

WALK RIGHT UP TO THE SUN, HAND IN HAND

The Power of Peer Mentorship in Facilitating the Successful Reentry of Former Lifers

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Introduction

Successful reentry has been one of the most challenging goals related to corrections, evidenced by consistently high recidivism rates and dismal parole outcomes. In a Bureau of Justice Statistics report of 34 states, 71% of individuals released in 2012 were rearrested within five years, and, in a follow up of individuals released in 24 states in 2008, 82% were arrested within ten years (Antenangeli & Durose, 2021; Durose & Antenangeli, 2021). Despite the negative outcomes, the inertia around the issue has produced little collective will to overhaul ineffective systems. However, given the leeway to operate outside of typical prohibitions and being provided the political will to try a different approach, innovation can lead to outcomes that verge on miraculous. Criminal justice reform advocate and philanthropist Glenn E. Martin (2017) famously stated that “those closest to the problem are closest to the solution.” A confluence of social and political factors created the circumstances for the unique reentry organization, Louisiana Parole Project (LPP), to emerge. LPP is a strong example of the veracity of Martin’s statement.

Louisiana is one of a few states that engages in overuse of life without parole (LWOP) sentences. Between LWOP and de-facto life (numerical sentences that surpass an individual’s life expectancy), a third of all prisoners in Louisiana are serving life (The Sentencing Project, 2017). After the temporary halt of the death penalty, rendered by the *Furman v. Georgia* verdict in 1972, a series of laws were passed to vastly restrict any possibility of relief, ensuring that individuals given these sentences would die in prison. This has led to Louisiana State Penitentiary-Angola having large and expanding graveyards and prisoner-run hospice programs.

However, a decade of Supreme Court decisions changed the landscape of possibility, beginning with *Roper v. Simmons* (2005), which ruled that the death penalty for crimes committed as juveniles was unconstitutional. The arguments in this case focused on an abundance of research showing that the adolescent brain was not fully developed and that there was significant room for growth and maturity. This significant crack in the pattern of harsh sentencing led to *Graham v. Florida* (2010), a decision that juveniles could not be sentenced to life without parole for a non-homicide offense, *Miller v. Alabama* (2012), which determined

that a mandatory life without parole sentence given to a juvenile was unconstitutional, and *Montgomery v. Louisiana* (2016), which affirmed the *Miller* decision and made it retroactive.

The *Montgomery* decision required states to re-evaluate anyone who was given a life without parole sentence as a juvenile, but did not specify the process. Despite the heavy resistance from Louisiana which initially led to the *Montgomery* case, the state quickly complied with the decision, determining that persons sentenced as juveniles to LWOP could be reviewed for parole eligibility after serving 25 years (Louisiana Law Revised Statutes, 2018). In a further unexpected turn of events, both progressive and conservative Louisiana politicians agreed (albeit for different reasons) that something needed to be done about the aging incarcerated population. This resulted in a 2017 bipartisan Justice Reinvestment package that provided for opportunities for the release of other people serving life or extreme sentences beyond those who were sentenced as juveniles, and a reinvestment of the cost savings into public safety (Criminal Justice Reform Initiative, 2023). People who formerly had little hope of ever being free now found themselves with an opportunity for release.

Incarcerated since 1997, Andrew Hundley became the first person released in Louisiana who had been sentenced to LWOP as a juvenile. After being released in 2016 and briefly working in reentry, Hundley quickly realized that most programs would be insufficient for the special needs of people coming home after being incarcerated for twenty or more years. Given the unusual leeway of Louisiana laws, which did not prohibit interactions between formerly incarcerated individuals with felony convictions, Hundley created the Louisiana Parole Project, a reentry organization specializing in the reintegration of people who served long sentences and staffed almost entirely by formerly incarcerated or system-impacted persons. The board and staff brainstormed and studied everything a formerly life-sentenced person would need to be successful and found a way to provide for almost all of these issues. More than the helping hand in all areas of need, the goal of the program is for peer mentors to assist the client with gaining the confidence to be self-sufficient. Although there is no set definition for what constitutes a “peer mentor” (Clark, 2016), research emphasizes a history of incarceration as the most salient factor for status as a peer mentor (Buck, 2020; Hinde & White, 2019; Matthews, 2021). LPP reached eight years of existence and over 600 clients in 2024. Previously its stakeholders claimed an outstanding record of less than 2% recidivism, as measured by re-incarceration at any point (LSU, 2021). The authors of the current paper do not have enough data points to confirm this claim, nor are we aware of data that disaggregates reentry programs or recidivism of individuals sentenced to life. However, the current research assesses the perceived value of the peer-mentorship program using 89 in-depth life history interviews with reentry clients, and a quantitative assessment of 175 early clients’ post-program competencies in different areas of reentry.

Review of the Literature

Life Sentence Reentry

The United States does not have a de-commodified welfare state. Fairly waged employment, housing, healthcare, education, and other social services are privatized and made a privilege, not a right, for working-class people in the country. For formerly incarcerated people, attaining these basic necessities while navigating mental and environmental changes is even more of an obstacle. Because access to social services is almost entirely mediated by an employer, one must be employed, typically full time, to access them (Hacker, 2002). Beyond obtaining employment, which may be difficult due to legal discrimination for having a felony conviction, the employment must be maintained and provide a sufficient salary to support an individual

and their family (Visher et al., 2010). It is an unrealistic expectation that people already in a vulnerable position post-incarceration will find themselves as successful members of society when they are faced with a plethora of seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

When people sentenced to life imprisonment return to society, most are confronted with the vast differences between prison and the outside world. Rapid technological advancements exacerbate these differences as well as a person's unease about their ability to adjust. One of the first issues to deal with after lengthy imprisonment is where the person chooses to live on the outside. It is estimated that between 90% and 95% of those who have served a prison sentence will eventually return to their original community (Wilson & Davis, 2006). While Liem (2016) found that only 20% of the interviewed lifers returned to their old neighborhoods, 86% returned to "communities characterized by low median income, high unemployment rate, and high crime" (p. 123). Support for returning citizens is often limited to what the neighborhood can provide; thus more work may be required while incarcerated in order to develop the most constructive version of the individual to re-enter society (Liem, 2016).

When a formerly incarcerated person re-enters society, there are different assumptions and stigmas that come with having not only a record, but also a "lifer" label. These individuals are often "stigmatized by family members, friends, prospective employers, and others" (Wilson & Davis, 2006, p. 305). These labels can devalue personal attributes, completely changing the original perception of the person. Derogatory labels related to having a felony record immediately place individuals in a permanent state of second class, which affects housing, employment, and relationships (Liem, 2016). Prior to 2016, restrictive lease agreements enabled housing discrimination if a criminal record was disclosed or discovered (Liem, 2016). In 2016, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development issued instructions that prevented blanket housing discrimination based on criminal history, specifying the requirement of factual reasons rather than perceived threat to bar someone from housing (Fair Housing Center, 2024). Despite this order, formerly incarcerated individuals are estimated to be roughly ten times more likely to be homeless compared to the general public (Couloute, 2018), in part because the newly released may not be able to afford the high costs of rent (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2024). Additionally, The Criminal Offender Record Information (CORI) can be requested by non-criminal justice agencies such as schools, daycares, and municipal government agencies (Liem, 2016). This, coupled with the relative ease of finding mugshots or incident-related articles on the internet, increases the struggles of re-entry for those trying to build a new life. Returning to a community that has an increased risk for crime and deviance, combined with the added stress of limited public assistance, food stamp eligibility, student loans, and obtaining a driver's license, hinders the ability for formerly incarcerated persons to be successful. Liem (2016) summarizes this with, "current policies regarding ex-offenders may produce unintended criminogenic effects by further damaging offenders already weak social bonds and cutting them off from promising avenues for desistance and reintegration into communities" (p. 128).

One of the biggest challenges to re-entry for those formerly serving life sentences is employment. Due to having a record, these individuals face a very narrow range of job opportunities, while also lacking the employable skills and work experience (McDonald, et al., 2008). Viable employment post release can allow the formerly incarcerated to provide for themselves but vocational and educational programs in prisons are normally reserved for individuals serving short term rather than life sentences (Liem, 2016). In one study, among former prisoners under community supervision, 32% reported having no marketable skills (McDonald et al., 2008). In Liem's study, 52% of the lifers obtained employment in the form of manual labor that had little customer contact, like working construction or manufacturing (2016). In these roles, the

person does not have to have the face-to-face conversations that may lead to the stigmas following a life sentence.

Volunteer and Peer Mentorship

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire writes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) that oppressed people have the ability to gain back their humanity through acts of liberation, but this can only be achieved if led by fellow oppressed peoples. Antithetical to the common prohibition of individuals with felony convictions interacting with one another, these arguments suggest that formerly incarcerated people may be best positioned to mentor other formerly incarcerated people.

Following the Federal Second Chance Act in 2008, more mentorship programs were developed for re-entry. While mentors can be professional staff or lay volunteers, some programs have relied on “peer mentors” who are formerly incarcerated individuals. With little guidance for reintegration in general, having a mentor with similar experiences may increase the likelihood of successful re-entry. These individuals can offer empathy and validation unique to their shared experiences as well as “offering practical advice and strategies for overcoming shared challenges” (Matthews, 2021, p. 2). Being coupled with peer mentors while being introduced to programs helps people feel more confident and trustworthy of the reentry services being offered to them. Since peer mentors have similar incarceration experiences, the participants see them as role models. Multiple studies conducted in recent years suggest that a history of incarceration is the most important characteristic for peer mentors to have in this context of reentry (Harrod, 2019; Matthews, 2021).

Being incarcerated, especially with a life sentence, causes unique pains, doubt, and stigmas. These experiences correlate to “unique challenges that are difficult to understand if you have never personally experienced” them and lead to “negative interwoven challenges” (Matthews, 2021, p. 15). In order to gain the most benefits of mentoring, matching clients to mentors with shared experiences will assist in overcoming these challenges and has been shown to lower recidivism rates (Price-Tracker et al., 2019). With peer mentorship, advice is perceived as more honest and is taken more seriously. The participants trust their mentors and connect with them. Matthews (2021) elucidates further that “it’s easier to take it to heart when it comes from someone you identify with” and “it’s about credibility. Credibility covers everything” (p. 12).

One such community-based program in Connecticut randomly assigned 55 parolees to either receive standard reentry services (e.g., focus on housing) or standard services plus a peer mentor (Sells et al., 2020). The sample was small and male only, with most having psychological and/or drug and alcohol issues, possibly confounding successful reentry. The peer mentors for this study were chosen for their history of criminal offending, incarceration, and successful reentry, and were supported and trained by two supervisors. The experimental group of parolees met with their mentors on average 1.43 times weekly and averaged over 33 contacts during the mentoring relationship. After controlling for demographics, the results showed that the mentored parolees were significantly less likely to recidivate compared to the non-mentored parolees.

Mentorship programs have also been shown to increase employment status and job security. An evaluation of Ready4Work, a community and faith-based mentorship program focused on addressing employment related needs for formerly incarcerated persons, found that “those being mentored were 35% less likely to recidivate after one year, twice as likely to find a job, more likely to stay in the program for an average of 3.1 months extra, than those who were not mentored (Price-Trucker et al., 2019, p. 15). A qualitative evaluation of RecycleForce (Harrod,

2019), a transitional employment program using peer-mentors to assist formerly incarcerated individuals, focused on the culture and perceived strengths of the organization/ program. That organization has full-time permanent employees who started as transitional employees and serve as peer mentors. While study participants noted that the program helped with obtaining this initial position post-release and allowed for “second chances,” the major strengths of the program came from the shared experiences of the mentors and mentees (“You’re me; I’m you”), having the permanent employees as role models, and having a space where the permanent employees work in shared space alongside the transitional employees every day. Like other programs that use a peer mentor model, participants noted the caring, non-judgmental culture that places heavy emphasis on dignity and moving forward, as strengths.

There is an abundant amount of literature on reentry programs that perform more or less successfully for both society and formerly incarcerated individuals. Several recent studies conclude that peer mentorship, centered on personalized reentry, is paramount to declining recidivism and providing a humanitarian life to enter back into. The current research contributes to the literature by investigating the outcomes of a unique peer mentor reentry organization staffed almost entirely by persons who were formerly serving life sentences. Louisiana Parole Project’s reentry program begins before the clients exit prison, with reentry specialists visiting and interviewing long-term incarcerated people to understand as much as possible about the person’s needs. Representatives of LPP attend parole hearings to assure the parole board that they will address those needs and are at the prison to pick up the client on the date of release. Clients are provided with transitional housing (or permanent housing for elderly individuals), assistance with finding employment, transportation, assistance with locating family, help with setting up medical appointments, assistance with obtaining legal identification, and classes on technological literacy, financial literacy, general life skills, and current social norms. Beyond the initial holistic assistance, the goal of LPP is to provide their clients with the skills and confidence to be self-sufficient. The following research aimed to explore client perceptions of LPP programming achieving these goals through peer mentorship.

Research Methods and Results

This study examines the perceived effectiveness of LPP’s peer mentorship programming. Quantitative survey data were collected from participants on a rolling basis at five points within their first year of being released from incarceration. The first wave of data was collected immediately following release from the correctional institution. A program staff member read the questions aloud and recorded responses from the participants. Wave 1 included 175 participants who completed a guided survey. Wave 2 survey data were collected after three weeks of service, which demarcated the end of LPP’s official structured programming. Post-programming, LPP staff and mentors remain accessible and available to assist clients in all areas for as long as is needed. Wave 3, 4, and 5 data were then collected at 3 months, 6 months, and 1-year post-incarceration. Eventually the program staff member responsible for the surveys left the organization, and, as a result, fewer surveys were completed at wave 2 (n= 164), wave 3 (n = 135), wave 4 (n = 116), and wave 5 (n = 80). Because of the significant attrition at later waves of data collection, we focus on the first three waves of data collection in our analysis.

Providing specificity to the context of peer mentorship help and competency in reentry domains, qualitative data is included from 89 LPP client life-history interviews in the primary investigator’s larger “Finding the Forgotten” (FF) study (see Table 31.1 for demographic information). These interviews ranged from 45 minutes to six hours, with the average running 2.5 hours. The interviews were conducted via Zoom and transcribed. The transcripts were searched for items related to predetermined codes based on subject areas such as perceived success in reentry, with an allowance for new themes to emerge. From a team of five, two coders were randomly assigned to code each interview transcript. The PI accepted codes that

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Table 31.1 Description of Sample

	N (%)
Sex	
Men	71 (80%)
Women	18 (20%)
Race/Ethnicity	
Black	59 (66.3%)
White	24 (27%)
Other	6 (6.7%)
Convicted as a Juvenile	30 (34%)
Sentence	
Life Without Parole (LWOP)	64 (71.9%)
100+ years	3 (3.4%)
65–99 years	4 (4.5%)
30–50 years	14 (15.7%)
Under 30 years	4 (4.5%)
Time Incarcerated	
Intensive Probation (25 years)	1 (1.1%)
10–19 years	3 (3.4%)
20–29 years	42 (47.2%)
30–39 years	18 (20.2%)
40–49 years	17 (19.1%)
50+ years	8 (9%)
At Interview–Time Since Release	
Less than one month	48
One to five months	19
Six to eleven months	4
One to three years	12
More than three years	6
Survey Completion	
First Wave (Day one of program)	175
Second Wave (Three weeks–last day of program)	164
Third wave- (Three months post program)	135

Life History Interviews; N = 89

were independently agreed upon (agreement rates varied, but were high with all pairings). Disagreements were brought to larger team discussions for code determinations or exclusions.

The survey was developed by program staff and contained statements spread across several domains (i.e., employment, technology, finances, health, life skills) (see Tables 31.2 and 31.3 for survey results). Participants were asked to respond to each of the statements on a 1 (least applicable to me) to 5 (most applicable to me) scale. The employment domain included 15 questions such as “I am confident in my job seeking skills,” “I am confident in my ability to complete necessary job applications,” and “I am confident in my knowledge of basic communication skills.” As initial statistical analysis revealed that three of the items did not correlate well with the others with the others, the remaining 12 employment items were added together to create an individual scale score that ranged from 12–60, with 60 representing the most confidence in their employment skills. The 12 items had high reliability scores at waves 1–3 ($\alpha = 0.902\text{--}0.912$).

Peer Mentorship in Reentry

Table 31.2 Descriptive Statistics for Program Outcomes at Waves 1–3

	<i>Wave</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
Employment	1	49.482	9.844
	2	52.311	8.329
	3	53.519	8.056
Technology	1	12.704	7.308
	2	19.793	5.392
	3	21.630	4.741
Health	1	8.496	4.191
	2	11.933	3.203
	3	13.067	2.760
Finances	1	15.304	6.441
	2	21.822	5.813
	3	24.356	5.679
Life Skills	1	56.756	9.952
	2	64.437	6.069
	3	65.800	6.068

A one-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to see if there were statistically significant differences in the employment scale over waves 1, 2, and 3.¹ Participation in the Louisiana Parole Project influenced changes in the employment scale over time, $F(1.891, 253.393) = 21.023, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.136$, with scale scores increasing from wave 1 ($M = 49.482, SD = 9.844$) to wave 2 ($M = 52.311, SD = 8.329$), to wave 3 ($M = 53.519, SD = 8.056$).

During the qualitative interviews, LPP clients discussed a variety of employment related support received including finding initial entry level jobs, and assistance and education on how to work their way towards desired meaningful employment.

Their staff personally stepped with me throughout my journey when I came here to get everything I need to get started. My driver’s license, my Social Security card, my SNAP benefits, helping me get a job. I mean actually stepping in, talking to the people to help me get a job. The lady, (redacted) she befriended me. I mean, it actually I mean, opened her arms wide in helping me with anything I probably needed.

–FF24

Parole Project has the building block to my future and a better life. Now, they have given me the opportunity to join. To be on, it’s like, “Wow, we not only want to get you a job, but we want you to maximize what you do best. We want to help you explore your options. And once you find something that you enjoy doing, we want to make sure that you do it and you do it well to and that is helping other people.” And this opportunity to help other people with the project was very phenomenal. I’m still shook by it. They tell you when you get a job, you get a job. If you get ready the night before your job and you’re happy about going to work, that’s the job for you.

–FF34

Parole Project, they provide so many resources. And so just being able to have those resources at your disposal like, you know. Like before I had a vehicle, you know, like

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Table 31.3 Post Hoc Analysis of Time in Program on Program Outcomes

Measure	(I) Wave	(J) Wave	Mean Diff (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Employment	1	2	-2.830*	0.609	0.000	-4.306	-1.353
		3	-4.037*	0.711	0.000	-5.761	-2.313
	2	1	2.830*	0.609	0.000	1.353	4.306
		3	1.207	0.591	0.129	-2.640	0.225
	3	1	4.037*	0.711	0.000	2.313	5.761
		2	1.207	0.591	0.129	-.225	2.640
Technology	1	2	-7.089*	0.528	0.000	-8.370	-5.808
		3	-8.926*	0.609	0.000	-10.403	-7.449
	2	1	7.089*	0.528	0.000	5.808	8.370
		3	-1.837*	0.400	0.000	-2.806	-0.868
	3	1	8.926*	0.609	0.000	7.449	10.403
		2	1.837*	0.400	0.000	0.868	0.2806
Health	1	2	-3.437*	0.373	0.000	-4.341	-2.533
		3	-4.570*	0.372	0.000	-5.471	-3.670
	2	1	3.437*	0.373	0.000	2.533	4.341
		3	-1.133*	0.258	0.000	-1.759	-5.07
	3	1	4.570	0.372	0.000	3.670	5.471
		2	1.133*	0.358	0.000	0.507	1.759
Finances	1	2	-6.519*	0.566	0.000	-7.891	-5.146
		3	-9.052*	0.597	0.000	-10.499	-7.605
	2	1	6.519*	0.566	0.000	5.146	7.891
		3	-2.533*	0.440	0.000	-3.600	-1.466
	3	1	9.052*	0.597	0.000	7.605	10.499
		2	2.533*	0.440	0.000	1.466	3.600
Life Skills	1	2	-7.681 [†]	0.678	0.000	-9.325	-6.038
		3	-9.044 [†]	0.737	0.000	-10.831	-7.258
	2	1	7.681 [†]	0.678	0.000	6.038	9.325
		3	-1.363 [†]	0.454	0.010	-2.464	-0.262
	3	1	9.044 [†]	0.737	0.000	7.258	10.831
		2	1.363 [†]	0.454	0.010	0.262	2.464

*The mean difference is significant at the p<0.05 level.

I couldn't get the job interviews, you know what I mean? And different – like, I couldn't even navigate putting that application in, you know, to even get to the place of a job interview. So, them being able to help with those situations, like you need a ride to get the job? You need a ride to the interview? I got you. Need a ride to the grocery store? I got you. Need a ride to go, do some shopping to get you some clothes, put some put something, you know, some shoes on your feet? We got you. It was like being able to have those resources has been the most helpful for me because... you know, had I not been able to get to the interview, I wouldn't have a job.

-FF88

LPP participants also responded to five survey statements regarding comfort using technology (e.g., “I am confident in my ability to use a cell phone, including creating a contact list for

storing phone numbers and email addresses,” “I am confident in my ability to purchase and maintain cell phone service”). The five items were added together to create a technology scale and the scales showed good reliability at waves 1–3 ($\alpha = 0.915\text{--}0.934$). Total, the scale scores ranged from 5 to 25, with 25 representing the most confidence with technology. A one-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to see if there were statistically significant differences in the technology scale over waves 1, 2, and 3.² Participation in the Louisiana Parole Project influenced changes in the technology scale over time, $F(1.659, 222.323) = 164.525$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.551$, with technology scale scores increasing from wave 1 ($M = 12.704$, $SD = 7.308$), to wave 2 ($M = 19.793$, $SD = 5.392$), and to wave 3 ($M = 21.630$, $SD = 4.741$).

The amount of technological innovation that occurred in the 20 to 50 years the LPP participant was absent from free society was overwhelming. LPP began the process of getting clients used to the new world immediately by taking them to food establishments and stores that had electronic self-service mechanisms. For most of the clients, learning how to use cell phones is troublesome, but a key component to living in the modern world.

They even got a lady that come to teach us how to use the little phone. The little cell phone. Because there's a lot of things. Because if you press the wrong button, you sending stuff to people or you deleting something or you think you putting the phone number in your phone and you not. You calling them right back. You know what I'm saying. I mean, they teach us all of this. But it's something good that you have to have.

–FF46

I had another one come and teach us how ... if you got a phone, to not... don't put your Social Security number in there for people to hack you. She taught us a bunch of spam things and all. But this is what you don't want to do because people will hack you and they can get your bank accounts and all that.

–FF46

Participants responded to four health questions at each wave of data collection (e.g., “I am confident in my ability to access medical care for check-ups and other necessary services.”). One item consistently did not correlate well with the others so the three remaining items were added together to create a scale at waves 1–3. Like previous analyses, the reliability scores were very good at all waves of data collection ($\alpha = 0.878\text{--}0.915$). A one-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in the health scale over waves 1, 2, and 3.³ Participation in the LA Parole project created significant changes in the health scale over time, $F(1.702, 228.113) = 98.909$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.425$, with health scale scores increasing from wave 1 ($M = 8.496$, $SD = 4.191$), to wave 2 ($M = 11.933$, $SD = 3.203$), and to wave 3 ($M = 13.067$, $SD = 2.760$).

In the respondent interviews, physical health was not often discussed beyond statements that healthcare in prison was negligent or minimal. When it was mentioned in reentry, the emphasis was on Louisiana Parole Project helping clients to get set up with Medicaid, insurance, doctor's appointments, and prescription medication.

But what I noticed when I walked into a Parole Project, they signed me up for food stamps, getting my Medicaid right. They were doing all these things I didn't know how to do and neither my family would have known how to do.

–FF45

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I do have a few health issues. I have to have a knee replacement. And my prostate level went up, so I have to see the doctor. I think they're going to want to do a biopsy. That's what I was told by doctors in Angola, so they lining me up with all of that. They help you with that. That's another thing. I would've never been able to maneuver around with that. I don't even know how to fool with that card. What they call it? Medicaid. Medicare. And (redacted) helps me with that. Helping me get my appointments lined up with the doctors.

–FF46

Six survey items assessed participants comfort with financial issues (e.g., “I understand how to open a bank account and use banking tools [debit card, mobile phone apps, checking account, etc.]” and “I am confident in my ability to find information on and apply for [if applicable] benefits from social security.”) The items were added together to create a scale that could range from six to 30 with higher scores showing higher confidence with finances and showed good reliability at waves 1–3 (alpha = 0.818–0.856). A one-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in the finance scale over waves 1, 2, and 3.⁴ Participation in the LA Parole project created statistically significant changes in the finance scale over time, $F(1.793, 240.257) = 150.381, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.529$, with finance scale scores increasing from wave 1 ($M = 15.304, SD = 6.441$), to wave 2 ($M = 21.822, SD = 5.813$), and to wave 3 ($M = 24.356, SD = 5.679$).

Most of the clients were last free when cash and checks were the most common economic forms. LPP clients learn how to use cards and digital currency, as well as how to manage money and plan for future monetary goals.

I would say the most helpful for me in reentry was the Parole Project and going through the classes. The classes that we went through and the financial class. They were federal credit union, you know, going to the financial class with her you know, I had a lot of questions about my money because I don't have much of it, but I need to know how to use it wisely to make it sustained. So that was really helpful to me.

–FF4

I learned about banking, saving money, which I'm doing very well now. I've never had a bank account. But I save, I know how to save. It's exciting. I be glad to get my check, go to the bank and put it in there. Back then I didn't know anything about it, cause you know. Parole Project is very understanding, they gonna help you with anything that you need.

–FF15

Finally, participants responded to 14 survey statements assessing their abilities to handle basic life skills (e.g., “I understand how to properly communicate with his/her parole officer,” “I understand and am comfortable with the social norms of male/female interactions and what constitutes sexual harassment,” “I am comfortable with the process of searching for and submitting an application for renting an apartment or house,” “I understand how to file, or access a provider, to file required state and federal income tax returns”). The items were again added together to produce a possible scale score ranging from 14–70, with high scores indicating more comfort with these issues. The reliability score for the scale was very good at waves 1–3 (alpha = 0.860–0.879). A one-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in the life skills scale over waves 1, 2,

and 3.⁵ Participation in the LA Parole project created statistically significant changes in the life skills scale over time, $F(1.596, 213.917) = 118.005, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.468$, with life skills scale scores increasing from wave 1 ($M = 56.756, SD = 9.952$) to wave 2 ($M = 64.437, SD = 6.069$), and increasing again at wave 3 ($M = 65.800, SD = 6.068$).

The ultimate goal of the Louisiana Parole Project is the success of their clients. LPP initially provides everything a formerly incarcerated person needs for reentry, so that the person is not overwhelmed and can comfortably focus on figuring out how to live in conventional society. As these individuals gain life skills, they become more confident in being self-sufficient before they move on from the reentry program.

So it was, it's not funny, but having the issue that I had, trying to find housing made me realize why people give up so easy. And the person that I was with, that actually helped me find the housing that I did find at that time, I said "You know I understand now why people give up and go back to prison." He was like "Why?" and I was like "Well because every damn door that we just walked through, just shut it." So, what's the point, but I'm thankful that I have that fight in me and I don't give up that easy and that I am surrounded by people who want to see me successful, who want to see me move forward, but for someone who doesn't have that support, could've very well threw in the damn towel and said what the hell with it, I'm going back to prison.

–FF2

I enjoyed the little class with one professor about how to deal with an encounter with law enforcement. Cause that's something you don't think about, but inevitably, it's going to happen at some point. You're gonna end up having to deal with law enforcement, so how do you handle it? Cause as soon as they run a plate it's gonna come back, or particularly once they get your license out, oh you're still on paper. You're still on supervision. So how do you handle it? I thought that was a very interesting class that they had. So my hats off to them.

–FF23

Even though they call it Parole Project, it's more than that to me. It's a lifeline. It's a lifeline. Not for food. It's a lifeline to get all your vitality. All you need to go to the other side. They prepare you for the other side because you ain't been out there on the other side. This the doorway right here. This the doorway. And you get into this door. While you are you going through this room from the doorway, when you get to the other side of the door, you're going to know something. You're going to know how to live on the other side. You're going to really know how to live on the other side.

–FF49

Discussion

This study examined how the Louisiana Parole Project's educational programming and peer mentoring influenced confidence in key reentry areas. While the study benefited from longitudinal survey assessments of confidence in key reentry areas and qualitative appraisals of the program, there were limitations. The LPP programming on the key reentry areas and the mentoring cannot be separated to determine how much perceived improvement or benefit was attributed to each component individually. Rather the results should be interpreted as a combination of services, with both the educational programming and peer mentoring support

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being parts of a larger package. Additionally, as noted before, the study does not have a comparison group of formerly incarcerated who did not participate in the LPP programming. As such, the results should be viewed as descriptive and informative but not causal.

Like previous studies of peer mentoring programming, the participants in this study showed improvement in key areas and reported overwhelming satisfaction with the LPP. The survey results show that participants reported significantly higher confidence in their employment skills, comfort with technology, ability to deal with their health, finances, and basic life skills from wave 1 to wave 3. Significant research has identified employment and housing as key to successful reentry. The survey and qualitative data results suggest that the educational programming and peer mentoring by LPP helped both with confidence and actual support in these key areas.

Parole Project did show me how to come live. I wouldn't have the slightest idea if they done opened that gate and booted me out the front gate and said, "Get the hell down the road." They might as well just turn around and open the back door because I would be coming back in because I had no idea how to get a job, how to get an apartment, none of that. How to go shopping? No, I didn't know how to do none of that. How much of a chance would I have had if I didn't have somebody like Parole Project show me? Prior to Parole Project, there wasn't nobody showing no one nothing.

–FF25

During the interviews clients demonstrated an overwhelming appreciation for LPP, without a single detraction. Seeing familiar faces of mentors that the client was previously incarcerated with or knowing that the reentry mentors had the same experiences, went a long way towards obtaining the trust and confidence of the clients. Formerly incarcerated individuals sometimes indicated a preference for LPP over blood-related families, due to family's inability to understand specific needs. For example, one LPP participant noted that...

[family] have the best of intentions, but to really truly understand what it takes... I mean you really have to take time out of your day to help me with the things I need help with. And for someone to not recognize that early on, then it becomes like you're a burden to them when really, truly you're not but that's what it seems. That's the picture that becomes painted at that point because now I need you to stop doing, I need you to take a day off of work to bring me to OMB and blah blah blah. Those simple things that you don't really think about because all you think about is I need my baby with me, I want my baby with me, I wanna be able to be with my loved ones but what we're doing. What the Parole Project is doing, saves a lot of people trouble as far as family goes.

–FF2

Louisiana Parole Project's reentry program serves a demographic population that did not exist before 2016: persons formerly serving life without parole. While a specific comparison group could not be assessed for the study, the descriptive information indicates overwhelmingly positive perceptions from the clients about peer mentorship and their own competencies post-programming, lending support regarding the efficacy of utilizing peer mentors in reentry. Beyond the manifest application of assessing peer mentorship, implications of this study challenge the forgone acceptance of prohibiting persons with felony convictions from interaction with one another. Twenty-eight states have full restrictions prohibiting interaction, while other states can put special conditions on parole or probation, that restricts interaction with other persons with felony convictions (Wang, 2023). Louisiana Parole Project has demonstrated

positive possibilities, which may ameliorate the lack of reentry success in other places if such restrictions were removed.

Notes

- 1 While there were three significant outliers, the data were otherwise normally distributed. A decision was made to retain the outliers as they represented true differences in scores (as opposed to measurement error or data recording issues). The assumption of sphericity was violated, as assessed by Mauchly's test of sphericity, $\chi^2(2) = 7.897$, $p = 0.019$. Therefore, a Greenhouse-Geisser correction was applied ($\epsilon = 0.945$). Post hoc analysis with a Bonferroni adjustment revealed that the scale score differences were statistically significantly increased from wave 1 to wave 2 ($M = 2.830$, 95% CI [1.353 to 4.306], $p < 0.001$), not statistically significant from wave 2 to wave 3 (1.207, 95% CI [-0.225 to 2.640], $p < 0.001$) and statistically significant from wave 1 to wave 3 (4.037, 95% CI [2.313 to 5.761], $p < 0.001$). This indicates that the participant's confidence in their employment competencies improved during the LPP educational programming.
- 2 There were no outliers, and the data were normally distributed. The assumption of sphericity was violated, as assessed by Mauchly's test of sphericity, $\chi^2(2) = 30.588$, $p < 0.001$. Therefore, a Greenhouse-Geisser correction was applied ($\epsilon = 0.830$). Post hoc analysis with a Bonferroni adjustment revealed that the scale score differences were statistically significantly increased from wave 1 to wave 2 ($M = 7.089$, 95% CI [5.808 to 8.370], $p < 0.001$), from wave 2 to wave 3 ($M = 1.837$, 95% CI [0.868 to 2.806], $p < 0.001$) and from wave 1 to wave 3 ($M = 8.926$, 95% CI [7.449 to 10.403], $p < 0.001$). These findings show statistically significant increases in LPP participants' confidence in their ability to use technology over time.
- 3 There were no outliers, and the data were normally distributed as assessed by visual inspection of the Q-Q plot. The assumption of sphericity was violated, as assessed by Mauchly's test of sphericity, $\chi^2(2) = 25.563$, $p < 0.001$. Therefore, a Greenhouse-Geisser correction was applied ($\epsilon = 0.851$). Post hoc analysis with a Bonferroni adjustment revealed that the scale score differences were statistically significantly increased from wave 1 to wave 2 ($M = 3.437$, 95% CI [2.533 to 4.341], $p < 0.001$), from wave 2 to wave 3 ($M = 1.133$, 95% CI, [0.507 to 1.759], $p < 0.001$), and from wave 1 to wave 3 ($M = 4.570$ (95% CI [3.670 to 5.471], $p < 0.001$).
- 4 There were no outliers, and the data were normally distributed as assessed by visual inspection of the Q-Q plot. The assumption of sphericity was violated, as assessed by Mauchly's test of sphericity, $\chi^2(2) = 16.319$, $p < 0.001$. Therefore, a Greenhouse-Geisser correction was applied ($\epsilon = 0.896$). Post hoc analysis with a Bonferroni adjustment revealed that the scale score differences were statistically significantly increased from wave 1 to wave 2 ($M = 6.519$, 95% CI [5.145 to 7.891], $p < 0.001$), from wave 2 to wave 3 ($M = 2.533$ (95% CI [1.466 to 3.600], $p < 0.001$), and from wave 1 to wave 3 ($M = 9.052$, 95% CI [7.605 to 10.499], $p < 0.001$).
- 5 There were no outliers and the data were normally distributed as assessed by visual inspection of the Q-Q plot. The assumption of sphericity was violated, as assessed by Mauchly's test of sphericity, $\chi^2(2) = 38.763$, $p < 0.001$. Therefore, a Greenhouse-Geisser correction was applied ($\epsilon = 0.798$). Post hoc analysis with a Bonferroni adjustment revealed that the scale score differences were statistically significantly increased from wave 1 to wave 2 ($M = 7.681$, 95% CI [6.038 to 9.325], $p < 0.001$), from wave 2 to wave 3 ($M = 1.363$, 95% CI [0.262 to 2.464], $p = 0.010$), and from wave 1 to wave 3 ($M = 9.044$, 95% CI [7.258 to 10.831], $p < 0.001$).

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