism, increase economic growth, foster public health, and reunify and bring communities back together. Still, this progress comes far too late and remains

insufficient. True commitment to justice and rehabilitation demands more than incremental fixes. We need bold, transformative, and lasting reforms that truly open the door for all returning citizens, not just a select few. Anything less continues to fall short of the values we claim to uphold.

Advocacy & Policy



The Language of Incarceration: How Rhetoric Shapes Attitudes Towards Returned Citizens

By Riya Ashok

“Prisoner, inmate, felon, convict. Why pretend these words don’t seize our breath?” ([Betts; Felon: poems](#)).

For much of our formative years, we are taught to believe fervently in the truth that *words matter*. They shape, summarize, and even modify the many complexities of our inner thoughts. Even bearing such a power, we often overlook the fact that our words carry social and political weight, oftentimes mechanisms for change in institutions where all an individual has is the breath in their lungs.

Nowhere in the United States is this fact more evident than within the criminal legal system, an establishment that for all intents and purposes weaponizes language and the power it entails over some of the country’s most vulnerable populations. The most consistent element of incarceration in the United States is not its purported success in ensuring the safety and prosperity of our larger society, but rather its notorious ability to return citizens to the economy a mere shell of their former selves. It is not in the least obscure of a fact that incarcerated individuals encounter a lifetime of prejudice and denial predicated off of the markings on their record. The term “criminal legal system” today means not only the institutes wherein inmates reside during their sentences, but also the institutes that they will find themselves in years succeeding their release. To academics, employers, and landlords, the time that returning citizens have served to duly pay their debts to society does not alone merit them the civil liberties enjoyed by their fellow American constituents. It does not alone merit them equal access to the institutions that they need to survive. In fact, the Center for American Progress points out that formerly incarcerated people are 10 to 13 times more likely to experience homelessness than their counterparts without criminal records, placing a staggering emphasis on this statistics association with the fact that 79% of the aforementioned individuals report being denied housing due to holding a conviction ([CAP 2021](#)). Inequality at this magnitude is anything but trivial.

To that purpose, how we legislate around issues that concern the livelihoods of human beings stipulates empathy and understanding from the ground up. In other words, approaching directives for inclusivity begins at the starting line, the very ideas and opinions that we have learned and internalized throughout our lives.

So, how is it that fellow citizens believe that previously incarcerated individuals are afforded the virtues of living above squalor? To answer that question, we must first make an observation about the foundations that we lay in society as they relate to incarceration.

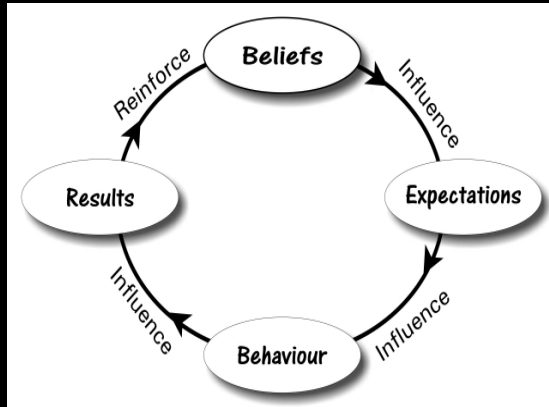
Rhetoric is the study of how language guides and facilitates human behaviors and beliefs. Epistemologically, this encompasses more than just word choice alone; rhetoric involves an in-depth analysis of how words are assembled and then deployed to formulate meaning or exert influence. For example, in a classroom setting, students typically dissect a sentence or paragraph of text to classify the words and phrases by the feelings they evoke; by parsing bodies of text and isolating the subtleties of language meant to persuade, inform, or entertain, we understand what is otherwise implicit in all forms of conversation. In being true, rhetoric is most comparable to an art, laying the groundwork for interpersonal communication in all forms. In being universal, it is the mechanism by which we interpret meaning and draw conclusions from exchanges with the people that surround us. That is to say, the rhetoric employed when discussing a certain subject shapes our perceptions and curiosities about that topic in a way that may even be unknown to us.

That being said, reconciling solutions tailored to the individual needs of returning citizens hinges on approaching the community empathetically, starting off with people-first language. Using non people-first language risks reinforcing harmful stereotypes about individuals who are returning from the system. In fact, history has shown that the rhetorical devices implicitly embedded in discussions about the criminal legal system are more often than not indicative of broader societal values. People with histories in the criminal legal system are often referred to in an array of dehumanizing labels, such as “delinquents, felons, and offenders” (fortune society). If the incentive to sentence and then release individuals is to eventually decrease recidivism with the hope of cultivating a safer society, othering them in spaces that have already historically made them feel unwelcome is certainly not a step in the right direction towards the greater goal of crime reduction. The safety and security of a nation is broadly contingent on meeting the needs of all individuals, those of which are largely constituted by either returning citizens and their loved ones.

In principle, this series of events turns into an unrelenting cycle that evidently does more harm than good. In a 2017 study on the social ramifications of language and rhetoric on minority groups, Jeroen Vaes, Marcella Latrofa, et al. analyzed how Italian journalists cover crime. They found that the style and language associated with reporting on crimes uncovered an unconscious bias in journalists that helped “to create and maintain a distorted and stereotyped image of minority group members” as aggressors ([C4disc](#)). In this case study, the use of inflammatory language was found to distort real-life perceptions of justice-impacted individuals and create an atmosphere of hostility that would then portray them as aggressive or violent, effectively stifling any potential for growth or reform. To satisfy curiosities of why this may be the case, psychological research aptly provides a concise answer.

The extensively studied self-fulfilling prophecy explains that when we impose erroneous expectations that have been informed by our implicit or explicit biases onto people, those perceptions guide the way we treat them, leading them to comport themselves in a manner that is ontologically

more similar to our distortions than reality ([Britannica](#)). In other words, the self-fulfilling prophecy constitutes insinuations of original expectations that lead to their eventual, albeit in most cases inadvertent, confirmation. Insofar as recidivism presents itself as being one of the largest issues with Americans post-incarceration—with an overwhelming 82% rate of reoffending—the goal in social settings should be to shift the focus and have conversations that reflect true acceptance and belonging, not behavior that underhandedly invokes the opposite.



Taking part in change seems daunting. However, making small perceptual changes and adopting alternative wording is an intuitive but powerful mechanism to enforce even an inkling of that positive change. To illustrate this fact better, look no further than to how we have historically referred to jails and prisons.

In 1779, British reformer John Howard passed a bill through parliament called the “penitentiary act”. With it, and associated with concepts of religious retribution derived from the root word “penance”, large-scale prison systems catalyzed by mass incarceration were born into fruition. As the name

indicates, such institutions specialized in punishment and the invoking of guilt or sorrow to repent for leading a “non-righteous” lifestyle. Within the walls of a typical penitentiary up until just a few decades ago, activities such as hard labor, religious instruction, and solitary confinement would be carried out under the guise of repayment ([Interrogating justice](#)). After the eighth amendment outlawed cruel and unusual punishment, it took decades to remodel the way in which public perceptions and private interests aligned with incarceration. Today, the term “correctional facility” is used broadly in reference to prison, aiming to increase awareness of rehabilitation and more empathetically contrived solutions in the criminal legal system. The shift in public consensus and understanding of the purposes that prisons serve stemmed from this root change in language; it mechanized a movement to offer rehabilitative services at a greater capacity than before, when the goal of incarceration was moral punishment alone.

To this day, there is much to be done within and beyond the criminal legal system in America, so much so that proponents of prison abolition often dismiss shifts in language as being a real force for change within the movement. Across the board, there seems to be distorted perceptions of minimal outcomes coupled with an ascribed lack of impact when it comes to reform in language.

It is instrumental, however, to understand that all things build from the ground up. Language—being the very substance of society that reflects and guides social perceptions, structures, and conflicts—is the only avenue by which societies and institutions can do so much as begin to navigate systemic upheaval. Since the civil rights movement, language and the reclaiming of historically derogatory or divisive language has shifted in magnitudes that are impossible to measure. Grassroots movements in feminism dating back to the 1800s started by recognizing, disobeying, and altering the words and language that underpinned traditional gender norms at the time; our words, whether we like it or not, come to terms with it or not, govern our attitudes towards the structures that surround us in society. Evidenced by the hundreds of social movements before us, change is hard—but when change

has the potential to reform societies' most unusual and cruel institutions, it becomes more than necessary.



A Better Way

A Better Way: Risks to Nonviolent Offenders in the Prison System and an Alternative Solution

By: Ethan Nichter



As of March 2025, the United States has the largest prison population in the world, nearing two million, and the fifth highest incarceration rate in the world, with 541 detained per 100,000 residents. America's statistics share more similarities to authoritarian nations and those undergoing democratic backsliding than a liberal democracy. Crime rates may be

steadily dropping in this country, but does the solution need to be locking offenders up and throwing away the key, regardless of the type of crime committed? Those locked up are likely to find themselves in prison again a few years after release because the American criminal legal system fails to properly recondition people back into society after incarceration. How can this country reform? Consider the fact that out of the nearly two million incarcerated, between 1 and 1.1 million are nonviolent offenders. Rather than condemn them to incarceration, alternative solutions for atonement can be offered. Replacing imprisonment with a community model of justice allows nonviolent offenders to properly give back to the community and avoid becoming victims of the prison industrial complex.

With a prison sentence, nonviolent offenders risk their health and safety. Prison overpopulation is a problem many nations around the world face. Exhausting resources for their overcrowded populations prevents prisoners from meeting basic human needs. Overpopulation and a lack of privacy have impacted the mental health of prisoners, increasing the likelihood of violence, self-harm, and suicide ([Citation](#)). With 1 to 1.1 million incarcerated for nonviolent crimes, implementing alternative forms of justice rather than prison time would ease the resource strain in prisons and potentially improve the quality of life.

Mandatory minimum sentencing reinforces the racial disparity in the criminal legal system and is a tool used to fill up prisons. This sentencing law came about in the mid-1980s with the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986. Before its passage, sentencing for drug charges was only 11% higher for African Americans compared to whites, but after four years, the disparity rose to 49% ([Citation](#)). The dramatic increase shows the weaponization of mandatory minimums to criminalize people of color is much harsher compared to white Americans. The long-term impacts of this sentencing law continue to impact certain communities to this day, fueling cycles of poverty, disenfranchisement, and social inequality.

Upon returning to the outside world, returning citizens risk reincarceration. An NYU study studies the statistics of those accused of committing a nonviolent crime. The research group examined two groups: those with a nonviolent misdemeanor case that were not prosecuted and those with a nonviolent misdemeanor that faced prosecution. Those not prosecuted found themselves less likely to receive a criminal complaint and face prosecution within two years after the misdemeanor case. When comparing statistics with nonviolent offenders that faced prosecution, the researchers discovered nonviolent offenders that faced no prosecution had a 69% decrease in the likelihood of receiving a criminal complaint, a 67% decrease for a misdemeanor complaint, a 75% decrease for a felony complaint, and a 64% decrease in being charged with a violent felony. Evidence also suggests that non prosecution primarily benefits first-time offenders the most ([Citation](#)). Nonviolent offenders are statistically likely to avoid becoming repeat offenders, but there needs to be better institutions in place to ensure the criminal legal system does not utilize incarceration as the primary crime prevention tool.

Alternatives to incarceration help not just the individual, it benefits the community as well. It can cost taxpayers up to \$28,000 a year to house a prisoner in federal prisons and even more for state prisons. Alternative solutions can divert taxes that would go towards incarceration and into more community-beneficial programs. Regarding communities, prison separates the offender from the family and community. Rather than incarceration, alternative solutions allow the individual to remain and contribute as a member of their community ([Citation](#)).

Restorative justice is an alternative that allows rehabilitation of the offender and the opportunity to make right with those impacted by the crime committed. Rather than a standard trial, a sentencing circle takes place, where the offender, victim of the crime, members of the community, and legal officials meet to form a sentencing circle, where everyone can agree on a sentence that allows healing for the victim, rehabilitation for the offender, and solutions for the community to fix systemic issues to prevent future crimes ([Citation 1](#) and [Citation 2](#)).

Replacing incarceration with a community-driven solution allows for improvement within the community and proper rehabilitation for the offender. The current criminal legal system in this country prioritizes a tough-on-crime demeanor, and while the prison population rises year by year, there are no efforts to address the problems with prison overpopulation caused by mandatory minimum sentencing and issues with reintegration. Restorative justice

can actively target the root causes of crime and guide individuals away from the prison industrial complex.

Breaking the Cycle



Breaking the Cycle: How Peer Navigation Can Reduce Recidivism

By: Lisa Yuyun

Each year approximately 600,000 people are released from prison and are expected to successfully reintegrate ([Carson, 2020](#)). For those who lack adequate support, the prospect of reintegration is bleak, as two-thirds of prisoners from United States Prisons are rearrested within 3 years of their release and half are reincarcerated ([ASPE, 2022](#)). This ever-growing statistic raises a lot of alarms, prompting a multitude of reentry organizations to

reassess their methods of successful reentry. Peer navigation, while being a highly understudied system, has shown to be advantageous in reducing recidivism, and ensuring that returning citizens have a smooth journey into reintegration.

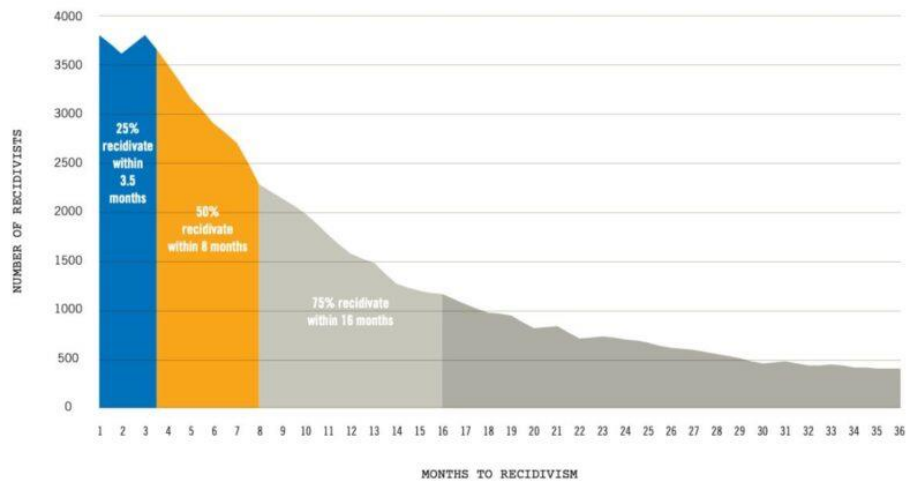
A peer navigation program is one where a mentor is paired up with a returning citizen (the mentee) in order to aid them in their journey to reentry. The application of this mentorship lies in the premise that somebody who has navigated adversity in the past is uniquely positioned to support and guide another who is facing a comparable one. The mentor, a returned citizen who has experienced what is deemed a “successful reentry”, offers empathy and validation, in addition to offering practical advice and strategies for overcoming shared challenges. Having a mentor that was once incarcerated is extremely important in optimizing this initiative. Research of violence prevention programs have shown that people involved in gangs respond positively to advice from former gang members who opted for a different life ([Cheng, 2017](#); [Lopez-Aguado, 2013](#)). Having once gone through their situation, they help their mentees effectively evaluate their choices, and provide the necessary guidance needed to assess their interpersonal skills and methods of coping, ultimately providing them with the confidence needed to achieve stability ([Marlow et al., 2015](#)). These peer navigators are oftentimes justice advocates, who understand and can clearly convey how to access and utilize key services for returning citizens, making the process of reentry evermore tranquil for the returning citizen.

Peer navigation and recidivism exhibit an inversely proportional relationship: research shows that these mentorship programs alleviate the rate of recidivism. A study conducted in 2020 found that peer mentorship, when added to standard reentry services, significantly reduced recidivism rates among moderate to high-risk individuals ([Sells et al., 2020](#)). That same year, a study investigated an employment program for people returning to the community, and found that peer mentorship from formerly incarcerated staff not only improved self-confidence, but promoted self-empowerment ([Matthews et al., 2020](#)). Similarly, [Andreas et al. \(2010\)](#) reported significantly enhanced client self-efficacy, as well as improvements in perceived social support, quality of life, and stress levels at 12-month follow-up. These copious results support the notion that those receiving standard reentry services plus peer mentorship would show lower recidivism than those receiving standard reentry services alone.

Now that we know that it works, this begs the question: why does it work? As I previously mentioned, the premise of peer navigation lies in the notion of having somebody who went through the same barriers as yourself helping you overcome said barriers. Returning citizens are a highly vulnerable population; combating the mental battle of returning to criminal activity is one that is unique to them. In a society that is set up to prevent returning citizens from thriving, it is challenging to find those who have successfully overcome these barriers. The psychological effects of this alienation can lead to desperation and hopelessness, which is an underlying basis for criminal behavior and recidivism ([McGinnis, 2017](#)). As human beings, we want to see others leading by example; watching somebody who was once in your shoes excel only motivates you to work harder. Returning citizens having these mentors to lean on and uplift them reduces the feelings of hopelessness and desperation, intercepting the possibility to recidivate.

As previously discussed, the effects of peer navigation on recidivism is still highly understudied. In order to fully understand the beneficiaries this program model provides, it is imperative that more reentry organizations and successful returned citizens provide this much-needed support for returning citizens. Here at the National Reentry Network, we uphold this initiative by employing this into our organization's central scope. As a community, we should be following suit. By prioritizing peer-led support, we take a critical step toward reducing recidivism and building stronger, more resilient communities.

**OF REENTRANTS WHO RECIDIVATE IN 3 YEARS, 75%
RECIDIVATE WITHIN THE FIRST 16 MONTHS**



Penn-Capital Star: Recidivism Rates high within first few months of release

Community Bulletin Board

COMMUNITY LED PREVENTIVE MODEL



OUR MODEL CENTERS TRUST DEVELOPMENT AND LEADERSHIP BY THOSE DIRECTLY IMPACTED BY HARMFUL SYSTEMS



THE CLPM AIMS TO REDUCE HARM, REPAIR RELATIONSHIPS, AND REBUILD TRUST, WHILE AIMING TO CREATE STRONGER RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE STAKEHOLDERS IN THE COMMUNITY

202-584-1000 www.thenationalreentrynetwork.org 1200 UST NW

- MAKE AN IMPACT - INVEST IN PEOPLE NOT PRISONS - MAKE AN IMPACT -

Are you a new Returning Citizen released from incarceration?
How has the first 72 hours of your release been?
Do you need assistance?

CALL

THE NATIONAL REENTRY NETWORK
FOR RETURNING CITIZENS

HELPLINE

1-844-916-2577

The National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens HELPLINE, 1 844-916-2577, is a confidential, free, 24-hour-a-day, 365-day-a-year, information service for returning citizens re-entering the community in need of reentry services.

We can provide assistance for emergency issues that may arise.

AVAILABLE 24 HOURS A DAY
www.thenationalreentrynetwork.org



MONTHLY COMMUNITY FOCUS GROUP

The Last Wednesday of Every Month

Engage, share, collaborate, and support the reentry community and learn what we are doing to advocate for returning citizens

Scan the QR Code to Register



SCAN ME

jharris@thereentrynetwork.org
www.thenationalreentrynetwork.org
202-584-1000



The National Reentry Network
for Returning Citizens

PEER NAVIGATOR PROGRAM



- Become a mentor with us and help other members in your community
- PAID OPPORTUNITY
- Or Participate as a mentee and connect with someone who has had similar experiences

CONTACT [202-584-1000](tel:202-584-1000) jharris@thereentrynetwork.org



ADVOCACY Training

MAY 20TH 1PM-3PM




EVENTBRITE



1200 U St, NW
Washington DC
1pm-3pm

RSVP: 202-584-1000
jharris@thereentrynetwork.org




THE NATIONAL REENTRY NETWORK FOR RETURNING CITIZENS

READY4WORK PROGRAM


Monday-Thursday

5 WEEK JOB READINESS PROGRAM

APPLY HERE 

- Job Coaching/ Searching
- Training Stipend
- DC Resident
- Business Attire Encouraged

MONDAY & THURSDAY 10AM-1PM
TUESDAY & WEDNESDAY 10AM-2PM
1200 U St NW Washington DC 20009
202-584-1000





BOOK CLUB

Weekly on Tuesdays

Community Building 6PM-7PM
733 11th St NE Washington DC 20002

More Information:
Ztalamonti@thereentrynetwork.org


MONTHLY COMMUNITY FOCUS GROUP

Engage, share, collaborate, and support the reentry community and learn what we are doing to advocate for returning citizens


JULY 30TH 2025

6PM-8PM

EVENTBRITE 



1200 U ST NW WASHINGTON DC 20009
jharris@thereentrynetwork.org




Join us for our event

Reentry Ready!

Clothing For Returning Citizens

733 11th St NE, Washington DC 20002
July 28th 11AM-2PM



THAT'S A SHOP

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