



# **The Confined Voices of Education:**

## **The Lived Experiences of Formerly Incarcerated Students at a Four-Year University**

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# Problem Statement

**How many people know or work with someone who has been incarcerated?**

# Problem

- Research through interaction with a formerly incarcerated student who needed housing for their college
- Formerly incarcerated belong to marginalized groups (low-income, first-generation, people of color)
- Face additional societal stigma
- Gap in Higher Education Research: s limited research on the experiences of formerly incarcerated students in higher education

# Purpose

- To explore the experiences of formerly incarcerated
- Enhance their voices
- Examine how incarceration & journey through higher education have been shaped and gain insight into the challenges and barriers they face
- Policy change

# Research Questions

## Research Question 1

What are the challenges and barriers experienced by formerly incarcerated students at a four-year public university as they navigate their undergraduate college trajectory?

## Research Question 2

What programs and support systems have formerly incarcerated students identified as aiding in their success throughout their undergraduate trajectory?



# Literature Review

## US Prison Rates & Demographics

- Mass incarceration disproportionately affects marginalized communities (Alexander, 2012; Dewitt, 2017).
- Educational disadvantage and societal stigma contribute to recidivism and limited economic mobility (Richardson & Christopher, 2015).

## The School-to-Prison Pipeline

- Concept of educational debt: highlights the historical and structural harm inflicted on marginalized communities (Ladson-Billings, 2006).
- Educational policies often privilege White and Asian elite youth while labeling Black, Latino, immigrant, and poor students as deficient, contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline (Fine and Ruglis, 2009).

# Literature Review

## Recidivism & Education

- Educational opportunities in prison significantly reduce recidivism (Duwe & Clark, 2014; Esperian, 2020).
- Educational attainment in prison improves employability, family relationships, and economic stability (Fine et al., 2001; Western & Pettit, 2010).

## Examining Recidivism and Education Globally

- Programs in Australia and New Zealand aim to enhance post-release employability by providing training and work experience before release (Cale et al., 2019).
- Successful reintegration relies heavily on providing incarcerated individuals with marketable skills and support systems that support their transition into society (Cale et al., 2019; Coates, 2016; Baldry et al., 2018).

# Literature Review

## Reintegration Challenges

- Multiple challenges including low educational attainment, limited employment, societal stigma, and housing instability (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014; Clark, 2016; Makarios, Steiner, & Travis, 2010).
- Society often marginalizes formerly incarcerated people impeding their reintegration (Alexander, 2012)
- Stigma from incarceration can harm self-esteem and educational attainment (Goffman, 1963; Cooker & Major, 1989; Copenhaver et al., 2007; Binnall, 2018; Hernandez, 2023; Abyeta, 2020).



# Literature Review

## Higher Education Support Systems

- Peer mentoring programs have shown positive effects on formerly incarcerated students, offering social capital, encouragement, and guidance to navigate academic challenges (Tietjen et al., 2020).
- Transition support programs are essential for academic success, but there are limited initiatives aimed at supporting these students (Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017).
- First-generation college students had similar challenges: feelings of marginalization, alienation, lower GPA's, difficulties with cultural issues on campus (Adams and McBrayer, 2020).
- First-generation students face challenges with resource awareness, access, and equitable resources (Nguyen, Phuong, & Salehi, 2024).

# Literature Review

## Literature Gaps

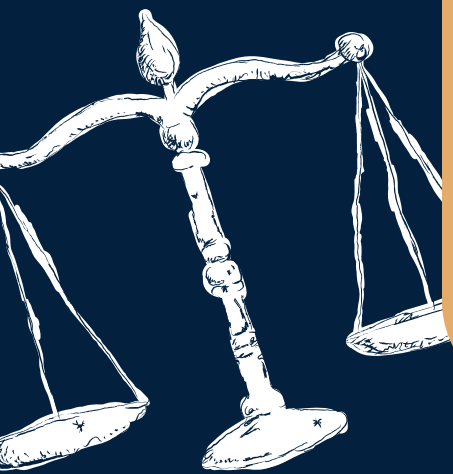
- Significant gap in understanding the transition from prison to college
- Existing research focuses recidivism rates - little attention is given to how formerly incarcerated individuals overcome challenges and achieve their educational goals
- Essential for developing effective support for formerly incarcerated students to succeed in academia and reintegrate into society

# Theoretical Framework

## Bourdieu's Social Reproduction Theory

Social Reproduction Theory helps identify areas where change is necessary to disrupt inequalities and promote educational equity

“Education cannot be analyzed just in terms of economic returns, such as the monetary benefits of earning a degree as it then fails to take into consideration the educational system's role in maintaining social structures” (Bourdieu, 1986).



# Theoretical Framework

## Bourdieu's Social Reproduction Theory

Educational Institutions favor students who possess greater capital

Reinforces social inequalities

Inequities and disparities are systematically reproduced through structures such as the education system creating challenges in upward mobility

Emphasizes how social inequalities are perpetuated and maintained through societal structures and institutions, such as education



# Methodology

Qualitative

Phenomenological

# Methodology

**Site**

Southern California  
4 year University  
Has a Project Rebound

**Participants**

Identifies as Formerly Incarcerated  
Current College student  
Over 18



**Qualitative Interviews:  
45-60 minutes**

**In person or by zoom:  
(at a place the participant is comfortable with)**

# Data Collection



# Data Collection Research Questions

Personal Educational Path to a Four-Year  
University

Challenges, Barriers, and Support Systems at their  
Four-Year University

Campus Experiences & Challenges

Recommendations



# Data Analysis

- **Challenges & Resilience**
- **Personal Connections**
- **Financial Challenges**
- **Valuable but Limited School Resources**

# Data Analysis

- **Challenges & Resilience**

- All participants faced severe personal struggles but used them as turning points for growth
- Incarceration was largely omitted from their stories—greater emphasis on transformation
- Students emphasized resilience and reframing their narratives to focus on future goals

“I struggle with drug addiction, and then so. But right before he passed away, I got sober, and then I, then he passed away, and then I just made the conscious decision to, like, get my life together and then go back to school. “

# Data Analysis

- **Personal Connections**

- Stigma and fear of judgment caused many to avoid creating connection
- Age, background, or emotional exhaustion/fear became internal/external challenges
- Internalized isolation

“I choose to not be around too many people, just because I'm like, none of these people understand me. And you know, if I were to really show them who I was meaning, like, if I were to tell them my background, would I be judged? You know, how would I be perceived at that point? So, yeah, I mean, I just think, like, I I called into my own shell”

# Data Analysis

- **Financial Challenges**

- On-campus wages too low to support basic living needs
  - Who's been to California?
- Full-time enrollment became a financial barrier
- Basic needs insecurity became barriers for academic success

“I'd rather prefer more hours to make sure that I have food on my table. I have housing for me. I have housing for my my dog, which is an emotional support. Like, you know, I have gas in my car. I make sure my car is paid, my phone bill, braces that I don't even have in my mouth anymore, I'm having to pay.”



# Data Analysis

- **Valuable but Limited School Resources**

- Tutoring centers were a highlight and supportive
- Mentorship from specific faculty/staff was critical transitions
- Many felt disconnected or judged due to lack of cultural and emotional connections

“The tutoring center has helped me tremendously. I don't want to say like, I don't like, want to put a title on it, but I guess I learn differently from other students and so but I am older and don't learn like the other undergrads.”

# Recommendations

- **Policy Change**
  - Reform housing requirements
  - Increase pay to reflect cost of living
  - Redesign support programs
- **Design Culturally Responsive Programs**
  - One-size-fits-all does not work—recognize the diverse needs of formerly incarcerated students/all students
  - Develop peer-led initiatives/programs
  - Improve Emotional and Social Supports
- **Recognize their stories as sources of strength not the stigma**

# Stength, Perseverance, Transformation

“Because I'm one of those people that I'm socially displaced, because I've been put away for seven and a half years at such a young age that I'm not used to coming to people to say, hey, I need help with this I just can't find myself asking for help from these programs especially if they don't understand me.”

