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A First Look at the Reentry Experiences of Juvenile Lifers Released in Philadelphia

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In 2012, when the U.S. Supreme Court abolished mandatory sentences of life without parole for persons who committed homicide offenses as juveniles, over 2,000 individuals across the United States were serving the sentence. To date, more than 800 juvenile lifers have been released. To better understand the experiences and needs of this population, we surveyed 112 Philadelphia-based juvenile lifers about their early-life experiences, the periods of their incarceration, and their release and reentry experiences. The majority of respondents reported relatively successful reentry experiences as measured by objective indicators such as housing and jobs. Eighty-one percent ($n = 91$) of respondents had secured stable housing, 75% ($n = 84$) were employed at least part-time, and 100% ($n = 112$) had been able to reconnect with 1 or more family members. Respondents rated family connections and support as critical to their successful reentry, and for most respondents (89%, $n = 100$) expectations of family support was well calibrated with actual support. Factors associated with perceived challenges to reentry included the number of adverse childhood events to which a respondent was exposed, age (with greater difficulties reported by respondents younger than 44 & older than 55, compared to others), physical and mental health, and the extent to which actual family support was consistent with expectations. We discuss the policy implications of our findings in light of continued trends toward decarceration in the United States and the potential that parole grants for persons serving long sentences for violent crimes may continue to increase.


Keywords: juvenile lifers, reentry, life without parole, juveniles, lifers


Incarceration rates in the United States have been steadily declining since 2007, when the country hit a peak of approximately 8 of every 1,000 adults in prison (West & Sabol, 2009). This downward trajectory was brought about, in part, by a national reckoning with the mounting costs of incarceration and increased public awareness that, despite incarcerating more people per capita than any other western nation (Wagner & Sawyer, 2018), the United States reaps no benefit in terms of public safety. Since 2006, 36 states have participated in the Justice Reinvestment Initiative (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2020), a Bush-era policy that provides federal assistance to states that aim to reduce their prison populations. A few states have led the way in policy changes. Michigan, for example, overhauled its sentencing laws in 2021, which is expected to result in parole approvals for an additional 900 persons, on average, per year. In 2014 California passed


proposition 47, which reclassified some felonies as misdemeanors. In the first year following ratification, the prison population fell by 25,000 incarcerated persons.

While these changes are laudable, the national movement aimed at reducing incarceration rates through legislation and policy reform has been uneven and fragmented, and the overall reduction in the prison population has been modest. While the number of incarcerated persons today is closer to 7 in 1,000 (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020), this represents a decrement of only .1% since 2007. Part of the problem is that legislative reforms have focused almost exclusively on individuals convicted of nonviolent felonies. Little to no consideration has been given to individuals serving long-term sentences for violent crimes, even though these individuals make up more than half of the state-prison population and tend to be the most well-adjusted segment of the prison population

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(Kazemian & Travis, 2015). In fact, research shows that individuals released after having served very long sentences, including life-sentences, have the lowest recidivism rates of any category of previously incarcerated persons (Daftary-Kapur & Zottoli, 2020; Weisberg et al., 2011). Any effort to substantially reduce the costs of incarceration in the United States must address persons serving long sentences for violent crime (Pfaff, 2017).

Although sentencing reforms targeting individuals convicted of violent offenses have not gained much momentum among policymakers or the public at large, the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) forced consideration of this question for one subgroup of incarcerated persons—those who were sentenced to life without the possibility of parole (LWOP) for homicide offenses committed when they were under age 18 (hereafter, juvenile lifers¹). In a series of cases between 2005 and 2012, SCOTUS held that the most serious of criminal sanctions—first the death penalty (*Roper v. Simmons*, 2005), then LWOP for nonhomicide offenses (*Graham v. Florida*, 2010) and finally mandatory LWOP for homicide offenses (*Miller v. Alabama*, 2012)—are unconstitutional for individuals who were under the age of 18 at the time of their offenses. The *Miller* Court emphasized that adolescence is marked by “transient rashness, proclivity for risk, and inability to assess consequences,” and required sentencing courts to consider developmental factors when sentencing juvenile defendants. In *Montgomery v. Louisiana* (2016), the Court held that *Miller* had established a new substantive rule prohibiting the imposition of LWOP for most juveniles², thereby retroactively invalidating all juvenile LWOP (JLWOP) sentences that had been mandated by statute.

At the time *Montgomery* was decided, there were approximately 2,100 individuals across the United States serving JLWOP sentences. To date, over 800 of these individuals have been released with no discernible impact to public safety (Smith, 2021). Pennsylvania, which had the highest concentration of juvenile lifers in the country and has led the nation in resentencing and release, provides perhaps the clearest evidence of this. Of the first 174 juvenile lifers released in Philadelphia, only two (1.14%) had been reconvicted of any offense over an average 20 months in the community, and both offenses were relatively minor (Daftary-Kapur & Zottoli, 2020)³. This result should be unsurprising; the relationship between crime and age is among the most consistent research findings in criminology (Loeber & Farrington, 2018), and the psychosocial (Steinberg et al., 2018) and neurobiological bases (Casey, 2015) for this relationship are well established. In addition to posing minimal risk to public safety, the cost savings for Philadelphia associated with the release of the first 174 juvenile lifers—estimated conservatively at \$9.5M over the first decade of release—are appreciable (Daftary-Kapur & Zottoli, 2020).

The positive outcomes for released juvenile lifers nationwide add weight to proposals to eliminate JLWOP and to arguments favoring resentencing and meaningful parole opportunities for individuals serving long sentences for violent crimes. To date, 25 states have abolished JLWOP and seven other states are currently considering legislation that will do so (Rovner, 2021). The United States Senate will consider the First Step Implementation Act (2021) in the Spring 2022 session, which would abolish life without parole for individuals convicted of federal crimes committed before age 18 (S. 1014; 2021). Other states are considering bills to

extend the age past 18, for example, Illinois is considering a bill that will allow parole eligibility for persons who were younger than 21 at the time of the offense (H.B. 1064; 2021). At the same time, for policymakers who are open to sentencing reforms, there is little guidance on how best to prepare folks who have served long sentences for reentry into the community, and how to provide opportunities for meaningful and successful reintegration.

In this study, we surveyed released Philadelphia juvenile lifers to better understand their experiences before, during, and following incarceration. The aim of this study is to inform the national conversation on policy related to the release and reentry of persons convicted of violent crimes who have served lengthy sentences.

Although juvenile lifers have some unique characteristics, their backgrounds and experiences are quite similar to those of typical individuals who commit crimes as teenagers (Daftary-Kapur & Zottoli, 2020). Moreover, it is not unreasonable to assume that the reentry needs of this population will be generally similar to those of persons who have served very long sentences. In the United States one in seven incarcerated persons (not all of them convicted of violent crimes) are serving sentences of LWOP or virtual LWOP (i.e., those who must serve 40+ years before parole eligibility). This is the first time such a large concentration of lifers (especially those convicted of violent offenses—in this case, homicide) have been released. As such, we are provided with a unique opportunity to (1) examine whether their reentry experiences are consistent with existing data on reentry, and (2) update and inform evidence based policies on how we can best prepare for, and support, returning citizens who have served long sentences.

Reentry Challenges for Returning Juvenile Lifers

Formerly incarcerated individuals face significant challenges when reentering society. Common barriers to reentry include finding employment, securing stable housing, developing connections with family members, and maintaining physical and mental health (Seiter, 2002). Although there is a substantial body of research on reentry experiences of formerly incarcerated citizens, and the factors that aid in successful reentry (see Harding et al., 2019 for a recent review), only a few studies have examined the experiences of individuals who have returned after long periods of incarceration (Liem & Garcin, 2014; Liem, 2013; Appleton, 2010; Pitts, 2018) and none of these studies included individuals sentenced as juveniles. A few studies have looked at the experiences of juveniles who were convicted of homicide or homicide-related offenses and subsequently paroled (see Liem, 2013 for a review). However, the

¹ While we typically avoid labels that equate individuals with legal statuses, we use the term juvenile lifers here for two reasons: 1) It is the term that has been adopted for self-reference by the community of individuals released from and still serving JLWOP, and 2) it is the term in common usage among advocacy organizations and attorneys engaged in JLWOP reform.

² In the *Montgomery* Court’s language, those that are “permanently incorrigible.” Note, in *Jones v. Mississippi*, 2021, the Court held that an explicit finding of permanent incorrigibility is not required by *Miller*, as long as the sentencing judge has discretion to consider developmental factors.

³ The follow-up period in the study was 21 months (ending December 2019). As of this writing, an additional 38 juvenile lifers have been released and there has been one additional arrest and conviction of a released juvenile lifer, for reconviction rate of 1.42%.

individuals in most these studies were incarcerated for relatively short time periods (ranging from 1–5 years; see Heide et al., 2001; Vries & Liem, 2011) and, as Liem (2013) notes, the studies have focused primarily on recidivism (variably defined), with rates ranging from 0–65%. To our knowledge, only one small ($n = 7$) qualitative study has addressed reentry experiences of juvenile lifers (Frost, 2020).

As Kazemian and Travis (2015) point out, the reentry experiences of lifers may be markedly different, and potentially more challenging, than those of individuals who have served shorter sentences as lifers spend most of their life course behind bars. Persons incarcerated for very long periods have fewer educational and occupational opportunities, may not establish romantic relationships, and may lose ties with family (Aday, 2003).

These reentry challenges may be exacerbated for juvenile lifers. By definition, juvenile lifers entered prison in adolescence. Most would not have finished high school at the time of their arrests—in a survey on incarcerated juvenile lifers, Nellis (2012) reported that most had only 46.6% were even enrolled in school at the time of their offense—and few would have had any work experience. Compounding the problem, in many state correctional systems, education and job training programs are limited for individuals serving LWOP sentences, on the grounds that these individuals will not be returning to the community (Boone, 2015). Additionally, reconnecting with family might be more challenging for this population, given the young age at which they were removed from their homes and the length of time that they have been away. Family support has been shown to be especially important to reentry success (La Vigne et al., 2005; Naser & La Vigne, 2006), as it facilitates achievement of other important objectives such as securing housing, transportation, and social services. Finally, as with all persons who leave prison after an extended period, physical and mental health issues can pose barriers to successful reentry. Health issues can be particularly pronounced for older returning citizens who often have multiple medical conditions and can encounter obstacles in optimizing their medical care (Williams & Abraldes, 2007). We explore all these issues and more in the current study.

Current Study

As explained, Pennsylvania incarcerated the largest percentage of juvenile lifers in the country (521 or about 25%; the majority, 325, from Philadelphia County), and yet has been at the forefront of the resentencing and release process. In Philadelphia, as of September 2020, all but ten of the 325 Philadelphia juvenile lifers had been resentenced and 174 had been released. Those who had not yet been resentenced either had a pending appeal or an open Post Conviction Relief Act petition.⁴ Across the state, as of October 2021, 470 juvenile lifers had been resentenced and 268 had been released. This fast-paced resentencing and release has put the spotlight on Philadelphia; media (Ewing & Melamed, 2019) and advocacy organizations (e.g., the Marshall Project) have highlighted the successful outcomes of returning juvenile lifers in Philadelphia, specifically the almost negligible recidivism as reported by Daftary-Kapur and Zottoli (2020). While recidivism is an important outcome, it is not the only component of successful reentry. As mentioned above, there is a large body of research on reentry of incarcerated persons and barriers to success, the majority of which focuses on those who have served shorter sentences; no

study has looked at outcomes and pathways to successful reintegration for those who had been sentenced to LWOP for violent offenses. As a first step, we conducted a broad-based survey to understand individual challenges to reentry, how they faced these challenges, and what resources helped aid reintegration. The purpose of this study was to develop a high-level, but comprehensive understanding of the early histories and reentry experiences of former juvenile lifers and provide a more complete picture of their lives at the time of the offense as well as their lives today.

Method

Participants

We recruited participants with the assistance of The Youth Sentencing and Reentry Project (YSRP). YSRP provides reentry services for returning juvenile lifers in Philadelphia and maintains a comprehensive database of released individuals. YSRP provided us with contact information for 140 of the 174 juvenile lifers resentenced and released in Philadelphia as of September 2020 (i.e., 80% of the Daftary-Kapur & Zottoli, 2020 sample).⁵ Solicitations were sent to all 140 individuals. Contact information for five individuals was incorrect.

Our final sample comprised 112 juvenile lifers (response rate of 83%), which was approximately 65% of the entire released population at the time of our survey. Respondents were between the ages of 38 and 67 at the time of the survey ($M = 52$, $SD = 7$, $n = 112$). The majority of respondents were male (94%, $n = 105$), and Black (82.2%, $n = 92$). The remainder identified as White (10.7%, $n = 12$), and Hispanic (7.1%, $n = 8$). Survey respondents' ages are representative of the population of released lifers as of September 2020 (Daftary-Kapur & Zottoli, 2020); race data had not been reported. The average age at incarceration (including time in detention pretrial) was 17 years ($SD = 2$, $n = 91$), ranging from 13–20 years, and respondents were incarcerated on average for 33 years ($SD = 7$, $n = 98$), ranging from 21–49 years. The average age at release was 49 years ($SD = 7$, $n = 112$), ranging from 37–67 years, and the average time respondents had been in the community was 30 months ($SD = 11$).

The sample was about evenly split among those who had been convicted of first- and second-degree murder (51%, $n = 53$, and 49%, $n = 52$, respectively)⁶; seven participants did not respond to the question about charge. In the state of Pennsylvania, first-degree murder is defined as the intentional killing of another person that is

⁴The Post-Conviction Collateral Relief act (42 Pa.C.S.A. §9541) permits some incarcerated criminal defendants to challenge their convictions after an unsuccessful direct appeal to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. It is the sole means of obtaining state relief following conviction, sentencing and direct appeal.

⁵YSRP seeks to establish contact with all released juvenile lifers, though they are not always successful. In some cases, released individuals choose not to be involved with the organization. We also note that the start date of this study was August 2020. YSRP had been in lockdown since March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and was having a harder time than usual tracking and keeping in touch with released individuals.

⁶We note that, relative to the population as a whole, our survey sample included disproportionately more persons convicted of second-degree than first-degree murder; 62% of juvenile lifers released as of September 2020 have been convicted of 1st degree murder and 38% of 2nd degree murder.

willful, deliberate, and premeditated. In contrast, a defendant can be convicted of second-degree murder (sometimes referred to as felony murder) for any level of participation in a felonious crime that results in a death. The top-charged felony (besides murder) for released juvenile lifers convicted of second-degree murder in Philadelphia was robbery (78%; Daftary-Kapur & Zottoli, 2020).

The Survey

The survey questions were designed to follow a life course trajectory and were developed based on previous research in delinquency, prison experiences, and reentry. The survey focused on three time periods: (a) life prior to incarceration including engagement in delinquency, family functioning, attachment to school, familial contact with the justice system, abuse history, and community crime; (b) life during incarceration including engagement in rehabilitative programming, visitations, and disciplinary actions; and (c) life after incarceration including family/friend relationships, housing, employment, health, and other aspects of reentry.

Demographics and Early History

We collected basic demographic information including age, race, gender, age at incarceration, conviction offense, and years incarcerated. We asked respondents whether they had any prior arrests and convictions. For each arrest we asked age at arrest, arrest charges, the outcome (adjudicated, diverted, charges dismissed), and if adjudicated, their sentence/punishment. We also asked participants to indicate whether one or more of 33 risk factors were present in their lives prior to their incarceration. We included the wide range of factors that have been identified in prior research on adolescent offending behavior (e.g., Shader, 2020; Monahan et al., 2009; Murray & Farrington, 2010). These risk factors can be roughly classified as falling into one of four categories—familial risk factor (e.g., physical abuse; parental substance abuse), school/academic related risk factors (e.g., learning disability; suspensions; poor grades), social/environmental risk factors (e.g., delinquent peers; violent neighborhood) and personal/individual risk factors (e.g., substance abuse; mental health issues)—though the distribution of factors across categories is not even, and some risk factors could be classified under more than one category. These categories were empirically supported; results of a principal components analysis are provided in the supplemental materials. Responses to one risk factor item (“removal from the home”) were deemed unreliable and not included in analyses involving risk factors (specifically, as we began data collection with participants who volunteered for a follow-up study to this one, we learned that participants may have misinterpreted this item as asking about whether they were removed from their homes at the time of their arrests).

Period of Incarceration

We asked respondents a series of questions regarding their time incarcerated and the moment of release. We asked questions focusing on programming and program participation, whether they were offered any prerelease programs to prepare them for reintegration, any jobs they held while incarcerated, and questions about disciplinary infractions. We also asked participants about the moment of their release—whether they were provided with

clothing, identification, gate money, transportation from the facility, and where they slept their first night.

Reentry Experiences

In order to compare relative differences in how challenging various aspects of reentry were for respondents, we asked them to answer a series of questions (e.g., “how challenging was it to find stable housing,” “how challenging was it to access social services?”) using a continuous rating scale from 0 (“not at all challenging”) to 100 (“very challenging”). Likewise, we asked respondents to rate on a scale of 0 (“not at all helpful”) to 100 (“very helpful”) how helpful various factors were to their community reintegration (e.g., “how helpful to your reintegration was family support,” “how helpful to your reintegration was access to transportation?”). While these rating scales are arbitrary, they permit relative comparisons of experiences across participants, as well as relative comparisons among different aspects of reentry for each individual participant.

Post-Release Supervision

We asked respondents about the length of their parole supervision, conditions of parole, and what if any conditions were challenging for them.

Family Relationships. We queried participants on a variety of factors related to family involvement in their reintegration. Participants were asked about the nature of their contact with family prior, during, and postincarceration; they were asked to state their level of agreement on a series of statements regarding closeness to their family, and they were asked to indicate whether family members had provided them with various supports including, but not limited to, housing, financial, job placement, food, transportation, and help accessing social services.

Employment. We asked participants a series of employment related questions. Specifically, we asked whether they had a job lined up prior to release, whether they started searching for a job on release (if not, why), and barriers they faced when trying to obtain employment. We also asked respondents how many jobs they had held since release, whether they were currently employed, last date of employment if unemployed, and their last/current job.

Housing. Participants were asked where they were paroled to (e.g., home of family member, halfway house), whether they had returned to their old neighborhood or not, whether their housing situation at release met their expectations, and the types of housing support they had received. We also asked individuals how often they had moved, their current housing situation, and asked them to assess the safety of their current neighborhoods using a series of questions.

Health. Finally, we asked participants to provide an assessment of their current physical and mental health, on a scale of 0 to 100 ranging from poor to excellent. We asked respondents to indicate whether they had any physical or mental health issues and to describe them. We then asked them whether they were easily able to access medical and mental health insurance and providers, and how often they availed of these services.

Procedure

The Montclair State University Institutional Review Board approved all procedures and materials prior to data collection

(IRB-FY19-20-1759). Participants were made aware of our study through an e-mail and text message sent by a reentry coordinator at YSRP. Following this, we texted participants (using a text messaging service, Textedly; www.textedly.com), with an invitation to participate in the survey, along with a link to the survey. We followed up with a second text/e-mail a week after the initial text for those who did not complete the survey. Two weeks after the second communication, we sent a third text reminder (with each text, participants were given the option to opt out of receiving text from us). A final, fourth reminder was sent 5 weeks after the initial text. With each text, participants were given the option to opt out of receiving texts from us; only two individuals opted out. Given the fact that a number of these individuals are of advanced age and might not have the technological skill to complete an online survey, we followed up with those who did not complete the survey, but did not opt out, via phone. Of the 112 respondents, 22 (19%) completed the survey with us via phone and not online. The average time to complete the survey online was 38 minutes (3 individuals took over two hours to complete the survey and their times was excluded from this calculation). Individuals were compensated \$25 via CashApp or Venmo for their time.

Research Questions and Analytic Strategy

The primary aim of this paper is to describe the reentry experiences of returning juvenile lifers, with successful reentry defined by objective indicators such as employment, stable housing, and positive social relationship. To contextualize the lives and experiences of these individuals, we also captured data on respondents' early life experiences and their experiences while incarcerated. The data permitted exploration of potential associations among these variables and reentry that, to our knowledge, have not been previously explored in any population of returning citizens. Of particular interest to us was whether experiences in early childhood or in prison were associated with reentry challenges, and whether prior expectations of family supports might play a role in how these individuals experienced reentry.

In addition to these immediate research questions, we used this survey to collect additional data, not analyzed here, that would inform future work with this population and with juvenile lifers from other jurisdictions (e.g., to help us develop questions for in-depth interviews with persons from these populations). As such, we make no claims as to having explored all possible relationships or addressed all possible questions that these data might present. For investigators who might wish to explore other relationships or compare these data to those of individuals from other populations (e.g., persons serving long sentences for nonhomicide offenses; juvenile lifers from other jurisdictions), the survey, codebook, data, and R code necessary to derive certain variables, are available in the supplemental materials (Daftary-Kapur et al., 2021).

Finally, all analyses and results reported in this paper are descriptive. Not only is this study exploratory (i.e., we made no a priori hypotheses), but the population of released juvenile lifers in Philadelphia is very small and our sample, which represents 64% of the entire population, cannot be considered random.

Results

We present survey results in chronological order, starting with early life experiences and the conviction, followed by incarceration experiences, and ending with reentry. We note that operational definitions for life experience variables (e.g., abuse, mental illness, etc.) vary across studies. What we report here are self-report data that are subject to differences in interpretations among respondents.

Early Life Experiences

Participants reported high rates of socioeconomic disadvantage and social deprivation, with all participants reporting one or more developmental or psychosocial risk factors for criminal behavior. Just over 90% ($n = 107$) experienced five or more risk factors, and nearly 40% ($n = 44$) had been exposed to 15 or more different risk factors. Table 1 displays the percentage of participants endorsing each of the risk factors asked about in the survey.

Exposure to Violence

The vast majority of participants (92%, $n = 103$) reported living in high crime neighborhoods, and neighborhoods that had drug problems (85%, $n = 95$); a significant proportion (38%; $n = 43$) reported violence exposure in the home. Slightly more than 27% of the sample ($n = 30$) reported being physically abused in the home and 30% ($n = 34$) reported being subjected to emotional abuse. Physical discipline was common in many of the

Table 1
Exposure to Childhood Risk Factors

Risk factor	Percentage reporting
Familial Risk Factors	
Poor relationship with parents	35%
Raised in a single parent household	63%
Experienced physical discipline at home	69%
Had poor adult supervision as a child	46%
Physically abused at home	27%
Emotionally abused at home	30%
Experienced neglect	37%
Parent(s) were engaged in criminal activity	23%
Parent(s) were incarcerated	18%
Violence in the home	38%
Parents struggled with substance use	36%
Parents struggled with mental health	21%
Experienced poverty	63%
Individual Risk Factors	
Drug use as a teenager	62%
Difficulty concentrating	38%
Head injury prior to age 18	29%
Developmental diagnosis as a child	17%
Physical health issues	15%
Mental health issues	21%
School related risk factors	
Expelled from school	49%
Suspended at least once	81%
Poor grades in school	64%
Peer related risk factors	
Delinquent peers	85%
Gang involved	43%
Neighborhood risk factors	
Neighborhood crime	92%
Neighborhood drug problem	85%
Neighborhood poverty	86%

respondents lives (69%, $n = 77$). For comparison, these rates are quite a bit higher than current estimates for domestic violence exposure (11%), physical abuse (3.7%), and emotional abuse (8%) in the general U.S. youth population (Finkelhor et al., 2015).

Home Environment

Sixty-three percent ($n = 70$) were raised in single-parent households; 46% ($n = 51$) indicated that they had poor adult supervision as a child and 37% ($n = 41$) indicated that they experienced neglect. A significant proportion of individuals indicated that their parents struggled with substance use (36%, $n = 40$) and mental health (21%, $n = 24$) issues. This compares to current estimates of 3.1% and 9.5% in the general youth population (Lipari et al., 2017). Approximately one fifth of respondents (23%, $n = 26$) had a parent who was involved in criminal activity, and 18% ($n = 20$) indicated that they had at least one parent who was incarcerated during the respondent's childhood. Comparatively in 2009, the rate of parental incarceration in the general population was estimated to be 11% (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011).

School and Peer Relationships

As is typical with criminal justice involved youth, the majority of our respondents struggled in school—64% ($n = 72$), indicated they had poor grades in middle and high school, 81% ($n = 91$) had been suspended at least once during their academic career, and 49% ($n = 55$) had been expelled from school. The overwhelming majority (85%, $n = 95$) indicated that they associated with delinquent peers, and almost half (43%, $n = 48$) were affiliated with a gang.

Prior Justice System Contacts

Most respondents (70%; $n = 78$)⁷ reported having had at least one prior contact with the juvenile justice system (ranging from 1 to 14 arrests). Of those with prior arrests, having three or fewer prior arrests was fairly common (19%, $n = 21$, reported one prior arrest; 15%, $n = 17$, reported two; and 13%, $n = 14$, reported three). In contrast, the rest of the respondents were distributed across 4 and 14 arrests, with at least one person at each level. The average age at first arrest was 14 years (ranging from 10–17 years). Of all those arrested at least once, 38% ($n = 42$) reported having been adjudicated as a delinquent at least once.

Relationship Between Risk Factors and Justice System Contact

Exposure to psycho-social risk factors is known to be associated with justice system contact (Molinedo-Quílez, 2020), and we explored this relationship in our data. Individuals who had at least one prior arrest endorsed, on average, three more risk factors ($M = 11.76$, $SD = 4.41$) than those without prior arrests ($M = 8.67$, $SD = 4.71$). The total number of risk factors was more important than the category to which the risk factors belonged in terms of association with prior arrests. Notably, neither number nor type of risk factor was associated with conviction charge.

Incarceration Experiences

All respondents had reached their 18th birthdays by the time of their sentencing, and thus, were placed immediately in general

population with adults. Consistent with the data compiled by the Philadelphia District Attorney's office for released juvenile lifers (see Daftary-Kapur & Zottoli, 2020), participants reported high levels of program participation and few or no misconducts during the tail end of their incarceration.

Rehabilitative Programming

All but one ($n = 111$) of the juvenile lifers surveyed reported participating in some form of prison programming, even though programming for lifers has historically been limited. Fifty-three percent ($n = 60$) of respondents reported having been restricted from some programs they wanted to participate in—mostly vocational training programs—due to their sentences (see Table 2).

More programming opportunities opened up for juvenile lifers following a 2013 Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruling allowing for resentencing of juvenile lifers following the SCOTUS *Miller* decision. These programs included many of the vocational programs that had previously been denied. About 30% of participants reported getting access to pre-release programming about 12 to 18 months prior to release; programming included life skills, banking, technology use, job readiness, parole readiness, and community reintegration, in addition to specific vocational training (e.g., barbering, computer repair courses, solar installation certification, HVAC certification).

Disciplinary Actions

Almost all respondents (97%; $n = 109$) reported disciplinary actions against them at some point during their incarceration, including disobeying orders, possessing contraband, failing a drug test, and fighting. Misconducts were typically more frequent early into incarceration and declined with time. On average, respondents were incident-free for at least 9 years prior to release and for all 112 respondents the last misconduct was minor. Regarding the last misconduct reported, the most common ones were fighting (12%, $n = 14$), possession of contraband (9%, $n = 10$), disobeying an order (9%, $n = 10$), accessing an unauthorized area (8%, $n = 9$), and not standing for count (7%, $n = 8$).

Reentry Experiences

Table 3 shows average respondent ratings of how challenging they perceived various aspects of their reentry to be (e.g., finding stable housing; finding a job), and Table 4 shows average respondent ratings on how helpful various factors were to successful reintegration (e.g., family connections; lifer support groups). On average, finding a job was rated as most challenging, with 57 individuals (51%) giving it the highest or second highest rating among all the factors and 52 (46%) giving it a rating of 50 or higher on the 0 (not at all challenging) to 100 (very challenging) scale. On

⁷ Survey respondents were not required to provide identifying information and did so only if they wanted to be contacted for future research. Therefore, as with conviction charge, we cannot cross-validate individual self-report with official arrest and conviction/adjudication records. For reference, Daftary-Kapur & Zottoli (2020) reported that 49% of the juvenile lifers resentenced in Philadelphia as of September 2020 had no prior justice system involvement; 48% had one prior juvenile court adjudication; only 3% of the sample had two or more prior adjudications. Arrest data were not reported.

Table 2
Percentage Reporting Engagement in Programming

Program	Percentage participating
Anger Management	80.00%
College Credit	40.00%
Substance Abuse	60.00%
GED Program	88.00%
Counseling	47.00%
Parenting Skills	33.00%
Life Skills	80.00%
Job Readiness	59.00%
Vocational programs	
Peer mentoring certification	60.00%
Other	40.00%

average, obtaining stable housing, connecting with family and accessing social services were rated as less challenging than finding housing, but more challenging than obtaining state identification or accessing educational resources, both of which were rated above 50 by only about a quarter of the sample—23% and 27%, respectively. Among factors they found helpful, stable housing received the highest rating, on average, and reentry services received the lowest, though there was a great deal of variability. Despite the variability in time-since-release for our sample, the variable had minimal discernible impact on helpfulness and perceived challenges ratings. The only relationships with time-since-release were found for helpfulness of social services, $r = .25$ (the greater the time in the community, the more helpful they found social services), and difficulty getting an ID, $r = .21$ (the greater the time in the community, the more difficult it was to obtain an ID).

Responses to items assessing perceived challenges were positively correlated (Pearson moment correlation coefficients ranged from .34 to .63); participants that rated one aspect of reentry to be challenging were also likely to rate other aspects as challenging. This was generally true for helpfulness ratings as well, though two items were not correlated with any of the others (lifer support groups and social services), and the associations among the helpfulness variables were slightly lower than for perceived challenges (correlation coefficients ranged from .22 to .48).

Resources Provided by Department of Corrections

Many respondents (78%, $n = 87$) were picked up from the correctional facilities by a relative or a friend; approximately 14%

Table 3
Ratings on how challenging various aspects of reentry were

Aspects of Reentry	Percentage rating at or above 50 on scale	Percentage rating below 50 on scale
Housing	41%	59%
Employment	46%	54%
Connecting with family	38%	62%
Accessing healthcare	38%	62%
Obtaining State ID	23%	77%
Accessing educational opportunities	27%	73%

Note. Participants were asked to rate various aspects of reentry on a 0-100 scale, with 0 indicating “not at all challenging” and 100 indicating “very challenging”.

Table 4
Respondent Ratings on How Helpful Various Factors Were for Reintegration

Factor	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Family	74.58	35.01
Stable housing	73.02	37.27
Job	63.65	37.40
Reentry services	27.23	33.01
Lifer support groups	50.19	38.98
Social services	56.07	37.98
Reliable transportation	58.33	40.96
Access to healthcare	59.59	37.99

Note. Responses were recorded on a sliding scale from “0” - not at all helpful to “100” - very helpful.

($n = 15$) took a bus to reach their release destination, and 8% ($n = 9$) indicated they were driven by a Department of Corrections employee to their destination. Two-thirds of the sample ($n = 74$) reported that they were provided with a state issued form of identification, which likely explains the relatively lower numbers of individuals rating obtaining an ID as particularly challenging. About half of the respondents (49%; $n = 55$) indicated that they were provided with at least one set of street clothing and the other half (52%; $n = 58$) indicated that they wore clothing that was provided by their families, or that they had purchased themselves.

Post-Release Supervision

The majority (96%, $n = 108$) of individuals surveyed are on lifetime parole. Three individuals were mandated to parole for 45–50 years, and two were on parole for 20–25 years. Parole requirements varied and included a standard litany of restrictions including curfew, travel restrictions, routine drug testing, fees, and seeking and maintaining employment among others. We queried participants on what they found most challenging about being on parole. A significant proportion stated that they did not find being on parole to be challenging in any way (44%, $n = 50$). Of the 63 individuals who did cite challenges, the most challenging condition endorsed was seeking and maintaining employment (66%, $n = 41$), followed by random drug testing (48%, $n = 30$). This was followed by having to inform parole officers of travel plans (27%, $n = 17$). A few individuals mentioned that the monthly parole fees can be a burden at times (15%, $n = 10$), and a small number expressed the notion that lifetime parole made them feel as though they were not truly free (6%, $n = 4$).

Housing

The majority of respondents were paroled to the home of a relative, friend or spouse (77%; $n = 86$). The remainder were paroled to some form of transitional housing. Roughly 80% ($n = 90$) returned to different neighborhoods from where they lived before incarceration—because their families had moved (41%, $n = 46$), or they did not want to live in Philadelphia (25%, $n = 28$). At the time they were surveyed, the majority were residing with family or a spouse (63%; $n = 72$), and 17% ($n = 19$) were living alone in an apartment or house. The remaining 20% ($n = 22$) reported either living with friends, in a treatment facility or in a halfway house/transitional facility. The majority of respondents (91%; $n = 102$) reported low levels of mobility since release; 35% ($n = 40$)

had never moved, 37% ($n = 42$) had moved only once, and 18% ($n = 20$) had moved twice.

Sixty-two percent ($n = 70$) described their current housing situation as long-term, and 85% ($n = 96$) described their housing situation as either at or above their expectations. When asked whether their neighborhood was a safe place to live, 73% ($n = 81$) agreed with the statement. On the other hand, only 44% ($n = 50$) agreed that their neighborhood was a good place to find a job and just over half (51%, $n = 57$) reported drug problems in their neighborhood.

Housing was rated as the most or second most challenging aspect of reentry by 46 (41%) respondents; 27 (24%) rated it as the most challenging. Regardless of relative ranking, 46 (41%) gave it a rating of above 50 on the 0- to 100-point scale; 22 people (20%) rated it 90 or higher.

Employment

Thirty-three ($n = 37$) percent of the individuals surveyed had a job lined up prior to release. Of the remaining 75, almost all (88%; $n = 66$) started searching for a job immediately upon release. Those who didn't ($n = 9$) were either paroled to a rehabilitation facility ($n = 2$) or had a health issue that prevented them from working ($n = 7$). At the time of the survey, 75% ($n = 84$) of respondents were employed in either part-time or full-time positions; an additional 10% ($n = 11$) reported that they had lost their jobs because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Of all those employed approximately 71% ($n = 59$) worked blue-collar jobs such as construction/maintenance/janitorial services/store workers, 15% ($n = 13$) worked in advocacy positions/public defender offices/criminal justice nonprofits, 7% ($n = 6$) worked in vocational careers (e.g., HVAC maintenance), and 7% ($n = 6$) worked in administrative positions.

The most frequently endorsed barriers to employment opportunities were having a criminal record endorsed by 58% of the sample ($n = 65$) and lack of job experience (41%; $n = 46$) and skills (25%; $n = 28$). Less frequently endorsed were lack interview skills (17%, $n = 19$), having a valid form of identification (11%, $n = 12$) and lack of professional attire (8%, $n = 9$).

As noted earlier, finding gainful work was rated as the most or second most challenging aspect of reentry by 57 respondents (51%), with 33 (29%) rating it as the most challenging, and regardless of relative ranking, 52 (46%) gave it a rating of 50 or above. Sixteen people (14%) rated it at 90 or higher.

Family/Social Relationships

Family connectedness appears to have played an important role in reintegration for released juvenile lifers. On a scale of 0–100,

with “0” indicating “not at all helpful”, and “100” indicating “extremely helpful,” participants rated the helpfulness of family support to their reintegration at 78.03, ($SD = 32.61$), with the modal response being 100. All respondents were closely connected with at least one family member—34% ($n = 39$) were connected with a sibling, 28% ($n = 31$) with a parent, 21% ($n = 24$) with a spouse/intimate partner, 8% ($n = 9$) with an aunt or uncle, and the remaining 9% ($n = 10$) mentioned either a cousin, friend, or child. All individuals reported having maintained continuous contact with family members throughout their incarceration. While the amount and type of contact varied both across participants and over the period of incarceration for individual participants, family contact included face-to-face visits, phone calls, and letters/emails. Table 5 shows participants' ratings of a series of items assessing the quality of their family relationships. Most participants report good relationships with the family member they were the closest to and report that they were able to rely on this person for emotional support.

In addition to emotional support, many respondents reported relying on their families for tangible supports related to housing, finances, transportation, finding employment, and navigating social services. Table 6 displays data on released individuals' expectations of family support and how these expectations played out. We also asked individuals to indicate which of several specific supports family members provided them. The most commonly mentioned support was transportation (68% of respondents; $n = 77$), followed by financial support (66%, $n = 74$), housing (62%, $n = 70$), food (52%, $n = 59$), job assistance (41%, $n = 46$), engagement in community activities (40%, $n = 45$), accessing health care (40%, $n = 45$), accessing educational opportunities (14%, $n = 16$), and assistance accessing counseling (8%, $n = 9$).

Despite the generally positive responses regarding family, we note that reconnecting with family was rated as the most or second most challenging aspect of reentry by 58 respondents (52%), with 22 individuals (20%) rating it as the most challenging. Regardless of relative ranking, 42 individuals (38%) rated it a 50 or above and 12 (11%) rated it at 90 or higher.

Health Care

Similar to previous findings (La Vigne & Kachnowski, 2005; La Vigne et al., 2009), returning citizens in our study presented with a variety of health issues. This is not surprising given that they spent an average of 34 years incarcerated; lengthy incarceration is linked with poor health outcomes (Visher et al., 2004). Thirty-eight percent ($n = 43$) of individuals surveyed indicated that they had a chronic physical health condition, and 21% ($n = 24$) indicated that they had been diagnosed with a mental health

Table 5
Ratings on Family Relationships

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
After release I wanted my family to be involved in my life	75%	14%	6%	3%	2%	0%	0%
Family has been a source of emotional support for me postrelease	72%	13%	5%	3%	2%	1%	4%
I am satisfied with communication with my family member	67%	21%	6%	4%	2%	0%	0%
I can calmly discuss problems with my family member	60%	21%	10%	3%	4%	0%	2%
I can express my true feelings to my family member	63%	15%	13%	3%	4%	0%	2%

Note. Responses were recorded on a scale from 1 – 7 with 1 indicating “strongly disagree” and 7 indicating “strongly agree”.

Table 6
Expectations of Family Support PostRelease

Type of support	I did not expect to receive it and I did	I did not expect to receive it and I didn't	I expected to receive it and I did	I expected to receive it and I didn't	N/A
Housing Support	11%	5%	74%	7%	3%
Job Seeking Support	10%	32%	45%	8%	4%
Financial Support	11%	10%	64%	9%	5%
Support navigating social services	21%	20%	50%	3%	6%
Transportation support	12%	12%	65%	5%	6%

Note. Respondents were asked to indicate, using the ratings in the table, whether they had various expectations of support from family (e.g., housing support). The percentages indicate the percent of participants endorsing each statement for each type of support.

condition. Despite this, they generally rated their current physical and mental health states fairly positively. When asked to rate their current physical health, the average rating was 74.05 ($SD = 20.02$) on a scale ranging from 0 = poor to 100 = excellent. Similarly, the average rating for mental health was 82.50 ($SD = 20.07$). Thirty-four percent ($n = 38$) reported that they saw a doctor on an as-needed basis, 20% ($n = 23$) visited a physician once a year, and 39% ($n = 44$) visited a doctor between 4 and 12 times a year; 27% ($n = 30$) had utilized mental health services in the community.

Perceived challenges accessing medical and mental health services ranked similarly with housing and reconnecting with family. About 51 persons (46%) rated it as the most or second most challenging aspect of reentry; 22 individuals (20%) rated it as the most challenging. Forty-three respondents (38%) rated it at 50 or higher and 13 (12%) rated at or above 90.

Factors Associated With Perceived Reentry Challenges

We explored the relationships between perceived challenges to reentry and factors that have been previously associated with reentry success, including—prerelease programming, familial support, age, and health. In addition, we also considered whether early risk factors might be associated with perceived challenges.

Pre-Release Programming

There was no consistent pattern between the 89 respondents who were offered pre-release programming and the 23 who were not with respect to their ratings of items related to perceived reentry challenges. Ratings were either generally equivalent for the groups (e.g., mean ratings related to employment were 42.47 for those receiving programming and 43.30 for those not), or differences were small and the direction of the difference did not favor either group (e.g., finding stable housing was perceived as more challenging for those who received programming than for those who didn't—39.85 and 28.17, respectively; the reverse was true for accessing services—41.74 and 34.34, respectively).

Accurate Expectations for Familial Support

We asked individuals if they expected certain types of support from their family upon release (including housing, financial, job assistance, transportation, and support accessing social services), and whether they received these supports on reentry. The vast majority of individuals had well-calibrated expectations for familial support—that is, their expectations for support and the actual support received were consistent—ranging from a low of about 77% ($n = 89$) of participants with well-calibrated

expectations for assistance with accessing social services to a high of 85% ($n = 94$) for expectation about transportation support. For the most part, those with well-calibrated expectations both expected and received support, ranging from 58% of those with well-calibrated expectations about job support to 94% of those with well-calibrated expectations for housing support. In contrast, those with poorly calibrated expectations were either evenly split between expecting but not receiving, and not expecting but receiving (e.g., 9.8% and 10.7%, respectively, for job support) or tilted toward the negative, expected but did not receive (e.g., 19.6% vs. 3.6% of those with poorly calibrated expectations for support accessing social services).

Well-calibrated expectations appeared to be an important correlate to perceptions of reentry challenges. Specifically, individuals with well-calibrated expectations for housing and job support reported struggling less to achieve these goals. The average rating for how challenging it was to find stable housing (on a scale of 0–100 with 0 being not at all challenging, and 100 being extremely challenging) was 34.52, $SD = 39.37$ for those with well-calibrated expectations, whereas those with poorly calibrated expectations had an average score of 50.95, $SD = 33.0$. The pattern was similar for securing employment; those who had well-calibrated expectations of familial support, on average rated finding a job to be less challenging ($M = 38.81$, $SD = 35.26$) than those who had poor calibration ($M = 57.48$, $SD = 33.57$). Perhaps unsurprisingly, those with poorly calibrated expectations for family support, in general, rated reconnecting with family to be more challenging than those with better calibrated expectations for all forms of support, except finding a job; on average, this difference was about 14.5 points on a 100-point scale.

Mental and Physical Health

Respondents with mental health issues found reentry to be slightly more difficult on average than those without; the largest gaps were in accessing social services ($M_{diff} = 12.93$, $SD_{pooled} = 34.27$), connecting with family ($M_{diff} = 10.92$, $SD_{pooled} = 35.19$), and finding employment ($M_{diff} = 10.18$, $SD_{pooled} = 35.43$). Those with physical health issues also reported more difficulty connecting with family ($M_{diff} = 14.64$, $SD_{pooled} = 21.67$), finding employment ($M_{diff} = 12.28$, $SD_{pooled} = 34.88$), and accessing social services ($M_{diff} = 9.12$, $SD_{pooled} = 34.23$).

Age at Reentry

There was no linear association between age and perceived challenges to reentry. However, visual inspection of the data

suggested that a nonlinear relationship was present. To explore this, we used the interquartile range to divide participants into three age groups—under 45 ($n = 25$), 45 to 56 years ($n = 56$) and over 56 ($n = 31$). Table 7 displays the means and standard deviations for average ratings for how challenging each aspect of reentry was for participants, broken out by these age groups. As can be seen, relative to older and younger persons, participants aged 45–56 generally rated their reentry experiences as less challenging, though the clearest differences between this age group and the older and younger groups was with respect to reconnecting with family and finding meaningful work. The youngest group rated educational and housing issues as more challenging than the two older groups who were more similar to each other; and the oldest individuals rated obtaining identification as more challenging than the two younger groups.

Early Risk Factors

The number of early risk factors endorsed was linearly and positively associated with greater perceived challenges across all categories of reentry, with the largest associations for securing employment, $r = .33$, and reconnecting with family, $r = .31$. Table 8 displays participant ratings on each potential barrier to reentry, broken out into four groups determined by the interquartile range for cumulative risk factors.

Discussion

In this paper we reported on the reentry experiences of juvenile lifers who were resentenced and released in Philadelphia between 2016 and 2020. Although juvenile lifers are unique in ways that should not be dismissed, their experiences overlap with those of individuals charged and convicted of serious crimes when young, and with those who serve long prison sentences before returning to the community. As such, their experiences are relevant to policymakers, legal actors and advocacy organizations working on issues related to rehabilitation of justice involved youth, sentencing reform, and reentry.

From a top line perspective, despite variability in terms of release provisions, and reentry programming and supports, our data paint a picture of successful reentry for the majority of juvenile lifers. All respondents reported having at least one close personal relationship, nearly three-quarters were employed at least part time, and all were domiciled, with 80% living in permanent housing. These data contrast with initial expectations that these individuals might struggle more than the typical returning citizen, due to having been incarcerated for such a long time and from such a young age and having been denied many of the educational

and vocational programming available to those who were not sentenced to LWOP.

At the same time, there was a great deal of variability across respondents in terms of what they perceived as barriers to reentry and a sizable minority faced serious difficulties in one or more areas. More than a quarter of respondents struggled (or were struggling) to find work and 20% were living in temporary housing. Over a third reported having chronic physical health conditions and 20% had been diagnosed with a mental health disorder—both of which, along with other factors such as age and adverse childhood events, were associated with challenges to reentry. In this section, we will briefly unpack some of the factors that were associated with reentry difficulties, noting areas that might benefit from increased research. We end with a discussion of the policy implications that might flow from this work.

Factors Associated With Reentry

Consistent with prior research (Mallik-Kane & Visser, 2008), respondents with mental and/or physical health problems reported more difficulties finding work, connecting with family members and accessing social services. Age was also related to perceived reentry difficulties, such that respondents between the ages of 44 and 55 rated all aspects of reentry as less challenging than those who were older or younger. While existing research points to unique reentry challenges for both youth and elderly persons (Couloute, 2018; De Wese-Mitchell, 2014)—the latter may struggle more to learn advanced technologies, face more health related issues and have fewer family members with whom to reconnect—we are unaware of any work that has looked at differences across the span of adulthood. Perhaps the youngest individuals, who are closer to young adulthood, simply have more competing goals and interests to balance; young adulthood is an active period of development in terms of finding romantic relationships, establishing social networks, and establishing career paths. In contrast, the group in the middle may face fewer of the obstacles the older group faces and also have fewer youthful interests (e.g., casual dating & socializing) to compete with other reentry objectives, such as employment and career development. Of course, these are speculations. An important next step in our research program is to interview released juvenile lifers about reentry, asking the detailed questions that will clarify these and other apparent relationships we report here.

We also found that individuals whose expectations for family support were well-calibrated to the actual support they received found it less challenging to obtain stable housing and satisfactory

Table 7
Average Ratings for Barriers to Reentry by Age Group

Barrier to reentry	Under 45 years		Age 45–56		Age 57+	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
How challenging was it to find stable housing	48.12	40.61	34.11	39.92	34.90	34.27
How challenging was it to find a job	55.52	37.52	36.09	33.20	44.10	36.32
How challenging was it connecting with family	45.92	34.02	26.57	33.91	38.77	32.44
How challenging was it connecting with social services	36.60	29.25	33.45	34.92	39.61	35.98
How challenging was it to get educational opportunities	34.76	32.39	19.86	26.89	23.42	33.77
How challenging was it to get identification	20.28	31.36	17.86	32.82	38.84	42.74

Table 8*Average Ratings for Barriers to Reentry by Cumulative Childhood Risk Factor Groupings*

Challenge to reentry	0–8 risk factors		9–12 risk factors		13–16 risk factors		17+ risk factors	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>
How challenging was it to find stable housing	17.85	9.41	33.03	10.11	54.85	9.41	44.74	7.77
How challenging was it to find a job	26.07	8.85	35.32	9.51	53.82	8.85	57.04	7.31
How challenging was it connecting with family	24.63	8.88	23.06	9.54	41.33	8.88	49.70	7.33
How challenging was it connecting with social services	28.19	8.40	29.97	9.02	36.41	8.40	49.74	6.93
How challenging was it to get educational opportunities	19.74	8.24	21.68	8.85	21.59	8.24	34.04	6.81
How challenging was it to get identification	29.07	10.15	16.58	10.90	26.37	10.15	25.93	8.38

employment, compared to those with more poorly calibrated expectations. Although there is some research to suggest that persons returning to the community rely more on family than they expected to (Naser & La Vigne 2006), we are unaware of any studies that have looked at whether or how the *calibration* of expectations with reality might relate to reentry success or perceived challenges to reentry. This strikes us as an important area for research. If the relationships we see in our data are consistently identified for returning citizens, then targeting expectations in pre-release programming could be a relatively low-cost way to increase reentry success.

One of the more compelling results of this study, in our view, was the finding that adverse childhood events were related to reentry experiences. As would be expected for a population of individuals charged with serious crimes in adolescence (Shader, 2020), our respondents endorsed high rates of adverse childhood events (e.g., abuse, parental incarceration) and other psychosocial risk factors (e.g., schooling difficulties, low adult supervision), but we are unaware of any prior work that has linked adverse childhood events to later reentry experiences. Future research might contemplate whether this is something unique to this population, given the young age at which they entered prison, the length of their sentences and—perhaps especially—the denial of reentry programming until shortly before their release. Notably, unlike others (see Newton et al., 2018 for a review), we found no relationship between prison programming and reentry success. It is reasonable to hypothesize that had more extensive programming been provided, an association between reentry barriers and the more distal early childhood exposures might be less apparent. At the same time, considering how similar these individuals' childhood experiences are to typical juveniles charged with serious crimes, this relationship might not be unique to these individuals at all, but something that has yet to be reported for other previously incarcerated youth.

Although the focus of this discussion is on reentry, it would be an egregious omission to move from the topic of adverse childhood experiences without noting just how similar the childhoods of juvenile lifers look to each other, and how different they look from the average American teenager. It is beyond the scope of this paper to review juvenile crime and prevention or to delve into the complex narrative on the historical, social and political factors that created, and sustain, the disadvantages faced by the communities where many justice-system involved youth grow up. Several excellent sources are available to the reader interested in a thorough treatment of this topic (e.g., Sampson & Wilson, 2007). Here

we simply note that more so than another study confirming the antecedents of juvenile crime, we need research aimed at how to best communicate to the public and to policymakers why it is in society's best long-term interest to invest in our most vulnerable communities to reduce the risk for juvenile crime in the first place.

We would also be remiss if we failed to emphasize the reentry success of these individuals—including negligible recidivism rates (Daftary-Kapur & Zottoli, 2020)—*despite* having experienced such a high number of risk factors associated with perpetual criminality (Assink et al., 2015). The data lend credence to what the Supreme Court acknowledged in *Miller*—that it is nearly impossible to differentiate among youth who will and will not continue to engage in perpetual criminal behavior. In that light, if life sentences for youth are justified on the grounds of recidivism risk/public safety, then back-end decision making about whether a youth has been rehabilitated (e.g., by a parole board) is on stronger empirical footing than front-end decision making about whether or not the youth can be rehabilitated (i.e., imposition of LWOP at sentencing). For interested readers, Zottoli et al. (2021) provide a fuller discussion of these ideas in the context of *Jones v. Mississippi* (2021), a recent U.S. Supreme Court decision on the resentencing of juvenile lifers under *Miller* and *Montgomery*.

Research and Policy Implications

Several relatively straightforward recommendations flow from this study, many of which are also supported by existing research. For instance, our respondents looked remarkably similar to participants in other reentry studies (e.g., La Vigne et al., 2009; Visser and Courtney 2007) with respect to variability in the supports they received upon release and in terms of how important family supports and stable housing were to their reentry success. Adequate release provisions (La Vigne et al., 2008), family support (Travis, McBride, & Solomon, 2005) and stable housing (Herbert et al., 2015) have all been associated with positive outcomes for returning citizens, including reduced rates of substance use, lower recidivism, greater success in finding a job, and better access to health care and social services. The adequacy of release provisions is often overlooked by correctional facilities (Gaynes, 2005), but is a relatively low-cost and logistically uncomplicated problem to target (La Vigne et al., 2008). Likewise, expanding visitation policies and providing options for video visitations are relatively uncomplicated ways that correctional facilities can adopt to help incarcerated persons maintain, and even strengthen, family relationships. More frequent prison visits—presumably because they help

maintain family bonds—are associated with lower recidivism, (Mitchell et al., 2016) and may be especially beneficial to persons who are incarcerated for long periods far from home. Larger-scale policies that lawmakers might consider include temporary rental assistance programs for newly released individuals and provision of housing subsidies or other monetary incentives for family members who are willing to provide housing to their released kin (Lockwood & Lewis, 2019).

Juvenile lifers are also unique in some ways that might have important implications for research and policy. One way they are different, of course, is that they were never supposed to get out. Because of this, the vast majority were restricted from programming geared toward skilled job acquisition and career development. Given the trend toward decarceration, we might expect more and more states to abolish sentences of LWOP for juveniles and other populations (e.g., those sentenced under three-strikes laws) or to reduce the required length of time that must be served before parole eligibility. As such, it might be prudent to revise policies that restrict lifers and virtual lifers from educational and vocational programming. It will likely be economically advantageous to do so. The average age at release for the first 174 juvenile lifers released in Philadelphia was 51 ranging from 35 to 68 (Daftary-Kapur & Zottoli, 2020). Many were young enough to enter the workforce and make a meaningful, long-term contribution. College classes and other skills training (e.g., computing) might have translated to higher salaries and better benefits for these individuals, reducing the likelihood that they would need government subsidies as they age. At the same time, many of the released lifers were too old to enter the workforce or to sustain jobs of a physical nature (the ones that are typically available to unskilled workers). As states consider sentencing reform for juveniles, policymakers will benefit from psycho-legal research aimed at establishing optimal lengths for sentences (or other interventions) before release eligibility that serve both to maximize rehabilitation and public safety, and also enable a successfully rehabilitated person to return to society when they are still young enough to make a meaningful contribution.

Another way in which juvenile lifers are unique is that they entered prison as teenagers and left as adults. An area ripe for research is how to best address the psychosocial implications of growing up behind bars. The majority of individuals in our study were arrested at 16 or 17 and entered prison at 18; many other youths serving extremely long sentences entered the system at even younger ages than that. An important focus of continued work with this population will be to understand how these individuals are navigating sex and dating, marriage and parenting, and other social relationships for the first time, in a world that is far less structured than the prison in which they grew up. Such data can be useful in developing pre-release and reentry programming.

Finally, it is perhaps worth noting that reentry success is often defined in objective terms (e.g., lack of recidivism; gainful employment) and takes little account of a returning citizen's perspective on what constitutes a meaningful life. Researchers might consider tackling these less concrete, but nonetheless important questions. The benefits in understanding how returning citizens define successful reentry might extend beyond the individual, as it is not unreasonable to assume that the extent to which these individuals thrive psychologically, spiritually, and physically will

have downstream positive social and economic impacts on the communities to which they return.

Limitations

Interpretation of our data is constrained by limitations that derive from our method of data collection and our sample. With respect to method, all data were self-reported and thus susceptible to socially desirable responding, defects of memory and retrospective evaluation of feeling states. This is particularly true in a sample such as ours which is diverse in age and time-since-release. For example, older respondents could have had a more difficult time recalling early childhood experiences than younger respondents for a variety of reasons, including being further removed in time from their childhoods. While we found no pattern in the relationships between time-since-release and perceived challenges to reentry, the way this variable might affect responses is difficult to parse. For example, some recently released individuals might not have been home long enough to experience some of the hardships of reentry or may have not yet moved past initial difficulties; others might have already moved through the most difficult periods of their transitions and have settled into their communities and relationships.

In addition, although most individuals completed the survey online, some answered questions over the phone. Survey method can affect responses, particularly for items that might be perceived as carrying stigma. Moreover, participants who took the survey on the phone could ask for clarification if they did not understand a word or phrase, whereas those taking the survey online could not.

With respect to our sample, we note that not all resentenced juvenile lifers have been released. The individuals in this study were granted parole, in part, on the basis that a parole board found them rehabilitated and ready for reentry. We urge restraint in making inferences from our data to juvenile lifers yet to be released. We also remind readers that juvenile lifers released in Philadelphia have been followed closely by the media and advocacy organizations and have been provided with somewhat more reentry support than that received by the typical returning citizen. It is an open question as to whether this attention has led to more successful reintegration for this group. However, we should also note that 119 juvenile lifers have also been released in Michigan; despite being met with less media fanfare, and more negative coverage, and to date there has only been one rearrest (Samples, 2021).

Finally, we made a concerted effort to survey every juvenile lifer released in Philadelphia. While it is remarkable that we achieved a response rate of 64%, we have no way to know whether the individuals who chose not to participate, or who did not respond, are different in ways that have bearing on the results we report here. It would not be unreasonable to assume that some of these individuals were missed precisely because they were facing more difficulties than those who participated (e.g., serious health problems) and/or had limited access to technology (i.e., phones, tablets, or computers).

Conclusion

In recent years, an increasing number of lawmakers across the United States have supported reforms to reduce sentence lengths and increase opportunities for parole. Although there is understandable hesitance in extending these reforms to persons serving

long sentences for violent crimes, it has long been recognized that adequately addressing mass incarceration necessitates attention to this population. Although there are many factors that lawmakers will take into account in determining sentencing laws, research on the experiences of released juvenile lifers can serve to inform the national conversation surrounding these issues. We hope this study will serve as a catalyst for more research on experiences and needs of released juvenile lifers.

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