

# Reframing reentry: Understanding how reentry programming affects the well-being and quality of life of returning citizens

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## Abstract

This study examined the experiences returning citizens (RCs) have in participating in different reentry programs and how these experiences may lead to improved well-being and quality of life (QOL). We conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with RCs participating in employment-oriented reentry programs. The interviews focused on participants' reentry programming experience and areas affecting their well-being (e.g., housing, education, financial stability). QOL was enhanced for RCs when they were able to access stable housing, develop supportive relationships, have a job that permitted them the resources needed to live independently, and increase their perceptions of self-efficacy and social capital. While reentry programs maintain a focus on employment for RCs, housing, healthy relationships, and opportunities for increasing self-efficacy and social capital are tied to well-being and QOL among RCs. Reentry programs have the potential to influence a variety of factors at multiple levels that shape well-being and QOL, and in turn employment and recidivism, among RCs.

## KEYWORDS

education, employment, prisoners, prisons, quality of life, self-efficacy, social capital

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

More than 10 million people each year return to their communities after cycling through state and federal prisons and local jails (Freudenberg et al., 2005). Though there has been an increase in public discourse surrounding mass incarceration, there is scant research on the experiences returning citizens (RCs)—a term that has been used by formerly incarcerated persons to describe themselves (Jackl, 2023)—have reentering society and participating in different types of reentry programs. Understanding the experiences of individuals reentering society after being involved in the criminal justice system can help to inform interventions and programs to address the health problems experienced by RCs.

There is an assortment of programs that focus on promoting a smooth reentry experience for RCs; however, there is no one-size-fits-all model for successfully facilitating reentry, nor is there adequate research on the subject (Wright et al., 2014). Reentry experiences may involve probation or parole, also termed community supervision, and/or participation in community-based reentry programs that tend to focus on job skills and employment (Reentry Programs, 2018). Employment-focused reentry programs aim to provide RCs with the training and support needed to re-enter the workforce. Yet even among employment-based reentry programs, multiple models of integrating individuals into the formal economy or promoting a smooth transition back into the workforce post-incarceration exist. On one side of the spectrum are programs that prioritize quickly acquiring a work placement and invest a few weeks in training individuals who have been released from prison with the skills needed to work minimum-wage jobs. For example, a reentry program may focus on job provision and search assistance. Through this process, individuals may find rapid job acquisition in fast food chains, public sector (e.g., building maintenance and cleaning in local public agency), or service-related industries (Apel, 2011). In contrast, other programs invest more time in the training process, drawing upon an apprenticeship model that teaches participants entrepreneurship and other skills needed for a long-term career as opposed to a short-term job. While these programs may focus on employment, they also focus on employability to increase “soft skills” that can help individuals find meaningful jobs (e.g., entrepreneur, teacher) and be a competitive candidate for job opportunities (Apel, 2011). For example, one New-York City-based reentry program provides a 4-day job readiness class, job mentorship/coaching, and counseling that can aid RCs in finding meaningful employment while they work a low-wage job. One consistent characteristic across different reentry approaches is that they seek to enable RCs to achieve employment.

In helping RCs access employment, reentry programs aim to reduce recidivism among participants. Existing literature often focuses on the lack of recidivism 1 year postrelease as a marker of the success and effectiveness of a reentry program (Klingele, 2018). However, the effects of these programs on participants' well-being and QOL remain overlooked in research. Specifically, studies on individual well-being and QOL as markers of success in the reintegration process for participants in reentry programs are limited. Using the WHO definition, we operationalize well-being and QOL as “an individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns” (World Health Organization, 1998). We conceptualize QOL as a multidimensional construct and consider multiple facets of the reentry experience that may contribute to RCs' perceptions of their QOL. We posit that there is a dynamic relationship among employment, a lack of recidivism, and well-being/QOL among RCs, such that these factors are interconnected and that improvements in one factor will positively affect the others. Research suggests a strong relationship between employment and well-being/QOL, and employment and reductions in recidivism (Burns et al., 2021; Lewchuk et al., 2003). Additionally, studies show that persons outside the carceral system have better mental health outcomes (often a proxy for well-being and QOL) than those who have been incarcerated and/or involved in the carceral system (Morgan et al., 2012; Prins, 2014; Yi et al., 2017). Thus, research suggests a robust connection among these three factors. Figure 1 depicts the interconnections among well-being and QOL, employment, and a lack of recidivism.

Without more insights on how reentry programs affect the well-being and QOL of their participants, it is challenging to know how these factors are influenced by different types of reentry programs, and how improving



**FIGURE 1** Interconnections among well-being and quality of life (QOL), employment, and recidivism.

well-being and QOL may facilitate economic independence and personal freedom among RCs. The study seeks to understand how reentry programs can not only successfully promote employment but also improve well-being and QOL, and the factors that contribute to it, among RCs. The questions that guide this qualitative research study are:

1. How do RCs describe the characteristics of different reentry programs, in terms of key focus areas and program elements?
2. How does participation in different types of reentry programming influence the well-being and QOL among RCs?

## 2 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 2.1 | Sample

Study participants were recruited from six different reentry programs in New York City and Los Angeles, CA. The re-entry programs varied in their focus on employment, training and educational experiences, and referrals to social services. While some reentry programs provided short 6–12-week reentry programming focused on rapid employment acquisition, often resulting in job matching for low-skill jobs, other reentry programs provided longer terms for participation, ranging from 12 to 18 months. The longer reentry programs often provided internship and job placement, oversight, mentoring, and skills-based training. Both types of programs served primarily people with limited educational and/or work experience.

Participants were recruited from reentry organizations with whom the study team had existing relationships or were referred to by community collaborators. Team members visited the reentry organization and described the

study to staff, who referred RCs to the study. A total of 14 people consented to do an in-depth, semi-structured interview. All study procedures were approved by the Columbia University Medical Center IRB.

## 2.2 | Measures and interview approach

The primary data collection approach was in-depth, semi-structured in-person and phone interviews with RCs who were participating in an employment-oriented reentry program. While the interviews focused substantially on participants' reentry programming experience, we also gathered data on areas directly impacting their well-being to contextualize their reentry program experience. These questions and probes focused on details such as their carceral experience, including their trajectory into and length of time in the carceral system; social support, including connections during and after incarceration; housing; access to health care and support for substance use and mental health needs; self-confidence; financial stability; and perceptions of well-being and QOL before, during, and after incarceration. Interviews were conducted by research team members in person, except for two interviews with participants in Los Angeles that occurred over Zoom.

## 2.3 | Analysis

The analysis commenced with the transcription of audio files by a research assistant, ensuring accuracy through cross-checks by the research team. The subsequent analysis of interview data involved content scrutiny and summarization. In this study, we employed Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT), an inductive research approach used to derive themes from participant interviews in situations where no prior adequate theory exists (Charmaz, 2014).

We employed a process-focused, line-by-line coding of the interview transcripts. This coding process, rooted in CGT, facilitated the generation of codes directly derived from the data. Memos corresponding to each code were then crafted to offer immediate analytical insights, guiding the final analyses and theme identification. Categories were systematically developed for each section of coding, serving as organizational frameworks that enriched the breadth of our analysis during the study. The approach aligns with CGT's core objective of exploring and understanding social processes in their complexity, ensuring that the resulting analysis captures the depth and richness inherent in the participants' perspectives.

Qualitative data analysis using CGT is a methodological approach rooted in social constructivism, emphasizing the co-construction of knowledge between researchers and participants (Charmaz, 2014). Our approach involved systematically analyzing data to generate theory that is grounded in the data itself, rather than testing pre-existing hypotheses. In CGT, the focus is on understanding the subjective meanings individuals attribute to their experiences, acknowledging the influence of context and the dynamic nature of reality. Our goal was to develop a nuanced understanding of the reentry experience for RCs in employment-focused reentry programs.

## 3 | RESULTS

The majority (71.4%,  $n = 10$ ) of participants self-identified as Black. Two participants (14.3%) identified as white, one (7.1%) was of Hispanic ethnicity, and one (7.1%) identified as "other" race/ethnicity. Almost two-thirds (64.3%) identified as male. At the time of the interview, half of the sample (50%) were currently employed with a full-time job, four participants (28.6%) were employed with a part-time job, two were unemployed, and one participant's employment status was unknown. Four participants (28.6%) had an annual income of less than \$10,999, three (21.4%) had an annual income between \$11,000 and \$25,999, six (42.9%) earned \$26,000–\$40,999, and one participant (7.1%) earned over \$50,000.

### 3.1 | Characteristics of reentry programs

Participants described various services to which they had access, and the availability of these services depended on the reentry program's mission, scope, and capacity. Services offered included employment, housing, education, workshops focused on healthy living, and programs to address substance use. Key areas of services included: (1) assessment (e.g., identification of strengths/areas for further development), (2) hard job skills (e.g., resume development, interview skills), (3) soft job skills (e.g., etiquette, active listening), (4) education (e.g., GED courses, certification/credentialing), (5) health (e.g., substance use and mental health referrals/treatment), and (6) social services (e.g., housing services, financial literacy programming).

The services reentry programs provided helped participants meet essential needs and obtain skills for independent living. Some reentry programs that could not directly provide resources to participants would provide them with funds to access them. For example, one participant noted:

I needed [an asthma] pump and it was a little situation where I would have to pay cause I don't have the insurance card where I can pick up prescriptions, and they [reentry program] paid for [it]. (Male, 25, Employed Full-time)

Participants often suggested that the more options available to RCs, the greater the chances for personal success in building a new life. Training and education, such as "what to do if you go on an interview," played an essential role in helping participants move into new jobs.

### 3.2 | Reentry program participation and well-being/QOL among RCs

Our qualitative analysis revealed several themes when examining factors that affected the well-being and QOL of study participants. Specifically, we identified five domains of factors influencing well-being and QOL: (1) Employment, (2) Housing, (3) Relationships/Community, (4) Self-efficacy, and (5) Social/Personal Capital. Table 1 identifies themes within these broad domains and examples of participant responses.

### 3.3 | Employment

At the time of the interview, almost all participants, whether working or not, were completing trainings and/or developing skills to facilitate engagement in wage-earning jobs. The reentry programs facilitated placing RCs into employment through trainings focused on job readiness skills, gaining experience via internships, networking and mentoring opportunities, and job referrals.

Participants indicated that the time and resources reentry programs provided RCs to identify and develop their job interests and skills were invaluable. One participant noted, "it's one thing to come into a program and then get nothing, but they're offering you job skills, or something to enhance your life" (Male, 68, Black/African-American, Retired). Another described his experience:

[The reentry program] is a good program. When I came here, they helped me get into school and paid for it so that motivated me to go to school. I actually passed four of my tests for the GED, so I just gotta take one more... (Male, 21, Employed Part-time)

Given this and other participants' sentiments, it is not surprising that employment- and education-related content was the centerpiece of programming for reentry programs.

**TABLE 1** Domains and related themes of positive and negative factors influencing well-being and quality of life (QOL) among returning citizens participating in reentry programs (N = 14).

Domain	Theme related to QOL	Example quote
Employment	Increasing job skills and education (+)	cause it's like, ultimately about building employability skills. Where I interned was ... in an office setting, in that environment, it was fruitful for me because although that wasn't really something I wanted to do, it at least allowed me to know that this is something I may not wanna do, but I'm still gonna get the job done. And in the process, I'll tell you what I learned. I learned the transferrable skills (Male, 24, Employed Part-time)
	Job turnover (-)	Since I've been with [reentry program], it's been, I've had two or three jobs with them. But it's like, internships and paid internships through them, and I just recently got a job with [grocery company] (Male, 22, Employed Full-time)
	Earning income through formal means (+)	It's just powerful to be able to earn money the right way, 'cause you start to learn the importance of what a dollar is, and you start to learn that there's different ways of obtaining the ends. But it's like, would you rather take a risk and risk your livelihood to make fast money, or would you rather devote your time to something that you're passionate about and make money off of that? (Male, 24, Employed Part-time)
	Referrals to facilitate job acquisition (+)	I forward my resume, I schedule an interview ... I interview with the administration there, whoever it is I have to interview with. I am formally offered employment, I accept employment, and I start working for them. So it's really more of a referral, it's kind of like they're vouching for me, but everything from that point forward, it's on me. It's me standing on my own two feet. (Male, 29, Employed Full-time)
	Working in reentry programs (+)	Going from a student, an intern, to being hired to the [program] team is amazing, great ..., I would not be here, definitely. Cause I didn't have no other type of support other than them [reentry program colleagues]. (Female, 18, Employed Part-time)
Housing	Living alone/having independence (+)	No, housing is needed, it's needed really bad. I'm not talking about no halfway house, you know, re-entry house and all that. I'm talkin' about actually the housing for guys: studios, one-bedrooms, you know, affordable one-bedrooms... that's what's needed. (Male, 67, Employed Full-time)
	Housing support (+)	I rent an apartment in this building. There's no doubt about it ... I would not be able to afford to live in [location] if I was not a part of this organization. (Female, 45, Employed Full-time)
	Dysfunctional housing situations (-)	I was depressed at the time, I had no joy. It's cause I wasn't having like, a stable housing, I was either in and out of [places] because of my family members, just my family members in general, they would try to lie to the

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Domain	Theme related to QOL	Example quote
		cops and say I did something that I haven't. Or I was either out of the hospital, psych wards and stuff like that, because of them. It wasn't that pleasant. (Male, 22, Employed Full-time)
Relationships/ Community	Establishing relationships with reentry organization staff (+)	Fortunately, I have a strong support system up in my family, but some people might not have that, so it's like, [reentry program] offers them solace, [reentry program] offers them a connection with them being able to be socially mobile, so it offers them opportunity to earn workforce experience so they can work their ways out of the cycle of poverty. (Male, 24, Employed Part-time)
	Receiving mentorship (+)	He was like an instructor there too, like one of the teachers. He's also like, into improv and got a little talk show, so he was helping me, so I started looking to him like, as a mentor sometimes, like for help ... I went to him for advice. (Male, 25, Employed Full-time)
	Creating new social connections and building community (+)	They got a thing called the gala where they meet up with all these important people, some people are rich, different careers and all these different lifestyles. And I met with a few of them, and like, some people opened my mind to new opportunities. (Male, 25, Employed Full-time)
Self-efficacy and Social Capital	Feeling a sense of purpose and direction (+)	One of the things that I realized ... is that didn't really have direction, I didn't have purpose. And when you go through this program and you actually start building on something and you start coming up with an idea of how you can be your own boss, how you can be your own business owner, how you can be an entrepreneur... when you start coming up with these ideas and you start formulating these plans, all of a sudden you have direction ... even inside, even though you're in prison, you have a purpose. And this is something that I have heard consistently from everyone else in the program on the inside, is that you find purpose. So you're not just sitting in a cell, you're not just wasting your time, you're actually working towards something, and all of a sudden, the future seems brighter and you start having more confidence in yourself and in your abilities. (Male, 29, Employed Full-time)
	Exposure to education and training (+)	And then I'm coming here, and it's like, okay, now I need job skills ... So I'm like, okay, I'm a fish out of water, I don't know where I'm going, what I want to do with my life ... So they offered workshops, so, seven months—eight months, wow – eight months that I've been in this program, so as you can see, I'm employed, I'll be starting my new career in ITT in [city]. (Female, 33, Employed Full-time)
	Developing professional connections (+)	So networking, meeting people, learning what you can from them, and being able to share yourself and tell your

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Domain	Theme related to QOL	Example quote
		story. What they call the elevator pitch—having an elevator pitch, I didn't have. But I have an elevator pitch now. (Female, 18, Employed Part-time)
	Gaining financial literacy (+)	Oh yeah, and we also learned financial literacy, so we learned like, the importance of making sure that you have a bank account rather than cashing a check at a check-cashing spot—'cause they do take your money, they do take a percentage of whatever you cashing. We speak about the importance of savings accounts ... we speak about investments, CDs. (Male, 22, Employed Full-time)

While employment was most often seen as an important—if not the sole—indicator of success for RCs, it did not always facilitate well-being and QOL. Employment provided some financial stability in many cases; however, jobs were often short-lived and/or low-wage and added to the overall instability of participants' lives. Additionally, some program participants did not know what they wanted to do for work and/or what skillsets they had that could facilitate employment prospects. And, for many who had specific interests, internship experiences and job opportunities did not align with their educational background, interests, and goals.

Reentry programs themselves served as employment outlets for some RCs, as several participants reported being employed as program staff. Though not always widely available, these positions provided opportunities not just for a job but for self-development. Overall, however, participants suggested that a scarcity of available jobs limited the number of employment opportunities provided to them. As a result, some RCs had to obtain random jobs (i.e., not related to skills they had developed and without long-term prospects) after program completion. Thus, the reentry programs in which RCs in our study participated generally provided opportunities that could lead to employment, but not necessarily stable jobs or careers.

We found that when RCs were engaged in a reentry program that began during incarceration, they were more likely to have some idea of what they wanted to do for work once they were released or even have a job lined up. Those who didn't have a clear plan for their future benefited from exposure to different types of internships and career options to explore their interests. There was variation in employment aspirations among participants. Some aspired to be entrepreneurs, chefs, pastors, and others wanted to work on justice-related issues by becoming reentry program staff and leaders. Regardless of specific career goals, our participants' reports responses suggested that the more that reentry programs provided meaningful job experiences and opportunities to learn skills that would give access to desired jobs, the higher the level of participant well-being and QOL. Working was considered an important way to help RCs hit a reset button on their lives post-incarceration. The ability to help RCs find work, and even more so, work that program participants felt fulfilled them in some way, was a critical part of their success, or lack thereof, after being in the program.

### 3.4 | Housing

Nine (64.3%) of the 14 participants reported living in a rented house, apartment, or room, while four (28.6%) were in transitional housing, and one was homeless at the time of the interview. Very few of the participants lived independently, though this was desired by the majority of RCs in the study. The perceived need for the autonomy and space provided by independent housing was engendered from the deprivation of freedom and personal space during their incarceration, which for many participants was a reflection of their unstable and traumatic home life experiences.



Study participants described ideal housing as allowing them to build social connections that create profound changes in their life after prison—giving them greater agency in choosing their relationships, avoiding unhealthy relationships, and making new healthier relationships. Some study participants received transitional housing support from their reentry programs while under community supervision (i.e., after leaving prison and before being released from the correctional system). For example, one participant noted:

I'm in some supportive housing downtown. They [reentry program] helped me with that ... this is a great program. But yeah, they helped me with that because I was, I was homeless at one point. (Male, 21, Employed Part-time)

Most participants whose re-entry programs did not offer supportive housing through their programs experienced housing instability. These participants often relied heavily on existing relationships before incarceration for basic shelter. However, in many cases these pre-incarceration relationships were often the people who had been a source of trauma and/or negative influences that contributed to their involvement in the carceral system. Nonetheless, many participants felt they had no choice but to engage in unhealthy relationships upon their release to be housed.

Although some study participants choose to maintain abusive or dysfunctional relationships for housing, others choose to be homeless. One participant described moving back in with his ex-wife, but because he was used to living alone during a long period in a maximum-security prison, he found it difficult to transition back into a communal setting. He eventually chose to move out and be homeless rather than stay with her. This participant's experience, and those of others, suggested strong connections between supportive housing and a sense of well-being among RCs in our sample.

### 3.5 | Relationships/community

Reentry programs were an important source of social connection for most participants, particularly those involved in more comprehensive and longer reentry programming. Participants identified the value of being a part of a community both in terms of material and resource support and in relational value. Engaging with people who had experienced similar struggles also created a desire for RCs to help peers in the program. They were inspired to help prevent other people with similar backgrounds from following a negative trajectory because of life traumas, poverty, or just "life on the streets."

In addition to inspiring altruism and a desire to work to help others, the positive relationships established between participants and reentry program staff and participants contributed to their sense of stability and well-being. The relationships were a key feature in sustaining participants' ongoing transformation and change, particularly when participants lost contact with positive support systems they may have had before or during incarceration. Connection and relationships pre- and post-incarceration played a key role that heavily influenced participants' carceral trajectory and QOL. RCs in our sample talked about specific mentors and program staff who served as role models and inspired or believed in them and most maintained relationships with the program staff after completing the reentry program.

Study participants also found community connections beyond the reentry program, via the jobs or opportunities it exposed them to. Through networking and referrals from a newly established relationship with program staff and peers, participants were able to leverage such relationships to ask or seek advice. These networking experiences again spurred advocacy and community-building. One participant said he thought participants in his reentry program found the opportunity to "Be socially mobile and earn workforce experience" and "work their ways out of the cycle of poverty" a direct conduit to developing community and having connections that motivate generosity and interests in giving back. He said, "...it's bigger than money, it's about like, helping the community. It's about helping people who have more adverse scenarios than me, but have the same, if not greater, potential to be better" (Male, 24, Black/African-American, Employed Part-time).

### 3.6 | Self-efficacy and social capital

Most participants had adverse experiences in their lives both before and during incarceration, which caused them to feel “lost” and “directionless.” The need for a sense of belonging and community was addressed in their past lives by joining gangs and involvement with peers who had negative influences on them. Being engaged in a reentry program helped enhance participants’ beliefs that they could move beyond their past and find a sense of purpose. For example, one participant said:

So before there were a lot of self-limiting beliefs. I had absolutely no clue how I would be able to start over again or pick up the pieces of whatever it is that was left of my life ... And today that is ridiculous for me to think that way ... I am resilient, and I have discovered that I have very strong skills that can be applied in just about anything in life that could make me a successful person. And just knowing that has boosted my confidence, and I can pretty much do anything that I set my mind to. And if I don't, you know achieve what I set my mind to, then I'll just try again or I'll try something different. But there is a big difference between the old me and the new me. (Male, 29, Employed Full-time)

Reentry programs’ educational services and trainings (e.g., focused on GED prep, financial literacy, budgeting) played important roles in helping RCs strengthen their self-efficacy and develop confidence in their ability to execute desired behaviors. With program staff’s support and guidance, several participants attained goals or tasks they once thought were unattainable. Consequently, achieving these goals helped them to develop an internal belief in their capacity to execute behaviors/tasks that were steppingstones to their larger goal. For example, one participant described his lack of confidence in completing his GED because of his past lack of success in school. He noted:

I went to go take the test and my teacher was like, just take the test, but I wasn't feeling confident to take the test, I don't think I'm going to even pass that [because] I was barely in school. But [the reentry program staff were] like, nah, you'll still take it, you're smart, you're a smart kid. I know I'm smart, that boosted my confidence, so I went, took it, and I passed four sections—that's crazy. (Male, 21, Employed Part-time)

The access to networks and connections provided through participating in reentry programs allowed participants to feel empowered and build social capital. Through networking and referrals from forming relationships with program staff and peers, participants could seek advice and learn about employment opportunities. Connections to people who sincerely cared about their growth and success helped participants “feel human again.” For example, one participant said networking with people “opened my eyes to new opportunities.”

## 4 | DISCUSSION

This study examined the experiences of RCs in different reentry programs and explored how participation in programs was related to well-being and QOL among RCs. Employing a CGT lens, we reframed our conceptualization of various levels of factors influencing quality of life—specifically, individual, interpersonal, and community/structural aspects. We draw inspiration from the socio-ecological approach proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979). Our study both built upon and extended the socio-ecological model, enriching our understanding of the nuanced dynamics affecting well-being and QOL across different levels and personal contexts.

Our findings suggested that reentry programs, which often primarily focus on employment outcomes, have the potential to influence a variety of factors at multiple levels that shape well-being and QOL among RCs. Participants' statements suggested a complex array of factors that led to enhanced QOL, some of which were tied to being employed and others that were dependent on housing, creating networking opportunities and social connections, and influencing self-efficacy and social capital. As the socio-ecological model suggests, the individual-level factors of self-efficacy and social capital were embedded within higher-order factors. Thus, accessing stable housing, developing supportive relationships, and having a job that permitted RCs the resources needed to live independently each influenced, and were influenced by, RCs perceived levels of self-efficacy and social capital.

Self-efficacy is defined as a person's belief in their ability to engage in behaviors leading to a desired outcome and confidence in their ability to persist in those behaviors in the face of obstacles (Bandura, 1997). Social capital is a multifaceted concept that, generally speaking, suggests that involvement and participation in social networks and groups can have positive consequences for the individual and the community (Portes, 1998). Social capital is thought to influence individuals via multiple levels and can facilitate, as well as hinder, access to resources (Ehlen et al., 2014; Oxoby, 2009). The quantity and quality of resources participants can access through the social connections created by reentry programs created social capital and enhanced self-efficacy among participants. Both were essential ingredients for RCs' overall well-being and QOL. Moreover, findings from the study suggest that while employment is a centerpiece of "successful re-entry"—and the variety of experiences this phrase may convey (Anderson-Facile, 2009; O'Brien, 2001; Pryor & Thompkins, 2013)—it is best focused on along with well-being/QOL to reduce RCs re-involvement with the carceral system (see Figure 1).

Reentry programs facilitated participant employment success through assessment of existing skills/capacities, assisting in the development of hard and soft skills, providing education/training, and providing job placement resources. These programming elements were significant in helping participants transition out of incarceration. However, for many participants, especially those who did not find employment with the reentry program in which they participated, they remained unstably housed, unemployed or under-employed (i.e., part-time in low-wage jobs that would not allow for financial independence). Participants were also challenged by their disconnection, often for several decades, from society and the work world. This suggests that there may be a greater need for in-prison educational programming and workforce training to better prepare those in the carceral system for return to society (Ellison et al., 2017; Vacca, 2004). This would be in alignment with a more rehabilitative carceral model rather than one that is punitive, which has the potential for the person returning to society in a worse state than when they entered the system (Miller, 2014). Beginning the process of facilitating post-incarceration employment and housing for the person while they are still within the carceral system may aid the transition to society and return to citizenship. Research has shown that stress on RCs is much greater after release from prison or jail as pressure to cover housing and other cost of living expenses and the stress of readjustment is so great (Grieb et al., 2014; Western et al., 2015). Programming that facilitates planning for reentry while a person is still incarcerated could decrease that pressure and most likely lead to lower recidivism rates (Bushway, 2003; White et al., 2012).

One of the most significant findings was that unstable housing was a major issue for many participants. The ability to be securely housed was tied to independence, emotional stability, and the ability to separate oneself from unhealthy relationships. Housing and relationships, and the potential to develop new relationships and build community, are strongly connected (Naser & La Vigne, 2006). We found that our study participants' experiences demonstrated the webbed interconnectedness between housing and relationships in securing housing, particularly immediately after being released from prison. The significance of having the ability and awareness to develop healthy relationships of all kinds (i.e., from close familial or personal connections to social networks tied to employment success) was evidenced in the stories of many study participants. Many of the RCs in our study were forced to remain in toxic or unhealthy familial and other relationships because of housing and/or a lack of financial independence. This finding is similar to one observed in The Boston Reentry Study (Western et al., 2015), a longitudinal study examining employment, family life, housing, and health of men and women just released from prison. Similarly, Valera et al. (2017) found that participants relied heavily on relationships (e.g., family, friends,

mentors, peers) to aid their return to the community. In particular, the relationships were critical in aiding participants with financial, emotional, and housing support. Many study respondents found themselves having to reconnect with toxic relationships and environments for the sake of obtaining housing.

Education and job training are important for RCs to achieve employment (Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al., 2019; Wheeler & Patterson, 2008), so the heavy focus on these types of services in reentry programs is sensible. Employment is essential for accessing income and becoming personally independent. However, our findings indicate strong interconnections among employment, housing, healthy relationships, and self-efficacy and social capital. Moreover, these factors were each critical to enhancing and maintaining well-being and QOL among RCs, which facilitates accessing and maintaining employment and reducing recidivism.

There are limitations to this study that should be pointed out. First, while there could be an argument that our sample size of 14 RCs participating in reentry programming was small, we achieved saturation within this sample as our population was relatively homogenous because men of color are the primary carceral system population. However, more research is needed on larger samples on RCs, including those not in a reentry program, to get a fuller picture of RCs' reentry experiences. Additionally, while case could be made that New York City and Los Angeles – two cities with some of the highest incarceration rates in the United States (Javanbakht et al., 2014; Prison Policy Initiative, n.d.)—are ideal settings to work with RCs and study the reentry process, they do not represent the variety of geographic settings that people return to after being incarcerated.

Despite these limitations, this study provides initial insights into the different programs provided to RCs in reentry programs and the potential impact of this programming on well-being and QOL among RCs. Our findings point to a need for reentry programs to use holistic approaches that target housing, relationships, and community building, and self-efficacy and social capital as conduits to improvements in critically important and interconnected outcomes among RCs: employment, a lack of recidivism, and enhanced well-being and QOL.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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## PEER REVIEW

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