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The Path to Higher Education After Incarceration: A Qualitative Case Study with Project Rebound Students

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ABSTRACT

Education can act as a motivational, and changing, force in any individuals' life – specifically for those who are experiencing incarceration. Project Rebound, an educational support program housed in the California State University system, has reported a >0.1% recidivism rate for its members. However, California's overall recidivism rate is at 41.9% (Correctional News, 2024). This study uses qualitative research methods to examine the path to higher education for formerly incarcerated individuals. Seven active students enrolled in Project Rebound from a large southern California university participated in a one-on-one interview that lasted between 30 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes. Each interview was audio recorded, and then transcribed for coding purposes. Participants were asked about their experiences in higher education, Project Rebound, and the juvenile justice system. After thematic analysis using inductive, then deductive coding, four main codes were prevalent across the participants – Change is Possible, Education as a Catalyst; Early Experiences with Incarceration; Educating Others; and “It's a Part of my Story, but not the Whole Thing.” Overall, these findings highlight the impact education, specifically higher education, can have in changing incarcerated individuals' lives.

KEYWORDS

Higher education, juvenile detention, formerly incarcerated, academic success, project rebound

Introduction

Formerly incarcerated individuals face significant obstacles post-release, including finding employment, housing, or even just getting back into the rhythm of life. According to Vasquez (2022), higher education has the ability to completely change the trajectory of a formerly incarcerated individual's life for the better, as it did his. However, it is not always easy for individuals to enroll in college post-incarceration, especially without exposure to higher education during incarceration. On average, about 0.7% of the United States population is in prison (Wagner & Bertam, 2020). Only about 9% of all incarcerated individuals receive a post-secondary degree (Wallace et al., 2020). Furthermore, 64% of incarcerated individuals receive their high-school credentials, as compared to 50% of non-incarcerated individuals (Vera, 2019, p.11). However, lack of post-secondary attainment for incarcerated individuals does not come from a lack of interest, but rather from a lack of accessibility (Vera, 2019). Project Rebound (an educational support program built into the California State University [CSU] system) aims to close that gap by informing individuals about higher education and assisting with their re-integration post-incarceration. Anderson et al (2023) conducted a study with Project Rebound members and found that campus supports were positively impactful for formerly incarcerated college students (FICS). Further, they highlight the importance of programs like Project Rebound to create positive environments and smooth transitions into the education system for FICS students (Anderson, 2023). Fox et al. (2023) conducted a study with Project Rebound which focused on their career trajectory and successes. The study reported here attempts to understand the impact of education on the life trajectory of

formerly incarcerated individuals in Project Rebound at a large Southern California university – capturing their experiences in higher education during & post incarceration, identity development, and juvenile incarceration.

Juvenile Incarceration

Youth are being incarcerated at astoundingly high rates – the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) reports a 500% increase in arrests since the 1970's (Frankfurter & Martin, n.d.). In 2019, there were an estimated 696,620 arrests for juveniles (Puzzanchera, 2021). California reported 43,181 arrests for juveniles in the same year (California Department of Justice, 2020). Simple assaults (146,800), larceny-theft (96,200), and obstruction of justice (90,500) are reportedly amongst the most common offenses for arrest (Hockenberry, 2020). Among the most common re-offenses are technical violations – such as not reporting to a probation officer or being truant from school – for which they can be held for over three months on average (Sawyer, 2019).

In California there is a mandated four-hour educational period for youth who are incarcerated, however the education youth receive is not rigorous or engaging enough (CDE, 2022; Rosales, 2022). The Los Angeles County Probation Oversight Commission reported that most classrooms lack a culture of learning; the quality of instruction is generally far below expectations; staffing of classrooms creates barriers to learning; and few on-site school leaders exhibited the ability and intent to improve instruction (LACPOC, 2023). Korman and Pilnik (2018) described the lack of access to challenging, or needed courses, the inability to make up coursework for previous classes, and the overarching inability to meet students' needs. Christian (2021) conducted a qualitative study examining the educational experiences juveniles in detention centers where most participants described their self-taught experiences – using tablets and computers to learn concepts, take quizzes, and prepare for the GED (Christian, 2021).

In 2012, it was reported that 21% of incarcerated individuals were young adults, ages 18-24 (CSGJC, 2015). This study also found that 76% to 84% of young adults experienced recidivism in three and five years, respectively (CSGJC, 2015); leading to adult incarceration.

Conditions and Interventions During Adult Incarceration

Based on the 42% recidivism rate in California (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation [CDCR], 2024), the public can conclude that the prison system's focus on punishment as a form of rehabilitation is ineffective. The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2024) reported a significant difference between recidivism rates for individuals with educational credits and those without (26.1% vs. 41.9% respectively). In 2010, a class-action lawsuit was filed which claimed that California prisons were violating prisoners' Eighth Amendment right – banning cruel and unusual punishment. *Brown v. Plata* (2011) decided that it was necessary for California prisoners to reduce their prison population, which resulted in serious overcrowding. Exposure to such high stress environments can severely affect an individual's ability to plan for the future, think positively, or engage in healthy coping mechanisms. However, higher education, and programs like Project Rebound, can help formerly incarcerated individuals find a new outlet, a new passion, and a new path for their lives while building a sense of community and safety.

Individuals who are incarcerated in adult prisons do not always have access to higher education. California law mandates that adults receive basic education (high school diploma, English as a second language, and mathematics) during incarceration – this might not be challenging or motivating enough to encourage academic engagement post-release. Runell (2016) conducted a qualitative study with 34 individuals who were incarcerated for various offenses and attempted to participate in the college courses provided for them. One participant stated, “In the classroom, with that teacher... She did not judge us... Everybody would want to stay the next period... 'cause they used to want to learn...” (Runell, 2016, p. 98). Education during incarceration has increased self-confidence, a sense of connectedness, and leadership/civic goals for incarcerated individuals (Binda et al., 2020). Binda et al. used personal quotes from incarcerated individuals to depict the change

that education can make; one student stated, “what I learned in those classrooms... it rebuilt who I was” (Binda et al., 2020, p. 250). The opportunity for education during incarceration can change the outcome of an individual’s life post-release. Davis et al. (2013) conducted a meta-analysis to examine the effects of education during incarceration – they found that individuals who received education during incarceration were 64% less likely to recidivate as compared to individuals who did not receive education.

The prison system’s intent is to allow individuals to atone for crimes they have committed, rehabilitate, and then reenter society. Receiving educational opportunities during and post-incarceration can significantly improve autonomy, self-awareness, and create opportunities for positive change (Miller, 2019). Higher education for formerly incarcerated individuals increases their opportunities for employment, social connections, and the possibility of breaking intergenerational trends of incarceration and poverty (Runell, 2016; Mukamal et al., 2015).

The Current Study

The current study is guided by the following research question: How do formerly incarcerated college students (FICS) describe their path to higher education? A one-on-one semi-structured interview method was used with members of Project Rebound, at a large Southern California university. There is little knowledge about the higher education experiences of FICS, particularly those in Project Rebound which is the case targeted for this study. This paper will fill a gap in the existing literature which is needed to further decrease recidivism rates and improve rehabilitation efforts for incarcerated and FICS.

Positionality Statement

During my time in my undergraduate career, I was able to work with a Project Rebound at a Southern California university. I have heard numerous personal accounts of the support Project Rebound has offered its members. I personally know what benefits a community like Project Rebound can hold for formerly incarcerated individuals, which is exactly why I chose this population. However, the potential bias that I hold is that I already view Project Rebound in a positive light. In my interview questions, I do ask members about their negative experiences, but I am entering this study aware of the fact that I believe Project Rebound has a positive effect on its members. I am an Armenian female, in my late 20’s, and I have never experienced incarceration; these are identities that were not similar to my participants, which can build a block from relating to participants’ experiences. However, I was confident in my ability to build trust with my participants – specifically because I had prior experience working with many members. By showing empathy, respect, and genuine care for their experiences, I was able to develop a trusting relationship.

Method

Participants

Seven active members of Project Rebound agreed to participate in the current study. Project Rebound is an educational support program housed in the California State University (CSU) system – 16 of the 23 CSU’s currently have an active program. The program focuses on recruitment, outreach, advocacy, and mentorship. Active members of Project Rebound reach out to incarcerated individuals to inform them about the benefits of higher education and assist with their reintegration post-release. Table 1 presents a list of the participants with their corresponding pseudonyms, gender, and years of incarceration. Participants’ ages ranged from 30 to 72 years old – three were in their 30’s, three were in their 50’s and one was over 70 years old. Participants self-identified as African-American (2), White (3), Asian-American (1), and mixed race (1); participants’ individual race is not included to protect anonymity. Each participant entered higher education immediately after release; their time in Project Rebound varied from a few months to three years.

Table 1
Participant pseudonyms, gender, and years of incarceration

Participant	Pseudonym	Gender	Time incarcerated
Participant 1	Kathrine	Female	12 years
Participant 2	Jerry	Male	10 ½ years
Participant 3	Derek	Male	27 years
Participant 4	Edward	Male	16 years
Participant 5	Stacy	Female	23 years
Participant 6	Alex	Male	14 years
Participant 7	Mark	Male	4 years

Data Collection Procedures

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Cal State LA as an exempt study. After IRB approval, a list of all active members (and their emails) was provided by the Project Rebound coordinator. All members (56) were emailed and a total of seven showed interest in participating. Seven interviews were scheduled in July 2022; five interviews were conducted in person and two were conducted via Zoom. Participants did not receive any honorarium for participating.

Interview Protocol

There was a total of 17 pre-determined questions about experiences in juvenile detention, adult incarceration, access to education, experience with project rebound, and perceptions. For example, “Did you have any educational experience during incarceration? If so, can you describe that experience?” However, questions were not always asked in the same order and some questions were not asked if they did not apply to the participant. For example, one participant did not have experiences with the juvenile justice system, so they were not asked any of the related questions.

Data Analysis

Using grounded theory to guide the coding process, multiple rounds of coding were employed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The first round was open coding (deriving codes from the data). The second round of coding was axial coding – identifying relationships and connections between codes. Finally, selective coding was employed – to refine the findings and find the major phenomena. Transcripts were re-reviewed with the main overarching themes to ensure they properly highlighted the stories of the individuals interviewed.

Two additional coders, undergraduate students trained in qualitative data, were invited to review the longest of the seven transcripts. Consensus coding was employed since the codes were not pre-determined and the two students assisting were not experts in the literature about FICS (Saldaña, 2016).

Coding

After the first and second rounds of coding, the transcripts resulted in 46 codes. These codes were compiled into a total of 13 sub-themes: Education, Incarceration, Family Influence, Project Rebound, Work Life Balance, Individual Characteristics, Opportunity, Impressions, Difficulties, Advice, Systems, Women vs. Men, and Beyond the Classroom – this process is represented in Figure 1. Four major themes were deduced from the transcripts: Change is Possible, Education as a Catalyst; Early Experiences with Incarceration; Educating Others; and “It’s a Part of my Story, but not the Whole Thing.” Figure 2 represents how the sub-themes mapped onto the 4 main themes. The approach to coding was holistic, in that each interview in its entirety was the unit of analysis. A single occurrence of a code would be sufficient for the interview to receive that code.

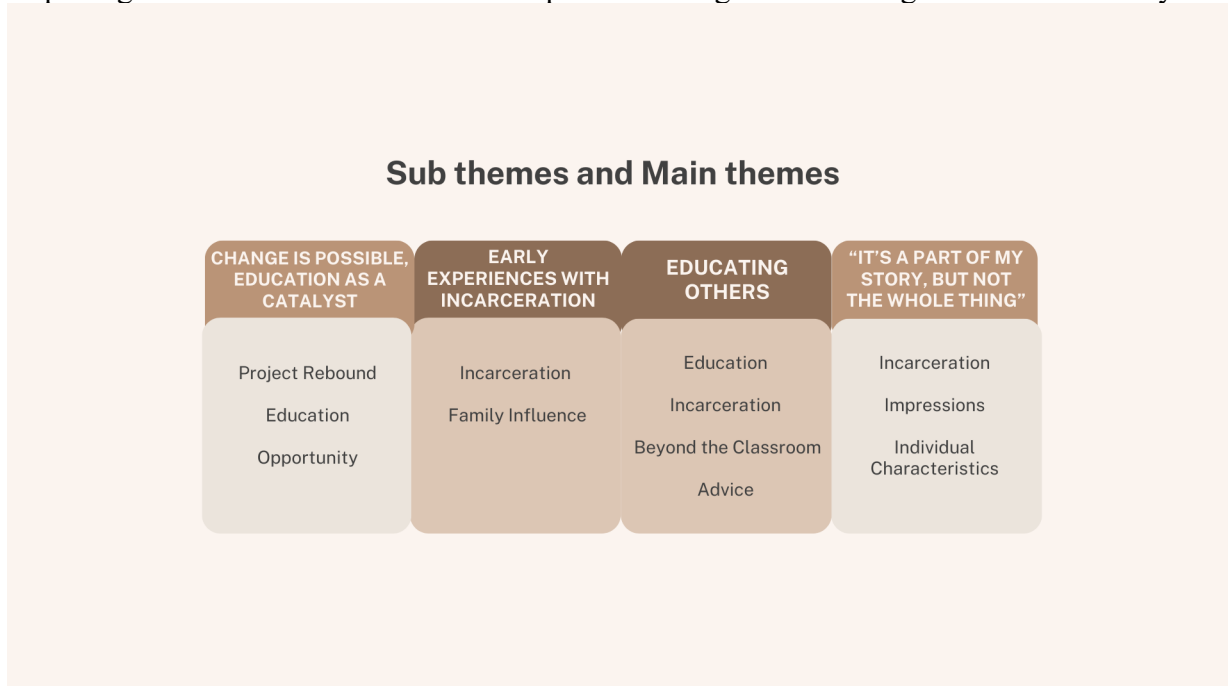
Figure 1

Depicting the original 46 codes and how they were funneled into the main themes



Figure 2

Depicting how each of the sub-themes map onto the larger overarching themes of the study



Results

Change is possible, Education as the catalyst

Society falters in its belief that people do not change. When we think about the population of individuals experiencing incarceration, we tend to think "once an offender always an offender." This narrative is further

pushed by the shockingly high recidivism rates in the United States. The United States Bureau of Justice (2014) published a report that examined recidivism rates over a 5-year period from 2005 and found that 67% of individuals experience recidivism in a 3-year period, and 77% in a 5-year period. Without appropriate resources post-release, it is almost inevitable that individuals will find themselves cycling through the system. Alex (14 years incarcerated) noted, “the recidivism rates for college educated prisoners is very low.” Finding resources, support, and work after incarceration is an incredibly difficult task – this is highlighted in various articles and interviews with formerly incarcerated individuals all over the United States. Edward (12 years incarcerated) highlighted the difficulty of getting educational support during incarceration:

You have to just ask around and figure it out... its usually a kind of a process... they don't make easy... so it's more a matter of being willing to stick with doing all the paperwork, following up and all that.

While this lack of support, and self-initiated path, might be common within the prison system, it certainly negatively impacts the rehabilitation process. Incarceration is incredibly isolating, as it cuts any connection individuals have with society. Derek (27 years incarcerated) stated:

I wanted to stay connected to the real world, not push it away, you know... but it's a rough transition. I mean, I, I'd never used a cell phone... I had never used the internet... when I was arrested, it didn't exist.

The transition to life outside of incarceration is incredibly difficult, whether it is due to the fact that individuals had been disconnected from life in the “real” world or that they could not figure out a way to step out of the cycle of recidivism. The ACLU (n.d) discusses the various challenges post-incarceration and joblessness as a main factor of recidivism; earning a job with a “formerly incarcerated” label can be quite difficult. Couloute & Kopf (2018) reported a 27% unemployment rate for formerly incarcerated individuals – higher than unemployment rates during the Great Depression. However, it is possible to experience a life after incarceration; this was best depicted by Stacy (23 years incarcerated):

Change is possible, you know, for me from being a drug addict and being a formerly incarcerated in and out in and out almost all my life. And right now, whoever thought that I would be 72 years old with my master's thinking about doing my second master's.

She continued on to highlight the importance of increasing educational opportunities, including the opportunity to earn a bachelor's degree, at women's correctional facilities, “[its] gonna give them a possibility of having the governor forgive them, because they're not the same women. They won't be the same woman that leaves that came in” (Stacy). Of the 34 state prisons in California, only eight offer the inmates the opportunity to earn their bachelor's degrees; all others provide some college courses with the chance of earning an associate's degree (CDCR, 2023). Kathrine explained that the main difference between the community college courses, and the courses geared towards a bachelor's degree, was the presence of the instructor. Jerry (10 ½ years incarcerated) was able to experience both, and recognized the impact of having instructors in the classrooms:

...but most of the instructors... if not all, they were also able to impart some of their decency, some of their humanity, some of their care and concern for humanity in general. A lot of us describe this taking effect along with absorbing the curriculum. And it made us more moral and civic minded.

Derek (27 years incarcerated) echoed this experience:

When we did the bachelor's program, unlike Coastline, which is Scantrons and, and do it yourself, and not really college. The... bachelor's program was professors in the classroom. We did it as a cohort...

having that in class experience was a huge difference from what Coastline offered. And they challenged us, Coastline wasn't really very challenging for most people... but also because they challenged us it really opened the door for us to spread what we were learning...

Many participants highlighted their positive experiences with education. Jerry (10 ½ years incarcerated) explained the main challenge of reintegration and how Project Rebound can be beneficial:

...there's two things the returning citizen has to say... they have to manage stigma, and reconstruct a positive social identity. And Project Rebound was just really one good source for me and lots of others to be able to do that. Because we have space on campus, we have a community to turn to... We got people that are presidents of student orgs, now, people giving keynote speeches at graduation. I'm in the classical guitar ensemble and playing the orchestra. We got people joining the forensics and debate team now... I was lecturing in the Comm department...

As described by Jerry (10 ½ years incarcerated), Project Rebound members' build a community of support for each other. This support in turn provides the ability to stop the cycle of recidivism.

I got there in 2007 and when I left there, I haven't used drugs... my main goal before I got education, was go find money, go get high. That's all that was on my mind. But after I started going to school, I started seeing other things that I don't even think about even though I live in the neighborhood I live in right now, you see people on the corner or in the pipe, and all that, but it doesn't even faze me because I'm a different mindset now (Stacy, 23 years incarcerated).

Education is not only important because it broadens our worldview and gives us new knowledge, but education can create a ripple effect of change in all aspects of an individual's life. This effect was best described by Mark (4 years incarcerated):

It helps with relationships, romantic, or just coworkers. How to talk to people how to recognize if they're having a bad day to maybe prevent a suicide or prevent their bad attitude resulting to domestic violence in their house or to their kids. So just education is very important, and people should prioritize it.

Jerry (10 ½ years incarcerated) echoed the impact of higher education with the combined effort of other programs aimed to help FICS:

I combined the higher education with a lot of inner work, a lot of therapy, a lot of peer to peer, teaching, you know, of personal responsibility, empathy, and stuff like that... The higher education is very helpful, but when combined with the inner work, that leads to, like a transformative, transformative, dynamic that is just surpasses my ability to express it right now.

Early Experiences with Incarceration

Six of the seven participants experienced juvenile incarceration. As early as 13, participants had an experience with being arrested, taken away from family, friends, and taken into juvenile detention centers. Some participants explained the reasons for their original arrest, and it ranged from theft to simple battery. Alex described having a fight with his father in which they both hit each other; his father later called the police and the police arrested Alex for bodily harm at the age of 15.

So, once he pushed me, I stumbled back and... the back of my head hit something. And I, at the time, thought my father did that intentionally, so I punched him. And that's when he called the cops. And when the cops interviewed the both of us, my father left that part out, he just said 'well, my son had an attitude problem and he just hit me...' so that's when the officers arrested me. I went to juvenile court, and for 19 days I was in juvenile hall. (Alex, 14 years incarcerated)

Edward described himself as being an incorrigible child – one who did not listen to anyone or anything, a privileged individual often left alone in the family house, with access to alcohol. Edward (16 years incarcerated) stated:

in retrospect I think once the fear of getting locked up and going to jail was out, once I was over that initial fear you hear 'all this is gonna be horrible...' You go there. No, that's no big deal... And then it just kind of progressed to adulthood.

This quote touches on how some individuals who might be afraid of experiencing incarceration, experience incarceration and rather than being scared straight the fear just disappears. Similarly, Alex (14 years incarcerated) stated: "He called law enforcement on me with the goal of straightening me out, like maybe through scare tactics, or actually taking me away to discipline me in the long run."

All participants either returned to school after their experience with juvenile hall and received their high school diploma or earned their GED. For those participants who returned to school post-juvenile incarceration, I asked if they felt that their teachers or administrators treated them differently. This was an attempt to address the impact of stigma associated with youth who experience incarceration. Mark (4 years incarcerated) stated,

I had always had teachers tell me that I would never finish high school anyways, but particularly after getting released and coming back to school. It was just like not really like animosity, but just like indifference. And I just felt like they were the teachers, and the administrators and the staff mostly just didn't care anymore. You know, they would rather focus a lot of their attention on other kids that were doing better than me, I guess.

Others claimed that they kept that part of their identity away from their teachers and peers, or they couldn't remember how their teachers treated them because they were under the influence (drugs and/or alcohol) or just didn't care enough to pay attention. Stacy (23 years incarcerated) said, "I was always drunk and high, so what they thought, what they felt, it didn't faze me." Jerry (10 ½ years incarcerated) didn't experience a shift in perceptions from his peers or teachers because "none of them knew about it... I didn't share that identity with hardly anybody." Edward (16 years incarcerated) shared "I was such an incorrigible kid that like I don't even really remember too much about going back to school." These young experiences with the juvenile justice system start the cycle of recidivism for many individuals – and certainly this was the case for six of seven of the participants in this study. Kathrine (12 years incarcerated) highlighted "yeah, I made a lot of bad decisions as a juvenile that led me to my adult incarceration."

It's a Part of my Story, but not the Whole Thing

An experience with incarceration follows with labels such as: convict, felon, criminal, offender, inmate, and prisoner. These labels can carry with them stigmas and negative perceptions that perpetrate throughout society; they tend to become the prominent identifier for others', and they have an everlasting connotation. Edward (16 years incarcerated) described how he balanced these identities:

It's not like it's not part of my story. I mean, it's part of my story, but it's not. It's not what defines me. What defines me is what I'm doing today... That's part of my past. And it's part of my story, but it's

me, if you want to sit down. I'll talk to you about it. It's not something I hide.

This quote highlights the importance of developing other identities and being able to define yourself for current or upcoming accomplishments rather than a label from the past, Edward did his best to not use his experiences with incarceration as the leading story. It is not an identity that holds high status and stature in society; similarly, Jerry did not share his stories of juvenile incarceration with his peers or teachers. Moving to higher education, Jerry (10 1/2 years incarcerated) continued to be cautious with this identity, "I also didn't feel like I had to lead with that... I didn't have to hide it, but like, most of the time, I would if they didn't already know."

As this "formerly incarcerated" label carried with it stereotypes and stigmas, Kathrine (12 years incarcerated) described her experience adjusting to college, stating that she had at-least one professor who was accommodating and understanding of the difficulties that come post-release, while others "were horrible to me." When asked if she felt like she could relate to any of her peers on campus, she said, "Um, sometimes, and then sometimes in classes. I don't know. Maybe I'll always chalk it up to my being incarcerated and having a vibe of being paranoid of people" (Kathrine, 12 years incarcerated).

For some, like Edward and Jerry, the identification of the "prisoner" or "ex-convict" identity is hidden until announced. Derek (27 years incarcerated) shared his experience with relating to others on campus and described how stereotypical looks of individuals can lead others to assume their identities:

Most people's reaction is "really, what's that like?" "How did you survive that?" Those kinds of questions. And the other and this is an interesting kind of tangent but is "not you." You know, you're a relatively well-spoken white guy who doesn't have face tattoos. How could I possibly have been in prison.... I've got a friend who's a Mexican gangbanger, face covered with tattoos. He's getting them removed, but the stigma is completely different.

Edward (16 years incarcerated) explained that he can relate to other incarcerated or FICS, however when it comes to other students on campus he stated, "I feel like an outcast." When Stacy (24 years incarcerated) discussed her experience, she talked about how feeling like she belonged made it easier to create connections, achieve bigger goals, and build a life outside of the incarceration label. She discussed:

But I know I felt funny because I felt like I was an outsider. And now I'm in and I've been in college... with Project Rebound, you feel like you're a part of something, you're with your people... back then I didn't have that... I realized how much Project Rebound enriches you... now it's a lot easier, less stressful, students can focus on their studies better because they have a part of something... they help too... with books and book vouchers...

It was evident that participants wanted to, and were actively, building a life for themselves outside of their "incarceration" labels. Participants highlighted the importance of recognizing the different identities they hold; they also highlighted the importance of having a feeling of belongingness on campus – often this happened with other members of Project Rebound.

Educating Others

A big part of receiving education during incarceration was the motivation to spread the knowledge to other inmates who were not enrolled in college courses. Multiple participants reported their experiences in college classes being a self-taught experience. Derek (27 years incarcerated) stated "Coastline, which is Scantrons and, and do it yourself, and not really college" when asked about his experience with higher education during incarceration. Similarly, Mark (4 years incarcerated) described:

I did all of my classes by correspondence, but I had a proctor who served as kind of the like, liaison, I guess, between the prison and the college. And I got to go and visit her for like an hour a week. That was it.

An interesting aspect of the participants' experiences with higher education during incarceration was the motivation to educate each other. It is evident that individuals who participated in the educational programs during incarceration took their knowledge beyond the classroom; they worked not just for their benefit but for the benefit of their peers, of individuals not enrolled in college, and to create a positive environment in the prison. That is best described below by Derek (27 years incarcerated):

And I was at the game room one day, and I looked over and four gentlemen not involved in college at all. We're discussing Notes from the Underground, by Dostoevsky. And two of them had [cellmates] that were in the college program. That's how they got the first two books. The other two had borrowed books. They had a note sheet, kind of a question answer sheet from one of our professors that they were using his talking points.

Further, the importance of inmates supporting other inmates during their educational journey was also highlighted. Edward (16 years incarcerated) stated:

If somebody's not doing well other people will try to help pull them up and get them through the class so they don't flunk out. there's not this attitude of "another one bites the dust. See you later." Like there's kind of... pulling together and trying to help somebody else... guys getting together and doing study groups on the yard. There seems to be a lot of camaraderie, and helpfulness. But at the same time, it's different because you don't have access to the professor. You can't email a professor you can't just call the professor over send them a text...

Overall, these quotes highlight how significantly educational courses impacted the lives of these individuals during their time incarcerated. It was not only important to enroll in college courses to make themselves better and to keep their minds occupied, but to educate others. These FICS actively worked to not only empower themselves but to empower others as well. "And it's helping people you know, they say, bro, fuck doing crime. I can get educated and, and have a purpose, you know, and help those younger ones" (Stacy, 23 years incarcerated). Educate and empower beyond just worksheet and scantrons, this human-to-human contact was what really made a change. Jerry remembered (10 ½ years incarcerated):

But the professors are able to, especially Dr. [X], like their goodness that somehow got into us too and we could transmit it now... so that's the big theme... we'd have these tattered handouts... and we'd go make a bunch of photocopies and teach it to each other, peer to peer... if there wasn't a class, we got our hands on a handout somehow and made copies and talk to ourselves.

Discussion

This study highlights four key themes amongst current Project Rebound members: (1) Change is Possible, Education as a Catalyst; (2) Early Experiences with Incarceration; (3) "It's a Part of my Story, but not the Whole Thing;" and (4) Educating Others. It is crucial to note that these seven individuals all had multiple experiences with the criminal justice system and they are actively and effortfully trying to turn their lives around. Education, and Project Rebound act as catalysts to get them on the right path. For each participant, knowledge of college courses and of Project Rebound during their time incarcerated helped them gain access to resources and support that they otherwise might not have. They each highlighted the importance of the support system that Project Rebound brought to them and on this journey of change and growth it seemed to

be crucial.

It is crucial to note that this study only considered stories of seven participants who were able to access Project Rebound post-incarceration. The voices of many individuals who experience incarceration and are unable to enroll in college, or unaware of Project Rebound, are not accounted for in this study. It is possible that without services and supports, students fall through the cracks and never make it back to higher education.

Through Project Rebound, participants in this study were able to build a community and experience a sense of belonging in a new and unfamiliar environment. Project Rebound provided a safe space where members could find all types of support (financial, emotional, and social), become mentors for future members, and become advocates for the community. While the existence of negative stigmas is prominent in society, especially for those who are formerly incarcerated, for most of these participants negative experiences were nonexistent in their time at the university. This can be since these participants had created a sense of belonging and a community with other Project Rebound members. A greater sense of belonging is correlated with better rates of persistence, engagement and mental health (Gopalan & Brandy, 2019).

For the participants in the study, higher education acted as a pillar of hope and a chance to change their current circumstances. One participant described the positive effect of having educators in the classroom from the Prison B.A. program – not just in terms of academics, but the presence of such a good and positive force in a room full of prisoners, “It’s contagious” (Jerry, 51 years old, 10 ½ years incarcerated). Providing good educational opportunities for individuals who are incarcerated, and opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals, might help decrease the rate of recidivism in the United States. Many participants discussed experiences of distance learning during incarceration and experiences with prison guards discouraging them and their academic success. “The mindset of the prison guards is that because you’ve broken the law, it’s okay to torment you” (Jerry, 10 ½ years incarcerated). As these individuals are trying to earn their freedom back, and become positive and productive members of society, it is crucial to create opportunities for them. Providing more funding and support for educational opportunities, and for the Project Rebound programs across California, can potentially aid this progress and continue to decrease the recidivism rate.

A variety of programs have reported a positive impact on FICS -- the Prison Entrepreneurship program reports only an 8% recidivism rate for its members (PEP, 2018), the Safer Foundation reports a 97% retention rate (indicating individuals stay in the program and do not return to incarceration) (Safer, 2016), and the Last Mile Program reports the 100% of their graduates never return to prison (Stand Together, 2023). Project Rebound reports less than .1% recidivism rate for its members – as of 2022, they’ve served 566 students and 95 of them have proceeded onto graduate programs (CSU, 2022). All these programs aimed at increasing opportunities for engagement in education or employment can help formerly incarcerated individuals find their purpose.

Limitations

Firstly, this study only included seven participants; because the method required an hour of each individual’s time, most eligible members opted not to participate. Using a survey for data collection might have engaged more Project Rebound members and provided more data. While individual interviews helped get a deeper understanding, being able to engage more participants could have provided valuable information. Secondly, the data from this study relied on a one-on-one, question and answer interview. It might have benefited the study to conduct focus groups where participants could discuss their experiences with each other. Thirdly, participants were asked to recall information from 20 – 40 years ago for this study, and memory is malleable. Unfortunately, this study could not do anything to help with that. The data reported in this paper primarily focuses on educational experiences which are more recent events for the participants. Future research should focus on gathering data from a variety of campuses to increase generalizability; as well as gathering different types of data (e.g., surveys, photo elicitations, observations) to get a deeper understanding of this population.

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