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The Challenges to the Reintegration and Rehabilitation of Sex Offenders: My Experience as an Adult Probation Officer

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Abstract

Criminal offender rehabilitation and reintegration have consistently taken a backseat to the United States' default policy of punishment, criminalization, and control. This paper seeks to evaluate the American criminal justice system, specifically as it applies to alternative sentencing for sex offenders. Utilizing both existing research as well as my personal experience working as an intern for the Connecticut Judicial Branch, I plan to explore the numerous barriers this population faces upon their reentry to their respective communities. My individual exposure to American probation aligned greatly with what I found in the existing literature. My clients repeatedly expressed frustration with a counterproductive system that is supposedly designed to support them yet consistently hinders their successful contribution to society at the very same time. These challenges were only amplified for the sex offender population, given the stigma and repulsion that exists among the public in response to their crimes. As I continued to work with and get to know my clients, their own experiences with violence, trauma, and victimization became apparent, reinforcing the need for effective interventions to break the perpetuation of these injurious cycles.

Keywords: adult probation, reintegration, criminal justice, incarceration, alternative sentencing

“Just write his warrant already.”

This was a phrase I heard with relative frequency while working in the Adult Probation Department of the Connecticut Judicial Branch and one that I would often chuckle at along with the other staff members. I had been assigned to the Sex Offender Unit of a Connecticut State Superior Court, where the primary purpose of my role was to assist clients in their reentry to mainstream society and to guide them through their rehabilitation following their convictions. It was common for offenders to violate one of their many conditions of probation, so much so that perhaps we were all becoming desensitized to what that would mean for our clients, their reintegration into their communities, and their futures.

Criminal offenders are presented with many barriers when working toward their rehabilitation. This is particularly true for sex offenders who have a number of additional obstacles in the way of their successful reentry into productive society. In this essay, I plan to discuss the mechanisms in which full reintegration can be inhibited due to the structure of our country’s criminal justice system, specifically as it applies to probationary programs.

The United States’ criminal justice system has become increasingly punitive over the past several decades. In the 1970s, our nation experienced a transition in crime and justice policy towards a much more punitive system - one that placed us on a destructive trajectory that has still not been fully reversed. The trend began under President Nixon with his initiation of the "War on Drugs" and an overall "tough-on-crime" political technique. However, the uniquely American system of mass incarceration didn't reach its full form until Ronald Reagan entered office. Under his administration, the prison population nearly doubled in size, growing from 329,000 to 627,000 in a matter of eight years (Cullen, 2018). This drastic increase in our nation's prison population was not correlated with any uptick in crime rates. Rather, it reflects the political priorities of the time, fueled by an increase in funding directed towards local and federal law enforcement, the creation of the DEA, and harsh legislative changes such as mandatory sentencing and three-strikes laws (Bullfrog Films, 2016). The increase in criminalization and punitive law enforcement and sentencing strategies resulted in a peak prison population of 1,615,487 in 2009 (Delaney, 2023).

As of 2008, the United States incarcerates one out of one hundred adults, incarcerating more of its population than any other country in the world (Warren, 2011). According to the film *Incarcerating U.S.*, America holds just 5% of the world's population but 25% of the world's prison population, making our country the only one in the world that has this kind of system of mass incarceration (BullFrog Films, 2016). Not only is our country's prison population increasing by sheer number, but the needs of our incarcerated population are increasing and diversifying. Prisons are no longer merely a place to hold people following a crime, but they now serve a much greater purpose towards the ultimate goal of criminal rehabilitation. They now act as schools, hospitals, and mental health treatment facilities (BullFrog Films, 2016). Unfortunately, our country's prisons have become the place we send individuals for whom we have no place within the community and who require a lot of support, those who commonly struggle with mental illnesses, difficult life conditions, and also violate the law.

Specifically relevant to my internship was familiarizing myself with the population and demographic I would be working with. For me, this began with understanding why these individuals had become involved in the criminal justice system, researching the prevalence of sexually violent offenders and their offenses, and discovering my role in the context of working with this population and ultimately towards creating safer communities. A sex offense is defined as a crime that is sexual in nature or contains a component of sexual arousal for the perpetrator, usually a sexual act that lacks consent from one party or is carried out through means of coercion

or violence (Suitt, 2022). Sex crimes are inherently difficult to define, observe, monitor, gather research on, and prosecute. With this understanding, it is important to note the several significant limitations that exist within the data collected on criminal activity and victimization in general, and specifically among the data we do have on sex crimes that themselves are so convoluted in nature. Research collected by the National Crime Victimization Survey estimated "284,350 rape/sexual assault victimizations occurred in the United States in 2014" and that young women under the age of thirty are the most common victims of sex crimes (Wiseman, 2015). Sexual assault victims are among the least likely to report these incidences to law enforcement, and research has revealed that it is actually quite common for victims to not disclose this information, "National Crime Victimization Survey data suggests that only in one in four rapes or sexual assaults have been reported to police over the last 15 years" (Wiseman, 2015).

Meanwhile, the National Women's Study data "indicates that 84% of victims did not report rape to the police" (Wiseman, 2015). These statistics, of course, are not to suggest that all those labeled 'sex offenders' are rapists but rather are being utilized to demonstrate the inconsistencies that exist in the disclosure and punishment of sex crimes.

Sexual offenders make up a distinct category of criminology and are different from other groups of criminal offenders in a number of ways. The Prison Policy Initiative clearly states one of the most important differences between offending groups: "People convicted of violent and sexual offenses are actually among the least likely to be rearrested, and those convicted of rape or sexual assault have rearrest rates 20% lower than all other offense categories combined" (Sawyer & Wagner, 2023). The data we do have on people who commit sex offenses reveals a markedly lower recidivism rate than any other criminal group, suggesting that our current responses to these offenses might not be the most appropriate or effective. In fact, within the first year following release from prison, sexual offenders have less than a 2% arrest rate for rape or sexual assault and an 8% arrest rate after nine years for similar offenses (Sawyer, 2018). These rates are even lower for individuals forty or older, reflecting a well-studied trend of age acting as a predictor of criminal behavior and violence. The risk of reoffending significantly declines following a peak during young adulthood, and these rearrest rates can even lower by half once the offender reaches middle adulthood and beyond (Sawyer, 2018). Despite this knowledge, we continue to incarcerate offenders long after their risk factors might require. Persons convicted of sex crimes typically serve longer sentences than those who commit crimes outside of this category, serving a five-year median sentence, while over 25% serve ten years or more (Sawyer, 2018). This may have to do with the particularly traumatizing nature of sex crimes, public antipathy, and their long-lasting impact on their victims.

This dramatic rise in our prison population has come with both a significant human cost and a great financial burden. Between the years 1987 and 2007, there was a 127% increase in corrections spending (Warren, 2011). The resources states choose to dedicate to our system of mass incarceration are resources that are taken away from vital social welfare programs that many argue would help address the root causes of several issues that afflict our contemporary society. The U.S. government chooses to blindly dedicate a large portion of its budget to our prison system, with little to no research supporting its efficacy or even directly contradicting it (Warren, 2011). In fact, the surge in the American prison population, which our government spends so much of its money on, does not even reflect changes in our nation's crime rate. Rather, the rise in mass incarceration reflects changes in policy that support tough-on-crime legislation that sends more lawbreakers to prison in addition to lengthening their sentences (Warren, 2011). This rise in mass incarceration also reflects our nation's investment in a prison industrial complex, a term that is

used to describe the economic and political arrangement between the state and its correctional facilities. Prisons have become a huge source of profit, and thus a compelling financial incentive has been successfully established to perpetuate the expansion of correctional facilities and the criminalization of various social afflictions (Davis, 2020). As a result, the Brennan Center for Justice estimates "39 percent, or 576,000, were in prison without any public safety reason and could have been punished in a less costly and damaging way" (Sawyer, 2018). The research found in the resources that I have presented thus far has led me to believe that there must be a better system to punish and simultaneously rehabilitate and prevent some deviant criminal behavior within our society. The following paragraphs will evaluate alternatives to traditional incarceration.

Following our country's establishment of the prison industrial complex and our trend towards mass incarceration, there has been a counter-movement towards alternative forms of state-sanctioned punishment. Essentially, our country's strategy of criminal incapacitation has failed to demonstrate a clear impact toward the deduction in crime rates or recidivism of criminal offenders, all while costing states an excessively large portion of their budgets (Warren, 2011). As a result of the outrageous costs created by an institution that lacks empirical evidence for its effectiveness towards greater public safety, essential funding is stripped from other programs like healthcare or education in order to support our nation's prison growth (Warren, 2011). Not only has incarceration shown to be largely ineffective in its initial goal of reducing American crime rates, but it has actually proven to be quite harmful to those forced to endure their barbaric conditions. Sawyer and Wagner of the Prison Policy Initiative explain how detrimental prison environments can be on both the physical and mental health of inmates, "Decades of research show that many of the defining features of incarceration are stressors linked to negative mental health outcomes: disconnection from family, loss of autonomy, boredom and lack of purpose, and unpredictable surroundings" (Sawyer & Wagner, 2023). In addition to the circumstantial stressors confinement creates, "Inhumane conditions, such as overcrowding, solitary confinement, and experiences of violence also contribute to the lasting psychological effects of incarceration, including the PTSD-like Post-Incarceration Syndrome" (Sawyer & Wagner, 2023). The environment that exists within the United States prison system is hardly an ideal place for serious criminal offenders, much less for those who commit minor and/or non-violent offenses. U.S. prisons and jails are even further from a therapeutic environment - the type of environment that would be required for those suffering from mental illnesses or a substance abuse disorder - conditions that are often criminalized.

The many extreme negative impacts that are created by the United States' system of mass incarceration have established reasoning for policymakers and government officials to begin exploring alternatives to caging criminal offenders. Through this exploration, some states have demonstrated that "Deploying a broad range of sanctions can protect communities, punish lawbreakers, and conserve tax dollars for other pressing public needs" (Warren, 2011). Alternatives to incarceration have illustrated how diversifying sanctions can be viable options for criminal punishment.

Many activist and criminal justice reform groups seek to stray from the United States' traditional system of punishment and control and to turn its focus on the rehabilitation of criminal offenders (PBS, 2017). The ultimate goal of rehabilitation is social harmony and public safety. Successful rehabilitation is highly contingent upon matching the offender to the right program for them based on their needs and the nature of their offense (Kelly, 2021). Parole and probation are two alternative forms of incarceration that have very similar conditions and supervision. The main difference between the two is whether an offender begins by serving a sentence in prison or if their

sentence sought to prevent incarceration altogether. Parolees are released from prison earlier than their given sentence of incapacitation and placed under community supervision for the remainder of their original sentence. Probation, on the other hand, begins and ends their criminal sentence under state supervision while remaining in the community. The main goal of probation is to rehabilitate the criminal offender and to give them an additional chance to prove themselves capable of obeying the law without fully incapacitating that individual and remaining integrated into their community (American Law Library, 2021).

Probation is a supervision program that falls under the umbrella of alternatives to formal incarceration, where an offender can remain in the community while still being supervised by the state and serving their sentence. This was the form of alternative punitive action that I would have exposure to for my community research and internship experience. Although these two types of programs are treated as a reward or a second chance for criminal offenders, it also tends to place them in a highly vulnerable position as opposed to merely serving their full sentence in prison. Sawyer and Wagner (2023) explain, “Community supervision... is often seen as a ‘lenient’ punishment or as an ideal ‘alternative’ to incarceration. But while remaining in the community is certainly preferable to being locked up, the conditions imposed on those under supervision are often so restrictive that they set people up to fail”. Many individuals end up being sent to prisons or jails for violations of their probation or parole conditions, not for committing an entirely new crime. In fact, at least 128,000 people were incarcerated for community supervision violations in 2021, accounting for 27% of total admissions to state and federal prisons (Sawyer & Wagner, 2023). Approximately one-third of parolees return to prison because of a violation of their conditions and not for a criminal act (PBS, 2017). In addition, within the U.S., more than fifty percent of criminal offenders recidivate within three years, either due to a new crime or for violating their terms of release from prison (Warren, 2011). Although the individual is in the community, they are still serving their sentence and can be taken into more restrictive state custody at any time law enforcement officials see fit and for incredibly minor and/or unfair technical violations. This system, although preferable to incarceration, often leads to unnecessary incarceration and a stigmatizing label.

As an intern for the Connecticut Judicial Branch under the Department of Adult Probation, I was eventually trained to perform the same duties as a traditional probation officer. I began by performing simple duties like sorting warrants, entering psychiatric treatment notes, and composing case records on behalf of the senior officers. I was then granted the opportunity to work with the probation officer who handled the domestic violence caseload and allowed me to sit on his office visits with him and take notes during meetings for him. I eventually graduated from sitting in on office visits and writing the visit summaries on behalf of the senior officers to conducting client reports myself. At first, I would see clients with the supervision of an actual officer, but eventually, I was entrusted to administer reporting independently for both sex offender and domestic violence clients. This became incredibly helpful to my department when someone was unavailable to conduct their reporting themselves, had too heavy of a caseload, or simply had too many other tasks that needed their attention and training.

Depending on the offense of the client, the conditions of their probation would be set by their primary supervisor to fit the needs of that individual client and to best suit them for their successful rehabilitation. These conditions of probation were vast, and there were severe consequences for clients who were not able to comply with the requirements set by the court. Non-compliance would result in a violation from the client's supervising officer. Violations would have to be reported to the court, and the sentencing of the individual would be reconsidered by a judge.

In my work, I would use a client's conditions of probation to guide the way I administered their reporting session. Essentially all offenders on probation were required to secure housing and employment and to attend both probation reporting and scheduled court dates. Sex offenders would often have additional special conditions that could include no victim contact, no minor contact, enrollment in sex offender treatment programs, sex offender registry, and potential substance abuse treatment, among other things depending on the specific nature and circumstances of their crime.

Despite even the best intentions of probation and parole, these programs themselves actually create many barriers to an offender's successful reintegration. Under these programs, individuals serve the remainder of their sentences in society, but they are not really free. In fact, many basic rights of citizenship and freedoms are still withheld. These compromised rights can include access to public assistance, parental rights, political participation, and much more. The unfortunate reality is that "While the rehabilitation services available to assist inmates both in prison and after release have decreased, the legal and practical barriers pertaining to their activities after release have increased" (Petersilia, 2003). While these legal and practical barriers act to significantly diminish the rights and privileges of former offenders, they operate mostly beyond the public's view, causing Petersilia to label them "invisible punishments." While these invisible punishments are not widely understood or recognized by the general public, they have very serious consequences and negative effects on those who experience them (Petersilia, 2003). Expanding legal and civil restrictions have an extremely detrimental impact on the reentry of criminal offenders. I will specifically evaluate some of the most outstanding barriers these individuals face, including access to employment, housing, and public assistance.

Based on preexisting research, a positive correlation between job stability and a reduction in criminal offending has been established (Petersilia, 2003). This empirically proven information demonstrates how critical employment is to an offender's successful reintegration into their community. Obtaining a job often gives an individual a sense of purpose. It helps them become a productive member of their community, develop life skills, provide for their family, and also breeds strengthened self-esteem and social connectedness (Petersilia, 2003). Natan Link and his colleagues confer "stable employment... supports the achievement of financial and prosocial goals" and argue that "Economic hardship is a well-documented source of strain that can increase the likelihood of engaging in criminal behavior to achieve economic goals or of coping in a violent manner as a result of the frustration with living in deprivation." Their research summarizes, "Unemployment and an increase in economic hardship among former prisoners are both expected to increase the probability of reoffending after release from prison" (Link & Colleagues, 2019). Despite this knowledge, individuals with criminal records are among the most difficult and least likely to be employed. Ex-convicts are legally barred from working in some professions, and even when they are not legally prevented from being hired, the knowledge of their criminal records by potential employers significantly reduces their chances of being employed, "Employers are much more reluctant to hire ex-offenders than any other group of disadvantaged workers. Employers fear the legal liabilities that could potentially be created by hiring offenders, and they view their offender status as a signal of lack of reliability and trustworthiness" (Petersilia, 2003). The combination of the barriers to employment that I have already outlined and the low levels of education and experience, substance abuse, mental health issues, and missing vital documents for their employment results in a very high rate of unemployment among people with criminal records. Unemployment among ex-offenders is estimated to be between 25-40%, and there is an estimated 10-30% wage reduction for those who manage to become employed (Petersilia, 2003). High rates

of joblessness among criminal offenders not only have to do with stigma and unemployability but also to do with conditions that limit their ability to perform certain jobs. It is estimated that 18-21% of former inmates report having a mental or physical condition that limits their ability to work and perform tasks necessary for their employment (Petersilia, 2003).

Because employment is often a condition of probation, I was able to experience first-hand the way that this supervision program made it incredibly difficult for its clients to comply with the very conditions that are set by the courts. One particular client that I worked with was under intensive pretrial supervision. Under this type of program, the client must come in for reporting with their probation officer three times per month (works out to about once a week). During one of our meetings, my client expressed his frustration with his conditions, as it was a lot to ask his boss to excuse their employee three times a month in order to report to probation, not to mention all the other court dates and hearings that each criminal offender is required to attend. "Employment is one of the most important things for my rehabilitation," my client recognized. He and I both wondered aloud about the counterproductive nature of his program. I continue to wonder the same things today. Many researchers argue that employment is the single most effective factor in reducing recidivism rates (Petersilia, 2003). Therefore, it seems most logical to me that we would support our client's employment the best we can rather than become yet another obstacle in the way of their rehabilitation.

Housing is another barrier that many ex-offenders face upon reentry into their communities. Petersilia considers housing to be "the linchpin that holds the reintegration process together." Should this area of the reintegration process be compromised, so will all other areas of reintegration efforts (Petersilia, 2003). There are many factors that contribute to an offender's inability to secure housing. Often, inmates are legally prevented from living with others who are involved in criminal activity, ruling out living with many family members and friends. It is also common that incarcerated individuals are unable to secure housing prior to their release and are unable to collect enough funds for a deposit on private housing. Due to this lack of funds and limited options to stay with others, many ex-convicts will seek out public housing only to find they are ineligible for a large portion of public housing and public assistance from the government due to their prior convictions (Petersilia, 2003). As a consequence of all these barriers to accessing housing, it is estimated that 25-50% of parolees end up homeless within a year of their release from prison (Petersilia, 2003). A 2015 United States Department of Justice Brief also states, "Residence restrictions may actually increase offender risk by undermining offender stability and the ability of the offender to obtain housing, work, and family support (Sawyer, 2018). Ironically and consequently, the same barriers and restrictions set in place to protect the public could actually put communities at greater risk, all while wasting valuable government resources and funding opportunities.

Public assistance is not only limited to those with criminal records in the housing sector but also in the availability of job training, substance abuse rehabilitation, and many other social welfare programs. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 "required states to permanently bar individuals with drug-related felony convictions from receiving federally funded public assistance and food stamps during their lifetime" (Petersilia, 2003). Legislation such as this one and others prevent offenders from obtaining government assistance or have limits imposed on the benefits they are given. This not only negatively affects the offenders themselves, but it also punishes the families of formerly incarcerated individuals.

In determining sentences for offenders, it is also important to consider what Feinberg labels "expressive functions of punishment." An expressive function is "... a conventional device for the

expression of attitudes of resentment and indignation, and of judgments of disapproval and reprobation" (Feinberg, 1965). The symbolic significance of certain penalties creates a condemnatory aspect that is largely missing from other kinds of formal punishment. The author of *The Expressive Function of Punishment* argues that both the formal and symbolic punishments inflicted on an offender must fit the crime committed (Feinberg, 1965). I believe that the expressive function of punishment is particularly impactful for offenders who commit sex crimes. There is a public perception of disgust and moral turpitude when it comes to sex offenders, and the general population commonly reports harsher views toward individuals with sexual convictions than criminals of any other kind (Rothwell, 2020). These views generally have an overall negative effect on the rehabilitation and reentry of sex offenders because there is greater resistance to their presence in society as a whole.

From the time I discovered I was assigned to work with sex offenders for my internship with the Judicial Branch, I knew this experience would present a significant challenge. I consistently asked myself how I would be able to work with and advocate for people who have committed such heinous crimes. I do not consider myself to hold certain assumptions or feelings towards criminals in general, but when it came to sex offenders, I found myself to have a particular aversion that was incredibly difficult for me to overcome at first. Despite my conscious efforts to challenge my natural instincts, reactions of disgust and contempt would bubble their way to the surface when I clocked out for the day. Seldom would I leave work realizing how common these reactions towards sex crimes were or even how common the stigmatization of criminals in general was. In fact, the stigmatization of criminals and the label that is imposed on them is often one of the greatest barriers to their successful reentry. However, individuals who commit sex crimes often face additional social ostracization and marginalization because the nature of the crime they committed is so egregious to the public.

Individuals who commit sex crimes are subject to a number of additional conditions and stigmas that further limit their successful reintegration into their communities. The relatively recent establishment of sex offender registries and public criminal records has resulted in further interference in reintegration. Due to the intense outrage displayed by the public towards sex offenders, the government has attempted to establish additional measures in order to maintain public safety and emphasize crime control. Offender registries were established following the implementation of Megan's Law and are most commonly used for sex crimes (Kelly, 2021). Federal law as of 1996 requires all U.S. states and territories to maintain a registry of convicted sex offenders, allowing for the expansion of this definition dependent on individual state preferences (Human Rights Watch, 2007). Registries and community notification systems are thought to increase public safety and are essentially an extension of an offender's formal punishment. Unfortunately, the increase in computerization and sex offender registries produce more significant barriers for sex criminals. With these registries, the anonymity of the offenders is compromised, it can be used to threaten, intimidate, and harass offenders, and they lead to further alienation from society (Kelly, 2021). As a result of this alienation from offender's communities, social support that is vital to reintegration is removed, compromising their full rehabilitation and success in their community. Because sex crimes create such an emotional response, there are many supporters for any type of increase in punishment for these offenders. However, there is also much disagreement on these registries as studies have failed to demonstrate an impact on recidivism rates and desistance (Kelly, 2021). In addition, many registries lump all sex offenders together without any system of categorization. Registries can include anything from homosexuality, sexting, and statutory rape to pedophilia and other heinous crimes (Kelly, 2021). Criminal history

records increase the stigma that offenders experience as data can be more easily shared and accessed by the general public (Petersilia, 2003). Registries remain a topic of debate as they contain errors and significantly impact an offender's ability to reintegrate into society and, at the same time, are not empirically supported to be effective in reducing crime rates (Petersilia, 2003).

As someone who has primarily studied Psychological Sciences and Criminal Justice, I was naturally drawn to the treatment programs that were designed for our clients convicted of sex offenses. Among other court-mandated programs that sought to help offenders work towards their stability and potential rehabilitation, many of our clients were enrolled in group therapies as one of the conditions of their probation. Clients were divided into different treatment groups based on their assessed risk of reoffending and present threat to their community. During my time with the Judicial Branch, I was able to sit in on some of these group therapies. Despite my initial hesitations and concerns about working with sex offenders, during these treatment groups, I found myself becoming lost in the stories of my clients while they shared their personal lives. I found myself laughing along with them when someone cracked a joke or when two were engaged in playful banter, empathizing when they had negative things to report, and ultimately relating to them as peers with many of the same daily afflictions I encountered. I was surprised to have let these criminals disarm me in this way despite my initial trepidation. Even the wording that I use to describe and reflect upon my experiences working in this setting and with this population displays how deeply ingrained these cultural stigmas have become in the American consciousness, enduring as I work to deconstruct those same unilateral perspectives.

I consistently found myself at a crossroads of constant internal conflict. I so badly aspired to treat everyone with whom I interacted with basic human dignity and respect, even those who were deeply flawed and had broken the law in such heinous ways. At the same time, I recognized the disgust I had for these people who had done truly horrific things and questioned whether they deserved any respect at all. However, upon further analysis and reflection, I came to be less and less surprised at the way I was able to interact with my clients. I treated them with kindness, advocated for them, and assisted them in their rehabilitation. It took me a while to recognize, but I understand these people have made grave mistakes yet still deserve to be treated with dignity. Showing my clients empathy and understanding became easier as they shared their own stories of victimization and trauma.

This is not to say that their own victimization negates their perpetration of these crimes, but rather draws attention to the cyclical violence that plagues our society. Sumner, Mercy, and Dahlberg (2015) explain the detrimental effects of violence on a victim's overall health and well-being, explaining "exposure to violence increases vulnerability to a broad range of mental and physical health problems'." As examples, these authors provide "meta-analyses indicate that exposure to physical abuse in childhood is associated with a 54% increased odds of depressive disorder and a 92% increased odds of drug use" and other negative enduring physical, mental, and emotional health conditions. Further, "experiencing violence (physical, sexual, psychological) is associated with increased risks of mental health and behavioral disorders such as depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, personality and conduct disorders, anxiety, sleep and eating disorders, substance abuse, and suicide and suicide attempts" (Sumner et al., 2015). These findings mean that in addition to the strongly established relationship between victimization and offending (DeCamp et al., 2017), some victims of violence may also develop psychiatric diagnoses that create additional risk factors for committing their own acts of violence against others. The American Psychological Association claims, "... people with serious mental illness - which generally refers to those with major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and

schizoaffective disorder - are somewhat more likely than members of the general public to commit acts of violence" and reiterates, "there is a link between mental health and violence" (DeAngelis, 2022). Symptoms of these conditions such as "lack of empathy, poor impulse control, and antisocial deviance" (DeAngelis, 2022) play a large role in instances where a violent act is executed. DeAngelis of the American Psychological Association also indicates other equally threatening risk factors include "a history of prior violence, a history of childhood physical abuse, having a father who abused substances or was a criminal, displaying antisocial behavior, and scoring high on anger measures" (DeAngelis, 2022). In addition to the micro-level impacts, these acts of interpersonal violence greatly increase the incidence of long-term, serious health problems later in life, "Violence is also associated with the development of major noncommunicable diseases, such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, chronic lung disease, and diabetes as well as key risk factors for several chronic diseases, including harmful alcohol use, tobacco use, physical inactivity, and obesity" (Sumner et al., 2015) - and "indirectly stunts economic development, increases inequality, and erodes human capital" (Sumner et al., 2015).

Essentially, interpersonal violence is not only a concern on an individual level but also on a societal one - a cost that we pay for collectively. The relationship that exists between the victimization of criminal activity and the subsequent engagement with deviant behavior manifests particularly strongly among victims and offenders of violent crimes (DeCamp, 2017). In other words, those who engage in criminal acts are often victims of violence and trauma themselves and are merely perpetuating this harmful cycle.

Sawyer (2018) of the Prison Policy Initiative explains that breaking the cycle of violence will require investment in communities and the people within them rather than in incarceration and harsher punishments. In fact, "National survey data show that most victims support violence prevention, social investment, and alternatives to incarceration that address the root causes of crime, not more investment in carceral systems that cause more harm" (Sawyer, 2018). These results hold true even for victims of the most serious crimes, such as rape or murder (Alliance for Safety and Justice, 2016).

The result is clear: the U.S. criminal justice system does not react appropriately to violent offenders or to the victims of this violence. Further, our carceral system also does not consider the overlapping characteristics that exist between offender and victim. The data examined in this paragraph and this paper as a whole calls into question current criminal justice practices, their efficacy, motives, and unintended impacts. Upon my evaluation of these institutions and uniquely American practices, it seems to me that our current carceral system is ineffective (does not deter violent crime), inefficient (over-incarcerating, poor outcomes), costly (both monetary and human cost), and does not address the needs or preferences of violent crime victims. Harsh sentences and difficult life conditions post-incarceration do not set individuals up for rehabilitation and success, nor does it break the damaging and perpetual cycle of violence in our society. Instead, our country needs cyclical violence interventions, violence prevention, and government investment in communities and public safety.

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