Life After Juvenile Life:
Understanding the Reentry Experiences of Formerly Condemned Children in Philadelphia

By
Alex Frost

A Thesis Advised by Professor Nina Johnson
Submitted to the Department of Sociology & Anthropology
Swarthmore College
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts
May 2020
Dedication

For Andre Young, who recently passed due to complications of COVID-19. Any words I muster about you will not be enough, you were that incredible of a person. Despite incarceration, you not only completed your bachelor’s but also your master’s degree inside. Your fighting spirit was contagious, even to someone like me who only met with you a few times. I am broken thinking about all the people who had yet to be touched by you and your spirit. One thing I know, however, is that you had a beautiful first year of freedom and left your mark on this world by touching the souls of many. Andre, you are sorely missed. If you were here, I know you would be telling everyone that the fight has only just begun. It is in your memory that I, and everyone else touched by you, continue this fight every day.
Acknowledgements

To my thesis advisor, Professor Nina Johnson: there are not enough words to express the impact you have had on me these past few years at Swarthmore. I remember the first time I stepped into your office I was so nervous. From the moment I met you, however, you took a chance on me and believed in me more than I believed in myself. You introduced me to the ideology of prison abolition and are responsible for radicalizing not only me but many others at Swarthmore. It is no surprise that the friends I am leaving college with were all also mentored by you. Without you I do not know where I would be, thank you for being who you are and continuing to hold everyone you come across with gentleness and love. I am excited for our many years of being in community with one another yet to come and cannot wait to keep learning under you. Simply put: I love you and you are the absolute best!

To my friends Coleman, Savo, Angie, Lali, and Diana: wow we have come a long way. You are the people, in addition to Professor Johnson, who have journeyed with me through my radicalization at Swarthmore. I have loved every minute of organizing we have done together and continue to be inspired by your passion each and every day. You are what I am taking from my Swarthmore experience and I could not be happier.

To my peers, who have become part of my family, currently experiencing incarceration: none of this would have been possible if it were not for you. We have come together across prison walls time and time again and shown our resilience against the cruel, inhumane system that is the prison industrial complex. Everywhere I go, I carry your positive lights and extreme wisdom with me. You have shaped me into the person I am today, Wednesday was always my favorite day of the week at Swat because I got to see you all. The worst part of my week, however, was also Wednesday because each time I left the prison, you all stayed. This thesis is only the beginning. Our fight is not over until I am able to give each and every one of you a hug outside prison walls.

To the participants of this study: thank you for trusting me with your words and stories. When I began this project, I did not understand the profound impact it would have on me. Each one of you is an incredible, intelligent, kind person who I am beyond thankful to have met and spent time with. I hope this thesis honors you to the extent you deserve to be celebrated. This system was cruel to each one of you, however, you have remained strong and continued to exude positive energy into the world. Thank you for your existence, for your fight, and for your trust.
Abstract

Within the last decade, two monumental US Supreme Court cases changed the trajectory for juveniles subject to mandatory life without the possibility of parole, otherwise known as death by incarceration, sentences. The first case was Miller v Alabama in 2012 which declared it unconstitutional to sentence a child under the age of 18 to mandatory death by incarceration. Four years later the Supreme Court decided, in the case of Montgomery v Louisiana, that the Miller v Alabama ruling applied retroactively to people already serving death by incarceration sentences for acts they committed as children. This decision affected almost 2,500 individuals nationwide, including 524 condemned children in Pennsylvania, over 300 of which were sentenced in Philadelphia. Currently, Larry Krassner is Philadelphia’s District Attorney and he identifies as a “progressive” prosecutor. As a result, almost 200 formerly condemned children have been resentenced and released in Philadelphia. This is a new population of returning citizens and Philadelphia is “ground zero” for the reintegration of these folks. This thesis seeks to understand the reentry experiences of several formerly condemned children reentering in the city. I employ prison abolitionist and transformative justice frameworks to put the participants’ experiences into a larger conversation that questions the validity of the Prison Industrial Complex.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

My Relation to this Topic

During my Sophomore Spring at Swarthmore, I had the opportunity to work with the Youth Sentencing and Reentry Project (YSRP), a nonprofit in Philadelphia that organizes to bring home folks sentenced as children to life without the possibility of parole, otherwise known as death by incarceration sentences. I assisted YSRP in writing the reentry plan for Will, a man who was sentenced to death by incarceration at the age of 16. I meticulously researched reentry organizations that could support Will if he obtained release. Will was given this opportunity for a resentencing hearing due to the landmark 2016 US Supreme Court decision: Montgomery v Louisiana. After working on Will’s case for a semester, I left the Swarthmore area for the summer and was less involved until a few months later, when Will’s resentencing hearing was set.

I returned to Philadelphia in late August of 2017 to attend Will’s hearing. He was now 40 years old and had spent 24 years of his life incarcerated. Will was given a death by incarceration sentence for second degree murder at the age of 16. Before the hearing, I waited to enter the courtroom with my supervisor and Will’s family, including his wife, Ruth, who I had been in phone contact with during the Spring semester. The energy was that of intense anxiety. The courtroom was running late, and our deep nervous eagerness was building. Would this be the day Will would be told he had a chance of coming home after 24 years?

Around 45 minutes after the designated hearing time, we were let into the courtroom. I sat in the back row, a mere fly on the wall. I had joined this case most recently and had been the most axially involved. Will entered the courtroom, a man who I had primarily heard about from
Ruth. I had been told what a kind and gentle individual he was to Ruth and her children and yet he entered the courtroom in a maroon prison jumpsuit, handcuffed at his hands and feet. He entered the courtroom as a man physically shackled by events he partook in as a boy.

Will took a seat and the judge started flipping through the reentry plan the YSRP team and myself had worked on. The judge took about five minutes looking at the plan and discussing all the programming Will had participated in while inside. The court was impressed by Will’s obvious dedication to his rehabilitation. The judge then put the report down and declared that he was resentencing Will to be immediately eligible for parole after 24 years. Will would finally get his chance at freedom.

Will had been incarcerated for 24 years and it only took 5 minutes in court to give him a chance at freedom. He was then escorted out of the courtroom through a side door, still bound in handcuffs at his hands and feet. The YSRP team and Will’s family exited out the front entrance.

Immediately I was embraced in a huge hug from Ruth. She turned to us, the YSRP team, looked us in the eyes, tears of joy falling down her cheek and thanked us for the work we had done. In a matter of minutes, her life had changed. She now had a chance to live with her husband and let him help care for her children.

Will’s resentencing hearing went as well as it could go, he would be able to seek immediate release. After leaving the court, however, I could not help but feel unsettled. I had not been with Will throughout his entire liberation struggle, I had only just learned of his case a few months prior. I felt the elation of Will, his family, and our team in my bones and I felt elated too. How could I not be incredibly happy? Will could come home. Underneath this happiness, however, I was struck by a deep sense of frustration and anger. All I had heard about Will was
his great character and the love he had for his family. He was sent to prison for an act he
committed as a teenager and yet he sat in jail for 24 years. He missed his 20s and his 30s. So yes,
I was happy for Will and his family but also could not shake the disgust I felt towards the
inhumane system that puts children away for life; and even more broadly a system that puts
anyone away for life.

Out of this experience, I continued to advocate for the end of and learn more about mass
incarceration. Specifically, I learned about the cruelty of a system that disappears people, and in
Will’s case tried to disappear him for life. Since working with YSRP, I worked at a reentry
organization in Baltimore where two of my mentors went through similar experiences to Will.
They were also sentenced to decades behind bars as young adults. Two people I admire, who
took a chance to educate me around these issues, were also disappeared for years by the system.
Additionally, I participated in multiple Student Exchange courses, where college students and
incarcerated students learn together, and many of my classmates are serving long prison terms,
and some even fall under the Montgomery v Louisiana ruling.

All of these people including Will, my mentors in Baltimore, and my peers from Student
Exchange are some of the individuals I value most in my life. They have taught me the meaning
of right from wrong, about radical love, about joy, and about patience and yet at some point in
their lives they have all been demonized by the system. One action does not define the people I
love the most. This thesis is an opportunity to present a different narrative about my loved ones
impacted by the criminal legal system. Folks who were originally erased from society have come
home, and like Will, are making positive impacts on the lives of so many. It is time their stories
be told and portrayed with the same care and love these people exude. Based on these
experiences, and my love for members of my community, I knew my senior thesis would be related to the Montgomery v Louisiana decision and what folks impacted by it, who were originally regarded as irredeemable, have done since coming home. I am excited to share this story.

**Background on Mass Incarceration**

“Short of major wars, mass incarceration has been the most thoroughly implemented government social program of our time.” – Angela Davis

Before I dive further into my thesis topic related to the Montgomery v Louisiana decision and the experiences of juvenile lifers, it is important to lay out the history of mass incarceration in the US. This history explains how within the last four decades the number of folks incarcerated in the United States has seen a 500% increase, how the United States is only 5% of the world’s population but responsible for 25% of the world’s incarcerated population, and how the US came to incarcerate children for life (Sentencing Project 2020).

Mass incarceration is a racial project, and its roots stem from a long history of the criminalization of blackness in the US. The criminalization of blackness in the US can be traced back to fugitive slave laws in the 1850s, to convict leasing of black individuals far into the 20th century, leading up to the racist, classist prison industrial complex we see today. During the Civil Rights Movement, white supremacists responded to the expanded rights for African Americans by exploiting the criminalization of blackness and creating the current state of mass incarceration (Alexander 2010, 40). Mass incarceration is and always has been a racial project that targets people of color, particularly in low-income areas.

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1 (Davis 2011, 11)
Tactics of “law and order” were first used to mobilize white opposition to the described “unlawful” nature of the Civil Rights Movement (Alexander 2010, 40). From the mid-1950s through the 1960s, Southern conservatives systematically linked their opposition to the Civil Rights Movement to a need for law and order. This strategy was used to depict actions calling for equal rights for African Americans, such as protests, as criminal not political. Unfortunately, at the same time conservatives were using these tactics, there was a rise in crime in the United States.

This rise in crime, however, can be attributed to several factors. First, the baby boomer generation caused a spike in the number of young men ages 15 to 24, the age group that is historically responsible for the most crime. At the same time, unemployment rates for black men were rising due to deindustrialization and spatial mismatch (Alexander 2010, 42). After the Civil War, many African Americans moved from the Jim Crow South where they saw little opportunity to northern city centers, a mass exodus known as the Great Migration. Black men found industrial jobs once they arrived in these urban cities. Starting in the 1960s, however, the US began a process of deindustrialization and globalization. Industrial jobs moved abroad and manufacturing jobs that continued to exist moved to the suburbs, a phenomenon known as spatial mismatch, which left high density low-income communities of color desolate of employment opportunities.

During this time, the US elected two presidents who significantly ratcheted up the “racially sanitized” rhetoric of “law and order” that white segregationists threatened by African American progress clung onto: Nixon and Reagan. Nixon declared illegal drugs as “public enemy number one” (Alexander 2010, 48). Following Nixon came Reagan who ran his campaign with welfare
and crime rhetoric central to his platform. Reagan followed this with policies that expanded the
budgets of federal law agencies, toughened punishments for drug crimes, and cut budgets for
social programs such as welfare.

When Reagan declared the War on Drugs in 1982, “less than two percent” of US
residents found drugs to be the most important issue facing the nation (Alexander 2010, 49).
Three years after Reagan declared his war on drugs, however, crack cocaine hit city streets. As
the majority of legitimate jobs in inner-city black communities had severely decreased in the past
decades due to deindustrialization and spatial mismatch, residents had increased incentives to
sell crack cocaine. This was followed by harsh media campaigns depicting inner-city black
women as “crack whores” and black men as “predators.”

As the racial propaganda surrounding law and order and drugs intensified, policy makers
preyed upon the racial fears and insecurities of white Americans to create even harsher law and
order legislation. Mandatory minimums were put in place, prisons were built en masse,
restrictions were put on public housing, and the media continued to demonize black Americans.
“Tough on crime” became the new winning political platform which brought republican George
Bush to office in 1989 and democrat Bill Clinton to office in 1992 (Alexander 2010, 55). This
platform, however, was simply a continuation of racist rhetoric that targeted and criminalized
black America. Sentence times for all crimes increased immensely as both continued to increase
law enforcement budgets and subsequently prison populations.

The combination of de-industrialization and spatial mismatch with racist criminalization
tactics uplifted by white supremacy created the largest Prison Industrial Complex ever seen in
the world. The US saw a jump from an already large prison population of 200,000 in the 1960s
to a prison population of over 2 million at the turn of the twentieth century (Davis 2011, 11).
Within this population growth included the growth of juveniles incarcerated in adult jails and within this population of juveniles were individuals under 18 sentenced to death by incarceration. **Background on Juvenile Incarceration**

The background on mass incarceration creates a historical understanding of the prison boom in the United States and its racist history. For this thesis, however, it is particularly important to situate juveniles in this system. The juvenile justice system in the United States was created at the turn of the twentieth century with a mission that children would be diverted away from the adult criminal legal system (Agyepong 2010, 85). In the era of mass incarceration, however, this changed. Juveniles, particularly youth of color, began to be seen as no different from adults.

It was in the 1970s, in the midst of the US’s greatest prison boom, that a rehabilitation mindset towards juveniles in the criminal justice system began to wane. Along with the rhetoric imposed by Nixon and other conservative politicians during this era, the media played a large role in criminalizing urban black people throughout the seventies and eighties using images of “animals and disease” (Agyepong 2010, 87). This propaganda campaign particularly began to target youth of color in the late 1980s as media characterized inner-city children as “‘wolf packs,’ ‘wilding packs,’ ‘vermin,’ and ‘wild dogs’ who went ‘prowling’ among ‘decent citizens’” (Agyepong 2010, 87). The media’s depiction was compounded by the warnings of politicians and academics about the upcoming generation of youthful, “super-predators” who would bring an “epidemic of violence” to the nation (Agyepong 2010).
The rhetoric depicting black children as criminals was clear in the emblematic and famous 1989 Central Park jogger case. During this case, five black and latino boys were accused of raping a white woman jogging in Central Park. It has since been proven that the Exonerated Five did not harm the woman, but the media frenzy of the time, despite the incredible lack of evidence, was enough to send shockwaves across the nation. Every major national news outlet featured headlines such as the “Wolf-Pack’s Prey” and “Heroic Woman vs. Feral Beast” (Agyepong 2010, 88). It was within this political climate of fear and “law and order” campaigns largely targeted at young black males that in 1989 the number of children who received life without the possibility of parole sentences drastically increased. At this time the focus of carceral policy was turning to children.

Many states lowered or eliminated the minimum age that children could be sentenced as adults and created mandatory transfer rules for sending children to adult courts taking away discretion from judges. As a result, tens of thousands of children who would have previously been processed in the juvenile justice system were sent to adult courts and the rate of juveniles sentenced to life without the possibility of parole, or death by incarceration sentences, peaked in 1996 (Stevenson 2014).

**Background on Condemned Children**

This thesis focuses on the era of mass incarceration, but particularly on the over incarceration of children during this time period. As a result of the increase of harsher sentences for juveniles, nearly three thousand juveniles in the US have been sentenced to die in prison by death by incarceration sentences (Stevenson 2014). Prosecutorial discretion was expanded during the era of mass incarceration allowing prosecutors more leeway when charging individuals,
including children, with crimes such as first-, second-, or third-degree murder. At the same time, judges were stripped of their discretion and forced to impose mandatory death by incarceration sentences to children as young as thirteen years old, based on charges enforced by harsh prosecutors. This means that at thirteen, a child could be told that they would never exit prison walls again. At thirteen a child was told they would always be the person who caused harm and told that their underdeveloped brain was never capable of growth and reconciliation within society.

In 2016, 2,310 people were serving death by incarceration sentences for crimes they committed as juveniles (Sentencing Project 2019). These children are commonly referred to as “juvenile lifers.” By giving a child a life sentence without the possibility of parole, however, you are condemning them to die inside a correctional facility, alone. Thus, I believe the more appropriate term that takes into account the inhumane reality of these sentences is: condemned children.

I first heard this term at a talk given by a formerly condemned child. The speaker stated that this term is the only one that truly encapsulates the illogical, draconian severity of the US criminal legal system. As participants stated in this study, while they were not sentenced to the death penalty, they were condemned to a “long term death” as they were told as children they would eventually die in prison. The term condemned child is alarming, the two words sound like they should never be put next to each other, like an oxymoron, as the thought of sending a child to prison to die is an illogical one. This, however, is what our criminal legal system has done and continues to do.
Thus, I will use the term condemned child and/or formerly condemned child when talking about the population in this study because the inhumanity of the state must be depicted. As you will see, the participants are all thoughtful, kind-hearted people who are making positive impacts on their communities. The participants, however, are also formerly condemned children, who did cause harm and were at one point depicted as “super-predators” who could never be rehabilitated. The disparity between the label “condemned child” and who the participants’ actually are is vast, yet the cruelty of the state cannot be forgotten. For these reasons, going forward I will primarily refer to the population of individuals reentering society after the Montgomery v Louisiana decision as formerly condemned children because it encapsulates the barbaric, inhumane nature of the US’s criminal legal system.

The international community has expressed its disapproval of the US’s practice condemning children to death by incarceration on numerous occasions. The international community recognizes the extreme nature of condemning children to long term deaths inside prison walls. One example of the word’s disapproval came in December 2006 where the United Nations adopted a resolution to abolish death by incarceration sentences for children and young teenagers. The result of this resolution was a vote of 185 countries to 1 voting to condemn the practice. The only dissenter was the United States (Agyepong 2010, 83). Despite this disapproval, the US continues to incarcerate juveniles until their death.

The demographics of the population of condemned children in the United States also vastly demonstrate the racial and class disparities within our criminal legal system. Currently, people of color makeup 37% of US society, however, they make up a total of 67% of our prison population. Racial disparities are only amplified when it comes to condemned children. The
percentage of condemned children who were nonwhite in 2016 was 77% and in specific the percentage of condemned children who were black was 63% (Sentencing Project 2019, 3). These figures clearly demonstrate the racial targeting in sentencing children to die in prison.

Additionally, class disparities are evident as 33% of condemned children were raised in public housing and 18% reported not living with a close adult relative before incarceration. Many condemned children experienced high levels of violence exposure prior to incarceration (79% within their homes and 54% weekly within their neighborhoods), nearly half experienced physical abuse (including 80% of girls), 40% of condemned children reported enrollment in special education, and 85% reported being suspended or expelled from school at some point (Nellis 2012, 2). It is clear through the demographics of condemned children that juvenile death by incarceration sentences are a racial and class project.

During the 21st century, there has been a vast amount of outcry from activist communities about the inhumane nature of death by incarceration sentences imposed upon juveniles. Activists have argued that harsh sentences are targeted against poor youth of color, evident in the demographics of the condemned children population, and that the scientific evidence that children’s brains are not fully developed has been ignored. Statistics demonstrate that criminal behavior is typically outgrown, the peak years being those of the late teens, and that crime rates are extremely low among those in their thirties and older (Alexander 2010). Thus, condemning individuals for acts they committed as children is counterintuitive to the nature of human development. The hard work put in by many folks led to an array of cases taken to the Supreme Court disputing the constitutionality of mandatory death by incarceration sentences for

**Background on Pivotal Supreme Court Cases Affecting Condemned Children**

The tides began to change for condemned children with the first major related Supreme Court win in 2005: Roper v Simmons. Christopher Simmons was sentenced to death in 1993 at the age of 17. In 2004, however, Simmons’ case was considered by the Supreme Court to question the constitutionality of sentencing a child to capital punishment. On March 1, 2005 the Court overruled the 1989 Stanford v Kentucky decision which upheld the constitutionality of the death penalty for those under the age of 18 at the time of the crime. In the Roper v Simmons decision, the Court declared that it is in fact unconstitutional under the Eighth Amendment, which protects individuals from cruel and unusual punishment, to sentence a child to capital punishment. The decision considered the fact that immaturity diminishes the culpability of youth offenders and the fact that juveniles have a heightened capacity for reform (Rovner 2015, 1). The ruling applied to 77 juveniles on death row across the US. Unfortunately, however, the decision came too late for 22 juvenile defendants sentenced to capital punishment between 1976 and the Roper decision who were executed for crimes they committed while younger than 18 (Rovner 2015, 1). After this decision, capital punishment of juveniles was outlawed but condemning children to death by incarceration was still very much practiced.

Roper v Simmons opened the door for arguing against the condemnation of children in the US criminal justice system. The 2005 decision acknowledged that children are psychologically underdeveloped and thus it is a violation of the Eighth Amendment, an infliction of cruel and unusual punishment, to sentence children to capital punishment. The defense team in
Graham v Florida used this statute in 2010 to ban the use of death by incarceration for children convicted of crimes other than homicide.

In 2003, Terrence Graham, 16 at the time, pleaded guilty to robbery charges and was sentenced to probation. Shortly thereafter Graham was arrested for home-invasion robbery, despite denying his involvement, and was charged for the robbery and violating his probation. While no one was injured, Graham was sentenced to death by incarceration at 16 years old. Graham appealed his conviction to the Supreme Court and on May 17, 2010 the court ruled again that juveniles are not fully developed and that a death by incarceration sentence should only be given to the “worst of the worst” juvenile offenders (Rovner 2015, 2). This ruling affected 123 children condemned to die in prison for crimes other than homicide.

I would like to shed light on the fact that the Graham v Florida decision did not impact the sentences of many condemned children convicted of felony murder. Felony murder is defined as when a death occurs during the action of committing another crime such as burglary. To be charged with felony murder one only needs to be involved with the initial crime, the burglary for example, to receive a death by incarceration sentence for murder. As a result of many juveniles acting in groups, about a 25% of all condemned children were convicted on felony murder charges (When Kids Get Life 2007). These children were not impacted by the Graham v Florida decision.

Following the tide of reform regarding condemned children, the decision of Miller v Alabama came in 2012. After the limited scope of the Roper and Graham decisions, about 2,500 condemned children were still serving death by incarceration sentences in the United States (Rovner 2015, 2). The Miller v Alabama decision consolidated two cases: Jackson v Hobbs and
Miller v Alabama. The Jackson v Hobbs case concerned Kuntrell Jackson who, when he was 14, was given a death by incarceration sentence for his involvement in a robbery in which he stayed outside when a store clerk was murdered; and the Miller v Alabama case concerned Evan Miller, a 14 year old convicted of committing homicide while robbing his neighbor and subsequently sentenced to death by incarceration. On June 24, 2012 the Supreme Court decided these two cases jointly in the Miller v Alabama decision. The court declared it was unconstitutional to convict juveniles of mandatory death by incarceration sentences without considering youth mitigating factors (Rovner 2015, 3).

After the Miller v Alabama ruling was announced, many condemned children already incarcerated saw it as a chance to appeal their cases given that it was declared a violation of the Eighth Amendment to condemn children to mandatory, non-parole eligible, life sentences. They believed their cases fell under this statute. Upon appeal, however, while fourteen states declared Miller applied retroactively to already condemned children, seven others, including Pennsylvania, argued that the Miller decision did not apply retroactively. This meant in these seven states, condemned children could not use the unconstitutionality declared in the Miller decision to overturn their sentences.

Following major disappointment and subsequent activism in the states that denied Miller’s retroactivity, the Montgomery v Louisiana case was decided by the Supreme Court in 2016. Henry Montgomery, a 17-year-old boy in 1963 was convicted of murder in East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana. At the time he petitioned his sentence based off the Miller decision, Montgomery was 68-years old, considered a “model member of the prison community,” and clearly not a threat to society (Montgomery v Louisiana 2016, 3). On January 25, 2016, Justice
Kennedy wrote the 6-3 majority opinion of the Supreme Court that corroborated the Roper, Graham, and Miller cases and declared: “children are constitutionally different from adults in their level of culpability” (Montgomery v Louisiana 2016, 22). The Court thus decided that Miller applied retroactively and condemned children who were sentenced based upon mandatory death by incarceration minimums had a constitutional right to resentencing hearings. This piece of legislation affected approximately 2,100 individuals incarcerated nationwide (Rovner 2015, 3).

I would like to clarify that these rulings did not make it unconstitutional to sentence juveniles to death by incarceration. These cases made it so children cannot receive these sentences mandatorily. Justice Kennedy stated in his opinion that the severest punishment of death by incarceration shall only be used for “the rarest of children, those whose crimes reflect ‘irreparable corruption’” (Montgomery v Louisiana 2016, 3). Thus, the US remains the only nation in the world that condemns children to death by incarceration sentences. Despite this reality, however, many condemned children were directly impacted by the Montgomery v Louisiana decision; specifically, Pennsylvania as a state and Philadelphia as a city were most heavily impacted.

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2 It is important to mention that despite Henry Montgomery’s case and the Supreme Court decision it caused, Henry Montgomery remains incarcerated with a death by incarceration sentence in Louisiana. Despite pawning the path to freedom for many other condemned children, Montgomery was denied release during his resentencing hearing. He is now 73 years old and has been incarcerated for a continuous 36 years for a single act he committed as a 17 year old. His reality demonstrates that the fight for justice is not over until we bring everyone trapped inside prison walls home.

3 In many states that continue to incarcerate children for life, this clause has been used to deny release to deserving condemned children. To date out of over 2,100 condemned children nationwide only 600 have come home.
The Unique Positionality of Pennsylvania and Philadelphia

While the Montgomery v Louisiana decision impacted over 2,000 folks nationwide, due to Pennsylvania’s strict criminal justice policies the decision had a unique impact on the state. In Pennsylvania, parole is denied to anyone serving a life sentence. Additionally, in PA anyone convicted of first- or second-degree murder receives a mandatory death by incarceration sentence. As a result, at the time of the Montgomery ruling Pennsylvania had the highest number of condemned children in the United States at 524, over 25% of those in the US and subsequently the world (Barnett 2018, 3). Furthermore, in PA, “youth of color are ten times as likely to be sentenced to life without parole than are white youth,” a rate higher than the national average (Barnett 2018, 4). Pennsylvania is a traditionally red state that has jurisdiction over two large, blue metropolitan centers with many residents of color.

After the Miller decision came down, the 28 states that still required mandatory death by incarceration sentences for juveniles were forced to comply. One of these states was Pennsylvania. Many individuals in Pennsylvania who were serving death by incarceration sentences for acts they committed as juveniles were ecstatic to hear the Miller ruling. These condemned children saw this legislation as a light at the end of the tunnel, a chance to step outside prison walls for the first time in decades. Pennsylvania, a state that “has a long history of imposing the harshest sentences on children accused of serious crimes,” however, was one of the most reluctant states when it came to applying the Miller legislation (Barnett 2018, 5).

Pennsylvania responded to the Miller v Alabama Supreme Court decision by passing Act 204. In November 2012, then Pennsylvania Governor, Tom Corbett, signed Act 204 into law requiring new standards for sentencing juveniles convicted of first- and second-degree murder.
Under Act 204, juveniles in Pennsylvania could be sentenced to death by incarceration sentences or a minimum of “35 years to life for youth ages 15-17 and a minimum of 25 to life for youth 14 or younger” (“Juvenile Life Without Parole in Pennsylvania” 2020). Act 204 was amended with year additions to the sentences of youth with prior records. Not only did Pennsylvania enact this harsh law, but it continued to avoid the question of retroactivity.

Following Act 204, Pennsylvania was required to address the retroactivity question when the PA Supreme Court ruled on the Commonwealth vs Cunningham case in 2013. Ian Cunningham was convicted of second-degree murder at the age of 17 and received a mandatory death by incarceration sentence in PA. His case was brought to the court to argue his right to a resentencing hearing after the passage of Miller v Alabama. In October 2013 in a 4-3 decision, the PA Supreme Court held that the Miller decision did not apply retroactively in the state (“Commonwealth v Cunningham” 2012). Condemned children in Pennsylvania would continue to serve unconstitutional, mandatory death by incarceration sentences.

Eventually, however, with the passage of Montgomery v Louisiana in 2016, Pennsylvania was forced to resentence each individual serving time who was sentenced to death by incarceration as a child. At first the state left it up to each county to handle condemned children. Chester County was the first county to act and they straight away gave the handful of condemned children they had serving time immediate eligibility for parole, otherwise known as time served. The PA parole board saw this, however, and pushed back stating they needed to have a minimum date, that folks could not just be let go. Pennsylvania is traditionally a red state and conservative politics regarding minimums were coming into play.
At this point, folks waiting to be resentenced in the Philadelphia jurisdiction were anticipating how Philly would act. Within Pennsylvania, Philadelphia accounted for over 300 of the 524 condemned children in the state, more than 10% of condemned children in the United States and the world (Barnett 2018, 3). Seth Williams was Philadelphia’s District Attorney at that time of Montgomery v Louisiana, and he was “fighting tooth and nail to keep everybody in Philadelphia in jail.” At first Philly stated the minimum for everyone would be 35 years and the debate continued. During this series of events, however, Seth Williams was incarcerated for fraud and an interim District Attorney was put in place before a new District Attorney, Larry Krasner stepped in. This was a pivotal moment for Philadelphia and its condemned children.

Larry Krasner is known as a “progressive prosecutor” and he set up a team to deal with the large number of condemned children due for resentencing in his jurisdiction. Over 10% of the world’s condemned children, more than 300, were in his district. The team came up with a resentencing scheme where everyone would get an individualized hearing. The city decided to start with those that had the most time served and work their way down to those with the least time. With so many individuals being resentenced and a relatively progressive prosecutor, Philadelphia has the most returning condemned children than any other place in the country.

The positionality of Philadelphia becomes even more unique and important for this thesis due to its relatively high rates of release of formerly condemned children. Philadelphia is the poorest big city in the country with over 25% of residents living in poverty and an estimated 1 in 3 residents having a criminal record (Barnett 2018, 5). In Pennsylvania as a whole, 400

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4 Quotation from my interview with Joseph Morgan, a participant in this study.
condemned children have been resentenced and about 200 have been released (Daftary-Kapur 2020, 2). The majority of these folks have been released in the Philadelphia district.

Sadly, this rate of release is incredibly high. In South Carolina about 42 individuals were condemned children at the time of the Montgomery decision. Only 15 individuals have been resentenced in SC and not one has been released. In Mississippi, 100% of condemned children were resentenced to death by incarceration a second time (Daftary-Kapur 2020, 2). Thus Philadelphia, has the highest rate of returning condemned children in the nation and the world. This makes Philadelphia ground zero for reentry of juvenile lifers – the exact focus of this thesis.
Chapter 2: Literature Review and Methodology

While this thesis seeks to further understand the reentry experiences of folks released in Philadelphia due to the Montgomery v Louisiana decision; it more broadly fits into a general conversation about reentry in the United States. In the US, 90% of folks who are incarcerated will eventually be released and “reenter” society (Harding 2019). There has been ample literature on the experiences of folks reentering and the process of reentry. At this point in this thesis I will review the literature that has already been written regarding reintegration. I hope to shed light on how scholars have studied reentry in the past in a few ways: generally, in regard to juveniles, in relation to those who served life sentences, and finally in relation to condemned children.

General Reentry Studies

As a result of the prison boom in the United States, “700,000 people leave American prisons each year and reenter society” (Harding 2019, 2). There is a plethora of literature that discusses the reentry experiences of these folks and what aspects are most important to the process. The general literature that discusses reentry speaks about the average individual reintegrating — someone in their mid-thirties released after a few years of incarceration (Harding 2019). I will review three general aspects of reentry that have been deemed most crucial by the literature: economic, support, and housing (Harding 2019)(Harding, Morenoff, and Herbert 2013)(Raphael 2011)(Berg and Huebner 2011).

Reentry as “Successful”

Before discussing the three aspects of reentry aforementioned it is important to note how reintegration after incarceration is typically studied. Most of the research pertaining to reentry focuses on these aspects of integration – economic, support, and housing aspects – solely as a
tool for examining the “success” of reentry. Generally, reentry is seen as successful when the returning individual abstains from criminal activity, also known as desistance from crime (Harding 2019). To measure desistance, studies typically focus on the rate that formerly incarcerated folks are reincarcerated, also known as recidivism. Many studies are empirical in nature and report on economic, support, and housing aspects of reintegration solely as they correlate to recidivism (Bushway 2007)(Kubrin 2006)(Mears 2008)(Stahler 2013). It has been argued, however, that this narrow focus on recidivism ignores the “process of reintegration more broadly” and hinders our understanding of the experiences of individuals involved (Harding 2019, 3). This thesis will focus less on the empirical data of recidivism rates and “success,” as is typical of reintegration studies, and instead more on the qualitative reintegration experiences that the reentry discussion is typically missing and absolutely missing for condemned children.

Economic Aspects of Reentry

An important feature of reintegration post incarceration is the economic facet, particularly employment. Securing financial stability is immensely important after incarceration. Finding a job, however, can be a difficult task during reentry. Most folks who are coming home have limited education, as 54% of the reentering population does not have a high school degree (Harding 2019)(Raphael 2011). Additionally, most individuals have limited work experience and/or credentials upon return (Harding 2019)(Raphael 2011). The reality of minimal formal education and work experience delegates many formerly incarcerated individuals to secondary labor markets.

While many individuals who are reintegrating have limited education and job experience, there are also many barriers in place confronting folks with criminal records during the job
search. For example, individuals with records are weeded out of certain positions because of previous convictions they hold. Some employers are responsible for “negligent hiring” where they are liable for “criminal actions” of their employees and thus are unwilling to employ folks with previous convictions (Raphael 2011)(Bushway 2007). This is compounded by the prejudice many employers hold towards applicants with criminal records. The relegation of individuals who were formerly incarcerated to secondary labor markets due to discrimination and lack of qualifications puts great strain on their reintegration process. Studies have shown that employment and recidivism, or reincarceration, are inversely associated (Bushway 2007). Thus, obtaining gainful employment is one of the most important aspects of reentry in terms of the typical desistance lens, in which “success” is measured solely upon one’s ability to stay out of prison (Harding 2019)(Berg and Huebner 2011).

*Support Aspects of Reentry*

The second aspect of reintegration that scholars pinpoint as important is support, both social and institutional. Social support, particularly that of family and intimate partnerships, is seen as the most crucial aspect of reintegration (Harding 2013)(Harding 2019)(Berg 2011). Family and a close social network can support someone reintegrating on multiple fronts. For example, social ties can help an individual during their pursuit of employment and housing through connections friends and family may have. On the other hand, social ties can impact a returning individual negatively; for example, by influencing someone who is reintegrating to reinvolve themselves in criminal activity (Berg 2011)(Harding 2019). Regarding the “success” narrative surrounding reintegration, scholars argue that individuals who come out of prison with
a strong, supportive social network surrounding them are more “successful” in terms of lower recidivism rates (Harding 2019)(Harding 2013)(Berg 2011).

In addition to support in terms of social ties, support also manifests in the form of institutional support provided to folks reintegrating. Depending on where an individual is returning to, they will have access to differing amounts of organizational support (Harding 2019). This support can look like reentry organizations catering to the needs of formerly incarcerated folks; however, these organizations do not exist in all areas. Additionally, institutional “support” also takes shape within the parole structure. Previously, parole officers acted much more like social workers who focused on rehabilitation and providing services for smooth reintegration (Harding 2019). In this moment of mass incarceration, however, parole officers have become increasingly punitive and typically enforce a model “focused on surveillance, control, and capture” (Harding 2019, 220). Many individuals reentering are subject to parole protocol that is responsible for reincarcerating them on technical violations that for someone who is not formerly incarcerated would not cause imprisonment, like drinking alcohol (Raphael 2011)(Harding 2019). Thus, institutional support also resembles a parole structure that can aid in continued “success” as desistance or aid in “failure” as recidivism through violations. In these ways, it is both the support of social relationships such as family and friendships as well as institutions like parole and reentry organizations that also shape the experiences of someone reintegrating after incarceration.

Residential Aspects of Reentry

Another important aspect to reintegration within the lens of “success” that the literature focuses on is residential factors. Residence has to do with securing stable housing as well as the
neighborhood and location of that housing. Stable housing is one of the first things one must secure after release. Housing is related to economic aspects of reentry, in regard to paying rent, but also can be associated with social ties as housing can come through connections (Raphael 2011). While an immediate need post release is securing housing, residential aspects of reentry also more largely relate to place.

Place of reentry is crucial in determining experiences returning citizens undergo. Studies show that less than 33% of folks return within half a mile of where they left, and after two years this number falls to 25% (Harding 2013). This reality can lead to reentrants lacking social ties in a new place which can affect their reentry experience (Harding 2013). The new places folks inhabit, however, are usually socioeconomically very similar to the neighborhoods they left. Mass incarceration is a racial project and disproportionately affects low-income urban communities. As a result, most individuals return to these spaces which typically have lower labor market opportunities because of deindustrialization, globalization, and spatial mismatch as discussed in Chapter 1 (Harding 2019). Thus, residential aspects of reentry impact economic aspects by determining employment opportunities as well as social aspects by spatially dictating one’s social network. This in turn demonstrates how the three aspects (economic, support, and residential) are interconnected and impact the experiences of those who are reintegrating.

In particular, scholars emphasize the mutual reinforcing relationship of the social aspects and the economic aspects of reintegration. Expansive social networks can help individuals secure employment and steady employment can reinforce one’s perceived legitimacy and standing in their social relationships (Berg and Huebner 2011). These two aspects of reentry, however, are both influenced by spatial context. As a result, when studying reentry, it is important to consider
different angles and facets of the reintegration process while also putting each in conversation with one another.

*Connections to Preentry and Time Incarcerated*

Within reentry literature, it is often emphasized that we cannot study reentry in a vacuum of post-incarceration experiences. In the work *On the Outside*, Harding details the reentry process as a product of:

“(1) the social, economic, and cultural resources with which a person leaves prison, (2) the social, economic, and institutional context to which he or she returns, and (3) the fit between the two” (Harding, 2019, 3).

In this way reentry is seen as a summation of circumstances and experiences during both preentry and time incarcerated colliding with the circumstances and experiences of post incarceration. Using Harding’s framework, the three facets of reintegration aforementioned – economic, support, and residential – also need to be put in the greater context of preentry and incarceration. For example, as stated, people usually reintegrate into places socioeconomically similar to those they left, which impacts economic prospects. Support networks are also influenced by preentry and incarceration experiences.

In relation to aspects of reentry influenced by factors separate from reintegration realities, race, gender, and health also play large roles in one’s experience of reentry (Harding 2019). African Americans typically return to poorer neighborhoods with fewer resources, face more discrimination in the job market, and return to families with fewer materials (Harding 2019). In terms of gender, women are more at risk of abuse when they get home. Finally, many folks return with a history of substance abuse and/or mental health conditions (Harding 2019). All of
these are factors outside of what a person is met with when they return but must also be considered in the larger reintegration narrative.

**Juvenile Reentry Studies**

While there is a plethora of literature relating to reentry processes and outcomes of individuals who were formerly incarcerated in the US; the literature is less thorough when it comes to the reentry of folks convicted as juveniles. One recent study, *Falling Back*, published by Jamie Fader, analyzes the process of navigating reentry for folks sentenced as juveniles. Fader’s work, however, looks at the experience of individuals reentering in their early twenties following incarceration during their teen years. Fader discusses how youthful incarceration resulted in “arrested psychosocial development” of the participants in her study and more dependence on familial support financially and emotionally when they were released (Fader 2013, 217).

I found that Fader’s study, however, was not applicable or instructive for understanding the respondents of this thesis. While Fader’s book does discuss reentry after youthful incarceration and its unique circumstances, it focuses on the reentry of individuals who were sentenced to shorter sentences and served less time than condemned children.

**Post Life Sentence Reentry Studies**

Literature regarding reintegration after life sentences is also available, but incredibly limited to a few texts. In the US, one in every 11 people incarcerated is serving a life sentence and one in four of these individuals is serving life without parole (Mauer and Nellis 2018, 3). This means, hypothetically, that three-quarters of those serving life will return to society and undergo a reentry process. Returning lifers face a unique reentry experience because they have
spent decades behind bars. The average person reentering has spent one to three years inside and is in their mid-thirties, however, this is not true for returning lifers who are older and were inside much longer (Harding 2019). As a result, there are other concerns that are more salient for former lifers that scholars may not discuss in general reentry studies.

The literature regarding reintegration after serving life sentences mentions unique experiences of this population regarding social, economic, and health aspects of reentry. As mentioned, a strong social network is incredibly important during the reintegration process. As a result of lengthy sentences, however, these social and family relationships are typically strained for former lifers as it has been decades since they were physically in their family members’ lives (Liem 2016). Economically, lifers have spent decades out of the workforce and usually face increased discrimination for their criminal record, making the job search even more daunting (Liem 2016). These realities create larger barriers in reentry for those reintegrating after serving a life sentence.

Finally, more consistently prevalent among lifers is increased health concerns and adjustments post release. Health is a greater concern for former lifers considering these folks were subject to subpar medical care for decades inside prison and their bodies typically have deteriorated faster than average (Liem 2016). Mental health adjustments are also larger for former lifers because decades inside can cause internalized institutionalization which can materialize into difficulties regarding self-efficacy and a feeling of “fragile freedom” due to a deep sense of abnormality within society (Liem 2016, 7). These specific hurdles faced by lifers come in addition to the general obstacles of support, housing, and economic reintegration making lifer reentry uniquely challenging.
Formerly Condemned Children Reentry

Finally, while there is literature in existence that discusses reintegration following incarceration generally, for young individuals, and for lifers, the literature completely lacks studies relating to the reentry processes of formerly condemned children. There is, however, limited research on the experiences faced by condemned children before and during incarceration. Empirical studies tell us that condemned children typically come from socioeconomic disadvantage, suffered high rates of abuse during childhood, and faced educational challenges growing up (Nellis 2012). Additionally, during incarceration condemned children face harsher realities than individuals given lesser sentences. For example, the majority of condemned children are unable to engage fully in programming due to restrictions based on their life sentences (Nellis 2012). Positive program engagement has been shown to improve – in terms of recidivism – reintegration outcomes (Harding 2019). During incarceration, “juveniles placed in adult prisons [also] are at heightened risk of physical and sexual assault by older, more mature prisoners” and “suffer horrific abuse” while incarcerated (Equal Justice Initiative 2008, 14). This adds to the mental health implications of incarceration in the forms of heightened PTSD and mental impact (Equal Justice Initiative 2008). This empirical data provides important information for this thesis due to the culminating nature of reintegration experiences — reentry is impacted by circumstances before, during, and, what is most often discussed, after incarceration; however, the current data does not discuss the actual reentry experiences of these folks (Harding 2019).

While limited data does exist regarding experiences of condemned children before and during incarceration, there is a gap in the literature concerning the reentry experiences of this
population. This is the first time in US history that thousands of individuals who were sentenced to death by incarceration have been granted a resentencing opportunity. This is also the first time that individuals originally sentenced to death by incarceration are leaving prisons in numbers. While the literature highlights several aspects of reentry most likely important to formerly condemned children — social, economic, and health experiences — it does not provide insight on the reality of their experiences. Thus, this thesis seeks to fill this gap and answer the question: how do formerly condemned children in Philadelphia experience reintegration? How is this experience unique?

**Methodology Section**

This thesis uses a qualitative methods approach to examine the reintegration experiences of individuals who have been resentenced and released from incarceration after initially receiving death by incarceration sentences as juveniles. The study focuses particularly on individuals reintegrating in Philadelphia. There is a high concentration of formerly condemned children returning to this city as a result of: one, a high concentration of death by incarceration sentences given to juveniles in Philadelphia and two, the District Attorney’s Office under Larry Krasner releasing more condemned children than in other locales. To shed light on the reentry experiences of this population, I use a constructivist and advocacy paradigm to approach my research. Under these paradigms, I performed eight in-depth interviews with formerly condemned children reintegrating in Philadelphia and one interview with an individual who reentered in Philadelphia independent of the Montgomery v Louisiana decision for comparison.\(^5\)

\(^5\) See Appendix for participant demographics.
I will then analyze the data using the theoretical frameworks of transformative justice and abolition.

**Approach**

I chose to use a qualitative methods approach for this thesis. Through qualitative methods and particularly interviews, I can center the voices of those most impacted by the Montgomery v Louisiana decision: individuals resentenced and released as a result. The specific approaches I use in this research are a conglomeration of constructivist and advocacy paradigms. These strategies allow me to center the perspective of my participants while also arguing for change to our criminal legal system.

The first approach I use is a constructivist paradigm. The constructivist ideology relies heavily on induction: the process of generating a theory based on data (Creswell 2016, 20). Unlike a majority of quantitative research where the researcher is testing a theory, I went into the interviews and data collection as open minded as possible. The goal of the data collection was to listen to the words of the participants in order to relay their perspectives on and experiences of reentry. As a result, the constructivist approach forced me to collect data first and attempt to draw conclusions afterwards, instead of testing a preconceived theory through data collection. While I studied reentry and aspects of reentry that scholars have deemed important, during the interviews I sought to discover what the participants saw as the most important aspects of their reentry. Important is an ambiguous word, however, I employ it here because it allows room for interpretation and personalized, unique perspectives on what formerly condemned children view as crucial to their own experience. Importance was up to the participants interpretation and it was
my job as a researcher using the constructivist paradigm to let that be as organic and rooted in their perspectives as possible.

While the constructivist approach covers my desire to hear the participants' words for what they were and without preconceived testable theories, I go one step further with an activist paradigm in my research (Creswell 2016, 21). One of my research goals is to present a project in which the subjects’ worldviews are centered, but another is to use the findings as a means of making change. The participants in this study are individuals who were told as teenagers they would never leave prison when they were given death by incarceration sentences. This research highlights the participants' challenges and successes in reentry – as they see them – in order to call greater society to action. This thesis will address issues of mass incarceration and reentry with a critical lens that questions the system’s validity as demonstrated through the words and perspectives of the participants.

*Interviewing*

As mentioned, the qualitative methods approach I use is administered through constructivist and advocacy paradigms. The method in particular that I used to collect data, however, is semi-structured interviews. The interviews were of formerly condemned children who have been resentenced as a result of Montgomery v Louisiana and who have or are reintegrating in Philadelphia. As a comparison, I also interviewed one individual who served a similar sentence but is not a juvenile lifer. This comparison will shed light on the unique experience of formerly condemned children. Each interview was approximately 1-hour and took place in a public location selected by the participant.
This project uses interviewing as a means of data collection due to the research goals of centering the perspectives of the participants. It is my goal to relay my participants’ reentry experiences as they perceive them, this is my constructivist paradigm. Semi-structured interviews is the approach I chose because of its flexibility (Weiss 1995, 8). While I had a set of questions going into each interview, the semi-structured nature of the conversation allowed for the participant to control the narrative of their own experience. Each interview, while I touched the same basic categories, was vastly different.

The participants in the study were selected based on specific criteria. When the Montgomery v Louisiana decision was announced there were over 500 condemned children in Pennsylvania. Of these 500, over 300 alone were convicted through the Philadelphia criminal justice system. The political moment for the District Attorney’s office in Philadelphia makes these 300 individuals unique. In many other jurisdictions, juvenile lifers have been resentenced to lengthy terms and remain in prison. In Philadelphia under the District Attorney’s Office led by Larry Krassner, however, many of these individuals are leaving prison and returning to the city. Thus, I specifically focused on individuals in the Philadelphia district. The formerly condemned children I interviewed were all between the ages of 15 and 17 when they were sentenced to death by incarceration and the comparison interviewee was 25 when he was incarcerated. I sought variability in participants who were incarcerated at SCI Scottsville or SCI Pike versus prisons further upstate. This variability was selected due to the unequal access to programming individuals at different institutions face. While SCI Scottsville and SCI Pike are close to Philadelphia and thus have extended programs, the prisons upstate lack these opportunities.
I did not choose to limit my study based on time served. There is variability in the study of individuals who have served between 25 years to 46 years incarcerated. No one in the study served less than 25 years, mainly because condemned children with under 25 years inside have not typically been resentenced to be released on parole until they reach this benchmark. Above 25 years, however, I did not limit based on time served to demonstrate further variability of experiences within the population of formerly condemned children in Philadelphia. I did, however, limit my study to individuals who served their time in men’s facilities. This was for two reasons. First, out of the 500 condemned children in Pennsylvania, only 10 were women. Thus, based on sheer access alone, it was much more difficult to recruit women for this study. Additionally, because I have chosen to vary my study based on years served and location of incarceration, I decided to not vary the study based on gender.

Finally, I chose to include one individual who served 25 years but who was not classified as a condemned child. The individual chosen served this long sentence after receiving it just after adolescence, at age 25. The reasoning for this is because of the spotlight on Philadelphia, “ground zero for juvenile lifer reentry,” as the location with the most condemned children in the world. As a result of this reality I knew before starting the study that juvenile lifers in Philly were provided certain services – parole privileges, housing privileges, etc – that a typical returning citizen does not receive. For comparison reasons, I included an individual under similar circumstances but without the condemned child label to further understand the unique reality of reentry for formerly condemned children in Philadelphia.
Recruiting Participants

After selecting the participant criteria: male individuals resentenced under Montgomery v Louisiana returning to the Philadelphia area after a variable number of years incarcerated and one individual with a similar sentence length returning to the Philadelphia area, I began to recruit participants. One way I recruited participants was through my connection to the Youth Sentencing and Reentry Project (YSRP). YSRP is a nonprofit that provides mitigation services to juvenile lifers during their resentencing hearings and reentry guidance once these individuals come home (Barnett 2018, 2). I had previously worked with YSRP on Will’s reentry plan. I was able to reach out to some of the individuals I had previously worked with about my study. I explained the study as my senior college thesis aiming to understand reentry experiences of juvenile lifers. The individuals I worked with then sent out my information and information about the study to some of the formerly condemned children they provide or provided reentry services to. Many folks responded that they were not interested but a handful were willing to participate in the study. YSRP also helped connect me to individuals who served most of their time upstate, otherwise I would not have had access to these participants.

The second way in which I recruited individuals was through the large network a researcher in the area has in Philadelphia as a result of their research on mass incarceration. This researcher provided me with contacts of individuals who they thought may be interested in the same way my contacts at YSRP did. After I received contact information for participants, I reached out to individuals through email or phone and explained the study. I explained my goals of talking to them for approximately 1-hour about their reentry experiences in Philadelphia. The participants and I then scheduled a time that worked for both of us and we selected interview
locations convenient to them. We then met at diners, cafeterias, coffee shops, etc and performed the interview.

*My Positionality*

As a researcher, it is imperative that I consider my role in the data collection and analysis process of this thesis. One positionality factor I must consider is that I am a white woman in her twenties and all the participants are black men between the ages of 45 - 65. While the study is not about race in particular, the overwhelming majority of condemned children are black and all of the individuals I interviewed are black. I did not ask specific questions about race during the interviews and I noticed it did not come up frequently. Towards the tail end of the interviewing process one participant brought up the disparity in the new sentences given to black and white defendants at resentencing hearings. None of the other participants had broached this with me. I realize that this could be attributed to my whiteness. Additionally, I do not know how the interviews may or may not have been different if I identified as a man. In these ways, my positionality greatly impacts the research.

Furthermore, my academic perspective impacted my interviews. One of the participants told me he was nervous before our interview. I was a stranger to many of the participants before I met them, and they knew I was recording them for an academic paper. This could lead to nerves such as those the above participant had – stemming from previous experiences such as parole board interviews or others with formal power structures – or also a potential for interviewees to respond in a particular way because I do come from an academic setting. At the beginning of each interview I attempted to reassure participants that it was a casual conversation and their responses were 100% voluntary and confidential to ease the perceived formality of
the interview. Each institution name, program name, and participant name in this thesis has been changed to a pseudonym for confidentiality purposes. I also memorized some of my questions in advance and tailored each interview specifically to the participants’ responses. In this way, I hoped to demonstrate to the participants I was genuinely interested in their words. Also, we met in very casual locations and I always arrived in casual clothing to further relieve some of the potential formal, academic nature the interview may have had. Finally, because Philadelphia is such a hub for the reentry of juvenile lifers, many of the folks I interviewed had been interviewed before and were familiar with the format.

Another positionality I must confront that affected my research is my outlook on prisons and my previous work surrounding criminal justice. I identify as a prison abolitionist and do not believe in the ideology that prison is the best way to address harm. While I did attempt to bring a constructivist paradigm to my research, it is impossible to erase any and all preconceived notions I may have surrounding the criminal justice system. In addition to my work writing a reentry plan for Will I also previously worked at a reentry organization in Baltimore. As a result, I knew some of the key pillars typically important for formerly incarcerated individuals integrating back into the free world. While I did ask specific questions about aspects of reentry such as support, housing, and employment, I also tried to let the participant steer the conversation towards aspects that were most important to them. Despite this, however, I do know that my previous work surrounding reentry and my positionality as a prison abolitionist impacted how I came across to the interviewees. In some ways, I think this was beneficial. For example, I was able to address how I came to this project by stating I had formerly worked on a reentry plan for a juvenile lifer’s resentencing hearing and that I had worked at a reentry organization. I think this gave me
some level of credibility when talking to individuals and made me seem a little bit less removed
than someone with no experience surrounding criminal justice interviewing them.

Finally, as a result of my positionality as a prison abolitionist, I was not interested in
asking my participants what their crimes were or their purported guilt or innocence. Many
interviews I have seen of formerly condemned children while I was initially beginning this
project do include questions surrounding the nature of one's crime. While many times discussion
of the past and previous events came up, I never asked such questions of the participants. This
thesis is about who these individuals are today and how they have adjusted to life after
incarceration, not on past events. I believe this also may have created a line of trust because I
was not interested in sensationalizing their story by means of portraying their crime. I tried to
demonstrate that I was focused on the present and what they were going through at this current
period of their life.

Data Analysis

Once I collected interviews, data analysis was an essential part of this project. The data
analysis began directly after each interview. After each interview I wrote a memo about aspects
of the conversation that stuck out to me and that I felt the participant deemed important to their
experience. These memos were frequently in conversation with one another as I saw patterns
arise between interviews. These shorthand reflections after each interview were the first step in
my analysis process.

Following the memos, I transcribed each interview. With the assistance of rev.com, a
transcription service, I transformed each audio recorded interview into a verbatim written
document of the conversations. After each interview was transcribed, I went through and created
additional memos following a second glance. I then used a qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti, to assist me in analyzing the content of the conversations. I coded the interviews, highlighting participant words that spoke to certain subjects. Some of the concept codes I used were: housing, employment, family support, relationship support, etc. I then was able to compile all of the data where the participants spoke on particular subjects in one place. I also coded specific phrasing participants used and references they made to comparative aspects of the study: the facilities they spent time in, the length of time they served, etc. As I coded, I continued to create memos as I recognized more themes and differences within the data.

By organizing the data, I was able to analyze it by means of comparative analysis, narrative analysis, and reflexivity. The comparative analysis came from having multiple experiences and demographics among my participants (Silverman 2013, 343). Some of the participants served their time upstate and some served time close to Philadelphia, some had family support, and some did not, and one of the participants was not condemned as a child. I looked at these different factors while analyzing the data. This comparative analysis was accompanied by narrative analysis. Narrative analysis emphasizes the use of the participants' own words and calls for the researcher to focus on how the participants impose order and make sense of events and actions in their lives (Silverman 2013, 339). This type of analysis focuses on how participants see and relate to their own experiences. This thesis attempts to understand what factors are most important in the reentry processes of formerly condemned children. Through narrative analysis I attempt to determine “importance” through the eyes of the participants, not through my preconceived perceptions. These two types of analysis, however, must be accompanied by an analysis that considers reflexivity (Silverman 2013, 332). Due to my
positionality and role in this research, throughout the analysis process I constantly asked myself how my biases might be affecting how I interpreted the data. I tried to balance reflexivity with narrative analysis to demonstrate that while this project centers the voices of the participants, it is not possible for it to be free of my interpretations.

All these analytic methods relate to the constructivist paradigm. I use these techniques to draw conclusions from the data and not let my former research dictate what the participants relayed. True to the constructivist paradigm, I turned to grounded theory to do so. Grounded theory is a process of systematically developing theories and conclusions inductively based upon data collection (Tavory 2009, 245). Using grounded theory, I reached my conclusions directly from the data. I was not testing a theory through my interviews, instead I let my interviews guide my findings.

While I practiced grounded theory when drawing conclusions from the research, it was also important to me to use the activist paradigm that I mentioned earlier. As a result, while I let the data speak for itself in terms of what it says about the reentry processes of juvenile lifers; I put the data in conversation with theories of prison abolition and transformative justice. The purpose of this thesis is to further understand reintegration processes of formerly condemned children, but it also has a larger goal of contributing to the conversation surrounding mass incarceration. Using theories of prison abolition and transformative justice I use the data to ask and answer questions such as: what does this teach us about long prison sentences and mass incarceration?

Prison abolitionist and transformative justice ideologies call individuals to critically think about the way our society deals with harm and to think about the ethics of erasing people from
our society by putting them in prison. The data draws its own conclusions established within grounded theory, but my activist framework pushes the conclusions one step further. It pushes these conclusions to assist in answering difficult questions about our legal system.
Chapter 3: The Effects of Institutional Context

During our interview, William Sanders, also known by his Muslim attribute, Hasan, walked me around his old neighborhood. He showed me the home he grew up in, his grandmother’s house down the street, and his aunt’s house on the corner. He then walked me through the event that caused his incarceration. Hasan expressed that he wanted me to see where he grew up and the context that led to his imprisonment.

Hasan was incredibly open with me the whole time. He later shared his experiences regarding mental health while incarcerated and his journey to his personal transformation. Hasan describes the moment below:

“An older guy told me ‘One day you’re going home and you’re going to need your GED.’ I then told somebody, ‘I’m never going home. You telling me you’re going to need this when you go home and I’m telling you I’m never going home. I have a life sentence. I’m going to die here.’ And he looked at me and he saw the tears in my eyes, and he knew that I came to the realization that this is my reality. That time, years passed, years passed, I still go to school but I’m just going to school because they making me go, not because I want to go. So it was one time that I was reading a book and it was way over my head and I couldn't understand a lot of the words. And I kind of felt like an idiot. So I said, you know what? It’s either you’re going to be an idiot in jail or you’re going to just educate yourself and just be able to talk to your family in an educational way and enlighten them on things. So I educated myself. I hung around guys that have love for me and I have love for them. Guys that are older that write plays and are very respected in the institution. So that’s how I came.” – William (Hasan) Sanders
Unlike Hasan, seven out of nine of the participants expressed that since day one inside, they held the firm belief that they were not going to die in prison. They expressed that they did not know how but knew that they would see the streets again. Hasan’s anecdote, however, portrays the impact of programming such as access to education and the presence of older role models while inside. While seven out of nine participants believed they would eventually leave prison, this transition would look very different for individuals coming from different institutions.

As I emphasized in the literature review, reentry is not only influenced by the experiences an individual has when they come home from incarceration; reentry starts the day of incarceration. In this chapter, I will explain this phenomenon through the lens of institutional context. An individual's reintegration experience is heavily impacted by what they did while incarcerated – whether they participated in programming, had access to programming, pursued their education, etc. – and different institutions offer differing levels of opportunity.

In Pennsylvania, prisons closer to Philadelphia offer more educational and programming opportunities than prisons further upstate and happen to house a greater number of condemned children. As a result, the reentry experiences of the participants who served time close to Philadelphia look very different than the experiences of participants who served time upstate. This chapter will highlight the impact of institutional context on creating these differences.

**Institutional Context**

The state of Pennsylvania currently has 24 state correctional facilities, 20 of which are men’s facilities. Seven of the participants spent most of their time at SCI Pike or Scottsville,
facilities right outside of Philadelphia. Two of the participants, however, spent all of their time upstate, at prisons anywhere from four to eight hours drive from Philadelphia.

**Pike and Scottsville Contexts**

SCI Pike by far has the most programming of all Pennsylvania prisons, with SCI Scottsville also having many programs. Brian Williams, Joseph Morgan, Andre Young, Chris Hall, Elijah King, and Marcus (Dusty) Anderson, spent the majority of their time at Pike. Hasan spent the majority of his time at Scottsville. SCI Pike and SCI Scottville are 45 minutes and 25 minutes from Philadelphia, respectively. The next closest prison to Philadelphia in PA is two hours from the city and the furthest, is 8 hours from Philly. Pike and Scottville offer significantly more programming than other prisons due to their proximity to the city. Volunteers are more willing and able to visit Pike and Scottsville and the staff at these institutions have also proven to be slightly more amenable to change. This is not to discount the inhumane nature of Pike and Scottsville, because prison is an inhumane solution to society’s problems. It is solely to account for the somewhat increased opportunity for individuals incarcerated in these facilities.

It is important to note that the participants who spent the majority of their time incarcerated at Pike or Scottsville were all recruited based on educational connections. They were recruited because they had participated in a Community Action or Student Exchange class while inside and thus met my researcher contact. In no way can I claim their experiences reflect those of all juvenile lifers returning from Pike or Scottsville because not everyone participates in this programming. Dusty is the only participant from Pike or Scottsville who I did not come into contact through an educational connection.
Educational Opportunities

Many of the participants, regardless of context, participated in educational programming while incarcerated. At the start of many of their sentences Pell Grants, government subsidized college access, were still available in prisons. In fact, college courses in prison were relatively common. In 1994, however, Bill Clinton passed his sweeping crime bill which, along with many other restrictions, eliminated the access of Pell Grants for people experiencing incarceration. This ban on Pell Grants eliminated access to college for the majority of incarcerated people.

Despite the elimination of Pell Grants, however, a nearby university decided to continue to fund its college program at SCI Pike. SCI Pike is the only prison in Pennsylvania that has college access directly linked to a university. This permitted some of the participants who served their sentences at Pike to obtain college degrees. While at Pike, Joseph Morgan finished a few credits shy of his bachelor’s degree, Chris Hall obtained his bachelor’s degree, and Andre Young not only obtained his bachelor’s degree but also as he stated “used his relationships” that he formed getting his bachelor’s to also obtain his master’s degree. Had Joseph, Chris, and Andre not served time at Pike they would not have been able to graduate from college, despite their obvious capability of doing so.

As Andre reflected to me, even though his employer is a Second Chance Employer, meaning they are open to hiring formerly incarcerated individuals, he knows part of the reason he got the job was due to his education. He is “the very first person with lived experience to be a part of the administration team” at his current job. Andre emphasized frequently that his “is not the typical [reentry] experience.” In fact, if Andre had been at any other prison, even Scottsville, he would not have been able to obtain his degrees and might not hold the job he currently does.
Programming

Not only does Pike have more educational opportunities for individuals but it also has more programming than other Pennsylvania prisons. The majority of the participants, much like Hasan, discussed a particular time of their incarceration that they personally transformed. Brian Williams discussed how the first ten years of his incarceration were “a mess” but “critical in the development of who [he is] today.” When Brian discussed how he matured around this time, he as well as Hasan, Joseph, Chris, and Elijah, stated that they turned to programming. They looked to men around them as role models and began to involve themselves in different activities throughout the institution.

Joseph and Elijah, who are incredibly close to this day, led the Pike NAACP chapter together, Dusty founded a program called, Lifers in Action, and Chris was involved with a group called Juvenile Lifers for Equity. While these programs may exist at other institutions, Pike and Scottsville, unlike prisons upstate, also had programming with outside volunteers or visitors.

Programming with Outside Volunteers or Visitors

Pike and Scottsville not only had a greater amount of programming than prisons upstate, but they also had a lot more people coming in and out of the prison as volunteers or visitors. Joseph reflected on how this impacted his reentry experience:

“I had a leg up...because I was constantly in a group with outside people, so constantly being reintroduced to how society works, how people work on the outside.”

A few of the programs participants discussed were Student Exchange classes and Community Actions. Student Exchange classes are seminars taught in carceral spaces where both traditional college students and incarcerated students learn together. Hasan took four different
Student Exchange courses while at Scottsville. Chris and Andre became Student Exchange
trainers and taught educators how to teach Student Exchange courses. Through these courses and
training, Hasan, Chris, and Andre constantly interacted with folks who were not incarcerated and
formed strong bonds across prison walls.

Joseph, Brian, and Elijah also participated in programming that transcended prison walls.
They, however, started their own reentry-group inside. Brian explained: “we help transform guys
from the criminal way of thinking to legitimate thinking” and they worked with outside reentry
organizations. All of these relationships formed across prison walls through Student Exchange
classes, Community Action, or self-created organizations continued during the reentry
experiences of these participants.

*Connections Based on Programming*

Pike and Scottsville’s programming, particularly the flow of outside folks into the prison,
allowed for the formation of connections and relationships that continued once participants came
home. For example, Elijah, Brian, and Joseph were in connection with an outside reentry
organization through their self-initiated inside association. As a result, when Elijah came home,
he continued his reentry work on the outside because he was immediately employed by the
reentry organization. Brian and Joseph both joined Elijah when they came home. Employment, a
crucial part of reentry, came directly from opportunities to connect to the outside while
incarcerated afforded to Elijah, Brian, and Joseph at Pike.

Additionally, Chris and Andre also came home to employment based on work they did on
the inside. Chris continues to work with the Student Exchange program, now from the outside.
Andre works at an organization that he was in contact with while inside. Andre’s job, however, did not start immediately when he got home. Andre reflects, however, that:

“I’d done so much work with folks inside that there were little pocket opportunities that allowed me to stay afloat money-wise until I got a full-time job.” – Andre

Andre’s pocket opportunities came from the relationships he made with college professors, community members, and organizations while he was incarcerated.

In this way, the expanded programming at Pike and Scottsville as well as the constant contact with society impacted the participants’ reentry experiences. Joseph, who came home to a job, tells others not to compare their reentry experiences to his because “everybody’s experiences are different” and at prisons near Philadelphia men had more opportunities.

**Upstate Context**

Clarence (Rasheed) Wright, who prefers to be called Mr. Wright, and George Taylor were the only two participants in the study who spent the majority of their time upstate. As a result, they had much more limited access to educational opportunities and programming.

**Opportunities**

Unlike at Pike, there were no college programs where Mr. Wright and George spent their time. Mr. Wright and George were incarcerated in prisons that outside visitors or volunteers rarely frequented. The institutions were also less open minded about expanding programming and supporting initiatives proposed by incarcerated individuals. This is not to say, however, that Mr. Wright and George did not participate in programs or employment while inside.

Mr. Wright and George spoke of their work experiences. George spent the majority of his time either working in the laundry or the kitchen. Mr. Wright worked in a clothing plant for
about 12 years, the kitchen for 10, and as a tutor for a few years. Mr. Wright and George both got their GED’s while inside, but did not have educational opportunities beyond the high school level. Mr. Wright and George both took up trades while inside, Mr. Wright did an apprenticeship in baking and took a computer class, while George took up refurbishing.

George said: “I did about 3 something programs within 43 years” which is very different from the experiences of the participants at Pike. While George did have access to much less programming, I am not positive if he could have taken more programming if he desired. George emphasized that he focused more on work while he was inside than programming, same with Mr. Wright. Both George and Mr. Wright, however, were involved in organizations. Mr. Wright became president of an organization and George was president of the juvenile lifer group at his institution. All the participants in this study were actively involved in at least one organization.

The Student Exchange program came up in my interview with Mr. Wright. He responded:

“I was always too far for that. I [was first in] Central Pennsylvania. Ain’t nobody coming there. Then [my second prison] was like trying to get on the map of prisons, then [my final prison] you’re a thousand zillion miles away. So I never was in a setting where we could and I would have loved to do Student Exchange.”

As a result of experiencing incarceration upstate, Mr. Wright and George were not afforded the same opportunities that folks incarcerated at Pike or Scottsville were. Despite an eagerness to engage in programming such as Student Exchange, Mr. Wright could not do so. Unlike some of the participants who served time near Philadelphia who came home to employment based on
relationships formed while they were inside, George and Mr. Wright did not share this advantage.

Reentry Impact

Within this study, it was clear that institutional context mattered. Juvenile lifers at Pike and Scottsville were returning to society with higher levels of education and more connections to employment and opportunity than those who spent time upstate. While this is the most obvious impact on reentry, institutional context also impacted the results of resentencing hearings.

Joseph, who spent the majority of his time at Pike, was originally going to be resentenced to 35 years to life. He said the judge “wasn’t trying to budge on no numbers.” Joseph had already served over 25 years and was being told he had ten more to go. Joseph, however, then worked with his lawyer to create a mitigating package of all the things he had done while he was inside. Joseph said the packet “was actually two booklets about [3 inches thick] a piece.” Joseph’s lawyer then submitted the packet. As a result of Joseph’s dedication to programming and Pike having a high number of opportunities, his mitigation packet demonstrated he had dedicated himself to transforming his life. Joseph said:

“So literally they got [the mitigating package] on a Wednesday, Friday they said time served.” – Joseph

After seeing all the work Joseph had done while incarcerated, the judge changed the original proposal of ten more years to immediate parole eligibility. Joseph came home soon after.

George’s programming also impacted his resentencing hearing. When George first went to the parole board, he had already served 42 years. George was given a new sentence of thirty years to life, making him eligible for parole. Then, however, George stated:
“Once I got back to the institution, they gave me a year hit due to the fact I didn’t take violence prevention.” – George

George was then put at the top of the prison’s three-year waiting list for the violence prevention program and completed it. The next year George went back to the parole board nervous with “a bad feeling there was going to be another hit.” George was not given an additional hit, but because he had limited access to programming while inside, he spent an additional year in prison. George served a total of 43 years starting at the age of 17.

The availability of programming and the enrollment in that programming impacted both Joseph and George’s resentencing hearings. Joseph, who spent the majority of his time at Pike, however, received a ten-year shorter sentence because of all the work he did. George on the other hand, who had already served 42 years in prison had to stay in an extra year. The apparent institutional impact on resentencing hearings comes in addition to the effect of institutional context on the participants’ ability to create contacts outside prison walls and prepare for reentry.

Reflections

Serving time upstate versus at an institution closer to Philadelphia led to vastly different incarceration and reentry experiences for the participants. This was known to the participants. Mr. Wright and Chris had reflections on this reality.

“That’s why I can’t forget the [prisons upstate] cause ain’t none of that coming that way. Pike was a hub of growth and success for a lot of men.” – Mr. Wright

“What you’ll see is people who were probably at Pike probably had access to more. And so you’ll see, if you compare the outcome, you’re seeing there’s a difference. And so yes, I agree wholeheartedly that I was exposed to more opportunities because I was at Pike. Not just
resources but relationships, having access to those relationships cause I believe the resources is going to come based off the relationships.” – Chris

The participants experiences and reflections demonstrate a clear influence of institutional context on reentry experiences of formerly condemned children in Philadelphia. The participants did not have control of where they were incarcerated, but institutional context did have control over what they were able to accomplish while inside. Whether an individual had access to programming or the ability to form professional relationships while inside changes their reintegration process.

**Juvenile Lifer Community**

“The majority of all the juvenile lifers that’s out, we all crossed paths. We was in jail with one another. Most of us, that’s out, we was all at [Bennington] together. That was our main jail until the riot. Then they just, we just scattered all over the place. So we haven’t seen each other in years.” – George

Transitioning from incarceration back to the streets is only understood by those who have lived experience of incarceration. Transitioning to Philadelphia after the overturning of a life sentence received as a teenager is only understood by an even smaller group of people: formerly condemned children resentenced and reentering the city. Many of the participants discussed the importance of community in their transitions. One community many discussed relying on was the juvenile lifer community itself. Experiences with and opinions of this community, however, varied among the participants.
A Tight Knit Community

SCI Pike was the fifth largest penitentiary in the United States and the largest in Pennsylvania before it closed in September 2018 and moved to SCI Smithdale. Throughout this chapter I have referred to Pike because most of the participants were released before the transition to Smithdale. Since Pike was the largest prison in Pennsylvania, naturally the greatest number of juvenile lifers returning to Philadelphia came from Pike. This has led to a deeply connected community of formerly condemned children in Philadelphia.

“We all are in community. The synergy overlaps a lot of us that are out here now, not everybody, a lot of us were doing similar things in there. So we overlapped in that arena. That’s where the bonding came...So when we talk about the reentry thing, we developed our own little network.

Unofficially. So a lot of the success shouldn’t be credited to service workers and service providers, it’s actually us. Juvenile lifers specifically.” – Elijah

Elijah’s words were not only evident when he said them but also throughout my interviews with multiple participants. Elijah, Brian, and Joseph all work at the same reentry organization and focus a lot of their energy on supporting other juvenile lifers coming home.

After my interview with Joseph, I actually met another former juvenile lifer, Anthony, who had just come home two days prior after 42 years inside. Anthony had come to the reentry organization Brian, Elijah, and Joseph work at for help getting on his feet. Anthony had planned on returning to his brother’s home but, unfortunately, his brother had passed away a few months before his release. He was still in his prison blues two days after getting home. As Joseph noted, “even guys that don’t have a lot of family. We’re there for them. We will support them coming
home so we become like a surrogate family.” I saw this that day as Brian was outfitting Anthony with clothes.

I did not only see the strong community of formerly condemned children at the reentry organization Brian, Elijah, and Joseph worked at, but it was evident in other interviews as well. While I was interviewing Hasan, we bumped into another former juvenile lifer as we walked through his old neighborhood. Hasan and the man were excited to see each other and check in on one another. Hasan also relayed that his best friend, David, was also home as a result of the Montgomery v Louisiana decision. Hasan had known David even before they went inside. Finally, as I was interviewing Elijah in a food court in Philly, Dusty walked by us outside. Elijah quickly got on the phone and called Dusty in to talk with us. The only reason I met Dusty was because of the network that exists between juvenile lifers.

The community of formerly condemned children in Philly has also set up once a month meeting for everyone to come together: returned juvenile lifers, parole agents, counselors, psychs. George spoke of these meetings and how “everybody just sits around and just expresses how they doing and whatnot.” For George, these meetings are helpful, he gets to learn from other people who came home before him and to express his feelings and uncertainties with people who actually understand. George also talked about how at these meetings they decided to start putting together care packages for other juvenile lifers coming home with “some money, underclothes, and stuff like that.”

The majority of the participants felt connected to the juvenile lifer community in Philadelphia. They felt as if they could turn to one another, that they had a network and could
check in with each other. This has been crucial for the transition of many of the participants because they are able to support and learn from one another.

*Fractures within the Community*

While I heard from many participants that the juvenile lifer community in Philadelphia is tight knit, I heard different sentiments from Mr. Wright. Mr. Wright talked about a Pike and Upstate divide within the community. George and Mr. Wright were not released in a large cohort affected by Montgomery v Louisiana like the individuals at Pike were. George said that where he was there were only ten juvenile lifers. Out of that ten only four made parole and George is the only one who returned to Philadelphia. Mr. Wright did not speak of any other folks resentenced to Philadelphia from where he served his time.

Unlike the participants from Pike, George and Mr. Wright were coming home to a very different juvenile lifer community. While the participants from Pike described the community as very tight knit, Mr. Wright did not feel that way. Mr. Wright remarked:

“Them dudes been in the same network for a long time, which is Pike. So they got they whole system together. So I’m like a foreigner to them guys.” – Mr. Wright

Mr. Wright insinuated that the “brotherhood is there but it ain’t there” because he did not do his time with the Pike folks. He knows them from resentencing not from incarceration.

Mr. Wright did say, however, that everyone gets along. He is friends with formerly condemned children who came from Pike and he gets excited to see them as they do him. Despite this friendliness, Mr. Wright discussed how he believes the rift in the community does not only come from the fact folks did not spend their incarceration together. To Mr. Wright it’s more than that.
“They ain’t on the same page as me. They talk in a different way. They talking, I don’t want to say it, they act like they’re more intelligent than what they left. They ain’t where I’m at. I don’t want you to forget the darkside.” – Mr. Wright

For Mr. Wright, the Pike guys come off as projecting superiority to him. The men at Pike had much more opportunity than Mr. Wright did upstate. As a result, Mr. Wright did not receive the same education as some of his counterparts who did their time at Pike. This difference has materialized into differing opportunities for Mr. Wright and folks at Pike.

Individuals at Pike who I talked to developed strong relationships with professors and organizations while inside. As a result, they had more opportunities at the door when they came home, opportunities that Mr. Wright was not offered. Even now he feels that he is only called on when the Pike guys are in need of a “hype man” and does not get called up for opportunities with greater financial gain. For Mr. Wright, he sees this as a disconnect in the community of juvenile lifers. The access to opportunity and connection was totally different upstate.

**Conclusion**

Reentry cannot be studied in the vacuum of post-carceral experiences. As this chapter demonstrates, experiences individuals have while incarcerated have a huge impact on their reentry and these experiences are influenced by institutional context. The participants who served their time at Pike or Scottsville were exposed to more opportunity than those who served time upstate. This is evident in the educational access folks at Pike had, Andre was able to get his master’s degree, versus folks upstate could only study through the high school level. Andre attributes his access to education as the biggest reason for his success, Andre reflects:
“let educational opportunities of all sorts inside of prison. Education is single handedly the game changer because already you're coming out and it’s like wearing a Scarlet letter. Like "Hey I was inside!" And folks have a judgement about that. So just getting folks educated because the reality is there are a bunch of folks that applied for the job that I have now. Both folks who are incarcerated and others, they did not get it though. I did. Part of it is because of my education for sure.” – Andre

Many of the participants were inside when Pell Grants were taken away and not able to finish their degrees or pursue college at all. Andre, Joseph, Elijah, and Hasan all spoke about the transformative experiences they had with education. Reentry is influenced by time spent inside and the fact that folks at Pike had to fight for every opportunity they had, and folks upstate did not even have the opportunity to fight at all is unacceptable.

Additionally, the contacts the participants made at Pike and Scottsville also eased their transition post-incarceration. These contacts included outside volunteers that frequented Pike and Scottsville, something that did not happen upstate, and also contacts within the juvenile lifer community itself. Through programming and educational pursuits, the participants at Pike and Scottsville formed strong bonds with folks outside of prison walls including scholars, activists, teachers, etc. These contacts led to job opportunities and a network of care for these participants. Again, the same level of access to outside individuals was denied to George and Mr. Wright because they served time upstate. This meant they came home without these extended networks that some folks from Pike and Scottsville had. Not only did George and Mr. Wright come home to less professional contacts, but they also came home less connected to the larger community of formerly condemned children than the participants who served their time close to Philadelphia.
While Elijah spoke about the network of juvenile lifers he had around him, Mr. Wright felt fractures within the same community of formerly condemned children. Mr. Wright and George did not spend their time inside with other folks resentedenced to Philadelphia.

Mr. Wright spoke of certain frustrations about his reentry experience, he reflected that he had hoped to publish a book by now or work in criminal justice reform. Mr. Wright did not have the opportunities or contacts that folks at Pike or Scottsville had. Overall, Mr. Wright was incredibly proud of his accomplishments, but I do wonder if he had had the same opportunities folks at Pike or Scottsville did if he would have been able to pursue more of his goals.

While each participant reflected positively about their reentry experiences, the individuals at Pike and Scottsville were better able to prepare for the transition home because of their access to programming, access to outside individuals, and access to one another. Where each participant served their time had an incredible influence on their reintegration experience.
Chapter 4: Support

I met Brian at his place of work for our interview. Brian works with Elijah and Joseph at a reentry program where they assist other folks transitioning home from incarceration. Brian talked about his desire to always be involved in reentry work because he can’t forget about those he left behind when he was released. He mentioned that nonprofit pay was not good and so to keep working in reentry he had a second job at night. Despite his intense schedule, Brian did not complain because he felt this was the work he was meant to do.

Brian had been involved in many organizations and programs while inside and knew upon release he would come out and continue the work he was already doing. Brian, however, mentioned that he did not always think this way. He described his initial mindset in our interview:

“You figure coming off the streets at 16 years old being placed in an adult prison, where you've heard all these horror stories and what can possibly happen, and most of them are true...So I was still living with that sense of urgency where nothing was going to happen to me. So this was the mindset, I wasn't gonna let anything happen to me violence wise. And so I became just as aggressive as everyone else. And that was the thing that started letting me into the hole, the RHU and things like that. So that first 10 years was critical.” – Brian

I then asked Brian if there was a shift in his thinking at year 10 and what caused that shift. He remembered the change quite vividly:

“It was a shift. Just slightly before that I started to lose family members...and it just bothered me so much. And then on top of that, my family members became victims of some of the crimes that I had committed myself on the streets. And now it looks different because it happened to me, you
know, somehow it's like, ‘Whoa, hold up.’ And you know, the realization kicked in that okay, yesterday was somebody else today it was me and I don't want anyone else to feel the way I feel. So that started everything. ‘Okay. I got to change how I'm thinking.’ I started getting involved and doing different things really to better myself. And cause I never, not once thought that I would spend the rest of my life in prison, although I had a life sentence, I really had the hope and belief that I would get released some day.”

Brian’s words are not words of a person who could never reconcile his actions and become a positive influence on others. Brian was not and is not the “superpredator” that young black and brown boys like him were painted to be. Brian was only adapting to his environment and trying to survive.

Each participant spoke of a moment where they changed their way of thinking. Some said they began to transform their thoughts from the beginning and for others, like Brian, it happened about 10 years in. Each participant, however, had a story of what caused their shift in thoughts. For Hasan, it was his want to educate himself and his family and for Brian it was the power of his love for his family members.

The relevance of family in both Hasan and Brian’s stories is telling of the importance of support during incarceration and during reentry. One type of support commonly spoken of is familial, however, support comes from many different sources including family, friends, partners, organizations, etc. Many participants mentioned support as one of the most important factors of their reentry experiences.

Last chapter, I focused on institutional context which highlighted the impact of carceral experiences on reentry. Again, reentry is not only influenced by experiences post incarceration,
but is also heavily affected by the experiences of incarceration itself. This chapter, while I will
touch on the experience of support while one is inside and how that impacts reentry, I will
mainly focus on post carceral support. By analyzing the participants’ experiences of support, I
will also discuss how these post-carceral experiences influenced the participants’ reintegration
processes.

**Family Support**

The participants discussed one type of support the most: family support. Family care
ranged from support while folks were still inside, to assistance right when they came home, to
housing and financial support, all the way to emotional support. All of the participants, aside
from George and Joseph, discussed family support as being one of the main reasons for their
success in reentry.

**Support Throughout Incarceration**

Multiple participants discussed the importance of their familial support throughout their
entire time incarcerated. In the previous chapter, I discussed how experiences during
incarceration impact reentry, particularly institutional context. A similar sentiment was expressed
in regard to familial support during incarceration for those who had it.

Elijah discussed the importance of support from his family while he was inside. Elijah
mentioned that he “had a strong support system throughout [his] whole incarceration” and for
him, it “actually allowed [him] to do a lot of [the] things [he] did” including: being the president
of multiple organizations, working towards a college degree, and making outside contacts for his
reentry. Elijah “didn’t have to worry about anything other than surviving and legal because
financially [he] was okay and emotionally [he] had somebody to turn to.” For Elijah, the
immense support he was given allowed him the ability to focus on not only making it through his incarceration, but also setting up a framework for his eventual release.

Chris also mentioned the impact of family support while he was inside. Chris is one of the youngest of eleven children. Unlike Elijah, Chris’s family could not make it out to many visits, but they always managed to show him support. Every time Chris went to court his family was there, as Chris put it, “when [he] really needed them, they were there.”

Chris and Elijah mentioned how the support they were given during their incarceration carried over into their reentry. Elijah stated that because these relationships remained strong throughout his 27 years inside, when he came out, “there wasn’t a void...that network was already lined up for [him].” Unlike other participants such as Hasan, who discussed the need to mend relationships before coming home, Chris and Elijah, among many other participants, were confident in their familial support before even leaving prison. This helped ease the beginning of their transition home.

*Initial Support*

“Everything that I’ve needed. And that’s from information to clothing, shelter, I mean like, it’s just so much, and then it never stops. It’s like an emergency happens in a city and you see the first responders, the police, the fire and the red cross, that’s how it was. It was like the brothers, the sisters, cousins and so forth and everybody was coming and whatever I’ve needed they were there to help me or assist me or to get it. And some things I had to actually say, let me do it myself because I don’t want them to coddle me.” – Brian

Many participants were in constant contact with loved ones while they were , and this support continued during their reintegration. As Brian attested, for many of the participants,
family support was crucial especially at the start of their reentry experiences. Elijah, Brian, and Hasan specifically spoke of the impacts family support had on their first few days home.

For Elijah, the outpouring of support from his family started the second he was released. As soon as Elijah walked out of the prison, he was greeted by his two younger brothers who had come to pick him up. During the car ride home Elijah and his brothers were overcome by emotion over the fact that this was their first time as “adults together on the streets.” Elijah recalled the experience:

“It was like a weight was lifted off of them. Them telling me they wanted their big brother and Robert was, like because he’s the middle child, ‘I don’t got to be the big brother no more!’ And Jamal, ‘I got two big brothers now!’ It was really emotional for me. It was emotional for them, every step of the way they did it with me and it still chokes me up because at that moment I realized how deep this affected everybody.” – Elijah

While recalling this powerful moment, Elijah smiled at me with tears in his eyes. I could not imagine what it was like to be one of the three brothers in that car, but the emotion and sincerity in Elijah’s voice led me to tears as well. I felt the power of unconditional support through Elijah’s words.

This was not the last of the love Elijah was shown on his first day. His family wanted him to have a moment to himself to process and rented him a hotel room for the night. They gave Elijah space to take his first bath in over 27 years and just decompress. His room had a view and Elijah took three baths that night. This moment of relaxation helped set the tone for Elijah’s reentry experience.
Hasan’s first day of freedom was also full of familial love and support. Once Hasan arrived in Philadelphia, he was greeted by a dinner at his sister’s house. His sister invited Hasan's mother, his sisters, his brother, his sons, and some of his friends. Hasan said they just “sat around, ate, and talked” for hours. It was a homecoming that Hasan will not forget. This homecoming was accompanied by the moment Hasan actually surprised his mom and she fainted upon seeing him.

Finally, Brian also shared his experience of his first day home. Like Elijah, Brian’s family came to pick him up from the prison. He knew his sister was coming but he was surprised to see his mom and his brothers. Brian said that when he finally got in the car, he “couldn’t hold back, it was the best feeling” and he just started to cry. Brian actually showed me a video of his car ride home with his family. The video captures the love and excitement in the car, it still makes Brian cry every time he watches it. It made me cry too.

As Brian stated above, the support just kept coming for him. He says almost every day for three months after he first got home his loved ones took him shopping. This immense support from the start that the participants received eased their initial transition home. Family ushered them out of the institution with love. This set the tone for the start of their reentry experiences.

**Housing/Financial Support**

“Housing particularly if you don’t have anyone that you know it’s difficult.” – Andre

Through the interviews, I learned that support was a huge factor in the reentry of all of the participants. Seven out of nine of the participants expressed that they had incredibly strong family support during reentry. One of the most tangible ways this support presented itself was through housing and financial support from family members.
All seven of the participants with strong family support paroled directly to a family member’s house. For Elijah, he actually had family members fighting over whose house he would parole to. Brian, Hasan, Dusty, and Chris all paroled to their sisters’ houses. Elijah paroled to his brother’s house, Andre paroled to his cousin’s house, and Mr. Wright paroled to his niece’s house. While a few participants who paroled to family members’ houses mentioned paying rent, multiple also stated how living with a family member was saving them money in the interim while they were looking for their own housing.

Paroling directly to a family member’s house allowed these participants to avoid staying in a halfway house. Joseph, whose family is mainly based in South Carolina, and George who does not have strong family ties both paroled to halfway houses. George described the halfway house during our interview:

“It’s somewhat half ass” because “there’s some things that it’s more like you’re still in prison to me. Because it’s like the same rules and count. So it’s really like you really not moving ahead. It seem like you still in that cell when you there. That’s how I feel.” – George

Having the option to avoid the halfway house, which according to George is essentially extended incarceration, was granted to the participants with strong family support. Joseph has subsequently moved into the suburbs with his wife and George continues to stay in the halfway house.

Financially, family support was also essential for several of the participants. When Brian first came home, he did not want to work for 60 days. After almost 30 years of incarceration, he wanted “to take a sigh of relief and just be around [his] family” before jumping into employment. Brian’s family financially was able to support him in this. Joseph, on the other
hand, started working the day after he came home, and Hasan started working within a week of getting home.

Elijah continues to live with his brother as he saves money to buy a house. For Elijah, he “refuse[s] to pay rent” aside from what he gives to his brother. Elijah has a timeline for his life and he came home in his late 40s without a retirement plan due to his incarceration. He says:

“I don’t have the luxury to give nobody rent, see people give rent and then they elevate into a house. I missed the rent stage, so I have to buy a house. Build my wealth, pass it on, buy equity in the community. It’s mandatory for me.” – Elijah

In the meantime, Elijah continues to stay with his financially stable brother and pay him a small amount in rent. In the next few years Elijah will be a homeowner because of his hard work first and foremost, but family support has also been huge in helping him achieve his goals.

Family support can allow for folks to come home and not have to worry about putting a roof over their head or food on the table. Instead, these individuals can focus on processing their transition back into the community and getting their bearings. This facet of family support is huge for so many.

Emotional Support

“The biggest thing I needed was just support. And not so much a financial support, just emotional support, that everything is going to be alright and you can do it. You got this. So that for me, that was the biggest thing and I received that from my family and my friends. They stepped up and they pushed me and showed me that it can be done.” – Brian

While tangible support in the form of transportation, housing, finances, etc. was incredibly important to many of the participants, every single one mentioned how important
emotional support is during reentry. A number of the participants received this emotional support from family.

Andre described his family as “so large that it’s funny” and not just large but “a large family that is very close knit.” During Andre’s incarceration he would call into family gatherings whenever they happened. Andre, however, described being present in the flesh as way different than attending events over the phone. In some ways, his huge family could be overwhelming, but Andre also described a sense of normalcy and comfort family brought to him.

Andre is one of his grandmother’s oldest grandchildren and he describes himself as a sort of “self-appointed big brother to everybody that’s under [him].” This has always been Andre’s role in his family. He says the moment he was released, he “had to step right back into [his role] as if [he] never left.” Andre describes this experience as:

“Consistent, in some sense it provides normalcy that’s taken away from you when you’re away.

Placing me back into the space where I was essentially helped me.” – Andre

The acceptance he received from his family eased Andre and provided him a sense of comfort during his transition.

The emotional support that Hasan discussed receiving from his family was very different than Andre. Hasan expressed throughout the interview that he wanted to do more, that he was hungry to keep moving forward in life. For Hasan, he has a younger cousin who lives out in Delaware in a house with his wife. Hasan discussed how he looks up to his cousin and attempts to model his lifestyle. The emotional support Hasan receives from his cousin is helping him to plan for his future.
The participants in this study spent anywhere from 25 to 46 years incarcerated. Exiting prison to reenter in Philadelphia was a stark transition all at once. For Brian, Andre, and Hasan emotional support from family members has provided them a sense of normalcy or goals to strive for. Family support, however, can also come with challenges as many of the participants mentioned. This is an additional factor that folks have to navigate during reentry.

**Challenges**

Family support was a cornerstone of the majority of the participants’ reentry experiences. With family support, however, also came challenges for the reentrants. Like all relationships, close familial ties also came with times of loss and grief for several participants. Additionally, while family provided so much for the participants, family support also came with expectations. The expectation of Andre to regrip his eldest role was positive for him, however, family expectations can also add pressure on individuals returning.

**Loss**

A large challenge for the participants throughout their incarceration and reentry was the health and status of loved ones. All of the participants lost family members while they were inside. Dusty, Elijah, George, and Mr. Wright all lost parents while they were inside. Dusty, Mr. Wright, and Hasan all lost siblings. All of the participants lost people they loved immensely during their incarcerations. The experience of loss while inside was particularly challenging because of the spatial separation between the participants and their families.

Mr. Wright spoke of his worst year in prison:
“My worst year in the prison was 95. I lost my mother, I lost my sister, I lost my nephew, and I lost my sister’s husband. The counselor sent people to me, ‘go talk to Mr. Wright.’ Like I was a damn death counselor or something.” – Mr. Wright

Losing someone while incarcerated means you cannot attend their funeral and you cannot surround yourself with family and loved ones to mourn in community together. Multiple participants talked about times of grief as some of the hardest of their incarceration.

Loss while inside impacted the participants’ reentry. Not only are you entering a world that has aged thirty years, you might be entering back into a world without your mother or sibling. There is potentially a subsequent grief process that takes place during reentry. This was the case for Elijah. The day after Elijah came home, he found out that his grandmother had passed away the day he was released. Elijah’s goal was to make it home to see his grandmother before she passed, but this did not happen.

The week after Elijah came home, he “was in a funeral seeing [his] grandmother for the first time free in a casket.” According to Elijah he is not usually an emotional person but seeing his grandmother, he “lost it.” After reflecting, Elijah realized why it was so difficult for him.

“I was so emotional then because that was the first one I was able to grieve. And so I wound up grieving for all of them. Like I said I lost my mother, my father, my grandma, and a stepbrother all while incarcerated. So and you deal with it, certainly you suppress and deal with grieving in jail. I couldn’t go to those funerals. And so seeing her there, I just lost it and now I realize like, ‘yo, that’s for everybody.’” – Elijah

Individuals experiencing incarceration are deprived of the ability to fully grieve. For Elijah, this meant all of his grief hitting him at once at his grandmother’s funeral.
Andre also had an intense experience with his family right after he was released. The day Andre came home, his mother had a major heart attack. Andre is his mother’s only child and he found his mother “slouched over in bed” and immediately had to rush her to the hospital. This event completely changed the trajectory of Andre’s first few weeks of freedom. Andre spent his first three weeks outside of prison walls at the hospital every night with his mother.

This health scare forced Andre to immediately make his “needs whatever they may have been sort of secondary.” Thankfully Andre’s mother recovered. Instead of easing into his transition, Andre had to spring right into action for his mom. In reflection, however, Andre says this may have been positive because he didn’t have time to “stew in [his] juices.” Nonetheless, however, the event was certainly scary and altered the start of Andre’s reentry experience.

Expectations

A challenge related to family support that came up in almost every interview was expectations. I saw this phenomenon both in the internal pressure participants put on themselves and also external pressure derived from expectations of family members.

Hasan described internal pressures that he feels in relation to his family. Hasan expressed how he wants to be who he is, that he wants “to be free.” For him this means independence and demonstrating he can contribute. As a result, Hasan actually pays the phone bill for himself, his mother, and his father. He feels the need to give back to them for all the support they have offered him throughout his incarceration and reentry. At the same time, however, Hasan admits that he “need[s] that support [and] that support from family means a lot.” He discussed how this support at times was hard for him to accept because he is a grown man. Hasan’s internal dialogue about his situation that mixes dependence with independence definitely weighed on him. For
Hasan, however, one way he alleviates some pressure is by giving back to his family, a great example is his coverage of the phone bills.

Elijah also felt internalized pressure and expectations of himself. Elijah is the oldest of three brothers and they have always been best friends. Like Andre, Elijah is also the oldest grandchild and he grew up being the one that everyone looked up to. When Elijah came home, however, he was “in the position where [he] need[ed] all the help from everybody else. The dynamic shifted.” This reality was very difficult for Elijah. His brothers still tried to say he was the oldest, but Elijah didn’t feel it. In this way, he said the expectations were “unfortunately negative for [him].” Elijah describes himself as a go-getter and thus not being able to do everything independently and feeling the pressure of wanting to be his true self but not being able to was incredibly difficult for him. Fortunately, Elijah says that the longer he is out the more this feeling subsides. With time, Elijah has found more independence and has been able to fill that older sibling/cousin role more comfortably. While Elijah did have strong contact to and support from his family throughout incarceration, navigating renewed physical presence with family members is difficult after decades apart and takes time.

Not only do internal expectations play a role in reentry, but many participants discussed external pressure they felt from family member’s expectations. This particularly came into play for formerly condemned children. As Brian put it: “being a juvenile lifer, you are experiencing life for the first time as an adult.” Brian and Joseph both talked about people expecting them to do certain things because of their age but their life experiences had not allowed them to have the knowledge. One example many participants gave was credit. The expectation that as a middle-aged person the participants would understand how to build credit and handle finances
did not take into account that juvenile lifers had never done this before. Expectations such as financial ones from family demonstrated a disconnect between the returning family member and their loved ones.

Andre, on the other hand, who was the only participant who is not a formerly condemned child did not speak of issues such as navigating finances. Prior to his incarceration, Andre had rented his own apartment and owned a car. He had previously paid rent, paid car insurance, and handled his credit. These were experiences the formerly condemned children in this study had never had before their recent release. This reality of reentry in which reentrants are experiencing certain adulthood wrights of passages for the first time is unique to juvenile lifers because the last time they were on the streets they were still children. As children they did not pay bills, worry about medical insurance, or build their credit score. Despite not previously experiencing certain aspects of adulthood, however, the formerly condemned children in this study have taken these new situations in stride.

More generally, Andre discussed difficult expectations one experiences after spending an extended amount of time incarcerated. These sentiments were shared by the other participants of the study as they all served long prison terms. Andre described his frustration with familial expectations stating:

“They don’t understand that there’s just so much more to being away then just like, ‘okay, you were there now you’re here.’ There is a lot to unpack. Unless you’ve been inside a carceral space, unless you are at least open to trying to understand what it means for folks, then you be like, ‘okay, well you’re home now, so you’re cool.’ It’s frustrating in some sense because you
know that they probably can’t wrap their heads around what it is. And so it’s just like ‘ugh, whatever.’ I do more whatevers than trying to explain it.” – Andre

For many participants like Andre, family members have approached the participants reentry by associating freedom with a cure all. As a result, Andre and other participants have felt like their families really do not understand or are not trying to understand what they are going through.

One example Andre talked about was his family frequently asking him to take trips when at this moment he just wants to establish a work history. Andre explained that while family might have positive intentions, their lack of understanding of his experience led to frustration for both parties. Andre saying no to a trip frustrates his family, while his family continuing to ask frustrates Andre. For families and returning loved ones, reentry is a period of reacquainting to one another. This refamiliarization while it is positive in so many ways, can lead to challenges when expectations are not the same from both sides. This is particularly salient when it comes to the participants in this study who all spent decades disappeared from society. For the respondents who were formerly condemned as children this frustration also stemmed from the reality that the last time they were in their loved ones’ lives they were kids and now they are grown adults with much different needs.

**Relationship Support**

The most common form of support the participants mentioned was familial support. Support for several participants, however, also came from relationships external to their family. For some participants friends really showed up to support them during their transition. A number of participants had significant others who provided ample support. Particularly for Joseph and
George, who do not have strong family connections in the area, significant others have filled in as major support systems.

*Friendships*

One source of support external to family support that individuals discussed was the support they received from friends. In some participants’ experience, friends filled vacancies of support and also provided different kinds of care. Participants discussed how having support from different sources helped alleviate some of the internal pressure they felt when it came to relying too heavily upon family.

One participant who discussed the support of friends was Andre. Andre is the oldest of his generation in his family and re-established his eldest role right when he came home. When Andre’s mom experienced a heart attack, however, he could not work for the first few weeks of his freedom. As Andre explained it, his “friends carried [him] through that period money-wise.” For Andre, this meant he did not need to turn to family for this support. While he has strong family backing, he has been fortunate to not have to financially rely on family members because of the support he has received from friends. Elijah who is also the eldest of his generation described an internal tension he felt because he had to rely on his family for things. Andre’s friends allowed him to avoid this situation.

When analyzing the differences between Andre and Elijah and their reliance on friends versus family financially it is important to distinguish that Andre is the one participant who is not a formerly condemned child. Andre was living on his own before he was incarcerated and maintains friendships he formed in adulthood on the streets. The other participants in the study were never adults on the streets until their recent release. Andre was the only person who spoke
of a friend from his former life supporting him money-wise. While others spoke of support from friends many spoke of friends they formed throughout incarceration and not friends they had maintained throughout the years. This was an area in this study in which Andre and the other respondents, who were former juvenile lifers, diverged.

While Andre was the only person to discuss financial support from friends Dusty and Hasan both talked about how friends supported them in their job searches. Dusty had “friends that was supportive in figuring out what [he] wanted to do.” His friends were patient with him but eventually, when Dusty was ready, connected him to a youth center and “hooked up an interview and [he’s] been there ever since.” This connection set Dusty up with a job he really enjoys.

Similarly, a friend helped Hasan find a job right when he got home. Hasan came home on a Thursday and started working the Monday after at a construction company his friend had a connection to. While it was not Hasan’s dream job it paid the bills until he figured out his next move. The support of his friend helped him begin to gain independence and make a living for himself as soon as he got home. Independence is incredibly important to Hasan and getting a job quickly after coming home helped him begin to establish self-reliance.

Friends can be a huge resource to individuals when they come home. Whether the friends were from before, during, or after incarceration, many participants discussed the relentless support they received from their friendships.

Partnerships

In addition to the support of friendships, six out of the nine participants mentioned having significant others. For multiple participants, the support of their partner has been crucial during
their reentry experience. For example, Hasan has relied on his partner for emotional support he might not receive from others. In particular, partner support has been incredibly important to Joseph and George. Neither Joseph nor George have family support in Philadelphia like the other participants. Joseph and George, however, have found support systems through their partners.

Hasan mentioned having strong family support but also felt a great deal of pressure to not rely on his family too heavily. He mentioned not wanting to come off weak to his family members because it is so important to him that they see a new, changed man. Hasan talked about how this pressure can be exhausting because he might not be as open with his family about his emotions as he could be. Hasan, however, has turned to his girlfriend when he does not feel comfortable turning towards his family.

Hasan characterized his partner as “amazing” and becoming “like family” to him. At the time of our interview, Hasan was happy with the work he was doing but he hinted at the fact that he was not satisfied, that he felt like he could be doing more. Around the time of our interview, Hasan expressed these feelings of dissatisfaction to his partner. His girlfriend responded right away and asked him “where do you want to be?” Hasan reflected on this and just knew he had more to offer.

Eventually, Hasan and his partner came up with the idea of writing a book about his experiences. Hasan’s girlfriend provided him with the emotional support when he needed it while also being a positive influence in the sense that they put his dissatisfaction into action. This encouragement has helped Hasan realize he is capable of more and that he has his partner to help him achieve things he did not think he originally could.
Joseph and George, unlike the other seven participants, did not have strong family support in Philadelphia. In Joseph’s case, the majority of his family is in South Carolina. Since his release, Joseph has visited his family, but he continues to live in PA. Thus, for Joseph the support of his partner has been incredibly important. Joseph has known his wife since they were kids and grew up around her family. As a result, Joseph says: “most of the family [he] deals with is really [his] wife’s side of the family, her family. They basically raised [him], so [he has] a lot of family support.” While Joseph’s family is not in state, his wife’s family has stepped up and provided him the support he needs.

Although Joseph might not have his family in the area, he does have family support from afar and support in Philly from his wife’s relatives. George, on the other hand, does not have family support. During his incarceration, George’s mother passed away and after that he lost contact with his family. Since his release George reached out to his family and they know he’s out. George says, however, “they know that [he’s] out but as far as them doing anything, [he hasn’t] seen none of them since [he’s] been out. [He] talked to them and that was about it.” Subsequently, George discussed reaching out to his family about spending time with them during the holidays:

“I was planning on, I was trying to get in touch with my brother. We was going to go there maybe like Christmas Eve for a few hours. But I left a message and they didn’t get back with me, so I ain’t gonna lose no sleep over it.” – George

When George explained this to me, he sounded sincere that he was not going to let his lack of family support bother him. Part of the reason for George’s confidence is the tremendous amount of support his girlfriend offers him. George said:
“I just don’t even worry about it. I don’t think about it. I’m making her my family.” – George

George met his girlfriend, Regina, soon after his release. Regina volunteered at the reentry organization that supported George when he came home. She has been a great source of support and joy for George. Regina actually sat in on my interview with George and they talked about the support she gave him. She was set on making George’s first year a great one, which included taking him to the zoo for the first time and taking him Christmas shopping for presents and a tree, also things he had not done before. When George talked about Regina, his eyes lit up and he even said as he looked at Regina smittenly:

“It’s new because I’m learning. And I never been in love before so it’s something new to me.

She’s going to teach me.” – George

A major area of support that Regina provides George is emotional care. She brings him to her home on the days he is allowed out of the halfway house and they just hang out. George mentioned that when he is stressed the first person he calls is Regina. He said: “I just call her and talk to her and she just talks to me and makes me relax and say, ‘everything’s going to be alright.’” For George, it was obvious on his face how much Regina’s support meant to him. While he may not have that family support, he made it clear that he has all the support he needs.

Challenges

While friendship and romantic partnerships have been a great source of support for several of the participants, some also spoke of the challenges this source of support can provide. Of all the participants, none returned to the neighborhood they lived in before incarceration. Hasan, however, still visits his neighborhood frequently and has an intense emotional connection to his community there. While the love of his relationships and friendships in his community are
strong, he has faced challenges when it comes to what is expected of him. In a similar vein, Mr. Wright spoke of his fiancé and their engagement and the love it provided but also how it causes him stress.

Expectations

Hasan has a very powerful connection to the neighborhood he grew up in and he still remains friends with many of the individuals he grew up with. For Hasan, however, he does not see his community as a place where he can thrive as he says it “only breeds bad.” Hasan discussed negative expectations folks he was close to in his neighborhood had for him. When he first came home, Hasan said:

“Everybody expected me to come home and solve all of their problems. Not in a good way. In a bad way. ‘My cousin coming home. Yeah. Yeah. Y’all know who he is. Yeah.’ – Hasan

When Hasan came home, however, he no longer wanted to “be known as this dangerous guy.” He wanted to be known for the positivity he exudes. Over the first month when Hasan was working full time and showing up in cars he had bought as a result, his friends and peers in the neighborhood noticed. They noticed that he was successful by working hard. Since then, Hasan has become a role model for the younger individuals in his community. I saw this firsthand as we were walking through his old neighborhood during our interview. Hasan was known by everyone we walked by and at one point he stopped to talk with a man in his 20s. Hasan asked him if he was currently using or selling drugs and also gave him a referral for a job opportunity. The young man walked away grateful and the respect he had for Hasan was obvious.

Since coming home, Hasan has been working and building wealth for himself. He has not been involved in the street life he was in before. While Hasan is proud of his accomplishments
and the role model he has become, he has also received pushback from some old friends in his neighborhood. When he declined to engage in drinking or smoking, a friend retorted “You think you're better than me. You think you’re better than us.” Hasan said this “hurt his heart” because he wants to be an example but for him even trying to do the right thing, some friends have responded negatively. At this point, Hasan felt like his friend was “putting the whole neighborhood on [his] back” and he felt tested and angry. Hasan has had to learn to let remarks such as this go because he knows who he truly is.

Despite some friends criticizing Hasan for his new way of life, some have also begun to rely on him too much. Hasan remarked:

“There’s a downside because now everybody thinks I’m doing so well. Now they come to me and ask me for money. It’s like you should give me two years before you even ask me for anything.” – Hasan

Hasan had only been home seven months and he has been doing incredibly well for himself. This has come not only with pressure to revert back to his old behavior from some, but also pressure to provide for others. Hasan emphasized that right now he is trying to focus on himself and build. These expectations and pressures have been difficult for him to navigate. Despite this, however, all of the positive influences in Hasan’s life, his mindset, and his work-ethic have allowed him to continue to succeed in reentry. For Hasan, succeeding is fulfilling his goals and his financial independence and he is on track for this.

In addition to George, Hasan, and Joseph, Mr. Wright also talked about his experience with relationships. Mr. Wright is currently engaged to his childhood sweetheart and says that he is “having a blast” with her. He did, however, open up about the impact of his sentence when it
comes to romantic connection. Mr. Wright said that he “didn’t date too much” when he was released, and he was only 16 when he went to prison. As a result, Mr. Wright felt inexperienced and unsure if he was truly ready to commit because he just wanted it “to be right.”

Mr. Wright’s fiancé expects him to be ready to make this next step when he is still getting used to life on the outside and more specifically being in a committed relationship. While Mr. Wright did have worries, he also got excited talking about the shared home he would have with his fiancé and his eventual wedding. He was incarcerated for 36 years and out of the dating scene for a long time. It was obvious he loved his fiancé, but his lack of experience made him, at times, feel pressure to commit.

Joseph also mentioned small obstacles he had to overcome in his relationship with his wife of eight years. Like the other formerly condemned children in this study, Joseph was off the streets for all of his twenties and thirties and thus was not able to date in the traditional way. He opened up about the impact this has had on his marriage:

“In relationships for example at times I revert back to 17 years old again. We might get into an argument, I shut down, I don’t want to talk no more. So at times where I become 17 again, my wife is like, you can’t just shut down like that, you gotta talk through this. So it’s going through growing pains in the relationship, you have to deal with it. Because dealing with women is different than it was when you were 17...You’re dealing with girls compared to you’re dealing with women now. Even though we’ve grown, relationship wise, we’re still that teenager. So it was knowing that and accepting it like there’s a lot of things in relationships we have to learn... Like we know how to be men inside the prison not to be men outside of the prison.” – Joseph
Joseph was incarcerated for almost 27 years in an all-male prison. Dealing with women, despite being married while inside, is a new experience for him. He has had to learn about dealing with conflict in his relationship. While Joseph did experience “growing pains” in his relationship, he had only been out for seven months and had already begun to adjust and better understand his partner. Relationships have been a huge source of support for many participants, but they have also come with their fair share of expectations and adjustments.

Organizational Support

The two sources of support the participants spoke of the most were family and other loved ones (friends and significant others). Participants, however, also mentioned more formal forms of support they received through organizations. Two commonly mentioned sources of support were: reentry organizations and parole.

Reentry Organizations

One source of support several participants spoke of was assistance they received from reentry organizations. The two individuals who spoke of the positive impact reentry organizations had on their reentry experience were George and Mr. Wright.

George did not come home to a network of support from loved ones like the other participants did. George did not grow up in Philly and knew few people when he was first released. One of the first things George did, however, was reach out to a reentry organization. He mentioned the organization as a huge reason for why he was not worried about lacking family support. George described the support he received from the organization below:

“I have my counselor at the center and the director at the center, if I have any type of problems, can’t deal with something, I just go to them and they help me.” – George
For George, the reentry organization he works with has been central to his experience. He met his girlfriend, Regina, there and says despite not having support from his family he is “making [Regina] and the other staff members at the center [his] family.” When George needs emotional support or life advice, he has found refuge at the reentry organization he works with.

Mr. Wright also spoke about reentry organizations and their impact on his reintegration experience. When Mr. Wright first came home, he linked up with a reentry service that connected him to his first job which he loved. He spoke of the organization as being “dynamite for [juvenile lifers]” and really offering services that helped him get on his feet.

While George and Mr. Wright spoke of reentry organizations in specific easing their transition home, Elijah, Chris, Brian, and Joseph all work in reentry. They have been crucial in the transition for other reentrants who lacked the strong family or relationship support they had when they came home. Support does not only come from close loved ones but also from organizations that focus on assisting individuals with their transitions from incarceration.

**Parole**

“Everything through this process it seems parole has taken an open stance that supports juvenile lifers and [has] been affording us the best opportunity to succeed. I don’t know there might be horror stories out there, but for the most part, the ones I’ve encountered and talked to all parole agents have been very helpful. I’ve had two parole agents that if I don’t call them, they don’t call me.” – Elijah

Each former juvenile lifer that I interviewed was resentenced to release from prison but given a lifelong parole tail. This means each participant is required to check in with a parole officer and comply with parole guidelines. What the participants spoke on, however, was the
unique approach the Pennsylvania parole system has taken when it comes to formerly
condemned children.

Philadelphia is aware that it is “ground zero” for juvenile lifer reentry and that the rest of
the country is watching. In the era of mass incarceration, parole has increasingly become a
surveillance apparatus used to “control and capture” formerly incarcerated individuals and send
them back to prison on technical parole violations. As a result of the microscope on Philadelphia
when it comes to juvenile lifers, however, many of the participants spoke about leeway they
were given with parole and that they actually had positive experiences with their parole agents.
Joseph reflected:

“For the most part, the regular guys on parole that’s not juvenile lifers, a lot of them get more not
harsh treatment, but they’re more on top of them. They got to see them maybe twice a month,
three times a month. But I think for the most part, like [juvenile lifers] that came home, we did an extended amount of time in prison and are more relaxed, so they kind of give us a little more
leeway for travel and stuff like that to do different things.” – Joseph

Similar to Joseph’s sentiments, other participants mentioned that parole has been easy for them
because their parole agents have stayed out of the way. Parole let the participants breathe and has
not been surveilling them as they typically would other reentrants. This freedom to live life the
way they want to has been a huge modem of support for several participants. They do not have to
worry about clearing their schedule for constant parole check ins, instead they can call their
parole officers when they need to.

Despite a more “relaxed” parole structure for formerly condemned children, using the
traditional recidivism lens, juvenile lifers have been incredibly “successful.” Out of the 174
formerly condemned children released to Philadelphia, only two individuals recidivated and none for another murder (Daftary-Kapur and Zottoli 2020, 2). Parole is supposedly the state’s apparatus to help limit recidivism, yet in parole taking a step back and allowing juvenile lifers to live their lives, they have thrived. Thus, I mention parole as a source of organizational support because for the participants, parole’s optimistic stance towards juvenile lifers and resultant step back has helped ease their transition home.

**Conclusion**

A huge part of each participants’ reentry experience was the support they received. As is evident in this chapter, support comes from many different sources and takes on many different forms. The most common sources of support participants talked about were support from family and support from other loved ones. Several other participants spoke on organizational support they received from reentry organizations or parole itself.

Support for some participants meant moving in with a loved one and avoiding having to stay in a halfway house. Others received strong emotional support from loved ones or organizations. What was evident throughout the conversations I had with participants about support, however, is that it is incredibly complicated. As Andre touched upon, release from incarceration is not a cure all. The participants in this study were all incarcerated for decades and all but Andre left the outside world when they were teenagers. The long gap in coexistence for the participants and their loved ones was a source of contention and disconnect in certain situations.

Not only did support come with some misunderstandings, however, interpersonal relationships are complicated in other facets as well. Elijah and Andre both experienced difficult
situations when they first came home, Elijah’s grandmother passed away and Andre’s mother became sick. These were life events you cannot prepare for. Other participants faced expectations from their sources of support that did not match the expectations they had for themselves. Reentry is a very unique experience for those reintegrating, however, for their sources of support, who were not disappeared from society for decades, life is continuing as it always has.

Support is many things, but one thing it definitely is, is complex. Figuring out how to reweave ones’ life with loved ones after decades comes with its ups and downs particularly for formerly condemned children. This chapter looked at the impact of support on the reentry experiences of formerly condemned children. By looking through this lens, however, the chapter also touched upon how reentry is shaped not only by pre-release – for example, institutional context as discussed in Chapter 3 – but also by factors reentrants are met with once they leave prison. Support is a huge facet of the post-incarceration aspects of reentry and navigating support and relationships was important for each participant when coming home.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

Findings

Current Reentry Research

This thesis seeks to highlight the unique experience of formerly condemned children reentering to Philadelphia. While there is plenty of research on reentry, I attempted to highlight different aspects of this field. Typically, reentry research focuses on the “average” reentrant: an individual in their 30s returning to society after a few years inside. This research is informative and helpful in highlighting typical aspects of reentry that are important to focus on: economic, support, and residential aspects. At the same time, however, the “average” reentrant cannot encapsulate everyone’s experience.

In my research, I used reentry literature to inform how I might format interview questions while also attempting to allow the participants to express what their individual reentry needs and experiences were. Each reentrant did talk about the basic needs mentioned in the reentry literature (economic, support, and residential aspects), but their accounts also illustrated many other facets of their experiences.

The majority of reentry works I studied solely discussed reentry as an experience confined to after incarceration. This research, however, demonstrates that reentry starts the day of incarceration. The institutional context of one’s carceral experience is crucial to setting up the foundation of their reentry process. Within Pennsylvania, different institutions offered varying amounts and types of programs for the participants. This meant that some reentered with college degrees and connections to outside organizations and potential employers, while others were
only able to obtain a GED. This was a crucial part of reentry that the literature did not touch upon.

This thesis is purely a qualitative project whereas many reentry studies incorporate a quantitative element. This inclusion, however, has created a very narrow scope for reentry studies where recidivism rates are the most important lens to understand reintegration. While there are benefits to studying and understanding recidivism, reentry is so much more than this attribute. If you only look at recidivism rates when studying reentry, it is easy to miss the human aspects and complexities that comprise this process. In this thesis, I did not look at recidivism. Instead, I focused on the challenges and successes participants experienced in their reentry.

By focusing on a holistic perspective of reentry I was able to examine aspects not typically reported on. For example, the difference institutional context has on reentry. Additionally, I saw a pattern of complicated relationships reentrants have with support. While support was central to each participants’ experience, support also frequently came with pressure and expectations. The discussion of challenges regarding support highlight the complex emotions that come with leaving prison after decades and reentering society.

Unique to Juvenile Lifers

“What was important to me was to know that the juvenile lifer title is not really applicable because I'm a grown man. And so when you categorize under that juvenile lifer category, you automatically subconsciously associate things that a juvenile would need. The way you deal with a juvenile or treat a juvenile. So that was my whole awkward, ‘I am not a juvenile, I'm a grown man.’” – Elijah
This thesis interrogates reentry and the nuances of this experience while highlighting the reentry experiences of a new population. There are reentry studies that focus on lifers and reentry studies that focus on juveniles, however, this study focuses on the reentry processes of formerly condemned children. These folks were told as teens they would never leave prison. The majority had never had a job or lived outside of their family’s home before incarceration. These individuals, however, as Elijah emphasized are grown adults.

The formerly condemned children in this study were experiencing adulthood on the streets for the first time which was accompanied by its own set of challenges. One example that was already discussed was the tendency for the participants to have to prove to their loved ones that they no longer were the teenager that left. They had grown up decades. Many were leaders of programs inside or held jobs for years. While they had not been men on the streets, they had become men while incarcerated.

Despite being adults, however, formerly condemned children faced challenges that other reentrants usually do not encounter. Reentry studies regarding lifers do take into account that the outside world has changed immensely during the decades folks were inside. One thing that traditional lifers have experienced, however, is adulthood on the streets. They most likely have paid bills, lived outside of their family’s home, or held a job. Andre spoke about having these previous experiences and feeling comfort that he was at least familiar with the processes. For all of the participants’ who were formerly condemned children, however, all of these experiences would be new.

Unlike other lifers, this is an added layer to the reentry of individuals impacted by Montgomery v Louisiana. What I heard over and over again, however, is that these new
experiences have been taken in stride by the participants. Despite a previous lack of experience, they were ready and willing to engage in these situations. Mr. Wright spoke of not being able to wait to pay his first bill. He said sarcastically that now after three years outside he does not like paying bills as much, but more seriously that despite not doing it before, it was something he was eager to do. As Chris said:

“It’s been a learning curve, but it’s a learning curve that I have welcomed. I welcomed that opportunity.” – Chris

While formerly condemned children face the most challenges to reentry on paper as they are experiencing adulthood for the first time outside of prison, this population has overwhelmingly thrived upon release. Despite originally being told they were incapable of rehabilitation and would therefore die in prison, juvenile lifers have time and time again proved the logic behind their sentences is groundless and inhumane. Formerly condemned children have thrived outside prison walls and also shown a dedication to positively impacting their communities.

*Community Changers*

“Just because I’m home, home itself is not the goal. I mean, you get home, but you get home to do a thing, you didn’t just get home to come home. I want to shed light on what we could be doing, how are we doing it different to help people who don’t have connections.” – Andre

Not only have formerly condemned children taken reentry in stride given the unique positionality they are in, but they have also demonstrated a dedication to bettering their communities. Each person I interviewed talked about wanting to give back. Six out of the nine
participants work in criminal justice reform and the other three participants partake in advocacy outside of work.

Chris, Elijah, Brian, and Joseph all work in reentry assisting individuals like themselves as they transition from incarceration back to Philadelphia, Andre works in political education surrounding mass incarceration, and Dusty works at a center supporting Philadelphia youth. While Hasan, Mr. Wright, and George do not have jobs related to criminal justice reform I saw Hasan give advice to kids in his old neighborhood during our interview, George is a role model to the younger guys at his halfway house, and Mr. Wright has lobbied policy makers for sentencing reform on multiple occasions. Each participant has a clear goal in mind: to enjoy life but never stop fighting for change to the system.

In order to continue fighting the system, multiple participants who are employed in advocacy work have second jobs to keep themselves stable financially. Despite this reality, when I asked Joseph if he plans on continuing to work in this field, he responded:

“Always. Always. I was just back in South Philly yesterday. So the thing is, I can’t walk away from this. There's guys in that joint that’s more qualified to go home than I am. Yet they’re still there. I always tell people that we’re not the exception.” – Joseph

More specifically, all eight of the participants who were condemned children spoke about wanting to get involved with youth. Andre, the one participant who is not a formerly condemned child, also spoke of continuing his involvement from a policy position but did not speak directly about working with youth. When I asked the participants about their motives for wanting to work with younger populations, Chris’s response to the question summed up the feelings multiple participants had:
“My goal is to go back to school and get my social workers. I think I would love to probably do a little bit more interaction with young people. Cause I think about what my experience was as a young person trying to navigate decisions that can be clouded sometimes because most children go through peer pressure and all that stuff anyway, but it becomes even more burdensome when you have to deal with all of the conditions a lot of young people have to deal with in inner cities. So you topple the natural adolescence with all the other stuff on top of that. And so I’ve been fortunate to be able to survive that experience, so how do I be able to lend my experience to them?”

The participants in this study were each sentenced to lengthy prison terms by the system. They were each taken out of society for a minimum of 25 years. Yet each participant did not once mention turning their back on those subject to the conditions they went through. In fact, many expressed that their experiences made them desire to be even stronger advocates. Particularly because they were incarcerated as teenagers, many expressed wanting to change this trajectory for other kids. People who were originally cast as irredeemable, “super-predators” are the ones fighting for their communities.

The reality for the majority of the participants is that they did not start advocating for positive change when they came home, they started doing so while they were still incarcerated. Each participant spoke of a moment in their incarceration where they transformed their mindset and began to partake in programming to better themselves and others. For many, this transformation happened early on ranging from the day they entered the carceral system to about 10 years into their incarceration. Each transformation came from within the individual, from
their own initiative, not because of actions of the state. Despite this, however, each participant spent a minimum of 25 years inside prison walls.

This reality causes one to wonder what impact folks could have on their communities if they were given the tools to transform their thinking within society, instead of having to undergo the trauma of the carceral system. It causes one to question the validity of incarcerating these individuals in the first place, as children, when clearly they were not irredeemable and in fact when given the opportunity for redemption, they have only exuded positivity. The participants have demonstrated their humanity and in turn illustrated the unethical and illogical nature of our current carceral system.

**Reflections on Reentry**

The scope of this thesis was relatively narrow as I focused on the reentry experiences of a very specific population: formerly condemned children. Focusing on this population, however, has highlighted many important considerations we need to be making in reentry. On paper, the population in this study had a uniquely difficult reentry experience. Formerly condemned children were last free as teenagers and the world has changed incredibly in the last 20, 30, 40 years. As Philadelphia is “ground-zero” for juvenile lifer reentry, all eyes were on formerly condemned children during their reintegration because they were the test to see if this population could truly reincorporate into society.

What this population has shown us, however, is unprecedented “success” in reentry. Out of over 200 formerly condemned children released in Pennsylvania, only two returned to prison and none returned for another homicide. While this recidivism statistic is powerful, this thesis has also demonstrated that these individuals have been role models and trail blazers in furthering
criminal justice reform and reentry services. A lot can be learned about reentry from the experiences of formerly condemned children.

*Preparation is Key*

One thing that was reiterated by the majority of participants was the importance of being prepared to come home. As Brian stated, “being ready mentally is the key. That’s the key because the other things can come. If you have the mental stability to keep fighting your way through it and working, continue to work hard, you can get it.” This for Brian, along with other participants was the most important thing.

Many spoke of how many individuals come out of prison with a defeated mindset. As Chris stated this is potentially particularly applicable to condemned children because they were faced with a “long term death.” He posed the question:

“How do you create meaning when you’re told that you’re never going to get out of prison?” – Chris

One aspect of preparation that the participants spoke of was being ready to take on the streets, the need to shed any defeated mindset and take things in stride. Andre mentioned that the world is not always open to welcoming formerly incarcerated individuals home. Jobs may discriminate, individuals may discriminate, so a prepared, fighting mindset is particularly important. Until society embraces concepts such as redemption and healing, formerly incarcerated individuals will continue to confront prejudice and be forced to fight for their humanity.

Additionally, folks mentioned preparation as having a plan for coming out. Many participants who were at Pike or Scottsville had access to programming that helped create this plan. Whether this took form in educational degrees or contact with outside organizations this
gave folks an ability to concretely line up jobs with contacts they had on the outside. The participants who spent time upstate did not have these same connections during their reentry experiences and thus did not come home to jobs or professional networks like several participants from Pike or Scottsville did. Even though all prisons are inhumane, inequity within the prison system itself does exist and influences reentry.

Formerly condemned children were also in a unique position because after the Montgomery v Louisiana decision there was a big push to “prepare” folks. Brian mentioned that:

“The state started putting in all kinds of things that allowed us to do programs that we couldn’t get in previously. Now we were able to get in these programs and they actually put us ahead of other people that were on that list, specifically juvenile lifers. So other lifers through that point still had problems getting into these groups.” – Brian

As a result of the push for programming, formerly condemned children were able to further prepare themselves for reentry. Despite the extra push for programming, however, George still said it was not helpful. He said he was given a phone to experiment on but that it was nothing like the phones he saw when he got outside. In this way, the preparation for reentry really falls onto the shoulders of the individual as the state is usually more of a hindrance than a help (i.e. denying programming to lifers, enacting harsh parole restrictions, etc.). George relates this to the fact that, “it’s easy to get inside those prisons, but it’s hard to get out.” All of the successes the participants in this study have had has come from their own will power, their own preparation, and their own actions when they came home.

I would like to take the time to mention that the crucial opportunity to participate in programming while inside is still not awarded to other lifers in Pennsylvania. The state continues
to see investing in lifers as a waste of time and thus limits program options, making preparing for potential release even harder. The reentry experiences of formerly condemned children prove the ill-logic behind life sentences and the capacity of individuals for rehabilitation. Juvenile lifers were depicted as “the worst of the worst” and yet they have grown into beloved members of their communities. Denying programming to lifers stems from a false premise of human irredeemability and only hinders our potential for collective healing and growth.

The Importance of Specificity

“And one part of my work as a reentry coordinator is to recognize that there’s no cookie cutter idea in terms of how everyone comes home. Yes, there’s some essential things that people need in terms of identified basics, these things are essential, but everyone’s challenges are different. Some people came out and had children and that takes on a life of its own. And so everyone’s a little different.” – Chris

Preparation is incredibly important to coming home, but participants also emphasized the importance of individualizing reentry. As Chris states, no two reentrants are the same. When starting this project, I did not realize how vastly different each person’s experience would be. Some folks came home to jobs waiting for them, some came home to family support, some came home to children they had not been able to raise; overall everyone had an entirely different story.

Despite having different stories, however, everyone mentioned how reentry programs traditionally put people in boxes. Brian said that “in a lot of situations that [he’s] seen on this side people tend to tell you what you need instead of asking what you need.” This goes back to Elijah’s point that while this population is referred to as “juvenile lifers” they are not children. While formerly condemned children were forced into dependency by the system during
incarceration, they are fully capable, independent adults. This lack of understanding and resulting infantilization in reentry can more often than not be more harmful than helpful. Brian also works in reentry and said many times he had seen a one-size fits all reentry model used and seen that it “make[s individuals] frustrated” to the point where it “can actually send you backwards instead of propelling you forward.”

Every reentrant, including every formerly condemned child, is different. They all have different lived experiences, needs, and wants. Thus, while this thesis attempts to understand the reentry experiences of juvenile lifers in Philly, that task is actually impossible and in some ways harmful. Generalizations have been made about folks who have experienced incarceration and particularly about formerly condemned children. The participants were once referred to as “super predators,” a stereotype that fueled the creation of the largest prison industrial complex in history. As a result, while this thesis does touch general themes seen in the reentry of juvenile lifers in Philadelphia, what it does more so is share the experiences of Hasan, Mr. Wright, Joseph, Elijah, Andre, Dusty, George, Chris, and Brian.

*The Importance of Programs Run by People with Lived Experience*

The people who recognize the importance of preparedness for and individualization of reentry are those with lived experience of incarceration like Elijah, Brian, Dusty, Hasan, George, Mr. Wright, Joseph, Andre, and Chris. In fact, I argue that these people are the only ones who can truly understand the importance of these factors, and more generally are the only people who know how to approach reentry. Time and time again the participants mentioned this fact: reentry programs should be run by formerly incarcerated individuals.
Currently, Philadelphia is a reentry hub having recently appointed a reentry specialist to focus on and coordinate reentry resources in the city. This is a huge step. This step, however, will only be successful if folks with lived experience are involved. Despite their intentions, multiple participants spoke of the shortfalls of these programs.

Mr. Wright, who was one of the first individuals to come home in Pennsylvania after the Montgomery v Louisiana decision spoke about a performative aspect of Philly’s reentry initiative. He stated:

“It was some people that we ran into and right from the door we knew we was being used. Us as juvenile lifers. Getting on that platform. Like, this is the hottest commodity right here: reentry with them.” – Mr. Wright

After the Supreme Court decision, money was thrown towards reentry for juvenile lifers. Yet, as Mr. Wright testifies, many organizations took this money and continued to offer subpar services. Joseph corroborated this when he spoke about different reentry services in Philly:

“Most reentry programs in the city, they say they got these services offered to you. They really don’t give them to you though. They don’t mentor. They do BS housing. I got one guy that went to another agency for housing. They put him in a basement that was like rats running around. It was crazy. Like this was the house you were at?” – Joseph

Additionally, participants discussed that because there is a lack of understanding of incarceration in reentry services, mental health has been continuously overlooked. There is a level of trauma that comes from incarceration and the readjustment afterwards is not necessarily easy. For example, each participant discussed anxiety in large crowds and as Chapter 4 discusses, reconnecting with individuals during reentry comes with its own challenges.
Hasan mentioned how at certain points he felt “depressed” or “like [he] was going crazy.” These emotions were compounded by the fact that Hasan “didn’t want to talk to [his] family” for fear of making himself “look weak.” He said at times he “needed somebody to talk to really, really bad” but did not have anyone. Hasan recognized this, however, and took initiative to talk to his parole officer about mental health resources. His parole officer referred him to a service, but when he got there, he was told it would cost $75. Hasan left frustrated without receiving assistance. For many reentrants this cost is not an option and folks are left to handle their mental health – during this intense transition – by themselves.

This disconnect demonstrates the lack of understanding reentry services have. Mr. Wright, who does not work in reentry, described reentry as consisting of “jobs, housing and wellbeing.” While this was a simplified explanation, one of the three aspects of reentry that Mr. Wright made sure to include was wellbeing. The mental health reality of reentry is a large reason why support is so important. It is an aspect, however, that is not taken seriously by individuals who have not experienced incarceration. Current reentry services lack a trauma informed lens that assists individuals cope with incarceration and their subsequent transition. While reentry organizations focus on the bare minimum to ensure that folks survive their transition back to society, folks with lived experience are asking questions such as “how do we help [juvenile lifers] to prosper?” The only people who truly know and are invested in this answer are those who have been through reentry and prospered themselves.

This project has shed light on aspects of reentry that are not normally discussed and demonstrated how current reentry initiatives are failing. When reintegration services inquire

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6 Interview with Chris.
about and subsequently address the needs of reentrants instead of assuming such needs, returning citizens consistently thrive. Elijah, Brian, Chris, and Joseph have all seen how a trauma informed, lived experience centered reentry model can be successful, as they implement this daily in their own work. In the US, 700,000 individuals reenter society after incarceration each year. If we listen to the testimonials of individuals with lived experience, such as the participants of this study, more reentrants will be given the opportunity to thrive.

**Reflections on Mass Incarceration**

“The most difficult and urgent challenge today is that of creatively exploring new terrains of justice, where the prison no longer serves as our major anchor.” – Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*

One story that stands out to me when I reflect on mass incarceration in the US is one that was told to me by someone who originally supported the existence of prisons until the criminal legal system went after their brother. This person found themselves and their family pooling together as much money as they possibly could for a lawyer to keep their brother out of jail. They then found themselves reflecting. They asked themselves: “if prisons worked as an institution, why am I spending so much money to make sure my loved one does not get sent to one?”

This story has stuck with me ever since. There are many cases for abolition, some that I will discuss here, however, I always find myself coming back to the premise of this story. I realize that no matter what one of my loved ones did, I would do all that I could to keep them out of prison. I would do this because I know that prisons do not solve society’s problems, but instead only exacerbate them.
**Experiences of Youth Targeted by the Prison Industrial Complex**

“Many people in black, Latino, and Native American communities now have a far greater chance of going to prison than of getting a decent education” – Angela Davis

Each of the individuals in this study grew up in low-income, communities of color. I asked the participants about what goals they had growing up and continuously received answers similar to Elijah’s below:

“Aspirations growing up I really didn’t have any to be honest. I just wanted to survive and that’s common where I come from. If I survive, I’ll figure out later how to succeed.” – Elijah

Mr. Wright shared similar sentiments when he told his mother as a teenager that he either would end up in prison or dead. When he got to prison at the age of 16, Mr. Wright was illiterate.

Continuously in low-income communities, funding is taken out of education and invested in the criminalization of residents. Schools place a greater value on discipline than they do on learning and cultivating a safe environment for students. This phenomenon has been described as the youth control complex: “a system in which schools, police, probation officers, families, community centers, the media, business, and other institutions systematically treat young people’s everyday behaviors as criminal activity” (Fader 2013, 25). The lack of aspirations the participants of this study had as children demonstrate the effect of the youth control complex on their childhoods.

The individuals in this study were incarcerated when youth of color were widely described as “super predators” that could never be rehabilitated. They were sent to schools where they were most likely also given this message in the classroom. While this study is related to reentry, it is important to examine the reasons for incarceration in the first place. Reentry only
exists because of the creation and proliferation of criminalizing black and brown individuals, including children.

It is important to ask the following questions: “what if these kids were given what they needed? What if instead of investing in their criminalization, we invested in their education and well being?” The cycle of incarceration continues in part because of the devaluation of children of color in inner-city communities. Each formerly condemned child in this study was devalued as a teenager by a system that gave up on their potential. If we interrupt this cycle, we allow kids like the children Elijah, Joseph, Brian, Hasan, Chris, George, Mr. Wright, and Dusty used to be to reach their full potentials without undergoing the trauma of the carceral state.

Community Impact

“We’ve institutionalized policies that reduce people to their worst acts and permanently label them ‘criminal,’ ‘murderer,’ ‘rapist,’ ‘thief,’ ‘drug dealer,’ ‘sex offender,’ ‘felon; -- identities they cannot change regardless of the circumstances of their crimes or any improvements they might make in their lives” – Bryan Stevenson

Each individual in this study has committed an act of harm. Each individual, also, however, has made a commitment to bettering their community in some way. Multiple work towards criminal justice reform or bettering reentry and multiple regularly mentor youth in their neighborhoods. Incarceration, however, took these people out of their communities for decades. Hasan and Brian who are both fathers, were denied the ability to raise their children. Their children were denied having their father present in their lives. Yes, the participants in this study did cause harm, as Joseph reflects:

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7 (Stevenson 2014)
“We did some terrible things like committing murder is a terrible thing. It’s something that I always regret, it's something I never get over, I have to live with that, but that’s not who I am now. You’re talking twenty-seven years later and that's the thing. The state don’t look at what you’ve done since that crime. That one act becomes who you are for the rest of your life and that’s not fair.” – Joseph

Each participant came to a point in their incarceration where they grappled with the weight of the harm they had caused. Each reflected and committed to becoming a positive influence on others. The state, however, did not care. Further, the state did not aid in this transition at all, in fact they hindered it. As Andre put it, education in his opinion was the key. The US, however, has systematically barred funding for folks experiencing incarceration to educate themselves. Despite obstacles the state forces upon incarcerated individuals, however, participants in this study still managed to reflect and transform themselves. They did so because of education, because of the influence of other folks inside, because of the support of loved ones, because of programming they fought for, and so many other ways that the state did not assist with.

Despite their efforts, however, the state kept these individuals isolated from society for decades. The experience leaves George with vivid nightmares of being locked in a cage and with Dusty envisioning what his life could have been. Dusty described his visions below:

“I might be at a restaurant or be in the library and I may be just walking up and down a street and I’d think about maybe when I was 17 or 22 or 30, and I have a wife and I have a family and I have children. That’s how things happen with me sometimes when I look at life out here.” – Dusty
Dusty is a mentor at a youth center and makes positive impacts on kids' lives every day. Dusty is a pillar of his community despite being incarcerated for 46 years. Dusty could have been this figure long before his release, Dusty could have been a great father. The racial project that is mass incarceration denied him of this. I ask, what was gained from denying Dusty his humanity?

_The Case for Abolition_

The existence of prisons has had little to no impact on rates of crime, the exact thing they are meant to mitigate (Davis 2011, 12). Instead of reducing harm, prisons proliferate it by disproportionately ripping individuals out of low-income, communities of color. Prisons are racist institutions and it is a fallacy that they mitigate harm. Prisons destabilize communities, continuing cycles of harm and incarceration. Alternatives, however, do exist.

What if instead of investing in prisons we invested in job programs, alternatives to welfare programs, student-centered schools, community recreation, or other decarcerating initiatives? Roots of harm in our society come from systemic inequality of resources and the ability to thrive. Prisons respond to existing harm while ignoring its roots. As long as prisons exist, we will not invest in each other. We will continue to erase our problems, instead of addressing them, by banishing individuals from the community. We will continue to pretend such measures make us safer when really, they do nothing to actually change peoples’ material conditions. The prison industrial complex is based on racialized criminalization and the maintenance of white supremacy. As long as we continue to rely on this system, we will continue to uplift its racist agenda.
What if instead of responding to harm by incarcerating individuals we instead turned to transformative justice practices? Transformative justice calls on us to engage with one another’s humanity and mitigate harm by investing in our collective liberation and prosperity. Transformative justice practices address radically changing material conditions that allow violence to occur, such as poverty, shortfalls in education, inaccess to jobs, etc. It is not enough to address harm after it happens, like our prison systems currently do, we must start investing in the power of individuals and valuing the most marginalized in our society. As we take proper steps towards healing and caring for one another, our need for prisons continues to shrink.

While this study focuses on reentry and makes suggestions regarding returning from incarceration, the reality is reentry only exists because of mass incarceration. It is our job to imagine, to realize that prisons do not have to be a permanent fixture of our society. The folks that inspire my imagination are individuals just like the participants in this study. They inspire me not only to imagine, but to work for change like they do every day. To work to tear down the walls and bring the millions of individuals, who matter just as much as anyone else, trapped in the wicked reach of this system home.

Currently, out of the 2,100 individuals nationwide impacted by the Montgomery v Louisiana decision, only 600 people have been released (O’Neil 2020). The truth is, because of the political moment in Philadelphia folks in this jurisdiction, such as the participants in this study, have come home in large numbers. This is not true for other states who continue to resentence condemned children to harsh sentences including death by incarceration a second time. The US continues to uphold the internationally disgraced practice of condemning children to die in prison. The participants in this study are all unique, exceptional individuals and the truth
is many other unique, exceptional individuals just like them remain incarcerated. The fight for abolition continues until we bring everyone home.

**Future Research**

While this thesis is the culmination of my senior year, it is far from complete. There are several critical lenses missing from this work that need to be highlighted in future research.

**Race**

One aspect of the reentry experiences of formerly condemned children that I did not interrogate in this study was the racial dimension. Race did come up in my interview with Dusty as he pointed out the racial disparities in resentencing of juvenile lifers in PA. Mass incarceration is a racial project and the population of formerly condemned children demonstrates this. The population of juvenile lifers is 77% people of color and more specifically 63% black. The racial disparities in the criminal legal system are evident in the makeup of the population of juvenile lifers but are even further exemplified in the new sentences given to condemned children in Pennsylvania.

When I was interviewing Dusty, he talked about the difference in the new sentences given to white condemned children in PA and those given to condemned children of color. Dusty stated:

“Caucasian individuals who were released right out of prison and the blacks was attached with a lifetime parole tail. It’s like that across the board in the criminal justice system when you deal with brown and black and white juveniles. Don’t get me wrong, there are one or two or three or four white juveniles is in there that maybe didn’t have the supportive system. But the majority of
them are not treated like black and brown. And that’s a conversation people don’t want to talk about, but this is reality.” – Dusty

All of the participants in this study were black, middle-aged men and each formerly condemned child I interviewed was given a lifetime parole tail when they resentenced. As a result of the limited scope of this study, I was unable to compare the experiences of white condemned children and condemned children of color. As Dusty stated, however, being black in the criminal legal system is very different than being white. In the future, I would hope to interview individuals of other races who were also condemned as children to get a fuller picture.

Gender

While I only interviewed men for this study, women have also been sentenced to die in prison as juveniles. Out of the 500 juvenile lifers in Pennsylvania, only 10 were women. Thus in the small scope of this thesis I was unable to interview a female individual who was resentenced under Montgomery v Louisiana and reentered in Philly. Women are often underrepresented in discussions about mass incarceration, despite being the largest growing incarcerated population (Davis 2011, 65). The experience inside women’s and men’s prisons are vastly different and thus a women’s perspective is very important for a more complete image of the reentry experiences of formerly condemned children.

Geographic Expansion

This study focused on Philadelphia due to its close geographical location to Swarthmore and its unique positionality as “ground-zero” for juvenile lifer reentry. Ninety percent of juvenile lifers in the US, however, are not facing resentencing and/or reentry in Philadelphia. Place is a huge part of reentry. Certain locations offer more services to reentrants than others and certain
states and cities have been much stricter on releasing juvenile lifers. For a more complete understanding of the reentry experiences of formerly condemned children, I would need to interview individuals from locales other than Philadelphia.

*Collaborative Process*

Finally, and most importantly, I believe the largest flaw of this thesis is that it is written by one voice: the voice of a white, female college student who has not experienced incarceration. The only way a study on the reentry experience of this population would be complete is if members of this population were co-authors of this project. In the end, this story is not mine. While I am honored to have spoken with each participant and humbled by their willingness to share their experiences with me, the only way to properly interrogate this subject is through collaboration.
# Appendix

## Participant Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age Incarcerated</th>
<th>Time Incarcerated</th>
<th>Time Since Release</th>
<th>Current Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Grew Up In</th>
<th>Where Incarcerated</th>
<th>Condemned Child?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brian Williams</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>28 years</td>
<td>About 2 years</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>SCI Pike</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Morgan</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>26.5 years</td>
<td>About 7 months</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>SCI Pike</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Hall</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Close to 30 years</td>
<td>Almost 3 years</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>SCI Pike</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William (Hasan) Sanders</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>25 years</td>
<td>14 months</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>SCI Scottsville</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elijah King</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>27.5 years</td>
<td>A bit over a year</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>SCI Pike</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcus (Dusty) Anderson</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>46 years, 6 months, 1 day</td>
<td>2 years, 8 months</td>
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<td>Philadelphia</td>
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<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarence (Rasheed) Wright</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>36 years</td>
<td>Almost 3 years</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>Upstate</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<tr>
<td>George Taylor</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>43 years</td>
<td>7 months</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Outside Philadelphia</td>
<td>Upstate</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<td>Andre Young</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Close to 27 years</td>
<td>About 9 months</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>SCI Pike</td>
<td>N</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Bibliography


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