A Study On The Causes of Recidivism in Massachusetts

(EPOCA Project)

A Reach for Community Advancement

An Interactive Qualifying Project Proposal

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Abstract:

The purpose of this IQP was to study the problem of recidivism in the United States. We hypothesized that by improving the quantity and quality of Re-entry programs as well as changing certain policies relating to Criminal Offender Record Information (CORI) Reports in Massachusetts, many ex-offenders would have a greater chance at reintegration into our society after incarceration as opposed to returning to a life of crime.
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Chapter One: Introduction

The United States prison system is one of the worst prison systems in the world. In comparison to other countries, the United States has more individuals incarcerated per person than any other. As of 2006, the incarceration rate in the United States was roughly 1 out of 136 adults.[33] The “World Prison Population List (fourth edition)” shows how while some countries have similar incarceration rates, most of the countries of the world have much lower rates. [31] With this high of an incarceration rate then it makes sense that in the near future many adults will be released back into society. Unfortunately, due to the stigma that has been associated with having spent a portion of a life in prison, or even just having a criminal record in general, these newly released ex-prisoners are finding it increasingly difficult to reenter the workforce. Our project addresses these issues by studying the implementation of a system in which ex-offenders would be able to be educated in certain skills that may help their future in the business world. As WPI students, we are aware of how useful having technical skills can be to functioning successfully in everyday life. As a result of this we chose the key element of this project to be teaching computer skills to ex-offenders. The realization of this project would greatly help a growing population of people adversely affected by the United States prison and judicial system.

In recent years there have been programs created in an attempt to deal with the problem that our project addressed. Unfortunately, the programs put in place, such as the Ready4Work Initiative which was established in 2004, are often under funded and are narrow in their scope for whom they wish to help.[9] Also, many of these programs only exist within the walls of the prison and as a result, once the prisoners are released they find that they are once again without help. This is not to imply that the prisoners are completely alone in their struggle; one group in particular which has shown a keen interest in assisting ex-offenders in the Worcester area is the group Ex-prisoners and Prisoners Organizing for Community Advancement, or EPOCA. Since this group works on a daily basis with ex-prisoners to organize various community projects they are the target audience for this project. In addition to EPOCA, anyone with a desire to learn
more information about the criminal justice system in the United States could benefit from studying the results of our project. Hopefully, in the future, EPOCA will be able to utilize our results from this project to assist it in its goal of helping ex-offenders, and also by increasing its knowledge of the problem that they are working to fix.

Unfortunately the goals of the project did not come to fruition in the time allotted for reasons that are detailed later in this paper. There were economic and time factors that prevented us from creating our proposed computer-tutoring site, and there are underlying factors that suggest that the program is fundamentally flawed. There will be further discussion of these factors, along with the actual outcome, the intended outcome and the ideal outcome, detailed later in this paper.

The ultimate goal of the project and that of its associated organizations is to improve the lives of ex-offenders who have paid their debt to society. The problems faced are those to do with the CORI report and those created by lack of proper job training. A solution will include a reform of the CORI system and the realization of a rehabilitation program for those who desire it. Chapter Two will look at the CORI report problem, and Chapter Three will outline the ideas behind, and the ground work for a rehabilitation program. The improvement of these target areas would greatly improve the lives of many in our own community as well as society as a whole.

**Chapter Two: The Problem with CORI**

Ex-offender reintegration programs, whether they start during or after incarceration, are a major challenge that have not achieved much progress or success in the United States in the past twenty years, as shown by the high recidivism rate of approximately 70%. This project worked to address the problem of recidivism by concentrating on CORI reform and by helping those affected by CORI in our local community. Much of the research accumulated suggests there are issues that need to be resolved pertaining to the Criminal Offender Record Information (CORI) report. There are many individuals who feel that this law’s power is not adjusted properly, and call for
it to be reformed. The following chapter will discuss background information pertaining to CORI as well as problems with the way CORI is currently implemented.

The United States has more prisoners than any other country in both number of inmates and percent of the population incarcerated. [23, 31, 32] For two decades the incarceration rates in the US have been increasing. Also, the only information about recidivism released by the government to the public shows that the only change in the high recidivism rate (~70%) has been a slight increase since 1983. [14, 3] Two questions are suggested by this statistic; “Why are so many people going to prison in the first place?” and “Why does such a large population get re-incarcerated?” The specific part of the problem we addressed was recidivism, which is affected by the community, the laws in place (CORI) and the prison system itself. We specifically addressed CORI, due to it being a major issue in the state of Massachusetts as it seems to only make it more difficult for re-entry into society.

We decided that this problem needed addressing after hearing about Criminal Offender Record Information searches, also known as CORI reports. CORI is a database used in Massachusetts by authorities, employers, and others with approved access that is a summation of any number of criminal charges that one may have accumulated in the past. It consists of court-generated information about the incidents that it describes and is not always accurate. This information is frequently accessed when submitting job applications and as a result, has had a very negative effect on the ability for ex-offenders to reintegrate themselves into society. One person we interviewed had some personal experience with “CORI discrimination”, which we discuss later in the paper. Since it can take up to 15 years for a CORI record to be sealed, these records can have devastating effects on those that have them, as well as their families.[38] Massachusetts law does not allow a record of a misdemeanor to be sealed until 10 years after the final disposition. For felonies, the wait is 15 years.[35] Also, since CORI is specific to Massachusetts it presents an obstacle for us to overcome in our project. The CORI Reader, which was put together by Ernest Winsor from the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute [35], provides a look at a lot of the information that is required to understand CORI, and also assesses some major problems with the current system.
The CORI Reader states that the CORI was created with two purposes; the first was to make the criminal justice system more efficient in its ability to quickly acquire information about possible criminals, the second was to ensure the privacy of those who would be affected by CORI. The CORI Reader also provides information about who is able to access CORI, citing groups such as Criminal Justice Agencies, individuals required to have access by other statutes, government agencies, families of homicide victims, and the CORI victim themselves. In addition, it summarizes some of the laws in place that help protect criminal rights when accessing CORI. For example, the state anti-discrimination statute forbids employers from asking potential employees questions about certain past offenses including those where no conviction resulted, as well as a first conviction of some minor misdemeanors, or any conviction that had occurred more than 5 years ago. This previous paragraph indicates that some efforts have been made to reform CORI, but there are still a number of problems with it.

The CORI has the possibility of hurting those that it was originally supposed to protect. The CORI reader addresses a few of these points and they are as follows. The CORI mainly consists of court-generated information in the form of computer codes that could potentially be misinterpreted by the employer in question. Examples of this include a case being dismissed, someone being found not guilty, or a case being continued without a finding. CORI can also be inaccurate since it does not use photographs, fingerprints, or any identifier other than the person's name and date of birth. This can sometimes result in one person's CORI being mistaken for another's, which ironically was part of the reason they started CORI in the first place. A final problem with the CORI report is the excessive amount of time a crime may stay on an individual's report. The information stays on their record for many years past the initial date on which the crime was committed, many even say for too long. A 19 year old who receives a felony conviction will have a CORI record until the age of at least 34. These characteristics of CORI contribute directly towards recidivism in Massachusetts.

When someone is released from prison, the system should help to integrate them back into society so that they can be a productive member of the work force instead of a drain on the economy. The harder this is for someone who has lived a life a delinquency, the easier it is for them to give up and go back to what comes easy. In their case, this
could be a return to the world of crime. This is where CORI reports act as an obstacle for rehabilitation, which was not its intended purpose. Even Burger King and Dunkin’ Donuts check CORI. Even three WPI students with majors in science and access to all the computers and phones needed, not to mention a number to give a call back to, had a hard time finding companies that would hire people with a CORI record. Also, our search was not limited to Worcester, while most ex-offenders probably don’t have the luxury of being able to move wherever they want for a job.

We went to a protest in Boston, which we will describe in depth later, that was lobbying for a law against CORI discrimination. The law proposed would call for employers not being able to check a CORI until after they decided that an applicant is qualified. This method, as compared to having a law that simply states it is not allowed, would keep offenders from having to prove that they were not picked because of their CORI record. Also, it would keep them from having to find the time and money to sue, which can be difficult if also faced with the challenge of prolonged unemployment. Furthermore, many companies would be able to get around this without much effort. Our interview with ex-offender, Yakov Kronrod, illustrated this fact. In his interview, he cited multiple cases of CORI discrimination with an example including having his calls ignored after disclosing to possible employers that he had a CORI record. In addition, he has also been forced to resign in the past when employers discovered his record even after they already hired him, and were pleased with his work. He is someone that got out of prison and decided not to go back. Since then, he has run for city council and has held numerous jobs despite the burden of CORI. Yakov Kronrod managed to do this after spending many years on the other side of discrimination. He was lucky enough, fortunately, to have a better support system along with a more comprehensive education than most ex-offenders. These factors helped him decide to join the group EPOCA, which today rallies to reform the CORI system and assist in the daily lives of ex-offenders.

The incarceration rate in this country is high for a number of different reasons. China, the country with the second largest amount of incarcerated people, has approximately 0.11% of their population incarcerated while the US has 0.83% incarcerated, and that number is increasing. [31, 32] While the effects of re-entry of ex-
offenders into society can be dire, the people who want to be rehabilitated and cannot due to legal or societal reasons are a part of a more pressing problem.

For this project we decided to concentrate on rehabilitation in order to combat recidivism and help those that want to be helped. Ex-offender re-integration is a difficult battle in Massachusetts. While CORI is the main reason, the fact that a few small groups are the only people trying to get ex-offenders on their feet is also a limiting factor. Upon exiting the penal system in Massachusetts, there are no programs available for ex-offenders that help them learn a skill or get a job. Without people to go to for support, it is a lot to ask someone who could not achieve holding a steady job and being a law-abiding citizen to do what they previously could not, especially with the added hindrance of a CORI report. There are many obstacles in the way of reaching this goal. For one, some people do not want to be helped, so we cannot help them, and some people who do want help, don’t follow through. According to a police officer and former prison guard named Officer Spellman who we interviewed, ex-offenders may eventually reach a point where they mature to where they are able to say to themselves that they do not want to live the life of a criminal as well as a consistent jail resident. It is then that he thinks they are ready to be rehabilitated. Unfortunately, according to both Officer Spellman and Yakov Kronrod, people reach this point at different points in their lives and there are no tell tale signs that indicate when that point has been reached. This makes it hard to find people who are serious about a program. Another problem is funding. It is hard to get people to believe in ex-offenders, which is obviously why many jobs turn down people with CORI reports. Both the problems with the system as a whole and the problems we faced head on with our project both stem from the same frame of mind and ignorance that the public has regarding this issue.

Chapter Three: The Current Re-entry Situation

In recent years, as a result of the prison system growing at such an alarming rate in the 1990s, there has been much debate over what to do with this growing subset of our population. Around the year 2004, “around 600,00 men and women (over 1,600 per day)
would be released from prisons compared to around 170,000 released in the 1980s”. [15] This figure is alarmingly high when you must then consider the difficulties facing these ex-offenders in successfully re-entering society. The Bureau of Statistics in 2001 concluded that “Of 459,000 US Parolees who were discharged from community supervision in 2000, within 18 months 42% were returned to incarceration – 11% with a new sentence and 31% in some other way.” [15] In response to these figures, an increased focus on “re-entry”, as it's been called, has developed in recent years in order to attempt to correct this. The focus of this chapter are the various problems in the rehabilitation system in the United States at this time as well as a critique on the re-entry initiative that is currently in place.

3.1 The Lack Of Rehabilitation

In the book, “The Perpetual Prisoner Machine”, Joel Dyer argues that due to fiscal reasons, cultural outlook, and extreme punishments for many non-violent offenders, the prisons are filling up quicker every day and there does not look to be much effort to stop it. [6] The title of the book refers to the system we have in place now in the United States and how it seems to be supported in ways that will allow it grow in the future. It does this by rewarding those who invest in its growth while preventing those affected by it (the ex-offenders) from making significant changes in their lives which can often lead to more crime. [6] Dyer's belief that there is not much effort to help prevent incarceration these days is based mainly on financial reasons, due to money being put towards making prisons to deal with the large prison population instead of towards rehabilitation. He not only explains that there is not much being done to change this, but also that he believes that at the rate we are going, in 20 years our funding for prisons will rise to the point where it will “…result in… the consumption of most of the tax dollars now being collected by our state governments.” [6] In addition, the right to vote is taken away in 48 states for felons serving time. [10] Even after their release, some states continue to deny the right to vote while on probation or parole. Two states even deny the right permanently after incarceration. [10] This puts much less pressure on politicians nationwide to help ex-offenders. Dyer states that if this is allowed to continue then, “…40 percent of the next generation of black men will not have the right to vote.” [6] The high
recidivism rate could be attributed to this lack of representation since those affected by the problem are not able to actively participate in government.

Fortunately, Joel Dyer is not alone in his call for change. Author Eric Schlosser, who has written many successful books, most notably *Fast Food Nation*, on topics such as immigrant workers and the fast food industry, is currently writing a book on the prison-industrial complex. In an article published in the Atlantic in 1998 Schlosser wrote, ‘The 'prison-industrial complex' is not only a set of interest groups and institutions; it is also a state of mind. The lure of big money is corrupting the nation's criminal-justice system, replacing notions of safety and public service with a drive for higher profits. The eagerness of elected officials to pass tough-on-crime legislation — combined with their unwillingness to disclose the external and social costs of these laws — has encouraged all sorts of financial improprieties.” [24]

Schlosser’s points are congruent with and addressed by Dyer’s arguments. According to Dyer, the people with the power to make the change do not due to financial interests. [6] While this is morally questionable, it is easy to see why someone who is trying to survive in a free market society is going to do the financially profitable action, which in this case causes them to become a proponent of more incarceration and lower living standards for convicts. In 1997, $150 billion was expended annually for criminal justice. [6] The private prison system keeps growing due to the large amount of people being incarcerated. Unfortunately, due to the interest of stockholders, private prisons tend to be less secure, have maximum-security offenders mixed with lower security offenders, and living conditions that are not up to standards. [6] They also get paid $5-7 an hour to take care of prisoners by the state but could potentially spend whatever they want and keep the rest as profit. [6] Due to fact that the guards there are private employees and that the people running it have invested financial interest, private prisons tend to be much less regulated than the government requires for public prisons. Although private prisons have caused many problems [6], they continue to exist due to the need for space in the United States for incarcerated prisoners. Unfortunately, it is not only big business that contributes to the overlying problem. Both the media and politicians are affected by the same dilemma. The public demands the media be violent and full of crime. In polls, Dyer
shows how people say they want less violence on the news and in media yet when the media does this, they get less viewers and thus less income. [6] This is an example of people saying that they want one thing, but voting the other way with their dollar. As corporations, media will produce whatever makes the most money, which leaves it up to the people to not support it. Politicians are in a similar situation. People want to hear them say they are fighting crime and keeping criminals off the street. This means that if a politician feels that our punishments for certain crimes are too harsh and that reform needs to be done to keep people out of prison, they will probably not get elected. [6] People do not want to hear a politician talk about the financial reasons for high incarceration; they only want to hear that their streets are safe. Unfortunately, this both causes them to pay higher taxes and effectively be part of the reason that some minor offenders and some would be rehabilitated citizens have a much harder time than they should, thus making the decision to return to crime more appealing. [6] This makes law reform difficult since the politicians will not get elected if they talk about it while people pay to keep negative, violent, criminal ideas on our TVs, in our newspapers, and in our theaters, which only reminds people to tell their politicians to keep violence off their street. Dyer points out very clearly the reasons that our incarceration rate keeps increasing as well as why no one is doing much about recidivism. The many facets of this problem, while all connected, require attention individually.

3.2 Current National Re-entry Program

This is not to say that nothing is being done to address the problem. While some prisons, according to our interviewee Officer Spellman, do have programs started by employees to help prepare the offenders for re-entry, the national program is the result of the need for recidivism reform in the United States. Prison reformers have been increasing focus on national re-entry programs in the past few years. [28] Unfortunately, these reformers are under heavy fire from others who strictly believe in the theory of desistance. Desistance is the idea that people change without the assistance of correction intervention and instead mature and grow out of crime of their own accord. [15] Although, it would make sense to think that this may assist the idea of re-entry and rehabilitation in general, it actually does the opposite. After all, since supporters of
desistance theory make the argument that criminals will naturally stop their involvement in criminal activities, why would the government be inclined to spend federal funding on rehabilitation programs? Despite the prison reformers who believed in desistance theory, some prison re-entry programs have been created. The main program that has been set up is the Re-entry Initiative, sometimes referred to as Ready4Work, which was established in 2004 in President Bush's State Of The Union address. This program aimed to assist ex-offenders by enrolling them in various employment-based programs that would hopefully increase their worth in the job market in future years.

After two years of operation, a report was done on the success of the Re-entry Initiative program thus far. It has a lot of valuable information for the purposes of our project. First, the program functions by contacting prisoners while they are still in prison. They do this by developing relations with Department of Correction officers so that they can make contact with the prisoners earlier in the hopes that this will have a greater effect on the actions they take when they leave. The program consists of training programs for many areas including a job readiness course that involves a series of workshops designed to improve skills such as interviewing, resume writing, work attitudes, and behavior. In addition to this the program assigns each participant a caseworker that regularly meets with the ex-offender in order to make sure they are still on the appropriate track to success. The caseworker is an integral part of the program and as a result of this, has caused the program to be likened to parole in some cases. This could be considered a bad thing. As Criminologist James Austin says, “even though 're-entry' has become the new buzzword in correctional reform the term is often simply just another word for parole supervision which many have tried to discredit and dismantle.”

[15] Finally, the Re-entry Initiative program has many different companies it works with that are willing to accept the participants into full time or part time employment. These jobs were also frequently contacted by the caseworker of in order to gauge their progress and quality of work.

At this point in time the Re-entry Initiative program has a 59% employment success rate. [13] This seems like a solid figure but when you consider that there are roughly 600,000 prisoners released yearly, there should be something done to improve it.
Unfortunately, this program is one of the few that has been approved for federal funding and is the only one of which studies have been done. Therefore, it is difficult to decide where to go in the future in terms of re-entry programming, since there have not been huge efforts made to advance the field.

Chapter Four: Our Project

In this chapter we will discuss our efforts toward helping our community. Working with Steve O’Neill and Yakov Kronrod of EPOCA we designed and attempted to create a program to teach computer skills to ex-offenders. Our efforts did not come to fruition for several reasons. This chapter will outline the work we did to address the problems presented by CORI in its current state, the work we did to implement a rehabilitation program, and the problems that we encountered.

4.1 Addressing CORI

Realization of the program began with research on the CORI report and what it entailed. All information regarding the CORI was to be collected to shed light onto the obstacles that our target demographic faced. Meetings were held with Steve O’Neill of EPOCA and his associates to find out what parameters this program would cover. Other programs of the same nature were researched in an attempt to discover trends that could be useful in the creation of this program and to find what common factors allow ex-offender programs to succeed. A list of approximately 200 businesses was acquired from EPOCA and surveyed regarding their human resource department. The goal was to see what role a prior criminal history played in the hiring process, and what effects the CORI report had on the chances of being hired. In our survey, we also attempted to find out what would help convince businesses to hire ex-offenders and some evidence of tax break incentives for those who participated was discovered.

In addition to written research on the CORI problem, we joined EPOCA for a protest for CORI reform in April of 2007. There was a march around the Boston
Commons followed by a rally in the commons. The protest was lobbying the idea that the 15 year record on CORI reports for felonies and the 10 years for misdemeanors be reduced to 7 and 3 years, respectively. To some who were protesting though, this was still too long. They were also lobbying for a law that would prevent CORI discrimination by employers. We also went around to congressmen and senators in Boston, along with some EPOCA members, and brought CORI reform up to them. The ones that would see us listened intently and had no arguments against anything said about the need for CORI reform. Unfortunately getting laws passed is a long, hard process and without multiple politicians behind an issue it does not pass easily, or sometimes even come up for the possibility of being passed. While Governor Deval has expressed some interest in CORI reform, it definitely does not get the attention it needs.

4.2 Our Re-entry Program

The original goal of our IQP was to create a program, or at least the framework thereof, that would assist ex-offenders in re-integrating themselves into society, specifically by aiding them in finding employment. With the increasing number of unemployed ex-offenders, it is becoming imperative that a program is created that will assist them in re-entering into society. Our plan was to allow ex-offenders, who would be screened by EPOCA, to work in a computer lab with a class size of about ten. The lab would be comprised of Windows XP compatible computers that would be running Microsoft’s online training software, and have classes that would be taught by volunteers. After an indeterminate amount of time that would be dependent on the time put forth and learning curve, the students would take an exam online to become a Microsoft Certified Technology Specialist. If they passed the test they would be rewarded with an official Microsoft certificate, and if not they would be given a certificate of commitment to rehabilitation for their time and efforts.

The program would not only make an ex-offender more desirable in the eyes of an employer, but would also give valuable experience in basic prevalent software. The certificate would be something that an ex-offender could present to an employer as proof of their intent to be productive and that they can commit to tasks and complete them.
Many books and online articles were read in order to develop a background on the situation at hand. Books were withdrawn from the Worcester Polytechnic Institute library and through a library network. These were selected to give background information about ethical, financial, and judicial obstacles. There was a need for statistics regarding the program’s parameters in order to evaluate what problems existed and would be encountered by the ex-offender in the job market and society. Even though our project had a specific goal, we broadened our research focus so that we could attain a better view of the problem at hand.

Background underway, the task of designing the program began. The program was to include a computer lab, volunteers, software and a curriculum. It was suggested by EPOCA that the Second Baptist Church in Worcester, near the EPOCA headquarters, be used for our project. They were in possession of a computer lab, which would prove to be a basis for construction. The lab was maintained by volunteers on the church grounds and would be additionally aided by volunteers from the church and from members at EPOCA.

Software programs were researched to find what would be most beneficial to teach to the students. Companies of interest included but were not limited to Apple Computers, Microsoft, and Sun Microsystems. Microsoft was chosen for its business sector dominance and large online program of education. Once the software manufacturer was chosen, the computer lab was to be outfitted with the proper hardware and programs. The Microsoft eLearning program and online database of program tutorials was considered and the degree chosen as most appropriate was the Microsoft Certified Technology Specialist (MCTS). There were free subscriptions to introductory programs and the remainder was available at forty dollars for a three-year license.

To gain insight into the judicial system and the plausibility of the project, a Worcester Polytechnic Institute police officer, Officer Spellman, was interviewed. As an apposing viewpoint to his, the vice president of EPOCA, Yakov Kronrod, was also interviewed. While their opinions differed greatly, they provided insight into the nature of the mind of an ex-offender and helped to understand the dynamic of the proposed program. Prior to the interviews, the possibility of educating ex-offenders on the
Worcester Polytechnic Institute main campus was considered. A consensus was reached that the benefits would not necessarily outweigh the risks involved, and an intense screening process would have needed to be developed in order to discern which ex-offenders could be trusted on campus. The idea was no longer entertained after the interviews.

As a possible pool of volunteers, a coeducation community service orientated fraternity of Worcester Polytechnic Institute was contacted. Alpha Phi Omega was asked if they would like to participate in the program. They were to be already proficient in the computer technology and would provide support and guidance to the ex-offenders while working in the computer lab, but unfortunately they were not interested in assisting and did not specify why.

### 4.3 Problems Encountered

There were several major problems with the realization of this project. The computer lab was a major source of resistance. Contacting and meeting the individuals involved with the church took much longer than expected. After many weeks of unanswered phone calls coupled with the absence of critical individuals, access to the lab was finally acquired. The lab had been fully disassembled and packed poorly into a small space. After weeks of waiting for it to become sorted out, there were finally ten computers ready to go. However, the system requirements for the Microsoft software required that Windows XP be installed on all the computers and that they have 1024x786 resolution monitors. The monitors that were currently in place were outdated and needed to be replaced. Eleven new monitors with proper resolution were acquired as surplus from Worcester Polytechnic Institute. The computer towers themselves were also very outdated. The hard disk space capacity was critically low and the random access memory was insufficient to properly run the required operating system and programs. There was also a requirement of internet access to download the Microsoft teaching components and to take the certification tests, which was impeded by the lack of an internet connection at the church. These problems were consolidated in that they all require financial donations to be resolved.
In addition, the Microsoft software and online tests all cost money as well. Efforts were put forth to contact Microsoft and request for a donation of these materials to the church, since it is a nonprofit organization. Every computer needed several forty dollar licenses and an expensive operating system upgrade in addition to the hardware issues. Microsoft, however, did not acknowledge our attempts to contact them.

The surveying of businesses was also very difficult and took months. Many businesses would not pick up their telephones and messages were left only to not be returned. Several attempts were made to contact each business to gather information, but overall many were never able to be reached. Those that were contacted and questioned generated a base of employer data. Unfortunately, this was not as accurate a statistical survey as it could be, since the sample population had a common factor and was not as large as originally intended.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The problems at hand have been explained and our project detailed. This chapter will illustrate the opposing viewpoints on the current system as well as outline suggestions for creating a program for rehabilitation like we originally proposed.

As illustrated in Chapter 2 of our paper, it is apparent that there are some flaws in the current United States prison system and additionally in the ways that it deals with offenders after they are released. Unfortunately, the government funded program, the Re-entry Initiative, had its funding cut which is detrimental to its success. In addition to this, the general opinion on whether it is actually beneficial to help ex-offenders has also been up to debate. The conservative stance has often sided with the supporters of desistance theory, whereas the liberal stance is often on the side of rehabilitation with a focus on re-entry procedures. Our interviews with Yakov Kronrod and Officer Spellman also illustrated this split in opinions on prisoner reform.

The interview with Yakov Kronrod, an affiliate of EPOCA was an example of how someone affected by CORI reports feels about the current re-entry opportunities.
Mr. Kronrod's responses, unlike Officer Spellman's, tended to have a more optimistic view in terms of rehabilitation of ex-offenders. He felt that although the CORI report was originally designed with the purpose of aiding offenders, it has recently lost sight of that goal and is currently holding people back. As a result of this, he felt that increased efforts must be put towards assisting ex-offender's readjustment to society. Mr. Kronrod was a strong supporter of the program we tried to create because he felt it was a step in the right direction in terms of aiding ex-offenders. By taking a class and earning a certification, it shows that ex-offenders are attempting to invest in their future and making an effort to reform themselves. Overall, Mr. Kronrod was of the opinion that more effort must be made to offer job training for ex-offenders in order to successfully return them to society.

In contrast to Yakov Kronrod's interview, Officer Spellman's opinion of ex-offenders tended to side more with supporters of desistance theory. Officer Spellman was interviewed because he has 5 years of previous experience working in a house of corrections, and thus has a very knowledgeable background in terms of the prison system. Having dealt with re-entry programs first hand while working in the house of corrections, he felt that there was never a noticeable change in the behavior of those who participated in the programs versus those who had not. He also came to the conclusion that it was not really the fault of the program but the fault of the individual. Basically, that they would not change based on outside factors but instead must make the decision to change of their own accord. In his experience, Officer Spellman believes that this change often comes with age. In addition to this, Officer Spellman did not agree with us that our plan of teaching Microsoft Office would help many ex-offenders. Although, he did say it may be of aide to those offenders who have “grown out” of crime with age, it could also result that their increased age may alienate them from the program. For example, a 40 year old ex-offender with little education may not want to take a computer training program for fear of embarrassment if they were not confident in their current abilities. All of these factors help contribute to the idea of locking away offenders with the hope that they will grow old enough to realize that crime will not benefit them, and as a result our growing prison population continues to increase.
As the two interviews show, there is a stark contrast in the opinions of how to handle ex-offenders when trying to reintegrate them into society. It is not surprising that a person who was affected negatively by the system believes it should be changed whereas an officer who supports the system believes that it works. Unfortunately, these differences in opinions contribute to preventing changes from being made to a system that is causing problems for many ex-offenders. As our research showed, there is an alarmingly high recidivism rate and something must be done to counteract that. Since employment is the easiest way to keep someone off of the streets and thus away from a life of crime, it seems that this is the obvious direction. Since we were not able to fully complete our proposed computer lab, we instead tried to decide based on information acquired what the best post-incarceration system could be for optimal prisoner reintegration. This is described in the next section.

Our research and experience gained in taking on this project has given us some insight on what works well for reintegration as well as what is feasible. Our program consisted of two main goals. The first was to teach some computer skills that we determined would be beneficial for applying for a job and the second was to help ex-offenders get a job. This seemed like a good idea in theory but when the financial situation of most ex-offenders is taken into consideration its lack of feasibility becomes apparent. “Convicts are released from prison with considerable debts and financial liabilities.” [15] If they do not get a job relatively quickly they will either be forced to go back to a life of crime to get money or they will just go back to jail. Our original plan of teaching them computer skills seemed like a good idea but we had not taken into consideration the financial burden on the ex-offenders. It seems obvious now that most ex-offenders would not have the resources available to them to be able to enroll in a program without having a job. Since getting a job is the point of the program, this makes the teaching skills approach futile for people who have been released. For the ones who are really willing to give a life of legitimacy a chance, the obstacles in the way of getting a job could prove to be what leads them back into delinquency. Officer Spellman believed that people can “grow out” of crime but if these people were not able to find a job before the bills started to pile up they might not have a fair chance.
The best post-incarceration program possible is one that helps ex-offenders get jobs. The way that seems most effective is to have local programs that have multiple businesses that they keep in contact with that are willing to hire ex-offenders. In addition, ex-offenders should be screened to see which types of jobs they would be interested in working in. Our project assumed that all ex-offenders would enjoy an office job, which was the motivation for teaching them Microsoft Word. Since this may not be the case, it would be good to see which types of jobs most ex-offenders are interested in and having those jobs available as a resource continually. Just finding a job for them is not enough. If the first job they get is not right for them, an option to get help finding a different job might be the difference between re-integration and recidivism. Also, finding jobs available to ex-offenders above minimum wage is important. Higher pay means that the bills that have been piling up will be dealt with sooner, not to mention that the job would probably be taken more seriously, seeing as how there is more to lose than in a minimum wage job since they are much more common. Finally, it would be beneficial if the implemented program frequently contacted the ex-offender to gauge his progress in the workplace. That way the ex-offenders could be monitored to ensure they remain on the right course in life. This combination of ease of getting a job along with the support offered by the program after the ex-offender is employed will provide any ex-offender who is willing to put in the effort and be an upstanding citizen with what they need to succeed. By remaining employed and avoiding any financial burdens, it is more likely that these ex-offenders will avoid criminal activities and thus, will not return to jail. This could help lower Recidivism rates as well as improve society as a whole.
Appendices:

A.1: Interview With Officer Spellman

Prof. Selkow: I called on a woman in HR over here and said, 'uh do we have a check off box for convicted felons?' and they said yes, and the woman I talked to, I didn't get her name, said in all the years she has been doing this nobody has ever checked it. So clearly there is an incentive either to not apply for the job, or lying. And there is a my wife and I have background arguments, if you can believe it, uh, that our church teaching Sunday school is now CORI checking. No one has checked off for this thing, so but I think my problem with CORI is that you should be able to put it behind you at some point, depending on the crime, if it's not a crime against children then you should be able to say I served my time and now 20 years later get it off my record please. That's my background, where I came into this.

Ryan: So basically the first question that we have for you is what type of prison did you work in: was it a minimum security prison or maximum?

Officer Spellman: I worked in a House of Correction.

Ben: Is that a state one?

Sp: No, a House of Correction is run by a sheriff so the Worcester County House of Correction. It's generally short term.

R: So, like a holding cell?

Sp: No, no.

B: Like a smaller prison?

Sp: That's exactly what it is. You don't see anybody do over two and a half years. But what does that mean? Well, it means a whole lot of things. Let's do a little history here, a jail is different from a house of correction. A house of correction is very similar to a department of corrections facility. But a jail, what you're referring to is, a holding facility. You go to jail until you can meet bail, nobody has found you guilty of a crime when you're in jail. But you'll see them interchanged, okay? The technical phrase for what is up here in West Boylston is what's called The West Boylston Jail AND House of Corrections. Okay. So I work at a jail AND House of Correction.

S: Our common friend from your fraternity was in the West Boylston House of Correction.

R: Great, uh, so how many years did you work in this House of Correction?
Sp: 5.

R: 5 years. Okay, now was Ready4Work or any other type of similar program where they try to reintegrate and reeducate prisoners before releasing them back into society present there? Have you heard of any similar programs?

Sp: Uhh, they had something very similar to it. Um, and ...

R: Was it successful in any way, do you have any opinion on it?

Sp: We never saw a decrease in what you guys, you've seen the phrase recidivism.

R: Yes, that was one of our later questions.

Sp: We're looking at a 77% Recidivism rate. It's ridiculous. Has it changed? Probably not.

R: Now, do you feel it was the fault of the program? Like the program wasn't working well or do you feel it is the individual’s problem?

Sp: Pretty interesting question. Is it the individuals running the program or the individuals enrolled in the program? I'd say its the individuals who are enrolled in the program. It ultimately comes down to an individual choice.

R: Okay, my next question, Having worked with prisoners, is there a distinction to be seen between possibly those who could be rehabilitated in one of these programs?

Sp: No, not seen but is there something that is identifiable? It's very curious, the older they get, the less recidivism. You see the 19, 20, 21 year olds. You know what else?

B: Religion?

Sp: Not religion, how involved they get in Religion. It's really positive. Without a question, talk to anybody, the tool that works best is religion, because it really gets to the heart of the individuals. Ya know, anybody can say, 'oh I found God when I was in jail,” They can say that but the people who truly found God in Jail, they're not gonna come back. Yeah.

B: So, you haven't found people with such a desire to not go back to jail, I mean to work and to get a job that they're inspired by?

Sp: No. I didn't see that. Not at all. You see these guys, and if you haven't spoken to the inmates and, if they’re at all honest...

R: Well, all we really encountered are from EPOCA which is the organization we're working with, and they seem like good individuals. Maybe they haven't been in the house
of corrections for too long, maybe it was just a drug offense or something like that, where it just went off their record

S: If I could say something about your question, “Just a drug offense that goes on their record,” Um, I would make this, there is a certain orientation to that question that I've discussed with our common friend, and I don't see it as just a drug offense. It's interesting that you would say that. And I think the most powerful thing for him was going to a funeral and watching my cousin who died of a drug overdose and our common friend sold that drug. So I would have you rephrase that, “just a drug offense” I know all too much about people who have been harmed seriously by drugs.

R: I apologize for that.

S: No, no, don't apologize for it. I've had this discussion with our common friend and yeah, I'll be quiet.

B: Well just a misdemeanor for anything then, nothing specific.

R: Yes, because people who aren't hardcore felons, would you be against bringing prisoners on campus for a program where we try to re-educate them would be so unsafe even considering the potential benefits? Although, you do not agree that would be a cause for lowering recidivism, I mean we kind of had been leaning towards that in our project.

Sp: I'd be interested to see how many people go to jail from misdemeanors. I mean, we talk about overcrowded jails and all that stuff but um, are they taking a plea from a serious felony to go to a jail for a minor felony or misdemeanor?

B: Or a major misdemeanor, thats all there is, right? Felony and a Misdemeanor

Sp: correct, there isn't an intermediate

B: And how long does it stay on your record? 15 years for felonys, 10 years for misdemeanors.

Sp: Ya, I know, my point here is simply when I think of those misdemeanors that I see, oh assault and battery on a police officer is a misdemeanor

R: On a police officer?

Sp: yes, misdemeanor. You won't go to jail for that.

B: Does it depend on exactly how it happened because can't you have a felony charge for assault and battery?

Sp: No, the reason they call it, uh, aggravated assault, ya know, but assault and battery is a misdemeanor.
S: Getting in a fight?

Sp: Can you get arrested for it? No. You can get charged for a crime. Not for assault and battery.

S: Jay a guy that worked here, got involved. And he decked him. That's a misdemeanor?

B: That would still be a serious charge on a record you know?

Sp: Oh yeah, probably certain players will look at you a little oddly. Do I think it's serious? Well, it depends on the job you're applying for. I mean, if you're selling cars, no one really cares you know.

B: So you're saying, would you agree with like, well if you were in a car, right, and you um have your computer in your car. And you pull him up and he has a misdemeanor for assault and battery, you wouldn't think he was necessarily a violent person or anything like that?

Sp: Well, you'd treat them a little different but you know, assault and battery? No.

B: Okay.

Sp: I dunno, its a minor charge. I wack you in the back walking out of a classroom. And I walk over to you and you call a police officer. I tell you “geez I didn't witness this so I can't charge you with a crime” but you can, so you go down to the court house and you charge the guy who hit you in the back with an assault and battery. He gets, let's say, well there's 3 different findings that can come out of this: You get the guilty finding, the not guilty finding, or a continued without a finding. Stays on your record, you know, that you were charged with it. Um, But you know if I'm an employer or I'm somebody looking at their past and I ask you what the hell happened here with this assault and battery? And you say “Oh I was a jerk.” You explain it and I was really pissed at him because he dropped the ball on our project. And I pushed him from behind, you know, and he was embarrassed and he charged me with a crime. And I took a plea and it was continued without a finding. And that stays on your record. Right? You're potential employer looks at you and says “No, we're not even going to consider you for the job,” So that's his perogative isn't it? But generally, that's a reasonable explanation.

B: Technically, I think that's discrimination.

Sp: Excuse me?

B: Technically, it's discrimination,

S: You can't use that to not hire?
B: Well I think the way it works is you cannot decide not to hire just because of a criminal record, you have to have other reasons.

S: Oh, alright, I don't know my employment laws, you guys should be teaching me that, you know?

S: I know I kinda go around it but honestly guys, when I think about the guys that I dealt with who are your age in the house of corrections, really thats what I was dealing with. Now the majority of them are really punky kids you know? If you saw someone who came in from like a DOC facility who had done some time. You know, thats what they call it I've done my time, I've done my bid. You see, those guys, they get along just fine in the joint. You know, they just jerk you around about stuff, and let me give you an example of that. I ran education programs, I was the only guy in the joint besides the sheriff who had a degree. Ok so we wrote some grants, we got some teachers in there and a guy comes up to me and says "hey I want to get enrolled in the GED program" and he was a 40 year old guy. And I said "great we meet at lunch time" and he says "Naw I'm not gettin in that class room with all those 20 year olds." And then I almost said how come but then I thought, ya I understand that. You don't want to go in there because your gonna be stupid and you don't want to associate. So he says "can I just get the books and just study on my own in my cell?" And I said "sure." He then did his work and at the end of the period of time he takes the GED exam. You know it doesn't matter to me how many people take it and how many fail, it doesn't cost a thing. He takes the exam, he does pretty well on it. So he had some innate intelligence but anyways, he takes the exam he passes it. He's all happy and he says "Hey let's keep it between you and me that I got my GED while I was in the joint." "Sure, that no problem." I mean it's two grown up men, he comes up to me asks me for the books takes the exam, passes, just what you would expect from a grown up man, right? Except he's in the joint. A year later I leave and get another job with the state. And I'm out and I get myself kind of in a jam in an area of Fall River that I probably shouldn't have been alone in. So just before I'm about to get hurt, who walks out from behind the bar, the guy with the GED. [and he said] "guys, he's going to be leaving right now, and no one is going to hurt him or follow him out to his car" "Alright, Nate" and everyone went back to their tables and I left. And he said "Mr. Spellman, you don't want to be in this neighborhood." And I said, "Ya that occured to me Nate." "but it is good to see ya, and thanks for never tellin anybody about the GED." And I said, "what GED?" [mumbles and laughter] Why did it take so long for him to get his GED. He wanted to do it in a way that didn't bring attention to himself for being inadequate. However, the guy was going to go back to his life in Fall River. He was going to go back to his same life before and the question was, what was he willing to do to make certain changes in his life so that he didn't go back to jail. He's gonna still associate with the same friends, he's gonna still live in the same neighborhood but now he is going to get on with his life. 20 year olds don't know how to do that. They are just gonna go back to the same place, hang out with the same kids and smoke the same dope and then they break into a house. Probability is that they did it before they are going to do it again. And they do that at 20. At some magical age, and we joked about it while we were in the joint, someone just needs to give them a maturity pill. And that is what separates the repeat offender from the non repeat offender.
B: So it comes with age and maturity level more than anything.

Sp: Yeah, they think I like it out here, I don't want to go back there. You know?

B: And there is embarrassment.

B: I need to get an education. I need to take some classes and stuff like that.

Sp: Yeah, that's exactly it.

S: Would it help get them jobs if they knew Microsoft Word?

Sp: Okay, I dunno.

R: You don't have any opinion on that?

Sp: Nope, I don't. I don't know what the market says, do you have to have that as a skill?

R: A lot of the businesses that we have contacted have said that they'd prefer it if people knew that because then they don't have to spend any time teaching it. I think it's a pretty common skill these days but they might not have it which could make them a bit more employable.

Sp: More employable, okay. Is that what they want to do? Do they want to go inside? Well do they want to work inside or do they want to work outside? Would you rather mow lawns and make $12 an hour or work inside an office and make $12 an hour? You know. I don't know. I mean, I don't know how to assess that. Is Microsoft Word a useful tool, sure it is.

B: Do you feel it's something that needs to be done? Looking at the recidivism rate of 77%, it's pretty absurd.

Sp: If you really want to look at it. I remember doing this in 1974. And my argument to people regarding any program I ran was it cost $24,000 bucks to keep an inmate in the joint. In 1974, that was more than tuition cost here. Um, but what do they do when they go to a community college. You'll see guys, they'll go to the community college and they'll do the same thing they did in high school. They'll skip class, say, 'yeah I went drinking' and next thing they know they're arrested or hanging around in the valley, buying some dope, and that's when the gang came up. It's always, just blame it on them. You should have been in class! You were at the valley. What were you doing at the valley? Ya know.

S: There's this wonderful minister down at the church there. yeah.

Sp: What's his name?
B: Harman?

R; Thurgood Harman? Over on 2nd Baptist.

Sp: Yeah, I don't know if, maybe that's 1st baptist.

S: He is a real helper. Believes that everybody should be dedicating their lives to helping these people. Exactly what you want. They got into the computer lab last week and it's just towers of machines. Okay, so if I can just summarize what I think you're saying, uh, would it be, for example, Even if they had a decent facility outside of WPI, in their neighborhood. I don't know if what these guys are talking about is on campus They want to go to EPOCA or somewhere where they feel more comfortable. And if they're not embarrassed, you know a 40 year old. What can they do to be attractive, even if they get a license, they offer equipment, and there is free training. What do they do to get these people in there. The kids aren't going to go through the doors because they won't be interested thinking, "I'm going back to my friends. " Uh, well people who are attractable, the older people.

Sp: Eh, I don't think it's a good idea to be setting it up in their neighborhoods. Well, it's probably the only thing you can do because of lack of money but wherever it is.

B: I think the church sounds like a good idea because then maybe the combination of the two might be a good thing.

S: My question is how do they get in the door? What do you suggest they do to attract them? I mean your making me feel like, uh, this is a pretty rough life. Until I feel I have enough of this and I'm 40 years old and want to do something different, is there anything that will work in your opinion?

Sp: Well the hard part is this, and I'm going to seem cynical here, but the hard part is this. Now you say you've already met a couple guys who did some time. Once they've been a part of the penal system, had two, three, four arrests, they become very attuned to telling you what you want to hear. I mean you want to train somebody how to work with your computer system who really has in the back of their mind "I'm gonna steal everything that I can out of here." And that is what is in the back of any employers mind regarding anyone who is a thief. Ya know? And you saw it in all of the Ocean's 11 movies, you know, once a thief always a thief. And thats not necessarily true, but ya know, when there 20 they see you and they see us as people they're going to use. They're going to tell you everything that they have to, to make their life a little easier for them and they're gonna burn you. That's all there is to it. You don't want them to date your sister, you dont want them to work for you, you don't want them to be driving on the road with you.

R: So do you feel society needs to change it's view of prisoners as a whole?
Sp: No not at all. You know the whole thing with CORI is, ya I understand. There are a lot of good guys who have records that are inhibiting them from either getting a really great job or getting promoted. There are probably people who are affected by CORI for which there is no intention to do that. What there intention was was to assess an individual for someone who was concerned about their security. I feel that it does it's job, you know? Does it go overboard? I guess it does but the security is there. And in terms of designing a program, ya know, there are very few programs out there that are very successful.

R: We've heard of ready4work and it is really the only one we can find on a national level.

Sp: I wouldn't look at national I would look at, you know, what have they done in Chicago and look like that.

B: We have found programs like that but they are few and far between. They are government funded and we found one in Chicago, one in Oakland California, and one in Florida and thats it.

Sp: You know what I would guess though? I would guess that it always comes down to one or two or three individuals who are really working hard to make it work. And they come to know their individuals and go “No, you're no good” and they walk in and thats exactly what they do, they say I'd rather have a good 7 people in here than a mixed group of 30.

B: Can you think of any way that we can find out more about those programs?

Sp: I would call the head of corrections for that. I don't really know. A house of corrections would not be the best place to go. Is it out there? Ya. But the way you'll run into it is some self serving people who go "hey I'm running a really good program. Over the last 6 months we've seen a lower recidivism rate." Well six months is no period of time. Who knows how to measure that you know? I mean your 20 years old and you got 3 hours of experience and I can talk your ear off but I can tell you one thing and that is the actual truth is there are some programs but they always come down to small individuals who are doing a good job. You know, there was a guy though. There was a juvenile delinquency program out on the island in Penikese, and there is a program that is run out of there...

B: Is this in Massachusetts?

Sp: Yeah, and I want to call it Penikese Island, do a google on that. P- E- N- I- K- E- S- E. And I think it's called the Cape Elizabeth islands. But there is a town out there called Gosnold. Anyways there is three small islands and on one of them there is a juvenile delinquency program out there and it is run by one guy. You know? I don't know his
name anymore. They have had an incredible run with the hardest kids. Which are the biggest pains because they are all such smart-ass' you know? Just think of yourself when you were 15 years old. You know, I'm getting laid and I'm getting drunk and I'm stealing from everybody, you know? That's what they are and you know "everybody is going to be my victim because the world is my oyster." They are a pain to deal with. But he has done a really good job and its learning, its education, its training and that guy could tell you more. You, inc. should have more information on that. They are in Worcester.

S:...Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration. They travel around the world actually helping people with justice and getting funding for non-profits and such through the department of health services. That's what he does for a living. So contact him, you can definitely at least bounce ideas off him. I am impressed though with the comments on the difference in age, with the confidence of kids, not every single one but basically what your saying is they just say to hell with this I'm going to go find something better. If you couldn't reach them at 20 you might be able to reach them at 40. Like your friend you were telling us about that helped you out.

Sp: You know, a guy like him, you know what he'd say? He is very cynical too. He would say it is a success if they don't bury me while I'm in the joint. You know, he had a decent life though by his standards. He had a girlfriend and made money and, you know, sometimes he was in the joint. That's how he grew up you know? It's like, kids from Charlestown, Charlestown Massachusetts, it's a neighborhood in Boston and for maybe 100 years everytime there was a bank robbery all you had to do was go to Charlestown and all the bank robbers came from Charlestown. If you asked them why they robbed banks they'd say that's where the money is. You are going to run into a lot of people who are gonna say..., you're going to run into people on both sides, you're going to run into people like me who say you can't do anything with them, you know? Don't give them Microsoft Word, they're going to have access to your system and are going to steal everything out of there. You want people like this to establish that they can go to work everyday. Go work for the landscape guy, go work for the city and county and mow lawns, you know? Show me you can do a job. Because you'll talk to these guys and they will be like oh ya I worked there for a long time. And you'll ask how long was that? Three months. Three months is a long time for these guys to do anything. You know? They might have a dream but when you look at where they are and their dream, they have no way to connect it. NO way to connect it. Like I'm going to win the lottery. But that's what you run into.

B: How is it for them in the house of corrections? Is it really hard for them or do they get used to it?

Sp: They get used to it. They know 40 or 50 guys when they go in the first day. It's hard because it's regimented but it's easy because it's regimented. You know what time your meals going to be everyday, what time your going to go to your room. The bad things are what they are going to run into when they get out anyways. Is it violent? Yeah it's violent, but it is violent where they're from.
B: (Inaudible)

Sp: 7’ o clock lights come on. You get up, the toilet is right there in the room. 2 guys, 3 guys, 4 guys in a room whatever, doing whatever they need to do. 7:30 the door opens up. There is no sound in the world like it and it's thousands of gates opening. Clang, clang, clang and that's what you hear. When you go in and they close the door behind you, you never ever get used to it. They close the door behind you and the guy who is closing it knows it. They aren't trying to offend but it is a solid sound of that door closing behind you. Now your locked in. Guards will say the same thing, "Hey I'm doing 30 years, except I'm doing it on the installment plan." Now they go up and down and count the people. Whatever happened the previous day comes right back. You can't get away from it. And now it's breakfast, they stand in line, they get their breakfast. Sit down, they can choose where they sit...kinda. You sit with your buddies. You can't be an individual.

B: Can you sit by yourself?

Sp: You can't sit by yourself, no. There is no by yourself. Even for the guards. There is no place to go. Now they have, they call out the workday people who are going to go work wherever. A minimal amount of people work. They get paid. They paint town halls. In one county, you went out on a fishing boat. It was a big deal to get certain jobs. They do the laundry or work in the kitchen. That's a big job. Everybody wants to work in the kitchen because you get fed better. You still eat with everyone else. The jobs are really used for one reason. It gives you something to do, something to look forward to for 2 hours a day. There might be some time to go to the gym, the yard. They call it yard time.

B: Is there a library?

Sp: Nope.

B: Wow it seems like a natural thing that there would be an option of doing.

Sp: Well there is a library but you can't get there. Everything's locked. It is something to take away from you. It is there to let them know they they are not in charge of their lives. That's the hard part. Now your life. Your life is yours out there, but in here it's mine.

S: That is one of the most messed up things I have ever heard.

(Everyone talking at same time)

B: It's control.
Sp: Yeah but to look at it that way. We have a library and you can't use it.

B: That seems like something that it is wrong to give away.

Sp: They just provide what is needed. Shelter, food. They give you a bathroom but it is not clean.

B: What do they do all day?

Sp: They watch TV. They talk. They fight.

Sp: Well there are seclusion areas where you are locked up for 23 hours a day. Your individualized there. One man one cell. They do not mix with the general population. Murder is not necessarily the worst offense. It is a solitary crime you know?

(cant hear)

Sp: Well they get out and don't recommit you know because a lot of the time it is a crime of passion. And by the way when you go inside there is a hierarchy of crimes.

S: I imagine the child molesters are up there. How do they find out about the child molesters?

Sp: I don't know, but they do.

S: That's the worst you can be right?

Sp: Yeah, sex crimes. And cops have a hard time. They keep cops in different areas but it is still a hard time.

S: So you'd lie about your story.

Sp: Well you embellish. You say things like "Oh well I got caught stealing from my employer."

R: That's all we have, Thank You

Sp: Good luck.
A.2 Interview with Yakov Kronrod

Robert Lowry: Yakov, do you mind being recorded?

Yakov Kronrod: I don’t mind, am I being recorded?

Robert: You are. For a reference it’s 5:15 pm on November 8th, Thursday.

Ryan Moak: Ok. So based on your experience with the prison system in general, have you ever had any experience with Ready4Work or a program similar to that where they tried to rehabilitate criminals?

Yakov: They used to, I’m not familiar with the specific provisions of Ready4Work, that specific program. I’m familiar with other programs, possibly even this one without being associated with the idea of getting prisoners ready to work on the outside through different programs. One thing I can comment on right away is that unfortunately, very unfortunately, most funding for programs like that has been cut over the years, so there’s not much available for people going through the system. I know a couple of people I’ve worked with who have been through similar programs and they found them incredibly helpful, but even those people have no mechanism to tell employers about it, so all they[employers] see is the negative side of it[cori]. Often times it doesn’t go as far as it could and defiantly doesn’t make its self accessible to as many people as it could. So you’ve got a few, very limited number of people, who can take advantage of the program and for the rest of them what is happening a lot of the time what ends up happening is people say ‘why didn’t you go through this program’ when really they might have been on a waiting list for ten different programs and never had a chance to do them because of limited funding and space.

Ryan: Speaking of the people who work in the program specifically, we are curious because you also work with EPOCA, have you noticed any type of destination between prisoners that could possibly be rehabilitated verses any defining characteristics of people who could not?

Yakov: No. I would say there are no defining characteristics.

Ryan: Do you think everyone could be rehabilitated then?
Yakov: No. Not everyone, but that would be like asking if everyone can learn calculus. It doesn’t matter if you are an intelligent person, you might just not have it in you to learn calculus. By the same token there’s defiantly a couple of people out there, a small percentage that I think over the long term really might just be beyond rehabilitation. I wouldn’t say anyone starts out beyond rehabilitation, unless you take into account factors like mental health. There are prisoners, actually over 70% of prisoners, are dealing with undiagnosed or untreated mental health issues. A lot of those will keep committing crimes because of mental disorders. Whether it be just Schizophrenia or other social dysfunctions, things like that, unless they get the treatment. They don’t need to be in prison, they need to be in treatment. If they don’t get the treatment they’ll probably keep committing crimes. But, yeah, there is probably a small percentage of people who just keep making mistakes, being dumb, and totally resistant to change. However, a lot of people who end up going through that are ones that could have been rehabilitated if they ever had been put in to rehabilitate them earlier on or to give them other options other than hard jail time with other crooks. That only reinforces the negative.

Ryan: Next question. For our program we had hoped to bring prisoners to campus, so do you feel that bringing eight prisoners to campus would be too dangerous?

Yakov: Will you require a police escort?

Ryan: That’s the thing, we’re just wondering if prisoners would be to dangerous to bring on campus.

Yakov: No, I would not say so. I could name hundreds of reasons why it would be totally safe. The real obvious one is that 90% of crimes aren’t committed randomly, they’re committed against people already known; relatives, friends, girl friends, neighbors. Most people in our jail system or prison system are not total sociopaths who will just hurt people or steel things just for the sake of doing it. Most of the people who are like that probably already have a long history, I wouldn’t advise inviting someone who has been in and out thirty times and is currently doing a sentence while awaiting trial on another one. Most people in our jails, I think, would be not only safe, I think it would be a really positive thing to do for both people who have a chance to interact with them and for them.
because it gives them a feeling of doing something good. I would say, obviously, there are a few obvious criteria. Don’t bring rapists, murderers, child molesters, people who are still going through the system after many years of doing it. I think if you eliminate even those couple it would be completely safe.

Ryan: So, obviously, you are affiliated with CORI and SORI reports.
Yakov: Yes.

Ryan: Do you believe that this is a good system or is it denying people opportunities instead of trying to just keep people safe?
Yakov: Um, is it a good system? If it was doing what it was supposed to be doing, it’s a positive system. But CORI was created to track people as they are going thorough the system and make it more accessible for law enforcement, and to protect privacy so you don’t mistakes on records pulled by the same name. Two people might share a name but have a different social security number, but that wasn’t part of it. They had originally expanded it to be just a safer fool proof system. Ok, I’ll comment on the SORI one real quick. Yeah, I believe that its absolutely necessary and I would even go further with it. I would have a little more oversight in assigning people the levels. There’s defiantly some people who are not dangerous offenders who are classified level three, or there are dangerous ones who get classified level three because cities and different jurisdictions kind of decide for themselves. There needs to be much better defined criteria for that, because I believe that a SORI; you know the one crime that’s been shown to have the lowest rehabilitation rate for any criminal in the world is a sex crime. The chance of them recidivating, doing it again, is very high. I think it is only fair that we protect our families and kids. Having said that; the SORI and CORI are two completely distinct things. So when I comment on changes to the CORI and, like its access and what’s in it, what people see how long it’s open for, I’m only strictly commenting on the CORI because that will not affect the SORI in any way. Sexual offenders have their own registry, their own system for maintaining that. We’ve got the sex registry of people having to register with police stations, completely two distinct things and nothing in the CORI would make it at all make it easier for child rapists to get jobs in schools. Having said that, I think that the
CORI the way it currently is, as opposed to what I described earlier and the way it was created, I believe it is holding people back. For a lot of people the problem is that if you keep committing crimes is that you’re going to be in jail or on parole or on probation, and if you decide to live a life where you keep committing crimes, you will never be in a position where you will be trying to get a really good decent job. You are not going to be in those positions where most people’s CORIs get checked. The people primarily in those positions are the ones that said ‘you know, I’m out and I got a family, I got a kid for whom it’s not too late, I’m gonna get a job. I’m going to get some housing and get into a program.’ A lot of programs, housing, and employers check the CORI, and everyone has access to it, almost. Anyone can apply to the criminal history systems board and get access to the CORI. Now you’ve got things of the CORI that people weren’t even convicted of. If you get charged in a court and you get dismissed, continued with out a finding, thrown out, wrongful entry, you were not convicted of it but employers still get to see all that information. So what is on it is unfair to the people. There is nothing positive to go with it. Like earlier we were talking about the programs; an employer will never see any list of programs you go through, they only see the negative. So that’s why a certificate to commitment of rehabilitation is so important. Also, you have more that two thirds of employers checking now and two thirds of those aren’t hiring anyone with a record at all. Whether it was being charged with stealing twenty dollars or murder, they make no distinction between it. A lot of people getting out, we were talking about can people not be rehabilitated; most of those people who keep going back aren’t going back because you can’t rehabilitate them, they’re going back because when they got out as my friend says ‘the streets are always hiring’. If you can’t get a job and a decent place to raze your kid you’re going to make money one way or another. What do you know? Well, you’re committed crime and you just spent time in jail just hanging out with criminals and learning, basically, until you get out and you try to change and you say ‘ok, even McDonalds won’t hire me’. Well, McDonalds might, Burger King and Dunkin’ Donuts check CORI. That all feeds into that, and I think that the CORI defiantly needs a lot of changes.
Ryan: As someone with a CORI record, have you experienced any difficulty in the past finding employment? Do you feel you have been denied a job?

Yakov: Oh, absolutely. I should have sued once or twice if I had known my rights. For the first several years after getting the CORI there were several specific times where the only reason that I was let go or not hired was because of it.

Ryan: Did they tell you that?

Yakov: Yep, so let me explain. Let me give you a few specific situations. A couple of times talking to recruiters for a software job. They would say that an employer was interested, I would do a phone interview, and they would want to bring me in. I’ll be talking to the recruiter, and I’ll kind of talk to him and be like ‘by the way I have a record’. He would be like ‘oh a record, what kind?’ They ask me and I would tell them I have this record, but I’m off probation, I’m out of jail, I’ve been working, and I will never hear from them again and I would not get my calls returned. Anecdotal evidence. However, another time I was working at [a] software company in Wayland, Massachusetts that discriminates to people and lies to their face. We were working on a customer recourse management program for an internet application. The hired me on and I was there for a month or so. I got a really good review of my work so far, and then we were doing an email exchange with some people, some other engineers in another group in the company. One of the engineers who worked in a totally different group who was just on the same email chain saw my name on there and wrote to the boss, telling him about my background and what I had done in college and getting caught with drugs and the boss called me in and actually maid up a story about a fake contract that they didn’t actually have to have a reason to let me go. He said it was a judiciary contract and required that no one with a felony work on the product, and since I wrote software that ran the thing, any other application that ran on top of it would be considered me working on their project. So they had to let me go. About a month later my manager, who I became good friends with, emailed me and said ‘by the way I heard what went down and we never had a contract with a Connecticut Department of Justice, he found out that you had that record’. Even though on the application I checked off the box that I had a record and filled it in,
because it never made it in front of him when it happened I was let go. I could go on and on, you know? Teaching in Southbridge for over a year when the superintendent found out I had a record, called me in, put a letter in front of me and told me to sign it. I said, ‘what is it?’ She replied that it was my resignation letter that I wrote. I was like ‘what happened?’ It turned out that she had met with a reporter that had covered my run for city council and talked about my record, mentioned it to her over lunch and she called me in, didn’t even let me go say bye to any of my kids in my class or anything. So, yeah, you could say that there’s been a couple of times when its come up.

Ryan: Alright, this is pretty much our final question. Do you think that the computer program that we were trying to set up, it was meant to teach Microsoft Office Suit to anyone who is interested but most likely EPOCA candidates, do you think that would help people faced with the monumental obstacle of the CORI report?

Yakov: I said earlier in the interview about the whole idea of having something positive go with the negativity of the CORI and one of the primary things that other states have done that is part of the whole public safety act, which is now being considered by the Senate and House of Representatives on Beacon Hill, is a certificate to commitment to rehabilitation. Whether in jail or on probation or on parole, whether it’s work force training or public speaking, technology, stuff like that. Granted that this would not be associated with the justice system so it wouldn’t be in that, but you would be providing, along the CORI, something positive the employer sees. When ever someone goes through a program, yeah they might have gone through Christian philosophy or Buddhism, they have that in some places, it’s just something that shows you want to work at something. It’s just automatically a positive thing, so if you had something like that where you could actually give them sort of certificate, ideally a Microsoft certificate—

Benjamin Webber: It would be.

Yakov: The end goal would be awesome, but even in the intermediary if people got some sort of certificate saying that they went through this and it’s helped them, that would totally change a lot of situations. When they come to an employer and they can feel more confident and tell their employer up front that the job they did—
The job I did get finally after not getting jobs was when I, in the interview, sat down with the employer and I had a list of things I had done since jail and I was like ‘look, I have a record, I’m a felon, but its been this long and this is what I’ve been working on and this is what I can bring to the table, and I got that job. Finally I realized that I just need to put that forward, so if other people had something like that certificate that they went through the program just to do it or if they got to the final test and got certified, I think that would go a really long way to give employers a security blanket. Yeah, it’s not a guarantee but this is someone who took the time to prepare themselves. That’s probably more than can be said about for a lot of people coming in without a record into this job. They’re probably just looking through the help wanted and applying to fifty jobs. I think that would make a tremendous difference, especially if you publicized it and got people who could take advantage of it to do it.

Ryan: Thank you, that’s all I have.

Benjamin: The only thing I would ask you is if you think the computer program would probably be the best way to go?

Yakov: Do you mean a computer program like an automated teacher where you sit there on the computer?

Benjamin: No, no I mean doing Microsoft certifications verses just doing the basics of how to get a job.

Yakov: Well, as far as teaching people how to get a job, we at EPOCA along with a lot of good allies, specifically The Work Force Central that is a work development place, we have been working on a pretty good program called New Leaf. It gives a chance for people to go through it and they work on things like résumé writing, interview skills, etc, so that’s primary and I think something like this good. It’s one thing to tell them how to make what they’ve done look good on a résumé, it’s another to give them a recent proof of having recently been doing something. So that’s like two very important things. I think there’s lots of other education that we need to do, like we’re working down in Providence right now on developing volunteer based education services for kids of people in prison so when they get out there is someone working one on one academically with them like a mentor in
a way. That would be feeding into that whole educating and giving people a chance to rise up. You could get into a lot of other things like nonviolence training for violent offenders, drug and mental counseling for people who have been untreated for that, but I think something like this is integral and can help expand the understanding for the need for services like that to other people. That is a very straightforward thing that could have a very direct impact on people in the short term.

Ryan: Thank you a lot for coming down.

Yakov: No problem, glad I could help.
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