Charting a Path to Full and Free Lives: An Abolitionist Vision for Reentry

KYMBERLY BYRD Vanderbilt University

ABSTRACT Scholar and activist Angela Davis writes, "Short of major wars, mass incarceration has been the most thoroughly implemented government social program of our time" (Davis, 2003, p. 11). With approximately 600,000 people exiting prisons each year, reentry efforts have garnered local, state, and national attention. Many of these reentry efforts do little to improve the social and economic conditions of those returning home. By failing to examine the social and economic forces driving incarceration, these efforts often reproduce the oppressive conditions they intend to address. While there have been bipartisan efforts to reform the system, prison abolitionists argue that the system is beyond repair. In this paper, I examine the issues with existing reentry efforts and articulate the need for an abolitionist vision for reentry. Drawing from interviews with formerly incarcerated individuals, this paper demonstrates how abolition can create the social and economic conditions for full and free lives after incarceration. I then explore the role of prefigurative politics, which refers to the construction of alternative social relations (Yates, 2015), in crafting an abolitionist vision for reentry. I conclude by examining implications for social work practice and policy.

KEYWORDS abolition, reentry, reentry programming, social opportunity, economic opportunity

THE UNITED STATES is home to 5% of the world's population but 25% of its prisoners (Pfaff, 2017). While this staggering statistic is cause for alarm, it is important to note that mass incarceration is a relatively recent phenomenon in the United States. In the 1970s, the incarceration rate was comparable to most European countries and had been stable since the late 1800s (Pfaff, 2017). The number of people in state or federal prisons rose from under 200,000 in 1972 to over 1.2 million in 2020. During this span of time, the incarceration rate for state and federal prisons increased from 93 per 100,000 to 358 per 100,000 (Carson, 2021; Pfaff, 2017).

The rapid, expansive growth of the carceral system now draws comparison to the American higher education system. Scholars find this comparison helpful in demonstrating the scale of the carceral system. Each year, the number of men who graduate from college is comparable to the number of men released from prison (Knapp et al., 2008; Massoglia & Pridemore, 2015). The size of the incarcerated population is approximately the same as the enrollment at all American research universities (Massoglia & Pridemore, 2015; Snyder & Dillow, 2010).

Many would describe the prison experiment in the United States as a catastrophic failure (Bell, 2021).The many efforts to reform the carceral system is evidence of this failure. Many believe that prisons were designed to reduce crime, create accountability, and promote public safety, but research demonstrates that prisons achieve none of these aforementioned goals. Instead, prisons

Abolitionist Perspectives in Social Work, Volume 1, Issue 1, Spring 2023
© Author. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
https://doi.org/10.52713/apsw.v1i1.3

exacerbate the conditions they were designed to address (Bell, 2021). In light of this, the focus has shifted to reentry policy and practice to respond to this failure. Nearly all individuals who are incarcerated are released from prison and most are released within five years of admission (Travis, 2005). Numerous programs and policies have been implemented to support the hundreds of thousands of individuals coming home. In spite of these efforts, recidivism rates remain poor (Bell, 2021; Jonson & Cullen, 2015).

In this paper, I examine the many issues with existing reentry efforts. Many exclusively focus on individual level problems instead of the structural and systemic issues impacting formerly incarcerated individuals. They fail to engage with the social and economic forces driving incarceration. This limits their potential to create meaningful, lasting change (Bell, 2021). Additionally, many of these programs create low quality of life standards and expectations for formerly incarcerated individuals. This approach often results in solutions that reproduce the unjust conditions these programs were designed to address (Bell, 2021; Burch, 2017; Byrd, 2016; Currie, 2013; Goddard & Myers, 2017). I then explore an abolitionist vision for reentry. Abolition requires structural and systemic interventions that have the power to transform the existing approach to reentry. Many social workers have committed to this transformation, which is evidenced by the formation of organizations such as the Network to Advance Abolitionist Social Work (NAASW). Established in 2020, NAASW's efforts include political education, knowledge generation related to abolitionist social work, and advocacy and organizing efforts to insert abolitionist practices into social work (Network to Advance Abolitionist Social Work, 2022).

In this study, I examine how formerly incarcerated individuals describe full and free lives after incarceration and how they describe their best possible futures. I then explore how abolition can create the social and economic conditions for this to be achieved. Finally, I explore the role of prefigurative politics, the construction of alternative social relations (Yates, 2015), in this abolitionist vision for reentry. I conclude by examining implications for social work practice and policy.

THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE OF REENTRY

Unprecedented numbers of people are leaving prisons and returning to their communities each year. As incarceration rates have grown, there have also been increases in the number of people exiting prisons. In 2020, state and federal prisons admitted 346,461 individuals and released 549,600 individuals (Carson, 2021). Forty years ago, less than 200,000 individuals made the journey from prison to home (Visher & Travis, 2011).

Given this increase, reentry has garnered local, state, and national attention and recidivism rates often dominate these conversations. In 2018, the Bureau of Justice Statistics released a report on a nine-year follow-up of 401,288 individuals released from state prisons in 2005. An estimated 68% of these individuals were arrested within three years, 79% within six years, and 83% within nine years. Almost half (48%) of these people were reincarcerated within three years (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2019). These recidivism rates have remained unchanged for the past two decades. Nationally, 25% of prison admissions are the result of technical violations, which refer to noncompliant but non-criminal behaviors such as missing meetings with a parole officer or lack of employment (Fenster, 2020).

While more resources are being allocated to reentry efforts, these efforts continue to be ineffectual and inefficient (Durose et al., 2014). Formerly incarcerated individuals continue to encounter debilitating obstacles in their attempts to access employment, housing, and other necessary resources. At present, reentry occurs in three stages: (1) rehabilitation and reentry programming inside prisons; (2) transitional services immediately after release; and (3) long-term, post-release support that continues after the initial transition period (James, 2014). In each of these stages, programs attempt to reduce recidivism with interventions such as substance abuse treatment, anger management classes, and professional development courses. Many of these programs focus no attention on the structural and systemic barriers that individuals encounter during reentry. Instead, they place the burden on these individuals to change. In many instances, "structural problems such as inequality, exploitation, unequal distribution of resources, and structural racism are translated into individualized deficiencies of system-impacted people" (Bell, 2021, p. 37). When this occurs, individuals are blamed for the problems they encounter as a result of these injustices. Scholars describe this process as responsibilization, where the responsibility to change is placed almost entirely on formerly incarcerated individuals (Bell, 2021; Currie, 2013; Goddard & Myers, 2017; Gray, 2009; Hannah-Moffat, 2015, 2016).

Research demonstrates that structural factors have more impact on recidivism than individual factors (Currie, 2013; Goddard & Myers, 2017). These structural factors include housing discrimination, employment discrimination, denial of educational opportunity, and the many other forms of exclusion this population encounters (Alexander, 2010; Geller & Curtis, 2011; Pager, 2007). In spite of this fact, reentry efforts often task formerly incarcerated individuals with their own rehabilitation. This approach demands that these individuals learn to tolerate the injustices they encounter and deems them maladjusted if they do not (Bell, 2021; Currie, 2013; Goddard & Myers, 2017). Programs that emphasize personal responsibility and individual blame teach individuals to "locate the sources of their problems mainly, if not entirely, in themselves" (Currie, 2013, p. 5).

These programs also have low standards for what they deem success (Bell, 2021). Reduced recidivism rates are the typical standard for measuring the success of these programs. The highly lauded Second Chance Act (SCA) helps to demonstrate this. The SCA authorizes funding for programs and research pertaining to rehabilitation and reentry, including prison education programs, substance abuse treatment, mental health services, and job training (Department of Justice, 2015). The SCA utilizes a single metric to determine success or failure: an appreciable negative impact on recidivism (Department of Justice, 2015). Programs unable to reduce recidivism are deemed failures and often defunded. Programs that negatively impact recidivism are seen as successes and continue to receive funding (Cullen, 2012; Cullen & Gendreau, 2000).

With recidivism reduction as the metric of success, many programs ignore the quality of life for this population. They have low expectations for what a full and free life can and should be for formerly incarcerated individuals. Currie (2013) writes:

> [W]e measure the "success" of these efforts in very minimal and essentially negative ways: they commit fewer crimes, do fewer drugs … maybe get, at least briefly, some sort of job. And even if the job is basically exploitative and short-lived and their future options are slim and their present lives are still pinched, desperate and precarious, we still count that as all good—as evidence of programmatic success. (p. 5)

THE CONSTRAINTS OF REFORM

The constraints and limitations of existing reentry efforts have left many asking how to improve outcomes for individuals being released from prison and improve conditions in the communities they call home. Many existing reentry efforts could be described as reform since they serve to reinforce and reproduce the current system (Bell, 2021; Ben-Moshe, 2013). These efforts focus on improving a system that continues to fail formerly incarcerated people instead of building a system that could generate different outcomes for this population (Rodriguez, 2018). Many scholars and activists believe that reform is not sufficient. Karakatsanis (2019) describes reform as "superficial and deceptive" (p. 851). Others argue that high recidivism rates, racial inequities, and obstacles to reentry are merely a function of how the system is designed to operate and that it is inherently and intentionally harmful to the poor, people of color, and marginalized populations (Alexander, 2010; Berger, 2014; Butler, 2015, 2018; Davis, 2003; Karakatsanis, 2019). They believe that the current system cannot operate under just, fair, or humane conditions, even under ideal circumstances (Bell, 2021; Karakatsanis, 2019). Scholars assert that reform does more harm than good. Butler (2018) writes that reform has a "pacification effect" because it "calms the natives even when they should not be calm" (p. 197). Reforms "dupe those at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy with promises of equality, fairness, and neutrality" (Butler, 2018, p. 197).

Not only are reforms ineffective, but they are harmful in that they create the illusion of addressing problems in the carceral system when instead they reproduce the injustice they purport to address (Karakatsanis, 2019; Rodriguez, 2018; Spade, 2012). Reform efforts tend to divorce problems in the system from their structural causes. Bell (2021) explains that reform efforts dedicated to working within the current systems reify the system, "distracting from the notion that the structure itself is inherently sick, violent, and destructive" (p. 42).

WHY ABOLITION?

Recognizing the inherent destructiveness of the existing system, a more radical approach is needed. Abolition is a theoretical framework through which we can articulate solutions in research and practice (Bell, 2021). This paper has outlined reform efforts that are situated within the current system, which reproduce and reinforce this system. These programs attempt to address problems by correcting people instead of correcting structures and systems.

Deeply aware of this ineffectiveness, abolitionists believe the carceral system is beyond repair. Kaba and Hayes (2021) explain that prisons perpetuate themselves by maintaining the conditions that foster crime. They write, "From 1978 to 2014, the US prison population rose 408 percent, largely filling its cages with those denied access to education, employment, and human services" (Kaba & Hayes, 2021, p. 51). They argue that the carceral system is geared toward recidivism and fails in its efforts to support public safety and promote public good. Abolition is a political vision that aims to eliminate surveillance, policing, and imprisonment by developing lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment. Abolition focuses on the elimination of the prison industrial complex, which describes the "overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social, and political problems" (Critical Resistance, 2019). Abolitionists envision a world with healthy, thriving communities where harm is met with accountability instead of punishment. Many abolitionists draw inspiration from the Black Radical Tradition, which can be described as a tradition of resistance that has "produced

an enduring vision of a shared future whose principal promise is the abolition of all forms of oppression" (Johnson & Lubin, 2017, p. 30).

Many deem abolition an unrealistic, unattainable goal. McLeod (2015) argues that this rejection would be warranted if "abolition is conceptualized as an immediate and indiscriminate opening of prison doors—that is, the imminent physical elimination of all structures of incarceration" (p. 1161). Instead, many argue that abolition should be conceptualized as a gradual project of decarceration. Furthermore, abolitionists often elaborate on the differences between negative abolition and positive abolition. Abolition has been described as a two-part project, consisting of both negative and positive processes (Bell, 2021). While negative abolition focuses on dismantling the prison industrial complex, positive abolition focuses on world building (McLeod, 2018). Describing these world building efforts in further detail, McLeod (2015) writes:

> A prison abolitionist framework involves initiatives directed toward positive rather than exclusively negative abolition. A prison abolitionist framework entails, more specifically, developing and implementing other positive substitutive social projects, institutions, and conceptions of regulating our collective social lives and redressing shared problems—interventions that might over the longer term render imprisonment and criminal law enforcement peripheral to ensuring relative peace. (p. 1163)

These positive projects, institutions, and concepts aim to render prison obsolete by solving the social problems that drive mass incarceration (McLeod, 2018). Further articulating the aims of positive abolition, Ruth Wilson Gilmore states, "Abolition is presence, not absence. It's about building life-affirming institutions." Positive abolition aims to address the social and economic conditions that track individuals from poor communities and communities of color into prison (Davis, 2003). Abolition requires government investment in jobs, education, housing, and healthcare to provide individuals the resources they need long before they commit their hypothetical crime (Kushner, 2019). Abolitionists long for a world where cages are not "catch-all solutions to social problems" (Gilmore & Kilgore, 2019, p. 1).

Many also criticize abolition for lacking fully formed solutions to address the harms caused by individuals many characterize as "predators." Kaba and Hayes (2021) explain:

> But the idea of "predators" and "dangerous people" is complicated by the conditions our society enforces—social and economic conditions that we know generate crime and despair. Communities whose needs are met are not rife with crimes of desperation, whereas struggling communities are; and people from communities that are highly criminalized by our racist system are far more likely to be thrust into the carceral system. (p. 53)

Abolition requires an analysis of crime that is linked with social structures instead of individual pathology. Furthermore, any anti-crime strategies must focus on social and economic needs (Davis & Rodriguez, 2000). Abolitionists often do not engage with questions such as, "What about the really dangerous people?" Instead, they treat these inquiries as questions we must collectively answer while problematizing the notion of "dangerousness" (Kaba & Hayes, 2021, p. 55).

Abolition also requires a reconceptualizing of justice. McLeod (2018) explains that justice in abolitionist terms attempts to "achieve peace, make amends, and distribute resources more equitably" (p. 1615). Abolitionist justice abandons punishment in favor of accountability and a

carceral system replaced by structural and systemic responses to inequality (McLeod, 2018). Punishment is a passive process that is imposed on individuals. Accountability is an active process that requires that individuals acknowledge the harm they committed, acknowledge the impact of that harm, express genuine remorse, attempt to repair the harm, and strive to become an individual who would not commit that harm in the future (Sered, 2019). Abolition demands the transformation of our political, social, and economic lives and a "holistic engagement with the structural conditions that give rise to suffering" (McLeod, 2018, p. 1616).

As McLeod asserts, abolition demands social and economic transformation. As abolitionists engage with the conditions that give rise to suffering, they also must engage with the conditions that give rise to flourishing. In this study, I examine how formerly incarcerated individuals describe full and free lives after incarceration and how they describe their best possible futures. I then explore how abolition can create the social and economic conditions for this to be achieved.

METHODS

Settings

Participants were recruited from three different organizations in the southeastern United States: a social enterprise, a prison entrepreneurship program, and a reentry court. The social enterprise is an employment-focused organization providing wraparound services to individuals transitioning from prison to the community. The prison entrepreneurship program is a six-month entrepreneurship education program targeting individuals who are incarcerated. The reentry court offers individual and group support to individuals recently released from federal prison. Individuals who successfully complete the 52-week program receive a one-year reduction in their parole terms. I had existing relationships with each of the organizations after volunteering with the organizations prior to conducting this study. When inviting the organizations to participate in this study, mutual benefit was of utmost importance. With each of the organizations, I co-designed a study that would assess the impact of their programming while advancing my research exploring barriers and facilitators to social and economic opportunity among formerly incarcerated individuals.

Sample

A total of 31 participants were enrolled in the study. There were 16 participants from the social enterprise, 12 participants from the prison entrepreneurship program, and 3 participants from the reentry court. The number of participants from each organization reflects the size of the organization, with the social enterprise providing services to the largest number of individuals. A majority (61.2%) of the participants identified as male and 38.7% identified as female. Over half (54.8%) of the participants identified as White, 41.9% identified as Black, and 3.2% identified as Other. Participants ranged in age from 28.6 years to 63.9 years and their average age was 42.7 years (SD=10.1).

Procedures

I obtained approval from my university's Institutional Review Board prior to launching the study. Staff at the three organizations identified inclusion criteria for the study. The social enterprise included individuals who were transitioning out of subsidized employment. The prison

entrepreneurship program included graduates of the program at different stages of reentry (e.g., released for months, released for years). The reentry court also included graduates of the program.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in October 2020, January 2021, and April 2021. At the beginning of the interview, participants completed an informed consent form, provided demographic information, and selected a pseudonym. 31 individuals participated in Interview 1, 24 individuals participated in Interview 2, and 21 individuals participated in Interview 3. Participants were compensated with a $25 gift card after each interview. Interviews were conducted on Zoom and lasted an average of 25.9 minutes. Interview 1 focused on the pursuit of a full and free life after incarceration, Interview 2 examined asset-based approaches in the three organizations, and Interview 3 consisted of a program evaluation. This paper draws from Interview 1 and Interview 3.

Data Analysis

Constructivist grounded theory guided data analysis. Constructivist grounded theory examines the social, historical, and situational contexts in which participants live. Constructive grounded theorists are concerned with the specific conditions giving rise to outcomes of interest and the responses of different participants to these outcomes (Charmaz, 2020). I employed constructivist grounded theory to explore the social and economic conditions necessary to achieve an abolitionist vision for reentry. I aimed to understand and describe the conditions we must create for formerly incarcerated people to live full and free lives.

During Interview 1, participants were asked, "I want to begin by asking you to describe a full and free life after incarceration. What does a full and free life after incarceration consist of?" During Interview 3, participants were asked, "Imagine ten years from now. You are living your best possible life. What does that life look like?" I used thematic coding (Harry et al., 2005) to identify themes that emerged from the responses to these two questions and coded for themes across both waves. Each step of this process was conducted using NVIVO.

AN ABOLITIONIST VISION FOR REENTRY

In *We Do This 'til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*, Mariame Kaba (2021) writes, "Let's begin our abolitionist journey not with the question 'What do we have now, and how can we make it better?' Instead, let's ask, 'What can we imagine for ourselves and the world?' If we do that, then boundless possibilities of a more just world await us" (p. 33). If we wish to create a world of boundless possibilities for formerly incarcerated individuals, we must improve social and economic opportunity for this population. Abolition can help to build this just world. In the following sections, formerly incarcerated individuals reflected on full and free lives after incarceration and described their best possible futures. Their vision for full and free lives can be achieved with the social and economic transformation that abolition demands.

Social Opportunity

Autonomy. For several participants, a full and free life after incarceration was a life of autonomy. Tiffany explained, "Freedom is the fact that I can pretty much make my own decisions, whether that's from financial to personal, all the way for decisions for my child. That's what freedom and full is like for me right now." Malcolm also desired a life "where I am able to make my own choices, basic simple choices of getting up, eating what I'm going to eat, who I'm going to interact with, the

ability to go out and seek employment and seek those who I have things or something in common with." Many participants discussed the importance of having control over their lives. Marie shared,

> I talk often about the hardest thing for me with incarceration was that I didn't have a voice. And so, I would put voice at the top of that, the ability to be able to say no, or the ability to be able to say yes, to have some control over things that are happening in your life and make choices. I think those are huge.

The power to say yes and the power to say no is a freeing experience for these individuals. Jay felt that "freedom is enjoyment" when you are "free to do whatever, right or wrong, and hopefully right." Participants value this freedom because prison was a place where they had no power or control. Chloe explained,

> The full part is just the family, the career, the normal routine, just having the normal day of not having the people yell at you to get up in the morning or tell you you have to go to bed at a certain time, or you can't walk outside, or you have to be at this place at a certain time. And I know you have with normal life. You have to do that too, but it's the freeing part, it's that the decision you can make on your own. You don't have that freewill on the inside. And outside, you can make decisions for yourself. Even on the inside if you're right, you're not right. You can't tell anybody you're right or you get trouble. You're wrong, period, and you do what you're told. And so that's the freeing part is having the free will. But the fulfilling part and a full life is just the normality of school and the day-by-day routine and the kid and the actually being able to just get in your car and go to the grocery store. That's the most normal fulfilling. That's what I see when I say free and full life.

Taz was glad to be free from prison officials "bossing you around." He no longer had to endure commands such as, "'You have to do this right now,' 'Hey, get over here,' 'Hey, it's time for the strip search.'" Taz no longer had to "worry about somebody coming up behind you and pushing you up against the wall because they feel like that you have something on you, and they want to search you." Participants cherished autonomy of the mind and of the body.

Pursuing peace. Several participants were in pursuit of a calm, peaceful life. For some, this was an internal process. Marie was in pursuit of mental wellbeing. Her dream was to have "some of those anxieties removed and being able to be relaxed." In this pursuit, it was important to honor her past experiences. She elaborated,

> I never want to forget the places that I've been in, but I do want to be able to look through those experiences, through a safe lens of understanding that is not a current situation for me but remembering that it is the current situation for other people. And allowing that to motivate me into good emotional space, but also continuing to push me in that good fighting space to help change that for other people.

As she heals, she will be better equipped to support others on their healing journey. Amber also connected her past to her present. She shared, "I've been through a really bad struggle and I'm ready

to just be comfortable. So that all this hard work is for a reason, you know?" She hoped that her struggles were not in vain. Others were pursuing peace in their external environment. In her best possible life 10 years into the future, Tiffany was on "somebody's beach." Similarly, Jay was living "somewhere out of town" with "no worries, on the beach." Sam also wanted to experience a peaceful, tranquil environment. He stated,

> I'm a nature guy, so I like the mountains. So I'll be somewhere off in the mountains. Just kind of living life. I'm a home body. I wouldn't say like a home body, but like I love just being ... Let me explain this. Let me see if I can explain this. When I say a house in the mountains or out in the country somewhere I think of like the old farmers that have like the front porches, and you just kind of sit and just enjoy the fresh air and everything. That's my kind of living. I like that. Nice and quiet. Peaceful.

Participants desired peace both internally and externally.

Family. Many participants wished for their families to thrive. Marie shared, "I would love if we were able to adopt and have an adopted child in the house. I told you we're building a house right now. So, being settled in that space and just being happy and seeing my son happy and emotionally mature and socially mature." Martavius expressed similar sentiments. He explained, "Well, ten-year goal. Well, first of all, for my kids, happy and healthy, my family just continue to do what I'm doing. Being there, providing, supporting them, encouraging them to do good in school and make good grades and to be a good person." Like Martavius, Malcolm desired "strong family relationships" that were "truly joyful." Em believed that a healthy family was "vital to a full and happy life."

For some participants, their incarceration strained their relationship with their children, and they desired to mend these wounds. Remington described this healing process as her most difficult endeavor. She elaborated,

> Ten years from now? Well, my goals are to get my daughter back, have custody of my daughter, my 16-year-old, get my mother out of the nursing home and care for her at home, and to have my girls, my granddaughters and my other oldest daughter reunited with me. 10 years, my best life would be to have all of that because it seems like that's what's difficult. Everything else is easy. Working is easy, getting the purses and getting them in that one store I'm working with, that's easy. That's all stuff I can plan for every day. Okay. Every day I know I'm going to work at this time, this time, and I know I'm going to set this time aside to work on a purse, but it's those variables that I dream about, dreaming about getting my mom out of the nursing home and having my daughters and having my granddaughters and having my family united. If that is the picture I have in 10 years, then I know I have lived my best life because those good things will come from that.

Remington felt that restoring these relationships was more difficult than the demands of work and her entrepreneurial pursuits of designing custom purses. Other participants never had the opportunity to experience a healthy family dynamic because of their incarceration. Ally desired a "quiet, normal family-oriented life" which is something she "never had." She continued,

> I'm 42, but I still want to, I want another baby. People think I'm crazy, but I messed up my chance to have a family earlier in my life because I chose to sell drugs. But I mean, it's not uncommon to hear ladies my age having a child and starting over. And that's, that's what I want to do.

For Ally, starting a family would provide a new beginning.

While younger participants like Ally were eager to start a family, older participants were focused on deepening intergenerational bonds. Kimberly commented frequently on his relationship with his granddaughter and was eager to grow closer to her. He missed decades of his son's life while incarcerated and now cherishes the quality time he spends with his son and his granddaughter. Hulk felt that supporting his family was his life's purpose. He shared,

> My mom, I want to get, make sure she has a house. She don't have a house. She's got an apartment. I want to make sure she has that. I want to make sure that all my family is straight. To me, that's, I could die after that. I could die after that. That's all I want to do. That's my whole purpose, I feel like, of being here is to do something with myself that's going to make the future generations of my family line, of my blood line, of my people, make them straight. Make them straight. And what they do with it is what they do with it. But shit, they're going to know that somebody in their blood line did good, did the right thing.

For several participants, seeing their families thrive would give their life meaning and purpose.

Community engagement. Several participants described a full and free life as the opportunity to contribute to their communities. Tiffany longed to be an "active member within my community, within my society." Danielle wanted her "life experiences to help others." For her, that meant "being active, giving back, volunteering, helping out in any situation, as being part of community." Remington shared, "A full life, I guess to me, would be just a life that is engaged, intentional as far as getting back into community." Martavius described community engagement as his ministry. He explained,

> Then too, as far as with the ministry, to continue to reach out, continue to hit communities. You feel what I'm saying? To go into the neighborhood, you know what I mean? And actually interact with people, be there for the people, you know what I'm saying? Feed the people, love on the people. You know what I mean? Stand witness to the people, make sure you're there. You know what I'm saying? In the people's lives, you know what I'm saying? Showing them that you care being a constant presence, I think that's how you build, you know what I mean? That's how you build.

Participants were excited to contribute to important causes.

Economic Opportunity

Financial freedom. Many participants were eager to experience financial freedom. Reflecting on his best possible future, Phil shared, "I'm financially stable, owning a house, my own home, and

established in just like... Let me see. It'll be financially stable, you know what I'm saying, money wouldn't be tight or whatnot, and to own my own home, and just dedicated to my work." Hulk expressed similar desires. His best possible future would "have to involve myself and my family with no financial worries at all. We could take off, a year off of whatever we're doing and still be straight because we've got, there's money coming in. We don't even really have to work for it." Hulk continued, "You can want to do a lot of stuff with your life, but if you ain't have the finances to do it, you can't do it." For some, financial freedom could be achieved through dignified work. Low-paying, grueling work was undesirable for John. He expressed his desire for,

> A comfortable job where you can have enough freedom and live comfortably with the pay. Somewhere reasonable, because it's hard to find a good job whenever you have felonies on your record. It disqualifies you for most places, and the places that are usually willing to hire you are not very good jobs. Like the people there are sometimes not paid very well or they don't like to be there. So it's just not a very pleasant place to work. So just a place where you can be able to pay your bills and enjoy your day.

Entrepreneurship. Other participants had entrepreneurial pursuits. Danielle believed entrepreneurship would be less physically demanding than her current position. She explained, "I do know that I want to gear out of such a physically demanding job. I've got to get out of cleaning full-time with my sinuses, everything like that. I'm getting older. I still want to be my own boss for sure." Demetrius was also eager to be "my own boss of my company." Across the three programs, participants from the prison entrepreneurship program were more likely to mention entrepreneurship in their description of their best possible future. Some of this can be attributed to their exposure to entrepreneurship while in the program. There were prison entrepreneurship program participants like Taz who had launched their businesses and were eager for them to grow. Taz, who currently operates a cleaning company and a catering business, longed for his businesses to be "well-known" and for his businesses to be advertised "across the TV screen, the radio, and the newspapers." His goal was to have his brothers, nephews, and other family members running the businesses. He shared, "We all will be better off with the family helping family. The bigger we grow, we all grow." Taz believed that his success is his family's success. Martavius dreamed of opening several radio stations focused on urban ministry. He stated,

> Ten years from now. Okay. Well for me, my family healthy, the radio station, it's been built in this successfully running, and then 10 years from now having a station, that's a big goal of mine, you know what I mean? Because the whole radio thing was to reach out to people incarcerated. So having my family healthy, marriage together, kids, you know what I'm saying? Doing well ministry, doing well, radio station up and going and people being saved, people lives being changed. Ten years from now, to see people and hear people say how infectious they were from the ministry in radio, ten years from now, that will be, that would be awesome.

Several participants associated economic opportunity with entrepreneurial pursuits.

DISCUSSION

When imagining the boundless possibilities for their future, participants named desires that spanned both social and economic opportunity. After years of physical and emotional bondage while incarcerated, they were eager to experience autonomy. For years, they were denied the power to say yes and to say no. Having the ability to decide when to wake, sleep, and eat is a new experience for participants who experienced decades of incarceration. These seemingly insignificant choices make all the difference for participants who felt powerless while incarcerated. The opportunity to live a normal, mundane life is a gift for these individuals. For several participants, a normal, mundane life provided much-needed peace. Peace could be found both internally and externally. Some participants associated peace with mental wellbeing. They had lived difficult lives and were eager to experience less stress. Others wanted to be in peaceful environments, such as beaches, mountains, and the countryside. They believed they would experience serenity and tranquility in these settings.

Many participants felt that once their families were thriving, they would also thrive. They associated success with healthy, happy, and whole families. For those whose relationships were strained because of their incarceration, mending these wounds was a top priority. Some hoped to regain custody of their children. Others longed to start their own families and experience a healthy family dynamic for the first time. There were also individuals who were thinking about their family legacy. They were committed to ensuring that future generations would thrive. Family gave their life meaning and purpose. Participants also found meaning and purpose in service. They wanted to be engaged in the community and use their lived experience to help others. For some, this engagement could be best described as ministry. They longed for the opportunity to share their faith with those in need.

Participants also believed that financial freedom was necessary to live a full and free life after incarceration. They longed to be free from financial stresses and envisioned a life where work would not be necessary. Some recognized that most jobs available to formerly incarcerated individuals cannot provide this financial freedom. They are low-paying, physically demanding jobs that offer little opportunity for upward mobility. For these reasons, entrepreneurship appealed to many participants. They hoped to one day be their own bosses. For some, entrepreneurship was a family endeavor. This pursuit could provide financial freedom to several different generations. Others hoped to launch social impact businesses and believed their entrepreneurial pursuits had the power to change lives.

Reflecting on these desires, it is clear that existing reentry programming is inadequate and incomplete. Participants' ambitions far exceed the scope of existing reentry programming. These programs lack the organizational capacity to promote social and economic opportunity in the manner these participants have described. It is important to note that several participants described dreams and desires that do align with the mission of many reentry programs. These programs can be effective at nurturing the personal and professional development of formerly incarcerated individuals. However, there are organizational constraints on how much support these programs can provide. For example, a program may inquire about a participant's relationship with their family, but it is unlikely that the program can provide therapeutic support as the participant seeks to restore these relationships. Similarly, a program focused on job placement may not have the capacity to support career development. The demand for reentry programs far exceeds the supply, which means there are time limits on how long individuals can receive services. These programs are not designed

to provide the long-term, holistic support that these individuals need to realize their visions for full and free lives.

Recognizing these inadequacies, we can begin to craft an abolitionist vision for reentry. While negative abolition focuses on dismantling the prison industrial complex and can be conceptualized as a gradual project, our abolitionist vision for reentry can be situated within positive abolition as we seek to build a better world for formerly incarcerated individuals. This is a world we can begin building now. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore states, "Abolition is presence, not absence. It's about building life-affirming institutions." These life affirming institutions would offer dignified work, quality education, affordable housing, accessible healthcare, and so much more. These life-affirming institutions would transform our social and economic realities.

Returning to the interviews, Tiffany, Malcolm, Marie, Chloe, and Taz could experience the autonomy they desire. This autonomy would not be constrained by the discrimination that formerly incarcerated individuals encounter in housing, employment, education, or any other systems. They could choose where to work, where to live, what to study, and so much more. Marie and Amber could access mental health services to support their healing journey. They could also cultivate a social environment (e.g., dignified work, affordable housing, healthy relationships) that would promote mental wellbeing. Tiffany, Jay, and Sam would have the financial resources to enjoy the outdoors. Tiffany and Jay could relax at the beach as often as they wish, and Sam could purchase his home in the countryside. Remington would have the resources to support her mother, daughters, and granddaughters. She could experience the unity she has always desired. Hulk could begin to build his legacy. He could purchase a home for his mother and build a foundation for his family to thrive for generations to come.

In this abolitionist vision, economic opportunity would not be constrained by low-paying, grueling work. Phil would earn a living wage and would no longer stress over his finances. Hulk would have more time to enjoy his family. John would not be limited to job opportunities designated for formerly incarcerated individuals. He would be free to explore his career interests. Danielle, Demetrius, Taz, and Martavius would run successful businesses. Their conviction would not bar them from accessing business loans.

While an abolitionist vision for reentry requires structural and systemic interventions, it is important to note that participants did not articulate the structural or systemic changes necessary to experience full and free lives. They provided vivid depictions of their best possible futures, but focused less on what needed to change to make these dreams their reality. Universal basic income, community land trusts, and worker cooperatives are three interventions that can advance the aims of abolition. By promoting social and economic opportunity, these interventions could support formerly incarcerated individuals like those in this study as they seek to live full and free lives and experience their best possible futures. Universal basic income (UBI) is a program of consistent, unconditional payments distributed by the government. UBI creates a basic income floor for all regardless of income and allows recipients to spend funds however they choose (Drexel University Center for Hunger-Free Communities, 2021). In UBI pilots across North America, Africa, and Asia, participants have experienced better educational outcomes, lower rates of psychological distress, improved child health outcomes, enhanced social relationships, increased housing stability, and an increase in entrepreneurial pursuits (Baird et al., 2013; Feinberg & Kuehn, 2019; Haridy, 2020; Maynard & Murnane, 1979).

Community land trusts are nonprofit, community-based organizations designed to ensure long-term housing affordability. The trust acquires land and maintains ownership of the land indefinitely.

By separating the ownership of the land from housing built on the land, market factors are less likely to cause prices to rise significantly. Community land trusts provide low- and moderate-income people an opportunity to build equity through homeownership while ensuring that residents are not displaced by gentrification. Foreclosure rates with community land trusts are notably lower than conventional home mortgages. Many community land trusts are also involved in homeownership education classes, community greening projects, and other community development efforts (Democracy Collaborative, 2021a).

Worker cooperatives are businesses that are owned and operated by their employees. In worker cooperatives, member-owners invest in and own the business together, sharing any profits. Decision-making is a democratic process and each member-owner has one vote. Worker cooperatives create quality jobs for the community, generate profits that remain within the community, and allow employees to accumulate wealth through ownership of the business (Democracy Collaborative, 2021b). Each of these interventions could be described as positive abolition. Abolition creates the social and economic conditions for individuals, families, and communities to thrive. It is a structural and systemic intervention intended to create boundless possibilities for all.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

While formerly incarcerated individuals must be the center of our abolitionist vision for reentry, social work policymakers and practitioners can help to further this vision. Social work policymakers can commit to implementing local, state, and federal policies that create dignified work, quality education, affordable housing, accessible healthcare, and so much more. This might include the implementation of universal basic income, community land trusts, worker cooperatives, and other abolitionist interventions. Social work practitioners supporting formerly incarcerated people can commit to cultivating life-affirming institutions by contesting reentry programming steeped in responsibilization. Macro social workers can support advocacy and organizing efforts related to employment, housing, education, and other issues that create the social and economic transformation that abolition demands. Clinical social workers not employed in advocacy and organizing spaces can support these efforts by attending meetings, joining demonstrations, and participating in similar activities that advance structural and systemic change. With this vision as our guide, we can chart a path to full and free lives for formerly incarcerated individuals.

LIMITATIONS

There are limitations to consider with this study. Different interviewing tactics could have generated more conversation on abolition. I attempted to avoid leading questions, but probing questions could have generated more commentary on the structural and systemic changes needed to experience a full and free life after incarceration. While participants may not have articulated a need for abolition, probing questions may have resulted in reflections on how dignified work, quality education, affordable housing, and other life affirming institutions would shape their lived experiences. Future research should further explore this topic.

CONCLUSION

Ineffectual and inefficient reentry efforts abound in this country (Durose et al., 2014). While these reentry efforts divorce problems from their structural causes, abolition illuminates different solutions (Bell, 2021). Instead of engaging in responsibilization, abolitionists demand a transformation of our social and economic realities. As they attend to people's immediate material needs, abolitionists are crafting a vision for a radical transformation of society. An abolitionist vision for reentry can incorporate elements of existing reentry programs, such as job placement, housing assistance, and mental health support. However, the vision must be far more vast. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore states, "Abolition requires that we change one thing: everything." Abolition requires the dismantling of capitalism, racism, and all forms of oppression.

An abolitionist vision for reentry must be designed by those who have experienced incarceration. Far too often, formerly incarcerated individuals are not treated as experts. Their lived experience is not valued in spite of their familiarity with the carceral system. They should have the power to define the problems and design the solutions. This creates an opportunity for formerly incarcerated individuals to engage in prefigurative politics. Prefigurative politics refers to the construction of alternative social relations (Yates, 2015). Jeffrey and Dyson (2021) explain that prefigurative politics is "popularly imagined as 'being the change you wish to see'" (p. 641). Prefiguration is based on five processes:

> 1) Experimentation as a community; 2) continual and collective reproduction of the group's political framework; 3) the creation of group norms and values that draw on the desired future; 4) consolidation of the results of these processes into a cohesive vision; and 5) the dissemination and diffusion of this vision within the wider community. (Beckwith et al., 2016, p. 239)

While individuals who have not experienced incarceration should also engage in these processes, these efforts must be led by those most impacted. In this study, participants described a full and free life after incarceration and envisioned their best possible futures. By engaging in the processes described above, they can build a world where these dreams and desires can be achieved. The vision they disseminate to the wider community might encompass housing, employment, healthcare, education, and any other system that impacts formerly incarcerated individuals. Incorporating both negative and positive abolition, we can imagine this vision requires the destruction of these systems as we know them and the creation of life-affirming institutions.

AUTHOR NOTE

Kymberly Byrd is the Senior Advisor of Evaluation Services at ResultsLab. Correspondence concerning this article should be directed to Kymberly Byrd at byrdkymberly@gmail.com.

REFERENCES

Alexander, M. (2010). The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness. New Press.

Baird, S., de Hoop, J., & Özler, B. (2013). Income shocks and adolescent mental health. Journal of Human Resources, 48(2), 370–403. https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.48.2.370

Beckwith, M., Bliuc, A. M., & Best, D. (2016). What the recovery movement tells us about prefigurative politics. Journal of Social and Political Psychology, 4(1), 238–251. https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.v4i1.548

Bell, M. (2021). Abolition: A new paradigm for reform. Law & Social Inquiry, 46(1), 32–68. https://doi.org/10.1017/lsi.2020.21

Ben-Moshe, L. (2013). The tension between abolition and reform. In M. E. Nagel & A. J. Nocella II (Eds.), The End of prisons: Reflections from the decarceration movement. BRILL. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401209236

Berger, D. (2014). Captive nation: Black prison organizing in the civil rights era. University of North Carolina Press. http://www.vlebooks.com/vleweb/product/openreader?id=none&isbn=9781469618258

Burch, M. (2017). (Re)entry from the bottom up: Case study of a critical approach to assisting women coming home from prison. Critical Criminology, 25(3), 357–374. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10612-016-9346-3

Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2019). Corrections. https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=tp&tid=1

Butler, P. (2015). The system Is working the way it is supposed to: The limits of criminal justice reform. Georgetown Law Journal, 104, 1419–1478.

Butler, P. (2018). Chokehold: Policing Black men. The New Press.

Byrd, R. M. (2016). “Punishment’s Twin”: Theorizing prisoner reentry for a politics of abolition. Social Justice; San Francisco, 43(1), 1-22,119.

Carson, E. A. (2021). *Prisoners in 2020* (pp. 1–38). Bureau of Justice Statistics. https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/p19.pdf

Charmaz, K. (2020). “With constructivist grounded theory you can’t hide”: Social justice research and critical inquiry in the public sphere. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *26*(2), 165–176. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800419879081

Critical Resistance. (2019). The Abolitionist Toolkit. http://criticalresistance.org/resources/the-abolitionist-toolkit/

Cullen, F. T. (2012). Taking rehabilitation seriously: Creativity, science, and the challenge of offender change. Punishment & Society, 14(1), 94–114. https://doi.org/10.1177/1462474510385973

Cullen, F. T., & Gendreau, P. (2000). Assessing correctional rehabilitation: Policy, practice, and prospects. Criminal Justice, 3, 109–175.

Currie, E. (2013). Consciousness, solidarity and hope as prevention and rehabilitation. International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy, 2(2), 3–11. https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.v2i2.114

Davis, A. Y. (2003). Are prisons obsolete? Seven Stories Press.

Davis, A. Y., & Rodriguez, D. (2000). The challenge of prison abolition: A conversation. Social Justice, 27(3), 212–218.

Democracy Collaborative. (2021a). Community land trusts (CLTs). https://community-wealth.org/strategies/panel/clts/index.html

Democracy Collaborative. (2021b). Worker cooperatives. https://community-wealth.org/content/worker-cooperatives

Department of Justice. (2015, October 1). Justice Department announces $53 million in grant awards to reduce recidivism among adults and youth. https://www. justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-announces-53-million-grant-awards-reduce-recidivismamong- adults-and-youth.

Drexel University Center for Hunger-Free Communities. (2021). Universal basic income: Key to reducing food insecurity and improving health. Drexel University Center for Hunger-Free Communities. https://drexel.edu/~/media/Files/hunger-free-center/research-briefs/universalbasicincome.ashx

Durose, M. R., Cooper, A. D., & Snyder, H. N. (2014). Recidivism of prisoners released in 30 states in 2005: Patterns from 2005 to 2010. US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Feinberg, R. M., & Kuehn, D. (2019). Does a guaranteed basic income encourage entrepreneurship? Evidence from Alaska (No. 2019–02; Working Papers). American University. https://ideas.repec.org/p/amu/ wpaper/2019-02.html

Fenster, A. (2020). Technical difficulties: D.C. data shows how minor supervision violations contribute to excessive jailing. Prison Policy Initiative.

Geller, A., & Curtis, M. A. (2011). A sort of homecoming: Incarceration and the housing security of urban men. Social Science Research, 40(4), 1196–1213. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2011.03.008

Gilmore, R. W., & Kilgore, J. (2019, June 19). The case for abolition. The Marshall Project. https://www.themarshallproject.org/2019/06/19/the-case-for-abolition

Goddard, T., & Myers, R. R. (2017). Against evidence-based oppression: Marginalized youth and the politics of risk-based assessment and intervention. Theoretical Criminology, 21(2), 151–167. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480616645172

Gray, P. (2009). The political economy of risk and the new governance of youth crime. Punishment & Society, 11(4), 443–458. https://doi.org/10.1177/1462474509341141

Hannah-Moffat, K. (2015). Needle in a haystack: Logical parameters of treatment based on actuarial risk-needs assessments. Criminology & Public Policy, 14(1), 113–120. https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12121

Hannah-Moffat, K. (2016). A conceptual kaleidoscope: Contemplating 'dynamic structural risk' and an uncoupling of risk from need. Psychology, Crime & Law, 22(1–2), 33–46. https://doi.org/10.1080/1068316X.2015.1114115

Haridy, R. (2020, March 12). Canada's cancelled basic income trial produces positive results. New Atlas. https://newatlas.com/good-thinking/canada-basicincome-experiment-ontario-report-results/

Harry, B., Sturges, K. M., & Klingner, J. K. (2005). Mapping the process: An exemplar of process and challenge in grounded theory analysis. *Educational Researcher*, *34*(2), 3–13. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X034002003

James, N. (2014). Offender reentry: Correctional statistics, reintegration into the community, and recidivism. Congressional Research Service.

Jeffrey, C., & Dyson, J. (2021). Geographies of the future: Prefigurative politics. Progress in Human Geography, 45(4), 641–658. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132520926569

Johnson, G. T., & Lubin, A. (Eds.). (2017). Futures of Black radicalism. Verso.

Jonson, C. L., & Cullen, F. T. (2015). Prisoner reentry programs. Crime and Justice, 44(1), 517–575. https://doi.org/10.1086/681554

Kaba, M. (2021). We do this 'til we free us: Abolitionist organizing and transforming justice (T. K. Nopper, Ed.). Haymarket Books.

Kaba, M., & Hayes, K. (2021). A jailbreak of the imagination: Seeing prisons for what they are and demanding transformation. In We do this 'til we free us: Abolitionist organizing and transforming justice. Haymarket Books.

Karakatsanis, A. (2019). The punishment bureaucracy: How to think about criminal justice reform. Yale Law Journal Forum, 128, 848–935.

Knapp, L. G., Kelly-Reid, J. E., & Ginder, S. A. (2008). Postsecondary institutions in the United States. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2008/2008159rev.pdf

Kushner, R. (2019, April 17). Is prison necessary? Ruth Wilson Gilmore might change your mind. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/17/magazine/prison-abolition-ruth-wilson-gilmore.html

Massoglia, M., & Pridemore, W. A. (2015). Incarceration and health. Annual Review of Sociology, 41(1), 291–310. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112326

Maynard, R. A., & Murnane, R. J. (1979). The effects of a negative income tax on school performance: Results of an experiment. The Journal of Human Resources, 14(4), 463. https://doi.org/10.2307/145317

McLeod, A. M. (2015). Prison abolition and grounded justice. UCLA Law Review, 5, 1156–1239.

McLeod, A. M. (2018). Envisioning abolition democracy. Harvard Law Review, 132, 37.

Network to Advance Abolitionist Social Work. (2022). Who we are. https://www.naasw.com/

Pager, D. (2007). Marked: Race, crime, and finding work in an era of mass incarceration. University of Chicago Press.

Pfaff, J. F. (2017). Locked in: The true causes of mass incarceration--and how to achieve real reform. Basic Books.

Rodriguez, D. (2018). Abolition as praxis of human being: A foreword. Harvard Law Review, 132, 1568–1574.

Sered, D. (2019). Until we reckon: Violence, mass incarceration, and a road to repair. The New Press.

Snyder, T. D., & Dillow, S. A. (2010). Digest of education statistics 2009. United States Department of Education. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/2010013_0.pdf

Spade, D. (2012). The only way to end racialized gender violence in prisons is to end prisons: A response to Russell Robinson's "Masculinity as Prison." California Law Review, 3, 184–196. https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38228S

Travis, J. (2005). But they all come back: Facing the challenges of prisoner reentry (1st ed). Urban Institute Press.

Visher, C. A., & Travis, J. (2011). Life on the outside: Returning home after incarceration. The Prison Journal, 91(3_suppl), 102S-119S. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032885511415228

Yates, L. (2015). Rethinking prefiguration: Alternatives, micropolitics and goals in social movements. Social Movement Studies, 14(1), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2013.870883

Manuscript submitted: September 19, 2022
First revision submitted: December 11, 2022
Accepted: December 21, 2022
Electronically published: April 17, 2023