# READY & RESILIENT

Qualitative Findings from Life Story
Interviews with Vocational and Life
Skills Program Participants

Grant Cycle Three: July 2018-June 2020

NEBRASKA CENTER FOR JUSTICE RESEARCH

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# Executive Summary

The current report summarizes a research project that explored the lives of individuals who participated in Nebraska's Vocational and Life Skills (VLS) Program. For over six years, the VLS Program has been administered by the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services (NDCS) and has provided services to individuals convicted of one or more criminal offenses in Nebraska. It was created by Nebraska Legislative Bill 907, which sought to increase employment opportunities and decrease barriers to successful reentry for Nebraskans convicted of criminal offenses. To date, VLS has served over 6,000 individuals. VLS services are provided within state prisons and the community and include vocational job training, education, temporary housing, and life skills programming.

The Nebraska Center for Justice Research (NCJR) conducts ongoing outcome and process evaluations on VLS. The current qualitative study is part of the process evaluation of the VLS. The current study goals were to understand which aspects of programming were particularly helpful and to inform program administrators on aspects of the program that had room for improvement. Participants interviewed had received a mix of programming from a variety of grantees, both inside and outside state prisons – an example of a continuity of care model. Researchers obtained referrals from then-current grantee organizations for a list of "a few participants who succeeded" in reentry and "a few who failed" reentry. Failure in this context was defined as being returned to prison on a revocation or new crime.

Potential participants were contacted to meet for a semi-structured interview. Twenty-one former VLS participants agreed to be interviewed in the summer of 2019. Each participant signed a consent document, informing them of the risks of participation in the study. Each retained a copy of the consent document upon signing.

A thematic analysis revealed that participants greatly appreciated services and programming both inside and outside of facilities. Participants conveyed that VLS encouraged and facilitated developmental growth regarding cognitive, interpersonal, emotional, and moral psychological lines. While not all participants acknowledged or demonstrated they had personally grown on all these psychological lines, they all conveyed that programming considerably increased their abilities to find, obtain, and maintain employment. Finally, participants revealed – sometimes in detail and sometimes broadly – they learned forms of resiliency needed to overcome reentry challenges. For example, many participants suggested that VLS programming taught them resiliency in completing supervision, gaining and maintaining employment, and staying crime-free. Even amongst the 'failure' participants, participants appreciated that for those who decided they wanted something different for their lives, staff guided and advised them on their journeys in significant ways. Many of the older participants indicated their intentions to dedicate time to help others in the way staff helped them. Struggles along the way to successful reentry were considerable, including avoiding past relationships and peer groups, avoiding substance and alcohol use, obtaining safe and affordable housing, gaining access to affordable mental health services, prescription drugs, controlling aggression, successfully parenting and/or reconnecting with their children, and obtaining and holding employment. Participants further provided recommendations that could improve reentry in Nebraska, including more education opportunities, general technology education and coinciding experiential learning, and computer courses.

# Background

In the late 1970s, America's increase in crime led to bipartisan calls to increase criminal penalties. The preferred 'punishment' for serious crimes was (and continues to be by the general public) incarceration for long periods of time. Incarceration rates in the U.S. would increase to lead the first world, from approximately 200 out of 100,000 individuals in the early 1970's to over 750 out of 100,000 individuals in 2010 (Travis, Western, & Redburn, 2014). This phenomenon has been termed as mass incarceration (Tonry, 2014). Although the intention of policies such as three-strikes laws, mandatory minimum sentences, truth-in-sentencing, and zero-tolerance was to deter criminal behavior, studies have demonstrated the costs of incarceration outweigh its benefits (Loeffler, 2013; Nagin & Snodgrass, 2013; Rose & Shem-Tov, 2018). As a result of the burden mass incarceration had placed on state budgets and state employees, state governments undertook initiatives such as building new prisons, modifying sentencing practices, and improving needs-based services such as prison rehabilitative programming and reentry services (Petersilia, 2003; Travis, 2005; Jonson & Cullen, 2015). Many administrators have turned towards the risk, need, responsivity model (RNR) for corrections to prioritize inmates for treatment programming, assign them to necessary programming, and utilize their unique learning styles and characteristics to customize case management and treatment plans (Andrews, Bonta, & Wormith, 2006). RNR provides part of a strategy to address unmet needs that are correlated to reoffending. Another key component in reentry involves a continuity of care (COC) across settings (Annison, Byng, & Quinn, 2019; Duwe, 2012). COC stems from the medical paradigm and is being adopted by many agencies to assist in facilitating the reentry process (Freeman et al., 2002). COC is a strategy that addresses inmate needs while incarcerated and continues services once the individual is released to the community.

Previous research has demonstrated that prison can serve as a turning point from crime when returning individuals have the resources to succeed after release (Harding et al., 2019). One strategy that can be effective in encouraging turning points in behavioral trajectories (i.e., improving reentry outcomes) is the implementation of 'rehabilitative' programs designed to assist returning individuals in overcoming reentry barriers and improving their opportunities for employment (Visher, Debus-Sherrill, & Yahner, 2011). Generally, reentry programs seek to provide returning individuals with informed personal advocacy as they navigate the criminal justice system (Western, 2018), and connect participants with knowledge and community services to help overcome structural barriers such as employment and housing discrimination against those with felony records (Kendall et al., 2018; Leasure & Martin, 2017). Such programs have promise in improving post-release outcomes (Aos, Miller, & Drake, 2006).

Incarcerated individuals tend to be undereducated, and often lack vocational training and legitimate work experience prior to entering prison (Petersilia, 2003; Richmond, 2014; Western, 2006). While this is primarily due to the young age of most individuals entering prison for the first time, legitimate employment subsequently becomes even more challenging to obtain after release (Hattery & Smith, 2011; Pager, 2008). Although most prisons offer vocational programming to gain skills that might increase the odds of employment, many individuals opt not to participate (Lynch & Sabol, 2001). While the case for mandatory prison programming has been discussed elsewhere (e.g., McCollum, 1990), theory insists that the structure and routine gained by regular work schedules can promote conventional lifestyles (Sampson & Laub, 1993).

However, and with a fair amount of disagreement in the literature, we purport that individuals must first decide to change one's criminal lifestyle before recognizing the potential rewards associated with conventional behavior (Bachman et al., 2016; Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Soyer, 2014). Our familiarity with criminological theory leads us to utilize life course theory (LCT) to explain why one enters, continues, and desists from criminal lifestyles. LCT is a broad integrative developmental theory that incorporates components of mainstream psychological and sociological theories of crime.

LCT would suggest that employment can provide crime-prone individuals with an important opportunity to change their criminal trajectories into conventional ones (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Warr, 1998; Uggen, 2000). Indeed, unemployment and crime appear to be interrelated (Anderson, 1999; Przybylski, 2008). While employment – including prison employment – alone has not been shown to reduce criminal activity directly, previous research has found that returning individuals who are able to heal their personal relationships and find living-wage employment do tend to develop pro-social identities (Bachman et al., 2015; Richmond, 2014; Uggen & Kruttschnitt, 1998). In other words, reducing barriers (e.g., contextualizing a lack of employment history, finding secure and safe housing, improving success rates with belonging to pro-social support groups) to reentry must be accompanied with a desire to improve one's life.

However, considerable evaluation research has examined how employment reentry programming affects recidivism (Duwe, 2015; Visher, Winterfield, & Coggeshall, 2005). While Visher and colleagues (2005) found that employment programs did not affect recidivism, others found employment reentry program to be associated with lower recidivism and increased odds of post-release employment among formerly incarcerated participants (Berk, 2008; Duwe, 2015; Kansas Department of Corrections, 2009; Skardhamar & Telle, 2009). Fair criticism has pointed out that a focus only on simple cross-sectional employment and recidivism outcomes often fails to measure quality of life improvements (Kendall et al., 2018). Further, outcome evaluations in correctional programming often lack access to quality and intensity measures of performance in programming (Lindquist et al., 2018). Finally, research on reentry often omits a rigorous evaluation of program to determine the extent to which delivery of an intervention adheres to program design (Miller & Miller, 2016). Thus, evaluations ought to utilize qualitative data to contextualize statistical findings of outcome evaluation and identify the multitude of factors that contribute to community incarceration.

# THE PRESENT STUDY

The qualitative evaluation research presented in this report utilized 21 one-on-one interviews with participants who completed a program offering through the VLS program. Semi-structured life story interviews were conducted by the NCJR, housed at the University of Nebraska Omaha, to understand how participant backgrounds impacted current life situations and their decisions to improve their skills through VLS programming. Participants often took multiple program offerings across funded VLS programs in grant cycle three.[1] The NCJR evaluators asked program providers to identify up to four participants who excelled in their program, and four who struggled. Therefore, this strategic sample was used to identify what is working well with programs and for whom. The interview guide was tailored so the evaluation team could learn more about the lives of incarcerated people, their decisions to take VLS programming, how it helped them with reentry, and what else they thought could improve the process. The primary evaluation questions guiding the interviews were:

1. How does VLS programming assist people reintegrating back into society?
2. What else can be done by interested stakeholders to improve reentry across Nebraska?

Grantees first provided the evaluators with lists of possible participants who might be interested in participating. The evaluation team then contacted participants to schedule interviews. The interviews were conducted from May through August 2019 and were recorded for accuracy. Interviews were conducted in facilities, coffee shops, and casual restaurants. NCJR researchers began the interviews by explaining that they were leading a research project to learn from participants' reentry experiences to improve the reentry process in Nebraska, and informed participants that they were not affiliated with NDCS or the reentry programs. Participants were then asked to sign the consent form acknowledging their identifying information would be protected and that there were no known risks for participating in this study. The consent form is presented in Appendix A and the interview questions guiding the interview are presented in Appendix B at the end of this report.

Interviews were professionally transcribed by Rev.com. The coding and analysis of interviews were conducted using MaxQDA qualitative software. The thematic analysis alternated between both inductive (moving from specific observations to broad generalizations) and deductive (moving from broad theory to interpretation of specific observations) approaches with the data. The researchers instructed coders to pay special attention to codes and patterns in the interview transcripts consistent with the life course theoretical framework guiding research questions in a deductive approach. Simultaneously, the coders had been educated in

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[1] Given the project aims, participants from service providers that are new grant cycle three were excluded. We most wanted to talk with participants who had long completed programming and had reflected on how the program may have helped them in their current life circumstances. Programs included were: Associated Builders and Contractors, Western Alternative to Corrections (Bristol Station), Metropolitan Community College, Mental Health Association, ReConnect, and Center for People in Need (TRADE).

different disciplines, thus they were encouraged to look for additional patterns emerging from the data with an inductive approach. Coders completed the first two waves of analysis, and the coding was checked for accuracy in subsequent final waves by another researcher. The thematic analysis involved coding the most common patterns that appeared in at least half of the interviews. Subsequently, variation within the most common interview patterns were examined in more depth to understand potential sources of these differences. Finally, the identified relevant patterns were interpreted and contextualized into the final themes presented.[2]

Some information used to contextualize the participant data derives from the researchers' experiences evaluating the VLS program. This researcher-provided knowledge is mostly applied when describing how some of the themes are being or planned on being addressed by VLS.

The current report shares these findings with stakeholders, so they may consider the complex lives of Nebraskans who have been incarcerated and received VLS programming and use this knowledge to inform and improve reentry in Nebraska.

# KEY FINDINGS

Demographic characteristics of participants are presented in Table 1. The sample is representative of all VLS participants in terms of gender and race, however the average age of 43 is slightly higher than the VLS general population at 35 years old. Although younger participants were recommended by program providers, we found them difficult to get in touch with to schedule an interview. This could be because younger people with less professional experience may need work longer hours to make ends meet, or they could be struggling with criminogenic factors that they do not want to discuss post release. Most participants had a high school diploma or GED.

## TABLE 1. PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS (N=21)

| Pseudonym | Age | Gender | Race/Ethnicity |
|---|---|---|---|
| Adam | 45 | Male | White |
| Billy | 43 | Male | White/Other |
| Cain | 52 | Male | White |
| Derek | 40 | Male | Black/Middle Eastern |
| Ethan | 42 | Male | White |
| Ferris | 53 | Male | Black |
| George | 52 | Male | White/Hispanic |
| Hugo | 53 | Male | Black |
| Isaac | 43 | Male | African American |
| Jamie | 44 | Female | Black |
| Kayden | 29 | Male | African American |
| Luke | 39 | Male | White |
| Martin | 39 | Male | Black |
| Natalie | 34 | Female | White |
| Owen | 25 | Male | White |
| Paige | 42 | Female | White |
| Raymond | 54 | Male | Black |
| Sergio | 36 | Male | Other/Hispanic |
| Tony | 56 | Male | White |
| Wayne | 43 | Male | Korean-American |
| Zander | 32 | Male | White |

[2] Quotes presented were edited slightly to improve readability and to ensure anonymity of participants. This involved removing verbal ticks (um, like, etc.) and names of participant family members or program staff.

## Table 2. Themes Raised by Participants

| Main Categories | Themes | Frequency (n=21) |
|---|---|---|
| Background of incarcerated persons | Trauma or abuse | 12 |
| | Initiated young onset | 17 |
| | Struggled with substance use | 14 |
| | Navigating health issues/disability | 13 |
| Preparing for reentry | Ready for something better | 19 |
| | Personal development | 20 |
| Reintegration | Selective social networks | 12 |
| | Importance of social support | 20 |
| | Housing struggle & assistance | 17 |
| | Gaining employment | 17 |
| Future endeavors | Resiliency & optimism | 20 |
| | Improvement recommendations | 19 |

## Trauma or Abuse

Nearly half of the participants discussed psychological and physical trauma experienced during adolescence. Most of these participants were victims of abuse from their parents, extended family, or foster families. Participants reported that some caregivers repeatedly perpetrated neglect or abuse, many times under the influence of alcohol or narcotics. In addition to biological parents, extended family members were said to sexually abuse participants, while foster family members primarily engaged in emotional abuse. Due to neglect and abuse, participants generally suggested that these experiences made it difficult to manage emotions and/or trust others, and likely delayed their ability to manage emotions when moving into adulthood. Jamie described how one of the VLS program offerings helped her deal with her anger as she prepared for reentry:

> I started looking at trauma. Possibly being left by my dad. Just fighting drugs over me. Picking drugs over me. My mom getting beat all those years. My anger from that. My mom making me sleep on a mattress. Everybody else sleeping in beds. I'm just sleeping on a mattress on the floor. I was angry about that for a long time... Just working through all that. It just helped me. And that's what (program provider) did.

Issac was severely abused in his early childhood, first by his biological mother and subsequently by foster siblings and parents. He described his biological mother as "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" depending on if she was under the influence of drugs and alcohol or not. Issac and his siblings remember hiding from her as she despondently walked through the house. His mother reportedly choked him regularly, and some of the less violent physical abuse occurred in the presence of others. Issac described one incident from when he was young:

> She slapped me hard enough to where I spun around and hit the floor. I remember some man saying, "Sara, you can't hit your kids like that." I remember crying. I got up and she said, "Now go get the cigarettes." I went and got the cigarettes.

> " They'd say go to school. You know, and you just got done getting held hostage all night.
>
> Derek, 40 "

As young as 11, Issac wanted to be a member of one of the many local gangs that started popping up in his neighborhood. By age 13, one of the local gangs allowed him to participate in a few activities. Issac claimed the gangs were desirable because they provided a sense of camaraderie and safety. "When I was with them, I felt like nothing could touch me," he said. Given the extensive vulnerability he claims to have felt during childhood, gang membership was a logical solution (Anderson, 1999). However, the strain mentally and physically that gang membership places on the individual is considerable (Venkatesh, 2008). As he aged, he attempted to distance himself from the gangs, but his pledged loyalty to the gangs required his perpetual obedience and participation. This led to many incarceration cycles. After his most recent release, he felt that he needed help in dealing with the stress and uncertainty of navigating life in the community. He claims that VLS programming helped him develop coping skills to address past trauma and learn how to foster and engage in healthy supportive relationships.

The psychological tolls resulting from such an upbringing can be extensive. Trauma and neglect can lead to delayed development of cognitive, interpersonal, emotional, and moral psychological lines and even induce mental health disorders, making the transition to a conventional adulthood difficult (Laub & Sampson, 2001). Further, values and morals learned in childhood have been shown to affect adolescent and adult behavior (Mallett, 2013; Tyler, 1990). These values are learned and observed at home, and at particularly high rates in socially and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods (Anderson, 1999). If the authorities are alerted and the youth are removed from their biological family, evidence suggests that such individuals are more likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system (Mallett, 2013). Further, the psychological strain placed on traumatized and neglected youths can lead to individuals experiencing negative affective states, increasing the likelihood for anger, depression, and fear (Agnew, 1992; Spohn & Kurtz, 2011). Intense and prolonged strain experienced in childhood, absent external social support mechanisms, increases the likelihood that an individual will engage in delinquent and criminal behavior (Sampson & Laub, 1993).

## Young Onset

Over eighty percent of participants began committing minor criminal acts between the ages of 10 and 21. Participants reported that they started "running streets" and becoming involved with gangs, due to concerns about protection and ongoing parental neglect. These available peer networks gave them the opportunity to engage in illegal behavior including violence, property theft, and drug and alcohol abuse and sales (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960). The networks simultaneously gave individuals relief from their tumultuous home life and opened the door to non-conventional norms. Participants who reported being involved with drugs typically claimed they started using around 13 to 16 years old, while alcohol abuse typically began in late high school to early 20's. These are crucial times in one's transition to traditional adult lifestyles (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Most had help learning how to be a delinquent. Only one participant acted alone when first beginning to engage in illegal behavior. Jamie reported that it was simply easier to work a half-day and make fraudulent checks for the rest for quick money, suggesting that she was actively engaged in a cognizant calculation of risk/reward and consequentially placing her on the boundary of conventional and non-conventional norms and lifestyles (Matza, 1964).

Whereas just over half of the early onsetters appeared to start down criminal trajectories at young ages due to trauma at home, participants who lacked abused or neglected backgrounds appeared to lose their way and 'drift' into delinquency (Matza, 1964). George described how a sports injury set him on a different path:

> I think that's where my struggle started when I was a teenager, and I was Mr. Jock. I played high school football, and I was a varsity first baseman, and I blew my knee out. Once I blew my knee out, it was like everything started to go downhill. I started to hanging out with buddies, drinking and my sports career just went downhill. That's when my life really took a turn, and I had all that free time. I wasn't going to practice, I couldn't play.

George did not know an identity other than a 'jock', but struggled to belong to a conventional social group after his injury. Owen was another participant who struggled to find belonging in school. "School was never a good thing for me. I was always the one who got bullied and everything," he said. The only peers that seemed to accept him were older (approximately 16-17) and they introduced 11-year-old Owen to drugs. This placed his behavioral trajectory on an exponentially non-conventional pathway (Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Although these paths to criminality are not 'fixable' with a reentry or aftercare program such as VLS, primarily due to their being in the past, the context by which individuals created their criminal identity is usually important in creating a reentry plan designed to develop skillsets able to thwart-off future criminal behavior. Such skillsets can be considered part of a broader set of conditions termed 'protective factors' (Andrews et al., 2006; Serin, Chadwick, & Lloyd, 2016). For example, an indicator that Ethan has difficulty with interpersonal boundaries suggests he could benefit from classes that address etiquette in the workplace. However, and most importantly for VLS, while this example strategy would address Ethan's need or criminogenic risk amenable to change, Ethan's case management and instructor/class should be responsive to his level of motivation for change, strengths, and use cognitive-behavioral approaches (Andrews et al., 2006; Barnes-Lee, 2020; Crites & Taxman, 2013; Ward & Brown, 2004). These strategies have been shown to promote success in reentry. Further, a case management plan should also consider non-skillset protective factors such as attachment to employment and supportive pro-social relationships (Serin et al., 2016).

> "
> **I started stealing really young, probably in kindergarten or so, so we could eat. So, I would go to the store and steal.**
>
> **Issac, 43**
> "

## Struggled with Substance Abuse

Three quarters of the participants struggled with substance abuse at some point in their lives. These participants felt substance abuse played a role in their charges either directly by being caught with an illegal substance, or indirectly by being under the influence of drugs or alcohol at the time of the crime. Drugs and alcohol have been shown to cloud one's judgement and thus the individual underestimates risk or overestimates reward (tangible or intangible); the latter notion commonly referred to in rational choice literature as the 'gambler's fallacy' (Pogarsky & Piquero, 2003). Raymond admitted, "my alcoholism actually led to the incident I'm in here for". Driving under the influence charges were mentioned by numerous participants. Some also recognized that they may have used these substances or consumed alcohol in excess in order to cope with trauma or anxiety. Cain and Paige drank to mitigate anxiety. Paige described how drinking and getting high made her feel accepted:

> I drank more than I should have in junior high, high school. It was a way to quiet what's going on in my head. It was a way to function. I felt normal then. I didn't feel ... I always felt like I was in a glass box looking in. I was outside and everybody's inside. I just always felt out. I always felt odd, like I didn't fit in. And I'd fit in when I was drunk and high, you know, everybody laughed.



Drugs and alcohol were also used after experiencing a traumatic event. Billy claimed that methamphetamine helped him escape depression following his father's murder. "After my dad died, I just did drugs", he said. Trauma can be induced from many types of experiences, and in the case of our sample, being victims of crime was the most prevalent. Some evidence suggests that fear is a moderating factor in how someone responds to being victimized, with too little or too much being problematic (Spohn, Wright, & Peterson, 2017). To prevent debilitating effects of trauma (e.g., drug and alcohol abuse), VLS provides emotional support and other programming designed to increase one's emotional intelligence. How to measure one's emotional intelligence is still a pending question for this and many evaluations of reentry initiatives. However, case managers and staff should be aware that an under-reaction to trauma experienced in the past or near-past can be just as debilitating to future development and growth as an over-reaction.

Some explanations of drug and alcohol abuse cannot necessarily be addressed by VLS programming. Paige's alcohol abuse also points to an escape from an uncomfortable or undesirable situation — in her case, perceived marginalization. VLS has few tools to address this subjective issue, aside from referrals to clinical counselling services. Further, marginalization can be on the individual level such as Paige's, but it can also be at the societal level (i.e., disadvantaged neighborhoods or systemic racism). While VLS can and should address one's ability to improve self-image and confidence through careful case planning, matching of needs to treatment, and referrals to counselling services, it is beyond VLS's capacity to address societal-level marginalization – a task that could potentially be addressed by community and government entities.

> "
> **Yep, after I had my daughter, I had like postpartum depression and stuff and I was prescribed Xanax... and then after I had each one of my sons, same thing. Then I got addicted to that.**
>
> **Natalie, 34**
> "

While not a main theme for this sample, a few participants commented on selling drugs. Under-the-table work such as drug dealing has been studied extensively for its connection to marginalization in the work force and being 'easy money'. It is theorized that, at the street-level, the strain experienced upon realizing that one would not be able to lawfully achieve the American dream of wealth and power leads someone to multiple forms of criminality, and primarily towards drug sales if the drugs and peer networks that sell them are available (Anderson, 1999; Cohen & Short, 1958). However, we found little evidence of this in our interactions with participants. Instead, we found that some of the power and wealth gained while selling drugs was used for altruistic purposes. Billy claimed that "when I used to sell drugs, I used to know a lot of people that didn't have money. I helped a lot of people out." Perhaps our sample was bias in that most individuals refrained from speaking on their more egotistical endeavors of the past due to current development, fear of rehashing trauma, or legal or loyalty purposes. Regardless, the dealing was acknowledged by multiple individuals and it appeared to be from those with more structural disadvantage (e.g., living in extremely marginalized neighborhoods).

After participants realized and accepted the implications of addiction regarding their ability to successfully reenter the community, VLS programs were generally able to help them identify and control triggers to substance abuse. However, a few participants noted that the proximity to others struggling with addiction increased their desire to continue abusing drugs and alcohol. Others noted that their reentry failure was not due to a VLS shortcoming, but rather a function of poor choices and/or continued supervision from "vindictive" officers, as one participant noted. Furthermore, while discipline and self-accountability are important in controlling one's addiction, participants found it helpful to not allow this notion to dominate thinking patterns. Jamie reflected on how the program shed light on addiction in our society:

> What can I do to keep myself well? During the week, during the day. Minutes, hours. I just learned that everybody doesn't have an addiction that is so, visible to everybody. It's not drugs, it's not alcohol. People have addiction to other things, but it stems from trauma or from the lack thereof, deep down inside.

## Navigating Health Issues or Disabilities

More than half of participants shared their struggles navigating health issues or disabilities throughout their lives. Most acknowledged some type of mental health need during incarceration. Some participants were able to get the assistance they thought they needed during incarceration, while others believed the lack of mental health care available caused more problems for themselves and others during incarceration. Owen claimed that the program during incarceration and release helped him realize he was a good person deep down, which was helpful considering how hard he was on himself. Paige on the other hand was diagnosed as bipolar, but said she was not given proper medication or the proper dosage of counseling. She subsequently spent seven years in segregation because her violent behavior was self-admittedly a threat to others and herself. She further admitted counseling in the community was impossible to afford.

> "
> I've always had a little bit of a social anxiety issue.
>
> **Adam, 45**
> "

The most common mental health issue experienced by our participants was anxiety, but participants also struggled with depression and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Most of these participants talked about how NDCS and VLS-provided counseling and group therapy contributed to improving their mental health, but also leaned heavily on a notion of self-improvement. A few of these participants also discussed how it was challenging to afford these services upon release. Natalie was the only released participant still receiving counseling, however she needed to self-pay, costing her a little over $100 per session. Supplementing this information with data collected from VLS staff, there appears to be considerable gap in services based in the community that can address mental health at a price participants can afford.

The lack of affordable counseling and assistance in the community was of considerable concern to many participants. Research has shown that communities that lack mental health services are associated with higher crime rates (Monahan & Steadman, 1983). This case presumably extends to communities where such services are out-of-reach financially for many in the community. Further, deteriorated mental health has been connected to criminality on the community level (Dustmann & Fasani, 2016) and individual level (Agnew, 1992). Considering mental health treatment has been demonstrated to reduce or delay recidivism (Cosden et al., 2003; Cuellar, McReynolds, & Wasserman, 2016; Hamilton, Hsieh, Campagna, Abboud, & Koslicki, 2016; McNiel & Binder, 2007; Yuan & Capriotti, 2018), Nebraska would likely benefit from prioritizing the improvement and increased use of mental health services for those who demonstrate a mental health need (Skeem, Manchak, & Peterson, 2011). However, VLS may not be equipped to deliver increased mental health services, as many others have been delivered by the courts (e.g., Sacramento, Spokane). Nonetheless, VLS has increasingly focused on addressing mental health by either directly treating participants with cognitive-behavioral interventions and informal counseling, or indirectly by guiding participants to providers. Unfortunately, the number of courses available that directly address mental health is small, and the few providers in many communities served by VLS often charge more than participants can afford (and more than VLS can compensate).

A potential possible multi-pronged solution to these apparent service gaps includes the following:

1. provide better training for VLS non-clinical mental health service providers;
2. develop a more comprehensive and detailed list of clinical providers in the community for NDCS reentry and VLS providers to utilize when developing reentry and case plans and making referrals;
3. advocate for the state of Nebraska and/or philanthropic organizations to supplement clinical mental health counseling for those reentering Nebraskan communities; and
4. encourage the state Legislature to direct funds to comprehensively evaluate this potential service gap.

While this apparent service gap was not the impetus for the current study, the data collected here and in other parts of the evaluation point to a potential for considerable improvement to reentry efforts in Nebraska. The potential benefits of the example multi-pronged approach to address program service gaps that span NDCS facilities and the community described above might include lowered strain on individuals and other community resources, leading to less social disorganization and criminal activity.

## Ready for Something Better

Although reentry staff and case workers may recommend programming based on participant needs, the participants ultimately must volunteer to take a VLS program offering. As Sergio put it, "You have to want that for yourself. Because if you don't, then you're going to keep doing whatever you're doing". Over ninety percent of participants made concerted efforts to gain new skills and reported commitment to improving their lives for the better. Some participants admitted they enrolled in VLS programming due to boredom, 'pizza parties', and the opportunity to meet others. Ultimately, there is little evidence to suggest that the reason one begins to participate in programming affects the eventual results of programming (e.g., the reduction of criminogenic risk/needs factors).

Moving away from a criminal lifestyle was gradual for some participants, but immediate for others. Many claimed to have experienced a 'get it' moment one or more times during VLS programming. Others reported to have slowly refrained from hanging out with anti-social peers either during incarceration or after release. This situation is supported by the literature, where behavioral and attitudinal trajectories change slowly, but there is sometimes an abrupt change due to a traumatic event or tipping point of smaller events (Sampson &

Laub, 1993). Indeed, the process by which one desists from criminal behavior and anti-social attitudes is very similar to the process of criminogenic onset. Sometimes change requires a specific or general event, and other times inspiration from a revered individual or even a stranger can push someone over the proverbial cliff (to change their behavior/attitudes).

In response to being asked if anyone motivated or inspired them to be successful in their reentry journey, Billy said, "Myself and the things that I could have. That's basically all… This ain't for me". Jamie was also motivated to try something different after recidivating multiple times:

> I know I got a problem. There's no sane person goes back and forth to prison, five, six times and don't have a problem. So, I started researching things and somebody else had done WRAP and they gave me their book. So, I was reading it. I was like, I think I need to do this. They were like, go, they got donuts! I was like, okay. Donuts. Don't get donuts in prison. I was like, yeah. So, I went. I learned a lot about myself. I learned what it looks like when I'm not well. What it looks like when I'm healthy. What are my signs that say, okay, I'm getting unhealthy right now.

"
> Start building your life that you're afraid to lose. Get nice things. Get a nice apartment. Soon, I'll find that nice relationship, something I'll be afraid to lose.
>
> GEORGE, 52
"

It appears Jamie realized her recidivism cycle was unproductive and unhealthy before learning of a relevant VLS program offering, but she when she was able to read over another participant's individual workbook, she signed up immediately. She reported wanting to be a better grandmother and mother, which she claimed was able to be addressed through multiple sources of support provided by VLS.

George had a similar experience saying, "I started looking at the fact of, where am I getting in this life? My daughter made it clear. If you continue to live the lifestyle you used to live, you will not be a part of your granddaughter's life." Billy, Jamie, and George made decisions to change for themselves, because they realized there was more to enjoy out of life by avoiding criminal behavior – and an avenue to avoid criminal behavior was to engage in VLS programs. This is consistent with previous research that has found people on criminal trajectories must first make connections between the hardships and harms experienced with how they view themselves in the present, and envision the type of person they want to become before behavior shifts (Bachman et al., 2016; Maruna, 2001). Although improving their skillsets was something participants had to decide for themselves, other family and staff were sometimes mentioned in this process. Individual family members, friends, NDCS or reentry program staff were mentioned as influential amongst different participants.

Derek also shared a lesson about love and compassion for others he learned when saying goodbye to his passing grandmother:

> I went to the hospital, she was on her death bed and she wasn't even worried about passing. She was more worried about me, and it just really touched me…Like, I'm about to pass away, don't worry. I'm at peace. She was more worried about me, so it just touched me. It really like, just changed me.

The kindness and support of these individuals humbled and motivated many participants to be better in their role within their relationships. Many described how their siblings and parents who assisted them in reentry went on to want to become improved versions of themselves. This notion is evident in VLS mentors alike. Overall, the imagination of a better self was certainly a goal for participants who succeeded, and VLS, the incarceration process, and family and friends provided the ability for individuals to explore those possible selves for the future (Bachman et al., 2016; Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Soyer, 2014). VLS programs and NDCS staff were reported to have helped participants examine past criminal experiences and decisions so they may promote cognitive transformations necessary to achieve a better future self.

## PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

About 95% of individuals interviewed reported some type of personal development through various correctional and community reentry programs. Correctional programming tended to be assigned based on correctional assessment results (i.e., the STRONG-R), and the feedback from assigned programming was mixed. Some participants were extremely grateful towards NDCS and/or VLS staff for assisting them in developing a case or reentry plan that worked. Negative feedback from other participants on this process does not necessarily indicate faulty case management or instruments. Indeed, instruments that predict need (i.e., a dynamic risk factor for criminal reconviction/reincarceration) have been shown for decades to be more accurate than a case manager's 'gut instinct' (Ægisdóttir et al., 2006; Gendreau, Goggin, & Little, 1996; Lin, Jung, Goel, & Skeem, 2020) and certainly more accurate than self-assessment. Rather, it is more likely the dislike of the assessment and assignment process was due to a combination of 1) a denial that a criminogenic need was present and 2) negative attitudes toward authority figures.

VLS programming, on the other hand, was something for which participants volunteered for or were strongly encouraged to participate in to become eligible for parole. Thus, participants might enjoy programs they choose simply because they had a choice. It seemed participants volunteered to learn as much as they could to improve their chances of finding employment. Jamie reflected on her program participation strategy saying, "Just go learn it. Put it in your toolbox. If you can't use it, then just save it for later." This notion of self-selection based on programming preferences, while likely leading to increased satisfaction of programming, is not in line with best practices and is unlikely to reduce recidivism (Andrews et al., 2006; Latessa, Johnson, & Koetzie, 2020; Taxman & Belenko, 2011).

Participants wanted a variety of vocational trainings, and took advantage of those offered like OSHA, construction, and welding. They claimed the courses were or could have been helpful in assisting them to develop personally and financially. However, a few participants expressed their frustration with waiting lists. Not all participants were able to take all programming available, due to limited seats available in classes, limited amount of time before release, and a program not being available in their facility or community. Most of the participants who were released built upon their training by continuing classes at the local community colleges, provided the courses were cost-free. At the time of our interviews, Ferris was taking construction management classes while Martin was working on a culinary arts degree, both funded by VLS. While all participants interviewed in the community were living in urban areas at the time of interviews, these types of courses are assumedly much less available in the more rural areas of the state. VLS also provided participants with tools, clothing, and other materials necessary to participate in programming or the workforce (e.g., steel-toe boots).

Another major skill that participants reported to have gained was computer/technology proficiency. Zander, Jamie, and Paige all benefited from access to computers to build up their experience. "I didn't even know how to turn a computer on, so they taught us all that stuff" said Paige. In addition to the vocational trainings available, participants also need a variety of basic life skills to function in a society that "changes daily". Skills needed among those interviewed included managing a bank account, digital or in-person communication skills, or dealing with complex emotions. Ultimately each participant is different and those who succeeded were able to utilize different combinations of programming to develop into the individual they envisioned.

> " I learned several life skills and boundaries and what are acquaintances, and what an actual friend. "
>
> **ZANDER, 32**

VLS focuses on reducing barriers to employment, with many program offerings building towards training for stable income. Research has shown that vocational trainings moderately increase employment opportunities, but rarely decrease recidivism (Lindquist et al., 2018; MacKenzie, 2012; Visher, Lattimore, Barrick, & Tueller, 2017). However, quantitative analysts consider vocational training completion as a 'desistance signal' that can lead to other individual changes that decrease the likelihood of recidivism, such as increasing rational thinking patterns and interpersonal skills (Bushway & Apel, 2012). Thus, while the direct impact of VLS's employment focus only be increased employment, it might also lead individuals to fulfil a major developmental achievement in adulthood: stable income. This allows others to view the participant as successful – even considering past criminal activity – and therefore opening the potential to acceptance into a conventional lifestyle.

## SOCIAL RESISTANCE



Just over half of participants discussed how they were resistant to socializing with others. Groups and individuals that participants chose to avoid include female partners, certain friends, people with differing life goals, "people like that", friends abuse alcohol or drugs, "negative people", gang members, or "fake people". Tony reported that the individuals he surrounds himself with keep him motivated. He said, "if you're around negative people, you're going to have that negative attitude …. I always try hanging out with the people that are trying to improve themselves". Martin said, "I don't even wanna be around nobody if they're not doing what I'm doing." In this selective socializing, participants also reported avoiding social gatherings such as clubs and situations where confrontations might arise such as "certain neighborhoods". Others said they prefer to stay home to avoid nearly "everybody". Given the evidence to suggest that conventional norms reinforced by supportive peer groups, this might not be the best strategy for participants (Akers, 1998). VLS and NDCS should strive to steer individuals who refuse to engage with any individual towards pro-social groups. However, this finding might be a result of institutionalization – one where the 'correct' answer to whether one engages with others is typically along the lines of 'no, I keep to myself and don't bother anyone'. Differentiating between institutional-speak and true intentions to refrain from any social contact presents a challenge to NDCS and VLS (and the current evaluators), but is certainly one that is worth pursuing to improve rates of successful reentry.

Moreover, previous research on VLS participants indicates that socialization with conventional others can be tremendously challenging, due to the stigma that many individuals and communities place on persons who have been incarcerated (Kurtz, Spohn, & Peterson, 2018).

Although there were only three females participants in the study, all participants who were engaging in social resistance were men. These men also mentioned they were hesitant to enter romantic relationships because they reported needing personal growth first with their own emotions and finances before feeling responsible for someone else. Hugo described his resistance:

> Even before I bring a female into my life, I think I need to get myself together. Let me get an apartment. Let me get a vehicle. Let me see where Hugo going first.

This is not a strategy that is uncommon or undesirable, because Hugo recognizes that there is work to be done on himself before he can risk others contaminating his social norms. Like Hugo, Issac also wanted to focus on himself and ended a committed relationship to focus on his growth at a residential VLS program. He was particularly concerned with his ability to establish and maintain boundaries with women. This behavior is likely influenced by certain gender norms that suggest men should be providers, whereas the participants did not feel they were yet in a place that they could provide for themselves or others. A similar qualitative study found that men reported being intentionally emotionally-distant to maintain safety, while women reported feeling isolated and lonely (Harding et al. 2019).

> " Yeah, no, I don't have no problem with women. I just stay away from everybody. "
>
> **KAYDEN, 29**

LCT would contextualize the pushing away of individuals and groups to change one's identity and life path as a phenomenon that serves as a turning point in a life trajectory (Sampson & Laub, 1993). While the topic of pushing away anti-social peers deserves more attention, it is relatively well-studied (Maruna & Roy, 2007). Sometimes referred to as 'knifing off' one's past bonds, social environments, and daily routines, this phenomenon is a natural part of desistance and one that can be facilitated with reentry programming and prison work programs (Williams & Schaefer, 2021).

## SOCIAL SUPPORT



Ninety five percent of participants reported gratitude for the people in their lives that provided much-needed social support throughout incarceration and reentry, or strategies to secure support if needed in the future. Sources of support included professional staff such as counselors or reentry staff, peer support, and family or friends in their personal networks. A majority of participants had some form of social support to rely on, but the most common source of social support in preparation and during the reentry journey was professional VLS or NDCS staff.

Natalie said the most valuable thing she gained from one of the program offerings was the peer support. She said that when you are home alone you can feel past traumas, so being able to reach out to peer support after completing the program is incredibly valuable with the ups and

downs of life. Social support was considered so valuable that Paige credited her reentry success to the people who have believed in her. Cain felt similarly to Paige saying, "I wasn't believing in myself. There wasn't too many people around that were believing in me, but these folks, they did, so they helped by believing in me. They lent me support." The support and belief that they could succeed from the program helped them believe in themselves.

> ## "
> I really liked that about the program, more than anything. They didn't just abandon you.
>
> **Derek, 40**
> "

Some VLS program offerings, but particularly "all-star (VLS or NDCS) staff", helped participants restore relationships that were challenged through incarceration. About three quarters reported additional support from family or friends, but only a few participants reported having an intimate relationship as a source of support. This is at least partially supported by one study of prison visitations that found ex-spouses were the only type of visitor that increased one's recidivism level (Duwe & Clark, 2013). Other VLS program offerings provided networking opportunities and peer support programs so that participants could build new supportive relationships with "people like themselves" who can best empathize with their situation.

Navigating the stigma of a criminal background during reentry may have been a very lonely and isolating experience for returning individuals cutting off 'negative' influences had it not been for the social support they received from VLS reentry programs. This is important to point out considering previous research has found social support can reduce criminogenic factors (Pratt & Godsey, 2003; Wright & Cullen, 2001). Theory suggests social support will reduce future criminal involvement by promoting cognitive desistance transformation, foster supportive interventions rather than punishment interventions, and help formerly incarcerated people navigate reentry stressors (Chouhy, Cullen, & Lee 2020; Cullen 1994). VLS stakeholders recognize the key role programs that overtly provide social support play in participant reentry success, and the expansion of peer mentorship programs should be considered.

## Establishing Employment

Obtaining meaningful employment is a primary goal of LB907. About 81% of participants expressed numerous ways that VLS programs were able to help them gain and keep meaningful employment. These services include helping participants build a resume, provide a credible reference, strive for careers with benefits (versus temporary employment), and obtain identification documents or required equipment for employment.
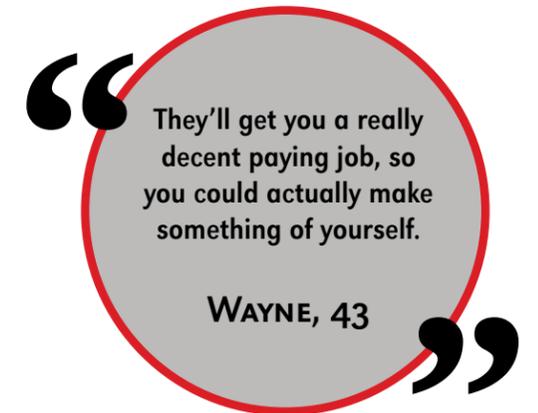


George expressed how frustrated he was after being told he could not be hired by a well-known manufacturing company after multiple interviews because of his criminal record. It was a major disappointment because George took advantage of multiple program offerings, but knew his past was the one thing he could not change. He said, "I did all this stuff in prison to change my life, but no one would give me a second chance." Distraught one day, he returned to the program office visibly upset. Staff de-escalated George's crisis and provided additional resources to assist him in obtaining meaningful employment. The VLS staff member assigned to George reportedly told a potential employer that he would stake his own career on George. Now employed by that employer, George says, "My boss said that as soon as he heard that recommendation, he knew he could hire me. He came up and talked to me and now that company's grown just off of me and my best friend starting there."
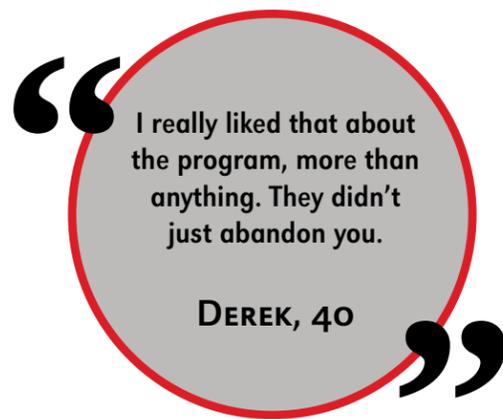
In Tony's first VLS program, he learned to differentiate between a 'career' and a 'job' – primarily that careers offer benefits, year-round employment, and can provide a more meaningful contribution to one's quality of life. Learning this distinction motivated him to obtain training and education in construction management, and he now has life, health, medical, dental, and vision insurance, and a retirement fund. Equally important he says, "I still have a current job now that I love" and plans on retiring with the company.

Although George and Tony among others could point to specific program services that were instrumental in securing employment, some participants reported no struggles in finding employment post-release. Derek, Ethan, and Kayden believed obtaining a job was a given, and job training provided by VLS was unnecessary. Derek said, "But job wise…I got every job I ever applied for. God is good. I'll tell you all the time." Kayden believed the judge that handled his case just decided to make an example out of him with a DUI sentence but had all the education and training necessary to obtain and keep meaningful employment. However, both Ethan and Kayden found the VLS programs helpful for the housing and peer support during the process.

> ## "
> They'll get you a really decent paying job, so you could actually make something of yourself.
>
> **Wayne, 43**
> "

Self-sufficiency allows one to develop a pro-social perception of self-worth and pro-social identity, and can direct behavioral trajectories (Latessa, 2011, 2012; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). It also allows one to support one's family and life a conventional lifestyle. Measured here as employment, the acknowledgement by an institution to a potential employer that an individual is ready to be employed can be an effective strategy to reduce employment barriers (Bushway & Apel, 2012; Bloom, 2012). Programs that overtly address this acknowledgement have shown promise. For example, the Certificate of Qualification for Employment (CQE) program in Ohio "was designed to demonstrate rehabilitation to employers, remove automatic licensing bars, and protect employers from negligent hiring claims" (Leasure & Martin, 2017, p. 528), and indeed did increase one's employment outcomes. We recommend this type of certificate be considered for programs such as VLS (Latessa, 2012).

While there are conflicting research reports on the effectiveness of employment programming on reducing recidivism (e.g., Duwe, 2015; Visher et al., 2017), the lack of high quality data on service duration, intensity, and quality, combined with the dearth of randomized controlled trials could be prohibiting rigorous and replicable studies from finding an answer (Lindquist et al., 2018; Muhlhausen, 2015). With this in mind, we as evaluators plan to make a concerted effort to collect better intensity and quality metrics to better assess the VLS employment-related program effects.

## Housing Assistance



Housing is a major challenge for individuals leaving the Nebraska correctional system. Over 80% of participants interviewed mentioned their appreciation for the housing assistance they received from VLS programs and the gradual release process provided by the NDCS work release center. Participants were grateful for the transitional housing some programs provide while also assisting these individuals with applications and housing opportunities. Adam lived at one of the VLS housing units while receiving programming and said, "I honestly really didn't have anywhere to go. It was the

only place that provided free housing, free food". Some VLS programs helped participants like Jamie apply for apartment leases while still inside the facility, and VSL facilitated negotiations between participants like George and his pro-social acquaintances to cosign leases and vouch for their character and finances.

Although some participants can save hundreds of dollars while residing at work release facilities and working in the community, these funds decrease with each rental application that is denied. Many participants claimed that finding safe housing was their biggest challenge in reentry. Participants suggested that 'safe' apartment homes would tell participants to apply but then often denied a lease. Rental applications appeared to average around $35, which is considerable given the employment wage within the facilities is often far below Nebraska's minimum wage. Martin continued to struggle with housing saying, "I tried. I mean, like I said, I got out and moved with somebody but, I wanted my own. I tried to sign up but, my background, I got denied." All participants who found housing pointed to a specific person or program opportunity that was instrumental in them attaining housing.

> " **Oh, my God. That was the hardest thing to do from the inside.**
>
> **Jamie, 44** "

While VLS and NDCS reentry appear mostly successful in obtaining safe and stable housing for those reentering Nebraska communities, VLS staff continue to report the strain these efforts put on their resources. Safe and secure housing has been considered an extremely important factor in keeping reentering individuals from recidivating (Garland, Wodahl, & Mayfield, 2010; Leasure & Martin, 2017; O'Brien, 2001). Evans and Porter (2015) found that gender, criminal conviction, and type of criminal conviction predicted whether landlords were willing to offer housing to anyone applying for a lease. As mentioned earlier, a Certificate of Qualification for Employment (CQE) was found by Leasure and Martin (2017) to significantly increase one's ability to obtain fairly-priced housing despite different types of felony records or demographics. This finding, combined with our qualitative findings describing the difficulty (yet relatively successful) process for VLS securing housing for reentering individuals, leads us to recommend VLS and/or NDCS test individuals for employment qualifications (e.g., administer a work-readiness tool), award eligible individuals CQE's, and encourage individuals and programs to use the CQE's when applying for leases. This procedure has a strong ability to be evaluated for effectiveness in Nebraska. It could utilize a quasi-experimental design, matching those who used their CQE with those who did not and/or with those who did not obtain or earn an CQE.

## Resiliency & Optimism

Despite past traumas and social stigma surrounding their criminal history, nearly all participants were optimistic about their future (95%). Participants believed these past and future challenges led to them being more capable. As Derek put it, "You know, what don't break you will make you stronger." Cain believed he was a good and hard-working person. He reflected further on his resiliency and future possibilities by saying, "I've made the most of a bad situation. I've tried to do everything the best that I could, to learn the most that I can, so that I can be happy". It was common for individuals demonstrating resiliency to also reference the role of spirituality in positive perspective shifts. Beliefs in Christianity were mentioned most often but putting 'positive energy into the universe' and 'Karma' were also discussed. Jamie articulated how her religious ideology guides her future endeavors:

> *I don't want to say I've grown up, but I've grown into the woman that I want to be. Not there yet because I always say, 'God, He's not done with me yet. I'm still a work in progress.'*

Since optimism was the most common theme, it seems that programs have likely provided hope for participants in different ways. While incarcerated, participants learned of programs through referrals or volunteers pitching the programs at reentry fairs. They also observed self-compassion through mentors, peer support, and program facilitators, portraying that they are not defined by their worst mistakes. After realizing what is possible for people like themselves, some participants started recognizing their own areas of growth and opportunity and began working with the programs to cultivate their strengths while finding ways to manage personal challenges.

The participants interviewed were optimistic about many aspects of their lives and what was possible for their future. Participant goals first and foremost centered on staying sober or clean or never returning to prison. Participants hoped to restore relationships with family members and intimate partners, achieve educational degree or career goals – particularly 'being their own boss'. Some wanted to travel and enjoy their freedom. Ethan longed to see Hawaii. Future goals reported were generally ambitious, but participants believed they were within reach.

The pinnacle of resiliency and optimism in future goals was demonstrated by participants who because of their experience believed they could and should help others in need, more specifically individuals in need on similar life trajectories. This was reported among participants who were at least 40 years of age. Isaac explains:

> *I really believe that we go through things in our life in order to help other people. So, the things that I've been through in my life, I believe I was intended to go through those things, because at some point in my life somebody's going to need help or a word of encouragement or something.*

> " **Stronger. Wiser. Focused.**
>
> **Jamie, 44** "

Other ways participants thought they could give back included mentoring currently-incarcerated individuals, becoming a drug and alcohol counselor, and starting programs for at-risk youth. About half of the participants who participated in the interview expressed explicit pro-social goals. However, participants were told that the interviews were being conducted so that VLS evaluators could learn how to improve the reentry process from former participants, and therefore the decision to participate in an interview without compensation could be considered evidence of pro-social behavior. Further, many of the participants stated that they hoped sharing their journey and lessons learned was helpful to us and future participants.

## Improvement Recommendations

Near the conclusion of the interview, participants were asked directly how VLS and NDCS could improve the reentry process for future participants. Over ninety percent of participants offered at least one suggestion. Participants suggested more of the following would be an improvement: housing programs, reentry staff, case manager staff, classes that teach them about computers or coding, counseling services, and vocational and educational classes earlier the incarceration sentence. Paige said, "Don't have them in the dark about computers and stuff like that. Teach them stuff, prepare them." Others problematized the high quantity of people incarcerated in the state. "Stop incarcerating everybody, that would probably be the first thing", said Derek.

States like California have put Derek's suggestion into practice by moving away from incarceration practices and towards the increased use of jail and probation. During this change, California observed only slight increases in property crime and major decreases in incarcerated populations (Lofstrom & Raphael, 2015). Although most spoke of correctional and reentry staff who helped them stay positive and suggested helpful programming, about a quarter of participants indicated that correctional staff might benefit from classes that helped them understand the backgrounds of inmates. They said some staff did not listen or treat the persons incarcerated respectfully, which can make it challenging as people reflect on themselves and try to improve.

Timing was another issue discussed by some participants. Tony was one of the participants who suggested programming be offered earlier in the incarceration process, claiming that programming prior to work release would be most ideal. He said that after he found employment, he was told he also needed to take three classes offered by the facility or he would need to return to work detail. He said, "So, I was having to miss work constantly to do these classes." He was stressed about the time he was required to take off to complete the classes, and that his case manager frequently contacted his employer to confirm his location. Regardless, it appears an assessment examining which programming ought to benefit individuals earlier, rather than later in the reentry process, could help address the question of timing.



Although participants were generally positive regarding their decision to utilize available programming, it appears that participants like Jamie may not have utilized such programming had a friend not told her the program offered donuts. Jamie now works for a reentry program helping hundreds of people make the same journey, but many could still be missing the opportunity to participate. The degree to which this is a problem is unknown, given this small sample size and reliance on anecdotal evidence. This potential problem may be further complicated for men who may feel that asking for help is 'feminine' (an undesirable characteristic). As Derek put it, "you got to be vulnerable enough to ask for help and let somebody help you."

We recommend that the matching of participants needs to VLS service providers should be more systematic. NDCS is progressing in this area by currently working with the evaluation team to develop a program catalog that matches needs to programs. This catalog is intended to be used by NDCS and VLS staff as a 'menu' of available programs, grouped into categories focused on 'need addressed'. This would allow VLS to refer individuals to types of programs that can maximize the effectiveness of programming. Further, while some programs address general needs and/or should be considered 'preferential', others are much more specific and should be considered 'highly recommended'. This matching strategy allows individuals to enjoy freedom of choice, while directing them to the services that will maximize their success. In practice, an example (but not the only example available) would be prioritizing those having a high need in interpersonal skills for job-related soft-skills programming prior to hard-skills training such as warehouse or construction. A slightly different example would be that individuals demonstrating underdeveloped cognitive thinking skills be subject to a prerequisite requirement of completing cognitive behavioral-based programming beyond standard institutional programs prior to being assigned to group-living settings (due to the potential for 'contamination' of a pro-social living environment hosting an individual not yet ready to take on the responsibilities of making good choices in close-proximity to others). In this example, individuals with developed cognitive thinking skills would not be subject to this prerequisite.

> "I know it's hard when you have so many people and so little help, but just to try to listen to people and not treat everybody like everybody's the same.
>
> **Cain, 52**

# DISCUSSION

The evaluation team initiated this project to closely examine the role VLS programming has had in the lives of participants, and determine what remains to be improved for reentry in Nebraska. These detailed interviews revealed that VLS and NCDS's reentry division delivers crucial services to individuals reentering the community. These services seek to provide opportunities to overcome barriers commonly experienced in the reentry process. The opportunities can allow individuals to pursue conventional behavioral trajectories (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Interviewed participants worked closely with staff at key points in their reentry to imagine different possibilities for themselves (i.e., a future-self), and identified opportunities for growth they could work on – following a cognitive-behavioral approach that addresses individual needs (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009).

Successful participants appeared to develop new ways of thinking and remained resilient on their pro-social course. They earned the rewards and benefits of conventional behavior – also referred to as 'stakes in conformity' by criminologists (Toby, 1957; Hirschi, 1969) – which included happiness, stability, and self-fulfillment. They rekindled family relationships and developed new pro-social support systems.

Those who struggled with reentry during and after participating in VLS programming demonstrated a consistent denial that they had criminogenic needs or a dearth of skills to help them gain employment and stable housing. These participants generally had a long history of fraud or violent behavior and used multiple 'techniques of neutralization' to minimize their criminal behavior during the interviews (Sykes & Matza, 1957). While some readers may consider these participants' reincarcerations unavoidable, it is important to note that VLS is voluntary, can do a better in matching needs to programming, and the choice to change one's behavioral trajectory is just that – a choice. This is not to suggest these individuals are simply 'bad apples' or their actions represent 'evil in society'. We suggest these individuals be contextualized with the following two considerations: 1) that there is always room to improve services (and oneself), and 2) successes represent a very concerted effort on the part of participants and staff to improve the quality of life for the individual, the individual's family and friends, and the community. Simply put, reentry is hard and requires continuous efforts by individuals and staff to improve.

The overall take-away when analyzing participants' life histories and contextualizing with criminological theory and other evaluation observations is that the mere participation in and completion of tasks previously unimaginable can provide participants with the motivation to improve themselves. Further, seeing others accomplish milestones inspired many participants to push that much harder to become crime-free. This may lend merit to the completion of vocational programming, in that it may not be the learned skill that reduces recidivism or improves one's chances for employment, but rather the sense of agency that leads to further cognitive, interpersonal, and moral development.

Research has shown employment vocational reentry programs in Minnesota resulted in reduced recidivism and increased employment (Duwe, 2015); however, one program or policy solution alone will not likely meet the considerable challenges of successful integration post incarceration (Western, 2018). Based on challenges noted from the interviews, additional policy implementations could aid in improving reentry outcomes in Nebraska. Our primary recommendations are as follows:

1. **Advocate for increased, affordable mental health services** to be available in the community and in facilities.
2. **Initiate a CQE program**. These certificates can be provided to potential employers and landlords to demonstrate the dedication the applicant has to stable employment. CQE's are supported by prior research, would not be outside the purview or capacity of NDCS reentry services and VLS programming, and could be easily evaluated for effectiveness.
3. **Incentivize participants with five- or ten-year expungement** to reward law abiding behavior or voluntary participation in peer mentorship programs. Criminal records were seen as detrimental to success by most participants.
4. **Improve evaluation metrics**. The intensity and individual program offering performance measures can be measured to help the evaluation team better measure the program dosage.
5. **Ensure individuals are engaging in pro-social peer groups**. While not essential at the beginning of programming, a pro-social peer group can provide much needed social support in times of need and maintain pro-social behaviors and attitudes by reinforcing pro-social norms and 'punishing' or ostracizing anti-social norms.
6. **Increase the availability of computer training courses**. Many claimed they felt behind in technology and needed to be caught-up to be successful in reentry.
7. **Examine the timing or sequencing of programming**. Some programming may be more beneficial earlier and some later.
8. **Develop and implement a more systematic way to match needs to services**. This goal is in the works and is anticipated to be realized in the current grant cycle.

A limitation to this work, but not necessarily the data, is that it lacks an analysis of differences in processes and outcomes based on gender and race. These analyses are planned to be conducted with the current data in the future.

An incredible amount of work goes into VLS programming among NDCS and program providers. The qualitative results presented in this report show promising indicators of desired long-term outcomes of increased employment and decreased recidivism. The majority of participants reported feeling the program helped them be more successful in reentry. These results are encouraging, and should guide VLS to potential gaps in service. For example, some participants felt vulnerable asking for assistance while others only heard about the program through referrals. With this information, evaluators can continue to work with NDCS reentry specialists to ensure all participants with specific needs are being encouraged to utilize specific programming that would address those needs that they may not have sought out on their own.

The evaluation team would like to conclude by thanking service providers who work directly with this population, and who gave participant referrals to the interviewers. When people make a decision to change their life trajectory, they understandably do not want to look back. Therefore, we realize that without you informing former participants about our research objectives using client trust, it would have been very difficult to get in touch with these individuals. Some of these individuals were still serving additional time incarcerated in NDCS facilities. Therefore, we would also like to thank the wardens, unit managers, and NDCS staff who arranged the interviews and provided us with quiet spaces to discuss sensitive life events. Without the combined efforts of NDCS staff and program provider staff, this hard-to-reach population would have been very difficult to interview (Western, 2018). Lastly, we would like to thank the participants who entrusted us with their stories. We hope your words and lessons are shared widely, and that our state can learn from you how to overcome reentry challenges.

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# Appendix A: Consent Form

**Vocational and Life Skills Evaluation**
**Consent to Participate in Reentry Program Interview**
**Evaluation Conducted by Nebraska Center for Justice Research**

**Title of Study:** Evaluation of Vocational and Life Skills Programs in Nebraska

The purpose of this interview and the ongoing data collection is to evaluate Vocational and Life Skills programs in Nebraska. The program you participated in is one of eight programs across the state that aim to provide job and life skills training and/or provide educational opportunities for participants who have been incarcerated or on probation. The Nebraska Center for Justice Research is evaluating Vocational and Life Skills programs to improve programming that help participants maintain employment and successfully reintegrate back into the community. This interview is part of the evaluation, and your participation is very helpful to us.

If you agree to participate, here is what will happen next:

- We will ask you to complete this interview. This interview will be tape recorded and later transcribed into a computer file, coded, and analyzed by the evaluation team.
- Your responses to the interview will be kept confidential. Only evaluators at UNO will know your individual responses to the interview.
- Interview responses may be used in evaluation reports on reentry programs or future publications and research, but your name will never be reported.

Please understand that:

- Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. You may choose not to participate. You may stop participating at any time. You may choose not to answer specific questions.
- Evaluators make no guarantees or assurances about the results of the study.
- There are no serious risks involved in this study.

If you have questions or concerns about the research, you may contact:

**Katelynn Towne**, Ph.D. | 402.554.2267          **Michael Campagna**, Ph.D. | 402.554.4007

I have read the above conditions for participating in the study. I give consent to my voluntary participation in the study. I understand that I will receive a copy of this consent form.

Program: _____

Legal Name: _____

Please sign here to give consent: _____   Date: _____

# Appendix B: Interview Protocol

**Note:** Interviewers introduced themselves, received consent, and asked permission to start and record the interview. Many questions were answered without being asked directly due to the open life story interview approach. Interviewers also asked probing questions to clarify details shared unique to each interview.

1. Starting from your childhood, please tell me about your life thus far? Who are you?
2. Please describe some of your living situations when you were young and now as an adult.
3. Could you describe some of jobs have you had?
4. Why do you think you got involved in the criminal justice system?
5. How long were you in prison and where at?
   a. Have you been in prison more than once?
6. What was your prison experience like?
7. What influence have other inmates had in your life while being in prison?
8. What positive or negative influence have correctional staff had in your life while being in prison?
9. What reentry programming have you participated?
   a. How did the programming work? (repeat if needed)
   b. Would you have changed the program in any way? (repeat if needed)
10. What made you decide to participate in this specific VLS program?
11. Was that programming helpful to your reentry process? In what ways?
12. What was the most valuable thing you gained from the program?
13. What do you believe have been your major challenges in your reentry process?
14. Do you feel you have changed since first being in prison? -how ("most recent time in prison")
15. (CHECK FOR CLARITY IF ALREADY MENTIONED) Has anyone motivated or inspired you on your journey? (friends, family, correctional or program staff)?
16. Why do you think you have been successful in your reentry process? OR Why back?
17. How do you see yourself today?
18. What are some of your goals you would like to accomplish in the future?
19. What could the Nebraska Department of Corrections do to help more people with reentry?
20. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

**Background Questions**

*Thank you for helping us with the study. This is valuable information that will help Nebraskans. We just have some demographic background questions left.*

1. How many years of your life have you spent under correctional supervision (probation, parole, corrections)?
2. Did you receive additional services from other places in the community? Yes or No
   a. Where?
3. Were any of the following challenges in your reentry process (circle)?
   a. Trouble accessing substance misuse services
   b. Trouble accessing mental health services
   c. Lack of computer skills
   d. Lack of other job or life skills
   e. Disability
   f. Access to safe and affordable housing
   g. Affordable childcare
   h. Reliable transportation
   i. Trouble meeting probation or parole conditions
4. My friends are supportive with my reentry process (circle). True or False
5. My family are supportive with my reentry process (circle). True or False
6. What is your age?
7. What was the age of your first arrest?
8. Including this conviction, what is the total number of prior arrests?
9. What is your sex?
10. How do you identify with race/ethnicity?
11. What is your highest education level?
12. What is your relationship status?
13. Do you have any children or dependents?

**Dr. Ryan Spohn, Director**

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