



CUSAG The Cultural Systems Analysis Group  
Community Action Anthropology

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

**A White Paper**

By

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## A Foreword

When I arrived in the Washington, DC area in the Fall of 1988 to begin my tenure as the Chair of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Maryland, I suffered a period of culture shock from the high rates of urban violence that were being reported daily in the local and national media. I use the term culture shock because I had just returned from a year in France studying the more sublime topic of food and culture, following 11 ½ years of doing similar research in rural North Carolina. As time went on I became interested not just in DC, but also in the national picture of relationships between high rates of urban violence, crack cocaine abuse, “get tough” crime policies, and what I came to call the *African American Incarceration Epidemic*.

This concept of an African American Incarceration Epidemic came to me as I became more aware of the fact that US incarceration rates had evolved to lead those of every other country on the planet, and of the disproportionate representation of African Americans among those being incarcerated. But the concept became even more vivid for me as I became aware of the vicious cycle of first arrests of individuals, the tortuous experiences of incarceration, failed prison-to-community reentry, and the high rates of re-incarceration (or recidivism). My use of the term epidemic, however, not only includes its impact on the physical, mental, and spiritual health of the African American individuals experiencing these vicious incarceration cycles, but also its impact on African American families and communities.

These interests led me to contribute a chapter to a book published in 2000 by Sage, edited by John May, and titled *Building Violence: How America's Rush to Incarcerate Creates More Violence*. My chapter titled *The "Epidemic" and "Cultural Legends" of Black Male Incarceration: The Socialization of African American Children to a Life of Incarceration* raised a number of questions that have haunted me since I started grappling with them 25 years ago. Among them were the following:

- 1) With so many young people of color (African Americans, and Latinos as time went on) being incarcerated, what will be the impact of prisons becoming major socializing institutions for so many young Americans?
- 2) What will be the impact of the African American Incarceration Epidemic, not only on African American individuals, but also on African American family structure, African American communities, and on the broader US society and culture?
- 3) How high is the US as a society willing to see these numbers rise among black males?
- 4) Is this mass incarceration phenomenon of young people in the US an indicator of a sick society and culture?
- 5) Aren't US policy makers asking themselves what happens when these people are released and return to their communities and society? And what are they doing to address reentry issues as a preventative against recidivism?

While I continue to work with collaborators in the exploration of possible answers to some of these questions, over the past few years there has been a lot of activity at the local and national policy levels addressing unjust incarceration policies and practices. With regards to above question #5 (policy makers and reentry), I have learned a lot over the past year from the work

that my last Masters of Applied Anthropology (MAA) degree student, Maya Kearney, has been conducting as an intern to Washington, DC's Mayor's Office on Returning Citizen Affairs (MORCA). In her enclosed White Paper, Maya discusses the historical processes and events that led to the evolution of MORCA, the agency's mission and programs, some of MORCA's accomplishments and challenges, and provides recommendations that might lead to improved policies and programs in achieving the agency's mission.

I believe that MORCA, as part of the governing body of the city, has the potential to become a model for other cities (as well as suburban and rural communities) that addresses the myriad of complex reentry issues. I also believe that Maya's White Paper can also serve as a model for how institutions of higher learning might contribute to efforts in addressing these issues through the student internship format to assist in documenting the activities, successes, and needs of organizations, both public and private, who are attempting to address the broad and complex issues of mass incarceration and reentry.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>2. PROBLEM STATEMENT .....</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1. U.S. MASS INCARCERATION AND ITS IMPACT ON BLACK COMMUNITIES .....	12
2.2. THE ISSUE OF PRISON-TO-COMMUNITY REENTRY AND RECIDIVISM .....	14
<b>3. STUDY DESIGN .....</b>	<b>15</b>
3.1. RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....	15
3.2. STUDY SITE .....	15
3.3. METHODS OF INQUIRY .....	16
<b>4. RESEARCH FINDINGS .....</b>	<b>16</b>
4.1. THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXTS OF RETURNING CITIZENS IN WASHINGTON, D.C.	16
4.2. NEEDS AND CHALLENGES OF REENTRY .....	17
4.2.a. <i>Housing</i> .....	17
4.2.b. <i>Employment</i> .....	20
4.2.c. <i>Education</i> .....	21
4.2.d. <i>Health</i> .....	22
4.2.e. <i>Gender-Specific Needs</i> .....	24
4.3. DC’S RESPONSE TO THE PROBLEM OF REENTRY: MORCA .....	25
4.3.a. <i>MORCA’s History, Mission, and Goals</i> .....	25
4.3.b. <i>MORCA’s Direct Services</i> .....	26
4.3.c. <i>MORCA’s Referral Services</i> .....	27
4.3.d. <i>MORCA’s Challenges</i> .....	27
4.3.e. <i>MORCA’s Recent Successes</i> .....	28
<b>5. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>33</b>



## Executive Summary

### 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:<sup>a</sup>

- 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:<sup>b</sup>

- 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)

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<sup>a</sup> For a complete listing of MORCA'S direct and referral services see Part III Sections B and C.

<sup>b</sup> Ibid.

- The Department of Behavioral Health (DBH)
- The University of the District of Columbia Community College (UDC)
- 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:<sup>c</sup>

- 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

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<sup>c</sup> For a complete listing and description of MORCA's recent success see Part III Section E.

locations of services, reduce service duplication, and broaden the range and 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.

## **Full Report**

### **1. Introduction**

This paper reports on an ethnographic assessment of the current status of prison-to-community reentry in the District of Columbia (D.C.), and the activities of D.C.'s reentry agency, the Mayor's Office on Returning Citizen Affairs (MORCA). The second section (Problem Statement) introduces the issue of mass incarceration, prisoner reentry, and recidivism on the national scale. In section three the Study Design is broken up into three subsections, which includes the research questions that guided the study, a description of the study site (D.C.), and the methods used to gather the data. The fourth section presents the Research Findings, which includes the socio-cultural contexts of reentry in D.C., the needs and challenges of reentry, highlighting the specific needs of D.C.'s returning citizen population, how MORCA responds to the needs of reentrants in D.C., the challenges it faces doing so, and its recent successes. Lastly, in the fifth section I provide recommendations and considerations on how MORCA can address its challenges as D.C.'s reentry agency.

### **2. Problem Statement**

#### **2.1. U.S. Mass Incarceration and Its Impact on Black Communities**

Today, at over two million, the United States has the highest rate of incarceration (jail and prison) in the world.<sup>1 2</sup> Representing only 5 percent of the world's population, the U.S. holds about 20 percent of the world's incarcerated population.<sup>3</sup> Surpassing the rates of nearly every developed nation and even those with highly repressive regimes such as Russia, China, and Iran. To highlight this statistical gap even further, in Germany, out of every 100,000 adults and children, 93 people are in prison. In the U.S. the rate is 8 times more, or 750 per 100,000.<sup>4 5</sup> Not only are there alarming rates of persons in jail or prison but those in the criminal judicial system as a whole standing at 7.1 million, which includes people on parole, probation, house arrest and other types of judicial supervision.<sup>6 7</sup> The notion of "mass" incarceration comes into play here when comparing the U.S. exceedingly high prison rates at the global level. However, this concept of "mass" does not only characterize U.S. incarceration on the global scale but also domestically when looking at the distribution of inmates within the U.S. prison population, specifically by gender and race.

Minorities are disproportionately represented in the U.S. prison population.<sup>8</sup> Among this group, black men compose the largest population of those incarcerated. Statistics show that among men in state and federal prisons, 39 percent are black, 31 percent are white, and 23 percent are Hispanic. This becomes even more apparent when looking at the statistics in terms of the national population; for every 100,000 black men 4,347 are in prison compared to 1,755 for Hispanic men, and 678 for white men; meaning that black men are nearly six times and Hispanic men are nearly three times more likely to be incarcerated than black men.<sup>9 10</sup> If current trends continue, one in three black men will serve time in prison (especially those from poor and segregated communities) compared to one in seventeen white men, and one in six Hispanic men. In some cites more than half of all young adult

black men are currently under some type of judicial supervision. When looking at the impact of mass incarceration on women, there are more than eight times as many women incarcerated in state and federal prisons and local jails as there were in 1980.<sup>11</sup> Also, similar to the trend seen regarding men's incarceration, the growth in the imprisonment of women has disproportionately affected poor women of color. In 2013, the incarceration rate for black women (113 per 100,000) was twice the rate of white women (51 per 100,000).<sup>12</sup> This suggests the lingering affects of the War on Drugs on African Americans as they (both men and women) continue to be overrepresented in the prison population.

Drug-related arrests grew from 322,300 in 1970 to 1,375,600 in 2000 and since the 1970s the significant increase in the U.S. prison population is mainly due to the sharp rise in the number of drug convictions.<sup>13 14</sup> Racial disparities in the U.S. prison population today are shown in drug offenses as black males are incarcerated for drug-related crimes at significantly higher rates than any other group.<sup>15 16</sup> In some states, black men have been incarcerated on drug charges at rates twenty to fifty times greater than white men.<sup>17</sup> In major cities heavily effected by the War on Drugs, as many as 80 percent of young African American men now have criminal records.<sup>18</sup> However, studies have shown that people of all races use and sell illegal drugs at similar rates.<sup>d</sup> This alludes to the discriminatory dimensions of the U.S. criminal justice system. Moreover, when offenders are released from prison they are burdened with the ex-con label and stigma, which then opens the door for acceptable prejudice.<sup>19</sup> This in turn limits their ability to progress in mainstream society.

Given that minorities, especially African American men, are those most affected (as they are incarcerated at higher rates than any other group) mass incarceration has created challenges for the communities from which they come and to which they are likely to return. Mass incarceration threatens the survival and sustainability of families and communities by taking young males during their most productive years. The life prospects of black men are significantly reduced as they enter the criminal justice system at increasing rates. The chances of obtaining gainful employment once having a criminal record is reduced, which makes these individuals less attractive as potential marriage partners and unable to provide for their children. Overall, this contributes to the high rates of poverty in inner-city communities.<sup>20</sup> High rates of incarceration among black males also numbs the social stigma surrounding it as prison time becomes accepted as a part of the normal life cycle of African American men in low-income communities. Furthermore, gang activity that is reinforced in the prison is brought back into the community, thus increasing the influence this type of behavior has in the community as healthy social ties to the labor market for instance are diminished.

Social scientists have explained the breakdown of social cohesion in inner-city communities experiencing high rates of incarceration and other social ills. Moral authority is handed over

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<sup>d</sup> For instance, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services National Household Survey on Drug Abuse reported 6.4 percent of whites, 6.4 percent of blacks, and 5.3 percent of Hispanics were current users of illegal drugs in 2000. In 2002 the National Survey on Drug Use and Health found nearly identical usage rates among whites and blacks only having one percentage point between them. However, if there are significant differences in the surveys to be found they frequently suggest that whites, particularly white youth, are more likely to engage in drug crimes than people of color (15).



to those engaged in crime and drug activity, which is further honed while in prison. Positive role models in the community no longer have as much influence and gradually disappear on top of high unemployment and poverty. This leaves the youth vulnerable to social ills such as “crime, drugs, family disorganization, generalized demoralization and unemployment”.<sup>21</sup> The large portion of black men in prison also threatens the overall picture of diversity in the U.S. that it prides itself on, because if the majority of young black men are incarcerated they are not able to contribute to the growth and development of their communities such as starting careers and families. Millions of African American men have faced inequality and injustice in the U.S. judicial system, which has ultimately affected the overall black cultural experience in the U.S. This is especially the case in inner city communities whose members make up the majority of the prison population. The ties that have been broken have far reaching consequences for the black community and the families dealing with the incarceration of a loved one(s) as more and more individuals are placed under the permanent veil of the criminal justice system.

## **2.2. The Issue of Prison-to-Community Reentry and Recidivism**

It is estimated that 65 million (one in four adults) in the U.S. have a criminal record. Now that so many Americans have criminal records, it has become just as important to figure out what to do with these people once they come home as it is for them to be convicted and incarcerated. One critical reason is because of the nation's high recidivism rates; a recently published study found that two-thirds (68%) of prisoners released in thirty states in 2005 were arrested for a new crime within three years of their release, and 78% were arrested within five years.<sup>22</sup> This has led to the recent national focus on the issue of “prisoner reentry”, as an influx of individuals (reentrants or returning citizens) are being released from prison back into the community every year; many of whom were convicted under laws established during the War on Drugs and “Get Tough” on crime era.<sup>c</sup> One of the primary reasons for this high rate of recidivism is that reentrants face significant needs and challenges during the process of reintegrating back into the community, particularly in the areas of housing, employment, education, and health. That is when these basic human needs are not sufficiently met, individuals are at greater risk of returning to crime and being reincarcerated.

The current paper reports on the reentry issue in Washington, DC, and the Mayor's Office on Returning Citizen Affairs (MORCA), an agency established to assist in responding to the needs of returning citizens. It discusses the needs and challenges of reentry in general with specific attention to the particular struggles of returning citizens under federal jurisdiction in the D.C. context. By drawing on scholarly literature, interviews with MORCA staff, and observations from my own fieldwork, the report sheds light on the complexities of reintegration, socio-cultural contexts and processes for those convicted in D.C. that should have relevance to the larger national issue of prisoner reentry in the U.S. Recommendations are also made that we hope will be of benefit to MORCA as well as to other organizations attempting to address reentry issues at the local and national levels.

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<sup>c</sup> Joan Petersilia (2003) defines “prisoner reentry” as the process including all activities and programming conducted to prepare ex-convicts to return safely to the community and to live as law-abiding citizens.

### 3. Study Design

#### 3.1. Research Questions

The following questions guided this study:

- d. *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.*
- e. *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?*
- f. *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?*

#### 3.2. The Study Site: Washington, DC

The nation's capital, Washington, D.C., is a microcosm of the national trend surrounding prisoner reentry as 60,000 of its residents (about 10% of D.C.'s population) have a criminal record, and about 8,000 additional residents are released from incarceration (prison or jail) each year. After three years it is estimated that 4,000 of these individuals will be reincarcerated.<sup>23</sup> Also, reflecting the overrepresentation of minorities in the U.S. correctional population, in D.C. the overall rate of incarceration for African Americans is 19 times the rate of whites.<sup>24</sup> Across the U.S., the geographical organization of metropolitan regions by distribution of wealth has created neighborhoods where particular social problems thrive and the life courses of residents typically include involvement with the criminal justice system.<sup>25</sup> In D.C. there are specific communities that have high rates of incarceration due to the socioeconomic and racial segregation of housing.

The majority of those under correctional supervision in D.C. come from lower-income predominantly black neighborhoods located east of the Anacostia River in Wards 8. This concentrated area of the city experiences some of the highest rates of crime, violence, substance abuse, low academic achievement, unemployment and other social ills that characterize poverty stricken communities. Men in Ward 8 are the most affected by the criminal justice system, with the majority of males between the ages of 18 and 35 being under some type of correctional supervision (mostly probation or parole). If this trend continues a large majority of men in Ward 8 will spend time incarcerated.<sup>26</sup> In light of these long-standing issues particularly in D.C.'s most impoverished communities, D.C.'s reentry system has come under critique in recent years by local officials and the public. Each year about 2,400 people return to D.C. from BOP facilities.<sup>27</sup> With D.C.'s reentry system being unique compared to other jurisdictions as felons are housed in federal and federal contracted prisons throughout the nation hundreds and even thousands of miles away, it makes the process of reintegration even more difficult for D.C.'s returning citizen population. This has ultimately heightened the need for enhanced reentry services in D.C.



### **3.3. Methods of Inquiry**

Three main ethnographic methods were used to collect the data for this study: 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**

### **4.1. The Socio-cultural Contexts of Returning Citizens in Washington, D.C.**

Since the closing of the Lorton Correctional Complex (Lorton) in 2001 as a result of the National Capital Revitalization and Self-Improvement Act of 1997 (Revitalization Act), the District's felony offenders are incarcerated by the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) in facilities across the United States.<sup>28 29 30 31 32 33</sup> This means that these individuals can be sent anywhere in the country, even as far as California.<sup>f</sup> Some will be lucky to be sent to facilities closer to D.C., however others must face the harsh reality that they will be far away from home, leaving behind their family and community. Having a strong support system is critical for rehabilitation, as well as successful reintegration once released but for D.C.'s felons, it is difficult to maintain connections with loved ones, which is problematic.<sup>34 35</sup> Also, felony offenders will more likely be incarcerated for longer periods than they would before the Revitalization Act since they are now sentenced under federal guidelines, which are far more punitive than those imposed by the old D.C. code, making it even harder to maintain relationships. Visitation and phone calls are less common for individuals housed far away and with longer sentences, because of long traveling distances as well as the high costs of collect calls from prison.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, long distance transfers will make it hard for inmates to communicate with their lawyers and to participate in the appeal process in a meaningful way that could have a positive impact on their case outcome. This could result in prisoners receiving poor quality representation when requesting review of their convictions.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>f</sup> After years of overspending and mismanagement, by the mid 1990's the District of Columbia was experiencing a financial crisis and on August 5, 1997, President Clinton signed into law the National Capital Revitalization and Self-Improvement Act of 1997 (Revitalization Act). The Act included the following guidelines: "(1) a Federal contribution of \$190,000,000; (2) the Federal Government to assume the pension liability for judges, police and firefighters, and teachers; (3) the transfer of the District's adult felons to the Federal prison system; (4) payment of Federal funds for the operation of the D.C. court system; and (5) payment for the operation of offender services in the District of Columbia". The law significantly affected the criminal justice system, as all activity was transferred from local to federal control, with the exception of the police. The law required that probation, parole, criminal defense, and pretrial services become the responsibilities of the federal government, including all polices and regulations under which these agencies operate. The act also mandated that the District revise its criminal laws to meet the federal "truth-in-sentencing" standards for sentences handed by the Superior Court, so that District felons would have similar sentences for similar crimes as federal prisoners. This was a result of some of the District's most severe management problems being experienced at Lorton. The deplorable conditions (overcrowding, poor food, dirty cells, etc.) of the prison had resulted in lawsuits involving violations of prisoners' constitutional rights.

The major needs of reentry (housing, employment, education, and health) are exacerbated for convicted felons in D.C., which is due to the long distance and time spent away from family and other social institutions. For other jurisdictions that have their own prison system this process could be considered less complicated due to inmates being housed closer to home and having more control in maintaining the social ties they will need for successful reentry once they are released. Furthermore, a more effective system is created that is ideal for a seamless delivery of services between the correctional institution and community so reentrants are not starting over when they come home to address their needs. When previously incarcerated individuals return to D.C. from federal prisons they have to compete for the same limited social services as the homeless, veterans, and other disadvantaged groups and the delivery of these services is prolonged even further due to the disconnect between BOP facilities and D.C. service providers. The fluidity of the reentry process is interrupted by the lack of coordination in assisting returning citizens in their transition back into society.

#### **4.2. Needs and Challenges of Reentry**

As stated earlier in Section 2.2, high rates of recidivism or re-incarceration is part of the complex myriad of challenges faced by returning citizens attempting to meet such basic needs as housing, employment, education, and physical and mental health issues. In this section, I will present some of my findings regarding these reentry needs and challenges.

##### **4.2a. Housing**

Studies have shown that obtaining housing is the most important need and biggest challenge for individuals transitioning back into society after being incarcerated.<sup>38 39</sup> Having a criminal record hinders the ability to find a stable place of residency, especially with federal guidelines in place for public housing that authorize the rejections of applicants with certain convictions on their records. One of the most significant collateral consequences for having a criminal record is that it weakens an individual's eligibility for housing, particularly through public assistance programs. Legislation such as the One Strike and You're Out Policy, regulations issued by Housing and Urban Development (HUD) grant public housing authorities, as well as other owners of assisted housing, the discretion to use criminal records to assess whether applicants pose a threat to the well-being of other tenants, which include drug related crimes and crimes of physical violence.<sup>40</sup> The use of criminal records can also be used to terminate leases and evict current tenants that engage in drug related activity. These provisions could also be applied by private landlords depending on jurisdiction, which makes finding housing even more of a struggle for reentrants, as private housing makes up 97 percent of the total housing stock in the U.S., and this only becomes an option if the person can afford it.<sup>41</sup> Housing is the most critical step to successful reintegration because it establishes stability for other needs to be met, such as employment, substance abuse, and mental health treatment. If a reentrant does not have permanent, sustainable housing it creates other areas of uncertainty and instability that could lead to recidivism.

In D.C. and other major metropolitan areas, returning citizens often come back to socially and economically deteriorating communities, which puts them at greater risks of recidivism,

as these communities do not have the resources to meet their many needs. Additionally, some reentrants may come back to areas where large revitalization projects are taking place and gentrification has led to the total transformation of long-standing housing developments, particularly for lower-income residents. In D.C. this has resulted in the relocation of residents to other areas of the city or to surrounding suburbs in Maryland or Virginia. This creates a challenge, as DC reentrants under federal jurisdiction (convicted felons housed in BOP facilities throughout the nation) have to serve their parole in D.C., meaning they have to live in the District even if their family has moved to a nearby jurisdiction such as Prince George's County, Maryland. In this case it becomes even more important to have planned housing arrangements prior to release, be it to a halfway house, with a family member or with someone else the reentrant knows and can accommodate them. The larger issue here is that released prisoners in D.C. do not know what they will be faced with when they come home if they have severed ties with loved ones (due to being incarcerated far away from home, lack of communication, and extended periods of imprisonment) preventing them from planning in advance for their return home to address the most important need of housing. They may return to a community that is struggling to support its residents and does not have sufficient housing available for reentrants, or to find that the community (and family) that was there prior to incarceration is not there anymore. This impacts the overall transition back into society, where reentrants have to struggle to deal with this significant barrier on their own without any assistance. Moreover, this might explain the 30 to 50 percent of parolees that are homeless in major cities, because they are not able to secure housing prior to release.<sup>42</sup> The risk of recidivism is also high when reentrants are on the street with nowhere to live, especially in crime-ridden areas.

There are other housing options for reentrants such as shelters and halfway houses that can serve as temporary housing while still searching for permanent living arrangements. However, shelters can have limitations as they tend to have long waiting periods, and once you are there you can only stay for a certain period of time even if you have not found other housing. Also, the crowded conditions of shelters may not be ideal for a reentrant that needs a healthy and stable environment to stay on the right track. On the other hand, halfway houses are better suited for reentrants as they are intended to provide an environment that facilitates an individual's transition back into the community. Ideally, halfway houses also provide services for residents to aid in the reintegration process, so when they leave they will have everything they need to be self-sufficient. D.C.'s halfway houses are described to assist with employment, housing, substance abuse treatment, and medical and mental health.<sup>43</sup> In some cases a reentrant is required to report to a halfway house upon release as part of their parole conditions. In D.C. about half (50%) of returning citizens from BOP custody to parole supervision under the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA)<sup>g</sup> transition through a Residential Reentry Center or halfway house that is contracted by BOP.<sup>44</sup> However, similar to shelters, halfway houses have limited stays (average 2-3 months) and poor living conditions, which are not conducive to the rehabilitative effects they were set up to have. Most do not provide the services (housing, employment, substance abuse, education, etc.) they are contracted to provide by the BOP. Additionally, as shelters and halfway houses

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<sup>g</sup> Established under the Revitalization Act of 1997, CSOSA is a federal, executive branch agency that is exclusively responsible for pretrial, supervised release, and parole supervision for D.C. offenders. Prior to the Revitalization Act the D.C. Board of Parole handled these responsibilities.

are only short-term options, reentrants are still at a high risk of being homeless. It is estimated that half of the remaining returning citizens in D.C. (25% of the total) not placed in halfway houses are homeless immediately upon their release.<sup>45</sup> Housing is a constant struggle for those who do not have the support of loved ones who are able to provide them a place to live until they are on their feet. In D.C. the strain that being incarcerated far away from home has on maintaining social ties and relationships can make finding housing especially difficult for returning citizens.

There are many layers to the housing challenges that reentrants face that has systematically disenfranchised this increasingly growing portion of the population. Obtaining stable housing is the most critical and often most challenging needs to fulfill. Having a stable living situation can help facilitate other areas of need that require a healthy and safe environment to be successfully acquired and maintained. For example, the health and employment needs of reentrants cannot be effectively addressed without fixed housing arrangements, as it is important for job security, substance abuse, and mental health treatment. Housing is truly the “linchpin that holds the reintegration process together” and for many of D.C.’s returning citizens it takes a long time to be realized with the barriers of the current system.<sup>46</sup>

*“One of the main needs of reentry is having a safe place to stay and roof over their (reentrants) heads. Housing stock that is available has turned over in that there are very few below market housing options for men and women returning from incarceration.” ~ MORCA Staff Member*

*“Everyone is homeless when they leave prison. A lot of people don’t have family members they can live with so they end up in transitional houses, or shelters. Transitional houses are very limited...there are only like one or two transitional houses in D.C. specifically for returning citizens. Some end up in halfway houses but after that they are pretty much on their own. Even when you do get employment, because the cost of living is so high you still may not be able to afford safe, affordable housing in the District. The housing list is closed for vouchers and section 8...” ~ MORCA Staff Member*

*“...There is an enormous amount of homeless individuals in the District and when men and women return from incarceration there is a huge amount that are being introduced into the homeless population and the chances of rehabilitation from that structure are just not good. It is like going for Prison A to Prison B...typically you get an individual that is released into the shelter system and you are coming from a controlled environment with dormitory-style living with a bunk and locker being released to dormitory-style living with a bunk and locker. The difference now is that it’s not controlled...no security, your in a place where drugs and alcohol are common along with a lot of the other ills that go on in these shelter systems.” ~MORCA Staff Member*

*“Gentrification has played a huge impact on the housing needs of reentrants, particularly for those who live west of the Anacostia River, Shaw/Columbia Heights area. For example, we have guys who come in here (MORCA) who been gone for 10-15 years and they don’t know anybody on their particular block. It creates a sense of alienation. Or you come back to the*

*community and your building is no longer there, it's a condo unit with 200 people in it. " ~ MORCA Staff Member*

#### **4.2b. Employment**

Another major collateral consequence of having a criminal record is that employers use criminal background checks to screen applicants, which serves as a barrier for reentrants trying to obtain gainful employment upon their release from prison. Advancements in information technology have increased the availability of criminal records, which has made documents once only accessible by authorized officials (i.e. courts and law enforcement) easily obtainable to the general public with just a stroke of a keyboard. In particular, in sectors where occupational licenses are required, background checks are used by employers to determine whether an applicant has a criminal record which in some cases would lead to them not being hired. The typical fields where ex-offenders cannot be hired include childcare, education, security, nursing, and home health care.<sup>47</sup> A survey conducted by the Society for Human Resources Management found that 80 percent of large employers in the U.S. conduct criminal background checks on applicants.<sup>48</sup> Given the overrepresentation of minorities in the criminal justice system, the prevalence of background checks disproportionately affects the inner-city communities the majority of these individuals come from, which exacerbates the existing social ills such as unemployment and crime.

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. Additionally, 80 percent said they were asked about their criminal history when looking for employment. Lastly, only 50 percent of those who received education or training while incarcerated said it benefited them in finding work after release.<sup>49</sup> These statistics illustrate the employment challenges that returning citizens in D.C. and across the country face upon reentry. Obtaining a job and keeping it is of paramount importance for the reintegration process and without this need being met, reentrants can easily fall back into criminal behavior in order to provide for themselves and family.

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".<sup>50</sup> The vagueness of this legislation gave employers the discretion to determine on what grounds applicants could be hired or denied. Debates surrounding employers use of criminal record in the hiring process led to new legislation being passed in D.C. such as "ban the box" in 2013, which prohibits an applicant being asked if they have a criminal record on applications for the local government. However, this law also has its inadequacies as applicants can still be denied employment on the basis of their criminal history, as long as this occurs after the initial stage of the application process. In 2014 another law was passed in D.C. called the Fair Criminal Record Screening Act, which expanded the "ban the box" policy to private employers with the exception of those with 10 or less employees.<sup>51</sup> Similar to the initial "ban the box" policy, this legislation prohibits private employers from asking about an applicant's criminal history or conducting a background check until after a conditional offer of employment is issued. For individuals returning to D.C. from federal



prisons these recent legislative changes were intended to provide an equal playing field in terms of competing for jobs, particularly for those who are able to obtain professional licenses. However, loopholes in these laws still give employers the discretion to conduct background checks and withdraw offers of employment if they can prove their case based on policy guidelines. Being able to meet the basic need of employment is a cornerstone for successful reintegration, yet this is still hindered due to having a criminal record and employer bias. Nevertheless, “ban the box” for both the public and private sectors in D.C. is a step in the right direction, as it demonstrates a growing awareness of the disadvantages and challenges returning citizens face in order to rebuild their lives and remain crime-free.

*“The employment needs are securing a resume, professionalism for interviews, and the digital divide because many coming home have been incarcerated for long periods of time before the computer age so they have to learn computer skills to do the most basic things. It makes you feel inferior or insecure.” ~ MORCA Staff Member*

*“Wages are too low to live off of unless you live with somebody and there is discrimination towards people with a record” ~ MORCA Staff Member*

*“Most jobs are in the labor field, which are hard for women especially.” ~ MORCA Staff Member*

#### **4.2c. Education**

In addition to having a criminal record, low levels of education and previous work experience also serve as significant barriers to reentrants obtaining stable employment.<sup>52 53 54</sup> According to a 2003 Bureau of Justice Statistics report only 46 percent of the incarcerated population had a high school diploma or GED compared to 82 percent of men ages 18 to 34 in the U.S. general population.<sup>55</sup> There are also high rates of poor literacy skills among prisoners, as 19 percent of state prisoners are completely illiterate and 40 percent are functionally illiterate, compared to 4 percent completely illiterate and 21 percent functionally illiterate in the general population.<sup>56</sup> Further disparities exist across races within the prison population, as minorities have lower levels of educational attainment than white inmates.<sup>h</sup> Despite these major educational deficits among the incarcerated population, fewer and fewer educational and vocational programs are being offered in correctional institutions. This is mainly due to budget cuts and resource allocation where money is used to support operational costs instead of programs for inmate rehabilitation. Public attitudes on corrections have also influenced the reduction of programs in prisons, as more punitive approaches have been favored over once popular rehabilitative ones. However, more recent studies have shown the benefits of inmates participating in vocational and academic programs in terms of reducing recidivism and finding employment once released, which has fueled another gradual shift in public views.<sup>57</sup> Also, with the six-fold increase of the U.S. prison population since the 1970s, past strategies have been deemed ineffective in the present

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<sup>h</sup> In state prisons 44 percent of black inmates and 53 percent of Hispanic inmates did not have a high school diploma or GED compared to 27 percent of white prisoners (57).

climate of over crowdedness and high recidivism rates as the needs of inmates are not being met.

A 2013 meta-analysis conducted by the RAND (Research and Development) Corporation highlights the impacts of inmate participation in educational programs. The study found that inmates who participated in correctional education programs had 43 percent lower odds of recidivating than inmate who did not. Furthermore, these results translate into a 13 percent reduction in the risk of recidivism for inmates who participated in education programs compared to those who did not.<sup>58</sup> The study also examined the relationship between participation in correctional education programs and employment and found that the odds of obtaining employment after release among inmates who participated in education programs (academic or vocational) was 13 percent higher than the odds for those did not participate. These findings show that having a sufficient level of education is an integral part of the reintegration process and if inmates are lacking basic skills prior to their incarceration, the chances for employment post-release are significantly small. Thus, addressing the educational needs of inmates during incarceration is critical to their successful transition back into the community and more funding should target this area of corrections.

*“Education is a major need of reentry, especially because inmates are not receiving the training they need in prison...computer skills training, GED, college courses to get credentials with transferrable credits, but it varies by prison and period incarcerated. You also lose eligibility for student aid for a period of time depending on the offense ” ~ MORCA Staff Member*

*“First step to gainful employment is literacy, job specific skills, and digital literacy. Skillsets that you need to be able to live in today's society. There are limited educational opportunities in prison, particularly for computer literacy. You need to learn how to send an email, attach a resume, etc. Learning these things in prison is critical.” ~ MORCA Staff Member*

#### **4.2d. Health (Chronic and Infections Diseases and Mental Health)**

The health problems of inmates (and consequently reentrants) are an urgent public health matter, as this population is disproportionately affected by leading chronic and infectious diseases.<sup>59</sup> <sup>60</sup> Individuals who spend time in correctional facilities are at higher risk of contracting diseases such as HIV, tuberculosis (TB), Hepatitis C, and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) than the general population.<sup>61</sup> They are also at higher risk of having conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, asthma, stroke, arthritis, and liver disease than the general population. Some of the major factors that contribute to the health issues of inmates are intravenous drug use, prostitution, poverty, and unprotected sex.<sup>62</sup> <sup>63</sup> A BJS study found that from 2011-2012 about 40 percent of state and federal prisoners, and jail inmates reported having a current chronic medical condition while approximately half reported ever having a chronic condition. In addition, 21 percent of prisoners and 14 percent of jail inmates reported ever having an infection disease. In terms of the prevalence of HIV about 1 percent of prisoners and jail inmates reported being HIV positive compared to 0.4 percent in the general population. Additionally, female prisoners (63%) and jail inmates (67%) were more likely than male prisoners (50%) and jail inmates (48%) to report ever having a chronic condition.<sup>64</sup>

Mental illness is another common health problem among inmates, because some offenders are born with conditions that increase their risk of becoming involved in criminal activity.<sup>65</sup> It is not surprising that there is a strong connection between mental health and substance abuse; when mental illness goes undiagnosed or untreated, individuals are more likely to self-medicate with illicit drugs, increasing their risk of incarceration. According to a BJS study in 2005 more than half of all prison (56% of state prisoners and 45% of federal prisoners) and jail inmates (64%) had a mental health problem, which include major depression, mania, and psychotic disorders. Among those who had a mental illness 64 percent in federal prisons, 74 percent in state prisons and 76 percent in local jails had a substance abuse (alcohol or drugs) problem. Additionally, females had higher rates of mental health problems in both state prisons and local jails.<sup>66</sup> Drug abuse disproportionately affects the incarcerated population and is a major contributor to recidivism if not treated.<sup>67</sup> A 2004 BJS study found that 53 percent of state prisoners and 45 percent of federal prisoners met the criteria for drug dependence or abuse, and that 17 percent of state prisoners and 18 percent of federal prisoners committed their crime to get money for drugs.<sup>68</sup>

One of the major consequences of these health issues faced by the incarcerated population, particularly infectious diseases, 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. Although, according to the 2011-2012 BJS the majority of prisoners (66%) who had a chronic condition reported taking a prescription medication and more than half (57%) reported being some degree of satisfied with the health services they received since admission, there is still debate surrounding the quality of health services and the delivery of them in correctional facilities. For example, 52 percent of prisoners reported that the health care services that they received while incarcerated was worse than the health care they received 12 months prior to admission.<sup>69</sup>

Insufficient health care is an even bigger problem among inmates with mental illness. In 2005, only 34 percent of state prisoners and 24 percent of federal prisoners had mental health treatment since admission.<sup>70</sup> In 2004, among prisoners who were dependent or abusing drugs, only 40 percent of state prisoners and 49 percent of federal prisoners participated in drug abuse treatment or programs since their admission.<sup>71</sup> Considering the proven benefits of having drug treatment programs in correctional facilities, these numbers reveal that not enough effort is being made to place eligible inmates in treatment in order to lower the risk of relapse and recidivism. Data has shown that inmates that participate in treatment while incarcerated have 9 to 18 percent lower recidivism rates and 15 to 35 percent lower drug relapse rates than their peers who do not get treatment.<sup>72</sup> Also, if inmates are not getting help while incarcerated and they only receive treatment post-release, it will likely not be as effective as they are no longer in a controlled and structured environment, and fighting a drug addiction in the same environment it was started can be counterproductive. Furthermore, positive results are more common among those who participate in both institutional and post-release treatment. When looking at the bigger picture, how can reentrants be expected to be



fully rehabilitated and equipped to live productive lives if they are not receiving adequate health care and services in the correctional facility?

*“If we don’t address the mental health needs we increase the likelihood of reincarceration and the psychological trauma that comes with incarceration. Many reentrants do not take care of their physical health...exercising, going to the doctor...you get hope and tend to do better reintegrating” ~ MORCA Staff Member*

*“These institutions are use to warehousing people... These individuals have never made an appointment with a health care provider, just emergencies. Health care needs are not addressed in prisons. They have little interaction with health care provider so they don’t follow healthy patterns once released.” ~ MORCA Staff Member*

#### **4.2e. Gender-Specific Needs (Women’s Reentry)**

The challenges that women reentrants face are unique in that they have the same key needs as men (housing, employment, education, and health), however, there are additional challenges related to the societal/cultural expectations of women that must be navigated as well that further complicate the process of fulfilling these needs. In addition, trends in incarceration data show that the number of women in prison increased by 646% between 1980 and 2010, which is about 1.5 time the rate of men (419%).<sup>73</sup> This rapid increase of women in the prison population is largely due to drug policies that instituted mandatory minimum sentences for relatively low-level drug offense.<sup>74</sup> This has ultimately heightened the risk of women falling into the challenging circumstances of reintegration, and as highlighted in Section B, minority women are the most affected. So what makes a woman’s reentry experience different from a man’s? To answer this question it is important to have a basic understanding of female criminality.

In recent years research has been conducted on “pathways” to crime, which focuses on what causes individuals to turn to crime or criminal behavior.<sup>75</sup> Distinct “pathways” for women and girls have been found with interrelated physical, psychological, and socioeconomic factors that often result in individuals becoming involved in criminal behavior. Some of the most common “pathways” for women offenders include childhood victimization (i.e. physical and sexual abuse), poverty, mood and anxiety disorders, self-medicating and substance abuse. Women can experience one or more of these pathways and use coping mechanisms to deal with the trauma or stress. However, coping often translates into illegal behavior such as prostitution, burglary, and selling and using drugs. Data on offending patterns also shows that women are more likely than men to be convicted for property and drug offenses. They are less likely to be convicted of violent crime and the majority of violent offenses that are committed by women are labeled as simple assault. Also, women are less likely than men to have institutional misconducts and to recidivate.<sup>76 77 78</sup>

Women’s reentry unfolds in light of the previously stated complex mixture of circumstances that contributed to their participation in criminal activity and subsequent incarceration. One of the main challenges that female prisoners face is maintaining their role as a mother and provider, as they are more likely than men to have served as the primary caretaker of their

children before being incarcerated.<sup>79</sup> In 2012 the Sentencing Project reported that women (62%) in state prisons were more likely than men (51%) to have minor children.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, 1 in 25 women in state prisoners and 1 in 33 in federal prisoners were pregnant at admission to prison, and in all but 13 states can be shackled while giving birth. In addition, mothers (64%) in state prisons were more likely than fathers (47%) to have lived with their children prior to their incarceration. Therefore, upon their release, many women are eager to reestablish their role as mothers, which is often very difficult especially for women who served longer sentences. Also, mothers in prison were more likely than fathers to have their children in the custody of grandparents, other relatives, and foster care rather than with the other parent.<sup>81</sup> For women reentrants, this makes the task of rebuilding relationships with their children even more complicated as they must work with non-immediate family members or external parties to gain custody of their children. Navigating the child welfare system in particular can be a very strenuous and stressful experience, as the mother has to prove she is stable and sober in order for her to take over as primary caretaker of her child. For female reentrants suffering from drug addiction (many of whom did not receive adequate treatment while incarcerated) this can be very difficult to accomplish. Also, finding stable and safe housing is another major obstacle that women reentrants must overcome to get custody of their children. It is already hard to secure housing for yourself as a reentrant, so having the additional burden of obtaining stable housing for you and your children is even harder, and the more children you have the more of a challenge this can be.

As illustrated above, reentry entails a complex web of obstacles that women offenders must overcome in order to fulfill their obligations and responsibilities. These challenges are rarely encountered by male reentrants that are fathers as they are less likely to be faced with the burden of fighting for custody of their children, and to have to prove to strict officials they are rehabilitated and stable enough to take on this role. In a society where women are viewed as the nurturers, caregivers, and responsible for keeping the family unit together, female reentrants have to maintain this position even when their offender status has taken it away.

*“Most women are in prison because of drug convictions, but not everyone has equal access to treatment and there are different requirements depending on where you are at.”*

*“I think trauma is what causes a lot of women to be in and out of prison. Because of the trauma they experienced while growing up and because most of them are victims of some type of physical or sexual abuse, they get on drugs and then end up in prison.” ~ MORCA Staff Member*

### **4.3. DC's Response to the Problem of Reentry: The Mayor's Office on Returning Citizen Affairs (MORCA)**

#### **4.3a. MORCA's History, Mission, and Goals**

The D.C. Mayor's Office on Returning Citizen Affairs was established in 2007 as a result of the 1997 Revitalization Act as a post-release agency for D.C.'s incarcerated population. MORCA's origins began with advocacy groups believing their needed to be a local government agency that is responsible for returning prisoners, which led to the “Office on

Ex-Offender Affairs and Commission on Re-Entry and Ex-Offender Affairs Establishment Act of 2006” being introduced to the D.C. Council, which was then approved by Congress on March 8, 2007. MORCA officially opened its door in 2008.<sup>82</sup> Both entities’ names were later changed to the “Office on Returning Citizen Affairs” and the “Commission on Re-Entry and Returning Citizen Affairs” in 2012 as ordered by D.C. Mayor Vincent Gray.<sup>83</sup> MORCA’s official mission statement reads:<sup>84</sup>

*“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.”*

The agency’s main goal is to assist men and women returning from incarceration with linkages back into the community and to address their housing, employment, educations, health, and social needs. MORCA also strives to continue to build and strengthen relationships with key stakeholders in the reentry community. Moreover, to expand and improve services available to the reentry population in order to effectively meet their needs. Ultimately, continuing to establish MORCA as the hub of community reentry for DC’s returning citizen population and to become a model for other reentry agencies around the country.

#### **4.3b. MORCA’s Direct Services**

MORCA provides multiple services onsite to address the major needs of returning citizens mainly in the areas of employment, education, and vocational training (MORCA 2013).<sup>i</sup> Employment services include resume development, email creation, online job application assistance, and job placement. Educational services that are offered are digital inclusion courses, CDL license, interview skills, college admissions orientation, and DC 2000/Ranking Factors. Training services available are workforce development, pre-apprenticeship electrical helper, janitorial and facilities management, heating, ventilation and air conditioning, and financial literacy. In addition, legal assistance is provided onsite by Bread for the City, a non-profit organization that provides services for vulnerable populations. These services are essential tools for reintegration and having MORCA as a one-stop-shop to access them helps to alleviate some of the stress of reentry. Many reentrants especially those just released from incarceration do not have reliable transportation to go from one agency to another to complete the various steps and requirements associated with transitioning back into the community. However, MORCA’s responds to the various needs of reentry by creating a structured environment for returning citizens to learn about and utilize their resources to aid in the process of becoming productive members of society.

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<sup>i</sup> Most of the information presented in this section is taken from MORCA’s FY2013 Annual Performance Report, with additional information being provided by MORCA staff during interviews and literature research (86).

### **4.3c. MORCA's Referral Services**

For services that are not offered onsite, MORCA has a referral system where clients are connected to outside service providers based on their needs.<sup>j</sup> Referral services fall under the need areas of job development/employment training, life skills training, social services, vital records services, legal assistance, and mental health/drug treatment. Agencies that provide job development and employment training services for reentrants in D.C. include D.C. Central Kitchen, the Department of Employment Services (DOES), the Department of Veteran Affairs (DVA), the Department of Aging (DOA), and Opportunities Industrialization Centers Inc. (OIC). Life skills training agencies include Street Wise, Strive D.C., and Operation HOPE. Social services agencies include Men's Fit, Virginia Williams, the Department of Human Services (DHS), and Family and Medical Counseling Service Inc. (FMCS). Agencies that offer vital records services include Voices for a Second Chance (VSC, formally the Visitors' Services Center) and the Foundry United Methodist Church. Another legal assistance agency that clients can be referred to is the Public Defender Service for District of Columbia. Lastly, mental health and drug treatment referral agencies include the Department of Behavioral Health (DBH) and the Federal City Recovery Services. These referrals serve as additional outlets for returning citizens to address their needs without the hassle of having to look for them on their own, as some may be unfamiliar with the various systems and protocols especially those incarcerated for a long period of time. Overall, this represents MORCA's goals of strengthening existing relationships and developing new ones to ensure up-to-date resources and speedy service delivery for their clients.

Other partners that MORCA collaborates with include the following: the Department of Public Works (DPW), The University of the District of Columbia (UDC) Community College, Georgetown University Law Center, Howard University, the Office of the Chief Technology Officer (OCTO), the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC), Consultants for Change (CFC) the Reentry Network for Returning Citizens, Sasha Bruce Youthwork, Family and Friends of Incarcerated People (FFOIP), Ward 8 Arts and Culture Council, Son's of Life, Returning Citizens United, the Department of General Services (DGS), the District Department of Transportation (DDOT), and the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA). MORCA is currently working to develop a strong relationship with the Department of Corrections (DOC).

### **4.3d. MORCA's Challenges as a Reentry Agency**

MORCA's overarching goal of responding to the needs of DC's returning citizen population and reducing recidivism comes with its challenges. In general, reentrants are an underserved and vulnerable population, which is largely influenced by the public stigma associated with having a criminal record. Individuals returning from incarceration are often faulted and looked down upon when back in the community even when they have paid their debts to society for their wrongdoings. Furthermore, the national and local recidivism rates have fed public sentiments surrounding reentry as past offenders are expected to reoffend when they

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<sup>j</sup> Ibid.

are released back into the community. MORCA has to serve as advocates as well as service providers for this growing population that is often disenfranchised and not receiving the amount of support from the community that is needed to shift current recidivism trends. Observations, informal conversational interviews, and semi-structured interviews with staff provided insight on the particular challenges that MORCA faces as a reentry agency operating under the local government. The agency's biggest challenge is the lack of resources to be able to fund the programs and services it wants to offer its clients, which is illustrated by its current operating (non-personal) budget of \$10,500.<sup>85</sup>

*"We have a big need to provide services through programs and currently we have a \$10,500 program budget and we served 5000 people in 2014. That is about \$2 dollars a person..." ~ MORCA Staff Member*

This illustrates MORCA's financial barriers, which ultimately hinders their ability to develop sustainable and effective programs for D.C. reentrants. When serving a population with such demanding needs it is critical that abundant resources are available to ensure steady and reliable delivery of services. Another major challenge that MORCA has 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. Not having this information effects performance analyses and evaluations, which consequently impacts the funding and resources that MORCA receives, because all productivity is not being accounted for. Having the ability to communicate with partner agencies after referring clients can help increase positive outcomes as clients can be followed up with to guarantee proper service delivery and to work through any issues. An underlying cause of MORCA's challenges is that when it was established there was not a fiscal impact or staffing study conducted that would determine what resources would be required to serve the returning citizen population in D.C. This has led to a budget that is not enough to fully cover all programming and staffing costs and has ultimately held MORCA back from reaching its full potential as a reentry agency. Overall, there needs to be a better understanding of reentry at higher levels of administration in D.C. so that more funding can be targeted towards service providers such as MORCA who orchestrates most of the city's reentry efforts.

#### **4.3e. MORCA's Recent Successes**

Despite its budget shortcomings MORCA has taken monumental steps in improving D.C.'s reentry system by establishing resource and service oriented initiatives and programs (MORCA 2013).<sup>k</sup> In fiscal year (FY) 2013 MORCA served 2,059 new clients and 3,114 existing clients returned for at least one service. Through its direct employment services MORCA placed 152 men and women in full-time employment in FY2013, which increased to 247 job placements in 2014. In addition the following services were provided in FY2013 to MORCA's client population: pre apprenticeship (20 clients), computer literacy training (44 clients), completed CDL training (112 clients), voter registration (482), job searches (1,276 clients), email set-up (627 clients), job application completion (1,523 clients), and HIV testing (802 clients in December 2012). One of MORCA's biggest achievements is the launch of the D.C. Reentry Initiative in January 2013, which is a memorandum of agreement

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<sup>k</sup> Ibid.



with critical municipal, federal, faith and community partners to dedicate resources to aid in the reintegration of returning citizens. This joint effort works to give reentrants a second chance by addressing their needs and using the platforms and resources of partners in various sectors to overcome major challenges such as employment, housing, education, and transportation.

In July 2013 MORCA opened the new Reentry Resource Center, which serves as a system for municipal, non-profit, community, and faith-based institutions to provide direct services to men and women who have been involved in the criminal justice system under one roof (MORCA) and for MORCA to be the “hub” for where services can begin. The center provides access to information on community resources and reentry services available in D.C. including food, clothing and shelter, vital records, faith-based support, medical care, substance abuse treatment, and job placement, training, and development. MORCA is also a part of a Digital Inclusion Initiative spearheaded by the D.C. Office of the Chief Technology Officer (OCTO) and its Connect.DC division. The program targets marginalized and under-resourced demographics such as returning citizens and agencies like MORCA provide technology assistance and digital literacy training.<sup>86</sup> MORCA’s Reentry Resource Center is used to teach computer literacy classes and other basic technological skills that reentrants need to know in order to survive in today’s digital world.

In May 2013 MORCA launched a gender-specific initiative targeting female reentrants called the W.I.R.E., which stands for Women Involved in Reentry Efforts. The W.I.R.E. consist of women who were previously incarcerated and have successfully navigated through the reentry process and their supporters. Their purpose is to raise awareness and address the gaps in services for women returning from incarceration as they are often faced with obstacles that hinder their ability to get back on their feet. Members of the W.I.R.E. participate in leadership training in order to mentor women returning citizens and educate the public on the gender-specific needs of reentry such as housing, employment, and family reunification. Other W.I.R.E. activities include panels, leadership conferences, prison visits, and testimonials. The W.I.R.E.’s slogan is “Lifting as we Climb” emphasizing the need for women who are going through the reentry process to have the social support from other women who have overcame the same challenges. The organization’s formal mission states:

*The goal of the W.I.R.E. is to raise public awareness regarding the gender-specific concerns female returning citizens face, engage in prison outreach, provide family reunification activities, and leadership training.*

In August 2013 members of the W.I.R.E. visited over 130 soon to be released men and women at USP (United States Penitentiary) Hazelton to provide information on resources offered in the community. The W.I.R.E. also facilitated family reunification activities with the women at Fairview Halfway House and their children. In addition, has taken over 20 children to the Secure Facility for Women in Hazelton for National Children’s Day for the BOP. During the summer of 2014 the W.I.R.E organized its First Annual Women’s Reentry Leadership Conference held on June 19<sup>th</sup> at the Howard University School of Law. The conference’s theme was “The Ceiling, Not the Floor: Setting Higher Standards & Rising the Bar” and was sponsored by MORCA, CJCC, the Court Services and Offender Supervision

Agency (CSOSA), and the Howard University School of Law. The program consisted of three interactive lectures for female reentrants: 1) holistic health and wellness (physical, mental, emotional, and social), 2) women in leadership, entrepreneurship and self-motivation, and 3) public speaking, self-confidence, and presentational skills. In addition, a workshop called “Training theory into Practice” led by Consultants for Change (CFC) was held for practitioners that work with returning citizens, particularly women.<sup>1</sup> Attendees included representatives from municipal, federal, faith-based, community, and non-profit agencies. The training covered “gender-specific” awareness and how to define the term, as it is often misunderstood in the context of reentry. Participants also learned different practical strategies to strengthen relationships with clients.

Other activities that MORCA organized and/or sponsored in the summer of 2014 are the Free Her Rally, Gateway DC Summer Film Series, and the Returning Citizens Family Appreciation Day. The Free Her Rally was held on June 21, 2014 at the Sylvan Theater located on the National Mall. The objective was to raise awareness on some of the injustices surrounding women’s incarceration and ending mass incarceration and the War on Drugs. The event was spearheaded by Families for Justice as Healing, a non-profit organization based out of Roxbury, Massachusetts consisting of formally incarcerated women who advocate for criminal justice reform focusing on women, children, and communities.<sup>87</sup> Attendees of the rally included representatives from faith-based, social media, and non-profit organizations as well as the general public. The Gateway D.C. Summer Film Series Event was held on July 23, 2014 at the St. Elizabeth’s Gateway Pavilion in Washington, D.C. The D.C. Office of Motion Picture and Television Development hosted the larger film series where MORCA helped organize the week honoring returning citizens. The evening began with a debate on the “ban-the-box” legislation, which prohibited D.C. municipal and private employers from asking applicants about their criminal history on job applications. The second part of the program consisted of the screening of *Life of a King* (2013), which is a film about an ex-felon who changed his life around and started a chess club for inner-city youth in D.C. The film is based on the true story of Eugene Brown played by actor Cuba Gooding Jr. The event also included food trucks and vendors. Lastly, MORCA coordinated a Returning Citizens Family Appreciation Day held on August 30, 2014 at the Randle Recreation Center in Washington, D.C. Sponsors of the event included DOA, the Reentry Network for Returning Citizens, Returning Citizens United, FFOIP, Son’s of Life, Sasha Bruce Youthwork, D.C. Central Kitchen, and Ward 8 Arts and Culture Council. The objective was to have a day of fun and activities for returning citizens and their families. Bringing the reentry community together was used as a way to foster positive relationships and continued growth among previously incarcerated individuals, their families, and the larger community. The day featured music and live entertainment, moon bounces, a kickball and softball tournament, cotton candy, and face painting.

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<sup>1</sup> Consultants for Change Inc. is an agency that focuses on creative ways to support nonprofits and nonprofit leaders who are addressing social justice issues. CFC also manages a women’s reentry initiative in D.C. in collaboration with the Justice Grants Administration. See [www.consultants4change.com](http://www.consultants4change.com) for more information.

## 5. Discussion and Recommendations

MORCA experiences a considerable amount of pressure as D.C.'s reentry agency and its relatively small staff must work to effectively provide services to D.C.'s total returning citizen population. Also, being located in the nation's capital and D.C. having a relatively high percentage of residents with criminal records comes with expectations that place MORCA in the spotlight of reentry efforts around the country. At CuSAG, we also believe that having an agency that is incorporated within the local government structure, can be a major contributor to the sustainability of services to a population segment which has little, if any political clout, and about which there may be little public concern.

However, MORCA's lack of funding and resources has hindered its ability to independently coordinate reentry efforts in D.C. and has relied on collaborations with other agencies to develop and implement different initiatives and programs. Even though partnerships are a necessary part of reentry efforts, having a flagship agency or a main center for service information and a starting point for service delivery can make for a more seamless and efficient reentry process for returning citizens. This is even more important for the felony population who are serving their sentences in BOP facilities around the nation and have had no contact with service providers at home prior to release in order to have a plan in place when they return. Therefore, having MORCA as the reentry service hub can relieve some of the stress that reentrants may have from being unfamiliar with D.C.'s reentry system.

MORCA's current budget does not allow for this type of growth so a budget increase is needed in order to further develop its Reentry Resource Center and to fund more onsite services provided by MORCA. More job placements, vocational training, certifications, medical and drug treatment can be provided with a budget increase which should include more staff to perform these duties. Additional funding can also enhance MORCA's community partnerships to expand existing programs/services and develop and implement new ones. The following is a summary and additional recommendations/considerations for MORCA and its operational affiliates:

- 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 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.

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