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The Collateral Impact of Post-Prison Supervision on College Experiences in the United States

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Abstract: In the United States, released prisoners are marginalized, because of their criminal pasts and in spite of their efforts towards crime avoidance. Most face collateral consequences of incarceration which are embedded in social stigmas and reinforced through policies that constrict opportunities for employment, housing and reintegration. Being under community supervision is yet another layer in this conditional liberty status which is imposed upon ex-offenders who have already atoned for their criminal transgressions by serving time in prison. This post-incarceration marginality is a potent, but not insurmountable effect of the American criminal justice system. Participation in higher education during and after incarceration can increase employability and lower recidivism risks. Less is known about how parolee involvement in college might influence parole officer supervision of formerly incarcerated individuals across campus and community settings. This paper will explore that connection drawing from experiences shared by parolees who took classes at a four-year university.

Paper: Introduction

Inherent to the American legal system are opportunities for incarcerated individuals to be released from prison early, prior to their sentence completion in accordance with individualized stipulations and liberty restrictions. Prisoners are informed of the possibility of being paroled, at the time of sentencing and those who are eligible must appear before a parole board after serving a designated minimum number of years in prison to demonstrate that they are committed to crime avoidance. A range of factors may be considered at parole eligibility hearings, including but not limited to criminal history, offense severity, victim statements and readiness for change; as indicated through participation in carceral activities such as vocational training, college involvement, participation in substance abuse counseling or anger management classes (Blomberg et al., 2012; Nally et al., 2014; Rakis, 2005). Prisoners who take college classes are better prepared to effectively handle challenges formerly incarcerated individuals typically face when transitioning back to communities of residence, old or new in regard to obtaining legitimate employment and (re)establishing support networks (Scott, 2016; Sokoloff and Schenck-Fontaine, 2017). College participation during imprisonment helps to buffer criminal stigmas and marginality because through it, ex-offenders can expand their academic credentials, and build the confidence needed to leverage that capital in real world

contexts. Evidence shows that involvement in post-secondary education is a logical and fair criterion in determining whether a prisoner is motivated to embark upon a new, crime-free trajectory after release from incarceration. Programs, such as the one highlighted in this paper, create avenues for those students to complete their higher education at four-year colleges after release from prison. People generally care about whether incarcerated individuals have viable opportunities to take college classes and actually take advantage of them. But is there a continuity of care among community corrections officers? More specifically, how do formerly incarcerated individuals who have committed to pursuing a higher education experience parole?

Under Community Supervision and In College

The focus of this paper is on relationships between parole officer and college student parolees from the lens of a group of formerly incarcerated individuals who were going to college while under community supervision. Parole is considered a privilege reserved for individuals who have demonstrated progress toward crime avoidance during incarceration. The rationale behind community sanctions is clear, that some formerly incarcerated persons need to be monitored because their criminal histories indicate a need for extended correctional treatment and support with adjusting to life after imprisonment (Rudes, 2012). That includes parolees who continue involvement in postsecondary education as they are still within the correctional system and therefore subject to freedom restrictions which might conflict with class attendance, employment and participation in extracurricular campus events. However, there are collateral consequences to being under such close surveillance which might contravene efforts made in furtherance of reentry, especially for formerly incarcerated college students who need the freedom and flexibility to attend classes, study, work and experience campus culture (Klinge, 2013). Taking college classes after incarceration is an experience in itself that can prove both challenging and time consuming given that ex-prisoners are exceptional non-traditional students (Potts and Bierlein Palmer, 2014; Strayhorn et al., 2013).

Data and Methods

This qualitative data was collected from June through July 2015 as part of a follow-up study to one completed in 2011 and it included information shared by seventeen of the original 34 research participants. The interviewees were ex-prisoners and also members of a program that affords incarcerated persons the opportunity to complete carceral college courses and continue their postsecondary education at 'State College', a four-year institution, after release from prison. All but two were released from prison under community supervision and remained subject to related liberty restrictions while attending State University. The fifteen individuals placed on a parole or probation status(es) disclosed their sentence terms and ways those circumstances framed and were framed by their college involvement. The interview questionnaire consisted of specific inquiries into conditional release statuses and stipulations.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research confirms that parole agents have legitimate authority to make discretionary decisions about how to control and manage the movements of offenders on their caseload. In that regard, the research participants shared experiences that were in large part influenced by officer management style and reciprocal parole-parolee interactions. The college student parolee participants shared real

life challenges and successes navigating higher education pursuits in correctional contexts. This data can help guide transparent and respectful interactions between individuals leaving prison and those responsible for supervising their post-incarceration transitions.

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