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A Taste of Freedom:
The Meaning & Experience of Work for Formerly Incarcerated Asian Pacific Islander individuals

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Abstract

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Asian American and Pacific Islander (API) incarceration rates have risen since the 1990s as part of the rise in incarceration of Black, Brown and low income communities. The school to prison pipeline is also known as a framework for understanding the root causes of incarceration. The experiences and voices of API individuals who are systematically targeted for incarceration have been missing. The salience of the model minority myth that assumes homogeneity of all API populations as successful, wealthy and submissive caricatures has made invisible the reality of suffering in API communities. Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander communities often encounter the school to prison to deportation pipeline.

This thesis is a cross sectional qualitative interview study on the post release experiences of formerly incarcerated Asian Pacific Islander individuals. Reentry for formerly incarcerated individuals is marked with vulnerability due to the sudden changes in environment, cultures and habits individuals encounter, alongside a lack of resources. The interviews conducted for this study aimed to 1) examine how formerly incarcerated API individuals define post-release well being and its relationship to transition into mainstream society, 2) examine the meaning of work and employment and its role in the post-release identity formation of racialized API individuals, 3) characterize the relationship between employment and an individual's post-release transition process and finally 4) identify other contributing factors such as family connections and culture, that support the post-release transition processes.

Work is a form of activity and effort, a form of labor, multifaceted and layered. My research reveals how formerly incarcerated individuals engage in work in ways that may not always be apparent and acknowledged. Survival work is only one component of the total labor that individuals engage in. Survival work is not merely functional, a way to survive, but also serves as proof by the parole system, as well as their families, as evidence of a desire to transition successfully. The centrality of survival work in the dominant understanding of desistance, exists alongside the minimization or invisibility of other kinds of desistance work that individuals and their communities engage in. This pattern creates confusion in the ways meaningful support can be imagined. Clarifying and naming existing desistance work that individuals are engaged in, outside of survival work, is crucial for understanding reentry and the broader communities' role in supporting it.

Prevailing notions around reentry centralize survival work as a symbol of an individual's intention to successfully transition. As my research shows, meaningful work which restores an individual's sense of humanity, connection and belonging to community is valuable for successful transition. I further identify that individuals engage with themselves, their work and their immediate families and communities as the various components of desistance work

For these reasons, I propose two areas for further exploration. One, an alternative vision of reentry, a "prison to liberation" pathway. Also, approaching desistance work on three levels -- the level of the individual self, the level of the immediate family and loved ones and then on a level of the broader community's support for the formerly incarcerated individuals and their loved ones who bear the brunt of the financial and emotional burdens of transition.

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List of Abbreviations

| | |
|-----|---|
| API | Asian Pacific Islander |
| DOC | Department of Corrections |
| ICE | Immigration & Customs Enforcement |
| INS | Immigration and Naturalization Services |
| MOU | Memorandum of Understanding |
| WA | Washington |

I) Background and Research

Incarceration: Disciplining the working class

The majority of individuals who are currently incarcerated in the US are the working or non-working poor (Gilmore, 2007, p 29). In fact, before incarceration, more than two thirds of male individuals were employed and more than half were the primary source of financial support for their children (Western & Pettit, 2010). Bureau of Prison statistics from 2014 further reveal that incarcerated individuals had a median annual income of \$19,200 prior to their incarceration, a whopping 41% less than non-incarcerated people of similar age range (25-42 years old) (Rabuy & Kopf, 2015).

The unprecedented increase in the prisoner population did not match the data on crime statistics. Crime rates actually dropped when the rise in incarcerated populations occurred (Gilmore, 2007). It has been commonly acknowledged that the rise in prison population has to do with stricter sentencing laws, such as mandatory minimums, three strikes and in Washington State, the removal of parole almost completely in 1984. However, the economic forces behind the rise of the prison industrial complex has not been widely discussed. Several researchers have linked the rise of the prison industrial complex to the economy.

Michelle Alexander situates the rise of the prison industrial complex in the 1980s with the post civil rights backlash. The Nixon administration promoted the rhetoric of the war on drugs and public safety, as racially coded lingo for Black bodies, needing surveillance and policing to quell the rise of the anti war left and Black organizing (Alexander, 2011). Studying California prisons, Gilmore expands on this by situating the rise of the prison industrial complex in the 1980s alongside the massive attacks on workers' rights, through deindustrialization and union busting (Gilmore, 2007) (McNally, 2011). The need to funnel surplus labor -- large numbers of un/underemployed men, poor and many of color, as well as the need for the state and wealthy strata to channel surplus capital from the agricultural regions in central California -- served as incentives for the construction of the prisons. The communities hardest hit by the economic recession were also the ones most targeted by the police and the criminal justice system to fill the beds in these new prisons. The American dream of upward mobility through a stable union job with opportunity for skill acquisition and job training may have become recently accessible to some communities of color as a result of the Black liberation and civil rights movement. However, this short-lived access was diminished by the unfolding of events at the time. This

period also marks the rise of precarious labor – unstable, fluctuating jobs with no benefits or training. This is the neoliberal era of unfettered free market capitalism that we find ourselves in today.

Western and Beckett add to this scholarship by identifying the penal system as a labor market regulatory institute. The low unemployment rates in the US in the 1980s and 1990s was rationalized as a product of the unregulated US labor market, in contrast to the corporatist welfare states in Europe. The authors argue that the concurrent expansion of the penal system and a high incarceration rate was in reality, a large and coercive intervention into the labor market. By removing young, able bodied, working age men from the labor force, joblessness among this population was masked (Western & Beckett, 1999).

The structural intervention taken toward the goal of economic stabilization was built on the backs of poor individuals. Rather than the common pathologizing of Black, Brown and poor communities and these communities' morality, culture and disposition that lead to criminal activity, such a structural framework allows us to understand the context in which individuals are subjected to lifetimes of incarceration, characterized by sensory deprivation, emotional numbness, boredom, violence, and exposure to infectious and communicable diseases (Liem & Kunst, 2013). When statistics reveal that incarcerated individuals are disproportionately Black or non-white, and their sentences disproportionately longer than white offenders charged with the same crime, then Gilmore's (2007) definition of racism as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" is resonant.

The balancing of employment trends, and justification of market deregulatory neoliberal ideology through the bodies of marginalized individuals do not end simply with entry into the penal system. It continues into their time in the penal system through engagement with carceral labor. While this is not the focus of the proposed thesis, it is important to note that incarcerated individuals are often coerced into labor while serving their time. Mandatory assignment into commercial industries or into doing maintenance work such as laundry, cooking, cleaning at the various Department of Corrections facilities, is often a non-negotiable task that incarcerated individuals have to engage in. In fact, federal legislation has even facilitated this coercive process through the 1979 Prison Industry Enhancement Act that allowed private business to profitably contract with prison labor, better known as factories with fences (LeBaron, 2012) (Unicor, n.d.) (Burton-Rose, 1998).

Pre incarceration poverty marked by unemployment or poverty wages, followed by coercive carceral labor with few or no transferable skills, do not leave incarcerated individuals in a good place when they eventually do get released into the community. Formerly incarcerated individuals have high rates of unemployment, marked by low wage mobility and stigmatization (Western, 2002). This proposed thesis research is an effort to characterize this transitional period in the lives of formerly incarcerated individuals. These stages of (non) engagement, being at the peripheries of the formal economy, mark the lifespan of a certain segment of the working class in the era of mass incarceration.

Asian Pacific Islander incarceration

Mass incarceration is an issue that impacts low income communities and communities of color. However, few specific statistics are available for the numbers of Asian Pacific Islander (API) individuals who are incarcerated. API individuals are often combined with race-ethnicity groups in an analytically useless “Other” category in the census data of incarcerated populations.

In recent years however, advocacy groups have begun to address this invisibility. They have confronted the salience of the model minority myth that posits all API as successful immigrants in contrast to other communities that are considered minorities, promulgating the American Dream. The American Dream has a foundational assumption that hard work (literally working hard at a job) is the primary factor that leads to success and comfort in the United States (Leonhardt, 2016). The Model Minority myth is a framework used to understand the rationale behind the state propagated assumption that all API immigrant cultures share common traits of innate obedience, conformity and diligence that allow API individuals to thrive in the US (Wu, 2013). It is not surprising that this image of the docile and passive Asian immigrant finding success and stability in the arms of American democracy and market economy, emerged during the vapid propaganda battles against the Communist bloc in the Cold War era (Wu, 2013).

In reality, the factors that contributed to the migration and displacement of Asian Pacific Islander populations in the United States have been understated. Asian Pacific Islander as a census category in the United States belies the diversity and complexities of the groups that make it up. Encompassing 60% of the world population, the Asian continent and the Pacific Islands consist of a variety of cultures, languages, and peoples that have differing national and regional

histories in relation to the United States and other European countries. The migration of various populations to the United States cannot be separated from the colonial legacies that have existed in the homelands. The migration of refugees displaced from the US invasion of Southeast Asia is an example from the last 40 years; as is the ongoing migration of Pacific Islanders where US military bases and failed military experiments are located. These are just examples of a variety of recent migrations. API populations vary drastically in class and documentation status, with much of the diversity lost in the aggregation of the data.

The lack of disaggregated statistics within the census group and conflation of API individuals as “Other” in the state and federal prison census contribute to the invisibility of the impacts of poverty and incarceration on the API community. The lack of data regarding incarcerated API populations go alongside the invisibility of data around API poverty. What is often ignored, is that Asian Americans are one of the fastest growing populations in poverty since the Great Recession in 2008. A report from the Center for American Progress reveals that Asian Americans living in poverty rose by 37%, beyond the national increase of 27%. The White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders also reports that Southeast Asian groups such as Cambodians and Hmong have 29.3% and 37.8% of their populations living in poverty (Ramakrishnan & Ahmad, 2015) (Chang, 2015) (AAPI Data). These numbers are comparable to or worse than the poverty rates of other minority groups, such as African Americans at 27% and Latinx populations at 26% (Ramakrishnan & Ahmad, 2015).

2013 census data reveal that there are about 118,000 individuals categorized as “Other” in state and federal prisons. The 1990s prison boom found an increase of 250% in API prison populations. Northern California statistics in 2006 reveal that Samoans had the highest arrest rates of any racial ethnic group in Oakland. Furthermore, Samoans and Vietnamese had the highest youth arrest rates, alongside Chinese youth with large numbers of arrest (Asian Prisoner Support Committee) (Asian American & Pacific Islander Beyond Bars). The story of API communities experiencing urban poverty, school drop-out rates, as well as incarceration is often lost in the mainstream (Ahuja S & Chlala R, 2013).

The Model Minority myth assumes homogeneity of the diverse class and ethnic populations in the umbrella of API. Dominant culture glorifies API communities for their engagement with wage work as a symbol of success, obscuring the reality that wage work either does not offer relief from incarceration for the API working poor, or that unemployment is a reality for many low

income API communities. This presumption of the impact of wage work to designate success and assimilation is echoed also in the messaging around reentry and transition for post release, formerly incarcerated individuals.

School to Prison to Deportation pipeline

There is increasing awareness around the school to prison pipeline, due to the efforts of Black-led movements against the root causes of mass incarceration. Mainstream civil rights groups are starting to take action to address the policies and practices that disproportionately push youth of color and youth with disabilities out of schools and into the juvenile and adult criminal justice system. Instead of age and neuro-developmentally appropriate interventions that center positive reinforcement, mentorship and support, state interventions to youth violence and behavior have predominantly centered around punitive punishment (ACLU Washington). Disciplinary actions against youth have involved the police and the juvenile prisons, which serve then as a gateway to adult incarceration.

What is less often discussed, is that for non-US citizens, many people of color, the school to prison pipeline ends up also in deportation. In fact, the increase in mass incarceration of API individuals have led also to a growth in immigration and detention of these communities generally, and specifically for Southeast Asian communities. In fact, compared with other immigrant communities, Southeast Asian individuals are three to four times more likely to be deported for old convictions (Pina, 2016).

Since a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between the Cambodian government and the US government in 2002, more than 500 post-incarceration Cambodian Americans have been deported (Danaparamita, 2015).

The Reentry Narrative

The prison population, including local, state and federal correctional facilities, amounts to 2.2 million individuals. Nearly all (95%) currently incarcerated individuals will eventually be released to their communities. In 2015, the number of individuals released from state and federal prisons amounted to 640 000 (National Reentry Resource Center, nd). The scenario that Western and Beckett hypothesized, of incarceration and prison expansion as a labor policy and temporal fix

to high unemployment, may well ring true, as the influx of formerly incarcerated workers into society take place at an era of deindustrialization and automation in the US economy (Western & Beckett). President Bush's 2008 declaration to offer formerly incarcerated individuals another opportunity at life through the "Second Chance Act" (SCA) was touted primarily as propaganda without substantial financial backing, but nonetheless emphasized the necessity of prisoner reentry. Several academics and policy makers have since then made the argument for necessary job provision for this influx of unemployed individuals back into the poorest neighborhoods and communities in the US (Western, 2008).

The predominant language of rehabilitation for formerly incarcerated individuals takes on the discourse of work. Where once the Department of Corrections contained within it an agenda of rehabilitation and work preparation, the language that formerly incarcerated individuals are equipped with now is the training and soft skills. The shift away from job provision toward job readiness that the DOC and other related agencies are responsible for, mirrors the shift from welfare to workfare -- and endless push to prove deservability and worth through engagement in productive work.

The limits of paid work

Upon speaking with individuals, I realized that paid work was a crucial factor in many individuals' reentry, and an area of changing emotional and psychological terrain. The kinds of paid work that individuals entered, and left, was both of a reflection of, and a barometer of their reentry journey. The kinds of attitudes they took toward their paid work was also a reflection of their own shifts in other areas of life. Paid work was also a source of stress but not independently so.

Instead on focusing solely on paid work as the factor to reduce recidivism, desistance work itself is a term that embraces the efforts formerly incarcerated individuals put into resisting a return to criminal justice system. If work is effort and labor, then not all work is paid. I expand my understanding of work to include these non-paid, cognitive, emotional and psychological efforts that individuals place into their desistance as part of the reproduction of themselves and their communities. Using the feminist framework of reproductive labor, this desistance work is part of the work that produces the next generation of (surplus) workers in this community.

Formerly incarcerated individuals are told that they play the role of a future worker, where in fact, deindustrialization and automation has reduced the actual numbers of jobs available for the US population as a whole.

This makes the desistance work that individuals and community uphold even more important and necessary. The desistance work and push against further entrenchment into the criminal justice system is itself a form of resistance against the caging of bodies and waste of lives as a way to adjust state and political policies and imbalances. Preventing our youth, and our people from being locked up is a way to resist their kidnapping.

How we sustainably and collectively undertake this work of keeping our communities outside of the criminal justice system and its surveillance apparatus is significant.

Reentry & Desistance work as Reproductive Labor

“Freedom is a process of social reintegration”
Bruce Western, “Homeward”

Reproductive labor is the labor required for the social reproduction of society. It is traditionally understood to be undertaken in three areas. First, in the regeneration of the worker so they can return to work the next day. This regeneration takes the form of housing, meals, and other forms of physical or emotional labor that allows an individual to be able to function on the job the next day. Second, are the activities that regenerate the non-worker who are not valued for their ability to work. These could be future or past workers, or the unemployed such as the elderly, children, people who are ill or some people with disabilities. Lastly, is childbirth and the caretaking for the next generation of workers that will maintain society (Battacharya, 2013).

Reentry work is also form of reproductive labor that undertakes the rehabilitation of the formerly incarcerated individual back into the folds of society. Freedom for formerly incarcerated individuals can be seen as a process of social integration into a society that one had been separated from, where one can find resources, emotional support, financial ability, housing and other needs, that prevent a return back to prison especially at a vulnerable time in their lives. This form of reproductive labor, undertaken by the individual and the families and communities they are a part of, constitutes desistance work. Desistance work is the work required by all

parties involved, to prevent a return to prison. With a national recidivism rate of 68% for released prisoners arrested within three years, desistance work is crucial and important for keeping individuals out of prison (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2018). In Washington state, recidivism rate is significantly lower than the national level. It has, however, increased from 28.7% in 2010 to 32.2% in 2012, the latest year for which data is available (Orenstein, March 2017).

Individuals are re-incarcerated for one of two reasons. First, committing a new crime that results in a new conviction, or a technical violation of supervision, such as not reporting to a parole or probation officer or for failing a drug test. Given that the profile of jobs that many formerly incarcerated individuals engage in are low paying poverty level jobs, the real need for money is likely a cause for recidivism or technical violation of parole conditions (Pew Center, 2011).

Several interventions exist to reduce recidivism rates, through provision of work, job training programs, housing programs, as well as through prison higher education programs. Despite a recognition that these programs are essential to reducing recidivism rates, they continue to be poorly funded.

In the absence of adequate programs and resources, the burden of reentry and transition are placed on the family and community members that meet those needs on an emotional, financial and material level. They serve as the last and sometimes only resort.

Valuing the ways that communities undertake on the work to support their formerly incarcerated families and loved ones, and supporting them in this form of reproductive labor is essential to reducing the risk of recidivism.

Deepening our understanding of an individual's desistance work and placing them at the center, valuing them not only as subjects of service but as individuals with emotions and stories and longing for connection and belonging to their old and new communities and families, can help us understand better how to support the transition process.

This is a labor that is undertaken by the individual, by their families and communities, and then also the broader community and society that provides the conditions for an individual to stay free.

II) Specific Aims

1. To examine how formerly incarcerated API individuals define post-release well being and its relationship to transition into mainstream society
2. To examine the meaning of work and employment and its role in the post-release identity formation of racialized API individuals
3. To characterize the relationship between employment and an individual's post-release transition process
4. To identify other contributing factors such as family connections and culture, that support the post-release transition processes

III) Method

This is an exploratory, cross sectional qualitative research project utilizing semi-structured interviews that were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) (Starks, 2007) (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) to characterize the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated Asian American and Pacific Islander individuals and their work experiences. The study and its procedures were determined by the University of Washington (UW) Human Subjects Division (Institutional Review Board) to be exempt status.

Participants were recruited through solicitation flyers and word of mouth. An electronic and physical flyer was circulated widely through a grassroots organization consisting of formerly incarcerated Asian Pacific Islander individuals, called FIGHT (Formerly Incarcerated Group Healing Together). I recruited participants primarily through word of mouth and network contacts. People who had done the interview would suggest their friends, whom I then reached out to. This created a snowball effect. I would conduct an email exchange or phone conversation to discuss the intent, goals, and expectations of the interview so the individual could decide if s/he wanted to follow through.

The participants were determined to be eligible for the study by their self identification with an Asian, Pacific Islander ethnic identity, were formerly incarcerated, and age 21 years or older.

I interviewed twelve individuals, and eventually excluded one. I realized that because the one participant was the only female interviewed, her experience could not be generalized alongside that of the eleven other participants who identified as men. I stopped my research at eleven male participants because at that point, I had reached the point of saturation.

I conducted an interview based off of a menu of questions. There was wide latitude in my selection of the questions that was based primarily on the level of engagement and interest I felt that the participant had in answering them. I interviewed a total of twelve participants, two of whom were Pacific Islander and ten who were Asian American. Among the Asian American participants, one was Chinese American, two Filipino Americans, one Laotian American and six were Cambodian Americans. When I first set out in my search for participants, I aspired to have gender representation among the interviewees. However, the reality was the snowball effect resulted in interviews with individuals who identified as male, and only one who identified as female. As I mention above, for the integrity of the project, I decided not to include the interview with the female participant since the results could not be generalized to female API individuals. A future project specifically focusing on formerly incarcerated API women is necessary.

Demographics of Participants

Race & Ethnic Breakdown n=12

| | |
|--------------------|----|
| Asian American | 10 |
| Chinese American | 1 |
| Filipino American | 2 |
| Laotian American | 1 |
| Cambodian American | 6 |
| Pacific Islander | 2 |

Gender n=12

| | |
|----------------------------------|----|
| Individuals identified as Male | 11 |
| Individuals identified as Female | 1 |

Age

n=12

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| 20-30 years old | 2 |
| 30-40 years old | 4 |
| 40-60 years old | 6 |

Citizenship

n=12

| | |
|----------------|---|
| US citizen | 9 |
| Non-US citizen | 3 |

Post-incarceration
Immigration
Detention
Experience

n=12

| | |
|--|---|
| No post-incarceration immigration detention experience | 7 |
| Post-incarceration immigration detention experience | 5 |
| Deportation orders | 3 |
| No deportation orders | 2 |

*Of the five individuals who encountered immigration detention post release, two were able to prove US citizenship after long legal processes and thus were not served deportation orders

Length of time in
DOC

n=12

| | |
|-------------|---|
| 5-10 years | 4 |
| 10-20 years | 4 |
| 20-30 years | 4 |

Each interview began with an introduction detailing all intentions, goals, and hopes of the research. I, the principal investigator, read the verbal consent form. After the interview, participants were given a \$50 stipend to compensate for their time.

I conducted the majority of the interviews in private spaces at the Seattle and King county libraries. The interviews were audio recorded and no identifiable information was documented. The following guidelines were also followed:

- 1) Data was identified with a pseudonym.
- 2) The list that matches fake and real names, plus participants' contact information was stored securely in a separate location from the data.
- 3) The identifying data will be kept for a period of 6 years per Washington state law and destroyed thereafter.

I prepared a set of questions in advance that I used consistently for each interview (See Appendix). After some emerging themes arose from initial interviews, I added questions for the subsequent participants. The questions addressed individuals' immediate post transition experiences, their jobs, their family connections, and more abstract questions like what freedom meant to them. I also asked individuals to tell me about their lives through the arc of a hero's journey to get at their sense of purpose, their goals and their redemption scripts. Being a semi-structured interview, I also let the participants talk freely and would direct them back to the questions if I felt they were going too far from the topic.

I owned audio recording equipment that I used for the interviews. I also was able to secure funding assistance from the UW Department of Environmental & Occupational Health Sciences through my committee chair, Dr. Bill Daniell, to pay the \$50 stipends as well as transcription services.

In addition to the written thesis, I organized a community presentation of my findings in conjunction with the grassroots groups I was working with, and the Seattle Public Library. The event was held at a publicly accessible place, in the Beacon Hill branch of the Seattle Public Library. Food was provided. The participants were all invited, and five individuals attended. The rest of the audience were other formerly incarcerated individuals, their families and community members. In total forty individuals attended. I created a presentation of the thesis and generated

questions for discussion (See Appendix). The audience questions and remarks serve to guide my Discussion section.

Data Analysis

I conducted a grounded theory approach to the analysis. The interviews were initially transcribed and then coded for themes. The initial codes were then reviewed for patterns and emerging themes such as “Discovering an individual norm” or “Mainstream societal norm.” A code book was created in Microsoft Excel to classify the themes and the quotes from various interviews (Starks, 2007) (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Understanding that “in phenomenology and grounded theory, researchers engage in the self-reflective process of ‘bracketing,’ ” whereby they recognize and set aside (but do not abandon) their priori knowledge and assumptions with the analytic goal of attending to the participants’ account with an open mind” (Starks, 2007), the grounded theory researcher should be self reflective of their own set of assumptions and biases, and need to be transparent of that through the analysis process. The researcher does this through the process of memo writing and critical reflection.

Prior to conducting this study, I was immersed in organizing work around the prisons alongside a community of formerly incarcerated individuals. I chose this issue as a thesis topic precisely because I hoped it would further the work that we were collectively doing around community-centered healing and transition for formerly incarcerated API individuals. I cared deeply for the individuals I interviewed and was invested in the process. I kept memos and reflections on a private blog throughout the process, being careful not to project emotions that arose onto the interviews themselves and to maintain a genuine sense of non-judgement and curiosity with whomever I spoke with. I utilized a set of practices that I acquired through two qualitative methods classes I took in the past year, which included writing pre-interview and post-interview journals. I also had to navigate the dynamics between interviewing individuals I was familiar with, and those whom I was not. There were challenges that arose from each one that I sought to be transparent about.

Grounded theory was a useful methodology for analysis because understanding culturally relevant reentry for API individuals is a relatively untheorized area. I had to be open minded and

to suspend preconceived thoughts to be able to listen and discover themes that were emerging from the collective interviews.

The goal of this thesis is to draw upon the findings of these interviews to inform conversations within the API community about how best to support those among us who are currently and formerly incarcerated.

IV) Findings

A Note on the Female Participant

Throughout my research process, I actively sought female participants to interview through word of mouth and outreach. Due to the snowball effect, the silence around API female incarceration and likely the lack of trust and absence of relationships between myself and potential participants, I found it challenging to find more than one participant. I was not able to generalize the individual female participant's experience to more than herself, and so I left her data and findings out of the research. A further study of formerly incarcerated API women and their desistance work is necessary.

In the meantime however, the preliminary findings from the individual female participant are worth noting. My ratio of female to male participants was 1:11 closely matched national statistics of female: male incarceration at 1:10 (Prison Policy Institute, 2010). The characteristics of the female participant's incarceration experiences included encounters with law enforcement due to sex work, substance abuse and domestic violence. Her pattern of incarceration was marked with several short stints each less than a year, due to non-violent offenses. It was also characterized by time in jails over prisons.

Desistance work conducted by the individual female participant also involved more explicit language around self esteem, self worth, and a need for boundaries around romantic relationships and familial relationships. In contrast, the findings with the male participants involved less explicit language around self conception.

These remarks are not intended to be comprehensive, and merely as a statement to indicate the need for further understanding of the experiences and needs of formerly incarcerated API women.

Desistance work: Self, Work & Communities

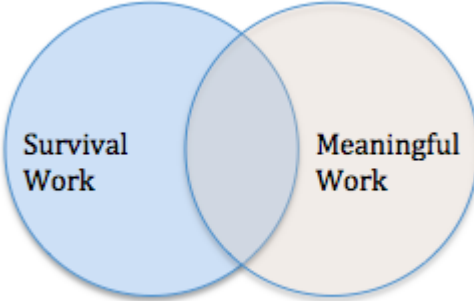
Desistance work is defined as work that marks the gradual shift from offending to a state of not committing criminal offenses during the reentry process (Harris, 2006). Individuals I interviewed underwent levels of desistance work -- effort, time, and labor they put in not only to prevent their recidivism, but also to live meaningful and purposeful lives. I observed desistance work taking place in three areas: first, within the individual self in the form of physical, emotional and cognitive transformations; Second, in the work that individuals engage in -- where they place their time. What I term survival work and meaningful work are two areas that I observe participants investing their time and energies into. Third, positive communities that individuals belong in also play a role in their desistance. Social connection through families, networks and communities that individuals are involved in play significant roles in their desistance work. They serve as protective factors in supporting the positive meaning making and outcome of the desistance work. A future study might look center more intentionally the ways communities undertake desistance work.

To summarize, the following will discuss the desistance work that formerly incarcerated individuals undertake on the level of

- Self
- Engagement with Survival Work
- Engagement with Meaningful Work
- Engagement with Families and Communities

Some Definitions & Descriptions of Themes and Terms

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Desistance Work | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Labor that reproduces bodies free from incarceration & detention• A form of reproductive labor• Done by the self, and by communities |
| Desistance Work as Reproductive Labor | Labor undertaken by individuals, their families and communities to prevent an individual return to prison or recidivism. |

| | |
|--|---|
| Desistance Work on the Self | The internal and external emotional, mental and physical labor and effort that an individual puts in to stay free and prevent a return to incarceration |
| Resisting Institutionalization | Effort and labor an individual puts in to resist the ways his/her behavior has been conditioned by the prison as an institution. |
| Redemption Scripts | A narrative that individuals create for their life stories to acknowledge and account for their past behavior, while also finding motivation in their revised past stories to explain the present attempt to live clean, law abiding lives (Harris, 2011) |
| Living in Freedom | The discrepancy between the fantasies of freedom while incarcerated and the challenges one encounters in the real world |
| Exercising Agency | An individual's sense of agency and control over their own lives |
| Survival Work | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low or minimum wage labor • Usually involving hard physical labor • Legal or under the table |
| Meaningful Work | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paid or unpaid labor • Fosters an individual's sense of meaning-making in their lives • Includes sense of fulfillment and belonging |
|  <p>Theoretically there may be overlap between survival work & meaningful work though the research findings show they are minimal in this study.</p> | |
| Alienation at work | An experience of separation between the individual and his/her full humanity due to his/her confinement in the role of a worker in a capitalist workplace (Marx, nd) (Horton, 1964) |

A) Desistance work on the Self

The physical, emotional and cognitive transformations that post-release individuals undergo take place in four areas. First, a resistance against institutionalization; second, the creation of a redemption script; third, a navigation of freedom and desires; fourth, the expression of agency.

I) Resisting Institutionalization

Participants were acutely aware that they were a product of the prison system and its norms. The jarring transition from prison norms to mainstream norms makes sense in light of the prison as a total institution, by Goffman's definition, as a location of "work and residence where a great number of similarly situated people, cut off from the wider community for a considerable time, together lead an enclosed and formally administered round of life (Davies, 1989)." It is hardly surprising that the norms of prison life are drastically different from and averse to the norms of mainstream society where relatively more freedom of movement and speech exists.

Chan, a 38 year old Cambodian man who had been released only a year ago after spending twenty years in prison, describes the learning he has to do.

"See, I've got to learn how to read through the lines, but I don't. I haven't figured that out. Because in prison, though, I figured it out. But when I come out here it's a different ballgame. I've got to learn something else. And in prison I learned everything. All the stuff that goes on there, I figured it out. Out here, now I've got to relearn all that stuff."

The unlearning of institutional norms in prison, and the relearning of societal norms is laborious and involves a shift in values. It requires first, naming what the values and structures are in prison and comparing how it matches up with the mainstream society. Axel had been released ten years ago after serving a ten year sentence. He describes the prison hierarchy as "backwards" from that of society and approaches it as something that one should not be "proud of" or "to live up to." However, understanding and internalizing this "backward" hierarchy is crucial for survival inside.

“First you have to survive. So in prison, everything is backwards. So in prison, if you're a murderer or a robber or an assaulter, then you're at the top of the hierarchy. Those are the crimes that are esteemed, and you get more respect for being in that category. Then if you take to stop and think about that, that's not anything to be proud of or to live up to or to live by, like that. But that's part of surviving in prison.”

The hierarchy of the prison system comes alongside with power dynamics, manifested as a form of strong over weak among incarcerated individuals. Borey who had served a five year sentence in the Department of Corrections, followed by two years under immigration custody almost fifteen years ago, states,

“Prison politics is that you don't give each other much respect. You don't acknowledge, you kind of like disregard the weak and interpret it as being a wuss or outcast because of that.”

He elaborates on how attempts to express emotional vulnerability in prison is ridiculed,

“You get teased because you're soft and stuff. That's really hard to basically break when you're in the prison environment. You just can't, and if you show weakness in the prison people will prey on you. People will take advantage of you.”

The discovery of an individual norm requires a cognitive and emotional reconfiguration. Counter to prison culture where one had to fight for respect, according to another participant, James, who said he'd “rather fight once, than fight ten different fights” to preserve a sense of respect, Borey calls instead for the need for “loose skin.” He describes it as “learning how to compromise, work things through, talk things through.” It involves managing anger, which he describes as “being in control of another person, ” abandoning, walking away, or ignoring an issue.

The prison system as an incubator for behavior norms that are perceived as maladaptive in mainstream society cause some conflict for formerly incarcerated individuals. The term “institutionalization” is used by the participants to refer to a perpetuation of prison norms, specifically in behavior and reactions. Even though it is only an aspect of what the participants refer to as “institutionalization,” it is an important dimension of it that has impact on individual

sense of post release identity. My interviews thus far reflect that this mental process and search for an alternative identity is an important theme in the transition process.

Poignantly, Axel asks this question, "So how do you prepare yourself to become or at least attempt to become normal in the sense of the way that society should be?" He adds,

"Because at some point at some time you got to believe that some systems that we live by in society are right, and that there are things that we should and shouldn't do. And I don't think that most people [in prison], they say, "I get it, I survived it, and I'm going to do it like this now". *And so you take parts of prison along with you, and those experiences and the things that work and didn't work, you bring them with you out here.*" (Italics mine)

The horizontal pressure among incarcerated individuals to conform to a certain position and demeanor of power, is accompanied by a sense of powerlessness and inferiority in relation to corrections officers in the prison setting. Axel recalls the salience of his status as "lower than" that echoes both within and without the prison walls.

"If you interact with people and if they just only had any idea that you were a convicted murder, they would cringe. Or when you get forced into situations where you have to be honest about your past and see people's reactions. And so, prison helped me prepare for that out here, because for all those years, *you just get used to and accustomed to people looking down on you and that you're second class and less than* from the CO [Corrections Officer] officer to the prison maintenance man, all the way to the warden, you're just used to people looking down upon you and judging you without even saying anything, without this person even knowing your name, where you came from or what you're even in prison for, because you wear a green prison badge, you're less than. And so, you have to learn how to deal with that over a long period of time. And so some people can overcome that, and some people can't."

Unlearning this sense of submissiveness and inferiority that was institutionalized through the power hierarchy in the prison meets some challenges on the outside. The ability of parole officers to accuse an individual of technical violations to their parole conditions cause some individuals to perpetuate this submissive persona from prison. The arbitrary nature of these

accusations lead to some anxiety. Chan echoes the sentiments of other participants when he speaks of the confusing ways he has to switch his demeanour and behavior between being a free man, and a subjugated man under intense scrutiny and authoritarian control.

Speaking of his parole officer, Chan says he is perpetually seen as “a freaking prisoner, and that's how they treat you, and your humanities taken away from you pretty much.”

“You just try not to get on their bad side. Just they tell you do something, just do it I guess. Or you gotta be nice to them, respectful to them. Treat 'em like they're the king pretty much. You try to go there thinking you're the boss, you're on their bad side just like that. You go in there and just talk to them normally like always got to be submissive. You got to. You have no choice. That's what they teach you in there. If you trying to be on their level, you're gonna get stomped down quick, chop you down.

He further describes how it impacts his ability to transition into the outside world.

“And it's bad though 'cause when you come out here, you can't really function really because they teach you how to be obedient to the point to where you can't really ... Sometimes you can't function. “

He is caught unaware by the small moments when this institutionalized submissive behavior arises and has to remind himself that he is no longer in prison. Whether it is asking for permission to use a bathroom in a public facility, or catching himself removing his beanie after being rebuked for wearing it by his parole officer, Chan describes how “obedience” and “submissiveness” are perpetuated out in the free world through these constant and regular interactions with parole officers. He finds a constant need to remind himself that he is free.

Resisting institutionalization involves a shift in the values and behavior that prison had inculcated that may be maladaptive in transitioning into society. Speaking about his past gambling addiction, Borey identifies it as an activity he did when incarcerated. He states, “[In the] prison system you play cards for whatever, you bet on certain stuff, so yeah it's kind of like I brought up that way thinking it's okay.”

Upon release however, gambling went from being an activity to pass time to becoming a risk taking endeavor. In analyzing gambling as an addiction that him, a recently released individual, and other members of his refugee community engage in, Borey captures gambling and risk taking as a maladaptive response to structural violence and disenfranchisement in the form of prison and war.

“Yeah so in most cases I always compare it to being incarcerated and coming and being immigrant or refugee, it's almost similar right. You get into another country with nothing right and immigrants do not come with nothing, and how do they get to where they want to be right. It's basically to take risks or get rich quick scheme, or whatever, and it's the same thing. Especially with growing up in my community it's the same thing. I mean our elder friends they get into that habit because they don't have good paying job, and they don't have a 401K, they don't have savings or pension. And so they tend to like depend on these kind of of stuff to take that chance right.

“And so as being formerly incarcerated, it's the same thing. We get out, we missed out on so many years of say making money, having liquid asset and stuff like that right. How do we get to where a normal American has some liquid asset or own a house and stuff like that right. Yeah, you get into that habit of trying to make it like others, but you know at the same time you compare yourself to white folks or non-Americans who build wealth throughout the years when you were incarcerated or while your family was in refugee camps or in civil war all 10-15 years.

“They building up all this wealth, accumulated wealth and you have nothing right. Refugees and all your family like come together with nothing right. There's that advantage of other folks that we tend to not really try to understand that, but get into to how to compete or live like others you know.”

When he was recently released, gambling shaped his work life. He would patron local casinos to “try to win money. In most cases I don't, and so I fall into that habit of losing money, then try to work, and then at the right time you go back again, and you lose again, and it's like this cycle of habitual gambling.”

As I will elaborate in later sections, Borey finds a solution to this risk taking behavior, and the habitual cycle of gambling and work, in work itself.

Resisting institutionalization takes the form of challenging behaviors, norms and self conception conceived in prison. This is done in part through the creation of redemption scripts

II) Redemption scripts

Axel's description of knowing one's place in prison reveals a structure that reinforces a position of inferiority and subservience that incarcerated individuals face, in relation to corrections staff with relative authority. Axel's resistance against the continuity of this institutionalized position that he held as an incarcerated person, takes the form of what Maruna (2001) calls a "redemption script." Individuals use "redemption scripts" to acknowledge and account for their past behavior, while also finding motivation in their revised past stories to explain the present attempt to live clean, law abiding lives (Harris, 2011). Axel reiterates the importance of acknowledging his past and weaves it into a narrative for a hopeful future:

"Just being comfortable with yourself. Being able to say yeah, I am a convicted murder. I am. And I did make some really bad mistakes in the past, but it's not who I am today. And that is way, way short for the average person to be able to explain that to somebody else that's in a position, to have to explain that to somebody that has the power to give you a job or give you a chance, to give you fair consideration. So I mean, that is something that you have to always, always work on. Constantly. Learning how to be comfortable with yourself, honest with yourself and honest with other people."

Having a narrative to explain the discrepancy between one's past actions and the present changed self is a form of cognitive defense against the ways prison had reinforced a sense of inferiority and irredeemability. Joseph is in his thirties, and had entered the prison system as a youth for a murder he committed at sixteen years old. He shared the psychological distance that he utilized to distance himself from the murder that he was sentenced,

"I have sympathy in the fact that, what I did [caused] other people lost somebody. They lost a loved one, and the loss, the suffering that they went through, I have sympathy for that. The shame, basically, is putting it all on yourself [...] I'm not gonna do that [...] Because then you're just punishing yourself for the rest of your life."

The refusal to “punish [himself] for the rest of [his] life” was accompanied with a deep remorse for the victim’s family and a desire to prove that he is now different. Joseph expressed,

“I fucked up. I truly fucked up in doing that. And that if I could change time, I would not have done that. And I truly apologize for taking [someone’s] son's life. To be able to really do that. And not just do it because, oh I was locked up, I did the time. You know, I might as well make amends and do all that kind of bullshit.”

Joseph emphasized that he is doing positive things with his life that count as a form of proof that he is now a changed person. Doing time in prison was not a marker of this change but rather the willing, voluntary actions he undertook upon release.

“But if I work towards myself, and everything, and actually had a true, meaningful effort of really changing and really, like, this is where I'm at now. What I'm doing. Then it's more meaningful than just getting out and saying, I did the time, I did the punishment for doing that, that mistake, that poor choice. That poor choice I did. I got punished for it, and now I'm saying sorry but it doesn't mean shit to me. I feel like it means more if you actually work towards like, hey, this is what I've been doing. I've been helping other people, coming out with similar situation, from incarceration to better their lives. To help them think of different ways of bettering themselves. And just motivating people inside the prison system. Not to fuck up. Not to fuck up in there, and not to fuck up coming out.”

Joseph’s redemption script involved doing good in the present as an expression of repentance. It also involved an explanation for his past actions, as a youth who committed a murder. Born to immigrant parents in Seattle who were often too busy working to be present with him in his youth, Joseph joined gangs to find a sense of family. Homeless in San Francisco at a young age of fourteen, Joseph found himself deeper in illicit underground activities such as drug deals and debt collection. Joseph resisted internalizing the murder as something innate to him, but rather as a survival act that he had chosen to commit, but under circumstances not of his choosing.

“I didn't think of me as an evil person. I thought of myself as, like, surviving. Because these are the cards I was dealt with. These are my options. And I chose that option. I chose, that was my decision to do that. [...] It was just, this is what I was dealt with, and this is how I did it. This is how I survived.”

The narrative of innate banality of the incarcerated person is reinforced by the prison culture of imposing inferiority and submission on prisoners. The effort to resist this narrative takes the form of a redemption script and consists not only of a cognitive transformation, but also of work and labor that extend meaning and transformation among impacted communities.

III) Living in freedom

“I jumped into freedom. Like swimming. And I haven't swim in so long I was like man, this is the first time I touched the water so I just jumped in and 'Ahhhhhh,' you know. I just enjoy myself man. I don't take nothing for granted man. Every day I live is always a pleasure to know that I'm free and I'm alive, you know what I mean? I'm not under the conditions of being locked up, telling what to do, when to do, how to do, where to go, how to eat, you know what I'm saying?”

Aleki interview with the author, Jan 2018

The exhilaration that individuals felt upon release, and their ability to move and be free, in contrast to the authoritarianism and confinement individuals experienced in prison was ubiquitous amongst all participants.

For Chan who had been incarcerated since 18 years old and only recently released 20 years later, his visions of freedom were grand. He used to say to his friends, “Man, I know when you get out people are free. They're like they're floating on a cloud, like if they're in Heaven, compared to in prison.”

This was “all [he] used to think about while [he] was in there, like, how it would be like, or just dream about being outside.” This vision was especially treasured because it contrasted with the daily experience of incarceration:

“I don't like being locked up. You know? I just want to be able to walk out when I want to walk out. And I don't want to be talked to like an animal all the time and be treated like an animal. And to move freely, you know? And talk and say what I want when I want to want. And walk out when I want to walk. Or just ... I hated that gate. You know? The bars. I'd just sit there and look at the bars all the time like, "Ah. It's stressing me out.”

Chan's fantasy of freedom contrasted with the reality he encountered upon release. He says, “but I've come to realize the stuff that I dream or think about how it's like, it's not the way it is.” At

the time of his initial interview, Chan expressed challenges living in his household with an alcoholic parent, and night shift work that was hard on his body. The freedom he experienced immediately post-release was hardly the “cloud floating” freedom he had envisioned.

The fantasy of freedom and the outside world seems inevitable when the very premise of the prison is built on isolation and detachment from the outside world. The discrepancy between that fantasy and the reality call for some support in the transition process.

Cam, a 40 year old individual who had been released after serving 20 years, speaks of his work release experience with some appreciation. Work release is a form of community supervision whereby individuals who are soon to be released are placed in facilities that offer food and housing with the expectation that individuals find employment. It is seen as a way to sustainably bridge the transition from prison to society (DOC document). Work release as a program however, is not available for individuals with ICE detainers or who are non US citizens.

Referring to individuals who are released straight into society after having served time, Cam says,

“If you get out and you go straight to the streets... I mean, if you do a lot of time, you're already gonna have structure in your life, you know what I'm saying? Because, you're already use to three meals, going [recreation] time, all that all, whatever, you know what I'm saying? You're used to all that structure. And you get out and you go straight to the streets, you can just do what the fuck you want to do is, people go a little bit crazy like, man.”

His own experience of being free was exhilarating, and yet work release was helpful in providing some form of structure and a gradual transition,

“I don't know. It's just a trip. not having no bars around and barbed wire and all that stuff, just. I mean, work release helped a little bit because you still ... you're still in that you gotta go to where you go and come back, you know what I'm saying? It's still a little structured for you to help you focus on what you gotta do. Get a job. Do your job. Come back, you know what I'm saying? It's still a little bit structured. So that, it helps you a little bit in to transitioning to the streets. But just being out, crazy.”

Work release offered a structure for individuals to navigate their sudden freedom. In the absence of work release, work seems to play a similar role. The work that most participants engaged in after release were primarily minimum wage jobs that require physical labor. I term this survival work.

Borey recalls the two jobs he held immediately post release, that what motivated it was “I wanted to keep myself busy. [I’m] afraid that with time on [my] hand, I might get in trouble [...] It’s more like well if I’m occupied with myself then I won’t get in trouble.”

Phet, a 39 year old man with a history of substance abuse who had been incarcerated five times since the age of 14, echoes this sentiment. Recently released three months ago, Phet had filled his time up with activities, including an apprenticeship, an intensive outpatient drug counselling program, one full time job and one part time job. Learning from his past, he says,

“I work so much because if I don’t, then I will fall back into my relapse stage. A relapse. Before, how I got into relapse was I was bored. I had free time. I had just too much on my mind. I would go call friends, and hang out with friends. I figured this time around I’m not going to do that. I’m going to go work. Do a school. Do anything with my time for a whole year.”

Work is pursued as a strategy for navigating the challenges of freedom. It is encouraged by the immediate family members and individuals as a mode of desistance work, and yet also appears to be unsatisfying or limiting. Chan laments that his life now consists of a cycle of “Sleep. Work. Sleep Work” where he’s “just living to work and come home and sleep.” Similarly, Borey, upon reflection, indicates how unsatisfactory overwhelming himself with survival jobs had been:

“[Working many jobs was] not a mistake, but I kind of regret it because I end up spending a lot of time working but don’t know how to save. Right, because you also get caught up in spending because you don’t learn how to budget, you don’t learn how to save, and what are your priorities and your future.”

Working many jobs may have occupied Borey’s time and prevented him from “getting into trouble,” but it did not affect his gambling addiction. He continued to gamble in his free time. He also identifies that occupying time is not the same as time management, which work did not teach but which he learned later in the process.

The effort that individuals make to prevent relapses or to prevent themselves from “getting into trouble” that could land them back in prison again, constitute a form of desistance work. In the absence of structure that work release programs offer, some independently create structure through their engagement with survival work.

IV) Exercising Agency

A common theme across the interviews was the issue of agency. Agency is the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices. The participants shared the ways in which they exercised agency. Joseph was released in 2006 after a ten year incarceration. He recalls a lack of reentry services then and reflected on the ways he approached the period immediately after he was released. I begin first with his quote because it sheds some light on the question of agency.

“Yeah, I mean, being out, once you get out, I feel like ... of course so many challenges and so many obstacles you have to maneuver, but just don't feel like things need to be handed to you, and things need to be made easier for you because you were locked up, and you were like a poor little puppy.”

He identifies this way of receiving help, a form of dependence where “things are handed to you,” could be achieved by “getting over on somebody.” This form of behavior was marked as a product of institutionalization.

“I don't feel like that's the attitude that should be ... that person should be doing. But then there's nothing in there [prison] to really motivate you to make you not think like that, not to be like using the system, because you're in there to learn, well not learn, but you're already established in learning how to use the system, because you're in the system, and you come out thinking, well I need to get over on somebody, and kind of use their system, so I can ... this using crap doesn't, I feel like, there's a way to teach people not to do that, and that you can still accomplish things, not only the same things, but even better, without even having to use that using mentality.”

Jason calls specifically for rejection against infantilization that people place upon themselves, that is a product of being institutionalized. He suggests that being able to “use the system” and “getting over on somebody” to make things easier for an individual, is a learned trait in prison.

Out here, he claims, it manifests as asking for “things to be handed to you.” He suggests that the former attitude is manipulative, and though it may be a form of survival and coping mechanism in prison conditions, it manifests also as a kind of infantilization in the outside world. In fact, Jason explicitly likens it to being a “poor little puppy” where evoking pity by using one’s past of having been locked up is part of the strategy of “getting things done for oneself.”

Jason accompanies his critique of this behavior alongside an acknowledgement of the obstacles and challenges that individuals encounter post-release. It is the space between an acknowledgement of the challenges and the call for individuals to seek services where needed, and yet the refusal to be infantilized as a “poor little puppy” both by services and by oneself, that I identify the concept of agency, the capacity of individuals to act independently.

Cam also emphasizes the need for individuals to exercise their agency by knowing the services that are available for them. Instead of chastising his peers for playing the part of pitiful individuals, he emphasizes instead the pride that individuals have that prevent them from accessing services.

Cam emphasizes the need to take advantage of opportunities available and was generally hopeful about the services available. He says,

“Most people know if they know that you've been locked up, okay, you fucked up but, it is what it is. They don't want to see you fucking just be a fucking bum. If you taking steps to fucking better yourself, most people will help you fucking better yourself. ”

Cam was now employed in the trades with a union job. He had undergone an unpaid pre-apprentice trades program that had created a pathway to his current work. He made a decent wage and was excited about the prospects of advancing in his career and buying a house in the next five years.

Problem solving around the challenges one encounters is an act of exercising agency. In his interview, Chan reveals a less satisfying experience with reentry services than Cam. Like Cam, he had undergone an unpaid pre-apprenticeship program. Not being paid for the time of the program created a financial challenge for Chan who was deeply unhappy at the time, with his

housing situation and was looking to save up money for a move. Unlike Cam, he had not gotten placed in a trades job.

At my first meeting with Chan, he was down about the warehouse job he worked in then. It was back breaking and he was paid minimum wage. The prospects of moving out of his parents' home were low. He had brainstormed several options -- trying out to be an electrician, return to being a carpenter, or to return to school. When I met him a three months later to revisit his work experience, Chan was much happier. He had followed through on his pursuit on becoming an electrician and was setting up appointments to meet with advisors at the local community college. He shared with me that he needed to learn some lessons to bridge the gap between the fantasy of freedom from behind the prison walls, to the actual experience of freedom,

“I know [what I want] is not going happen over night, that's one thing I learned. When I was in prison, I thought it would be faster. I thought I was going to be out here and things were going to be just fine, everything's gonna work out. I don't need to work for it, it's going to be there. Now, I'm out here. I learned a lot of stuff that I didn't realize while I was in prison. While you're in prison you can only imagine things...Experience and imagining are two different things. I'm learning though. Every day I see things and realize things. I'm out here. I still need to learn a lot more. It's going to take some time. I just got out.”

Chan's active decision to problem solve, his hopefulness of his learning journey and ability to make some changes in his life where able, were all expressions of agency and appeared to make him more self confident and able to encounter challenges.

Reaching for what they wanted, especially against expectations of what an ex-felon should be, were moments where individuals also felt that they exercised their agency. Participant Ly, a Cambodian American man who had experienced prison and immigration detention, was working as a grinder in a factory shortly after his release. He did well on the job but was hoping to acquire one where he would get paid more and engage more mentally. He says this,

“I like to both physically and mentally work and I know that I was smart enough, and that [being a grinder] isn't me, who I am. I felt like even with the lack of college degree that I know that I was able to learn if given the opportunity. And that's what all I was looking for was that single

opportunity for someone to actually give me that chance and say, here, take it. Run with it. Yeah. And somebody did. I was very thankful. I was very blessed that somebody when I told them gave me that chance to work.”

Grasping the opportunity and reaching beyond the expectations others may have had of him, as an ex-felon, was what motivated Ly to approach the Radiography supervisor at his work to hire and train him. Without a college degree or certification, Ly was not the prime candidate for the job. However, he believes that the supervisor was moved by his sense of ambition, “knowing that I had that [the felony record] hanging over my head, it didn't stop me. And he knew that. ”

Besides opportunities for individuals to exercise and realize their agency, another key factor that the participants identified that supported their own agency was receiving trust from people around them.

James, a trade worker who landed an apprenticeship through connections he made while working as an independent tattoo artist, indicates that his work involved a level of hiding about his past.

“ [I got this job] by accident. By accident and the company I'm with, the management and the owners, I don't think they, they don't know about my history, they know something kinda, a little bit of it but they don't know.”

What James appreciates most about this job however, is the trust they have in him.

“James: I come across to them I'm very appreciative, very humble because they treat me with respect and they are very helpful, they have my back and they don't realize why that means so much to me and why I value that.

Me: Why does it mean so much to you?

James: Because it's not normal. A lot of people just ... For example, I went to a customer's house, replaced their window and left. That customer was an old lady, kinda loopy, but she calls the shop and accuses me of taking her credit card which was sitting on whatever, right? I didn't touch it. I was in and out, did my thing and gone. The manager, the management, took my back and said, no, he wouldn't do that.

James: That means a lot to me because normally you don't, I wouldn't get that maybe 'cause I'm perceived as a thug or that's probably what she did. She saw the tattoos and prejudged me.”

Outsiders' trust in one's morality and ability was meaningful to the participants and creates an environment that further motivated them to exercise their agency.

B) Survival Work

I define survival work as minimum wage jobs that require manual labor, some of which are under the table jobs. These are also jobs with little/no prospects of advancement, and examples include janitorial work, bouncer work, landscaping, delivery and warehouse work.

Individuals encounter stigma and resistance from employers to hire them. Washington state's recent “Ban the Box” legislation aimed at mitigating the discrimination that formerly incarcerated individuals encounter in job searches only belie its prevalence (National Law Review, 2018). Several of the participants expressed anxiety over being asked about their conviction history in job applications or interviews. They undertake a variety of strategies in response -- either to be honest about it on the applications with the goal of explaining later, or to leave the answer ambiguous and reveal their conviction history during the interview. Almost all have had an experience of rejection that they believe is directly linked to their conviction history.

Eight out of the eleven individuals I interviewed found their jobs through family and community connections. One of the interviewees was unemployed due to health reasons at the time of interview. Being vouched by family and community members seemed to reduce the significance of the conviction history, and made the employers more willing to hire the individual.

I) Some divisions among Formerly Incarcerated individuals

i) Immigration Status

The engagement with survival work is divided in its access for formerly incarcerated API individuals. For participants with deportation orders, namely those who arrived in the US as refugees without converting to US citizenship prior to their incarceration, legal work was harder to acquire. Among the eleven interviews I included in the study, three were with individuals with

deportation orders. Two others were initially detained at ICE but managed to prove their citizenship and were subsequently released. The three individuals with deportation orders each discussed the challenges immediately post release, of finding an employer who would hire them without legal work authorization. The process of applying for a work permit for those with deportation orders also take time and resources. As a result, individuals found themselves working under the table, doing informal contingent labor immediately post release. In these settings, community and family connections for finding work proved to be even more important.

Plans Gone Awry

Department of Corrections tout the necessity of plans for successful re-entry. Work release, and the purported structure and support that DOC offers to transitioning individuals as they search for work and financial independence, is part of this planning. DOC declares on its website on “Re-entry into the community,” that “successful planning for eventual release begins far in advance from the actual date of release and the Department is intent on providing the needed tools to be successful” (DOC, nd). Transitioning individuals are required to fill out “Offender Release Plans” that stress the importance of a plan. The prison to work pathway is part of this vision of reentry.

James offers advice for individuals from the time they are doing their time as they transition out. He states the need for a transition plan, including advice on the need to acquire marketable skills when one is doing time. Technology, he says, is not advisable because of the rapid changes in the industry that one lacks access to from the inside.

Yet, plans and advice aside, James states of his own frame of mind at the time when he was transferred to ICE detention without a release date. He says, “I stopped giving a shit. When the guards threatened me, I didn't care. So what? I just didn't care. Those guys, you know it's easy to lose hope in there.”

Release plans, crafted with even the best of intentions, go awry with ICE intervention. Speaking of his time, James states,

“it was indefinite dead time like you're not going anywhere. You're just, this is your life inside this place. When that happens, you're like, when I was in there, I didn't really have a plan. Because I didn't think I was getting out. I started thinking, I'm not going

anywhere. This is, I'm stuck here. There were guys in there for 12 years...with no release date, no court dates, just sitting there. Dead time.”

Hopelessness was associated with the absence of the possibility of release and the absence of a plan for transition and release.

Prison to ~~Work~~ Deportation pipeline

Survival work is a common entry point into society for majority of individuals recently released from prison. As I enter into that discussion of survival work and individuals’ experiences with it, it is necessary to highlight that part of the stratified experiences among formerly incarcerated API individuals, is the very denial of post-prison survival work. For those individuals with deportation orders, the loss of the right to stay and live in the country which they grew up in as displaced refugees, meant that the freedom to work was denied them as they made their foray into the immigration detention system. Instead, these individuals had to undergo struggles to fight for their freedom to work and to live in mainstream society.

Borey and James each underwent hunger strikes to be released from then Immigration & Naturalization Services (INS) detention. Detained prior to the 2001 ruling in the Supreme Court that indefinite detention in immigration was considered unconstitutional, Borey and James faced the prospects of being detained indefinitely while awaiting deportation to their countries of origin. Through individual and collective organizing, which included organizing hunger strikes in the detention center and for James, a lengthy stint at King County Jail, both were eventually released from immigration detention two years after their criminal sentences were complete.

Upon release, James says, “[The detention experience] still hung over my head. When I got out, I was just focused on getting a job, working, helping my family, paying rent, doing what I had to do.”

After his detour in prison and immigration detention, James entered the workforce as a cook in several restaurants. Fortunately for him, his social security card was valid and he was legally able to work.

Borey was less fortunate. His entry back into the workforce was marked with homelessness and lack of documentation. He found odd jobs through his mother’s friends, in landscaping, building maintenance for one or two days at a time.

The journey from prison to immigration detention centers and then to the freedom to work is filled with anxiety and trepidation. The individuals whom I spoke with counted themselves fortunate for not having been deported, and were relieved to be released in the US instead of their countries of origins which they had not lived in. The impending threat of potential deportation left them with anxiety and fear. Not knowing if they could realize the dreams they had while awaiting release from prison was stressful and heart wrenching. Ke compares the prison time to this nerve wrecking period in ICE detention. He refers here to the month in which he was taken to various detention facilities enroute to Philadelphia to have an interview with the Cambodian authorities about his eligibility for deportation, that "my prison time was cake compared to that month during the interview process."

The loss of the freedom to work with legal documentation came alongside a loss of identity for the individuals with deportation orders, all of whom have grown up in the US since they were children. Ke, a 24 year old Cambodian American individual who was incarcerated for five years and then six months in immigration detention, had grown up in the US since the age of two. He says of his identity,

"I'm not American legally, but I'm Americanized. I've been in here in the United States ever since I was two years old. I know the Pledge of Allegiance, the National Anthem. I did a rendition of the National Anthem at somebody's high school graduation, so I'm pretty much American... you know what I mean?"

ii) "Should I give up my shoulder or my back?" -- Physical barriers to survival work

One's physical ability was also a factor that affected access to post-release work.

47 year old Aleki had previously served 24 years for an assault charge and released in 2014. He had since worked in orchards, in snow ploughing, in the auto business as a detailer until he was diagnosed with end stage renal failure in 2016. Aleki has since lost work and receives disabilities as his primary source of income. He lives with his wife and her parents in Eastern Washington. At the time of the interview, he states that he was struggling financially but was thankful that he had a roof over his head with his parents-in-law and a family that cares for him.

Chan is a healthy 39 year old individual. At the time of his initial interview, Chan had reported having a very challenging time finding work. He had consistently declared his felony conviction in the application forms and in interviews and was not having much luck. Through his brother's

connections, he had finally found work in a warehouse that hired predominantly API workers. He was elated. He worked ten to twelve hours a day lifting beer cases and kegs.

The physical nature of the work led Chan to conclude that “these jobs are made for young people though, like, in their 20s or early 30s.” At the time of the interview, Chan was considering becoming a carpenter. He had had some experience with carpentry. He was frustrated, thinking about the limited options he had before him.

“[But] I've got bad shoulders. I can't hammer all day. I want to. I said, "Should I give up my back or should I give up my shoulder?" You know?”

He concluded,

"I'd probably give up my shoulders. My back, I can't walk no more. I can't do anything. But [with] my shoulder, at least I will have one. I can move my other arm."

These considerations frustrated Chan immensely. The experiences of both Aleki and Chan reveal the challenges that individuals with physical disabilities or illness encounter as they seek survival work upon release

II) Alienation in Work

Survival work was a source of financial independence for the participants. Several reported dreams of buying homes, supporting their families and living comfortable lives. Despite these dreams, individuals also encountered aspects of work as a form of alienation. Alienation is broadly the experience of distancing and estrangement of one's relationship to an essential part of oneself that leads to a sense of powerlessness and helplessness (Marx).

i) Revealing one's formerly incarcerated identity

None of the individuals I interviewed were open and upfront about their formerly incarcerated status at work. Most hid their status, with attitudes ranging from wanting to keep their business to themselves, to an actual fear about how they may be discriminated on the job. How individuals decide to reveal their conviction history and status reveals a lot about how they feel like they have to conform to a notion of a mainstream normal.

Axel describes having to hide his conviction history as a “struggle,” and feeling like a “square peg trying to fit into a round hole” when he worked at a healthcare facility. His fear of judgment from strangers was the main barrier. He says, “If you interact with people and if they just only had any idea that you were a convicted murder, they would cringe.” This reaction was reminiscent of the feelings of inferiority he would receive from the prison workers and guards, where he faced judgment “ without even saying anything, without this person even knowing your name, where you came [from].“. This similarity was so salient in his mind that he attributed to prison, his ability to handle the judgments that individuals at work would lay on him. Axel says, “prison helped me prepare for that out here, because for all those years, **you just get used to and accustomed to people looking down on you** and that you're second class and less than.”

Hiding was a strategy Axel used to avoid judgment and the emotional triggers of inferiority. Ly, who similarly hid his conviction history from his coworkers, felt a disconnect when his coworkers would talk about felons and incarcerated individuals.

“I think after hiding [my felon status] for so long, and then hearing folks have a bad image of those that are formerly incarcerated, or that are currently incarcerated. And just hearing them say that all criminals are bad, they all deserve to be locked up and throw away the keys, and just all this other stuff. Right? And I know myself as a felon, and formerly incarcerated, I felt like they were talking about me. But I know I wasn't, and I'm not like that. Sure I made a mistake, I made bad choices, but I don't feel like anybody should be locked up for the rest of their lives, throw away the keys. And so I would talk about it, bring it up like, I think the first time was at work. And you know, we worked a couple years together already.”

Ly emphasized the surprise his coworkers expressed upon learning about his incarceration history. Part of the significance of this sharing, was that it was premised on the fact that Ly did not seem to conform to an expectation of what a felon should be like. It begs the question what his coworkers expectations were for the profile and behavior of a felon.

“And I'm like, "So what if I tell you I was formerly incarcerated?" And they're like, "Get out of here." Blah, blah, blah. It's like, "No, no. I'm serious. What if I am? How would that change your outlook on me?" And they didn't believe me. I told them my story.”

It appears that Ly's coworkers never considered that he could be a felon. It could be that Ly's adjustment to the norm and general sense of being well liked by his coworkers offered him the space and safety to come out to his coworkers.

What about those for whom the mainstream norm was elusive and distant? Being formerly incarcerated was a status that they had to constantly prove against.

Jason alludes to this endless need to prove oneself as a condition of being formerly incarcerated. He says this about the achievements he sought when he was inside.

Jason: I took courses. I took the building maintenance course, I took computer aided design, I took ... I kind of like Microsoft Office, to learn how to use everything in an office. I took a math class, which I didn't have to, but they just told me I needed to complete my certificate. And writing, those two. I took some self help classes, like sleeping exercises. I mean, I just wanted every certificate I could get. I didn't really have to take that. I took a resume writing class. I took ... I took a lot of better yourself courses, to help better yourself.

Me: What's the purpose of getting all these certifications?

Jason: Just to have the certificate to whoever is interviewing me, and I guess to further show that, hey, I changed while I was in there, I didn't just waste time just being there.

Me: So that's like a symbol of your hard work?

Jason: Symbol of hard work, yes, but also having to prove yourself still. Just doing the time doesn't prove anything to society, and doing good inside still doesn't really prove anything.

This element of having to prove oneself could be perceived as one type of response to Axel's statements about the de facto banality and inferiority that individuals were subjected to.

When asked how this sentiment of "having to prove oneself" extended into the jobs he took on after he was released, Jason says,

“You're already labeled already. You're a felon, so then the stereotype is criminals. People would commit crime again, or not to trust those kind of people, those are the stereotypes that I have to live with all the time.”

It is within the context of this deep discrimination and stigma that formerly incarcerated individuals experience, that one's work ethic is also assessed.

“Yeah, I mean working ... even through Arby's is fast food, I still had to ... I was still being watched all the time. I started out doing part-time, then they finally gave me full time after that, 'cause they wanted to see if I made it to work on time, if I had transportation, or how I was with other coworkers and everything. I applied for full time, they only gave me part-time. They had full time available.”

One is expected not simply to prove that one is a responsible worker, but more specifically, that one is a formerly incarcerated individual who is deserving of work. Participants understand that this is the expectations that are set upon them, and subsequently navigate their search for work by marketing this narrative.

“And so, the biggest challenge to getting work post-prison is getting the interview, to be able to look a person in the eye and tell them, look, yes I did just get out of prison, but you would be making a good decision by hiring me because I need the job more than the next guy, and I need to be able to show you, not only myself, but to show you that I'm worthy of this job, I'm capable and that I can be an asset to your company or whatever.”

The weight of hiding their status as formerly incarcerated individuals could be understood by the sense of relief individuals experience when they finally reveal the information.

Ly describes how he felt after he told his coworkers about his felony status:

“And at that time, I felt like this relief of burden on my shoulders. Like somebody just took it off, and it felt so good. It felt really, really good. And then I felt like I shouldn't be afraid to talk about this. And if it's a relationship that I built with somebody else before I told them my testimony, and that causes it to change, than they weren't a good friend to begin with. And that's how I saw it.”

Similarly, Axel speaks of the comfort he has in finding work that did not require him to hide his felony status. In fact, in his new job as a youth counselor, the blight that caused him to feel judgment and inferiority actually became a kind of credential for reaching out to at-risk youth. It offered a meaning and a calm that none of the other survivor jobs could offer.

ii) A Fragile freedom, Parole officers & the Push to work

All of the individuals I interviewed were under some form of community supervision in the form of parole officers when they were released. The parole officers expected the individuals to be employed and working as a productive use of their spare time.

Freedom is fragile and tied to employment. It is arbitrary how strictly parole officers enforce employment requirements. Chan, who encountered a lot of challenges trying to find a job, discussed how the frustration of rejection from work was compounded with the anxiety of a possible return back to prison. This resulted in immense stress for him.

“We're required to go out there, like, three hours in the morning and three hours in the afternoon to search for a job. And if you don't find it in a certain amount of time they'll put you back in prison. So I was stressed out. I said, "Man, I need a job." I tried. You know? I told my CCO [Community Corrections Officer]. My CCO understands because I've been locked up so long, liked up such a long time that she understands why; because I've been gone for so long that I don't know how to adjust back into society.”

For Chan, the anxiety of needing to find a job brought him to a program called Fast Jobs that was offered at his work release site. According to Chan, the program promised to help him and others find work within a week or two. The program had classes that he was not paid to attend, but where he would work on his resume and learn interview skills. Chan was skeptical of the program and felt he had been deceived. Having been to several classes, he felt it was a waste of his time and that he could have learned the information on the internet independently.

Chan saw himself as a victim. “They know how to get to people, especially vulnerable people that just got out of prison that just depend on them. And we believe. We just go for it. You know?”

He broke down his analysis of how he felt like a statistic and the way job programs like these function,

“I feel like they get money by getting people to sign up for their program. I'm not sure. But I'm thinking that's why they do that, because they want to keep their program going to get money from the government. So the more people they can sign up, the more it makes it look legit, you know, like their program is actually working [...] "Hey, you come with us, we'll help you guys." At least it didn't happen for me. I hear some success stories. Like, some people tell me, "Yeah, they help." But when I was in work release, the majority of people, they don't get help by the people that say they're going to help you when you get out. They find their own job.”

Disillusioned with his experience, Chan says that the only way someone like him could get a job was through community connections and people he knows.

For Axel, the stress of employment as a requirement of parole was felt most in the level of scrutiny he encountered.

“My experience [with parole officers] was how they look at you is that you're lying and manipulating and that they can't trust you. So that means, okay, how are you doing, have you been looking for a job yet? Did you get high? Where did you say you were at? They want to verify every little thing that you've done and everything that you tell them to make sure you're not lying to them, and it just makes you feel like they're trying to catch you in a lie or making some kind of mistake.”

The fragility of the freedom individuals experience post-release is best marked by Chan's description of the hazy region between prison and freedom that the parole visits consist of. The arbitrary nature of parole officers and the absolute power they have in deciding whether one is in proper abidance of parole conditions generate some fear and anxiety. More importantly, the parole visits reinforce what Chan identifies as an institutionalized trait fostered in prison, obedience and submissiveness, both of which are maladaptive in the outside world.

“You just try not to get on [the parole officer's] bad side. Just they tell you do something, just do it I guess. Or you gotta be nice to them, respectful to them. Treat 'em like they're the king pretty much. You try to go there think you're the boss, you're on their bad side

just like that. You go in there and just talk to them normally like always got be submissive. You got to. You have no choice. That's what they teach you in there. If you trying be on their level, you're gonna get stomped down quick, chop you down. And it's bad though 'cause when you come out here, you can't really function really because they teach you how to be obedient to the point to where you can't really ... Sometimes you can't function.”

Chan gives an example of how embarrassing it was for him to internalize that obedience and submissive to power and authority. He says,

“Like it took me awhile to snap out of it. Like here, if I was to come here, I would've asked the staff if I could use the bathroom sometime, and people look at me weird like why this guy? I figured out ... No, I get to stand somewhere. Like why this guy asking me if can bathroom? I'm like, "Damn, I'm not in prison no more. I'm tripping.”

iii) Knowing one's capabilities beyond survival work

Another component of alienation that individuals felt was related to work was how they felt unable to express other parts of themselves. He refers nostalgically to the time when he encountered classes and school.

“I feel like I've grown so much while I was in prison. And coming out, it just ... the stuff that I've learned, it's slowly going away. You know? It's like, I know I had all of that knowledge, that wisdom I learned while I was in prison. Now I'm out here. I'm not using it. It's slowly going away, because if you don't use it you lose it. And I haven't been using it for a long time, the stuff that I learned while I was in prison. I'm just living to work and come home and sleep. “

Like most of the individuals I interviewed, Chan had not completed a high school degree.

“I enjoy learning. And I didn't realize that I could learn. But I did...it's empowering.”

Access to education had been one of the significant moments during Chan's imprisonment. He speaks at length about his professor and how she taught him how to enjoy and read literature. Chan states that he misses those times. The joy of learning draws a stark contrast to the

mundane and mentally unstimulating times he experienced at work. College and learning was not what he was meant to do, given his social position.

“[People with] my background, we don't go to college. We go to prison.”

Family expectations and the very dire need for financial support make school inaccessible. Chan faces judgment from his family for wanting to attend school, seen as an impractical choice after release. Speaking of his mother, Chan says,

“She says to save for myself. She doesn't have an education or anything like that so [school is] nothing to her. It's worthless to her. Work is more meaningful to her. [She's] like, "What the hell is wrong with this dude here?" I can't explain it. I can't talk to her about school at all. ”

These sentiments are not limited to Chan. Other individuals expressed a combination of frustration and regret that they were not able to further the education that they had pursued while incarcerated.

Sam echoes a different sentiment. He expresses willingness and desire to work, and also an unwillingness to submit to the conditions of survival work as they are accepted. He expresses that the worth of his labor extends beyond the amount he is being paid and it causes a sense of resentment. The warehouse workplace he describes is staffed mainly by immigrants. Upon release, he joined the caste of poor workers, many of color, breaking backs for low wages.

“[They] paid by the hour. \$9.25 an hour. It was crazy. I said, hell no I'm not doing this shit. I'm not gonna bust my ass for this shit. I don't care how strong I am, or how strong you think I am. I even got into it...They put me there for a while and then they saw this m'fucker aint gonna go much faster than that so they put me on that other line. I box shit up on my own pace. This one other dude had the nerve to be like, hurry up man. I said, who the fuck are you?”

iv) Knowledge of being exploited

Sam's indignation arose from both knowing that his labor was worth more than the meager amount he was paid, and also from the frustration that he was being subjected to this working condition due to his status as an ex-felon. He drew attention to the fact that the other coworkers were immigrants and people of color. Like him, other participants knew that their marginalized felon status made them susceptible to exploitation. The attitude toward the low wages and hard labor they were subjected to, was addressed with a mix of humility and indignation.

The humility arose from the sense that they were being paid more than they ever had in prison. Several participants noted that whatever meager wages they made out in society would be better than the \$55/month they made in prison. It was similar with working conditions -- that if one could tolerate the working conditions inside, they would be able to outside. Ly says of his janitorial job in the prison,

"I guess it humbled me, you know. Yeah. I know that some folks were upset that they were working crappy jobs and stuff. But then they're all crappy jobs, right. And I figured if I can't even make it in here, I can't make it outside. And it humbled me, too. Whatever job I can get, I'll do it. Being out here for a long time now, of course I'm going to be very selective about the jobs that I want to do. But I think that gave me that humbleness of do it. If you need it, do it. You were making way less back then. And you're getting paid dollars [now], you know, versus cents."

There are many debates about the role of prison labor and its relationship to the prison industrial complex. Regardless of the role it plays, prison labor appears to also play the role of a disciplinary regime aimed at creating submissive workers content with low wage jobs. The sense of submission that prison labor cultivates among former prisoners is premised on a few things. First, the challenges they face finding work as a stigmatized individuals and so the need to be content; Second, their need to prove themselves as responsible individuals and workers after a long beatdown on their confidence and self worth; Third, the discrepancy between prison and regular wages. Compared to cents per hour of work, any dollar amount would seem much more. However, this effective wage increase does not account for the ways in which individuals now have to account for their livelihood and expenses.

The indignation that some individuals expressed were either immediate, or cultivated over some time after the initial high of having a job disappeared. With Chan, his initial excitement at finding a dishwasher job when he was unemployed and stressed about a possible return to prison for failure to find employment, quickly diminished when he was faced with the harsh working conditions. He did not get enough hours, and the work was hard and low paying. He realized very unmistakably that he was being mistreated and exploited at work. This created a sense of resentment that was a huge contrast to the initial excitement.

Further, the status of a dishwasher in society also affected his sense of self worth. Speaking of the individuals at a gym that he frequents who don't know of his incarceration history, Chan states,

“And the people, I got to the gym, they say, "What do you do for a living?" I say, "I wash dishes." And then the next day they don't want to talk to me no more. And I'm like, "Hi, how are you doing?" They look the other way. Most of them. Most of the majority of people are like that. And if they do, I've got to go up to them and shake their hand, "How are you doing?" They don't really want to look at me because I'm a dishwasher.”

The stigma of incarceration is compounded by the stigma of being a low wage worker in society. This all stood in stark contrast to the expectation and fantasy of freedom that Chan had while he was awaiting release. His resilience laid in the fact that he was able to rebound from this discrepancy and create a life that was more emotionally and mentally uplifting.

III) Survival work as Harm Reduction in Desistance

Survival work was a necessary condition for individuals whom I interviewed. They were janitors, cooks, dishwashers, warehouse workers, orchard workers, doing physical labor. The minimum wage work compounded with the low status made this somewhat undesirable. The reasons individuals continued to pursue it was based on their need for structure and management of addiction and emotions -- work, through the occupation of time served that purpose and also because of the very basic need to survive financially.

Capital valorizes this need for individuals to prove oneself, both through the repressive system of the state in the form of parole officers, as well as the affective wage of proving oneself as being able to be independent and hold down a job. One had to prove that he was not only a

responsible worker, but an ex-felon who had to prove that he even deserved a job. The expectations and judgements placed on them was somewhat different than that placed on individuals with no conviction history. Third, the disciplinary regiment of in-prison labor and discrimination against felons created a scenario where one needed to accept what is given and available.

Individuals resist these prescriptions for their adjustments by leaving the survival jobs that initially gave them some reprise, by seeking better paying work and promotions or exercising the range of their abilities -- which included tattoo art and returning to school. I did not hear of any individual who spoke of organizing the workplace where they were at.

Individuals resist the exceptional scrutiny and pathologization that is placed on the work ethics and behaviors of formerly incarcerated individuals. Cam, a trades worker who describes himself as having a good work ethic and discipline insists,

“I've seen people out here their whole life fucking struggling to get work, never been locked up, more because they drink too much [...] So it's not just because motherfuckers been locked up and all. It's just people never been locked up but everybody got their own demons, you know what I'm saying?”

The participants all acknowledge that their transition to mainstream society require a drastic adjustment to the ways that life is structured and that there is a lot to learn. There exists however a rejection towards the way in which their lifestyles are now made exceptional and brought to scrutiny, and being held to a higher standard beyond the diversity of human behavior. It pulls at the feeling of having to prove and overcompensate for their identities as ex-felons, rather than being seen primarily as a person first, with the diversity of human experiences and behaviors. This endless proving is a psychologically exhausting task.

I liken survival work to harm reduction in the trajectory of an individual's transition because it met the immediate needs of individuals at a particularly vulnerable time in their transition, though it was not the ideal or desired outcome they want.

C) Meaningful Work

Meaningful work is the kind of labor and effort people where individuals find meaning and purpose. This kind of work can be paid or unpaid, and plays a role in the individuals' desistance

by offering individuals a sense of belonging, a space to be their full selves, and a sense of continuity from their past and thus strengthening their redemption script. With the exception of Axel, the participants identify work that is meaningful to them to be unpaid. I discuss the characteristics of these meaningful work below.

i) Full self, Not hidden

Hiding his past is something that Axel avoids. “I hate to try to portray something that I am not. I don't like to hide,” he says. Axel speaks of the times when he had to hide about his identity as a formerly incarcerated person, and how the impending fear of being unmasked and judged by his coworkers as inferior, was stress inducing. Being able to be transparent about his past then, was important for Axel's well being.

At the time of the interview, Axel expressed gratitude for his job as a youth outreach coordinator at a large social service agency. The work with youth of color who are involved in gangs gives Axel an opportunity to do the work he had done “unintentionally for many years.” It was familiar to him, and served as a continuity of his role as a mentor to youth inside prison.

“I've spent a substantial amount of time in prison meeting youth and my experiences with life and the struggles of poor people of color and the obstacles of economic struggles and parents, the unconventional family units and stuff that I've been able to process that during my incarceration and share those experience with a variety of different people, and so I've done this work unintentionally for many years.”

Rather than a set back and something to be judged, his past as a formerly incarcerated individual who had experience mentoring youth in prison actually gave him credibility in his new job. It also added to his redemption script, a narrative of the past that helps explain the present and generate hope for the future. Axel says,

“I get to be myself. I'm not hiding my past. And then part of my healing is being able to help somebody. I know I've hurt people in the past. It feels so much better to help somebody.”

In the resistance against institutionalization and a search for an individual norm outside of both mainstream norms that judge ex-felons as inferior, and prison norms that are maladaptive to the outside world, Axel finds meaning in work that is inarguably positive -- helping youth by turning away from crime and the prison system. It offers a redemption to the past as much as it offers meaning to the present.

Like Axel, Borey found paid work in continuing the work he had already done while incarcerated. Instead of having to hide his incarceration history or immigration status, Borey's work with a social justice agency paid him specifically for doing advocacy work around immigration and deportation. Borey had acquired skills as a jailhouse lawyer fighting his and others' legal cases, as well as the skills around organizing hunger strikes, all of which were primarily for his survival. Being able to openly share his experiences and be a source of support for other people in his situation turned out to be meaningful for Borey. Instead of feeling alone in fighting his deportation, he found a sense of community and belonging with "his people" -- other Cambodian individuals who were willing to embrace his situation.

"There's a portion of my people that cares about my situation that I'm in. I think if you go through it alone and nobody cares, you're not motivated to make changes by yourself, but if you see people doing the same thing you tend to gravitate to them."

His attitude toward the advocacy work went from being a necessity, as the only person who was able/willing to speak publicly about his immigration issues, to being something that he was passionate about. In fact, organizing with his community around the issues of deportation and incarceration shifted his own self perception and empowered him to take on leadership. Borey says,

"I was skeptical about the community because I felt we don't have enough power because we come from a country, dictatorship, and as people we don't have much of a say in much and so that was brought on to us in American life. We don't know the justice system that well, we don't know the bureaucracy that well to basically influence congress or anything like that. We underestimate ourselves, basically, and because I don't come from an academic background my family, the folks around me, don't come from an academic background where it can take this to another level where we can basically, strategically do it in a way where we can make positive changes. That was kind of like the obstacle that I need to get over, but then I realized that even if there's nobody like

that from my people then maybe I can become that individual, that speak up, that try to make change.”

iii) New values, new norms

“[There’s] no way to justify not working on yourself when you are with people who are”
Borey

Meaningful work was also the site where new values and new norms were cultivated. The work and the communities the work was done in offered a space for individuals to be able to reflect on their past, learn from people around them, and cultivate new ways of being for themselves. Three participants who were involved in social justice work discussed how the communities offered an alternative to the mainstream norm that was alienating to them.

For Borey, being involved in the advocacy work around deportation changed him. It pushed him to ask himself if he was living by the image he created of himself. He refers to the questions he asks himself, “[H]ow could [you] try to organize people when you yourself is not even a good person right?”

Borey describes how valuable it was for him to be around an alternative set of values that was not mainstream and materialistic. What attracted him to the activists he was around, was not their wealth but that they were “good people” who “didn’t need to drive fancy cars.”

He contrasts who he was to who he is right now.

“[W]hen I got out and I made money and I like bought a nice car, thinking that’s something I missed out on [that’s] gonna make me feel good. It did make me feel good, but it didn’t make me a better person. I was still a douchebag you know. And so I realized later on after, maybe not having a nice car and getting me friends that don’t have a nice car, but they are really good people. That money doesn’t define you.”

Borey’s search for new values in communities that do meaningful work resonate with Jason. Jason is drawn to the rebellious nature of the work which involves sacrifice and struggle for those who are struggling:

“It's the rebellious thing. I guess that's what it falls under. It's only normal to people that's in social justice, that they're rebellious. It's actually fighting ... 'cause who fights for people? Who out there does these kind of struggle and risk arrest, risk all these kinds of things for people?”

The diversion from a mainstream norm is exactly what attracts Jason to the activist community.

“ I'm already not normal. A guy followed me. I killed somebody. And I'm fortunate to still be out. Most people that kill people are not ... they're not free. So I'm already not normal. Why should I fit with normal society?”

Referring to the time when he was in gangs as a youth as the only time he felt “normal” back then, this alternative norm that helps and fights for other individuals constitute a more positive norm, one where “I'm not causing any more crimes, as long as I'm not harming other people.”

Between the prison norms and mainstream norms, lie the discovery for individual norms. For Jason, the mainstream norm was already alienating to begin with. Participants built community where they engaged in meaningful work, where their individual norms that were outside of the mainstream could find resonance and growth.

ii) Community Engagement

Meaningful work also involved community engagement. For many of the individuals, it was a strong desire to meet others who were in a similar situation as them, or who were currently incarcerated. It offered them a community of people who understood the challenges they were undergoing, where they did not have to pretend to be someone other than themselves.

Not forgetting the individuals who were currently incarcerated was important for those whom I interviewed. The connections were born both out of care of the people inside, and also a strong empathy of the isolation and loneliness they had once experienced. The time they had shared with other incarcerated individuals were also transformative. At times too, the connection served to remind individuals when they were facing challenges in their lives, of the horror of prison life and how they would not willingly subject themselves to incarceration again. It served to motivate individuals in their desistance work.

iv) Space to Acknowledge Past Trauma and Experience

For some individuals who have been active in supporting their currently incarcerated communities, the work is meaningful in part because it offers space to acknowledge and potentially work through the past trauma and experiences they have undergone. The interactions are characterized as positive, motivating and encouraging, to serve as a support for individuals inside to, as Jason says, “better themselves” through their relationships with participants. The return to spaces that previously had been traumatizing -- the courthouses to support other individuals they know facing resentencing, or to the prisons for the events organized by incarcerated API individuals carry a variety of meaning for the individuals who do it.

Jason describes the visits to the courthouse where he was first sentenced as a sixteen year old, and the adult prison where he was incarcerated as a youth, as a kind of release. “Actually being in the place where everything happened, that changed your life, and being able to walk away from it and not be on the punishment side of it,” Jason describes as “freedom.” Furthermore, being able to visit the individuals whom he had been locked up with, with whom he had experienced many transformative moments with, was considered meaningful. He speaks of his connection to those who remain incarcerated, that “part of me was still in there because the brothers were still in there, so that was another component to, seeing them, some of the ones I haven't seen for years.”

Feeling like he had narrowly escaped deportation himself, Ly sees his work as contributing to others avoiding deportation as well. Ly had been ordered deported by the immigration judge and said his goodbyes to his family. Fortunately, paperwork arrived in time to prove his US citizenship and he was released. His close call with deportation and family separation drew him to the work. He wanted other families also to feel the joy he felt when he first “hugged his mom” after being released.

Being involved in the organizing work also created a space for him to talk openly about his experience in immigration detention without having to feel like he had to hide or be ashamed. It was one of the first times he was transparent about his past. This was a huge risk to take, as well as a huge relief after. One can appreciate the significance of this public revelation from Ly's description of what he had felt before.

“So getting out and facing all of this different trials and heartaches of being constantly rejected or actually being afraid to talk to somebody about the history of being incarcerated. Or talking about immigration. I was going to be deported, you know. How do you spark that conversation just out of the blue? Right? It's just not something that you can have coffee with friends and family. And I was thinking about it, right, nobody knows that you were incarcerated. And if they did know, you were shunned. Your family was shunned automatically. And just that embarrassment and just knowing that I let my mom down.”

Meaningful work serves as a space for individuals to acknowledge their past, seeing themselves today as part of a continuity and recognition of what they had been through as well as confronting some of their fears.

D) Communities

Most participants reported being engaged with the various communities. These families and communities are not without their complexity and individuals choose to selectively engage with aspects of them. Positive communities are defined by the participants as those that prevent recidivism and are part of an individual's desistance. These communities take the form of family, currently and formerly incarcerated API individuals, as well as social justice and organizing communities.

I) Currently and Formerly Incarcerated API individuals

“[As] far as the API we were really tight family. We all became family.”

James

“All of my friends and all of my good good friends are formerly incarcerated or people that understand that life. You know what I mean? It's like I can only travel in a certain circle of people to be my true self.”

Axel

The level of comradery and family that API individuals expressed for each other was resonant across all the interviews. Individuals emphasized the kinds of positive bonds they had with one

another and recalled several moments when the presence of other API individuals supported their ability to survive their incarceration.

Mentorship and community stood out as traits that API individuals offered to one another inside. Speaking of his time at Stafford Creek Corrections, where “all the Cambodians are at,” twenty four year old Ke expressed an excitement to be transferred there from another institution. He was able to speak his language and learn about his culture.

The cultural connection Ke sought was not readily available in his pre-incarceration life. Growing up in the North end of Seattle, Ke stated that his community existed more of Africans and white folks, not Asians.

The other Cambodians he met in the system offered him more than a cultural connection to his roots. As the “youngest Cambodian in the prison system,” Ke, who turned twenty years old in the county jail prior to his transfer, spoke of the elders or individuals with long sentences, as mentors. They reminded him of the need to stay away from prison politics and to focus on his release, so that he could “do something productive out in society rather than just sitting in a cell and being limited on what you could do while in confinement or in prison.”

Their mentorship drilled into him a sense of purpose during his incarceration. He says, “What can I do to avoid coming back and falling back into this pattern that would land me back in prison again?”

Apart from concrete advice to not engage in actions that could get one into further trouble, other API mentors inside also helped individuals sustain themselves mentally to do their time. Referring to individuals who had longer sentences than him, Chan says of his twenty three year bid, that “I barely made it [...] intact, mental-wise coming out of there [...] [Those doing longer sentences] are way stronger than I am. Because I got this much time, I'm going crazy already, I'd think to myself. And them, they just seem like [...] they're handling it [...] That's what I would just think all the time when I was in prison, too, to get me through.”

This support extends beyond the prison walls into individuals' transitions. Several participants spoke of the significance of connecting with each other outside. Individuals came through materially and sought work for one another through the networks they were a part of. In

addition, they sought advice, emotional support and encouragement from these existing connections.

Cam refers to a friend, Mex¹, whom he had done time with more than a decade ago, who had made the effort to keep in touch throughout the years. Cam takes his advice seriously, including pursuing a trade job and enrolling in a pre-apprenticeship program as a way to achieve some upward mobility. He says, “He's been through the same shit I've been through [...] It's not like I'm talking to some church guy that's never fucking did anything or just some random person on the street. Like, oh, I wanna see you do good. Okay. You wanna see me do good but you ain't been in the same fucking places I've been to. You ain't fucking done the same shit I've done.” This particular individual Cam references, Mex, receives respect and trust, not simply for having gone through what others have gone through, but also because of his continual dedication to those inside.

Aleki, also speaking of Mex, says,

“[He] is financially able and he would go to Walla Walla, drive to Walla Walla and visit his friend. That's not even his childhood friend, that's just a friend in prison. He would drive all the way there because he cares about the guy and he would drive to Clallam Bay to visit Bun [another individual who had been incarcerated]. That's kind of like determination that I don't have. I might want to like organize and stuff, but I don't have the capacity or the time to make that commitment because I don't appreciate guys in prison enough for me to drive all the way. I didn't develop a long term friend inside of prison that much, that long for me to make that commitment.”

Mex's dedication to the individuals inside is witnessed and respected by those on the outside and earns him trust among the community.

Mex sets a high standard for comradery and connection that others aspire to. Speaking of Mex's commitment to others, Borey says, “He showed the commitment that he's for real. In order for me to compete with that, I need to do something that would compliment that.” Yet, it is also the

¹ I was unfortunately not able to interview Mex due to time constraints in the project.

collective desire to support and encourage one another on varying levels that maintain the tight network among formerly incarcerated API individuals.

Aleki lives in Eastern Washington comes through to the Seattle metro area from time to time to seek medical services. His chronic condition is stressful and he says he seeks affirmation and support from his formerly incarcerated community. He visits with them every time he comes westward. He says of these visits, "What it does is encourages me and we can encourage each other by being positive and saying, 'Hey man, that's good that you do that. You know what I'm saying? That's good that you went back to school or that's good that you went back and got your GED.' Things like that. If there's things that you missed in your life, I mean, go back and get it because it's never too late to establish that, you know what I mean?" Being witnessed in his efforts keep him out of trouble.

The empathy for others undergoing similar situations and sufferings that individuals had encountered serve as a motivation for further growth. James, the trades worker who had been detained in immigration detention for two years after his release from prison, speaks of the challenge of finding work without a valid work permit upon his release. The vivid memory of these moments inspired him to conceive of a business collaboration with other formerly incarcerated individuals, to form a company as "a way to help some of the guys coming out, give them a job."

II) Families

The participants reveal a complex array of relationships with immediate family. They range from deep love and appreciation to family for having supported them emotionally and financially through their incarceration, including for some individuals, a sense of regret that they were not able to be present for their loved ones' growth, transitions, and even death. The mix of emotions that are bottled in the years of incarceration are layered.

Family relationships and resources are important, if not for the sole reason that it is where majority of the participants found housing. Where immediate family members are unable to provide housing due to poverty or substance abuse, participants ended up homeless. This highlights both the lack of housing services for formerly incarcerated API individuals, and in light

of this absence, the undue burden placed on marginalized and poor API communities to provide material resources for their family members who transition.

Participants discuss how tensions exist however, between individuals and their family members due to the latter's inability to understand the incarceration and post-release experience. Several participants speak of the stigma and silence around their incarceration. College or military were often reasons given by family members to justify the absence of their loved ones to acquaintances and extended family. Speaking of his Southeast Asian family that had arrived to the United States as refugees in the 1980s, Ly explains the rationale behind these lies,

“I think it's the shameful that we've escaped war or we were given this opportunity to live this American dream. Everybody want to be fucking American, because everybody wants to live this American dream. So, then you get locked up. It's like it's shameful to the family, especially those family members that are actually well to do. They're doing good. My mom wants me to be a doctor, an engineer, or a lawyer.”

The shame went both ways. Ly similarly felt he had let his mom down.

Ly reveals the depth of this silence when he encountered his uncle in immigration detention.

“He was pissed off when he saw me there. “What are you doing here?” Anyway, I saw my uncle there and he had to be his cellies [...] It was weird, because I was so embarrassed. It was kind of weird, because now I know that he's in Immigration and he knows that I'm in Immigration, but none of the family knows anything about what's going on. Because everybody's keeping quiet, but we know. It was weird, because he was my uncle.”

The silence does not negate the love and care that family members have for their incarcerated loved ones. Ly and other participants speak of their family members with appreciation and love, especially in the form of financial and emotional support during their incarceration. In his close encounter with deportation, Ly was told to give his last goodbyes. He speaks movingly of this moment with his mom.

“I was shackled up from ankle to my arms, to my hands and my wrists, and I remember kissing my mom for the first time in a long, long, time. Because she would never come visit me. I was getting teary eyed, because I thought, this is it. I will never see my mom again. She gave me like this long hug and they stripped us away, because it was too long.”

She was also the first person he wanted to see upon release from immigration detention. He vividly recalls the moment when he saw her at her home,

“My mom was doing beer grass, so it was a whole bunch of folks that were just out there, and she has this little shack and it was like an awning tarp kind of housing thing that she made. And I went there and she had it facing one way, and there was a chair that was open next to her, and I went and sat down. I sat down for a while. I sat there for a long time, just watching her work. I felt so bad that I wasn't there to help take care of her.”

The love and support among family members was not always accompanied with understanding however. Jason struggled with his family members' inability to understand him and his experiences upon release. They pressured him to get a job, seeing that as a form of tough love to support him through his transition. Apart from that, avoidance was their primary strategy for dealing with his emotional state.

“Everyone was stepping on eggshells, which was bothering me a lot, but it was hard to talk to everybody about it, because they haven't seen me for like 10 years, so they don't know how I'm gonna react, don't know my triggers or anything, but it also made me nervous too, to be in there. I felt more better when I left the house than being in the house.”

He elaborates that “[they would] just hide and don't look at [him] for a long time.” This made him feel like a “dangerous animal, like a tiger.”

Having family members as the defacto parties that individuals return to upon release can also trigger memories of childhood trauma. Two participants spoke of alcoholism in their household that they did not want to be close to, but had no choice because of the lack of housing.

For Chan in particular, the return to his childhood family home brought on immense anxiety. It brought back memories of his childhood and the environment he took to the streets to escape from. He says, “ I used to get in trouble on purpose so I could get locked up so I don't have to stay at home, or go to stay at my friend's house, you know, like, months at a time because I hate it so much. And now I've got to go back there.”

The stress of family trauma and history made Chan want to go back to prison to escape it all. He says,

“Sometimes I feel like going back to prison, sometimes. Like, "Man, I'm stressful. I don't like this. I hate this." They're drinking and yelling and, what do you call it, they're verbally abusive. And I just don't like that. It's just what I remember before I got locked up. I remember I hated it so much. And now I'm back here, like, ‘Oh.’”

Revisiting this conversation with Chan several months later, he expressed more hope with his living situation. His father, unfortunately, had serious liver disease from his drinking and had since stopped. Chan reported a much better living environment that he could tolerate. His family connections and obligations, including wanting to continue to work to support his family financially, motivated him to find more high paying work.

Families are complex. The ways they contribute to an individual's desistance changes with time, experience and communication. A deep connection and obligation to family cut through all the participants' interviews. Despite challenges participants encounter with their loved ones, doing their part for their family, making up for the disappointments and burdens they brought to their loved ones during their incarceration were a motivator for several participants.

iii) Organizing/Social Justice Communities

Several of the participants refer to social justice communities as having been beneficial to their desistance work. As discussed above, the space given for new values and new norms to be developed was positive for individuals. It offered them a space to be different from their past selves, where they could be recognized for the experiences they had survived, be it incarceration, hunger strikes, or the close threat of deportation. Having the space to openly discuss those parts of their histories with no shame was enlivening and hopeful for the individuals involved.

Discussion

Work is a form of activity and effort, a form of labor, multifaceted and layered. My research reveals how formerly incarcerated individuals engage in work in ways that may not always be apparent and acknowledged. The desistance work they undertake to prevent a return to prison involves labor that is paid and unpaid, and requires their active engagement with families and communities in a meaning making process. Survival work is only one component of the total labor that individuals engage in. For the formerly incarcerated API people I interviewed, survival work is not merely functional, a way to survive, but also serves as proof by the parole system, as well as their families, as evidence of a desire to transition successfully. The centrality of survival work in the dominant understanding of desistance, exists alongside the minimization or invisibility of other kinds of desistance work that individuals and their communities engage in. This pattern creates confusion in the ways meaningful support can be imagined. Clarifying and naming existing desistance work that individuals are already engaged in, outside of the dominance of survival work, is crucial for understanding reentry and the broader communities' role in supporting it.

The findings of this study are valuable for several reasons. First, the research offers a space for an often invisible formerly incarcerated API community to offer insights about their own transition process. Their words help us understand the areas of work that are important and valuable to them in their transition process. Through learning about the ways that individuals engage with families and community in their desistance work, the two parties can also understand how to better respond to the needs of their formerly incarcerated loved ones. Overcoming cultural barriers, such as the stigma associated with incarceration, as well as the ways that families articulate tough love through a push to work are valuable insights gathered from the participants.

Second, the overlapping criminal justice system and immigration deportation system, "crimmigration," create a complicated and tense situation for formerly incarcerated API individuals. Reentry work seldom includes the experiences of those who were detained in ICE facilities, nor those who have deportation orders awaiting removal. The level of uncertainty and

anxiety such a predicament creates for those who only recently survived the trauma of incarceration sheds light into another dimension to reentry that needs to be done.

Literature around reentry focuses largely on paid work as a primary desistance factor. Institutions like Correctional Industries in Washington State DOC emphasize work during incarceration as a way to reduce recidivism. Additionally, language around reentry emphasizes employment as a factor of reducing recidivism. This literature seldom discusses the kind of work that formerly incarcerated individuals are engaged in and how, or why, employment impacts recidivism rates. The interviews reveal that individuals' experiences with prison labor have not been meaningful to them upon release. HVAC classes or janitorial work inside, being paid a mere 55 cents/hour, for example, did not result in meaningful skill transfer beyond a temporary sense of humility and willingness to accept low paid minimum wage labor. This initial humility and acceptance was easily shattered by the hefty expenses of daily lives upon release.

The model minority narrative emphasizes API individuals as hard workers who through their diligent and submissive labor, are able to succeed in the US and achieve the American Dream. This narrative is important to subvert and contest, because it is more a projection and construct and less a truth about the actual lives of individual API people. The interviews focus on the non-model minority -- the formerly incarcerated whose experiences and lives dispel the model minority myth through their involvement in the criminal justice system. Their experiences with work too, resist the easy projection of hard work, easy submission and obedience on a racialized API identity. Paid survival work is a necessity, a harm reduction tool for survival, an alienating experience individuals undertake begrudgingly, knowing that they are exploited. There is an absence of flair or fantasy to the willing and submissive API hard worker.

In contrast, the participants repeatedly express the significance of meaningful work. Meaningful work can/may involve paid or unpaid labor. When paid, it is labor that allows formerly incarcerated individuals a shot at success, at genuine financial independence, a light at the end of the tunnel. It also involves a normalization of their experiences as the non model minority, where being formerly incarcerated does not need to be hidden. Where unpaid, it involves active engagement with their peers, those who are currently or formerly incarcerated. Meaningful work is an extension of the personal work that individuals are already engaged in -- a resisting of institutionalization, a search for new values and norms, fostering a sense of accountability and

agency. This is where communities and families, those who have close interactions with formerly incarcerated individuals, enter. They can serve as important spaces that individuals can engage in to expand their new “clean selves” and articulate a meaningful “redemption script” (Harris, 2011).

The study is limited in its small sample size and the snowball effect of participant recruitment. The individuals I spoke with were gathered through their proximity with a grassroots group consisting of formerly incarcerated API individuals. Most of the individuals I interviewed have been involved in cultural organizations while incarcerated and saw their transition into the outside world as an extension of that engagement. Furthermore, I did not consider patterns of their incarceration, including time served, violent vs. non-violent crimes, and length of time from release in the development of themes drawn from the interviews. These factors could impact the ways in which individuals conduct the intensity of their desistance work, as well as engagement in survival and meaningful work. Nonetheless, credibility of the study findings is bolstered by the repeated occurrence of the identified themes across the (male) participants.

Another major limitation of this study is the absence of female participants. I was not able to interview more female participants and could not meaningfully characterize female API incarceration and post release experiences as they might be distinct from those of male participants. This was a shortcoming in the part of recruitment but points to the need for further research focusing on formerly incarcerated API women.

Proposed frameworks for further exploration

I propose two areas for further exploration that can offer an alternative vision of reentry. These two areas of exploration emphasize the desistance work that individuals, their immediate families and communities, and the larger API community can engage in.

A) Imagining an alternative vision of Reentry: A Prison to Liberation pathway

Prevailing notions around reentry centralize survival work as a symbol of an individual's intention to successfully transition. As my research shows, meaningful work which restores an individual's sense of humanity, connection and belonging to community is valuable for

successful transition. For that reason, I propose an alternative a “prison to liberation” pathway for further exploration.

The “Prison to Liberation” pathway begins from prison because it emphasizes the resilience of incarcerated individuals and their communities. Particularly, how individuals put in work resisting isolation, maintaining connection and community within and without the prison walls. A different vision of reentry extends from these existing threads of resilience, a continuation of these efforts beyond the prison walls. A prison to liberation pathway is the antithesis to the school to prison to deportation pipeline. Decarcerating our communities, seeking communal and individual healing of individuals and the communities that have been disproportionately impacted by state violence is a political act.

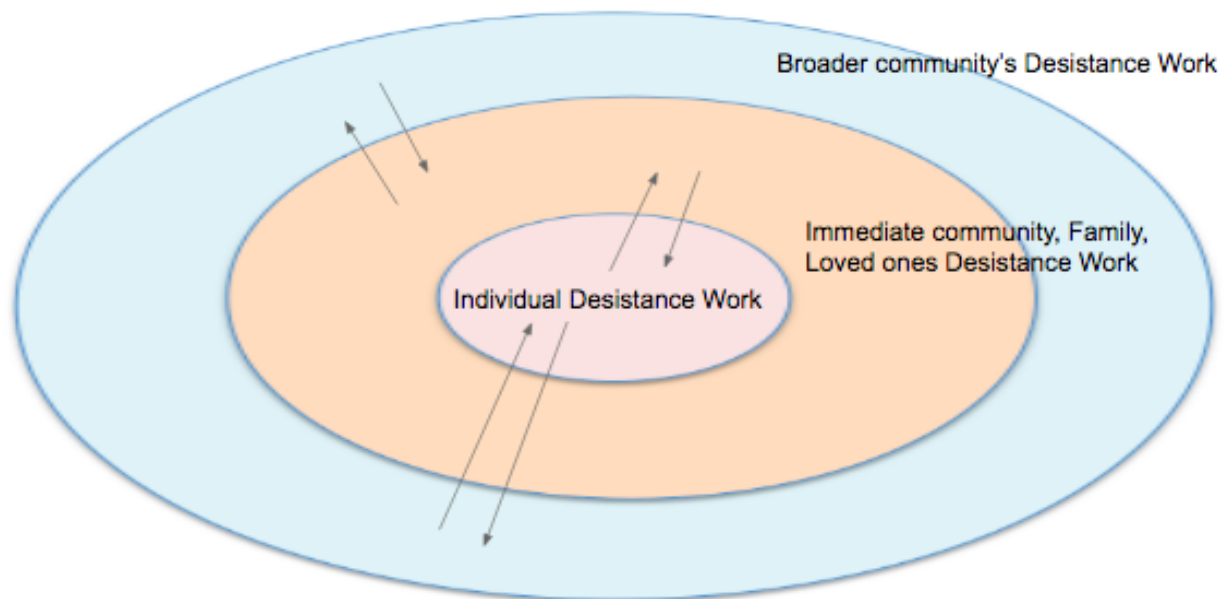
What could be the principles and values of a prison to liberation pathway? A pathway, not a pipeline like the school to prison to deportation pipeline, or the prison to work pipeline that railroads the lives of poor individuals, many of color, into a cruel, punitive system of control and loss of agency both inside and outside the prison walls? Could we instead imagine many pathways that resist the prison industrial complex and the carceral state through the collaboration and self activities of prisoners, families and communities alike? That in the resilience and struggle for humanity in each step lie also the creation of the path to collective liberation.

A prison to liberation pathway will center the voices and experiences of formerly incarcerated API individuals, understanding that they are the experts in their own transition and reentry needs and hopes. It will build off the positive connections and bonds that they have created both within and without the prison walls. It will further honor the individual and collective resilience that individuals and their families and communities undertake to get free. How this realistically looks like is an ongoing work of building, organizing and discovery.

B) Levels of Desistance Work

The findings reveal that individuals engage with themselves, their work and their immediate families and communities as the various components of desistance work. These findings then also beg the question of how families and communities can support the individuals’ desistance work. I identify three levels in which desistance work takes place -- on the level of the individual

self, the level of the immediate family and loved ones and then on a level of the broader community's support for the formerly incarcerated individuals and their loved ones who bear the brunt of the financial and emotional burdens of transition.



Questions to ask are, What can we do as communities, families & loved ones to support individuals transitioning? How do we care for communities & families that are also experiencing transition and reentry? State policies that can ease the barriers of transition, alongside efforts to shift cultural understandings of incarceration, navigating through the shame and stigma associated with incarceration, can go a long way in supporting healthy processes of reentry for the parties involved.

The research on API individuals and the ways they make meaning out of work sheds light on the need for us to expand our understanding of reentry beyond paid work experiences to encompass the labor, effort and activity that individuals undertake to keep themselves out of prison.

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Appendix

A) Outreach Flier

B) Flier for Community Event

ARE YOU
FORMERLY INCARCERATED
&
ASIAN PACIFIC
ISLANDER (API)

I WANT TO LEARN ABOUT YOUR
POST-RELEASE EXPERIENCES

Be a part of a University of Washington Public Health Masters Thesis project aimed at understanding culturally relevant post-release transition for formerly incarcerated API individuals.

An two-hour long interview will be conducted in a private location.

All details kept confidential.

A \$50 stipend will be offered to compensate you for your time.

Interested? Questions?
Please call or email for eligibility

JM Wong
wongjm31@gmail.com
206 855 3174





**TOWARDS A
COMMUNITY &
FAMILY-CENTERED
REENTRY**

**FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH
FORMERLY INCARCERATED ASIAN PACIFIC
ISLANDER INDIVIDUALS**

Please join us for a conversation

Lunch provided

**Beacon Hill Library
2-4pm
Sunday Aug 19**

A presentation of a University of Washington Public Health Masters Thesis

Many thanks to Formerly Incarcerated Group Healing Together (FIGHT), Asian Pacific Islander Cultural Awareness Group (APICAG), Pacific Rim Solidarity Network (PARISOL) & the Seattle Public Library