Can Civic Engagement Serve as a Pathway to Desistance Among Formerly Incarcerated Citizens?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY / ABSTRACT

This paper examines how civic engagement functions as a pathway to desistance among formerly incarcerated citizens through identity transformation and social contribution. Drawing upon scholarship by Shadd Maruna, Justin M. Smith and Aaron Kinzel, Justeen Hyde and colleagues, and Joni Schwartz, this study analyzes how redemption scripts, carceral citizenship, and the concept of the "wounded healer" convert personal suffering into community leadership. Rather than remaining marginalized by the stigma of a criminal record, justice-impacted citizens leverage lived experience to foster reintegration and advance broader systemic reform.

> 2 Million	95%	~592,000
U.S. INCARCERATED POPULATION	EVENTUALLY RELEASED	ANNUAL STATE REENTRY FLOW

I. INTRODUCTION & THE PROBLEM OF CARCERAL CITIZENSHIP

In America, citizens who have been incarcerated often find themselves treated as the "other", facing exclusion from full civic engagement even after serving their time. This marginalization has intensified with the increase in mass incarceration across the country. There are currently over 2 million individuals incarcerated in the U.S., with the Bureau of Justice Statistics reporting that around 95% of state prisoners will eventually be released, amounting to approximately 592,000 state prisoners returning to society in a single year (Hughes and Wilson). This illustrates the significant number of people who must navigate the substantial challenges of community reentry.

Despite their return, many encounter systemic obstacles. Smith and Kinzel describe the phenomenon of "carceral citizenship," which encompasses the racial disproportionality of mass incarceration, the psychological harms resulting from loss of autonomy and confinement, and the enduring post-imprisonment collateral consequences such as political disenfranchisement and restrictions relating to employment, healthcare, and housing (Smith and Kinzel 97).

II. IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION & TURNING POINTS

Instead of reintegrating as equal members of society, many formerly incarcerated people find themselves permanently labeled as outsiders. Mass incarceration has created a marginalized group whose chances for successful reintegration are hindered by stigma. However, Smith and Kinzel suggest that carceral citizenship is not solely about disadvantage. While individuals with criminal records face hurdles, their collective experiences can serve as a powerful source of political engagement. Through community organizing and public speaking, formerly incarcerated individuals turn marginalized status into a platform for leadership and social change.

> **KEY FRAMEWORK: REDEMPTION SCRIPTS**
> Maruna (2025) highlights that desistance from crime is a gradual process of identity realignment. Redemption scripts allow individuals to reconstruct their narrative, turning past trauma into social contributions.

Reintegration is a two-way street: individuals must change, but society must adapt as well. Historically, societies have categorized people into those deemed redeemable and irredeemable. Mass incarceration reduces people to their worst decisions, but recognizing human potential challenges whether a person should be defined by a single chapter of life. Maruna notes that desistance processes operate even among active offenders and life-course persisters (Maruna 10). Desistance is rarely overnight; it represents a slow realignment of identity.

What is often missing is a turning point—an event or relationship that crystallizes a change of heart and makes the new story livable. Such turning points include a second chance through employment, mentorship, or meeting someone who offers blind trust. These moments carry emotional weight because individuals receive a reason not to disappoint those who have invested in them.

III. PEER SUPPORT AND THE "WOUNDED HEALER" MODEL

Civic engagement for justice-impacted citizens takes many forms, from advocating for record sealing to careers in social services. A critical modality is peer mentorship. In *"Enhancing Community Integration After Incarceration,"* Hyde et al. evaluated an intervention where formerly incarcerated veterans served as peer specialists for newly released veterans. With an estimated 107,400 veterans in state and federal prisons (U.S. Department of Justice), tailored reentry programs are essential.

> **EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE (HYDE ET AL., 2022)**
> Returning veterans receiving Post Incarceration Engagement services demonstrated significantly lower rates of rearrest and lower rates of homelessness relative to those receiving standard reentry services.

The success of the program reflected a "brother's keeper" philosophy grounded in mutual trust. Because mentors understood both military culture and carceral realities, they established fraternal solidarity. This approach proves that humane interventions built on lived experience produce measurable improvements in reintegration outcomes while reducing recidivism.

IV. THE CREDIBLE MESSENGER & GLOBAL MOVEMENTS

The peer specialists described by Hyde et al. embody Schwartz's concept of the "wounded healer"—a person who transforms personal suffering into healing for others. Schwartz and Chaney observe that prisoners develop deep bonds similar to military veterans, created by shared, life-altering experiences (Schwartz 157). Guidance from wounded healers is not drawn solely from professional training, but from firsthand knowledge, converting personal hardship into community recovery.

> **CONCEPT: THE CREDIBLE MESSENGER**
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> Credible messengers represent the culmination of desistance. Like delegates on a world stage, they translate personal redemption into leadership within national and global policy networks.

This evolutionary shift is expanding exponentially. Maruna highlights how regional groups have coalesced into formal networks like the *Formerly Incarcerated, Convicted People & Families Movement (FICPFM)*, a national network of over 50 grassroots organizations led by organizers, policy experts, and artists with conviction histories (Maruna 15).

The globalization of this concept mirrors how organic subcultures rise from marginalized groups to inspire broader social transformation. Just as historical leaders emerged from within their communities to advocate against oppression, the voice of change in criminal justice reform must originate from those who share the same lived experience.

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