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Developing Qualitative Research Questions for Illinois Post-Release Prison Analysis

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Developing Qualitative Research Questions for Illinois Post-Release Prison Analysis

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Illinois Sentencing Policy Advisory Council (SPAC)

Illinois State University

Capstone Project

May 2023

Abstract

The Illinois Sentencing Policy Advisory Council (SPAC) partnered with Dr. Kathryn Bocanegra of the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) to conduct a two part research study examining the impact of long term prison sentences in Illinois state facilities. This study is unique, in that it incorporates both quantitative and qualitative methodologies in its data collection and analysis. The purpose of this report is to exemplify the process used to develop the qualitative research interview questions for the UIC study. Components of this process, including relational meetings, and recommendations provided by stakeholders in the criminal legal system for conducting post-release prison research, are described in this report. By analyzing how we developed the qualitative research questions and protocol for the UIC study, we are able to emphasize a human-centered approach to Illinois post-release prison analysis.

About the Illinois Sentencing Policy Advisory Council (SPAC)

The Illinois Sentencing Policy Advisory Council is a nonpartisan and independent sentencing commission that seeks to serve the State of Illinois through objective research, and the analysis and presentation of criminal justice data to the Illinois General Assembly, Illinois Supreme Court, and Governor. To learn more, visit <https://spac.illinois.gov/>.

About the Author

Kiera Eckhardt is an Applied Community and Economic Development (ACED) Fellow through the Stevenson Center at Illinois State University. She is completing her professional practice with the Illinois Sentencing Policy Advisory Council. Her major responsibilities include employing qualitative and quantitative research methods to further the organization's initiatives and projects. Kiera has a B.A. in Anthropology, and soon an M.S. in Anthropology from Illinois State. Prior to working as an Applied Community and Economic Development Fellow, Kiera served in Peace Corps Ecuador as a TEFL Volunteer, then with AmeriCorps VISTA as a Refugee Mentor Coordinator for the Florida Department of Children and Families Refugee Project. In addition to serving the interests of SPAC, this report was completed to meet academic requirements.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Mark Powers and John Specker from the SPAC Research Team for their guidance on all things SPSS/quantitative, SPAC's Executive Director, Kathy Saltmarsh, for her unfettered leadership and trust throughout the professional practice process, as well as Mike Elliot, and the Stevenson Center faculty and staff for their advising and support. The author would also like to thank Dr. Kathryn Bocanegra from the University of Illinois, Chicago (UIC) for the opportunity to work with her on this research project.

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Research Study Background

Although numerous studies have highlighted the negative consequences of mass incarceration, life-course and criminal career research has largely failed to document psychological, social, and behavioral changes that occur during periods of incarceration.¹ This oversight is particularly noteworthy in the case of individuals serving long sentences, as they spend a significant portion of their life behind bars. Long term sentences, for the purposes of this research, are a continuous stay of ten or more years in jail or prison. The policies and programs targeting prisoners are seldom tailored to long termers and lifers, and we know little about effective interventions, or even how to measure effectiveness, for this population.²

During the last twenty years, the prevalence of life sentences has increased substantially in the United States; currently one in nine prisoners in the U.S. are serving life sentences, four times the rate in 1984.³ Further, in 2013 (most recently available data) nearly 7,900 individuals were serving life sentences in the United States for crimes committed when they were under eighteen years of age. Researchers and policy makers have largely ignored this population and interventions have not been designed to address their needs.⁴

There are various studies describing the “afterlife” of incarceration and the long-term impacts of incarceration, including for family members of incarcerated individuals and their communities.⁵ Long termers are likely to experience the repercussions of trauma more intensely than other individuals exposed to traumatic incidents, in part because of their heightened risk of

¹ Kazemian, L. & Travis, J. 2015. “Imperative for Inclusion of Long Termers and Lifers in Research and Policy.” *John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York*, 355.

² Ibid

³ Ibid, 356.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Dudeck, M., Drenkhahn, K., & Dunkel, F. 2011. “Traumatization and Mental Distress in Long-Term Prisoners in Europe.” *SAGE Journals: Punishment & Society*, 13(4).

Codd, H. 2008. “In the Shadow of Prison: Families, Imprisonment and Criminal Justice.” *Willan Publishing, Portland, USA*.

exposure to new traumatic experiences.⁶ To a further extent, incarceration also places a significant strain on intimate partner, family, and parental relationships, leading to difficulties in reestablishing healthy relationships post-release.⁷

The Vera Institute of Justice asserts in their 2018 study, “Reimagining Prisons,” that social and psychological adaptations to prison conditions, and the lasting effects of trauma from the structure and routine [of prison] can erode personal autonomy.⁸ In conjunction, the report also cites the National Academy of Sciences’ study that of 7,528 incarcerated people in thirteen prisons, almost 40% had experienced physical or sexual assault by staff or another incarcerated person within the previous six months. The Vera Institute study concluded that the rate of violence from other incarcerated individuals was ten times the rate of assault outside of prison.⁹ The fear and actual experience of victimization can result in deep and long-lasting distrust of others, an inability to express or share emotions, feelings of anger, and an outsider mentality that can make it difficult for people to seek help from others.¹⁰ When preparing for the reentry of incarcerated persons, it is imperative to consider this, and the vicarious trauma, or trauma incurred when one is exposed to other people’s suffering and need.¹¹ Few escape the effects of violence behind bars.

In 2022, the Council on Criminal Justice (CCJ) Task Force on Long Sentences asserted that life without parole has nationally increased 6% from 2016 to 2020, and that “while the number of people serving a long sentence has decreased,” they make up a larger share of the

⁶ Dudeck, M., Drenkhahn, K., & Dunkel, F. 2011. “Traumatization and Mental Distress in Long-Term Prisoners in Europe.” *SAGE Journals: Punishment & Society*, 13(4).

⁷ Codd, H. 2008. “In the Shadow of Prison: Families, Imprisonment and Criminal Justice.” *Willan Publishing, Portland, USA*.

⁸ Delaney, R., Subramanian, R., Shames, A., & Turner, N. 2018. “Reimagining Prison.” *Vera Institute of Justice, New York, USA*, 2-3.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

currently incarcerated and prison exits, due in part to the “stacking effect” of sentences, which refers to sentence enhancements based on the nature of offenses.¹² In short, the CCJ concluded that long term sentences are becoming longer on average. While it was also concluded that there is no relationship between sentence severity and reductions in crime rates, there is still a significant gap in literature regarding the social, emotional, psychological, spiritual, and relational effects of long-term sentences.

To this extent, Dr. Kathryn Bocanegra of the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), in partnership with the Illinois Sentencing Policy Advisory Council (SPAC), has constructed a research study to examine the impact of long term prison sentences in the State of Illinois. The research study utilizes quantitative data and a qualitative, interview component to seek to address the social, emotional, psychological, spiritual, and relational impact of long term prison sentences. The purpose of this capstone report is to describe the process used to develop the research questions for the qualitative portion of the study. The following section explores the process that was used to conduct relational interviews with stakeholders of the Illinois criminal legal system, and in turn, how their recommendations are used to design the final list of interview questions and interview protocol.¹³

¹² “Task Force on Long Sentences.” 2022. *Council on Criminal Justice*. Accessed 12/10/2022. [LS_101_for_TF_distribution_4_6_2022_.pdf | Powered by Box](#)

¹³ Appendix B

Process of Designing Qualitative Research Questions

I. Introduction

I was hired by the Illinois Sentencing Policy Advisory Council (SPAC) through the Applied Community and Economic Development (ACED) Fellowship program at Illinois State University. Prior to serving with SPAC, I completed academic coursework centered around community and economic development literature, while obtaining my Master's degree in Anthropology. I am honored to have served in the capacity of a graduate fellow with SPAC during my second year of the fellowship program. I was able to assist the team with various qualitative and quantitative research initiatives, many of which provided information and data to members of the Illinois House of Representatives, Senate, Supreme Court, and Governor's Office. One of these initiatives was a research project with Dr. Kathryn Bocanegra from the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). This study, as it is ongoing, seeks to examine the "Impact of Long Term Prison Sentences," with the intention of creating a pilot program to assist formerly incarcerated persons with their reentry into communities.

I formally began working with SPAC and on the "Impact of Long Term Prison Sentences" research study in June 2022. A majority of my previous research experiences were within the field of political anthropology, and so, I was excited to connect with members of the criminal justice community and to work with quantitative data. Truthfully, the only interaction I had had with the criminal justice system prior to my experience with SPAC were speeding tickets, and my personal experience of a family member being incarcerated. With regards to quantitative methodologies, the UIC research project was also my first time formally using SPSS software.

Within the first week of my fellowship with SPAC, we established a recurring call

between myself, Mark Powers (SPAC Research Director), and Dr. Kathryn Bocanegra, to begin writing the research protocol and IRB for the quantitative and qualitative portions of the “Impact of Long Term Prison Sentences” research study. During the first several meetings, we focused on constructing the quantitative IRB and obtaining access and approval to use the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) data that was necessary for the completion of the project.

Between July and August 2022, the quantitative IRB was submitted, and we began waiting for other contractual approvals. During this time, I conducted relational meetings for the qualitative interview component, where I had the pleasure of meeting with lawyers, State’s Attorney’s, staff members from the Lt. Governor’s Office, and other family members and formerly incarcerated persons who work within or have been impacted by the criminal legal system in the State of Illinois. The purpose of these meetings were to:

- 1) Share information about the goals of the UIC research study¹⁴
- 2) Elicit feedback on the study’s research protocol¹⁵
- 3) Brainstorm questions for the qualitative interview component.

A total of ten relational meetings were conducted through phone and video zoom calls that lasted thirty minutes in length. A majority of my contacts for these meetings were recommended by Kathy Saltmarsh (SPAC’s Executive Director) and Dr. Kathryn Bocanegra. At one point during the relational meeting process, I was also introduced to a handful of contacts through someone that Kathy Salmarsh had connected me to. This was very helpful, and expanded the circle of people I was able to work with.

I would normally reach out to contacts via email, and would follow up with them or their office through a phone call if I did not hear from them within a week. Everyone that I spoke to

¹⁴ Appendix A

¹⁵ Appendix B

was very open to working with me, and of the ten meetings conducted, four of them shared that Dr. Kathryn Bocanegra herself had alerted them of the study, prompting their interest to learn more. As I was given full autonomy to schedule and conduct the relational meetings, I kept the research team updated through emails, a master note list, and our recurring weekly meetings.

After completing the final relational meeting in August 2022, I created a comprehensive list of the recommended questions received, which was then used by the research team (with help from the “You Matter” Advisory Council) to create the final list of research questions for the UIC study. Before breaking down the final list of questions in the conclusion, the following section offers a description of the relational meetings in the order in which they occurred. Relevant topics surrounding long term prison sentences and the Illinois criminal legal system are also discussed here.

II. Relational Meetings

My first relational meeting was with a peer who had served as a corrections officer for Norfolk, Virginia. We met a total of three times; twice in July, and once in August. The big ideas from our conversations encompassed topics such as excessive use of force on incarcerated persons, housing subsidization, community preparedness, and employment. After more background research, I shared this perspective with Dr. Kathryn Bocanegra, and Mark Powers (SPAC Research Director), who helped me steer the conversation back towards Illinois prison facilities. We determined that at that point in time, the purpose of our current research study was to examine the impact of long term prison sentences by conducting fifty interviews with men and women who had served ten or more years, and so, we would not be pursuing the perspective of corrections officers in an extended capacity, though this could be an excellent study for future research.

While I was anticipating participants to bring up their treatment in Illinois state facilities, specifically their interactions with corrections officers and other individuals who were incarcerated, I would like to make a note that this was something that was hardly brought up in my relational meetings. More specifically, when it came to the relational impact of long term incarceration, topics such as how families remained connected– or became disconnected– during someone’s incarceration, the concept of parenting behind bars, and struggles associated with visitation, were more prominent in discussions.

In fact, the concept of family reunification services was brought up in at least 4 different relational meetings, where it was asserted that there is limited familial support in long term prison sentences. Some people believe that this is because family members may have passed away or moved, that certain prison facilities may have limited visitation, or that family members may be limited in their ability to visit. This brings up another point, which is that a majority of individuals who are incarcerated in the State of Illinois are coming from the Chicago-land area, but most of the correctional facilities are located in southern or rural counties in Illinois, necessitating hours-long train travel or day trips for visitation.

With some of this information in mind, my second relational meeting was with an administrative member of the Illinois Department of Corrections (DOC), and included Dr. Kathryn Bocanegra and Mark Powers (SPAC Research Director). After Dr. Bocanegra explained the research project to our contact, we were given preliminary approval to use Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority (ICJIA) and SPAC data of prison exits, so long as we received IRB approval for the quantitative portion of the research study. To a similar extent, we were also recommended to consider excluding those who are serving prison sentences through mandatory

supervised release (MSR) terms from our quantitative sample.¹⁶

Within the same meeting, it was brought up that the least coercive way of obtaining participants for the fifty qualitative interviews would be through passing out fliers. This is a method that the principal investigator, Dr. Kathryn Bocanegra, has used before, where individuals are released from the custody of the Illinois Department of Corrections, and are offered a flier that advertises the research study and compensation for their participation. We did not choose to utilize this method for recruitment, however, and chose to levy our relational contacts and recommendations from reentry organizations to recruit participants for the study. At the conclusion of this meeting, our contact also shared that they are unaware of any targeted efforts for long term prison sentences.

The third relational meeting was held without Dr. Bocanegra and Mark Powers, on the same day after meeting with the administrative member of the IDOC. This meeting was held virtually with an Illinois State's Attorney. While the focus of the UIC research study is on the impact of long term prison sentences as experienced by those who were incarcerated, this stakeholder offered great insight into the victim's advocate sector of the Illinois criminal legal system. I make note of this because later in my fellowship, I witnessed members of victim's advocacy organizations testify at the Resentencing Taskforce public hearing that SPAC was chairing, and found their message and organizing to be very powerful. In both this meeting, and my meeting with the administrative IDOC member, it was brought up that the threshold we are using to describe a long term prison sentence— ten years— may be considered relatively short with regards to average sentences. To this assertion, the research team has deferred to the Council on Criminal Justice's Task Force on Long Sentences, who used a similar threshold of ten years to

¹⁶ The research project went to a full IRB review where we received approval to incorporate the aforementioned population into the quantitative data sample, however, we chose to follow the relational meeting's recommendation not to.

conduct their analyses on long term prison sentences in 2022.¹⁷

At the beginning of the study, and prior to receiving access to Criminal Record History Information (CHRI) data through Criminal Justice Information Authority and prison exit data through the Sentencing Policy Advisory Council that was provided by the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC), the research team conceptualized which offenses usually receive long term prison sentences of ten years or more. Most commonly, Class X felony convictions, violent offenses (most prominently murder), and sex offenses, were anticipated and then found to be in the quantitative sample.

At this point in the relational meeting process, a majority of the feedback received had been surrounding the quantitative portion of the study or the interview protocol, but not the actual questions we were developing for the qualitative interview component. My fourth relational meeting was with a policy advisor for a major criminal justice civic organization, who stated that people serving long term prison sentences are “distanced in every sense,” due to the length of time they are incarcerated, as well as the separation from community that occurs when a crime is committed and when someone is away for so long.

While this contact believes that reentry begins the day that someone enters prison, and that this project (as well as future research studies) should have realistic expectations for reentry, they shared that some questions they would ask someone who served a long term prison sentence, in regards to community reentry, would be:

- What worked well and not well in the system?
- What does success look like to the participant?
 - What is your definition of success and how to adjust the system for people to be

¹⁷ “Task Force on Long Sentences.” 2022. *Council on Criminal Justice*. Accessed 12/10/2022. [LS_101_for_TF_distribution_4_6_2022_.pdf](#) | Powered by Box

successful?

- Individual experience and within the system?
- The intersection of recidivism and people achieving what they want.
- Does the system make sense, and what did it do to them?
 - The illusion of helping people.
- If you were to design the system, what would you change?
- What personally affected you?
- The time you went into the time you left, how did you cope with it?
- Were you prepared for how the world had changed? (e.g., technology)
 - What was most difficult for you?
- How does one reconcile wrongs?

What is interesting to note is that when the question of “What does success look like to the participant” was recommended, we acknowledged that success could be considered a subjective term, but that this could lend the question its strength. By asking those who served a long term prison sentence what success looks and maybe in the past tense– looked like– to them, we would be better able to understand the shortcomings of current reentry efforts or what the quantitative sampling may not be telling us in regards to real life challenges. The question of “If you were to design the system, what would you change” was also particularly fascinating to me, though I would incorporate this sort of perceptual analysis into an alternative study on reentry efforts.

While the recommended questions became more large-scale down the list– like for example, “How does one reconcile wrongs”-- something important that was also brought to my attention in this relational meeting was the topic of technological disadvantage experienced by

those incarcerated for long term sentences, especially within the last twenty years. Smart phones, tablets, touch screens, laptops, the internet, and paying bills online are a few of many everyday acts that could be a learning curve for someone reentering society. We incorporated the question, “How did you feel about the advancement of technology,” into the final list of research questions, following the question, “What was most difficult for you to adjust to when you were released?”

The fifth relational meeting was with a staff member of the Lt. Governor’s Office who shared their experience of being incarcerated as we discussed the issues surrounding visitation in prisons, specifically how arduous it is to have to travel from the Chicago area to prison facilities located in southern counties. This contact offered many recommendations, including how we should compensate people for their time after interviewing them. They also asserted that compensation should not be limited to a \$25 gift card, and that in some cases, people may not know how to use them. Regarding this point, the research team decided to offer \$100 through cash, a cash transfer app, or gift card, to compensate research participants. The contact also recommended that there be a disclaimer of not having to answer all interview questions. The interview protocol¹⁸ incorporates this point by reviewing the consent process and agreement with participants, and also states that participants are compensated the full amount of \$100 for completing an interview, even if they do not answer every question.

With the same person, we discussed the topic of safe spaces. Actually, several relational meetings asserted that there is a gap in trauma informed support services, and that it is important to allow participants to feel like the interview is a safe space. One relational meeting, later on, recommended that when someone is emotional or processing their experience in an interview, interviewers should verbally tell participants that they should acknowledge how they are feeling,

¹⁸ Appendix B

and to then “hold that space with them”. Another relational meeting stated that by making the interview a safe space, it allows participants to build their emotional intelligence, and to process thoughts and emotion they may have been internalizing during their incarceration experience.

The fifth relational meeting contact also reflected that for this topic of research, many familial and social questions would be difficult for people to answer. They said that there are many people who are incarcerated that are also parents, and that their children would have had to grow up without them. To this extent, the questions they proposed for the qualitative interviews were:

- What was the mood of the phone calls when you talked to your family?
- What difficulties did your family face in coming to see you?
- How was your family able to overcome the challenges of you being incarcerated?
 - Gauging the difficulty level of overcoming those challenges.
- How did you maintain relationships while you were incarcerated?
 - What was your experience maintaining relationships while you were incarcerated?
- How did you build community? On the inside and outside.
 - What went into those relationships?
- With regards to programming, what made a difference?
- What do you define as a long term sentence?

These questions are more family oriented and relationship-based than the previous questions surrounding what success looks like to participants. The question of, “What do you define as a long term prison sentence,” was included in the final list of interview questions, and in fact, the other questions from this relational meeting, in the way in which they were worded,

were added by Dr. Kathryn Bocanegra to the final list of qualitative interview questions.

Something that is not included in the final list of interview questions, that I would love to explore independently, is the question of “How did you build community? On the inside and outside.”

This is due in part to the incredible network of criminal justice organizations and nonprofits (e.g., Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation, Restore Justice Foundation, etc.) in the State of Illinois that I was able to work with through the Resentencing Task Force and my time with SPAC, as well as the need for more social support and organizations such as these.

The sixth relational meeting was with a staff person working on the policy front in the Illinois Department of Corrections. A majority of my time with this contact was spent discussing DOC programming, and the research project’s topic: challenges that formerly incarcerated people experience when reentering communities. While someone is incarcerated, the contact affirmed that programming is geared towards proximity of release, and that there are no specialized programs or individualized assistance for those serving long term sentences. To a similar extent with reentry, the contact asserted that people who served long term sentences sit in the same classrooms with those who served short term sentences to discuss parole.

On the similar topic of post-release, the contact also stated that there is currently no way of gauging if people who check the box for having a host site need any additional resources, help, or services. Outside of a parole agent, support for finding housing, and an ad hoc basis for referring people to social organizations, the DOC does not provide support. To this extent, they recommended the following questions for interviews:

- How have you seen the incarceration system change or evolve? With relation to COVID?
- Tell me about your experience
 - With programming.

- With therapeutic opportunities.
- With access to the above or to information/resources/personnel/etc.
- How could your experience have been improved?

For the final list of interview questions, the question regarding experience with programming and therapeutic opportunities or resources was reworded to ask: “With regards to programming, what made a difference,” as well as the following variations of: “What was not helpful when you were reentering your community; What kind of support would have been helpful when reentering; What resources were you pointed to; and What resources do you need to help you transition?” The wording for these questions came from other recommendations to ask about programming and resources, wherein six out of ten relational meetings asked a question about what someone would need for reentry after serving a long term prison sentence.

For my seventh relational meeting, I met with a second staff member from the Office of the Lt. Governor of Illinois. With this contact we discussed the impact of COVID-19 on visitation in prison facilities, as well as the concept of someone being allowed visitation as long as they do not have disciplinary actions against them. Psychologically, the contact shared their experience being incarcerated for a long term sentence and how physical touch, as well as allowing families to stay connected during someone’s incarceration is imperative to reunification efforts but also rehabilitation. For recommended interview questions, the contact shared:

- What happened to you?
 - What leads someone to their incarceration?
 - Significant moments.
- How did incarceration impact you?
- How did your incarceration impact your family?

- How have you processed what happened to you?
- How did you feel about the sentence imposed on you?
- How did your sentence impact your family?
- What did you think about your reentry?
- How did you feel about returning to society?
 - 5 years vs. 10 years into sentence.
- How did it feel for you to see other individuals being released?
- How did it feel for you to see people returning?
- How did you feel about the advancement of technology?
- What was not helpful when you were reentering?
- What kind of support would have been helpful when reentering?

Again, these questions delve into how long term sentences are experienced by families as well as socially. We specifically incorporated the question of “What was not helpful when you were reentering,” into the final list of interview questions, alongside “What kind of support would have been helpful when reentering,” and an ancillary question about programming. By doing this, we are essentially asking the same question (What is helpful?) in three different ways, so as to elicit the most verbose and comprehensive of responses from participants. The question of “How did you feel about returning to society? Five years vs. ten years into sentence,” was also kept the same and incorporated into the final list of interview questions, as well as “How did it feel for you to see other individuals being released; and How did it feel for you to see people returning to prison?”

The eighth relational meeting was with someone recently promoted within the Chicago’s Mayor’s Office to continue their work around reentry initiatives. This contact recommended the

\$100 threshold for participants that we established to compensate people for their time being interviewed. They also recommended hiring a research assistant who served twenty years or more to assist the research team with the study. Through funding, the initial research team of myself, Dr. Kathryn Bocanegra, and Mark Powers (SPAC Research Director), were able to add three research assistants who have worked in, or were impacted by the Illinois criminal legal system. The contact recommended that we ask research participants:

- What resources were you pointed to?
 - That you were discouraged from when you didn't receive them, to the point that you almost gave up
 - How did that play out for you when you did everything right?
- Who gets left out?

These recommended questions are synonymous with ones previously outlined that have to do with access to and the necessity of certain resources with regards to reentry. With the purpose of the qualitative portion of the research project being to examine the physical, spiritual, emotional, psychological, and relational impact of long term prison sentences, I would relate questions regarding resources as they pertain to reentry as physical impacts experienced, though there is potential for some personal narratives to be representative of different impacts at the same time. At this point in the relational meeting process it appeared that there was a heavy interest in familial, social and relational questions, which led to the recommendation of emotional and psychologically based questions.

The ninth relational meeting was with a campaign staffer who focuses on criminal justice initiatives for the Illinois State government. An important moment I shared with this contact was how they openly reflected that they did not know how to stop a criminal lifestyle, and that they

spent their time studying and preparing for moving forward in life during their long term prison sentence. They discussed that the stories that were shared with them by people who were formerly incarcerated and working in the Illinois criminal legal system to exact change on reentry and rehabilitative programming efforts, made a profound impact on them, and pushed them to want to participate in that work upon release.

This contact described reentry as the hardest part of reunification, in that it was a process of rebuilding relationships, and a lot of people do not know how to talk about their experience being in prison. Some people may ask themselves, “What is my role now?” when they return to their families and communities, and in some cases, in their children’s lives. For example, the contact shared that when they returned home, their children did not go to them for advice, and that this is a reality other mothers and fathers experience. For the purpose of the qualitative interviews, this person recommended the following questions:

- What are the emotions you experienced when incarcerated?
 - As you got closer to the door, what were you experiencing emotionally (e.g., reconnecting with children)?
- What resources do you need to help you transition?
- What case do you hope we make with this research/project?

From this list it is interesting to point out that for the second meeting in a row there was an interest in what resources were necessary for reentering communities after serving a long term prison sentence. Alongside of the question explicitly asking about what emotions the participant experienced while incarcerated, which was incorporated into the final list of interview questions, the research team also incorporated the question of “What case do you hope we make with this research/project” as we began finalizing our interviewer schedules and recruiting people for the

study. Around this time, Dr. Kathryn Bocanegra and the research team also formally made the decision to not accept referrals for interviews from corrections officers or DOC programs when recruiting participants for the study. This is to ensure the confidentiality and protection of interview participants, while mitigating the risk of corrections officers, programming personnel, parole officers, and any entity related to mandatory supervised release (MSR), from being able to access or share a participants' personally identifiable information.

Following this, the tenth and final relational meeting was with a member of the Illinois Department of Corrections. In real time, this person offered their perspective on Illinois correctional facility operations and staff members, while expressing the timeliness of our research study. They shared that of the proposed quantitative and qualitative portions of the project, they were increasingly interested in how the study could affect external crime rates and the influence that long term prison sentences have on children who have a parent or parents incarcerated, quite holistically. They continued the discussion of how there is no familial support in long term prison sentences, and asserted that family reunification counseling services would be the best way to maintain parent-child relationships.

Another interesting point brought up was regarding the prisons' aging populations. More specifically, the contact noted that nursing homes will not take in people with sex offenses, and a majority of older persons do not have family that can take care of them upon their release. To this extent, the contact said that the Illinois Department of Corrections has limited capacity for contact care (cost burden), and belabor what is known as compassionate release, typically for terminal illnesses, though this does not address all of the issues that older individuals who are incarcerated experience. While the UIC project examines the impact of long term sentences, it is not specifically addressing aging populations, though data from the quantitative component of

the study would offer more information on this. After discussing this at length, the contact recommended the following list of questions for the interview component:

- Are sentences really deterring crime?
- What are mechanisms in place that helped you get through your sentence?
 - Family support?
 - External vs. Internal
- How do you maintain yourself in a long term sentence?
- How can we allow parents to continue to parent?
 - Allow incarcerated parents to be a part of the DCFS process?
 - Especially for those with long term sentences
- Having gone through your experience/knowing what you know now, what would you have needed?
 - Department, resources, etc.
 - “To be your best self”

To summarize, the question referring to the “mechanisms” in place that allowed the person to get through their sentence was counted as another point towards the tripartite question of “What is helpful?” that was brought up after the seventh relational meeting. We did however keep the wording of the question “How did you maintain yourself in a long term sentence” and incorporate it in the final list of questions towards the middle before asking more family-based questions. To this extent, I would also like to point out that the contact’s question of “Are sentences deterring crime” was not only added to the final list of interview questions, but is the last question closing out the interview. Personally, I agree with this decision, as the preceding questions asks someone to reflect on what they individually experienced, then their experience in

association with their family and communities. The last question finally postulates an alternative and provocative line of research, whose data collected in this project could fuel future study.

After completing the final relational meeting, I consolidated all of the notes, general summaries, and recommended questions and feedback for the interview protocol into a password protected account that is shared with Dr. Kathryn Bocanegra and Mark Powers. After going through my notes, I pulled out all recommended questions from my relational meetings and made a comprehensive list of all questions. I ordered the questions where the interview begins with asking someone about their experience of what happened to them. Then the questions go into their experience as it relates to other people, more specifically family members, which, as we discussed in the relational meetings, is an important and very personal topic. The remaining questions on the list are more “big ticket” ideas. It’s as if we are asking the interviewee to share their personal experience with us at length, then answer larger, more abstract ideas on the topic of reentry. The following is the list of recommended questions:

III. Recommended Questions

- What happened to you?
- How did you cope with what happened to you?
- How did incarceration impact you?
- How have you processed what happened to you?
- How did you feel about the sentence imposed on you?
- What were the emotions you experienced while incarcerated?
- What was most difficult for you to adjust to when you were released?
- How did you feel about the advancement of technology?
- What worked well and not well in the system?

- What does successful reentry look like to you?
- If you were to design the system, what would you change?
- When you were incarcerated, what was the mood of phone calls when you talked to family?
- How did your incarceration impact your family?
- What difficulties did your family face in coming to see you?
- How was your family able to overcome the challenges of you being incarcerated?
- How did you maintain relationships while you were incarcerated?
- What was your experience maintaining relationships while you were incarcerated?
- How did you maintain yourself in a long term prison sentence?
- How did you build community on the inside and outside? What went into those relationships?
- With regards to programming, what made a difference?
- What do you define as a long term prison sentence?
- How did you feel about returning to society? 5 years vs. 10 years.
- How did it feel for you to see other individuals being released?
- How did it feel for you to see people returning to prison?
- What was not helpful when you were reentering your community?
- What kind of support would have been helpful when reentering?
- What resources were you pointed to?
- What resources do you need to help you transition?
- What case do you hope we make with this research/project?
- Who gets left out?

- Are sentences deterring crime?

As you can see, the entirety of this list is composed of recommended questions that were received from relational meetings with stakeholders of the criminal legal system in Illinois. After internal deliberations with the research team, the list of recommended questions was shared with the “You Matter” Advisory Council,¹⁹ who offered feedback on preferred wording choices and the way in which question order could establish rapport. The final list of research questions is as follows:

IV. Final List of Research Questions

Context of post-release experience:

- To begin, can you please tell me how much time you served in the IDOC?
 - What was the sentence imposed?
 - How long did you serve in jail and prison on that sentence?
 - What was the criminal charge associated with this sentence?
- During your time of incarceration, did you stay in touch with any friends or family members?
 - Did you receive visits? Mail? With what frequency?
 - Did it change at all over time?
- As you neared your time of release, did you receive any support in planning for your reintegration back into society?
 - Were there any pre-release services or programs provided?
 - Did family help you plan?

¹⁹ A part of the Dave Easterling Foundation’s “You Matter” Project for developing a pilot program for reentry in the State of Illinois.

- What was your biggest concern about being released back into society before you were actually released?
 - Did these concerns end up being a challenge?

Description of post release experience:

- To the best of your ability, can you describe the day you walked out of prison?
 - Was someone there to pick you up?
 - What were your first impressions?
 - Where were you released to?
- Did you have any financial support the first few months after your release?
 - Did family or friends support you? Did you have a job?
- Can you describe your living situation post-release? How did it help or challenge your process of reintegrating back into society?
 - Who were you living with? Did you feel safe? Did you have supportive relationships available where you were living?
- Can you please tell me more about your relationships with family, friends, and intimate partners after release?
 - Who did you feel like you could talk to if you were struggling?
 - Did any of these relationships make your process of reintegration more difficult?
- What do you wish you knew before being released that you know now?
- What supports (programs, services, mentors, etc.) were available for you in your community when you were released?

- Were you able to find the support you needed in your community? If not, what was missing?

Discussion & Conclusion

It is interesting to note that the final list of research questions are split into two descriptive categories; one of which refers to the “context” of one’s post release experience, while the second refers to the participants’ “description” of their post release experience. Mainly for the purpose of establishing rapport did this occur in this way, however, when taking a closer look at the final list of interview questions, it can be deduced that the questions also offer a chronological journey of the participants’ incarceration and reentry experience, should they choose to answer every question. The final list of research questions begins by asking someone about their perspective of what happened to them, leading into the relationships and support they experienced before being released, and how these relationships and other factors may have changed following their release. The following is a list of nine themes that I propose the final list of research questions follows.

I. Research Question Themes

- ★ Breaking Down the Question: “What happened to you?”
- ★ Pre-Release Relationships
- ★ Pre-Release Reintegration Support
- ★ Challenges or Concerns About Release
- ★ Personal Narrative
- ★ Post-Release Reintegration Support
- ★ Post-Release Living Situation
- ★ Post-Release Relationships

★ What do you wish you knew before being released that you know now?

Chronologically speaking, the themes begin with a general rendering of what happened to the research participant, moving into their pre-release experience of incarceration, wherein participants are asked about the nature of and associated feelings with relation to their relationships and access to reintegration support prior to be released, the actual moment of release and the immediate housing situation that the participant experienced, then goes into the impact on and status of the previously mentioned relationships and access to resources, but not post-release. The final line of questioning then refers to what that person may wish they knew before being released. The final list of research questions can be broken down into the above themes as follows:

★ How to Break Down the Question: “What happened to you?”

- To begin, can you please tell me how much time you served in the IDOC?
 - What was the sentence imposed?
 - Did you serve the full sentence?
 - What was the criminal charge associated with this sentence?

★ Pre-Release Relationships

- During your time of incarceration, did you stay in touch with any friends or family members?
 - Did you receive visits? Mail? With what frequency?
 - Did it change at all over time?

★ Pre-Release Reintegration Support

- As you neared your time of release, did you receive any support in planning for your reintegration back into society?
 - Were there any pre-release services or programs provided?
 - Did family help you plan?

★ Challenges or Concerns About Release

- What was your biggest concern about being released back into society before you were actually released?
 - Did these concerns end up being a challenge?

★ Personal Narrative

Description of post release experience:

- To the best of your ability, can you describe the day you walked out of prison?
 - Was someone there to pick you up?
 - What were your first impressions?
 - Where were you released to?

★ Post-Release Reintegration Support

- Did you have any financial support the first few months after your release?
 - Did family or friends support you? Did you have a job?

As well as:

- What supports (programs, services, mentors, etc.) were available for you in your community when you were released?
- Were you able to find the support you needed in your community? If not, what was missing?

★ Post-Release Living Situation

- Can you describe your living situation post-release? How did it help or challenge your process of reintegrating back into society?
 - Who were you living with? Did you feel safe? Did you have supportive relationships available where you were living?

★ Post-Release Relationships

- Can you please tell me more about your relationships with family, friends, and intimate partners after release?
 - Who did you feel like you could talk to if you were struggling?
 - Did any of these relationships make your process of reintegration more difficult?

★ What do you wish you knew before being released that you know now?

In total, this approach to dissecting the final list of research questions is meant to rationalize which questions participants are asked. The personable and empathetic wording of questions such as: “Can you please tell me more about your relationships with family, friends, and intimate partners after release; Who did you feel like you could talk to if you were struggling; and Did any of these relationships make your process of reintegration more difficult,” can be accredited to the You Matter” Advisory Council.

In conclusion, there was a major emphasis on family related questions, or questions referring to family reunification services and visitation, wherein these types of questions occurred in four out of ten relational meetings. Alongside this, there seemed to be a tendency to follow a given impact of a long term prison sentence (e.g., physical, social, emotional, psychological, and relational) to its natural conclusion in relational meeting conversations,

wherein contacts often stayed on a single set of impacts for the entirety of our meeting. For example, it was common for a discussion on the relational and social impact of long term sentences to be discussed at the same time, and for the emotional and psychological impact to be discussed in tandem as well.

The University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) qualitative and quantitative research study on the impact of long term prison sentences in Illinois state facilities is the first of its kind in the Illinois criminal legal system. The quantitative data describes the size and characteristics of the population, while the qualitative research methodology offers an inclusive, personal, narrative-oriented description of fifty individual's experience of impact when reentering communities after serving a long term prison sentence.

As the data collection for the qualitative portion of the research project is ongoing, I want to write in summary here that through the relational meeting process and in collaboration with the "You Matter" Advisory Council through the Dave Easterling Foundation's project, we have been able to construct a relevant and methodical list of research questions that allow us to tell the story of someone's incarceration and reentry from their own perspective. I am so grateful to all of the relational meeting contacts that took the time to meet with me and to offer their personal and professional insight into the criminal legal system, and all the advice received for the quantitative and qualitative portions of the research project. For future research projects, I support the idea of co-authorship, or research participants being co-authors of projects to continue emphasizing community-led advocacy based research.

Appendices

Appendix A

Impact of Long Term Prison Sentences Research Study Description

Quantitative Portion: Criminal History Record Information (CHRI) Data

Summary

In partnership with SPAC, Kathryn Bocanegra of the University of Illinois, Chicago (UIC) constructed a project examining the impact of long term prison sentences on men and women who served a minimum of 10 consecutive years in an Illinois state penitentiary. Drawing from Criminal History Record Information (CHRI) data and Illinois Department of Corrections data, descriptive profiles were developed to include demographic, criminal history, and offense information, as well as a summary of subsequent criminal involvement.

Number of Subjects

The quantitative portion of the study analyzed the administrative records of individuals who served a minimum of 10 consecutive years in the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC), specifically having exited between 2009 and 2019. It is noted that IDOC exit trends have varied over the years, which is correlated to changes in sentencing policy, parole policy, and IDOC administrative decisions, among other factors. When initially analyzing publicly available IDOC exit records, which were available from 2014-2021, it was found that approximately 10% of IDOC exits within a given year have served a minimum of 10 consecutive years in an IDOC facility. On average, between 20,000 and 30,000 individuals exit IDOC each year. On an annual basis, between 500-700 of these exits have served at least 10 consecutive years in an Illinois state facility. Multiplied by 10 (for 10 consecutive years, 2009-2019), it was estimated that the analytic sample for the study would include between 5,000 to 7,000 individuals.

Qualitative Portion: Interviews

Summary

In addition to the analysis of Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) data and Criminal History Record Information (CHRI) data, the research aim of the qualitative portion of the study is to comprehensively examine the psychological, social, emotional, spiritual, and relational implications of long-term institutionalization both in prison and post-release.

Number of Subjects

50 in-depth semi-structured interviews with men and women who have served at least 10 years in an Illinois state facility were conducted, with recruitment occurring mostly in Cook County and Sangamon County. For the purpose of this capstone project, the sample has been limited to 10 interviews (N=10), as data collection and analysis for the qualitative portion of the research project is still underway.

Participant Selection

The research team distributed flyers about the interview component of the study to various re-entry service providers and nonprofits who may have contact with individuals who have served long term prison sentences. Interested participants called or emailed Dr. Kathryn Bocanegra, who confirmed the eligibility of interested participants:

- The candidate must speak English or Spanish
- The candidate must be 18 years of age or older
- The candidate must have served at least 10 consecutive years in the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC)
- The candidate must have been released from IDOC within the last 10 years (i.e. if they have been out of prison for longer than 10 years they are not eligible)
- The individual must have been released from IDOC²⁰
- The individual must have been paroled to either Cook County or Sangamon County and resided there for at least the first year post-release from prison.

Vulnerable Populations

Prisoners, defined as someone who is currently incarcerated, were not involved in this study. Some interview subjects are on Mandatory Supervised Release. MSR is managed by the Illinois Parole Department, which is under the Illinois Department of Corrections. The IRB of the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) does not consider individuals under MSR as prisoners.

²⁰ No interviews were conducted with individuals who are currently incarcerated, on work release, or serving their parole sentence incarcerated.

Appendix B

Impact of Long Term Prison Sentences Interview Protocol

Study Overview, Confidentiality Notice

You are being asked to participate in a research project titled “Examining Long-Term Prison Sentences”. The purpose of this research is to understand the physical, emotional, social, psychological and spiritual impact of long-term prison sentences following release from the Illinois Department of Corrections and how to support individuals who are reentering their communities after serving these sentences. The person leading this study is Kathryn Bocanegra, Assistant Professor at the Jane Addams College of Social Work at the University of Illinois Chicago. This study is supported by the Illinois Sentencing Policy Advisory Council.

You are being asked to participate due to your experience being incarcerated in the Illinois Department of Corrections for ten (10) consecutive years or more. You only have to participate in one interview that will last up to 90 minutes. During this interview I will ask you a variety of questions, ranging from how you, your family and your community have been impacted by your incarceration, and forms of support that have/ could be helpful for individuals who are reentering their communities.

While you will be asked to reflect on your experience being incarcerated, you will not be asked your name, organizational affiliation, or any personally identifiable information. The interview will be audio-recorded so that we do not miss anything you say or get distracted from the conversation by taking notes. The audio-recording will be transcribed (typed out) and then destroyed. The transcripts will not include your name and will be stored in password protected files that are only accessible to the research team. In order to protect your confidentiality, we will not use your name during the discussion. If, accidentally, your name or other identifying information are recorded, this information will not be written into the transcripts, and the audio recordings will be destroyed.

None of the information you share during the interview will be disclosed to your friends, family, coworkers, employers, the Illinois Department of Corrections or any law enforcement entity. The research findings will report aggregate trends in a way that does not identify you as an individual. As these questions relate to the experience of incarceration it is possible that these questions may be upsetting and lead you to experience sadness or anxiety. You are not required to answer any of the questions, and you may terminate the interview at any point. We will remind you when these questions will occur during the interview.

You have received in your email the Verbal Informed Consent Form in advance of this interview. In case you have not had a chance to review this form I have a printed version with me.

START RECORDING NOW

Verbal Consent

I am going to repeat the consent process that is at the bottom of the verbal consent form.

Do you agree to participate in this interview?

You recognize that participation is completely voluntary, and you can end your involvement in the interview at any time. Please say “yes” or “no” clearly as your response.

Do you agree to the interview being recorded? Please say “yes” or “no” clearly as your response.

[assuming Yes] I will now ask you the same questions to have them recorded and commence the interview.

Interview Script

CONCLUDE RECORDING

End Script re: Compensation

This concludes the interview. We are thankful for your contribution and will compensate you \$100 for your time. The Principal Investigator has provided the following compensation options:

- a) Cash Transfer App (Venmo, Zelle, ApplePay)
- b) Visa Gift Card
- c) Cash

Which is your preference?

Assuming that Cash Transfer is their preference:

Could you please let me know which App you prefer, and the phone number or email address linked to your account? Within the next 24 hours you will receive the cash transfer to your account.

If it is the Visa Gift Card/ Cash

I have the cash/ gift card on hand- please sign this sheet indicating that you have received the gift card.

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