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DOI: 10.1111/1745-9133.12701

CRIMINOLOGY & Public Policy

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

"Everything is technology": Examining technology access and use among returning citizens

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Funding information
The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Data used for this paper were collected with the support of the Michigan State University Graduate School Alliance for Graduate Education and the Professoriate (AGEP) Scholar Award, the College of Social Science Early Start Summer Research Award, and the College of Social Science Summer Provost's Undergraduate Research Initiative Award.

Abstract

Research summary: Digital inequality is a barrier for returning citizens. Yet, much remains unknown about the specific issues they encounter. As the world continues to advance technologically, it is important that we understand returning citizens' access to and use of technology and how it impacts their ability to reintegrate into society. Framed in the Digital Rehabilitation Model, the current study uses qualitative data from 28 returning citizens to explore their experiences with digital exclusion. Findings show that returning citizens have challenges accessing and using technology in several reentry areas.

Policy implications: The study's results reflect returning citizens' need for support to access and use technology for reentry purposes. Specifically, they need assistance with accessing computers and using technology for online job searching, education, and other personal needs. In addition, they also need education on how to maintain online safety. Policy recommendations are given for how correctional facilities can work with existing organizations and frameworks to increase returning citizens' access to technology, the Internet, and digital skills programming prior to and after

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release from prison. In addition, concerns about how to maintain prison safety and security while increasing access to technology devices and the Internet are addressed.

In the United States, about 800,000 people are on parole (i.e., returning citizens), which is a period of supervised release that occurs after serving a portion of a prison sentence (APPR, 2021; Sawyer & Wagner, 2024). While on parole, returning citizens must comply with various supervision conditions, such as obtaining employment, complying with drug testing, and meeting with their supervising agent (Jones, 2018; Wang, 2023). At the same time, they must also navigate formal collateral consequences in the employment, housing, education, and voting sectors, making reintegration all the more difficult (Warner & Michaels, 2024). In addition, returning citizens are reentering a technologically reliant society (De' et al., 2020), which is often difficult for them because they are digitally excluded during incarceration (Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022). Digital exclusion occurs when an individual is unable to access technology and lacks digital skills. Hence, to be digitally included and achieve the beneficial outcomes of technology use, an individual must have access to technology *and* digital skills (van Dijk, 2020).

The digital exclusion returning citizens face exacerbates their reintegration experiences and inhibits their ability to meet supervision conditions and address other personal needs (e.g., health concerns) (Reisdorf et al., 2021). This, consequently, places them at risk of receiving a technical violation of supervision as well (Jones, 2018). However, despite the barrier digital exclusion poses, the research focused on digital inequality during reentry is limited. Moreover, the extant research also fails to examine returning citizens' digital exclusion across the areas identified in the Digital Rehabilitation Model (DRM) (Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018). The DRM is an ecological framework that theorizes about how social and digital exclusion shape returning citizens' experiences during incarceration, reentry, and online. Consequently, the current study will address these limitations by exploring returning citizens' digital exclusion within the DRM framework and answering the following research questions: *(1) How do returning citizens describe their access to and use of technology postincarceration?* and *(2) How do returning citizens' experiences with technology map onto the Digital Rehabilitation Model?*

1 | LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 | Digital rehabilitation model

The current study uses the Digital Rehabilitation Model (DRM) as a framework for exploring participants' experiences with technology. The DRM is an ecological framework that explores the interrelationships between social and digital exclusion and their influence on returning citizens' pre- and postrelease offline and online experiences (Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018). In particular, the model focuses on five key areas of everyday life: economic, cultural, social, personal, and health, and each area can be operationalized in a variety of ways. For example, during incarceration, the economic area may consist of any certifications obtained or prison employment. During reentry and online, it may include household income or the number of jobs applied for online. Similarly, in

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the personal and social areas, incarcerated people have limited access to the outside world but rely on their social network during reentry (Bennett et al., 2025; Goodson-Miller, 2022; Visher et al., 2004). Thus, technology is a digital communication tool that can assist with the reconnection process and strengthen relationships during reentry (Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018; Seo et al., 2020).

On the other hand, the DRM's cultural area is concerned with returning citizens' self-representation and presentation because, upon reentry, they are able to focus more on who "they are" versus who "they were" and desire to shed harmful labels and stigma (Fader et al., 2024; LeBel et al., 2015; Stevens, 2012). Hence, they may choose to use technology and social media as digital tools to represent themselves (Gurusami, 2019; Seo et al., 2020). Lastly, related to the health area, incarcerated people disproportionately experience health issues and receive inadequate health care (Wang, 2022). Consequently, returning citizens experience an increased risk of mortality (Massoglia & Pridemore, 2015) and must independently navigate the healthcare system (Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018). Additionally, their health experiences may be further exacerbated by healthcare providers' increasing use of digital health practices (e.g., telemedicine) (Butcher & Hussain, 2022). Nevertheless, all of the DRM's key areas are individually conceptualized but linked together during incarceration, reentry, and online. Thus, researchers using the model to explore returning citizens' experiences must account for its nuanced and interrelated nature.

1.2 | Digital inequality, community supervision, and reintegration

As the world continues to technologically advance (De' et al., 2020), having access to technology and digital skills remains important. Yet, not everyone in society has equal access to technology, the Internet, and digital skills, resulting in digital inequality (Gonzales, 2016; Vogels, 2021). The conceptualization of digital inequality has changed over time, with the NTIA (1995) first defining it as whether an individual had access to information-communication technologies (ICTs, e.g., phones or computers), but soon after, scholars realized that access should not be conceptualized as a "have" or "have not" dichotomy, leading to the second level of digital inequality. The second level of digital inequality focuses on digital skills and usage of technology (Hargittai, 2002), and there is a plethora of research demonstrating that individuals with low digital skill levels have more difficulty completing online tasks (Van Deursen et al., 2016; Vogels, 2021). As a result, the same people are less likely to experience the beneficial outcomes of internet use, resulting in the third level of digital inequality (Scheerder et al., 2017; Selwyn, 2004; van Dijk, 2005). Thus, the full and current conceptualization of digital inequality accounts for inequities in technology access, digital skills and usage, and beneficial outcomes of internet use (van Dijk, 2020).

The increasing technological advancements in society not only led to the conceptualization of digital inequality but also categorizations of technology users as digital natives (i.e., those who grew up with technology and learned to speak its "language") or digital immigrants (i.e., those who must continuously adapt to the new, ever-changing technological environment) (Prensky, 2001).[1] In terms of who is more likely to be considered a digital immigrant or experience digital inequality, factors such as age, socioeconomic status (SES), race, urban or rural location, and

[1] It is important to note that some scholars debate whether digital natives actually exist because there is evidence debunking the claim that simply being born into a world with technology automatically equates to being technologically savvy (see Judd, 2018 and Kirschner & De Bruyckere, 2017 for more on this).

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education level are all relevant (Gonzales, 2016; Mubarak & Suomi, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2021; Vogels, 2021; Warren, 2007). Furthermore, the same people who disproportionately experience digital inequality are also more likely to be mobile phone dependent, meaning their mobile phone is the only form of technology they have access to (Gonzales, 2016; Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022; Vogels, 2021). In fact, about 15% of US adults are mobile phone dependent, resulting in dire consequences like lower digital literacy and less diverse technology use (Anderson & Horrigan, 2016; Correa et al., 2020; Pew Research Center, 2021).

For returning citizens specifically, age and length of incarceration are two of the most pertinent factors impacting their digital inequality, as older returning citizens and those who served longer sentences more often describe challenges with using technology (Hwang et al., 2023; Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016; Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022; Reisdorf et al., 2021). However, this somewhat contrasts with what would be expected because the average age of incarcerated people is 39 years old (Beatty & Snell, 2021). Thus, they would be more likely to be digital natives because the oldest digital natives (i.e., those born in 1980) are 45 years old (ALA, n.d.a). But the extreme digital depravation incarcerated people experience likely results in returning citizens who are considered digital natives exhibiting traits more similar to those of digital immigrants (Blomberg et al., 2021; Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022; Reisdorf et al., 2021). In fact, even short stints of incarceration can be detrimental to digital skill development due to the rapidly changing nature of technology (Gonzales, 2016). Consequently, all returning citizens are at risk of experiencing digital inequality and a technological culture shock upon reentry because they must use devices that are new to them or that changed drastically during their incarceration (Hwang et al., 2023; Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022; Reisdorf et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, while on supervision, returning citizens must comply with their conditions to avoid parole violations (Jones, 2018; Wang, 2023) while also navigating digital inequality, collateral consequences, and other reentry barriers (Couloute, 2018b; Nordberg et al., 2021; Reisdorf et al., 2021; Warner & Michaels, 2024). The overlap between these challenges and barriers makes reentry all the more difficult and justifies Reisdorf and Rikard's (2018) call for the use of "digital rehabilitation" reentry models to explore how various forms of social and digital exclusion shape the reentry process. Thus, the remainder of the literature review explores digital inequality across five key reentry areas: employment, education, housing, transportation, and social support.

1.2.1 | Employment

Finding and maintaining stable employment is one of returning citizens' most pressing reentry concerns and falls within the economic area of the DRM. Yet, the rate of unemployment among returning citizens is almost five times higher (27.3%) than that of the general population (5.2%) despite returning citizens being more active in the labor market (Couloute & Kopf, 2018). Furthermore, when they secure employment, it is often unstable, low-paying jobs (Couloute & Kopf, 2018), causing returning citizens to forage for work (Sugie, 2018). Returning citizens' high unemployment rate occurs as a result of employment-related collateral consequences, felony discrimination, and technology's diffusion into the labor market (Muro et al., 2017; Pager, 2003; Warner & Michaels, 2024). In fact, about 92% of jobs across industries require employees to have some digital skills (Bergeson-Shilcock et al., 2023), including jobs that only require a high school diploma.

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Additionally, the online job search is the most popular job search method (Faberman & Kudlyak, 2016) and requires applicants to complete various tasks (e.g., uploading a resume) that may be difficult for people with low digital skill levels. Specifically, existing research finds that people who have never attended college, are currently unemployed, or are mobile phone-dependent struggle the most with online job applications (Anderson & Horrigan, 2016; Smith, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). Consequently, they experience higher rates of unemployment and burnout and secure lower-wage work (Bejaković & Mrnjavac, 2020; Bergeson-Shilcock et al., 2023; De Marco et al., 2023).

For returning citizens, in particular, the online job search is one of, if not the most challenging online tasks for them due to pop-ups and predatory advertisements, concerns about online privacy and safety, and other application-based issues (Gurusami, 2019; Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al., 2019; Reisdorf et al., 2021; Seo et al., 2020). Making matters worse, the online job search exacerbates other labor market inequities (Gurusami, 2019; Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016; Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al., 2019; Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022). For example, many returning citizens are concerned about the online public availability of their criminal records and employers' reliance on background checks (Gurusami, 2019), and older returning citizens' low digital literacy compounds with their experiences of ageism, felony stigma, and bureaucratic barriers in the labor market (Grosholz et al., 2024). Thus, these technology-related labor market challenges are exemplars of the second and third levels of digital inequality (Scheerder et al., 2017). This ultimately leaves returning citizens vulnerable to difficult labor market experiences and continued economic marginalization (Reisdorf et al., 2021; Sanders et al., 2023).

1.2.2 | Education

Similar to employment, education also falls under the DRM's economic area, and educational exclusion is another reentry barrier. In fact, around 25% of returning citizens *do not have* a high school diploma or GED, and more than 50% of them *only* have a high school diploma or GED. As a result of their low educational attainment, many returning citizens experience even more precarious situations in the labor market (Couloute, 2018a). Consequently, they find themselves looking for opportunities to increase their education credentials while incarcerated and during reentry. However, they often find that their options are limited because of limitations on prison facility programming or difficulties fitting educational programming into their schedules while on parole (Couloute, 2018a; Jones, 2018; Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al., 2019; Wang, 2023).

However, using technology and the Internet to search for and complete education opportunities offers a solution for returning citizens' educational exclusion, but much like the online job search, using technology for educational opportunities is challenging for this population (Blomberg et al., 2021). In fact, one study using interview data from 45 formerly incarcerated women found that the women experienced problems when searching for and completing education opportunities online as a result of technology and internet access challenges and lacking the necessary digital skills to complete their coursework (Blomberg et al., 2021). Comparatively, the women who were able to secure devices and participate in online learning opportunities (e.g., computer skills courses) felt as though it exposed them to more educational opportunities and improved their employment prospects. Still, in some cases, the women relied on their smartphones or technology provided by their children's schools to complete online coursework, which occasionally imposed barriers on their learning opportunities (Blomberg et al., 2021).

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1.2.3 | Housing and transportation

Securing stable housing is another pressing reentry need, as returning citizens are 10 times more likely to experience homelessness than the general public (Couloute, 2018b), and it falls under both the DRM's economic and personal areas. As a result, many of them rely on family, low-income, or transitional housing options to overcome housing instability (Goodson-Miller, 2022; Hoskins & Sanders, 2019). Although, even with support, returning citizens may still find it difficult to access permanent housing options due to felony discrimination and living in communities with inadequate housing options (Cobbina, 2009; Warner & Michaels, 2024). Nonetheless, technology can serve as a tool for returning citizens to search for housing opportunities so long as they can overcome device access and digital skills challenges (Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al., 2019; Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022; Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016; Reisdorf et al., 2021). For instance, recent research finds that system-involved women had difficulty searching for housing online because they were mobile-phone dependent and encountered incompatible websites or glitches with the online application (Blomberg et al., 2021). Therefore, this is yet another reentry area where digital inequality can worsen existing barriers.

Transportation insecurity is another example included in the economic and personal areas of the DRM. It is also an impediment to reentry that can prevent returning citizens from meeting supervision requirements and accessing technology resources in the community (e.g., libraries) (Davis et al., 2023; Nordberg et al., 2021; Northcutt Bohmert, 2016; Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022; Reisdorf et al., 2021). Nevertheless, returning citizens find themselves relying on their social networks or public transit options to secure transportation (Nordberg et al., 2021; Northcutt Bohmert, 2016), but both can be unreliable, costly, and difficult to use (Davis et al., 2023; Nordberg et al., 2021). But, technology-based rideshare services (e.g., Uber), on the other hand, offer returning citizens a new potential transportation option (Brown, 2019). However, even these services have drawbacks. Specifically, a person must have access to a smartphone and a reliable data plan, credit card, and digital skills to use rideshare apps, all of which are challenging for older or socioeconomically disadvantaged people (Dillahunt & Veinot, 2018; Durand et al., 2022). Moreover, some potential rideshare users do not trust the platforms because they ask for their credit card information (Dillahunt & Veinot, 2018). Thus, given what is known about returning citizens' demographics and online safety concerns (Reisdorf et al., 2021; Seo et al., 2020), they may be potentially less likely to use rideshare services.

1.2.4 | Social support

Aligning with the DRM's personal and social areas, social support from romantic partners, family, and other personal connections is crucial for accessing material resources during reentry (Goodson-Miller, 2022; Visher et al., 2004). In regard to technology, returning citizens rely on their social networks to increase their technological capital (i.e., access to technology and digital skills) as well (Blomberg et al., 2021; Gilbert, 2010; Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022). In fact, they often begin receiving support to access and use technology immediately upon release (Reisdorf et al., 2021). Most commonly, they receive access to a phone, but, albeit to a lesser extent, they can sometimes also access computers, video game consoles, and MP3 players through household members or community resources like libraries (Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al., 2019).

Additionally, returning citizens often rely on younger network members, in particular, to provide technological capital because they are more familiar with technology. However, older family

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members and even other returning citizens, in some cases, may still provide support as well (Gurusami, 2019; Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al., 2019; Reisdorf et al., 2021). However, the support provided is not always helpful and may not focus on reentry-relevant digital skills, and as a result, returning citizens may search for digital skills courses to enroll in. But, the courses might be too fast-paced or insufficient, hindering them from completing the course and stagnating their digital skill level (Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al., 2019).

1.3 | The current study

The aforementioned research provides a solid foundation for the current study but suffers from one overarching limitation. Specifically, prior research fails to examine returning citizens' digital exclusion through the DRM framework. Consequently, knowledge of how digital inequality manifests during reentry across the five key areas identified in the DRM is limited. This also inhibits scholars' and practitioners' ability to design correctional policies and programs aimed at reducing digital inequality, hence, a need for more research focusing on the overlap between incarceration, reintegration, and digital exclusion. Therefore, the current study uses the DRM as a framework to explore returning citizens' digital exclusion and build on what is known.

2 | METHOD

The current study explores 28 returning citizens' access to and use of technology by using primary qualitative data to answer the following research questions: *(1) How do returning citizens describe their access to and use of technology postincarceration?* and *(2) How do returning citizens' experiences with technology map onto the Digital Rehabilitation Model?*

2.1 | Sampling

Due to the study's exploratory nature, convenience sampling methods were used to diversify the sample as much as possible. For recruitment, a master list of participants from two previous studies who consented to contact for future research was used to generate a list of potential interviewees for the current study. The justification for this recruitment method is rooted in difficulties with institutional access barriers and the structural precarity of system-involved people (Ellis, 2023). Thus, this recruitment method eliminated access barriers and also provided a sample with whom rapport had already been built with.

The recruitment methods of the two original studies were more robust, with both starting in 2019 and ongoing at the time of this study (i.e., 2022). Case in point, the first study focused on system-involved men and women's relationships with their supervising agents, and to be eligible for participation, participants must have had at least one felony conviction, been under supervision for at least 2 months but no more than 5 months, and a medium to high recidivism risk score. Then, after informed consent, supervising agents were randomly selected to participate in the research study and provided with information on how to randomly select up to seven eligible clients to refer to the study. The second study was a program evaluation of a Detroit-based reentry program. To be eligible to participate, participants must have been paroling to Wayne County, Michigan, and have a medium to high recidivism risk score. Eligible participants

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were found through screenings conducted by the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) Reentry Facility Coordinator. Additionally, for both projects, the majority of the interviews were conducted over the phone due to the COVID-19 pandemic and university requirements, hence, the continuation of using phones to collect data for the current study.

Given the limitation of only recruiting participants from the two previous studies, the ability to diversify the current study's sample was limited, but the study's only eligibility requirement was that participants must have been on parole for a felony offense in Michigan within the last 5 years. Subsequently, to begin recruitment, the master list of participants was stratified by gender and included 133 men and 43 women on parole. A variety of contact methods were used to reach out to potential participants, and as new clients were recruited to the ongoing studies, they were asked if they wanted to receive information about the current study. If they said yes, an informed consent call was conducted. Nevertheless, participants on the master list were contacted via phone call, text message, email, or postal mail, but some participants were unreachable because the list did not have their (current) contact information. There were also six participants who consented but never completed their interviews. Finally, alongside the limitations of my recruitment strategy, I also recognize that conducting interviews via phone presents an issue of bias in the sample, making it possible that the interviewees were more digitally literate than unreachable participants. Thus, participants' experiences likely represent a relatively optimistic picture of the digital inequality among returning citizens, and it is possible that returning citizens not included in the sample may have it much worse.

The final sample includes 28 returning citizens. As shown in Table 1, the average age of the sample was 42 years old, and participants spent about 8.4 years incarcerated most recently, with an average of five lifetime incarcerations. Most participants had at least a high school diploma or GED or some college experience. The majority of the sample was employed as well. The Digital Literacy Scale scores ranged from one to four, with one indicating high digital literacy and four indicating low digital literacy. The average digital literacy score for the sample was 1.6, indicating that the sample had high digital literacy overall. Although the score was considerably high, it is important to note that the range of the score was 2.08 (Min: 1.00 and Max: 3.08), with seven participants having a score of 2.00 or more. More information about the Digital Literacy Scale is provided in the Appendix.

2.2 | Data and data collection procedures

Before starting data collection, Institutional Review Board approval was obtained, and the interview questions were revised numerous times with input provided by graduate students and a professor. The questions were developed with the DRM in mind and focused primarily on returning citizens' experiences with accessing and using technology for employment, education, personal needs, and entertainment and leisure (i.e., social media). Although there were no specific questions that related to the cultural or health areas, these areas were loosely mentioned during interviews and are discussed in the findings where relevant. The interview instrument was also pilot-tested twice to gain feedback on ways to improve the interview questions and flow. The final instrument included four areas: demographics, digital literacy scale, technology and reentry, and technology programs.

Interviews were conducted over the phone in private areas and were audio recorded if the participant consented. Most interviews lasted about 45 min, with a few going over an hour. After completing the interview, participants received $30. An undergraduate research assistant (URA)

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TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Total sample ($n = 28$)
Age (years)	42.0 (12.7)
Digital literacy score	1.6 (0.65)
Number of times incarcerated in prison or jail	5.0 (5.6)
Years incarcerated most recently	8.4 (9.3)
Total years incarcerated over the lifetime	11.0 (11.1)
Gender	
Male	14 (50)
Female	14 (50)
Race/ethnicity	
Black	15 (53.6)
White	11 (39.3)
Bi/multiracial	0 (0)
Hispanic/Latine	4 (14.3)
Indigenous	1 (3.6)
Education level	
Less than a high school diploma	4 (14.3)
High school diploma or GED equivalent	11 (39.3)
Some college but no degree	9 (32.1)
Trade/vocational school or other certification	1 (3.6)
Associate's	2 (7.1)
Bachelor's	1 (3.6)
Employment status	
Unemployed	10 (35.7)
Employed	18 (64.3)
Wi-Fi	
Had access	26 (92.9)
No access	2 (7.1)
Email	
Had access	28 (100)
Phone	
Had access	28 (100)
Computer/tablet	
Had access	15 (53.6)
No access	13 (46.4)

Note: The numbers in parentheses represent the percentages for each category except for the Age, Digital Literacy Score, Number of Times Incarcerated in Prison or Jail, Years Incarcerated Most Recently, and Total Years Incarcerated Over the Lifetime variables. In those cases, the number represents the standard deviation.

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and the author did all the recruiting, screening, and interviewing for the project. Both received training in motivational interviewing techniques as well, and another URA received training on interview transcription. Lastly, several steps were taken to protect participants' confidentiality. First, each participant was assigned a "Case ID" number that was kept with their interview data. Only the author had access to the password-protected file with the names and Case ID numbers. Second, all interview transcripts were de-identified and did not include any personally identifying information. Third, all participants were assigned pseudonyms, which are used in the presentation of the results. Participants' length of incarceration, age, and time since release from prison are included in the presentation of the results as well. For simplicity, there are three time since release groups: (G1) Less than a month to 12 months ($n = 16$), (G2) 13 months to 24 months ($n = 7$), and (G3) 25 months or more ($n = 5$).

2.3 | Analytic strategy

The NVivo coding software was used to conduct a thematic analysis. Using Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase thematic analysis method, the author and another graduate student inductively searched for themes in the data, developed the codebook, and established interrater reliability. We started by reading the first ten cases in the dataset together and identifying initial emergent codes. Then, we reviewed and refined the codes to generate a more definitive list of themes. We developed the themes by combining child codes (i.e., subthemes) where needed to make them broader and discussed any inclusion criteria (i.e., the criteria a quote must meet to be coded within a theme) we wanted to set.[2] After finalizing the initial codebook, we conducted interrater reliability by coding 20% of the remaining data separately. The interrater reliability test resulted in a Cohen's Kappa (k) of .73, indicating substantial agreement (Glen, n.d.a.). The remaining transcripts were coded independently by the author.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Access to technology

3.1.1 | Phone access

As shown in Table 1, 100% of participants had access to a phone, and the majority (89.3%, $n = 25$) had smartphones. Despite the high level of phone access, seven participants (25%) still reported experiencing issues using their phones. Sharing her experience, Makayla (32 years incarcerated, 48 years old, G1) said, *"I need help navigating the phone functions. A good example is I seen a pop-up about voicemail messages and didn't know how to access them. When I finally got help, I had like 30 messages."* Similarly, Lucas (28 years incarcerated, 56 years old, G2) stated, *"I would like to learn how to text on a phone and all the rest of stuff, like Google. I don't know how to do any of that."*

[2] For example, we created a theme called "device issues," which was used when participants stated they had issues using a technology device at work, but we felt it was important to distinguish between computers and other types of devices based on prior literature. Thus, the inclusion criteria for the "device issues" theme is that the participant must be referring to issues with a device that is *not* a computer.

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To mitigate challenges using their phones, participants relied on their social networks. For example, Stephanie (18 years incarcerated, 39 years old, G2) shared, *"My friend gave me a phone and taught me [how to use it]. She was like, 'This is how you turn the phone on/off. This is an app. These are the basics of your phone. This is how you text.'"* Steffin (20 years incarcerated, 70 years old, G1) described receiving help from his brother and girlfriend:

> *I've been gone for so long. The technology with phones was different and not that difficult. Now, I cut [accidentally hang up on] people off on the phone and stuff. [They help me by] showing me how to use the Internet, the maps on the phone. Whatever I need, if I don't know how to do it, they'll help me.*

Comparatively, Reese (4 years incarcerated, 47 years old, G1) linked his challenges using his phone to a health issue and relied on his son for help, illustrating the link between the reentry realm, online realm, and health area of the DRM (Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018). He explained,

> *I locked myself out of my phone. My son got me back in. I forgot my passwords, don't write them down, and always use a different password. Why do I do that? I don't know, but for a couple months, I was in the hospital having seizures. My memory is lost.*

Further illustrating the link between the different realms of the DRM, Cameron (5 years incarcerated, 30 years old, G1) expressed how being locked up for 23 h a day currently impacts him:

> *[My wife] does it all. Every time the phone starts talking to me out of nowhere, I think it's the government or robots. I don't like this. I can't even make my doctor's appointments. I sat locked up for 23 hours for years. I don't know how to talk to people, but I'm working on it.*

Cameron's quote also reveals that because he is unfamiliar with virtual assistant apps (e.g., Siri), he does not trust them and may even have some privacy concerns, which is expected (Gurusami, 2019; Seo et al., 2020s). Moreover, Cameron also shared that he participated in a digital skills program while incarcerated but portrayed it as unhelpful because the learning environment was disrupted by the negative attitudes of his peers and the instructor. As a result, this prohibited him from improving his digital literacy prior to release.

Nevertheless, despite needing help to use phones, some participants felt learning how to use a phone would be easier than learning how to use a computer. Case in point, Adrian (1 year incarcerated, 63 years old, G2) claimed,

> *I just got a new phone the other day. [My family and fiancé help me] figure out how to use it and the computer. I wouldn't mind learning more about the computer or phone, but the phone ain't really that important. All I gotta do is just keep dealing with it, and I will catch up.*

Other participants connected having an easier time with phones to the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, Makayla (32 years incarcerated, 48 years old, G1) pointed out, "*COVID has forced me to learn how to use the phone quicker, which isn't bad but stressful. If it hadn't been for COVID,*

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I don't think that I would be trying to learn how to navigate technology and not giving up." Similarly, Brian (12 years incarcerated, 71 years old, G3) shared, *"COVID gave me an opportunity to sit at home and play with smartphones to learn more. It impacted my comfortability with them."* Still, he also reported receiving help from his wife to navigate frustrations with technology when they occurred: *"Let's say I have an issue with downloading something or resetting a password, she got more patience than I do. So, she'll come over and get me straight."* Thus, Bryan reiterated the importance of technological capital (Gilbert, 2010).

3.1.2 | Computer access

Computer access was remarkably lower than phone access, with only 53.6% ($n = 15$) of participants having a computer. When asked why they did not have a computer, participants cited three reasons. The first was financial challenges to purchasing a computer. Sharing his story, Steffin (20 years incarcerated, 70 years old, G1) tersely said, *"Money, the finances, and the cost are the challenge."* Correspondingly, Diondra (2 years incarcerated, 45 years old, G3) uttered, *"I have to buy one, but money is a challenge."* The second reason participants did not have a computer was that some felt it was unnecessary since they had a smartphone. For example, Janel (1 year incarcerated, 28 years old, G2) remarked, *"[There are no challenges]…my phone can do everything that a computer can do."* Interestingly, the four participants who felt computers were unnecessary were all born over a decade after the first personal computer was invented in 1971 (Computer History Museum, n.d.). However, it is unclear whether their age or incarceration length influenced their attitudes toward computers because participants in the same and older age ranges and with similar incarceration lengths were represented in all reasons for no computer access. Therefore, more research is needed to untangle the relationship between length of incarceration, age, and attitudes toward computer access.

The third reason participants did not have a computer was because they simply never owned one and had not gotten around to getting one, but they recognized computers' importance. Exhibiting this theme, Sarah (13 years incarcerated, 47 years old, G1) asserted, *"Some phones don't show certain tabs that a computer will show. So, it is important to have both,"* and Adrian (1 year incarcerated, 63 years old, G2) exclaimed, *"I don't have access right now, but I'm planning on getting one. I ain't have the money to go buy one [before]."*

Alongside sharing reasons for not having a computer, several participants also discussed how they mitigated this challenge. This was often done by using computers at public libraries. For example, Adrian (1 year incarcerated, 63 years old, G2) explained, *"I used to go to the library when I wanted to look up something, and a lot of my relatives got computers. So, if I really needed it, I go over there."* Brenna (3 years incarcerated, 34 years old, G1) declared, *"I've never owned a computer. If I need one, I go to the library."* Intriguingly, even participants who felt they did not need a computer used the library for computer access. Take, for instance, Vanessa (10 years incarcerated, 36 years old, G2), who stated, *"I really don't have to use a computer. If I need to, I go to the library*."

In contrast, there was one participant who was completely unable to gain computer access. Explaining his experience, Cameron (5 years incarcerated, 30 years old, G1) commented, "*I don't know nobody that has computers except the library, and I don't use those because I don't know where one is. Everybody I know got a phone, but nobody has a computer unless they grown up with one*." Cameron's quote reveals that he lacks access to computers and does not know how to find

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technology resources through his personal network or public resources, trapping him in a cycle of digital inequality. Because Cameron spent 13 years incarcerated across his lifetime and was released less than a year ago, it is plausible that he is still unaware of available resources and adjusting to life after release. In addition, he also shared that he needed help finding substance abuse or mental health treatment and budgeting, indicating that he may also be unable to buy a computer due to other co-occurring needs.

3.2 | The digital rehabilitation model and returning citizens' use of technology

3.2.1 | The economic area

Issues with the online job search. Challenges with the online job search were by far the most common online challenge participants experienced. For instance, Jaiya (2 years incarcerated, 35 years old, G1) explained, "*[It's difficult because] it's all online. When I grew up, I could just walk in with a paper and get a job. I feel like a first impression is the best way to get a job. [So,] it debilitates my skills because of these stupid computers*." To assuage her difficulties with technology, Jaiya relied on social support from her boyfriend, best friend, and mom, but even with their support, she still experienced a lot of frustration when using technology and expressed, *"I'm so far behind with the technology it's frustrating. Honestly, it's a trigger to my sobriety."* Jaiya associating her digital inequality with her sobriety is understandable, given that having low digital skills is connected to negative outcomes like burnout (De Marco et al., 2023). However, it is important to note that Jaiya is the only participant who made this connection.

Describing her challenges with the online job search, Julie (4 years incarcerated, 36 years old, G3) declared, *"I had to fill an application out four times. It wouldn't submit. So, I'm like, 'Yeah, I'm good.'"* Stephanie (18 years incarcerated, 39 years old, G2) elucidated how being released from prison during the COVID-19 pandemic worsened her online job search:

> *When I was released, it was more difficult finding jobs because of the pandemic. The whole system is different. Before I got arrested, we were still using paper. [Now], I fill out applications on the phone. The most difficult thing is when you're uploading your information. It's also irritating going on Indeed. They take you six different places and not even [to] stuff that you applied for. Even some of the in-store ones that say, "text job to 1234" doesn't work*.

Stephanie's story reiterates the importance of having access to a computer because phones are not always compatible with certain websites, making job searching more difficult (Anderson & Horrigan, 2016).

In some cases, participants completely avoided applying for jobs online due to privacy concerns, which are common among this population (Seo et al., 2020) and could be attributed to their deficiency in internet socialization and digital skills (Gurusami, 2019). Detailing this experience, Makayla (32 years incarcerated, 48 years old, G1) commented, "*I was trying to apply online but didn't understand how to sign up, log in, or the passwords. I was scared of going too far because I didn't know how much information was safe to give online. I just said forget it. It's difficult*."

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Lastly, two participants tied their experiences with online job searching back to felony discrimination in the labor market. For instance, Joshua (3 years incarcerated, 44 years old, G1) said,

> *Some of the application machines at certain places didn't even work. It takes so long when you could just do it quicker the old way on a piece of paper. I think at Amazon I did take a picture of my resume and sent it with my application. They kept on stalling and telling me that my background check has not been completed. People were telling me that's like a 'no' without them telling you. Sure thing, they send me something eight months later with a copy of my entire criminal history saying they cannot hire me.*

Likewise, Reese (4 years incarcerated, 47 years old, G1) divulged,

> *The hardest thing I had to do was get on Indeed and ZipRecruiter. I still don't think I did it right because I'm getting job emails that have nothing to do with anything I put down. Also, I'm scared to put down that I'm a felon, but I don't lie. I either don't fill out the application or find a job where that doesn't matter.*

Both of the aforementioned experiences underscore how the difficulties with the online job search and job searching after a felony conviction converge (Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al., 2019; Warner & Michaels, 2024). However, Reese also uniquely mentioned an internal struggle he faces with asking his social network members for help with technology and other needs. Consequently, he avoids mentioning his problems. This strain between knowing he needs help and actually asking for it could be a result of a gender-based experience wherein, because he is a man, Reese feels added pressure to maintain independence. This would align with the extant research (Panuccio & Christian, 2019) and support the overlap between digital inequality and gendered experiences (Gilbert, 2010), but more research is needed to untangle this relationship.

Issues with technology on the job. Six participants (21.4%) experienced issues using technology on the job as well. Specifically, they had computer, software, connectivity, or device issues. Sharing his experience, Cameron (5 years incarcerated, 30 years old, G1) recalled,

> *I got a job at Taco Bell. It was going well. Then, they sat me in front of a computer for orientation, but I don't know how computers work. So, I quit. It was the first time I'd been on a computer since middle school. It was really different. I couldn't keep up. I don't even know how to use my phone, where the app store was, or what 'trending' meant. My wife be having to show me. I was sitting in a block for thirteen years [referring to his total lifetime incarceration]. The world was different. I didn't even know how to use a microwave.*

Cameron's quote elucidates a strong example of how, even after the online job search, returning citizens may face technology issues on the job. Nevertheless, other participants' discussions of difficulties using technology on the job were less severe. For example, Brian (12 years incarcerated, 71 years old, G3) claimed, *"Sometimes the app doesn't work, and my job requires me to use it [for] communications, which is frustrating."* Likewise, Jaiya (2 years incarcerated, 35 years old, G1) shared, *"The whole Bluetooth and Wi-Fi concept, I don't get it. I have difficulty with it at work, [and] because I don't have an iPhone, my bosses have to send all my stuff differently."* Taken together, the findings

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from this theme show how returning citizens' employment-related technology challenges are not limited to the online job search. Instead, they may find themselves experiencing technology-based issues while on the job, which could result in frustration, constant challenges, or, in some cases, the individual quitting the job.

Education. Challenges using technology for educational purposes were sparsely described but took two forms. First, some participants wanted to learn how to find education opportunities online. Case in point, Lucas (28 years incarcerated, 56 years old, G2) asserted, *"I would like to learn more about a computer so I can do stuff like get a GED online*," while Alyssa (3 years incarcerated, 38 years old, G1) said, *"I don't know the correct websites. I want to sign up for a degree to be a peer recovery coach. So, my therapist is going to help me."* Second, one participant described the challenges she faced using technology for school. Explicitly, Margaret (1 year incarcerated, 31 years old, G1) remarked, "*I don't have the right software because it's not compatible with my Chromebook. Chromebooks don't have Windows, which is an issue. I have to get a whole other computer."* Of the three participants, Alyssa was the only one to overtly state that she would receive support in this area. However, in another interview section, Margaret revealed that her husband does assist her with using technology. Thus, it is he might also be helping her navigate this education-specific challenge. Lucas, on the other hand, received help from a friend to access and use his phone, but he described the help as only focused on setting up his Gmail and downloading mobile apps. Therefore, the help he received did not touch on his other areas of need, explaining why he desires to learn more about online education opportunities.

3.2.2 | The personal area

Participants mentioned experiences using technology for other personal needs, such as transportation, mental and physical health treatment, and social safety net benefit needs.

Transportation. Regarding transportation, Janel (1 year incarcerated, 28 years old, G2) said, *"I'm going to be buying a car and searching for housing. So, I want to learn how to search in the right place and avoid certain websites so I don't get scammed."* Likewise, Stephanie (18 years incarcerated, 39 years old, G2) stated, *"When COVID came, my friend's vehicle broke down. So, I was utilizing technology to figure out how to get to work. I searched and found the CATA system and Spectrum [a health service provider offering transportation assistance]."*

Lastly, Shaun (3 years incarcerated, 31 years old, G1) shared, *"We don't have a car. So, we've just been Lyfting and Ubering everywhere."* Shaun was the only participant who mentioned using rideshare services. Thus, it remains unclear how often returning citizens may turn to them as a source of support. Nevertheless, all three participants' experiences highlight how technology can potentially serve as a tool to find resources to eliminate transportation barriers.

Mental and physical health needs. Discussions about treatment and support services overlapped with the DRM's health area but were only mentioned by three participants (10.7%). Case in point, Brenna (3 years incarcerated, 34 years old, G1) asserted, *"I do [participate in support groups] almost every day. I get in community with other Muslims and am in another support group that's not with my Muslim ladies."* Comparatively, Margaret (1 year incarcerated, 31 years old, G1) connected her experience to the COVID-19 pandemic: *"I'm learning a lot of new ways [to use technology] because of the pandemic. A lot of things are virtual, even doctor's appointments. I just had my weekly doctor's appointment over the phone."* Makayla (32 years incarcerated, 48 years old, G1) also used telehealth services and exclaimed, *"My therapist sent me forms to fill out, and I didn't know*

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how to [do it] on my phone. I could open them but couldn't fill them in. I had to have somebody help me." Together, the women's experiences demonstrate how technology can offer returning citizens more convenient mechanisms to get their health and support needs met, but in some cases, such as Makayla, they may still need support to do so.

Social safety net benefits. Lastly, two participants had challenges navigating online social safety net benefit applications, which relates to the DRM's economic area as well. Stephanie (18 years incarcerated, 39 years old, G2), for instance, had trouble finding the food stamps application:

> *I applied for food stamps online. It wasn't too difficult to fill out [except] just getting the information of what website to go on because, when you Google "food stamps," it might take you to six different things. [So], you have no idea which to click. So, [I] was just waiting on where I go, what I do, and who I contact.*

Makayla (32 years incarcerated, 48 years old, G1) had issues finding the correct website as well, and when asked what impacted her ability to access benefits, she responded, "*Not knowing if websites are safe…people can hack you. There's fake sites that can get your information. I'm scared and don't look up things because I just don't know. I wonder, 'Is this a real site? Is this safe? Is this site going to scam me?'*" Yet again, Makayla's story illustrates the privacy concerns she has about the online world, supporting extant research (Seo et al., 2020). However, when looking across the three sections mentioned in the personal area, it is clear that technology still provides returning citizens with the opportunity to find various transportation, health, and social safety net resources, all of which are beneficial to their reintegration.

4 | DISCUSSION

The current study used qualitative interview data from 28 returning citizens to explore their experiences with digital inequality, and the findings revealed three key takeaways. First, participants had considerable access to phones but not computers, with 46.4% of the sample being mobile phone-dependent. The participants' lower rate of access to computers is to be expected based on existing research (Gonzales, 2016; Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al., 2019; Reisdorf et al., 2021; Vogels, 2021). However, the current study's findings uniquely identified three specific reasons why returning citizens may lack computer access: financial constraints, feeling as though they did not need a computer, and never owning a computer but not having any specific access barriers or attitudes against computers.

The study's second key takeaway is that participants had challenges or concerns about using technology for a variety of reentry needs, including, most notably, online job searching. Specifically, participants had issues completing applications, receiving information about irrelevant jobs, and concerns about maintaining online safety when applying for jobs, all of which are consistent with prior research (Blomberg et al., 2021; Gurusami, 2019; Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al., 2019; Seo et al., 2020). Additionally, two participants connected their negative online job search experiences to their concerns about their felony records' impact on job opportunities, which is a well-known and legitimate concern for returning citizens (Pager, 2003; Warner & Michaels, 2024). Lastly, regarding the employment-related findings, the current study unearthed a distinctive contribution to the literature by demonstrating that, albeit to a lesser extent, returning citizens also have trouble using technology on the job. Though the finding is unique, it makes sense, given the

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increasingly technical nature of the labor market (Bergeson-Shilcock et al., 2023). Therefore, it is insufficient to only consider returning citizens' experiences applying for jobs. Rather, digital inequality and reentry scholars must explore the entire employment spectrum (i.e., searching, applying, and working) in their scholarship.

Alongside their employment-related technology challenges and concerns, participants detailed their experiences using technology for education, housing, transportation, health, and social safety net needs, though more infrequently. In regard to education, participants were mostly unfamiliar with where to go online to find information about education opportunities, building on Blomberg et al.'s (2021) findings. As for transportation and housing, participants used or planned to use technology to search for housing opportunities, alternative transportation options, and rideshare services (i.e., Uber). Participants discussion of rideshare services, in particular, underscores the potentially high utility these services may have for returning citizens because they may be unable to access transportation otherwise (Brown, 2019; Dillahunt & Veinot, 2018; Nordberg et al., 2021). Furthermore, the findings in the housing, transportation, and health areas contrasted the employment, education, and social safety net findings because participants felt their experiences were positive or, at the very least, neutral rather than negative. Nonetheless, experiences in these additional reentry areas were only described by a few participants, hence the necessity of additional research covering these areas.

As expected, challenges using technology were particularly prevalent among older participants and those who spent longer or multiple times incarcerated (Hwang et al., 2023; Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016; Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022; Reisdorf et al., 2021). Nevertheless, younger participants and those who experienced shorter stints of incarceration were not precluded from also experiencing difficulties. These difficulties likely persist across participants due to the sample's high rate of mobile phone dependence (Anderson & Horrigan, 2016; Correa et al., 2020; Reisdorf et al., 2021). The high rate of mobile phone dependence may also explain why participants' most notable concerns were with the online job search. Although, it could be related to the sample's high unemployment rate (35.7%) or low educational attainment level, as both are linked to issues with online job searching (Smith, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c).

Lastly, the study's third key takeaway is that social support played an important role in helping participants alleviate technology access and use challenges. Consistent with prior research, very few participants received any prerelease digital skills training (Gurusami, 2019; Hwang et al., 2023; Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al., 2019; Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022; Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016). And among the nine who did, four participants felt the prerelease programming was unhelpful. Thus, it is unsurprising that participants felt social support was critical to easing digital inequality. Furthermore, participants' sentiments reiterated what is found in extant research (Blomberg et al., 2021; Gilbert, 2010; Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al., 2019; Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022; Reisdorf et al., 2021) and emphasized the importance of public libraries (Møhler Sørensen, 2021) for assistance with a variety of online tasks. However, the help received did not always result in participants accomplishing their goals, making it clear why, even with some technological capital (Gilbert, 2010), participants still faced digital inequality.

4.1 | Policy implications

The current study's findings lend themselves well to two key policy implications for correctional facilities. The first policy implication suggests that correctional facilities should help returning

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citizens increase their technological capital (Gilbert, 2010) by connecting them with community organizations and resources offering support for accessing affordable technology, particularly computers. By helping returning citizens access devices, correctional facilities would be directly involved in lessening the rate of mobile phone dependence and digital inequality among this population.

Public libraries, in particular, are a strong potential technological resource for returning citizens, given that one of their main functions is to promote digital inclusion by providing access to computers, digital skills training, and technology support (ALA, n.d.b; Møhler Sørensen, 2021). Moreover, people without home internet access and those who are currently looking for employment are the ones who feel using the Internet, computers, and printers at libraries is very important to them (Pew Research Center, 2023). In addition to libraries, other nationwide organizations (e.g., Human-I-T, n.d.) are also working toward digital inclusion by providing access to low or no-cost devices and employing "digital navigators" who offer guidance on finding affordable devices and internet services and technical support (Michigan Department of Labor & Economic Opportunity, 2023; NDIA, n.d.). Correctional facilities could establish partnerships with these public services and organizations to equip returning citizens with technology devices and technical support immediately upon release. This would serve as a first step to increasing their technological capital and capacity (Gilbert, 2010).

The second policy recommendation is to increase currently incarcerated people's access to technology devices, the Internet, and prerelease digital skills programming focused on basic and reentry-specific skills and maintaining online safety. In fact, existing programs are already showing promising results. For example, Castek et al. (2015) found that participants in their digital skills program reported an increase in feelings of self-empowerment, self-efficacy, and self-confidence in relation to using technology and navigating the Internet. Likewise, there is some preliminary research demonstrating that increasing incarcerated people's access to the Internet and digital skills programs improves the prison environment and relationships between incarcerated people and correctional staff. It reduced the amount of disciplinary offenses as well (McDougall et al., 2017). More recently, Mufarreh et al. (2021) found that prison staff believe increasing technology access in prisons has positive effects.

Despite the positive impacts, there are legitimate safety and security concerns to be addressed in regard to increasing access to technology devices, the Internet, and digital skills programming in correctional facilities, and there are several existing methods used in the United States and Europe to address these concerns. For example, in the United States, the Remote Area Community Hotspot for Education and Learning (RACHEL) program provides incarcerated people with a digital library filled with educational content and does not require an internet connection, although the interface gives the appearance of being connected to the Internet (Prisoner Learning Alliance, 2020). The Last Mile (TLM) program uses a similar method to teach incarcerated people digital communication and technological skills with a specific focus on increasing their employability after release (Burley, 2023). Comparatively, prisons in Denmark utilize a tiered approach to internet access based on incarcerated people's risk profiles. The three levels are structured as follows: (1) communal internet cafes that allow monitored internet use for educational or reentry-based activities and block unsuitable websites (e.g., social media), (2) classroom-based heavily monitored internet access for groups focused on a specific purpose, (3) unrestricted prison cell-based internet access through computers for specific educational or work purposes (Prisoner Learning Alliance, 2020). Lastly, there are also two recently developed guides on principles and standards for building the technology ecosystem in prison that correctional

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officials may find beneficial (see Badertscher et al., 2023; Office of Career, Technical & Adult Education, 2022).

4.2 | Strengths and limitations

The current study is not without strengths and limitations. Beginning with strengths, the current study's semi-structured approach allowed participants to provide detailed responses. Subsequently, the findings inductively emerged from participants' responses, allowing them to shape the results and improving the study's credibility. Study credibility was further improved by conducting interrater reliability as well. Additionally, the current study demonstrates palpability (i.e., displaying findings concretely; Small & Calarco, 2022) through the use of quotes with specific examples. This was achieved by asking participants probing and follow-up questions. Heterogeneity or diversity in perceptions and experiences (Small & Calarco, 2022) is also showcased in the findings by the presentation of multiple quotes highlighting similarities and differences in participants' experiences. Lastly, for strengths, this study advances the empirical research on the DRM (Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018) by using it as a framework for examining participants' experiences with digital inequality in both the economic and personal areas. This contrasts the extant research, as it primarily focuses on economic-related technology uses. Furthermore, the results underscore the relationship between the DRM's prison, reentry, and online realms, supporting the model's use in reentry research.

As for limitations, though a sample size of 28 is sufficient for achieving data saturation (Guest et al., 2006), it is possible that if the sample size were increased and diversified based on length of incarceration, age, or other characteristics, the results may change. Thus, the findings should be interpreted as a first step toward a deeper understanding of digital inequality during reintegration. Likewise, though multiple areas of the DRM were represented, there was a lack of interview questions about the cultural and health areas, limiting knowledge of returning citizens' experiences in these key areas. Finally, the use of convenience sampling may not have attracted the most digitally excluded returning citizens, which could have further biased the results.

4.3 | Future research

There are three improvements that can be made in future research to address the study's limitations. First, more robust sampling methods, such as recruiting from parole offices or local reentry organizations, can be used for recruitment. This would potentially increase the chances of including the most digitally excluded returning citizens. Additionally, the sample size should be increased, as this would allow for subgroup analyses and confirmation or rejection of the current study's findings. Larger sample sizes would allow for mixed methods approaches as well. Second, using longitudinal methods would allow researchers to explore returning citizens' experiences with digital inequality over time and unearth new knowledge on how their experiences may change. Third, future research should include targeted questions about returning citizens' experiences in the cultural and health areas of the DRM and Helsper's (2012) social and digital impact mediators. In addition, future research can also continue to build on the DRM areas that were represented in the current study.

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5 | CONCLUSION

To conclude, the current study used the DRM to explore returning citizens' experiences accessing and using technology. The findings revealed that participants had negative experiences with accessing and using technology, particularly during the online job search. Fortunately, participants were able to mitigate technology challenges through social support from various personal network members, but this support did not completely eliminate their digital inequality. Thus, the current study serves as a first step to demonstrating how digital inequality shows up within the context of reintegration and supports Reisdorf and Rikard's (2018) call for using a "digital rehabilitation" lens in reentry research.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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How to cite this article: Sanders, K. (2025). "Everything is technology": Examining technology access and use among returning citizens. *Criminology & Public Policy*, *24*, 501–525. https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12701

APPENDIX

DIGITAL LITERACY SCALE

The Digital Literacy Scale (DLS) was designed based on factors important for returning citizens (e.g., finding a job) as no scale currently exists for this population. However, inspiration for this scale was taken from Blau's (1994) "Job Search Behavior Scale." The DLS consisted of 12 items, and the average score for the sample is presented in Table 1. Participants were given the following Likert scale response options and definitions to choose from: **(1)** excellent (i.e., I completely know how to do this myself.), **(2)** good (i.e., I need very little help to do this.), **(3)** fair (i.e., I need a lot of help to do this, but I can get it done.), and **(4)** poor (i.e., I can't do this at all.). The justification for including definitions with the response options was to ensure that all participants interpreted the response options the same.

An exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring with an Oblimin Rotation and Kaiser Normalization was conducted to create the scale. The scale's reliability test resulted in a Cronbach's alpha (α) of .91, indicating excellent internal consistency (Glen, n.d.b.). Two factors were extracted. Factor one represented intermediate or challenging digital skills (e.g., creating a resume) and explained 53.24% of the variance with an eigenvalue of 6.39. Positive factor loadings for factor one ranged from 0.414 to .971, and there was one negative loading of –0.084. Factor two represented basic digital skills (e.g., knowing how to turn a computer on) and explained 12.21% of the variance with an eigenvalue of 1.47. Positive factor loadings for factor two ranged from 0.415 to 0.780, and there were two negative factor loadings of –0.095 and –0.312. Cumulatively, the factors

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explained 65.44% of the variance. The scale's median was 1.2, and there were two modes: 1.00 and 1.08. The variance of the scale was 0.37. Table 1 displays the average scores and standard deviations for the DLS.

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Dr. Kaelyn Sanders received her PhD from the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University and is an incoming Assistant Professor at Arizona State University's School of Criminology and Criminal Justice. Her research interests include corrections and community supervision, reintegration, and inequality broadly, although her current work is focused specifically on digital inequality among returning citizens. Her past research has been published in the *Feminist Criminology*, *Crime & Delinquency*, and *the Journal of Criminal Justice Education*.

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