



CUSAG The Cultural Systems Analysis Group
Community Action Anthropology

*Executive Summary:
Ethnographic Assessment of the DC Mayor's
Office on Returning Citizen Affairs*

A White Paper

By

Maya S. Kearney, M.A.A., CuSAG Associate

and supervised by

Tony L. Whitehead, PhD, MS.Hyg, Professor Emeritus
and Director

The Cultural Systems Analysis Group (CuSAG)

1. Introduction

This report provides an ethnographic analysis of the current contexts of prison-to-community reentry focusing on Washington, D.C. and provides ethnographic data on D.C.'s reentry agency, the **Mayor's Office on Returning Citizen Affairs (MORCA)**. Emphasis in the study was placed on the four major need areas of reentry (**housing, employment, education, and health**), how MORCA responds to these needs, and the challenges it faces doing so in the D.C. context.

2. Problem Statement: Mass Incarceration, Race, Reentry, and Recidivism

Mass incarceration identifies the current state of the United States criminal justice system as the U.S. has the highest rate of incarceration in the world (over 2 million). Minorities, specifically young black males are overrepresented in the incarcerated population as out of the men in state and federal prisons, 39 percent are black, 31 percent are white, and 23 percent are Hispanic. The surge of black men behind bars is largely due to the **War on Drugs** and the rise of drug convictions, which has significantly impacted inner-city communities that already face other social ills such as poverty, unemployment, and low academic achievement.

About one in four (65 million) adults in the U.S. have a criminal record, which has drawn national attention to the issue of "**prisoner reentry**" to address the high rates of recidivism as about 70 percent of former prisoners are rearrested within three years after release. This represents the influx of individuals being released from prison back into local communities every year; many of whom were convicted under laws established during the War on Drugs and other "Get Tough" on crime policies of the 1980s and 1990s. **The current study explores the complex needs of reentry, and the efforts of a community reintegration agency that was established by a local municipal government to assist in addressing such needs.**

3. Study Design

The following **research questions** were created to guide this study:

- a. *Why do we need community reintegration agencies? This question is explored through MORCA's attempt to respond to the needs and challenges of returning citizens.*
- b. *What does a reintegration agency do? That is, what is its mission and program strategies in responding to the needs and challenges of returning citizens?*
- c. *What are the challenges, successes, and further needs of our study reintegration agency (MORCA) to enhance its capacity to carry out its mission and program strategies?*

The study site, Washington, D.C., is a microcosm of the national trend surrounding mass incarceration, reentry and recidivism. Mirroring national statistics, in D.C. the overall rate of incarceration for African Americans is 19 times the rate of whites. **With regards to reentry, about 60,000 of D.C.'s residents (about 10% of D.C.'s population) have a criminal record with about 8,000 additional residents being released from incarceration (prison or jail) each year.** After three years it is estimated that 4,000 of D.C's returning citizens will be re-incarcerated.

Three main **ethnographic methods** were used to collect data: **secondary data analysis, participant observation, and interviews**. Secondary data analysis included related literature, statistics, websites, and reports. Participant observation involved shadowing MORCA's director, and observations of settings, scenes, activities, and events related to MORCA's daily operations. Lastly, informal conversational, individual semi-structured, and group semi-structured interviews were conducted with MORCA staff.

4. Research Findings

Due to the **National Capital Revitalization and Self-Improvement Act of 1997 Revitalization Act**) and closure of the **Lorton Correctional Complex** (Lorton) in 2001 all convicted felons in D.C. are transferred to Federal Bureau of Prison (BOP) facilities. This means that individuals are sent to federal and federal contracted correctional facilities throughout the country far away (as far as California) from their communities and families, making it even harder to maintain the relationships that are critical for successful reintegration once they are released.

Housing, employment, education, and health are the four critical needs that reentrants have once they are released back into the community. For D.C.'s returning citizen population, specifically convicted felons these needs are exacerbated due to them being housed in federal prisons hundreds and even thousands of miles away from home. These individuals often come back to communities that do not have the resources to meet all of their needs, as well as weak bonds with family members and other support systems that are essential to successful reintegration. The following sections describe the four major needs of reentry both nationally and locally in D.C.

Housing is the most important need and the biggest challenge for reentrants, because having a stable living situation can help facilitate meeting other areas of need. Not only does housing for low-income D.C. residents continue to decline in availability (existing housing units) and accessibility (due to costs), but having a criminal record further hinders the ability to find public housing. Authorities are legally given the discretion to use criminal records to assess an applicant's threat to the well being of other tenants. Other temporary housing options such as shelters and halfway houses are limited in D.C. and the conditions in these facilities are often not conducive to the rehabilitation that most reentrants need in areas such as substance abuse and mental health. Therefore, if a reentrant did not make housing arrangements prior to release they are left struggling to find fixed housing and are at higher risk of recidivating.

In D.C. about **half (50%) of returning citizens are transitioned from BOP** custody to parole supervision under the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA) **through a Residential Reentry Center or halfway house** that is contracted by BOP. At the same time, however, it is estimated that **half of the remaining returning citizens in D.C.** (25% of the total) that are not placed in halfway houses **are homeless immediately upon their release**.

Difficulty finding **employment** is another major collateral consequence of having a criminal record. A study of 550 D.C. reentrants conducted by the Council for Court Excellence (CCE) in 2011 found that **46 percent of those surveyed were unemployed and 77 percent said they received no job assistance** while incarcerated.

The current study also found that:

- Eighty percent of **large employers in the U.S** use criminal background checks to screen job applicants.
- Advancements in information technology that has increased availability and accessibility of criminal records online and through record keeping agencies.
- In sectors where an occupational license is required (childcare, education, security, nursing, etc.) employers conduct criminal background check to verify the moral character of applicants. Under D.C. law an individual is permitted to earn a professional license if they have not been convicted of “an offense which bears directly on the fitness of the person to be licensed”, which gave employers the discretion to determine on what grounds applicants can be hired or denied.

Recently, legislation has been passed in D.C. in an attempt to address the issues surrounding the use of criminal records by employers in the hiring process. Included was the “**ban the box**” legislation passed in 2013, which prohibits an applicant being asked if they have a criminal record on applications for the local government. Then in 2014 the **Fair Criminal Record Screening Act** was passed, which expanded the “ban the box” policy to private employers with the exception of those with 10 or less employees.

Besides having a criminal record, low levels of **education** and previous work experience also serve as significant barriers preventing reentrants from obtaining stable employment. Among the issues related to reentrant education and literacy needs are the following:

- Prison populations have higher rates of illiteracy than in the general population and this is most apparent among minority inmates as **blacks (44%) and Hispanics (53%) have lower levels of education than their white (27%) peers.**
- There have been declining educational and vocational programs being offered in correctional institutions, which is largely due to public attitudes, budget cuts, and resource allocation.
- Recent studies, however, have shown the benefits of inmates participating in education programs in reducing recidivism and finding employment once released. A meta-analysis conducted by RAND in 2013 found that inmates who participated in correctional education programs had **43 percent lower odds of recidivating and 13 percent higher odds of obtaining employment** than inmates who did not participate.

The **health** issues of inmates are an urgent public health matter. The incarcerated population is disproportionately affected by leading chronic conditions, such as hypertension, diabetes, asthma, stroke, and liver disease, (**40% of state, federal, and jail inmates**) and infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis, Hepatitis C, STIs (sexually transmitted infections, such as gonorrhea, chlamydia, syphilis, et al), among others (**21% percent of prisoners and 14 percent of jail inmates**). About **1 percent of prisoners and jail inmates reported being HIV positive compared to 0.4 percent in the general population.** One of the major consequences of the prevalence of infectious diseases among inmates is that if left untreated or not treated effectively they are brought back into the community to be potentially spread in the general population. Also, having to constantly deal with an infectious or chronic disease(s) can hinder the reintegration process putting the individual at high risk of returning back to crime. Mental illness and substance abuse are also more common among incarcerated individuals.

The **gender-specific needs** of reentry describe the challenges that are unique to female returning citizens in the major need areas of housing, employment, education, and health that are often a result of societal/cultural expectations and norms related to women and motherhood. These struggles have been exacerbated by the increasing rate of women's incarceration (**from 646% between 1980 and 2010 which is about 1.5 time the rate of men at 419%**), which is largely due to drug convictions. This has ultimately heightened the risk of women falling into the challenging circumstances of reintegration with minority women being the most impacted. Research on "**pathways**" to crime has found that for women and girls interrelated physical, psychological, and socioeconomic factors often result in individuals becoming involved in criminal behavior.

The **D.C. Mayor's Office on Returning Citizen Affairs (MORCA)** was established in 2007 as a local governmental response to the types of reentrant needs and challenges discussed above. MORCA's mission is stated as:

"Our mission is to provide zealous advocacy; high-quality products; and, up-to-date, useful information for the empowerment of previously incarcerated persons in order to create a productive and supportive environment where persons may thrive, prosper and contribute to the social, political and economic development of self, family, and community."

MORCA's **direct services** in the areas of employment, education, and vocational training include:¹

- Resume development
- Digital inclusion courses
- Job placement
- CDL license
- Workforce development
- Financial literacy training
- HVAC training
- Legal assistance

MORCA provides **referral services** in the areas of job development/employment training, life skills training, social services, vital records services, legal assistance, and mental health/drug treatment. The agencies that provide these services include:²

- D.C. Central Kitchen
- The Department of Aging (DOA)
- The Department of Veteran Affairs (DVA)
- The Department of Human Services (DHA)
- Voices for a Second Chance (VSC)
- The Department of Behavioral Health (DBH)
- The University of the District of Columbia Community College (UDC)

¹ For a complete listing of MORCA'S direct and referral services see Part III Sections B and C.

² Ibid.

- Georgetown University Law Center
- Sasha Bruch Youthwork
- The Criminal Justice Coordination Committee (CJCC)
- The Reentry Network for Returning Citizens

MORCA's biggest **challenge** is its lack of resources to be able to fund programs and services for its clients. In 2014 the agency served 5000 people with a current operating (non-personal) budget of \$10,500. Another challenge is the need for a computerized referral database to be able to maintain and track referral services and outcomes once clients are linked to other agencies. In general, reentrants are an underserved and vulnerable population, which is largely influenced by the public stigma associated with having a criminal record. MORCA has to serve as an advocate as well as service provider for this growing population that is often disenfranchised and underserved in terms of not receiving the level of support that is needed to shift current recidivism trends.

MORCA's recent successes (related to its mission) despite its financial limitations and other challenges, include the following:³

- Placing 152 men and women in full-time employment in FY2013, which increased to 247 job placements in 2014
- Launching the D.C. Reentry Initiative in January 2013
- Opening the new Reentry Resource Center in July 2013
- Being a Contributor to the D.C. Digital Inclusion Initiative
- Launch of the W.I.R.E. (Women Involved in Reentry Efforts) in May 2013 as gender-specific initiative targeting female reentrants
- The W.I.R.E. facilitating family reunification activities with the women at Fairview Halfway House and their children
- Hosting the W.I.R.E's First Annual Women's Reentry Leadership Conference in June 2014
- Sponsoring the "Free Her" Rally in June 2014 on the National Mall
- Sponsoring the Gateway D.C. Summer Film Series and "Ban the Box" Debate in July 2014
- Sponsoring Returning Citizens Family Appreciation Day in August 2014

5. Discussion and Recommendations

- MORCA should continue to work within the government to secure more resources, both staffing and fiduciary, in order to enhance its services to returning citizens, and to broaden its partnership relationships with community, academic, faith-based, local business, and non-profit organizations.
- MORCA should develop an active strategy to create a referral network structure that would include the successful recruitment of a larger number of referral organizations, which in turn would provide services to a larger number of returning citizens, expand locations of servicers, reduce service duplication, and broaden the range and

³ For a complete listing and description of MORCA's recent success see Part III Section E.

effectiveness of reentrant needs being addressed. Within such a structure, MORCA would act more as a referral network coordinator, rather than attempting to respond to a broad range of services in house.

- The D.C. government should provide a budget increase to include funds to establish a referral database for MORCA to track and maintain referrals as well as monitor its program activities leading to desired annual outcomes, evaluations of those outcomes, and justifications for future budget modifications.
- MORCA should develop an active strategy for the inclusion of more successfully re-integrated returning citizens in the planning and delivery of its service programs; that is men and women who have turned their lives around and have become productive citizens after returning from incarceration. Their firsthand experiences should be used to develop initiatives and programs that would enhance the population appropriateness of these services and possibly their effectiveness.
- Overall, MORCA should continue to spread awareness of reentry issues and promote unity in the reentry community as everyone is fighting for the same cause of addressing the needs of returning needs and reducing recidivism in order to make our communities safer.