



2023

From Life to Life: Transitioning to Freedom After 45 Years of Incarceration- A Single Subject Case Study

James O. Mackey

University of the Pacific, jamesomackey5@gmail.com

Lindsay Gietzen

University of the Pacific, lgietzen@pacific.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/pjh>



Part of the [Clinical and Medical Social Work Commons](#), [Community Health Commons](#), [Community Health and Preventive Medicine Commons](#), [Other Public Health Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mackey, James O. and Gietzen, Lindsay (2023) "From Life to Life: Transitioning to Freedom After 45 Years of Incarceration- A Single Subject Case Study," *Pacific Journal of Health*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 3.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56031/2576-215X.1041>

Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/pjh/vol6/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pacific Journal of Health by an authorized editor of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact mgibney@pacific.edu.



From Life to Life: Transitioning to Freedom After 45 Years of Incarceration- A Single Subject Case Study

Abstract

This case study delves into the complex process of reintegrating an elderly parolee who recently emerged from a 45-year-long incarceration within California's state prisons. The research explores this unique individual's reentry experiences and compares them with those of parolees of average age and sentence length. Factors such as family support, educational background, criminal history, health, social support, employment, access to age-appropriate resources, and recidivism rates are meticulously examined to provide valuable insights into the successful reintegration of elderly individuals back into society.

Keywords

elderly parole; reintegration; long-term imprisonment; reentry

From Life to Life: Transitioning to Freedom After 45 Years of Incarceration-

A Single Subject Case Study

This case study profiles the remarkable journey of an elderly male who, after serving a staggering 45-year sentence within California's state prisons, has recently been granted parole and reintegrated into society. Through a comprehensive review of records and in-depth qualitative interviews, this research explores the subject's perceptions of life before, during, and after his incarceration, along with the multifaceted challenges he now confronts as an elderly parolee and the factors facilitating his transition.

Subject Overview

The subject is a 73-year-old African American male whose life story is marked by a 45-year-long confinement in California's state custody. His educational journey began with an eighth-grade education, which he later augmented by earning a General Educational Development (GED) certificate during his incarceration.

The subject's extensive criminal history includes a juvenile record and convictions for attempted murder of a police officer and first-degree murder. During his time behind bars, he associated with the radical nationalist group, the Black Panthers, and prison gangs. These affiliations provided him with unconventional education in politics, history, language, and philosophy but also engaged him in a life of violence. Now, in his advanced age, his past involvement in violent activities and nationalist activism offers a unique perspective, accompanied by potential transitional challenges based on his attitude and choices.

Post-Incarceration

Despite stable employment, robust health, and a supportive family network, the subject faces the challenge of navigating relationships with other formerly incarcerated individuals who may expect him to conform to the "Original Gangster" (OG) stereotype. Research has shown that post-release individuals often grapple with the stigma associated with their criminal records, leading to perceptions of untrustworthiness, which can hinder their reintegration into society [1].

In response to what advice he would offer to those incarcerated in county jails and on their way to prison, the subject shared:

"I use myself as an example of what you shouldn't do. A lot of young Black men think they want to be in gangs, but sometimes circumstances dictate how this is going to go for you. It can go all bad. Sometimes just being with the wrong crowd in the wrong place can go bad. You could end up with a tag on your toe. It can go that bad."

From an educational perspective, the subject's self-motivation and resourcefulness are apparent as he actively sought opportunities to further his education while incarcerated, even during extended periods of administrative segregation. His achievement of a GED certificate demonstrates his resilience and determination. While 44% of inmates in state prison do not have a high school diploma, "Formerly incarcerated people are nearly twice as likely to have no high school credential at all" [2]. Additionally, his experiences with the Black Panthers and prison gangs have equipped the subject with a unique set of experiences and skills, albeit intertwined with a history of violence.

Despite the challenges of his past, the subject maintains a positive health profile, regularly engaging in physical exercise and health check-ups. This is a notable contrast, as

"nearly 80% of individuals leaving prison have a chronic health condition" [3], making his commitment to personal well-being instrumental in his successful reintegration.

In terms of social and financial stability, the subject is currently employed full-time as a counselor and day manager at a transitional residential home, where he assists other formerly incarcerated men with reintegration. His active contribution to society and his desire to give back attests to his positive attitude and intention to transition effectively. Furthermore, he enjoys a robust social support network, including family and friends, which has been instrumental in aiding his transition. Financially, he reports no hardships and has access to family assistance if needed.

The subject's age, length of imprisonment, and personal history distinguish him from the typical parolee. In California, the average age of individuals on parole is 39, a significant difference from the subject's age. Moreover, the average prison sentence served is approximately 3 years, considerably shorter than his 45-year sentence [4]. Notably, 35 years of his sentence were spent in solitary confinement, which could have significant psychological repercussions [5].

The subject's involvement with the Black Panther Party during his initial incarceration represents a unique sociopolitical scenario. His radicalized mindset against what he perceived as an extremely racist system, coupled with his violent responses, hints at the backdrop of his formative years, which he describes as "a beautiful time." These experiences may pose potential hurdles in his reintegration process due to prevailing racial and social disparities in America. Also, despite his strong health profile, stable job, and supportive family, the subject's advanced age, extended term of confinement, and previous engagement with violence and nationalist activism could create distinctive challenges. His exclusion from society for 35 years and

removal from the general prison population may have lasting effects on his mental health [6].

Reentry and Transition

While the average sentence served in California is 3.3 years, a few individuals, like the subject, have served much longer sentences, with some being categorized as "lifers," serving indeterminate terms for serious crimes. In response to federal mandates to reduce prison overcrowding, California instituted the Elderly Parole Program [7], which allows certain inmates to become eligible for parole after serving at least 20 years and reaching 50 years of age. These policies and programs reflect the broader context within which the subject's journey unfolds. The subject's remarkable journey from a 45-year incarceration to the challenging path of reintegration into society serves as a compelling study, shedding light on the complex dynamics of reentry and transition for elderly parolees.

Although the average parolee in California faces challenges related to shorter sentences and younger ages, the subject's exceptional circumstances underscore the need for specialized support tailored to elderly individuals who have spent the majority of their lives behind bars. Unfortunately, despite the emergence of the Elderly Parole Program as a step in the right direction, there has been little effort to establish standards addressing the unique transitional needs of elderly formerly incarcerated individuals like the subject. As we look into his reentry experiences, we gain valuable insights into how policies, social support, health, and personal resilience intersect to facilitate or impede the successful reintegration of elderly individuals who have spent a significant portion of their lives incarcerated.

Barriers to Reentry

Regardless of the support one enjoys, transitioning back to society after a long-term prison sentence presents multiple challenges for any individual, especially for older adults like the subject. Some potential barriers to reentry include social stigma and discrimination, institutionalization, psychological adjustments, lack of modern skills and knowledge, medical and mental health care, legal and financial challenges, difficulties in rebuilding and maintaining relationships, and identity issues. For example, the subject's exposure to violence and involvement in violent activities could lead to PTSD, guilt, or other psychological and emotional issues that might hinder reintegration [8]. Coming from a place where a look or gesture was a potential signal of impending violence to a world full of looks and gestures that can mean completely different things can be confusing and dangerous.

Recidivism

In the United States, the recidivism rate for individuals over 65 years old is exceptionally low, at 3.72% [9] compared to the average recidivism rate of approximately 42% for all parolees [4]. This suggests that age might contribute to a reduced likelihood of reoffending. However, the experience of older parolees can be challenging due to the lack of adequate services offered by parole departments, which mainly focus on younger individuals with a higher perceived risk of reoffending.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this case study examines the reentry process of a 73-year-old African American man who spent 45 years incarcerated in various California prisons, facing the challenge of reintegrating into society. The findings highlight key factors shaping reintegration:

education, employment, health, social support, and the unique challenges faced by elderly individuals.

By demonstrating how they have facilitated the subject's transition, the study emphasizes the pivotal roles these elements play in supporting the successful return of elderly formerly incarcerated to their communities. The subject's successful adaptation to post-incarceration life highlights the importance of these resources, while also shedding light on the potential hardships faced by those lacking such support, underscoring the need for increased attention and intervention.

This analysis underscores the significance of personalized support systems for elderly parolees, aligning with established research and theoretical perspectives. Additionally, the qualitative approach, while illuminating an individual experience, emphasizes the necessity for a balanced perspective, urging future quantitative methods, using a larger subject base and long-term studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of broader trends. This multifaceted approach not only increases the chances for successful reintegration of older parolees but also emphasizes the value of understanding individual experiences and the urgency of tailoring support to address age-specific needs to advance societal progress.

Ultimately, this research illuminates a promising path for future initiatives aimed at facilitating the successful reintegration of older, formerly incarcerated individuals, promising positive change at both individual and societal levels.

References

- [1] Buck, K., Cochran, A., Young, H., Gordon, M.J., Yuen, H.K., & Tucker, S.C. The facilitators and barriers when transitioning back into the community following a prison sentence. *Int. Jour. of Off. Ther. and Comp. Crim.* (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624x2111013518>
- [2] Couloute, L. Getting back on course: Educational exclusion and attainment among formerly incarcerated people. *Pris. Pol. Init.* (2018). Retrieved on 09/26/23 from <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/education.html>
- [3] Hadden, K.B., Puglisi, L., Prince, L., Aminawung, J., Shavit, S., Pflaum, D., Calderon, J., Wang, E.A., & Zaller, N. Health literacy among a formerly incarcerated population using data from the Transitions Clinic Network. *Journal of Urban Health*, (2018), 95: 547-555. <https://doi.org/101007/s11524-018-0276-0>
- [4] California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. Offender data points. (2020). www.cdcr.ca.gov/research/wpcontent/uploads/sites/174/2021/11/201912_DataPoints.pdf
<https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/3-judge-court-update/>
- [5] Arrigo, B. & Bullock, J.L. The psychological effects of solitary confinement on prisoners in supermax units: Reviewing what we know and recommending what should change. *Inter. Jour. of Off. Ther. & Comp. Crim.*, (2008). <https://doi.org/10.1177/03026624X07309720>
- [6] Wolff, M.J. Fact sheet: Incarceration and mental health. *Weill Cornell Medicine*. (2017). Retrieved on 7/21/23 from <https://psychiatry.weill.cornell.edu/research-institutes/dewitt-wallace-institute-psychiatry/issues-mental-health-policy/fact-sheet-0>
- [7] California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. Elderly parole hearings, (2023). <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/bph/elderly-parole-hearings-overview/>
- [8] Liares, L.A., & Montgomery, S. Psychosocial needs of released long-term incarcerated older adults. *Crim. Just. Rev.*, (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0734016820913101>

[9] Rakes, S., Prost, S.G., & Tripodi, S.J. Recidivism among older adults: Correlates of prison re-entry.

Just. Pol. Jour., (2018). Retrieved on 7/20/23 from

https://www.cjci.org/media/import/documents/recidivism_among_older_adults_correlates_of_prison_reentry.pdf