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Searching for Justice

# News Media Coverage of Re-entry

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# Executive Summary

The US incarcerates more people per capita than any other nation in the world (Statista, 2021), even though advocates, researchers, and the public have called for reform for years. This pattern also translates to large numbers of people who have completed sentences. In the US, 4.5 million people – one in every 55 adults – is under community supervision, such as parole or probation (Horowitz et al., 2018). Millions more have completed supervision at some point in the past. And countless people have family members and loved ones currently or previously involved in the carceral system.

The public's understanding of the carceral system is important because it can shape debates, policies, and cultures surrounding that system. And because people without direct personal experience tend to form their opinions on social issues based on what they see in news media, it's important to study news media and the tone it sets.

In 2021, we set out to understand how the news media covers the carceral system, specifically formerly incarcerated people's experiences of re-entering society. Our study examined local news stories from a select number of states in the US. We wanted to investigate the nature of reporting on barriers to re-entering society, as well as the gaps in coverage of this topic. These questions guided our analysis:

- Do news stories treat people who have been incarcerated as full human beings, or do they focus on a “criminal” identity?
- How does news coverage treat the carceral system and re-entry process?
- How do journalists characterize redemption for formerly incarcerated people?

We hope that the answers to these questions will inform the work of news media organizations and journalists as they continue reporting on re-entry. The Kendeda Fund provided support for this project.

## Findings

This study revealed that news coverage spans a diverse set of re-entry issues, including employment, voting, housing, healthcare, personal finance, and more. However, there is little attention paid to the relationship between the carceral system and re-entry experiences. Researchers and advocates have shown how the US carceral system disproportionately oppresses minoritized groups – particularly Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities (e.g., Equal Justice Initiative, n.d.; Prison Policy Initiative, n.d.). Yet news stories largely neglected this aspect of the carceral system and its effect on re-entry experiences. We also found a reporting gap in the overlapping and interlocking connections among barriers to re-entry. For instance, formerly incarcerated people typically have difficulty finding stable housing. This issue then complicates people's ability to open bank accounts, which further threatens their financial stability.

We found that most reporting tends to humanize formerly incarcerated people by using language that acknowledges their personhood. These humanizing approaches included phrases like *person on parole* or individual names, rather than terms like *prisoner* or *convict*. While our analysis focused on print articles, we observe that video interviews enable journalists to further humanize their subjects, as visuals can provide information about a person's background and emotions beyond what is typically offered in print stories. We also examined story structure, to determine whether coverage offered details about subjects' convictions and at what point in the story that information was included. Generally, news stories featuring individuals did not recount their offenses. However, reporting that did include such details typically introduced that information in the first few lines. This practice had the effect of casting convictions as the most important detail about a person.

Most stories were reform-minded, meaning that they characterized the carceral system as flawed but able to be improved. Some stories framed the carceral system as functioning well and very few advocated for abolishing the entire system. In a similar vein, about three-quarters of the stories presented incarcerated people as redeemable. This approach reflected the belief that individuals "repay their debt to society" through personal growth during incarceration, and that barriers to re-entry put an unnecessary burden on people. A small number of articles expressed the belief that the only path to re-entry is through ongoing punishment.

In spite of the humanizing reporting practices and reform orientations that appeared in a majority of articles, we also saw inconsistency in reporting styles. News articles often contained tropes that appeared to undermine their intent. For example, a story that used humanizing terms to describe its subject and advocated for reforming as aspect of re-entry might also use the opening lines to introduce the individual's offense.

### Let's Put It to Work

This research points to several overarching ways to improve reporting on barriers to re-entry for formerly incarcerated people.

- **Connect the Dots** – Reporting should be clear about the source of re-entry issues, rather than simply describing the effects. Explain the links between the design of the carceral system and barriers to re-entering society, as well as the overlapping and compounding nature of these barriers.
- **Be Consistent with Tone, Structure, & Intent** – News coverage should make sure all components of a story align with each other. If a reporter seeks to humanize formerly incarcerated people, make sure that language and story structure support this goal.
- **Focus on Solutions** – While clarity on the source of problems is important, it is also critical to showcase what works for reducing and removing barriers to re-entry. Solutions Journalism offers a framework for this approach, which recommends describing tangible rather than hypothetical responses to a social issue, demonstrating evidence of a solution's impact as well as acknowledging its limitations, and facilitating engagement in a solution, among other techniques.
- **Be Aware of Choices in Medium** – Consider how audio or video stories can help humanize a formerly incarcerated person.



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# Introduction

Inequities, institutionalized injustice, entrenched racism, and ethics lie at the heart of debates about the current and future carceral systems and cultures of the United States (Alexander, 2010; Equal Justice Initiative, n.d.). After people are released from carceral facilities, many remain under the system's control through community supervision and limited release programs. The impacts of the carceral system reach far beyond supervision, impacting personal finances, employment, housing opportunities, social relationships, education, and more. That is, punishment often extends long after people have completed their sentences. As a result, it is critically important to understand the re-entry process and the long-lasting consequences of experiences in the US carceral system.

News media serves as a reflection of and conduit for public perspectives and debates on social issues. Narratives in the news are socially situated, like all other forms of text and talk (van Dijk, 2009). News media's claims to objectivity help make those narratives seem neutral (cf. Galison, 2015), although in truth they are as value laden as all narratives. In this way, news narratives frequently reproduce larger social structures. As a result, it's equally important to understand news media reporting on the carceral system, including re-entry processes.

In 2021, we studied news media coverage of formerly incarcerated people's experience of re-entering society in the United States. Researching the narratives that are most frequently used can help shine a light on other possible narratives, creating space for news coverage to challenge and dismantle unequal power structures.

We focused on recent local news stories from a selection of states with carceral systems that stood out in some way, whether due to sharp disparities or recent reforms. Two questions drove our research:

1. What is the nature of current reporting on barriers to re-entry for formerly incarcerated people?
2. What are the gaps in current reporting on this topic?

The Kendeda Fund provided funding support for this study as part of a larger investment in the PBS NewsHour series Searching for Justice. Our research was designed to provide data to inform reporting on re-entry topics.

The research team was made up of social scientists who have a range of personal, professional, and advocacy experience with the carceral system. One of this report's four authors has personal experience with the system: either they or someone close to them has been incarcerated. None of us has professional experience working in the justice system, although several of us have close personal relationships with people who do. All four of us also have some experience working or volunteering with groups that advocate on behalf of incarcerated people's rights.



# Our Approach

We used *discourse analysis* to study news media coverage of re-entry after incarceration. Discourse analysis is an umbrella term for a family of research approaches that focus on natural language use in real situations to better understand worldviews that are widely held (Bucholtz, 2003; Kroskrity, 2005; van Dijk, 2009). Researchers in this tradition understand these worldviews to be inseparable from social positions and identities. That means that what people may think of as a “neutral” position is simply one that favors the status quo (Fairclough, 1985). Discourse analysis is particularly useful for revealing the role of news in reproducing aspects of society, including “racism and other forms of domination and social inequality” (van Dijk, 2009, p. 192).

We approached news articles with three guiding questions:

**Do news stories treat people who have been incarcerated as full human beings, or do they focus on a “criminal” identity?** Criminal convictions are only one part of many people’s history and experience. Researchers have long pointed out the harmful effects of dehumanizing various minoritized groups (e.g., Santa Ana, 1999; 2003) in news media portrayals, so we looked at terminology. In stories that include details about a person’s conviction, the location of this information also matters. News stories typically use an “inverted pyramid” structure where the most important information is provided first, and being attentive to placement can be telling of the overarching perspective promoted by news outlets (cf. van Dijk, 2009).

**How does news coverage treat the carceral system and re-entry process?** Here we consider the range of characterizations: fundamentally functional, fixable, or irreparably broken? News media can help naturalize the worldviews of powerful people, transforming them into matters of “common sense” (Fairclough, 1985). While the nature of the US carceral system’s flaws remains a question of political debate, finding one attitude overwhelmingly common in news coverage would indicate that this attitude is taken for granted. In turn, this would indicate news stories support current configurations of power in the carceral system.

**How do journalists characterize redemption for formerly incarcerated people?** We asked this question for similar reasons, to understand whether news coverage promotes a single, dominant view. In some worldviews, redemption is possibly only through personal faith; other views hold that punishment, hard work, time, self-discovery, community accountability, or financial recompense are required of those who commit offenses. Looking for prevailing, “common-sense” discourses in news media helps us uncover what is taken for granted.

To answer these questions, we focused our study on a select number of states and news articles specifically about the topic of re-entry experiences of formerly incarcerated people. Here's how we did it:<sup>1</sup>

### Selecting States

We chose states that were prominent in relation to their carceral systems. Some had disproportionately high rates of incarceration of specific groups of people. Others had high rates of people under community supervision, typically after being incarcerated. Still others made recent notable investments in reforming their carceral systems. Ultimately, we selected nine geographically, culturally, and politically diverse states as case studies for our discourse analysis: Arizona, Arkansas, California, Georgia, Louisiana, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Texas.

### Selecting News Stories

We conducted a systematic search for local news stories published in those states. For this search, we used LexisNexis Newsdesk, a digital database for news articles. We looked for any article that contained one of our search terms, including words and phrases that we anticipated journalists might use, such as *probation*, *reintegration*, *ex-felon*, *formerly incarcerated*, and more. We focused on articles that were published in 2020 that addressed at least one barrier or issue involving re-entry. This process produced a total of 215 articles for in-depth analysis.

### Analysis

To shape our investigation of the 215 articles, we used the three guiding questions described above. We examined humanizing versus dehumanizing language and reporting techniques, and compared those to other patterns we found in the stories. We studied the ways news articles were oriented to the carceral system, as well as how these pieces characterized people's ability to be redeemed after incarceration. We also categorized articles loosely by topic, since a number of challenges to re-entry kept coming to the forefront. Finally, two researchers identified themes emerging from this process and intersections between questions.

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<sup>1</sup> A full description of our methods can be found in the Appendix.





# Findings

We found patterns in our analysis of the news stories that illustrate trends in media coverage about people re-entering society after incarceration. We identified quantifiable trends in Story Framing and Story Topics, which include explanations and descriptive statistics of these patterns. We also uncovered several themes in reporting practices, which reveal gaps in reporting as well as opportunities.

## Story Framing

### Language

We examined the language used in the news articles with the understanding that language not only reflects reality, but also helps shape it. In the context of this study, this principle means that the language used to describe formerly incarcerated people can amplify their humanity or dehumanize them (Cerdeja-Jara et al, 2019). In particular, crime-first language likely increases stigma compared to person-first language because it positions the behavior as stable over time (Denver et al., 2017). To distinguish between humanizing and dehumanizing terms, we used a framework developed by The Underground Scholars Initiative (Cerdeja-Jara et al, 2019; Table 1). Specifically, humanizing terms describe the individual’s involvement with the carceral system as one of many parts of their personhood. Meanwhile, dehumanizing language characterizes involvement with the carceral system as the defining characteristic of a person. We characterized each article in our dataset based on the type of language it used. If a story contained both humanizing and dehumanizing terms, we categorized it as dehumanizing.

Table 1. Humanizing and dehumanizing terms used by The Underground Scholars Initiative.

Humanizing Terms	Dehumanizing Terms
Incarcerated person	Prisoner, Inmate, Criminal, Convict
Formerly incarcerated person	Ex-Con, Former prisoner / Inmate
Individual names	Violent Offender, Drug Offender
Person on Parole / Probation	Parolee / Probationer
People convicted of... (Drug violation / violent offense)	

The majority of stories in our dataset used language to humanize people who re-entered society after being incarcerated. Out of 215 stories, 137 contained humanizing language to describe formerly incarcerated people. Seventy-five stories contained dehumanizing terms, which included stories that used both humanizing and dehumanizing phrases. A few stories did not use any terms, so could not be coded.

## Story Structure

Media narratives can shape public perception by informing stereotypes (Reny & Manzano, 2016). We examined how closely articles connected people with their convictions when addressing their experience of the re-entry process or their opinions about it. We coded articles as dehumanizing when they prioritized recounting the crimes for which people were convicted and had served their sentences. Given the “inverted triangle” structure wherein news stories begin with the most important details, this approach frames the conviction as the most important detail, over an individual’s experience of re-entry.

To answer this question, we focused on the 63 articles that mentioned at least one individual to illustrate an experience. We examined whether, and when, they mentioned the crime(s) the person was convicted of.

In most cases, when a formerly incarcerated person was featured in a story, the crime they were convicted of was not described. However, when conviction details were included, they were often introduced right away, in the first few lines of the article. For example, one article from New Jersey opens with this line: “When Fairlawn police arrested ‘Elizabeth’ on drug charges in November 2018, she thought it meant another skipped court date, more unpaid fines, and another warrant to haunt her” (Janoski, 2020). This passage introduces the reader to both the conviction and the person simultaneously.

Overall, stories that emphasized the experience of an individual were likely to use humanizing language throughout the article. This was especially evident in articles that held off on mentioning a person’s conviction until later in the story, which used humanizing language in every case we reviewed.

## Orientation to the Carceral System

We examined how news articles position the carceral system as a whole, and whether that framing cast the carceral system as irreparably broken, flawed but fixable, or functioning properly. It is important to be aware that the US carceral system was designed to benefit certain stakeholders while harming others (Alexander, 2010); there is no truly “neutral” or “objective” frame (*cf.* Galison, 2015). There is an argument to be made that the system does “work fine” for those that own private prisons or profit from prison labor. At the same time, perspectives favoring reform or abolition of the carceral system assume a different stance on who should benefit and how.

The vast majority of pieces took the stance that the system was imperfect but fixable. Journalists sometimes quoted experts or advocates who took a stronger stance, but they typically offset these views by offering equal space to competing perspectives. For example, a piece reporting that the NAACP “hope[s] the nation’s highest court will declare private prisons unconstitutional before a majority of states rely on them” also quoted a prison spokesperson who described the NAACP’s lawsuit as “blatantly false and slanderous” (Castle & Polletta, 2020). We considered stances expressed in quotations only qualitatively because journalists are not held responsible for the truthfulness of sources’ comments (Waugh, 1995; compare Lawson, 2021). Instead, we focused on the overarching tone of the story.

Editorial and opinion pieces were more critical than journalistic pieces overall, but they were still typically framed as “flawed but fixable,” stopping short of condemning the carceral system wholesale. They typically made public appeals for reform. The most critical piece we reviewed included the following:

“Because the pain associated with this movement is not limited to any single issue, incident of excessive force, or killing, we must acknowledge New Jersey’s own long history in not living up to the all-important words, ‘justice for all.’ In fact, New Jersey is the state that holds the shameful distinction of having the nation’s worst disparity in rates of incarceration between black and white offenders — an abhorrent 12-to-1. We can — and must — do better” (Oliver et al., 2020).

Yet even this piece ended with a call for “a system that lives up to the very essence of the words ‘justice’ and ‘equality.’” This appeal points to a concept that goes unchallenged in this article: the need for a carceral system at all. Across our data set, we rarely saw an abolitionist orientation in news coverage of re-entry, nor stories that paid attention the causes of crime.

### **Debt to Society**

In general, the public does believe that most people are redeemable, at least in theory (Ouellette et al., 2017). Yet there is considerable debate over whether the carceral system’s primary purpose is to rehabilitate or to punish. One recent national survey (Opportunity Agenda, 2014) found that roughly equal numbers of people supported each position. A survey of voters in a politically centrist state found that most people said you should release someone early if they can prove they’re no longer a threat, with some differences depending on *how* early (O’Hear & Wheelock, 2016). Perhaps unsurprisingly, that study also found robust partisan differences in views on punitiveness.

On the whole, news coverage of re-entry reflected a belief in redeemability. Across states, about three-quarters of stories implied that people who have committed offenses repay their “debt to society” through personal growth during their time spent incarcerated. These articles conveyed a sense that the re-entry experience is unnecessarily burdensome to formerly incarcerated people and often advocated for improving the process. These included stories highlighting specific individuals and programs that aid in re-entry, as well as recent ballot measures that have restored voting rights to formerly incarcerated people or people on parole. Typically, stories with this type of framing used humanizing language.

Though far less common, a small handful of articles emphasized the importance of restorative or communal approaches to reintegrating into society. For example, an article about jurisdiction over Native youth observed that “Tribal justice systems tend to be more focused on rehabilitation and restoration, which is what juvenile justice was intended to be” (Schlabach et al., 2020).

Several articles took an explicitly Christian perspective, suggesting that people can ultimately find redemption to society through faith.

A small number of articles implied that the only path for a formerly incarcerated person to re-enter society was through punishment. For example, one article recounted how a political candidate removed a supporter from campaign after finding out that the individual had been previously incarcerated. This piece implied that continued shunning was a natural – and deserved – consequence of that supporter’s previous actions (Clay, 2020). In a similar vein, an editorial about sentencing reform contained the following lines:

We should be able to provide more rehabilitation in prison and shorter sentences for truly nonviolent, repentant felons without opening the cell doors early for scum who rape unconscious women or traffic children. And habitual thieves should be locked up for a while (Skelton, 2020).

Unsurprisingly, this group of stories most often used dehumanizing language.

## Story Topics

In the 215 articles in our dataset, we found a wide range of topics relating to re-entry after incarceration.<sup>2</sup> No single topic dominated the stories. Furthermore, many articles addressed multiple topics. The most common topic – work – appeared in just over a third of the stories (Figure 1).

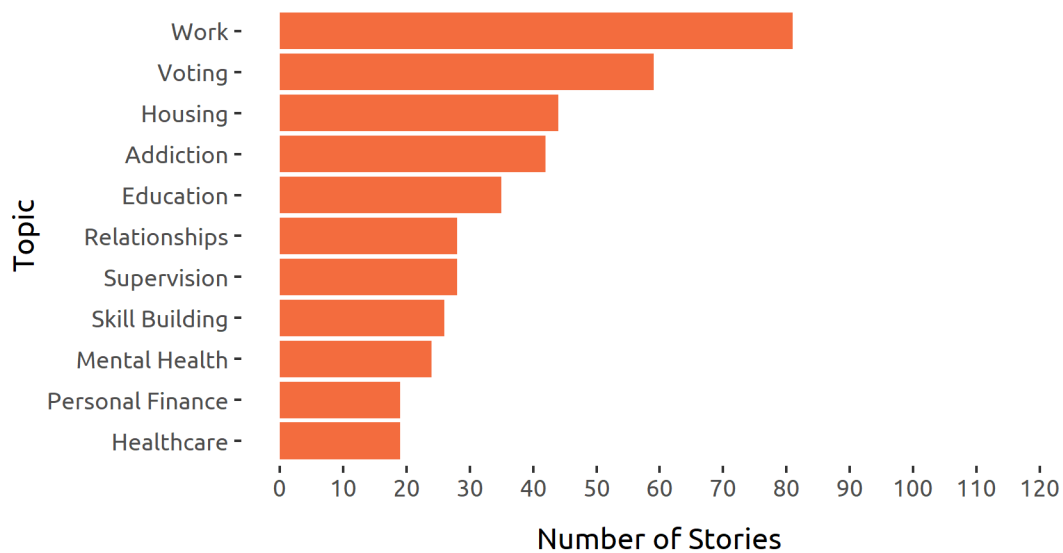


Figure 1. Frequencies of topics found in 215 news stories on re-entry after incarceration.

Note. Topics were not mutually exclusive; stories could contain multiple topics.

Obstacles related to **Work** or employment were the most frequent topic, appearing in 81 articles about re-entry. Overall, articles on this topic vocalized the general lack of job opportunities for formerly incarcerated people. These articles featured subjects like job

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<sup>2</sup> The initial set of topics was developed through conversation with journalists from a partner news media organization and refined based on the news stories we reviewed.

availability, job interview training, and prejudicial screening in job applications. One story from Arizona featured,

*"... a tattoo artist who spent 10½ years behind bars for armed robbery, said he has applied for dozens of jobs. Time and again, the father of three marked the question on applications that ask whether he ever had been convicted. By the 89th application, he said, he lied to get a job bussing dishes in a restaurant" (Beltran, 2020).*

A few articles also mentioned the obstacle of not being able to obtain an occupational license required for some jobs, such as an esthetician or barber.

**Voting** was the second most common topic, appearing in 59 stories about reintegration after incarceration. Nearly half of these articles ( $n = 27$ ) were related to a recent ballot measure in California to restore voting rights to formerly incarcerated people and people on parole.

The majority of the voting stories provided a brief reference to people on parole not being allowed to vote, though some went into further detail about how voting is a necessary step for reintegrating in society. Some asserted that people who are on parole and also paying taxes deserve to vote on who is in charge of how those taxes are spent. For example, an op-ed published in Georgia reported,

*"The rehabilitation of rights is a crucial part of the re-entry process. I personally didn't have to spend time in prison but the idea that I am at my core a criminal is one that I and many others still grapple with years after completion of our sentences. The time, financial cost, and physical energy it takes to earn back your rights is not lost on any person who has ever been convicted of a felony. When we complete our sentence to the state and register for any election, it's earned and shows a level of commitment that many people would have a tough time imagining" (Dale, 2020).*

There was also considerable coverage of **Housing**, with 44 stories featuring the lack of affordable housing, barriers in applying for housing with a criminal record, residential re-entry housing, and issues of homelessness for people who were formerly incarcerated. Forty-two articles covered **Addiction** as a convergent challenge frequently associated re-entering society. Many of the programs highlighted in these stories are designed for carceral facilities and people whose convictions are related to drug offenses. Some programs, like Alcoholics Anonymous, are described as supporting people after leaving carceral facilities (Noble, 2020).

There were 35 articles that covered **Education** in the context of gaps in opportunities for formerly incarcerated people to continue formal education, whether receiving a GED (Castle & Polletta, 2020), pursuing a college or graduate degree (Trethan, 2020), or gaining a certificate in a professional field like counseling (Goldsmith, 2020). Similarly, 26 articles described **Skill Building** outside formal certificate or diploma programs as a critical aspect of people's re-entry experiences. These chronicled programs that provide training for things like landscaping, cooking in restaurants, and gardening (Noble, 2020). There was also a

handful of articles highlighting the need for technology literacies. These stories pointed out how technology changes rapidly, which presents a substantial challenge to reintegrating into society, especially for those who served long sentences. In most cases these pieces were about skills that could be used to gain employment, but were differentiated from the Work category because they did not focus specifically on access to jobs.

A small set of articles covered **Relationships**. These 28 pieces described Relationships in the context of reconnecting with family members. Some called attention to the risk of victims of domestic abuse getting out of prison and returning home to unsafe environments (Sweeney & Weinberg, 2020). Other stories explained a program that help formerly incarcerated people overcome challenges stemming from relationships. One program planned activities to help formerly incarcerated people feel connected to their community through projects like mural painting (Harden, 2020), and another organization connected mentors to people on juvenile parole (Carlson, 2020).

For many people who finish their sentences and leave carceral facilities, the burdens of **Community Supervision** figure into their experience of re-entry, which often contradict or undermine the process of reintegration into society. Community supervision differs across states and carceral systems, and includes parole, probation, and mandatory supervision, among other programs. These programs are designed to oversee formerly incarcerated people outside of carceral facilities, and are administered by agencies with the legal authority to enforce sanctions (National Institute of Justice, n.d.). In our dataset, 28 stories addressed surveillance as a barrier to re-entry, which largely focused on people in community supervision programs. Many of these articles illuminated the issue of people who are sent back to prison for parole violations (Fraser, 2020). Some articles focused on community supervision reform, with one article suggesting substituting “the state parole board with a re-entry board. In tandem with truth in sentencing, our state parole board should be re-purposed to help prisoners transition into society” (Stone, 2020). Another example of reform was an alternative form of parole consisting of home calls to youth convicted of non-violent crimes (Sledge, 2020).

Of the 23 stories about **Mental Health**, the majority were about offering mental health services and counseling to formerly incarcerated people. A number of articles talk about specific needs that affect many people re-entering society, such as veterans and others struggling with mental health like post-traumatic stress disorder (Noble, 2020). Some stories explored the experiences of formerly incarcerated women who are victims of abuse. These individuals often lack the mental health services and trauma-informed care they need to recover (Hua, 2020).

**Healthcare** was less common in articles, appearing in only 19 stories. Many of these pieces covered specific medical clinics, integrated care programs, or transitional housing programs; several addressed COVID-related early release programs. They did not report on reasons formerly incarcerated people might struggle with access to healthcare, nor on the consequences of lack of continuity in care. For instance, in 2019 about half of all US adults accessed health insurance through their employers (Kaiser Family Foundation, n.d.). Given the documented barriers to stable employment described above, we had expected to see this issue addressed more thoroughly in news coverage. In fact, research indicates that the

Affordable Care Act has helped close the insurance gap for formerly incarcerated people (Winkelman et al., 2017; Gutierrez & Pettit, 2020), but these studies suggest that employment status remains related to their health care use. Other studies suggest that incarcerated people may lose trust in the healthcare system due to coercion (e.g., Kutnick et al., 2019) and that recently incarcerated people experience discrimination in healthcare settings, which may create additional barriers (Frank et al., 2014).

There was noticeably little reporting about **Personal Finance** challenges of re-entering society after incarceration, which appeared in fewer than 20 articles. Incarcerated people in the US face a heavy debt burden from three sources: debts directly from the criminal justice system, debts that compound while a person is incarcerated, and debts amassed during re-entry (Harper et al., 2021). Only the first of these was commonly raised in the articles we reviewed. They addressed fees, fines, and restitution people owed after release. In some states, these were a frequent cause of re-incarceration. Articles also reported on which states required these debts to be paid off before reinstating voting rights – in some cases, journalists reported on debt only in this context. We also saw some reporting on guaranteed income programs, bail alternatives, and organizations providing access to capital for starting businesses. However, we saw almost no coverage of the bigger picture: while incarcerated, people are frequently required to work for little to no pay (Hatton, 2018), making it difficult for an incarcerated person to save money or pay off old debts. In turn, this makes it nearly impossible to gain access to credit or banking services, or other paths to financial stability after release.

Several articles addressed re-entry challenges in a broad sense, without listing specific barriers. For example, these were a number of articles featuring formerly incarcerated artists and musicians that used their experience to bring attention to the problems of the carceral system and show what formerly incarcerated people are capable of.

A handful of stories mentioned the added challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic for re-entry. This reporting covered reduced job availability, as well as loss of funding and staff for social services that provide support to formerly incarcerated people (e.g., *Tulsa World*, 2020; Weisman, 2020). While there were many stories that talked about the risk of COVID-19 in prisons, only a few articles directly acknowledged its impact on re-entry.

## Themes in Reporting

In our analysis of story topics and framing, we found patterns in reporting styles and gaps. We present the most notable themes in this section.

### Structural Versus Single Issue

The challenges of re-entry after incarceration are not isolated. Advocacy organizations and scholars have long documented the systems that create overlapping and interlocking disadvantages for formerly incarcerated people (e.g., Anderson et al., 2018). In our dataset of 215 articles, we found that stories differed in their approach to the interrelated nature of re-entry challenges. About half of the articles focused on a single issue involved in re-entry.

These single-issue stories were scattershot – they covered a very wide variety of issues but neither identified the relationships among issues nor referred to an overarching system. The other half of the articles in our dataset mentioned two to five challenges each. Stories that covered multiple issues often took a more general approach. They tended to mention obstacles like Housing, Work, and Mental Health services as a related group of problems, often linked by a single statement. For instance, an editorial contained this sentence: “Often, they need help in finding jobs, finishing school, reconnecting with family and staying out of trouble through mental health and substance abuse services” (*Tulsa World*, 2020). However, this laundry-list style of reporting was more common than deeper exploration of the connections between overlapping issues.

Some topics were more likely to be the only subject of a story, whereas others regularly appeared in conjunction with other issues. Voting appeared as a single issue in 45 articles and Work was the sole issue discussed in 22 stories. Meanwhile, other issues were more likely to be grouped together. Thirty-one articles paired Housing and Work, for instance. Some issues that are related were only occasionally connected in stories about re-entry. For instance, only 18 articles connected Mental Health and Addiction.

### Self-Contradictory Reporting

Many articles relied on tropes, devices, or techniques that seemed to contradict a story's intent. When we compared a story's tone to its structure or language, these components did not always appear to serve the same goals. We spotlight two stories to examine the nature of these contradictions.

First, we compare story structure and goals in “Re-entering society during a pandemic,” which discusses barriers to employment for people who were previously incarcerated (Leathers, 2020). The opening lines simultaneously introduce readers to a person and their conviction history. The second sentence in this story reads,

“A 46-years-old [sic], Alvarado has been to jail a handful of times. He's a convicted felon, having charges of grand theft auto and several drug accounts [sic]. Living life as a former inmate has presented a series of setbacks finding work and resources, which has only increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Nevertheless, later in the article the writer portrays the individual as a multifaceted person with positive characteristics:

“Alvarado is now studying to become a certified counselor in addiction through Additional [sic] Counselor USA, which offers online counseling courses. On May 15, Alvarado celebrated one year of being sober. Nowadays, he finds escape in God, playing guitar, exercise and helping others, and the pandemic has only magnified his desire to help.”

By starting with the subject's record, the writer suggests that this is the most important information about them – even though the article ends with information about how to donate to support re-entry services. Putting it all together, this story relies on a structure that identifies the individual based on their incarceration history, while at the same time



arguing that the person is more than their convictions and is experiencing unfair discrimination.

We also found that many stories used terminology that undermine their goals. These stories attempted to raise awareness about an unfair issue experienced by people re-entering society, but relied on dehumanizing language to describe the subjects. *Insider NJ* (2020) reprinted a press release from a county government titled, “Freeholder board passes resolution supporting the elimination of private for-profit prisons in New Jersey,” which read:

“...adopted a resolution supporting the elimination of private for-profit prisons in the state of New Jersey. The resolution notes the historic legacy of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which ended slavery in the United States. It also addresses the ‘Punishment Clause’ of the amendment and how it has effectively relegated **inmates**, who are disproportionately people of color, to a virtual free source of labor – thereby extending the legacy and effects of slavery.” (emphasis added)

This passage exemplifies the contradiction of language and intent by calling for improved treatment of formerly incarcerated people, but fails to use humanizing language.

### Success Story Reporting

About a third of the articles in our dataset were “success stories” that highlighted an individual overcoming an obstacle or a program that supports individuals re-entering society. Usually, the programs worked with a local carceral facility to serve a need unmet by the system. These services varied widely: they offered resources for continuing education, provided free cell phones, granted seed funding to start small businesses, taught a specific skill like landscaping or cooking, supported a person in building a political election campaign for local government, or hired primarily formerly incarcerated people as part of a business model.

Some “success story” articles included elements of Solutions Journalism, a reporting approach that centers responses to social problems rather than only explaining the causes and effects of these issues. McIntyre and Lough (2019) explain that journalism that uses this framework should include the causes of a social problem but pay more attention to the response to the issues, so that the problem-solving process is central to the story.

In most cases, articles in our dataset represented seemed to have the goal of bringing attention to something or someone meeting a need or overcoming a challenge in the context of re-entry. However, most lacked some critical aspects of Solutions Journalism, such as data on the effectiveness or limitations of solutions, or explanations for ways news users can contribute to solutions.



# Opportunities for Journalism

Our study of US news stories about formerly incarcerated people and re-entry into society showed that there are some gaps in reporting. We discuss some opportunities to fill these gaps.

## Connect the Dots

News coverage of formerly incarcerated people's experience of re-entry called attention to a wide range of barriers that complicate this process. However, the reporting in our data set generally lacked clear and consistent analysis of larger systems, treating individual issues as if they were isolated. The framing of re-entry problems as isolated issues may also suggest that formerly incarcerated people are responsible for finding their own solutions. It's clear from advocacy groups and researchers that the US carceral system fundamentally diminishes people's ability to develop productive, healthy, and independent lives as they transition back into communities (Taliaferro, et al. 2016; Baer, et al., 2006). The carceral system is also built on institutionalized racism and other forms of oppression, which has an effect on the challenges people encounter during re-entry (e.g., Equal Justice Initiative, n.d., Prison Policy Initiative, n.d.). Barriers tend to compound one another, a fact that is frequently missing from news stories. Our research suggests that reporting should address the links between individuals' re-entry struggles with the carceral system, as well as the exacerbating and multiplying nature of these problems. For instance, reporting should acknowledge how struggles to find stable employment complicate access to housing and healthcare. Providing international comparisons or solutions can also help contextualize barriers that may be unusual or unnecessary.

## Be Consistent with Tone, Structure, & Intent

We found that news stories advocated for reforming the carceral system and the re-entry process, while at the same time relying on tropes and techniques that conflict with this message and justify the status quo. These aspects of any story should reinforce each other: stories about re-entry should use language that humanizes their subjects, demonstrating that previous convictions are not the only thing that matter about a person. Reporters should also pay attention to story structure, and avoid placing details about convictions when a person is first introduced to readers. Journalists should also reflect on whether it's necessary to include details about the offense at all. And if that information must be included, we encourage including the minimum degree of detail needed.

## Focus on Solutions

News stories explored the nature of the issues involved in re-entry and sometimes discussed responses to these problems. There is a great deal of potential for strengthening coverage of solutions for re-entry issues. In a series of interviews with practitioners, McIntyre and Lough (2019) identified several themes of Solutions Journalism. They said this approach should:

- Advance goals of fairness and balance by reporting on both successes and failures, rather than focusing on conflict as a news value.

- Focus on the solution, rather than stopping at defining the problem or cause.
- Present the solution as tangible, rather than hypothetical.
- Include all five Ws, with a heavy focus on **how** a solution is implemented.
- Be rigorous and include replicable evidence of impact.
- Include the limitations of a solution, and not report on a single success story as an isolated case.
- Be usable and facilitate engagement, although what that means can vary. Many journalists wanted to provide people with guides to replicate the approach, while others stopped at providing mobilizing information through hyperlinks.

Featuring this information seems to help people feel less negative about a story and has large effects on attitudes towards both the story and the solution presented (McIntyre, 2019).

### **Be Aware of Choices in Medium**

Video and audio can give news users different types of information, compared to print pieces. When a visual or audio story features a formerly incarcerated person, it can help to humanize that individual by showing a great deal more information about them. However, we encourage being mindful to present them using the same techniques journalists would use for any other interviewee, such as using flattering lighting and taking care to avoid images or editing that may prejudice viewers.



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# Appendix

## Methods

Here we provide a full account of our methods to select the articles in our dataset and our analytical approach.

Our project goal was to learn about the landscape of news coverage on re-entry from the carceral system in the US. To keep the scope for this study manageable, we did a case study of local news produced in nine states. We selected these states because they each stand out in their relation to the carceral system (Table 2).

Table 2. Rationale for selecting states to include in media analysis.

State	Reason for selecting
<b>Arizona</b>	Has the highest incarceration rate of Hispanic people (Nellis, 2016).
<b>Arkansas</b>	Has the second-highest percentage of adults on parole (Kaeble & Bonczar, 2017).
<b>California</b>	Is making considerable inroads into reform, after receiving a pilot grant to improve the use of fines and fees in 2016 (DOJ, 2016). The state made it easier to clear records, removed some offender registries, and created an education and employment program within the California Conservation Corps in 2019 (Newsom, 2019), and re-enfranchised parolees in 2020 (McGreevy, 2020).
<b>Georgia</b>	Has the largest percentage of adults on probation, as well as the largest percentage in community supervision (i.e., probation and parole combined) (Kaeble & Bonczar, 2017).
<b>Louisiana</b>	Is making considerable inroads into reform, starting with a pilot grant to improve the use of fines and fees in 2016 (DOJ, 2016). The state has recently instituted a pre-release mentorship and education program (DeRobertis, 2020) and is currently considering a “clean slate” law to simplify clearing records (Justice & Accountability Center of LA, n.d.).
<b>New Jersey</b>	Has the largest racial disparity in the country, with more than 12x as many African American and Black adults incarcerated as White – although Black incarceration rates are below the national average (Nellis, 2016). Prison populations have declined in recent years.
<b>Oklahoma</b>	Has incarcerated one in fifteen adult Black men, the most of any state (Nellis, 2016). Oklahoma also has the highest incarceration rate of White adults.
<b>Pennsylvania</b>	Has the highest percentage of adults on parole (Kaeble & Bonczar, 2017).
<b>Texas</b>	Is making considerable inroads into reform, starting with a pilot grant to improve the use of fines and fees in 2016 (DOJ, 2016; Greener, 2018).

Using LexisNexis Newsdesk, Knology pulled every article published in 2020 from news publications located in the selected states which included one or more of a selection of terms (Table X). This search resulted in a set of 13,434 articles. From this set, a researcher then pulled either all stories published in 2020 (as of early December) or the most recent 1,000 stories, whichever number was smaller. This process resulted in 7,226 articles to review.

Table 3. Search terms used in LexisNexis to identify articles about re-entry.

Search Terms:
"formerly incarcerated"
"probation"
"parole"
"ex-con"
"former prisoner"
"parolee"
"ex-felon"
"re-entry"
"reintegration"
"recidivism"

In some cases, the search terms did not result in articles about formerly incarcerated people re-entering society. For example, "re-entry" appeared in articles describing states' plans for opening up schools and businesses after a COVID-19 lockdown, the term "probation" appeared in the title of a probation officer who was featured for retiring, or a story detailed a school athlete being on "probation" from playing in matches. To increase the relevance of our set of articles, a Knology researcher reviewed snapshots (article title and sentences including search terms) of all articles in Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software program.

Articles each received one of four tags: potentially about re-entry, about criminal justice but not about re-entry, irrelevant, and duplicate (Table 4). Across states, the majority of articles that were about the carceral system focused on specific incidents or court rulings without commenting on the system in general. Almost every state had some form of recurring, often weekly, crime report or "most wanted" list. A few states had noticeable trends. For example, New Jersey's recent legalization of marijuana led to many mentions of the War on Drugs, minimum sentencing, and coverage of racism in the carceral system. Or in Georgia, there was a noticeable number of articles discussing the future and the ethics of the death penalty. This process winnowed our dataset to 359 articles that were potentially about re-entry.

Table 4. Breakdown of articles after relevance review with Dedoose.

State	Total articles	Potentially about re-entry	Criminal justice, but not re-entry	Irrelevant	Duplicate
Arizona	969	39	759	61	110
Arkansas	225	6	212	2	5
California	1,000	66	690	19	225
Georgia	471	19	439	12	2
Louisiana	1,003	29	864	17	93
New Jersey	997	56	571	18	353
Oklahoma	562	33	450	49	30
Pennsylvania	1,000	61	762	110	67
Texas	1,001	50	776	28	147
<b>(Total)</b>	7,226	<b>359</b>	5,520	315	1,032

We were able to review 326 of the 359 articles. (Full text was unavailable for 16, and we identified another 27 duplicates in this round of analysis.) Upon a full read, we eliminated another 111 articles due to irrelevance. This left 215 articles (Table 5) to organize using a codebook developed collaboratively by the Knology research team. Analysis occurred in an excel worksheet by the same Knology researcher who initially reviewed the articles.

Table 5. Number of articles in the final dataset for each state.

State	Number of articles
Arizona	26
Arkansas	4
California	42
Georgia	13
Louisiana	16
New Jersey	26
Oklahoma	18
Pennsylvania	48
Texas	22
<b>Total</b>	<b>215</b>



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