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RECLAIMING OUR HUMANITY: REDEMPTION, REIMAGINING, AND RESTORYING OF THE FOUNDATIONS FOR SUCCESS OF FORMERLY INCARCERATED AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES

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RECLAIMING OUR HUMANITY: REDEMPTION, REIMAGINING, AND RESTORYING OF THE FOUNDATIONS FOR SUCCESS OF FORMERLY INCARCERATED AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES

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Dissertation Abstract

Reclaiming Our Humanity:

Redemption, Reimagining, and Restorying of the Foundations

for Success of Formerly Incarcerated African American Males

African American men represent the highest population found in the criminal justice system. Systemic racism contributes to the high recidivism rates of formerly incarcerated Black men. Additional barriers to affordable education, job training, and other services exist for the formerly incarcerated. The purpose of this study was to interview formerly incarcerated African American men and provide a counter-narrative of the foundations for success post-incarceration. This research project explored the narratives of the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated Black men through the lenses of two theoretical frameworks: Black critical race theory and abolitionist theory. Together these frameworks work to shift the narrative around decarcerated Black men. Data were collected via one-on-one interviews with six formerly incarcerated African American men based in California.

Six themes emerged from the data: (1) Early educational experiences: The love for learning that was not cultivated; (2) The absence of belonging: Growing up in a traumatic environment incarceration; (3) Incarceration: Building meaningful connections through mentorship, reading, and debating; (4) Post-incarceration: Programs facilitating transition and educational opportunities*;* (5) Factors that build success: Reactivating the genius inside us, networking, and education; and 6) Recommendations and the foundations for success. The findings of this study highlight the additional barriers that formerly incarcerated African American males encounter during reentry and job placement. Furthermore, the results highlight

the urgency of providing culturally relevant mentorship and affordable education, job training, job placement and cross-collaboration between institutes of higher learning and reentry organizations, along with developing increased awareness and understanding of the unique needs of formerly incarcerated African American males. Results from this study offer insight and implications for improving the reentry experiences of African American males in both policy and practice.

SIGNATURE PAGE

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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God, thank you for everything you have done for me. Everything I have is due to your favor. I would like to thank God for always guiding me in the right direction. I would be lost without you. Thank you, God, for every small accomplishment and success I have had. I would like to thank God for the precious gift of life, health, and happiness. Thank you, God, for giving me another chance, another chance to become a better individual, another chance to give and experience life.

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CHAPTER I: THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Introduction

My Journey

I grew up on 78th and Hillside in East Oakland, CA. I loved my neighborhood and childhood friends. We grew up playing sports together, and our comradery was unyielding. Many of us aspired for bigger and better things beyond 78th Avenue. Some of my friends would fall victim to the cycle of violence and poverty that have plagued our Oakland neighborhood for generations.

I was lucky in terms of growing up in a household that valued education. My family has always viewed education as the key to unlocking our potential. It was my parents and my ancestors who believed education was vital for upward mobility. My mother and father hold Master's degrees in Library Science and Creative Writing, respectively. My grandfather, Robert Mossi Alexander, Senior, was a Civil Rights attorney. My aunt, Floretta McKenzie, Ed.D., was the superintendent of Washington, D.C. schools in the 1980s. My uncle, Martin Dukes, is a practicing obstetrician-gynecologist on the Island of St. Thomas. I have many uncles, aunts, and great-grandparents with at least a bachelor's degree, and school has always been important to the Alexander-Duke family.

I have come to understand delayed gratification as putting off something that is considered an instant pleasure or happiness for something greater in the future. Instant gratification could be drugs, fast money, jewelry, expensive cars, and dating without the intention of marrying. These things must be had immediately as opposed to delayed gratification where young people could potentially earn college degrees, lucrative or fulfilling careers,

marriage and the security that comes with commitment, and property investment or homeownership.

My educational success and obtainment were influenced by other societal factors. like opportunity, access, and modeling. I believe that your view of the significance of education will dictate how far you go and how much you invest in schooling as well. I also feel that one's value of education has to do with the culture the individual is born into combined with their circle of influence. In many ways, the educational system is broken, but in my opinion, educators need to bring awareness by helping to mend a broken system.

After years of being preached to about how education was the key to my success and my ticket out of my low socioeconomic neighborhood, I was surprised to find myself in county jail shortly after high school. It was the summer of 1996, and I had just graduated from Skyline High School in Oakland, CA. I was feeling good because I was done with high school and had a break before I started college. My childhood friends came to pick me up in a car I had never seen. I knew it was borrowed, maybe even stolen, but the night was young, and who was I to judge? As fate would have it, we got pulled over by the police after a full night of underage drinking in what turned out to be a stolen car. That night I learned a valuable lesson—you are guilty by association.

When I first got arrested, I was nervous and thought about how I would survive if I had to do "real-time," like three to five years. Thoughts flashed through my mind about all those "scared straight" shows I had seen on television. When I got to Santa Rita County Jail, it was not that bad. Hell, I even saw people I knew there. We played basketball during recreation time. We even played dominoes with the ones they used to sell at Dollar Tree.

Some of the older inmates gave me some “free game”—a Black colloquialism for advice—on how to best let the stress fall by the wayside. I learned expressions like, “Do not worry about nothing you cannot control” or “beat the time, do not let the time beat you. Read and workout.” This got me thinking, and I had all kinds of questions swirling in my head. Would I just be another statistic? Will I be a repeat offender like everyone else from my neighborhood? Will I be a lifetime criminal? Could I get used to this?

The frustrating part about county jail was that many of the inmates were uncertain about their future. The maximum amount of time an individual could spend in Santa Rita County Jail was one year. I met many people in transition from the streets to the county jail to the penitentiary. I did not plan on being there long. As soon as my friends confessed to who actually stole the car and confirmed that I was just a passenger in the vehicle, I was sure I would be released. The worst was the early morning court appointments.

If you have a court appointment, the Correctional Officers (COs) wake you up at 5 a.m. for breakfast. You eat a quick breakfast, which could be cereal or a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. You then file onto a bus with other incarcerated folks who have court appointments that morning. During my first court appointment, I was nervous but listened to what the Original Gangsters (OGs) told me: “Hope for the best but prepare for the worst.” I had to get my mind and my heart ready for what was to come.

As I looked in the crowd to see if my mom had made it to court, I started thinking it would not be bad if she did not show up. That way, I would not witness her sorrow when they sentenced me. When I finally did connect my eyes with hers, the look on her face was something I would never forget. It was the look of despair. The look that told me she did everything she

could to raise me right. The look that told me she was utterly disappointed in my decisions. The look that asked, “Why, God? Why is this happening to me and my child?”

To my relief, my charges were dismissed because of a lack of evidence. I had dodged a bullet. My mother and I were elated. I will never forget that moment because it put everything in perspective for me. I hit the reset button on my life. I re-evaluated who I was hanging out with and what my future would be like. I could now start college as previously planned. Furthermore, I was able to answer my own questions. No, I will not be another statistic. No, I will not be a repeat offender. No, I will not be a lifetime criminal. No, I could never get used to this.

How many men of color have been in a situation where they are one bad decision away from ruining their lives? Many have access to four-year and community colleges but do not see college success as a viable option. For many men of color, college can seem unreachable because they are coming from communities where there are not many college graduates to learn from in terms of modeling (Gale, 2007). In my experience, some young boys from high-crime communities learn to earn money illegally while perpetuating what is known as the school-to-prison pipeline. Sojoyner (2013) defined the school-to-prison pipeline as the consequence of harsh school policies (e.g., zero-tolerance policies) that target the disadvantaged children in the community and push them into juvenile and criminal justice systems. In addition, some have access to community colleges but do not go. I realized that some men of color also have positive mentors in their lives but do not talk to them. Whether or not men choose to ignore college opportunities and mentorship is another story, but this dissertation examines how these two factors can reduce recidivism, that is, the act of individuals reoffending, becoming re-arrested, or re-incarcerated (Thomas, 2020).

The Significance of Education for African Americans

Based upon my own life experiences as a youth, community college counselor, and father, I strongly believe that African Americans should not take for granted the importance of education, mostly because of the sacrifices of our enslaved ancestors. For African Americans to know the history of enslaved Africans and not take advantage of the educational opportunities in the 21st century is a travesty. To add context, most plantation owners did not allow enslaved Africans to learn reading and writing skills because some wrote their own freedom passes and escaped slavery (Margolis, 2001). Many scholars, such as Anderson et al. (2018) and Bridges et al. (2012), contend that K-12 public school education miseducates and does not provide an in-depth look at African American history.

Cornelius (1983) documented the testimonies of 272 enslaved Africans who learned to read and write and discussed the horrific dangers as well as the benefits of literacy. Many enslavers allowed the teaching of reading for control, which was directly connected to religious practices known as *biblical literacy* (Cornelius, 1983). Due to this, some enslaved preachers were able to learn and excel in reading and writing. Still, most of the enslaved were not given the opportunity because of their fear of harsh punishment from the plantation owners (Monaghan, 2005).

Brave slaves in the antebellum South were willing to risk getting caught for the chance to learn how to read (Cornelius, 1983). If caught reading, the enslaved could face whippings, amputation, or being hanged. An enslaved African in Madison County, Georgia shared: “The first time you were caught trying to read or write, you were whipped with a cow-hide, the next time with a cat-o-nine-tails, and the third time they cut the first joint, often your forefinger" (Cornelius, 1991, p. 66). This historical reality is that education is an invaluable part of the

equation of life and has historically been inextricably linked to suffering, trauma, and sacrifice, as well as a path to upward mobility, social mobility, and advancement (Perry, 2014). Therefore, I feel that African Americans today cannot assume that education is a given right but instead a right that was earned with the blood of our predecessors.

Statement of the Problem

The main problem addressed in this research was the high rate of recidivism of incarcerated African American males in the United States, and the potential of education and mentorship to reduce that high rate. Research conducted in 2014 by Tucker (2014) noted that of the total 1,402,404 incarcerated males in the U.S., 516,900 were of African American descent. Fazel and Wolf (2015) compared the recidivism rates of different countries and found that between 2005 and 2010, 13% of formerly incarcerated individuals were likely to re-offend after six months of release, 23% after one year, 36% after two years, 45% after three years, 51% after four years, and 55% after five years. In 2012, the Bureau of Justice Statistics revealed that at least more than 60% of formerly incarcerated African American males were likely to re-offend within three years of being released (Stepteau-Watson &Watson, 2014).

The criminalization of the African American male is attributed to prejudicial concepts, such as anti-Blackness (Dumas, 2016), which have been the basis of policies that have put minorities in the criminal justice system for minor offenses (Burris-Kitchen & Burris, 2011). Like mass incarceration, the school-to-prison pipeline resulted from policies like zero-tolerance (Smith, 2015), which were meant to bring changes to the American criminal justice system. Black, indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) groups of students in public schools experience increased suspensions and expulsions compared to their White peers, despite having similar, or even lesser, offenses in some instances (Heitzeg, 2009). The fact that disproportionate

rates of African American students receive harsher punishments in relation to their White peers casts doubt on K-12 school disciplinary actions and how they are shaped by White hegemony (Killough et al., 2014).

This study addressed this problem by highlighting how themes such as anti-Blackness and systemic racism have contributed to high recidivism rates in the United States. Additionally, formerly incarcerated individuals face difficulties when attempting to integrate into society. Buss (2019) assesses that most of these individuals are from low socioeconomic backgrounds and find difficulties acquiring financial aid, educational support, and mental support. Both Black boys and men find it hard to transition to education institutions that serve as reentry programs to minimize recidivism rates (Williams et al., 2019). To investigate these issues, this study looked at how mentorship during and after incarceration may reduce the chances of released inmates returning to jail or prison (Davidson & Young, 2019).

Supporting the formerly incarcerated can be done through community colleges by establishing rehabilitative programs that utilize efforts and resources tailored for the individuals (Anders et al., 2011). Compared to the traditional four-year college, community colleges allow academic flexibility for the formerly incarcerated and lower tuition and fees (Abeyta et al., 2021). There is a challenge in establishing specific programs in community colleges that meet the needs of formerly incarcerated students. Some of these challenges are the lack of strategies in identifying formerly incarcerated students, having a limited budget allocation to aid the reentry process, establishing programs that rely on traditional methods of teaching, and subjecting the students to attrition (Mukamal et al., 2015). This study highlighted existing college and mentorship programs that have attempted to meet the needs of formerly incarcerated African American males.

Background and Need

A vast amount of research, for example, Lea and Abrams (2017) and Stayhorn et al. (2013), has explored the effectiveness of mentoring formerly incarcerated African American males by assessing the quality of life of these individuals pre-incarceration. High recidivism rates are correlated with mass incarceration and systemic racism (Gottschalk, 2006). Weiman (2007) notes that this correlation is due to the punitive policies in the criminal justice system that focus on containing incarcerated individuals instead of rehabilitating them. Understanding how these penal policies have led to mass incarceration and high recidivism rates requires an investigation into how race and socioeconomic disparities became factors upon which the U.S. criminal justice system was built.

According to Rehavi and Starr (2014), the United States houses at least 25% of the world's incarcerated individuals. The United States Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) has stated that the common features of an individual in an adult correctional facility are being undereducated and unemployed before being put in prison (Western & Pettit, 2010). The number of incarcerated individuals in the United States brings into question the entire education system, which is considered a means to reduce crime rates (Mills, 2016). Steurer and Smith (2003) document the alarmingly high rates of racial disproportionality on convictions of crimes such as drug, sexual assaults, and murder. A study by Gross et al. (2017) showed that Black people are at least seven times more likely to be incarcerated for a crime they did not commit as compared to White people. Gross et al. (2017) also note that African American males are five times more likely to be incarcerated over drug crimes compared to their White counterparts despite having the same rate of drug dealing and drug abuse. The disproportionality in convictions not only

explains why more Black people are in American prisons but also why they are likely to be rearrested and deliberately subjected to harsher sentences (Cullen et al., 2011).

The disproportionality in convictions in the United States has been the basis of debates on the relationship between race, education, and crime (Harris et al., 2009). Huggins (2010) notes that individuals return from incarceration to communities that lack sufficient support structures to impact positive behavioral, social, and academic outcomes. However, adult mentoring services provide direct and indirect support for "at-risk" youth. These services are considered paramount in countering the failures of the correctional system that prove unsuccessful in deterring future offending (Orrick et al., 2011). The formerly incarcerated may return to environments that spark additional crime activities, and since they tend to be less educated, they are more likely to have lesser opportunities for employment (Bauldry et al., 2009). Reentry programs are therefore instrumental in providing successful rehabilitation and consequently reducing recidivism.

Novek (2014) asserts that little attention has been given to eliminating stereotype threat, mischaracterization, dehumanization, and miseducation of African American males, who have often been portrayed as dangerous. The author further notes that these perceptions have become the basis for racial targeting of criminal laws in the U.S. According to Steurer and Smith (2003), recidivism rates of African American males are a by-product of racial targeting in the U.S. Recidivism is attributed to social segregation, criminal law, and minimal opportunities to allow formerly incarcerated (FI) community building. Their study found that correctional education programs were more effective in reducing these rates by allowing individuals to achieve educational attainment and become part of social development.

Some organizations have attempted to provide correctional education to African Americans who have been released from correctional facilities to ensure smooth integration into society (Lockwood et al., 2012). These organizations, such as the Berkeley Underground Scholars (BUS) and Restoring Our Community (ROC), provide reentry programs that offer support during a person's time of transition from incarceration back into the community (Haviv et al., 2020). BUS focuses on providing undergraduate education at a top university in an attempt to shift to a prison-to-school pipeline. ROC focuses on establishing strategic partnerships aimed at helping the formerly incarcerated meet their social needs.

A reentry mentoring relationship is complex and can take different forms, which depend heavily on the goals of the reentry program. Heaney (2013) argues that mentors in most reentry programs might provide educational or career guidance, emotional support, or accountability partners for those struggling with substance use. Formerly incarcerated men preparing to return to their communities from incarceration have needs and challenges that are beyond the scope of what mentoring alone can address (Singh et al., 2018). Mentoring relationships can be an impactful component of a reentry program when mentoring services are well-structured and effectively integrated with other reentry services (Stacer & Roberts, 2018). Similarly, Jolliffe and Farrington (2007) assessed the effectiveness of mentoring on reoffending and concluded that the duration and frequency of the meetings had a direct influence on the outcomes of the individual. Their study also noted that even though mentoring effectively provided a little support, it was not sufficient as a sole intervention. Therefore, the need to critically analyze how mentorship programs can successfully prevent reoffenses was recognized in this study. By extension, the study explored why incarceration rates among African Americans are higher than White males.

Throughout the 20th century, mass incarceration in state and federal prisons did not exist in the United States (Western & Pettit, 2010). Still, stability was disrupted by introducing the "war on drugs" in the late 1970s (Eldredge, 2000). The war on drugs contributed to the era of mass incarceration, which statistics have shown affected African Americans more than their White counterparts (Walker et al., 2016). Some correctional reforms stated that drug abusers and drug dealers would receive mandatory minimum prison sentences, which ultimately would lead to longer prison terms and more individuals in correctional facilities (Thomas, 2020). Data have also documented that White people are six times more likely than African Americans to commit drug offenses, which brings to light the racial disparity in the criminal justice system (Caudy et al., 2013). The rate of incarcerated Black males increases as stricter guidelines and regulations are enacted in American institutions (Raphael, 2006). Understanding the phenomenon of mass incarceration illuminates the issue of whether these systems are meant to rehabilitate individuals or cause social and economic harm to ethnic minorities.

An issue related to mass incarceration is the slavery era, which is considered to be at the root of Black communities' indoctrination to serve the White man (Burney, 2018). This submissive domination led to racialization and overall systematic control and inhumane treatment of Black people (Petit, 2012). From a historical lens, African Americans have been painted as less intelligent individuals, and it has been difficult to dispel the stereotypes and thinking patterns of dominant societies (Gottschalk, 2011). Historical racism is experienced in all sectors of American society, and it has been more evident in the justice and education systems (Tourse, 2018). Evidently, there is a gap in knowledge of how the carceral system dominated by White supremacy (Mills, 2001) is meant to reduce recidivism rates of Black incarcerated individuals who have been released from prison.

What is worse is that, according to Alper et al. (2018), at least 86% of African American males released from prison between 2005 and 2014 returned to prison, while 46% returned after a year of being released. Research by Law (2021) addressed why prison programs fail to be the most effective forms of rehabilitation. These statistics reflect the failure of research to inform policy and the formation of additional rehabilitation interventions beyond prison programs to smoothen the transition after release. Love et al. (2016) realized that experts have failed to apply developmental research in capturing diverse perspectives with regard to unique experiences before, during, and after incarceration. My research shed light on how sustainable reentry practices should provide a holistic integrative experience for the formerly incarcerated, including evidence-based practices derived from risk/needs assessments where the individual is matched to the services.

Anthony et al. (2010) noted that a number of needs persist for the formerly incarcerated once they rejoin communities, due to a lack of sufficient resources to reestablish the services that were discontinued by the justice system. The study assessed how the reestablishment of services, that is social support and college education, contributed to successful reintegration. Lee et al. (2012) asserted that the end of racial disparities in the United States was expected to commence after the election of President Obama, the first African American president in the United States. For a multitude of reasons, including those that are political and economic, the end of systemic racism was not realized, and more African males continue to remain under correctional jurisdiction. The influence of anti-Blackness—a concept that describes racial prejudice that dehumanizes Black people—has been correlated with the school-to-prison pipeline among Black youth (hooks, 2019).

This study drew from the experiences of the formerly incarcerated to understand how these sentences have affected them with regard to reintegration into society. By utilizing self-narratives, the research departed from previous literature by focusing on personal experiences instead of statistics. This study contributes to the literature by affording an opportunity to gain a collective understanding of integration and reentry experiences after incarceration and to provide much-needed insight based on qualitative experiences with the goal of establishing programs that would meet the needs of the formerly incarcerated.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to use in-depth interviews to explore the post-prison experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals and the effectiveness of reentry programs in higher education institutions, in this case, in community colleges, in assisting them in adjusting to life to improve their social, economic, and academic outcomes. The study also examined how mentorship programs help resolve problems that contribute to high incarceration rates among African Americans. My study aimed to fill gaps in prior research on formerly incarcerated by providing authentic narratives based on their experiences with reentry. Moreover, this study provides alternative solutions to reduce recidivism through mentorship and education.

Research Questions

The main objective of the study was to highlight how college education and mentorship may reduce recidivism for formerly incarcerated African American males. The specific research questions this study was designed to address are as follows:

1. What is the role of college education in reducing recidivism in formerly incarcerated African American males?

2. What is the role of mentorship in reducing recidivism in formerly incarcerated African American males?
3. What are the barriers to successful social integration and educational attainment of formerly incarcerated African American males?
4. Which other interventions have helped to reduce recidivism in formerly incarcerated African American males?

Theoretical Framework

This section describes the two theories that guided the objectives of this research: Black critical theory (BlackCrit) and abolitionist theory.

Black Critical Theory

BlackCrit theory provides an in-depth exploration of Blackness to complement theories on racism like the critical race theory (CRT) (Dumas & ross, 2016). BlackCrit theory evolved from CRT to focus on the marginalization of Black people and Black experiences that have violated international human rights (Dumas & ross, 2016). Lewis (2002) argued that BlackCrit theory was first discussed in the mid-1980s by activists like Gay McDougall, among others, who sought approaches that would specifically highlight Black experiences. These activists realized the connection between race and international human rights and the racial and economic oppression that is directly related to anti-Blackness (Lewis, 2002). Lewis (2008) noted that BlackCrit theory addresses how anti-Blackness has contributed to the marginalization of Black people, which is reflected in social, cultural, and economic systems.

Dumas and ross (2016) defined Black marginalization as the direct and indirect racial inequalities in U.S. society. They use BlackCrit to understand how it, in coordination with CRT, attempts to reverse the effects of anti-Blackness, which has contributed to Black marginalization.

Coles and Powell (2020) differentiated CRT and BlackCrit, where the former explains institutionalized racism while the latter focuses on Blackness and anti-Blackness. They also emphasized the importance of understanding the distinctions between the two theories. CRT focuses on theorizing racism by criticizing White supremacy, hence guiding policies, and BlackCrit focuses on anti-Blackness and the suffering Black people endure in opposition to what is humane. CRT analyzes race from the Black-White binary, which includes people of color and generalizes dominant ideologies, which results in Black people being categorized as just a "race" (Busey, 2021). In this way, CRT can be limited in its ability to address the anti-Blackness and experiences of Black people and how these factors work against Blacks in terms of the law, institutions, and everyday lives of Black people (Busey, 2021).

Abolitionist Theory

Abolitionism was first introduced in the 19th century as a religious movement to end slavery in Great Britain (Ferrel, 2006). The movement led to heated debates and political controversies, which fueled the American Civil War in 1861 and led to the end of slavery. Some of the early abolitionists included Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher, and William Lloyd Garrison (Carrier & Piche, 2015). Abolitionist theory stems from the vision and worldview of people aiming to take away social problems that are caused by oppressive systems (Chua, 2020). Abolitionist theory, therefore, focuses on the need to destroy punitive penal practices that have dehumanized the word "criminal" and the need for criminologists to focus on restoring the human rights of individuals proscribed by the criminal justice system (Saleh-Hanna, 2008). Penal abolitionism calls for revisions in the mainstream structures regarding power, wealth, and social order, which have emerged as the main factor in social functioning (McLaughlin & Muncie 2012).

Abolitionist theory notes that the U.S. incarceration system is characterized by racial stratification, brutality, and violence, failing to meet the goals of the criminal justice system to rehabilitate and promote retributive justice (Ferrell, 2006). Racial subordination, which serves as the root of abolitionism in the United States, reflects the Jim Crow laws that were enacted in the mid-20th century, causing racialized violence and racial segregation (Alexander, 2010).

The argument of prison abolitionists is that the closed-structure carceral system can be associated with enslavement, especially since it inhibits the opportunities of the incarcerated and damages their individuality (McLeod, 2015). As opposed to reformist views, abolitionist theory identifies the depersonalization and dehumanization of punitive policies in the United States. Instead of describing these features as merely superficial errors, abolition calls for more humane treatment and alteration of the approaches that cause violence and degradation (Langer, 2020). Abolitionist theory calls for decriminalization, urban redevelopment, preventive justice, reconceptualizing justice, and grounding justice to include primarily retributive and rehabilitative structures (Ferrell, 2006).

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement is considered a contemporary abolitionist movement that has attracted global attention, specifically the police abolition movement (Chua, 2020). This movement highlights the unevenness in the distribution system enabled by capitalism and illuminates the record of failure of the U.S. criminal justice system in the last 40 years.

Limitations and Delimitations

My relationship with the participants in my study was both a limitation and a strength. The participants I selected were acquainted with me on a personal level. My participants might have known me through sports, coaching football, mentoring, academia, or as former students.

The long-standing relationships I established with my participants could have been beneficial because they provided me with access, but I also did not want my friendship with them to cause them to limit honest answers.

Another delimitation was that I was studying only the African American males I selected. The reason for studying formerly incarcerated African American males was that they were impacted by the carceral system more than others. African American males also have the largest educational achievement gap (Olneck, 2005).

Educational Significance

This study investigated the post-prison outcomes of formerly incarcerated individuals and the effectiveness of reentry programs in community colleges in assisting them in adjusting to life to improve their social, economic, and academic outcomes. The study explored how to reduce the high rates of recidivism, which was addressed by Ramakers et al. (2017), and which Steurer and Smith (2003) argued is made possible with educational attainment. By illuminating the challenges that African American males face, specifically the formerly incarcerated, this study encourages higher education institutions to establish programs aimed at helping them integrate into society.

Shrum (2004) argued that at least 70% of incarcerated individuals lack the proper education needed to integrate into society after they are released. These populations are likely to recidivate when they lack the viable resources and guidance for successful reintegration (Burt, 2018). This study highlighted the significance of education and mentorship by emphasizing how they can reduce reoffending among the formerly incarcerated. In addition, this study fills in the existing literature by highlighting the experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals in community colleges and reentry programs. Through their insights, these participants offer ways

that higher education institutions can establish services tailored to address the specific needs and challenges of African American males when reintegrating into society. These changes can be facilitated through seminars and lectures targeted towards understanding the experiences of the formerly incarcerated and including the formerly incarcerated individuals in the discussion. This effort can bring awareness and contribute to making a difference in reducing recidivism rates in the United States.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review focuses on five central themes: (1) the racial history of the American criminal justice system, (2) recidivism among African American males, (3) the reentry process, transitional needs, and barriers, (4) the impact of college education and mentorship on recidivism, and (5) factors that influence the educational outcomes of African American males. The fifth and last section of the literature review analyzes these factors according to the following themes: anti-Blackness, Black marginalization in education, trauma and institutionalized racism, Black empowerment and affirmation of Black knowledge, and Black men as mentors.

The Racial History of the American Criminal Justice System

In 1967, Charles Hamilton and Stokely Carmichael (who later changed his name to Kwame Ture) published *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*. Hamilton and Carmichael (1967) popularized the term *institutional racism,* which they described as "less overt, far more subtle, less identifiable in terms of *specific* individuals committing the acts," but "no less destructive of human life" (p. 5). They cited an example of an individual racist act that results in the murder of a Black child in comparison to institutional racism, which creates a poverty dynamic that kills thousands of Black children annually (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967). The racial context of the criminal justice system can be traced back to the origin of the United States, where the "Whites" became the dominant population by owning the vast majority of the resources (Hage, 2012). Green (2017) argued that criminalization became the weapon through which these resources could be acquired and secured, as was observed between the White settlers and Native communities. Furthermore, securing the resources meant enlisting African people for labor, which birthed the slavery era in the United States (Cobb, 2009).

According to Delaney et al. (2018), racist ideologies and stereotypes were developed during slavery to criminalize slaves who were punished outside the court system. The term *brutes* were used to describe African Americans, who were considered rapists and needed to be confined to prevent them from harming White communities (Delaney et al., 2018). Race thus became a social construction, as emphasized by Enlightenment thinkers, such as Thomas Jefferson, who pointed out the physical differences between White people and enslaved Blacks (Rehavi et al., 2014). These distinctions became the roots from which racial notions grew and further demarcated the boundary between racial superiority and inferiority in American society (Blumstein, 2015). Law (2021) observed that understanding how liberty and natural rights were denied to enslaved Africans explains how racism spawned in America. After the abolition of slavery in 1865, a structure was needed to control the Black communities, who were perceived as innate criminals who needed to be confined (Moore, 2017).

Manby and Seale (2012) argue that the marginalization of people of color began when the dominant White society realized that economic prosperity could not be shared. To obtain this, confinement needed to be legal through regulations like the Pig Laws, Jim Crow, and the Black Codes, which targeted at Black people who had attained their freedom (Graff, 2015). These codes returned the Black community into slavery-like conditions, as people were imprisoned for petty crimes (Goodwin, 2018). Prisons rarely housed White people, as Mcleod (2015) has asserted. At the beginning of the 20th century, 85% of the inmates in the prisons across the South were African American. Beckett and Western (2001) brought to light the exceptions included in the United States Constitution's 13th and 14th amendments that were meant to end slavery: Black people who had been imprisoned were not allowed to be remunerated for their labor or to vote, which Bozelko (2017) has agreed was a strategy by the Whites to fill penal institutions.

State prisons were built for power and economic domination of White populations, who determined the rate and degree to which "crime" and "criminals" would be punished (Bozelko, 2017). Childs (2015) observed that, despite incarceration rates dropping after World War II, Black Americans continued to experience the perceptions of inherent criminality and they dominated American prisons. The prison population doubled between 1926 and 1986, especially when African Americans migrated to the North and the West, where the racial disparities in prisons grew (Wacquant, 2002).

Racial discrimination continued to be displayed in the criminal justice system when the introduction of wars on drugs, crime, violence, and indecency in the 1980s led to mass incarceration, with a majority of the imprisoned population being African American (Thompson, 2019). The argument offered by Tourse et al. (2018) demonstrates how systemic racism in the justice institution has pervaded America for centuries. These new policies resulted from years of criminalization, and the state's effort to control ethnic minorities contributed to the highest incarceration rates ever experienced in the U.S. (Bell, 2017). This minority population included the African American population, English-speaking and non-English-speaking immigrants, and refugees, who made up 50% of the prison population. As Tonry (2010) noted,

> Group differences in violent crime do not explain racial disparities in prison. What does explain them is a combination of police practices and legislative and executive policy decisions that systematically treat black offenders differently, and more severely, than whites. (p. 280)

Mass incarceration created a prison landscape that not only confined populations with both actual and alleged criminal behavior but also ensured that they would return to the community worse than they were before imprisonment (Gomberg-Munoz, 2012).

This systemic incarceration demonstrates Murakawa's (2005) conclusion that penal policies aimed to establish racially disparate outcomes in contemporary society. Ellawala (2016) argued that despite claims about the inextricable nature of penal policies—that is, that they may not be directly related to race—race must be a factor when the outcomes of policies affect some races more than others. Systemic racism is evident in the justice systems where the dominant administrations, the court, police, and prisons are ruled by White supremacy (Hinton & Cook, 2021). Adedoyin et al. (2019) offered examples of how inequitable treatment and racial disparity in the correctional system is evident from the arrest techniques and racially charged terms used to define criminalized African American men. For example, the term *no humans involved* was used by the Los Angeles judicial system to describe cases involving Black and Brown populations (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). Police departments have used other terms like *thug* (which evolved from the term *brute*) to justify killing unarmed Black men (Burris-Kitchen & Burris, 2011). Similarly, the perceived crime of "driving while Black" describes racial profiling by American police officers, pointing to how historically-rooted perceptions on race are related to the propensity to commit a crime (Nellis et al., 2008).

Such policies (both formal and informal) introduced longer sentences and more punitive punishments like solitary confinement which resulted in mass incarceration (Drucker, 2013). A study by Debro and Hall (1977) showed that Black prisoners were more likely to receive harsher punishments and longer sentences from the courts compared to White prisoners. Additionally, White inmates were allowed to choose their assignments in the correctional system (Debro & Hall, 1977) but Black inmates were classified according to custodial levels, limiting work assignments and, ultimately, their movements in prison.

Recidivism Among African American Males

The United States has the highest global per capita prison inmate population in the world, with 655 inmates per 100,000 people (Spelman, 2020). An analysis of global penal trends conducted by the Institute for Criminal Policy Research (ICPR; 2018) showed the United States has 5% of the world's population, yet 20% of the world's prison inmates (Walmsley, 2018). The U.S. prison system suffers from overcrowding, sparse opportunities for inmates to realize any genuine sense of rehabilitation, widespread mental illness due to poor conditions and insufficient facilities to treat inmates, and the growth of for-profit private prisons that place profitability before rehabilitation and humane treatment of inmates (James, 2015). These high incarceration rates substantially impact high recidivism rates because the U.S. carceral prison system ensures that incarcerated individuals are deprived of their civil rights (Honigsberg, 2014).

Recidivism is defined as committing an offense after being released from prison and then being incarcerated again (McKean & Ransford, 2004). Statistics express recidivism as the percentage of released inmates who commit a specific number of crimes within a specified year (Latzer, 2018). What is controversial is the degree to which the return to crime can be expressed, since criminal acts can either be self-reported or detected by the state (Oliver, 2003). The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) reported that, on average, at least 68% of released prisoners are likely to return to crime after three years of release, while 77% are likely to be incarcerated again after five year (James, 2014). Clark (2019) followed the prisoner-release cohort provided by the DOJ, which detailed that out of the 412,731 released prisoners in 2005, 45% were arrested one year after release, 78% after six years, and 82% after nine years.

While limited research focuses on recidivism and reoffending in the US, researchers like Nagin et al. (2009) have attempted to relate the experience of imprisonment with reoffending

rates. The authors analyzed the work of Miller (1998), who observed the decline of the prison population in the early 1970s which led to juvenile reformatories in Massachusetts being emptied. This showed that the carceral systems were not necessary for reducing lawbreaking. However, when crime-control practices became even more punitive, the prison populations increased in the United States (James, 2014). This is attributed to the incarceration of low-risk offenders and drug abusers and the need for the state to deinstitutionalize minority groups and protect the society's dominant classes (Bales & Piquero, 2012). These studies questioned the rehabilitative effectiveness of prisons, and the U.S. Sentencing Commission reported in 2019 that high rates of recidivism were observed among individuals arrested for violent crimes compared with nonviolent offenses.

Jonson (2010) argued that understanding how prisons influence recidivism requires a comparison with individuals who have undergone noncustodial sanctions. For example, California State Auditor Elaine Howle (2019) noted that recidivism rates for inmates who completed cognitive behavioral therapy between 2015 and 2016 and inmates who were not assigned any rehabilitative programs were inconclusive—almost no difference was detected (Sawyer, 2019). This can be attributed to the different perspectives with which prisons are related: sources of crime or correctional outcomes. Despite these perspectives, the characteristics of offenders influence their deterrence from or propensity to crime (Blagden et al., 2016). Offenders who do not view imprisonment as an unpleasant experience are likely to commit more crimes after release, a concept that Pogarsky and Piquero (2003) called the *gambler's fallacy.* This occurs when an individual believes that a series of outcomes will not have the same effect as a single outcome—that is, offending more frequently alters the expectations of being punished (Lanza et al., 2014).

The high recidivism rates in the US can also be ascribed to the lack of resources and social programs to provide former prisoners with a sense of belonging (Grant, 2018). Because African American males constitute the largest incarcerated population, it is evident that they are deprived of civil rights that will ensure successful integration into society (Mauer, 2003). These prisoners reenter communities that are disenfranchised without employment and education opportunities, which leads to reoffending (Andersen et al., 2020). Clear (2009) provided a broader lens on how mass incarceration has contributed to high recidivism among African American males. This research found that high rates of incarceration within specific communities have a negative impact on the economic and social stability of that community. This concept was built from the Rose-Clear hypothesis, which claimed that high incarceration rates disrupted social control and the consequence would be more crime (Clear, 2009). Clear argued that individuals released from prison reenter these fragile and impoverished communities where social networks have been affected, and stigmatization becomes the driving force to commit more crimes. Langan and Levin (2002) noted that high recidivism is observed from property and drug offenders, while Visher et al. (2004) pointed out that the rates are higher in individuals with an incomplete high-school education. The probability of these individuals committing more crimes is influenced by social factors like stigmatization, lack of strong social networks, and dependency on weak economic and social institutions (Auty & Liebling, 2020).

The Reentry Process, Transitional Needs, and Barriers

At least 95% of offenders are expected to be released from prisons to reintegrate into society (Krisberg & Marchionna, 2006). Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory recognized that formerly incarcerated individuals face challenges after reentering society. The hardships of reentry result from moving from a confined space to an open society (Zhang et al., 2019). The

Bureau of Justice noted that in 2015 over 600,000 people were released from both state and federal prisons in the United States, and three-quarters were expected to be rearrested within five years of their release (Li, 2018). These statistics illustrate that reintegration into the community can either be successful or pose a high risk of reoffending depending on the social, political, and economic structure within that society (Andersen et al., 2020). Powers (2010) argued that the process of reentry depends on the four Ss of transition: self, strategy, support, and situation. These factors assess individuals' ability to cope with the challenges of the open society, the strategies they integrate to cope, the support they receive from the community, and the degree to which they assess the intersecting issues arising from reintegration (Zhang et al., 2019).

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2013), the formerly incarcerated have transitional needs despite having primary or secondary resistance (the former describes the immediate action of steering away from criminal activities, and the latter explains the long-term abstention of crime). Transition needs include housing, health, social support, education, and employment (Anderson et al., 2011). Lee et al. (2012) argued that employment and education for an ex-offender are critical as they act as factors that assist the formerly incarcerated to stay crime-free. Basic transitional needs are often affected by ex-communication and mistrust from friends, family, and communities (Stayhorn et al., 2013). In addition, the incarceration experience can cause mental illness and toxic traits, which Kupers (2005) described as "socially regressive traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia and wanton violence" (p. 714).

Torres (2020) classified the barriers to reentry as economic, social, and educational access. Economic barriers stem from a lack of employment opportunities for individuals with convictions on record (Anthony et al., 2010). This is emphasized further by the government's

lack of access to jobs for marginalized communities where most of the incarcerated population live (McTier et al., 2017). Bullis and Yovanoff (2006) provided evidence that employment is effective in reducing recidivism, and suggested that establishing placement strategies for inmates who will be released will support them in overcoming economic barriers. Social barriers and educational access are influenced by stigmatization born out of the criminalization of African American males (Stayhorn et al., 2013).

Smiley (2009) discussed how the BLM movement illuminated that the system is rigged against Black men—and former Black inmates more so. He used Trayvon Martin's homicide as a focus for discussions with recently released Black males and those who have been in reentry for a year or longer. Smiley's research demonstrated that community reentry was reliant on adequate partnerships in the community and on the justice system to prevent recidivism and increase the quality of life of the individual. From evidence like this, James (2014) concluded that the system must be torn down and reconfigured if former inmates will ever have a real chance at reintegrating into society.

The Impact of College Education and Mentorship on Recidivism

Karpowitz et al. (1995) noted that African American males at a high rate fail to enroll in colleges due to the school-to-prison pipeline. Individuals who enroll are less likely to persist in their education than their White counterparts, attributed to inadequate programs to enhance the academic outcomes of formerly incarcerated (FI) individuals (Karpowitz et al., 1995). A report by Arambula and LeBlanc (2018) noted that college opportunities reduce the rate of recidivism by 43% compared with individuals who do not enroll in college. The study highlights the efforts of California Jerry Brown to enhance the community college system for formerly incarcerated individuals in California. The state provided $400,000 from the California Department of

Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) recidivism fund to establish reentry hubs that facilitate college education and reentry services for ex-offenders. Other college programs like Berkeley Underground Scholars (BUS), Restoring our community (ROC), and Restorative Integrated Self-Education (RISF) in California work closely with FIs to create safe spaces for them.

Assessing the efforts of community colleges in establishing programs to provide academic opportunities is crucial in understanding how this reduces recidivism (Brower, 2015). For example, BUS recognizes that school can be intimidating but also can serve as an escape (Berkeley Underground Scholars, 2021). Many of the faculty and staff are FIs themselves, and FIs who complete the program often return as guest speakers and are employed as staff and student mentors (Berkeley Underground Scholars, 2021). Similarly, Restoring Our Community is an academic support program at Laney College, and for formerly incarcerated students (Laney College, 2021). ROC provides a safe space for FIs with financial aid, assistance with graduation requirements, transfers, job resources, tutoring, mentorship, and housing (Chung, 2015). The ROC program attempts to eliminate the stigma associated with going to jail or prison (Laney College, 2021). The program leads by modeling the support needed at community college, and many ROC graduates return to work in the ROC office as peer mentors. (Laney College, 2021). Through such college programs, FIs can begin to believe in themselves and view a college education as attainable (Tietjen et al., 2020).

Acclimating to societal forces that almost universally work against the successful reintegration of released inmates can lead to recidivism (Smith, 2021). The influence of education on successive outcomes of formerly incarcerated individuals can be observed in a study by McTier et al. (2017) that assessed the transition process of four ex-offenders between the ages of 37 and 66. The participants detailed that they enrolled in college programs after

obtaining support in navigating through the transition process. They added that acquiring a college education meant having the social and financial competency in the future to sustain themselves and their family. Brower (2015) noted that studies assessing outcomes of prison-based education show that education reduces the rates of recidivism by 29% after the release. Further, for every dollar invested in establishing correctional education, at least two dollars were saved that would otherwise have been spent on incarceration costs (Brower, 2015). Other academic opportunities that have been identified are the presence of Prison General Educational Development (GED) credentials in the majority of the state correctional facilities (Darolia et al., 2021).

Because 95% of incarcerated populations will eventually be released into society, educational opportunities inside and after incarceration are key for building skills and knowledge necessary in the contemporary environment (Quan-Baffour & Zawada, 2012). Educational programs that support inmates to better themselves and advance their knowledge provide opportunities to penetrate the labor market and contribute positively to society. Tyler and Kling's (2006) research investigated the impact on post-release outcomes of obtaining a General Education Development (GED) certificate. The study concluded that GEDs provided a large proportion of inmates with skills they would use to navigate the labor market when they reintegrated into society. Taylor (1993) claimed that assistance programs like Pell Grants are meant to provide the formerly incarcerated with financial aid to pay for college education. After the Higher Education Act was introduced in 1965, ex-felons were able to enroll in college programs, which reflected positive outcomes in the rate of recidivism (Zoukis, 2014). The Pell Grant initially aimed to make college more affordable for African Americans who come from low-income communities (Karpowitz et al., 1995).

In 2020, restrictions on eligibility for Pell Grants were lifted, allowing more people in prison to access the funds for education (Tahamont et al., 2020). At least 500,000 additional individuals will be able to access post-secondary education in prison and post-secondary institutions (Tahamont et al., 2020). This change resulted from understanding the impact of education in promoting change in individuals and the importance of observing human rights for people with convictions (Mallory, 2015).

Mentorship and the Formerly Incarcerated

Research on the influence of mentors in reducing recidivism have increased over the years. The basic feature of mentoring is the interaction between an "at-risk individual" who was formerly incarcerated and a role model (Brown & Ross, 2010). According to Tietjen et al., (2020), mentorship is a holistic process that includes collaborating with corrections partners (that is, probation or parole staff), identifying the basic transitional needs of the mentee, equipping the mentee with the necessary life skills to meet social and academic objectives, and utilizing both quantitative and qualitative measures to understand which strategies are effective in reducing recidivism. Mentorship provides support throughout the stages of reentry and can include social support, emotional support, career and academic advice, and accountability support (Peters, 2018). Umez et al. (2017) detailed that the benefits of mentoring are heightened when it is tailored to the individual's needs, and when follow-up takes place after the mentoring program ends. When mentoring has a persistent influence on an individual, the likelihood of recidivism is low even after mentoring ends (Unruh et al., 2009). Jollife and Farrington (2008) concluded that successful outcomes occur when mentoring is used alongside other interventions like cognitive behavioral therapy, which identifies the motivation behind criminal activities and disrupts the patterns of these motivations.

According to Veysey et al.'s (2014) research on offenders in the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative program in New Jersey, positive outcomes of low recidivism rates were realized after the inmates were released. The study compared the outcomes of offenders supervised by mentors and those with no supervision and concluded that the latter group's recidivism rates were significantly higher than the former. Similar outcomes were observed when Braga et al. (2009) investigated the recidivism of offenders in the Boston Reentry Initiative (BRI). The program utilized faith-based mentors suitable to individual criminal histories and tailored interventions based on the individuals' attributes and level of social support (Braga et al., 2009). The program ensured that the mentors provided support holistically for 18 months after release, reducing recidivism by 30% (Braga et al., 2009).

Welsh and McGrain (2008) found that mentoring is one of three critical components of success in the faith-based in-prison drug treatment and education program they studied. Over a twelve-month period, 347 inmates participated in a mentoring program while incarcerated. Welsh and McGrain (2008) identified three critical elements as necessary for success: personal motivation, a strong rapport with peer counselors and non-peer (professional or nonprofessional) mentors, and in-program milestones used as predictors of success that allowed participants a sense of independent validation of their progress. The authors found that skilled professional counselors are more successful in supporting inmates with histories of violent criminal activity than peer counselors. Workman (2018) identified a potential reason for the value of mentoring—he concluded that emotional development is often disrupted through incarceration. This is especially true for adolescent youth incarcerated in juvenile centers. The prisoner's attachment status must be determined to facilitate the proper mentor-mentee paradigm to follow during rehabilitative therapies (Tietjen et al., 2020). These studies provide a footing for understanding

the importance of mentoring FI individuals and how this practice helps them successfully reenter society.

Similarly, Schreeche-Powell (2020) examined peer-led prisoner inductions and interventions as a force to counter what he describes as “iatrogenic” reforms by White individuals and institutions attempting to remedy racism embedded in society. Reforms often have unintended negative consequences (Anderson et al., 2020). Peer-led inductions allow for a praxis of instruction that includes more beneficial information and knowledge than formal induction protocols meant to instruct new prisoners on rules and regulations (Schreeche-Powell, 2020). Life in prison is very different from the prison life model presented by prison manuals and rules (Zwick, 2018). Peers who live the experience are much better at guiding new inmates in avoiding conflict and using the system in positive ways (Gonzalez et al., 2019). Further, prisoners who receive such support participate in constructs of behavior that give them a sense of involvement once they leave the carceral environment (Zwick, 2018). These peer-led interventions, like mentorship, provide the prisoners with a sense of involvement and belonging, which translates to a sense of community when prisoners are released (Remington, 2020). Therapeutic communities like this increase positive self-construction and consequently reduce recidivism (Devilly et al., 2005).

Factors That Influence Educational Outcomes of African American Males

Overall, anti-Black violence as a result of institutionalized racism has caused U.S. society to be afraid of Black children (Powell & Coles, 2021). This in turn has led to the establishment of policies that have contributed to high incarceration rates among African American males. This section identifies the factors in the educational system that criminalize Black males in particular and ultimately contribute to the high incarceration rate among this population. They also lead

towards the high recidivism rates among African American males, which by extension influence the reentry process and the educational outcomes of the formerly incarcerated African American males.

This section highlights five sub-themes that impact the educational outcomes of African American males: anti-Blackness, trauma and institutionalized racism, Black marginalization in education, and the school-to-prison pipeline, Black knowledge and Affirmation of Black knowledge, and Black men as mentors. Caton (2012) described the presence of Black marginalization in the zero-tolerance policies that have been adopted in American public schools, which have resulted in disproportionate suspension and expulsion of Black males. He argued that zero-tolerance policies are subjective and treat schools like criminal-justice institutions. In addition, research on the "school-to-prison pipeline" focuses on the disproportionality of suspensions among Black urban youth that often leads to incarceration by analyzing how suspensions embedded within structural policy have their genesis in anti-Blackness (Coles & Powell, 2020).

Anti-Blackness

Anti-Blackness is a concept describing racial prejudice that dehumanizes Black people (Bashi, 2004). The theory was first mentioned by Joseph Washington in 1984 in his work *Anti-blackness in English Religion: 1500-1800.* The term was used by other scholars like Amiri Baraka (1994) to critique White supremacy which is institutional and systemic. The theory can be traced back to Afro-pessimism concepts that brought into light the relationship between race and humanity in describing how Black people are treated in society (Bledsoe, 2020). The concept has been utilized to assess how Black urban youth have attempted to establish Black curricula within a society with a highly unequal education system.

Coles (2020) analyzed the racial history of the mainstream U.S. curriculum, which has been rooted in centuries of White settler colonialism. Wright (2015) described this notion as coming from a Black-White binary lens where the Whiteness or Blackness of people is a social construction used to justify the positioning in the social-political hierarchy. The mainstream U.S. curriculum was originally developed for White individuals, as slavery marginalized Black people and excluded them from education. Despite this system of anti-Blackness, Black communities have responded by displaying the intelligence of the Black youth through a concept called Black genius (Dumas, 2016). The concept has allowed Black people to resist the nation-state curriculum and create new ideas centered on Black ethos (Coles, 2020).

Coles (2020) applied the BlackCrit paradigm to research different urban high schools between 2016 and 2017, linking the paradigm to the experience of Black degradation during the slavery era. Historically, Black bodies have been treated with disgust while the Whiteness of their counterparts is normalized (Coles, 2020). Brown and Au (2014) similarly noted that the educational curriculum in the U.S. was created by White men with no regard for Black experiences. Black contributions and educational equality are appraised only if they fit the interests of White people. Black empowerment has been observed to disrupt anti-Blackness by disregarding White supremacy in the education system (hooks, 2019). Coles (2020) realized that Black abundance is not centered on White supremacy but on knowing where problems are and exhibiting “wake work,” a concept that describes how Black people exhibit communal care despite the impacts of chattel slavery. Coles (2020) concluded that affirming Black knowledge is crucial in counteracting anti-Blackness in the U.S. curriculum.

Black Marginalization in Education and the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Caton (2012) utilized research from Gregory et al. (2010) and Wallace et al. (2008), among others, to conclude that Black males disproportionately experience suspensions and expulsions in high schools. Caton (2012) identified Black marginalization in education in efforts by the more dominant races in America to segregate the minority. Such inequality in educational opportunities occurs not only in the allocation of funding in White-dominated wealthy schools but also in the number of Black males who drop out of high school (Riphagen, 2008). Further, zero-tolerance policies are discriminatory towards ethnic minorities, especially Black males—who are regarded as criminal suspects unless proven otherwise (Gregory et al., 2010).

Anderson (2020) similarly deduced that zero-tolerance policies have disproportionately negative outcomes for Black males. Relevant themes include lack of support from teachers, an inhospitable and hostile school environment resulting from security measures, exclusion from the class which affects student learning, and overall impact on the sense of belongingness. The impact of Black marginalization on education brings attention to the importance of having a safe school environment, as surveillance technologies for students punished for misdeeds affect their learning (Hines-Datiti & Andrews, 2020). The Black males in Anderson's study attributed their disengagement from school to the lack of a sense of belongingness. These students were at a higher risk of engaging in criminal activities, contributing to recidivism for Black males in American prisons (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019).

Riddle and Sinclair (2019) concluded that there are racial differences in the type of punishments that Black and White students receive as a result of disciplinary actions. Black students are more likely to be suspended and expelled, as they are considered more problematic

(Rocque & Snellings, 2018). Wun (2016) similarly noted how subjective school policies that are directly linked to the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon target Black students as "criminals."

Coles and Powell (2020) described these suspensions as "anti-Black symbolic violence" (p. 13) and analyzed this practice from a historical lens where Black youth were criminalized in public schools. Legislation like the Jim Crow laws illuminates the belittling and criminalization of Black youth. These laws became a legalized form of slavery (Coles & Powell, 2020). Black existence in itself is circumscribed as problematic, and so academic suspension is considered a corrective action for Black individuals while White students receive less harsh punishments for similar offenses (Novek, 2014). Coles and Powell (2020) concluded that anti-Blackness and racism are socially constructed and that society itself views these notions as "normal" and ordinary—U.S. society is systematically created upon establishing the unequal in society, ensuring that outcomes are inevitably racist.

Trauma and Institutionalized Racism

Powell and Coles (2021) defined collective trauma as a consequence of centuries of institutionalized racism. Trauma and institutionalized racism have contributed to how Black families have often been characterized: as incomplete or broken with absentee fathers, obnoxious mothers, and children labeled as "criminals" (Powell & Coles, 2021). Schools and disciplinary policies further presuppose that Black parents lack sufficient skills and knowledge to guide their children and reject the notion of collaboration between teachers and parents. Powell and Coles (2020) incorporated BlackCrit theory to focus on anti-Blackness and its link to trauma created from slavery. Anti-Black violence is rooted in the U.S. chattel slavery structure, which dehumanized Black bodies and made Black minds insignificant. Black mothers, however, are made to relive historical trauma and Black history through out-of-school suspensions and

expulsion (Stein, 2016). Bledsoe (2020) noted that the narratives Black families established due to institutionalized racism caused educators to be afraid of Black children.

Black mothers continue to attempt to make sense of narratives that affect their children's education, which is historically linked to the dehumanization of African males (Morris, 2016). Powell and Coles (2021) therefore developed the theme "I know they're looking at me," which describes the experiences Black women face as a result of narratives developed centuries ago. The "Black children can never do right" concept discussed by Hale and Hale (1982) explains how Black families perceive the American education system's portrayal of their children. Narratives established from institutionalized racism create a sense of being overwhelmed, especially since anti-Blackness is viewed as normal in the US (Wun, 2016).

Black Empowerment and Affirmation of Black Knowledge

Lea et al. (2020) described how the curricula in learning institutions can foster positive experiences for Black males returning to school after incarceration, leading to Black empowerment. Black empowerment in education requires strategic moves that go against mainstream practices to ensure African American populations are aware of the critical issues caused by racism (Callende, 1997). Affirmation of Black knowledge is an approach to Black empowerment that emphasizes the saliency of equipping Black children with the knowledge of self (Taysum & Ayanlaja, 2020). The school-to-prison pipeline has intensified Black males' struggles concerning education, creating the need for a culturally-inclusive curriculum that promotes the holistic development of formerly incarcerated males (Wilson & Johnson, 2015).

Curricula similar to the one developed by Lea et al. (2020) need to be integrated by teachers to ensure that the discrimination that young Black males face after incarceration is counteracted with positive self-conception. Lea et al. (2020) identified the theme "traditions are

just not for me," (p.8) and a program focusing on fostering culture and resilience. Such programs realize the importance of young Black children being racially and socially conscious about their history, their roots, and the impact these factors have on their socioeconomic advancement. When Black males are in educational settings that provide meaningful opportunities, caring relationships, and high expectations that emphasize resilience, successful educational outcomes are observed (Codjoe, 2006).

Black Men as Mentors

The idea of Black men as mentors recognizes how interactions with Black men, teachers, and Black boys can reenvision conceptions of inferiority (Warren, 2020). Majors (2005) recognized efforts to reinforce a culture among Black youth that emphasizes their ability to change their imperative on manhood and masculinity. These efforts include increasing the number of Black male teachers to increase interpersonal relationships with Black males in school (Callende, 1997). Warren (2020) explained how concepts of inferiority are rooted in the degradation and exploitation of Black bodies by White settler colonialists. This hegemonic system of domination has created elements of subordination that leave Black boys questioning their significance in society (Grantham, 2004). Black educators have attempted to diminish the social constructs of race and gender with regard to educators and acted as role models. According to Davis (2003), the impact these educators have on emphasizing anti-oppressive learning has contributed to Black boys' educational outcomes and the establishment of resilience, self-identity, and cultural identity. Terms such as "father figure" and "mentors" can be applied to teachers who guide Black students in becoming adult Black men in society (Warren, 2020). In single-sex schools especially, these interactions intensify the portrayal of a successful Black man and provide new convictions on masculinity and manhood (Palmer & Gasman, 2008).

Rogers, Scott, and Way (2015) have critiqued some of the strategies Black male teachers employ, arguing that they reflect White supremacist ideals to portray what manhood is in an effort to remove anti-Blackness structures and systems. Young Black men are more likely to emulate the teachings of male Black teachers, who take a different stance in fighting White supremacy. Sanchez (2016) argued that Black men should emphasize the importance of modeling the existing rules of success instead of following them. This contributes to the goal of disproving White supremacy through teaching Afro-cultural values (Childs, 1984).

Summary

This literature review highlighted anti-Blackness and the school-to-prison pipeline as the main factors that influence the likelihood of African American males entering incarceration systems. The United States education and criminal justice systems have promoted Black marginalization and institutionalized racism, and so they have necessarily limited Black empowerment, affirmation of Black knowledge, sense of belonging for Black males, and the utilization of Black men as mentors. Since the slavery era, these systems have relied on race and socioeconomic disparities to increase the likelihood of African American males entering the criminal justice system and consequently reoffending upon release. After incarceration, African American males are likely to be rearrested and reincarcerated due to a lack of targeted systems that promote successful reintegration into society. A criminal record reduces the opportunities for the formerly incarcerated to enter the labor market, attend educational institutions, and access social services like safe and affordable housing. Lack of support from family and the community also contributes to recidivism.

College education, mentorship, and reentry programs focus on shifting the negative experiences of the formerly incarcerated to allow successful integration into society. By getting a

college education, formerly incarcerated individuals attain the social and financial competency to sustain themselves and their families. Mentors support them by assisting in searching for jobs, providing guidance in life choices, encouraging individuals to attend rehabilitation when necessary, and overall focusing on social, mental, and emotional well-being. The critical literature emphasizes the importance of college education and mentorship programs that are tailored to the individual needs of the formerly incarcerated in reducing recidivism.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Restatement of Purpose of the Study

As stated in Chapter I, the purpose of this research was to investigate the experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals and the effectiveness of reentry programs in higher education institutions, in this case, in community colleges, in assisting them in adjusting to life to improve their social, economic, and academic outcomes. The study also examined how mentorship programs helped resolve problems that contribute to high incarceration rates among African Americans.

Research Questions

The research questions of this study are:

1. What is the role of college education in reducing recidivism in formerly incarcerated African American males?
2. What is the role of mentorship in reducing recidivism in formerly incarcerated African American males?
3. What are the barriers to successful social integration and educational attainment of formerly incarcerated African American Males?
4. Which other interventions have helped to reduce recidivism in formerly incarcerated African American males?

Research Design

As a storyteller, the son of a librarian, and a playwright, I was naturally drawn to the narrative methodology. I believe narrative research can provide the "human experience" and shine a light on the untold stories in our society. This section focuses on the importance of narrative research and how it was used throughout this study.

Narrative research is the study of how different humans experience the world around them, and it involves a methodology that allows people to tell the stories of their "storied lives." (Clandinin, 2014). One of the leading narrative research scholars, Labov (2003) realized that narrative research is useful for understanding major events in one's life story and the cause and effect those events have on individuals constructing the story. Furthermore, narrative research utilizes an *evaluation model* of one's life that focuses on who, what, when, and where (Ollenranshw & Creswell, 2002).

Narrative research has many benefits: (1) Memorable, interesting knowledge that brings together layers of understanding about a person, their culture, and how they have created change; (2) details about struggles to make sense of the past and create meanings as they tell and/or 'show' us what happened to them; (3) stories that help organize information about how people have interpreted events; the values, beliefs, and experiences that guide those interpretations; and their hopes, intentions and plans for the future; (4) complex patterns, descriptions of identity construction and reconstruction, and evidence of social discourses that impact on a person's knowledge creation from specific cultural standpoints; (5) knowledge that is situated, transient, partial and provisional; characterized by multiple voices, perspectives, truths and meanings (Gay et al., 2009).

I was particularly drawn to narrative research because of the opportunity for formerly incarcerated men of color to share their counter-stories and how they make meaning of reintegrating into society. Bamberg and Andrews (2004) described a counter-narrative as a story that offers a positive alternative to hegemonic viewpoints. I was able to deconstruct harmful, stereotypical, and false narratives, usually about minoritized communities. Counter-narratives are important because they allow the stories of the invisible to be heard (Andrews, 2002). Counter-

narratives humanize formerly incarcerated individuals when society has forgotten about them (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Counter-narrative research strategy also provides me with an opportunity to tell my own story. My first job was at the Oakland Zoo. I was a rides operator, and I ran the spinning teacups. I would laugh at how parents and their children would go from anticipation and excitement to nausea in a matter of minutes. I learned from an early age that I have a sick mind. I only made $4.25 per hour, but it allowed me to keep money in my pocket as a young 16-year-old. Before getting my first job, I answered a series of questions. The questions that stood out to me were: "*Have you ever committed a crime, and have you ever been convicted of a felony?"* The formerly incarcerated are subjected to such questions. Research conducted by Tran et al. (2018) noted that the language used by the formerly incarcerated is critical in humanizing the criminal justice system. This brings to light questions like: Has society heard their side of the story? Does society care about their side of the story? How long will society continue to invalidate and dehumanize formerly incarcerated individuals because of a mistake(s)? These questions speak to the need for counter-narratives about the experiences of formerly incarcerated people.

Counter-narrative research strategies provide a platform to hear from the formerly incarcerated. They legitimize them as human beings. Most would agree that people want to feel whole. Stories are unique in that we take a closer, personal, eye-opening look into the experiences of those that are considered on the fringes of society. What about those formerly incarcerated who were in the wrong place at the wrong time, which is why they got arrested? How about those that are a victim of circumstance that got caught in the cycle of poverty? What about those formerly incarcerated people who could not break their chemical dependency issues,

which led to crime as an alternative? These are not bad people. Counter-narrative allows for their stories to be told.

The United States is the world leader in terms of the number of people put in jail (Travis et al., 2014). Punitive laws have been implemented in low socioeconomic status communities, which bring into question the values and principles of the United States with regard to rehabilitative ideals (Sojoyner, 2013). The "school-to-prison pipeline" is perpetuated for a reason. In this study, readers hear testimony from six formerly incarcerated African Americans. Their stories of trials, tribulations, and triumphs illuminate how these men used college education and mentorship as their ticket to a successful future.

Participants

In my study, *Reclaiming Our Humanity: Redemption, Reimagining and Restorying of the Foundations for Success of Formerly Incarcerated African American Males*, I heard the oral narratives from six men of African ancestry. In these interviews, the participants were asked about their experiences regarding college education, mentorship, and restorative justice and how they used these experiences as a means for upward mobility to get acclimated back to society and find a job and later a career.

The six individuals were selected for the study using the criterion sampling approach which involves establishing criteria for identifying and then speaking to select individuals (Creswell, 2007). Instead of becoming repeat offenders, they used the opportunities presented to them as a second chance, just like I did. Some of these men started at community colleges and transferred to four-year colleges. At the time the study was being conducted in May 2022, one individual had recently received his doctorate in education from USF, and another was working on his Associate's degree.

Another criterion I used in selecting my participants was that they are people who have benefitted from some form of mentorship. The mentorship could have taken place while incarcerated or after. Most of the participants in this study were giving back to their communities by mentoring currently. I had this connection with my participants because of my full disclosure to the group that I am a formerly incarcerated youth. They all supported what I have done and were behind me in wanting my research to be groundbreaking and far-reaching. In the next section, I present brief biographies of Gary "Malachi" Scott, Harold Atkins, Marlon Lewis, Dr. Reggie Daniels, Shaka Senghor, and Vincent Garrett.

Gary "Malachi" Scott

Age: 45

Occupation: Restorative Justice Circle Trainer, Life Coach, Consultant

Hometown: Oakland, California

Garry "Malachi" Scott serves as the reentry/community restorative justice coordinator for Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth. He holds restorative circles in the juvenile detention center and he is helping to build a community restorative justice framework in North Oakland. He co-founded the North Oakland Restorative Justice Council and served on the Safety and Services Oversight Commission (Measure Z) in Oakland. He is also the co-founder and co-director of Atunse Justice League. He played a major role in Shakti Butler's film "Healing Justice" through the telling of his personal story. He came to restorative justice through the Victim Offender Education Group, a program of the Insight Prison Project, while incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison.

During his incarceration, he obtained an Associate's Degree, co-founded a restorative justice-based group called Kid C.A.T. (Creating Awareness Together), and was the sports editor

for the San Quentin News. He is an excellent speaker on the topics of restorative justice and mass incarceration.

Harold Atkins

Age: 48

Occupation: Director of Each One Reach One Success Centers for San Mateo Juvenile Hall, HIV/AIDS Prevention Specialist, Football Coach

Hometown: Palo Alto, California

Harold Atkins is a friend and mentor who has been a featured guest speaker in my Human Sexuality class for over three years. Harold is the director of an organization called Each One Reach One (EORO). He started as a caseworker/manager for homeless youth, and for many years he worked in HIV prevention through San Mateo and Santa Clara counties. Harold describes his unique skill set as being something that was sought after when he applied for the Program Director position of Each One Reach One: he was a male person of color who had been incarcerated but turned his life around through education. Harold is a community organizer, and he fits exactly what EORO was looking for ten years ago.

EORO started in 1998 and was designed to divert incarcerated youth from life in prison through mentor-based performing arts. Each One Reach One is reimagining the way positive programming impacts incarcerated youth. EORO is now transforming lives in San Mateo, Santa Clara, and San Francisco counties, serving almost 2,000 youth. Each One Reach One helps locked-up youth write plays. EORO uses the performing arts to help juvenile offenders find purpose and meaning in their lives. One of the fundamental aims of leading young writers through the playwriting workshop process is to increase their comfort level in sharing ideas and feelings, producing a collection of plays that deal with conflict resolution through metaphor.

Metaphor is a powerful means of allowing students to open up and incorporate their own opinions and reflections into their works. The National Endowment for the Arts recognized the program as one of the nation's outstanding art programs.

Marlon Lewis

Age: 43

Occupation: EBMUD supervisor

Hometown: Oakland, California

Marlon Lewis was raised in West Oakland and Hayward, California. He graduated from Alameda High School and had dreams of making it big as a businessman. When Marlon was twenty-two years old, he got arrested for drug trafficking and served three years in a federal penitentiary. Upon his release, he enrolled at California State University, East Bay, and obtained his Bachelor's degree in Business. Marlon has always been ambitious and shortly after enrolled at Saint Mary's College of California and received his Master's degree in Business (MBA). After years of serving as a Forman for Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART), he transitioned to a supervisor role with East Bay Municipal Utility District (EBMUD).

Reggie Daniels

Age: 54

Occupation: Adjunct Professor at USF, Violence Prevention Specialist, Playwright, Actor, and Director

Hometown: San Francisco, California

After serving many years in a state penitentiary, Reggie Daniels has worked to create a better Bay Area for all. Growing up in San Francisco and doing hard prison time, Daniels

eventually found his "road to recovery," teaching communication and listening skills to violent inmates, while earning a BS in Organizational Behavior & Leadership. His passion is working with at-risk youth, and he has worked for over a decade in San Francisco County Jail. Reggie has received the KQED radio station's "Black Hero's Award" and the Bayview Hunters Point Foundation "Change Agent Award" for his personal and professional achievements. His research focuses on in-custody violence prevention program efficacy and culturally responsive pedagogy and policies to interrupt oppressive systems and bring social justice to his community.

Reggie is organizing to build a Re-entry Resource Center for formerly incarcerated individuals. He works in marginalized communities to eradicate the harms caused by systemic racism and mass incarceration by using art and scholarship to center the voice of the incarcerated and by creating spaces to foster organic scholars who have in many cases been silenced. Reggie performed in and co-created with artists and formerly incarcerated men an award-winning dance/theater film entitled Well Contested Sites.

Shaka Senghor

Age: 48

Occupation: Author of *Writing My Wrongs* (2017), Teacher at the Atonement Project, Lecturer at M.I.T.

Hometown: Detroit, Michigan

In the summer of 1991, Shaka Senghor shot and killed a man, after which he spent 19 years in different prisons in Michigan, seven years of which were in solitary confinement. Of these seven years, four and a half were consecutive. He was released from prison in 2010.

Aside from being a leading voice on criminal justice reform, Shaka is the recipient of numerous awards, including the 2012 Black Male Engagement Leadership Award, the 2015 Manchester University Innovator of the Year Award, the 2016 FORD Man of Courage Award,

and the 2016 NAACP Great Expectations Award. He was recognized by OWN (the Oprah Winfrey Network) as a "Soul Igniter" in the inaugural class of the SuperSoul 100. He has taught at the University of Michigan and shares his story of redemption around the world.

Vincent “Vince” Garrett

Age: 46

Occupation: Student Services Specialist at Restoring Our Community (ROC), Laney College

Hometown: Oakland, California

Vincent Garrett is a graduate of the University of San Francisco, with a Master’s degree in Organization & Leadership in the Department of Leadership Studies, within the School of Education. His goal is to become an educator, scholar and practitioner for programs that support formerly incarcerated college students and inform policies that impact formerly incarcerated students.

He currently works for a program called Restoring Our Communities (ROC) that supports formerly incarcerated students at Laney College. His Master’s thesis was on creating a framework for the creation, implementation, operation and evaluation of what he terms “Campus Reentry Support” programs for formerly incarcerated students.

Vincent graduated from UC Berkeley in 2016 with BA in Sociology; graduated from Merritt College with five A.A. degrees and was once a certified union sound and communications data installer. He has been off parole since 2000.

Research Site

All of the men selected were formerly incarcerated African-ancestry males that now give back to their prospective communities through mentorship. Because of the novel coronavirus

pandemic which began in 2020, the World Health Organization provided guidelines that required people to reduce human-to-human contact in an attempt to curb the spread of the virus. In adherence to these guidelines, the participants were interviewed from their office or home by following COVID-19 safety protocols. I met the participants in various places throughout the greater San Francisco Bay Area, with the exception of Shaka Senghor, who was interviewed in person at his home in Los Angeles, California.

Data Collection

In conducting this study, I followed the guidelines established by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). After the IRB approved this research in February 2022, I began to collect data. The research utilized conversations that took place through individual interviews with African American men who have been incarcerated. The individual interviews were conducted in person and the researcher was able to collect a rich narration of experiences. The interviews were recorded with the consent of each participant.

Data Analysis

I first transcribed the interviews verbatim. Then, I utilized a narrative data analysis strategy as recommended by Butina (2015), which is suitable when developing the basic elements of qualitative data which are codes, categories, patterns, and themes. Narrative analysis involves gathering data through storying, restorying, and configuring the data to understand actions, events, and happenings (Kim, 2016). I used the restorying data analysis approach by gathering data from stories by participants, evaluating codes and themes from the stories, reordering the stories in chronological order, and drawing conclusions to address the research questions (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). Narrative research takes into account that

participants may have stories that are inconsistent and it was critical to making sense of the stories by reordering (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002).

The research questions served as the standardized format for identifying the story pattern to be able to compare and contrast different stories and establish guidelines for easier interpretation (Mello, 2002). After the interviews, the participants verified the transcripts for accuracy.

Background of the Researcher and Positionality

Positionality refers to the stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study—the community, the organization, or the participant group (Bourke, 2014). My positionality is one of a formerly incarcerated youth. I was detained as a 16-year-old at Camp Sweeney and then again at 18 years in Santa Rita County Jail. When I was 18 years old, I told myself that I would do everything within my power to not return to the prison walls that confined me while I was making bad decisions.

I have been a counselor and instructor at De Anza College for 12 years, and many would say that I am a "contributing member" to society at large. I have taken it upon myself to seek opportunities to give back through volunteering, mentoring, teaching, and inspiring young men of color to achieve their goals. I believe that my formal education and the countless mentors who have supported me are the two factors that contributed to my success.

My role as a college counselor could have ethical considerations, as well as advantages because I have been trained to see the good in all my clients and students. I believe in *unconditional positive regard*, a term coined by Carl Rogers (1956) to mean the basic acceptance and support of a person regardless of what the person says or does. The belief that human beings have the ability to "do good" and are well-intentioned individuals can leave one vulnerable to

harm because, unfortunately, all human beings will not “do good” whether you believe in them or not.

My volunteer work has been with the San Jose Rites of Passage, Each One Reach One (EORO), 100 Black Men of The Bay Area, and The Berkeley Mount Zion Baptist church. I want urban youth to view college as an option for upward mobility.

My positionality as a formerly incarcerated college graduate could be seen as a hindrance based on my assumption that since college worked for me, it can and will work for everyone who has been imprisoned. College has opened many doors for me, but it is not a one-size-fits-all strategy in dealing with our formerly incarcerated population. While listening, I strove to remain open to all possibilities that my participants raised in their interviews. As a formerly incarcerated college graduate, my positionality remains that positive mentorship and formal education will reduce recidivism for men of color.

CHAPTER IV: PARTICIPANTS' PROFILES

I am presenting the study's findings in two separate chapters: Chapter IV focuses on the participants' profiles and Chapter V on the themes identified in the interviews.

Table 1 below shows the participants' demographics regarding the age of incarceration, the institutions where they served time, the years served, and the number of times they recidivated. Participants were of similar ages when they were initially incarcerated (15-19 years old). Their time served ranged from three-and-a-half to 19 years. Four never returned (Marlon, Shaka, Harold, and Malachi) and two (Vincent and Reggie) returned a number of times before they found a different life for themselves.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Characteristics: Age of Incarceration, Institution, Years Served, Recidivism (Number of Times)

Participant	Age incarcerated	Institution	Time served in years total	Recidivism (Number of times)
Gary "Malachi"	15 years old (tried as adult)	Calipatria State Prison San Quentin	10	0
Harold	18 years old	San Quentin	5	0
Marlon	19 years old	Dublin Federal Detention Center, Phoenix Federal Correctional Institution, Lompoc Federal Correctional Institution	3.5	0
Reggie	18 years old	*	*	Several times
Shaka	18 years old	Michigan Reformatory	19	0
Vincent	18 years old	San Quentin, Solano, Mule Creek State Prison Pleasant Valley State Prison Sierra Conservation	4	5

Note. *did not mention.

Gary “Malachi” Scott

Childhood

Malachi grew up in Los Angeles, spending most of his time in Section 8 housing. Malachi recalled vividly how his mother was on governmental assistance during his childhood. She had different boyfriends who moved in and out of the house, and depending on the boyfriend, times were either fun or chaotic. Most of Malachi’s time was spent between South Central Los Angeles and Inglewood. Malachi and his family got by with the bare necessities. He did not always have new clothes but got good hand-me-downs from his brother. Food stamps and government assistance kept food in the refrigerator. Early on, Malachi did not ask many questions, focusing on being a kid.

The late 1980s were turbulent times for Malachi because of all the gang-banging that took place between the Bloods and the Crips. These were bloody years filled with warring in the streets. Malachi recalled a time when his mom came to get his brother and had them sleep on the floor because of the shoot-outs that were happening in his neighborhood. Malachi recalled that he slept on the floor many nights. He and his brothers would hear the helicopters outside and run into the house. The police would sometimes knock on the door and say, “We’re looking for a suspect.” He explained how he went outside and saw a bloody T-shirt from a shootout. This was also at the height of the crack era. Malachi and his family would often see needles and other drug paraphernalia outside.

Although Malachi did not understand everything that was going on, he remembered certain moments of being afraid because of the uncertainty and unknown. During good times he was filled with feelings of excitement and joy, like when he rode on the back of the ice cream trucks while trying to hide out. Malachi would go swimming with his neighborhood friends, and

block parties and water balloon fights in the neighborhood were his favorite pastimes. Alongside the good memories were those of turbulent times. He would also be full of fear due to the frequent shootings. In his house, Malachi recalled that some of his mom's boyfriends were abusive toward her, and he witnessed his mother getting beaten often. He remembered being too scared to do anything about it, so he would just watch helplessly. He not only witnessed abuse, but he experienced physical and psychological abuse firsthand. He characterized that as a norm growing up.

As Malachi got older, he started to feel shame about not being able to help his mom at the time and felt resentment towards her for allowing these boyfriends to be around him and his brother. Once Malachi became a teenager, things totally shifted. His mother let him do whatever he wanted to do. Malachi eventually ended up getting expelled in middle school, which led to his smoking marijuana and underage drinking more frequently.

> I stopped having respect for my mom's authority because I didn't feel like she protected me enough. I just got to a point where I'm not sure if there was a point of return to that respect in that moment, you know what I'm saying? Once I started spending a lot of time away from school, and I couldn't be home because I was supposed to be at school, I started spending a lot of time in the streets. Because of that, I got introduced to things that were … accessible to me in an unhealthy way. (February 13, 2022)

Education

Malachi excelled in primary school and was a self-assured learner. He had the mindset that he could master any skill. His overall confidence in himself is a trait that lasted into young adulthood and to this day, stemming from the belief that if he worked hard, he could achieve anything. Malachi reflected on other aspects of school and how school played a role in leading

him down a certain route. Initially, Malachi found school easy, and he was getting good grades. When he transitioned to middle school he was still doing well. This shifted in the seventh grade. Malachi recounted numerous events occurring outside of school that had an impact on his academic performance.

Malachi started attending a school in Inglewood in Los Angeles and did not do well. Some days he went to school but was absent on most days. Nevertheless, in spite of all the absences and truancies, he graduated. Knowing he could still graduate by doing the bare minimum, he hung out in the streets even more. The city of Los Angeles was flooded with Bloods and Crips. Every neighborhood was somebody's territory.

When Malachi was arrested while in the 10th grade, he had no credits on his academic record. Eventually, at the age of 16, he was fortunate enough to get his GED. At the age of 27, he earned an Associate's degree through a program in San Quentin called the Prison University Project (PUP), which was accredited by Patton University. Malachi would seize every chance to further his education that was provided to him while he was incarcerated. With no education from 2000 to 2008, he spent most of that time studying in the library.

Incarceration

Malachi started engaging in criminal activity in the form of low-level burglaries at the age of 13 years. Even though he was committing theft, he was in tune with his conscience, and had respect for the victims; however, he described himself as just trying to get by. That is how Malachi believed he got started in "the life." Although Malachi engaged in criminal activities, he was never officially affiliated with any gang until he turned 14. He eventually decided to join one because he was hanging around a specific group for a period of time; he started to feel good being a part of something. He was the youngest in the group and they went places, did things

together, met parents, ate dinner together, and it felt like a community in a way he had never experienced at home. He was “all in.” However, the nature of his activity changed drastically from petty thefts and burglaries to armed robberies and dealing large quantities of drugs.

Malachi attributed his incarceration to several factors in his life. His lack of respect towards his mother, the different boyfriends that would frequent the household, and his not knowing his biological father all contributed to his seeking a sense of belonging from the gang. He struggled with his identity, and he had an older brother whose father used to come and pick him up, leaving Malachi behind with a sense of loss. The gang with which he was affiliated made him feel good just being around them because he felt a sense of being accepted and a part of it, giving him access to things he never had before. Malachi began to get access to weapons, merchandise, drugs, alcohol, and money because of this association. He described how satisfying it was for him to feel like a member of the group. His affiliation and sense of purpose resulted in him being kicked out of two schools. He had reached a point where the school was not fun to him anymore.

Malachi recalled thinking that if the schools he attended had helped him have a sense of belonging or even helped him deal with the trauma he was experiencing at home and in his neighborhood, the outcome would have been different. If schools had played an active role in helping Malachi arrange things in his life that were out of order, his life might have had a different trajectory. However, schools at the time merely took punitive measures on students that were on the fringes.

Malachi recounted attempting to rob someone; the situation escalated very quickly, and he ended up shooting the victim. Six weeks later, the police came to Malachi’s house at gunpoint and took him in for questioning. He was released after two days following the District Attorney’s

rejection due to a lack of sufficient evidence at the time. A month later, they had admissible evidence. The police, not finding Malachi at home, arrested him in school. He was trying to go back to school even though he had already been kicked out of school. Malachi was eventually convicted of first-degree murder, which was later reduced to a second-degree murder homicide once he took a plea deal. He was imprisoned for 15 years.

Malachi does not attribute his transformation to prison, except for the fact that San Quentin permitted volunteers to enter the facility to assist inmates with their education. Malachi gave the volunteers credit for bringing the Patton University Project (PUP) accreditation program inside for the inmates. He claimed that there was openness at San Quentin. Malachi asserted that San Quentin offered a lot of options compared to other prisons. The opportunities provided at San Quentin led Malachi to request a transfer from Corcoran State Prison. He was also driven by the fact that his friend was accepted to the PUP, which inspired him to apply as well. Later, Malachi was accepted into San Quentin PUP.

Malachi informed his mother of his decision to transfer to San Quentin, knowing that doing so meant he would have fewer visits with her. However, he desired to better himself in some way and aggressively pursued schooling as a result. He viewed this as his last chance. Additionally, Malachi stood a chance of receiving early release because of his efforts.

Reintegration

Malachi claimed that internal transformation occurs from within. From his experiences traveling from prison to prison, Malachi had to learn how to meet new people. When he got to San Quentin, he gravitated towards the people that were like-minded, who were seeking to do something better, and not negative things. He used the same tactics during reentry and put

himself in position to be around people that were trying to build something for themselves and for others as well. Malachi was intentional upon his release and has never recidivated.

At the time of the interview, Malachi was leading restorative justice healing circles, which he was introduced to by practitioners who volunteered their time at San Quentin. To Malachi, restorative justice is more sacred and spiritual than other forms of justice.

Employment

Malachi is a coordinator for Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (RJOY). He was introduced to restorative justice when he was in San Quentin. Malachi feels that society must take a closer look at the justice system and how we heal from the harm of wrong doing. He shares:

> All persons harmed by wrongdoing should be brought together, according to the restorative justice ideology, which has roots in indigenous traditions, in order to address their needs and obligations, and, to the greatest extent possible, undo harm. In order to make things right as much as possible, restorative justice is similar to the process that might occur that allows people to explain what they did, how they acted, how to recover, and how the neighborhood helps them recover. … The voice of the victim is valued in restorative justice. Only those whose lives have been most negatively affected are given a voice in restorative justice. It disregards the law. It is justice for all through restorative practices. It fosters ties between people. Honoring the voice of the survivor is restorative justice. In restorative justice, only those whose lives have been most adversely impacted are given a voice…. When restorative justice is used correctly for the purpose of healing practices, it can strengthen interpersonal bonds. (February 13, 2022)

Mentorship

Malachi did not specifically speak about the help of a mentor that helped in. Malachi believes that everyone needs a mentor and has become one himself through RJOY. He trains Oakland Youth in Restorative Justice practices.

Recommendations

Malachi gave several recommendations to others who have been incarcerated and want a successful integration back into society:

> Part of it is to enjoy the journey of realizing who you are in the outside world. It takes some time to come to terms with who you are on the inside. This is true whether you wish to pursue it as a career or in relationships that you desire. It goes toward the future you choose to live. (February 13, 2022)

His advice was to "Build your community, your social network . . . Slow down." He finds it essential to be with "those who share your viewpoints and are trying to better their lives as opposed to those who are living other undesirable lives." By continuing to surround himself with good people, good things began to happen for Malachi. Many people have the misconception that prisons are full of people who are dangerous and who do not want to do anything for themselves. Malachi has seen first-hand that a majority of incarcerated folks want to do better for themselves.

He also spoke of "self-love and being committed to yourself" and "to know what you want . . . know what you don't want, so you are not going to necessarily put yourself in a situation where you can reoffend." It is vital to "discover your life's purpose and create your own core mission. Make a commitment to living your life to the fullest and establish goals for yourself." Malachi is "now committed to myself and to where I want to be. I feel like I have a

purpose in this world. I have reasons to be here, and I have a mission to accomplish; if that makes sense at all."

Malachi claimed prison culture is not actually about transformation or rehabilitation. According to Malachi, the prison system is not ineffective; it is merely focused on generating revenue from healthcare initiatives to pretty much anything that can make money for the prison industrial complex. Malachi explained that crimes are the result of strained interpersonal ties. Crime is a dividing and severing force. In the world of crime, humanity does not exist:

> Crime is the breakdown of human relationships. Crime is something that separates, and divides. When, when you think about the word crime, that's connected to a state-to-state policy, criminal justice jargon. There's no humanity in the word crime. If I commit harm, is it a violation of the state? Or if I'm breaking apart the harmony that we share as people first, I harmed a human being. Forget the state law or a crime. I harmed a human being. My relationship, I'm connected to this person now, or this person harmed me. I'm connected to that person. (February 13, 2022)

Harold Atkins

Childhood

Harold grew up in East Palo Alto in the 1980s-90s. East Palo Alto was rough; Harold said it was designated the murder capital of the country in 1992. His father was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole when he was still a young toddler, and his mother was a drug addict. Harold's mother was serving time on Terminal Island while pregnant with him, having been sentenced to five years in prison. He said that nine days after his birth, his grandparents came and picked him up from Terminal Island prison. The Federal Correctional Institution Terminal Island (FCI Terminal Island) is a low-security United States federal

prison for male inmates in Los Angeles, California, operated by the Federal Bureau of Prisons, a division of the United States Department of Justice.

Harold was raised by his grandparents for the first five years of his life. When his mother was released from prison, he went to live with her. Harold's mother raised him to be quick and independent. Harold was a latch-key child, the term for a child at home without adult supervision for some part of the day, especially after school, until a parent returns from work. As a latch-key child, he witnessed things he should not have as a youth.

When reflecting back on his childhood, Harold discussed how he is able to see things more clearly now. Harold believed that the children from his community were never raised to attend Harvard; instead, they were destined to go to San Quentin or Pelican Bay. His mother never wanted to send him to school. She believed that he was going to be a "punk." He stressed that he and his siblings were raised hard and had to learn the street's survival philosophies. Harold attested that he learned these philosophies from his mother and from other homes in the community. Most of Harold's necessities, such as food, clothing, medicine, and welfare, came from either state welfare or crack hustle. With this kind of lifestyle, the mentality instilled in him resulted in his belief that he was not that important in society.

Education

Harold indicated that at the beginning of his school life, he was once placed in the gifted children's class. He was enrolled in the program and tried his best to hang on, stating, "For the most part I wasn't the best student in there, but I was able to hang." He confessed he was not that confident and that he had a problem with focusing on his academics. His difficulty focusing was in part due to his worries about whether his mother was okay and whether everyone was safe back at home.

Harold said he had the desire to get his General Education Diploma (GED) while he was in county jail. When he went to state prison, he adapted rather quickly. Then when his friend was released by Otto Kareem, he signed him up for different programs. His friend's effort was to keep him from the yard, where he could have been influenced in a negative manner. His friend used to encourage him to change his life for the better. Harold began attending alternative to violence programs (AVP), and self-help groups, and these programs led him to take a course on modern American literature. Harold read *The Jungle*, a book written by Upton Sinclair about Chicago meatpacking companies. The book illustrated the unfair conditions for people, and "I remember reading that and going, man, you need an academic outcome." Harold initially enrolled in the course because he was signed up, but he was the only one who scored an A+; automatically, his academic confidence developed.

Harold emphasized that none of the programs he attended were sponsored by the prison system but rather by an outside community-based organization. He revealed that these organizations really gave him and others a chance to better their lives as convicted criminals. The HIV peer education program at San Quentin especially enabled him to discover his abilities, develop his self-worth development, and cultivate life values that have proved useful in his career. As such, it was pivotal to his ability to make the most of employment opportunities, such as the job he was in at the time of the study. He stated,

> This was one of my life goals and I started out working with people in public health care. HIV prevention, as you know because I've come to your class. Teaching people who have been infected and how to live with the virus and those that have it I have been giving them the tools for prevention. It wasn't until I was at AIDS Community Research Center (ACRC), I became an education specialist. I was tasked with writing the HIV

> prevention curriculum and committing to teaching those who were living with the virus about how to keep living with the virus in a healthy way. How to adhere to the medication and how to become an informed consumer. (June 17, 2022)

Harold stressed that going to school while in prison was not a "walk in the park" for him. He confessed that he had put his all into learning health science, public speaking, and many other subjects. He recounted that his close friend was a lifer, a term for a person who receives any sentence of imprisonment for a crime under which convicted people are to remain in prison for the rest of their natural lives or indefinitely until pardoned, paroled, or otherwise commuted to a fixed term. This lifer told Harold that he had a better chance in life if he came out with the ability to write and solve math problems, like in algebra. Harold's participation showed that he had academic astuteness, and these programs gave him confidence, focus, and the willpower to sail through his courses. In addition, the programs led Harold to gain mentors. Harold was lucky in the sense that he never abused drugs, was never homeless and did not have mental health problems. Lacking these experiences increased his chances of having the positive outcomes he is so proud of today. He understood that drug abuse had caused a lot of harm to his family.

At the time of the study, Harold was enrolled at Foothill Community College majoring in business, after switching from sociology. He confirmed that he was approximately two semesters from graduating with a degree. Harold believed that if one is focused, knows their life direction, is aware of what one wants, and has goals, educational attainment is a great achievement that can potentially lead to an excellent career outcome. To Harold, higher education is a key to life success. He conveyed the belief that even though people can achieve a lot in life without higher education, everyone deserves to receive one.

Incarceration

Harold was incarcerated because of a shooting that took place in front of his house in East Palo Alto. Harold was the alleged gunman. These events led to him facing a sentence of 38 years to life. He was later paroled on March 25, 1999, after serving nine years. Harold has never been rearrested due to the life skills and values he learned in prison through the programs he participated in. At the time of the study, Harold was anticipating receiving a certificate of rehabilitation, which will automatically lead to him receiving a full pardon from the Governor of California on the charges he is facing.

Reintegration

The reentry process was not difficult for Harold because of the training he received while in San Quintin. The training he received led to a job as an Educational Specialist with the HIV prevention program. Based on Harold's kill set he was then hired to work with San Mateo Juvenile Hall. Harold has never reoffended and credits this to reestablishing his values while he was incarcerated. His values are family, community, and football.

Employment

Harold is the Director of Success Centers San Mateo Juvenile Hall. Harold is the President of the Menlo Atherton Vikings Pop Warner Football team and the head coach for Serra High School.

Mentorship

Over time, Harold gained mentors, such as Nina Grossman, Barry Zak, and David Lewis, who, unfortunately, have since passed away. These are mentors Harold had while working as director of Each One Teach One Success Centers, San Mateo Juvenile Hall. During the interview, he credited these mentors with helping to make his life meaningful both in and outside of prison walls. He also credited them with helping him to realize the value and meaning of

being a mentor. Harold said that before he came to know these mentors, he hated the idea of being there for anybody else. He used to think that it was a cliché. Harold said that he himself is a mentor. He is a coach and a father to his give sons, whom he is actively mentoring.

Harold took great pride in being a positive role model to other Black men with similar experiences. Harold expressed how he helped individuals to not recidivate by leading by example:

> You have young people being told that once you get in this system it's hard to get out. Now they get to see a brother that's coming in every day and doing this work with them and they get to be reminded that he was in state prison. He was on parole for 3 years. Now he's been off parole for 17 years. Now he's been out of the system for 20 years, and he's showing up here every day giving me that game. Who better deliver the message that the way we live ain't cool? Who better deliver the message that this cannot be a revolving door? Breaking the cycle of your grandfather who went to jail. Now your father went to jail. Now you are in jail. Your kids went to jail. Who better to deliver the message that not only somebody that went through all that but this is what I'm doing to break the cycle. (June 17, 2022)

Recommendations

Harold expressed not everyone in prison is wicked; some inmates serve lengthy sentences for mistakes they committed in their youth. Harold gave an example of an inmate by the name of DC, a former marine, who made a mistake and was serving life in prison. These people can be mentors to others who for one reason or other were taken down that road. Harold noted that a mentor must be an active listener and be available most of the time. After listening to his mentee if he does not have a solution, he connects them to someone who can help. Harold explained,

> When we get them (correctional youth) they start to see how to be in a learning environment. They see how to be in a learning community and that is a part of society. Because most of the time these youths have been kicked out of these situations. They have been kicked out of class. Oftentimes they have been kicked out of their programs and expelled to the point where they can't come back. In our program, we don't believe in that. We believe that if anything our kids need more schooling or more learning opportunities. It is not always centered around traditional school subjects. There's more to life than just school. (June 17, 2022)

To Harold, education is a key factor in shaping life values and skills. With education, many opportunities may present themselves to a person. Lastly, parents and guardians have a key role in shaping their children's life paths. The environment in which one is brought up plays a pivotal role in instilling culture and belief in oneself. However, Harold cautioned that the high standards of higher education may lead us to forget about other important things in life.

Marlon Lewis

Childhood

Marlon grew up in Oakland where he lived until age 13. Marlon would go back and forth between West Oakland and East Oakland, spending time with both his mom and his dad. He had one sister. His mom had a boyfriend that sold drugs, but Marlon had been unaware of this fact as a kid. Marlon remembered the boyfriend as being nice to him and able to buy him a lot of different things. When one of the kids in the neighborhood told him that his mother's boyfriend was a drug dealer, Marlon replied, "I don't believe you." Marlon nevertheless described his childhood as "normal for an Oakland kid," just doing kid stuff like going to school and playing sports. He gravitated towards football.

Education

Initially, Marlon wanted to excel in school. He wanted to get the high star. His class would be counting numbers, and his name would be placed on a spaceship, the height of which was determined by how high he could count, and Marlon aimed to have his spaceship be higher than his peers. Marlon was competitive in that way. He wanted to answer questions to prove to his teacher that he was bright. This competitive attitude lasted until he was in the fifth and sixth grades when school became a little bit more challenging, but not to the point that he wanted to give up.

After sixth grade, Marlon acted like many traditional Oakland kids who could not wait for the summer to arrive. He did just enough to get by so he could make it to the summer and be happy with his time off. By seventh and eighth grade, classes started to separate completely, a science class here, a math class there. Marlon became an average student by continuing to do enough just to get passing grades. He did not fail any classes, nor did he excel in the ways he once had.

Marlon became frustrated because he did not excel in anything anymore, but what frustrated him more than anything else was that no one thought to push him in the direction of his interest. For example, he suggested it would have been impactful if someone had said, "Oh, I see you really like math. Here are the careers associated with mathematics for someone that is strong in this subject like you are. Have you thought about engineering, or being a statistician, economist, accounting, and so on?" Marlon became an average student going to school because he believed this is what kids were supposed to do—to show up because their parents told them to. Marlon later graduated from Alameda High School, receiving his high school diploma.

Incarceration

Marlon explained that at the time he was growing up in Oakland, hustling was the mentality; being a player or having money was what youth strived for. Starting in the ninth and tenth grade, Marlon began to develop a “two-bit hustle.” He described one of the first hustles he had after meeting a White lady in the neighborhood who was a heroin addict and a booster. A booster is someone who steals for a living; usually cars, clothing, or jewelry (Urban Dictionary, 2008). She told him, "Hey, I can get you certain things.” Oftentimes she would get random things like cell phones or baby’s clothing, which Marlon would resell, finding a way of making a little money.

By the 10th grade, Marlon had fallen in love with hustling. Then Marlon’s older cousin had a venture in which he would clone cell phones. Cloning cell phones was a process by which a phone that was basically cloned to someone else’s phone could be used independently. Marlon followed in his cousin’s footsteps, cloning and selling phones, and he began to meet many different people. Somebody asked him, “Hey, can you get me some cocaine?” He admitted to not really knowing much about it, but he knew a lot of people. One kid that Marlon was going to school with had access to cocaine. When he asked about it, his friend replied, “Yeah, my brother has it. Give him a call.” This was Marlon’s introduction to the drug trade.

Marlon already knew his friend’s brother because he had sold him some phones. When they started talking about the quantity, Marlon initially experienced some confusion. The friend’s brother had said “Yeah, I can give you one for 13,” referring to a kilogram of cocaine, but at the time, Marlon had no idea what that meant. Marlon had never really sold drugs, on the corner or hand-to-hand, so he anticipated a steep learning curve. The person Marlon was going to sell to wanted an eight-ball of cocaine. Marlon found out from an older gentleman he knew that an eight ball was an eighth of an ounce of cocaine (Urban Dictionary, 2004). The older gentleman

had asked, “Wait. You have a connection on a kilo?” A connect is a drug supplier, dealing in large quantities. (Urban Dictionary, 2004). Marlon said, “Yeah, that's what the guy said.” The older gentleman explained, “Do you know the people?” Marlon said, “Yeah. I mean, they are good people.” When Marlon purchased the kilogram of cocaine, his connect said, “Hey, look. This is what I’m going to do. I’m going to give you an extra $1,000.”

When Marlon saw how quickly he was able to make $1000, it was the beginning of his career in drug dealing; for everything else he was doing, he was getting $50 here, $100 there. Basically, Marlon stumbled on a Latino connection for cocaine and made it work. Marlon spent 1-1/2 years dealing drugs on the kilogram level. For each kilogram he sold, he would receive $1,000. He established several contacts in the city. The bond he shared with his contacts was quite uncommon. There were times when he made a lot of money, anywhere from $5,000 to $7,000 per day.

Unbeknownst to Marlon, his supplier was under surveillance with his phone being tapped. Unfortunately, Marlon got caught up in the investigation while the authorities were looking for his suppliers. The FBI and DEA raided his father’s home and arrested him. Marlon’s naivete overcame him. He believed that the modest sum of money he had would help him buy his freedom, but federal cases are always serious in scope. Marlon was federally indicted, and at age 19, he pled guilty to conspiracy to distribute cocaine. He was sentenced to five years in jail. He served in a federal prison in Phoenix for a year before being transported to Lompoc, California.

When Marlon was in the Metropolitan Detention Center (MDC), a guy told him to say that he was a drug addict so that he could get a year off his sentence. Hence, Marlon was enrolled in the Drug and Alcohol Program (DAP) even though he had never done drugs. Marlon

claimed there was a janitorial program in Lompoc prison that led him to get a job upon release. He mentioned another program that was useful to him, which had college courses. His first college credit was through Alan Hancock College, located in the Lompoc area south of the coast. During his time in prison and through the janitorial program, Marlon was able to earn 18 to 21 credits. When he was released from prison, he enrolled in Laney Community College in Oakland. He was able to use his credit to earn his Associate's degree.

Reintegration

Marlon reported that his reintegration was not as tough as it is for some, and he attributed this to his family's support. He went to live with his dad and he was able to acquire various jobs that helped him to make money the legal way and that felt good to him.

Employment

At the time of the study, Marlon was a maintenance superintendent for the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART), the main subway in the San Francisco area. This job was obtained in part due to the janitorial certificate that he received while he was incarcerated. The janitorial exam is a rigorous test that most people do not pass on the first attempt, and on completing the certificate, Marlon was very proud that he had passed despite the odds. After his prison release, Marlon was hired at the Port of Oakland, unloading trains. This was where he came across the information about the job at BART. Marlon was interested in the job at BART because it paid $14.60 per hour, which was a good wage in 2002, had health benefits, and was a career-type job. He applied for the job and got it.

While working at BART in a maintenance capacity, a job position for an electronic technician became available. Marlon was advised by a colleague to go back to school and get an Associate of Science (AS) degree because it would help him get the electronic technician job that

he coveted. Since he already had 12 to 18 credits from Allen Hancock when he was incarcerated, he had a jumpstart toward getting his AS. After he earned his AS, Marlon applied for the electronic technician position and was hired. Marlon rose from BART foreman to BART assistant superintendent within a few years. Although he left BART for East Bay Municipal District (EBMUD) for two years, he returned to BART and was hired as an assistant superintendent and then superintendent.

Mentorship

Marlon explained how he met mentors through the DAP program and credited them for focusing not only on drug rehabilitation but also on life skills. In terms of other positive influences, a few peers gave him advice, and he was heavily impacted by reading certain authors. The book that helped Marlon shift his paradigm was Nathan McCall's *Makes Me Wanna Holler* (1994). He said that the book really gave him inspiration and that his mother had given it to him.

Recommendations

Marlon delineated several possibilities available to ex-offenders outside of higher education, which can prevent formerly incarcerated folks from returning to criminal activities. Marlon expressed his dismay with "mandatory minimums," portraying that the judicial system needs to improve the way it views drug offenses on a case-by-case basis, juxtaposed to handing out harsh sentences for first-time offenders. Marlon explained,

> I'm definitely a proponent of college. I just don't want to say that college is the only way to have this opportunity that will keep you from diverting back to any criminal activity. I think another part of my case is I never really looked at my . . . I kind of fell into this opportunity of crime. It was like the story I told you early on. It was weird. I'm not saying that a person is a criminal or a person's not or any difference like that, but this was

> my first offense and they sentenced me to 5-years. Where is the justice in that? (February 11, 2022)

Marlon recommended that parents do a diligent job in encouraging their children to discover their talents and interests with the help of their support system, teachers, and guardians.

> Well, yeah, I mean that certainly happened. I mean if you look at the timeline, it started off a little stronger and ended up a little weaker. But I think, in my mind, how I look at it today and I probably have actual resentment for my parents because I feel like they did not foster my abilities. Going to school is what you are told to do, show up, and that's it, without any full understanding of . . . how schooling is potentially connected to your future. (February 11, 2022)

Also, Marlon expounded that free college education would encourage more people to attend. Marlon noted there are many people who would like to pursue higher education but are unable to do so because it is expensive:

> I mean college is expensive. I mean I think I'm on the side of everybody that college should be free because that makes it more accessible to a lot of people. I'm sure there are people who don't go to college because they're afraid of the costs. I know the area that we're in, the Bay Area, is a pretty liberal area. There are a lot of resources. But again, I mean I'm a proponent of college because it allows you an opportunity to learn about things and it makes you aware of things that you may have not been aware of before. Learning and exposure to new things is how you figure out your passions.

Marlon related that personal transformation is required to stay on the right track and not reoffend. A person who wants to change must admit that it will not be simple, but they must do their best.

> Well, I mean the first part is within the person. You have to want to change and . . . acknowledge. . . it is not going to be easy and . . .you are going to be at a deficit. I think that is the first thing. … From what I have seen in this area, the Bay Area, I mean there are a lot of opportunities. So generally, I would just advise people, who don't have the victim mentality. I mean you are at a disadvantage. You do have a mark on you. But I think in today's society especially, you can overcome it. I think that as far as what other agencies, cities, counties, or anybody can do is obviously give people opportunities for employment, for growth, maybe making education affordable and free for people who are ex-offenders . . . so they can start off on the path. I just think it starts with the person, just having that inner drive to say, "This is what I do not want, and this is what I do want." I think that is the big recipe. That is the shrimp in the gumbo. (February 11, 2022)

Reggie Daniels

Childhood

Reggie grew up in San Francisco, up the street from the Potrero Hill projects. Reggie characterized his parents as "in the life, and liv[ing] this really fast lifestyle;" they would often try to sell stolen goods or try to figure out a way to make fast money. When life got too hectic for Reggie and his parents, he would go stay with his grandparents. His grandparents were very strict and followed Judeo-Christianity ideology. Judeo-Christianity values American politics, values, morals and many see them as being affiliated with American Conservatism, but to an African American, pre-teenager these values seem rigid and strict.

When Reggie lived with my parents, they stayed in the Sunnydale projects. When he was with them, life was all about the hustle and bustle, and rules were different. Reggie's parents struggled with heroin addiction. Like most folks who are poor, they could not afford to keep up

their habit. His mother would earn extra money through forgery. He would go on "licks" with his parents. "Hitting a lick*"* means that the person is going to, or has already, "gained money, or something worth money or value, most likely illegally or stealing" (Urban Dictionary, 2015, para. 3). They looked for burglary opportunities, and Reggie would ride in the car with them. He knew from a young age that he had to grow up fast, and so he did. He lived with his parents as a partner in crime. However, life was different when he came to live with his grandparents. His grandfather was a minister, and in order for Reggie to live there, he had to comply with the rules and regulations established in his grandparents' household. Therefore, living with his grandparents was much more structured.

Education

Reggie liked school and felt "school came easy to me." However, his perspective on school depended on who he was living with at the time (parents vs. grandparents). When he lived with his grandparents his performance at school was highly valued; his grandparent's household was centered around Reggie's academic performance; he had to get good grades, show up every day, be on time, and be an active learner. Since Reggie was a small kid in school, he described an incident where one of the older neighborhood bullies sold him a bike and then took it back later. Doing well in school was important to Reggie because he knew that if he did well, he would get certain benefits. Those benefits included being able to hang outside and stay up late. Reggie excelled in reading and writing and believed he did not need to work as hard as his peers because of his exceptional reading ability. He stayed with his grandparents in elementary school.

However, when he lived with his parents, he went to school in a rough neighborhood and was an only child; he witnessed a lot of violence at school and he realized that he was not safe there. Reggie understood from an early age that teachers were not going to protect him. Along

with being an only child, he was not much of a fighter and was not a great athlete. Moreover, he noticed some families in the neighborhood were notorious for fighting, violence, and hustling, and as an only child, he felt it was important to make friends for his safety.

Reggie learned how to make friends, and how to connect with people that were strong. He then used the connections that his parents had. Reggie graduated from Reardon High School, which is a private Catholic School before he was incarcerated. His experience with high school counselors was not positive because their main objective was getting students to graduate, which he thought was a good cause, but the counselors were not focused on students' career objectives. Due to the counselors' shortcomings, Reggie was never prepared for college. However, Reggie wanted to go to San Jose State since he had graduated with honors. One of the requirements for San Jose State was a second language, which Reggie did not satisfy; he ended up enrolling in City College with psychology as his area of study. All this was before he was imprisoned.

Reggie got back into City College after incarceration in 1996, where he stayed for approximately six years. During this period, he was exposed to a philosophy class, and he started a philosophy club. He received his Associate's degree from San Francisco City College. Then he was cast in a play at San Francisco State, which led him to meet the President of City College, and he shared his interest in continuing in higher education.

Reggie then applied to the University of San Francisco (USF) and was accepted. USF offered an accelerated undergraduate program for working adults and individuals to get a Bachelor's degree in 13 months. Reggie had spent a significant amount of time at City College and had many units, not all of which he could transfer. However, he was able to transfer some of his units to USF. He was able to earn his degree quickly, which raised his expectations for what he could do. He did not pause and went straight for a Master's program in Organizational

Development at the School of Business. There he got hooked up with a cadre of folks who assisted him in completing his Master's. Following his Master's, he applied for an Ed.D., where he had a good professor and a good writing teacher. He enrolled in the doctoral program in Organization and Leadership, which he completed in 2019.

Reggie explained that his experience in college, like his experiences with other institutions, was intertwined with different polarities; there were people who understood him and his background well, and peers who misunderstood and feared him. Reggie's naivete led him to think that college folks would understand him if he just shared his history with them. Later, he came to realize that they were using his story to harm him. This experience made Reggie withdraw from being open to sharing his story.

Despite all of this, Reggie felt that his college experience was great for him, though he had been out of school for about 20 years. Initially, students treated him differently because due to the questions he would ask, they perceived that he needed more help. Reggie saw a division in the Organizational Developmental Leadership program during his time in college. An intervention from the dean was necessary because there was a separation between those who had expertise in social justice issues and those who really came to learn. It was hard for him because he never anticipated being caught in the middle of such turmoil. When Reggie would share his life experiences in college, some students would gravitate towards him and want to hear more while others would fear him. Reggie thought that school had the potential to be a safe place and that the higher an individual rose in education meant he had made it in society; he was not in the hood anymore; he was no longer in prison. He was disheartened by the fact that even in college, he did not feel protected, reminding him of his childhood experiences in school.

Reggie also met some amazing people in college. He had the opportunity to participate in a play. He had traveled to a few countries, such as Germany and Prague. Reggie's interest lay in theater, and he saw himself teaching in the Performing Arts & Social Justice Department. He said the college experience really changed him, and education gave him an anchor for his career and life. Reggie stated that finishing his doctorate opened many opportunities for him, including being asked to participate in interviews, public speaking, and serving as a member of a board.

Reggie was not dismayed by how expensive higher education was to pursue. Despite all of the hardship entailed in attending school due to the cost, Reggie confirmed that scholarships were available; however, he himself had been previously unaware of them. Nevertheless, after establishing a strong network, he took advantage of those financial aid opportunities. Reggie also benefitted from taking advantage of social media platforms in order to get financing for education, including GoFundMe. Reggie has encouraged peers and mentees to use entrepreneurship to pay for education as well.

Incarceration

Reggie had a romantic relationship with a girl in a rough neighborhood while he was attending City College. One day he got into a fistfight with a man who was attracted to Reggie's girlfriend and was connected to a gang in the Fillmore District referred to as Out of Control (OC). Reggie's rival found Reggie in Potrero Hill while he was hanging out with the girl, who was just 18 years of age. Three men surrounded his vehicle and started shooting until their weapons were empty. Reggie was shot and went to the hospital to seek treatment, while his girlfriend was only grazed by a bullet. Whenever a gunshot wound is reported in the hospital, the police are notified immediately. The police came in and interviewed him. While he was giving his side of the story, the police listed him as a suspect of gang involvement. After Reggie

explained his side of the story, the police told him that he was near Connecticut Street, which is a place infested with high-powered drugs and a lot of violence. The police thought Reggie was hiding something, and because he was from Potrero Hill and they had no police record on him, they assumed that he was involved in a drug deal that went wrong and held him as a suspect.

After the shooting, Reggie went back to the hood. There he got connected to a person who heard what he experienced. Reggie expounded on everything that happened to him to a trusted OG (original gangster, or someone who has been around). Reggie's OG gave him a pistol and offered to train him to defend himself with a gun and what is called "ghetto politics." Reggie was expected to seek revenge and went to the neighborhood of his rivals, holding a gun to the heads of those he thought were involved. He said that this ordeal changed his life after he realized the power an automatic weapon had.

After being shot, carrying a gun became Reggie's religion. Approximately eight months later, Reggie caught his first case. Most people have a story about being in and out of prison, which Reggie had for over 15 years for drugs and gun charges. Reggie was first arrested for a weapons charge, although it was dropped because they had no search and seizure warrant. Shortly after, he was arrested for drugs; he lost the case in court and was sentenced to prison.

Reintegration

Reggie had a hard time with reentry because he competed with his former self. He still wanted to be connected to the streets and still looked at illegal ways of making money. He referred to himself as "R.D." and R.D. took on a different persona than Dr. Reggie Daniels. R.D. was ready to fight, sell dope and carry guns. R.D. did not believe in delayed gratification and was willing to get a fast buck by any means.

Since the transformation of the mind had not occurred in Reggie, he experienced the cycle of recidivism over five times. It was not until he started being mentored by older men while incarcerated that he realized he was not being the person he wanted to be.

Employment

Reggie was not able to get the job he really wanted until he mastered how to avoid instant gratification. Reggie has always been an entrepreneur and became a DJ while he was in school. Reggie worked for several organizations that helped people with his similar background with the reentry process. After incarceration, Reggie worked for the Prison Arts and Community Exchange (PACE) program in 2014 and then for the University of San Francisco's (USF) Department of Performing Arts and Social Justice starting in 2017. Since receiving his doctorate from the School of Education at USF in 2018, he has been teaching at USF as an adjunct professor.

Mentorship

Reggie attributed mentorship as playing a big role in advancing his college experience. Reggie stressed the importance of having a mentor and how beneficial it is to be able to create a vision for one's life. He believed that mentorship enables individuals to see the potential in themselves:

> And that's the most powerful thing I think that a human being can do for another human being, man, is see something in them that they don't see in themselves. And no matter how they go off track, they can still hold that vision powerfully for them. That's what my mentor did for me. (March 23, 2022)

A mentor named Floyd helped to nurture his vision and supported him when he was in difficult situations. Reggie also pointed out that mentorship programs have helped him to stay

out of prison, encouraging him not to commit crimes. Mentorship has shown Reggie the importance of socializing and teaching him about anti-social behaviors and how to know what to expect. Through mentorship from Floyd, Reggie found a surrogate father, especially when his biological father died of AIDS from sharing intravenous needles while doing heroin.

Reggie spoke of being a mentor in a program called Men's Mentoring Movement (M3). The program originated out of a need to help folks reenter society from the county jail. Reggie spoke fondly of his mentor, Floyd Johnson, with whom he is still in communication. Reggie explained how becoming successful after incarceration enabled him to become a mentor. He explained that mentoring is what he is destined to do. Reggie said that with great power, comes great responsibility, and it is a 24/7 job.

At the time of the interview, Reggie was a mentor to a brother who was recently released after serving 27 years in prison and has gotten into a Master's program. Reggie found it meaningful that someone would find his own path something worthy to emulate.

Recommendations

Among Reggie's recommendations was the need for more culturally relevant programs. Reggie has worked on cultural relevance or cultural humanity, finding significance in folks learning from people with similar experiences. He discovered that people are more likely to trust people with similar experiences and are willing to try on newly acquired characteristics. Reggie emphasized that if the information and language are familiar to the cultural icons that they grew up with, they will learn faster.

To Reggie, cultural relevance is the native way people speak, the way they cook, the way they dress, the way they do things, and having an appreciation for all of these. These descriptions add value to people's cultures as opposed to emphasizing cultural differences and using deficit

thinking to put folks down. Reggie stressed that understanding cultural relevance is essential and elevates the community. He noted we are starting to see it with Juneteenth, Carnival, and cultural acknowledgments worldwide. Reggie believed that if we want world peace, we need to get a better understanding of everyone's culture.

Reentry for Ex-Felons

Reggie recommended that reentry programs focus on their mission and stop chasing funding sources of funding. Most importantly, they should help ex-felons who are ready for reintegration back into the community. Reggie's exasperation with these programs was telling when he spoke about how programs sometimes keep people out:

> What I found in programs, and there's a book that talks about this, how programs begin to hold resources for the sake of the program and not the sake of the people. It's like when a program outlives its mission, and starts to mission drift. What I found out is that reentry programs … started to be possessive about clients that were doing well because they wanted these success stories. They could give that to their funders. They were looking for more funding, as opposed to looking to me at what was most needed in the community. They were looking at what was most needed to keep their funding source. (March 23, 2022)

He shared there is a need to employ ex-felons, as he believes employment would help them reintegrate back into the community.

> I think they need to challenge those laws where brothers like me are affected. We have a challenge with me coming in because I'm formally incarcerated. They don't won't that. But I feel like brothers like me, myself, and folks who have come through this are the most qualified people to come back and speak with incarcerated folks. (March 23, 2022)

Reggie concluded that if ex-felons want high-level jobs in society, they should apply for an intentional investigation from the district attorney where they committed the crime so that they can ask the judge to sign a validation document to show their upstanding citizenship:

> It's a process where you go back to the district attorney where you offended, and you say, "Look, man, I know you guys have reviewed and investigated me to prosecute me, but now I want you to intentionally investigate me to validate that I am now an upstanding citizen. I want you to check my sources, talk to my family, talk to my children, and talk to the places where I've been employed. And I want the judge to sign something saying that this is now validated." A lot of folks do not know they can request this, but it's key. A lot of people think that it's not useful, but it's very instrumental in getting some of these higher-level jobs. (March 23, 2022)

Moreover, the laws that prevent formerly imprisoned people from going back inside are draconian and Reggie calls for amending these laws.

Changing One's Mindset

Reggie stands as a pillar in his community, going above and beyond in his efforts to help people that were like him to get out of prison and stay out. Reggie elaborated on how to keep oneself from reoffending; the importance of changing one's thoughts and keeping one's mindset positive despite the elements surrounding them in their environment.

> I talk about the transformation of the mind. My mindset is different. All the same, elements are there, but the things that used to attract me and bring me down are now things that I see as opportunities to model change to other people. (March 23, 2022)

Shaka Senghor

Childhood

Shaka was raised in a working-class and middle-class area on the east side of Detroit in the 1980s. His mother was mostly a homemaker, while his dad served in the Air Force. Six siblings made up the entirety of his family at one point, but after his father remarried, the number rose to nine. He grew up mostly with his six siblings.

Even though Shaka was raised in a rough neighborhood and attended an underperforming school, he had a lot of confidence in his academic abilities. Because he was a curious kid, he started reading when he was about four years old. He excelled academically, and as a result, his teachers were astounded by how quickly he completed his assignments. He had the opportunity to run around the school and complete all the teacher-requested tasks. Learning was a key part of his childhood because he loved it. He took great pride in his ability to read and comprehend throughout elementary school.

Unfortunately, he began to lose interest in school in the sixth or seventh grade, like many children who struggle with dealing with the distractions of external factors; in his case, he was emotionally distraught over his parents' separation. He found it extremely difficult to concentrate, and one of the things he wonders about now, especially since now as a mentor and someone who has worked in various facets of education, is how the teachers missed all those warning signs that indicated he was going through a tough time.

Shaka and the majority of his siblings fled from their homes before they turned 14 or 15. Shaka departed when he was between the ages of 13 and 14 with the idea that someone would have compassion on him, take him in, and nurture him in the manner in which he had hoped to be reared: Ideally, this would mean being raised in a loving and caring atmosphere; regrettably, this did not happen. Shaka was drawn into a life of drug dealing, particularly crack-cocaine. At the age of 14, he started to normalize this culture. In the first six months of being out on the

streets, Shaka's childhood friend was murdered, he was robbed at gunpoint, and he was nearly killed:

> I now realize how wrong I was, how impossible it is to forge bonds of familiarity under the oppressive weight of a prison sentence. I was so bent on trying to connect with you and guide you down a different path that I didn't stop to think about the path you were forging on your own on the other side of the bars. How could I have done so? Being a parent is complicated, in or out of prison. But in prison? Impossible, perhaps. (May 14, 2022)

Education

Shaka received his GED and Job Corps at about the age of 16 prior to his incarceration. He had begun to lose a little bit of interest in school at this point. Additionally, he had to attend GED lessons a few days a week. He never cared about the teachers personally when he arrived at class because he felt like they were just there to do a job. The work was too simple for him, and, "I just wasn't interested in — . . . like his work is too easy, and so he [the teacher] was like, 'well if you can pass this half this, I'll let you take the GED.'" After passing that half-test, he headed to Kentucky State. He was not aware that Kentucky State was a historically Black college or university (HBCU); but he went there, took the GED, and completed the test in a single day.

Incarceration

On March 8, 1990, Shaka was shot by a gunman standing on the corner of his neighborhood. Like many inner-city youngsters who are shot, he was left with the emotional scarring that comes with such a high level of trauma. Shaka observed how much it cost him not to have his trauma addressed: No one recommended he seek treatment or visit a psychiatrist or psychologist, and he was left to deal with it on his own. Shaka was despondent and felt

conflicted within himself. Sixteen months after being shot, Shaka declined to make a drug sale and got into an argument, which led to a fight. The person he argued with returned, and Shaka opened fire on him, shooting him four times. Even though Shaka only fired four rounds after the argument, it cost the man his life. Shaka was sentenced to 17 to 40 years but ended up serving 19 years in prison, 15 of which were in solitary confinement.

> As I got older, I realized that . . . my environment makes you grow up fast, faster than children in less trying circumstances. Now I realize that this isn't only what happens to the children of incarcerated parents; being a child generally ends early for Black boys. (May 14, 2022)

Shaka was incarcerated in 1991. At the time, prison still included rehabilitative programming, such as college classes. Unfortunately, programming and opportunities for further education started to dwindle. Shaka, who was 19 and serving a lengthy sentence, had given up hope of ever leaving prison. Although he wasn't exposed to many opportunities, Shaka stated he took advantage of the few that were open to him, talking to people who were already there to find out about them. Some of the guys were telling Shaka about college programs they had taken, enrolling in community college courses taught at the prison. They could still receive Pell grants at the time, so he enrolled in a course that led him to pick business as his focus, and he maintained a 4.0-grade point average.

Because the funding was cut from that program as a result of former President Bill Clinton's crime bill, Shaka was unable to finish college in prison. In addition, the program was terminated. He wished that the opportunity that existed when he initially entered prison had persisted. Shaka expressed the wish for more possibilities for people to pursue an education, pick

up a trade, or engage in other activities that would enable them to forge their own career paths while incarcerated.

Reintegration

Technology Gap. As anyone might guess, after serving up to 19 years in prison, Shaka was ecstatic to learn that he would soon be granted parole in 2007. He could not wait to leave prison and see the world. Prisoners have very little exposure to the outside world. When Shaka returned home, he was overwhelmed by the simple realization that everything required at least a rudimentary understanding of technology, whether it was a Word document or the Internet. The internet had essentially been established while Shaka was incarcerated. Shaka did not have a lot of access to those resources, so before leaving, he enrolled in a computer class that was very basic and used an outdated model of technology. Unfortunately, prison did not utilize the most recent models. Shaka remembered attempting to navigate the computer, and he said he would constantly chuckle when he thought about it. When Shaka wanted to save a Word document, he would worry that he would accidentally blow up the computer because he did not know the difference between a Word document and the Internet. All he had heard while he was in prison was that if you click on the wrong thing, you can give the computer a virus.

Shaka affirmed that he is a lifelong student; formal schooling is not only a way to become knowledgeable, educated, and capable of acting. He would want his doctor to have a college education but he expressed the belief there are various ways for learning to occur. Shaka thought that his opportunities came from his curiosity about the world and his ability to use the skill sets he has acquired through life and many different environments. Getting a fellowship at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Media Lab was one of those life-changing highlights he could not pass up. He described his visits to the media lab, traveling on the

Cambridge campus, and seeing all these robotics and 3D printers after having been released from prison only two years earlier. Because he did not speak the language of technology, this experience was also really daunting for him. He had no idea what "coding" was back then. He knew very little about algorithms and all else that affects jobs in fields such as Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (S.T.E.M.) when there are jobs being done and products being produced.

Shaka was fortunate that the director, who was actually a good friend of his, recognized his capacity to contribute and gave him the chance to interact with those who went on to start amazing software companies. However, he came to the realization that he was truly as intelligent as the faculty and students and that he could contribute to whatever he decided to create. The Restorative Justice Project encompasses both academic and volunteer-based programs at the University of Michigan (U-M), which includes U-M students, faculty and staff, community volunteers, youth and adults in detention and treatment programs, and formerly incarcerated adults. The Restorative Justice Project and the Prison Creative Arts Project bring those impacted by the justice system together with the U-community for artistic collaboration, mutual learning, and growth. The restorative justice project was situated at the nexus of technology and the arts.

Employment

Whereas his transformative readings and debates inspired by mentors helped Shaka sharpen his intellectual acumen while incarcerated, Shaka continued to have amazing opportunities post-incarceration. He said, "One of those first opportunities was becoming a fellow at MIT Media Lab Fellow and I remember when I went to the Media Lab, I had been out of prison, probably maybe close to two years." Other opportunities continued to come his way:

> I ended up first partnering with a professor at the University of Michigan, Professor St. Lucas, and her and I ended up starting a class there. So I was teaching at the University of Michigan, a class I co-founded, taught there for about three semesters, and still do lectures there every semester but the work that we created between my work at MIT Media Lab and the University of Michigan we were nominated for TED prize, which is a global million dollar prize for innovative projects and we ended up becoming one of 20 finalists. (May 14, 2022)

Shaka talked about the partnerships that he has had with many universities that have happened organically. He went on further to explain that even though he did not continue his education in the traditional college setting in contrast to the other participants in this study he expresses himself through the arts. Shaka's art platform is writing. I consider Shaka to be an Artivist (Art + Activism). Artivism is a word that combines Art and Activism and is also referred to as social activism.

> You know while I didn't go on to continue my college education, post-incarceration, I've continued to work with universities throughout the country, and just the ability to be in a classroom with professors and students, I love working with young students, young minds and I think that the intersection of our criminal justice system and education, kind of parallels in terms of the institutionalized nature of it.
>
> Art, I think art is one of the greatest ways to communicate with people without putting up a barrier to being an artist, anything from writing, which is my particular area of expertise, to some visual arts and things of that nature but what I wanted to create was a platform for people who have been victims of violent crimes and interact with people who have been perpetrators of violent crime through using art as a vehicle

> of communication and using art as a vehicle of restorative justice and for that work. (May 14, 2022)

Mentorship

Shaka spoke at length about the role mentorship in prison played in his ability to excel academically and really think critically:

> I realized … that with new information comes new behaviors, and when new information comes new actions, and what those brothers provided me was new information; we would debate books, we would debate ideas, I look forward to going to the law library and getting into these desktops, we were very competitive. And, you know it was also oftentimes really heated exchanges. Like prison is, there's so much ego attached to winning and so going over there and being a young guy who could challenge these titans— you know these guys were masterful debaters great … you're well versed and knowledgeable and they love that kind of back-and-forth banter that we had. (May 14, 2022)

He talked about how they would discuss and debate the ideas they read in the books they shared:

> So I would assemble groups, the young guys and we will share the same book, and then we will come out and debate what did we agree on? What did we disagree on? What did we learn from it? How does it change our behavior? (May 14, 2022)

Reflecting on the mentors he had while he was in prison, guys like Ganster Al, Slim Hurney, and Timothy Greer who nurtured him along the way, he remarked on the fact that even though they had life sentences, they still saw the value of mentoring those would leave:

> What still moves me is the fact that those men had all come in with life sentences, yet they still mentored the young. Even if the world felt they were on the scrap heap, they

didn't, they were determined to better themselves and the younger men coming after. (May 14, 2022)

Shaka claimed that without the advice of those brothers, who gave him those books and pushed his thinking, he would not be who he is today. These were brothers who supported him in his worst moments. He claimed that these men helped him develop intellectually at a time when he was not paying attention to anything and they did not even realize he was listening to them. Shaka learned the value of doing research; Shaka was and still is an avid book reader who does not accept information at face value. Shaka was curious about the background of every circumstance. His experience being mentored in prison, he felt "like, I have a responsibility to impart wisdom and share resources with people who are coming up behind me who were looking up to me." In the same way that Malcolm, Huey, and the other brothers inspire him, Shaka's art has expanded into a realm he previously did not know existed and is now inspiring others.

Mentor. Shaka has been mentoring at a high school in San Francisco for about six years, and the mentorship is a mix of formal and informal. He was the executive director of these other informal networks of organizations and also served as a mentor to many department heads. Numerous individuals contact Shaka on social media, including those who are finishing their education and those who are establishing enterprises. They simply exchange back-and-forth messages while establishing a bond that leads to community building. Shaka believes that we are all mentors in some capacity. We all have the ability to help others by providing direction. He noted that some of the younger guys, who have a lot more enthusiasm than he ever had, look up to Shaka as a mentor. Shaka said that it has been a priceless experience to put his ego aside and acknowledge that he can truly learn from someone younger who is more in touch with current events, while simultaneously being able to mentor someone older.

Shaka wrote to his youngest son about the atrocities of the world while attempting to reclaim his own humanity.

Dear Sekou,

I am writing this letter to you as our country burns. Once again, a string of assaults—both physical and verbal—has been made upon us by a culture that does not see us as fully human. We are just the latest generation to be reminded, brutally, that we are in chains. Our culture does not believe we are worthy of real freedom because it does not see us as fully human, to the point where we can be threatened, screamed at, assaulted, falsely arrested, falsely imprisoned, and killed, for one reason and one reason alone: we are Black.

I faced a tough decision a few years ago, and in fact, you made me make it. I was working for the Anti-Recidivism Coalition, a non-profit that helps women and men reenter society after incarceration–in fact, I was its executive director. We were doing prison tours and helping people transition back to society, spending hours with the newly released people and talking about their experiences. We helped people get jobs in construction and firefighting and Hollywood, and we raised a ton of money. But mostly we helped people unpack their trauma, including some staff members. That was the heaviest part of work–and the most beautiful—but often felt we could never do enough. (Senghor, 2022, p. 114)

Recommendations

Unfortunately, some states are further behind than others in terms of prison education, career preparedness, and mental health support. Many of the services they currently offer, in Shaka's opinion, do not genuinely prepare people for success in life after prison. A lot of the information presented is obsolete, no longer applicable, and does not take into account the

current labor shortage. Shaka believes that prisons ought to offer services that connect the prison population with skills and careers that are in high demand: for example, the tech industry, business accounting, and healthcare professions.

Reflecting on education, Shaka considers both formal and lifestyle education important. More formal education is crucial for preparing people for the workforce and lifestyle education will be vital when people have been dead for decades. Shaka discovered that people in society seem to assume they can learn these things over time, whereas he needed a crash course in Google and had to really delve into it.

Shaka believes this is akin to "saying to someone, tomorrow you're going to study Mandarin, and you have to use that language successfully to navigate the environment you're in." Shaka Senghor acknowledged how being a life-long learner gave him the chance to truly study and pick up things quickly because he has a keen mind and would not take his intelligence for granted. This is something for which Shaka should always be grateful. In order to spend time with his young sons and family members, Shaka wanted to know everything. Shaka boasts, "I was lucky that I didn't have to fight those fights alone. In the years since my release, I've found community among the countless people who are also fighting to change the criminal justice system."

Aside from his wonderful two sons, a highlight of Shaka's life are his bestselling novels, *Writing My Wrongs* (2013) and *Letters to the Sons of Society: A Father's Invitation to Love, Honesty, and Freedom* (2022). *Writing My Wrongs* chronicles Shaka's journey through Michigan correctional facilities after being charged with second-degree murder. *Letters to the Sons of Society* is a collection of beautifully written letters to Jay and Sekou. Senghor traces his

journey as a Black man in America and unpacks the toxic and misguided messages about masculinity, mental health, love, and success that boys learn from an early age.

Vincent Garrett

At the time of the study, Vincent Garrett was a student services specialist in the Restoring Our Communities program for formerly incarcerated students at Laney College.

Childhood

Vincent was a bright student while in elementary school. He excelled in English, math, and science. Although he was considered gifted for his age, Vincent explained that he was not sufficiently challenged in school, which led him to act out. He explained that he would finish his work early, and then "started messing with people and would get in trouble." His grandparents raised Vincent because his parents were too involved with drugs to care for him. He was raised in a violent environment, especially during his puberty. Whereas they attempted to put him in gifted classes in the school he attended, his behavior began to become more problematic. Vincent spent much of his childhood fighting.

Vincent attended first to sixth grade at Laurel Elementary, a public school in Oakland, with a break in the third grade, when he attended St. Lawrence O'Toole, a Catholic school. That year – 1983 - was a problematic year for him, the beginning of his frequent suspensions. He described feeling frustrated because he had a little brother who caused a rift in the relationship between him and his stepfather (his brother's dad). Vincent always felt angry and started acting out in class, but nobody ever addressed it; he did not know how to address it himself because he was just a kid. Eventually, it would start a pattern of him getting suspended regularly. Being angry and acting out followed Vincent when he transferred in the fourth grade back to Laurel Elementary. He was suspended a couple of times that year as well. Vincent did not have

confidence in his ability at this time. He took his life for granted; he was never worried about anything that may happen in his life. He was never fearful of school. Vincent labeled these attitudes as a lack of confidence in anything.

Vincent elaborated on going through trauma while being the son of drug-addicted parents. He would often spend time with his grandparents when times were bad. He credited his grandmother for helping to rear him. Growing up in the 1980s in Oakland, California, was difficult for many urban youths because of all the drugs, violence, and crime. When Vincent got to junior high school, he ditched class and hung out with older kids, which led him to start drinking early.

Education

Vincent attended Bret Harte Junior High School in Oakland from seventh to ninth grade. In this junior high, a group of girls stomped out a little boy. Vincent became attracted to the street life and while doing so helped him to protect himself, it led to him not performing well in his studies. Before Vincent was incarcerated, he had been able to make it to the 10th grade. He witnessed violence at King Estates Junior high school and Frick Junior High summer school, where he had to make up classes he had not passed because he was suspended. Vincent described several incidents of students being “jumped” by other students. Vincent described this time of his life as tumultuous, and chaotic, and how he had to defend himself constantly, which later led to him being the aggressor.

Vincent described in detail all his academic ups and downs while he attended King and Bret Harte versus Frick and Havenscourt. He said that this was 1993, and everyone was fighting every day. He did not characterize it as gang involvement, but more like kids were walking around with hostility. He described his first time attending King Estates Junior high school as a

"welcome to the jungle" experience. Vincent dropped out of school because all of his peers had graduated, which left him with little motivation to continue. Vincent was discouraged because many of his peers were graduating, and he only had enough high school credits to put him in the 10th grade. He thought he was too far behind to catch up, and he quit school.

Vincent did not go back to school until the year 2000 when he was released from prison and started the process of taking classes for business. His rationale was that if nobody wanted to hire him, he would become his own boss. Later, that year Vincent discovered he was going to be a father, and he had a son in 2001. Vincent subsequently dropped out of community college and did not return to school until 10 years later, in 2011. When Vincent made his triumphant return, he finished four degrees in Business at Merritt Community College. He received his Associate of Arts in Economics, Associate of Arts in General Business, Associate of Arts in Business Accounting, and Associate of Arts in Business Administration. This was a proud culminating moment for Vincent.

However, Vincent was not done with school. He transferred to the University of California (UC), Berkeley, which was a special time for him. Between 2014 and 2016, the organization called Berkeley Underground Scholars was formed. Berkeley Underground Scholars is a support program for system-impacted students at UC Berkeley. Vincent began to become aware of mass incarceration. Michelle Alexander's book, *The New Jim Crow* had come out in 2010 and started to awaken his mind to the disproportionate number of Black men who were affected by the penal system. Vincent believed that his ending up on the school-to-prison pipeline was not a fluke. Vincent remained at UC Berkeley for the next two years and received a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology there.

Vincent was inspired and motivated to get those degrees because he did not have any

degrees at the time. He only had a GED, but he felt as though that did not count. Vincent wanted desperately to have his mother and grandmother see him walk the stage to graduation. Initially, he aimed to obtain an economics degree, but then he learned how to look at the catalog and see what kind of classes he was taking and soon learned that if he took one more class, he could get one more degree. Therefore, Vincent took another class and was able to receive a degree in accounting. He took another class and received his business administration degree. He took another class and got his general business degree. Vincent made a concerted effort to keep a high GPA, which helped him get into UC Berkeley. He became an honors student and was very grateful to give his mother and grandmother the opportunity they never had while he was in high school. This is what motivated Vincent the most.

After receiving his bachelor's, Vincent took a year off to work at Merritt College. In 2016, he and others started Restoring Our Communities (ROC) at Laney College in Oakland, CA. In 2017, Vincent applied to and started attending the University of San Francisco (USF), where he graduated in 2019 with a Master's degree in Organization and Leadership.

Incarceration

Decades earlier, Vincent was forced to leave his home after stealing his grandmother's car, driving while intoxicated, and crashing it. Afterward, Vincent lived homeless for over a year, and he wound up in jail in 1993. This started the process of Vincent going to jail and becoming a repeat offender. During this year, Vincent got into the first real trouble he encountered in his life. Vincent stated, "What led me to my incarceration was that I was an addict. I was on drugs and I was also selling drugs. So, a lot of my cases were drug cases, either possession or possession for sale."

Upon being released in 1994, Vincent's grandmother gave him $2,000 and bought him a

car as an incentive to getting his GED. Vincent received his GED in 1994, and for the next 5 years, he bounced in and out of prison due to addiction and selling drugs. He narrated how his first drug case occurred by getting caught during a traffic stop. Vincent was found to have marijuana and heroin while riding with Oakland Rapper and legend Numskul from the rap group, the Luniz. Vincent had not been aware of traffic laws nor his rights as a passenger in a vehicle that had led him to be searched. Upon being searched, the police found him in possession of drugs. He did not fight back, and he was put in a diversion drug program. Vincent reflected back on this incident from the perspective of having learned later about the legal system through his studies, realizing that he was illegally searched and detained. He noted that knowledge is power.

Vincent was not able to maintain his sobriety while in the drug diversion program. He kept violating, which ended in a 90-day observation where he was sent to prison. Vincent did not want to be in prison. His grandmother was concerned about him, and when he was in prison, his grandmother sent him an application to Laney College. Vincent convinced the judge to let him out, but he returned to his addiction. During this time, the state banned the programs allowing prisoners access to a college education. This came to an end around the mid-1990s.

Vincent acknowledged that the state of California has improved since then. Pell grants are now available in the prison system, and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) has raised money for the scholars' network in the State of California. They have allowed the local colleges to teach prisoners, and incentives are available to them.

Reintegration

In 1999, when Vincent was transitioning out of prison, he received services. Vincent now had a clean environment and health care in the East Oakland Recovery Center. Vincent stayed in the program for six months and then was allowed to transition to another program known as

Midway, a county program in which he stayed for another 18 months. Vincent was then able to get into another housing plan, Building Opportunities for Self Sufficiency, under Berkeley Supportive Services. Vincent managed to stay in this program for another 18 months. In this program, with the assistance of the coordinator named Zena, Vincent got his first apartment. He was proud to sign his one-year lease. Vincent characterized the program as exceptional and that it added value to his life. However, after the tenure was over, he was evicted from the apartment because he could no longer afford the rent. From 2002 to May 2003, Vincent searched for shelter. Finally, he found another apartment where he has been living ever since.

Employment

After living in prison, some employment in the warehouse provided grants; however, Vincent stated that the payment was not enough to cover the cost of living at that time. This motivated him to go back to school. He was aware that school could equip him with better skills, which allow him to apply for better jobs. He ended up in a program known as a pre-apprenticeship program facilitated by Allen Temple Church. Allen Temple is a pillar in the community. This occurred around the time Vincent got his apartment.

Education: A Factor that Can Reduce Recidivism

A college education enabled Vincent to acquire resources that helped him to be successful. During the 2013 recession unemployment ran out and Vincent was sitting at home. He could only think of returning to what he knew, which was selling dope. Vincent kind of sat on his hands, unable to pay rent or the bills. In fact, he did not pay for anything for the next couple of months. Vincent attributed school as what saved him, and he noted his dad and Uncle Reno were going to school as well. They were all taking substance abuse classes with Dr. William Love at Merritt, which brought Vincent to Merritt College. The love and community

support kept Vincent thriving in school.

Mentorship

Vincent's mentorship experience with Ron Moss enhanced his college experience because he initially did not know how to navigate college life. Ron Moss was a counselor and professor at Merritt College. Ron Moss, together with the encouragement from his dad, really changed his way of doing things. Vincent and Ron always talked about what it was to be a good student; Ron was running Street Scholars and Vincent was running Restoring Our Community (ROC), which are both programs that support college students that are transitioning from incarceration to college. Ron and Vincent both observed that the most successful students were those who learn how to be great students by treating school like it was a good job they were trying not to lose. As Vincent said:

> It takes about 18 months to get into the groove. Which includes setting a study schedule and sticking to it. Arriving to class every day and on time. Even when you do not feel like it. And lastly, learning how to ask questions and advocate for yourself." It was a little quicker for me because Ron pointed me in the right direction and that's why a support system is essential to educational success. But most importantly I owned my education and held myself accountable.

Recommendations

Vincent explained his views on criminal justice reform. Because the system never was designed to rehabilitate, it is necessary to get rid of the whole system and start over. Vincent explained that we need to come up with a new system that is holistic and designed to really help people, especially in terms of reintegrating the formerly incarcerated back into society. Vincent stated that although there is movement in that direction, it is too slow.

For the past five years, Vincent has made it his mission to make people aware of the issue of mass incarceration. He noted that his position as one of the founders and the director of ROC gives him pride. Vincent advocates for strategies that give people the agency to choose their own direction. At ROC, students have options and decide on their own what they want to do with their lives. ROC helps students to figure out life, educational, and career goals. Communities of color and formerly incarcerated/ reentry folks need the right support and the right resources. His work at ROC has given Vincent a sense of pride because he has been walking in his purpose, helping students who are at the margins of life and facilitating student success, all while being clean and sober.

Summary

These stories support existing literature that documents how early educational experiences are impactful in young learners' lives (Perry, 2014). These oral histories are unique in showing how much reflection on their lives these formerly incarcerated men have engaged in, which played a role in their ability to reintegrate. The participants' resilience comes through their narratives in many ways. They were able to pinpoint areas of need, such as early on in school when some awareness and interest in their lives would have been pivotal.

The grandparent role was also influential in the lives of a few participants' resilience. Vincent, Harold, and Reggie stayed with their grandparents for extended amounts of time when their biological parents were having substance abuse issues or were incarcerated. In the stories of the participants, their grandparent caretakers were the driving force for them to positively achieve career success post-incarceration (Burnette, 2004). Social workers and educators must do better in addressing the mental health challenges that young learners face after a traumatic experience. These narratives also show that cultural relevance in working with decarcerated

folks, career/ job placement, housing assistance, addiction treatment, and mental health help are all critical in working with reentry individuals.

CHAPTER V: COUNTER-NARRATIVES AND THE FOUNDATIONS FOR SUCCESS

The purpose of this narrative study was to examine the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men. Moreover, this study sought to understand what their experiences reveal about how the participants were able to reintegrate into society. Six themes emerged from the data analysis of interview transcripts: (1) Early educational experiences: The love for learning that was not cultivated; (2) The absence of belonging: Growing up in a traumatic environment; (3) Incarceration: Building meaningful connections through mentorship, reading, and debating; (4) Post-incarceration: Programs facilitating transition and educational opportunities*;* (5) Factors that build success: Reactivating the genius inside us, networking, and education; and 6) Recommendations and the foundations for success.

Early Educational Experiences: The Love for Learning that Was Not Cultivated

In this theme, participants related experiences of excelling in school during their first few years of school and lost opportunities of educators to capitalize on the brilliance these Black youth inherently demonstrated from the beginning. All of the participants were placed in gifted or Gifted & Talented Education (GATE) classes and experienced barriers in maintaining the ability to excel in school. Barriers included having difficulty focusing in class due to preoccupation with what was going on for participants outside of the classroom. In some cases, Black marginalization and school safety was a factor that detracted from their ability to focus.

During the interviews, all the participants talked about their early educational experiences and reported being good at school and feeling competent. Some enjoyed school more than others, but they all were able to excel academically. For example, Shaka recounted being confident and earning scholarships early on:

> Yeah, I was actually really confident in school. Do you know I learned how to read when I was around four years old and always was a really curious child. I was very good academically, you know I was one of the students that, the teachers used to be impressed with how fast I would finish my work. … I loved learning— that was a big part of my childhood, I took pride in being able to read and comprehend and all the things and unfortunately, during that time, like many kids, I was also navigating … household abuse and environmental factors. (May 14, 2022)

Similarly, Malachi, Harold, Reggie, Marlon, and Vincent described how they received good grades and had confidence in their academic ability when in elementary school. Marlon said he was competitive about doing well in school and wanted to get the "high star." Four of the six participants (Harold, Marlon, Vincent, and Reggie) shared that they were put in gifted or GATE classes or were academically ready to skip a grade. As Marlon described:

> School, I think in first grade through fourth grade, I remember that there was a gifted program, and I did good. I don't recall how I felt about school, but I recall performing pretty well. I don't know how analysis were performed to tell who would be in the gifted program or not, but I remember being selected. I remember there was boarding schools that actually came and spoke with my parents about me participating, and one was in Boston. (February 11, 2022)

As Reggie stated, "School came easy to me." He would have been able to skip a grade but the grandparents would not allow that. Then he said, "They asked my grandparents, could they skip me up first and second grade. Of course, they said no. Yeah. That was school for me. It came easy in some areas."

At various points in their narrative, participants talked about aspects of their experience that made it more difficult to continue excelling in school. All the participants described some aspect of their home, community, or school life that kept them from being able to focus on academics. All six participants talked about finding it hard to stay focused in school because they were distracted or preoccupied with what was happening at home or in their community environment. When they talked about their inability to focus, some were aware of being distracted by their home life, the violence in the community, or school being unsafe, and some only knew they had a hard time focusing. Possibly having more Black male mentors, teachers, and coaches could have made a significant impact on the lives of participants.

However, all participants were navigating traumatic environments either at home or in the community, and often these two environments overlapped. Shaka's parents separated, and he remembers how it "destabilized the household. So it was really hard to focus." Reggie, Harold, and Vincent's parents were on drugs, and Malachi was upset over the abuse he witnessed as his mother's boyfriends were violent toward her. On looking back, Malachi was aware that it was his home environment that was distracting him from his focus on school.

Malachi felt resentment build toward his mom because of the abuse she allowed from her boyfriends, and he began to check out by disobeying his mom, skipping school, and by smoking weed. Vincent described going through the trauma of having drug-addicted parents and living in a violent neighborhood. Moreover, he detailed how his little brother created a rift between him and his stepfather. He began getting suspended in the third grade due to what was happening at home. He began to cut school in junior high. He recalled how angry he was but did not know why.

School Was Not Safe and I Had To Dumb It Down To Fit In

Reggie, Vincent, and Harold brought up the fact that their school was not safe. These same participants talked about having to “dumb it down,” because it was not safe to excel academically. Reggie said he had realized the teachers were not going to protect him, and because school was unsafe, Reggie felt like he had to "get connected in the streets." He thought if he aligned himself with guys that knew how to protect themselves and him, he would be safer. He explained that he was an only child and had no siblings to look out for him.

Vincent talked about being kicked out of one school and attending a school that was “really violent:” the fact that school was unsafe made it even harder to be there. Why Vincent was kicked out of school in the first place is a question for further exploration, but most likely this happened due to anti-Blackness. Vincent was fighting so much and by the time he got to Skyline, "I was done with school." He missed so much school it felt impossible to catch up. His classmates were graduating leaving him behind in the 10th grade.

These participants also said they did not feel it was safe to excel academically in their classrooms. They realized they needed to “dumb it down.” For example, Harold stated,

> It wasn't until once again that cultural stuff came in like I was telling you how I was raised. I realized none of my own were in this class. My homeboys talking crazy and saying sh**, like, nerds in there, and why you would never do square stuff and all that. So, I realized I needed to dumb down and get up out of that class. So, I dumbed down and got up out of it. (June 17, 2022)

A few participants also recounted times in which other adults, such as teachers, should have noticed what they were going through and that it was hindering their academic performance. They also thought teachers failed to support their ability to excel academically.

For example, Shaka and Vincent thought their teachers should have been able to identify the trauma or distress that should have been obvious to them. Shaka in particular wondered, “How did the teachers miss those signs? You know a kid that goes from Rhodes scholarship to not even really caring about participation and sadly, it is this reality that I see often in our school systems.”

Oftentimes educators miss opportunities to intervene for the better in a young student’s life. Vincent also recognized that what he was going through could have been addressed:

> And so, I believe that I was just angry and I was acting out in class, but nobody ever addressed it. And I didn't know how to address it. I was a kid. So I started getting suspended that year. And then it kind of followed me when I went back to Laurel Elementary for the fourth grade. I got suspended a couple of times that year as well. (February 12, 2022)

Harold and Marlon talked about how teachers and even parents did not encourage them or see academic potential in them. Participants mentioned that people really did not encourage them academically. Harold said he had no academic mentors and Marlon expressed disappointment that “Nobody checked to see, “Hey, how can we foster what he likes?” He also partly resented his parents for not fostering his abilities. In speaking about his belief that “school should prepare us for the future and how interest should be linked to majors or careers” Marlon talked about the importance of helping a kid find his passion:

> But it could have been more along the lines of, "Hey, what do you like to do and how can we enhance that by putting you in programs that if you like this or if you like photography or if you like whatever the subject may have been, how can we enhance

> it?" I feel like they didn't do it. So you went the way of other kids like I just want to go outside and play and do other stuff like that. (February 11, 2022)

The Absence of Belonging: Growing Up in a Traumatic Environment

All the participants described the difficulty of navigating a traumatic environment growing up and how it factored into their survival strategies. Shaka, Reggie, Vincent, Marlon, and Malachi lived in environments where drug use, gangs, violence, and criminal activity were taking place. Malachi described living in Section 8 housing in LA during the 80s and early 90s, which he described were "the bloodiest years." Not only did he witness violence in the form of his mother's boyfriend's domestic abuse, but they were all having to manage without any help or intervention the shootouts from the Bloods and the Crips:

> I remember my mom coming to get my brother and I to sleep on the floor because of the shootouts that were happening between the Bloods and Crips at that time. … She used to come, we used to sleep on the floor sometimes. You hear the helicopters outside, and even actually saying like, yo, going to the house, we're looking for a suspect. I remember those moments. I remember coming outside and seeing bloody t-shirts from a shootout or just ... This is now in the height of the crack era too, so we would see needles and different things outside. Although I didn't understand it, I remember certain moments of feeling fear, feeling afraid. (February 13, 2022)

It's noteworthy that Malachi ended up joining one of those gangs. Many Black men coming from urban areas experience community violence and family conflict or abuse and do not have the resources to get help. Malachi talked about how helpless he felt in that environment, especially witnessing his mom being abused," I was too scared to do something and I just simply just watched." Malachi experienced them all.

Shaka spoke about how his "childhood friend was murdered," and he was "robbed at gunpoint, I was beaten to death" in Detroit. Harold talked about growing up in East Palo Alto in the 80s and 90s "when it was rough, 1992 murder capital of the country." He also talked about both parents being incarcerated. When Harold was five years old, he was raised by his mom who had the mindset of raising him to survive. She thought he had to have some street smarts in order to make it. Being able to *make a way out of no way*. He said, "I was raised for the streets. I was raised like a gangster." Reggie talked about what it was like to live with his parents who struggling with heroin addiction and living "this really fast lifestyle." He said, "I lived with my parents as a partner in crime. I would go on crime sprees with my parents." He described going with them to do "burglaries, and things like that." Marlon also talked about growing up in Oakland, an environment where "gangs is the mentality." He described how everyone around him was getting money illegally which influenced his own illegal entrepreneurship and that "starting at ninth and tenth grade, I always had a two-bit hustle."

Lack of Intervention for Trauma

Malachi, Vincent, and Shaka all talked about how their emotional trauma went unaddressed and how that factor played into their trajectories. Shaka was the most vocal in describing how not getting help for the trauma he endured left him conflicted and prone to act out. He not only spoke of how teachers failed to see that he had been traumatized when he showed signs of losing interest in school early on, but he also believed his life would have been much different had he gotten psychiatric help for his trauma when he got shot. That event was stuck inside his mind even though it happened 30 years ago:

> So when I was 17 years old, March 8th, 1990, I got shot multiple times on a corner, in my neighborhood, and like many inner city kids who get shot, there was no treatment plan,

> there was no kind of, hey, you should see a therapist, you should see a psychiatrist or psychologist or whatever the case may be and so I was left with all emotional damage that comes with that level of trauma and I began to tear myself up, I found myself in conflict. (May 14, 2022)

The participants' narratives revealed they seemed to be hurting with no real way to address the emotional damage. Trauma led to more trauma and inner turmoil and conflict. Vincent's driving while intoxicated and crashing his grandmother's car led to his being homeless for awhile, and then "I ended up in jail later that year in '93." Malachi told a similar story of needing help emotionally for the trauma he endured early on due to witnessing his mother getting abused and growing up in a violent neighborhood. He talked about the emotional issues he needed to resolve and were not addressed:

> Like I said earlier, the lack of respect for my mom's authority, not knowing my biological father, just different boyfriends coming in and out of the household. I feel like I definitely struggled with the identity, and I had an older brother. He was only a year older, and so his father used to come and grab him sometimes. I'm not going to say he was a part of his life, but sometimes he would go with his father. He knew him, and got to meet his other siblings and stuff. (February 13, 2022)

In the quote above, Malachi spoke of the need for something more to heal emotionally and the need for connection to a father figure he did not have. While belonging to a gang seemed to help fill in for his losses, he could have pursued other more affirming alternatives if they had only been available. For example, African-centered Rites of Passage programs have been shown to increase a similar feeling of belongingness that youth find in gangs, but lead to much more positive outcomes (Coles & Powell, 2020).

Most of the participants spoke about being led to engage in criminal activity because the environment set up a culture in which ways to success were limited. They all recounted experiences in which the culture of criminal activity was “alluring,” especially the way it was able to meet their needs. This was true whether it was for access in Shaka’s case to “fast money” (as Marlon described it), to ease the pain of addiction in Vincent’s case, or to address the emotional damage from trauma in Malachi’s case. Malachi fell in with a group that was engaged in criminal activity and felt a sense of belonging.

Shaka described his experience as being "seduced” into the crack cocaine culture and how he found himself “winning in that culture” at age 14. Marlon talked about stumbling upon a connection for cocaine while he was selling burner phones for his cousin. The amount of money Marlon was making, while he was in the drug trade, was alluring:

> Once I saw how quick I made that $1000, that was the end of the story as far as . . . I shouldn't say the end of the story, but that was the beginning of my career in drug dealing because in everything else I was doing, I was getting $50, $100 here, $50 there. So basically, I stumbled upon a Latino connection for cocaine, and I just made it work. (February 11, 2022)

Marlon had never dreamed of making the amount of money that he made as a drug dealer. It was addictive to him to be able to make up to $7,000 dollars a day as an 18-year-old. In the streets, they call this, “fast money” because of the speed at which money is earned. Marlon explained how he would make a deal and some of the consequences of being a drug dealer in the East Bay. It took Marlon some time to wrap his head around the fact that he was making more money than he ever had. He also knew that there were a lot of risks involved. Marlon believed he was smarter than everyone else and would not get caught up.

Malachi explained that once he got kicked out of middle school, he started smoking marijuana and drinking. Spending a lot of time on the streets meant that he was introduced to unhealthy activities involving not only substances but criminal activities. Even though Malachi was confident that he could pick right back up in school he had already been introduced to gang culture and the streets were more powerful than any classroom could ever be. He said that "once I started spending a lot of time away from school, and I couldn't be home because I was supposed to be at school, I started spending a lot of time in the streets." He said that was how he "got introduced to things that were really accessible to me in an unhealthy way. That's when I started engaging in criminal activity at 13 on minor level burglaries."

Malachi went on to talk about how hanging out with this specific group started to feel good and the criminal activity got serious very fast. When parental support is lacking, a sense of belonging and friendships can be found in gang involvement (Gormally, 2020). Reggie too was seduced into the culture. Reggie was in and out of prison for over 15 years for drugs and gun charges. Reggie was first arrested for a weapons charge, although it was dropped because they had no search and seizure warrant. Shortly after he was arrested for drugs; he lost the case in court and was sentenced to prison.

Incarceration: Building Meaningful Connections through Mentorship, Reading, and Debating

Participants described their experience of incarceration. They described being mentored while incarcerated, transformational reading and role models and the participants of the intervention experienced while incarcerated. Being mentored while the participants were in prison played a significant role because these gentlemen knew what their mentees were going through so they could offer advice that was authentic. These mentors were referred to as "trusted

messengers.” A trusted messenger has the knowledge and cultural competence to mentor the most vulnerable.

Four of the participants, Shaka, Reggie, Harold, and Malachi, spoke of meeting men in prison who had a positive influence on them. Both Shaka and Reggie experienced mentorship while incarcerated, and it affected their trajectories both in and outside of prison. They described transformative experiences. They both noted how they were not able to duplicate that communal feeling that they experienced while in prison and how many of the mentors they had in prison were lifers. These men could have given up hope, but instead chose to pass down knowledge to their friends and mentees. Shaka described the impact on him of meeting these men, “I often tell people that I would not be the man that I am, the day I had an encounter with these brilliant, beautiful souls.” Shaka spoke of “the wisdom of those brothers, who gave me those books and who challenged my ideas and who encouraged me,” at a time in which he described himself as “incorrigible” and mostly not listening. He engaged in debates that “helped sharpen me intellectually.” Shaka spoke of “one of the older guys” who is “still in solitary confinement … now for 30 years.” Both Shaka and Reggie saw the power of mentorship in being helped by people who saw their potential and wanted to help them realize it. For example, Reggie explained,

> The most powerful thing I think that a human being can do for another human being, man, is see something in them that they don't see in themselves. And no matter how they go off track, they can still hold that vision powerfully for them. That's what my mentor did for me. (March 23, 2022)

Harold too recounted the wisdom passed down to him from someone who was surviving life without the possibility of parole. Although this wisdom may sound simple, he remembers

and holds onto it to this day: “I remember a lifer told me something; he said, ‘If you can leave here with the ability to write a paragraph and the ability to do basic algebra, you have a better shot out there than most people who can't do it.’” One of the lifers signed him up for all these programs, “college courses, everything because he's trying to keep me away from the yard.”

The role of mentoring went beyond the experiences these men found so important while incarcerated. Although many of the participants talked about how crucial these experiences were in helping them develop within prison, they also talked about the importance of being mentored and mentoring others as a road to a successful life after they left that environment.

The Impact of Being Mentored

Five of the participants talked about the experience of being mentored once they left prison. Some, like Shaka, maintained contact with the mentors they had met inside. Shaka said, “I think it's incredibly important for people returned into the community to have mentors and I think most of those mentors should be system-impacted people who have been through what they've gone through.” Shaka found it was critical to maintaining contact with mentors he met in prison who were out now. He thought he was “fortunate when I think about the big house and Timothy Greer, like all of them brothers out now.” He mentioned, Big Al, who was the last one to get out having served from 43 to 47 years, and Slim, who “probably more often” than the others “call every now and then” to “check in on them, see how they’re doing and tell them of all the things that I've accomplished.”

It may come as a surprise to many who have never been incarcerated that people in prison have the wisdom to impart to others—that they care about others’ well-being, want them to be successful, and will invest a lot into helping to ensure their success. Once someone has been locked up, it is almost as if they are forgotten by society. Many of Harold’s mentors are folks

who had been incarcerated for decades, and Harold, like Shaka, still kept in contact with them. He said, “I think those mentors have impacted my likelihood of staying out of jail more so than any other factor.” They looked out for Harold when he was in San Quentin. Harold's father was also in San Quentin and he looked out for Harold’s mentors, which is the way they paid it back. Harold said, “They looked out for me, from a mentor standpoint. … These guys were available when many other people weren't.”

After his incarceration, Reggie joined a mentorship program called “M3, the Men's Mentoring Movement.” He described that it “was developed for folks reentering through the county jail, and so they still work inside of the county jail.” Reggie attributed a great deal of his success after incarceration to his mentor, especially his role in encouraging him to continue his education. The details of what Reggie’s mentor did for him are valuable to share. Most importantly, this is the program where Reggie met his mentor, Floyd. Reggie explained that Floyd “started mentoring me in the county in the early '90s, and he supported me all the way through my challenges, all the way through my doctorate, and came to my graduation.” He talked about how he had an idea about himself that “I was just being lazy, right?” Floyd “nurtured my vision. He started calling me, ‘Dr. Daniels, you're gonna get this, man.’” Floyd treated him like a son, “inviting me in his home, treating me like, basically, I became one of his sons. He called me his son. It's really made a profound impact on my life, and his modeling.” This was especially important “in the absence of my father who was caught up in the heroin addiction, and eventually died from AIDS-related complications.”

As Reggie described it, the reason “I needed Floyd in my life, bro” was that he “needed a brother that was actually living it that I could see.” The importance of Floyd in his life came

from the fact that he was “a brother who was really living the values that they were talking about. As Reggie watched to see if Floyd could be congruent in his values and actions:

> He was modeling that for me on a daily basis over a 25-year period. This brother's an oak. I never seen him cheat on his wife. I never seen the brother hustle. He was the man that I needed to see in my life, a man, to help me to develop those values that he had. He made it real, bruh. He made it real. It wasn't just a hypothetical thing. It wasn't just like, “Just say no to drugs.” Somebody telling you to do the right thing while they get high in front of you. No, he's the real deal. (March 23, 2022)

Reggie said that post-incarceration, “I had to learn how to live through the flat spots. I had to learn when it's not high-high or low-low emotional, right?” He said he needed to learn a lot more than simply how to maintain a structure of “going to work, man, coming home, getting your clothes prepared for the next day. And so, my mentor modeled that.”

Vincent was indistinguishable from Reggie in passionately expressing the importance of his mentor, Ronald Moss, being there for him after he was incarcerated. Vincent now leads some of the programs that once guided him. At the time of his interview, he was the director of Restoring Our Community (ROC) at Laney College which helps justice-impacted students. Ironically, Vincent was in a program similar to ROC while he attended Merritt College in Oakland, CA. Vincent explained further:

> The guy who became my mentor, Ronald Moss, he's over at Merritt now. He took Dr. Love’s place. But he was also over the Street Scholars program at Merritt for formerly incarcerated students: Street Scholars peer mentoring program. So just the right people were at the right place at the right time that kind of helped guide me. And yeah, it was the

> school that saved my life because I don't know what I would've did had I not went back to school. (February 12, 2022)

Being a Mentor

Four participants, Malachi, Shaka, Harold, and Reggie, talked about their experiences of being a mentor. They discussed the value being a mentor had for them in their healing, their sense of purpose, and their ability to help others in the way they had been helped through the type of mentoring they had had. Malachi talked about how being a mentor was part of his healing process, stating, “Mentoring, that's a part of my healing process too. Whoever I'm mentoring is also mentoring me, and they probably don't even know it because I'm learning a lot from that experience and that conversation and it's healing for me.”

Shaka spoke at length about being a mentor. He said, “The thing I will say that I'm most proud of is that I'm a man of my word.” Hearing about how he has inspired others and has followed through on his commitment is “the best feeling in the world.” He said he felt it when he gets calls from “prison brothers and they're like,” I just read this article or somebody just played his video over the phone and you give us hope and your work, you've been true to your word like that.”

What Shaka believed was important about his mentorship is “I'm inspiring guys to think about like, differently.” He talked about how “like it blew my mind” to discover that someone in Dansville prison in Illinois was reading this article he had written so long ago. Encountering how others were reading his writings, he was reminded of reading about Malcolm X and how much it affected him. He visited Statesville prison in Illinois and saw this dog-eared copy of his own book, *Writing My Wrongs* (2013). Shaka recalled, “That was a surreal moment for me, because it

was just like, my work has reached a space that I once was in and it's inspiring people, the way that Malcolm and Huey and all these other brothers inspire me." He continued,

> To see my book in that setting and it was marked up and dog-eared and ragged and it reminded me of those books when I used to go get Malcolm X and I read that book several times at different prisons and they will be tore up with the pages on the line and marked up because brothers were sharing it. (May 14, 2022)

What came home to Shaka at that moment was that through communicating his experiences and being available to others, he was able to help them: "It was just to know my work is reaching people inside. I ended up honoring everything that I said I was coming to do." Shaka added that he thought that everyone could be a mentor, that all have the capacity "to give back to give guidance to people and it doesn't matter the age, you know." He said, "I can actually learn from somebody who's younger, who's more in touch with current realities, but then I can also mentor somebody who's older like that exchange has been invaluable." He said that "I'm a mentee to some of the younger guys, you know who have way more energy than I'll ever have, again, or have different insights."

Harold also expressed his thoughts about being a mentor and what he strived to do through the process. He discussed the importance of actively listening and seeing if he can take them where they want to go. He detailed how a mentor is like a coach, which historically was "a vehicle connected to horses that could take people from where they are to where they want to be." He said, "That's my whole model as a mentor, as a coach, what do you need from me? Where are you trying to go? How can I help you get there?" He thought it was important to add that it was "not about me putting together people's lives, life plans, not about me offering up a

whole bunch." He remembered people who would offer too much specific advice in an attempt to control him. Above all, he saw his role as, "I got to first actively listen."

Reggie explained the importance of his mentor to his own success. He also talked about the experience of being a mentor. Like Shaka, he said, "It's very powerful" having an effect on someone and he attributed this effect to cultural relevance. He said, "When folks see folks like them doing things that aren't necessarily traditionally expected for a five-time felon to come back, and get a doctorate." Vincent also discussed mentoring students at the ROC office. He shared that it was an opportunity for him to give back the same kind of positive support he was given:

> I don't know how successful I would've been had it not been for people to mentor me along the way. Initially starting with my dad helping me, just encouraging me, just signing up, just signing up. So with me doing it for other people, it gives me a sense of purpose, a sense of belonging, belonging to ROC. I belong to Street Scholars and Underground Scholars and the Rising Scholars Network. It's a sense of purpose and belonging that I feel is really important, and I actually have something to give back. (February 12, 2022)

Harold initially did not have confidence that education was going to have an impact on his life. However, while incarcerated he began to believe in his abilities to excel in an academic setting. He said, "It showed me that I had the confidence, the focus, and the willpower that it takes to make it through a program."

Malachi also received education while incarcerated and learned first-hand how a transformation needs to happen. He said, whether "you're talking about rehabilitation or transformation, it's the people who want it on the inside who find other like-minded people and

they start having these conversations." These conversations he said were "positive conversations just around education or whether it's around healing." One of his transformative experiences occurred when he learned about restorative justice, an approach to justice that seeks to repair harm by providing an opportunity for those harmed and those who take responsibility for the harm to communicate about and address their needs in the aftermath of a crime. Although Malachi did not refer to it as mentorship, he underscored the importance of being with people who were seeking something better. In this respect, his experience was very much like the other participants around this theme.

In their interviews, four participants, Shaka, Reggie, Harold, and Marlon, reflected on transformational readings from inspiring authors and role models. In the way they described it, transformational reading is life-altering literature that has a lasting impact on an individual. Although getting books into prison may have presented a challenge, most prisons have libraries, and these participants credited their mentorships and their transformational reading as the way they were able to make it through their sentence.

Both Shaka and Reggie talked about the power of Malcolm X as a role model. Shaka and Reggie were in awe of Malcolm X's ability to teach Black people how to love themselves and demand "knowledge of self" or learning about their roots. Malcolm X was also a scholar and the ultimate example of transformation by going from petty theft, pimp, and ex-convict to one of the biggest leaders of the Nation of Islam has ever seen. Shaka explained how Malcolm X's legacy shaped him:

> A lot of people focused on him Malcolm X as a Black nationalist, as a humanitarian, fighter and civil rights and all the things that we've grown to know him for and love his legacy for but Malcolm was really well-read each other's ideas, he challenged thoughts,

> he loves to debate, he debated with scholars, he debated with, people within his organization, he went abroad and just continue to advance his education and his understanding and I would get into arguments with guys when they talked about him not being loyal or him leaving the nation and going to start his own thing. (May 14, 2022)

Reggie reflected on the books that helped shape him when he was in prison. Reggie referred to these books as life-changing. Speaking of Malcolm X, Reggie explained how powerful it was to read about him.

Harold spoke about a book by Upton Sinclair that was also impactful to him called, *The Jungle* (1906). He said learning about the harsh conditions and exploited lives of immigrants in the United States in Chicago and similar industrialized cities awakened his curiosity to learn. Once he learned that he was the only one in his class that received an "A" grade he wanted to go further.

Marlon fell in love with a book called *Make Me Wanna Holler: A Young Black Man in America* (1994), which is a memoir by Nathan McCall that journaled his Black man's rite of passage from a life in the streets, to the prison yards, to a journalism career at *The Washington Post*. Marlon credited *Makes Me Wanna Holler* for not allowing him to leave prison with the victim mentality. People with a victim mentality feel as though terrible things keep happening and the world is always against them. They may feel as though everyone and everything is lined up against them, for example, their significant other, coworkers, or even close family or friends. This mentality is extremely debilitating because it keeps people from considering what they themselves can do to help fix the situation. Marlon recognized the importance of taking responsibility for their actions and not feeling as though everything is out of their control:

> A book by a guy by the name of . . . I think that was the most impactful. His name was Nathan McCall, I believe. The book was called *Makes Me Wanna Holler*. I'm not saying that there aren't challenges. I'm just saying that it gave me hope, I guess. Hey, here's a person who's a professional, who went, I think his crime may have been violent, but basically went from one side to the other side and he's well-respected in his field. So, I think that is the book or the resource that really gave me hope, outside of courses, which were basic core courses and things like that. But that's the book that really stuck out. (February 11, 2022)

All the participants' voices were part of this theme, as they all spoke of taking full advantage of whatever educational opportunities were there for them in prison. Some also experienced community-based interventions while incarcerated that had a positive impact on them.

Taking Full Advantage of Educational Opportunities in Prison

The participants all made the most of what opportunities were available to them. Many of the participants had educational opportunities in prison and some were not in prison long enough to reap the benefits of any effective programming. Malachi always knew that while he was incarcerated, if they provided any sort of education for him that he would take advantage of his opportunity. Malachi got his GED in prison: "Yeah, once I was incarcerated at 15. By the time I was 16, I had my GED." He said, "I knew that if I sat down for a little while, I can get it and it can make sense to me and I can thrive, and that's exactly what happened when I went inside."

Malachi discussed how a program in San Quentin called the Prison University Project (PUP), which was accredited through Patton University, helped to transform his thinking about himself and the world:

> When I was incarcerated, before I got a chance to go to the Prison University Project, my mind was limited. … Once I went to the Prison University Project and took some of those classes, even though I haven't been to places or experienced certain things, I felt like that exposure to those kinds of conversations also was a part of me expanding in my knowledge and wisdom and development. (February, 13, 2022)

In contrast, Shaka did not have many opportunities where he was incarcerated but when he connected to one, he took advantage of it:

> There wasn't a ton of things, a ton of opportunities, but I was intentional about trying to find the few opportunities that were available. … So, the way I went about finding opportunities is really just to talk to the guys who were already there and some of the guys were telling me about college program that they had and enrolled in Community College back then we still could get Pell grants and so I enrolled in that took down a business process and it was averaging 4.0. (May 14, 2022)

Marlon's amazing career trajectory to the superintendent of Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) started in Lompoc Federal Penitentiary, where he got his janitorial certificate. That program would prove pivotal in launching him into a series of successes that spawned new goals: "It's funny. We could talk about my job and how a program that they had in there lead to my job—a janitorial program." He went on to talk about educational programs that furthered his educational achievements.

The Role of Community-Based Organizations Running Programs

A few of the participants talked about the positive role of community-based organizations (CBO) in their ability to further themselves within the prison and then on the outside. A CBO aims to make impactful improvements to a community's social health, well-being, and overall

functioning. CBOs usually occur in geographically, psychosocially, culturally, spiritually, and socially connected cities. Harold explained, “These were community-based organizations coming in and giving their time to better the life of convicts like myself.” He described that “the main program that I took, that really changed my life outside of the academic programs was HIV peer education program.” He gave credit to this program as a place “where I learned what I do and that spring-boarded me into all of the employment opportunities that I currently have today”:

> It showed me that I had the ability and some self-worth and some values, but it was a rigorous academic process to learn all that science and all that public speaking and all the stuff that comes with it. It just showed me that if I work on some of these skills, academic employment, job readiness, and all that stuff, then I can leave here better than when I came in. (June 17, 2022)

Malachi credited the fact that San Quentin is located in a liberal city to the richness of his own experiences in prison. What does it mean to be a liberal city? According to Malachi, many of the San Francisco Bay Area inhabitants have a liberal mindset. Liberals have a moral philosophy based on the rights of the individual. The root word of liberal is “liberty” meaning freedom which is associated with words like “generous” or “broadminded” and that the government should be active in supporting political and social change. Malachi spoke of all the programs San Quentin had because of all the people willing to volunteer and offer support:

Malachi expanded on how the volunteers help shape San Quentin by going above and beyond. This gave the prisoners opportunities to meet people: “You have probably a thousand volunteers coming inside each day, and the next day is a different set of volunteers. You know what I'm saying?” The CBOs also helped shaped Malachi’s viewpoint on Restorative Justice. Marlon also experienced a program consisting of college courses. He received his first “official

college credit" though John Hancock College. He described that the professors would come in to teach classes. In fact, the janitorial program he took had been through their college.

Post-Incarceration: Programs Facilitating Transition and Post-Educational Opportunities

Participants reflected on the programs that they felt helped them with their transition or reintegration into life outside prison. The programs they mentioned were rehabilitation programs, housing programs, and an apprenticeship program.

Marlon was released a full calendar year early by participating in a drug rehabilitation program while being in Lompoc Federal Penitentiary. He explained how he had trepidation about applying to this program because he was never a drug user. He also stated that he really did not learn anything new from the program but used it as a vehicle for early release. Vincent's road to recovery has been a long and arduous one. Vincent was a repeat offender and many of his arrests were linked to his drug and alcohol abuse. He credited the fact that the program called Road to Recovery was located by his home in East Oakland:

> When I was released in '99, I met with my parole officer and he was going over my rap sheet and it was just dirty tests, dirty tests, absconding, absconding, 40, 60 violations there. It was just a mess. And he looking at this rap sheet, he's like, "You want to go to treatment or something?" And I didn't want to go to treatment. So what he suggested was that I go to a cleaner, sober living environment, and low and behold it was in my neighborhood too. … And they had outpatient programs and things going on . . . And that was the start. That was the start of my journey there. That was very helpful. (February 12, 2022)

A few participants spoke of the importance of housing programs in assisting with their transition. Malachi talked about his transitional housing and how he did not want to go home

and be a burden to his mother, grandmother, and other family members. Vincent credited the program Building Opportunities for Self Sufficiency (BOSS) and a case worker named Zena who took a liking to him for helping his own transition. Zena set up housing for Vincent and was really a guiding light to Vincent by teaching them how to really be self-sufficient:

> From there, I got housing through, it wasn't Shelter Plus. It was BOSS. It was BOSS, was Building Opportunities for Self Sufficiency now. Then it was Berkeley Oakland Supportive Services. And I was able to stay with them for 18 months. They got me my first apartment and I didn't have to do anything. Zena with BOSS, she called me up one day, like, "Come sign this lease." I was like, "What?" Went up there and signed the lease. And I'm glad she did it for me because I didn't know how to do any of that. I just wasn't responsible at that time. So I went and signed the lease, got my first apartment and that started my journey to self-sufficiency. It worked for me. (February 12, 2022)

It's worth noting the experience of one participant, Vincent, in a program that was helpful with his transition. Vincent found an apprenticeship program that greatly assisted his employment opportunities.

Shaka alluded to receiving an MIT Media Lab Fellowship. Media Lab Fellows are offered a two-year honorary affiliation with the MIT Media Lab. The Fellows meet and collaborate with Lab students and faculty both on- and off-site to deploy Lab innovation, tackle real-world problems, and expand mutual learning and creativity. Shaka expounded upon his involvement with MIT and how he almost won a distinguished award. He elaborated on the importance of educational opportunities post-incarceration,

> You know while I didn't go on to continue my college education, post-incarceration, I've continued to work with universities throughout the country and just the ability to be in a

> classroom with professors and students, I love working with young students, young minds and I think that the intersection of our criminal justice system and education, kind of parallels in terms of the institutionalized nature of it. (May 14, 2022)

Factors that Build Success: Reactivating the Genius inside Us, Networking, and Education

In this theme, participants discussed the importance of reactivating the genius inside of them, mentorship experiences, engaging in networking and community building, and formal education as factors that keep formerly incarcerated individuals from returning to prison. All the participants in this study talked about how reactivating the genius inside of them was critical to integrating successfully into life outside prison. They all recognized that it was not possible to continue to think and behave in the same ways they had before being incarcerated if they wanted to avoid becoming a repeat offender. They also realized that reactivating the genius inside of them is not an overnight thing but one that comes with patience, understanding, and surrounding oneself with positive people in nurturing environments.

Malachi spoke about this theme at length, especially with respect to how limited his mind was before he was incarcerated:

> When I was incarcerated. . . my mind was limited. My mind was just shaped in South Central and Inglewood and juvenile hall and prison. That's all I knew. That's all in my mind. I didn't have that expansiveness in my thinking. (February 13, 2022)

Harold discussed the role of values in making the necessary change. Values are molded by family, community, and culture. A value system is a hierarchy of moral beliefs that and most people's value systems differ and can be influenced by our vices and/or virtues that develop over a continuum. Harold spoke of the need to reassess his value system while incarcerated and made the necessary changes to address his newly evolved values. Harold referred to emotional

intelligence (otherwise known as emotional quotient or EQ) as the ability to understand, use, and manage one's own emotions in positive ways to relieve stress, communicate effectively, empathize with others, overcome challenges, and defuse conflict. Without having a solid grasp on one's EQ, some men will continue to have anger management issues. Harold explained that being part of the animal kingdom and with that comes emotions and sometimes rage. He went on further to explain:

> So, my value system and I have to do this process, self-realization, family, education, community. Ability to process emotions attributed to mentors. Whereas before, it was all emotion. So, now I know what I'm feeling. I know what I'm feeling. When I'm mad. I can tell you, oh, man, I'm hot right now, I need to figure out where this is coming from. I'm getting frustrated right now. I am sad now, you hurt my feelings and all this stuff. I didn't have this ability before and this is why I'm not getting rearrested because I would say back then I needed somebody that could control me probably. Today I'm under control and this is attributed to my mentors but back then I had to learn to control myself so that somebody else don't have to control me. Speak up for yourself, and have confidence but do it in a way where you can sit down and talk to him, you don't have to start throwing punches and pulling knives and sh**. (June 17, 2022)

Similarly, Reggie explained how vital reactivating the genius inside of him and the transformation of the mind was to reintegrating into society. He acknowledged that nothing in his external world had changed. He also recognized since he did well early on in school it was no wonder that he excelled in college. Reggie concluded that the only way to handle that transition was to change his attitude. He said that he knew he "would always get out. And I could get out, and shine and go back, but how do you stay out?" He said, "Changing my mindset and humbling

myself, and asking for help was key. And . . . my staying power is what keeps me focused to this very day."

A closely related theme to mentoring, is the importance of cultivating relationships through building one's network and community. The participants all agreed that networking and community building are important elements for successful reintegration. Reggie and Malachi were able to articulate this the best. Reggie explained that networking was one of the key aspects of his experience at USF that really helped him with reintegration. He said, "meeting brothers like you that really care, that really means something, that I want to form a lifelong bond with" was so vital to his ability to realize his ambition. He had not thought that college was necessary "a place for network," "I thought of it just a place to go get a degree. But it's like, yeah, so important to network, man." He had 12 people in this cohort, and they would be 12 people he could ask for recommendations. He said, "I just feel like those are areas and gaps that we can actually capitalize on if we start to build on that more."

Reggie explained that networking is not only meeting with people from the same school or who are on the same career trajectory. He viewed it as,

> being intentional. Like in any relationship, right? Giving it life. What we would do is let's sit down and eat together. It's not just about the business, right? Let me get to know you as a person. Let me get a feel for you. Because to be honest, everybody ain't for everybody, or let me say it like this, everybody ain't for me. I need to get a sense of the vibe. (March 23, 2022)

Similarly, Malachi expressed the importance to him of building a community. The community was source of healing for him as he could talk through issues and feel loved, valued, and supported in living a meaningful life:

> Because I had community, I was able to get a job after the year of being home, where I didn't have to put on anything that I was incarcerated because it's about who I know and the relationships that I have. Because I had community, I didn't have to worry about what clothes I'm going to get, if I run out of food, what's going to happen. Some of these worries that other people may have, I didn't have to, so I definitely had privilege in that. Ain't nothing like having people that love you, so find that. (February 13, 2022)

Four participants, Malachi, Harold, Vincent, and Reggie, expressed how their education helped them to strengthen the parts of themselves that were vital to their ability to be successful and not recidivate. They emphasized the importance of education in providing structure and future opportunities, along with paving the way to employment.

Providing Success Structures and Future Opportunities

Malachi expanded on how education helped him to find another path and develop aspects of himself he had known that he had but had not experienced. It helped him to think about things and see things differently and make better decisions. Malachi knew deep down that a high level of academic intelligence had been suppressed since he youth and he just needed a way to activate. He talked about the classes as opening his mind up to new experiences and "that exposure to those kinds of conversations also was a part of me expanding in my knowledge and wisdom and development." Malachi knew that with the right structure in place he would flourish. He explained how it helped to change the way he saw his life:

> because if all I knew was what I experienced in the gang life, me hearing about more opportunities, me seeing the world, and me learning about the history that led up to this gang culture gave me certain knowledge that tells me that I bit the fish hook. (February 13, 2022)

Malachi also expressed how education helps give people structure when they are on the outside and how it is up to educators, your support system and the community to provide structures for success. He said that getting a degree cultivates the same attitude and lifestyle skills that it takes to hold a job. Waking up, staying on top of the schedule, struggling, asking questions, keeping at it, and putting in the hard work to get it.

Both Harold and Marlon thought education was key to successful reintegration. To Harold, higher education is the key "to move through today's society." Marlon talked about education as being something that can help reduce recidivism because it gives people more opportunities:

> It's like you don't want to throw that away for something stupid. So, I would say that it does decrease the likelihood that you would reoffend if you have a college degree because you're invested in something and you have more opportunities. (February 11, 2022)

Reggie also noted how having more opportunities because of the education he received. His opportunities included "Entrepreneurship, many opportunities that would never have happened because of achieving a doctorate." Now he is regularly invited to boards and panels and is asked to be interviewed. As he commented, "It's just been amazing. It's been an amazing change." He also talked about the role that "completing education, getting my degree gave me" in being "an anchor on the side of staying out, doing positive things." In retrospect, he recognized that in his early schooling, he was a victim of anti-Black systems quick to give him a referral, suspend, and expel him. Reggie now combats the broken criminal justice system and white supremacy with abolitionist theory by fighting back against the system through his lectures, theater work, and volunteering in local prisons and jails.

Vincent said “a college education” reduced recidivism for him because “it put me in a position where I wasn't so in need of resources that I had to start thinking criminally.” He describes that during the recession, his unemployment ran out, his wife “ran out” and, while “sitting at home, the only thing I'm thinking of is going back to what I know, sell some dope.” He said that for the next two months I didn't do anything. I didn't pay rent. I didn't pay bills.” He said “It was actually school that kind of saved me.” His dad and uncle were going to community college, taking “substance abuse classes with Dr. Love at Merritt. So that's what landed me at Merritt. And they already had all the hookup.”

Educational prowess was lying dormant in Vincent, just like with others. Education was important to his grandmother, father, and uncle, and he went to Merritt Community College at the same time as his father and uncle. The structural support Vincent gained later in life could have given him what he needed as a youth when he lost interest in school. This structural support involves the community, teachers, and immediate family working in tandem to foster the development of our youth.

From Education to Employment

For those who are lucky enough to be in a prison that offers educational opportunities, it is usually a good way to make the most of your time. Some incarcerated take classes that enhance their job outlook, while others take classes for personal growth. Marlon took advantage of classes being offered at Federal Correctional Institution Lompoc, as he detailed how one accomplishment led to the next. He received his janitorial certificate while in federal prison. After receiving his AS degree, he was hired as an electronic technician - a job that earned him double the pay he had been receiving. He applied to be a foreman, and while in that position, finished his education at California State University-East Bay, where he received a BS. Marlon

just kept going up level after level. His success in climbing the BART career ladder was a combination of education and training, pushing himself, asking people the right questions, and applying the same hustle and ingenuity that he used as a drug dealer. Marlon demonstrated transferable skills that he used before his incarceration to become the Superintendent of BART Maintenance:

> From a foreman, I did other jobs, including training manager, and assistant superintendent. I Left BART and went to another organization for two years. I came back as an assistant superintendent again but then hired as a superintendent. At that time, it was to take what I can get, what was coming into the prison as programs. That college was probably pretty much the only thing that they had in the region that was actually invested into, I guess, the prisoners in there. If they would have offered a photography class, I probably would have taken that. (February 11, 2022)

In the same way, Reggie explained how community college was impactful to his future employment. He began his educational career in community college, and now he is known as Dr. Reggie Daniels as an adjunct professor at USF, violence prevention specialist, playwright, actor, and director. At S.F. City College, he took a wide array of classes, including philosophy where he started a philosophy club. He received his AS there. He then was in a play at San Francisco State, where he learned about and applied to an accelerated undergraduate program for working adults where students can receive their BA in 13 months if they have the units. He was able to transfer the units needed and was done in 13 months.

Recommendations for Building Foundations for Success

The final theme includes participants' recommendations for ways to improve access to educational opportunities and reduce recidivism. These were mainly ideas that institutions and

organizations could adopt to improve the system, including rethinking laws and the prison system.

Most participants agreed that existing rehabilitative programs are currently inadequate. Participants referred to restorative justice, job training, preparing those for changes that had occurred on the outside while they were in prison, and mentoring programs as being impactful. Whereas some participants took certificate programs while incarcerated, which eventually led to their current career, Malachi said the restorative justice practices he learned in prison were able to accomplish quite a bit in helping him to heal. Malachi explained that what is needed is more in the way of "education, restorative justice, healing, mental health support, whatever they feel . . . is necessary until we get to a point where we can get rid of the prisons and replace them with more of a restorative accountability." This will provide healing "process and structure."

Shaka spoke of the lack of rehabilitative components that were in place when he went in. He also spoke to the fact that prisons are doing an inadequate job of training people for current jobs, for instance, tech careers or even trucking. He said that when he entered prison in 1991, there was a rehabilitative component, but these opportunities began to disappear like programming and educational programs. He described prison as a "hopeless environment." He felt what was needed were "more opportunities for people to get an education, learn how to do a trade, do something that allows them to create a career path for themselves."

Both Marlon and Shaka would have benefited from rehabilitative components that would have prepared them for changes taking place in the world. When Marlon was released, he began to witness gentrification for the first time. He said that the cost of living had gone up as the tech world had transformed urban communities. Similarly, Shaka saw that Black marginalization was taking shape, and he wanted to do something about it. Oakland was changing from

predominantly Black to less so, and housing was difficult to get because “the rents, it seemed like they doubled in four years.” Shaka brought up the need for more mentorship programs like the Anti-Recidivism Coalition (ARC) he was involved with and the need to expand programs like ARC.

Shaka, Vincent, Marlon, and Malachi all spoke to the importance of education and how college programs should be offered with more consistency. Some prisons offered educational programs while others did not. Vincent talked about how Pell grants disappearing and college courses were becoming unavailable, while Shaka spoke about how the program he was attending was about to be discontinued. Most of the participants talked about their frustrations, the inconsistency, and good programs losing funding. For example, Shaka noted how his program lost funding “due to Clinton's crime bill. . . and we ended up not being able to complete our college education.” He said that others were able to get their “associate's degree and unfortunately, I wasn't able to complete mine because they ended the program.” Shaka wanted to see more opportunities for people to “engage with these different universities as they begin to prepare for life after prison.” This would help people start to make contacts and develop an interest they can pursue when they get out. Shaka said that education is just one potential aspect of reentry and that everything else needs to fall in place for an individual to be successful.

Marlon also spoke of the potential role of prisons in offering academic and trade programs. He said that these programs offer hope and emphasized how education can provide hope:

> I mean I think providing hope, right? If somebody has hope that, hey, when I come out here, it’s something that I can do to . . . Because everybody wants to provide for their family and everybody wants to be on their feet. So, if the prison can put you in a position

> where you feel like you're leaving with a skill, a trade, a knowledge that can make you competitive and can help you survive, I do think that that will be a positive for anyone that's leaving prison. (February 11, 2022)

Furthermore, Malachi advocated for more educational programs for the incarcerated along with more comprehensive programs. For example, many employers value experience over education. The question becomes: How does one get a job without experience? How does an incarcerated individual obtain the experience necessary to apply for jobs? Nowadays, people need both education and experience to acquire employment. Malachi lamented how frustrating it was trying to attain positions he did not have the experience for and how education is not everything. He recommended that institutions and organizations develop programs that help incarcerated individuals acquire the experience they need to gain meaningful employment:

> You got to get people an experience. You got to trust people, and give them a shot at learning. That's one of the sad things about job applications or job positions that become available. You need to have the experience to get it. There's no pathway to experience. It's like, okay, whether you have a degree or not, getting that experience, figuring out a way to get that experience [is critical]. (February 13, 2022)

Malachi and Shaka expressed the need for wraparound support, including therapy, education, job training, and continued mental health support. Malachi explained that mental health practitioners need to do much more than simply prescribe pills. He said that the medical programs in prison are mostly about making money:

> You have people who are dealing with mental health and the only thing that they get is some pills every day. They might sit down to talk to a psych or something like that, but they're stuck in the cell. They don't get adequate treatment in there. (February 13, 2022)

Malachi went on to express how “the prisons aren't designed to support people with mental health either.” Treatment for mental health issues is also needed outside of prison. The tendency to simply medicate and not go deeper and address the trauma underlying the symptoms occurs both in and outside prison. Shaka also viewed that having therapy and wrap-around support was vital “to help stabilize people post-incarceration.”

Participants spoke at length about particular aspects of institutional life that needed changing. For one, separating people by their gang affiliation was a practice that was counterproductive to rehabilitation and healing. In addition, restorative justice practices should be more widely integrated to bring about a greater sense of justice and healing for both those inside and the community outside prison.

Reggie remarked that in every institution there is “a small cadre of folks who are willing and who want to change, and who are open to talking to people, and I just don’t see these institutions taking advantage of those small opportunities.” They could start by trying to “bridge the gaps between communities, and some of that hurt, and some of the violence that goes on, and I think that that would filter out into the streets. And that could be a deep impact for change.”

In terms of creating conditions in which the incarcerated could heal and change, Malachi was a strong advocate for restorative justice practices in prison. He emphasized that “restorative justice is about relationships.” It involves people “really expressing why they did what they did. . . . the way that things impacted them, and that takes . . . vulnerability.” Although a lot of shame and guilt may come up, “it can be transformational. People can learn a lot about themselves and also see other people model vulnerability that necessarily creates a different thought in their mind about sharing.” Malachi strongly believed these practices would help people come to terms with their past and move on.

Participants shared many different ideas for providing the support that incarcerated individuals need to successfully reintegrate, such as changing one's mindset and changing one's lifestyle and how mentoring often helps to provide that support. Changing one's mindset involves people leaving a different way than how they entered the prison. It includes feeling empowered to choose what they want for themselves, knowing that they have what it takes to make a living that is legal, and they have alternatives to violence. Reggie explained how he reconditioned his mindset so that he could "tone down all of my necessities," adding that a part of changing his mindset was to recognize that he did not need material things any longer. He was not the same person because he had already lived on meager standards. He recalled how his decisions used to be driven by the need to impress people with material possessions:

> I'm out here trying to live a life that . . . I really can't live—to impress people that probably really don't like me, right? To do something that's going to send me right back. And I think that, like I said, brothers will hand us that suicide kit when we first get out, if we open to it. (March 23, 2022)

Malachi also believed that success on the outside requires a "transformation of the mind." Malachi is another example of the importance of having a change of mindset to succeed. He left prison with a renewed sense of purpose and that helped him to do what he needed to do to make his life work. Moreover, he was aware there was work for him to do and he was motivated to do it. It would be that motivation that gave him the strength to not open "that suicide kit" that Reggie mentioned:

> I'm going to scratch, claw, turn over every rock, do whatever I can before I go that way, and not just give up and don't do my research, don't put in the effort, and do something and make me go back inside. I'm committed to myself and to where I want to be, and to

> my purpose too. I feel like I have purpose in this world. I have reasons to be here and I have a mission to accomplish if that makes sense at all. (February 13, 2022)

The participants discussed the need to have structure to support and sustain these changes, including a change in lifestyle. Harold and Malachi spoke of how some of their old friends and family members do not recognize when a change has taken place in them. These individuals do not want people to change because they may not be ready to make changes for the better themselves. This often can cause a rift in the relationship because when people start out on a positive track it does not allow for negativity. Harold explained that when he was focused on his school work his friends would often try to distract him by wanting him to hang out instead.

Self-discovery was another theme that participants recommended for those spending a lot of time in prison. Malachi grew up in prison. He went in when he was 15 years and he talked about what it was like to grow up there versus growing up on the outside. There is maturity that has to take place. A person can regress back to a younger age if they have not experienced childhood. He talked about how "people need support to grow up." Especially people like himself, who grew up on the inside: "I would definitely say take time to get to know yourself on the outside." He said developmentally, people need to figure out what they want in life. They need to allow themselves to do that and they need a structure that allows that. Malachi went on to about the importance of self-discovery, self-love, building your community, and enjoying the journey of self-discovery.

> What I would've told you the day that I got out versus now probably would look different. That's because I'm getting to know who I am on the outside in this world and where I want to go. Slow down; build your community and your social network, enjoy the path of finding out what you want to do, and pursue that. . . . Also, self-love and

> being committed to yourself, being married to yourself in the sense that you know what you want so much, you know what you don't want. So, you are not going to necessarily put yourself in a situation where you can reoffend. That's one thing I don't want to do. (February 13, 2022)

Malachi and Shaka both mentioned the role of accountability in this change of mindset and lifestyle. To Shaka, who said education was important, "there's a whole host of other things that have to happen. What must go along with college is the need for accountability." The "personal accountability piece that I think is important," he said. Malachi also thought accountability was an important aspect of success on the outside. He referred to this as "restorative accountability" —a kind of process and structure that promotes healing. People need "stable friendships," having a more "inside-out approach," which can start while people are still incarcerated and that sets up "realistic expectations that allow them to gradually grow through the process." He believed that with this kind of structure the "outcomes are a lot better.

Similar to the type of structure Malachi mentioned, Shaka had a program in mind that he had seen work firsthand. He was the executive director of the Anti-Recidivism Coalition and the people in the program were "all formerly lifers, all formerly serving life sentences, and the time spent inside range from I think at that time I was like 17 to 33 years and at that time." Although they were all men initially, they later invited women who had life sentences and whose sentences were either commuted or pardoned. The mentoring process would begin while people were still serving sentences and before parole and "that continues all the way throughout." He said, "We had a ride home program, where our team would go and pick them up the day they walked out of prison." He said they would feed them and "just really let them know that, 'Hey, we're here to support.'"

Lastly, Reggie and Malachi explained that reentry programs need to be more culturally relevant and that some programs outlive their mission and tend to drift until they are no longer serving the individuals they were developed to serve. Reggie explained that individuals from rehabilitation programs who work with decarcerated individuals need cultural competence. To be culturally competent, people need to have knowledge of another's culture, of their own culture, and differences between the two cultures. Self-reflection is key to developing cultural competence because we are steeped in a culture of systemic racism, in which blindness to culture and racism is the norm. Engaging in self-assessment is necessary to discover what one does and does not know about the culture of the individual they are working with. Reggie's experience in both county jail and in San Quentin were that programs were run by professional White women that had little or no experience with the culture of the people they were working with. Although they had credentials, they lacked the human connection. Regarding mission drift, Reggie reached a point of frustration when he learned that certain programs did not have the community's interest in mind, but instead cared more about perpetuating themselves through funding.

Summary

For many of my participants, joining a gang or acclimating to street life was a point of survival. Malachi described how he found community and a sense of belonging in the gang he joined, but most salient was his joining to survive. As Monster Kody Scott, author of best-seller autobiography *Monster* (1993) described:

> My activity gravitated around a survival instinct: Kill or be killed. Conditions dictated that I evolve or perish. I was engaged in a war with an equal opponent. I did not start this cycle, nor did I conspire to create the conditions so that this type of self-murder would take place. My participation came as second nature. To be in a gang in South Central

> when I joined–is the equivalent of growing up in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, and going to college: everyone does it. Those who don't aren't part of the fraternity. And as with everything from a union to a tennis club, it's better to be in than out. (Scott, 1993, p. 164)

The findings of this study show the importance of early experiences at school in either supporting or discouraging the participants to mature into individuals who are able to fully realize their potential. These findings also point to how influential incarcerated mentors are in helping African American men believe in themselves when they did not. This was noticeable in the stories of Shaka, Harold, and Reggie. Their incarcerated mentors gave them hope when they were in despair. For this reason, culturally responsive mentorship appears to be vital in helping system-impacted folks before reentry. In addition to culturally responsive mentorship and teaching, awareness of a broken system is needed as well.

CHAPTER VI: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, REFLECTIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Summary

This study explored the oral histories of six formerly incarcerated African American men. The findings show the importance of early experiences at school in either supporting or discouraging them to mature into individuals who are able to fully realize their potential. The study was conducted in the hope that this exploration will inform researchers and policymakers aiming to design programs and create laws that are equitable and improve social, economic, and academic outcomes for formerly incarcerated African Americans.

My study aimed to fill in the gaps of prior research on formerly incarcerated by providing authentic narratives based on their experiences with reentry. Most previous research has focused on the accounts of people on the outside of prison looking in. In this study, my formerly incarcerated participants played an active role in contributing to a body of research that has often reflected the perspective of systems that have historically kept us out of view or cast our experiences in an overly positive light. Moreover, this study provides alternative solutions to reducing recidivism through mentorship and education. The framework for this exploration was BlackCrit, which acknowledges the existence of a racially biased system and urges an understanding of what constitutes Blackness and challenges conversations beyond racism by emphasizing *being Black* and *knowing what it means to be Black* (Dumas & ross, 2016).

The study's findings show that participants were able to reclaim their humanity through education—a universal human right—and mentorship. The study extends previous literature that placed emphasis on anti-Blackness and the school-to-prison pipeline as the main factors that influence the likelihood of African American males entering incarceration systems. Participants'

narratives suggest that many other factors contributed to their "acting out," which ultimately led to incarceration.

One of these factors was unaddressed emotional and psychological trauma from childhood. Another factor was the "dumbing down" of intelligence in order to fit in with peer groups that did not put a high value on education. Thirdly, a sense of belonging that was affiliated with joining a gang, as well as finding ways to get money illegally with neighborhood friends, helped compensate for losses and trauma in family life. Lastly, there was an apprehension of "delayed gratification" juxtaposed to "fast money," which was constantly modeled to all of the participants since their adolescence, all of whom came from low socioeconomic status.

In this chapter, I present the following: (1) Discussion of responses to the research questions and how they relate to the scholarly literature in Chapter II; (2) Reflections on the interviewing process and conducting this research; (3) Participants' recommendations; (4) My recommendations for future research, practice, and policy; and (5) Conclusion.

Discussion: Responses to Research Questions

The main objective of the study was to highlight how college education and mentorship may reduce recidivism for formerly incarcerated African American males. I begin this section by discussing how the findings answered the following research questions in this study:

1. What is the role of college education in reducing recidivism in formerly incarcerated African American males?
2. What is the role of mentorship in reducing recidivism in formerly incarcerated African American males?

3. What is the role of mentorship in reducing recidivism in formerly incarcerated African American males?

4. Which other interventions have helped to reduce recidivism in formerly incarcerated African American males?

Research Question #1: What Is the Role of College Education in Reducing Recidivism in Formerly Incarcerated African American Males?

College played a critical role in reducing recidivism because none of my participants returned to prison after receiving a college degree, and this is consistent with what the literature states about reducing recidivism. The highest degree among the interviewees was a doctorate in Organization and Leadership, which was earned by Professor Reggie Daniels. Marlon Lewis and Vincent Garrett have Master's degrees in business and social work, respectfully. Harold Atkins, Malachi Scott, and Shaka Senghor all have Associate's degrees. Even with an Associate's degree, the participants of this study did not recidivate. As Marlon stated, "Once you have something to lose, you typically do not want to do anything dumb to jeopardize that."

The participants were able to be successful in higher education because they possessed academic greatness inside them all along. Although their elementary, middle, and high school teachers had opportunities to tap the participants' academic potential, they did not do so. This reflects a systemic problem of White supremacy. All educators can play a significant part in connecting students with their passion, goals, or careers, but they are not able to do so with structural impediments, like the curriculum they use. Methods of teaching the participants often failed to engage them, especially when they had experiences at home or in their community that were keeping them from focusing. Using a curriculum that draws on students' multiple intelligences could help African American students express themselves at a fuller capacity in

kinesthetic, musical, dance, and dramatic expressions, which could have a healing effect on them (Gardiner, 2011).

Research Question #2: What Is the Role of Mentorship in Reducing Recidivism in Formerly Incarcerated African American Males?

My participants described how when they were in prison, they needed people who were going to uplift and highlight their redeemable qualities. They met some of their most supportive mentors when they were incarcerated, and some of the participants maintained these relationships. The literature does not mention that having a mentor while incarcerated is effective in reducing recidivism among African American males; rather, it suggests that mentors should be folks who are decarcerated. This study is unique in that it suggests that incarcerated and decarcerated mentors are effective in reducing recidivism among Black males. However, most importantly, in this study, the participants showed how culturally relevant mentors and the ability to establish rapport and trust quickly were essential to building a long-lasting relationship.

Shaka discussed how his mentors in prison gave him literature and challenged him on topics within the book to assess whether he was reading it or not. Even though these gentlemen were older than Shaka, they still saw leadership qualities in him. They influenced Shaka in many positive ways, and their mentorship continued to affect him after his release. According to Shaka, they played a large role in ensuring he did something constructive upon reentry.

Reggie had never seen another place or institution where Black men were getting together with older Black men who were wise, brothers who were conscious about their diet, conscious about what they read, clean, and disciplined. When Reggie experienced this, he was inspired to do right by following their wisdom and guidance. Reggie gave a lot of credit to his mentor Floyd who was able to model the attributes Reggie would need to make it on the outside.

Reggie said, “I needed Floyd in my life, bro . . . I needed a brother that was actually living it that I could see.”

Similarly, Vincent experienced positive mentorship when he got to Merritt College. A professor named Ron Moss at Merritt College saw potential in Vincent. Professor Ron Moss was considered a legend and local hero at Merritt. Unfortunately, Ron passed away in 2020, having influenced a large number of people. Professor Ron Moss was instrumental in establishing the Street Scholars Peer Mentoring Program as a student services program for formerly incarcerated adults attending Merritt College. Over 75% of the Street Scholar students were formerly incarcerated or had substance abuse issues, and the majority of the students graduate from the program and acquire fulfilling jobs.

All of the participants of this study expressed that everyone needs a mentor, and they would not have gone as far as they did without the help of one. Only one participant, Marlon, did not benefit from a mentor. He attributed his success to other factors, such as attaining his janitorial certificate.

Research Question #3: What Are the Barriers to Successful Social Integration and Educational Attainment of Formerly Incarcerated African American Males?

The barriers to social integration and educational attainment have to do with the cost of college. All of my participants spoke about how expensive college tuition is. Two participants applied for grants and scholarships to help cover the cost of college, while others started a GoFund.me account (an online platform for accepting donations). The cost of college is still a major barrier to educational attainment. More decarcerated individuals would be pursuing higher education if college was not so expensive. The participants were able to utilize their resources in order to pursue their goal of achieving academically.

Another barrier to social integration is unresolved trauma. Whether psychological, physical, or emotional, trauma left to fester has negative long-term effects on an individual. The long-term effects can lead to anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and depression. Ignoring lifelong signs of mental health issues often leads to high blood pressure, heart attack, and stroke, which is already a major issue in Black communities. Many of the participants had unresolved emotional trauma from their childhood and acted in ways that were unbecoming of who they were. Early interventions, such as seeking mental health help, can assist people in getting better and recovering completely.

Interestingly, none of the participants spoke of *imposter syndrome* because they already felt in their hearts that they belonged in institutes of higher learning. The participants believed they could achieve academically because they had excelled at some earlier point in their educational journey. Thus, it was a matter of recommitting and staying focused on the new goal.

Research Question #4: Which Other Interventions Have Helped to Reduce Recidivism in Formerly Incarcerated African American Males?

Education matters. Job training matters. Community-based organizations matter. All of these had a major impact on the participants. Each participant reported how being able to take classes when in prison made them feel that they were able to make the most of their time. One intervention that helped reduce recidivism was a janitorial certificate that Marlon Lewis received when he was at Federal Correctional Institute Lompoc. The janitorial certificate created a pathway for Marlon to eventually become the Superintendent of Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART).

Malachi was introduced to restorative justice practices by a community-based organization while incarcerated in San Quentin. He now is the coordinator of Restorative Justice

for Oakland Youth (RJOY). Harold went through an HIV peer education program which prepared him for his career working with Healthy Choices and now is Director of Each One Reach One Success Centers for San Mateo Juvenile Hall.

Changing one's mindset was something all participants mentioned as vital to them in their ability to leave prison and not return, and this finding is a contribution to previous literature. Oftentimes, a change of mindset has to do with turning negative thoughts into positive ones. In these narratives, participants saw the need to change their belief systems or thinking patterns regarding the ways in which they could earn money. Financial currency is a driving force when folks are transitioning from adolescence (young boys) to adulthood (manhood). The primary question in their minds as grown men is: How are they going to provide for themselves and their family? They were aware that people in their neighborhood were getting lots of money illegally, but now with a changed mindset they knew of a myriad of ways to make money legally (or the right way); they needed to discover the way that was right for them. Malachi alluded to the need for self-exploration, what adolescents need to do developmentally to grow into their adult identity. When individuals are released from prison, they may need time to engage in a similar self-exploration

Moreover, wanting something better for oneself and one's family is not a crime, but using illegal ways of achieving this makes it a bad thing. While some of the counter-narratives were unique to my participants, the lack of mental health resources and exposure to non-traditional career fields are critical challenges for schools. I ask my sons all the time, "Do you guys have career days?" and the answer is always, "No." Why don't we have career days in elementary schools anymore? Instead of metal detectors at schools, can we invest in internship opportunities? This would allow an intelligent Black child to see themselves as a software

engineer, coder, or computer scientist. The system needs to change—not the individuals. The arrows are pointing to the structural inequalities and should not be pointing to the affected individual that the system impacts.

Reflections on the Process

I used BlackCrit theory to help me analyze the role of anti-Blackness in explaining how Black bodies became marginalized, disregarded, and disdained in schools and other spaces of education. In this case, the lack of education or the feeling that an individual has nothing to lose potential leads to feelings of inadequacy, which causes many participants to act out (Dumas & ross, 2016). Alicia Garza, one of the co-creators of #BlackLivesMatter, explained,

> When we say Black Lives Matter, we are talking about the ways in which Black people are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity. It is an acknowledgment that Black poverty and genocide is state violence. It is an acknowledgment that 1 million Black people are locked in cages in this country—one-half of all people in prisons or jails—is an act of state violence. (Garza, 2014. p. 3)

Although my participants all volunteered their time to conduct these interviews, which they did not have to, they all felt a sense of pride in sharing their experiences. Even though they did me a favor, my participants all thanked me for being a part of this study. Many of my participants expressed how liberating and important it was for them to disenthrall their minds from past guilt and shame associated with being incarcerated.

Conducting interviews and writing about my experience and others was cathartic in the sense that I was able to reflect back on being incarcerated myself and look at the support I received upon reentry. In addition, I was able to process some feelings that I had about being a failure or letting my family and community down. The participants of this study found this

process to be therapeutic as well because they were able to work through tough periods of their childhood; in doing so, there was a healing component to being interviewed.

The six participants displayed a high level of resilience. Being resilient is the ability to overcome difficult situations and not let those arduous moments hamper one's life goals. Every last one of the participants exemplified resiliency. This is the reason I wanted to interview these gentlemen—to hear their qualitative stories on what worked for them and helped them to not recidivate.

Overall Recommendations

Surrounding Oneself with Positivity

Harold Gardiner (2011) points to a mindset in which researchers and teachers "systematically underestimate the importance of situational factors and overestimate the importance of dispositional factors" (p. 185). This means that rather than viewing a person's learning style and behavior as a result of environmental factors, behavior is "attributed to his being a 'bad' or a 'good' person" (p. 187). All of the participants were clear on the effects of the school-to-prison pipeline, mass incarceration, and the prison industrial complex. They became disengaged with school in spite of starting out bright, competitive, and eager to excel. For some, the street seemed to offer more skills for surviving their environment than school did. Rather than neglect their needs, we need to create in our schools an environment that sets them up for success. Some of my participants have used their own platform to educate, inform, and eradicate the barriers they faced.

"It takes a village to raise a child" is an old African proverb that essentially means we need all stakeholders involved in order for our youth to be successful. We need the principal, the teachers, coaches, parents, and the community to not only recognize potential but also help our

Black youth obtain greatness. Our communities are depending on this to happen. As you can see, when the participants were put in the right conditions, they achieved. It is on educators to create the right conditions. Let us take what we know and create these communities of achievement. If the system is broken, then let's fix what we can. Knowledge is power, and communities must mobilize in order to spread awareness so our Black youth do not become a casualty of mass incarceration.

Teachers Missing Something Important: "How Did the Teachers Miss Those Signs?"

A few participants recounted times in which others, such as teachers, should have noticed that something was hindering their academic performance and inquired into what it was. They noted instances in which their trauma or distress could have been identified and addressed and what a difference it would have made in their life trajectories. Shaka in particular wondered: "How did the teachers miss those signs? You know, a kid that goes from a Rhode scholarship to not even really caring about participation, and sadly, it is this reality that I see often in our school systems." (May 14th, 2022)

Lack of Support for Academic Achievement: "They Didn't Foster My Abilities"

Several participants mentioned that people did not encourage them academically. Even when participants did well in school early on, elementary school teachers had an opportunity to connect what they were doing well in the classroom to job or career opportunities. For example, Marlon recalled doing well in math and science. He was hoping that someone would have recognized this and explained to him how being good in math and science can potentially lead to careers in Science Technology Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM).

Cultural Competence in CBOs

Another recommendation for organizations that offer rehabilitation programs is that they learn about cultural competence. Most CBOs fail to have culturally competent individuals. Many of these personnel lack the ability to connect with people of different cultures, ethnicities, and socioeconomic levels. The need for cultural relevance is critical in helping the formerly incarcerated reintegrate into society. This was noticed by several interviewees when being asked about programming in prisons. Oftentimes, if a particular state penitentiary has funding to hire outside CBOs, they elect to send people that have the credentials but lack the experience and expertise in working with African American felons.

More funding needs to go into job training and to prepare system-impacted folks for career fields. A better aptitude test or career assessment tool for matching personality, values, and skills with growing career fields is lacking.

Recommendations for Future Research

In this section, I offer my recommendations for future research. These recommendations are centered around the following: (1) developing cultural competency, (2) utilizing the transferable skill set of system-impacted individuals, (3) establishing an entrepreneurial mindset, and (4) working with the formerly incarcerated and capitalizing on young student success or preemptive solutions to prison.

Developing Cultural Competency

In terms of cultural competence, it would be advantageous to study the effectiveness of community-based organizations (CBOs) with high levels of cultural competence compared to CBOs that lack cultural competence or who employ folks that view cultural competence as unnecessary. In addition, this study took the first step in discovering the importance of mentoring

in reducing recidivism, but more research is needed on the benefits of mentoring for formerly incarcerated individuals. Such research could validate the extent to which the formerly incarcerated are successful, as all these participants were, by becoming instrumental in putting policy into practice. Participants all made substantial efforts to apply what they learned so that others could benefit from it.

Many of these participants are mentors now after having benefited from it in the past. For example, Reggie has mentored formerly incarcerated individuals in the San Francisco County Jail, and Vincent Garrett is the coordinator of Restorying Our Community (ROC). Although Malachi took another man's life, he has devoted his own life to running restorative justice circles. Shaka was the coordinator of ARC, a program that implements mentoring in prison before individuals are paroled and supports them post-prison, ensuring they are supported and successful. Harold is the director of success centers for San Mateo Juvenile Hall. These gentlemen personify cultural competence and praxis.

Utilizing Transferable Skills of System-Impacted Individuals

Another recommendation for future research would be long-term because it might be difficult to track the effectiveness of an intervention throughout an individual's lifetime. All of my participants are industrious, conscientious, and enterprising individuals who chose the wrong path to entrepreneurship. Their path led them to prison. A recommendation for further research is to examine how transferable skills, like being a "hustler" in street narcotics, could be used in building a legitimate business. In particular, research could explore the transferability of skills like initiative, communication, adaptability, and leadership, which are desirable traits of both a "hustler" and a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of an enterprise.

We need more research on the types of economic models that can help the Black community attain economic self-sufficiency. Malcolm X advocated for economic models that were in line with the philosophy "that we should control, own and operate the businesses of our community, and thereby be in a position to create job opportunities for our own people so that they won't have to boycott and picket and beg others to give them a job" (Goldman, 2013, p. 149). My research recommendation would be for more studies that examine which business models have been successful in Black neighborhoods. Longitudinal research on effective business models that employ historically underserved youth who demonstrate early entrepreneurship would be useful. An example of this is how a friend opened up his own cannabis dispensary after catching a marijuana charge.

Working with Formerly Incarcerated Individuals

What was shown to be effective with the participants of this study was creating opportunities that were not available before they went to prison. Some found success with education, and others with entrepreneurship. The participants were split regarding whether their mentorship experiences were more effective inside or outside of prison. They all agreed that important attributes to interventions include showing authenticity, establishing trust, and being able to lead its participants to successful outcomes. These aspects are crucial to gaining participants' full investment. However more research on these topics would be useful.

Recommendations for Policy into Practice

The formerly incarcerated participants personified policy into practice because they either do mentor work now or benefitted from it in the past.

The Documentary Film

As a part of my passion for this research, I decided to not only record this journey through this dissertation to also create a documentary film entitled, *Reclaiming Our Humanity: Redemption, Reimagining, and Restorying of the Foundations for Success of Formerly Incarcerated African American Males.* I chose this title because I feel you lose a little bit of yourself when you go to prison. You lose the ability to eat what you want. You lose the luxury of wearing your own clothes. You lose the ability to make decisions for yourself. You lose your humanity and these brothas reclaimed it. The documentary will document the stories of the six participants I interviewed, along with a group interview I conducted with four other previously incarcerated men. My documentary will be available by Summer 2023.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this process, I had certain expectations of how this was going to go. I thought it would be challenging to find six participants, much less getting them to commit time and energy to my cause. My cause was to complete my dissertation promptly. Not only did my six participants commit to my dissertation journey, but they held me accountable for continuing to write when I did not feel like it. Initially, when I started conducting the research, I had it in my mind that I would hear negative stories about my participants' upbringing and how they had to sell drugs to keep the lights on and the water flowing in the house. In many instances, this was not the case. Although I had a few interviewees who grew up in Section 8 housing and used food stamps for meals (which my mother did as well early on) the majority of my participants went to church, played sports, had academic rigor, and had a community of support.

This study was able to determine that environmental factors played a central part in leading participants to incarceration. Many of my participants wanted to do well in school, but traumatic events went unrecognized, making their successful beginnings difficult to sustain. The

lack of importance that is given to schools in certain underserved communities, leading to a "dumbing down" of intelligence, affected their outcomes and led them to eventual incarceration. All of my participants came from communities that did not emphasize academia and utilized resources to police Black boys instead of coaching, inspiring, or mentoring. Peer influence was a major contributor to the school-to-prison pipeline displayed in the findings and lack of alternatives to the types of illegal success they found within their communities.

The trajectories of my participants were mainly due to the structural impediments of their environment. These structural barriers are impenetrable for many who live in similar communities. As Luis Rodríguez writes in his book, *Always Running* (1993):

> I've talked to enough gang members and low-level dope dealers to know that they would quit today if they had a productive, livable-wage job. . . . If there was a viable alternative, they would stop. If we all had a choice, I'm convinced nobody would choose la vida loca . . . to "gang bang." But it's going to take collective action and a plan. (p. 251)

This study was conducted in the hope that this exploration would inform researchers and policymakers aiming to design programs and create laws that are equitable and improve social, economic, and academic outcomes for formerly incarcerated African Americans. Let us create communities of achievement and foster the giftedness so vital to the larger community.

I am glad that I had the opportunity to amplify the unheard voices of those formerly incarcerated individuals, like myself, when oftentimes it feels like society had forgotten about us. In conducting this research, I was able to refer to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was introduced to me in my Human Rights Education class at USF. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights acknowledges that education is a human right. These counter-narratives demonstrate that everyone deserves a second chance and has a powerful story to tell.

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APPENDIX A: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Gender & Sexual Orientation
    a. What is your gender expression? Is this the same as your gender identity? What is your preferred gender pronoun? Sexual orientation?
2. How old are you?
3. Location and Upbringing
    a. Where were you born and raised?
    b. Tell me about your family? Do you have any siblings?
4. Class and Work Status
    a. How would you describe your socioeconomic class?
    b. Where do you currently live and work/attend school?
    c. For staff: What is your current work title? How does that fit into your career plans? How long have you been in this position?
    d. For students: What year in school are you? What is your major? How does that fit into your career plans?
5. How many languages do you speak?
6. Discuss any disabilities that you have. Are these visible or hidden?
7. Share your religion, faith, or other view on spirituality.
8. Do you have a political affiliation?
9. What other identifiers are important for the researcher and the study's audience to know or understand about you?

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Date of Interview:

1. Have you been incarcerated before? If so, can you tell me the events that led to your incarceration and the length of your sentence?
2. Have you re-offended, been re-arrested, or re-incarcerated after release? If so how many times?
3. What was your experience after reintegrating in the community?
4. From the following services, which ones did you receive?
    a) Housing Assistance
    b) Support from friends and family
    c) Employment advising
    d) Healthcare
    e) Advocacy support
    f) Mentoring and advising
    g) All of the above
    h) None of the above
5. What was your level of education before incarceration?
6. What is your current level of education? Have you enrolled in a higher education institution?
7. Have you enrolled in any reentry programs? If so, which ones? Would you recommend them to people in similar situations as you?
8. Have you joined a mentoring program? If so, what has it taught you and has there been growth?

9. How would you describe your relationship with your mentor?
10. Has mentorship played a role in enhancing your college experience? If so, tell me of a mentorship experience that resonated with you.
11. Do you think getting a college education after incarceration has impacted your likelihood in committing another crime?
12. Do you think a mentorship program after incarceration has impacted your likelihood in committing another crime?
13. What reentry strategies do you think could help Black males in your neighborhood to have successful outcomes after incarceration?