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CAPSTONE PROJECT 2025

FREEDOM AFTER WRONGFUL INCARCERATION:

UNDERSTANDING AND IDENTIFYING THE NEEDS AND RESOURCES FOR THE WRONGFULLY CONVICTED

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UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF
Dr. Kimberly Kras

FINAL REPORT IN PARTNERSHIP WITH
The Innocence Center, Inc

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Acknowledgments

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Most importantly, we extend our heartfelt appreciation to the wrongfully convicted participants who trusted us with their stories. Your courage and openness have been instrumental in the creation of this reentry resource guide. This work would not have been possible without your voices.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our capstone project explores the reentry experiences of exonerated and paroled individuals who were wrongfully convicted, focusing on the enduring and complex effects of unjust imprisonment. These individuals encounter unique challenges in their reintegration that set them apart from other formerly incarcerated individuals, including psychological trauma, social stigma, and insufficient post-release support. Our project also examines the role of The Innocence Center (TIC), a nonprofit law firm dedicated to freeing the wrongfully convicted and assisting in their reintegration through advocacy and transitional resources.

Through qualitative research methods, we draw from interviews with exonerated and paroled individuals as well as case studies of clients supported by TIC. We utilized NVivo software to code and analyze the data, identifying key themes related to mental health, reintegration, and access to resources. These findings were then compared to existing reentry models, allowing us to assess service gaps and propose targeted reforms for improving the reintegration process. We found that:

Reentry gaps remain a major issue, as many participants were released without financial support, identification, housing, or a caseworker to guide them through the process.

Emotional and mental health strain was common, with most lacking access to therapy and many were unaware of how deeply incarceration had affected their mental health until well after their release. Job insecurity and limited pathways were also concerns, as participants emphasized the need for long-term employment support instead of one-time assistance.

A lack of financial literacy and access created additional barriers, Individuals struggled to open bank accounts, build credit, and access public assistance, often returning home with debt they hadn't incurred and little understanding of financial systems.

Compensation delays or complete lack of restitution further added to their challenges, leaving some without any financial support for the harm they endured.

In light of these findings, our recommendations offer a range of integrated solutions aimed at overcoming the barriers to successful reentry. They are:

Implementing a structured case management system. Case managers should act as primary points of contact, adopting a trauma-informed approach while maintaining small caseloads to provide personalized support.

Developing peer mentorship programs and support groups based on shared experiences will help individuals connect with others who understand their challenges. Developing life skills and financial literacy programs are essential to assist participants with ID recovery, credit building, and accessing benefits.

Establishing partnerships with corporations to create direct employment pipelines for exonerees is crucial. Expanding mental health support by making therapy a standard part of the reentry process with clinicians specializing in carceral trauma, and normalizing therapy through peer mentoring programs to reduce stigma and encourage engagement.

Addressing fundamental reentry needs such as housing, transportation, communication tools, and hygiene supplies is critical for successful reintegration.

A **centralized resource guide** will help connect wrongfully convicted individuals to services in real-time. This project contributes to the efforts of The Innocence Center by identifying service gaps and offering actionable recommendations to strengthen support systems for wrongfully convicted individuals as they rebuild their lives.

Authors

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Christina M. Aikens received her Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), and earned her Master's degree in Criminal Justice & Criminology from San Diego State University (SDSU) in 2025. She currently works as an Alcohol & Drug Program Specialist, providing direct services to individuals incarcerated in the County of San Diego detention facilities. She is well versed in working with both adult and juvenile populations. Her academic and professional work reflect a deep commitment to rehabilitation, public safety, and justice reform. Her research interests include corrections, the death penalty, and how adverse childhood experiences contribute to individuals' involvement in the criminal legal system, with a focus on applying evidence-based practices to improve outcomes for justice involved populations. Her future endeavors include pursuing a Master of Social Work (MSW), to obtain clinical licensure and provide therapeutic services to vulnerable populations within her own private practice.

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Adriana Chavez earned her Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice with a Minor in Psychology from San Diego State University (SDSU), where she is also completing her masters in Criminology and Criminal Justice. As a first generation college student from a justice-impacted family, she has always been passionate about criminal justice reform and breaking cycles of systemic inequality. Her lived experiences have inspired her to not only pursue higher education but to be a role model for others who have faced similar challenges. She currently works for a nonprofit organization that supports incarcerated juveniles and youth on probation, where she teaches restorative practices to help them transform anger into positive change. She hopes to continue using her education and personal journey to advocate for system wide reform and empower others to realize their potential beyond the justice system.

Aliyah Ellis

Aliyah Ellis earned her Bachelor's degree in Cognitive and Behavioral Neuroscience at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). She completed her Master's in Criminology and Criminal Justice at San Diego State University (SDSU). In the future, she hopes to continue her education and gain a forensic psychology license. She is interested in studying human behavior within the scope of criminology. This interest is inspired by how the human mind works and how different attributes often influence behaviors. She is intrigued by knowing why people behave the way they do, whether from the environment, childhood, or other factors. She enjoyed interviewing individuals who have wrongfully been incarcerated and hearing their experiences, and she hopes to do further research on the impact of the criminal justice system.

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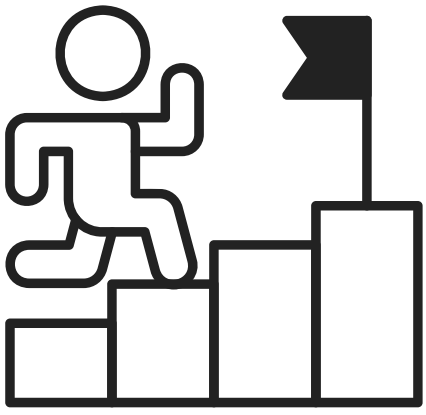
Bianca Gutierrez earned her Bachelor's degree in Sociology with an emphasis in Criminology at Cal State San Marcos (CSUSM) and completed her Master's degree in Criminology at San Diego State University. She has over six years of experience working with children and adolescents and currently works with adults with disabilities. Her passion lies in advocating for vulnerable populations. In Fall 2025, she will return to pursue a second Master's degree in Social Work (MSW). Her future career goal is to combine her backgrounds in criminal justice and social work to pursue a career in forensic social work. Her research interest is criminal justice reform, driven by her commitment to advocating for marginalized communities and creating equitable systems that support successful reintegration after incarceration.

Freedom After Wrongful Incarceration

INTRODUCTION



Introduction

Exoneration is the legal process by which an individual is officially cleared of accusations of criminal conduct when new evidence proving their innocence is discovered (National Registry of Exonerations, 2023). Since 1989, the National Registry of Exonerations has documented 3,608 exonerations in the United States, totaling more than 32,750 years served of wrongful incarcerations (National Registry of Exonerations, 2024). According to the 2023 National Registry report, 153 individuals were exonerated across various charges, including 88 for homicide, 17 for sexual assault, 23 for other violent crimes (such as assault, robbery, and attempted murder), 25 for non-violent crimes, and 2 for misdemeanor offenses (National Registry of Exonerations, 2024). In 2022, there were 233 reported exonerations, showing a 31.4% decrease compared to the 2023 report (National Registry of Exonerations, 2023). This decline could indicate that the criminal justice system is improving its ability to prevent wrongful convictions further, but the reality is that thousands of wrongfully convicted individuals remain within it (National Registry of Exonerations, 2023). Their cases must be recognized and brought to light to help exonerate them and contribute to the decline in wrongful convictions.

The reentry experience for exonerated individuals is uniquely challenging as they face the compounded effects of their wrongful conviction. While they face many of the same issues as those formerly incarcerated, such as housing insecurity, employment difficulties, and mental health concerns, exonerees endure specific burdens that may make their reintegration more difficult. Psychological trauma resulting from their wrongful conviction is one key difference, often intensifying mental health struggles such as PTSD, depression, and anxiety (Shlosberg et al., 2020). Exonerees frequently suffer from adjustment issues and significant psychiatric difficulties, which are worsened by the injustice of their imprisonment (Shlosberg et al., 2020). Alongside these mental health challenges, exonerees are also uniquely impacted by social stigma. They face societal discrimination, having to prove their innocence to others due to enduring mistrust and disbelief (Lopez, 2002). The experience of wrongful imprisonment can be just as or more damaging than for other incarcerated individuals, further deepening their trauma (Campbell & Denov, 2004). In some cases, exonerees face sudden, unprepared release without the support that formerly incarcerated individuals receive, leaving them vulnerable to challenges like homelessness and lack of post-release programs (Westervelt & Cook, 2010). These factors make the reentry experience uniquely harsh for exonerees, highlighting the need for targeted resources and support to address their specific and unique challenges.

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THE INNOCENCE CENTER

The Innocence Center

The Innocence Center (TIC) was launched in 2023 as an independent nonprofit law firm dedicated to freeing innocent and wrongfully convicted individuals from prison. In addition to advocating for justice, TIC is committed to educating the public about the causes of wrongful convictions and supporting freed clients as they reintegrate into society by providing essential resources and assistance. TIC has freed more than 40 people who collectively served over 560 years in prison for crimes they did not commit (The Innocence Center, 2023). The Innocence Center team has also played a pivotal role in changing a dozen laws to prevent future injustices and make it easier to free the innocent. TIC is among the few organizations that share the goal of helping exonerated individuals by providing them with essential legal aid, resources, and support.

TIC fights wrongful convictions by advocating for legal reforms and supporting affected individuals at local, state, and national levels. At the local level, the Innocence Center prevents wrongful convictions by ensuring access to essential resources, such as DNA testing and post-conviction evidence (The Innocence Center, 2023). They also support exonerated individuals and those paroled for wrongful convictions by advocating for compensation and assisting with their reintegration into society through transitional services. At the state level, TIC collaborates with the California Innocence Coalition (CIC) to advocate for laws that enhance access to evidence, prevent wrongful convictions, and reform legal processes. An example of this is Senate Bill 923, which standardizes eyewitness identification procedures to minimize misidentifications and wrongful convictions (The Innocence Center, 2023). At the national level, TIC partners with the Innocence Network to address systemic issues in the criminal justice system, push for legislative reforms, and prevent wrongful convictions.

They advocate for policy improvements regarding DNA testing, eyewitness misidentification, and false confessions, while also securing fair treatment for wrongfully convicted individuals through post-conviction relief and compensation initiatives (The Innocence Center, 2023). Importantly, TIC helps exonerated and paroled individuals of wrongful convictions reintegrate into society, addressing their unique challenges.

The Current Study and Research Questions

The current study seeks to understand the experiences of exonerated people returning to the community and consider how TIC can address the challenges faced by their clients. Our study aims to answer the following research questions:

- What are the experiences of exonerated people returning to the community?
- What resources exist to support exonerated people?
- What existing programs from the Innocence Center work well for exonerated individuals?
- How can the Innocence Center better support individuals who are exonerated?

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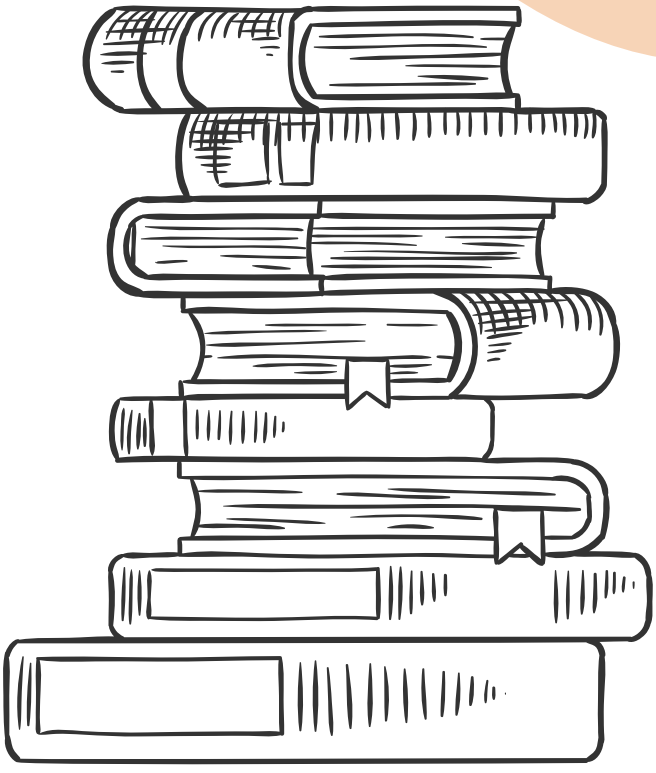
LITERATURE REVIEW



Literature Review

Understanding the process of returning to the community after prison for exonerated people requires considering the typical barriers to reentry identified in research through a new lens. For example, many exonerees face barriers in mental health, emotional regulation, employment, community, and government services, but unlike individuals released on parole, exonerees are not a part of the legal system once set free. This means they are not given access to the resources that other non-exonerated individuals receive, such as reentry services that help exonerees transition back into society. The lack of reentry services includes financial assistance, employment services, mental health support, housing, legal assistance, and more. In this review of the existing research, we examine these concerns.

Challenging Aspects of Gaining Employment After Incarceration

Exonerated individuals face many challenges when reintegrating into society, particularly if incarcerated for many years. While some may receive financial compensation, they may lack other forms of essential support. Essential resources include help finding employment, stable income, addressing stigma, and supporting mental health (Goldberg et al., 2020). As exonerees receive fewer reentry benefits than individuals who are convicted and later released (Goldberg et al., 2020), society must recognize exonerees' personal and financial hardships to address these barriers.

Exonerees face significant financial hardships, particularly when finding stable employment. The stigma of their wrongful conviction often leads to discrimination, creating the same barriers to employment as those convicted of crimes (Goldberg et al., 2020). In a study tracking 118 exonerees post-release, researchers found nearly one-third did not have their records accurately expunged (Goldberg et al., 2020). A criminal record makes it harder to secure employment and is linked to greater destabilization and higher reoffending rates (Heilburn et al., 2020). Exonerees from the in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted by Shlosberg et al. (2020) identified securing employment as their most important concern.

All formerly incarcerated individuals face barriers to gaining employment due to the label of being a convicted felon (Visher et al., 2011). However, exonerees face additional obstacles even after all charges are dropped. Securing meaningful employment that also provides satisfaction, concurrent with decent wages, are referred to as the key to experiencing a successful reintegration (Visher et al., 2011). Many exonerees stated that they felt the shadow or stigma of having been wrongfully incarcerated. In one study, exonerees felt that prospective hiring managers tend to believe that they must have gotten out of prison due to a technicality and are not truly innocent despite all they had been through (Miller, 2022).

Exonerees' status of having been incarcerated made them more prone to face hiring discrimination due to rigorous background checks and criminal records that may not be fully expunged despite being wrongfully convicted and serving time for a crime that they did not commit (Shlosberg et al., 2020). Although these issues are not uncommon for formerly incarcerated individuals, the issue for exonerated individuals is exacerbated due to the fact that they do not qualify for job training, vocational services, and the therapeutic programming opportunities that are often readily available to paroled individuals because they are no longer under the purview of the criminal justice system (Shlosberg et al., 2020). On the other hand, parolees qualify for reentry services because they are still under supervision of the state when granted parole. Both rightfully convicted and wrongfully convicted individuals have the opportunity to participate in therapeutic programming while in the institution as a means to target criminogenic risk factors. Once a wrongfully convicted person is exonerated they are abruptly removed from custody, any current programming, and also no longer have access to those programs after they are freed.

Furthermore, because exonerated individuals' departure from prison means they are no longer under the state's purview, they are not assigned a parole officer that would typically assist with their reentry needs and linkages to community resources. Considering the shortfall of community reentry programs available to this population, this enhances the urgency for the proper support specific to exonerated individuals. Being able to experience a successful transition back into communities ultimately should begin while exonerees are still incarcerated. This is typically done in the form of in-prison programming run by behavioral health providers within the institution, and subsequently, government-funded reentry programs continued upon release out in the community. These forms of programming are intended to change negative thinking patterns, enhance social skills and networks to gain steady employment, and ease that transition out of custody by providing a continuum of care. Oftentimes, family and friends' support can be minimal to nonexistent for many who are incarcerated, therefore; relying on these reentry programs can become one's only option when being released from prison and trying to reintegrate back into a world that does not familiarize you (Miller, 2022).

Research suggests that if provided, these programs can have high efficacy on positive reintegration if started in prison and continued after reintegration (Miller, 2022). Without any parole officer guidance or fundamental training that stems from prison programs such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), skills groups, and employment groups offering assistance with resumes and interviewing techniques continued through community reentry programs, exonerees face heightened barriers to securing employment. For example, exonerated individuals may have a lack of interview training and preparation for questions related to criminal history and large gaps in work history (Shlosberg et al., 2020). The inability to secure meaningful employment makes this population at risk for destabilization, including mental health concerns and further legal system involvement. Securing meaningful employment that also provides satisfaction, concurrent with decent wages, are referred to as the key to experiencing a successful reintegration (Visher et al., 2011).

Mental Health Challenges

Along with financial and employment hardships, exonerees struggle with mental health issues, strained relationships, and social stigma, issues often overlooked in financial compensation statutes (Goldberg et al., 2020). Due to being wrongfully convicted and incarcerated, individuals face emotional challenges like anger, grief, depression, and trauma, which affect reintegration (Heilburn et al., 2020). Evidence suggests that being incarcerated produces considerable post-incarceration mental health challenges including depression, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and anxiety which are associated with the environment of the prison itself (Heilburn et al., 2020). Due to both formal and informal rules within the prison, it can promote self-destructive behaviors, antisocial cognition, and induce unhealthy coping mechanisms such as substance abuse, especially when left untreated due to a denial of reintegrative services (Shlosberg et al., 2020). Exonerees often lack the resources to navigate these difficulties, leaving them isolated and unsupported (Goldberg et al., 2020). Additionally, incarceration has been linked to mood disorders, such as major depressive disorder and bipolar disorder, which may worsen emotional struggles post-release (Heilburn et al., 2020).

In a study of 13 recently exonerated individuals who worked with the Innocence Network organizations, exonerees reported moderate to high levels of depression, anxiety, PTSD, as well as disturbances in sleep behaviors (Alexander et. al., 2020). DeShay (2016) interviewed nine exonerees, 7 men, and two women, over a five-month period to understand their struggles when exiting prison. His study revealed both negative and positive coping mechanisms used by exonerees during their reintegration. Positive mechanisms used by exonerees were prayer/faith, meeting with one another, and being helped by other exonerees. However, negative coping mechanisms, such as social withdrawal, were also evident (DeShay, 2016).

In another study by Miller (2022), 23 exonerees divulged that their decreased social skills presented heightened challenges for them immediately upon release and also when attempting to secure employment. In prison, many exonerees felt isolated from the rest of the incarcerated individuals, did not understand prison jargon, and never fully adapted to being incarcerated (Miller, 2022). This only exacerbated feelings of isolation and marginalization within the prison environment. These findings show how important it is to provide exonerees with mental health resources and peer support.

While some find comfort in prayer/faith exercises or even through connection because of similar experiences, some struggle with self-isolation and turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms. This highlights additional issues with exonerees fitting back into society after release, where the toll that is taken on exonerees' mental health can be often ignored. However, providing the proper support so they can better learn healthier coping and better adjust to life on the outside can be a positive thing for them overall. To address the mental health barriers faced by exonerees, ensuring access to community resources post-incarceration is crucial, as these resources provide essential support in managing mental health challenges, ultimately facilitating a smoother reintegration into society.

Access To Community Resources Post-Incarceration

Exonerated individuals face many of the same hardships as formerly incarcerated men but with an abrupt departure from custody, there are limits to their release planning and accessibility to resources. The transition from incarceration back into the free world is a sensitive period of maximized instability and uncertainty in the lives of anyone who has been incarcerated. Even the most fundamental elements of social reintegration, such as a place to live, a means of maintaining oneself, and a web of support alone, can pose significant challenges to someone trying to navigate a new world with advanced technology and heightened processes to gain access to services (Halushka, 2020). While *some* reentry services are coordinated by parole officers for convicted offenders upon their release, the problem for the wrongfully convicted is that these same reentry services are not at all provided to them nor accessible once exonerated and freed. When looking at studies that have already occurred within the United States government, it is concluded that this country does not currently offer community reentry services for exonerated individuals (Clow, 2017). Although some exonerees have sought out services that are available for parolees, they are typically disqualified from receiving services from programs since they did not actually commit crimes (Clow, 2017). For exonerees, this exclusion to necessary services leaves them lacking any resources that are desperately needed while on a path to heal from the trauma and wrongful imprisonment they have experienced (Clow, 2017).

All formerly incarcerated individuals share one commonality–they all are trying to navigate life and get connected to resources that ultimately help them reintegrate. A study of exonerees discovered that this population struggled with adjusting to everyday life post-release, also issues navigating technology, and social activities (Martin, 2006). Research by Simms (2016) noted that the most essential assistance required post-release is immediate transitional housing and employment. Considering the time that exonerated individuals have spent incarcerated for crimes they did not commit, they have missed out on opportunities to develop certain life skills and the ability to maintain them.

Since the number of exonerated individuals is still of concern in the criminal legal system, it is paramount that specialized reintegrative support services are developed and become readily available for this specific population (Baduria, 2022). This is to include but not limited to: support groups, trauma-informed care post-release, psychoeducational life skills groups, cognitive behavioral therapy, employment assistance, and substance use disorder treatment as part of the aftercare component to incarceration. By excluding exonerees from receiving necessary transitional services, it leaves a heavy burden on wrongfully incarcerated individuals to navigate a world that was taken from them, and exacerbates the multiple injustices that the criminal legal system has placed upon their lives.

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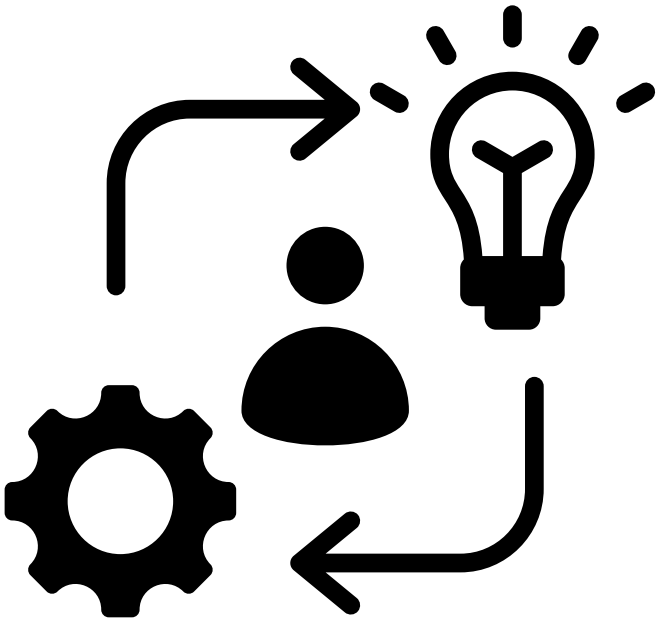
METHODS & RESEARCH DESIGN



Methods

Researchers from the Master of Criminal Justice & Criminology (MCJC) program at San Diego State University (SDSU) collaborated with The Innocence Center (TIC) to explore the reintegration experiences of wrongfully convicted, exonerated, and paroled individuals. *Exonerated* referred to an individual previously convicted of a crime but officially cleared of that conviction, typically due to new evidence establishing their factual innocence (National Registry of Exonerations, n.d.). A *paroled* individual who was wrongfully convicted referred to someone who was released from prison before serving their full sentence, typically due to factors such as good behavior or sentence reduction, but without an official exoneration. Although these individuals maintained their innocence and were in the process of seeking exoneration, their convictions remained intact, and they continued to endure the legal and social repercussions of their wrongful convictions (Innocence Project, n.d.).

This qualitative research, reviewed by the San Diego State University Institutional Review Board (IRB), was conducted through semi-structured interviews with recent exonerees and paroled individuals associated with TIC. The primary goal of the study was to identify key themes and insights that informed TIC's approach to addressing the barriers faced by formerly incarcerated individuals of wrongful convictions during reintegration. Rather than focusing on the details of the exonerees' cases, the research aimed to better understand how TIC enhanced its support mechanisms and created a more comprehensive continuum of care.

Research Design

The research design for this study involved qualitative methods, specifically semi-structured interviews. These interviews explored the experiences of participants during their reintegration, focusing on their interactions with TIC, challenges related to employment and stable income, stigma surrounding criminality, and their social and psychological well-being, among other factors. This approach was intended to capture in-depth, personal narratives of individuals' reintegration challenges and experiences rather than the specifics of their legal cases. To ensure confidentiality and consistency, a semi-structured interview format was used to cover key topics across all participants. As Kvale (1996) described, this approach blended the flexibility of open-ended questioning with the focus of more structured methods, offering a balanced framework for exploring participants' experiences. This method enabled the research team to explore the experiences of exonerees, capturing both commonalities and individual variations, and highlighting how these experiences differed from those of formerly incarcerated individuals.

SAMPLING AND RECRUITMENT APPROACH

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

Sampling and Recruitment Approach

Jasmin Harris, TIC Director, promoted the study to her clients to participate in the study, explaining the project's purpose and emphasizing that participation is voluntary and optional. She has also assured them that their privacy and confidentiality will be respected throughout the process. This is a critical step because only if we ensure that participants understand what we tell them about the study, their participation, and the potential risks and benefits can they give 'informed consent' (Kielamnn et al., 2012). Throughout the process, confidentiality will be maintained by removing personal identifiers.

Dr. Kras and Ms. Harris reviewed seventeen open-ended questions to ensure alignment with research objectives and ethical guidelines. These seventeen questions will be used to capture participants' unique stories and provide detailed descriptions of their experiences. The questions are broad and flexible, allowing interviewees to guide the conversation toward the areas they consider most significant while still addressing key topics such as discrimination, support systems, health challenges, and access to resources. Please see the interview guide in Appendix A.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection involved interviews with 19 exonerees or paroled individuals, with each researcher assigned to conduct at least five interviews. Interviews were conducted in person, via video call, or over the phone, depending on participant preferences. The research team was provided with a contact list of potential participants and scheduled interviews through phone calls, texts, or emails. Each interview, which lasted between 30 to 60 minutes, included 16 open-ended questions. All participants were offered a $25 incentive. Participants could choose to be interviewed by a single researcher or have a note-taker present. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis, and field notes were also taken.

Interviews were conducted in person, via video call, or over the phone, depending on participant preferences and logistical considerations. This flexibility will allow participants from the San Diego and Los Angeles regions, with varying schedules, to participate comfortably. Interviews will be scheduled at times convenient for participants, ensuring minimal disruption to their daily lives. In-person interviews took place in a publicly accessible but semi-private space (room on SDSU's campus, office at TIC, library, etc.), providing a comfortable and neutral environment. Each interview lasted 1.5 hours on average, giving participants ample time to share their experiences in detail.

All conversations were audio-recorded with the participant's consent to capture the interviews verbatim. In addition to the recording, field notes were taken during the interviews to document non-verbal cues, emotional tones, and other contextual elements that may not be captured through the recording alone. To preserve participant confidentiality and anonymity, we did not collect demographic or identifying information.

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ANALYSIS

COMPILING THE RESOURCE GUIDE

Analysis

The interview transcripts were imported into the qualitative software program, NVivo, to capture every nuance of the conversation. To analyze the interview data collected for this research project, we relied on a thematic analysis approach to identify patterns, themes, and insights related to improving reentry experiences for the exonerated (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process involves familiarizing ourselves with the data, generating the codes, searching for them, reviewing the themes in the interviews, defining and naming the themes, and finally producing our final analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

This process began with a thorough transcription of the interviews, using the coding software NVivo, as mentioned above, to organize and manage our data. The coding process involved both deductive and inductive strategies. Deductive coding began with a preliminary set of codes taken from the literature and our research's objectives, while inductive coding allowed for themes to be derived directly from the data, ensuring that the participants' voices are central to the analysis. We also used a systematic approach to "breaking" down the data into meaningful segments while attempting to capture their essence without reducing them (Kielmann et al., 2012). The analysis findings offer a detailed understanding of the reintegration process from the exonerees' perspective, highlighting their challenges and providing actionable insights to improve TIC's support and services.

Compiling the Resource Guide

Our findings supported development of a comprehensive resource guide that synthesizes key recommendations and strategies emerging from the research. This guide focuses on identifying and compiling national, state, and regional organizations within the Innocence Network that provide essential support services for exonerees. The process involved web-based searches to identify organizations offering legal, mental health, housing, and employment assistance, among other resources. This information has been compiled into a detailed, user-friendly web-page, making it easier for stakeholders to connect exonerees with the appropriate services. By organizing these resources in one accessible guide, we aim to support the reintegration process and ensure exonerees receive the comprehensive assistance they need to successfully transition back into society. Here is the link to the Resource Guide.

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FINDINGS

Findings

We present our findings in three main sections: 1) Reentry Barriers and Systemic Failures, 2) Impacts of Wrongful Conviction and Incarceration on Mental Health and Well-Being, and 3) Support Systems and Relationships. The first section describes the structural and logistical challenges participants faced upon release, including lack of identification, employment hardships, housing insecurities, difficulties meeting basic needs, and ongoing financial hardships. The second section explores the psychological and emotional toll of wrongful incarceration, highlighting themes such as depression and anxiety, substance use as a trauma response, emotional suppression, difficulty trusting individuals and institutions, grief over lost time, feeling overwhelmed by freedom, the process of embracing identity and personal growth, and support received from the Innocence Center. The final section examines the role of social support in reentry, including difficulties reunifying with family, the importance of peer networks, efforts to seek mental health services, and the enduring impact of public stigma. Themes are presented from both exonerated and paroled participants, as their experiences offer valuable insight into the broader challenges of reentry and recovery. Where relevant we note if the participant is exonerated or paroled to illustrate important differences in their experiences.

Re-Entry Barriers and Systemic Failures

After participants were released from incarceration, many reported wanting to take the necessary steps to get back on their feet as soon as possible. Many participants were incarcerated at a young age and did not have many documents that would be needed to start working or get any government assistance. Participants reported not having proper identification after being released and expressed difficulties accessing these documents. Participants also expressed difficulties with gaining employment due to gaps on their resume or having issues with their criminal record from their time being incarcerated. In addition, participants also experienced issues with obtaining housing due to not having the financial means to afford it or having to live with family members while they searched for employment and obtained proper documents.

Lack of Identification

Many participants reported that they had trouble obtaining identification when they were released. Some of the participants were incarcerated when they were under the age of 16 and were not able to get proper state identification before serving time. Upon release, they needed valid state identification to apply for a job or obtain a bank account. Many participants reported having difficulties trying to obtain their identification documents. One participant stated,

> *" I went to try to open up a bank account and I couldn't do it because you need two forms of ID, either a license or a California ID and then a social [security number], and I didn't have any of that."*

Some participants did not have access to their birth certificates, so it was a complicated process to prove their identity, which held them back from other opportunities.

"My biggest priority was my documentation gathering. I need to get documentation from my ID, my driver license, my birth certificate. I need to get my social security card number. I need to get all that, because without that I was not able to function once I got released. Once I begun getting my birth certificate and all that it probably took me about maybe 9 months. 9 months to a year, probably."

Lack of identification served as a major issue for most participants considering many of them were either incarcerated at a young age or did not have possession of their original documents after release.

Employment Hardships

Many participants reported struggling to gain employment upon release. When completing job applications, some participants had to check the box saying they had a felony due to not being able to get the crime they were accused of expunged, as shared by one participant:

"Well, every job, I went on, I mean, the 1st thing they did ask was, "have you been convicted of a felon? Been convicted of a crime?" So being that I took a deal, I had to say, Yeah. I would have to, you know, to get the job. I would have to contact the Innocence Center and they would have to send all my paperwork, and by that time they hired somebody else. I was fortunate to get a job a month after I got out through somebody else I knew so I had a little help to get in the door, but nevertheless I still had to explain my conviction."

Another issue, if their record was expunged, was having to explain the gap in employment due to time being wrongfully incarcerated. One participant explains,

"I've had more negative experiences like with the whole job thing,... I wonder, is it because, you know, because I'm an ex-felon? Like, does that come to play? Even though they say, oh, no, they don't supposed to do that, they don't supposed to ask these questions, but this is my whole thing. Like, I don't want to be lying because see, this is what a lot of people don't realize. When they call me in for an interview and they say, "okay, well, I got your resume," they're like, "but, what have you been doing from 1995 all the way, I see you got until 2022, like what's been going on?" Like how do you answer that? And then like if I start lying about it and they find out I'm lying, I get fired anyways. So it's like a catch with that. They don't have to ask that, because the paper tells it all. You know what I'm saying? Like almost a three decade gap in employment? Like what you been doing?"

*P*articipants reported having negative feelings when it came to explaining the gap of time in their resume. Many participants were unsure if they should come up with a lie or tell the truth. One participant was unsure on what exactly they should say when it came to explaining the gap. They were uncomfortable with sharing their story due to their innocence being questioned for years. They became comfortable with lying because it felt safer than telling their story and being at risk of not being believed again or having to relive their trauma.

The same participant stated,

"I'd become a liar because on my resume, there's a huge gap. And so now I'm a liar, which I don't lie. So why is there a big gap? "Oh, I had to raise my kids. I was raising my kids." So, one place finally hired me and, um, I was there for five days and then I was asked not to come back. And, it makes me feel so bad, you know what I mean? You just like kind of crumble inside, you feel ashamed and sad, 'cause they have to know what the fuck happened, you know? Now I'm having to send them all this information. And I sent it to the girl and she ended up telling, like, the whole hospital and so, my boss called me and she was like, "if you just wouldn't have lied." And I'm like, "how do you want me to tell you the worst day of my life? On the first day you meet me?" So I said, fuck it. I'm gonna tell the truth. And my friend used to tell me that "just stop, don't lie." I'm like fuck you, what do you mean, don't lie? You're not in my position. So then I started telling the truth. What do I have to lose, you know?"

Many participants reported that they believed they were not offered jobs due to their criminal record whether they were exonerated or not. One participant describes,

"You know, I was overqualified for a hospital job that I applied for and I didn't get it. I went through the interview process on Zoom, they liked me, you know, "we should have had a spot available" this and that. Ghosted me. Month and a half she goes to me, "I'm going to contact you on Monday." So I'm assuming that they probably got my background, whatever the case is. I'm sending a follow up email after the following email. Two months later, finally, "we went in a different direction."

Even though these individuals did not commit the crime, the employment process made them feel as if they did, and they were now facing the consequences of being incarcerated.

Housing Insecurities

Upon release most participants were fortunate enough to have family to lean on especially when it came to housing, however, this was not the case for all. Some participants did not have family readily available to stay with so they had to figure out their housing situation on their own after being released. Many paroled participants who were not exonerated were given the opportunity to stay in a halfway house for six months. Participants who were exonerated did not have this opportunity. One paroled participants details their struggle with housing upon release:

"Yeah, so unfortunately, I kind of was homeless for like about, I think about a month and a half. I was sleeping in my car, but I was still going to work. I was still going to school. I was still doing everything. I just didn't have a place to live and I couldn't go back to LA because my parole was in San Diego and they were telling me like, you have to have an address out here in San Diego for us to let you, you know, go to LA. So it was like it was a hassle and uh man, I didn't know about housing. I didn't know you had to make two and a half times the rent. And then the credit score came into play and like these were things like I had no knowledge of. So like when I was last out, I was a juvenile. I was just running around the street."

It was hard for some participants to find housing due to the previously mentioned barriers. Many were young when they were incarcerated and did not have the knowledge of how rent and bills would affect them, so upon release, they were not prepared to handle the unexpected expenses.

"Like my responsibilities are different, you know, like, um nobody's helping me and like the cost of living, that's another thing that was kind of like shell shocking to me. You know, where you go from not paying any bills, not worried about any bills, not worried about any rent, you know, and then you get out to society now and it's just, you got phone bills, you got Internet bills, you got light bills, gas, trash, sewage. I'm like, I don't even know what this is. When am I using this stuff, right? But it's just because I never knew. I never knew about it. So I think that was just the biggest thing for me was trying to make a balance of how much less that we make at our jobs. Like, it's ridiculous that we barely make enough money to survive. It's all gone every month. So basically it's just like working to live, and keep a roof over your head."

There is a lack of education and resources when it comes to housing and many of the participants had to figure out how to get housing on their own or rely on a family member or friend to help them.

Meeting Basic Needs

Participants are often released into society with no financial safety net, expected to survive and rebuild with little to nothing. Many have no savings, no work experience, and no idea how to navigate modern systems. One individual that was incarcerated for 33 years, described just how wide the gap was between what they needed and what was available:

My first priority was securing housing… my second concern was figuring out how to replenish the nine different medications I need to survive… third, I needed a job… fourth, I needed clothing… fifth was figuring out how to feed myself. But without proper identification, I couldn't get any of them.

Another participant shared,

"I didn't have that ability... I really wanted to have those responsibilities again... the freedom that both [a license and job] provided, which is financial stability… being able to provide for my own needs instead of being dependent on a correctional officer."

These personal stories reflect how basic needs like food, shelter, and healthcare become immediate stressors upon release.

Financial Hardships

One of the most consistent issues raised by participants was the lack of any meaningful financial support at the time of release. Individuals are released with nothing but a prison identification and expected to navigate systems that require identification, credit, or documentation they don't have. *"All I had when I was released was a prison ID,"* one participant explained. ***"When it came to obtaining my state ID, Social Security card, and other necessary documents, it was almost like trying to pass an act of Congress."*** In some cases, even the money they had saved during incarceration wasn't returned in a timely manner: "*They sent me the money that was in my account three months after my release."* Another participant shared, ***"Since I've been in California, I haven't fallen under any kind of disability assistance or financial support. I wasn't provided with any relief from a parole board because I wasn't released from a California institution."*** These experiences show that in the absence of financial support, identification, or coordinated assistance, individuals are often forced to navigate reentry alone with no clear path forward.

When someone is wrongfully convicted and later proven innocent, some states have laws in place that require the government to compensate them for the years lost in prison. Through this compensation which is meant to help them, it often arrives long after the critical period following release. One exoneree explained, ***"They sent me the money that was in my account three months after my release,"*** referring not to compensation, but to personal funds that were withheld by the system. This is important because compensation is meant to address the harm of wrongful imprisonment. The basic return of one's own money is often delayed, worsening financial and emotional hardship. Another described the emotional and financial impact of the delay. These delays extend instability. The gap between the moment of freedom and the arrival of financial restitution forces individuals to remain in survival mode. In theory, compensation is supposed to make up for the harm done. In practice, it often comes too late to prevent housing insecurity, health risks, or mental strain in the early stages of reentry.

For some, no compensation ever comes. One person explained the failure for that simply: ***"I haven't fallen under any kind of financial assistance or support."*** Because of jurisdictional differences, many exonerees fall between systems and never receive a dollar, even after years or decades of wrongful incarceration. Despite being cleared, they are still not recognized as individuals owed restitution. One participant described how the absence of compensation made it harder to stabilize their life or even catch up with everyday living expenses. Others shared how not receiving support after being proven innocent made it feel like the state had no interest in repair, just in dismissal. The lack of consistent policy across state lines means outcomes are based more on geography than justice. When there's no compensation, exonerees are left to rebuild their lives with zero acknowledgment of the harm caused or the resources needed to move forward.

Even beyond the lack of immediate help or compensation, participants face the challenge of returning to society with no credit history and, in some cases, debt. One person shared, ***"We had to get our financial things in order… we don't have much because we're renting… I can't even raise enough money to buy an $8,000 car."*** The absence of a credit record makes it difficult to rent an apartment, apply for a loan, or even be considered for certain jobs. Another explained that despite finding a good job quickly, financial systems still presented a barrier: ***"I just really wanted to have those responsibilities again… [like] financial stability, being able to provide for my own needs."*** Many participants come home with debts they didn't earn, court fees, fines, or child support that continued accumulating while they were inside. As one participant pointed out,

"Even after I got a job, they wouldn't take taxes out of my paycheck because the IRS had me listed as dead. I had to get a credit card, but I couldn't get one because I didn't have a bank account, and I couldn't get a bank account because I had no credit."

This example shows how systemic barriers tied to financial identity make reentry significantly more difficult. Many are released with outstanding debts, such as court fines, restitution, or child support that continued during incarceration. Despite their convictions there are few systems if any in place to help with these issues. Even starting over without credit is like being punished all over again only this time, the system doesn't even pretend it's offering a second chance.

Impacts of Wrongful Conviction and Incarceration on Mental Health and Well-Being

Individuals who were wrongfully convicted and later exonerated or paroled often speak about the emotional strain of trying to piece their lives back together after being released (Zannella & Smith, 2020). Many participants in this study describe feeling a strong sense of self-blame, struggling with depression and anxiety, and having trouble being around others due to anxiety in social situations. Trust also becomes a major issue, not just with individuals participants encounter, but also with the systems that failed them. There's a deep grief over the years lost and a sense of being overwhelmed by the sudden freedom they were given. For some, these struggles lead to maladaptive coping strategies, such as substance. Despite these challenges, participants found strength in their journey by learning how to turn silence into strength, embracing their identity after release, and focusing on personal growth. The support and guidance from the Innocence Center gave them hope and a sense of direction during their reentry.

Depression & Anxiety

Participants often struggle with emotional challenges and anger management due to the deep trauma of being incarcerated (Grady et al., 2024). Many study participants spent years in a highly controlled, negative, and coercive environment, leaving them feeling angry, resentful, and disconnected from their emotions. A participant was convicted of shooting and killing an individual in the mid-90s. Despite consistently claiming his innocence and passing a lie detector test, he was found guilty of murder and conspiracy to commit murder. The judge sentenced him to more than 25 years to life in prison (The Innocence Center, n.d.). Being wrongfully convicted had a significant impact on his mental health, making it difficult for him to process and feel his emotions. He shared,

"I was mad and bitter. Depressed, then I kind of, for a long time in prison, was numb. Those negative feelings prevented me from starting my process of changing myself earlier… The anger was coming from pain inside me… I just didn't know all the stuff that was going on inside of me from my past traumas. I had to learn how to identify them, speak to them, understand them."

A participant shared that she was incarcerated for 13 years after being wrongfully convicted of murdering her spouse. She not only endured the trauma of discovering her spouse's body but was also falsely accused of the crime. The career she had worked so hard to build was quickly taken from her. Although she was eventually exonerated, the trauma of her wrongful conviction has led to an ongoing battle with depression and anxiety. She shared,

"Being wrongfully convicted] made me depressed and made me want to kill myself. Uh, I have anxiety to this day. Um, it made me feel ashamed, it made me feel like I was less than. It made me feel like I was just bottom of the barrel because of what had happened to me. And, so that's how I felt, you know? And still to this day, you know, I get sad because of everything that has happened, but I have to be careful not to go into self-pity."

A participant shared that while he was not formally diagnosed with bipolar disorder, the intense emotional ups and downs of incarceration made him feel as though the environment could cause someone to become bipolar. He also described experiencing depression during this time, as the harsh conditions took a significant toll on his mental well-being. He stated, ***"I used to have this funny saying... I would rather be depressed because happiness doesn't come every day, but depression sticks with you for a little while."***

One participant stated that in prison he had to stay on high alert, especially due to being confined in a crowded environment. He stated,***"Crowds still bother me to this day... it can be a little nerve-wracking, but I just try to understand that's how society is."***

Participants experience anxiety and PTSD triggers in social settings due to the overwhelming stress of unfamiliar or crowded environments. A participant explained that being in a large crowd can quickly lead to anxiety attacks, causing them to feel the need to leave to regain control. They stated,***"I get a lot of anxiety attacks. And uh, like if I'm in a big crowd, I start getting anxiety and I have to just walk out."*** This heightened anxiety is often accompanied by feelings of depression, with individuals questioning whether they are acting or behaving "right". One participant stated,

"Sometimes, it's just the anxiety about what's going on around you, and other times, it's depression that just hits you." You start questioning, 'Am I doing things right?' Especially when you're faced with situations like not having enough money for a bill or no food. It makes you wonder, 'What am I doing wrong?'"

These experiences show that the effects of incarceration don't end at the prison gates. Everyday situations like being in a crowd can still trigger anxiety and feel threatening, keeping many in a constant state of alert even after release. Especially when financial struggles, like not being able to pay bills or afford food, add to the stress.

Substance Use as a Trauma Response

Participants who were wrongfully convicted may turn to substances to cope with the emotional pain and trauma of being wrongfully convicted. Out of the 19 participants interviewed, four reported using substances as a way to cope. A participant shared that after being home for about a year, the emotional and mental toll of adjusting to life after incarceration became overwhelming. He described moments where everything felt like too much to handle, leading him to self-medicate as a way to cope. He began using substances like marijuana again to numb the anxiety and stress, explaining that it helped him "zone out" when the pressure felt unbearable. He stated, ***"You start to resort back to the little things that kind of help you numb the feeling. Like I started smoking weed again and stuff just to kind of, be all right, I gotta zone out. This is too much shit for me to take on right now."*** Another participant shared that while in prison the emotional weight became so overwhelming he used substances as a way to numb his pain, escape the constant judgment, and block out the trauma he was experiencing. He also shared that there were times he thought about taking his own life, especially after being labeled a sex offender, something he said felt worse than a slap. Although he came close, he held onto the hope that one day he would prove his innocence. He stated,

"I started using drugs in there for me to forget... I became a junkie. I started using drugs because it would ease me, like I wouldn't care... I was going to try to end my life. But then I said, no, man, you're not going to prove to the world, to everyone, that you're innocent."

For many, substance use isn't about escape–it's about managing pain without the proper tools to process it.

Emotion Suppression

Participants expressed having to suppress their emotions in prison, making it harder to process them later. A participant shared that after being away from his family for over ten years, his biggest struggle at home has been showing compassion, as he had cognitively trained himself to suppress emotional reactions and rely solely on logic as a coping mechanism. He shared,

"I had to make a decision that once I walk into prison, either I'm going to walk in thinking with my heart or I'm going to walk in thinking with my mind... I had to kill off my heart and my emotion and just think logically about everything."

Another participant shared that they initially avoided talking about their experiences to prevent reliving the trauma or placing an emotional burden on others. Over time, however, they found healing through therapy and the support provided by programs linked through The Innocence Project and The Innocence Center. The participant stated, ***"I didn't come out with the mentality of really wanting to speak about it... It wasn't until after I started getting involved with The Innocence Project that I became more vulnerable to speak about my situation."*** This highlights the emotional challenges tied to the difficulty of processing trauma under the weight of long-term emotional suppression.

Difficulty Trusting Individuals and Institutions

Participants often struggle to trust others, resisting emotional openness after incarceration. Even in supportive environments, they struggle with discomfort around others, which can lead to self-isolation. A participant stated that he had a hard time opening up about how he was truly feeling because he didn't trust others. He shared that he struggled with something he didn't even realize at the time. Whenever someone asked how he was doing, his automatic response was always "*I'm okay,*" suppressing his true emotions instead of being honest and . He stated, ***"Every time somebody asked me how I was doing, my first response was, 'I'm okay, I'm okay,' instead of just being like, 'Ah, I'm a little stressed out."*** This reluctance to open up creates barriers to building trust, as participants learn to suppress their emotions and keep others at a distance. Many feel abandoned by the system that wrongfully convicted them, and they are left with a sense of betrayal. A participant shared that after he was released, he attempted to seek help from support services, but he often found himself being passed around with no real assistance (see also Halushka, 2020), which only deepened his lack of trust. He stated,

"Support organizations? They claim they'll help, but you just get pushed around from one to the other with no real answers. I'm calling to try to get back to where I need to be. But nobody understood on the phone what an exonerated person was, or what it meant to be in prison innocent. You could tell the laugh on the other line. You could hear the rolling of the eyes, and so I'm retraumatized every time I'm trying to put one foot in front of the others."

Additionally, the system's failure to acknowledge its mistakes leaves participants, making it even harder to trust others or seek help moving forward. A participant shared that the system never took accountability for wrongfully convicting him and committing the real crime of putting an innocent person in prison. He stated, ***"I've had a hard time trusting people again, especially the system. I feel like they set me up to fail."*** For those wrongfully convicted, trust in the justice system is often profoundly shattered. In the late 1990s, three women were attacked or sexually assaulted in Los Angeles under strikingly similar circumstances, leading prosecutors to believe the same individual was responsible for all three incidents. One participant was wrongfully convicted of multiple sexual assaults due to eyewitness misidentification and spent 16 years in prison before DNA evidence identified a third-party suspect (The Innocence Center, n.d.). Being wrongfully convicted without any physical evidence linking him to the crimes caused him to lose trust in the justice system. He shared,

"I lost trust in the system. When I got arrested, I lost trust in the system because when I was being charged, and even when I went to the lineup in the county jail, and when I was going to court, I kept saying to myself, 'There's no possible way. They can't convict me because I didn't do it. I mean, what kind of evidence could they have?'"

Despite the deep loss of trust in the justice system, moments like these helped him regain a sense of humanity and validation. He expressed **"*The fact that one of the victims came up to me and expressed her sorrowfulness for me, having lost all that time made me feel validated, made me feel like a human again.*"** Can participants trust a system that they feel never trusted them in the first place?

Participants who were wrongfully convicted often struggle with self-blame and doubt, even though they were not at fault. A participant, wrongfully convicted of sexual assault and murder as an adolescent, was coerced into signing a false confession. Reflecting on the experience, he blamed his younger self, feeling that he should have known better, even though he was threatened with never seeing his family again if he didn't sign. He stated, ***"One of the biggest things I had to struggle with is forgiving my 17-year-old self because I just couldn't understand how like, 'Why? How would you sign a paper? You know what? You should've known better."*** They may question past decisions and feel responsible for what happened, especially when hardships continue after release. A participant shared that he was constantly harassed by investigators and other authority figures, who insisted he committed the crime he did not commit. He explained that he would defend his innocence, but his claims were always shut down for years. He said that the constant harassment and false accusations made him question himself and led to feelings of self-blame. He stated,

"Obviously, I'm sitting here yelling—not yelling, but pretty much proclaiming—like, 'Hey, that ain't what happened. I didn't do this,' da da da, and all I'm hearing from the system is, 'No, you did. Nah, you did.' And I'm like, 'No, I didn't.' So... it messes with your head... after a while, that person starts to question themselves like, damn, am I stupid?"

The constant denial of their innocence by the system eroded their confidence, causing them to second-guess their own judgment and sense of self-worth.

Grief Over Lost Time

Participants who were wrongfully convicted often struggle to rebuild their lives because of the deep grief over lost time (Brooks & Greenberg, 2020). Many feel like they are far behind, having missed out on supporting their aging parents, caring for their loved ones, or building careers. A participant, reflecting on their experience, shared that their life was stolen from them and that they will never get back the time or opportunities they missed. They stated, ***"I just feel like I can't get that time back. I feel like that was my life. I had a whole bunch of stuff taken from me."*** Years spent in prison take away crucial moments, like family time or personal growth, leaving them struggling to make up for the time lost. A participant shared that after being released, they felt overwhelmed by all the missed opportunities and how far behind they were in life. She stated, "***I'm trying to just be like everybody else now, and we can't, because we're so fucking far behind. And we have a hard time putting one foot in front of the other."*** .The feeling of being behind in life, particularly when they never should have been in that position, is overwhelming. A participant reflected on the overwhelming difficulty of adjusting to life after release, expressing that the emotional toll was so heavy at times that they felt it would be easier to give up. They shared the deep struggle they faced, stating, ***"It was easier in prison than it is out here. That's a horrible thing for an innocent person to have to think or feel. Because I shouldn't even been in this fucking position to begin with."*** Adjusting to life after incarceration is incredibly difficult, as so much has been lost, leaving them to rebuild a future after their lives were unfairly interrupted.

A participant shared that after being released, they wanted to live a normal life but quickly realized there was so much to rebuild and catch up on. She was wrongfully accused of murder and incarcerated for 13 years. She expressed that for many who were wrongfully convicted, it is a struggle to find a sense of purpose, especially when it feels like that purpose was taken away. She stated,

"We just want to get back to our normal life, and we have a lot to rebuild and we are trying to play catch-up. And now we're trying to find our purpose, where our purpose has disappeared because we're not raising kids anymore. After all, we're grown. We're not being our parents' caretakers because they're dead. We're trying to just be like everybody else now, and we can't, because we're so fucking far behind."

Even after completing programs meant to help, the emotional weight and practical challenges of starting over remain. A participant expressed ongoing frustration and pain over the time lost to wrongful incarceration, sharing that even personal growth and rehabilitation programs couldn't undo the damage. One participant stated, ***"It's still taking a toll... the system is full of crap... I did all the programs, life skills, anger management, but it doesn't change the fact that I lost all that time."*** They want the support they need to rebuild their lives and find a place where they no longer feel left behind.

Overwhelmed by Freedom

Participants reported struggling with the sudden loss of structure they had in prison, leading to feelings of chaos and overwhelm. A participant shared that after serving almost 20 years in prison for a crime they didn't commit, how tough it was to adjust to life after being released. The fast pace of the outside world felt overwhelming, with all the responsibilities that came with it, such as getting a job, paying bills, and just managing day-to-day life. He explained that,

In the beginning, it was a little overwhelming because life moves so fast out here. It's difficult adjusting after being confined in an environment where every day is the same, and then suddenly being surrounded by so much. Making that transition back to a normal life, such as having a job, feeding yourself, and paying bills, can be really challenging.

Participants often described feeling immense pressure to quickly regain independence and catch up with life milestones that others had already achieved. One participant shared that he was released from prison on a Thursday after serving a lengthy sentence and began working the following Monday. Although a former manager initially offered him a job, restrictions tied to his parole prevented him from accepting the position. Instead, he found employment through a workforce agency that he discovered on his own. He emphasized that, at the time, there was no available support or guidance to help him navigate the transition. As a result, he had to manage the overwhelming challenges of reentry independently.
I think anything could have helped me at the time, you know, but since the help wasn't there, my only option was to go get a job. That's what I did. I think I got out on like a Thursday, and by Monday, I already had a job.

He described the transition back into society as overwhelming and fast-paced, especially after spending years in an environment where each day felt the same. When asked if the transition was difficult, he replied, ***"It was, it was. I wasn't expecting it, you know, I was trying to catch up on time, but I had no room for it… we were going through some financial situations that I had no other option."*** His drive to support himself and his family, while facing financial hardship, left no time to pause or process the emotional weight of reintegration.

Another participant shared that while connecting with other exonerees, he expressed that it's hard to "catch up" and often feel left behind when other exonerees reach milestones they haven't yet. He stated, **"I'm trying to catch up... everybody's talking about buying houses... and I'm like, I'm not even one step closer to figuring out how to get my life back together."** The desire to be self-sufficient adds to the burden, leaving participants overwhelmed and feeling like there's not enough time to achieve everything they need. A participant shared that they didn't struggle financially after their release because they had strong family support, but what overwhelmed them most was the desire to be independent and not rely on others.

They explained that it's a lot for someone to handle after doing so much time and living such a structured life day in and day out. He stated, "Just wanting to be responsible for myself and not wanting to rely on anybody else... it's a lot for an individual after doing so much time." This pressure to catch up intensifies their struggle to rebuild their lives.One participant shared his experience regarding his employer being upset that he had been incarcerated. He stated,

"I had got a job at a men's sober living home, and 6 months later the boss came in and said "you've been to prison for almost 30 years and she said,"well you can't work this job." I told her I was innocent. She said 'can you give me some paperwork that proves you're innocent?' I got the paperwork and she said I can stay, but if the state gets involved she has to let me go. So I went to find me another job and then she got mad! She called the unemployment office and told them I quit. I couldn't afford to sit around and wait on something to happen."

Both exonerated and paroled individuals alike disclosed that they often had to show documentation of their innocence to keep jobs, however; this was not always received well by employers, often resulting in being let go or denied the opportunity. Another participant shared his story stating,

"When I turned in my application, my manager actually called me into the office like you know, what's this all about? And so I explained to him. He goes 'look if it was up to me I would give you a job right now. But I'm just a worker like everyone else. And unfortunately the company that we work for does not allow any felons.' I said but I'm not a felon. And he says yeah but unfortunately it's out of my control. So they ended up letting me go and I had to go find another job."

Many participants struggled with such experiences where they felt employers did not truly believe their innocence, or held some sort of bias against formerly incarcerated individuals. They also expressed feeling some shame as a result of being wrongfully convicted due to others' perception of certain charges. A participant shared,

"I still have those fears. Like you don't want people to know your history and stuff even in the workplace. So you know I really still have those fears. Like I said, there's a stigma attached to that, you know. Especially a murderer. You're pretty much labeled a killer, or a murderer despite being innocent. And a lot of people don't wanna be around that. They don't really know the story but all they know is what's on the sheet. They don't even know the individual."

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"I still have those fears. Like you don't want people to know your history and stuff even in the workplace. So you know I really still have those fears. Like I said, there's a stigma attached to that, you know. Especially a murderer. You're pretty much labeled a killer, or a murderer despite being innocent. And a lot of people don't wanna be around that. They don't really know the story but all they know is what's on the sheet. They don't even know the individual."

While participants were innocent of all charges accused of, they still faced stigma and discrimination due to others' biases and judgments of their criminal record. They additionally expressed having concerns socially such as dating, as a result of being wrongfully incarcerated for so long and how that would be perceived. A participant disclosed his experience after contracting an infectious disease while incarcerated. He shared,

"This is a cyst and it goes all the way up into my hand and I've had it for four years. I also had a lymphoma on my neck. A whole bunch of medical issues started popping up on my body. I contracted valley fever while in prison and the CDCR says they don't know nothing about it. The valley fever started blowing me up and I almost died because they didn't wanna give me the medication I needed. I started feeling like a weakling and would walk around and you see people looking at you weird, and even ladies looking at you asking 'do you need some help'? It takes a toll on you, you feel embarrassed and it can send you into a depression. And then I don't wanna get into a relationship because I don't wanna feel uncomfortable, or make them feel uncomfortable either. I don't want to have to talk about that, you know. It's really hard for people that age in prison. They just want you to go off and die somewhere."

Support Systems and Relationships

Participants often speak about the challenges that they experienced when trying to reunify and reintegrate back into households with loved ones after being released (Miller, 2022). The adjustment from such a drastic change of environment from prison to normal life again was difficult, and took time to acclimate to new surroundings. Many expressed difficulty with learning how to trust others again which was directly attributed to the dangerous and unpredictable environment of prison that they endured. One participant stated, ***"I mean myself, I came out, I was very sketchy. I wasn't comfortable with people around me. Literally I couldn't have somebody walking behind me because I was very jumpy over it, you know. And that was one of the biggest things, was stopping that. My wife told me numerous times you need to stop, you're okay"*** Participants that shared a similar experience really leaned on others' support and reminders that they are now safe. Participants stated that their continued hypervigilance after release directly impacted their ability to integrate back into family households, and their ability to socialize with children and significant others again. An exonerated participant stated,

"Upon coming home, I could literally tell you like the first three years, it was just…it was crazy. Mentally it was crazy you know trying to get reintegrated into society, trying to learn how to get readapted with my family, my kids, my wife. And then still trying to function you gotta go get a job. It's like, how do you deal with all these things and the pressure at one time?"

Several participants stated that they needed to work on themselves and learn how to coexist with family again while in a normal environment, along with the pressure of trying to rebuild their lives. Many participants that were released on parole and received transitional housing assistance for six months or more, stated that the continued support of programming and peer groups required by housing was helpful to them while reconnecting with loved ones. They expressed that it created networking opportunities with others and assisted them with gaining additional support systems such as therapy, employment, and financial resources for formerly incarcerated individuals. On the other hand, exonerated participants were not provided the opportunity upon release to receive access to additional support groups and programs that could have helped improve their reintegration experience such as enhance social skills, reduce hypervigilance, and establish connections to resources after decades of wrongful incarceration. Exonerated participants were left to solely rely on guidance from any friends and family around, to navigate freedom again. Many also expressed that while they would have loved to receive programming services upon release, TIC was a great support system to them in their journey and always picked up the phone and made the time to hear about any issues they had while reintegrating.

Difficulties Reunifying With Family

Many participants expressed some level of difficulty when trying to reintegrate with family and loved ones after being released. This was due to the lengthy incarceration terms that they endured and the physical distance that kept them apart. Some expressed that being wrongfully incarcerated for such a substantial amount of time while fighting for their innocence put strain on various relationships. This, along with the men coming out of such a volatile environment in prison, made it difficult to adjust to living with family and significant others again. One participant expressed how difficult it was to watch his child grow up only through pictures over the years, and how his strained relationship with the mother of his child affected his ability to stay close with him throughout incarceration.

"And then also with my son, that's another big one you know because I came to prison when he was just 8 months old. So of course me really getting to know him and him getting to know me… and that bond we weren't able to establish like that is now being established and we were both already grown men."

He additionally expressed that it was challenging to get acclimated to living with his spouse post release. Only relying on short visits and phone calls did not allow him to know his spouse on a deeper level until they lived together after exoneration, and getting used to each other's habits was an adjustment.

"Oh and of course transitioning with my wife, in the sense of we were together for 13 of those 28 years. We were getting visits, I met her while I was still in prison so there was a level of… we knew each other but we didn't know each other because we wasn't in super close proximity to each other all the time. So even though to me it's exciting to be able to do that, but it can be challenging because now we have to understand each other everyday. How do we coexist? You know… so she's seeing my quirks, I'm seeing her quirks, so how do we work around this you know, how do we coexist in one household?"

Importance of Peer Groups

Participants reported engaging in programming groups while they were incarcerated, which gave them peace, camaraderie, and the ability to look within themselves despite having been wrongfully convicted. Most participants stated that they found a level of comfort and guidance by having access to programming and peer support groups subsequent to their release. Unfortunately, exonerated individuals did not have access to these groups once they were released and transitioned out into the community. This is due to the court overturning their conviction after having made a mistake, which then views them as innocent in a court of law. Exonerees are abruptly released from prison without any assigned parole officer, or any continuation of care established in the community. One participant stated

"I did a lot of programming when I was in prison. Um, being able to continue and like I said, be around like a peer support group and network really helps. You know… where you can talk and hash stuff out, you can get some direction. Cause you're going to have some issues where things are not gonna work out like you've planned."

In contrast, paroled individuals had immediate access to support groups and programming within their transitional housing residences. In fact, the majority of paroled men stated that programming while still in transitional living was mandatory as a means to help them get acclimated to society again. They stated that this requirement provided them great networking opportunities to help share resources for jobs and other assistance programs, assistance with gaining necessary identification and medical information, and acclimating to a fast paced world that was so different from when they left. This raises the issue that exonerated individuals need to be provided that same support and opportunity to reacclimate to a new environment that has advanced technologically and socially in various regards.

This is the thing though, for exonerated people that's coming home , that gets their case overturned and the judge lets them go, they have nothing. That's a very difficult place to be in especially after you've done 20-30 years and they say *"ok we messed up, we made a mistake, you're free, bye"* … Like what?! So I think this is actually a great idea, to have something for exonerees to come home to, those services, because it's needed.

Exonerees are truly left at a disadvantage for successful reintegration after being released from decades of wrongful imprisonment. Since exonerated individuals are excluded from receiving reentry services and transitional housing opportunities, they are left to fend for themselves while trying to rebuild a new life and also repair the harm that the state inflicted upon them. One participant expressed the disadvantages he experienced of not being able to participate in programming post release.

I think all across the board everything like all programs could have helped me mentally reintegrate into society at the time. But, there's nothing out there for us. I mean in my situation they literally opened the door and pushed me out, like *"here figure it out."* If those programs would have been there, it could have been a lot different for me, the struggle would have been a lot different.

You have exonerated individuals that went through a 30, 40 year sentence wrongfully convicted then they come home and there's nobody there to support them.

Transitional services should be offered to both exonerees and paroled individuals regardless of their label upon release. Exonerees also spend several years in the dangerous and unpredictable prison environment fighting for their innocence and freedom, therefore; it is paramount that they are given access to reentry support in the community as a way to slowly acclimate themselves to a new world.

Seeking Mental Health Support

Participants faced mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD, with mixed experiences in seeking support. Some found therapy helpful, especially when reminded that healing takes time. A participant shared that being in the community is difficult. He gets scared when he sees police, feels anxious at social gatherings, and avoids movies related to his case because they bring up intense emotions. Therapy helped him open up about his feelings, and his therapist provided support by validating his emotions and reminding him that healing takes time. He was diagnosed with Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and anxiety. He stated,***"I'm not afraid to say I am kind of messed up a little bit in that aspect... my therapist said it's normal... it's going to take some time."***

Others regretted not seeking therapy earlier, fearing it might reopen old wounds. A participant explained that countless nights he couldn't sleep, constantly thinking about what had happened to him, what he went through, and the time he lost with his kids and family. He stated, ***"I should have taken the Innocence Center up on their suggestion of, you know, mental health therapy... those things still affect me today."*** Overall, although therapy was available, it was often underused or seen as insufficient in addressing the depth of their trauma. A participant shared that he initially avoided therapy because he believed opening up about his experiences would only reopen old wounds without providing any real help. He thought therapy would just have him talk about his past and then leave him to handle it on his own. He explained that he had learned to suppress his emotions over the years, convincing himself that doing so made them easier to manage. He stated, ***"Therapy was offered to me, but I didn't take it because I thought it would just tear the wound open again... I'm actually gonna do it now."***

Another participant shared his experience of seeking mental health therapy after release. ***"Being in there for so long, certain habits develop and you learn to live with that mentality and it becomes normal."***

He expressed that being wrongfully incarcerated for 29 and a half years made him develop certain characteristics since he needed to behave a certain way in order to survive. He also expressed how trusting others is nonexistent in the prison environment. He stated, ***"Because if you trust too much, you can end up getting hurt."*** He later understood the psychological damage that he endured while in prison and sought out therapy which he found helpful.

"So I really didn't trust people when I came home. And I didnt realize that I didn't trust people that much until I was being told and exposed. And in that place you have to have a certain mentality to survive. So therapy and talking my way through things, trying to connect back into society is important because everybody that goes through that place for that long gets traumatized, I don't care what you say. It's like you're in a war zone."

Many individuals identified that mental health was a challenging aspect to reintegration as evidenced by a heightened state of alertness and mistrust of others upon release back into society. Both exonerated and paroled expressed difficulty adjusting mentally to life outside of prison. They expressed hyper-awareness of their surroundings, symptoms of depression, symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and concerns with road rage. Many that did receive therapy while inside or after, stated that it was helpful to talk through past trauma and feelings of grief, due to lost time of their life and being wrongfully incarcerated.

Some of the individuals shared that they did not think they needed therapy, but wished they had taken the opportunity to participate in it or wished it was offered to them. Researchers found that knowing where to find and seek mental health support after release was a real barrier for exonerees since they did not have any guidance from transitional housing staff. Some participants also felt pressure to work quickly soon after release to fulfill parental and family obligations, which hindered their ability to properly adjust and seek the mental health support needed. Additionally, it was noted that some individuals felt reservations about seeking mental health support while still incarcerated since it could be used against them at parole board hearings.

Support from The Innocence Center

Participants shared that TIC played a crucial role in supporting them throughout their reintegration process. Many expressed deep appreciation for being part of a community that genuinely cares, highlighting how meaningful it was to be surrounded by a support system that consistently showed up for them and prioritized their needs.

A participant shared that after serving over 20 years in prison, he was fortunate to have a great relationship and support system from his family by his side through his whole journey. He was also deeply grateful to have TIC by his side, providing guidance and standing up for him when he needed it most. He acknowledged that not everyone is as lucky, as many individuals reenter society without the comfort of family or organizational support. He stated, ***"You know what? They were very beneficial to me. They were very supportive and they were willing to help me with anything that I needed, whether it was medical care, dental care, with the job, they had outlets to help me or programs to help me."*** TIC's support made all the difference during this difficult transition.

Many participants shared that TIC was more than just a reintegration program; it felt like family, consistently supporting them every step of the way. A participant explained that he didn't feel supported by one of his attorneys, but was later connected with the team at the Innocence Center. He shared that once he became involved with the TIC team, he felt truly supported throughout his journey, both during his incarceration and after his release. He shared,

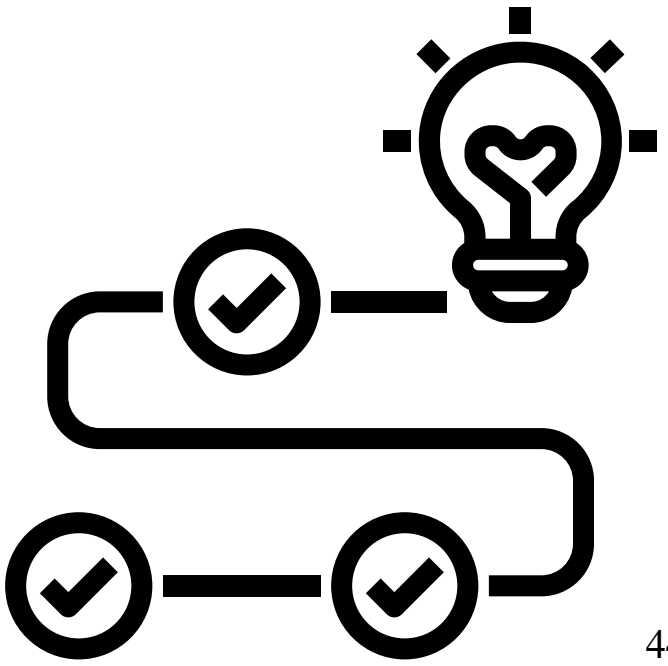
"They've done everything. They've helped me financially. They've helped me spiritually, they've helped me even now we have an event, the Innocence Convention in April…they wanted me to speak but I was shy to it. There were too many people. This year they want me to speak, I'm gonna do it. So the Innocence Center has helped me with my confidence."

A participant who was wrongfully convicted of sexual assault after being misidentified by witnesses and the victim was later proven innocent through DNA testing, which identified a third-party suspect. He explained that TIC supported him throughout his journey and was there for him every step of the way. He explained that the Innocence Center helped him reintegrate,

"By their continued friendship. It's really nice to be able to, to reach out to them, you know, from time to time and just have a conversation…You know, Mike's been, Mike's been a real friend to me…when I was going through my, um, training program, I forgot how to do fractions and Mike … would spend like an hour with me and tutor me on math and he might teach me how to do fractions again. Um, that's the kind of people that they are. They really care. Their first priority is to help get wrongfully convicted people out of prison, but they care about them when they get out."

For many, TIC wasn't just a source of support. It became a vital resource, offering the care, community, and confidence necessary to help them rebuild their lives.

CONCLUSION& RECOMMENDATIONS



The findings from these interviews make it clear that freedom is the start of a complex, ongoing process. While exoneration legally acknowledges a person's innocence, it raley provides the tools or structure necessary to navigate life after incarceration. Participants emphasized that reentry is about much more than being released, learning how to function in a society that moved on without them is often a common theme. Across interviews, the commonalities emerged: lack of identification, housing, income, healthcare, and meaningful support. Many individuals had no guidance navigating these things during this crucial transition. Barriers like delayed compensation, limited credit access and job insecurity only made the process more difficult. In short, while the system may clear their name it does little to help them move forward.

If reentry is going to be more than what it is now, it has to be backed by so much investment into these individuals' lives. This means financial assistance, trauma informed and culturally relevant services, access to mental health care as well as job and housing support. These recommendations are designed to move past gestures and toward long term infrastructure that truly supports exonerated and paroled individuals not just upon first release but throughout the years it takes to rebuild their lives. Researchers found that proper training regarding how to disclose their past wrongful conviction would be helpful upon release to assist with negative stigmas and being treated like a criminal by society. Lastly, our findings highly raise the issue that exonerated individuals need to be provided that same support and opportunity as paroled individuals to reacclimate to a new environment that has advanced technologically and socially in various regards.

IMPLEMENT A STRUCTURED CASE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM 01.

Participants emphasized the importance of consistent and active communication between organizations and their clients. They shared that clients should never feel left out or forgotten. Regular updates and check-ins help individuals feel supported, rather than abandoned once assistance begins. To truly support those they serve, organizations must prioritize ongoing communication and relationship-building throughout and beyond the reintegration process.

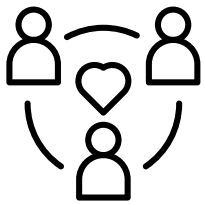
To address this need, it is recommended that The Innocence Center implement a structured case management system. Case managers would act as consistent points of contact, guiding clients through reentry while offering individualized support. They could connect individuals with essential resources such as housing, job training, education, counseling, and access to food, transportation, and communication tools (After Innocence, n.d.). Having multiple case managers would allow for better caseload distribution and ensure support is tailored to each client's unique needs.

For example, the After Innocence organization has successfully provided trauma-informed case management to more than 800 individuals, demonstrating the significant impact of this model in supporting the wrongfully convicted (After Innocence, n.d.). Implementing this approach would not only enhance reintegration but also align with restorative justice principles by promoting healing, accountability, and community support.

DEVELOP SHARED EXPERIENCE SUPPORT NETWORKS 02.

Wrongfully convicted exonerated and paroled individuals carry unique stories, but there is immense value in connecting with others who have had similar experiences. These connections offer an understanding that many professionals, regardless of their training, may struggle to provide without first hand experience. Participants highlighted the need for specialized support systems that reflect the realities of wrongful conviction, emphasizing that peer support plays a crucial role in encouraging genuine care, comfort, and a willingness to be vulnerable. Implementing mentorship programs that pair individuals with mentors who share similar experiences can offer valuable guidance and help build personal connections that support healing and adaptation to life after release. Additionally, support groups specifically for exonerated or paroled individuals could provide a safe space where they can share their stories and receive the emotional and social support they need. Creating spaces for individuals with lived experience to connect, both in and out of prison, is vital to helping them express their emotions and seek the help they need.

At Exonerated Nation, the Social Support Team provides compassionate, culturally competent, and trauma-informed services tailored to the unique needs of exonerees upon immediate release. Recognizing that wrongful incarceration can have long-term impacts on mental health, financial stability, and personal relationships, the organization offers holistic, peer-centered support (Exonerated Nation, n.d.). Through their peer mentorship program, exonerees are connected with others who share similar experiences, helping to build a sense of community and understanding. In addition, their social services navigation ensures that clients receive the critical resources and guidance needed for successful reintegration. This comprehensive approach supports exonerees in reclaiming their lives, restoring their independence, and finding stability after release.



SUPPORT FOR REENTRY FAMILIES 03.

Participants recommended the need for family and parenting programs that can help prepare individuals who were wrongfully convicted to rebuild relationships, reconnect with loved ones, and navigate the responsibilities of parenting after long periods of separation. While there are existing reentry programs, there remains limited programming specifically tailored to the unique experiences of wrongfully convicted individuals. CDCR offers community reentry programs for both men and women, such as the Male Community Reentry Program (MCRP) and the Female Community Reentry Program (FCRP). These programs offer a variety of community-based rehabilitative services, including guidance and support, family reunification, education, employment assistance, healthcare services, and housing support (CDCR, n.d.). The goal is to help participants successfully re-enter the community and rebuild family relationships. Similarly, San Diego County offers a Second Chance program that provides comprehensive reentry services, including parenting support, for individuals recently released from incarceration (County of San Diego, n.d.). This program can also be particularly beneficial for wrongfully convicted individuals, as it supports reintegration and family reconnection efforts after release. However, to fully meet the needs of this population, there is a pressing need for programs that are specifically designed to address family dynamics and relationship rebuilding in the context of wrongful conviction.

Some participants shared that seeking therapy with a licensed therapist or psychologist played a major role in helping them adjust after being wrongfully incarcerated. A participant spoke about how therapy should be seen as a normal and essential part of reentry, something that helps you take care of yourself while learning to navigate a world that feels completely new. This feedback highlights an opportunity for the Innocence Center to strengthen its support by making mental health care a regular and proactive part of the reentry process.

The After Innocence organization offers a Mental Health Pilot Project designed to ensure that every exoneree has access to trauma-informed treatment for PTSD and other mental health challenges (After Innocence, n.d.). Many exonerees leave prison with significant psychological trauma, often without having received a formal diagnosis or any form of treatment. Through this initiative, 116 clients were screened for symptoms of depression and PTSD. Of those who participated in follow-up services, 71% reported a reduction in symptoms of both depression and PTSD (After Innocence, n.d.). This kind of data-driven approach to care demonstrates the value of embedding mental health services into reentry efforts.

Therapy services should be introduced early and offered consistently throughout a client's transition period. Every staff member should understand the importance of mental health and be prepared to support and refer clients as needed. Case managers, in particular, should take the lead in coordinating this care, ensuring services are offered regularly and tailored to each individual's specific needs. Expanding the Center's network of trusted mental health professionals would further help ensure that every client receives the support they need to thrive. When possible, it would also be valuable to connect clients with mental health professionals who have themselves been exonerated. These providers may offer a unique sense of understanding and connection that can help clients feel seen and supported in ways that traditional therapeutic relationships might not.

ESTABLISH PROGRAMMING FOR LIFE SKILLS FOR REINTEGRATION

04.

One of the most consistent takeaways across interviews was that release from prison doesn't guarantee readiness for society. Participants repeatedly emphasized that returning home without guidance especially around finances, documents and employment creates avoidable barriers that slow down or completely stall the reentry process. Basic needs like getting an ID, opening a bank account, or applying for Social Security benefits became major challenges. As one participant said, ***"If you could help with housing, we need that. You know, I mean, just the... the IDs... Open up a bank account..."***.**Others pointed to the lack of jobs:** ***"Some of these major corporations like Pepsi, they donate to the Innocence Project. Why not, instead of taking a donation, give one of our exonerees a job?"***. These are foundational things people need to survive and be able to stabilize.

To address this gap, the Innocence center should develop basic needs and life skills programs as a formal part of its reentry strategies. This programming Should be integrated into case management as previously mentioned and peer mentor roles, ensuring that each person has individualized guidance while also learning directly from those who've been through the process themselves. A structured guide covering ways to open a bank account, rebuild credit , apply for public assistance and navigate employment systems should be developed and delivered through one on one support as well as group workshops. Case managers and peer mentors would be responsible for walking individuals through this material, helping them build confidence in everyday systems they may have never been exposed to or may no longer recognize.

In addition to life skills education, the organization should pursue direct employment partnerships with companies that already donate to the Innocence center. Campaigning for jobs not just donations would provide a more meaningful as sustainable investment in exoneree success.

As one participant put it, ***"Give one of our exonerees a job instead of taking the dollars."*** Reentry programs should move to create career building pathways, in these efforts can prioritize hiring those with lived experience and support career development from entry level to long term growth. Ultimately, people are coming home trying to rebuild their lives often from scratch. As one participant stated, ***"We just need the basics. A job, a car, a place to live, money to eat, insurance".*** These needs are the core to successful integration, through meeting with targets trauma informed programming and community based solutions it's necessary.

Some of the biggest takeaways from these interviews is that reentering isn't just about physical freedom it's also about financial survival. People are coming home with nothing, and the system seems to expect them to figure it out on their own. As one participant said, ***"We just need the basics. A job, a car, a place to live, money to eat, insurance."*** If we're serious about reentry, there has to be guaranteed short-term income, real-time help with public benefits, and emergency funds for things like housing deposits or meds. Expecting people to rebuild their lives without giving them something to rebuild with is physically impossible. In this, states should be able to establish transitional streamlines that give those struggling access to public benefits (social security, medicaid, food, and transportation) in order to help people stabilize in those first critical months after release.

Beyond survival, long term stability depends on building financial literacy and access this is often not even talked about. Another participant, mentioned ***"We need more accessible, judgment-free education around credit, savings, even long-term stuff like Roth IRAs. People are down to learn, they just haven't been taught"***. Reentry support has to be a real opportunity not just charity, in this led by people that have lived through it and can help those in it now. Although, organizations like the Innocence center often provide self out of pocket help with their personal resources. Those lived experience education partnerships with not only formerly incarcerated individuals but helping those struggling navigate a space for understanding the systems they've been so in the dark with for so long.

ALL SERVICES SHOULD BE TRAUMA INFORMED AND RESTORATIVE JUSTICE FOCUSED

05.

The trauma caused by wrongful convictions is profound and often long-lasting, leading to PTSD, depression, anxiety, grief, and deep mistrust of institutions. A trauma-informed approach prioritizes the creation of support systems that enhance safety, trust, empowerment, and support, principles grounded in both clinical theory and research-based findings. Likewise, restorative justice provides a path to healing by focusing on the lived experiences of those who are wrongfully convicted, allowing space for truth-telling, recognition of harm, and reintegration into the community (Healing Justice, n.d.). Programs like Healing Justice exemplify this model by facilitating restorative circles, survivor-wrongfully convicted dialogues, and trauma-responsive healing spaces where those who are wrongfully convicted can process their experiences and receive collective support (Healing Justice, n.d.). Embedding trauma-informed and restorative justice principles into all services is not only a moral responsibility but also a crucial step toward creating systems that genuinely support healing and long-term reintegration.

To further this mission, The Innocence Center could consider starting a bi-weekly or monthly support group that integrates both trauma-informed care and restorative justice principles. This group could offer a safe and supportive space where individuals who have experienced wrongful conviction can come together, share their stories, heal, and rebuild trust in themselves and their communities. Having a consistent, scheduled meeting time would provide a sense of stability and routine, allowing participants to rely on a dependable resource for emotional support. By creating such a platform, The Innocence Center would not only provide crucial emotional support but also cultivate a sense of empowerment and connection for those whose voices often go unheard.

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Appendix A. Informed Consent and Interview Guide

INFORMED CONSENT - IN DEPTH INTERVIEW (30 - 60 minutes)

What are the experiences of exonerated individuals returning to communities after release? Under the supervision of Dr. Kimberly Kras, Associate Professor, master's level students at San Diego State University Criminal Justice & Criminology Program are conducting an applicable research study aimed at uncovering difficult barriers during exonerated individuals' reintegration journey back into communities after release from state custodial sentences. Researchers are committed to assisting The Innocence Center organization in establishing a solid plan of action to develop a robust continuum of care for exonerated/paroled individuals that ultimately improves the pathway and accessibility to social services and various supports needed to proactively reintegrate back into society.

We are kindly asking you to participate in a 30-60 minute audio recorded interview with one or two members of our research team to record and understand your individual experiences and valuable insight on this topic. We ask for your participation in this interview due to your recognition as being part of one or more of the following groups:

- A person who has experienced incarceration due to being wrongfully convicted
- Person who has collaborated with The Innocence Center and been fully exonerated from prison
- Person who has collaborated with The Innocence Center and been paroled early from prison

This interview may take place in person, on the phone, or over Zoom. If in-person, this interview can include a sitting format and dialogue where we will audio record our conversation, both with your permission. (If approved, participants will receive a gift card/incentive for participating in our interview).

This study involves risks that are no greater than those you have encountered daily in life. The benefits of this study include having your voice and unique experiences heard. Your participation will contribute to implementing recommendations and finding solutions that may improve support systems for future exonerated individuals navigating post-release reintegration.

We will ask you several questions during the interview; however, you may skip questions or stop participating at any time. If a member of the research team considers a participant's behavior to be hostile or harmful, the interview may end early (the participant will still receive their incentive, if applicable).

Your responses to interview questions will remain confidential. We would like to audio record the interview to ensure we precisely capture what you share. After the interview, the recording will be transcribed (converted into words), and the audio file will be destroyed. Your name and identifying information will not be linked to the transcript. All data will be securely stored in a password-protected electronic folder accessible only by the research team. While results may be published or shared for academic and scientific purposes, they will not include any information that identifies you.

You do not have to participate in this study. You can say "no" at any time, and saying no will not affect your relationship with San Diego State University or The Innocence Center.

- If you would prefer **not to participate**, please let us know, and we will not schedule an interview.
- If you **are** willing to participate, please let us know, and we will arrange a time for the interview.

Contact Information:

If you have any questions or concerns about the research to be conducted or questions regarding your rights as a participant in this study, please reach out to Dr. Kimberly Kras by email at kkras@sdsu.edu.

If you would like to participate in an interview, please indicate which of the following you consent to.

__ I consent to audio recording only
__ I consent to interviews with taking/writing notes only (no audio recording)
__ I consent to interviews with taking/writing notes (with audio recording only)

Interview Guide

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me/us today. My name is _____. (Repeat for interviews occurring in pairs). We are from San Diego State University, in collaboration with The Innocence Center.

Before I/we begin, I/we would like to walk you through the consent form just to ensure that you understand your rights and responsibilities as a participant in the study.

I/We previously asked about this when going over the consent form; however, I/we must mention it again. If I/we ask any questions that you are uncomfortable answering, just let me/us know, or feel free to decline to answer. Additionally, I/we want to reiterate that you do not have to answer any of the questions. It is your decision.

Are there any questions you would like to ask before I/we begin?

Participant Questions and Clarification

(If applicable, write the participant's question(s) and your response.)

Interviewer: "Do you verbally consent to participate in this interview?"

(Confirm consent before proceeding.)

Ice Breaker

So first, as I've mentioned before, we're doing this research because we want to understand the experiences of exonerated individuals in their reintegration back into society after such lengthy prison sentences, as well as what supports would have made your transition occur more seamlessly.

Speaking Point: We know that everyone's story is unique, and we really value the insights you're willing to share with us today. It's important to us that you feel comfortable and in control of what you share.

I would like to ask you how you would like us to refer to someone in your position of having been exonerated. Some individuals prefer the term 'exonerated individual.' Is it okay if we refer to you using that term, or is there another term you would feel most comfortable with? (Use the participant's preferred term throughout.)

Reentry Barriers/Access To Resources

1. **C**an you share with me your journey following your release? What was that transition like?

Speaking Point: Take your time—we know this can be a lot to reflect on. Thinking back to those first days, what stands out most?

2. How did you feel once it was determined that you would be released from custody?

Speaking Point: I can only imagine that must have brought up a lot of emotions. Did you feel prepared for what came next?

3. When you were first released, what were your biggest priorities and needs?

Speaking Point: Sometimes, it's the basic things, like finding a place to stay or reconnecting with family, that feel the most urgent.

3. How did you get those needs met? If any, did you receive external help? (Probe: In the time frame it took to receive these services?)

Speaking Point: It can be tough knowing where to turn for help—were there any particular people or organizations that stood out to you?

4. What were some of the most difficult challenges of gaining access to services once reintegrating back into the community (if there were any)? (Ex: healthcare, therapy, food stamps, cash aid, housing assistance.)

Speaking Point: Accessing services can be overwhelming even under the best circumstances. What roadblocks did you face?

5. What kind of resources did you have immediate access to once you were released? (Any pre-planned linkages to resources?)

Speaking Point: It's interesting to hear what support systems are already in place versus what might be missing.

5. What stands out to you as one of the most difficult parts of adjusting to life after your release?
    - Can you describe to me why it was so challenging - if it was?

Speaking Point: Thanks for being open—we know this isn't always easy to talk about. Sometimes sharing even the smallest challenges can help others understand the bigger picture.

Next, I would like to talk about financial barriers and understand this can be a tough topic. Would you like to take a break before we continue?

Financial Barriers/Employment

1. What were some of the most challenging aspects of your experience trying to find employment after being released? (Ex: transportation, identification, lack of job history, etc.)

Speaking Point: Finding work after such a long time away must have been a huge shift. What were some of the first steps you took?

2. What was that process like for you?

Speaking Point: Were there any specific obstacles that made it harder, or moments when things started to feel a bit easier?

3. Were there any moments, good/bad, that stood out to you during this time?

Speaking Point: Sometimes even small wins or setbacks can really stand out—whatever comes to mind is helpful.

4. Were there any skills/trades that you learned in prison that prepared or helped you gain access to employment once you were released? Please describe.

Speaking Point: It's always interesting to hear how those experiences inside can translate to opportunities on the outside.

I understand that these questions might have brought up some strong feelings. Would you like to take a break before continuing on to Mental Health?

Mental Health Barriers

1. Can you describe how your overall mental and emotional well-being was affected by your experience of wrongful incarceration?

Speaking Point: Your mental health is such an important part of this story, and we appreciate you sharing as much as you feel comfortable with. It helps us understand the full impact of your experience.

2. What mental health challenges, if any, did you experience when you were released?

Speaking Point: The transition out of prison can be jarring—how did it affect you emotionally?

3. What about after time had passed?

Speaking Point: Sometimes challenges shift over time—did things get easier, or did new issues come up?

4. What kind of resources or support systems were available that helped you with your mental or emotional well-being? If so, what? If not, what resources would you have liked?

Speaking Point: It's often the case that people don't get the mental health support they really need. Your perspective on this is really valuable.

Support

1. Can you tell me about the support systems you relied on, if any, during your return to the community?

Speaking Point: Sometimes even a small support system can make a big difference. Who were the people or places you leaned on the most?

2. How could having had a strong sense of community make a difference in your reintegration experience?

Speaking Point: Community can play such a big role in feeling grounded—what would that have looked like for you?

3. What kind of support groups (programming) were the most beneficial to you while you were incarcerated? (ex: Life skills, CBT, Substance Use, etc.)

Speaking Point: It's great to hear what worked—sometimes programs inside can really help set the foundation for life after.

4. If you programmed in custody, what extension of programs would you have liked to continue on the outs to ease your transition?

5. How has the Innocence Center helped you reintegrate?

Speaking Point: It's helpful for us to hear how organizations like the Innocence Center are making a difference, and where they might be able to do more.

6. Do you have any suggestions or feedback for the Innocence Center that could improve how they support exonerated individuals throughout the reintegration process?

Speaking Point: Your feedback is incredibly helpful in shaping better support systems for others in similar situations.

Thank you for your time and patience. I just have a few questions I would like to ask. Is that okay?

Closing Questions

1. As a closing question - What do you want more people or institutions to understand about you as a person while trying to rebuild your life without being seen as labeled exonerated, or does that matter to you?

Speaking Point: It's important for us to hear how you want your story to be understood and shared. How do you want people to see you beyond your past experience?

1. Is there anything else you would like to share that I haven't asked you about?

Speaking Point: We really appreciate everything you've shared with us today. Your story is powerful and can help make a difference for others.