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COLLEGE AFTER PRISON

A Review of the Literature on Barriers and Supports to Postsecondary Education for Formerly Incarcerated College Students

Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary

This paper explores an area in strong need of further recognition and inquiry: higher education for formerly incarcerated individuals in the community. Each year, more than 600,000 individuals are released from state and federal prisons and return to the community. Despite that, and the significant benefits to receiving a college education, most programming and research (where it has been implemented) has been concentrated on correctional education. As a result, formerly incarcerated individuals are largely not recognized as a student group in need of support, programming, and research in the field of higher education. This paper is an attempt to synthesize existing literature around higher education for formerly incarcerated individuals, and to describe current support mechanisms for this group as a base for continued work. Some key takeaways from this paper are:

1. **Formerly incarcerated individuals are a student group with specific barriers to accessing (and completing) higher education.**

Formerly incarcerated individuals share many characteristics and challenges with other marginalized or nontraditional student groups, such as current/former foster care youth, nontraditional students/adult learners, and military students and veterans. Despite that, formerly incarcerated individuals also face specific challenges that arise from their experience with the criminal legal system. These include, but are not limited to:

- the prevalence of disclosure policies and documentation/review of incarceration histories at colleges and universities that often dissuade applicants;

- the stigma associated with prior experience in the criminal legal system, which can make classrooms and campuses hostile environments;

- the erosion of social trust in others and institutions that may inhibit help-seeking and cause colleges to seem like places of surveillance and sanctioning;

- the restrictions of community supervision that limit the time and financial resources of formerly incarcerated individuals; and

- the challenges with mental health, and particularly post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), that often arise from the trauma of incarceration, among others.

Despite this clear need for support services for formerly incarcerated individuals, considerably less has been developed to aid their pursuit of higher education, and even to position higher education as a viable pathway, in many cases.

2. Formerly incarcerated individuals stand to both benefit from and contribute significantly to college campuses.

It is important to highlight that formerly incarcerated individuals do not just stand to benefit from higher education, they can also contribute significantly to their classrooms and campuses. Like other nontraditional students, formerly incarcerated individuals offer a wealth of life experiences that can provide unique perspectives and insight in class discussions and interactions on campus. Formerly incarcerated students on campus can also help break down the stigma of having been incarcerated for their peers, professors, and staff. Finally, students with conviction histories can also add value to their campuses through community engagement with campus clubs, as well as advocacy across many issues that intersect with the criminal legal system.

3. Some programs exist to support students post-release, but more funding is needed for programming, evaluation, and research.

Some college support programs exist to serve formerly incarcerated individuals pursuing higher education in the community, such as the John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity's College Initiative (CI) and the College and Community Fellowship (CCF). These programs help demystify the viability of pursuing college and the college process itself. They support students from pre-enrollment application steps to course enrollment and persistence to degree completion. CI also provides referrals to external supportive services to aid with reentry needs that may hinder college enrollment, as well as peer mentoring to help with the transition to and progress through degree programs. However, wider support for this work is needed both through funding for existing support programs and for the development of new programs. Additionally, further study is needed to build our understanding of this population as a particular student group within the landscape of higher education. Finally, additional evaluation work is needed to determine best practices for supporting formerly incarcerated individuals in their pursuit of higher education.

A Note on the Current Study

In September 2018, the John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity (hereafter "the Institute"), then the Prisoner Reentry Institute (PRI), contracted with CUNY's Office of Research, Evaluation, and Program Support (REPS) and Greg Wolniak of the University of Georgia to conduct an evaluation of its College Initiative (CI) program. CI began in 2002 as an independent organization, and then joined the Institute as one of several programs in 2015. It offers an array of college assistance services from initial engagement and support with enrollment, college success, and workforce entry. Throughout CI's history, it has helped thousands of individuals achieve the dream of gaining exposure to higher education, and touches the lives of over 500 individuals each year.

The evaluation of CI includes a process evaluation of CI's history and services as a community of higher education access and success support for those with conviction histories. Additionally, an outcomes evaluation will examine postsecondary and cognitive effects for CI students. The goal of this white paper is to lay the groundwork for these forthcoming analyses, provide an overview of the landscape of higher education for individuals with conviction histories, and introduce the significant work that is being done within the Institute and CI to serve the needs of this group. In particular, we review the barriers people are subjected to upon reentry to the community and how these barriers inhibit pursuit of higher education. Next, we examine the literature about higher education support for similarly marginalized/non-traditional student groups (current/former foster care youth, adult learners, and military students and veterans) and what programming and supports have been developed for them. Finally, this paper discusses the field of higher education for individuals with conviction histories, the work of CI and the Institute, and areas for continued work.

Introduction

Background

In 2017, more than 600,000 people were released from state and federal prisons (Bronson & Carson, 2019); another 2.2 million people were incarcerated in prisons and jails; and more than six million people were under some sort of criminal justice supervision within the community (Kaeble & Cowhig, 2018). Until the 1970s, the rate of incarceration was growing on pace with the U.S. population; however, with changes in law enforcement and policies introduced during the "tough on crime" era that were intended to curb crime through stringent laws and harsh sentencing, the rate of incarceration expanded dramatically. As a result, these 2017 figures represent an increase of about 500 percent over the previous forty years, compared to an increase of just 58.5 percent for the general population of the United States (World Bank). These policies and the resultant surge in individuals with criminal legal system[1] involvement have had a disproportionately negative impact on communities of color and have therefore necessitated active and innovative responses to rebuild communities and create more access to opportunities in their wake.

Benefits of Higher Education

At the same time as the U.S. has become the world leader in incarceration, educational attainment in the U.S. has also surged. In 2017, the percentage of Americans who had completed at least a high school degree reached 90 percent for the first time in national history (Schmidt, 2018). Accordingly, the percentage of Americans who earned a Bachelor's degree or higher rose to 33 percent, an increase of roughly 20 percentage points over the previous 40 years (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2019). These gains are significant given the wealth of benefits conferred to individuals with postsecondary degrees and beyond. A college education remains the strongest mechanism for social mobility in the United States. A strong body of research has demonstrated that, among other benefits, people with college degrees also earn much higher salaries, have more stable jobs, experience less unemployment, and have lower poverty rates and lower reliance on public assistance (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2019).

Additionally, the benefits of a college degree extend beyond economic factors. According to the College Board's Trends in Higher Education series[2], Americans with bachelor's degrees (or higher) are more likely to report being in good or excellent health and engage in healthy behaviors, on top of reporting higher levels of happiness. Further, those with advanced degrees are more likely to volunteer more often and have higher levels of civic engagement and community involvement (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2019). Earning a college degree has also been shown to have intergenerational effects, positively impacting the educational attainment of degree holders' children. Finally, college degree attainment affords important social, cognitive, and emotional benefits for personal growth. These include increased problem solving and time management skills, openness to new ideas/perspectives, higher levels of self-esteem, building social/professional networks, and a sense of accomplishment or empowerment from completing a degree program (deHaan, 2011; Heckman, Humphries, & Veramendi, 2018; Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2019; Rowley & Hurtado, 2002).

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1. Throughout this paper, we use the terms "criminal legal system" (and legal system for short), "formerly incarcerated individuals", "(those/individuals with) conviction histories", "system involved", and "system impacted" to refer to people who have been impacted by the institution commonly referred to as the criminal justice system in the literature.

2. See https://research.collegeboard.org/trends/trends-higher-education for more information.

Higher Education for Those with Conviction Histories

While the general advantages of completing a higher education program have been studied extensively, comparatively less has been written about the benefits of higher education for individuals with conviction histories. One early study found that, like college degree attainment in general, higher education provides social and economic benefits as well as higher earnings for formerly incarcerated individuals (Malveaux, 2003). Similarly, higher education has been associated with an increase in cognitive ability, enhanced social networks, and increases in social capital for those with conviction histories (Owens, 2009).

While there are a host of benefits to higher education, formerly incarcerated individuals face numerous barriers— both systemic and personal— to accessing and completing a college degree, and therefore accruing these advantages. For instance, many struggle with substance use disorders, mental health issues, and trauma while pursuing employment or higher education upon reentry (Lynch, DeHart, Belknap, & Green, 2013; Sacks & Pearson, 2003; Torrey, Kennard, Eslinger, Lamb, & Pavle, 2010; Vitopoulos, Peterson-Badali, Brown, & Skilling, 2019). It is important to highlight that these issues may be present prior to incarceration, but the experience of being incarcerated may leave individuals with significant trauma, stressors, and worsened physical or mental health upon release (DeVeaux, 2013; Hagan et al., 2018; Liem & Kunst, 2013; Piper & Berle, 2019). As a result, according to the Prison Policy Initiative, formerly incarcerated individuals are eight times less likely to complete a college degree program than the general public, as evidenced by just 4 percent earning a college degree compared to 29 percent of the U.S. population (Couloute, 2018). Furthermore, despite its potential benefits for this group, comparatively little research and higher education support programming exists for formerly incarcerated individuals, particularly post-release and upon reentry into the community.

Collateral Consequences of Criminal Legal System Involvement

Those with conviction histories must contend with significant structural barriers to re-entry, termed the "collateral consequences" of criminal legal system involvement. The collateral consequences of legal system involvement refer to the laws and policies that limit the rights and privileges of those who have had contact with the criminal legal system. Broadly, these policies frequently include restrictions (or bans) on voting, obtaining personal documentation (e.g., driver's licenses), the receipt of public assistance and the ability to reside in public housing, and access to mental health and substance use disorder[3] treatment, among others. Often, these restrictions are enacted upon conviction of a crime regardless of subsequent incarceration status. In higher education, the collateral consequences of legal system involvement can mean limits on financial aid eligibility (Vallas & Dietrich, 2014 p. 27). In employment, it can mean restrictions on licensure for careers such as barber/cosmetology, real estate, and health care among many others (NICCC; Vallas & Dietrich, 2014 p. 36). In both areas, individuals with conviction histories are often subject to increased scrutiny before, during, and after the application phase.

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3. Substance use disorders are defined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA) as recurrent drug and/or alcohol use that causes "clinically significant impairment in one's health and ability to meet work, school, or home obligations."

Employment

Another significant structural barrier to securing employment is policies that require disclosure of conviction histories in varying detail on college and job applications. Much research has been dedicated to the detrimental effect of these policies on employment, largely because of the biases that employers display in the hiring process (Doleac & Hansen, 2016). This effect has been documented to disproportionately hurt Black and Latinx men because they are incarcerated at rates disproportionate to the rest of the population. (Doleac & Hansen, 2016 p. 4).

As Devah Pager's earlier studies demonstrated, employers discriminate against individuals with conviction histories even when their educational background and work history matches that of other applicants (Pager, 2003). To test the impact of a conviction history on employment outcomes, Pager created test job applications from male candidates that varied only by race (Black or White) and conviction history (history or no history) and submitted them for local job openings. Overall, applications from candidates with conviction histories received fewer callbacks from prospective employers. However, when examining callbacks by race, Pager found strong evidence of racial bias amongst employers: applications from White candidates received the most responses overall, and even those with conviction histories received more interest from employers than Black candidates without one. With these findings, Pager demonstrated that Black men with conviction histories were doubly disadvantaged by racial bias from employers that was compounded by their conviction histories, as evidenced by this group receiving the fewest responses in her study (Pager, 2003 p. 958).

Finally, despite employers' apprehensions about the employability of those with conviction histories, recent studies suggest that these concerns do not necessarily translate to subsequent job performance. For instance, in a study of military service records, Lundquist and colleagues (2018) observed that those who received waivers for felony convictions performed similarly (e.g., similar rates of attrition and dismissal for poor conduct) or better (e.g., higher rates of promotion) than their peers without. Similarly, a recent study found that employees with conviction histories had longer job tenure: they retained their jobs longer and were less likely to quit than other employees (Minor, Persico, & Weiss, 2018).

Impact of "Ban the Box" on Employment

As a result of studies demonstrating the harm of disclosure policies on employment, President Barack Obama struck down policies requiring disclosure of conviction histories for federal jobs in 2015, and 24 states and Washington D.C. enacted similar laws in the following years. This movement to "ban the box" aimed to reduce the bias that those with conviction histories are subjected to in pre-employment selection processes. Despite these legislative changes, research suggests that removing disclosure policies actually had the unintended effect of increasing employer bias against racial minorities – populations that are disproportionately impacted by mass incarceration – to screen out those who employers perceived as being more likely to have had contact with the criminal legal system. For instance, a 2016 study showed that, without the information about applicants' conviction histories after banning the box, employers were less likely to hire pools of candidates that they deemed likely to include those with such histories – young Black and Latinx men (Doleac & Hansen, 2016). More specifically, the study found that, after ban the box policies were enacted, young Black men were 3.1 percentage points less likely to be employed and employment decreased by 2.3 percentage points for young Latinx men. Further, another 2016 study by Agan and Starr demonstrated that Black men aged 18-64 were hurt by the implementation of ban the box policies. They found that prior to the implementation of ban the box, White applicants received 7 percent more callbacks from employers; afterward, they were six times more likely to do so, receiving 45 percent more callbacks (Agan & Starr, 2016). Overall, the findings

reveal that while the intended purpose of removing the requirement for individuals to disclose their conviction histories was to reduce employer bias, it instead increased racial bias due to perceptions regarding criminal legal system involvement (Agan & Starr, 2016; Doleac & Hansen, 2016).

Higher Education

In higher education, students are required to disclose prior convictions on the Common Application for college admission, which is used by over 800 colleges according to recent estimates (Member Institutions, Common App). Additionally, a 2018 survey of 85 randomly sampled colleges in the northeast found that 78 percent of sample schools required disclosure and used it in admissions decisions, and that 4-year private schools were most likely to require disclosure (Evans, Szkola, & John, 2018). These policies have resulted in students being required to disclose their conviction histories for purported campus safety concerns. However, it is important to note that there is a lack of data showing that this requirement improves campus safety, as schools that screen students' criminal histories do not have lower rates of reported crime than those that do (Olszewska, 2007; Weissman et al., 2010). Instead, data shows that crimes on campuses are often committed by students with no conviction history (Rosenthal, NaPier, & Weissman, 2015).

To date, the impact of these disclosure policies on college admissions has not been widely examined. One 2014 survey of 300 randomly sampled colleges found that 61 percent conducted criminal background checks (CBCs). Additionally, schools in the sample that required disclosure also admitted a slightly lower percentage of students (64% vs. 72% for schools that did not conduct CBCs) and fewer racial/ethnic minorities overall (Pierce, Runyan, & Bangdiwala, 2014). The study found that, for those that required it, disclosure had a detrimental impact on the schools' evaluation of applicants. Among schools that required disclosure, a majority reported that they would probably or definitely not admit students with conviction histories for a number of different convictions, including assault (80%), drugs other than marijuana (72%), and distribution of prescription drugs (70%) (Pierce, Runyan, & Bangdiwala, 2014, p. 366). Additionally, a national experimental audit study found that applications submitted by testers with conviction histories were 2.5 times more likely to be rejected overall than control applications sent by testers with no such history (Stewart & Uggen, 2020). This study also found a slight difference by race: Black testers with conviction histories were rejected most often and at a rate 2.9 percentage points higher than White testers with similar histories (Stewart & Uggen, 2020 p. 16).

Impact of Disclosure Policies in Higher Education

This data may significantly underrepresent the chilling effect of having "the box" on an application. There is evidence that suggests that the requirement to disclose their conviction history may discourage people from even applying out of concerns about being stigmatized (Rosenthal, NaPier, & Weissman, 2015). For instance, a 2015 case study found that nearly two-thirds of potential applicants with conviction histories did not pursue State University of New York (SUNY) admissions processes due to cumbersome disclosure policies and a fear of stigma – a phenomenon the researchers termed "felony application attrition" (Rosenthal, NaPier, & Weissman, 2015). Disclosure policies for colleges also usually extend beyond acknowledging conviction history on an application. Students with conviction histories are often mandated to complete additional steps in the application process that can range from extensive supplementary documentation to separate interviews with admissions staff to detail their legal history (Custer, 2016; Dickerson, 2007; Lantigua-Williams, 2016; Rosenthal, NaPier, & Weissman, 2015). According to Vivian Nixon, (the former) Executive Director of the College and Community Fellowship (CCF), the additional required documentation is often "invasive and stigmatizing," overwhelming students during an already difficult process (Lantigua-Williams,

2016). Additionally, most campuses that collect this data about students do not have formal policies in place to train staff on how to evaluate it for admissions (Vallas & Dietrich, 2014 p. 28).

The results of the 2015 SUNY case study suggest that banning disclosure policies could help broaden access to college for individuals with conviction histories by reducing felony application attrition[4]. However, given the findings of Pierce and colleagues (2014) and Stewart & Uggen (2020), efforts to reduce the burden of disclosure should also account for potential unintended consequences for communities of color as demonstrated with the unplanned impact of "Ban the Box" on employment for these groups. This precaution for addressing the impact of disclosure policies is imperative given that Black and Latinx men are still overrepresented in the criminal legal system despite declining incarceration rates (BJS, 2020) and consequently underrepresented in higher education simultaneously, despite considerable gains in college enrollment for these groups (Espinosa et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, disclosure policies are not the full scope of college access for individuals with conviction histories. Even in the absence of disclosure policies, those with conviction histories can face significant hurdles in the college application and pre-enrollment phases. These include understanding the different college options and institutions available, acquiring personal documentation (e.g., tax forms and other financial documentation, transcripts, diplomas, or certificates), navigating the maze of financial aid regulations and restrictions (depending on prior offenses), filling out required applications and paperwork, and gaining technology skills (if needed), among others (Miller et al., 2014; Ross, 2019). While previous studies document the challenges that those with conviction histories face upon applying and enrolling in college, there is evidence that access to higher education can also provide benefits to this population prior to reentry. As such, the following section examines the literature about the benefits associated with access to correctional education programs.

Higher Education for Marginalized Groups

Completing a college degree leads to myriad benefits; however, accessing college and successfully completing a degree is challenging for many marginalized (or nontraditional) student groups, such as current/ former foster care youth, non-traditional students/adult learners, and active military/veterans. Some of these groups have significant overlap and/or shared challenges and characteristics with formerly incarcerated students. As a result, research on, and practices for, these groups can be instructive for how to address the needs of system-involved students in higher education. The following section provides a brief overview of the landscape of higher education for current/former foster care youth, non-traditional students / adult learners, and active military/veterans.

Current and Former Foster Care Youth

Barriers to Higher Education
There is significant overlap between the foster care system and the criminal legal system; children who are placed in foster care are significantly more likely to become involved with the criminal legal system, both as

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4. It should be noted that after banning the box on applications, SUNY implemented post-admissions disclosure requirements for students who sought to live in dorms, study abroad, or participate in certain academic programs or internships. To date, the effect of these policies has not been studied.

children and adults (Yi & Wildeman, 2018). Given that current and former foster care youth are similarly marginalized as those with conviction histories, it is no surprise that they face many of the same barriers, most critically the significant need for financial, food, and housing resources, mental and/or physical health support, and the significant need for support and guidance around the college admissions process (McTier, Santa-Ramirez, & McGuire, 2017; Ross, 2019). These challenges drive the overlap between both groups and contribute greatly to the poorer higher education outcomes observed for each group. For instance, research on current and former foster care youth in higher education shows that, despite high levels of interest, only roughly 20 percent enroll in postsecondary institutions and 3 to 11 percent obtain a college degree (Pecora, 2012). As such, given the high overlap between both groups, the efforts of colleges and universities to meet the needs of current and former foster care youth can serve as a model to address the same needs for prospective students with conviction histories.

Policies

In response to the disconnect between the postsecondary aspirations of youth connected to foster care and the reality of their college enrollment and completion rates, a growing number of federal and state policies have been implemented to address the financial barriers to college enrollment for current and former foster care youth. These include programs and vouchers implemented to help cover college tuition and fees for current and former foster care youth, as well as other expenses (e.g., textbooks, transportation, childcare, etc.) related to attending college. Such supports lift some of the financial burdens of attending college and enable youth connected to foster care to prioritize and focus on school (Davis, 2006). Additionally, to address the gap in knowledge about the college admissions process, more campus support and transition programs have developed resources and services to provide current or former foster care youth and/or their foster parents with adequate information about the application and enrollment process (Burley, 2009).

Support Programming

Even after enrolling in college, many current and former foster care youth face challenges that impede their continued enrollment and completion (Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011). As a result, colleges have also created on-campus support programs that aim to reduce these barriers to college completion through supports such as: financial aid (e.g., tuition waivers, internships/campus work opportunities, stipends, etc.), academic services (e.g., tutoring, seminars/workshops, academic advising, etc.), social supports (e.g., peer mentorship, student groups, events/activities, etc.), and other supports (e.g., on-campus housing and referral to campus and external supports and/or resources) (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Salazar, 2012). Early evidence suggests that such on-campus supports may be effective at improving access to college and postsecondary outcomes for former foster care youth (Burley, 2009; Randolph & Thompson, 2017). As such, given the large overlap between current and former foster care youth and formerly incarcerated individuals and the comparable barriers they face, similarly tailored wraparound services via campus support programs may be helpful in improving higher education access and outcomes for individuals with conviction histories.

Nontraditional Students/Adult Learners

According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP), the vast majority (94.6%) of individuals incarcerated in federal prisons are older than 25 (BOP, 2020); in New York State, the average age is 38.9 (Dworakowsi, 2018). Given the varied lengths of time that individuals can be involved with the criminal legal system, many of these individuals return to the community and enter higher education as adult learners (also commonly referred to as nontraditional students). Adult learners are usually defined as students aged 25 and over. However, this student group also includes any students who have characteristics typical of adulthood, such

as working full-time, being financially independent, or having dependents, as well as other characteristics such as being a single caregiver, attending school part-time, or having a nontraditional educational trajectory, such as delayed postsecondary enrollment or having earned a GED/HSE certificate (Chen, 2017).

Barriers to Higher Education

In accordance with their population characteristics, adult learners face numerous barriers to college access and success, including financial barriers such as a lack of familial monetary support, a lack of financial aid eligibility or support, and competing financial obligations; a lack of time due to competing priorities such as work, children, or other dependents; a lack of confidence in their ability to succeed after a gap in formal learning; institutional barriers like unfavorable scheduling of essential classes, or the ability to access online courses; and finally, a lack of social and/or emotional support (Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2017; Taylor & Bicak, 2019).

These barriers are often compounded by institutional and faculty approaches toward adult learners, such as courses that are not designed with the learning needs of adult students in mind (Carlson McCall, Padron, & Andrews, 2018); college orientation processes that are geared toward first-year college students that are recent high school graduates; and a lack of appreciation for their perspectives and experiences by other students, faculty, and staff (Witkowsky et al., 2016). Together, these are examples of factors that create an atmosphere where adult learners often feel isolated, othered, and self-conscious in the classroom and on campus, which can undermine their chances for success (Kasworm, 2010).

Supports for Non-Traditional Students/Adult Learners

In response to the challenges faced by this group, colleges and universities have developed strategies to promote persistence and degree completion for adult learners, including a shift toward more flexible course options such as evening and weekend courses, as well as more varied course types (e.g., accelerated, online, and hybrid courses) that offer nontraditional students the flexibility to attend class around the rest of their commitments (Taylor, Dunn, & Winn, 2015). Additionally, schools have developed strategies both to recognize the wealth of experience that adult learners can possess (e.g., via credit for prior learning through work and life experiences) and to create a more welcoming environment for adult learners in the classroom through inclusive teaching strategies and optional refresher lessons, among others (Bowe, 2000; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Rust & Ikard, 2016).

Adult learners (nontraditional students) are a population with a particular blend of challenges and strengths in accessing higher education and persisting to degree completion. Many students with conviction histories are also adult learners when they reenter higher education. As a result, efforts to be more inclusive and supportive in meeting the needs of nontraditional students will also assist those with conviction histories and serve as a model for more tailored programmatic and institutional support for this group.

Military Students and Veterans

Student veterans and active military students face similar social and emotional barriers that system-involved students face in their transitions back into the community and into higher education. Although military service is voluntary, it shares characteristics with incarceration that are typical of what sociologist Erving Goffman termed a "total institution" (1968): the de-individualization process that re-socializes people into the culture of the institution, the requirement that all daily activities be conducted within groups in the same shared space, and the control exerted over daily activities (e.g., meals, free time, and sleeping) through rigid

scheduling. Given the loss of agency produced by both institutions, members of the military, like system-involved individuals, become acclimated to highly structured environments (Brown, 2011; May et al., 2017). As a result, the return to the much less structured environment of the community can prove difficult for both groups in similar ways. As such, the literature around military students and veterans in higher education presents an opportunity to learn how higher education can meet the needs of students with conviction histories.

Barriers to Higher Education

Veterans and active military students are a subgroup of adult learners/non-traditional students (Brown, 2011). However, despite having benefited historically from policies that facilitated their transition into higher education via financial support (Hammond, 2017), student veterans and active military still face numerous barriers in transitioning to and succeeding in college. Chief among these barriers in the literature is the psychological toll that often is exacted by military service (Barry, Whiteman, & Wadsworth, 2014; Borsari et al., 2017). Relative to non-military students, military students and veterans suffer from higher rates of substance use disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and this is particularly true for student veterans who have engaged in combat (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). Additionally, the personal adjustments made to adapt to the highly controlled and regimented "total institution" of the military can be incompatible with the more unstructured environment of a college campus, impeding a successful transition to college and degree completion for student veterans (Hopkins et al., 2010; Messina, 2014).

Like non-military adult learners, military students also report difficulties connecting with their non-military peers (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Whiteman et al., 2013) and facing adverse attitudes from faculty in the classroom regarding their military service, U.S. conflicts, and political views (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Elliot, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011). Altogether, these barriers create a campus atmosphere that is often difficult for military students to access and navigate through successfully. Given that individuals with conviction histories can face similar challenges with mental health, stigmatizing attitudes from faculty and peers on campus, as well as difficulty transitioning away from the regimented daily structure of incarceration, it is reasonable to anticipate that they will encounter a similarly complex and challenging campus environment.

Supports for Military Students and Veterans

According to a national survey of more than 700 colleges and universities, there is significant policy and institutional support for military students and veterans; a majority of the colleges that responded to the survey noted they have programs and services designed specifically for this nontraditional student group (Cook & Young, 2009). Additionally, building on this work, subsequent studies have highlighted the importance of holistic supports for this student group that address the range of needs like financial support, knowledge about the college and financial aid processes, acclimatization to campus and the classroom, and facilitating access to campus health and wellness services, among others (Barry, Whiteman, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2014; Borsari et al., 2017; Kirchner, 2015). As with nontraditional students, given the similarities and overlap between military service and criminal legal system involvement, these approaches can serve as a model for how to address the needs of those with conviction histories in higher education.

Completion of a college degree remains an integral part of personal growth and social mobility for many Americans. For those with conviction histories, it may also be critical for successful transition and promoting desistance. However, as illustrated in this section, access to college and earning a degree are often not straightforward processes for marginalized/non-traditional students. Students who do not follow the general trajectory of high school completion in four years into immediate full-time college enrollment face significant

barriers to college entry and completion despite their resilience and the other positive attributes they bring to their college campuses. Among each of these groups, the barriers faced are also compounded by systemic racial/ethnic and socio-economic constraints that, among others, deny students the social and cultural capital needed to navigate the enrollment process and degree programs (Aronson, 2008; Teranishi & Briscoe, 2006; Wells, 2008). As such, over the last decade, campus policies and programs designed to facilitate college access and success for marginalized and nontraditional college students have proliferated. At the same time, comparatively little exists in the way of research about access to higher education for formerly incarcerated individuals, particularly post-release and reentry into the community. The following sections outline significant findings from the literature on higher education for those with conviction histories.

Higher Education for Individuals with Conviction Histories

Barriers to College Access and Success

As mentioned previously, access to college and degree completion remains a significant challenge for those reentering the community after incarceration. Some estimates indicate that just 4 percent of those with conviction histories earn a college degree, compared to 29 percent for the general population (Couloute, 2018). Regardless, numerous personal, institutional, and structural barriers exist for those who are interested in pursuing higher education, and these challenges continue even after enrollment in a degree program. As such, this section explores some of the ways incarceration produces barriers[5] that inhibit individuals from being able to fully prioritize and pursue higher education, such as the demands of the reentry process, mental health, the restrictions of probation and parole, lack of trust in others and institutions, predatory colleges and universities, and a lack of targeted supports and resources.

Demands of the Reentry Process

As explored in the previous section, nontraditional students and adult learners often have competing life obligations (e.g., work, family, etc.) that limit their time and make it difficult to prioritize school. Additionally, in their transitions to adulthood and independent living, former foster care youth often must prioritize life essentials such as finding stable employment and housing to support themselves. For those with conviction histories, the demands of the reentry process and the need to prioritize re-integration and stability can be a significant impediment to higher education access and success in college. As documented extensively in the literature, the process of reentering the community is fraught with challenges and potential roadblocks. Chief among these include challenges with securing stable housing and finding stable and sufficient employment, while contending with the stigma of a having a conviction history as well as the formal and informal sanctions/ policies that place limits on their ability to gain access to these necessities (McTier, Santa-Ramirez, & McGuire, 2017; Ross, 2019; Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017; Strayhorn, Johnson, & Barrett, 2013). Additionally, very little (if any) pre-release planning and resources are provided to those transitioning from incarceration back into the community (McTier, Santa-Ramirez, & McGuire, 2017), and therefore, they may have to expend significant time and effort to secure these necessities. Finally, given that unstable housing

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5. The barriers included in this section include those that were identified as significant through feedback from the evaluation's advisory committee, a group with expertise in the field and prior incarceration experience.

can impact class attendance, course performance, and persistence in school (Silva et al., 2017), in addition to constraints on time, finding housing is also a barrier to degree persistence post-enrollment (Ross, 2019; Strayhorn, Johnson, & Barrett, 2013).

Gender-specific Barriers for Women

It is also important to note that women's experiences of these challenges during reentry can differ significantly from that of men. For instance, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) highlights that, in seeking safe and stable housing, women must consider whether their housing options ensure their safety, particularly if they have experienced domestic violence in the past (2020). Additionally, as primary (and often sole) caregivers, women must also contend with the limitations to income assistance that arise from certain felony convictions, gendered pay disparities and the additional financial obligations of raising children, and with finding employment options that can be balanced around the need for childcare, among many others (Opsal & Foley, 2013; Ramirez, 2016; SAMHSA, 2020). Women also face specific challenges during reentry, including the need for legal support to reestablish parental rights and obtain custody of their children and reuniting with their families (Opsal & Foley, 2013). Like the barriers of housing and employment more broadly, these additional priorities during the reentry process also represent roadblocks to pursuing higher education. In sum, while both men and women face challenges on the path to reentry, the unique obstacles that women grapple with require distinct forms of support and further inquiry.

Mental Health

Low-income and communities of color experience a persistent lack of access to quality and affordable behavioral and mental health services (Chaudri et al., 2019; McGuire & Miranda, 2008). This issue of access is also compounded by over-policing in these communities, which means that those with mental health conditions are particularly vulnerable to being incarcerated rather than provided mental health treatment (AbuDagga et al., 2016; Swanson, 2015). In fact, according to a 2010 report by the Treatment Advocacy Center, in most states, those experiencing serious mental illness are more likely to be incarcerated than placed in psychiatric units or hospitals, and at least 15 to 20 percent of the jail and prison populations are estimated to have serious mental health conditions (Torrey et al., 2010). These existing inequities are also exacerbated by the trauma of incarceration itself. As stated previously, while mental health issues may be present prior to incarceration, the experience of incarceration can produce trauma responses, the adoption of behaviors considered maladaptive or dysfunctional[6], and trigger new mental health conditions, particularly PTSD (DeVeaux, 2013; Hagan et al., 2018; Liem & Kunst, 2013). Moreover, these issues have been shown to endure post-release for some and therefore make reentry and integration challenging, especially without adequate support. As Mika'il DeVeaux (2013) writes in his reflection on his experiences with the trauma of incarceration:

> *Having been released, I still know of no process designed to repair the damage done. I know of no debriefing. I know of no stand down procedure. All that was provided, and all that is still currently provided, was a "good-bye" and "get out." Those fortunate enough to leave, as I have been, must discover how to rebuild their lives on their own.*

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6. This is most often framed in terms of post-release re-integration into the community. Behaviors adopted to help individuals cope with and survive their incarceration may no longer serve them once they are released.

As a result, the college admissions process, which is already fraught with extra scrutiny and additional requirements for those with conviction histories, can be complicated even further for applicants who are managing mental health conditions and processing the trauma of incarceration. Given the impact of mental health issues on students' ability to remain enrolled and persist to graduation (Arria et al., 2013; Auerbach et al., 2016; Hunt, Eisenberg, & Kilbourne, 2010), this is a critical area of support for formerly incarcerated individuals who are interested in pursuing higher education.

Restrictions of Community Supervision

Probation and parole programs are sanctions that require individuals to remain under intensive supervision (Kimora, 2008). Probation and parole programs typically emphasize extreme close surveillance, urinalysis testing, treatment, and employment (Petersilia & Turner, 1993; Russell, 2013). In 2020, approximately seven million people were under some form of correctional control in the United States (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). Moreover, more than half of the seven million people under the control of the U.S. legal system in 2020 were on probation (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). The use of community supervision has more than doubled in the past 25 years (Chamberlain et al., 2018; Petersilia & Turner, 1993).

As a result of the increase in the use of probation and parole, scholars have examined the impact of these supervisory measures (Chamberlain et al., 2018; Petersilia & Turner, 1993; Russell, 2013). The stated purpose of these programs is to divert those with conviction histories from reoffending and returning to prison (Kimora, 2008). However, the barriers to successful reentry created by the requirements of probation and parole are substantial. For example, these programs often require extensive fees, court mandated appointments that may conflict with an individual's schedule, and difficulty creating a regular time to meet with the probation or parole based on the officer's work schedule (Russell, 2013).

In addition to these challenges faced by individuals on probation and parole, previous research has also examined the relationship with the supervisory officer and its impact on recidivism (Chamberlain et al., 2018). As the number of individuals on probation and parole has increased, it has also diminished the capacity for officers to develop meaningful relationships with those that they supervise (Chamberlain et al., 2018). The findings reveal that the relationship is significant and that a negative relationship with a supervisory officer increases the likelihood of recidivating (Chamberlain et al., 2018). While probation and parole programs are framed as mechanisms that seek to ensure that individuals with conviction histories do not reoffend, research finds that participation in probation actually increased the number of new arrests (Petersilia & Turner, 1993). Further, community supervision did not reduce the number of serious offenses committed but instead led to a significant increase in technical violations and jail sentences (Petersilia & Turner, 1993). In sum, probation and parole programs have contributed to increased incarceration rates in the U.S. and created additional obstacles for formerly incarcerated individuals to reenter society (Chamberlain et al., 2018; Petersilia & Turner, 1993). It is important to highlight that previous research shows that nontraditional students pursuing higher education often face a lack of time due to competing priorities such as work and parenting. Given these existing and competing demands for nontraditional students, it can be assumed that the path towards pursuing a college education for those with conviction histories, while also meeting all the additional requirements of their probation or parole, is exponentially more difficult.

Trust

Social trust is a belief that in interactions with others, they have your best interests in mind and will not purposely harm you (Gambetta, 1988; Hardin 1999; Warren; 1999). This trust allows us to seek and accept help from others, which can be an integral part of the college application and enrollment process.

Research has demonstrated the importance of knowledgeable sources of support in providing information and guidance through the college admissions process, particularly for marginalized groups (Gamez-Vargas & Oliva, 2013; Holland, 2010; Shamsuddin, 2015; Skobba, Meyers, & Tiller, 2018). However, the experience of being incarcerated and the related psychosocial outcomes outlined above can erode an individual's sense of social trust and willingness to engage with institutions (Haskins and Jacobsen 2017; Lageson, 2016; Moore, 2015; Weaver and Lerman 2010). For example, in one study of the civic engagement of formerly incarcerated individuals at a non-profit agency, at least half of the participants reported that having been incarcerated decreased their ability to trust others (Moore, 2015). As such, many might find it difficult and might be hesitant to seek help or rely on others after incarceration. Another layer to the erosion of trust for formerly incarcerated people is suspicion of institutions more generally as places that do not prioritize their best interests (at best) and can actively harm them (at worst). In the same study (Moore, 2015), several participants shared negative experiences with organizations that hindered their reentry process during critical times with ineffectual and delayed assistance - furthering their mistrust. Additionally, the process of exclusion via the continued sanctions and limitations placed on formerly incarcerated individuals even after their release caused them to view institutions as sites where they will be targeted for surveillance, undue scrutiny, and punishment (Beckett and Herbert 2010; Haskins and Jacobsen 2017; Moore, 2015). Given the prevalence of disclosure policies at colleges and universities, one could argue that the application attrition observed with SUNY applicants in the 2015 case study reflects a mistrust of institutions more broadly and the desire to avoid the additional scrutiny and exclusion produced by being labeled an offender.

Predatory Colleges and Universities

Additionally, any discussion of barriers and challenges faced by formerly incarcerated individuals would be remiss without highlighting the detrimental role of predatory for-profit colleges. For-profit colleges and universities are institutions of higher learning that operate to generate earnings for owners and shareholders and are owned and operated by private entities (Hall, Curtis, & Wofford, 2020; Schade, 2014). These schools have come to be labeled as predatory because they engage in questionable practices to increase student enrollment and revenue from tuition and fees. These predatory practices include misleading marketing that obscures or misrepresents data on poor student outcomes and job placements (Schade, 2014; Shireman, 2018), targeting marginalized and vulnerable populations to take advantage of prospective students' financial aid (Ross, Tewksbury, & Zaldivar, 2015; Schade, 2014), and allotting a relatively minor proportion of their budgets to educational services, resulting in poor quality degree programs (Schade, 2014), among others.

Knowing what college options are available and how to assess school quality and suitability is a form of social capital (Hall, Curtis, & Wofford, 2020; Hughes, 2017; Museus, 2012; Schade, 2014) that prospective system-involved students may lack (Ross, 2019). As such, this population is particularly vulnerable to the deceptive marketing and recruitment strategies employed by for-profit schools in the absence of crucial information, guidance, and support (Ross, 2019). Predatory colleges lure students with more flexible and accelerated degree options for those looking to make a substantial shift in their life path and progress quickly through a degree program, with the promise of improved job or career options as a payoff for their investment (Schade, 2014). However, for those who are lured in by these tactics, rather than receiving a leg up via higher education, they are instead locked into low-quality degree programs from which they cannot transfer credits (Hall, Curtis, & Wofford, 2020; Shireman, 2018), saddled with exorbitant debt (Yeoman, 2011), and faced with uncertain job prospects at best if they persist to degree completion (Ross, Tewksbury, & Zaldivar, 2015).

As a result, predatory colleges represent a significant pitfall in formerly incarcerated individuals' pursuit to access quality education that will help advance their personal and professional goals[7] (Ross, Tewksbury, & Zaldivar, 2015; Ross, 2019).

Lack of Targeted Supports and Resources

Although students with conviction histories share many barriers with other marginalized and nontraditional students, it is important to emphasize that they need specific types of support based on the unique challenges they confront. Historically, support for providing access to education has fluctuated, particularly for those who are currently incarcerated. The opposition to this access is reflected in the history of policies granting or denying access to Pell Grants[8] for incarcerated individuals (Conway, 2018) and other policies that have limited the ability to receive financial aid for college or to earn college credentials while incarcerated (Castro & Zamani-Gallaher, 2018). Post-release, this resistance is also demonstrated in the generally negative attitudes towards having those with incarceration histories on college campuses (McTier, Santa-Ramirez, & McGuire, 2017; Ross, 2019; Strayhorn, Johnson, & Barrett, 2013) and the additional scrutiny they face during the college application phase via disclosure policies. This lack of recognition also has important implications for funding. For instance, despite facing similar challenges as military students and veterans, there is distinctly more policy and institutional support for those with military experience than those with conviction histories, particularly in terms of direct funding for students and for the development of college success programs[9]. Therefore, as more evidence emerges about best practices for serving other populations, it is critical that funding, resources, and programming are allotted to meet the needs of formerly incarcerated students, a group that stands both to significantly contribute to and benefit from higher education.

Facilitators of Success

While formerly incarcerated individuals do face substantial barriers to pursuing higher education in the community, these challenges only represent part of the picture. As mentioned in the previous section, many formerly incarcerated individuals still succeed in their pursuit of higher education. Additionally, as Halkovic and Greene (2015) and others point out, formerly incarcerated individuals also possess significant gifts and unique perspectives that can enrich their lives and campus communities. For instance, while the stigma of a conviction history can serve as a hindrance to successful reentry and transition to college, it can also serve as a point of motivation for persevering and overcoming obstacles despite the stigma and negative expectations of those with prior incarceration experience (Strayhorn & Barrett, 2013). As a result, for those who persist to college enrollment, their experiences can serve to break down some of the stereotypes that the label carries (Halkovic & Greene, 2015; Strayhorn & Barrett, 2013). Additionally, formerly incarcerated students demonstrate enormous resiliency in enduring the strain of the incarceration experience and the reentry process, as well as persisting through the barriers of the college admissions process to enrollment.

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7. Although the focus of this section is predatory colleges in the community, it should also be mentioned that predatory colleges like Ashland University target individuals prior to release with low-quality correctional education programs that exhaust their available financial aid. Through Ashland's correctional education programs, incarcerated individuals receive nearly all of their degree program instruction and coursework on tablets, with little support and oversight. To learn more, see: https://www.themarshallproject.org/2020/12/17/this-tiny-christian-college-has-made-millions-on-prisoners-under-trump

8. For more information on the elimination, and reinstatement, of Pell Grants, please visit: https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/restoring-access-to-pell-grants-for-incarcerated-students.pdf

9. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs College Toolkit outlines the wealth of resources and benefits available to veterans interested in pursuing college. Likewise, the post-9/11 GI Bill and U.S. Department of Education programs that support student veterans provide additional financial and other services to support college access and completion. Finally, as noted in Cook & Young (2009), support programs and services for veterans is relatively robust at colleges and universities.

Given the importance of resilience in persistence through college (Cotton, Nash, & Kneale, 2017; de la Fuente et al., 2017; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Morales, 2014), formerly incarcerated students therefore possess a significant asset in pursuing a college degree.

Correctional Education Programs

The drive toward accessing higher education begins prior to release and can be influenced by what opportunities are available while a person is incarcerated. Research has shown that correctional education is one of the most reliably effective opportunities in prison that can benefit incarcerated individuals beyond their time in prison and assist with reentry[10] (Baranger et al., 2018; Batiuk et al., 2005; Gaes, 2008; Gerber & Fritsch, 1993; Hall, 2015; Kelso Jr., 2000; Kim & Clark, 2013; Porporino & Robinson, 1992; Nally et al., 2012; Steurer et al., 2001). More specifically, the benefits that formerly incarcerated individuals receive from correctional education are skills and tools that can carry over to their pursuit of higher education upon release. Research finds that correctional education positively impacts several post-release outcomes of incarcerated individuals, including recidivism rates (Batiuk et al., 2005; Gaes, 2008; Gerber & Fritsch, 1993; Hall, 2015; Kelso Jr., 2000; Kim & Clark, 2013; Nally et al., 2012; Steurer et al., 2001), familial bonds (Baranger et al., 2018; Porporino & Robinson, 1992), critical thinking skills (Baranger et al., 2018), personal development (Baranger et al., 2018; Parker, 1990; Porporino & Robinson, 1992), and self-esteem (Baranger et al., 2018; Parker, 1990).

Previous studies have focused on the impact of correctional education on rates of recidivism, which is defined as re-arrest, re-conviction, and re-incarceration (Gaes, 2008; Steurer et al., 2001)[11]. Findings from those studies reveal that incarcerated individuals who participated in correctional education programming had lower rates of recidivism compared to those that did not (Batiuk et al., 2005; Gordon & Weldon, 2003; Hall, 2015; Kelso Jr., 2000; Kim & Clark, 2013; Nally et al., 2012; Steurer et al., 2001). On top of that, another study found that correctional education not only lowers rates of recidivism, but it also increases participation in educational opportunities (Gerber & Fritsch, 1993). In short, the findings from existing studies reveal that correctional education has a positive effect on reducing recidivism and underscores the importance of making correctional education accessible to individuals that are incarcerated (Batiuk et al., 2005; Gordon & Weldon, 2003; Hall, 2015; Kim & Clark, 2013; Steurer et al., 2001)[12].

In addition to examining the effect that correctional education has on recidivism, scholars have also analyzed whether participants receive any social or personal benefits because of their participation (Baranger et al., 2018; Jacobs & Weissman, 2019; Parker, 1990; Porporino & Robinson, 1992). Existing studies found that correctional education increases self-esteem and confidence among incarcerated individuals (Baranger et al., 2018; Parker, 1990). The increase in self-confidence is also extended to academic abilities, including communication, critical thinking skills, and interpersonal interactions (Baranger et al., 2018; Parker, 1990).

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10. The potential benefits of correctional education are not limited solely to post-release outcomes. For instance, participation in correctional education programs is also positively associated with reduced incidents of misconduct while individuals are incarcerated (Duwe & Hallett, 2015, Lahm, 2009, Pompoco et al., 2017), among other positive outcomes.

11. This definition of recidivism contains limitations because re-arrest does not indicate guilt.

12. While research illustrates that correctional education is positively correlated with lower rates of recidivism, several studies have been unable to conduct a randomized control trial to account for self-selection bias (Batiuk, 2005; Gordon & Weldon, 2003; Hall, 2015). This is significant because scholars contend that individuals that participate in correctional education programs tend to have more motivation and self-discipline than those that did not. The reason that a randomized control trial cannot be used to account for self-selection bias is due to the structure of correctional education programs. Individuals that are incarcerated have the opportunity to enroll in a correctional education program but they are not mandated to do so (Kim & Clark, 2013).

Research finds that this also extends to interpersonal relationships post-release (Jacobs & Weissman, 2019). A study by Jacobs and Weissman (2019) finds that students that participated in correctional education reported improved relations with family members upon reentry. Additionally, correctional education faculty provide participants with a connection to the outside world, and this greatly benefits them as they work to rebuild or establish new relationships upon reentry (Baranger et al., 2018; Porporino & Robinson, 1992). In short, correctional education is shown to positively impact familial bonds. Prison education programs also foster an opportunity for individuals to develop improved interpersonal relationships with other program participants and other individuals in prison (Baranger et al., 2018). The strengthening of interpersonal relationships and familial bonds is significant because it displays that education can serve as a tool for connecting with others both in prison and upon release (Baranger et al., 2018). Overall, research finds that correctional education provides participants with self-confidence, critical thinking skills, improved interpersonal relationships, and improved communication skills that foster a positive transition to society upon release from prison (Baranger et al., 2018; Jacobs & Weissman, 2019; Parker, 1990; Porporino & Robinson, 1992). In sum, given the benefits to post-release outcomes and successful reentry to society, correctional education is an important link to the pursuit of higher education in the community.

Peer Mentorship

Although individuals with conviction histories face a series of challenges and barriers to pursuing higher education, there is little research surrounding the various supports available to students with conviction histories. For example, there is a dearth of research on the role of peer mentorship in supporting formerly incarcerated students. One study finds that peer mentorship for students with conviction histories provides tangible benefits (Tietjen et al., 2020). This study utilizes the auto-ethnographic writings of three formerly incarcerated criminology faculty members to illustrate the crucial significance of peer mentorship for graduate students that also have conviction histories. Overall, the findings from the study reveal that encouragement, a feeling of inclusion, and social capital are several key themes that emerged during their mentorship of students (Tietjen et al., 2020). In addition, the study also highlights that the systems of support that have been created because of the mentor relationship enable students to better manage the many obstacles that they confront on their journey through higher education and the workforce (Tietjen et al., 2020). These obstacles may include discussing and presenting their conviction histories in public and professional settings (Tietjen et al., 2020). More specifically, Tietjen et al. (2020) highlight the ways that mentors can provide guidance for mentees attempting to navigate these difficult situations based on their own lived experiences.

Although research on the role of peer mentors is scarce, the research of Tietjen et al. (2020) further underscores the need for additional studies to assess the benefits of peer mentorship for formerly incarcerated students as they navigate the process of pursuing higher education. In addition, future studies should also examine the effect of having available spaces on college or university campuses that students with conviction histories can share and engage with other students with similar backgrounds. This is significant because as Tietjen et al. (2020) note, the benefits that formerly incarcerated students received because of having a connection to those that shared similar experiences are beneficial and warrant further research to better assess the importance of spaces free from stigma where individuals can connect on a college or university setting.

Reentry and Higher Education Programs

People with conviction histories face considerable barriers to enrolling in and completing college. These barriers appear across multiple life domains, including resource insecurity, mental health issues, a lack of support and guidance, and the stigma of prior contact with the criminal legal system, among others (McTier, Santa-Ramirez, & McGuire, 2017; Ross, 2019; Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017). The wealth of research on similar populations (i.e., current/former foster care youth, nontraditional students/adult learners, and military students/veterans), however, demonstrates the potential for support programs to assist marginalized and/or overlooked student populations in the transition to and through higher education. At the same time, as is the case with these other student groups, students with conviction histories bring significant life experiences, perspectives, and abilities to their college communities that are worth supporting. As outlined by Halkovic and Greene (2015) and Ross (2019), students who have conviction histories can make better students due to their discipline, maturity, and patience (Ross, 2019). They also reshape the perception of system-involved students within their institutions (Halkovic & Greene, 2015). Despite their potential for success, comparatively little has been developed in the way of post-release higher education support programming. Such programming is significant because it can help those it serves to realize their potential, build on their strengths, and address the barriers they face to college access and success. Therefore, this represents a significant gap in the supports available for formerly incarcerated individuals at the intersection of higher education and reentry programming.

Given the wide-ranging needs of individuals with criminal legal system involvement, the landscape of programming designed to serve those individuals is made up of networks of intersecting programs and services. Because 95 percent of incarcerated individuals will eventually be released (Travis, 2005), reentry programs like the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO), the Fortune Society, the Osborne Association, Exodus Transitional Community, and Strive, for example, provide substantial support for formerly incarcerated and system-involved individuals to make the transition back into their communities. Some programs like CEO focus exclusively on connecting individuals to transitional and permanent jobs, and others, like the Fortune Society, Exodus, and Osborne, feature a multi-service model that aims to address issues of housing, substance use disorder, employment, and other wraparound services (McDonald, Dyous, & Carlson, 2008; Muhlhausen, 2018; Redcross et al., 2012). Given their focus on post-release stability, funding for and evaluations of reentry programs center outcomes, such as the number of individuals who secure and retain housing or employment, the rate of substance use or abuse, and different measures of recidivism including the number of individuals who return to prison or jail (Lattimore, et al., 2012; Muhlhausen, 2018; Redcross et al., 2012). However, it is notable that, despite the positive social and economic effects of higher education for this group (Malveaux, 2003; Owens, 2009), reentry programs typically do not focus on higher education as a support service (Muhlhausen, 2018; Redcross et al., 2012). Instead, the academic needs of students are addressed through mutual partnerships and referrals to higher education programs that serve formerly incarcerated individuals (Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2015).

Higher Education Programs for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals

A 2017 literature review of the landscape of higher education programming for individuals with conviction histories profiled three types of programs that serve this population: 1) college-in-prison programs, 2) hybrid prison-to-community education programs, and 3) college access and success programs in the community

with transitional supports (Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017). While the authors were able to identify a significant number of college-in-prison programs, there were fewer hybrid programs and even fewer community access and success programs.

Hybrid College Programs

Hybrid programs are those that provide access to college in prison as well as college transition assistance upon reentry and/or direct pipelines to college enrollment in the community. As explored in a previous section, in-prison college education programs have experienced fluctuating levels of support and funding despite clear evidence of their significant social, economic, and mental benefits for those who can participate. However, while these programs are effective, they often do not provide a link to continuing education post-release. As a result, hybrid prison-to-community education programs such as the Reentry Support Project (RSP) at the Community College of Philadelphia (CCP), the Prison-to-College Pipeline (P2CP) at the John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity (CUNY), and the New Jersey Scholarship and Transformative Education in Prisons (NJ-STEP) initiative, have been developed to address this gap (Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017).

Reflecting their hybrid status, these programs report on a combination of outcomes related both to recidivism and higher education outcomes, such as retention and graduation. While there is no comprehensive evaluation data on the efficacy of such programs, these programs play an important role in connecting individuals with reentry support services and resources to support successful transition to and completion of college (Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017). However, one constraint of these hybrid programs is that they recruit individuals while they are still incarcerated, and therefore, primarily serve those they had already worked with in their college-in-prison programs. As a result, like the specialized programming reviewed in the previous section, there is a need for higher education access and success programming in the community that serves individuals with conviction histories more broadly, particularly given the prevalence of mass incarceration.

College Access and Success Programs in the Community

Sokoloff and Schenck-Fontaine (2017) found only two examples of such college access and success support programs that serve individuals with conviction histories in the community with transitional supports – College and Community Fellowship (CCF)[13] and College Initiative (CI) at the John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity (formerly the Prisoner Reentry Institute), both in New York City. These programs are unique in that they provide support services for formerly incarcerated individuals in order to promote the successful transition to and completion of college degrees. The support and services they provide to students include assistance navigating the college admissions process, academic counseling, and peer mentoring. These programs also make referrals to reentry organizations for transitional support (Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017). It is important to highlight that the referrals to reentry programs illustrate the way college access and success programs work in concert with reentry programs to support those with conviction histories while providing their own distinct services. Additionally, given their position within the field of higher education, both programs perform crucial advocacy on behalf of system-impacted students within higher education and higher education policy. Like higher education programs more broadly, and in contrast to most reentry programs, these programs are focused on student outcomes more typically examined in higher education research, such as the number of individuals who enroll in college, student retention in college, course

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13. CCF is a college access and success support program that was founded in 2000 with the aim of lowering barriers to higher education for system-impacted women and helping them to earn a college degree. For more information please see: www.collegeandcommunity.org

performance and completion, and graduation. Therefore, while a reduction in recidivism may be an impact of participation in these programs, it is not the main outcome of interest as higher education programs. Both CI and CCF have demonstrated potential to promote success in college for formerly incarcerated students. According to Sokoloff and Schenck-Fontaine, by 2017, CCF had helped formerly incarcerated women earn over 200 undergraduate and graduate degrees (2017). Early results for CI were similarly promising in promoting access to and completion of postsecondary education programs (Fried, 2006). Given the unique positioning and early successes of these programs, there is a considerable opportunity to continue to explore this model of higher education supports for formerly incarcerated students. The following section outlines the multi-faceted efforts at the City University of New York (CUNY) around developing community and policy supports for formerly incarcerated individuals.

CUNY Initiatives for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals

As mentioned, although people with conviction histories face significant barriers in pursuing higher education in the community, very few access and success programs exist to support them. In this section, we provide an overview of some of the work that CI, the Institute, and CUNY are doing to improve the lives and well-being of individuals with conviction histories while supporting their college enrollment, persistence, and completion[14].

The John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity College Initiative (CI)

College access and success supports, such as those provided by CI, are imperative for the success of marginalized students including those with conviction histories (Bosari, 2017; Burley, 2009; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). Accordingly, CI provides system-impacted students with individualized academic counseling, assistance in obtaining financial aid, enrolling in college, and engaging in a range of enrichment services that increase student persistence and college success. CI also provides students with additional sources of support, such as:

- **Supportive Services:** The Institute's Intake and Supportive Services unit makes initial contact with all new CI participants and supports their non-academic needs. This includes making referrals to partner organizations for support with other needs, such as housing, employment, benefits, and health. Through a partnership with the Community Service Society of New York (CSS), Institute participants can also work with an attorney to clean up their RAP sheets and address other legal concerns. As such, CI ensures that students' needs upon reentry to the community are addressed alongside their support for the transition to college. This combination of support services is integral given the impact of material needs on students' ability to pursue and remain enrolled in higher education programs.

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14. As a note, the selected efforts do not represent the entirety of the current work, and more information can be found in the Institute for Justice and Opportunity's annual report: https://justiceandopportunity.org/research/john-jay-college-institute-for-justice-and-opportunity-annual-report/

- **Peer Mentoring:** Research has demonstrated the importance of peer mentoring for students with conviction histories (Tietjen et al., 2020). Through CI's mentoring program, incoming students are matched with more experienced CI students who provide guidance and support during new students' first two semesters of college in the community. Mentors can be paired with up to four mentees and the Institute requires that peer mentors and their mentees make contact at least five times during critical points of each semester, including: (1) before the semester begins, which includes a campus tour; (2) during the first week of classes; (3) two to three weeks prior to midterms; (4) two to three weeks prior to finals; and (5) two to three weeks after finals.

In addition to the college transition and persistence supports provided to students through the CI, the Institute performs crucial research, training, technical assistance, and policy advocacy work around the needs of formerly incarcerated individuals. In particular, the Institute has done significant work around improving access to housing for this population, which is a significant area of need during reentry and a potential barrier to college access and persistence. This work includes:

- **New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA):** Since 2015, the Institute has led a coalition of housing, legal services, and criminal justice advocates to review NYCHA practices concerning permanent exclusion and ineligibility due to conviction histories. This group of engaged stakeholders is working to promote alternatives to eviction, permanent exclusion, and eligibility bans.

- **Fair Chance for Housing:** In 2020, the Institute's advocacy team worked with City Council Member Stephen Levin to craft a bill banning the use discriminatory conviction history background checks for housing in New York City—without carve-outs for certain types of convictions, which some cities have allowed.

Additionally, lack of trust when dealing with institutions and reentry organizations was identified as a significant barrier for those with conviction histories during their transitions home (Haskins and Jacobsen 2017; Lageson, 2016; Moore, 2015; Weaver & Lerman 2010). To ensure that people with conviction histories are represented in employment, particularly within organizations that serve this population, the Institute has done a significant amount of work training their students for those roles. Through this work, and their own hiring practices, the Institute seeks to create environments where people feel safe and comfortable when seeking out services because they are around people with similar lived experience who have empathy and understanding of their needs. Some notable work in this area includes:

- **Fellowships:** The Institute offers programs that combine long-term placements at non-profit organizations with academic study and professional enrichment to train the next generation of leaders in youth justice, policy advocacy, and philanthropy. These include The Pinkerton Fellowship Initiative, The Tow Policy Advocacy Fellowship, and David Rockefeller Fund Fellowship.

- **The Navigator Certificate in Human Services and Community Justice** is a one-semester training program offered twice a year for people with lived experience in the criminal legal system. The program, which is offered in partnership with John Jay College's Professional Studies, focuses on the skills entry-level and prospective employees need to apply their lived experience toward a career in the field of human services.

- **Collective Leadership Supervisor Training:** In fall 2019, the Institute began offering a training program that would help supervisors of individuals with conviction histories support their professional growth and leadership via improved communication of expectations and performance feedback.

Finally, the Institute has contributed significantly to helping individuals navigate the reentry process through informative guides and publications. These include (among others):

- **Mapping the City University of New York: The University's Commitment to Students Impacted by the Criminal Legal System** (April 2020) details the scope of CUNY's policies and programs for students impacted by the criminal legal system. The report is based on interviews with over 85 people across CUNY and identifies opportunities for CUNY to better support and welcome those students.

- **Getting to Work with a Criminal Record: New York State License Guides** (June 2020 Expanded Edition) explains the process for people with conviction records to obtain licenses in 25, high-demand occupations and professions. This resource dispels myths and misinformation that often discourage people with convictions from pursuing employment and career paths that are actually available to them.

- **Getting the Record Straight: A Guide to Navigating Background Checks** (January 2021) is designed to help people with conviction records navigate the individual, institutional, and systemic barriers erected by background checks. This guide helps readers understand what appears on a conviction record, prepare for a background check, and be ready to respond to questions.

CUNY Justice Learning Collaborative

In recent years, the Institute's policy team has embarked on efforts to make CUNY a more welcoming and supportive place for individuals with conviction histories. In September 2020, the Institute launched the CUNY Justice Learning Collaborative to convene CUNY leaders and stakeholders across campuses to identify how the University can better serve students with conviction histories. Although this work is relatively new, the work of the Collaborative (in addition to the work of CI and the Institute overall), aims to demonstrate that a focus on higher education is a viable strategy for supporting individuals when they transition back to the community and to provide evidence of promising strategies for addressing the needs of this group within CUNY and for the field of higher education overall.

College Access and Success Programmatic Needs and Limitations

College access and success programs like CI that serve students with conviction histories are uniquely positioned to work alongside reentry programs and address the needs of those pursuing a postsecondary education. While the mission and purpose of these programs is to expand access to higher education for this population, it is extremely important that programs serving formerly incarcerated students receive sufficient funding to meet their needs. However, as Conway (2018) argues, the question of supporting access to higher education is too often framed solely in terms of the impact on recidivism and, by extension, the cost-benefit for taxpayers. These economically-based arguments are insufficient because they ignore the imperative of addressing the underlying structural inequities of mass incarceration and leave the issue of funding vulnerable to the perceptions of the general public and lawmakers who may not be inclined to see this investment as worthwhile (Conway, 2018). Therefore, examining access to higher education for this group must be decoupled from this framing, and funding for supportive programming and resources allotted to meet the needs of students with conviction histories.

In addition to securing funding, it is crucial that college access and success programs also have access to data that will be informative of how to best serve their students. Although research on these higher education programs is quite limited, previous literature has shown the importance of data availability for programs that serve marginalized groups (Barrat & Berliner, 2013). Access to robust and reliable data better enables programs to support students that they aim to serve. This is significant because, as discussed earlier, research finds that on-campus supports, for example, are a vital tool for other marginalized populations (Bosari, 2017; Burley, 2009; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). Moreover, access to data that is longitudinal and traces students' educational experiences over time would be significant to better understanding the educational trajectories of the population that these programs aim to serve. It is also important to note that while the availability of data regarding students' conviction histories may be difficult to obtain due to confidentiality, data on students' prior educational outcomes and the social supports that they utilized will better inform all future programming decisions.

In addition to the data needs of college access and success programs, there is also a need for extensive evaluations of such programs. In a 2018 address to the Secretaries Innovation Group, Dr. David Muhlhausen, director of the National Institute of Justice, underscored the need for rigorous research and evaluation to develop evidence-based practices for reentry programs, stating, "We have a long history of throwing money at problems without a good understanding of whether the programs are effective." (Mulhausen, 2018). As distinct but related programs, the same need applies to college access and success programs for students with conviction histories. An evaluation of higher education programs that serve students with conviction histories can provide strong evidence of replicable models and best practices that can be utilized by other programs in the field to address practical challenges. This includes navigating the difficulties of outreach and recruitment for a population contending with stigmatization and lack of trust and engagement with institutions. While there have been several studies that have evaluated the efficacy of reentry programs, there is less known about the effects of college access and success programs on the students that they serve. An evaluation of these programs should include a process assessment that will identify and analyze promising practices, strategic partnerships, and resources that programs utilize to serve students. It is also important to highlight that, in addition to a process assessment, an outcomes evaluation is also necessary to examine the effectiveness of these programs on the students that they serve. An outcomes analysis can include short, medium, and long-term outcomes. For example, outcomes of interest for college access and success programs can include college enrollment, retention, credits accumulation, grade point average (GPA), college graduation, and employment, as well as social, emotional, and cognitive growth for students served by these programs.

Finally, the data and evaluation needs of college access and success programs also underscores the need for further research regarding individuals with conviction histories in higher education more broadly. More specifically, there should be a closer examination of the educational backgrounds of individuals with previous conviction histories. For example, as opposed to solely focusing on the level of educational attainment of individuals that have conviction histories, future research could include qualitative analyses of their prior experiences with schooling and education to better understand how these experiences shaped their own perceptions of self and education. In turn, this can provide valuable insight and an opportunity to understand if these experiences make some individuals more or less likely to pursue higher education in the future. Such research would be an important contribution to the field of higher education access research in general and would further inform program development in this field.

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