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Introducing Restorative Practices at Leading Into New Communities (LINC)

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Abstract

Restorative values such as collaboration, community, and resiliency are not new, but they are new in their relationship to the criminal justice system. Within recent decades, restorative justice practices have grown in popularity as they provide several solution-focused strategies to address crime. Restorative practices also have the potential to positively transform reentry-specific processes. In Wilmington, North Carolina, Leading Into New Communities (LINC) is an organization that assists its residents in their return from prison, recognizing that restorative values are essential to a successful transition. However, while LINC is restorative in its overall mission, most staff members do not possess concrete understandings of restorative justice.

In this study, to improve staff understandings of these topics, two voluntary training workshops were held to provide LINC staff members with more information on restorative justice, including its many programs and practices, as well as the unique ways in which it relates to reentry. Workshop observations and anonymous feedback forms provide insight into how these workshops benefitted LINC staff. This paper highlights the importance of restorative workshops in similar organizations as a way to improve understandings of restorative justice practices and how they can be utilized throughout reentry processes. With a broader understanding of restorative justice, organizations such as LINC will be in a better position to assist individuals with reentry in more meaningful ways.

Background

Incarceration, Retribution, and Reentry

Ever since the industrial revolution, Western societies have relied extensively on incarceration to deal with individuals who break the law (Thompson, 2010). Massive institutionalized incarceration continues to be a significant symbol of control in these nations. For example, the apprehension and removal of a criminal offender from society by the state symbolically indicates to the public that their government values the retribution and punishment associated with the popular “tough on crime” mentality. In addition to its symbolic significance, there is also value in how incarceration incapacitates individuals. Sending people to a strict prison environment where they can do no further harm is viewed as one of the most efficient ways to protect the community, subsequently fostering a sense of security among the public.

With this, an important element of incarceration is the belief that incarceration deters and prevents future crime. In line with the deterrence theory of crime, removing a person’s rights for an extended period through incarceration is thought to deter them from offending again in the future. In this way, incarceration is considered a form of specific deterrence. Prisons have a powerful “simplicity value” that links together retribution, the value of incapacitation, and their supposed ability to deter crime through incarceration (Muntingh, 2008).

Although incarceration sounds fool proof on paper, especially in terms of its specific deterrence value, recidivism data shows that incarceration does not deter crime. Statisticians from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (Durose, Cooper, & Snyder, 2014) reported that 55.1 percent of 404,638 released United States prisoners had returned to prison within five years of their initial release. A return to prison is one of the most widely used measures of recidivism and accounts for new convictions, as well as returns to prison resulting from technical violations of a previous release (Durose et al., 2014). Part of the issue thus relates to the impact incarceration has on a person's life post-release. It is exceptionally difficult for individuals who have been incarcerated to rejoin society through the process of reentry after they complete a prison sentence, complicating their ability to desist from crime, and find success in the future. Some of the problems reintegrating individuals experience post-release stem from criminal labels and stigma, as well as a difficulty establishing positive community ties.

Although many people develop an "out of sight, out of mind" mentality regarding incarcerated individuals, roughly 95 percent of the current prison population is expected to return to their communities in the future (Petersilia, 2003). This means that an overwhelming majority of incarcerated individuals will eventually go through the process of reentry. To put these numbers in perspective, over 641,000 U.S. state and federal prisoners were released in 2015 and these statistics are fairly consistent from year to year (Carson & Anderson, 2016). This data suggests that there is a pressing need to address issues associated with reentry processes to ensure that the hundreds of individuals returning home each day can successfully reintegrate into their communities, become productive citizens, and ultimately avoid going back to prison.

Common Reentry Issues

Successfully rejoining the community during reentry proves challenging for formerly incarcerated individuals for a variety of reasons. To understand these complex challenges in more detail, it is worth analyzing reentry research that utilizes in-depth, ethnographic interviews with individuals who have experienced (or anticipate experiencing) reentry, such as research by Aida Hass and Caryn Saxon (2012). Once a week for eight weeks, Hass and Saxon (2012, p. 1042) met with a voluntary focus group of 14 male participants nearing release from Greene County Jail in Springfield, Missouri, hoping to encourage "safe discussion in which offenders could say whatever they wanted without repercussion". In the broadest sense, what Hass and Saxon (2012) found was that post-release, participants anticipated that finding shelter, food, employment, and positive social networks without significant outside support would be among some of the most daunting tasks. More specifically, the men in the focus group acknowledged that it would be hard to find "acceptance, healing, and forgiveness of past transgressions", all of which would ultimately help them move on with their lives. Hass and Saxon (2012, p. 1043) also noted a "genuine desire" among the group to replace old habits with new, more positive ones to successfully reintegrate, but group members knew doing so would be challenging without a positive network of support. To complicate matters, participants felt that it would be difficult to repair family relationships which are often strained by a "lengthy period of separation" (Hass & Saxon, 2012, p. 1044).

More specifically, while all participants feared failure post-release because of these anticipated roadblocks, individuals with a past of substance abuse reported having a more intense fear exacerbated by expectations of relapse. It is no surprise that drug and/or alcohol abuse is common among incarcerated persons, with around 74 percent of reentering individuals self-reporting substance abuse (Petersilia, 2003). However, despite a desperate need for such services, very few receive proper treatment while they are incarcerated. Thus, upon their

impending release, the particular subgroup of substance abusers within Hass and Saxon's (2012) focus group felt that a steady routine and a structured life outside of prison would help them find success after prison. They anticipated that finding this kind of structure, as well as decent substance abuse treatment, would be difficult for them.

The most consistent finding from Hass and Saxon's (2012) study was that to be successful outside of prison, the focus group believed they needed to relearn how to care about others through more positive relationships. While incarcerated, individuals are taught "not to care about anyone or anything", leading them to become "defensive and hostile" rather than open and caring (Hass & Saxon, 2012, p. 1044). Such hostile attitudes are not always socially acceptable outside of prison contexts and would likely impede successful community reintegration especially in terms of building relationships. With that being said, one common roadblock to reentry is the challenge of creating and sustaining positive connections with others. As one Green County Jail participant is quoted, "If I don't make that connection, I'll go right back to hanging with my boys on the street corner and selling drugs" (Hass & Saxon, 2012, p. 1044). Unfortunately, almost every person in the focus group felt that society is not structured in a way that will help them move forward because although "society wants us to be law-abiding citizens...they are shunning us away from becoming full citizens...and constantly reminding us of who we were, not who we are now or who we could become" (Hass & Saxon, 2012, p. 1045). This suggests that high levels of social stigma may contribute to difficult reentry processes for the formerly incarcerated, especially in terms of how they make connections with others and secure important resources vital to a healthy, productive life.

Hass and Saxon's (2012) research certainly sheds important light on the problems of reentry, but their work is limited in that it only documents the perspectives of a very specific group of male inmates. Additionally, because the focus group members were not actively experiencing reentry, it is hard to know whether these findings are reflective of reentry difficulties as they are experienced. To address some of these limitations, research by Ioan Durnescu (2019) takes the same ethnographic approach one step further. His research team followed 58 formerly incarcerated males for one year after their release from a Romanian prison to understand the reentry process from their perspectives. Through a series of in-depth interviews with the participants, as well as written observations and questionnaires, Durnescu (2019) discovered a variety of themes regarding participant reentry experiences.

The first major theme addresses the difficulties associated with readapting to "new environments" (Durnescu, 2019, p. 6). Most of the participants experienced such issues primarily in the realm of family life. For example, the female partner of one participant became the primary breadwinner of their family during his incarceration. Although actively looking for work, this was something the participant had to adjust to. Other participants had a hard time reconnecting with their children, especially those who were divorced from their spouses because of incarceration. Similarly, another major theme in Durnescu's (2019) study relates to social isolation. Without families to return to and/or friends to reconnect with, many inmates felt desperately alone and isolated within their communities. Social isolation was particularly common among older participants, especially those over the age of 50 who had served longer sentences (Durnescu, 2019). These findings suggest that the older returning population experience problems of reentry differently from other groups and are less likely to have proper social networks and family connections, making reintegration that much harder. Knowing that as of 2019, around 31 percent of incarcerated people were 46 or older (Federal Bureau of Prisons,

2019), the needs of aging individuals reentering the community are worthy of more consideration.

Like in Hass and Saxon's (2012) study, stigma was another major issue Durnescu's (2019) participants encountered. The stigma surrounding their "ex-criminal" or "felon" labels made it difficult for these individuals to find adequate employment opportunities. Due to the stigmatization they experienced, participants generally reported feeling "severely discriminated against...with no hope for the future" (Durnescu, 2019, p. 8). Stigma intersects with other problems participants reported, such as poverty, instability, health problems, and dealing with what Durnescu (2019, p. 9) refers to as "absurdities of the state". For example, state bureaucracy made it nearly impossible for the participants in the study to receive identity papers that would make them eligible for certain benefits which would in turn help them secure decent employment and housing. This often started a vicious cycle that left some participants feeling helpless and "tempted to go back to crime" (Durnescu, 2019, p. 10).

Although Hass and Saxon (2012) and Durnescu (2019) conducted qualitative studies on former inmates in two different countries, many of the reentry experiences, either lived or anticipated, were very similar between all of the participants. With that being said, however, both studies fail to include female perspectives in their research. While some of the problems males and females experience during reentry may overlap, women have different needs post-release and thus experience different struggles during the reintegration process.

A journal article by Jennifer R. Scroggins and Sara Malley (2010) addresses the process of reentry for women, detailing different female-specific categories of need based on existing literature. One category, which is perhaps the most prominent in terms of successful female prisoner reintegration, deals with "childcare and parenting skills development" (Scroggins and Malley, 2010, p. 147). According to Scroggins and Malley (2010), nearly 80 percent of women in prison (compared to 26 percent of men) are the primary caregiver of a child at the time of their imprisonment. Thus, it makes sense that "most imprisoned mothers plan to reunite with their children at release" (Petersilia, 2003, p. 43). However, reconnecting with children post-release is easier said than done, as most women are incarcerated at an average of 160 miles away from their families due to a general lack of female prisons (Scroggins and Malley, 2010). This physical distance during incarceration makes it hard for women to keep in touch with family and maintain strong relationships when they are behind bars, especially if their family members are at an economic disadvantage. Additionally, although children and their incarcerated mothers can keep in touch with letters and phone calls if in-person visits are hard to arrange, these forms of contact usually decrease in frequency over time (Petersilia, 2003).

Related to the issue of reconnecting with loved ones, most women also require strong networks of support after their release. These social networks should be positive to ensure successful reintegration, especially because women who spend time with criminally labeled others are more likely to participate in crime than those who do not. Similarly, women who suffer abuse (often domestic abuse) are more likely to abuse drugs, opening the door to other forms of crime (Scroggins and Malley, 2010). These two patterns alone suggest that formerly incarcerated women need a strong, positive community of support that they can turn to during the reintegration process. Connecting these women to those who have their best interests at heart is vital to their reentry success.

While returning individuals of color, both male and female, experience many of the same reentry needs as discussed by Hass and Saxon (2012), Durnescu (2019), and Scroggins and Malley (2010), their status as racial minorities complicates the reentry process in different ways.

For example, the often discriminatory practices of the criminal justice system create an inherent distrust and disrespect for the government among minorities, creating high levels of “alienation and disillusionment” that “erodes residents’ feelings of commitment” (Petersilia, 2003, p. 30). This makes people of color less willing to actively engage in the community post-release the kind of engagement that is essential to successful reentry. Thus, when dealing with returning individuals of color, in addition to the addressing the more common reentry needs of men and women at a general level, it is necessary to address and repair the broken trust between former prisoners of color and government bodies. Further, these individuals are plagued by an extra layer of stigma that derives from racial prejudices and implicit bias. They must overcome criminal labels as well as pre-existing racial stigma during the reentry process to connect with others in positive ways and secure avenues of support.

Despite an overall lack of generalizability, Hass and Saxon (2012) and Durnescu (2019) provide valuable contributions to reentry literature by focusing on both the anticipated and actual struggles male prisoners experience during reintegration. Scroggins and Malley (2010) also shed light on the problems women face upon reentering the community using existing literature to understand their gender-specific struggles. Evaluating the specific experiences of male and female prison populations, both in and out of the United States, is important to understanding the various roadblocks to reentry as they are experienced. It is even more important to acknowledge that reentry problems are more complex for people of color. However, although these important research contributions may not be generalizable to the experiences of all formerly incarcerated individuals reentering society, these findings overlap and are consistent with existing literature. It is worth noting that areas of overlap relate to the negative impacts and consequences of criminal labels and, for people of color, racial stigma. The social stigma that results from labels complicates the reentry success of participants, especially in terms of building important relationships within the community and ultimately desisting from crime.

Desistance is a concept defined by Shadd Maruna (2001, p. 26) as “the long-term abstinence from crime among individuals who had previously engaged in persistent patterns of criminal offending”. Although some researchers have defined desistance as relating to one specific “moment” where a person resigns from their criminal career, Maruna’s (2001) definition accounts for the long-term nature of desistance and conceptualizes the process as one that requires continuous maintenance. Further, Maruna (2001) points to two explanations of desistance. The first relates to the long-studied relationship between age and crime. After the age of 25, criminal impulses and behavior naturally decline, eventually leading to criminal desistance into adulthood. Perhaps more important than age in the desistance process, especially concerning the problems of reentry, is Maruna’s (2001, p. 30) second explanation, which he refers to as “a steady job and the love of a good woman”. Put more formally, strong, positive bonds with others and steady employment and/or education are some of the most important sociogenic factors related to desistance from crime. However, much like desistance itself, maintaining positive relationships and “labor force attachments” is an ongoing process that requires considerable effort from formerly incarcerated individuals looking to desist (Maruna, 2001, p. 31).

Although reentry needs are complex and vary from person to person, there is significant potential for restorative justice practices and programs to address common reentry issues, particularly in regards to helping reentering individuals overcome various forms of stigma and develop stronger ties to the community to desist from crime. The following section details restorative justice and restorative reentry in-depth, including descriptions of restorative reentry programs currently in place.

Restorative Justice and Restorative Reentry

Restorative justice is a needs-based approach to justice that differs substantially from the common “retributive” or “punitive” model of justice currently dominant in the United States. Restorative justice is centered around the belief that all people are connected and that wrongdoings are violations of those relationships (see Figure 1). This differs from the punitive justice model, which views wrongdoings as a violation of the state. In the context of restorative justice, those who have violated relationships or caused harm are asked to take responsibility and do what they can to “put right” (Zehr, 2015, p. 31). This is not to say that forgiveness and healing are requirements of restorative justice processes. Rather, these processes create a space where such outcomes are a possibility. Forgiveness and healing are very difficult to achieve under the retributive model of justice, and it is therefore not as conducive to the same kinds of “restoration” that restorative justice often is.

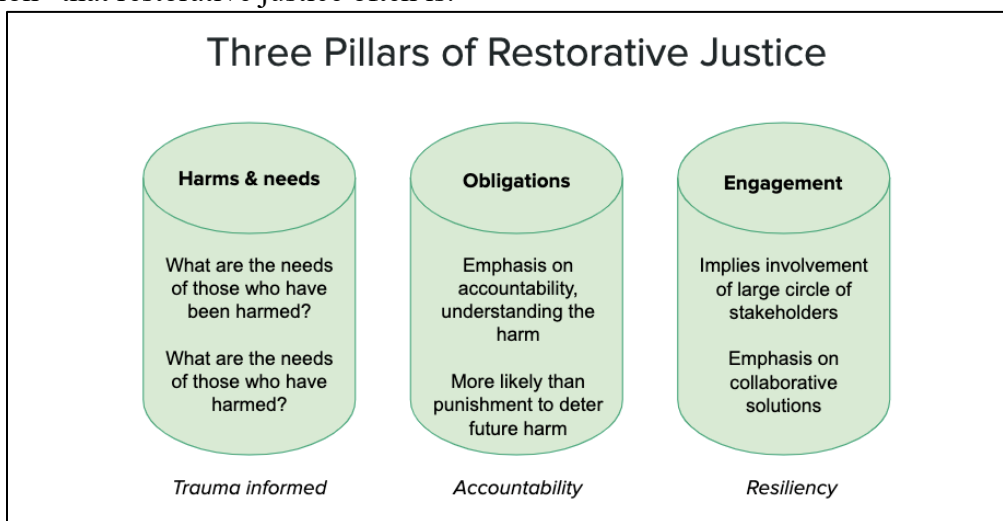


Figure 1. Three Pillars of Restorative Justice, inspired by Zehr (2015).

Instead of focusing on delivering punishment and “just desserts” to those who have harmed, restorative justice attempts to identify and address the needs of a wide variety of stakeholders through meaningful dialogue processes. Potential stakeholders include the person who was harmed, the person responsible for the harm, and the community that was impacted by the situation. In other words, rather than focusing on punishing wrongdoers and inadvertently alienating members of the community in the process, restorative justice brings these groups together in a constructive, collaborative way to find a solution that both holds individuals accountable and benefits all stakeholders.

Because there is no one right way to practice and/or implement this kind of justice, perhaps the most important aspect of restorative justice is its guiding foundational principles. According to Howard Zehr (2015), there are five major principles when approaching justice with a restorative lens (see Figure 2). With “respect for all” as a defining feature, restorative justice should first and foremost involve legitimate stakeholders. Once the appropriate parties are willingly involved, restorative justice should focus on the harms and needs of stakeholders, addressing obligations, using inclusive and collaborative processes, and ultimately “putting right” wrongdoings and harms (Zehr, 2015, p. 45).

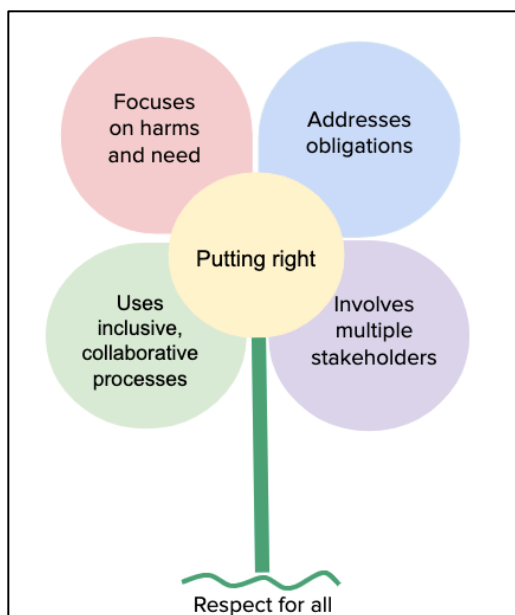


Figure 2. Restorative Principles, inspired by Zehr (2015).

The community-centered aspect of restorative justice, as well as its emphasis on respect, obligation, and “putting right” makes it an approach worth incorporating in reentry processes. Tanya Settles (2009) outlines three core principles of restorative justice as they relate to reentry. The first is that post-incarceration justice “demands” healing and voice for all, but primarily for those who were harmed as a result of the situation (Settles, 2009, p. 291). Unfortunately, while a person is incarcerated, their isolation from those they have harmed and their surrounding community makes it difficult for them to actively participate in processes that might otherwise promote healing, further straining those relationships. Therefore, Settles (2009, p. 292) suggests that after a person is released, restorative reentry approaches should focus on creating a restorative “opportunity for a mediated encounter between the offender, victim (or possibly a victim surrogate), and community”. These kinds of mediated encounters might come in the form of circle processes, victim-offender conferences, family-group conferences, or some variation of the three. Regardless of the form of the encounter, it should be a safe, respectful space for all stakeholders to speak freely with the guidance of trained restorative justice practitioners. This allows each stakeholder the opportunity to “speak his/her own truth”, further encouraging accountability and social reintegration (Cook, 2006, p. 110).

Secondly, restorative reentry processes are reliant upon the involvement of the person responsible for the harm. Settles (2009) notes that in normal retributive justice processes, and even in some current restorative reentry approaches, these individuals are more passive in the process of reintegration than most realize. For example, the state often requires these individuals to “do” things, like “attend cognitive development classes, meet with parole officers” and so on, with the hope that these activities will change formerly incarcerated persons for the better (Settles, 2009, p. 293). However, while these processes do hold individuals accountable to an extent, requiring participation in such activities does not truly involve them in active, voluntary ways. Since not all reentering persons will want to participate in reintegration processes voluntarily, it is up to the outside forces (like the community and law enforcement) to encourage their voluntary involvement, a potential limitation of restorative reentry.

Lastly, while it is not necessarily a requirement, it is possible for restorative reentry to change the way governments and communities operate. For example, many communities

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receiving people from prison are disadvantaged in more ways than one. Settles (2009, p. 294) points to various “social characteristics” of disadvantaged communities like poverty, high unemployment rates, high levels of residential instability, and an abundance of homeless people. Such communities also lack informal social control and heavily rely on formal social control (like law enforcement) which may contribute to higher levels of crime in these areas. All in all, these characteristics make it difficult for disadvantaged communities to receive formerly incarcerated persons, potentially adding to the burden they already carry. However, through restorative reentry processes, communities, not just victims and offenders, may start to heal (Settles, 2009,). When implementing restorative reentry, disadvantaged communities are given the chance to exhibit more informal social control by playing a more active role in the criminal reintegration process. In turn, the government becomes less of a stakeholder in reentry and more of a facilitator, giving the community more say in the process. This is important because, as Settles (2009, p. 294) writes,

“Without efforts on behalf of the community to reintegrate the offender, the formerly incarcerated are socially and economically marginalized, are separated from friends and family, and may experience barriers to fully participate in community life because of their inability to find housing, employment, or health care.”

Considering the problems of reentry as explored by Hass and Saxon (2012), Durnescu (2019), and Scroggins and Malley (2010), social isolation and discrimination, both of which are negative consequences of criminal/offender labels and stigma, are major roadblocks for formerly incarcerated persons. Using restorative justice to involve community members in the reentry process and facilitate mediated encounters between those returning from prison and those who they have harmed could be a way to work through criminal labels and stigma, fostering better relationships between those returning from prison and their communities.

Presently, a majority of restorative justice-based reentry programs exist on a smaller scale. However, despite their often-localized reach, these programs are still worth analyzing to understand the more widespread potential of restorative reentry. It is important to evaluate the degree to which restorative reentry programs address reentry needs and challenge criminal labels and stigma, ultimately helping formerly incarcerated individuals find success in their communities during the reintegration process.

As recommended by Tanya Settles (2009), some restorative reentry programs make use of circle processes *prior* to an individual’s release from prison. Circles are perhaps the most common restorative justice practice, but they have significant potential in the more complex context of reentry. This is because they often involve the community and the reentering person in more active ways, enabling the kind of dialogue that often results in the restoration of broken relationships between important stakeholders and members of the community (Settles, 2009). Circles are also highly customizable which means they can address the specific needs of certain incarcerated groups, be it men, women, people of color, those with a history of substance abuse, or some combination of these characteristics. One such example comes from a Hawaiian prison that utilized reentry planning circle processes for a small number of its soon-to-be-released inmates. Research by Lorenn Walker, Ted Sakai, & Kat Brady (2006) focuses on one such individual, Ken, who had the opportunity to participate in one of the first restorative circles in the state of Hawaii.

The restorative reentry circles created by Walker et al. (2006), formally named the Huikahi Circles, are significant in that they utilize solution-focused approaches. Solution-focused

approaches are a common facet not only of many restorative justice practices but of solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) commonly used in the context of social work. SFBT and restorative justice share several important foundational principles, emphasizing the importance of defining goals and constructing solutions that are future focused (Lehmann, Jordan, Bolton, Huynh, & Chigbu, 2012). Both restorative justice and SFBT do this by asking individuals what they want or need, and what they feel should happen for those needs to be met. Often, the process of defining goals and creating unique solutions is characterized in both approaches by collaboration and a focus on building relationships. Additionally, those involved in solution-focused approaches to problem-solving often have a more active role in the process. The use of SFBT in Walker et. al's (2006) work, which focuses specifically on improving reentry processes by building relationships, highlights the value of solution-focused tools in restorative justice practices.

For example, Walker's Huikahi circles gave stakeholders, including participants like Ken, the ability to define justice for themselves rather than having third parties (like lawyers or judges) do it for them (Walker, Sakai, & Brady 2006). This meant that those who were most impacted by the participant's actions, as well as the participant, got to decide what their needs were and how best to address them. These solution-focused conversations often resulted in positive solutions and outcomes "that can increase individual and community self-efficacy and empowerment" (Walker et al., 2006, p. 34). In Ken's case, he asked to include his aunt and girlfriend in the circle process as well as his primary drug treatment counselor and, per his special request, a friend also serving time in the prison. Along with a trained facilitator, the group gathered in a circle and took the first step into Ken's restorative reentry process with a continued emphasis on strengths, needs, and solutions.

At the beginning of the circle process, Ken challenged his criminal label by speaking about his proudest accomplishments since being incarcerated. Members of the circle were asked to name some of Ken's best traits to reinforce Ken's achievements. "Friendly", "good sense of humor", and "determined" were just a few traits they named (Walker et al., 2006, p. 34). Asking loved ones to list off strengths of the reentering individual acted as an important strengths-based foundation for the discussions. After this, Ken's reentry needs were discussed in full. One need was that of reconciliation with those he harmed, specifically his aunt and girlfriend. Together, they created a reconciliation agreement in which Ken, with a history of substance abuse, promised to stay clean and out of prison. Aside from reconciliation, the circle brainstormed numerous ways for Ken to meet his other needs upon release, such as his needs for housing, employment, and so forth. Walker et al. (2006) emphasize the significance of returning individuals choosing their reentry plans during circle processes such as Ken's, as they are more likely to follow the plans they make for themselves as opposed to plans made for them by others. This has significant ties to SFBT which understands that those returning from prison benefit the most from being "engaged and self-directed" in reentry processes as opposed to "case-managed" (Lehmann et al., 2012, p. 52).

To hold inmates like Ken accountable to their plans, circle groups decided upon dates for re-circles in the future. During re-circles, members of the first circle process reconvene and check on the inmate's progress. Together, they revisit and revise plans/goals to address any unanticipated problems the reintegrating inmate may experience upon release. The group can plan as many re-circles as deemed necessary, but the first re-circle is typically held a few months after the person is released.

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It is difficult to say whether or not restorative processes like the Huikahi Circles encourage desistance from crime post-release. However, according to Lorenn Walker and Rebecca Greening's (2010) research on the impact of the Huikahi Circles, 16 of 23 participants remained out of prison for at least one year without any new arrests, convictions, or parole violations. Only seven of the 23 returned to prison since their release. These numbers are somewhat promising, but it is hard to draw definitive conclusions because of how small the sample is. According to Walker et al. (2006), the circles proved most beneficial in terms of encouraging reconciliation and healing among inmates, those they wronged, their family members, and their community. The "deeply emotional" nature of the circle processes often encouraged participants, including the reentering person themselves, to express forgiveness and remorse (Walker et al., 2006, p. 36). Additionally, the circles allowed family members to have open and honest discussions about difficult topics that were often never addressed in the past. For example, one Hawaiian inmate who experienced a gender transition was able to talk about it with their family members for the first time in a healthy, constructive way (Walker et al., 2006). Overall, according to a survey given afterward, 100 percent of those who participated in the Hawaiian reentry circles from 2005 to 2010 rated them as a "positive" or "very positive" experience (Walker & Greening, 2010, p. 45). The combined 280 circle participants (which includes family members and friends of inmates) were overwhelmingly grateful for the process and left feeling more connected to their loved ones because of it. Even though the long-term impact is unknown, Huikahi Circles certainly draw attention to the significance of collaboration in reentry processes, particularly as it relates to strengthening relationships between reentering individuals and their communities.

As previously discussed, positive social networks as well as forgiveness for past wrongdoings are important for the successful reintegration of inmates after they are released, regardless of race or gender (Durnescu, 2019; Hass & Saxon, 2012; Scroggins & Malley, 2010). With that, rekindling family relationships is of serious importance to nearly all incarcerated persons and especially incarcerated women. Through restorative pre-release circle processes such as the kind implemented by the Hawaiian prison, it may be possible for reentering individuals to reconnect with their loved ones in more constructive and positive ways. Having a safe space for family members, friends, and returning individuals to voice their concerns, frustrations, doubts, needs, forgiveness, and remorse is an important step in terms of reintegration and reconciliation. Helpful, too, is the opportunity for returning individuals to understand and take responsibility for the past harm they may have caused others during circle process dialogue. Aside from reconnecting inmates to their communities prior to release, giving returning people and other members of the circle the ability to create a reentry plan, as well as reconciliation agreements, may encourage desistance.

Leading Into New Communities (LINC)

In addition to specific pre-release restorative justice programs such as the Huikahi Prison Circles in Hawaii, there are several around the world that directly assist the growing reentry population after they are released from prison. One such organization is Leading Into New Communities (LINC), a residential reentry program located in Wilmington, North Carolina. Although LINC has a variety of helpful programs (such as LITE Manhood, a program geared towards empowering at-risk youth), their organization is primarily recognized for its transitional program. At their Marvin E. Roberts Transitional Living Campus, LINC staff members provide housing, food, and a supervised therapeutic environment (complete with computer labs, full kitchens, and a small gym) for male and female residents returning from incarceration. During

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their time with LINC, residents also receive assistance with interview skills and job skills and spend time learning how to create short- and long-term goals for themselves. Many of them also have the opportunity to receive intensive outpatient treatment services for substance abuse. On average, residents spend about 6 to 12 months with LINC before “graduating” and moving on to the next chapter of their lives, hopefully, well-prepared for life after incarceration because of their time there.

Simply based on the kind of environment and resources LINC provides its residents, LINC embodies several restorative values and understands the complex needs of the returning population. However, although staff members at LINC do amazing work for their clients, most only have a general understanding of restorative justice. Likewise, staff members are not formally trained on how to implement restorative practices (such as reconciliation circles, as explored by Walker (2010)), nor do they understand how such practices can help guide reentry processes and further help residents overcome the wide variety of challenges they face during reintegration. There is thus the significant potential for formal restorative justice training at LINC, training that would contribute to the professional development of staff in regard to understanding and utilizing restorative practices. With greater knowledge of restorative reentry and the power of restorative practices, it is the belief that staff will be in a better position to directly improve how their unique clients experience reentry, helping them to cultivate a meaningful relationship with their friends and family and strengthen important ties to the Wilmington community.

The Present Study

In order to improve understandings of restorative justice and better assist residents in their transitions, staff members at Leading Into New Communities (LINC) were introduced to restorative justice practices and principles through two workshops, each lasting approximately two hours. This was done on a volunteer basis, meaning staff members had the option to attend (or not attend) the workshops at their leisure. The term “workshop” is used to capture the dynamic, collaborative aspect of these meetings. While the workshops utilized a presentation with text, images, and relevant educational videos to convey important ideas related to restorative justice, staff were also engaged in meaningful dialogue around restorative principles to further strengthen and reinforce these concepts.

The researcher was responsible for both creating workshop presentations and facilitating important dialogue among staff. Although these workshops were primarily educational, they were structured in a way that encouraged staff members to share their own experiences not only within their professional roles at LINC but within their personal lives as well. This open dialogue was supported by pre-planned “pause and talks” throughout presentations as well as the use of traditional circle process seating arrangements. The following sections detail a more comprehensive breakdown of what occurred during each workshop. There is also a discussion of plans for a third workshop which was ultimately cancelled as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The final workshop was set to include a formal circle process centered around implicit biases.

Workshop I: Restorative Justice Overview & Introduction to Implicit Biases

Eight LINC staff members attended the first workshop, which included an overview of restorative justice and an introduction to implicit biases. Chairs were arranged in a half-circle facing the projector screen so that each person could see the presentation, while still being able to directly engage with others. Although this workshop did not include a formally guided restorative justice circle process, the semi-circle seating encouraged connection and

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collaboration. After introductions, staff members were reminded that any information collected throughout the project would be completely confidential as a way to further encourage open dialogue during and after the workshop, as well as honest feedback at the end of the project.

The presentation began with an overview of the project plan in full, as well as a brief description of the workshop's core objectives. In the first workshop, the stated objectives were to (a) learn about restorative justice principles and programs, (b) learn about implicit biases, and (c) learn about the different ways in which restorative practices can be utilized by staff members and residents at LINC to assist with reentry processes. With these objectives in mind, staff were asked to think about what restorative justice meant to them before fully diving into the material. Together, the group discussed their preconceived notions of restorative justice, building off of different ideas and experiences. Knowledge levels around the topic varied from person to person with some knowing very little about restorative justice and others knowing more specific applications of restorative justice. For example, one staff member understood restorative justice as a toolkit utilized during reentry-specific reconciliation dialogue between those returning from incarceration and their loved ones. Some understandings were more general, with other staff members speaking about restorative justice as an opportunity for individuals to right their wrongs in situations of harm. This discussion provided more insight into the extent to which each staff member understood restorative justice and restorative practices going into the workshop.

After this discussion, staff conceptions of restorative justice were compared to a broader definition on the following slide as well as the four guiding questions of restorative justice. These questions aim to identify who was harmed, what their needs are, whose obligation it is to make reparations, and what support is needed to promote those repairs. To further reinforce what restorative justice is, a second slide detailed what restorative justice is *not*. For example, restorative justice is *not* limited in its applications, nor is there one specific blueprint for implementation. Recognizing that restorative justice is not a one-size-fits-all approach to justice was significant to staff, especially as it pertains to their diverse clientele. Various aspects of restorative justice were also compared to aspects of the current punitive justice system to show staff members how ideas of crime and justice differ between each approach and how these ideas could guide policy. The graphic displayed in Figure 3 was used in the presentation to highlight important differences.

Punitive justice v. restorative justice

Punitive	Restorative
+ Crime is a violation of the law/state	+ Crime is an injury/harm to multiple stakeholders (violation of relationships)
+ Individuals encouraged to avoid taking responsibility	+ Emphasis on responsibility/accountability
+ State determines blame, imposes punishments	+ Collaborative processes; outcomes are mutually agreed upon
+ Those who have been harmed are not central to the process or outcome	+ Those who have been harmed are central to the process and outcome
+ Use of stigmatizing language (such as "offender" and "victim")	+ Strengths-based language

Figure 3. The punitive approach to justice versus the restorative approach to justice (Zehr 2015).

Not surprisingly, given that many of their backgrounds are characterized by experiences either navigating or working alongside the justice system, most staff members were familiar with

ideas central to punitive justice. However, although they were familiar with these concepts, staff were struck by how crime is defined in a punitive justice system versus one that is restorative. In the former, crime is a violation of the state, and the state determines blame and imposes the “proper” punishment as a result. In restorative justice, crime is considered a violation of relationships and it is up to those involved to decide how to right those wrongs to satisfy all stakeholders. With a broader understanding of restorative justice principles, staff were given examples of restorative justice programs. These included school mediation programs, diversionary programs for juveniles, truth and reconciliation commissions, and mediated dialogue/circle process.

Restorative justice circle dialogue received the most discussion during this workshop. Circles were highlighted to not only address harmful situations after they occur but to prevent situations from happening in the first place. This is done in circle process by creating a sense of community and togetherness through constructive, strengths-based dialogue. In this way, circles are valuable for their reactive and proactive use.

During this workshop, staff were also introduced to implicit biases. They were presented with a formal definition of implicit bias, followed by an in-depth discussion of the word “implicit”. When a bias is implicit, it means that biases (defined as prejudices held against or in favor of certain groups) are subconscious. With that, implicit biases can exist in opposition to stated values and beliefs. Staff were shown a TED Talk¹ by Dushaw Hockett titled, “We all have implicit biases. So what can we do about it?” that reinforced these concepts more visually. Staff seemed to enjoy learning about implicit biases, recognizing the importance of self-awareness, humility, and remaining open to other ideas and perspectives. Conversations around implicit biases were important in this context, especially considering how implicit biases and the resulting stigma can negatively impact the reentry process for formerly incarcerated individuals. There was not a formal discussion around how implicit biases impact the relationship between staff and residents, but hopefully being more aware of implicit bias will improve the way LINC staff interact with and treat not only each other but their clients in the future.

To finish out the workshop, there was a final discussion around how restorative justice processes, such as circle dialogue, can be used at LINC as a way to improve staff relationships and/or address specific reentry issues residents experience. In addition to circle process dialogue, staff were encouraged to continue utilizing strengths-based language with each other and with residents. There was a slide dedicated to strengths-based language, particularly in regards to how it is characterized by the recognition of strengths and accomplishments and respect for differences, as well as its solution-focused orientation. Strengths-based language is significant to restorative justice processes because it encourages positive relationships, cultivating a sense of community as a result. For example, at LINC, residents are separated from their stigmatizing labels (like “felon” or “criminal”) and are constantly reminded of their strengths and accomplishments as good people. In this way, strengths-based language provides an opportunity for staff to recognize LINC residents for who they are. Residents are no longer defined by their worst act as they often are in a prison environment.

Workshop II: Restorative Justice and Reentry

The second workshop, attended by 11 LINC staff members, was held approximately one month after the first. Workshop II covered restorative justice in the more specific context of

¹ TEDxTalks. (2017). We all have implicit biases. So what can we do about it? | Dushaw Hockett | TEDxMidAtlanticSalon. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKHSJHkPeLY>

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reentry. The presentation began with an outline of the workshop which included a) an overview of reentry, b) how restorative justice can be useful in reentry processes, and c) a more in-depth look at restorative circle process dialogue with a video example and discussion of Huikahi reconciliation circles.

Before covering new material, there was a slide dedicated to a “recap” of restorative justice and its principles. This was beneficial for staff members in attendance who were not present at the first workshop. Likewise, because the second workshop took place later than anticipated due to scheduling difficulties, this was a helpful refresher for other staff members as well. This led to a discussion of reentry facts and statistics to preface the presentation. For example, staff were made aware of the fact that 95 percent of the prison population is expected to return home in the future (Petersilia, 2003). Among those who left prison in 2014, it was the case that approximately 55 percent returned (or recidivated) within five years. To segue into the relationship between reentry and restorative justice, we posed the question, “What can be done to improve the reentry process and potentially reduce recidivism?”

To answer this, the next slide highlighted how utilizing restorative justice can be valuable regarding reentry. Through different programs central to restorative justice, such as circle process dialogue, it is possible to ameliorate the transition from prison to community and potentially reduce recidivism in the process. As explored in Workshop I, restorative justice processes can help address the varying needs of individuals returning from incarceration because of how dynamic restorative justice is. Restorative tools can likewise help restore broken relationships, where applicable, which is one of the most pressing needs of those returning from incarceration. Within restorative justice, there is also a continued emphasis on a reentering person’s strengths and the removal of negative, often stigmatizing labels through the use of strengths-based language central to SFBT.

Workshop II was the first time staff were introduced to a restorative circle process focused on addressing reentry needs. They were shown a video from Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (RJOY)² an organization that aims to interrupt the cycle of incarceration by promoting restorative justice intervention in schools, communities, and the juvenile justice system. In the video shown to LINC staff, members from RJOY teamed up with the Oakland Unified School District to provide a restorative reentry circle for Cedric, a young man returning to his high school after a period of juvenile detention. This circle was attended by Cedric, Cedric’s mother and step-father, the principle of Cedric’s school, Cedric’s counselor, and many other members from Cedric’s school system and surrounding community. Together, the group focused on Cedric’s needs moving forward and created a written reentry plan to meet those needs. They also talked about what members of the community, as stakeholders, needed from Cedric, whether that was an increased dedication to his studies or more open communication with his family, teachers, and counselors. One of the most important underlying themes of the circle, as is the case with most restorative justice circles, was the unconditional support shown by everyone in attendance. This became very clear during the closing ceremony of the circle where each member of the community was invited to give Cedric and his mother a hug and a few words of support. The group agreed to meet again in the future to talk about Cedric’s successes and to address/work through any roadblocks he might encounter along the way.

There was a fairly lengthy group discussion after the video, with many LINC staff citing a personal connection to Cedric’s life. Reflecting on their teenage years and young adulthood,

² Friedman, C. (2013). Restorative Welcome and Reentry Circle. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSJ2GPiptvc>

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some staff members could relate to Cedric's situation firsthand. For example, Cedric found himself in trouble after trying to help out his family economically. A few staff members understood the pressure for disadvantaged youths (without other means of income) to tap into the underground economy to help support their struggling parents. For staff who had been in a similar position at one point or another, they felt as though a circle process like Cedric's would have been beneficial to them, either to prevent crime or to bounce back from it. However, they acknowledged the essentiality of establishing trust between themselves and members of their communities for such an intervention to be impactful. It is difficult to move forward with an inherent distrust of the "system", as LINC staff put it.

With this in mind, many staff members acknowledged the importance of having staff with similar experiences available to LINC residents as a way to build trust by being relational. While trust is an important part of any restorative justice intervention (especially circle processes), staff recognized that LINC residents have an overall easier time at the transitional facility when they feel like they can trust the people around them. This highlights the importance of harnessing the diverse experiences of both staff and residents as a way to establish trust and genuine connection within the transitional facility. Perhaps only with trust and patience can restorative justice interventions be useful in the context of reentry, particularly at LINC.

During this discussion, staff members also took turns sharing information about their personal lives. A majority of their differences stemmed from their diverse racial backgrounds. These very thought-provoking conversations around race provided an opportunity for staff to relate to one another on deeper levels than before and to better understand life from a number of different perspectives. Moving forward, it is the hope that these kinds of conversations will continue between staff, strengthening their relationships with each other and in turn, with residents.

Building off of Cedric's reentry circle, staff were also made aware of the Huihaki Circles created by Lorenn Walker. These circles are structured very similarly to Cedric's circle, but they cater more specifically to adults returning from prison who are interested in creating reentry plans and establishing broken relationships with loved ones. In the future, with more experience and training among staff, implementing similar reconciliation circles for residents at LINC could be an option for those looking to reestablish family connections in a more constructive way. In the meantime, staff felt that it might be worthwhile to utilize a low-stakes circle process during new resident orientation to make residents more aware of the roles of each staff member and the kind of support they can offer during a person's residency. It was very rewarding to hear staff members brainstorm new ways of implementing restorative justice into their organization as a result of workshop material, as these processes would likely benefit LINC residents in the long run.

Workshop III Plans: Implicit Bias Circle Process Experience

To further reinforce many of the concepts covered in the first two workshops, this project was set to include a third workshop inviting staff to participate in a restorative justice circle process centered around the topic of implicit biases. By participating in a circle firsthand, staff would have a better understanding of how circles operate and therefore be in a better position to implement them at LINC as a way to benefit residents. The topic of implicit bias was also significant, as implicit biases directly shape understandings of others, including those with criminal histories. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic struck the United States about a week

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prior to the third workshop. To comply with social distancing protocols and ensure the health and safety of LINC staff, the final workshop was cancelled.

Findings

Workshop Feedback

After each workshop, staff members had the opportunity to voluntarily complete an anonymous feedback form. Feedback forms were comprised of four short answer questions and four Likert scale statements relevant to workshop content/objectives. These provided some insight into how each workshop impacted staff and whether or not they felt comfortable implementing restorative practices in their day-to-day processes at LINC as a result. Table 1 and Table 2 display workshop feedback from volunteer staff members.

Table 1. Workshop I Feedback

Section 1: Evaluation of Workshop I	
<i>1. What did you like the most about today's workshop?</i>	
Very open and informative.	
The research and presentation well put together.	
The group forum. Informative	
<i>2. What is something you learned from the presentation/videos?</i>	
To pay more attention to implicit biases.	
The mediation between victim and person committing.	
Implicit bias is real. The punitive system is about exclusion.	
<i>3. Were there any concepts covered today that you would like to learn more about?</i>	
In general I think the information given is a dialogue and deserves ongoing conversations.	
How restorative justice migrated from New Zealand.	
Refined mediation techniques. Solution based language.	
<i>4. In regards to the presentation, do you have any suggestions for improvement?</i>	
[I am still] learning, so I wouldn't know what could be improved on or not.	
Integrate community and government to the table.	
The question, "Who has been harmed?" Most "offenders" leave themselves off the list. They were harmed as well.	

Section 2: Outcome Evaluation of Workshop I	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Statements	Participant Ratings				
<i>1. Today's workshop improved my understanding of restorative justice (e.g., its values, how it differs from punitive justice, and examples of programs).</i>					

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2. <i>Today's workshop improved my understanding of implicit biases (e.g., what they are, why they matter, and how they can be addressed).</i>					
3. <i>As a result of today's workshop, I have a better idea of how I can implement restorative practices at Leading Into New Communities.</i>					
4. <i>Overall, what I learned today will help me be more successful in my position at Leading Into New Communities.</i>					

Table 2. Workshop II Feedback

Section 1: Evaluation of Workshop II					
<i>1. What did you like the most about today's workshop?</i>					
Information					
Sharing of personal life-experiences by coworkers					
enjoyed the video					
The discussion was intensely good.					
<i>2. What is something you learned from the presentation/videos?</i>					
The impact on commitment.					
The 360 degree give+take in circle process					
when someone does not trust the person, they do not trust the process and vice versa					
you have to trust people in order to trust the process					
<i>3. Were there any concepts covered today that you would like to learn more about?</i>					
Circle discussions					
Implicit bias					
Circle method					
circles					
<i>4. In regards to the presentation, do you have any suggestions for improvement?</i>					
None					
Limit discussion so that one person's comments do not monopolize the workshop. Never challenge everyone to speak - putting individuals "on the spot" is not productive and intimidating					
Not right now.					

Section 2: Outcome Evaluation of Workshop II	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<i>Statements</i>	Participant Ratings				
<i>1. Today's workshop improved my understanding of restorative justice in the context of reentry.</i>					

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2. <i>Today's workshop improved my understanding of circle process dialogue (e.g., what is it, how they are structured, how they can help).</i>					
3. <i>As a result of today's workshop, I have a better idea of how I can help implement restorative circle process dialogue at Leading Into New Communities.</i>					
4. <i>Overall, what I learned today will help me be more successful in my position at Leading Into New Communities.</i>					

Discussion of Feedback

Due to the optional nature of the feedback forms, there was a fairly low response rate following both workshops. For example, only three anonymous paper surveys were turned in after Workshop I even though eight staff members were present. To increase response rates following the second workshop, surveys were moved online to Survey Monkey. Staff members could access the Workshop II feedback form anonymously through a link sent via e-mail. Unfortunately, even with a format that was easier to access and submit, only three fully completed surveys and one survey missing Section I responses were turned in.

Despite a low response rate, staff members who did provide feedback seemed to positively benefit from each workshop. After Workshop I, for example, all respondents agreed, to some extent, with the four statements provided in Section II of the form. Most notable is that two of three staff members strongly agreed with the fourth statement, which reads, *“Overall, what I learned today will help me be more successful in my position at Leading Into New Communities.”* For these staff members, this suggests that learning about the material covered in Workshop I was beneficial to their success in the organization, particularly in regard to how they can both help and relate to their clientele. The same was true of Workshop II material. According to feedback following the second workshop, three out of four respondents agreed with the same statement, with only one respondent reporting that Workshop II neither helped nor hurt their likelihood of success at LINC. However, all four staff respondents agreed that they had a better understanding of restorative justice in the context of reentry following Workshop II. Although it is hard to know for sure, having a better understanding of restorative reentry could mean that these staff members are now in a better position to implement some of the restorative programs and practices covered in both workshops to benefit their residents in their transitions home.

According to some of the written feedback from Workshop I and Workshop II, respondents seemed to primarily enjoy how workshops were structured. Respondents specifically emphasized the openness of the group forum and how interesting and “intensely good” the discussions were between staff members. This was a major theme after the second workshop, which was more dialogue-driven than the first. Based on other written feedback, there were also important takeaways from each workshop that stood out. From Workshop I, staff reported learning the most about implicit biases and restorative mediation. From Workshop II, staff reported learning the most about building trust and commitment for restorative processes to be effective. For example, one respondent wrote, “you have to trust people in order to trust the process”. Although there were a number of concepts covered in each workshop, the two or three concepts most memorable to staff will be significant in the long run. Having a better awareness

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of implicit biases, for example, will be an important part of the organization's continued use of strengths-based language and will positively guide the way staff treats each other and LINC residents. With that, understanding that restorative practices can only take hold when trust is present is also important. Ensuring that the residents can trust LINC staff will be vital moving forward, especially if the staff is interested in implementing more hands-on restorative justice tools, such as circle process dialogue, in the future.

Recommendations and Conclusions

After release from prison, there are many unique challenges that accompany reentry. These challenges vary from person to person depending on a number of factors, such as race, gender, class, age, and so forth, but the most common reentry issues are rooted in a difficulty reestablishing community ties and positive social networks outside of incarceration. Part of why those returning from prison have such a difficult time reintegrating into their communities certainly stems from negative social stigma, imposed upon and exacerbated by the current punitive justice system. Restorative justice approaches attempt to undo some of this stigmatization by focusing less on retribution and more on creating a sense of community through connection and meaningful, strengths-based, and solution-focused dialogue. In the context of reentry, restorative approaches can be incredibly profound, reconnecting formerly incarcerated individuals to loved ones and/or providing a space to establish helpful reentry plans.

Organizations that assist those transitioning back into the community from incarceration often understand how complex the reintegration process is. They do their best to connect their residents with many important resources that make the transition easier, providing residents with a way to start rooting themselves back into their communities. However, according to this study, staff members from such organizations have the potential to positively benefit from formal training on restorative justice, particularly ones that cover topics such as implicit bias, strengths-based language, and restorative circle process dialogue. At Leading Into New Communities (LINC), a residential reentry organization in Wilmington, North Carolina, several staff members are now in a better position to implement some of these restorative practices as a result of formal workshop trainings. These workshops covered restorative tools that, if utilized by staff members, will positively benefit residents and further assist in their transitions home. This is made evident by data from anonymous feedback forms following each workshop, many of which indicated a growing understanding of restorative practices among staff.

Specifically, at LINC, staff members are encouraged to continue participating in open dialogue not only to improve their relationships with each other, but with their residents. This will put staff in a better position to address the unique needs of residents moving forward, especially as they pertain to reentry. As staff members mentioned during workshops, it would also be worthwhile if LINC implemented restorative circle process dialogue during new resident orientations as a way to welcome new residents into the facility and to create a more comfortable, open environment. These circles would also be a great tool for establishing important relationships between staff and new residents, as these kinds of up-front conversations would allow staff to clarify their roles at LINC and demonstrate how they can be a helpful resource for each resident. They would also likely help clarify what each resident hopes to gain from their experiences at LINC, and how LINC staff can help them reach those goals.

In the future, it would be wise to continue these same kinds of restorative trainings with staff at organizations like LINC, utilizing different follow-up measures to see how workshops influence the day-to-day processes of those working with formerly incarcerated men and women and to gauge where more training is needed. With so many people returning home from

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incarceration every day, society must find new and meaningful ways to assist with these complicated transitions. For organizations like LINC that serve these individuals firsthand, improving the reentry process of their clients begins with a more concrete understanding of restorative justice principles. For the rest of the world, this begins with a restorative mindset, one characterized by compassion and unconditional respect for differences.

Limitations

There are a few important limitations of this research. First, because workshops for staff were voluntary, not all staff members attended the meetings. With that, some staff attended the second workshop without attending the first (and vice versa). This was not a major issue, but some of the material in Workshop II built off of information from Workshop I. Those who did not attend Workshop I were thus at a slight disadvantage, missing important information regarding the basics of restorative justice and implicit bias. With that, as previously discussed, feedback on each workshop was fairly limited. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, there were plans to conduct in-depth interviews with volunteer staff members about the impact of all three workshops on their professional development, as well as how they were trying to implement restorative practices as a result. Unfortunately, such interviews could not take place. Limited conclusions about the impact of workshops can only be drawn from the feedback received via the survey.

In regards to the limited feedback, Workshop II survey responses revealed that staff was eager to learn more about circle process dialogue, a tool that is very useful within restorative justice. Staff would have learned the most about circle process dialogue in the third workshop which was set to involve staff in a circle process centered around implicit biases, a topic they are now fairly knowledgeable about following Workshop I. The third workshop was cancelled as a result of COVID-19 protocols, leaving staff members with a limited understanding of circle processes based on presentation materials and videos. Although it is clear that staff members know more about restorative justice processes than they did before these workshops, being able to involve them in a circle process would have put them in an even better position to utilize circle process with residents to address reentry needs.

Author's Reflection

Prior to starting this project, I had the privilege of working at Leading Into New Communities (LINC) as a student volunteer. During my time there, it was my goal to understand the ins and outs of LINC as an organization and to connect with residents returning from incarceration. I wanted to understand their pasts, their goals for the future, and how staff members at LINC assist with the completion of those goals. What I found was that a number of residents experienced trauma prior to, and often as a result of, their incarceration. Most trauma related to family relationships that are further tarnished by a person's incarceration. Because of this, several residents cited reconciliation with loved ones as a primary reentry need. When I learned about the common desire among residents to reconnect with family and friends, it became clear that introducing LINC staff to restorative justice practices, which ultimately center around rebuilding connections in constructive ways, could be extremely beneficial in the long run.

Pulling from my experiences as a volunteer, one of the primary goals of this project was to deepen LINC staff understandings of restorative practices through training workshops. These trainings would provide staff with new skillsets to further assist residents in their transitions back into the community. Based on the results of this work, it is clear that staff learned important information from each workshop and will be able to use their new knowledge of restorative

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justice in their professional positions at LINC. Perhaps with even more training in the future, LINC staff will be able to facilitate reconciliation circles between LINC residents and their loved ones to reestablish connections that are often essential to successful reentry. I hope that this work inspires other reentry organizations to incorporate similar restorative justice training in their professional development processes. Exposing staff members that assist with reentry to restorative practices will likely enable these organizations to better meet the complex needs of those they serve.

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