The Abolition of Care: An Engaged Ethnography of the Progressive Jail Assemblage

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The Abolition of Care: An Engaged Ethnography of the Progressive Jail Assemblage

A Dissertation Presented

by

JUSTIN HELEPOLOLEI

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

February 2023

Anthropology
THE ABOLITION OF CARE:
AN ENGAGED ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE PROGRESSIVE JAIL ASSEMBLAGE

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JUSTIN HELEPOLOLEI

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DEDICATION

This research is deeply indebted to all of the community organizers I’ve worked with in Western Massachusetts and beyond, the true scholar-activists, who do the day-to-day, week-to-week, and decade-to-decade work of sustaining communities and of moving us towards abolition and collective liberation. Special shout-outs to: Cassandra Bensahih, Derrick Washington, Tamik Kirkland, The Elm Street Think Tank, Great Falls Books Through Bars, Decarcerate Western Mass, UMass Alliance for Community Transformation, and especially to Jackie Velez, Katie Talbot, Don Perry, Khalil Rodriguez, Izzy Rivera, and Messiah Allah. This work is dedicated to the legacy of Jafet Robles (1984-2017), whom I never had the honor of organizing with, but who continues to inspire many of the people who inspire me. The process of “writing up” my findings has meant reflecting on community organizing and abolitionist activism that we’ve been engaged in over the past 8+ years. I present some of what I’ve been reflecting on, informed by victories and challenges that we’ve faced together and that we’ll continue to navigate - until there are no jails, or sheriffs. I remain both hopeful, and impatient for that day.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project was only possible because of the generous encouragement, insightful guidance, and enduring patience of my dissertation committee. Thank you Jackie, Julie, Jen and Barbara. Thank you to all of the UMass Anthro faculty and grad students for creating such a supportive community of critical, engaged scholars - I feel so lucky to learn from you all. And big ups to my cohort! Dr. Donna Moody, you’re with us always.

Funding for this research came from the Ford Foundation Predoctoral Fellowship and the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst’s Dissertation Research Grant, but the most support came from my family and friends.
ABSTRACT

THE ABOLITION OF CARE: AN ENGAGED ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE PROGRESSIVE JAIL ASSEMBLAGE

FEBRUARY 2023

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This dissertation draws on ethnographic research conducted with prison abolitionists and criminal justice reform activists in Western Massachusetts - a context in which the sheriffs who operate county jails see themselves as reformers. I use the concept of a “progressive jail assemblage” to analyze the varied actors and logics that sustain incarceration locally, focusing especially on the use of care discourses and practices. I consider how progressive jailing puts prison abolitionists in the position of being against some forms of care. At the same time, abolitionists have put forth competing notions of care, ones they see as building a world in which prisons and jails would not exist. Informed by interviews with formerly incarcerated organizers who navigate this assemblage, I argue that both tendencies have the potential to reinforce the hierarchies that sustain incarceration, but they also have the potential to create openings for undoing the world as it exists.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

October 19, 2014

Jail Break 5K

I arrive at the jail half an hour before the “Jail Break” is set to begin. I wedge my truck in among other hastily-parked vehicles. The lot is the fullest I’ve ever seen. Some people have given up trying to find a real spot, parking on curbs and in the ambiguous margins between spaces. One woman who has parked in an area painted with white lines waves to a police officer; she asks him if it’s okay if she parks there. He shrugs and she leaves the car where it is.

Scattered among the already-parked cars and the steady trickle of arriving vehicles, several dozen people in brightly colored athletic gear are stretching their legs out and jogging in circles. The neon pinks, yellows and greens of their shorts and running shoes stand out in vivid contrast against the gray, rainy sky hanging low around us. I notice an older, South Asian man chatting with some other runners, and I recognize a Latina mom and city councilor from my town who I say hi to. But besides them and myself everyone else seems to be white. The whiteness of the runners and volunteers might be unremarkable in this part of Western Massachusetts, especially north of the Tofu Curtain¹, if it weren’t for the much higher rate of racial diversity present only feet away - on the inside of the jail. At that time, and now, Black and Latino men in the region were disproportionately incarcerated. That imbalance only increased when the sheriff’s department contracted out one unit of the jail to Immigration and Customs Enforcement for

¹ Tofu Curtain - A regional nickname for the division between the lower and upper parts of the Connecticut River Valley or “Pioneer Valley” that references racial, economic and political divisions between a whiter, more affluent, and liberal upper valley (more inclined to buy and eat tofu) and a more multicultural and working class south. This term erases a lot of racial, class, and political diversity, but is nonetheless a salient term that activists reference, often in regard to the marginalization of the lower valley and the cities of Holyoke and Springfield in particular.
several years before ending the contract and using that unit to incarcerate women.

Waiting in the parking lot I look around and I’m feeling - suddenly - very unprepared. These people are serious runners. Their legs are muscle-y. My legs are not. And I feel like my gym shorts and tennis shoes give me away as an obvious amateur. The parking lot stretches across the front of the jail, descending away from the complex of buildings and barbed wire fences to the locally-owned grocery store and neighborhood of single-family houses and apartment units that border it. There is no gate separating the jail parking lot from the surrounding community, only a short driveway. To get to the registration tables, runners cross in front of an imposing, brick edifice – the original jail building which now houses the minimum security unit and Kimball House, the lowest security section of the jail. From there, runners head towards a row of garages situated along the edge of another smaller parking lot. I register at a table set up inside the “Fleet Maintenance and Auto Detailing Program Garage,” giving my name to a professionally-dressed, middle-aged white woman who hands me my race number, a red ‘Jail Break 5K’ t-shirt, and raffle tickets that I deposit into two coffee cans, one marked ‘Round of Golf’ and another, ‘Oil Change by FCSO [Franklin County Sheriff’s Office] Auto Detail Program.’

A number of tents are set up in an arc extending along the edge of a barbed wire fence that separates the parking lot from the jail yard. These include: a tent where runners can have their pictures taken and superimposed onto fake “wanted” posters; an apple cider stand being operated by a half dozen 5-7 year old girls (without any apparent supervision); an area with three massage tables and a sign that reads ‘Massage Therapy, Free Race Massage;’ and finally, a table with a pile of free “Livestrong”-style rubber bracelets and pamphlets advertising Community Action, the social service program that the race is raising funds to support.

A few minutes before 10 am, Officer Collins, a thin, tall, white police officer in a navy uniform, with a shaved head and black gloves picks up a microphone and introduces himself. He welcomes the crowd,
which continues to grow as we get nearer to the race start time. He thanks the sponsors - “I don’t want to
list them all and miss anybody” - as well as the Sheriff, Chris Donelan – who takes a turn to greet us.

Officer Collins then explains how the race will work: three ‘crooks’ will escape from a sheriff’s office
van. They will start running and then the rest of us will chase after them. If anyone catches a crook they’ll
get a discount on the $20 registration fee for next year’s race. To mix things up, Officer Collins tells us
that he’s asked the K9 officer to have their dogs try to bite one of the crooks, “So we’ll see how that
goes!” This is met with laughter from some of the race participants and from the volunteers working the
registration tent. Officer Collins instructs us to start heading towards the road where the run will begin.

There are now about 200 people gathered, talking in small groups and stretching, waiting where the
driveway to the jail meets Elm Street and opens up to the neighborhood. After only a few moments I see
the crowd parting in a few places, and from out of one gap emerges one of the ‘crooks’, a white man with
a stocky build and a closely-shaved head, sporting a black and white striped shirt. Following closely
behind him is another ‘crook,’ also heavier set with short hair, and wearing a similar outfit. The sound of
barking at the top of the hill announces the arrival of the third ‘crook’ – a very tall, white man with short,
dark hair and sunglasses who runs across the lawn, two German Shepherds nipping behind him. The
police officers holding onto their leashes are laughing. The third crook high-steps as he runs, weaving
through the crowd of people to comical effect. Some runners point and chuckle, though most seem too
busy in conversation with each other to notice.

The runners move close to the starting line as the three crooks run ahead. Without further warning, a shot
is fired and the race has begun. I jog. Most of the runners quickly move ahead of me. Behind me is a row
of infants in strollers, pushed by a line of parents in running gear. They’re soon passed by a cadre of
police academy recruits who are running in formation, chanting - “Left. Left. A-Right. Left... Left, Left,
Keep it in Step.” They quickly pass me as well. The route goes through the neighborhoods that border the
jail. A young, Latino man is sitting at a bus stop, wearing headphones. As I pass him I feel self-conscious
and wonder what he thinks of this spectacle. I run faster to avoid making eye-contact. Some people wave from their porches or honk their cars at us.

The route takes us out of the neighborhood and onto a bike trail that runs along the river behind the jail. We hit a 2-kilometer marker. I stop at intervals to catch my breath and take field notes. Some of the other joggers are just walking at this point, so I don’t feel too bad about my pauses. Orange, gold, and red leaves are stuck to the asphalt trail. We pass the 3-kilometer marker – a cardboard signpost emblazoned with the “Jail Break 5K” logo, a white male character with sunglasses, a sweatband on his head, and black and white-striped running outfit. Before long I’m crossing the finish line and back to the jail where we started.

I follow arrows into the lobby of the jail and use the bathroom before returning to the tent area. Before I can do anything a curly-haired, cherub-looking child hands me a cup of cider, raising it as high as she can reach before looking away shyly. I take it and thank her and she runs back to the booth next to the jail yard. I walk over to the booth and leave a donation at their stand, but none of the operators seems too concerned about collecting. They’re too focused on bringing Dixie cups of cider out to the returning runners. I sip my cider and turn to watch as the K9 officer begins a demonstration, leading one of the police dogs around the grassy lawn in front of the jail in a mock drug search. The dog seems a little distracted. Addressing the audience of children and parents sitting cross-legged in front of him the officer explains: “He gets excited at events, all the people and excitement, he’s all jacked up!” Within a few minutes the dog has retrieved the planted drugs and the officer gives the dog a blue chew toy to play with. “It’s a big game for them” he remarks, “You have to give them a treat for working. This is his treat. You wouldn’t like it if you worked and didn’t get a paycheck would you?” This is met by a few sparse laughs.

Next comes a demonstration of how suspects are apprehended. From one of the doors to the jail a figure in a heavily padded jacket and pants comes running out. On his head is a green, plastic alien mask and in
one of his hands is a wooden baton. “Uh oh!” exclaims the K9 officer in a tone of mock concern, “Looks like we’ve got a bad ...alien? ...for Halloween I guess.” The officer releases the dog, who then leaps at the alien and grabs his arm with its teeth. The dog jerks its head side to side, hanging off the “alien’s” arm. The K9 officer and another officer are laughing as the audience claps and cheers. The alien mask falls off to reveal a sweaty, white man with short red hair. His face is flushed. He is not laughing. The K9 officer yells loudly “Aus! Nein! Fuss!” The dog releases the alien. We are told that Drago, the dog, was trained in and responds to German commands.

The officers run another demonstration, this time with two dogs, but my eyes move to the brick, jail building behind them and, for the first time that day, I notice an actual prisoner, a figure silhouetted in a 2nd floor window. The first figure is joined by another. I scan the building to see if anyone else is watching and see two more men standing outside, in the yard directly behind the fence that abuts the massage stand and the cider booth, talking to each other and watching the festivities outside.

As the K9 demonstration ends, the people around me begin talking. I notice the three crooks are now standing together in a small group with several uniformed FCSO officers. I want to approach them but I feel intimidated by the number of them and by how closely they’re standing to each other. I talk to one of the other runners instead, a middle-aged white woman dressed up as part of the “Chicken Run” group, in yellow tights, and with an inflated, latex glove attached to her head. “I love your costume!” I tell her. She says thank you. “How many years have you done this event?” “This is my first year, but it’s great. It’s very beautiful scenery” We agree. She joins the rest of her running group who seems to be leaving. The cherubic, cider child comes by again, this time running excitedly towards one of the crooks, the tallest one with dark hair who bends down to high five her.

A dance troupe sets up in front of where the K9 demonstration took place. On the loudspeaker, a white woman in her mid-30s announces that the group is ready to begin: “It’s nice to be back at the Jail Break
5k – it’s always a super fun event! Has anyone ever seen Celtic dancing?’ She asks. Some of the kids and adults raise their hands. A song begins playing on the sound system as the dancers - all girls dressed in black - form two concentric circles, stepping in unison to the music. Above them the prisoners are still watching from the window. There’s a breeze and the clouds have mostly cleared, but the air has gotten colder. The crowd starts to thin and I join some other people as they start walking towards their cars. I climb into mine, already stiff and sore, and leave the parking lot of the jail, Celtic music blaring on the loudspeakers behind me.

---

This event was my introduction to a degree and type of familiarity between a jail and a surrounding community that I had never experienced before moving to Western Massachusetts. I describe it as an introduction to some of the major themes this dissertation explores, in particular: efforts coming from various directions to integrate care, community and incarceration; and the simultaneous presence and exclusion of community members with lived experiences of incarceration. In the context of the 5K event, the jail served as a vehicle to raise funds for Community Action programs like fuel assistance, food pantries, early childhood learning and youth programming. In hosting the event, the sheriff’s department used its staff and the jail infrastructure to support these community resources and to serve as a gathering place for neighbors and area residents.

The jail grounds had the feel of a town festival, with food and music and family-oriented activities, but there was no attempt to hide the violence of incarceration. The theme of a “Jail Break” was woven through the fake wanted posters, K9 attack demonstrations, and the hunting down of “escapees.” All of this took place next to real, barbed-wire fences and in view of real prisoners. The event brought the jail and the surrounding community together, while still cloistering actually-incarcerated community members. The disproportionately-high percentage of Black and Latinx men and women incarcerated in
the jail, and who also depend on Community Action resources, were not reflected among the runners of the 5K.

I began formal fieldwork for this project in 2018, but the project began long before that. I started to get involved in prison abolitionist organizing in Western Massachusetts in the Fall of 2014. Among the large number of organizations working towards social change in the region, I was surprised that I could find only a handful of active projects that were explicitly abolitionist – Out Now, Prison Birth Project, Hampshire Students Against Mass Incarceration, local supporters of Black and Pink MA, and an annual convening of Running Down the Walls. By the time I began the fieldwork for this dissertation, most of those projects were no longer active. New projects were emerging, but the number of activists engaged in abolitionist organizing remained small, especially compared to other regions. Prior to organizing in Western Massachusetts, I had been involved in protests in Arizona against Sheriff Joe Arpaio, and against Senate Bill 1070 policing undocumented immigrants, and I had supported and researched radical anti-authoritarian-politics in the United States and in Europe. It seemed that in many other places, even more politically conservative communities, prison abolitionists had built robust organizing communities in collaboration with incarcerated comrades.

In Western Massachusetts, a hub of protest and progressive politics, and historically a center of abolitionist organizing against slavery, there seemed to be a minimal presence of prison abolitionist organizing, and much of what existed was connected to people incarcerated in other places, not in Western Massachusetts. As a prison abolitionist planning to live in Western Massachusetts, at least through graduate school, I wanted to support more prison abolition-oriented organizing in my communities. As a researcher, the absence of such organizing piqued my interest: Given the visibility and support of progressive politics in Western Massachusetts, why wasn’t there more organizing for prison abolition? And given the millions of people who have been incarcerated in the United States, and thousands locally – why weren’t more formerly incarcerated people leading struggles for reform, decarceration, and abolition? As I got more familiar with incarceration locally, and more involved in abolitionist organizing, it became apparent that community organizers and activists working towards
decarceration and abolition, and the sheriffs they oppose, both claim to represent the community and both claim a commitment to reform. From 2018 to 2021, I explored these questions and convergences ethnographically, drawing on interviews, participant observation, and personal and collective reflections.

In this dissertation, I try to highlight the perspectives of formerly incarcerated organizers, individuals who have been through the criminal legal system themselves and are working to change – or end – the system as it exists. Their perspectives have too often been ignored or excluded, from policy reforms as well as abolitionist organizing and academic scholarship. After introducing the historic and contemporary contexts of reform and the ways in which I came to meet these organizers, I center their stories as they shared them in interviews. I discuss organizing campaigns that they took part in, and then return to consider how currently and formerly incarcerated people are both central to, and marginalized within, movements for criminal justice reform and prison abolition.

I draw on the concept of “antropología comprometida,” or a committed anthropology, which I describe in greater detail in subsequent chapters, to think through my own commitment to abolition, as well as the ways in which I am implicated in and complicit with the hierarchies and exclusions that characterize the convergence between incarceration and academia. Thinking with this concept has helped me to better understand what I call the “progressive jail assemblage,” the larger concatenation of technologies, practices, forms of expertise, organizations and actors whose varying motivations and interests form, and reform, the institution of the jail in Western Massachusetts.

In this introduction I describe: some of the scholarly conversations that this project builds on and speaks to; the context in which this study takes place; and the specific research questions and methods that I have used to approach the activist concerns with which I began. I close with an overview of the chapters that follow.

**Literature Review**

*Critical Studies of Incarceration and Reentry*
Over the last two decades, critical scholars of incarceration have sought to make sense of the explosive growth in prison populations, particularly in the case of the United States. Such studies can be organized around a handful of major themes. One theme has been the use of incarceration as a tool of social control: how governments use and exploit the fear of crime as a pretense for expanding state power (Simon 2007), or as part of a larger cultural shift informing more punitive and economic state policies (Garland 2001), or as part of an evolution away from state welfare towards a neoliberal “prison-fare” regime for managing the poor (Wacquant 2009). A second major theme is the disproportionate policing, incarceration, and disenfranchisement of people of color, especially black communities. Major recent studies have considered how ostensibly “color-blind” policies of the war on drugs and war on crime have perpetuated racial inequality from the period of chattel slavery to the current moment (Alexander 2012, Dilts 2014, Hinton 2016).

A third theme in contemporary scholarship relevant to this project has been the role of gender within incarceration. Scholars have considered the often-neglected experiences of women (Law 2009, Haney 2010, McCorkel 2013, Hackett 2013, Perry and Hackett 2016, Sufrin 2017) and trans-prisoners (Smith and Stanley 2011) in incarceration, and in resistance, especially within progressive, “gender-responsive” programming. A fourth, related theme is the role of progressive politics and reform in perpetuating mass incarceration in the United States. Scholars have considered how movements for various citizen rights have enabled a more robust criminal justice system by demanding more state intervention, through campaigns against drugs and drunk driving, against racist violence, and against domestic and sexual violence (Murakawa 2014, Gottschalk 2006, 2015).

A fifth theme is the explicit discussion of prison abolition, from both contemporary and historical perspectives – including considerations of what institutions would be needed to replace the prison (Davis 2003, Schenwar 2014, Zurn and Dilts 2016). Finally, treatment and prisoner reentry is an area that has begun to receive more scholarly attention in recent years, and has also been a major focus among discussions within criminological and practitioner research over the past decade. Where this research has tended to focus on improving the efficacy of programs designed to prepare prisoners for leaving
incarceration (Lin 2000, Ross and Richards 2009), more critical approaches have critiqued the expanding “prisoner reentry industry” as an extension of prison control and surveillance into predominantly low-income communities of color and as a means of displacing social responsibility onto individuals (Wacquant 2010, Thompkins 2010, Werth 2013, Miller 2014, Liem 2016).

This project engages with each of these themes as they intersect in one geographic region, integrating attention to the dynamics of race, gender, social control, political stance, abolition and treatment. To develop a nuanced picture of incarceration and reentry this project uses an ethnographic approach, exploring how the process of reentry, the continuum between jails and communities, and possibilities for ex-prisoner engagement are experienced by formerly incarcerated community organizers. This grounded approach hopes to illuminate where local dynamics in Western Massachusetts reflect, and break from, the larger, national and international trends that are the focus of most studies described, and seeks to center the lived experience of formerly incarcerated organizers and their analyses. This project considers incarceration from the perspective of what some prisoners and staff consider to be its progressive edge, in terms of the emphasis on reform within the region’s criminal legal system and convergence with local and national progressive politics. Such a perspective can help to complicate and expand current discussions of incarceration and abolition, presenting what economic geographer Bent Flyvbjerg describes as a type of ethnographic “critical case study” - an extreme position from which one can see a more complete picture (Flyvbjerg 2001: 79). By focusing on a kind of “progressive extreme” within incarceration, this dissertation makes visible some of the regional variation in prisons and jails, and the particular challenges to reform and abolition that take shape in this context.

**Ethnographies of Incarceration**

At the writing of this dissertation, over 2 million people are currently incarcerated in the US - more than any other country in the world - and at a rate of 639 people per 100,000 – a rate that is also higher than
every other country\textsuperscript{2}. Over 4 million Americans are under some form of court-ordered surveillance (including parole or probation) at any moment\textsuperscript{3}. In the United States, Black people are incarcerated at the rate of 1,501 per 100,000. That is twice the rate of Hispanic/Latinx people (797 per 100,000), and 5 times the rate at which white people are incarcerated (268 per 100,000) and this disparity has decreased by 34% since 2006\textsuperscript{4}. The numbers are striking, and scholars and activists utilize this quantitative data to powerful effect. Numbers have proven useful for drawing attention to the extremity of incarceration within the United States, and for mobilizing action towards reform, decarceration and abolition. However, as some researchers argue below, more qualitative studies are needed if researchers, activists, and the public are to know how incarceration is experienced by the formerly incarcerated and their communities, and what effects, if any, proposed reforms might have.

Since the middle of the last century, a small but growing number of social scientists have sought to investigate incarceration. Much of the early qualitative research on prisons sought to show how inmates lived, how they built relationships and how they navigated the rules and governing their confinement (Clemmer 1940, Sykes 1958, Goffman 1961). This body of sociological research argued that prisons were communities with unique sets of relationships and social expectations that deserved scientific study. These and other studies emphasized the humanity of prisoners, and opened prisons to public scrutiny, prompting debate about the effects of prisons on individuals, and on the larger society of which individuals are a part. By and large, they argued that forms of prison culture they observed reflected the ways in which prisoners adapted to the environment of the prison, and that these qualities were not inherent, criminal characteristics of the individuals.

Most of these earlier, qualitative studies were conducted by sociologists and criminologists. Only in the 1990s were anthropologists beginning to study prisons in earnest. James B. Waldram, an applied anthropologist and psychologist, began research in a Canadian prison after being hired to develop more

\textsuperscript{2} World Prison Brief, May 2021: http://www.prisonstudies.org/highest-to-lowest/prison-population-total
\textsuperscript{3} Bureau of Justice Statistics, August 2020: https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=6986
culturally-informed treatment programs for Aboriginal prisoners (1998). In his 1998 article, he explores the challenges to conducting ethical research with captive populations and the protocols he developed with Aboriginal elders within the prison. Waldram argues that it is possible to do ethical research in prisons, but only if the individuals participating in the research can exercise oversight over the process, can veto the project, can view and edit manuscripts, and receive any monetary benefit from the project. Waldram argues that research outside of prisons is no less fraught with issues of power, and both require reflexivity.

Along these lines, anthropologist Lorna Rhodes, writing in 2001, argues that anthropologists should be conducting more research on prisons, as anthropologists can contribute more reflexive approaches than other fields, as well as more critical interrogations of the logics of incarceration, and “the terms of the discourse that frames and supports them” (Rhodes 2001: 75). Rhodes’ own research has looked at conditions of “super-maximum” security units in relation to mental health. Rhodes’ ethnographic approach combines interviews and visits with detailed descriptions of the techniques and technologies used by guards. These descriptions ground her critique of the super-maximum security unit, in which she finds that these units simultaneously house the most difficult, resistant prisoners, and exacerbate prisoners’ precarious mental and emotional states, leading many to become more resistant yet (Rhodes 2004).

In a 2002 article critiquing the “curious eclipse of prison ethnography,” Loïc Wacquant describes what he considers a surprising lack of ethnographic scholarship on the social phenomenon of incarceration (Wacquant 2002). Wacquant cites Waldram and Rhodes as exceptions to this shortage of contemporary prison ethnography, though he disagrees with Rhodes that the most pressing issue for social scientists of prisons is to intervene in the discourses that support them. In contrast, Wacquant argues that the most immediate need is simply for more ethnography and more social scientists inside prisons and jails. In the remainder of the article he presents some of the ethnographic research he has conducted in the Los Angeles County Jail, including analysis and field notes that document tense, overcrowded conditions. Wacquant also reflects on the risk of ethnography lapsing into voyeurism in a setting of confinement.
Researching the origin of California’s infamous Pelican Bay State Prison, Keramet Reiter analyzed the construction of the “super maximum”-security facility and the expanded use of solitary confinement within the California prison system, especially against confirmed or perceived gang members and political radicals (Reiter 2016). Reiter examines how the use of solitary confinement, also referred to as administrative segregation, and even the construction of new solitary units, is conducted at the discretion of prison administrators and with little to no legislative, or public oversight. Reiter argues that this administrative capture of the process of classification of inmates leaves little recourse for prisoners to contest their categorization, and has kept the increasingly-frequent use of this extreme form of punishment out of public view. This obscurity is occasionally interrupted, as was the case in 2013, when inmates at Pelican Bay organized a hunger strike that grew to include over 30,000 prisoners throughout the California prison system. Reiter’s account demonstrates how, even in the most isolating and punitive conditions, prisoners have been able to self-organize and build coalitions across racial and gang lines, and to build support from outside of prison.

Manuela Cunha’s 2014 Annual Review of Anthropology on "The ethnography of prisons and penal confinement," shows that the field has grown substantially since Wacquant’s critique. Cunha identifies some of the approaches that anthropologists have brought to the study of prisons: from contextualizing them as a porous, permeable institutions within larger social fields (contrary to the closed-off representation of which Goffman’s “total institution” is representative), to considering them as sites of interface between prisoners, their families, prison staff, etc.; to more reflexive research approaches that interrogate the relationship between researcher/research and incarceration. Cunha emphasizes the international scope of prison anthropology, as much of the most recent research on prisons has come from outside of the US and English-speaking world, from Europe, Latin America, Asia and Africa.

In his 2016 ethnography of a “short-stay prison” in metropolitan France, Didier Fassin considers some of the changes to France’s legal system that have contributed to a growing prison population and how prisons have dealt with that overcrowding. He describes the ways in which obvious ethnic and racial disparities are obscured by official state policies that do not record race, and how those disparities are
produced and maintained throughout the legal process. Fassin pays close attention to the material reality of the prison, following the movement of objects like cellphones and tobacco, and explicating the significance and variation in peepholes, windows, and other aspects of the physical layout of the prison, as well as the daily schedules and tensions of the prison, from perspectives of inmates, guards, and staff, and pointing where conflicts emerge or are resolved. Despite the overt emphasis on rehabilitation claimed by prison officials, Fassin finds that in practice, the purpose of the prison remains, one of retribution and one which targets a racialized, “dangerous class.” Situating himself between Goffman’s analysis of the asylum as a total institution, cut-off from society, and Foucault’s articulation of the prison within a larger “carceral archipelago” that extends throughout all of society, Fassin insists on the importance of understanding the connections and movement of people and things between prison and the outside world, and the distinct, intransigence of the prison as a specific type of historical phenomena.

Catarina Frois (2016) offers a comparative study of three Portuguese prisons, comparing inmates’ understandings of security and insecurity under very different physical and social conditions, with one facility housing more urban and younger inmates perceived as being more dangerous, another housing celebrities and sex offenders (who are themselves at higher risk of being victimized within prisons) and a third facility with a more heterogeneous mix of demographics and security levels. Frois finds that many factors contribute to the production of feelings of security/insecurity, including the physical infrastructure, and characteristics of prisoners, such as age and type of crime. Frois argues that, even if a prisoner does not come to see themselves as a danger to society, the setting of the prison is highly effective in encouraging prisoners to see fellow inmates as threatening and untrustworthy.

Some ethnographers of incarceration have looked beyond the physical setting of the prison or jail to consider how larger family networks and communities are impacted by this practice. Nancy Geilhufe (1978) describes working as an activist anthropologist on a local, ad-hoc committee trying to improve conditions for female inmates awaiting trial in the Santa Clara county jail in California. As a member of the committee, Geilhufe used her research and report-writing skills to support their calls for a new system to release women sooner, though she found that the committee had insufficient power, both in terms of
political support within the county government, and of organized support from the actual women in the jail.

Donald Braman’s 2004 *Doing Time on the Outside* takes an “anthropological approach” to describing the lives of the families of individuals who are incarcerated, how they support themselves and their loved ones, and how they make meaning of their experiences. Braman conducted hundreds of formal and informal interviews with fifty families in Washington DC, using a combination of snowball sampling and random sampling from the Washington DC Department of Corrections database. Braman argues that the current model of imprisonment creates more harm than good, and that more empirical studies are necessary to examine the ways in which incarceration can be buffered by, and can also undermine the “social capital – networks, reciprocity, and social norms” of prisoners and their families (Braman 2004: 6). Braman’s approach is a helpful conceptual model for thinking about how the social networks, including families, of ex-prisoners shape their experiences of post-incarceration.

Critical geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s 2007 study *Golden Gulag* also addresses the relationships between prisoners and their families, as well as prisons and communities. Gilmore combines a historical analysis of the political economic context of California’s prison boom, with an ethnographic study of activism by the group Mothers Reclaiming Our Children, an organization of mothers and other family members of incarcerated individuals. Gilmore describes how the group came together to support each other and to make sense of the political landscape in order to work towards police and prison reform. Working alongside the organization, Gilmore describes how politicians in rural counties were vying to build prisons and capture tax revenue, while police targeted Black and Latino communities in urban centers with heightened policing and tougher punishments, including longer sentences and mandatory minimum sentences. Gilmore demonstrates how racism and neoliberal reformations of the state have interacted, laying the groundwork for massive prison construction as a response to “surplus” populations, land and state capacity.

Judah Schept’s ethnography *Progressive Punishment* also looks at community-based activism, in this case against the construction of a new “justice campus” in Bloomington, Indiana. Schept, draws
attention to the local and global-level political economic factors that have driven incarceration within a politically progressive context. Politicians and bureaucrats at the state, county, and city level pushed for the combined jail, youth detention facility, and social services hub, as a positive use for a former television factory site after that company relocated its factory to Mexico. In creating the campus, these various actors consolidated local punitive, rehabilitative and therapeutic resources in one location. Schept and other activists involved in the effort to stop construction rejected this justification, arguing that the “justice campus” as proposed, would be a thinly-veiled, neoliberal response to the deindustrialization of Bloomington and its surrounding area, further entangling social services with incarceration and surveillance.

Across these ethnographies, researchers find similar themes, including tensions between the rehabilitative and punitive goals of correctional facilities, as well as the ways in which prisons and jails are simultaneously part of, and set apart from, larger social and political landscapes. The biggest contrast between these various studies might be the relationship between researchers and prison administrators. Contemporary researchers in North America describe more fraught relationships with prison and jail staff than European researchers. Waldram and Schept, in Canada and the US, describe explicitly avoiding close interactions with staff in order to build deeper rapport with prisoners and activists. In contrast, Fassin in France, and Frois in Portugal describe working closely with guards and supervisors, as well as with prisoners, with the intention of including a broader range of perspectives.

*Ethnographies of Reentry*

At the end of their sentence or upon receiving parole, incarcerated people who are released from prison or jail begin the process of what has come to be called “reentry.” Reentry has become a site of increased interest for prison officials and policymakers, who have tended to focus on the issue of recidivism - whether a former prisoner will be returned to incarceration after their release. Former prisoners may be incarcerated for committing a new crime, but they are much more likely to be re-incarcerated for violating a requirement of their parole. In the most recent National Institute of Justice
assessment in 2005, as many as 76.6% of released prisoners were arrested again within five years of their release. Much of the research on re-entry has focused on evaluating programs that seek to reduce rates of recidivism.

Critical scholars have observed a tendency within the reentry literature to focus on specific reentry programs and their outcomes, rather than questioning the reentry framework itself or the social, racial, and economic contexts within which reentry is being formulated (Hallett 2012). Ethnographic researchers have also sought to understand the impact of experiencing incarceration on the millions of people who have returned to their communities. Two recent ethnographic studies have approached the process of re-entry with critical and humanizing perspectives.

Jeralyn Faris’ 2011 PhD dissertation, Ex-prisoners’ lived experiences in a reentry court: An institutional ethnography presents her research, conducted over 46 months in a “Problem Solving Court” or re-entry court in the United States. Faris focuses intently on the daily operations of the court in which a judge decides on how the state should respond to probation violations, either through requiring the participant engage in some other form of programming, or through sanctions including re-incarceration. In her examination of the court, Faris documents the circulation of people within it, and the bureaucratic process and legal documents that shape the functioning of the court. Faris finds that legal documents like case managers’ reports and criminal records can take on a life of their own, weighing more heavily than the ex-prisoner’s own testimony, though the interpretation of these texts is negotiated by numerous actors, including the judge, case manager, reentry court team, ex-prisoners, and any supporters. Faris argues in favor of the expansion of this type of reentry court, with the caveat that the court find ways to support ex-prisoners in their efforts to make restitution and re-establish social ties, rather than exist solely to punish those who are unable to meet their probation requirements.

In a 2016 article based on her dissertation research, Renee M. Byrd examines how the discourse of prisoner reentry used by public officials, draws on the growing critique of mass incarceration, but uses it to further naturalize and expand the prison’s functions through reentry programming. Byrd uses critical discourse analysis of reentry programs and discourses of reentry, as well as ethnographic research,
involving interviews with formerly incarcerated women in Minneapolis-St. Paul and participant observation of religiously-oriented reentry programs. Byrd’s research is based within the politically-progressive setting of Minnesota, and examines how evangelical Christian and neoliberal logics intertwine within reentry frameworks.

Byrd finds that these influences reinforce each other, placing blame on formerly incarcerated women as morally-deficient individuals who, through self-improvement and faith can work to redeem themselves. In her interviews with ex-prisoners she finds a widespread sense of frustration that women are “surfaced” to freedom and then often re-incarcerated, in a cycle that deprives them of many of the resources and relationships that could help them to be successful in reentry. Byrd frames her research as building towards an “abolitionist reentry praxis” that would “take up and develop community accountability methods,” in which:

Formerly incarcerated people would be brought to the center of abolitionist movement-building. Individual-level service work would be held in tension with broader campaign work and popular education to combat the prison industrial complex (Byrd 2016: 16).

Both Byrd and Faris’ studies describe a fundamental tension between the coercive and rehabilitative tendencies of reentry courts and programs. They highlight the struggle of ex-prisoners to counter the isolating and stigmatizing effects of imprisonment, a struggle which is in some cases made easier by reentry programs and in other cases made even more challenging. Byrd’s vision of an “abolitionist reentry praxis” disrupts the individualizing focus of re-entry by emphasizing movement-building and campaign work, while still recognizing a role for individual level service-work - though she presents these as a necessary tension within such a praxis.

Governmentality and Treatment

Critical studies of governmentality - the production and control of subjects through various techniques and disciplines - offer another body of scholarship with which to investigate incarceration and post-incarceration. Scholars such as Nikolas Rose, building on the work of Michel Foucault, have analyzed the role of “psy” sciences as technologies of producing governable selves, acting alongside and
through institutions like schools, hospitals, and jails (Rose 1989, 1999). Psychology, psychiatry, behavioral and therapeutic sciences have been fundamental in shaping and justifying the treatment paradigm that informs much contemporary jail practices. As I explore in my research, jail and post-jail treatment programs in Western Massachusetts are presented as scientific (“evidence-based” and “trauma-informed”) means of converting prisoners into more effectively self-governing subjects – or as the Hampden County Sheriff’s Office describes, “challenging them to pick up the tools and directions to build a law-abiding life.”\textsuperscript{5}

Barbara Cruikshank has analyzed how such discourses of empowerment operate within self-esteem programs, social services, and even welfare reform movements. Cruikshank considers how these and other “technologies of citizenship” found in democratic societies function as tools of liberal governance, producing “citizen-subjects” that are at once both subject to the constraints of the state and society, and tasked with helping and governing themselves within it (Cruikshank 1999). Rather than seeing these technologies as only modes of social control, Cruikshank argues that such technologies also produce the conditions that make democratic citizenship possible. Where a social control-focused perspective might dismiss jail programs as only serving to blame prisoners for their problems and to extend surveillance over their lives, an approach that examines them as “technologies of citizenship” can help us appreciate how prisoners and ex-prisoners navigate within programs, enacting their own agency and drawing resources out of these programs, while still subject to their regulations.

Ethnographies of treatment and poverty provide examples of this kind of approach. Summerson Carr (2011) examines the language of addiction recovery through interviews and participant observation of the staff and clients of a gender-sensitive, outpatient drug treatment program for homeless women. Carr explores how therapists and social service professionals exhort program participants to narrate or “script” their recovery in prescribed modes. Carr finds that many clients become experts in “flipping the script” – learning to meet staff expectations in terms of how they narrate their recovery, while exercising

\textsuperscript{5} “About our Department,” Hampden County Sheriff’s Office (8 Aug 2017): http://hcsdma.org/our-sheriff/
agency by acting in ways that contradict these scripts as they seek out other resources, relationships, or strategies (2011). Similarly, Dana-Ain Davis, in her ethnography *Battered Black Women and Welfare Reform* finds that Black women who have experienced domestic violence and are seeking assistance are compelled by punitive welfare policies to become “self-sufficient,” while those same policies hinder their ability to become independent (2006). In the case studies Davis describes, these women navigate complex and contradictory welfare program requirements, using their own strategies to get around program rules that prevent them from sustaining themselves.

James Waldram’s ethnography, *Hound Pound Narrative*, expands on this work to considers how white and Aboriginal inmates in the sex offender treatment program of a Canadian therapeutic prison navigate competing modes of narrative and paradigmatic truth-telling in their efforts towards parole. Waldram refers to the existing treatment process as one of “habilitation” (rather than rehabilitation), using Cognitive Behavioral Therapy methods to condition prisoners to see and respond to the world in new ways that will make them less likely to re-offend. Waldram criticizes this approach as focusing exclusively on one narrow measure of public safety and not considering the experience of the inmate, or the larger social conditions in which their offenses have taken place. Waldram presents his ethnographic research as a contribution towards the “anthropology of therapeutic intervention” in that Waldram complicates existing studies of treatment that consider success or failure rates but not the underlying logics of rehabilitation that inform prison programs or how they are experienced by participants (Waldram 2012).

Similarly, Carolyn Sufrin’s ethnography of medical care in the San Francisco county jail, from the perspective of an ethnographer and as an OB/GYN employed by the jail, considers the ambiguity cultivated by both healthcare providers and patient-prisoners within the jail setting. As Sufrin describes, jails and prisons often serve as de facto safety nets for the most marginalized. At the same time, prisoners are the only population in the United States who are legally entitled to medical care, though what that care looks like is negotiated by healthcare providers, jail staff and administrators, and prisoners themselves. Ambiguities within the roles of jailer and healthcare provider, or prisoner and patient, create space for
providers to informally offer humanizing care and for patient-prisoners to build relationships with staff. These relationships may also serve as openings for manipulation by prisoners or abuse by staff, however. Sufrin argues that ethnographies allow for a more complex understanding of care than those critical approaches that dismiss treatment as simply tools of discipline (Sufrin 2017).

These ethnographies, like Cruikshank’s analysis, provide nuanced examples of how treatment modalities are used to discipline prisoners and ex-prisoners, and how they also create opportunities for contestation, resistance, and re-appropriation. Ethnographers of incarceration cite scholarly literature on neoliberal governmentality in their analysis of how such treatment programs are deployed as tools of rehabilitation, intended to produce reformed and self-governing subjects while erasing the structural violence and abandonment that have shaped many incarcerated people’s lives (Waldrum 2012, Hackett 2013, Perry and Hackett 2016). This dissertation builds on this body of critical ethnographic studies of incarceration by drawing on individuals’ lived experience to analyze how: 1) a highly-individualizing emphasis on self-improvement within treatment paradigms can serve to discourage collective, political activism and draw prison and jail reformers away from larger, structural analyses; and 2) the assemblage of programs, actors, institutions and logics that constitute the treatment paradigm within prisons, jails and reentry can also create conditions for formerly incarcerated organizers to become leaders within reform movements, and even support abolitionist re-imaginings of the end of incarceration.

**Government, Industry and Nonprofit “Gray” Literature**

In addition to academic writing on incarceration, this dissertation engages with literature produced by professionals in fields connected to incarceration, including: state agencies, including the Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections, Massachusetts Department of Corrections; private security companies like the GEO Group and CoreCivic (formerly Corrections Corporation of America); private consulting firms; and institutes and advocacy organizations, like the Urban Institute, American Civil Liberties Union, Prison Policy Initiative, Mass Inc., and the Real Cost of Prisons Project. These entities publish their own reports, white papers, news articles, and more, reporting the outcomes of
initiatives, and promoting best practices in their respective fields. Some of these materials cite academic writing, and academics sometimes draw on this literature, but more often, these conversations exist in parallel, with very limited engagement between academic and “industry” literature. Reading and interacting with this literature has also been important for understanding the ideas and trends that inform local practices and how those have changed over time.

**Literature Written by and with Prisoners and Ex-prisoners**

One of the goals of this project is to engage with formerly incarcerated individuals as knowledge producers. Written accounts by prisoners and former prisoners have had a prominent role in prison reform and abolition movements. In the 1960s and 1970s, memoirs written by Black political prisoners like George Jackson’s *Soledad Brother*, Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*, Angela Davis’ *If They Come in the Morning*, and Chicano prison intellectual raúlrsalinas, inspired political organizing within and beyond prison walls (Rodriguez 2006[9]). More recent writing by political prisoners like Russell Maroon Shoatz (2013) and Mumia Abu Jamal (1996, 2015) have continued this lineage of prison-based intellectual activism. Andrea James (2013), a former lawyer and formerly incarcerated individual from Roxbury, Massachusetts, argues for the need for former prisoners to have a say in policy decisions that impact their communities - a goal she advances through Families for Justice as Healing, an organization she co-founded with other incarcerated women.

In the US and the UK, formerly incarcerated scholars have established a new field of “convict criminology,” critical research on criminal justice systems and social aspects of criminology, informed by direct experiences of incarceration and post-incarceration (Ross and Richards 2002, 2003, 2009, Earle 2016) Criminologist William Davies, in the *Palgrave Handbook of Prison Ethnography* (Drake 2015), discusses his decision to share his status as an ex-prisoner with inmates before conducting interviews at a prison in the UK. Exchanging information about his own history helped him to build rapport with current prisoners and explain his stake in the research. Under the pressure of a brief time limit set by the prison,
he found this strategy of opening-up about his own experiences to be helpful for quickly establishing a relationship with participants, and for distinguishing himself from staff.

Some educational and therapeutic programs in jails across the country also engage prisoners as members of learning communities. Teachers trained by the Inside Out Prison Exchange program hold classes in correctional facilities across the country. These spaces serve as a point of encounter between prisoners and outside college students, and often involve the production of texts on various themes, including reflexive writing about incarceration (Davis and Roswell 2013). Voices from Inside, a Western Massachusetts-based organization holds writing workshops and public readings by currently, and formerly incarcerated women, some of whom have gone on to facilitate their own workshops. These venues offer a starting pointing for engaging with ex-prisoners who are already writing and thinking critically about the experience of incarceration.

**Project Context + Description**

This project is situated within the specific cultural, political-economic, and historical context of reform efforts in Western Massachusetts. Though I focus on reform activism based in and around local, county jails, including the continuum of post-incarceration services with which many ex-prisoners interact, these efforts extend outwards to statewide policies and national mobilizations around prisons, jails, and policing.

*The jail*

A central focus of this project is the institution of the jail. Jails are generally differentiated from prisons in that jails are facilities where prisoners are held while awaiting trial or for shorter sentences, rather than prisons, which are reserved for longer sentences. In Massachusetts, most counties have a combined “jail and house of corrections.” Jails are formally the sites where individuals are held while awaiting trial and houses of corrections are sites where sentences of 2.5 years and shorter are carried out. Both sections are operated by the sheriff of that county and both sections tend to be adjacent or even within the same
physical structure. Jail administrators and activists frequently use the term “jail” as a shorthand to describe both the jail and house of corrections.

The primary reason that I focus on jails is that there are no prisons in Western Massachusetts, only local and regional jails. Despite their absence, there are numerous connections between Western Massachusetts and prisons in other parts of the state. Because there are no local prisons, individuals from Western Massachusetts who are sentenced to terms longer than 2.5 years are incarcerated in prisons in the central and eastern parts of the state, usually after being incarcerated in local jails beforehand. While sheriffs determine many of the policies within county jails, their funding as well as statewide policies are determined by the Massachusetts state legislature, so activists attempting to change state policies often coordinate with incarcerated people in state prisons as well as county jails. Despite this relationship between prisons and jails, jails are often overlooked within academic and popular discussions of incarceration. Echoing Sufrin (2017), I consider jails to be a critical, yet under-studied feature of the criminal justice system. I argue that the following qualities of jails make them especially generative for studying incarceration, and for studying attempts by activists to reform or abolish incarceration:

1) Reformers tend to have more physical, and political access to jails as jails tend to be located within or closer to the communities, and are administered by local, political units. Because of their proximity to communities, jails may be more likely to demonstrate impacts of reform efforts, especially local variations in policies\(^6\). By contrast, prisons tend to be more physically remote, and are administered by larger administrative units at state or federal levels.

2) Former prisoners are likely to have ongoing interaction with jail systems after incarceration, as many of the city or county sheriff’s departments that operate jails also manage some type of post-incarceration support and coordinate with probation offices. This is often true for individuals who have been incarcerated in both prisons and jails. Recently released ex-prisoners often have conditions placed on them that can include: required, weekly reporting to a probation officer, rules that prevent ex-prisoners from interacting with other formerly incarcerated people, prohibitions on alcohol and drug use and random testing of urine samples to check compliance, GPS ankle bracelets that verify an ex-prisoner’s location, required attendance in substance abuse or anger management classes and more (Ross and

\(^6\) In a recent example of such variation, the Bristol County Sheriff’s Office in Eastern Massachusetts announced in July 2017 that it would end all in-person visits between prisoners and family members, replacing contact with video conferencing to limit opportunities for prisoners to acquire contraband. The week after the Bristol County announcement, all four Western Massachusetts sheriffs spoke in contrast, affirming their commitment to in-person visits as a tool for rehabilitation.
Richards 2009). These kinds of programs extend the jail’s reach into the lives of formerly incarcerated individuals, their families, and communities, but they also create targets for reform, and opportunities for engagement within the system – through employment or volunteering.

3) Jails are more prevalent within the United States than prisons. There are 3,283 local jails compared to 1,921 state and federal prisons. Far more people pass through jails than through prisons each year, and yet prisons are more visible in popular media and much of the scholarly literature than jails. According to the Prison Policy Initiative (also based in Western Massachusetts), the number of people in local jails in the United States at any given time is around 630,000, compared to 1.2 million in state prisons and 226,000 in federal prisons, however, there were 10.6 million times that individuals were incarcerated in a jail in 2020. This number includes people who were incarcerated multiple times within a year, those who were transferred to or from prisons, as well as those who were incarcerated but not convicted of a crime and later released. This movement of people in and out of jails is referred to as “jail churn.” And these statistics mean that people incarcerated in the United States are far more likely to be incarcerated in a jail than a prison.

4) Jails have more fluid populations, and populations with more diverse legal statuses than prisons. Because of their function, jails house individuals who are awaiting trial, individuals who have been convicted of minor misdemeanors or probation violations, individuals convicted of more serious crimes, as well as in some facilities, undocumented immigrants held awaiting removal proceedings. Jails are used to serve multiple public health interventions, as sites to address immediate substance abuse (“drunk tanks”) as well as sites where prisoners have longer term substance use and mental health treatment imposed upon them. Formerly-incarcerated sociologist John Irwin argues that the primary purpose of the jail as an institution has, throughout its history, been to contain that community’s “rabble,” the unruly segment of the lower classes, based on their offensiveness to the public, rather than the severity of their crimes (Irwin 1985). The instability and heterogeneity of jail populations create conditions that differ from prisons, and that both incarcerated and formerly incarcerated organizers and their allies navigate in different ways from prison-based organizing where populations are more stable, though still diverse in terms of demographics, sentence length and security level (medium and maximum security, “super-max,” and death row).

5) Jails have their own unique characteristics as institutions. Jails are the initial site of incarceration for individuals, and new prisoners often experience some of the most acute forms of stress, guilt, and trauma while in jail. According to a federal, Bureau of Justice Statistics study, the suicide rate in county jails in the United States between 2000 and 2013 was three times that of prisons, and the suicide rate for those awaiting trial was seven times the rate for those who have been convicted. The death of Sandra Bland is one recent, high-profile instance of the well-documented phenomenon of death in jail, but this is a phenomenon well documented in the US and internationally (Fassin 2016, Frois 2016). There have been 42 documented cases of suicide in Massachusetts county jails since 2012 alone.

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8 https://www.themarshallproject.org/2015/08/04/why-jails-have-more-suicides-than-prisons#.grOno4FNP;
9 New England Center for Investigative Reporting: https://www.necir.org/2017/05/06/behind-the-wall-suicides-mount-in-massachusetts-county-jails/
for prisoners in jails as opposed to prisons, where prisoners may have years and even decades to build relationships and community.

The region

The geographical setting for this project is Western Massachusetts. I focus primarily on incarceration and organizing within Hampden County, where I lived while carrying out most of the research for this dissertation, however I also consider connections to the larger landscape of incarceration, reform and abolition in the other two counties that make up the “Pioneer Valley” of Western Massachusetts – Franklin and Hampshire counties – and to a lesser extent Berkshire County in the far west of the state. I situate this organizing within statewide political structures and organizing initiatives. Within the study of incarceration, medium and smaller-sized cities and rural areas have received far less attention than major cities, and jails and post-incarceration experiences have received less attention than experiences of prisons.

Like other regions of the United States, parts of Western Massachusetts have experienced severe, though uneven, effects of deindustrialization over the past 50 years. The economic shift, from hubs of manufacturing and agricultural industries to ones in which hospital systems, human services, and educational institutions are the largest employers, has had implications for what industries interact with correctional facilities, as well as for the employment possibilities of individuals returning from prison and jail. Jail-based programs for education, job training, and substance abuse treatment are supported and/or supplemented by county, state, and federal initiatives as well as by colleges, human service agencies, churches, and community organizations. Although there are profound variations among the communities in this region, in terms of politics, demographics, and resources, the region tends to elect Democratic Party politicians and there is a long history of social reform movements and activism in Massachusetts, ranging from religious and labor reform, to abolition organizing against slavery, to progressive social causes, environmental direct action, and utopian living experiments – all of which, as I explore, is reflected in the region’s jails.
Research Questions

In doing this research I set out with the following questions:

1) How do formerly incarcerated individuals experience reentry to society from jail in Massachusetts?
2) Who are the actors currently involved in prisoner reentry to society from each jail?
3) What are the post-incarceration, treatment and educational programs that currently exist?
4) Who are the actors currently involved in jail reform?
5) What research questions are formerly-incarcerated activists interested in?

Description of Chapters

In the first two chapters, “Histories of Incarceration and Reform in New England” and “the Progressive Jail,” I situate the current moment of progressive jailing within a long history of carceral reform. I describe how reformers in 19th century Massachusetts established probation services, halfway houses, and created modes of shared governance within reform schools and prisons. In the 20th century Massachusetts prisons were experimenting with open campuses, furloughs, vocational training, college courses, and treatment centers for alcohol and drug addiction. Within this context, contemporary commitments to treatment, rehabilitation, and care join a longer historical tradition. Throughout Massachusetts history, these rehabilitative, caring elements have existed alongside violence, abuse, and isolation. I use the concept of assemblage to make sense of how these heterogeneous elements work together, and at odds, and how they have become integral to progressive jailing in New England.

In the following chapter, “Doing the Ethnography Pt. 1” I describe the political commitments and influences that inform my research and activism, and that have shaped my multiple modes of engagement with jails and abolition. I use the concept of antropología comprometida to reflect on how my own committed, and even compromised, positions make visible some of the tensions and convergences between jails, abolitionist organizing, and academia (Aguirre Beltrán 1977, Fultz 2010, Hernández Castillo 2018).

In the chapter titled “Trajectories,” I interview formerly incarcerated community organizers and activists who describe their process of re-entry post-incarceration and the paths through which they
became active in reform, advocacy, and support work. Some of the major themes that emerged from their stories were: the importance of developing a sense of agency, the importance of connecting their experience to others, and the importance of mentoring relationships. In my interviews with the, formerly incarcerated organizers also described barriers they faced. These included broader challenges to stability like discrimination in employment and housing, the onerous demands of parole, and frustrations within organizing, especially exclusionary practices that kept power in the hands of a small number of people.

In the “Campaigns” chapter, I describe organizing campaigns led by currently and formerly incarcerated organizers. Through these campaigns, organizers demanded immediate improvements to conditions inside jails and prisons: increasing access to medical care, ending abusive treatment by corrections officers, and - during the Covid-19 pandemic – access to sufficient food, cleaning supplies and personal protective equipment. Organizers demanded greater power for currently and formerly incarcerated people through access to voting, and worked to build platforms for those most impacted by prisons and jails to be able to speak out. I analyze some of the issues that campaigns faced, including tensions within movements over what to prioritize, and some of the particular challenges posed by progressive jailing.

In “Contesting Care” I focus on the concept of care as a key terrain of contestation. Care emerged as a central concern of both the progressive jail assemblage and activists working towards decarceration and abolition. In the chapter, I analyze competing notions of care, describing the discourses and practices of progressive sheriffs and their jails, as well as those of community organizers and decarceration activists.

In the chapter “Collaborations,” I considered how activists are attempting to address inequalities within movements and their communities, using concepts of mutual aid and harm reduction to attend to relationships of unequal power in organizing and care work. Drawing on the work of Black Feminist theorists Christina Sharpe and Denise Ferreira da Silva, I considered the concerns that formerly incarcerated organizers have raised about how movements enact care and reproduce otherness, and how these dynamics might be interrupted.
In “Doing the Ethnography Pt. 2,” I outline how I have attempted to apply insights from this research into various interventions, based on my positionality as a committed activist-scholar. I describe some collaborative interventions that have already occurred and propose some future directions. In the “Conclusions” I review key findings and consider how this work might inform future research as well as abolitionist organizing: 1) the relationship between progressive jailing and decarceration; 2) the contested terrain of care; and 3) insights for abolitionist scholar-activism.
CHAPTER 2
HISTORIES OF INCARCERATION AND REFORM IN NEW ENGLAND

Scholars have characterized the history of incarceration as one of perpetual reform, or as Ruth Wilson Gilmore puts it, “reforming reformed reforms” (Gilmore 2007: 14). In 1958, sociologist Gresham Sykes referred to “the prison problem” as a “hardy perennial” that “has managed to survive every new storm of public indignation and concern” (Sykes 1958: vii). In Discipline and Punish (1975), Michel Foucault examines the emergence of the penitentiary as a specific shift of punitive practices, from those that impose sovereign power, through the physical destruction of the body of the perpetrator, to the disciplinary power enacted through the regulation of every aspect of life within the prison. Reforms have varied in their aim, and have frequently sought to amplify or undo previous reforms: limiting the modes and extent of punishment, increasing the severity of punishment, decreasing capacity of the prison, expanding what counts as a crime worth of incarceration, and more.

Within the context of Western Massachusetts, and New England more broadly, the history of incarceration is saturated with reforms, carried out by those within positions of power enacting projects of moral uplift and social experimentation, and by those resisting institutional power and fighting for collective liberation from the prison cell. While scholarship on prisons and jails in the United States has grown tremendously in recent years, the specific histories of incarceration in New England, and their implications for reform and abolition work today remain under-theorized. In contrast, the historic trajectory of incarceration in the American South has become more widely known and documented: from the institution of chattel slavery and enslavement of Africans, to Jim Crow laws of racial segregation and oppression, to “the New Jim Crow” of mass incarceration and prison labor exploitation that has continued to disproportionately target Black Americans through the 13th Amendment’s exception, allowing the continued enslavement for convicted criminals and the physical reconfiguration of plantations into prisons (Alexander 2012, DuVernay 2016).
This history has been invoked by activists to characterize the history of incarceration across the United States, and while important, it ignores other regional dynamics. Across these instances, prisons and jails have been used as technologies of social control, reinforcing white supremacy, economic inequality, patriarchy and other forms of oppression. However, the ways in which they operate have had very different implications for the interactions between activists and prison and jail officials, and for the terrain of reform and abolition. In this chapter I discuss some of the history of incarceration in New England, and some of the threads of reform that have shaped how prisons and jails operate today.

Colonial roots of incarceration and reform

In what would become the United States, criminal justice reforms began with colonization. English colonists in North America sought explicitly to make punishment more constrained than it had been in England, particularly in the limitations they placed on capital punishment. Where in England, a much wider range of crimes could be punishable by death, under the new colonial administrations only the most heinous crimes and intransigent offenders faced execution. In addition to the English and other European settlers who populated the new colonies, Indigenous and Black individuals were sometimes subject to these laws - though this was only a small piece of the larger genocidal violence to which their communities were subjected under ongoing settler colonization (Mofford 2012, Manion 2015, Welch 1999).

As early as 1620, members of the Puritan sect of the Church of England founded some of the original European colonies of present-day New England. Displacing, destroying, and assimilating indigenous communities, their mass settlement in present-day Massachusetts and Connecticut and official charters from England allowed them to impose a strict moral code on themselves and other colonists as well as indigenous peoples who remained within their colonies. Puritan town leaders concerned themselves with the moral comportment of families and of individuals in their relationships to the community, including the proper observance of Sabbath days. Their concern focused especially on the control of sexual deviants, women who rejected expected gender roles, Quakers, Native Americans, and
enslaved or formerly enslaved Africans. Puritans built structures called *gaols* (jails) to confine those awaiting punishment (Mofford 2012). A scene from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, describes a crowd of Puritan onlookers waiting outside the jail of Boston in the 1640s:

“It might be that a sluggish bond-servant, or an undutiful child, who his parents had given over to the civil authority, was to be corrected at the whipping-post. It might be that an Antinomian, a Quaker, or other heterodox religionist, was to be scourged out of the town, or an idle and vagrant Indian, whom the white man’s fire-water had made riotous about the streets, was to be driven with stripes into the shadow of the forest. It might be, too, that a witch, like old Mistress Hibbins, the bitter-tempered widow of the magistrate, was to die upon the gallows” (Hawthorne 2005: 37).

The scenes of punishment that Hawthorne describes are corroborated by colonial accounts. Punishments in colonial New England included fines, public confession, confinement in the stocks, public whipping, or physical disfigurement. Hanging was used for capital or repeated crimes or as punishment for witchcraft. The first jail in Massachusetts was founded in Boston in 1635, fifteen years after the founding of Plymouth Colony and only six years after the founding of Massachusetts Bay Colony. Jails in this period, as portrayed above, were utilized primarily as holding places for those awaiting trial, and punishment itself was generally delivered quickly.

**The emergence of penology in the early United States**

By the time of the American Revolution, Puritans had lost their dominance over the government of the New England colonies, and especially over the regulation of punishment. A new generation of reformers emphasized rehabilitation over retribution, inspired by Enlightenment thinkers like the Italian jurist and philosopher Cesare Beccaria, whose 1764 treatise *On Crimes and Punishments* helped to establish the field of penology. Newly-formed state governments sought to limit the use of capital punishment even further, and replace widespread corporal punishment with isolation and work in newly-constructed prisons and workhouses. This “scientific” approach was promoted as more effective and humane, in explicit contrast to the reliance on capital punishment inherited from Great Britain (Manion 2015).
The United States emerged as a leader in the new field of “penology.” Quaker reformers in Philadelphia developed the “Pennsylvania system,” using architectural innovations to enforce total solitary confinement in new “penitentiaries,” like Eastern State Penitentiary opened in 1829, where prisoners were left to study biblical scripture and reflect in total isolation in penance for their crimes. In New York state, reformers modified the penitentiary model, introducing collective labor during the day, but maintaining total silence and solitary confinement at night, a model referred to as the Auburn system (Manion 2015). In rejecting the public violence of whipping and disfigurement, reformers of the early United States turned to forced labor and solitary confinement, elements of contemporary incarceration that have received some of the most vehement condemnations. By the 1970s, organizations like the American Friends Service Committee would later come to renounce the role that Quakers and other reformers had played in pushing for these changes, and eventually join other groups, like the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, in calls for a moratorium on prison construction (American Friends Service Committee 1971, Gottschalk 2006). At the time, however, these changes were considered revolutions of Enlightened thinking and the Auburn and Pennsylvania systems became models for prisons around the world. Great Britain, and other European states would establish similar systems, weaving scientific and humanist concerns into new modes of punishment aimed towards rehabilitation.

In 1831, the French government sent two commissioners to study the innovative penal institutions of the United States, and to develop recommendations for improving the French system - Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave Beaumont. Writing from Boston, Beaumont boasts that he and de Tocqueville have “consulted the best authorities in the field” and:

visited two very well maintained prisons, organized according to the new model, whose basic principle is solitary confinement. The advantages of this system are widely recognized and have been adopted by almost every state of the Union. Not for a moment do I doubt its superiority. The only obstacle to its introduction in France will be its cost” (Tocqueville, Alexis de, Gustave de Beaumont, and Frederick Brown 2010: 189-190).

In addition to Auburn Prison in New York, and Eastern State Penitentiary in Pennsylvania, one of the other institutions de Tocqueville and Beaumont toured was the Boston House of Reformation, a reformatory for delinquent youth where Episcopal minister EMP Wells had introduced a new system of
“self-governance.” As the superintendent of the Boston House of Reformation from 1828 until 1832, Wells banned corporal punishment and compulsory training and granted “inmates” voting rights in school administration and discretion over which classes they chose to attend. The young inmates were also expected to assess and record their own merits or demerits in evening assemblies and to adjudicate each other in the case of transgressions against rules set by the community (Baker 1985). Similar dynamics of self-governance have continued in jails, in the form of weekly meetings and self-assessments and in the setting of community guidelines. So too has solitary confinement: as a disciplinary tool in the case of non-cooperation, as a “safety” measure used to isolate LGBTQIA prisoners\(^\text{10}\), or even as a quarantine measure during pandemic\(^\text{11}\).

**Massachusetts as a site of progressive experimentation**

Massachusetts State Prison in Charlestown, a maximum-security facility for adults was open from 1805 to 1956, and was also the site of progressive experimentation, including the formation of the Massachusetts State Prison Society for Moral Improvement and Mutual Aid. Founded in 1843, the Society was led by a committee composed of the warden, chaplain, prison clerk, and six elected inmates and included up to 75% of those incarcerated at the prison. It championed the self-improvement of each member, practiced through abstinence from alcohol, and encouraged by fortnightly meetings with reading discussions that included both inmates and officers (Baker 1985). John Augustus, a professional cobbler and temperance activist, earned a reputation in Boston courts as the “Father of Probation” for his practice of bailing out some offenders facing charges related to drunkenness. As a member of the Washington Total Abstinence Society, Augustus sponsored individuals who were unable to pay bail and whom he

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perceived as capable of reform (Augustus 1972). Beginning in 1841 and ending with his death in 1859, August paid the bail for 1,946 men and women. The majority succeeded in meeting the requirements of the court with many being released on fines rather than face incarceration. Other volunteers and judges took part in this early experiment in probation and set the groundwork for the Massachusetts’ legislature to pass the nation’s first probation law in 1878 and establish the Massachusetts Probation Service (Alarid 2017).

In 1877, Massachusetts opened the Sherborn Reformatory for Women, now Massachusetts Correctional Institute Framingham, the oldest correctional institution for women currently in operation in the United States (Jacobson-Hardy 2002). The establishment of a specialized institution for women allowed for programming aimed at reforming the morality of women and work training programs designed to assist incarcerated women in finding socially acceptable work after release. It also had the side-effect of concentrating most of the state’s female prisoners in one location, far from most of their families, and excluded from many of the experimental reform projects taking place at other facilities in the state.¹²

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, New England towns demonstrated a communal obligation to care for residents that frequently blurred into more coercive forms. David Wagner, in his study of the history of “poorhouses” and “poor farms” in New England analyzes institutions in which families or local authorities placed those who could not support themselves. Greenfield was among those cities, and had a “town farm,” located down the road from the current jail. That farm is now the site of Just Roots, a social-justice oriented farm and community garden, where currently-incarcerated individuals in pre-release can apply to work among non-incarcerated workers. Residents of poor houses and poor farms included the

¹² These issues have continued, alongside the physical dilapidation of many of the buildings. Incarcerated women at MCI-Framingham have fought against the retaliation of guard and prison administrators to document medical neglect and the health impacts of exposure to asbestos and black mold over many years. Grebben, Shelby and Isha Marathe, “Inside the fight to document the horrors at America’s oldest women’s prison” Dig Bòston (December 17, 2020): https://digboston.com/inside-the-fight-to-document-the-horrors-at-americas-oldest-womens-prison/?fbclid=IwAR3cuu4MfM2R188CerIow7O2sxn9R7SF89oIWPX-DK3vM_RXht4sRCgxKnY
elderly, the infirm, those with mental or physical disabilities, alcoholics, single mothers, and itinerant laborers, as well as prisoners charged with minor offenses. All were expected to contribute to the maintenance and self-sufficiency of the institution and to live under its regulations. However, letters from residents and staff reports attest to ways that residents sometimes flouted prohibitions on drinking, pursuing outside work, and engaging in sexual relationships. Wagner argues that the “repressive benevolence” of the poorhouse, as a combined site of welfare, punishment, respite, labor, and emergency shelter, is characteristic of the tangled traditions of American social welfare and charity that have continued into the current era (Wagner 2005). Some of the poorhouses Wagner studied continued to operate as late as the 1970s, after which all were either closed or converted into nursing homes or houses of corrections.

Alongside these efforts to concentrate individuals deemed “deviant” into jails, and poorhouses, there were also initiatives to try and prevent deviance. In the 1910s and 1920s, Western Massachusetts hosted several studies and public health initiatives promoting the then-cutting edge science of eugenics (Rothschadl 2014). Backed by public health officials, academics, policymakers, and religious leaders, groups like the American Eugenics Society collected information on families perceived as contributing to the moral and economic decline of their communities, by passing on what were then seen as hereditary traits of alcoholism, uncleanliness, and feeble-mindedness. Eugenicists held public assessments of genetic strengths and weaknesses in the form of “Fitter Families” contests at county and state fairs, including the Eastern States Exposition of West Springfield. Public officials’ interest in eugenics coincided with anxieties about demographic shifts in Western Massachusetts, as Irish and Eastern European Catholics (especially Poles) replaced out-migrating English protestants. Promoters of eugenics argued that these new immigrants represented the section of society rejected by their home countries. Officials discouraged the reproduction of immigrants and those autochthonous families deemed genetically predisposed to criminality and poverty, using a combination of segregation and coerced sterilization. In neighboring Vermont, the Vermont Eugenics Survey disproportionately targeted French Canadian and Native American (especially Abenaki) families [4] (Kaelber 2012).
The eugenics movement was more directly aimed at preventing reproduction than contemporary interventions utilized by jail and reentry programs, but it can be seen as an important precursor for coercive, state involvement in poor families and families of color. The eugenics movement was, at that time, also considered a progressive movement. Eugenicists promoted the use of science to guide reproductive policies that they saw as promoting the social good. Current day programs range from Nurturing Father’s Programs that teach parenting skills to incarcerated men, to residential drug treatment programs for mothers who are leaving incarceration [5]. Though these programs coach current and future parents in better parenting skills, one of the side-effects of mass incarceration continues to be the physical separation of individuals from their families, often during prime reproductive and parenting years, undermining their ability to enact such parenting skills and provide for their families. This is not to equate parenting classes with eugenics, but to argue that within the state, there is a continuation of the impulse to intervene in the lives of marginalized families and individuals, and a socially-accepted authority to do so for the good of the individuals involved and of the larger community. These various faces of state jurisdiction, scientific expertise, and moral obligation continued to inform prison and jail reform throughout the 20th century in Massachusetts.

In 1931, the State Prison Colony at Norfolk was established as the nation’s first “community prison.”¹³ The Norfolk Prison Colony utilized an open campus design as well as programming that incorporated education, a working farm, trade schools, and a highly-successful debate team that would continue into the 1950s and even count Malcolm X as one of its alumni. Even outside of these kinds of “model” prisons, administrators were willing to try new approaches to governance. In 1952, following a riot at the prison over poor conditions at the Massachusetts State Prison at Charlestown, prisoners founded an Inmate Council and elected councilors and representatives to express their concerns to the warden during monthly meetings. When the prison was closed in 1956 and all prisoners were moved to a

new maximum security facility at South Walpole, the practice continued and was recognized by the prison in the form of an Inmate Advisory Council.

In 1962, the governor of Massachusetts, Endicott “Chub” Peabody publicly campaigned to end the use of capital punishment in the state,\(^\text{14}\) claiming that he would refuse to sign any execution orders, even for the notorious “Boston Strangler” who was still at large. At the same time as state officials and prison administrators were promoting progressive changes to punishment and to working with prisoners, individuals incarcerated in Massachusetts described the overall system as deeply racist, and often brutally violent. Most of the inmates and the guards were white, and some came from the same working class neighborhoods (Liem 2016). Guards stoked racial divisions as an explicit strategy of control, heightening the potential for violence among prisoners. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, physical facilities across the system had also become decrepit with age and constant use, in some cases for well over a hundred years. These issues and more became important targets for prisoner organizing in the years to come.

**The back and forth of resistance and repression**

In 1973, a racially-integrated group of prisoners organized a work strike at Walpole Prison, protesting exploitation and abuse and demanding recognition of themselves as a chapter of a nationwide union, the National Prisoners Reform Association. When John O. Boone, the state’s first black Corrections Commissioner sought to negotiate with the prisoners’ union, the prison guards went on strike, demanding his resignation. Commissioner Boone had by then already become a polarizing figure in the state - a Black, prison abolitionist whose commitment to reorienting the Massachusetts corrections system towards rehabilitation led him to downsize and close some facilities, and increase prisoner opportunities for work, education, and self-organizing. Disgruntled guards abandoned their posts at Walpole Prison, in the hope that a riot would ensue. Instead, the prisoners took over the running of the prison themselves.

They invited outside observers into the prison to serve as witnesses that prisoners were continuing the educational and work functions of the facility, even without the guards. The governor of Massachusetts eventually fired Commissioner Boone, and ordered state police to take back Walpole Prison, ending the experiment in self-governance and limiting interactions between prisoners and outside supporters (Bissonette 2008). From the 1970s to the early 2000s, Massachusetts’ prison population boomed, at a similar rate to the rest of the nation[8]. Influenced by the federal War on Crime and War on Drugs, the Massachusetts state legislature introduced its own punitive measures, including the suspension of driver’s licenses for prisoners convicted of drug charges, longer sentencing and mandatory minimums, and the increased targeting of low-income, primarily black and Puerto Rican/Latinx communities (Garland 2001, Wacquant 2009, Alexander 2012, Goffman 2014).

In 1985 and 1986, the Massachusetts Department of Corrections opened the nation’s first “Driving Under the Influence” facilities for individuals convicted of drunk driving, the Longwood Treatment Center in Jamaica Plain, and the Western Massachusetts Correctional Alcohol Center in Springfield (Nardone and Forcier 1989). In 1985, then-governor of Massachusetts, Michael Dukakis also proposed a plan to the state legislature to address what had by then already become a problem of prison overcrowding. Dukakis attributed a rise in the state’s prison and jail population from the early 1970s to the 1980s to several factors: a dramatic rise in “the ‘at risk’ population of males between the ages of 18 and 29,” longer sentencing, a declining parole rate, and stricter enforcement of drunk driving laws (Dukakis 1985: 3-5). In the proposal, Dukakis calls for an expansion of housing for state and county correctional facilities, more alternatives to incarceration through alcohol treatment programs, and increased programming to improve the reintegration of more inmates into communities - through furloughs, halfway houses and home-based self-reporting. As throughout the history of incarceration in Massachusetts, policies promoting alternatives to incarceration occur alongside expansion of the prison system. Acknowledging systemic problems within prisons and jails, reformers from within the state were nevertheless committed to its persistence as a social institution.
Dukakis’ support for reintegration initiatives, including a prison furlough program would later haunt him and the state of Massachusetts during his 1988 campaign for US president. In the fall of 1988, the campaign to elect George H.W. Bush ran a series of advertisements against Dukakis, publicizing the escape of William “Willie” Horton, a Massachusetts prisoner and furlough recipient who had previously been convicted for murder and theft. During his 10th furlough, Horton fled the state and was found guilty of committing assault and rape in Maryland. The Bush campaign promoted this story as evidence of Dukakis’ weakness and incompetence in fighting crime. The use of the figure of “Willie Horton” drew on existing, racist fears of black men as inherently violent and criminal. Critics of sentencing and parole reforms have continued to use the story of Willie Horton as a visceral argument against expanding parole programs throughout the country (Wacquant 2009).

Incarceration in Massachusetts in the 1980s and 1990s largely followed the trends of the rest of the nation towards expansion and more punitive responses to crime. This shift was pushed by various interest groups, including prison guards’ unions, the National Rifle Association, and victim’s rights advocates, but also progressive actors, including women’s movements against domestic and sexual violence and activism against capital punishment (Gottschalk 2006). Republican and Democratic politicians at federal, state and local levels contributed to the shift away from rehabilitation, and towards retribution and incapacitation. In one example, a section of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (1995) signed by Bill Clinton ended the extension of Pell grants to prisoners, resulting in the closing of 340 prison college programs across the country (Fine et al. 2003).

In 1997, a group of prisoners formed the Massachusetts Prisoners Association Political Action Committee. Motivated by a series of legislative attempts to disenfranchise prisoners, the committee sought to encourage voter registration and political education among incarcerated individuals and their families, and to financially support politicians who favored improving conditions for prisoners. The Governor of Massachusetts responded the following day with an executive order, instructing the Department of Corrections "to enforce an absolute prohibition on prisoners engaging in any form of solicitation of money or other things of value for political purposes," based on a law that prohibited any
solicitation of money for political purposes within government buildings. In a referendum in the year 2000, Massachusetts voters overwhelmingly passed an amendment to the state constitution to disenfranchise convicted felons. Before that time, prisoners in Massachusetts could vote by absentee ballot. In 2001, three convicted felons sued the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, claiming the state amendment violated the US constitution for disproportionately affecting Black and Latino prisoners. Their suit was eventually rejected by the Supreme Court. Formerly incarcerated individuals, prisoners awaiting trial, and prisoners convicted of misdemeanors remain eligible to vote in Massachusetts, though they face many barriers.

Throughout the state’s history, reactionary and progressive policies have existed in tension. In 2010, Dominic Cinelli, an aging prisoner released early on parole after decades of incarceration killed a Massachusetts police officer during a robbery. This event resulted in intensified scrutiny of parole and reentry practices, limiting opportunities for potential parolees as an already-conservative parole board become more reluctant to approve parole cases - as in the aftermath of the William Horton case (Liem 2016). At the same time, the early 2010s saw larger shifts towards rehabilitation, with more criminal justice practitioners, social service providers, and legislators concerned with: “reentry” – the process of people returning from incarceration to the outside world in increasingly higher numbers as a result of mass incarceration, and growing concern about what has come to be known as the “opioid epidemic” – expanded opioid drug use, especially in middle-class and affluent white communities. These broader trends were reflected in changing priorities for jails nationally, and especially for sheriffs in Western Massachusetts. Jails in Western Massachusetts introduced new screening procedures for incoming prisoners to assess addiction and mental and behavioral health, hired additional reentry case workers, and introduced new educational and rehabilitation programming. These shifts within local county jails are described in more detail in the next chapter.

The structure of county jails and the peculiar power of sheriffs
In Massachusetts, each county has a jail for incarcerating people who are accused of a crime and awaiting trial. If someone is in jail, either they could not afford to pay their bail (a sum of money held by the state, designed to compel individuals to return to court for their trial), or a judge did not grant them the opportunity to pay bail. Each county also has a “house of corrections” for individuals who have been sentenced to two and a half years of incarceration or less, typically for minor felonies or misdemeanors. People sentenced to longer periods of incarceration are sent to state prisons run by the Massachusetts Department of Corrections, though they spend time in jail beforehand and are sometimes moved to county jail before release. As of 2018 – 9,900 people were incarcerated in Massachusetts county jails and 9,200 people in Massachusetts state prisons. Both jails and prisons are funded through the state legislature, and are overseen by the Executive Office of Public Safety and Security (EOPSS), an office which is accountable to the Governor, who is additionally advised on matters of pardons, commutations and appointments by the Governor’s Council. Historically, governors and the Executive Office of Public Safety and Security have exercised very little oversight over the statewide Department of Corrections or individual county sheriffs.

Typically, county jails and houses of corrections are in the same or connected buildings. Both jails and houses of corrections are overseen by the sheriff of that respective county. Employees of the sheriff’s department, including guards or “corrections officers,” caseworkers, medical personnel and more, move back and forth between the sections. Colloquially, the jail and house of corrections are often referred to together as “the jail,” though they have these distinct components. Following that convention, I also use the term “jail” to refer to both, unless otherwise specified. Within heavily-policied communities in Holyoke and Springfield, the predominately white suburb where the main jail and house of corrections is located – Ludlow – is synonymous with the jail itself. If someone is “in Ludlow,” it can often be inferred that they’re in jail, similarly to how going, or being “upstate” can be understood to mean going to prison within some communities in New York City, reflecting the location of prisons within New York.

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state. Even in Massachusetts, where prisons are mostly located in the central and eastern parts of the state, the term “upstate” was used to describe being sent to state prison.

Houses of corrections are divided into varying levels of security that can include medium, minimum and pre-release. These levels correspond to varying degrees of access to work, programming and autonomy for incarcerated people in them. Being moved between security-level specific areas or “pods” requires approval from jail administration, which is often based on assessments of an individuals’ compliance with jail discipline and participation in programming.

In Massachusetts, sheriffs hold tremendous discretion over the policies and programming of “their” jails. This is evident in the range of programming and approaches across Massachusetts jails and houses of corrections. While many Western Massachusetts sheriffs have been supportive of progressive priorities like addiction treatment and rehabilitation, others like Sheriff Thomas Hodgson of Bristol County have espoused more punitive views – making telephone calls for prisoners and their families more expensive and harder to access, limiting mental health resources despite a high suicide rate within the jail, and even proposing that prisoners from his jail be sent to build parts of then-president Donald Trump’s border wall. None of these stances are taken in a void. They reflect the cultural and political contexts of their counties and the sheriffs’ constituents.

In Massachusetts, as in most other states, sheriffs are elected officials. They must appeal to the priorities of voters. Once elected, however, sheriffs rarely face opposition and are likely to remain in office for decades. In this way, a sheriff’s approach to incarceration can become deeply entrenched in the running of the jail and in the training of sheriff’s department staff - from which is likely to come the next sheriff. Nevertheless, as elected officials, sheriffs are still dependent on public support to get into, and to


17 Kevin Karpiak resources, Nancy Ries ‘Thugocracy”
stay, in office. They are likewise dependent on state legislators for funding, and on the public to elect legislators who will support their priorities. As a result, sheriffs in Massachusetts are engaged in constant advocacy and outreach work for themselves and their departments, addressing policymakers as well as the public. Sheriffs do so through collective, statewide advocacy in the form of the Massachusetts Sheriffs’ Association, and at the local level, through speaking at community events, leading local, charity initiatives and task forces, writing guest columns in local newspapers, posting on social media and more. For all of these reasons, it is necessary to appreciate the role of the sheriff, as both law enforcement officer and elected official, to understand the function of jails and the particular forms that jailing takes in specific places.

In this extensive quote, the Franklin County Sheriff’s Office in Western Massachusetts describes the history and role of the sheriff in their own words:

Although the office of the sheriff as we know it today is a uniquely American institution, its roots are to be found in early English history. In order to provide for effective social control and to promote efficient government administration, England was divided into regional entities known as shires. In addition to its other functions, each shire had a more-or-less formal law enforcement apparatus headed by an officer called the reeve. The reeve, a royal appointee, was responsible for ensuring basic law enforcement, preserving peace within the shire, arresting wanted offenders, and operating the regional jail. The reeve also was considered to be an agent of the judiciary and was specifically charged with executing court orders. Once English domination of North America's eastern seaboard became a political reality, efficient colonial administration took on new importance, and the imposition of effective social controls became absolutely essential in order to insure the survival of this outpost of the British Empire. In an effort to meet these challenges, the English settlers attempted to transplant traditional British institutions to the colonies. To these basic institutions, however, the settlers added their own unique twist. Each of the colonies was Subdivided into counties not unlike the English shires, for purposes of resource exploitation, regional political administration, and primary social control. In addition to the usual array of government officials, each county had an appointed sheriff (or shire-reeve) who had the authority to protect life and property, enforce the criminal law, and assist the courts. In short, the sheriff was charged with the responsibility of maintaining social order through law enforcement.

The colonial sheriff, out of practical necessity, acquired the right to deputize assistants and to enlist their aid in the management and operation of the office. Based on English tradition, the sheriff was also vested with posse comitatus - the "power of the county." Under this doctrine, the sheriff was granted the authority to assemble any and all able-bodied men for the purpose of securing their help in apprehending fugitives and/or returning lawbreakers to the county for criminal court action or the imposition of penal sanction. As durable colonial constitutions emerged, the sheriff was almost always designated the chief law enforcement officer in county government. Because populist political sentiment was rising and democratization of the North American colonies (brought on by the geographical separation from England as well as by the unique needs of the colonial Americans themselves) had been accomplished, the sheriff became...
an elected county official. Although some of the basic functions of the sheriff's office have been altered over the years, it is safe to say that the structure and the philosophy that developed during the colonial period have remained virtually unchanged in most areas of the United States. In the vast majority of the more than 3,000 counties in this nation, the sheriff—by provision of the state constitution—is the chief law enforcement officer of the county, is an elected county official, and still has the power of posse comitatus. Despite the complexities of modern-day living and the impact of rapid sociocultural change on contemporary American society, the office of the sheriff—because of its grass roots appeal and its political adaptability—remains a viable institution in most jurisdictions. An examination of sheriffs’ departments throughout the nation suggests that there is an extraordinary diversity in terms of basic objectives, organizational structures, and assigned functions. Some sheriffs’ departments provide very restricted service to the community and still reflect the traditional orientation, that is, the "one-man show"; others are structured as full-service urban law enforcement organizations with quasi-military characteristics, thousands of deputized employees, and a wide variety of specialized functions.”

- “History of Sheriff’s Office,” from the Franklin County Sheriff’s Office website:

  https://www.feso-ma.us/history

In this public description, the Franklin County Sheriff’s Office firmly roots its modern-day purpose in colonial history, and a continued “responsibility of maintaining social order through law enforcement.” The narrative argues that the office of the sheriff has remained viable because of its “grassroots appeal” and “political adaptability.” In the next chapter, I explore these features of incarceration, focusing on the ways in which sheriffs in Western Massachusetts have adapted their jails, in ways that are seen as committed to progressive, social reform.
CHAPTER 3
THE PROGRESSIVE JAIL ASSEMBLAGE

In this chapter I describe jails in Western Massachusetts and the sheriff’s departments that run them. I focus especially on the elements that individuals who work within local jail systems refer to when differentiating themselves from other jails. I use the term “progressive jail” to describe this mode of incarceration, which I characterize as having the five following features: 1) an orientation towards reform, 2) an emphasis on rehabilitation and treatment, 3) intensive community engagement, 4) a commitment to fighting discrimination, and 5) an overarching framework of care. The concept of “progressive jail” draws on the work of Hackett (2013), Schept (2015), and Arutunyan (2017) who describe similar orientations within carceral contexts in states in the Mountain West, Indiana, and California, as well as the broader framework of compatibility between progressive politics and states of security that James and Amparo Alves (2018) describe. Understanding how incarceration varies among different contexts is important for scholars seeking to document and explain the persistence and pervasiveness of carceral logics and practices. But it is especially critical for activists attempting to confront carceral systems, as the same critiques and strategies may not be effective in mobilizing broader support for change, or may produce unintended consequences. I begin this chapter by describing an annual, celebratory event hosted by one of the sheriff’s departments, which I was invited to through my participation in a volunteer, reentry mentoring program.

November 8, 2018

“Appreciation Dinner” at the “Treatment and Wellbeing Center”

I parked in the lot of the center a few minutes early and waited until closer to 5:30 to go in. Described as “a minimum security, community-based, residential treatment facility… designed to provide for the custody, care and treatment of substance users from Hampden, Franklin, Berkshire, Hampshire and
Worcester counties,” the center is housed in a nondescript, 3-story building, set among apartment buildings and large, Victorian-style homes.

The entrance lobby had lockers and a kiosk for uploading money to prisoners’ accounts, but otherwise felt like the front lobby of a downtown motel - bare linoleum floor, fluorescent ceiling lights, and a plexi-glass window where a sheriff’s deputy sat.

I signed in on a clipboard and the friendly-looking sheriff’s deputy behind the window buzzed me in. As I entered there were several older white women dressed in business casual clothing and ID tags who welcomed me. One said “Good morning!” to me and then corrected herself” good evening! – she said she’d been there since 8am. I noticed a conspicuous lack of windows that may have also contributed to her confusion. After I signed in she directed me down a hallway and said that someone else would bring me down. In the hallway, I passed through a group of white men, including the sheriff who said, “Hello young man” to me, and they all smiled. One of the other mentors from the program I was part of waved me over and we all walked downstairs into a large common room where tables were set up. As I walked past tables, various men (mostly white and older, mostly wearing suits) at the tables greeted us. We walked over to a far more racially diverse table where the predominantly Black and Puerto Rican mentors were already seated.

The director of the center, a tall middle-aged white man, clean cut with a suit and tie and glasses, went up to a microphone in the center of the room and welcomed us all. He thanked the staff and the volunteers who “make the center possible,” as well as the participants who’ve been through the programs there. Then he introduced the sheriff, and said that it was an honor to have him since the sheriff is “probably asked to speak at 5 or 6 events a day and somehow does all of them.” The sheriff, who is bald, white, and heavy-set stepped up to the microphone smiling warmly. He was wearing an athletic tracksuit with a
turtleneck, bearing the sheriff’s department logo. He laughed that he had to lower the microphone before he began speaking, being so much shorter than the director of the center.

The sheriff spoke about the importance of the program and volunteers. He said that he had gone to a meeting of the Massachusetts Sheriff’s Association in Essex County that afternoon. He said that the president of the national association of sheriffs had been there, a sheriff from Tennessee, and that this other sheriff was impressed by the commitment to treatment that he described, and especially the use of Medically-Assisted Treatment for opioid addictions. The sheriff spoke informally, and in an animated way, emphasizing many of his points with his hands. He said that he couldn’t take credit, that he had inherited the commitment to recovery and education from his predecessor, who “wrote the book about it.” What he could take credit for, he said, was letting the practitioners within the sheriff’s department system continue to carry out their work and commitment to treatment and rehabilitation: “The jail isn’t my jail, it’s your jail, it’s the community’s jail.” The sheriff went on to say that he “talks out of both sides of his mouth all day - and that it’s all true.” On the one side, he is responsible for supporting all the people under his care in the jail, and giving them all the resources to become productive. And on the other side, he is responsible for supporting the victims who have been harmed. And his job is to do both.

Receiving applause, the sheriff turned the mic back over to the director, who introduced an older, white female minister who said a prayer and held a moment of silence for all the lives lost to the disease of addiction. After the prayer, we were invited table by table to get our food. As we moved down the food line, I could see into the kitchen, where two guards and four prisoners were serving food through a cafeteria window. There was turkey in a tray of broth, mashed potatoes, stuffing, gravy, squash, and canned cranberry sauce. We thanked each of the servers as they loaded up our Styrofoam plates and we moved down the line to self-serve tables with salad, rolls, and cake, bottled water, cartons of milk, and coffee.
Another mentor came and joined us at our table and we chatted across to another table of mentors, including an evangelical pastor I hadn’t met yet. We ate and talked for a while and then the director came up again and introduced a former resident of the center who was celebrating a year sober. The former resident spoke about his years of struggling and going through many programs, including those at the center, and ways he had been supported – and pushed - by many of the people in the room. Partway through he started crying and had to pause and get water. People in the room encouraged him to keep going and that he was doing great. At the end of his testimony, he received a standing ovation.

After he spoke a woman who worked at the center thanked everyone and led the audience in giving the former resident another round of applause. We finished dinner and people started heading out. I got in line to shake the former resident’s hand as I left. As I took the elevator back up with the female mentors from the re-entry program - all Black or Latina – and a younger, Black male police officer, one of the mentors joked that he looked like an elevator operator with his uniform on, except he was missing the hat. He said he was missing the tips too! Everyone laughed. We got off and walked out the building, through the lobby and to our cars.

“Enlightened and Effective Corrections”

In 1974, Michael Ashe, a social worker, ran for sheriff in Hampden County and won. He remained the sheriff of Hampden County until 2016. As sheriff, Ashe instituted numerous reforms which remain listed on the department’s website, including creating the nation’s first Day Reporting Center for some segments of the incarcerated population to finish their sentence at home; and the After-Incarceration Support Systems (AISS) program to assist people who are in the process of returning from incarceration, or what is often referred to as “reentry” - to apply for housing assistance, find employment, access

18 “Sheriff Michael Ashe bio,” Hampden County Sheriff’s Department: hcsdma.org/sheriff-ashe-bio/
addiction treatment, sign up for SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) also called “food stamps,” and job training programs like commercial driver’s license training for truck driving. Many of the formerly incarcerated organizers whose trajectories after prison and jail are described in following chapters cite AISS as a source of support - and frustration.

In the 2000s and 2010s, sheriffs in Western Massachusetts continued this trajectory, introducing new screening procedures for incoming prisoners to assess mental/behavioral health needs, including addiction. Departments hired additional caseworkers to make reentry plans with prisoners about to leave, and introduced new educational and rehabilitation programs. These changes occurred, at first, in response to a shifting approach towards reentry. Criminal justice professionals increasingly concerned with recidivism rates, began to acknowledge the widespread lack of support for people returning from incarceration.

Another major reform period began in the mid to late 2010s as sheriffs began responding to what has been described as the “opioid epidemic” – a surge in the use of opioid painkillers, and in related harm and overdose. As many critics have noted, the framework of an “opioid epidemic” has coincided with especially high rates of white people using opioids\(^\text{19}\) – heroin, OxyContin, fentanyl. As activists and scholars have noted, where the previous response to opioid use within Black, Latinx and indigenous communities was a “war on drugs\(^\text{20}\),” the “opioid crisis” affecting primarily white communities has triggered an increase in funding for treatment programs. Sheriffs in Western Massachusetts have been particularly active\(^\text{21}\), founding addiction task forces to work with public health officials, partnering with social service agencies, and even expanding the capacity for incarceration to respond specifically to addiction.


The current sheriff of Hampden County, Nick Cocchi, cites his predecessor Michael Ashe, as establishing the Hampden County Sheriff’s Department’s focus on rehabilitation, what the department refers to as “enlightened and effective corrections.” Sheriff Cocchi is regularly lauded in local news, and in high-profile national outlets like the New York Times for carrying on this “progressive tradition… branching out into services to reintegrate former inmates and treat addiction.” Even in carrying out one of the other main functions of the sheriff’s office besides incarceration – serving eviction notices – he is portrayed as “searching for ways to make them respectful and humane.” The Hampden County Sheriff’s Department continues to run “After Incarceration Support Services,” (which was renamed “All Inclusive Support Systems” in 2020 when the sheriff decided to expand services beyond formerly incarcerated individuals to anyone in the county). The sheriff’s department also partners with non-profit, human service agencies, including: Roca Inc., Community Resources for Justice (CRJ), Allies in Recovery, Voices from Inside, Wayfinders, the Gándara Center, local Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings, and the Nurturing Fathers program.

Figure 1: All Inclusive Support Services Logo

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One of the most significant initiatives Sheriff Cocchi has led has been to convert a segment of the jail to be used exclusively for Section-35 commitments. Section 35 is a legal process in which a court can approve of an order for “involuntary civil commitment,” in which an individual can be incarcerated because of alcohol or substance addiction, typically as the result of a family member, doctor or police officer petitioning a judge to have them taken into custody “because they pose a danger to themselves or others.” In 2018, the Hampden County Sheriff’s Department opened the “Stonybrook Stabilization and Treatment Center,” utilizing some of the jail’s surplus capacity to house people incarcerated under Section 35. In doing so, Hampden County became the only county jail in the country to establish a program for involuntary commitments of individuals not charged with any crime. In various press releases and interviews, former Section 35 detainees as well as their families have spoken in praise of the program. As one parent described for the Boston NPR-affiliate WBUR, “”[My son] was telling me how good he felt about the care he was receiving,” Derick said. "He said that it feels like one of the better treatment places he's been in. He's been to well over a dozen private and public rehabilitation centers." For many such families, the dire shortage of space in addiction recovery programs means that the jail is their only option for readily-accessible treatment.

There has also been substantial criticism of Section 35 and Hampden County jail’s treatment programming. In 2019, a lawsuit was filed to end the practice of using correctional facilities for involuntary civil commitments. Prisoners’ Legal Services filed the lawsuit on behalf of three men who allege that they were treated as if they were in a prison at the Hampden County facility. One man wrote that he had been incarcerated in the Hampden County jail before being civilly committed there. “There is no real difference between how I am treated now and what it was like when I was here as an inmate,” he

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wrote. He said the correctional officers are the same ones who work in the jail. “Although most officers are professional, some are on a power trip and talk to me like I’m worthless or as if I had done some terrible crime to get here,” he wrote. The man wrote that civilly committed men can get locked in their cells or put in handcuffs, just as in the jail. He said men can end up confined to their cells – with no programming for 24 hours — for offenses like being argumentative or having a “bad attitude,”. He said he has seen the jail’s “move team,” a group of officers in riot gear, come in to remove a man.”26 In 2019, a state commission tasked with evaluating the use of Section 35 commitments recommended ending the coercive use of correctional facilities for drug treatment, partly for a lack of evidence of its efficacy. A study by public health scholars, in which researchers interviewed patients, family members and staff was similarly critical of this practice, warning in even more dire terms, that: “Involuntary civil commitment to treatment for opioid use disorder carries significant potential harms that, if unaddressed, may outweigh its benefits” (Evans et al.2020: 733). Despite these concerns and the ongoing lawsuit, as of May 2022, the Massachusetts legislature is considering increasing funding for Section-35 involuntary civil commitments in Hampden County, and through the Massachusetts Department of Corrections.

This focus on treatment is present in jails across the region. In Franklin County, Sheriff Christopher Donelan, a former police officer, probation officer, and Massachusetts State representative, describes his impact as shifting the jail:

…from a place where the mission was containment of offenders to what today resembles a locked treatment facility. Using evidence-based treatment, including mindfulness and Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) to being one of the first Houses of Corrections in the country to offer Medically Assisted Treatment (MAT)\textsuperscript{27}

Within this shift the entire purpose of the jail has been reimagined to resemble a “locked treatment facility.” The department website reiterates that “Sheriff Donelan’s leadership has made the Franklin County House of Corrections a national model for addiction and mental health treatment.” As a student and then volunteer within the jail, I was struck by the amount of programs, especially within D-Pod, a section of the jail known as the “treatment unit,” and by the number of collaborations with external programs and organizations, including the Greenfield Community College “Inside-Out” sociology course I took part in. The jail provided transportation for some segments of the incarcerated population to Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous Meetings, to the Recovery Learning Community, a drop-in resource space and peer mentorship network, the local YMCA for exercise and to church, and even grocery shopping – described by jail staff as helping to practice budgeting skills and to lessen the shock of returning to “the free world.”

In 2012, the Franklin County Jail was chosen from over 3,000\textsuperscript{28} jail facilities to serve as one of six “Phase II learning sites” where the “Transition from Jails to Communities Initiative” is being implemented and studied. The Transition from Jails to Communities (TJC) Initiative is a collaborative effort of the Urban Institute and the National Institute of Corrections. Launched in 2007, and expanded five years later, it was intended to coordinate the “development, implementation, and evaluation of a model for jail to community transition,” or what the initiative describes as “a new way of doing business that entails systems change and the development of collaborative relationships between jail and community partners,” with potential grants of up to $450,000 a year for those partners.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{27}“Learn About the Sheriff” Franklin County Sheriff’s Office: https://www.fcso-ma.us/learn-about-the-sheriff
\textsuperscript{28}Census of Jails 2006, http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cjf06.pdf
\textsuperscript{29}Taken from the Transition from Jails to Communities website: http://www.urban.org/projects/tjc/
In 2013, the Franklin County Jail also received an additional Second Chances Act grant, providing two years of federal funding “for a broad range of inmate services to transition inmates back to the community prepared to be productive, law abiding citizens.” Quotes from the Sheriff’s Office website offer some insight into how these grants were seen and towards what priorities officials plan to put them:

This highly competitive grant is big news for all of Franklin County," said Congressman Jim McGovern. "I believe Homeland Security begins with hometown security, and the innovative programs offered by the Franklin County Sheriff's Office go a long way to keeping our streets safe, while ensuring that released prisoners can transition into being productive members of our community.

All of Franklin County owes a huge debt of gratitude to Congressman McGovern for his support of this funding," [Sheriff] Donelan said. "A small percentage of offenders commit the lion's share of crimes in our community. If we are successful in turning those offenders away from crime with the skills and support to succeed with a job and a strong family, we make all of our citizens safer, and we save a lot of time and money throughout the criminal justice system.30

In a phone interview I conducted as part of preliminary research for this project, Kevin Warwick, a consultant and national coordinator of the Transition from Jails to Communities Initiative, characterized the Franklin County Jail as having “always been a part of the community, but now it’s more connected.” Among the “learning sites” involved in the grant, Warwick described the Franklin County Jail as having “come the farthest, it’s the most advanced site.” It has had “the most buy-in” among administrators and community partners, and its correctional officers are the most “enlightened” among the study sites. In another interview, Laurie Kamansky, the Minimum Security Unit Manager of the jail, echoed this sentiment, insisting that “our community is one of the best, people want to work with us. Franklin County, Hampshire County are progressive”. She reiterated this during a tour of the jail, saying that the mentality of people from community organizations in Greenfield and the Pioneer Valley is “let’s work together!” For Kamansky and Warwick, the progressive political context of the area, and interest of local non-profits and community organizations to collaborate with the jail set it apart from jails in other parts of the country.

In a presentation delivered at the UMass Chan Medical School’s 2020 Community Engagement and Research Symposium, Dr. Liz Evans from the UMass Amherst School of Public Health and Health Sciences, and Ed Hayes, the assistant superintendent of the Franklin County Sheriff’s Office, along with other colleagues from each institution, present the findings of their “criminal justice-engaged research collaborative” and community-based participatory research. The collaborative developed three projects that brought together UMass public health researchers and staff from the Franklin County and Hampshire County Sheriff’s Offices, as well as Baystate Health and UMass Medical School. The projects included: 1) an evaluation of the implementation of “medication for opioid use disorder” (MOUD) treatment programming at the Franklin County jail and house of corrections, funded by the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) agency; 2) an evaluation of “post-release opioid use trajectories after MOUD in jail” which compared usage of opioids by “detainees” from the Franklin County and Hampshire County jails, one of which had access to MOUD treatment; and 3) the creation of a statewide, Massachusetts Justice Community Opioid Innovation Network (JCOIN) Research Hub, intended to coordinate the evaluation of MOUD treatment implementation across all county jails, considering their longitudinal outcome for “detainees,” as well as an economic evaluation of the cost of programming and its value from “state-policymaker and societal perspectives.” The presentation contextualizes the importance of this final network with the explanation that Massachusetts is the first state in the nation to mandate the use of MOUDs in county jails. In a collaborative article written by Dr. Evans and FCSO staff, Sheriff Christopher Donelan et al (2021), describe how the Franklin County Sheriff’s Office was among the first jails in the United States to utilize all three FDA-approved medications to treat opioid use disorder (MOUDs): buprenorphine, methadone, naltrexone. These medications help to ease patients off of opioids, lessening withdrawal symptoms and making opioids less

32 https://linkinghub.elsevier.com/retrieve/pii/S0740547220304736
effective. The article describes how the jail has managed to continue to deliver medication with professional support despite the disruptions of Covid-19.

The Franklin County Jail is not alone in this approach. Here, the Hampshire County Sheriff’s Department describes their own orientation to treatment:

The mission of the Hampshire Sheriff’s Office Treatment Department is to promote public safety by providing opportunities for successful reintegration to each individual sentenced to this facility. Through collaborative efforts of substance abuse recovery, individualized treatment plans, case management, cognitive behavioral treatment groups, education, anger management, communicable disease and health education, vocational training and job readiness, release and reentry planning, stress management, family services, as well as significant contributions from our volunteers, community-based, and self-help communities, we provide opportunities to all participants, for a healthy, pro-social transition back into the community. Every participant may expect to be treated with respect and support, while being held highly accountable for his actions, rehabilitation, and release planning. Treatment opportunities for sentenced offenders take place within a modified therapeutic community called the Lifeskills Program. The opportunity to engage in treatment programming is available to all sentenced offenders. Those choosing to engage in treatment are moved to the dormitory-style modular unit. Under the direction of Sheriff Cahillane, the treatment department is supervised by Assistant Deputy Superintendent Melinda Cady. As the Director of Treatment for the Hampshire Sheriff’s Office and House of Correction, she oversees the departments providing case management, substance abuse, contract services, family and parenting initiatives, volunteer and religious services, education, minimum and pre-release programming, reentry services, and aftercare.

This litany of treatment and rehabilitation programs, and the effort that Sheriff Cahillane and the other sheriffs put into presenting their commitment to care (and even “aftercare”), demonstrate a culture of incarceration that is shared across the jails in Western Massachusetts. Sheriffs present “safety” as the outcome of successful therapeutic interventions into the lives of the people they incarcerate and whom they eventually “release” into their communities.

**Intensive Community Engagement**

The sheriffs’ interventions are not relegated only to the physical jail. Through various initiatives, sheriffs in Western Massachusetts also engage with the communities around them. County jails in Western Massachusetts, as in other part of the country, often use incarcerated people as workers for municipal projects, especially those that are physically-demanding, dirty or dangerous - such as picking up trash from the sides of roads, clearing trails, painting municipal buildings (or sometimes churches),
demolishing condemned publicly-owned buildings, disaster relief, and more. In Massachusetts, incarcerated people are paid as little as $1 a day for this labor. Working on “community service” crews is considered voluntary, however, participation in community service is frequently a factor for how incarcerated people are evaluated, for classification to lower-security sections of the jail by jail administrators and by parole boards.

Community service crews are visible in the community, with usually one or two armed, sheriff’s deputies overseeing a van-load of incarcerated workers. In some instances, the sheriff’s department staff itself will operate publicized, community outreach projects. Sometimes these involve picking up trash, but more frequently involve events giving away free backpacks for children going back to school, free bikes for youth, a summer camp called the “Youth Leadership Academy” for children, and a “Civic Outreach Academy” for adults. In 2020, the sheriff’s department provided phone support for people navigating Covid-19 vaccine registration websites. Incarcerated individuals in the Hampden County jail produced personal protection equipment that was then distributed to police, hospitals, EMTS, and to community members in the county. Following the releases of some pre-trial prisoners ordered by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, the sheriff’s department was able to convert part of the jail to a “First Responder Recovery Home” for frontline workers who contracted Covid-19. These efforts were recognized by local media and in a visit by Congressman Richard Neal. Through actions like this that reach outwards, the sheriff demonstrates that the progressive jail not only cares for the people it incarcerates, but also for the larger community.
Under the leadership of Sheriff Thomas Bowler, the stated “primary mission” of the Berkshire County Sheriff’s Office is “to protect the public from criminal offenders by operating a safe, secure and progressive correctional facility while committing to crime prevention awareness in the community” or as the Berkshire County Sheriff’s Office website describes:

We accomplish our mission by: Maintaining a safe, secure direct supervision correctional facility while upholding all national standards, laws and judicial decisions. Exploring innovative and cost effective community correction alternatives to incarceration that ensures the efficiency of the Sheriff’s Office. Pursuing the fair and equitable treatment of inmates while respecting the rights and dignity of all persons (i.e., CORI, Victim/Witness Program). Creating a just and fair environment that encourages positive behavior from criminal offenders (i.e., Direct Supervision Management, Treatment Environment). Promoting education, treatment and social responsibility in an effort to successfully integrate criminal offenders to society (i.e., G.E.D. and ongoing Substance Abuse Programs). Developing public safety initiatives, volunteer and support programs for the prevention of criminal activity and providing the community with pertinent information (i.e., D.A.R.E., Drug and Alcohol Awareness Program, Triad, Public Information Initiatives.) Seeking the highest level of professionalism, through support, motivation and training for all employees with accountability to the public we serve.33

In 2020, the Berkshire County Sheriff’s Department added a $500,000 “aquaponics greenhouse,” in which incarcerated people are trained to grow up to six varieties of lettuce, using water fertilized by hundreds of tilapia fish raised in tanks in the facility. The operation can grow up to 900 heads of lettuce a week. In the words of a correctional officer describing the program:

33 https://bcsoma.org/our-mission/
“And 45 days after they plant that seed, they hold two heads of lettuce and think, ‘This one is going to feed myself and my brothers in the House of Correction, and this one is going to go to some homeless people who have it harder than me…”

As the article goes on to describe:

“So far, lettuce grown at the facility has been donated to organizations like South Congregational Church, the Berkshire Food Project and the Berkshire United Way. And when those nonprofits come to pick up their bounty, which happens three or four times each week, Bowler said, inmates in the program go down and greet the nonprofit volunteers. Understanding where the food they grew goes, and by whom it is enjoyed, is a crucial piece of the program, Bowler said. While, ideally, participants would be able to foray their knowledge into a job in the sector after their release, Bowler said the aquaponics facility at the jail is unique to Berkshire County. “The ideal situation is for these guys to walk out of here and go work in another aquaponics facility, but we don’t have any here,” he said. “But, the one thing they are getting is a good, solid structure and work ethic. They’re all here every single day, on time, and they do their job.” The aquaponic growing season in the greenhouse is 365 days a year, Bowler said, and the method will only gain prominence because of climate change impacts on farming. “This is growing in the future right here,” he said, “and we’re getting a jump-start on it.”

Sheriff Bowler’s description of the aquaponics program and its intended effect of teaching prisoners a “work ethic” is consistent with the kinds of rehabilitative programs that other researchers have described in terms of neoliberal governmentality (Wacquant 2009) and even earlier “civilizing” projects like the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, which sought to discipline kidnapped, indigenous children into settler colonization and capitalism. Where the jail takes a progressive turn is the program’s other effects: of addressing food insecurity in rural Berkshire County through the jail’s contribution of food to local food banks, and of developing and familiarizing farming practices that might be more resilient in the face of climate change. The job training component of the program, as Bowler admits, is somewhat dubious, given the lack of aquaponics facilities outside of the jail itself. Once people are released from the jail, there are no comparable jobs in which they could apply their new skills, though the sheriff anticipates that these may come eventually. What the program does contribute is food for county residents and a functioning example of sustainable farming technology. The publicly-funded jail is helping to feed

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community members at no cost to the recipients and helping people in the area to imagine other modes of producing food.

**Partners in incarceration: Non-profit organizations and service agencies**

Much of the programming and community outreach that progressive jails do is possible because of their collaborations with non-profit organizations, these include organizations that work within sheriff’s department facilities, as well as residential and day programs for individuals leaving incarceration. Placement in such a program can be a requirement for release, and people often wait weeks or months for an “open bed,” despite having completed their sentence. Correctional officers and staff from sheriff’s departments frequently transport people to residential programs. In some cases, these programs are on the same premises as sheriff’s department facilities, or staff may work at both the jail and a residential program, so formerly incarcerated people may still see the same corrections officers or jail staff on a regular basis even after leaving the jail.

Non-profit agencies, community organizations, educational institutions and other public entities are also part of the web of actors and institutions that are part of, and partner with, the jail. These relationships are complex and dynamic, sometimes in tension, and sometimes intensifying each other. Some examples of organizations that partner with the jail system in Hampden County include:

**ROCA (Springfield and Holyoke, Boston, Baltimore)**

- Roca’s mission is to be a relentless force in disrupting incarceration, poverty, and racism by engaging the young adults, police, and systems at the center of urban violence in relationships to address trauma, find hope, and drive change.
- “Roca’s theory of change is that young people, when re-engaged through positive and intensive relationships, can change their behaviors and develop life, education, and employment skills to disrupt the cycles of poverty and incarceration.”

**Community Resources for Justice, Foundation House @ Mill Street**

- 140-year old organization: “CRJ as it exists today is the result of several mergers of organizations rooted in different aspects of social activism. One branch focused on preventing crime, while another undertook providing direct aid to incarcerated men and women and to newly released
former prisoners and later to adults with developmental disabilities. CRJ traces its origins back to the New England Society for the Suppression of Vice, founded in 1878. Part of a Victorian-era backlash against what its members viewed as threats to society’s moral fiber, the organization campaigned against gambling and other perceived vices. The organization’s name and mission evolved over time as it shifted to focus more broadly on crime prevention and working with law enforcement.

**Allies in Recovery**

- From the Allies in Recovery\(^{35}\) website:
  “Allies in Recovery is home to the premier virtual training program available for all who care about someone enduring addiction. Since 2003, we have taught CRAFT (Community Reinforcement and Family Training), the only behavioral training method *designed specifically for families and scientifically proven to work*. The Allies training program is also recognized by [SAMHSA](https://www.samhsa.gov) – the government agency that funds addiction prevention and treatment.”

  According to *Allies in Recovery*:
  “Addiction is a disease and can be treated. Individuals struggling with Substance Use Disorder deserve an environment where their illness is understood and recovery is fostered. And families absolutely have a role to play in guiding them towards that place.”

### Commitment to fighting discrimination

In June of 2020, the Hampden County Sheriff’s Department account on Facebook responded to an explicitly-racist post, uploaded by someone claiming to work at the jail. In their response below, they conveyed their commitment to anti-racism. The original post and the HCSD response occurred in the context of the summer 2020 uprisings for Black Lives, in response to the murder of George Floyd and other Black people by police.

\(^{35}\) [https://alliesinrecovery.net/](https://alliesinrecovery.net/) (Accessed January 13, 2023)
On June 3rd, 2021, the Hampden County Sheriff’s Office posted on their Facebook page: “The Hampden County Sheriff's Office is as diverse as the public we serve, and our strength comes from that diversity. During Pride month, we celebrate our LGBTQ staff, recognize the LGBTQ individuals in our care and custody and double down on our commitment to justice and equality for all!”
Through these statements on social media, the sheriff’s office acknowledges issues of racial discrimination, and discrimination against LGBTQ individuals as social problems, while positioning the sheriff’s office as committed to fighting against racism and for “justice and equality for all.” The sheriff’s office presents itself as a champion of anti-racism and anti-discrimination, both within the jail and its treatment of staff and incarcerated people, but also in confronting broader society. This stance ignores the jail’s systemic role in perpetuating racism and the oppression of LGBTQ individuals by incarcerating these groups at much higher rates. The sheriff situates discrimination elsewhere,

**Overarching Emphasis on Care**

Threading throughout each of these previous sections is a recurring emphasis on, and alliance with, a discourse and set of practices conceived of as care. The sheriffs and other actors who sustain progressive jails in Western Massachusetts frequently invoked the concept of care to describe their work, whether in their treatment of the people they incarcerate (the “individuals in our care”, the sheriff’s departments’ orientation towards the community, or the motivation of the organizations and individuals who collaborated with jails to create programming. In this section I describe an interview I conducted with an employee of an agency that partners with one of the sheriff’s offices whose approach exemplified this emphasis on care.

“Caleb” is a case worker and supervisor at a short-term residential prison re-entry program in Springfield. He moved to Springfield in 2018. Before moving to Springfield, Caleb received a bachelor’s degree in Criminal Justice and worked as an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer, the US-based equivalent to the Peace Corps, doing housing-oriented, community development work in a nearby state. Caleb works for an organization that was founded in Boston and recently expanded to Western Massachusetts. In addition to re-entry support, the organization advocates for criminal justice policy

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36 After our interview, he asked that his name be removed, as well as the name of the agency that employs him, so I use the pseudonym “Caleb” in place of his name.
reform. In Springfield, the organization shares a location with the sheriff’s department’s minimum security treatment center.

Caleb describes himself as a “20-something, talking to guys who could be my father and they’re like - What do you know? And I don’t know a lot of things, but I know some things.” White and from a working class, rural community, Caleb’s background contrasts in multiple ways from the majority Black and Latinx population over-represented in the Hampden County correction system, most of whom are from the cities of Holyoke and Springfield. Caleb’s interest in criminal justice reform was inspired by learning about those exact inequalities in the criminal justice system. As he describes, “Studying the war on drugs really pissed me off when I was getting my bachelor’s, because it’s impacting minorities especially. The rich white kids selling drugs never got in any trouble.” Caleb’s education helped him to see inequalities, even in his own experience in a very different context from Springfield, and ways that policing disproportionately targeted young people of color and poor and working class people.

Another source of inspiration that Caleb names for pursuing his current career was hearing Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, speak at his college. Caleb describes still feeling moved by Stevenson’s presentation. He returns to it as an explanation for why he has chosen to engage in social justice issues in the “on the ground” way that he has- doing housing justice outreach, or as a case worker supporting people leaving incarceration. Paraphrasing Stevenson, Caleb described how he had internalized the following points as a motivation to stick with challenging experiences:

In order to fix an issue, you need to be next to the issue. If there’s a problem in a neighborhood you need to be in the neighborhood, you need to be uncomfortable in order to make the change, you need to be in places you don’t know and you gotta get up close, you need to be on the ground, you have to get into the problem. And I was uncomfortable as hell going into the jail to interview. My interviewer said she thought: “These guys are going to eat you alive.”

Despite the apprehensions of his interviewer, Caleb has remained in this position for several years and now supports a team of case managers, each of whom supervises 14 people at a time. According to Caleb, “the staff at [the program] are good people and they really care about the people in the program. There are a lot of people that genuinely care,” and this was apparent in their view of drugs as a chronic issue and not a criminal issue. Comparing Massachusetts to the states of New York and Pennsylvania where has
worked previously:

…marijuana charges are not being pursued in Massachusetts… the war on drugs has flooded the system, drug addiction, issues with drug abuse, out here is treated as a diagnosis, that you have issues with drug abuse needs to be addressed, chronic drug addiction is being talked of here more is something that I’ve noticed. Throwing people in a jail is not helping them, need helping managing addiction, seeing a therapist. Why are people using drugs in the first place? Helping those that have drug addiction problems.

In his role as a reentry case worker, Caleb described doing “basic things” like: helping people get IDs, getting them set up with mandatory programming based on their conditions of release, using assessment tools like the Ohio Risk Assessment Survey37 for determining what kinds of programming the “guys and girls” in the program are required to complete. This range includes: Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings, assigning therapists and psychologists that can address personal trauma, and neighborhood and social attachments and issues informed by what Caleb called, “social learning theory.” The program also works with the housing non-profit Wayfinders to set up an apartment “away from criminal friends, friends with “criminal thinking.’

Caleb named a range of challenges that he had to contend with as a case worker and that clients of the program faced. These included external, structural challenges, and what Caleb described as the challenge of individuals’ “mindset” in relation to the agency’s programming. One of the risks Caleb identified within the array of programming he described is that “too much programming can increase risk

37 Ohio Risk Assessment System:

“In 2006, the Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections (DRC) contracted with the University of Cincinnati, Center for Criminal Justice Research, to create a set of research-driven tools that would provide risk assessments at multiple points in the criminal justice system validated on an Ohio offender population. Not all offenders are equal in their risk to reoffend, or their need for treatment and programming. Informed by a commitment to the principles of evidence-based practice, the intent was to separate adult offenders into risk groups determined by their likelihood of recidivating, and to identify dynamic risk factors (or criminogenic needs) to guide and prioritize appropriate and effective programmatic intervention.”

as people get frustrated.” Residents are required to attend programs that take up almost all their waking hours, leaving little time for anything else, even down time. According to Caleb:

They are required to make an itinerary for their day, which they get frustrated [with]. But they have so much stuff going on. How can they remember they have to get here to get their birth certificate, job interview, DTA [Department of Transitional Assistance], RMV [Registry of Motor Vehicles], job interview, if they’re on parole their mandated to go to OCC [Office of Community Corrections], more programming, go to AISS? It’s a lot, having that itinerary is another way to schedule your thoughts or your day that day.

Caleb describes a day that is saturated with appointments. Despite their freedom to move outside of the confines of the jail, Caleb says that people feel frustrated with how much they are required to do to stay in the program, and in some cases, to avoid being re-arrested for not complying with the requirements of their release. While Caleb is understanding of the frustration of program participants, he considers the ultimate determinant of whether someone is successful in not being re-incarcerated to be their mindset:

You can lead a horse to water. Some people are ready to change, some people are not ready to change. Sometimes you catch people at the end or the beginning of their “career” of incarceration. …We’re only 3-6 months, we’re a stepping stone. People who get comfortable aren’t getting the most out of the program. Getting someone to be able to change their mindset, if they’re not willing to change, they’re not going to, if they’re willing to change and do more, finding a way to guide someone, if you have to push someone they’re not going to do it.

While attitude, or “mindset” was the primary factor for success according to Caleb, he also identified some of the structural challenges that his clients face, and that he faces as a caseworker trying to support them in their process of leaving the jail and making it through the re-entry program. The main three issues he named were: employment; issues with the sheriff’s department; and bureaucratic issues.

For employment, Caleb voiced a fundamental concern, that: “There aren’t jobs right now. Once people have jobs things change. When they’re working, we ask people to save half their paycheck. They don’t pay any rent while they’re living here.” This situation was made worse under Covid. Despite people still being released from the jail, Caleb said that, he: “Can’t imagine releasing someone right now, the way society is, cause there’s not a whole lot [in terms of jobs and longer-term recovery programs] and it’s kinda scary.”
Even when there are more jobs available, his clients are less likely to be hired than other individuals applying for those jobs, especially because of their race. Successful, statewide community organizing led to criminal justice reform legislation in 2010 that has since made it illegal within Massachusetts for employers to ask on an employment application if the applicant has a criminal record. Nevertheless, employers may ask during an interview. In Caleb’s experience as a caseworker, his Black and Latinx clients were less likely to even get to that stage, despite support the jail and the agency he works with require of clients through resume writing workshops and practicing job interviews. Both the jail and their non-profit partners also maintain relationships with employers who hire formerly incarcerated individuals and as a result benefit from the Internal Revenue Service’s Work Opportunity Tax Credit. Nevertheless, as Caleb argues, “taking the box off applications doesn’t address systemic racism” and the “job readiness” interventions the jail and its partners continue to make, miss one of the primary issues that prevent formerly incarcerated individuals from being hired – systemic racism on behalf of employers.

Caleb also named issues with the relationship between the sheriff’s department and the re-entry support work his agency was doing. For Caleb, it was “frustrating cohabitating with the sheriff’s department… The C.O.s (Correctional Officers) know some of the guys, there’s a conflicting relationship that can kind of be a big one. Some of the participants say, ‘we’re still in the sheriff’s department building,’ they feel they’re still incarcerated even if they’re not incarcerated.” The blurring between the sheriff’s department and the non-profit service agencies and community organizations that the sheriff lauded in the opening vignette was experienced by incarcerated people that Caleb worked with as an extension of incarceration beyond the jail itself into an ongoing experience, with the same staff as inside the jail working in the facility that some people were placed in after their release from the jail. Rather than feeling supported, some individuals felt trapped by it and frustrated that they were continuing to be treated as prisoners.

38 IRS Work Opportunity Tax Credit: https://www.irs.gov/businesses/small-businesses-self-employed/work-opportunity-tax-credit
A third, significant logistical challenge that Caleb named was that very often, people who are incarcerated do not have the driver’s licenses, birth certificates, or other forms of state identification that many government assistance programs require. As a result, his clients were frequently unable to be released or to access programming, as they were required to navigate bureaucratic offices to obtain recognized ID forms. This is especially true, Caleb says, for people who were born in Puerto Rico. In his experience, even as a salaried case worker tasked with helping program participants track down documentation, getting their birth certificate has been next to impossible. Which then makes it impossible for these residents to access various forms of assistance with housing and employment. All three of these challenges were profound sources of frustration and discouragement for the individuals Caleb was working to support. I asked Caleb if there was advice he would give himself or someone else going into this line of work:

Patience, different mindsets and culture, being able to speak Spanish probably would have helped me, not bringing stress from the job back home. If you help one person, someone other than yourself, you’re doing more than other people are doing... But I’ve changed one person so I’ve done what I set out for…Whether I stay with this or find a different career, it’s about helping people. We need more people who have that mindset.

Caleb’s interview offers several different angles into the “care” orientation of the progressive jail. Even while acknowledging the structural barriers that formerly incarcerated people face, in terms of discrimination and even the bureaucratic complexities of colonization, Caleb insisted on the possibility of successful re-entry. The “guys and girls” that go through the program can succeed if they have the right “mindset,” if they care as much as the staff trying to help them. Though he concedes that not all of the sheriff’s department staff are supportive of this mission, and that the blurring between the re-entry program and the jail itself had the possibility of undermining some individuals’ progress, he saw the overall mission as one of helping people, and he saw his position as one that allowed him to do that.

Discussion
The jail as an assemblage

Incarcerated people, guards, lawyers, family members, sheriffs, journalists, legislators – people with different kinds of relationships to incarceration, refer to the jail and the larger carceral apparatus that it is a part of as “the system,” typically a shorthand for the criminal justice system. While the idea of a “system” suggests solidity – a structural coherence, an intentional design, and a consistent functioning of parts in sync, in practice, the progressive jail as I have been describing it, brings together disparate, even conflicting logics and actors. The jail extends beyond the formal institutions of the sheriff’s office to include diverse community partners, and disagreements exist among jail staff as well as partner groups as to what the purpose of jail even is. Incarcerated people are bounced between programs and made to navigate ever-changing requirements.

Foucault uses the terms “carceral archipelago” to describe the diffusion of “techniques” of the penitentiary, “from the penal institution to the entire social body” through schools and factories, but also “charitable societies, moral improvement associations, organizations that handed out assistance and also practiced surveillance, workers’ estates and lodging houses…” and “all other disciplinary mechanisms throughout society” (Foucault 1977: 298). Anthropologists have used other concepts to describe phenomena that exist between the metaphors of a coherent, intentional “system”, and that of a diffuse “archipelago” of institutions and techniques.

Closer to the idea of a system, Feldman (2011) has used the term “apparatus” to describe the “non-local” community of European migration policy officials, and the interactions of surveillance technologies, policing practices and humanitarian programs through which they attempt to control the movement of immigrants. Jason de León (2015) uses the concept of “hybrid collectif” to describe the United States Border Patrol’s policy of “Prevention Through Deterrence,” a strategy which relies on brutal desert conditions and gang violence to supplement the presence of heavily-armed officers in their attempts to stop migrants from crossing the US-Mexican border. The agency that this hybrid collectif enacts, is as de León writes, “an emergent property created by the interaction of many heterogeneous components known as actants, sources of action that may be human or not human “(de León 2015: 39).
The concept of assemblage has also been used to address such contingent, heterogeneous convergences of actors, and it is one that I find particularly useful for analyzing progressive jailing. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2016) uses the concept of assemblage to describe how various actors can become unintentional collaborators, in her case as part of matsutake mushroom worlds in cultural, economic, and ecological entanglement. Lancione (2014) uses “assemblages of care” as a concept for analyzing the city of Turin’s policies towards care and control of homelessness through varied approaches. Lancione argues that the framework of assemblage allows for a “grounded, vitalist, and processual investigation” that explores the varied and contingent ways that homelessness is experienced within the interaction of different policies, institutions, discourses, spaces and actants like bunk beds, waiting lists, and ID cards (Lancione 2014: 36).

Tania Li (2007) also uses the concept of “assemblage” to describe shifting community forest management practices as various actors have responded to neoliberal policy changes over the past 30 years in various contexts across the globe. Rather than using the terms network, apparatus, or collectif which emphasize a stable structure, Murray Li argues that an analytic of “assemblage” helps to highlight the contingency of governance interventions, making more apparent: the agency involved in the ongoing act of assembling; the range of practices through which different elements are assembled; and the diverse set of situated actors that produce the assemblage and all of the varied rationalities they bring to it. Li describes six “practices of assemblage” she has seen within community forest management governance. I list these below and think with them to also unpack some of the elements of progressive jailing at work in Western Massachusetts.

1) “Forging alignments: the work of linking together the objectives of the various parties to an assemblage, both those who aspire to govern conduct and those whose conduct is to be conducted.”

For community forest management, Li describes the processes through which state forestry agencies, environmental organizations, and villages in or near protected forests attempt to forge alignments with
each other in order to prevent over-foresteing while also maintaining access to resources for villagers. In Western Massachusetts, sheriffs actively seek out, or receive proposals for collaborations with non-profit organizations like: ROCA, Allies in Recovery, Community Resources for Justice (CRJ), etc. The Hampden County Sheriff’s Department coordinates the Holyoke Safe Neighborhood Initiative and has partnered with 413 Cares, a portal for helping direct people towards resources provided by social service agencies, municipal governments, and community organizations. The sheriffs’ departments that run county jails work to forge alignments between a broad range of community actors in the running of the jail, including incarcerated people themselves, some of whom return as volunteers within the jail after their release.

2) “Rendering technical: framing the arena of intervention”

In community forest management, Li argues that the political rights of communities to self-manage the forests on which they depend are re-articulated into support for villagers’ “careful management” of forests, a re-framing which supports the interests of conservationist-oriented states and non-profit actors in ensuring that forest use is monitored and policed. In the progressive jail, what might be considered a moral or ethical question, of what to do when someone has caused harm, is rendered into a technical question of how to most effectively rehabilitate people who have been convicted of a crime. Each of the jails in my study area uses some kind of diagnostic assessment to evaluate the people entering the jail and decide what kind of rehabilitative programming to assign them. Incarcerated people are put into programming for addiction, anger management, cognitive and dialectical behavioral therapy, work-readiness training, creative writing, and more. The jails have been especially active in developing programs for opioid use disorder treatment, collaborating with public health experts to assess and improve their interventions within the jail.
3) “Authorizing knowledge: specifying the requisite body of knowledge; confirming enabling assumptions; containing critiques.”

Using a small number of exemplary case studies where community forest management has been seen as successful, Li notes how advocates acknowledge shortcomings in other locations, doing so in such a way as to justify more intervention. If a project fails it is because the community was not adequately trained. Within the progressive jail assemblage, various kinds of knowledge are authorized and drawn upon in the project of rehabilitation. Experts with formal education in criminology programs, social work, public health, training and licensing in psychological sciences, addiction recovery coaching, permaculture, etc. are employed by the jail or welcomed as volunteers. Alongside formal education, peer mentors are hired by after-incarceration programs. Their experience as formerly incarcerated individuals are valued, especially as exemplary models of the potential for rehabilitation among the currently-incarcerated.

4) “Managing failures and contradictions: presenting failure as the outcome of rectifiable deficiencies; smoothing out contradictions so that they seem superficial rather than fundamental; devising compromises.”

As Li describes, the failures of some community forestry programs are used to justify further intervention, rather than a rethinking of the model. Jail and re-entry programs frequently define the problem of recidivism (re-incarceration after release) as the result of individual failures. Caleb’s assessment that some participants don’t have the “right mindset” to succeed captures this perspective, as well as the frequent lament among mentors I volunteered with, that “you can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink.” The other reason the jail staff cited for rehabilitative failures was that the state did not provide enough support for jail and reentry programming.

Within community forest management, Li cites “compromise” as one way that advocates address contradictions within the assemblage of community forest management, such as when villagers are not interested in policies that are supposedly for their benefit. As Li frames it:
In practice, contradiction is managed less by technique than by compromise in its dual sense: parties to the assemblage make compromises and, in so doing, they become implicated, their positions compromised and their critiques contained (Li 2007: 279).

Li finds that, most often, compromises are reached between parties to keep the assemblage together. Policies are modified to bring dissenting parties in further. A Sulawesi villager that Li interviewed who was critical of the forest guards received support from an NGO which allowed his village to remain within a national park. The villager was then invited as an expert to speak in front of other NGOs advocating for community forest management. The villager, in compromising by working with the NGO to avoid being evicted from the forest, then became implicated in the NGOs efforts to support the policies that had initially threatened him. This dynamic is representative of the kinds of work that go into building and sustaining an assemblage:

Assemblages such as community forestry cannot be resolved into neat binaries that separate power from resistance, or progressive forces from reactionary ones. It is difficult to determine who has been co-opted and who betrayed. Fuzziness, adjustment and compromise are critical to holding assemblages together (Li 2007: 279)

In the case of progressive jailing, even those opposed to the jail’s existence, including myself, were invited into participating in it. Our critiques were welcomed by sheriffs and jail administrators who were willing to meet with us, and potentially put us into the compromised position of assisting them in sustaining the jail.

5) “Anti-politics: reposing political questions as matters of technique; closing down debate about how and what to govern and the distributive effects of particular arrangements by reference to expertise; encouraging citizens to engage in debate while limiting the agenda.”

In the context of community forestry management, “A state forest agency willing to govern and improve itself in dialogue with its critics, learning from scientists and the new experts in the community, strengthens its claim to govern” (Li 2007: 280). Likewise, sheriffs and jail administrators sought to engage with critics, incorporating those whose projects strengthened their images of progressive, reform-oriented incarceration. Sheriffs and community partners presented the jail as a “locked treatment facility”
and in doing so, reframed the jail’s purpose as providing professionalized care rather than punishment. This stance allowed for a range of community members to support local sheriffs, even those who had worked previously towards criminal justice reforms intended to decrease incarceration in Massachusetts. While one rogue, retired correctional officer organized a handful of rallies in support of police and then-President Trump, local sheriffs emphasized the racial diversity of their departments, and the community outreach initiatives that seek to build relationships between sheriff’s deputies, local police officers, and Black and Latinx youth. In these ways, sheriffs and their allies evoked discourses of care – for the community through outreach and for incarcerated people, through rehabilitative treatment.

6) “Reassembling: grafting on new elements and reworking old ones; deploying existing discourses to new ends; transposing the meanings of key terms.”

Li describes how neoliberal interventions emphasizing “community” ownership over state bureaucratic functions, and promoting entrepreneurialism to combat poverty among individual villagers were being grafted into the assemblage of community forestry management, building on and tweaking existing logics and practices. Through the mechanisms described above, actors within the jail assemblage re-worked incarceration, representing it as a form of care, for both incarcerated individuals and for the community. Sheriffs and jail staff in Western Massachusetts described themselves as being on the cutting-edge of reform, initiating medically-assisted treatment for opioid use disorders earlier than most jails in the country, and decades before that, embracing the turn towards “re-entry” support in the creation of extensive re-entry programming which has only continued to expand. Progressive jails have proven eager to absorb new care modalities, including even care for the Earth, in the stewardship of natural resources and attention to climate change as exemplified by permaculture training and aquaponics food production.

Conceiving of the progressive jail as an assemblage, rather than as a stable, cohesive entity, draws attention to the processes described above, through which it is continuously and contentiously produced. The progressive jail as an assemblage oriented towards care, emerges from the dynamic interactions of various state agencies, non-profit organizations, academic experts, activist collectives and more, as well
as their varied motivations, logics, and resources. The progressive jail has varied effects on the people incarcerated within it – experiences that are violent, boring, nurturing, traumatizing, etc. But the jail is also an effect of these many interacting parts.

**Individualizing and medicalizing treatment**

Across the various interventions described in this chapter, the unit of focus, and site of intervention for issues as varied as addiction, racism, unemployment, parenting, was consistently that of the individual. Within the logic of treatment, progressive jails sought to assess and rehabilitate individuals. In her study of prisoner reentry programs, Byrd (2016) describes how programs she observed used “medicalized language… locating the individual level as the proper domain of intervention,” even translating “the concept of dosage” to describe “effective case plans” (Byrd 2016: 7). Corrections professionals approached recidivism like an individualized illness, something that people can recover from if they are willing to commit to their own healing and to follow prescribed treatment regimens. Similarly, Hackett (2013) analyzes how a re-entry program designed for women acknowledges the contexts of interpersonal harm and structural violence that women face, but still focus exclusively on individuals as the site of treatment. Even while acknowledging that women who are re-incarcerated have faced disproportionately higher rates of trauma and violence, “their failure in treatment is not due to ongoing marginalization arising from raced, classed, and gendered inequities, but rather from their lack of willpower to change their minds and hearts,” according to the program (Hackett 2013).

One of the stated goals of the progressive jail - reiterated again and again by sheriffs, employees of the agencies they work with, and in program descriptions - is to rehabilitate the prisoners in their care, turning them from (repeat) offenders into “productive” citizens. The assemblage of care that makes up the progressive jail seeks to cultivate qualities within incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people that aim to improve them – focusing especially on their employability, recovery from addiction, and relatedly, anger management, and parenting. These are qualities that can make them more individually self-sufficient within the legal and economic structure of Western Massachusetts, and more equipped to
regulate their own behavior. Ideally, as demonstrated through mentorship programs, they can also become models and sources of support for other members of their communities. In these ways, the modes of neoliberal subject-making that have been described in other contexts of education, employment, welfare, immigration, etc. are also present within the progressive jail’s treatment paradigm. Similar to what Cruikshank (1999) explores within programs aimed to cultivate self-esteem and elevate self-help, or as del Percio (2018) describes in the linguistic and behavioral skills training of migrants in Italian job guidance centers, the programs of the jail are intended to cultivate engaged participants. This is apparent in the programs described above, which focus on shifting the “mindset” of incarcerated people, on cultivating their “work readiness,” or on moving them towards “pro-social behavior.” Jail system programs are not asking for total subjugation, but active participation. Even within the coercive context of the jail, sheriffs require the active participation of individuals for their programs to be successful and to merit ongoing funding and the sheriff’s re-election. Across the various programs run by local sheriff’s departments and their non-profit collaborators, there exists a consistent focus on the individual as the target of intervention.

Lyon-Callo (2008) finds a similar dynamic within the “homeless sheltering industry” in Western Massachusetts. In his ethnography, based on deep, activist engagement within a shelter program, Lyon-Callo describes how policies designed to address homelessness, the non-profit agencies that support homeless populations, and the various counseling and addiction treatment professions they work with enact a “medicalizing” approach that focuses on the treatment of houseless individuals – rather than the structural factors that make securing housing and employment difficult. Like prisoners within the progressive jail, Lyon-Callo describes how, “the homeless’ are routinely broken down into many categories of individual disorders necessitating specialized ‘experts’ whose job it is to retrain and treat these aberrant subjects” (Lyon-Callo 2008: 111). These programs situate reform within the individual, their perceived need for treatment and “mindset,” and not the conditions that give people good reason to have negative mindsets – namely the structural inequalities within the criminal justice system, as well as employment and housing, and more. As described in much of the programming above, a medicalizing
focus on treatment has taken a central role in how sheriffs present their progressive jails, and how their jail is run. This is not to say that the progressive jail does not engage in punishment, or use coercive means to carry out its function. Force, and the threat of force, are ever-present in the form of restraints, walls, armed corrections officers, dogs and other implements. But the primary function of the progressive jail, as I argue, and as those who run them describe it, is to correct through care, acknowledging that it may require coercive means to impose that care or that some prisoners may not be in the “right mindset” to accept that care. Sheriffs present themselves as exercising care on prisoners, for the sake of the larger community of which the sheriff, jail and prisoners are all a part.

As the history of incarceration presented in the previous chapter describes, however, interventions focused on individualizing treatment predate the turn towards neoliberalism and embody earlier, liberal projects intended to create moral citizens through projects like alcohol temperance, the punishment of sexual deviance, eugenics movements, and efforts to assimilate racialized immigrants. Much critical scholarship on incarceration has brought attention to the sustained legacy of slavery and anti-black racism within the history of policing, prisons and jails in the United States. While this history has informed the criminal justice system across the United States, this was not the direct history of policing and incarceration in New England. Unlike the slave plantations converted into prison farms in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Texas, or Federal and state prison factories elsewhere in the country, jails and houses of corrections in Western Massachusetts are not primarily designed to extract prison labor. Relatively few incarcerated people work within “jail industries” or “community service.” The work assignments that do exist are highly-coveted positions, given as rewards by correctional staff. They are often one of the few opportunities to get out of the unit, and to make some money before release. Even within Massachusetts state prisons, only a small percentage of people incarcerated at state prisons work within the state’s Massachusetts Correctional Industries, producing furniture, clothing and other products, mostly for other state agencies.

Rather than through the extraction of labor, the progressive jail generates value through programming – in the numbers of criminals who are pressed into classes and therapy sessions. By and
large, the captive population is not at work in fields or factories. It is being assessed, it is shared in a
circle, it is being compelled into an itinerary of mandatory workshops. The stated intention of these
workshops is to reform incarcerated individuals. This goal is not new. Rehabilitation has long been the
objective of New England jails. While a more explicitly-Christian orientation centering penance and
redemption guided early jail policies, a secular progressive orientation has become more prominent, while
still leaving space for the jail’s Christian heritage to continue in Bible studies and in recovery
programming like Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous, but shifting more generally towards treatment,
focused on “enlightened” and “evidence-based” practices. Though in some cases, these also incorporate
practices and concepts from westernized Buddhist traditions – such as mindfulness and meditation.

The breadth and intensity of all this jail programming is informed by funding priorities of federal,
state and local funders. Administrative staff and treatment professionals within the jails seek out grants to
sustain and expand programming. Non-profit organizations run programs within sheriff’s departments
through collaborative partnerships, funded by government agencies, private foundations, and individual
donations. Not only do jails generate economic value from this captive market, they derive purpose.
According to the sheriff’s departments, and even in testimonials from incarcerated people, these programs
save lives. They play a role within the larger community that is not just punitive, but rehabilitative. In
communities across the United States, jails are often the largest provider of behavior health and addiction
treatment. In these contexts, care and the violence of incarceration are not separable, and as others have
argued, care that comes from patriarchal, white supremacist institutions can itself be a form of violence.
From their beginning until the current day, jails and some prisons in Massachusetts have been run
explicitly as social experiments, with the aim of civilizing the uncivilized, and treating the un-well. The
progressive jail assemblage recruits many kinds of expertise, from psychological, to educational, to even
the lived expertise of formerly incarcerated community members. In Chapter 5, I share the perspectives of
some community organizers who have navigated this assemblage, as prisoners and as activists working to
reform it.
Who is incarcerated?

Nationally, and within Massachusetts, prisons and jails disproportionately incarcerate Indigenous, Black and Latinx people, poor and working class people, and LGBTQIA people. A 2015 Prison Policy Initiative study using national Bureau of Justice data found that, across racial, ethnic and gender demographics, people who are incarcerated had a median annual income of $19,185 - 41% less than peers of similar ages. A 2016 report by the Criminal Justice Policy Program at Harvard Law School, requested by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, analyzed data from agencies across the state, including the Massachusetts Trial Court, the Department of Criminal Justice Information Services, and the Department of Correction. Researchers found:

Black and Latinx people are overrepresented in the caseload compared to their population in the state. White people make up 74.3% of the Massachusetts population and the defendant is White in 58.7% of cases in our data set. Black people make up 6.5% of the Massachusetts population and a Black person is the defendant in 17.1% of cases. Latinx people make up 8.7% of the Massachusetts population and a Latinx person is the defendant in 18.3% of the cases in our data set.

Researchers found that Black and Latinx defendants are also less likely to receive probation, and tend to receive more severe initial charges, and receive longer sentences than White defendants. The researchers considered various contextual factors that could explain these discrepancies, “including the defendants’ criminal history and demographics, initial charge severity, court jurisdiction, and neighborhood characteristics,” and concluded that “…one factor—racial and ethnic differences in the type and severity of initial charge—accounts for over 70 percent of the disparities in sentence length” (CJPP 2016: 1-2)39.

At the local level, the most recent, publicly-available statistics for the Hampden County jail are from the National Prisoner Statistics Program survey from 2015 and demonstrate an even larger racial

discrepancy compared to the statewide numbers, with even lower rates of incarceration for white people, though they still make up a third of the jail’s population according to the survey40.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Hampden County Jail Population by Race (2015)</th>
<th>Table 2: Hampden County Population by Race (2015)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16% Black – (232/1445)</td>
<td>7.69% Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43% Latino – (630/1445)</td>
<td>23.88% Latino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35% White – (520/1445)</td>
<td>64.29% White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.4% Asian – (7/1445)</td>
<td>2.4% Asian</td>
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<tr>
<td>.06% Native American – (1/1445)</td>
<td>.2% Native American</td>
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<tr>
<th>Table 3: Hampden County Jail by Gender (2015)</th>
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<tr>
<td>17.78% of prisoners are listed as female (257/1445)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78.4% or prisoners are listed as male (1133/1445)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.8% of prisoners did not have a gender listed (55/1445)</td>
</tr>
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Previous studies attest to this racial disparity. Timothy Black’s ethnographic study *When a Heart Turns Rock Solid* (2009) describes 18 years in the lives of three Puerto Rican brothers and their families, as they

navigate precarious employment and incarceration in Springfield, Massachusetts. At different points in the span between 1990 and 2008, all three brothers experience discrimination in schooling and formal employment, find livelihoods through the illegal drug economy, are arrested and incarcerated under targeted policing within their neighborhood, and struggle to escape the cycle of further marginalization and re-incarceration. Their stories are common among the disproportionately criminalized young Black and Latinx men and women in Western Massachusetts who experience incarceration and the spectrum of re-entry programs of the state Department of Corrections and county sheriffs’ departments at higher rates than their white counterparts.

During a conference presentation I gave on progressive jailing, a scholar asked if I thought the emphasis on treatment and care within progressive jails was a reflection of whiteness and of the racial demographics of Western Massachusetts? Their question, as I understood it was, are jails here progressive because there are more white prisoners? Other researchers and activists have pointed to such a shift within policing responses between the “war on drugs” policies of the 1980s onward that targeted Black and Latinx communities with militarized policing and mass incarceration, and the “opioid crisis” in which treatment and rehabilitation have been proposed for the higher rates of white users struggling with addiction.

Given the persistent racial disparities in which Black and Latinx people are still incarcerated at far higher rates than whites in Western Massachusetts, and the underlying classism, ableism, and transphobia among other modes of oppression - I don’t believe that jail takes the form it does here because of the prisoners. Jail takes on a progressive form in Western Massachusetts because voters elect sheriffs and legislators and district attorneys who enact progressive policies, and because community partner organizations and volunteers bring their ideas and labor into assemblage with the jails. Jails are progressive in Western Massachusetts because voters and collaborators support the jail as an institution and see it as a means for enacting progressive social reform.
Conclusion

This chapter has sought to explore what sheriffs in Western Massachusetts and their collaborators mean when they describe local jails as progressive. Their progressive orientation takes the form of evidence-based treatment modalities, programming grounded in personal empowerment, diversity discourse, gender-responsive programming, engagement with community organizations and institutions of higher education, and an overall orientation towards reform. Jails and houses of corrections in Western Massachusetts are used disproportionately to incarcerate Black and Latinx, and poor white people. Many people who are incarcerated have indeed done harm – but jails are not designed to address larger, systemic issues that led to that harm being done, or to give communities the resources they need to address their own challenges. Instead they seek to re-program individuals so that they can integrate themselves better within a capitalist, settler colonial society. While the goal is ostensibly to create better workers, the number of barriers to employment and self-sufficiency created by the jail itself seems more often to produce people who are legally-required or economically-compelled to participate in state welfare programs indefinitely.

What the criminal justice system imposes in the Pioneer Valley, and in its colonial precedents, is a kind of vanilla power (McCorkel 2013), a white supremacy that seeks to domesticate, to civilize, one that incarcerates as a form of care. It is a less physically brutal regime than elsewhere, but it shares the structurally violent goal of correcting individuals to better fit within a white supremacist society. One Western Mass abolitionist used the term “vanilla quicksand” to describe how the system here pulls outside activists and reformers into the carceral assemblage of progressive jailing, even those who are critical of the jail’s very existence.

The compatibility between progressive politics and carceral control is not relegated to jailing. Savannah Shange (2019) in Progressive Dystopia considers how a high school in San Francisco, founded

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41 Vanilla itself is a product of colonization, native to present-day Mexico, brought to Europe, re-circulated and grown in colonized parts of Asia and Africa. The flavor of and term “vanilla” has since been made to stand in for something that is plain, normal, ordinary, traditional, the opposite of “kinky,” white.
with a commitment to critical pedagogy and anti-racism, nevertheless perpetuates systemic anti-black racism by consistently punishing and expelling black girls at higher rates than any other school in the city. Even while espousing anti-racist values, jails in my field site, like the school Shange describes, can continue to enact systemic racism, while ignoring their own role as key sites for perpetuating this and other forms of oppression. The progressive jail as assemblage offers itself as a means for reform, of the individual and of the community.

In contrast with the open, anti-Black racism and white supremacy of the convict leasing and plantations-turned-prisons of the South (Lichtenstein 1996) and the massive warehouses of surplus humanity in California and other Western States (Gilmore 2007), the “progressive” jails of New England employ a domesticating form of vanilla power, no less grounded in racism, but couched within a framework of paternalistic care and rehabilitation. For most people incarcerated in the state, days are marked by boredom and by programming. Exploitation, in this context, is focused less on extracting free labor to produce good, and more on subjecting incarcerated people to self-improvement programming. Their time and energy are taken by the jails, and the private, state and non-profit contractors that work with the jails, who receive funding from the state, foundations, insurance companies, and private donors, to continue to employ themselves and carry out programming.

Judah Schept’s ethnography, Progressive Punishment (2015) describes the construction of a “justice campus” in Bloomington, Indiana – a politically liberal, progressive context in which incarceration has literally taken the place of manufacturing. The campus consists of a jail and courts as well as social service agencies - all located on the site of a former television factory. As Schept points out, the justice campus serves as a replacement to either employ or incarcerate community members who had previously worked in the factory or factories like it in the region. Schept describes how progressive officials in Bloomington demonstrated support for the building of the justice campus, while attempting to distance themselves from the racism of mass incarceration elsewhere:

I came to understand local officials’ simultaneous advocacy of carceral expansion and rejection of the prison-industrial complex as ‘dis/junctures’: dispositions toward incarceration and punishment at once distinct and, crucially, bounded by and inscribed with the logics and practices
While Schept sees the shift towards progressive punishment in Bloomington as an outcome of “the localizing effects of the neoliberal carceral state,” what can be called progressive jailing in New England today is grounded in a much longer history, one that far predates neoliberalism (Schept 2015: 10).

Urla (2019), citing Collier’s (2009) discussion of Foucault’s evolving articulations of governmentality, describes how rationalities and technologies of power exist as “topological,” building on each other and interacting, rather than “epochal,” with new modes of governmentality replacing earlier ones (Urla 2019: 264). In New England jails, neoliberal governmentality interacts topologically with current and earlier biopolitical regimes of intervention for the care of prisoners as patients, Christian interventions of pastoral care for prisoners’ souls, and even radical interventions attempting to recruit incarcerated people into networks of community organizing and mutual aid. Since its colonial origin, incarceration in New England has been shaped by interests in social reform, progress, treatment, and care – enacted through state violence, in racialized, gendered and colonizing ways. In the chapters that follow, I consider how formerly incarcerated individuals have navigated the emphasis on reform and treatment and especially “care” within jail systems, and the challenges that sheriffs’ commitments to progressive reform pose for activists demanding competing reforms or making a case for abolition.
CHAPTER 4
DOING THE ETHNOGRAPHY, PT. 1

Scenes from the field:

- A rapper I met in jail 5 years ago tags me on Facebook whenever he posts a new video of himself freestyling. I hype him up in the comments and send his videos to friends who rap or book shows.

- Someone in a car I don’t recognize slows down and honks at me while I’m crossing the street outside my house. “Hey! You bailed me out!” We wave to each other and he drives off.

- The clerk at the post office is beaming when I come in to mail books out. She tells me she has a box of paperbacks to give me. She’s been telling all her friends about Great Falls Books Through Bars and collecting books for us to mail to prisoners.

- A re-entry coordinator who works at a local jail calls me one afternoon, two years since we’ve seen each other last: “Hey brother, you still working with that bail fund? I found someone a bed in a program, but they’re gonna lose it if they don’t get out today.”

Having laid some of the historical and contemporary context of incarceration in my field site in the previous chapters, I turn now to describe the research itself, the trajectory of the project, some of the many relationships that shaped and made this research possible, and my own role and political commitments within the research field. For this project, I spent 3 years engaged in intensive fieldwork and several years before and after that, thinking and working as an organizer and volunteer in prison abolition, criminal justice reform, and reentry support. Over these years, I have had the privilege to dedicate most of my waking hours to collaborating with, and learning from, a lot of smart people engaged in these issues. As the above moments describe, this work allowed me to submerge myself into organizing, volunteering, and researching. I was an active participant in organizing meetings, protests, and as a volunteer with agencies that support currently or formerly incarcerated individuals. I worked with community organizations and social service agencies, and spent long days at courthouses and in jail waiting rooms. I recorded field notes based on observations and informal conversations. I interacted regularly with formerly incarcerated community organizers involved in efforts to reform incarceration; community organizers and activists involved in criminal justice reform who had not themselves experienced incarceration; staff and administrators involved in the running of state or non-profit reentry
programs, and local elected officials connected to jail reform. I conducted interviews with formerly incarcerated organizers and their collaborators.

**Modes of engagement**

I have never been incarcerated. I hope I never experience it. I find the idea of being locked up, with no control over my schedule, personal space, bodily autonomy, or safety to be terrifying. I have friends and family who have been incarcerated, but no one who I was directly supporting, or supported by. This project is based in solidarity, not in personal experiences of incarceration, though the threats of police and of incarceration have hung over my head for almost as long as I can remember. From my teen years onward, I’ve been stopped by the police more times than I can remember, while walking and while driving, while living in Arizona and in Massachusetts. I’ve become adept at talking with cops in friendly and deferential tones. As half-Native Hawaiian, I am apparently brown enough to elicit police attention, but the beneficiary of enough forms of privilege to make it out alive and without being arrested – as also being half-white, a full-time student, a native English speaker, a US citizen. Over the past two decades, I began to derive some humor from hearing police trip over my last name when running a check for any warrants on their radio. My interactions with police have, so far, ended without more violence. I was arrested once for civil disobedience in Arizona, during protests against SB 1070 and the racist policing of immigrants. With the support of volunteer legal support, I and other protestors only spent a few hours in police custody, and our charges were eventually dropped.

My decision to focus on incarceration came out of my efforts to be more engaged in community organizing in Western Massachusetts, the region where I live and work. Several personal connections drew me to criminal justice reform, jail volunteering, and prison abolition. This research emerged out of the many relationships and experiences and through various roles that I took on, throughout my activism and research. My experiences in each of these roles helped shape my research, and this research has informed how I approach these ongoing modes of engagement.
As I got more involved in issues around incarceration, I became interested in understanding why there wasn’t more organizing for prison abolition happening in the area, considering the history of organizing for the abolition of slavery and the robust legacy and present-day strength of activism for progressive social movements. As a volunteer and as a researcher, I came to experience an openness on the part of local sheriffs and jail staff who welcomed me as a participant in mentorship programs. They expressed an orientation to reform and to collaboration with progressive activists that surprised me. Eventually, I came to see the reform-oriented stance of local jails, and the degree of collaboration between sheriffs and local progressive activists, as potentially contributing to why prison abolition was not a more broadly-shared, organizing goal. This experience informed the first activist and research question:

1) How do activists work towards prison abolition in a context where the jails and the sheriffs who run them are considered and consider themselves progressive?

As I became more involved as an organizer, I was also struck by the small number of formerly incarcerated community members involved in the work that was happening. Compared to the degree of organizing led by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people in places like New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles and the Bay Area, I wondered why there wasn’t more organizing being led by prisoners or formerly incarcerated people in New England more broadly? Even in the smaller cities and towns of Western Massachusetts, thousands of individuals have been incarcerated, and hundreds are in jail at any given time. Those individuals have the most direct experience of what conditions in prisons and jails are, but also what interventions have helped them and which have not. I consider centering the perspectives of those who are directly impacted to be a good in itself but also a practical concern for avoiding ill-informed campaigns that cause more harm. This informed the second major activist and research question:

2) How to support incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people as the leaders of any organizing to reform or abolish prisons?

Throughout my fieldwork, and in the years before and since, my relationships to “the field” of prison
abolition, criminal justice reform, and reentry support have been multiple, at times converging and at others conflicting. Ana-Maurine Lara uses a concept of “woven density” that I find helpful. As Lara describes:

To enact multiple knowledges and languages simultaneously is to embody what I call woven density—that is, a multiplicity of often contradictory registers of being that draw on multiple frameworks to actualize meaning in the everyday. Woven density allows us to visualize how gender, sexuality, and race are interconnected processes that draw on multiple registers and frameworks and, like spirit, shift according to context—shifting from one kind of humanness into other kinds of humanness (Lara 2020: 20).

Lara uses “woven density” to describe the multiple registers of being she inhabits, of Blackness, queerness and Indigeneity, as they inter-connect and shift, within and against “Christian colonial impulses.” In my experiences of navigating different roles and spaces within an activist-research context, I resonate with the embodied “woven density” that Lara describes. The relationships through which I have connected to these issues have blended love, anger, family, friendship, activism and research. I have been welcomed as an ally, seen as a threat, assumed to be incarcerated, dismissed as harmless, and encouraged as a collaborator. The roles I have taken have varied, including at times: legal observer, protest jail support, teacher, person with bail money, driver, student with access to a printer, and bad motivational speaker. In the sections that follow I describe three of the primary roles that have defined my engagement in this project: volunteer, organizer, academic.

Volunteer

One unexpected outcome of this research is that I’ve now eaten multiple cheeseburgers with county sheriffs in Western Massachusetts. One was on the front lawn of a jail, sitting at a picnic table with men from the “pre-release” section of the jail, converted from the former warden’s living quarters. Other burgers have been at a city park during an annual Fourth of July BBQ with currently and formerly incarcerated individuals, volunteer mentors, and sheriff’s department staff. I expected more distance, but sheriffs in Western Massachusetts were approachable to staff and volunteers, as well as the larger community. Any given week they can be found making public appearances, representing the sheriff’s
department, or working in coalition with other agencies and organizations. I was also surprised by the openness of local jails to volunteers through various programs and partnerships. This openness was methodologically useful, as it allowed me to build relationships with people working with/in the jails. But it also became analytically important, as it helped me to think about the jail as an assemblage, incorporating varied actors beyond those directly employed by the sheriffs – including myself.

Research for this project began in 2014 with a preliminary study of incarceration in Greenfield, Massachusetts. I conducted a semester of ethnographic research on jail and community relationships at the Franklin County Sheriff’s Office and House of Corrections for a seminar on Political Ethnography taught by Timothy Pachirat. In Fall 2015, my neighbors Ya-Ping and Natan encouraged me to take an “inside Out” sociology class that met at the Greenfield Jail, taught by Revan Schendler. The class was comprised of incarcerated students from the jail, and non-incarcerated students from Greenfield Community College. After the class ended, incarcerated students and outside educators continued to meet as “the Elm Street Think Tank,” with the long-running facilitation and support of Joan O’Beirne, Andrew Stachiw and Eli Liebman.

From Spring 2016, until the Fall of 2019, with some pauses in between, I took part in weekly meetings of Think Tank, sharing stories, support, frustration and laughter, and helping support collective projects like zines, art shows, recording original rap music, and crafting successful proposals to hold outings – including hikes and campus visits to the nearest community college. Think Tank served as a space for mutual support, sharing, and listening, and a forum for generating other proposals for the jail for new programming and policy changes. Over the years, the composition of the group changed frequently, as members were released, and as new people entered the jail and joined the group.\(^{42}\) I remember going to

\(^{42}\) During its existence, the Think Tank maintained a complicated relationship with jail administration. The jail supported the group, paying a stipend to several of the outside educators who facilitated the space, approving some of our proposals including outings for hikes at pre-approved locations, and allowing us the use of vans, jail facilities, and printing resources. But we were also suspended at various points - once in response to making a stop for snacks on the way back from a hiking excursion – and at other times following un-related drug busts in other parts of the jail.
my first Inside Out class at the Greenfield jail, and the first time those two sets of metal doors locked behind me – once as I entered, and again as I left - and the immense feeling of privilege that I could get in my car and go home while the incarcerated students remained inside. All the members of the Think Tank would eventually leave the jail, but some would also return.

In 2017, I began volunteering as a mentor with After Incarceration Support Systems, a program of the Hampden County Sheriff’s Office which helps support people who are incarcerated and nearing the end of their sentence or who have returned to the community from jail. As a volunteer mentor, I attended weekly orientation sessions inside the pre-release and medium security sections of the county’s house of corrections, joining other mentors in sharing encouragement and advice, and describing the services offered by the after-incarceration support program. Most of the mentors were Black or Latino men, in their 40s and 50s, and most were formerly incarcerated, except for: myself, a retired police officer, and a minister. (Similar programming took place in the women’s facility, led by female-identifying staff and mentors. I was not invited to join these groups).

Mentoring sessions took two forms: 1) mentors speaking in front of a large group of incarcerated individuals in a mode of testifying or inspirational speaking, or 2) paired-off conversations between mentors and individuals, more focused on talking through that incarcerated person’s situation, challenges, and any plans for once they got out of jail. In the first mode, much of the advice given by mentors during orientation sessions was based on their lived experience – reflections on their lives before, during, and after incarceration, what dynamics resulted in them getting re-arrested, and what things helped them to stop ending up back in jail. When it came to my turn I would generally offer encouragement, offer to talk with anyone considering college after they get out, and talk about some of the reform organizing happening, in as non-threatening terms as I could manage. I wouldn’t say “abolition,” but I would talk about how formerly incarcerated people were working to change the system. I was initially nervous mentioning anything about reform or organizing while part of a sheriff’s department program - inside a jail - but received no pushback. On several occasions, other mentors or program staff described the jail as a site of modern-day slavery, one that benefits from locking up and exploiting Black and brown men.
The jail units we visited were always occupied by predominately Black and Latinx men, occasionally some white men and more rarely East or South Asian. Mentors exhorted the incarcerated men in the program to stop getting exploited by coming to jail. Their analyses were critical of the system as rooted in white supremacy, and critical of incarcerated people for allowing themselves to be exploited by it. While I had worried my critiques of incarceration might make me unpopular with the program, their analyses seemed quite able to fold in my critiques as well.

In addition to the orientation meetings inside the house of corrections, I attended various community events, including annual barbecues, holiday potlucks, and graduation celebrations for individuals completing the after-incarceration program. These events blurred the inside and outside, bringing together program staff, volunteer mentors, formerly incarcerated individuals and their families, currently incarcerated individuals in “minimum security” incarceration who were escorted to events by sheriff’s department staff, and the sheriff himself. I hung out with mentors outside of programming, carpooling to the jail and back, and going to the movies.

In my interactions with jail staff, administrators, volunteer mentors and even correctional officers, nearly all expressed what I felt were sincere desires to help incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people to improve their lives and stay out of jail - including the sheriff. This dissertation does not question their desire for people to have better lives and to not be incarcerated in the future. I believe that most of those who do the work of incarcerating people in Western Massachusetts care deeply about the people in their custody, which is exactly what makes reform work and especially abolition more challenging. As I will argue in this dissertation, the forms of care that are exercised within this context of incarceration have the effects of: justifying and expanding the coercive reach of the jail into more peoples’ lives, of individualizing what are systemic problems, and of perpetuating colonizing logics and technologies.

While applying to become a volunteer for the re-entry mentorship program I informed the coordinators of the mentorship program that I was conducting dissertation research. They were supportive of me joining as a mentor, and considered my status as a UMass student and instructor to be a resource
for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated mentees considering going to college. The director of the program and another mentor were also pursuing PhDs at the time. The administrators informed me of other research they were doing, and that had been carried out with the sheriff’s department, all focused on program effectiveness. I decided not to carry out research through any of the sheriff’s departments, or conduct interviews or participant observation within any of the jails for two reasons:

1. Conducting official research within any of these programs would have required approval and input from the sheriff’s departments throughout the process. Some of the community organizers I interviewed or organized with, are in active contention with local sheriff’s departments, and they would likely not have chosen to participate in my research, or collaborate in organizing if this study had been conducted in formal cooperation with any of the sheriffs. Even without the project involving sheriff’s departments formally, research participants were concerned with potential ramifications of their words. One staff member of a re-entry program asked to have their name and the name of their program redacted from our interview to avoid possible retribution, while some former employees of various programs insisted on having their names included with their critiques to counter the generally positive coverage of local media and scholars.

2. I do not believe that full consent for academic research is possible for people who are currently incarcerated. Incarcerated people are routinely compelled, pressured, and coerced into participating in various kinds of programs and evaluations. In a context where there is no assumption of autonomy or freedom of communication, I felt uncomfortable introducing research – especially research on activism directed towards the jail itself.

These concerns resonate with what Orisanmi Burton (2021) describes in his article on kinship and Black masculine care work:

Early on, Ab, as I call him for short, cautioned against my plan to obtain approval from penal authorities to do participant observation in the prison where he was held at the time. His position was that my presence would elicit unwanted scrutiny of the captives’ daily lives and activities, a concern that resonates with Allen Feldman’s (1991, 12) contention that “in a culture of political surveillance, participant observation is at best an absurdity and at the least a form of complicity with those outsiders who surveil.” Indeed, according to policy, DOCCS grants physical access to its prisons only in instances where “the proposed study promises to have some value for the Department,” a protocol that structurally positions researchers as collaborators with the prison’s regime of knowledge production, “value” creation, and control. Given that my aspiration is to collaborate with the captives and not their keepers, standard ethnographic methods are unworkable. Instead, Absolute and I continued our letter-writing practice and began to think of it as a form of community building, grassroots intelligence gathering, collective theorization, and mutual aid—a modality of “ethnography from elsewhere” (Reese 2019) [Burton 2021: 5].

Like Burton, I incorporate letters written by incarcerated individuals as an ethnographic method. Because of the keen interest of local sheriffs and jail collaborators in the ways that they are depicted, and the
possibility of retribution, I include only letters by writers who have chosen to have their letters made public, through organizations I have worked with, namely Decarcerate Western Massachusetts, Great Falls Books Through Bars, and MASS Power. Though I also chose not to conduct ethnographic research within jails, various experiences as a volunteer within jail-based programming, especially in the Elm Street Think Tank at the Franklin County House of Corrections, and as an After Incarceration Support Services volunteer mentor in the Hampden County Sheriff’s Department, have been especially key in informing my thinking, and the questions in which I came to be interested. Volunteering in these different contexts helped me to better understand the jail systems and to build relationships, with people incarcerated in them, and with those whose work keeps them running.

Organizer

In 2016, I helped organize Great Falls Books Through Bars, a volunteer-run program that mails books to people incarcerated around the country, and hosts public film screenings and discussions on prison abolition, state violence, and resistance. The year prior I had moved into a collectively-organized, two-story building in downtown Turners Falls, Massachusetts, to collaborate on a living and community space dedicated to supporting people of color in Franklin County, a predominately white, working class and rural county in Western Massachusetts. The building began as Casa Rara, and later became La Mariposa as other collaborators joined. The two storefronts on the street level housed: a secondhand and vintage clothes store called Cosa Rara; Mariachi Shoe Repair; a community space for meetings, childcare, and youth arts programming; and monthly work days for Great Falls Books Through Bars, where volunteers would come and help us pack books from our library of donated books housed in the basement. I continued to organize with Great Falls Books Through Bars as a collective member until the Spring of 2021.

In the fall of 2019, I joined a statewide campaign attempting to reinstate voting rights for all incarcerated people in Massachusetts (Mass POWER). The campaign was initiated by incarcerated organizers with the Emancipation Initiative, especially Derrick Washington, and allies on the outside. For
the campaign, I took on the role of county coordinator for Hampshire and Franklin Counties. We created the infrastructure and our own roles for the campaign as we went, operating without a budget or paid staff, but growing to recruit individual volunteers and partnering with organizations across the state, like Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) Boston, Massachusetts Against Solitary Confinement (MASC), Common Cause, Massachusetts Voters’ Table and Families for Justice as Healing. My role as county coordinator entailed doing outreach to promote the campaign, recruiting volunteers to collect petition signatures, and coordinating the certification of each signature by the town clerk where that voter is registered.

In the fall of 2020, I worked with some of the same organizers from the Mass POWER campaign to register currently incarcerated but eligible voters to vote and to access mail-in ballots. The “Election Protection Behind Bars” coalition gathered even more coalitional and legislative support, building on the relationships and networks created during the Mass POWER campaign. Major organizations like the ACLU supported the effort, and state senators and representatives introduced legislation to ensure ballot access for currently eligible voters, and to restore eligibility to include all Massachusetts citizens regardless of incarceration status.

*Academic*

My approach to engaged research is informed by the work of generations of anthropologists committed to thinking about the possibilities and challenges of using our scholarship to work towards social change. Jeffrey S. Juris and David Graeber’s research and activism allowed me to see the possibilities of a militant, and anarchist anthropology, that put ethnography at the service of radial social change. The activist ethnographic reflections of Dana’ain Davis (2013), Andrea Dyrness, Melissa Checker (2014), Kay B. Warren (2006), Charles Hale (2008), Setha M. Low and Sally Engle Merry (2010), Kamari M. Clarke (2010), Faye V. Harrison (1991), Joanne Rappaport (2008), Aline Gubrium, Krista Harper and Marty Otañez (2015), Maple Rasza (2015), and João H. Costa Vargas among many others have also been deeply influential in shaping my approach to activism and to anthropology.
This research was informed by academic projects that I took part in as a graduate student. In 2016, I took a course called Grassroots Community Organizing through the UMass Alliance for Community Transformation, called UACT. The course included an alternative spring break trip that brought college students from the University of Massachusetts Amherst and the other “Five Colleges” (Amherst, Smith, Mount Holyoke and Hampshire) to work with community partners engaged in local organizing work in different cities. The class section I was a part of went to Worcester, MA and the community partners we worked with included organizers from EPOCA, Ex-Prisoners and Prisoners Organizing for Community Advancement, a community organization that works on statewide and local legal reforms, whose leadership and membership base are primarily formerly incarcerated individuals, specifically Cassandra Bensahih who I have continued to collaborate with since. The following year, I co-facilitated a section of the Grassroots Community Organizing course that returned to work with the same community partners.

In April of 2017, I helped UACT organize a forum that brought together eight community organizations in Western and Central Massachusetts confronting mass incarceration and/or supporting individuals and families impacted by the criminal justice system. The forum was the capstone event of the Feinberg Family Lecture Series which focused that year on the theme “the U.S. in the Age of Mass Incarceration.” We brought together organizations in order to connect with each other and with potential volunteers and supporters, many of whom had been attending lectures by scholars and activists throughout the year. In the summer of 2017, I participated in an instructor training of the Inside Out Prison Exchange Program, an organization that trains college educators who work in prisons and jails throughout the country. In the Spring of 2018 I helped coordinate a UACT class called Relational Organizing, which brought together activists and organizers in Western Massachusetts working on themes of prison and police abolition. The following year I co-facilitated the Relational Organizing class which met in Springfield, building on those relationships and continuing to use the class to build deeper relationships between organizers in the region and to host workshops to support organizers developing their skills and sharing knowledge.
The director of UACT, Jen Sandler, describes UACT as a collective effort towards learning, teaching and enacting a “critical relational solidarity” (Sandler 2019: 77) - one that centers three elements:

1. becoming-with-others, through the engagement of values of collectivity and care, emerging from:
2. a critical understanding of structural inequality and violence, through specific mechanisms of producing and mobilizing:
3. substantive relationships among people with diverse stakes in relation to structural, institutional, racial, economic, and/or social power

Many hours of reflecting on, and working towards relationships of “critical relational solidarity” - with other students, with other facilitators, trainers and staff, and with community partners - through UACT have profoundly shaped my approach as a researcher, but also how I see myself as an activist and as a community member. Each of these projects described above, have helped me to develop the relationships that made this research possible, and continue to inform my thinking about reform, abolition, and collective action.

**Antropología comprometida**

True for most anthropologists, the seemingly-distinct roles I have described so far do not adequately convey how much this research has vaporized any idea of a separation between political and personal. It has involved partners, roommates, family, neighbors, mentors, students, and friends. Thinking with this deep engagement has helped me to think more about the entanglement of the jail in the lives of people who are far beyond the barbed-wire fence. I chose to do research where I live, where I could stay engaged in activism throughout the process, and where I could be more accountable to the people whose lives I write about.
A concept that I have found helpful for thinking about all the various threads of this research is that of an antropología comprometida (Aguirre Beltran 1977, Fultz 2010, Hernández Castillo 2018). The term comprometido/a can be used to describe being committed to an idea or a cause, but it can also mean something or someone that is compromised, as in potentially jeopardized, implicated, or caught in an awkward position. In this first sense of the word, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltran describes the emergence in Latin America, following the events of 1968 in Mexico, of an anthropology of liberation, an antropología comprometida in which “a critical stance is not enough, that militance is necessary, and a commitment to the movement” (1977: 37). Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo, describes a similar “antropología feminista socialmente comprometida” in projects of investigación-acción, working with indigenous women activists working against patriarchal violence and the violence of incarceration. For Hernández Castillo, this looks like reducing the space between academic researchers and activists, creating bridges between communities by using accessible language to support a “globalization from below” (Hernández Castillo 2018: 101).

In an introduction to a collection of essays on collaborative media production, Katherine Fultz describes how the Jesuit priest and Guatemalan anthropologist Ricardo Falla used the term antropología comprometida to describe his “academic and pastoral engagement with internal refugees” during the civil war in Guatemala, reflecting his political commitment to assisting them, as well as the compromises to his own safety that taking a side within the conflict entailed, and compromises of adapting his research pursuits to investigating issues of concern to refugee communities (Fultz 2010: 132). For me this project has taken on a similarly, varied number of meanings, from my activist commitment to working towards prison and jail abolition, to the ways in which I and my work are implicated in the entanglements between progressive jails, academia, and non-profits that I describe in later chapters. Lastly, comprometida/o can also refer to someone who is engaged to be married, and this project has been, and continues to be, a very

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long engagement. Alongside the concepts of activist, engaged, and militant anthropology, I use the term *antropología comprometida* because of its multiple meanings that, I feel, better capture the contradictions of occupying positions that are both critical of, and collaborative with, the institution of the jail.

As an abolitionist, a volunteer for the sheriff’s department, and an academic – I make no claims to objectivity in my research. To the contrary, I offer my analysis, from these multiple, simultaneous perspectives, grounded in the tensions that comprise criminal justice reform, prison abolition activism, and the idea of a progressive jail. My analysis is marked by these different roles and bears the imprint of these experiences. It carries the stamp of the institutional review board. It has a visitor’s badge. It tastes like AA-meeting coffee and Dunkin Donuts. It smells like four of us smoking Newports in my Camry, in the winter, with the windows barely-cracked, celebrating the ride home from Ludlow to Springfield. It sounds like shout-outs to and from incarcerated loved ones on Hot 93.7 Linda Reynolds’ radio program “Late Night Love.” It sounds like trying to have a conference call on a prison phone line that’s getting constantly cut-off. It feels hopeful, and impossible, and like there’s no reasonable option but to keep fighting until no humans are condemned to live and die in cages.
CHAPTER 5

TRAJECTORIES OF FORMERLY INCARCERATED ORGANIZERS

In this chapter I share reflections of formerly incarcerated community organizers who were active in Western Massachusetts during and before the time of my fieldwork. I present their perspectives in the form of extended excerpts and responses to interview questions. These excerpts come from longer interviews in which I asked organizers to reflect on their experiences of leaving incarceration, and how they came to be involved in reform work. I have edited these excerpts only slightly for clarity (removing repetitive words). Across each of the interviews I conducted, formerly incarcerated organizers requested to have their real names used rather than pseudonyms. Following their preference, I have kept their names, as well as the names of the organizations and institutions that they cite.

Most of the individuals I interviewed were people I have worked with in some organizing capacity, whether through some of the campaigns I describe in the next chapter, or as part of a shared organization or coalition. They describe the paths they took to become activists, advocates, and organizers - joining existing community organizations, forming their own initiatives, working in direct service provision and more. These organizers discuss the forms of support they received, and the opportunities that have shaped their work. They also name some of the barriers that have made participating in reform work more challenging.

These interviews demonstrate some of the ways in which formerly incarcerated organizers understand and talk about how they became involved in activism after, and in some cases, during their incarceration. Their descriptions illuminate the challenges that formerly incarcerated people face generally, and that those looking to reform the criminal justice system face in particular. The placement of this chapter in the middle of the dissertation is intended to center the perspectives of formerly incarcerated organizers, while situating their experiences and analyses within the histories, institutions, and interventions that they navigate. Where I have so far sought to describe the context of this research, the histories and contemporary practices and logics of incarceration in Western Massachusetts, this chapter
highlights the ways that people who have been incarcerated have fought for their lives and communities within and against these institutions of confinement.

**Katie Talbot**

Katie and I first started working together through the statewide Mass POWER (Massachusetts Prisoners and Organizers Working for Enfranchisement and Restoration) campaign to restore voting rights for people incarcerated in Massachusetts in 2019. We had been coordinating over email for several weeks before meeting for the first time in person in the First Churches of Northampton basement, a somewhat dreary space which serves primarily as an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting room, but that night was animated by a dozen interested activists looking to join us in campaigning for the voting rights of incarcerated people. Katie and I had decided to host informational meetings about the Mass POWER campaign in the counties we were organizing. She came with her daughter to the one I put together in Northampton for Hampshire County, and a couple weeks later I went to the info meeting she organized at a church in Springfield in Hampden County.

Katie has been organizing with Neighbor 2 Neighbor since 2010, fighting against a coal power plant in Holyoke and through the Jobs Not Jails campaign which helped pass a major Criminal Justice Reform Act in 2018 among other campaigns. Talking over the phone and meeting in person, I was excited by Katie’s energy, both her faith that we could do what sometimes felt like an impossible task - overturning the law passed in 2000 to deprive incarcerated people of the right to vote in Massachusetts - and her openness when she had doubts or concerns or thoughts about how we might do things better.

More than any of the other organizers I profile, Katie and I worked together closely for over two years as co-organizers and friends: we collaborated on campaigns related to criminal justice reform and voting, she graciously hosted some of my students in a class on community organizing, and I became a member of the Holyoke chapter of Neighbor 2 Neighbor, and later a community board member.

**Community organization: Neighbor 2 Neighbor**

Neighbor 2 Neighbor (N2N) is a statewide community organization based in Massachusetts, with chapters in primarily low-income and working class communities with higher percentages of
people of color: Holyoke, Lynn, Springfield, and Worcester. N2N organizes what it calls the "new majority": people of color, immigrants, women, and the working class, on a path to liberation. Neighbor 2 Neighbor’s Holyoke chapter fought to close down the Mount Tom Coal Plant in 2014, and has fought to prevent the expansion of a Columbia Gas pipeline through the region, among other statewide campaigns.

Rare among community organizations, N2N has both 501(c)(3) tax exempt status --which allows the organization to campaign for policies, receive funding to support various community-based projects and hire staff -- and 501(c)(4) tax exempt status, which allows it to campaign for individual politicians. During the time of my fieldwork, all of the local politicians N2N supported were also members of its working class and majority people of color base, running for city council positions, or in the case of Adam Gomez, for a state senate position.

For our interview, I met with Katie at Holyoke Hummus on High Street. She had just recently hosted a Neighbor 2 Neighbor meeting there and the owner John, also active in local politics, had donated food for the event. He offered us coffee as he started the process of closing-up the shop but invited us to stay and talk for as long as we wanted. When I asked Katie how she became involved in organizing, she said she’s always been organizing, that she’d always had a “sense of responsibility,” starting in high school with feeding the homeless, and becoming involved in activism around environmental issues in college. After several periods of incarceration, Katie succeeded in graduating from college. As Katie describes, it was through incarceration that she saw herself within a larger social context:

When I had my first incarceration, and quickly realized that I'm a beneficiary of a broken system, I am a white, educated woman who has the same if not worse crimes than my black and brown counterparts. And I was getting extremely light sentences. I mean, the longest I got sentenced to was nine months, and I should have been sentenced two years for the crimes that I committed and the repetition of those crimes. There was the same shit, over, and over again. And it, and it fucked me up. Like it really fucked me up to see that.

You get removed from society like you get put in these cages in this wall. And you're removed from society to begin with, you know what I mean? Like you're dehumanized, just becoming incarcerated and then like, it further perpetuates it when medical assistance isn't available, when psych assistance isn't available. So, it's this constant cycle of dehumanizing while incarcerated, you know, and I started opening-up to see all that. Like my eyes started to be open to that, like how fucked up this is.

Especially coming from Hampden County, where like Mike Ashe was like glorified as this socially-conscious sheriff. And don't get me wrong, I'm grateful I did all my time in Hampden County, like it would have been a very different experience elsewhere, but there's faults in the system and I was just very open to it. And then when I got out of my first incarceration, and understanding what my CORI was, and understanding the difficulty of finding a job and going

44 Neighbor 2 Neighbor Massachusetts website: https://www.n2nma.org/en/who-we-are/
back to school if I wanted to… I started learning more and more about like, housing opportunities that would be taken, and just this non-stop punishment for crimes that I already committed.

When I was incarcerated I got involved in this class - “Voices from Inside.” My first incarceration. And it was funny because I was at Howard Street which is like a rehab and it was on my weekly list and it's like “Creative Writing” - for two hours! They put it on. Yeah, yeah, like it was not voluntary and I was pissed. I was like, I can write a research paper. Creative Writing? Who wants to do that??

And then I loved it, like fell in love with it, like couldn't wait ‘til every week to be able to go and so I continued with Voices from Inside after my first incarceration. And I got introduced to this woman, the board president of VFI at the time was Karen Hansmann. And Karen is very much the type of person - owning your voice, owning your place in this world. And taking your seat at the table, no matter what your experiences, you know? Your experience offers you more value and more to bring you know, and she really took me under her wing for a little while and was bringing me to like these different events and eventually introduced me to Lena, who was the Holyoke organizer for Neighbor 2 Neighbor at the time. And it was right after the coal plant closed in Holyoke and Neighbor 2 Neighbor was starting to get involved in the Omnibus bill and the Jobs Not Jails campaign. And it was the first opportunity that I saw, that I saw a direct link from like the things that I came to realize while I was incarcerated, and change, like real change. Concrete change. Change that would actually make a fucking difference.

Community organization: Voices from Inside

Founded in Western Massachusetts in 1999, Voices from Inside (VFI) holds creative writing workshops for currently and formerly incarcerated women in several of the jails in Western Massachusetts. Through VFI writing workshops, “participants receive encouragement and support for their writing, gain self-confidence as they strengthen their literacy and communication skills, and begin to imagine new possibilities for themselves.” VFI holds public events where women who have taken part in workshops can share their writing and raise awareness about the issues that incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women face. VFI “also trains previously incarcerated women to become writing group leaders themselves. Many of them have led writing groups in correctional institutions or in community programs for women at risk of incarceration or re-incarceration, providing them with valuable leadership experience and skills.” One of the correctional institutions where VFI holds regular workshops is AISS (After Incarceration Support Services/All-Inclusive Support Services).

Donald Perry

Donald Perry has been speaking out against the harms of incarceration and especially life without parole for years, drawing on his own experience of incarceration and of organizing for reform. Don’s work is

45 Voices from Inside website: http://www.voicesfrominside.org/about.html
extensive: connecting with other formerly incarcerated organizers across the state; presenting to academic programs and social service agencies who are looking to improve their outreach; and waging legal battles against the state, primarily focused on parole conditions.

In 1983, Don was sentenced to a 2nd degree life sentence. He spent 18 years and 7 months in prison. 3 of those years he spent in solitary confinement. After years of advocating for himself and other prisoners, Don was released on lifetime parole, which meant that, although he was free to leave, any future arrest could result in him being re-incarcerated for the rest of his life. After his release, Don took classes at the University of Massachusetts through its University Without Walls program and graduated with a bachelor’s degree. He worked full time as a coordinator for a single room occupancy program and as a kitchen manager for the Not Bread Alone soup kitchen in Amherst.

In 2011, Don was giving a ride to someone, something he did often in his capacity serving community members. The police stopped him and found a backpack with stolen goods that his passenger had left before fleeing. Don was arrested and re-incarcerated. After trial, Don was found not guilty of the charges of receiving stolen property. He was acquitted, but because of the lifetime parole conditions of the earlier 2nd degree life sentence he was re-incarcerated anyway. His case was covered by Al Jazeera America’s in its 2014 series “The System” which showed how friends, family and community members organized a campaign to get him released. The campaign ultimately succeeded, but his life had nevertheless been completely disrupted and he had to live with the experience of being re-incarcerated despite having committed no crime. Since then, Don continued to organize, starting his own organization Project Operation Change focusing on parole reform in Massachusetts, and graduating from Just Leadership USA’s Leadership Program for formerly incarcerated advocates. One of my first interactions with Don was in Springfield in 2017, for an event called “Dismantling the Legal Institution of 21st

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47 Just Leadership USA: “is led by directly impacted people and is dedicated to decarcerating the United States by educating, elevating and empowering the people and communities most impacted by systemic racism to drive meaningful and lasting policy reform,” from the Just Leadership USA website: https://jlusa.org/
Century Slavery” at the Society of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Social Club. The event was organized by the Emancipation Initiative and Young Abolitionists who came out from eastern Massachusetts, and local activists from Arise for Social Justice, Out Now, Ayyub Abdul-Alim who had been wrongfully incarcerated through an FBI entrapment operation after 9-11, and Don, as part of Project Operation Change. Don spoke about his own incarceration, his experiences of solitary confinement, and his struggle to be free despite a punitive and heartless parole system.

I interviewed Don at the Barnes and Noble in Holyoke, which we both use as an un-official office. The café section of the store is frequently brimming with people - Holyoke Community College

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The Society of our Lady of Mount Carmel Social Club: Although the event wasn’t sponsored by the club itself, the venue’s history in the South End of Springfield demonstrates some of the demographic and political shifts within the city. According to Leo Florian, the president of the South End Neighborhood Council and local historian quoted in an online Mass Live article, the Society of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Social Club was founded in 1897 and was one of several Italian-American clubs in the neighborhood where a growing number of Italian immigrants had settled. In its more than 100-year history, the club has hosted festivals and cultural events, fostering mutual aid and solidarity within the Italian-American community. The mayor of Springfield, Domenic Sarno, volunteered at the club as a youth. The club has continued to serve as a venue for baby showers, receptions, meetings and other significant events for community members of the South End - Italian American and non-Italian American alike. The club has also been the site of violence and suspected affiliation to the mob. In 2003, Adolfo “Big Al” Bruno, a mob figure and member of the Genovese family was killed in the club’s parking lot. According to an FBI investigation reported on by the Springfield Republican’s Mass Live website, the club has been managed behind the scenes for years by a known, loan shark Albert Calvanese. One of his alleged enforcers, Anthony Scibelli, was indicted in 2019 for extortion after assaulting an under-cover government witness.

In 2015, a man was stabbed at the club during a “Latin Night” event and the club’s license was suspended for 20 days. In recent years, the club had been hosting more events directed towards the Latinx community, reflecting the changing demographics of the neighborhood as years of “white flight” of upwardly-mobile Italian American families to Springfield’s suburbs. In 2019, the club was raided as part of a federal investigation of leaders of the Latin Kings gang. The investigation alleged that Michael Cecchetelli, known within the gang as “King Merlin,” had hosted meetings at the club in his role as the gangs’ “East Coast Czar” in which gang business, including orders for murder had been discussed and recorded by an undercover informant. Michael Cecchetelli’s uncle, David “Fat Chickie” Cecchetelli had also been connected to the club and convicted for running illegal gambling operations and illegal possession of ammunition. As an Italian American, Michael Cecchetelli is rare among Latin Kings’ leadership, but his familial affiliations to the club, and gang affiliations to the Latin Kings mirror a shift along the lines of which populations are criminalized within the city of Springfield. In response to his arrest and the larger FBI investigation, Mayor Domenic Sarno called for the city to revoke the club’s entertainment license. As we talked about, this probably has got to get worked into the text somehow. Its too important to be packed into a footnote, but this can be a place to part the information for now until you find a ‘home’ in the text – maybe when you talk about the geography of political organizing?
and Westfield State University students in study groups, local college professors working off-campus, bible study groups, people on dates, meetings with recovery sponsors, people napping in armchairs. Don and I spent several hours talking, and Don wove back and forth, talking about his incarceration, his experience of becoming an organizer and advocate for reform, and the kinds of changes he feels need to be made. As Don describes:

… the reason why I advocate about parole reform is: the culture of parole in Massachusetts is a white boy sadistic frat house culture. It’s just like being in a funhouse, you never know where the trap doors or smoke and mirrors is at. You trying to put, you put your heart and soul into staying out of trouble and doing what you need to do and they’re in there playing games, which I mean, because their, because their mentality is to what? As they say, ‘trail ‘em, nail ‘em and jail ‘em.’ So anytime they can trip you up, they send you back, so that it’s supposed to be the overall culture, is supposed to be changing now, but it’s really twisted because you will have the old-school guys that just want to be there until they retire. Then you have these young people coming in with the blazing guns, they've seen too many CSIs and all this cop shows, and they come in and they get that little power, man, and they just act a fool. And it was not only the young guys but you women too.

And so, I was talking to a friend of mine the other day, he's been on parole for 17 years. He's like, “I’m tired of this man.” I mean, so yeah, I mean, people, well you get tired. Because, so first of all, if you're in prison, any means of getting out [you’ll take it] instead of sitting by themselves, locked in. Being out here? Yeah. But then they didn’t realize the novelty will start wearing off because you're a grown man. I want my life back. I don't want to have to go back and tell you [parole officer] everything that I’m doing. Or have you, that you can talk to me any kind of way, you know what I mean, because you have state-sanctioned authority. I can’t, I want to leave and go to the shore, or South Carolina, or whatever, I got to get permission, 45 days ahead of time?

Then when I get there, when I leave, I got to come down, gotta give urine, a breathalyzer, gotta get a paper. I got to take it to wherever, I got to get there within 24 hours. I gotta check in again, get that signed off, come back. You go to another state, people are like “What the hell are you doing? What are you a sex offender or something?” No! I’m not” “Why you have to do all of this?” You know what I mean. So, this is crazy man. I mean curfews, 10 o’clock curfews, all this kinda crazy. Yeah, people having to wear bracelets. That’s humiliating stuff. And the thing, they're like normal then and I'm sure you've seen it out when you've been in Springfield and places in the community, you see men and women with bracelets on them, they’re wearing shorts and stuff like it’s nothing. They’re normalizing that man. And it's like, wait a minute, man, this is wrong.

This is wrong. I mean, not only is it normalizing that but then also, the thing that people are not aware of is like they’re using these to combat the overhead of incarcerated people. $57,000 right? Somebody said, “Oh! we can just put a bracelet on them and incarcerate them in their own homes.” Some people may not want to really wake up to what's happening ‘til you got a block with maybe like 10 people on it. So, this is flying under the radar, and a lot of those instances people are having to pay anywhere from $10 a day to $300 a month.
The “bracelet” that Don refers to is a GPS monitoring device, attached to a person’s ankle. Courts sometimes use these devices for probation, as an alternative to jail before trial, or as a condition of parole. The GPS device is used to track someone’s location and ensure that they remain in authorized locations. As Don indicates, this method of surveillance has been promoted as an alternative to incarceration, one which would allow people to remain with their families. As Don and other scholars have argued (Schenwar and Law 2020), this also allows a larger number of people to be digitally incarcerated at less cost to the state, because it transfers much of the cost (of food, housing, and even the device’s operation) to the incarcerated person. In practice, people are often not allowed to live with family members or anyone else with a criminal record and experience the ongoing stress of worrying whether or not they’ll get home in time for curfew or be delayed by public transportation or if the device might malfunction, causing them to accidentally violate the terms of their conditional release. As a volunteer with the Massachusetts Bail Fund, I once spent an entire court day, from 9am until 4pm, posting bail for someone in Hampden County and waiting for them to be assigned a GPS ankle monitor, which then took hours to report their correct location at the courthouse. Another incarcerated person I worked with in Greenfield was still incarcerated but allowed to leave for work during the day. The battery on his GPS ankle monitor would die frequently, so any time he was back in the pre-release dorm of the jail he had to spend hours near an outlet so he could charge the device and avoid setting off an alert that could throw off his progress towards release. Living in Holyoke and working in Springfield I was also surprised by the number of GPS monitors I saw on neighbors and community members, most of whom were young Black and Latino men.

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During Don’s earlier incarceration, a white prisoner with the same name, in collusion with guards, took advantage of their shared name to blame him for various infractions. The effect of these false infractions accruing on his record was that Don was denied access to educational opportunities and training programs while incarcerated:
I wind up having to file lawsuits about the erroneous information on my record, right? So what they do? They clean it up, send me to another institution, and then to get back at me - throw it back in there.

So then it got to the point, that, deputies, some security cop had me taken out of my cell one night like, 12 o'clock. So they have what is called a “blue book” with all of their rules and everything. So they’re in my cell, tearing it up looking for the blue book, right?

He said, “Yeah, I'm a tell you right now, we’re in your cell looking for the blue book right now.” I said, “Well, first of all,” I says, “I don't have a blue book.” “Yeah you do.” Cause he’s looking at the language that I use. I’m quoting from it. I said, “Listen, I have filed for many lawsuits. I said “The blue book is right here” (Don pointing to his head). Good luck. Good luck.”

This is a Black dude who is talking to me too. He said, “Listen, he said nobody in this institution likes you,” he said, “Cause it feel like it’s just a matter of time before you bring a lawsuit against them.” I said, I’m not here to make friends, I’m trying to go home.

It’s just crazy man. But so, this is the kind of stuff that I've had to deal with. But ultimately it prepared me, for what? It prepared me to overturn, to get out of prison first, right? It prepared me to overturn my case and to get out of prison. I overturned two guys’ cases before I got out, while in prison. One guy Ritchie Rivera we used to play like Scrabble all the time, and so he was talking about his case and everything, then I helped him and this guy, Jerry Johnson. He was going blind, you know what I mean? But each time was like, ‘Damn, if I can do this for other people?’ But then ultimately, I was able to do it for myself. And I just like, Thursday I just finished a lawsuit. I got a third lawsuit which I’m starting right now, by next week, they’re going to be really pissed at me next week.

Even when programming was available at the prisons where Don was incarcerated, conflicts with other incarcerated people and with corrections officers made it such that Don had to constantly wage legal battles against prison staff to access them. These experiences of fighting for his own rights within prison ultimately trained him to be able to help other incarcerated people. He has continued this fight even after his own release.

So, I think the process of me getting to this work… I think I was forged by my own situation, right? But then too, I think that my own situation forged me, it’s like, not only in the understanding that it was, how I had been treated so unjustly, but then understanding that it's not just about me, it's about other people too. So if I've been treated so unfairly, it's the same. So even though I’ve extricated myself from a lot of things, I have some semblance of success at this particular point, the bottom line is a lot of other people still suffer, from the same or similar injustices, you know what i mean, and it’s not only just impacted me, but its impacted my community.
I'm from Springfield, I’m from the black community. I have kids. I have family there, you know what I mean. So, the same thing, they’re getting caught up in the same system. You know what I mean, or my great grandkids, I mean, so this is all about, you know, doing what's necessary for us, not only for me, but as a society, because like I said, this criminal justice stuff has ran off the rails. This is definitely the new form of mass incarceration, but you know, and so what are they going to do next? You know what I'm saying. And so, but transparency and accountability is on both sides of the coin.

We can't just point for someone else, you know, I mean, we have to, we have to get, getting back to the individual, you got to put some responsibility on the individual too. Because at some point in time, they have to be accountable. Again, like I said, you're not responsible for the situation you're born into. But after you reach a certain age and you have your stable mind and everything, you have to start taking some responsibility. You gotta start figuring it out, you know what I mean? You can’t go through life blaming everybody for everything. You know what I mean? And I tell people, so any success you have in life, other people are responsible for that too, right? Yeah. Well what is it? So, yeah this is what I preach on both sides of the coin, in prison out here, whatever, you know what i mean?

Khalil Rodriguez

On a warm Saturday morning, on the edge between summer and fall, Khalil has assembled around a dozen volunteers at the park next to the Holyoke Public Library with the purpose of picking up used needles that have been discarded by intravenous drug users in some of the alleys and parks around town. Most of the volunteers are members of the Vanguard Movement, the organization of tribe-affiliated community members that Khalil helped to co-found. Khalil uses the term “tribe” instead of gang when describing his path as a tribal leader turned community advocate and organizer, and his work with the Vanguard Movement has focused on negotiating truces and building relationships between local tribes to support them finding ways to mediate conflict with each other without violence. Before becoming an organizer and outreach worker, Khalil was incarcerated in state prison.

Khalil also leads community syringe pick-ups like this as an outreach worker with the non-profit community health services provider Tapestry which I have attended as well, and he mentions that there will be another clean up the following Saturday sponsored by Tapestry. As we walk we scan the ground for used needles, picking them up with long, plastic grabbers, and dropping them into secure containers. Our crew makes its way to the Holyoke Transportation Center bus station, combing the alley behind it.
We cross Veterans Park, and take the alleys between Elm and Pine, back across Appleton and up to Sargeant, one of the neighborhoods in Holyoke where I’ve lived for several years, and an area of high outdoor drug use, especially heroin and fentanyl.

While me and the other volunteers’ eyes are mostly scanning the ground, Khalil is engaging with every community member we pass, asking how they are, if they need clean syringes and Narcan. Khalil has an intense, friendly energy that stays constant throughout the day, even as the rest of us focus mostly on the ground. He tacks back and forth, lingering to talk with a community member, then speed-walking to the front of the group, offering encouragement and somehow also pointing out needles we’ve missed despite our hyper-focus on the task. Some neighbors point to where they’ve seen needles and thank us for cleaning up. Some of the volunteers are current or former tribal members. It seems like every block we make our way through, someone recognizes and says what’s up to Khalil or another Vanguard member. This familiarity seems to put people at ease as we make our way through the alleys that functions as spaces for the use and sale of drugs, places of vulnerability and the fear of potential police intervention or other violence.

Community organization: **Vanguard Movement**

Khalil co-founded the Vanguard Movement to try to decrease violent conflicts between tribes (gangs) in Springfield, including: the Latin Kings, Solidos, Bloods, and Crips. They formed a council for leaders to resolve disputes without violence and since then have been trying to find ways, like the syringe pick-up, to direct their capacity towards supporting their communities and preventing harm.

I interviewed Khalil at his mom’s apartment in Springfield. He stops by every day after work to visit with her and help with chores and pay bills. It’s a short walk from the downtown branch of the public library where I often check email and write up field notes. He meets me at the front door to her building where Khalil greets neighbors who are hanging out. We go in and up to his mom’s apartment. When we get in he greets her and we sit in the living room where his mom brings us fruit to eat while we talk. A fan is whirring and a lovebird in a cage nearby makes occasional noises. I asked Khalil what the process was for
Um, I guess I would say I was... it came out of incarceration. I mean, I mobilize all the time. I mean, I used to gangbang and I became a warlord, well I was granted warlord position when I was in gangs. I always knew how to organize. I think I always felt like I led. Never felt like followed much, but when i was incarcerated. It was my mentor Hakim, who is never coming home.

He [Hakim] shared with me a piece of advice for employment. He said, Khalil start to volunteer doing something that you enjoy doing. And then sooner or later it'll become a job and it'll feel like you're never working. So that's pretty much like kind of what i did. I started to volunteer with different organizations, from family and youth services where I became the lead liaison, or the voice of the community, while all these other agencies are kind of lined up and trying to figure out how they can work together to provide services for families. And I was just that kind of person. There was a community member that was going to kind of what they call today as ‘community health workers.’ I was kinda like that community person that was going to be a voice for the people, kind of get that data from the people and kind of bring it to the roundtable on what people needed. And I did that volunteer, and I got a stipend for that.

And then me and my brother started to volunteer with the sheriff's department um… this mentorship program where you mentor men, men who have been incarcerated, take a training and the Sheriff grants them permission to go back into the penitentiary and mentor men who are coming home. So what we would do is we would mentor them. We’d mentor men from the pre-release behind the wall. And as folks were coming into the community, folks that already been incarcerated will kind of help them the ropes, you know, the CORI (Criminal Offender Record Information49), you know, where, who’s hiring folks with a CORI and stuff of that nature.

And I think that's where like this work actually started to become like employment, I guess I would say. I was giving a presentation for men who were brought who were high risk, so they get brought down from upstate prison after doin’ state time50, and they will get brought down after their 90 days were left, and that's only to integrate them. So, on the first workshop, they will have the DA (District Attorney), they will have a police officer, they will have all of that kind of scaring them straight, sane, if you start to do that life you're going to face us. And then on day

49 “A name-based criminal record check (CORI) returns information on available Massachusetts arraignments. This type of criminal record check is done by submitting the name and date of birth for a person. That information is then searched against Massachusetts court records to determine if there is a possible record for that person. This type of criminal record check contains only Massachusetts information and is not fingerprint supported”  https://www.mass.gov/massachusetts-criminal-offender-record-information-cori

50 In Massachusetts, all state prisons, where individuals are incarcerated for any sentences of over 2½ years, are in the central and eastern part of the state. Incarcerate and formerly incarcerated people in Massachusetts refer to state prison time as going “upstate” – even if their movement to a Massachusetts state prison is geographically east or even further south depending on the part of the state where they live. This geographical framework is the same, and probably influenced by, New York, where anyone incarcerated in New York City and sentenced to state prison is sent to one of the prisons in upstate New York.
two that we had like providing services from DTA (Department of Transitional Assistance) and mentoring to mental health. And they had this program called Roca. And then they had the mentorship program that I used to volunteer for. And it was my turn to volunteer and go and give a speech about AISS.

And the assistant director of Roca was there. And he offered me a job. And I told him to go fuck off. But I took his card anyway. I mean, my mom lives here. And Roca’s right there (around the corner, on School Street in Springfield). So, one day, I was walking my mom to the bus stop. And the guy, the director came out, like, ‘Hey, I've got a job for you!’ And, you know, in front of my mom and shit, you know, put me on the spot.

I left Roca because Roca tried to sit me down. And when they sat us down, they said, we're gonna start this new thing called Operation Repo. And when I, you know, I'm very attentive and I know language, I learned how to read and write in prison from my mentors, you know, so when I heard Repo, I'm like, “What the fuck is yours that you need to repossess?” That was a question in my mind. So, when they started talking, they were they were talking about like, arresting our, our, our youth! on MY CASELOAD right? And what I realized, I put two and two together, right? At the end of my work day, I'm supposed to write data in this ETO (Efforts to Outcomes) database.

And so, I'm supposed to bring, you know, my participant’s info, from what level of change is he at? Is he in ‘pre-contemplation,’ ‘contemplation,’ ‘maintenance,’ all that other stuff. And I would probably write ‘gangbanging, still carrying guns and selling drugs,’ right? Three months later, he's probably doing something different, right? Yeah, he's not carrying a gun to the program, but I have to write this data, in the ETO. What I didn't realize is the grant writer was named Sergeant Brian Elliot. What does that tell you? He's a police officer. So, where's that data going? So, they wanted to bust out Operation Repo where they were going to use that data.

So, because I have morals and values, I decided to like, cause hell until they got rid of me. They demoted me from roamer. They didn't want me out within the community with other agencies. They said, ‘We're going to give you the Holyoke caseload,’ which was the shittiest caseload. And they got upset. Within two weeks, I was bringing everybody from my caseload to the building, and I was being arrogant and I said “Melvin, Melvin couldn't do this,” because it was Melvin’s caseload right? Melvin couldn't do this. Holyoke in the house now, I got everybody ‘Team Khalil’ shirts, you know what I mean. Cause I can do it. People will move yo, when you speak from the heart. Words that come from the heart enter the heart. I got the Holyoke list up and popping. Them kids was getting jobs and all this other stuff. And they [Roca] ain’t like that. You know what I mean?

And they fear, it's like that's what they fear. They fear what you writing about right now. So, they made sure they took me out of there because I can easily climb the ranks. I ain’t got no degree. I hate college. I took a couple college courses and I dropped out because ain’t no teacher gonna talk to me in that kind of way. Ain't gonna tell me about reality. Ain't gonna tell me about my people. And then talk about my people in a way they do, such a stigmatizing way. I was hurt while in classrooms and that’s why I dropped out of school. But I can tell you what, I have worked alongside people with master's degree in this field. They don't know fucking shit. They can't reach our people. Ain't no books, no four year, eight-year degree gonna help you reach our people.

So, I left… after four weeks of being rehired, they had some money for me and they cut me a check and they said they wouldn't even fight my unemployment. They just didn't want me in their
space anymore. So, I took the money. And I said ain’t nobody want to do it or Operation Repo anyway.

After our interview, Khalil insists that I take some fruit with me so his mom won’t scold him for being an inconsiderate host. I give him a ride to go pick up the van at Tapestry that he and other outreach workers use to provide harm reduction service. He shows me the back, where they have supplies for HIV testing, Narcan for reversing opioid overdoses, and clean needles for exchanging with used ones.

Jackie Velez

Jackie grew up in Brooklyn but now lives in Springfield, Massachusetts. She is a published writer and was the Western Massachusetts regional organizing director for Senator Ed Markey’s successful 2020 re-election campaign. In an article published on Oprah Daily in May of 2020, Jackie describes how she survived solitary confinement and incarceration on Riker’s Island, through prayer, imagination, reading and writing poetry. Jackie had been writing since she was a child, but after moving to Massachusetts, Jackie connected with Voices from Inside and was able to join a community of women writing about their experiences surviving trauma, incarceration and stigma, finding hope and support and supporting others. Jackie became a student at Bard College’s Micro-College program at the Care Center in Holyoke, a program oriented “to serve young mothers and low-income women” working towards associate degrees.

When I was starting field work and looking to get involved in local criminal justice reform organizing in Hampden County, Jackie invited me to meet with her at the Neighbor 2 Neighbor office at Nueva Esperanza in Holyoke. The first time we talked mostly about Neighbor 2 Neighbor and the campaigns the organization was working on. A year later, and with some organizing work in between,

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talked with her again. This time on the phone, due to Covid-19, and focused on how she got involved in organizing after her incarceration. For Jackie, re-entry from incarceration was intensely stressful. As she describes, after a year of probation, she failed a drug test and was required to take part in more intensive programming – and surveillance:

I had to see a counselor once a week. I had to see my PO once a week. And I had to go to group therapy once a week. I was so fucking pissed, because it's hard to get that [time] off. I had a little bullshit, part time job in a medical clinic. I was a filing specialist, and I was the filing person, you know, but I enjoyed it because I didn't have to deal with patients. I didn't have to deal with people. Right? I was angry at the world. But this time, right? I wanted to start my life over, I wanted to get a decent job. So anyway this becomes my job - probation. I have to go to group therapy, individual therapy. So I was just in all these different things and did all of that.

I graduated from the drug program. While I was doing the drug program, they referred me to different programs, I could learn more skills. I did like a program for computer training like introduction to the Microsoft suite. I did that. One in which you get mentored by corporate people. I did that. I graduated from that. I did a leadership and advocacy training at an organization called the Correctional Association, where they taught you how to advocate for yourself and others.

I became friends with my probation officer. He started to accommodate my schedule when realized everything that was on my schedule. So, he also had to come to my house once a month or once a week, I can’t remember. He would come see me first, before the rest of his caseload, so he made things easier for me.

By the time I finished I had gotten a job as a medical receptionist for a year and a half, and then I lost that job and got into another abusive relationship. And then when I broke it off with him, I ended up working for that organization that does advocacy training [Correctional Association of New York].

I volunteered for them. And then I got hired part-time and they gave me $18/hour in 2009, right? That was more than I've ever gotten paid in my life. I did that for the next six years, and I became an advocate for prison reform through that organization. So that's basically what turned things around for me. That job changed my life. I got to know stars, I got to know legislators, you know, the mayor, the governor, and I just became addicted to my job. And that kind of seems like it turned everything around for me, and I look back at going to jail as a good thing for me because it was a short amount of time, but enough time that I didn't want to spend another day away from my daughter, right? And then I'll do better and be better for my daughter and myself. You know, that's pretty much what turned around for me.

*Justin: Did that job kind of like, set you on the track to the work that you're doing now?*

Yeah, it sure did. It taught me everything. It taught me about the school to prison pipeline, it taught me that, you know, we were targeted - when I was in the 90s hanging on the street, right?
That there were forced confessions that were not, you know, legal, and they was doing all kind of illegal shit to give cases that were really illegal. That, that we were victims. That most of the people in prison are abused, that they were just warehousing us, right, that the schools were preparing our kids for prison. All kinds of stuff I learned from that job, because they had the mandate to go into every New York State Prison.

They could inspect the prison and the conditions and bring findings to the New York State Legislature, the press, and the public since 1846. So this was an organization that has existed for over 175 years. Today in the present day, they wouldn't have given any nonprofit that type of, and that was life changing for me. The first assignment I had was to get 30,000 signatures to reform the Rockefeller Drug Laws. And then a few months later, we were protesting in front of his office in Manhattan to enact the anti-shackling law that would enable women not to be shackled during labor delivery and birth. When you’re giving birth. How? Like all of that changed me, you know? I just wanted to do more and more and more.

It got me to the point where I wanted to start my own nonprofit organization, which I'm concentrating now. Because it seems like there is such a need here, here in this region. And there is not an organization that does, or that focuses solely on people that are formerly incarcerated and currently incarcerated. It's very lacking. And I've been here for four years. That was super evident.

I worked with Neighbor 2 Neighbor for three years on criminal justice reform, but after they passed that comprehensive legislation in 2018, they were like this is done and over with. And Jafet Robles had already been dead for some time. And they really didn't want to do that anymore. And I was very disappointed with that. So, my work suffers from it because they weren't letting us organize what we wanted to organize.

Justin: Do you think that Neighbor to Neighbor will go back to doing criminal justice reform?

I think so I think eventually, you're going to see that those are the people that need the most empowerment. There’s still many issues that affect that population. But if they don't, even if they did, they're not going to fully focus on that. Because their thinking is, if you’re an organizer, there's no issue you can't organize around. I think that you need to narrow the focus, you can't just do everything, because you’ll be an expert in nothing. Or especially, you won't have a specialty of any particular narrow the focus. But that’s not my decision, right, because they want to run things how they want to run things. It’s on the organizers to take initiative in the spare time, to let them see the proof that criminal justice reform still needs to be branched off.

One thing, if I have to open my own nonprofit, is that a lot of people that are formerly incarcerated even if they can seal their record, there are a lot of things that hinder them: one, getting educational opportunities while they were in prison. So when they come home, they can actually be employed in a job that would pay them a decent wage, and not bullshit because they formerly incarcerated. And there's really no programs here for that, like college in prison. They don't really have that here. It's crazy to me. Today, I woke up with that in my heart. And I was thinking about Jafet Robles, I don’t know if you met him. And I was just like, you know what, it's not here, right? ‘cause when I first moved here, I researched every organization that I possibly could, and what criminal justice work was being done. It’s nothing, it’s not here. You know what I mean?
Israel Rivera

Israel Rivera - or Izzy, as most people call him – is a city councilor in Holyoke. I interviewed Izzy at his office at the University of Massachusetts where he had a position as Area Studies Program Manager with the Center for Latin American, Caribbean, and Latino Studies and was a graduate student in the Public Policy program. Izzy had been incarcerated and was initially rejected from attending UMass because of his history of incarceration, despite his qualifications and what is normally a simple transfer through a program that allows students of regional community colleges to complete their Bachelor’s degrees at UMass. Izzy persevered, with support from faculty and other students, and UMass admissions were pressured to re-visit their decision and admit him. Here, Izzy describes his path to outreach work and now politics:

I think for me, it was more of a stroke of luck and skills that I attained as a young kid navigating the systems within Holyoke in general. Now what I mean by the systems, I mean the schools, the after school programs, the like the Boys and Girls Club. What do you call it, teen center activities, playing youth sports, or you get network with other people that have positions in different places. And as like, I guess that provided me with access that provides a lot of people with access that they don't realize they have until they actually like begin to utilize it.

So when I came out, I went back to like my old roots. I worked with the Boys and Girls Club for a long time, from like age 13, 14 until I was like 19, 20. At the Boys and Girls Club, I worked with kids. A variety of different staff members. Like over the years, it was like five, six years. So when I work with different nonprofit organizations, I also grew up in housing, which is another, not a non-profit, but it's like, sort of like a federally-funded program. That kind of functions as if it were a nonprofit. They gave us summer work when I was like 13 too, so like, I met people through there that were connected to the city.

So when I was coming out of prison, I was able to reach out to people at the Boys and Girls Club. I was able to reach out to some old teachers that I had, baseball coaches. Build, like, network, so that I can be successful.

Justin: Were there resources that were helpful when you got out?

I wouldn't say there were… there were resources, like there is after incarceration support services. AISS.

Justin: Through the sheriff’s department?

Yeah, the sheriff's department stuff. I'm not gonna, I'm not gonna say they don't do nothing. I mean, I tried to juice as much as I could from them. But there's not much. You're gonna get an ID and your social security card or maybe your birth certificate. But I mean, in Illinois, they don't even give you that, or Indiana and those places like, you don't even get that upon release. So that isn't on you to get those things. So, I guess you have to be appreciative of that. I already had a
high school diploma or GED and all the other stuff. There was nothing for me. There was no programming because I was on a mandatory sentence. They just made me do drug programs, which didn't benefit me in any way because I wasn't an addict. I sold drugs. I wasn't an addict. I still had to do like all these other programs. That didn't make any sense. But, I guess to them, it made sense because they got their numbers and they got what they needed out of it.

But upon release, I went to a AISS a couple times. I met my counselor once and then never saw him again. Because, not because, more I guess, according to them, it would be more about my fault. Or my, my, my own doing because I didn't go searching out for him or go looking for him. Well, you work for the state, bro. I just came out of prison for five years. I got like… I'm supposed to look for you? That's, that was my mindset at the same time. Like I don't. I reached out to you guys. I tried to get into college while I was incarcerated. Because I was on a mandatory sentence they said no, I can't do that. So I just gotta sit around. Everything else I can do on my own. When I get out I can. I know what to do to get to HCC [Holyoke Community College], I know what to do to get my food stamps, I know what to do to get all the stuff I need to do. I grew up in the system, so I technically don't need you to do all that stuff. What I needed you to do was, like be able to get me into school at the time, get me different resources for studying or even if I can't sign up for school, give me some books or some stuff that I can actually start working my mind out to get when I get to school, I'm there. Because when you're incarcerated, you got a lot of time on your hands.

Isn't it? I mean, so there is resources, they have mentorship programs, I was a part of the mentorship program, but I went to be a mentor. As a mentee, I didn't really do much. I didn't. I wasn't a part of it. I didn't do their stages, three stages they do. I didn't do any of those. I just went out and applied for a job with Max Salvage with a friend of mine I played basketball with. I asked him to hook me up with a job there with Michael Sullivan, who's now city councilor in the city of Holyoke, and he gave me a job and then from there, I just, I worked there for about six, seven months. And I applied to HCC, I did all my paperwork, I did everything I needed to do. I got into HCC, I started taking a couple classes took like one or two classes I got, I did good. I got two A's, which motivated me to keep going. And then ultimately that job ended cause the winter came.

And for me, it was more of a like a stroke of luck, or God, divine entity, whatever you want to call it. I was jogging one day to free my mind because I had nothing. I had like $600 to my name and the situation was that I got laid off over there. And the only thing I can do is probably brick pick if I wanted to make money and I was like hell no, I'm not a slave bro. I didn't feel like I'm gonna start brick pick, picking bricks like, in my mindset I was like I'd rather go back to selling drugs and that's what ends up happening - like, that's what I started thinking, you know, I got $600 let me see how I can turn that, flip it into something, and during this process while I was jogging, so during this process while I was jogging, I was jogging by the canal over there in the Flats, and I had my wallet in my pocket with the money and for some odd reason that shit just bounced out of my pocket, and it fell into a fucking crevice that led into the canal. I lost everything. I lost my $600. I lost everything, everything, everything, everything. This not even a lie. Not a joke, not to embellish the story, this is fuckin facts, this is off the rip. This is what the fuck happened. And I was, I was stressed. I was depressed. Like $600!

I got nothing bro. Like, I got no job. I got nothing, nothing. I don't know what the fuck am I gonna do. And then the next the following, I had stayed at my friend's house, who was my barber and the following day I was just walking back up the hill to my mother's house and I go through Heritage Park. And while I cut through Heritage Park, the Boys and Girls Club is running a group, they are like they're doing some stuff. And I see some people that I know from the Boys and Girls Club. I say hi to the staff because they work there from when I worked there. Whatever.
This random lady named Rebecca she calls me over, ends up being Jafet Robles’ sister. She calls me over and she was like, “Hey, are you Izzy?” And I'm like, yeah. And I was like, “Who are you?” And she's like, “My name is Rebecca. You don't know me. I work for the Holyoke Safe and Successful Youth Initiative.” And I was like, “okay,” and she was like, “I heard a lot about you.” And I was like, “Okay, this is creepy now.”

She was like “I heard that, I heard you used to work at the Boys and Girls Club” and I was like, “Yeah,” “I heard you came out of prison recently.” And I was like, “Yeeaaah. What’s this about?” And then she was like, “Well, would you like a job?” And I was like, uhhh sure. She's like, “Are you working right now?” I was like “No.” And she was like, “Well, we need a part time, pretty much outreach worker to mentor some of the guys reach out and also manage them while they’re at the fence at Wistariahurst painting the black fence.” The fence that’s there, we painted it, I did all that shit, me and my crew did the whole fence we're just missing a chunk yeah, it’s like that much. We never got to finish it.

But I did all of that before everybody that's there now. Like I've been, yeah, I've been I've been around Holyoke, like doing a lot of this work shit in Holyoke since I came out of prison in 2012 or 20… yeah 2012, 2013. So then how I end up so, then I tell ‘em whatever I guess right? Like, yeah, so the Holyoke Safe and Successful Youth Initiative is a grant-funded program. They want to develop projects like little babies, or whatnot - whatever terminology they want to use. And they were saying that, that it's a program for adjudicated youth 14 to 24 years that have been involved with gun charges, or gang violence.

Yeah, so I'm pretty much dealing with younger kids that just came out of jail. And I just had to be a role model for them and show them how to pretty much live in a way where it's functional within today's society. So, I end up reaching out. The next day, I go to the program, and when I walk in, most of the kids in the program are, were my kids at the Boys and Girls Club before I went to prison. Like 90% of them were my kids at the Boys and Girls Club before I went to prison. So they go ‘Izzy what’s up!’ Boom boom - like there was no introductions. I knew them more than the people that work there knew them already. So it was already, it worked for me - perfect. So then they were like, “Oh my god, perfect.” So, I go and I sign my paperwork, I do everything I need to do.

I end up getting hired with no interview process or nothing. Just, they put me on at Career Point at the time, now it's Mass Hire. But at the time it was Career Point. I worked for Career Point. They pay me $13 starting off. Minimum wage back then was like $8.75, $9, something I think I don't remember clearly. But I was like, 13 wow, I'll take that. 3, 4 hours a day, five hours a day. Why not? I'm still going to college anyways. And within three months, they made me full time. And I'm really making like $35- $40,000 a year almost. Well, actually a little less like 35,000, and I'm sitting here like, wow, I just came out of jail. I've been out like six, seven months. I’m doing alright, you know what I mean?

So, from there. I'm working with these kids that are out there selling drugs and um becoming a knucklehead - are doing knucklehead activities - and all this other stuff. And I'm trying to steer them in a direction where it's not. I'm not telling them that not to do it anymore because I understand the process. Remember, I was just flat broke not too long ago, my mind is like I’m not gonna stay broke for nobody. And I don't disrespect nobody for doing that. This is a survival mechanism for people that grew up in that neighborhood or in that, those circumstances.

But it made me actually hold myself accountable to certain things so I could no longer sell drugs, not even think about it, you get what I'm saying? I can’t even think about it. Now I can't because
now I'm in a position of, I would be a hypocrite if I'm out there trapping and I'm out there telling people that you shouldn't trap. You know what I'm saying? So now I'm holding myself accountable to a standard that I was not ever held to before. At least for myself, because it's just that's a self-thing. Because everybody else could tell me “Oh, you shouldn't do that.” But that doesn't mean shit when yourself is telling you that, it's a whole different concept.

And I guess, through that process, I grew, I began to grow through the Holyoke SSY. I began to do different organizing, different ways, in fashions, because as an outreach worker, I was good because I knew everybody, but I didn't want to just be an outreach worker. I wanted more than that. So I figured, with school that and then start doing like some community organizing I can, I can prove my worth to the community. You know what I mean? Especially having just came out of prison. And from there, it just kept, it continues to go. I graduated from HCC. I ended up working, getting recruited for the school department, but then not getting hired because of my record. So, then I end up working at One Holyoke CDC. And then from there, it's just like, I kept going. I graduated from HCC I graduated from UMass. And now I'm in the Master's Program for MPPA.

I'm trying to figure out how that, I can function or navigate this system too as well. A lot of these things. I feel like they're all bullshit ass systems, and you gotta kind of navigate and get through it. Once you're done. You get, you're supposed to get a reward at the end. We're still waiting. I'm doing all right, compared to others. I mean, one of my guys from the program, he just got killed the other day. And like, it's crazy. Today, I think it's his wake. And he was my kid in the Boys and Girls Club when he was like, seven, eight years old, too. Yeah, like so he went through there and then he went through there. I don't know, bro. Sometimes it just like for me, it gets to the point like, what are we doing?

Like in Holyoke, in general, for me, it's like, a lot of these kids that are going to jail or getting killed, they were my kids once in the club. And I'm like, you know? You get to meet them in a different light, just like in jail. I get to meet people in different lights, like the panhandler - the person you see you asking for quarters or whatever. When they're incarcerated and they're doing time, you're doing time with them. They're just a regular person. They good, because we all on the same level now. Ain't no different classes or anything like that.

And then when you come out and you see them in the street, things look different and you sit there like wow, what the hell happened, bro?

But yeah, I guess, I guess I found support mechanisms. Like a holding of myself that I can hold myself accountable with. And then I guess the adversity of always having to prove, kind of like, has kept me grounded. I don't know if that makes sense, but it like it kind of has kind of kept me grounded. Like, I don't do dumb shit, because, I kinda want to make people look stupid.

Justin: Like prove them wrong?

I'm not supposed to be where I'm at. 90% of the time I'm not supposed to be there. I'm on the Parks and Rec commission. I mean, I'm running for city council now. I'm probably not gonna win, but fuck it. I'm not supposed to be here. I'm not supposed to be running anyways. I'm not supposed to be doing a lot of the shit I'm doing. I mean, I see people in the community and they look at me like why do people even listen to that guy?

Justin: But a lot of people do!
I don't know if they listen, but I guess they respect, right?

Messiah Allah

Katie connected me to Messiah Allah, who she had tried to bring into Mass POWER organizing. After several failed attempts to connect with Messiah, we found a time to meet at the “Make-it Springfield” co-working space on Worthington. The space is filled with art by some of the members, stations with sewing machines, a 3-D printer, tools for a bike workshop and other supplies for various groups and individual makers. Messiah is reserved at first. I get the sense that he’s trying to figure me out, or I might be projecting this because he’s been reluctant to get involved in Mass POWER organizing. As we start talking he opens up. He tells me that he’s from Springfield, and had been incarcerated several times, most recently with a 12-year sentence. While in prison he got a culinary arts license, took resume writing classes, and “every mental and emotional class you can take,” including Jericho Circles\(^{53}\), emotional awareness, AVP (Alternatives to Violence Project). After being released he also took part in After Incarceration Support Systems in Springfield. More than any of these programs, he cites the importance of other incarcerated men as the mentors who got him on a path to helping others. For Messiah, being incarcerated:

… made me develop a greater character, however, it was being around a certain group of men, while I was incarcerated, that developed a character, a mindset, a passion, to engage in the same things that we speaking about... these are the individuals who, like myself now, who inspired me to think outside of the box, as it relates to life #1 cause that’s most important, and then prison reform as a whole, however if we teaching individuals who to be the best in life then prison reform is not even needed. Get it?

What I mean on that is this, I’ll use myself as an example, when I was incarcerated during that 12-year time frame, actually, I did 5 years before that, during the 5 I was introduced to a group of men, who were formerly known as the 5% Nation of Gods and Earths\(^{54}\), I don’t know if you’ve

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\(^{53}\) Jericho Circle Project’s mission is to help men “develop tools to come to terms with their inner struggles and bring down the walls that separate them from their loved ones, communities and themselves: ” [https://jerichocircle.org/](https://jerichocircle.org/)

\(^{54}\) The 5% Nation of Gods and Earths is an off-shoot of the Nation of Islam. The community is especially active within prisons and their history and philosophy as they describe it is below:
heard of them? This group of individuals opened up my mind in a way that allowed me to assess things from a different scope, if it wasn’t for that I wouldn’t be here sitting with you speaking the way that I’m speaking to you. For some individuals, it’s being a Muslim being a Christian, Buddhist, whatever. For some individuals it’s just education, it’s just tired of being incarcerated. For each individual incarcerated is different, the one thing all those individuals have in common is this, “each one of those individuals came across one individual, or a group of individuals, right? Who motivated them to want to do better. First and foremost, doing what? Assessing their own life.

If you help somebody figure out how to be their best in life, then all this that we’re speaking about is null and void, but these things this exist because not everyone is gonna get that. These individuals, even though they have never been a part of the process in a direct way, they never spoke to you, they never been at any forums, they never spoke to the DA or anyone else about prison reform. Only people they spoke too is who? Other incarcerated men. Right? However. These things have been on they mind, these are the things they been advocating for years prior to society taking notice, so to speak, of them. These are the individuals who anybody involved in prison reform, truly, need to speak to. And you gotta assess who you speak to, you know what I mean? This is a real sensitive topic, number one, but it has to be a comprehensive topic.

“The 5% Nation of Gods and Earths was founded on October 10, 1964 after Allah the Father, born on February 22, 1928 as Clarence Smith, brought his understanding of the Supreme Wisdom Lessons of the Nation of Islam (NOI) to the youth of Harlem. While a Registered Muslim in Temple No. 7 under the leadership of Malcolm X, Allah the Father, then known as Clarence 13X, had the theophany that he himself was Allah and sought to teach the Original Asiatic People the truth of their identity of divinity. After meeting much opposition from various factors and factions within the Black community, Allah the Father, along with his right hand man, Justice, and also Abu Shahid, who left the NOI with him, understanding that “the babies are the greatest,” gave the teachings, along with a system he devised of deciphering their truths known as Supreme Mathematics and Supreme Alphabets, to the children. Allah the Father became a father figure to many of the misguided and marginalized youth and made boys into men and men into God firmly rooted in the soil of the Original Asiatic Black Woman as Mother Earth.

Allah the Father charged the collective cream of his students, known as the “First Nine Born,” with the task of spreading the message that “THE BLACK MAN IS GOD AND THE BLACK WOMAN IS THE EARTH,” with Black people including the entirety of the global majority of Black, Brown, Red and Yellow people and with the duty to teach civilization to all the human families of the Planet Earth being neither Pro-Black or Anti-white. The mission is popularizing pro-righteousness and advocating anti-devilshment wherever it may exist.

Propelled by Allah the Father’s “self-styled wisdom” the “Suns of Allah” taught hundreds and then thousands in the New York City and Tri-State area turning gangs into Gods. In 1968, after the assassination of Martin Luther King, while ghettos across the nation burned, Allah and his Five Percent, now wholly a distinct entity from the Nation of Islam, kept peace and maintained order in Harlem.

In honor of this accomplishment, Mayor Lindsay granted Allah the Father and his Five Percent a “Street Academy,” currently known as Allah School in Mecca, to further the teachings. Additional recognition of his accomplishments was recently bestowed upon him when the intersection where Allah School in Mecca stands was co-named “Allah, Justice and The Five Percenters Square.” As of this writing, there is a campaign seeking landmark status for Allah School in Mecca as a long-time cultural institution and one of the few remaining pre-gentrification establishments of “Old Harlem” as the Mecca of Black People” (“About 5 Percent Nation,” 5 Percent Media: https://fivepercentmedia.com/about-five-percent-nation/)
I really want to transform my life. Am I willing to work in a warehouse for 20 years? No, because I understand my value and I understand my worth. Is that to say that I won’t work at a warehouse starting off? Of course, ‘cause I need a job. Is that to say that I want to remain there? No. More so because it’s a need to have individuals who have a shared experience, because being incarcerated period, right? Is something that, if you haven’t been incarcerated is something you will never understand. And I don’t care how much you think you would like to understand. You haven’t.

It affects many people differently. It’s really PTSD, PTSD comes with that. Coming home, dealing with food, clothing, shelter, dealing with your own sanity, nothing worse than figuring out what you’re going to do, how you’re going to make your way in society and dealing with the after-effects of being incarcerated. Most individuals who were formerly incarcerated don’t even speak on topics like this, even though they develop anger, but they never speak on it. Why? There’s really nowhere to go to speak on these things. After you speak on issues, coming up with solutions. The key is to speak on it. Oftentimes you don’t get a chance to speak on it. Why? Because they’re still wrestling with mental and emotional things they have yet to overcome. You don’t understand why you’re decaying, without talking to someone who has that shared experience. I talk to a lot of people who are formerly incarcerated, to fulfill my individual role in relation to prison reform

I don’t work for an organization - I’m organized. And I understand what I need, so I’m compelled to seek that out and do it. Like I said to Katie, my goal, because I understand the cycle of incarceration, individuals that I deal with, and I don’t get paid to do this, I do it because I understand the value. Individuals who transition home from prison, when they come home, I connect them with a job, based on my own individual resources, people that I know, who I deal with, people who have rose through the ranks in their companies. Based on my word. I’m doing this as an individual.

Prison reform is a bottom up type of thing, you know like grassroots. From the lowest to the top, those that are the lowest are the individuals that are incarcerated, who have the best experience, as it relates to what’s needed, you feel what I’m saying? In the lives of those who have been incarcerated or those who are currently incarcerated, get me? So – you know, that’s always needed, and it’s developing some steam, right? some. However, the prison reform, just like many other things, you have because it’s a money game, all this is a money game, because people come out the woodwork seeking money for all these things, so it’s all a money game. That’s just facts.


Jafet Robles was a formerly incarcerated community organizer active in Springfield and Western Massachusetts in the years preceding my fieldwork. After his incarceration, Jafet earned a degree at Holyoke Community College and began organizing with Neighbor 2 Neighbor in Springfield. He was a major force in the statewide, Jobs Not Jails campaign which pressured the Massachusetts State Legislature to pass the Omnibus Criminal Justice Reform Act in 2018. Among the various reform measures the bill enacted were: decriminalizing some minor offenses and ending some categories of
mandatory minimums, and decreasing the amount of time after incarceration before criminal records could be sealed. Khalil, Jackie, Katie and many other activists and organizers described Jafet as a mentor and someone who continues to inspire them in their advocacy, organizing, and outreach work. According to the organizers I interviewed, Jafet was especially effective in bringing new people into organizing work, especially those who were formerly incarcerated.

In September 2017, Jafet was murdered. His body was found in Szot Park in Chicopee, a town located between Springfield and Holyoke. He had been shot and was pronounced dead at the scene. As of 2022, no one has been charged with his murder. In the years since, local organizers have continued to hold annual vigils to remember Jafet, and to draw attention to the failure or suspected indifference of local police in solving his murder, as a formerly incarcerated organizer who fought for criminal justice reform, often opposing the local criminal justice system. Despite his murder and the lack of resolution, his legacy has continued to inspire local organizers. Following his death, Maria Elena Letona, the Executive Director of Neighbor 2 Neighbor at the time, wrote:

It is with a truly broken heart that we share with you that Jafet Robles, devoted father and fierce justice warrior, now rests in peace, love and power. He was 33 years old. He leaves four children behind. To those of us at N2N who had the blessing of knowing Jafet, he was our Springfield Chapter lead organizer. More than that, Jafet was the heart of N2N’s organizing work. He was fierce, fearless and relentless in his work to end mass incarceration. He had deep, passionate love for Puerto Rico, her people and her independence. He quickly would become curious, find out on his own, and readily embrace the struggles of all people, keenly understanding that all our struggles are connected deep at the roots: Black people, immigrants, the LGBTQ+ community. “Ubuntu” is the word he spoke to one of our members who brought Jafet’s spirit in remembrance yesterday: “I am because we are.” Jafet knew in his soul that we are one. His love for his work was only surpassed by the love for his people. He fought for your liberation, for my liberation, for the liberation of us all. And Jafet acted this love. He manifested it. With his singular passion and devotion for la lucha, the struggle, he, through love, organized into N2N a beautiful and diverse membership. Jafet challenged us all to think deeply and intentionally on our legacy: “What do you want to be remembered for?”

In these times of such chaos and confusion, of such hatred and violence, of such division and disintegration, N2N takes up your challenge, dear Jafet. We vow that we, like you, will be remembered for taking a stand fiercely and fearlessly against injustice and hatred and division.

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AND, we also will remember YOU, dear Jafet for your courage, your inspiration, your love, your fierceness and fearlessness, and your smile.
We are because you are, dear Jafet. Ubuntu!
Jafet Robles: ¡PRESENTE! Now and always.

Jafet, in his own words at an event at the UMass Center at Tower Square in Springfield during the Jobs Not Jails campaign that brought together labor and criminal justice reform organizers, stated:

This is not gonna change unless we come together. It’s like if I’m in Tower Square, and I’m speaking by myself, ain’t nobody gonna hear me. But if I got 30 people with me, then they’re gonna hear me. It’s the same thing with this bill. We got to come together. We got to really unite. Regardless of our religion, our race, whatever the case may be.

We understand the system is broken and we need to come together and learn, and unite, in meetings. Despite our differences, we need to come together around this issue and organize. Organize. Organize. Meeting weekly, strategically planning.

Never underestimate the power of people organizing. Life is short, it’s a short ride. So, my question to you guys is: What do you guys want to be remembered for when you die?

Is it going to be the big house, the superficial status, the position at the job, the three cars, all this popularity? Or do you want to be remembered for standing up, like Ben Swan [a former Springfield-based, state representative and civil rights leader] is, for taking these issues head on, for people like Martin Luther King and Malcolm, people who died but their voices still echo, we still hear ‘em, because they fought hard and they dedicated their life to the struggle.

And I want to tell you guys that something facing you guys right now, mass incarceration, our people are in this situation, you guys sat here for all these stories, you guys heard all these stories. You guys know what’s wrong. It’s common sense. So - I want to ask you guys, what do you want to be remembered for? Are we just gonna let this happen? Are we gonna continue to let this happen? Or are we gonna build a movement? Are we gonna come together and start uniting. And really make this shit happen? I’m gonna let you all reflect on that. What do you want to be remembered for? 56

Discussion

In this section I analyze major themes that emerged from these interviews as formerly incarcerated organizers described their trajectories of becoming involved in advocacy and reform work after their incarceration. The major themes I saw across these interviews include: reframing stigmatized experiences, connecting individual experiences to structural injustices, the importance of relationships,

56 “What do you want to be remembered for?” 2016. Neighbor 2 Neighbor Massachusetts: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2y4xBt_pxs
and the necessity of addressing material needs. I end by discussing some of the potential barriers to involvement in organizing and advocacy work that were named or that I observed through my fieldwork. These themes speak to the questions of what has helped formerly incarcerated individuals get involved in reform work, and identify some of the factors that have prevented more from doing so.

**Reframing stigmatized experiences**

In my interviews, several organizers described how part of their process of becoming organizers involved re-defining the significance of their incarceration, transforming what is a deeply stigmatizing experience and a potential source of shame into a source of insight and even authority within reform work. While many reentry and rehabilitation programs exhort individuals to narrate “scripts” of personal transformation – which often include expressions of personal accountability, remorse for causing harm, moments of clarity, experiences of hitting “rock bottom,” reflections on formative trauma, shifts in “mindset,” and commitments to change, these are typically oriented towards individualizing processes of self-improvement (McCorkel 2013, Hackett 2013).

By contrast, the organizers I interviewed turned their personal, traumatic experiences of incarceration into motivation for working toward collective and systemic change - from neighborhood initiatives, to statewide legislation and even advocacy at the national level. Inverting the discrimination and pressure to hide their histories that they have faced as people with criminal records, Don Perry spoke explicitly about the value of individual stories in making reform advocacy more compelling to potential audiences by learning to tell his own story and encouraging others to tell theirs. Messiah insisted that I talk with more currently incarcerated people, especially those who were not usually reached out to, or likely to speak on any panels. For Messiah, their structural exclusion made their voices all the more critical.
Katie Talbot talks about her frustration with post-incarceration and the “non-stop punishment for crimes that I already committed.” With the insistence of a mentor from Voices from Inside she describes how she was urged to think about:

Owning your voice, owning your place in this world. And taking your seat at the table, no matter what your experiences, you know? Your experience offers you more value and more to bring you know?

Even while she was facing discrimination in finding housing and employment, and in accessing education because of her criminal record, Katie also came to see her experiences as giving her “more value” and “more to bring.”

Khalil re-framed his experiences of incarceration as a path through which he has gained a deeper understanding of the issues he and his community face:

I ain’t got no degree. I hate college. I took a couple college courses and I dropped out because ain’t no teacher gonna talk to me in that kind of way. Ain't gonna tell me about reality. Ain't gonna tell me about my people. And then talk about my people in a way they do, such a stigmatizing way. I was hurt while in classrooms and that’s why I dropped out of school. But I can tell you what, I have worked alongside people with master's degree in this field. They don't know fucking shit. They can't reach our people. Ain't no books, no four year, eight-year degree gonna help you reach our people.”

Dána-Ain Davis reflects on research she has conducted, collecting oral histories of women who have been the subject of self-improvement and self-empowerment projects as residents of a shelter for battered women. Davis illustrates the ways in which research participants, rather than passive repositories of data, are knowledge-producers who can also act in their own interests within research encounters, enlisting ethnographers to help them. In her case, participants asked Davis to bring their intimate stories to people in positions of power within welfare agencies, which she felt obliged to do as a “sister friend” and as someone that social service directors might be more inclined to listen to. For the women Davis interviewed, their willingness to share very personal histories was a way to connect with the Davis and potentially improve their immediate situations, and an expectation of the welfare programs in which women were compelled to participate. According to Davis, feminist activist ethnography should use methodological strategies that “embrace the everyday experiences of people – especially those forced to
live on the margins – as epistemologically valid” and at the same time seek to “unravel issues of power and include interventions that help move toward social justice” (Davis 2013: 27).

The forms of confession demanded within carceral programming, as in welfare (Davis 2006), emphasize individuals’ agency, both the decisions that incarcerated people made prior to their incarceration and those they are making, or will make, to address their previous actions and avoid further incarceration. Summerson Carr (2011), in an ethnography of the language of addiction recovery among staff and clients of a gender-sensitive, outpatient drug treatment program describes how program participants learn the “script” expected by therapists and staff of the program, and deploy it strategically. They learn to share their stories in ways that meet the expectations of the program, while still enacting their own agency in seeking resources and opportunities within and beyond the program, or acting in ways that challenge the restrictions of the program. Carr, drawing on participants’ language, calls this “flipping the script.”

In Don Perry’s experience, flipping the script looked like using the prison regulations in “the blue book” against the prison itself, a process through which he became active in advocating for other and himself. He continues to use the legal system to sue the Department of Corrections to address the ongoing impacts of his incarceration and probation that he and many others are subject to, sometimes for life. For Izzy, this challenge within and against the system has taken the form of succeeding in arenas that have been formally or informally closed off to people who have been incarcerated – whether as an undergraduate, or graduate student, or as a city councilor. For Izzy, his entry into these spaces is a challenge to power. Where legalized discrimination and institutional gatekeepers prevented him from working in various jobs and initially from being admitted into the University of Massachusetts, he leveraged informal relationships and opportunities and has been successful in his professional and educational careers. These are not instances of assimilation, as both organizers remain deeply critical of the criminal justice system, but instance of learning the system and working within it to challenge it.

Organizers often use personal stories as organizing tools. One framework cited often by community organizers is Marshall Ganz’ framework of public narrative which begins with a “story of
“story of self” to describe the process of self-reflection and identifying personal experiences that for organizers can lead to identifying social injustices (Ganz 2009). In the context of sheriff’s department-based programming like Voices from Inside, the stories that are solicited often focused on individuals’ experiences, taking responsibility for harm they caused, past choices they made, conditions forced into, ways they’ve grown or processed traumatic experiences, and individual dreams for different futures. Within this framework, the focus is on the individual, on their recovery, healing and growth.

**Sense of structural injustice through sharing and hearing others’ stories**

For Katie, her “story of self” became a tool for recognizing systemic issues, and working towards building collective power to address those, including challenging the institutional power of jails. In her case, the story of self is not the endpoint, but the beginning step towards what Ganz calls a “story of us” - finding connections between individuals’ experience - and a “story of now” through which individuals coming together can build towards collective understandings of larger systemic issues and action to address those issues. As Katie described:

> When I had my first incarceration, and quickly realized that I'm a beneficiary of a broken system, I am a white, educated woman who has the same if not worse crimes than my black and brown counterparts. And I was getting extremely light sentences. I mean, the longest I got sentenced to was nine months, and I should have been sentenced two years for the crimes that I committed and the repetition of those crimes. There was the same shit, over, and over again. And it, and it fucked me up. Like it really fucked me up to see that.

For Khalil and Messiah, prison was both a place of realization and a place of connection, somewhere they were able to find mentorship and to find a community of peers with which they could process their experiences, of racism and discrimination, of traumatic violence and abandonment. As I expand on in the next section, Khalil and Messiah were able to share their stories, to recognize the broader, systemic nature of the issues they had dealt with as young men and children, and to build relationships with other men. In this sense, spaces created by and within the assemblage of carceral served as openings for collective analyses, away from the progressive jail’s individualizing and medicalizing interventions, and towards
more collective reflection and analysis.

**Relationships**

Organizers named relationships as critical to their paths from incarceration to reform work. Some of these relationships were based on mentoring – either mentors that encouraged organizers, or relationships in which organizers took on mentorship roles themselves. Other relationships were more networking focused, through which organizers were supported in less ongoing ways, but connected or encouraged in pursuing new opportunities.

**Mentorship**

Khalil, Messiah and Katie were particularly explicit in naming the importance of specific mentors within their development as activists. As Khalil describes:

> I mean, I used to gangbang and I became a warlord, well I was granted warlord position when I was in gangs. I always knew how to organize. I think I always felt like I led. Never felt like [I] followed much, but when i was incarcerated. It was my mentor. Hakim, who is never coming home.

> He shared with me a piece of advice, for employment. He said, Khalil start to volunteer doing something that you enjoy doing. And then sooner or later it'll become a job and it'll feel like you're never working. So that's pretty much like kind of what i did.”

For Messiah, mentorship came from a group of men who were part of the 5% Nation of Gods and Earths:

> It was being around a certain group of men, while I was incarcerated, that developed a character, a mindset, a passion, to engage in the same things that we speaking about... these are the individuals who, like myself now, who inspired me to think outside of the box, as it relates to life #1, cause that’s most important, and then prison reform as a whole, however if we teaching individuals who to be the best in life then prison reform is not even needed. Get it?

Katie relates how the board president of Voices from Inside became a mentor to her, encouraging her, “taking her under her wing,” and connecting her to community organizing through Lena, the Holyoke organizer for Neighbor 2 Neighbor, which Katies describes as:
…the first opportunity that I saw, that I saw a direct link from like the things that I came to realize while I was incarcerated, and change, like real change. Concrete change. Change that would actually make a fucking difference.

**Networking Relationships**

Organizers also described important sets of relationships that created opportunities for them, though they may have been less intensive than mentoring relationships. For Izzy, this included staff at the Boys and Girls Club who knew him and were willing to vouch for him and employ him after his incarceration. Khalil draws on his network of tribal relationships, as a founder of the Vanguard Movement and former gang leader, in mobilizing support for peacemaking and for outreach efforts, such as the syringe pick-up and needle exchange. Messiah helps people returning from incarceration find employment, drawing on his own personal connections. Don Perry operates within multiple worlds, bouncing between academic spaces, activist organizing and community outreach work. These networks of relationships have been means of support as well as avenues through which to mobilize for social change.

**Support for material needs**

**Employment**

Even though my sample bias included mostly formerly incarcerated people who were working in a capacity related to community organizing or advocacy for criminal justice reform, each of the people I interviewed still considered discrimination from employers as a major challenge to their involvement in reform work and re-entry more generally. As Messiah related:

> I really want to transform my life. Am I willing to work in a warehouse for 20 years? No, because I understand my value and I understand my worth. Is that to say that I won’t work at a warehouse starting off? Of course, ‘cause I need a job. Is that to say that I want to remain there? No.

Jackie went from volunteering, to working as an advocate for the Correctional Association of New York, and at the time I interviewed her she was working as the Holyoke organizer for Neighbor 2 Neighbor and later for Massachusetts Jobs With Justice as the Racial Justice Organizer. Katie later took the job of Holyoke organizer with Neighbor 2 Neighbor after volunteering with the organization for around 10
years. Jafet also worked as the Springfield organizer for Neighbor 2 Neighbor. Izzy, through his own networking found employment through the Safe and Successful Youth Initiative, One Holyoke CDC, and at UMass. Khalil describes his path to employment through ROCA and to Tapestry as fraught, but as allowing him to do the outreach work that he wants to do.

**Education**

Impacting the previous category of employment for many of these organizers has been the role of post-secondary education. Jackie, Katie, Izzy, Don (and Jafet) each had completed a post-secondary degree by the time of this study (either Associate’s or Bachelor’s) and Izzy was in a Master’s program, having completed his Bachelor’s and despite initially being rejected by the University of Massachusetts Amherst due to his status of having been incarcerated. None of the organizers I interviewed were able to complete any degrees while incarcerated, but did so after their release.

**Barriers to involvement in organizing**

While this chapter has focused on the trajectories of people who have gone from incarceration to reform work, it is significant how small the number of organizers is, in comparison with the hundreds of people incarcerated at any moment in Hampden County, and the thousands who are formerly incarcerated. Participating and volunteering as I did for several years I feel fairly confident that my interviewees were the only self-identifying, formerly-incarcerated organizers active in Western Massachusetts at the time. Many formerly incarcerated individuals like Messiah, may not identify as an organizer and may support peers through informal means, helping connect people to housing or jobs. Or they may support in other capacities, such as working as a mentor through the sheriff’s department’s **After Incarceration Support Systems**. Their mode of engagement is less explicitly focused on systemic change or reform, but more focused on relationships of support. In some cases, these networks can also become engaged in reform work, as I explore in the next chapter focusing on organizing campaigns.
For others who would like to be engaged in reform work, but are unable to, it’s not because it’s a choice but because of the many barriers to getting involved in organizing. In their interviews, organizers named some of the challenges that made becoming involved in organizing work more difficult for them and that likely discourage others as well:

**Requirements of parole**

Both Jackie’s and Don’s narratives described the challenges of complying with parole requirements, both the logistical difficulties of reporting to parole officers at intervals that made holding down a job and supporting a family difficult, and the frustrations of having their movements surveilled and limited even after completing the terms of their incarceration. For many people, finding time to be able to attend meetings and actions is not feasible. Additionally, individuals on parole risk “getting violated” by their parole officers (being found in violation of parole terms) if they’re arrested during a protest, or sometimes even if they’re found to be interacting with other people on parole with previous convictions. All of these elements mean that people most recently incarcerated face additional difficulties in building community with other formerly incarcerated people and in organizing towards reform.

**Unaddressed trauma and emotional exhaustion**

Messiah:

It’s really PTSD, PTSD comes with that. Coming home, dealing with food, clothing, shelter, dealing with your own sanity, nothing worse than figuring out what you’re going to do, how you’re going to make your way in society and dealing with the after-effects of being incarcerated.

A barrier that the Massachusetts chapter of the organization Black and Pink described in a post on Instagram labeled “When the PIC gives you lemons, make lemonade,” was “the emotional labor of re-engaging with the system through abolition work” that formerly incarcerated members of the organization
had reflect on. To respond to the particular toll returning to sites of incarceration as activists, the post offered “tips and tricks for mitigating triggers and caring for ourselves” that included: “bring a friend when going to a court or jail for conversation and support, eat before you go, order uber eats especially when posting bail, bring snacks, water helps flush the system of stress hormones, prayer and meditation helps focus the mind and bring in a power greater than the pic, positive self-talk, get your nails did after, listen to music during/after, debrief with a friend, shop therapy.”

Lack of access to housing, employment, education

The interviews showed that some of the main challenges to getting involved in reform or abolition work were the baseline challenges that most people faced after experiencing incarceration: a shortage of employers willing to hire people who have been incarcerated; housing discrimination towards people with criminal records; onerous parole requirements that disrupted attempts to work, go to school or organize; and limited public transportation, especially connecting different parts of the region. Informing each of these challenges was a feeling of stigma that formerly incarcerated organizers described experiencing in their interactions with everyone from employers, to landlords, to teachers, neighbors, and family members. They drew a connection between this external stigma and an internalized shame that people described as discouraging them from even considering opportunities for which they may have been qualified.

Organizing-based issues

Another set of factors that organizers named as barriers to the involvement of more formerly incarcerated individuals were specific to organizing practices and dynamics, these included: gatekeepers within organizations, changes in funding priorities, and a lack of spaces oriented specifically towards supporting incarcerated people.

57 https://www.instagram.com/p/CWBLWAOgaf7/
A frustration for Jackie was Neighbor 2 Neighbor’s change of organizing priorities, away from criminal justice reform after the success of the 2018 Criminal Justice Reform bill. Jackie wanted to continue to focus on issues of criminal justice reform in her community, but this required either: convincing the larger organization, moving to another organization, which she eventually did, or starting her own organization focused specifically on criminal justice reform. Similarly, Messiah was critical of the lack of physical space for formerly incarcerated individuals to connect outside of those controlled by the sheriff’s department. As Messiah put it, there is “not one program that is solely for incarcerated individuals, nowhere individuals can go as a center, as an individual place, that place right there serves the overall well-being of formerly-incarcerated individuals.”

When I asked him why more formerly incarcerated people weren’t involved in or leading reform work, Don Perry wove together a lot of the barriers I have described above:

One: people are ashamed, they’re ashamed, they're isolated. Right? And the powers that be have been dependent on that shame and isolation to help perpetuate their agenda, right?

Two: the people that supposedly been advocating, or helping people, right, they became the gatekeepers, right? Because in their mind, they know what's best for someone else. And they've been trying to employ the paternalistic perspective, not knowing or not thinking like, wait a minute, these people know this stuff better than I, right? Or that the read some books, you know what I mean, all this kind of stuff.

I think a great example of that is, again, referencing a guy that that goes, does a lot of that, people want to go in and they want to go in and preach to people and talk about this. You can't do that. People know the Bible more better than you. All they do inside is read. You go in there and hit up some of the Muslim brothers? They gonna eat you up man.

But this is the way people think about it though, right? They don't even consider that. And people with these organizations and everything, where they’re applying for this different type of funding. They locked themselves in positions where they can't advocate for people.

Justin: Because of the funding?

Because the type of funding and stuff that they get, right. So, funding - and then one of the things, or their own ambitions to be a part of a higher echelon. I'll talk and people will be like, “we have to understand the political nuances.” You mean, you gotta know whose ass to kiss and all this political kind of stuff. Come on! Ain’t no one trying to do all that, man.
…The thing is to be more inclusive, you know what I mean? You got like a room full of academics man just talking about these issues. What about people that live it every day? They know this stuff better than you, and I'm only one person. The other day this woman come up to me and say that they was from an agency. I forget what agency she was from, she said they was having a meeting and they was talking about stakeholders. And they said yeah, “Don Perry’s a stakeholder and we just want you to know. you got a following man.” Cause I be like, I mean, I be like putting it down in there man, you know what I mean, I don’t be playing games.

Conclusion

While the paths they took, and the modes of reform or advocacy work they engage in vary, the formerly incarcerated organizers I interviewed shared some similar experiences and themes, in both challenges that they have faced, as well as supports. Some organizers cited jail and re-entry programming as supporting some of the elements of their journeys to reform, advocacy, and outreach, while others found it detrimental. In Katie’s experience, the promise of “socially-conscious” incarceration was revealed to be a lie in terms of access to medical and psychological care – and yet, still better than elsewhere. Through mandatory programming, she was compelled to participate in Voices From Inside (VFI), a creative writing program for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women focused on self-empowerment. Although VFI is not an activist or organizing project, it was through the process of finding “her voice” and through relationships formed in VFI that Katie was introduced to the community organization Neighbor 2 Neighbor (N2N), and to criminal justice reform organizing. Katie is now the staff organizer for Holyoke for Neighbor 2 Neighbor, leading campaigns and training other activists. The coercive programming of the jail brought her to VFI, which served as a platform for self-empowerment, and for connecting with reform and abolition work confronting the same jail and sheriff’s department.

In contrast, Messiah felt burdened by re-entry programs that he experienced as not oriented towards his actual needs and as preventing him from taking actions that would have actually helped him to succeed after incarceration. He experienced reform organizing as yet another space of marginalization, in which some organizers become un-elected representatives, speaking on various panels on behalf of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. Though he did not have a formal affiliation with any community organization at the time that I interviewed him, he had interacted with various organizations
including Neighbor 2 Neighbor and Arise for Social Justice, and was still committed to organizing informally, supporting recently-incarcerated community members by connecting them to resources.

Across most of the narratives in this chapter, and even between Katie and Messiah’s contrasting experiences, some elements resonated. Organizers identified the sharing of personal stories - as a means of re-framing the stigma of incarceration they experienced, and as a means of connecting with others - as integral to their process of becoming politically active. This use of personal stories as a means towards collective action resists some of the expectations of the progressive jail assemblage. Within jail programming, from Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous, to individual and group therapies, to creative writing workshops, incarcerated people are compelled to tell their stories, as a step towards better self-governance or towards recognizing the need for rehabilitation. Incarcerated people are supposed to find themselves as the object in need of reform, not the jail, let alone the society in which the jail is embedded.

Similarly, the ways that organizers described being supported by other incarcerated people as mentors could be seen as overlapping with the progressive jail assemblage’s incorporation of formerly incarcerated individuals in mentorship roles. Yet the content of these mentor relationships undermined the legitimacy of the jail assemblage rather than reinforcing it. The mentors that Khalil, Messiah and Katie cite oriented them towards seeing themselves as part of larger struggles for racial and class justice.

In their narratives, formerly incarcerated organizers describe how they utilized resources from the jail when useful and operated on their own when those resources fell short or worked against their goals. Izzy drew on a network of relationships that he had built beyond the jail to find employment and to get into UMass, and eventually elected onto city council, in spite of various institutional barriers and a lack of support from the jail. Khalil worked within ROCA, and in partnership with AISS and the jail, until it became apparent that his outreach work was at risk of being put towards the incarceration of more Black and brown youth.

In these narratives, organizers name very clearly some of the barriers that have made their trajectories from incarceration to participating in reform work more difficult. Some of these are the same barriers that many people returning from incarceration face: onerous parole requirements, unaddressed
trauma and emotional exhaustion, and a lack of access to housing and employment. Other barriers that came up in these narratives were specific to organizing spaces: gatekeepers within organizations, changes in priorities as a result of changes in funding, and a lack of spaces oriented specifically towards supporting incarcerated people.

In the chapters that follow, I describe some of the larger campaigns in which formerly incarcerated organizers and their allies took part. Building on this chapter and the complex narratives that these individual organizers shared, I consider how collective organizations also contested and became implicated in the progressive jail assemblage, and how campaigns sought to center the perspectives of currently and formerly incarcerated organizers and also reinforced some of the same barriers.
CHAPTER 6
CAMPAIGNS FOR REFORM AND ABOLITION

In this chapter I describe campaigns for prison and jail reform that I took part in during my fieldwork. I situate these campaigns within earlier organizing efforts, and describe some of the reform organizing that has continued after the period of my formal fieldwork which began in 2018 and ended in 2021. Within community organizing, campaigns are coordinated efforts towards a particular goal or set of goals. Campaigns can be centered on goals like: pressuring legislators to propose and pass new laws, fundraising, growing an organization’s membership, or resisting some kind of development.

In each of the campaigns I describe below, organizers sought to improve the immediate conditions of incarceration, while also working towards deeper, structural change. For abolitionists and organizers, the goal of “meaningful, durable change,” as Sharlyn Grace – a founding member and former director of the Chicago Community Bail Fund – argues, requires resisting “reformist reforms’ that merely legitimize and entrench carceral practices and institutions,” and instead, building “incremental and pragmatic campaigns” that chip “away at current systems of control, isolation, and punishment”\(^{58}\).

Turning our attention to campaigns for criminal justice reform and prison abolition allows us to see how organizers attempt to mobilize towards meaningful change, while navigating tensions and competing priorities.

List of Campaigns:

*Precursors and preliminary fieldwork:*

- Jobs Not Jails Campaign: Criminal Justice Reform Omnibus Bill 2018 (EPOCA/PVP/N2N)
- 2018 Nationwide Prison Strike
  - Abolitionist orientation and organizations > demanding reforms focused on conditions

\(^{58}\) Sharlyn Grace (September 23, 2021) “Organizers change what’s possible” *Inquest: A Decarceral Brainstorm.*
Fieldwork period 2019-2021:

- Mass POWER: Prisoners and Organizers Working for Enfranchisement and Restoration
- Decarcerate Western Mass
  - In context of BLM and Covid

Post-fieldwork:

- 2021 No New Women’s Prison + and Prison and Jail-Building Moratorium
  - Recent predecessor movements
    - SHaRC (Statewide Harm Reduction Coalition) - Stop Construction of Chicopee Jail and Greenfield Jail (2006)
    - Campaign to end shackling of incarcerated people giving birth (2014), led by Prison Birth Project and allied organizations: AFSC

Campaign Descriptions

Jobs Not Jails Campaign: Criminal Justice Reform Omnibus Bill 2018 (EPOCA/PVP/N2N)

From 2014 to 2018, a statewide coalition of organizations in Massachusetts, including faith-based networks of progressive congregations, labor unions, legal advocacy organizations, and community organizers came together to push for reforms to the criminal justice system in Massachusetts\(^{59}\). Some of the key legislative changes they fought for - and won - were changes to: raise the minimum age a child

\(^{59}\) Additional Jobs Not Jails Campaign information: [https://nationinside.org/campaign/jobs-not-jails/about/](https://nationinside.org/campaign/jobs-not-jails/about/)
can be held criminally responsible in court from 7 to 12-years old, require that a defendant’s ability to pay bail be considered when setting bail, expand diversion programs as an alternative to jail time, expand compassionate release for individuals facing life-ending illnesses, shorten the amount of time before criminal records can be sealed from 5 to 3 years for a misdemeanor, and from 10 to 7 years for a felony, decrease the use of solitary confinement by requiring periodic hearings for individuals kept in segregation and preventing the use of solitary for children and pregnant women, and eliminate some mandatory minimums for low-level drug use and policies that prevented people returning from incarceration from having their driver’s licenses reinstated if they had been convicted of a drug-related crime.

One of the primary ways I became involved in criminal justice reform work in Massachusetts was through working with one of the organizations directly involved in this campaign, EPOCA, Ex-Prisoners and Prisoners Organizing for Community Advancement. In 2016 and 2017, EPOCA was a community partner organization of the UMass Alliance for Community Transformation (UACT). I joined UACT as a student and then trained to become a facilitator in the Grassroots Community Organizing class. This was my first experience of working with formerly incarcerated people organizing to change the criminal justice system, using their lived experiences as motivation, and as a resource for reform. Cassandra Bensahih, the executive director of EPOCA, and a formerly incarcerated community organizer, led my classes through trainings on basic organizing skills and invited us to attend member meetings where formerly incarcerated community members were making decisions about how to mobilize their communities towards changing the policies that affected them and their families. We attended workshops where EPOCA leaders supported other formerly incarcerated people in filing paperwork to seal their criminal records - a step towards greater opportunities for housing and employment.

Cassandra took multiple classes with her to lobby legislators’ offices in the Massachusetts State House. We went to the offices of state representatives and senators, to encourage them to keep supporting the statewide, criminal justice reform legislation that the Jobs Not Jails campaign was proposing. In one
office, an aide to a state senator assured us that the senator was in support of criminal justice reform and was working on the new legislation. He tried to name some of the features of the bill, but he was getting details wrong. Cassandra corrected the aide, and let him know that she had helped write the bill, so if the senator had any questions she would be happy to assist. The other students and I tried to hold our laughter until we got to the hallway. We reflected afterwards on what Cassandra had demonstrated, that that the people closest to the problem were the most qualified to solve it, and that if they don’t insist on being heard, other people, including their allies, would quickly speak over them. In this case, many of the policies of the war on drugs and the war on crime, at least as it took shape in Massachusetts, were made in the state house. But the people subjected to those policies were now coming to change them, and had little faith that any politician, with no loved ones in prison, with no lived experience of incarceration, would know what needed to change.

In Western Massachusetts, the Pioneer Valley Project and Neighbor to Neighbor organized formerly incarcerated individuals and their families in the disproportionately-policing communities of Holyoke and Springfield to support the Jobs Not Jails campaign, informing legislators and their constituents of the need for reforms and directing them to make changes that would impact the lives of tens of thousands of people across Massachusetts. By the time of my fieldwork, both organizations had moved onto other campaigns outside of criminal justice reform specifically, but their work was critical to the bill’s passing, and the campaign was a watershed moment in mobilizing formerly incarcerated organizers to get involved in reform work and in building up their leadership, as Jackie Velez, Katie Talbot, and Khalil Rodriguez attested to in their interviews as organizers with Neighbor 2 Neighbor. Jafet was a major figure in the organizing of this campaign, and though he did not live to see its passage, and his dedication has inspired many of the organizers with whom I worked.

2018 Nationwide Prison Strike
In 2018, incarcerated organizers across the United States called for a nationwide prisoners’ strike from August 21 to September 9th. Coordinating through the organization Jailhouse Lawyers Speak, the strike was called initially in response to 7 prisoner deaths at Lee Correctional Institution in South Carolina, and included work stoppages, hunger strikes, boycotts of commissaries and other actions to disrupt the functioning of prisons. The strike coincided with the recognition of Black August, an annual event in which politicized prisoners study, fast and engage in activism in remembrance of the murder of political prisoner George Jackson on August 21st, 1971, and the anniversary of the Attica Prison Uprising on September 9th, 1971.

The organizers of the 2018 Nationwide Prison Strike issued the following demands:

1. Immediate improvements to the conditions of prisons and prison policies that recognize the humanity of imprisoned men and women.
2. An immediate end to prison slavery. All persons imprisoned in any place of detention under United States jurisdiction must be paid the prevailing wage in their state or territory for their labor.
3. The Prison Litigation Reform Act must be rescinded, allowing imprisoned humans a proper channel to address grievances and violations of their rights.
4. The Truth in Sentencing Act and the Sentencing Reform Act must be rescinded so that imprisoned humans have a possibility of rehabilitation and parole. No human shall be sentenced to Death by Incarceration or serve any sentence without the possibility of parole.
5. An immediate end to the racial overcharging, over-sentencing, and parole denials of Black and brown humans. Black humans shall no longer be denied parole because the victim of the crime was white, which is a particular problem in southern states.
6. An immediate end to racist gang enhancement laws targeting Black and brown humans.
7. No imprisoned human shall be denied access to rehabilitation programs at their place of detention because of their label as a violent offender.
8. State prisons must be funded specifically to offer more rehabilitation services.
9. Pell grants must be reinstated in all US states and territories.
10. The voting rights of all confined citizens serving prison sentences, pretrial detainees, and so-called “ex-felons” must be counted. Representation is demanded. All voices count.

During the 2018 Prison Strike, members of Great Falls Books Through Bars, the Abolition Network, and the Pioneer Valley Workers Center coordinated two local, in-person events in support of national “phone zap” campaigns – organized actions to call prison and state officials in support of prisoners facing retaliation for organizing work stoppages as part of the strike. In Northampton, on the steps outside city hall, and in Springfield, outside of the district and superior courthouse, protesters came together to hold signs spreading the word about the strike inside prisons across the country, but also making calls to prison
administrators to uplift strikers’ demands. On one call I talked with the receptionist at a Texas prison who tersely informed me that they’d been receiving calls all morning. I repeated the listed demand for the warden and Texas department of corrections to install air conditioning to prevent the risk of heat deaths and she said she would relay the message, with a note of exasperation.

Through these phone zap campaigns, as well as public protests and online petitions, volunteers on the outside made similar calls, pressuring prison officials to meet demands, but also to release organizers who were being held in solitary confinement as retribution for their organizing and participation in the strike. Through calls, letter writing, and fundraisers for prison strike organizers’ phone and canteen accounts, activists on the outside sent emotional and material support to those on strike in prisons from South Carolina to California, New Mexico, Florida, Delaware and even Nova Scotia, Canada. In Tacoma, Washington, migrants incarcerated at the Northwest Detention Center held strike actions.

Figure 6: 2018 Prison Strike Support Flyer

August 6, 2018
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contacts:
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Great Falls Books Through Bars, gfbooksthroughbars@riseup.net
Western MA Prison Abolition Network, wmassprisonabolitionnetwork@gmail.com

When/Where:
Thursday, August 6, 2:30-4:30 in Northampton, 15 Gothic St.
Friday, August 7th, 12:00pm-2:00pm in Springfield, 50 State St.

Who: A coalition of grassroots organizations and community members who are standing in solidarity with prisoners who are striking across the nation to demand for better conditions and an end to prison slavery. The strike began August 23rd and will continue until September 9th.

What: We are in the midst of one of the largest national prison strikes in U.S. history, but the mainstream media has not been adequately covering it. To support the prisoners and incarcerated people who are protesting and going on hunger strike nationwide, local organizers are holding two public phone zap actions in Northampton and Springfield. Phone zaps have been widely used throughout this strike as a way to put pressure on prisons who have incarcerated members striking so that they meet their demands (link with demands here). We will be circulating the demands that the prisoners on strike have made
public, sharing zines and literature on the strike and prison abolition, and calling prisons across the country where these strikes are happening to pressure them to comply with the demands of the prisoners. We call on media to cover this event as a means to reach prisoners in western Massachusetts and across the state who may not be aware of the strike and the organizing that is being done in communities and prisons across the country to meet their demands to end mass incarceration and prison slavery.

*Facebook event pages:*

Northampton, Thursday @ 2:00pm at 15 Gothic St: https://www.facebook.com/events/1103159976520009/

Springfield, Friday @ 12pm at 50 State St: https://www.facebook.com/events/864849450371345/

During the 2018 Prison Strike, organizations used social media to share demands of the strike organizers that included policies for extending minimum wage requirements to prisoners, including state funding for rehabilitation services, and re-establishing Pell Grants for education. These organizations also supported a state constitutional amendment campaign in 2019 to re-instate voting rights for incarcerated people in Massachusetts. The Western Mass Prison Abolition Network states that they support “strategic abolitionist reforms.” For Great Falls Books Through Bars, the decision to endorse voting rights policies and the reforms demanded by the prison strike was based on the distinction that these policies were called for by prisoners themselves and these reforms were intended to move power to incarcerated people.

**Mass POWER: Prisoners and Organizers Working for Enfranchisement and Restoration**

In the fall of 2019, I joined the Mass POWER (Prisoners and Organizers Working for Enfranchisement and Restoration) campaign - a coalition of individuals and organizations working to restore the right to vote for incarcerated people in Massachusetts. Up until the year 2000, even people who were currently incarcerated in Massachusetts had the right to vote from prison or jail (which is a right that is recognized in Maine and Vermont). Several years before that, in 1997, building on a long history of political organizing by incarcerated people, members of the Norfolk Lifers’ Group, who were serving life
sentences at Massachusetts Correctional Institute – Norfolk officially filed to form the Massachusetts Prisoners Association Political Action Committee. They sought to create a prisoner-led organization for:

the purpose of providing educational material to prisoners of the Commonwealth and their family members dealing with the voting records of elected officials as it pertains to prisons...[to] encourage all prisoners and family members to register to vote, as well as to participate in the electoral process, [and contribute money to political candidates with] a track record of being fair and open minded on prisoner issues\textsuperscript{61}

The governor of Massachusetts at the time, Paul Cellucci, responded to their organizing with a press conference announcing that he would be introducing legislation to abolish voting rights for currently incarcerated people in the state. The legislation passed through constitutional amendment in 2000, and applied to all individuals incarcerated for a felony.

In 2019, Derrick Washington, an incarcerated organizer and co-founder of the Emancipation Initiative, began a campaign to try to reverse this constitutional amendment. I had collaborated several years earlier with Emancipation Initiative members Rachel Corey and elly kalfus on a project to help incarcerated people who were still eligible to vote (anyone who is in jail but awaiting trial, or in jail for a misdemeanor) to access mail-in ballots by registering incarcerated potential voters and helping them fill out ballot request forms. The Mass POWER campaign re-activated some of the networks of volunteers that Emancipation Initiative had created through their previous prisoner voting rights work, and created new relationships between community organizations, prisoner advocacy groups, student organizations and abolitionist collectives throughout the state.

Katie Talbot and I had volunteered to serve as point people for the four counties in Western Massachusetts. Katie in Hampden and Berkshire counties, and me in Hampshire and Franklin Counties. Just to begin the process of proposing a new constitutional amendment, we would have to collect 83,000 signatures - within a narrow window of only several months, and without any kind of budget or existing, statewide organizational infrastructure to coordinate it.

\textsuperscript{61} Emancipation Initiative, “Timeline of Massachusetts Incarcerated Voting Rights” https://emancipationinitiative.org/ballots-over-bars/returning-the-right-to-vote/
In Hampshire County, the network of volunteers I was able to organize was comprised of a large number of students, including members of the Prison Abolition Collective at UMass, the Amherst College Direct Action Coordinating Committee, and Smith College student activists – some of whom were also organizing for fossil fuel and prison divestment. In Franklin County, most of the volunteers I connected with had also been supportive of Great Falls Books Through Bars. At one of the kick-off meetings for the Mass POWER campaign in Northampton, Izzy from One Holyoke CDC, Lois from the Real Cost of Prisons, and Revan from the Elm Street Think Tank at the Greenfield Jail attended to offer support and ideas for building public support for re-enfranchising incarcerated voters.

October 17th, 2019

Mass POWER on the Urban League

I got into my car after stopping at Rusty’s Place in Holyoke for coffee and a muffin. Turning the radio to 90.7 WTCC, I hear my friends’ voices. Katie, Huey and Mia are being interviewed, along with Messiah, and Katie’s brother Chris. Katie is talking about Mass POWER and our campaign to restore the right to vote for people incarcerated on felony convictions. In trying to get the word out about the campaign, Katie had reached out to Bishop Talbert Swan, a local minister and president of the Springfield chapter of the NAACP - with a substantial Twitter following and occasional Twitter bans for taking staunch positions against the racism of political leaders. Bishop Swan connected Katie with Henry Thomas and Andrew Cade of the Springfield Urban League, and the hosts of a radio program on WTCC, the public radio station broadcasted from Springfield Technical Community College. They were excited to have Mass POWER come on to the program to talk about the campaign and how people could get involved.

Knowing I’d have to teach that morning, I connected Katie with Huey, an Amherst College alum and prison abolitionist, and with Mia, a current Smith College student and abolitionist, both part of the Hampshire County effort to collect petition signatures. Both could speak about the campaign, including the upcoming Trick or Treat Canvassing for petition signatures on Halloween in Northampton, and more
broadly about the conditions of prisons and jails, and the disproportionate rates of incarceration and forms of violence facing people of color, women, queer, trans and gender non-confirming individuals within the prison industrial complex.

Katie had brought in Chris and Messiah, both also formerly-incarcerated, to speak about their experiences and the importance of incarcerated people having their voices heard. Towards the end of the program, Katie received a planned call from Derrick Washington, currently in maximum security at the Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center in Eastern Massachusetts. Derrick spoke about the organizing he and other prisoners were doing inside: to raise political consciousness through study groups, to imagine a world without prisons where harm done in communities was addressed in ways that strengthened them, and to insist that people inside be part of that work. He had to call back twice after the time limit expired on his phone call. When he finished speaking there was a brief silence. The show’s hosts described themselves as “speechless,” pausing before expressing their admiration to Derrick for the work he was doing inside and the compelling way he spoke about the importance of restoring voting rights to incarcerated people. The hosts ended the program, thanking all the guests, and encouraging listeners to email us or follow Mass POWER on Facebook to find out where they can go to sign the petition.

Across the state, volunteers spent months collecting pages of signatures from registered voters in support of re-enfranchisement. I canvassed with volunteers at farmer’s markets, harvest celebrations, outside of grocery stores and Wal Marts, at college campus events, and going door-to-door to try to collect signatures.

Once we had signatures, we were required to submit them, in hard copy, to the town clerks across the 351 cities and towns in Massachusetts where each of the signers was registered, to have them verified as belonging to voters registered in that town. Our efforts fell short of collecting the required 83,000 signatures to get the amendment onto the ballot. Nevertheless, we raised enough support and awareness
to gain the attention of larger non-profits like Common Cause and the ACLU of Massachusetts, as well as several state legislators, who would go on to support subsequent efforts, leveraging their organizational capacities and budgets.

Election Protection Behind Bars 2021

After the Mass POWER campaign ended, some of the key organizers shifted their attention to ensuring that incarcerated people who still had the right to vote (anyone in jail who is not convicted of a felony, including those who are still awaiting trial) were able to vote. As Danielle Squillante, one of the Western Mass-based organizers describes below, this took concerted effort between activists, jail staff and elections workers and required pressuring sheriffs to recognize the rights of incarcerated, eligible voters.

“Entry Denied “
By Danielle Squillante (from the Decarcerate Western Mass Newsletter Fall 2021)

The coronavirus pandemic has, in addition to changing how we move in public spaces and how we work, shifted how we can organize for change. Though the rebellions against police violence have renewed the strategic use of the streets as a site of resistance, as hundreds and thousands of people don masks to confront police terror, a significant portion of organizing work has moved into Zoom rooms, slack channels, Google docs, and other online platforms. For all forms of social justice organizing this has complicated how we can connect to members of the community we seek to build relationships with and who are impacted by the issues we contest. For abolitionists in Massachusetts, the closing of jails and prisons to outside visitors and the rolling use of lockdowns to contain the spread of coronavirus and retaliate against organizers behind the wall, has placed additional constraints on the flow of information. It is critical to abolitionist praxis to forge reciprocal and collaborative relationships with people behind the wall, not only because they are most impacted by the criminal legal system. They are also best positioned to inform organizers on the conditions inside jails and prisons and co-develop strategic responses to existing issues.

The challenges of organizing during the pandemic became clear during a recent jail voting initiative that was spearheaded on the state level by Kristina Mensik of Common Cause and elly kalfus of the Emancipation Initiative. The Election Protection Behind Bars Coalition, as it was called, collaborated with county based volunteers and organizations to ensure that eligible incarcerated voters had access to the information and resources needed to vote in the 2020 election. Individuals who are in jail on pretrial detention, who are incarcerated for a misdemeanor conviction, or are civilly committed maintain the right to vote in the Commonwealth. As specially qualified voters, they are not required to register to vote but are able to apply for an absentee ballot using their current or last known address, or use the jail as their domicile if they can satisfy
residency requirements set out by the state. But most eligible voters aren’t aware that they can vote, nor are there orchestrated voting drives in most of the jails (where people are held pretrial) or houses of correction (where people serve sentences).

In Hampshire County, Lois Ahrens of the Real Cost of Prisons Project and I collaborated with Janet Kline, the paralegal at the Law Library, to ensure that individuals who were eligible to vote were aware of their eligibility, had access to absentee ballot applications, were aware of the voting process and deadlines, and had access to candidate information. We supplied Janet with information on the special status of incarcerated voters, questions around residency, information from the City Clerk in Northampton and the Secretary of the Commonwealth’s Elections Division, as well as posters and a candidate information packet. Janet used her position in the Law Library to publicize eligibility criteria and support voters in securing resources needed to engage in the voting process. According to the 10/8/2020 COVID-19 update from Hampshire Sheriff Cahillane, seventeen men held on pretrial were interested in voting, eleven of whom had never voted before. Because of the heightened interest in protecting the vote in the 2020 Election generally and the organizing efforts of the statewide coalition more specifically, local media and state officials (particularly Rep. Lindsay Sabadosa) called attention to the de facto disenfranchisement of incarcerated voters in the Commonwealth and highlighted statewide and local initiatives to increase voter turnout in jails and houses of correction. When journalists asked to be connected with people behind the wall who were voting in the election, we were unable to make that connection because of a lack of pre-existing relationships with incarcerated individuals or their families, as well as an inability to forge new connections because of COVID restrictions and lockdowns.

We do not know whether voting initiatives happened inside the jails and houses of correction, we do not know with certainty how many people voted or didn’t vote, nor do we know what kept people from voting. Any information we have came from the Sheriffs and their staff. Since the Sheriffs are not accountable to anyone, and can decide what does or does not happen inside their jails, there is no mechanism for ensuring that all eligible incarcerated voters have the opportunity to engage in the voting process. Despite our best efforts, it is unclear how successful the voting initiative was. What we do know is that the Commonwealth needs clear procedures that ensure all eligible voters who are incarcerated can participate in elections, as well as oversight and accountability measures that ensure voting is happening inside the jails and houses of correction. The fight for the enfranchisement of incarcerated voters is only beginning, as we organize not only to ensure that already eligible voters have access to the ballot, but endeavor to re-enfranchise people serving time for a felony conviction [the right was stripped in 2000].

**Update (June 2022)**

Continuing the momentum of the Emancipation Initiative’s Donate Your Vote campaign, the Mass POWER campaign, and Election Protection Behind Bars, some of the same organizers coordinated as the Democracy Behind Bars Coalition to push for state legislation that would require sheriffs in jails to take measures to facilitate voting. The proposed legislation came from incarcerated organizers of the African American Coalition Committee at the Massachusetts state prison at Norfolk (MCI Norfolk) and was
informed by the experiences of these previous campaigns. In the summer of 2022 this legislation gained
enough support to pass, as the following press release describes:

“A Win by and for Incarcerated Organizers:
The fight to end jail and prison-based voter suppression is led by the African American Coalition
Committee, a social justice organization based in MCI-Norfolk, and led by and for organizers
who are incarcerated there.

This group is seeking to reverse Massachusetts’ history of disenfranchising hyper-policed and
incarcerated communities: in 2000, Massachusetts stripped people incarcerated in prison of their
right to vote as a punitive response to decades of prison-based civic engagement, including that of
the AACC. The jail based voting bill recognizes that while some incarcerated people in
Massachusetts- especially those in pre-trial detention - are legally able to vote, they are
effectively unable to cast ballots given the systematic denial of ballot access and rejection of
legally cast votes due to disinformation.

The jail-based voting provisions were originally written by currently and formerly incarcerated
organizers, as well as organizers in the DBBC who organize jail-based voting programs, whose
lived experience gives them an issue area expertise on the problem and most effective solutions.
These stakeholders must continue to lead to inform implementation and improvement.”

The legislation requires that jails: display posters in visible areas that explain voting rights and
procedures, distribute voting information to everyone who might be eligible to vote, ensure the privacy of
voting and transfer of mail ballots, track the number of people seeking to vote, and record and respond to
any voting-related issues.

Another update:

In July of 2022, the ACLU of Massachusetts, as part of their “Know Your Sheriff” campaign, published
the results of a questionnaire that they had sent to candidates running for sheriff in the November 2022
elections. In the survey, Sheriff Patrick Cahillane of Hampshire County responded to the question, “What
have you done, or plan to do, to provide meaningful ballot access for incarcerated eligible voters?” with
the following:

_I took an oath to uphold the Constitution, and part of fulfilling that oath is protecting the civil
rights of the men in my care. For decades, helping our men focus on the importance of full_
participation in their communities, and reminding them of their right and responsibility to vote (11), has been fundamental to the culture of the Hampshire Sheriff’s Office. I believe that voting is an investment in community and family, and that the men in my care have a better chance of success if they feel invested – in their communities, their families, in themselves. My office maintains a law library, fully stocked with voter information guides, and a librarian who helps our eligible men obtain an absentee ballot. Once a ballot is mailed, our men can track it on our library computers. I encourage voting because I want our men to feel the civic power of having their voices heard.

In his response to this question, Sheriff Cahillane describes an active and long-standing commitment on the part of this department, to providing access and support for incarcerated people to be able to vote. To be clear, this commitment and the practices he described were not visible in any form that was apparent to the abolitionists working from the outside to support incarcerated voters, to the jail staff they worked with in creating new educational materials and voting registration processes, to the incarcerated voters they were trying to work with, or to local elections officials who were unfamiliar with jail-based voting. Sheriff Cahillane’s claim that the Hampshire County Sheriffs’ Department has vigorously supported voting for decades through the methods he describes is blatantly untrue, but his claim is all the more interesting for how it appropriates some of the demands and rhetoric of outside activists and signals a convergence, between abolitionists working to expand voting access and the power of incarcerated people, and the sheriff’s mission of helping “men in his care” to “have a better chance of success.” This example, of a sheriff claiming an activist win as a pre-existing, shared priority is an example of the assemblage that makes up the progressive jail in action. Contentious interactions between activists, sheriffs, election officials, legislators, staff and voters

**Decarcerate Western Mass**

In March of 2020, as Covid-19 was overwhelming hospitals, nursing homes, and colleges - incarcerated people and their allies were raising concerns about the likelihood of large-scale outbreaks within prisons and jails, institutions that were continuing to bring in more prisoners while other similarly-sized institutions were shutting down and putting quarantine precautions into place. In Western Massachusetts,
some of the initial organizing to demand the immediate release of incarcerated people came from long-term prisoners’ rights advocates like Lois Ahrens of The Real Cost of Prisons Project, radical public defenders, and also members of the Abolition Network, who had coordinated a local extension of the Massachusetts Bail Fund.

I joined with others via Zoom and over email to help draft and circulate a petition calling on the local District Attorneys and Sheriffs to work with lawyers and service providers to release as many people as possible - as quickly as possible - from their jails before Covid-19 infections spread throughout each of the county jails and houses of corrections. Given the high rates of infection for other communicable diseases in facilities like prisons and jails, and the high morbidity rate of infections among populations with existing health conditions, we argued that many people inside were facing potential death sentences, even though people in jail are there for sentences of 2 and ½ years or less, or still awaiting trial and not even convicted of a crime. Beside the danger to incarcerated people, staff working in the jails would be exposed to higher risk as well as the surrounding communities that staff returned home to every day.

County sheriffs and district attorneys in Western Massachusetts met this petition and other growing calls from advocates for incarcerated people, with press conferences and letters to the editor in local newspapers. In their responses, sheriffs and district attorneys rejected calls to find safe ways to release incarcerated people to the community, even though most prisoners in county jails are released within months, due to the short nature of their sentences. Local efforts to address the Covid-19 crisis within jails grew. In a break-out room during a large Zoom town hall organized by the Pioneer Valley Workers Center, long-term abolitionists connected with new activists looking to get involved in fighting for short term efforts to decrease the number of people incarcerated in Western Massachusetts. We made plans to meet again over Zoom the following week, and quickly formalized this convergence of activists, establishing a name to call ourselves and a weekly meeting time on Monday evenings to help us coordinate our actions and thinking.
Decarcerate Western Mass Mission Statement:

Decarcerate Western Massachusetts is a coalition working to secure the release of incarcerated people who are most vulnerable to the ravages of the coronavirus pandemic, to amplify and respond to the needs of prisoners and their families, and to build a future without mass incarceration. Incarceration is always a crisis. Before, during, and after COVID-19 - jails and prisons do not keep the people living inside their walls safe, nor do they make our communities safer. Join us now to work in the short-term to get people out of jails and prisons during this dangerous pandemic, and in the long-term to reimagine our communities beyond police, prosecutors, and prisons.

Decarcerate Western Mass came together within a broader swell of new, mutual aid networks in Western Massachusetts. Groups of self-organized volunteers met mostly over the internet and on the phone, worked to mobilize assistance for each other and their neighbors, coordinating tasks like grocery delivery and fundraising rent relief for neighbors struggling with the health and economic crises of Covid-19. Decarcerate brought together long-term abolitionists, young activists from organizations like the environmental justice-oriented Sunrise Movement, as well as previously-unaffiliated individuals who were new to activism, but looking to get involved in abolitionist organizing following the summer of protest in response to the police murder of George Floyd in May of 2020. Throughout the summer of 2020, young people in cities and even small towns throughout Western Massachusetts held marches to protest George Floyd’s murder, as well as the many other killings of Black people by police. Many of these marches were called for by people with no organizing affiliation or experience, but these calls resulted in record turnouts, with thousands marching. In some places, activists drew on this momentum to promote police reform and even abolition.

Decarcerate included activists who were simultaneously working on city and town-specific efforts, as well as valley-wide coordinating as the Defund 413 network, mostly aimed at defunding local police departments and calling for reinvestment in other community responses to crisis and harm. Organizers who were active in Decarcerate Western Mass helped to lead protest efforts in Northampton under the banner of Northampton Abolition Now, successfully pushing for: a decrease in police funding, the creation of a Policing Review Commission, the election of abolitionist city councilors, and the creation of a Department of Community Care to develop alternative responses to crises outside of the
police. Outside of Northampton, activists in the region failed to decrease municipal budgets for policing, but they were successful in creating organizations like Defund 413 Amherst and “A Knee Is Not Enough” in Easthampton. The organizations worked to disseminate information about local police department budgets and practices, and encouraged conversations about local policing.

In Holyoke, I joined other residents in cleaning up and re-purposing a parking lot on High St. in order to paint a “Black Lives Matter/Vidas Negras Importan” mural and to use for community events, including a “Know Your Rights Workshop” led by abolitionist public defenders and musical performances. The initial call for a mural and coordination came from Jose Maldonado, a friend and neighbor who later successfully ran for Holyoke City Council with the support of Neighbor 2 Neighbor. In meetings among Holyoke community organizers in the summer of 2020, there seemed to be a consensus that most of the Holyoke residents that organizers worked with, including Black residents and Puerto Rican residents, did not and would not support defunding the police, but would support greater oversight of the police. The City of Holyoke introduced a Civilian Review Commission, but that quickly atrophied for lack of institutional support, according to Dr. Vanessa Martínez, a commission member, alumna of the UMass Anthropology department, and professor at Holyoke Community College.

In Springfield, community organizers from groups including the Pioneer Valley Project, Arise for Social Justice, Out Now, connected with newly-radicalized and un-affiliated activists after calls on social media for protests and marches mobilized thousands to protest the police. These actions came after years of campaigning against police violence and cover-ups of misconduct by the Springfield Police Department. Since 2006, the Springfield Police Department has been forced to pay over 9 million dollars in legal settlements to survivors of police violence. In 2020, organizers were successful in calling on the

62 As of November 2021, the city of Northampton had hired Sean Donovan as the interim director of the new Department of Community Care, and cited his work as a program coordinator with the Wildflower Alliance – a peer support network for people who have been impacted by homelessness, incarceration, psychiatric commitments, addiction and more as qualifying him for the role: [https://www.gazettenet.com/Northampton-names-Sean-Donovan-as-Department-of-Community-Care-head-43466421](https://www.gazettenet.com/Northampton-names-Sean-Donovan-as-Department-of-Community-Care-head-43466421)

United States Department of Justice to investigate the Springfield Police Department, making it the only police department to be investigated under the Trump Administration\textsuperscript{64}. The investigation resulted in a consent decree in 2022, through which the department has been compelled by the federal government to reform its policies for the use of force\textsuperscript{65}. The Pioneer Valley Project has also campaigned to remove Springfield Police from public schools, and to end the practice by school administration of directly connecting school video surveillance cameras to the police department. Organizing in Hampden County, especially Springfield and Holyoke was less directly focused on defunding and abolition, and more on reforms to decrease police violence and reach.

Within this context, the framework of “Decarceration” was useful for bringing together activists with a range of stances, from those who calling for the immediate abolition of prisons and police to activists looking to gradually decrease the use of police, prisons and jails by investing in other resources or through reforms to restrict their reach. “Decarcerate” created a spectrum in which anyone oriented towards less incarceration could work in collaboration - although one of the stated goals has been “to reimagine our communities beyond police, prosecutors, and prisons.”

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Towards the beginning of Decarcerate Western Mass, I invited formerly incarcerated organizers I knew and had worked with to join or collaborate with the project. Organizers like Katie Talbot and Jackie Velez were especially important influences, as well as Don Perry who connected us to Jasmin Borges, a formerly incarcerated organizer based in Eastern Massachusetts, who co-founded the organization I AM. Cassandra Bensahih, who had become an organizer with Massachusetts Against Solitary Confinement

\textsuperscript{64} \url{https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/justice-department/what-happened-lone-police-department-investigation-started-trump-s-doj-n1231321}

\textsuperscript{65} \url{https://www.masslive.com/opinion/2022/04/springfield-police-department-consent-decree-should-mark-beginning-of-new-era-for-law-enforcement-editorial.html}
became a regular collaborator, bridging Western, Central and Eastern Massachusetts. Decarcerate held weekly Monday night general meeting zoom calls and working groups held calls at other times during the week. Most of general meetings were focused on building up relationships within Decarcerate Western Mass, welcoming new people, and coordinating projects across working groups, but several were focused on networking with organizers in the eastern part of the state, including organizers with Emancipation Initiative, Families for Justice as Healing and Showing Up for Racial Justice Boston’s Prison Abolition Working Group. In Boston these organizations and other activists had built a coalition called “Building Up People Not Prisons” to oppose the construction of a new women’s prison which the Department of Corrections had proposed to replace the aging women’s prison in Framingham. The coalition continued to mobilize against the construction of this and any other new prisons or jails, while also mobilizing to pressure for decarceration in response to the immediate crisis of Covid-19.

During the first year of Decarcerate Western Massachusetts, our work grew to include: applying public pressure for decarceration via op-eds, petitions, phone zaps, and in-person protests; a robust letter writing program connecting incarcerated individuals to outside letter writers for support and to inform the priorities and demands of all campaign organizing; public outreach through “Abolition 101” workshops and newsletters; fundraising for commissary accounts of incarcerated people; and a reinstated bail fund to raise donations and post bail so incarcerated people who could not otherwise afford to could await trial with their families and friends, and be able to freely meet with their lawyers and prepare for their cases. The number of working groups expanded and changed over time, and included: Communications, Outreach + Accountability, Fundraising, Bail Fund, Community Care. Members also held 1:1 meetings between people who had been organizing for longer and with new people, to get to know them and their interests and see how they might get involved. We held ongoing, sometimes repetitive, conversations about the purpose of the group, and how to make decisions as a loose collective that included people with different capacities and orientations.

These conversations often circle around two main principles that became helpful guide posts for describing what we were trying to do across the various projects: 1) that we wanted to “decarcerate”
Western Massachusetts towards the goal of abolition, and 2) that our organizing efforts would be guided by those most directly impacted – “to amplify and respond to the needs of prisoners and their families.”

The first value informed our resistance to collaborating with, or in any way legitimizing, the sheriff’s departments, district attorneys, courts, or police and became a test for determining what kinds of reform projects or legislature to support. If a reform would expand the authority or capacity of the sheriff’s departments or the statewide Massachusetts Department of Corrections we opposed it. The second value guided how we tried to organize, working to build relationships with people who were currently incarcerated in the jails in Western Massachusetts. Unlike state prisons, where prisoners had been coordinating political actions and study groups, there were no pre-existing, prisoner-led organizations within the jails for us to connect to. Instead, we had to work to find, and help support, prisoners in the local jails who were leading protests, primarily against lockdowns, medical neglect and abusive treatment by guards. We built relationships through letter writing and phone calls, and we were connected to incarcerated people by family members on the outside who saw our social media or physical posters, or whom we connected with through bail outs.

Building relationships with people who are incarcerated is difficult in general, but this is compounded by the suspension of in-person visits and the limitation of phone access which sheriffs instituted during Covid-19. In addition, attempting to organize against the sheriff’s department while being locked up within it made incarcerated organizers vulnerable. Letters were censored or disappeared. Incarcerated organizers were put into solitary confinement as retribution for organizing a petition to improve medical conditions and end brutality from guards. State legislators, who have a legal privilege which allows them to enter prisons and jails freely, exercised this right to investigate similar conditions at the Souza-Baranowski state prison. During unannounced visits, legislators could talk directly with incarcerated people to learn about conditions from their perspective rather than through prison administration. Despite our efforts to encourage them to do the same at county jails, state legislators were not responsive, and all communication had to go through the phones or mailrooms controlled by the sheriff’s departments. Despite these dangers, incarcerated organizers stayed in contact with us, directly or
through family members. Their concerns and their proposals guided the work of Decarcerate Western Mass, and we responded as best we could with ideas, time, and resources.

The following are two of many letters written by incarcerated people in correspondence with Decarcerate members:

*From the Decarcerate Western Mass Newsletter, Spring 2021*

“Can we really say we are safe in here?’ These images of a letter received from Danny Ramos who is/was incarcerated at Ludlow were written in response to my question: why do you organize or take action against conditions in the jail despite the risks involved in doing so?”

Figure 7: Letters from Danny Ramos, Decarcerate Western Mass Newsletter Spring 2021
Hello. First and foremost I want to thank you for giving me and my peers a platform to voice ourselves. Especially in a world where people are to believe that felons and people who are incarcerated are the scum of the ocean. So the second people find out you’ve been guilty of a
crime or even had to fight charges behind fenced-in walls, they automatically become afraid of you, or believe that you’re a loser and barely believe you deserve a second chance. The sad reality is that no matter what you do to prove to people you are not a monster or a loser or unworthy of a second chance there’s a low percentage that their view on such a person will never change... I wanna tell you my story. I won’t go into full detail because that’ll take too much time and paper and years to understand. But anyways as a kid my mother did any and everything to keep a roof over mines and my sisters heads. Growing up for me wasn’t easy because the man in my moms life who raised me since I was 9 months until 16 use to beat me like I was a grown man and these beatings seemed to be everyday. I used to think and believe I deserved these beatings because in school I’d take my emotions and anger out. So I was suspended a lot and with those suspensions came beatings. There was never no talking. These beatings usually occurred when my mother wasn’t home. At the age of 10 I ran away but nobody would listen not even the police. The police knew my dad because we lived in a small town, and they always viewed him as a hard working man who had a step kid who made up lies so his mother would leave. It wasn’t until I kept on running away and trying to jump off a bridge did the police and town take notice... She finally left him when I was 16. But the damage was already done, I was a growing boy with no male figure and a lot of anger. I started getting in trouble with the law which resulted in Smith VOC expelling me. I was in the 10th grade. I never got a chance to go to another school. Northampton’s County Jail became my home school for the next 2 years. I never had a juvi record and was going through a tough time in my life when I committed the crimes that sent me away. When I came home at 19 almost 20 I met a girl shortly after, she knew my past and my jail sentence and didn’t judge me. I still had 5 years of probation when I came home and I ended up completing that probation successfully. I ended up having a child and I was able to find someone to give me a chance and hire me to my first job. I was able to stay grounded and out of jail for a very long time. That relationship didn’t end up working out and a while later I got with a new woman. This woman became my fiance but the road was long and stressful because her parents didn’t approve of me because of me being in jail before and because of my record. They use to call me a loser, a low life and also say that I was a man who could never amount to anything in life. They would also go on to say that I wouldn’t be able to provide for her since I was a felon. At this point they didn’t even know me or even met me yet. Eventually she got her parents to agree on getting to know me and also met me. Over the course of my relationship with this woman her parents came to respecting me as a man and for what I stood for. I also got an apology from them and they stated that they would look at people who have gone to jail differently. From there I was given the blessing from her family to ask her to marry me. But everything came crashing down when I got into an accident that broke my leg and foot. I was then put on a bunch of painkillers at this point in my life. I would’ve never imagined the damage and pain that these pills would do to my life and effect it would do to my loved ones. Addiction plagued my life from 25 to 28 and within that time I lost everything I worked so hard on establishing. I even lost my fiance. Shortly after this I started coming to jail again. I’m 2 years sober now :) I just hope and pray I can do something with my life. So that’s a preview of myself. I didn’t tell you this little story for pity. I told it so you and others can see that it is possible for people to view men and women who are and have been incarcerated differently and not the stigma that our world likes to make seem. So I do know first hand that you can change peoples views on things and of you. But only with time and understanding. The key word being understanding. One thing that I do believe is that jails and prisons will always exist. The reason why being that way too many people, especially politicians, profit from them. If people were to really understand and see what does go on behind these walls and fences they would come to understand what is wrong with society today. Jails and prisons is our modern day slavery trade. We are nothing but numbers in a system. No one and I mean no one is exempt from these walls. People need to realize would they want their children to go through this? ...Finding other solutions is as simple as helping people build futures, have careers so people can support their loved ones. Like drug dealers, I’m sure if men
and women could get a decent job with a decent wage that’ll help support their families they wouldn’t go back to that lifestyle. Life after prison is hard so a lot of people do what they know and in exchange they keep a roof over their heads and food on the table. But at the same time these drugs damage someone else’s life and takes food off their table. This is a door that will always go round and round and never close.

Despite the logistical barriers and the risks that incarcerated organizers faced, these kinds of correspondences have guided the work of Decarcerate Western Massachusetts, orienting the focus of outside organizers to the needs and analyses of those within jail. Sometimes these orientations conflicted. Like Josh, many incarcerated pen pals did not consider prison abolition to be a realistic goal of organizing. As a result, none of the campaigns coordinated by Decarcerate Western Mass were aimed specifically at closing any of the local jails. Instead, organizing focused on the common ground shared between prisoners and outside abolitionists, of reforms that would improve conditions for people who were incarcerated, support their voices being centered within organizing work, and expand community awareness conditions inside the jails.

Post fieldwork: 2021-2022 No New Women’s Prison + and Prison and Jail Building Moratorium

As the period of my fieldwork ended, organizers who had been mobilizing for several years as the Building Up People Not Prisons coalition - in opposition to the state’s planned construction of a new women’s prison in eastern Massachusetts - extended their organizing to the entire state. Where the Massachusetts Department of Corrections insisted on the need for a new facility to replace the decaying women’s prison known as MCI-Framingham, organizers with the Building Up People Not Prisons demanded that the millions of dollars intended for the project be re-directed to non-carceral support programs that would allow women to stay in their communities.
In September of 2021, the coalition coordinated a statewide march from Springfield to Boston. The march connected organizers from Western Massachusetts, including members of Decarcerate Western Massachusetts, organizers in Springfield, and Smith College student activists who planned a march through Northampton, with Boston-based organizers from Families for Justice as Healing and Showing Up for Racial Justice Boston. Organizers succeeded in encouraging legislators Chynah Tyler in the MA State House of Representatives and Joanne Comerford in the MA State Senate to introduce legislation that would impose a 5-year moratorium on jail and prison construction in Massachusetts.

This recent organizing against a New Women’s Prison echoes previous organizing in Massachusetts between 2003 and 2006 against the construction of the Western Massachusetts Regional Women’s Correctional Center in Chicopee. Activists and community organizers collaborating as the Statewide Harm Reduction Coalition (SHaRC) opposed the construction of a new, regional women’s jail in Chicopee, as well as the expansion and renovation of the Franklin County Jail and House of Corrections in Greenfield. Organizers from Arise for Social Justice, the American Friends Service Committee, Out Now, and the Real Cost of Prisons Project were among the Western Mass activists leading the coalition.

At that time, Joanne “Jo” Comerford was director of the Western Mass AFSC and part of the community organizing efforts to oppose jail construction. While that organizing failed to prevent the renovation of the Greenfield jail or the construction of the Chicopee women’s jail in 2007, it laid a foundation of relationships which have continued the resistance to new prison and jail construction today.

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“Nothing About Us Without Us” Formerly Incarcerated Leadership in Criminal Justice Reform and Prison Abolition

During the period of my fieldwork in Western Massachusetts, members of each of the various prison abolition and criminal justice reform organizations, collectives, and initiatives I worked with, articulated calls for more leadership by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. In meetings, public forums, and in interviews, formerly incarcerated organizers themselves were among the voices insisting on the importance of lived experience in informing work towards change. Calls for centering lived experience have become increasingly present in the broader landscape of prison abolition and criminal justice reform. National organizations like Just Leadership USA work to “invest in the advancement of formerly incarcerated leaders.” The Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee, a prisoner-led section of the Industrial Workers of the World with chapters in prisons around the country, works to “amplify the voices of working class people in prison, especially those engaging in collective action or who put their own lives at risk to improve the conditions of all.” As Melvin Washington of the Vera Institute writes, these calls are not new:

68 I was introduced to this phrase through the organizing work of Families for Justice as Healing. “Families for Justice as Healing” is an abolitionist community organization led by “incarcerated women, formerly incarcerated women, and women with incarcerated loved ones.” Based in Boston’s historically-Black community of Roxbury, Families for Justice as Healing (FJAH) is dedicated to ending the incarceration of women and girls. In rallies, in meetings, and at speaking events, the organization’s founder, Andrea James, a lawyer and formerly incarcerated black woman, often invokes the organization’s motto: “Nothing about us without us!” In their mission, FJAH insists that: “Formerly incarcerated women have the solutions and expertise to address the root causes of incarceration. We are leading work to shift resources away from the criminal punishment system and into Black and Brown communities so we can have housing, healthcare, education, economic development, and community-led organizations.” For FJAH, their work includes: “participatory defense” meetings, where people dealing with the criminal justice system can get support from others who have dealt with similar experiences, organizing campaigns to change state laws and policies based on the goals of their members, and building ongoing resistance against the construction of new prisons and jails. FJAH works towards the goal of decarceration, and at the core of their orientation towards decarceration and abolition is the centering of lived experience as the criteria for deciding whose visions and voices define their work.

69 Just Leadership USA: https://jlusa.org/
70 Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee: https://incarceratedworkers.org/about
Advocates in Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and poor white communities that have been most impacted by incarceration have long highlighted its harms and limitations. These stakeholders have indispensable knowledge about the needs and resources of marginalized residents. Genuine partnership between government and community-based organizations, particularly those led by formerly incarcerated people, advances racial equity and facilitates power-sharing by bringing traditionally marginalized people to the center of decision-making. It can also expand the lenses policymakers use to understand problems and solutions. Without collaboration, reforms may fail to meet the needs of residents and cause unintended harm for communities of color and other marginalized communities that are already overburdened by incarceration and a lack of effective public investment (Washington 2021).

Other scholars have described similar efforts within social movements to center the leadership of individuals who have been directly impacted by particular issues. Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) describes the work of the mothers of incarcerated individuals in challenging the hyper-policing and incarceration of their communities in Los Angeles. Keisha-Khan Perry (2013), conducting research among anti-displacement activists in Brazil, demonstrates the importance of black women’s mobilization in response to urban marginalization and political repression. Perry’s ethnography demonstrates how black women in a neighborhood slated for eviction fought against urban re-development. In both studies, the mothers’ social roles gave them legitimacy among community members. Similarly Ralph (2014) describes how former gang members who had suffered injuries from shootings drew on their experiences of injury, and the struggles and isolation that come with it, to inform their interventions and against gang violence and against state policies that further marginalize young, black men.

Andrea Dyrness (2011) found similar tensions in her ethnography of organizing for school reform in Oakland, California. Dyrness describes how Latina immigrant mothers struggled to get their voices included in the organizing and planning of new autonomous, “small” schools within the public school system. After having faced marginalization from the original school system, the mothers were frustrated to also be sidelined by the teachers and organizers leading the reform movement - despite the fact that the involvement of parents was cited as a strength of the movement. Dyrness demonstrates how the mothers created “counterspaces” for collective reflections and research, including one member’s kitchen, from which they were able to challenge the forms of exclusion that they faced within the reform movement.
In the context of decarceration work in Western Massachusetts, the results of such calls to center incarcerated and formerly incarcerated organizers were mixed. Each of these campaigns included formerly incarcerated people in some leadership positions, but building and sustaining that leadership was fraught with internal and external challenges. The Mass POWER campaign for prisoner voting rights was initiated by Derrick Washington, an incarcerated organizer with the Emancipation Initiative, and supported by other incarcerated individuals at the Souza-Baranowski Maximum Security and MCI Shirley and MCI Norfolk prisons, as well as by organizers on the outside who did much of the coordinating. Many costly and logistically-complicated phone calls were made to make sure that organizers on the outside were following the lead of incarcerated organizers. We eventually also received funding from larger non-profits that allowed us to pay stipends to formerly incarcerated community members to canvass for petition signatures. Within Decarcerate Western Massachusetts, I was part of the Outreach + Accountability working group. We worked closely with several people whose family members had been incarcerated to organize support for their loved ones and to build public campaigns to pressure officials to change visitation and medical policies. Committee members corresponded by mail, and through the jails’ expensive phone and email providers to get updates from incarcerated organizers on prison conditions and requests for support to relay out through our social media and email lists.

Despite these efforts, we had limited success in building up the sustained leadership of directly-impacted community members. The number of incarcerated or formerly incarcerated leaders also remained very small, relative to the number of other activists involved in campaign organizing and to the number of people who have been impacted by incarceration. Some formerly incarcerated organizers expressed frustration with how their voices were excluded from decision-making about reform. Even with the inclusion of their perspectives, formerly incarcerated organizers Messiah and Don emphasized the importance of prioritizing currently incarcerated people’s perspectives as being more current and more in need of uplifting.
In the interviews I conducted, formerly incarcerated organizers did not describe specific instances of explicit discrimination within activist spaces, but they did name some of the structural impediments that made it more difficult for people who have been incarcerated to get involved in organizing work, such as unstable employment and housing, and disruptive parole requirements. They also described some issues within organizing practices, where some individuals became de facto representatives of all incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people - often as a result of differing levels of educational privilege and related personal networks.

In planning meetings and in public events, organizers identified the problem of activist spaces unintentionally perpetuating forms of oppression through practices like meeting in formats that were less accessible to people without stable internet access or technological savvy, or meeting at times that were harder for parents or people who worked evenings to attend. Most communication was in English, and in specific registers of academic and social justice-oriented English at that. In some cases we were able to provide some translation to Spanish, but this was not the norm and even then, the default language of banter and coordinating was in English.

Across each of these campaigns, organizers struggled with addressing these issues and had some mixed success. Mass POWER was able to fundraise money to pay some stipends for canvassing work rather than just mobilize volunteers. Decarcerate Western Mass began with a very small number of incarcerated contacts inside local jails, and grew to a robust network of incarcerated letter-writers and their outside pen pals, whose collaborative work informed organizing demands. This took a great deal of effort and outreach to expand beyond those incarcerated organizers who were already comfortable writing letters about jail conditions.
In addition to the leadership of incarcerated organizers like Tyrell, whose petitions for better conditions within the Hampden County Jail became a focus of Decarcerate Western Mass’ campaign work and Derrick Washington, who co-founded the Emancipation Initiative and began the organizing that would become Mass POWER, there were other non-incarcerated activists and organizers who played critical roles in sustaining campaigns. Each of the campaigns described was held together by key non-incarcerated or “outside” people who did much of the day-to-day coordinating and communicating. Across the different organizations and campaigns, the majority of this work was done by women and non-binary individuals. Organizers like Rachel Corey with Emancipation Initiative, Katie Talbot and Jackie Velez with Neighbor 2 Neighbor, Holly Richardson of Out Now, Ellen Graves at Arise for Social Justice, Danielle Squillante, Aya Mares, Aime Matos working with Decarcerate Western Mass, Lois Ahrens of the Real Cost of Prisons Project, Cassandra Bensahih of Massachusetts Against Solitary Confinement and even state Senator and former-AFSC director Jo Comerford and others, dedicated enormous amounts of time to connecting people inside and outside of prisons and jails. They maintained relationships in-between campaigns and supported other organizers and community members. This dynamic mirrors what Karen Brodkin Sacks describes among hospital worker organizing at Duke, in that a number of “centerwomen” held social networks together day to day, connecting people and resources, and transmitting knowledge that then informed and made union organizing possible (Brodkin Sacks 1988).

Challenges that campaigns faced

1) Balancing urgency and building power

An issue that decarceral groups in Western Mass faced, and that any activism or community organizing against structural violence contends with, is having to decide how to respond to the immediate needs of communities impacted by that violence, while also working to support those communities in building collective power to shape the policies and conditions that enable or enact that violence. It can be faster
and easier for people with more privilege and resources to address urgent material needs of other through social service projects. It can also be easier for people with more privilege to meet and make decisions regarding how to go about reforming institutions, than it is for those people who are directly impacted by that institution – in this case, the jail.

It is much harder to focus on the root causes of oppression, and harder yet for individuals who are at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression to be involved in, let alone, lead organizing work. When people’s lives are endangered by violence or neglect, it can feel difficult, even counter-productive to choose the slower and more difficult option of taking the time to center their leadership and decision-making. And yet, excluding people from decision-making, even unintentionally, can reproduce the kinds of structural inequalities that led to the oppression being fought against (Schutz and Sandy 2011). This tension between urgency and long-term power building played out differently across campaigns.

For the Mass POWER campaign to restore voting rights to incarcerated Massachusetts residents, we had to operate within strict deadlines for collecting and delivering petition signatures that had been set by the state. The short time frame created pressure for us to move quickly, which made creating a structure for consulting and building up the leadership of incarcerated people more difficult. We attempted to maintain a balance between both values. Organizers on the outside checked in with incarcerated comrades from Emancipation Initiative who had begun the campaign and who were organizing inside Massachusetts prisons. However, many of the meetings we held consisted entirely of people on the outside, the majority of whom did not identify as being formerly incarcerated. Had we spent more time and resources in ensuring that incarcerated individuals could participate in all decision-making we probably would have collected fewer signatures than we did, but we may have gotten more involvement among current and formerly incarcerated people, which could have built a larger, committed base of support for future attempts.
Covid-19 amplified what were already-existing issues within jails, from lack of adequate healthcare and nutrition, to the use of solitary confinement as punishment for speaking out against abuse by corrections officers. For Decarcerate Western Mass, alongside trying to build support for decarceration, much of our organizing went into supporting incarcerated people and their immediate needs – conducting in-person and phone zap protests against retaliation by jail officials and raising money for bail and for commissary. This was also true of the 2018 Nationwide Prison Strike in which much of the work of outside allies centered on these modes of material support.

2) Convergences with the progressive jail

Shared discourses of community + care

While activists working towards decarceration proposed “community care” as a replacement for policing and prisons, sheriffs in Western Massachusetts also referred to their work as a form of care, and invoked the broad support they receive from community members - from voters, legislators, local media, non-profits and community organizations, survivors of violence, family members of some of the people they have incarcerated and even some of the community members that were previously incarcerated themselves. Sheriffs touted their outreach projects, which extended the sheriff’s department’s presence beyond the jail and into schools, streets, parks and the homes of senior citizens. Sheriffs present these projects as demonstrating their commitment to supporting the communities of which they are a part.

In contrast to recent examples of “tough-on-crime” sheriffs like Joe Arpaio, the former sheriff of Maricopa County in Arizona, or Thomas Hodgson in Bristol County Massachusetts, who offered to send incarcerated people to help Trump build a wall on the US-Mexican border, the sheriffs of Western Massachusetts made regular public statements emphasizing the humane care of their jails. Rather than toughness, they extoll their departments’ commitment to rehabilitation and treatment. The approach of sheriffs in Western Massachusetts emphasizing “care” has won them a high degree of support, especially
in a context in which there were very few sources of support for issues like addiction, mental health crises, and domestic violence. Through outreach efforts, sheriffs enact what they describe as a mode of care for the larger community, and which many members of the community see in similar terms as well.

Co-optation/incorporation

The progressive jail complicated these campaigns through its aptitude to incorporate a diverse range of outside individuals and organizations into its work. While responding confrontationally in public to some reform efforts, in meetings with activists and in their own policies, sheriffs in Western Massachusetts also displayed a willingness to incorporate reforms. Sheriffs adopted ideas from progressive, reform movements, like medically assisted treatment for opioid addiction, trauma-informed care, mindfulness, permaculture, etc. – in ways that expanded their capacity and justification to incarcerate more people for different things. They also incorporated reformers. Some organizers working towards decarceration also held jobs in non-profit agencies, or volunteered in positions that brought them into collaboration with sheriff’s departments, myself included.

Jails in Western Massachusetts incorporated formerly incarcerated individuals as mentors - sources of motivation and insight, and examples of success in returning to the community that could be achieved post-incarceration by engaging in reentry programming. Formerly incarcerated mentors were considered important resources, yet remained outside of leadership roles. Some of their testimonies reinforced ideas that were central to the progressive jail’s narrative, encouraging incarcerated people to see themselves and their “mindset” as the ones responsible for their current state in jail and for their success in remaining outside of jail once they leave. They reinforced the legitimacy of the sheriff’s office and its reentry programming by emphasizing the degree to which volunteer mentors and sheriff's department staff care.

While activists critiqued sheriffs’ incorporation of reforms and reformers as a cynical co-optation of progressive ideas, sheriffs presented themselves as simply sharing progressive values, being reformers themselves. The long history of reform in New England prisons and jails supports the sheriffs’ position
that progressive social change is, and has been, compatible with incarceration. Alongside Murakawa (2014), Schept (2015), Shange (2019) and others, I argue that exploring this compatibility allows us to better understand how the logics of incarceration have become so entrenched in communities across the United States - even in deeply liberal contexts. Regardless of the intentions of the sheriffs, corrections officers or any other actors within the sheriff’s department, whether committed to care or simply to maintaining and increasing their support and funding, the assemblage of the progressive jail is “sticky” in ways that I and other abolitionists I worked with did not expect as I illustrate below and I describe more in the next chapter. Sheriffs and their collaborators grab onto ideas and people, expanding the jail’s reach and raison d’être.

In this closing vignette I present notes on a zoom meeting that took place after a protest organized by Decarcerate Western Massachusetts, in which we coordinated a slow-moving, driving protest of over 50 cars that went past both the Ludlow (“Men’s) and Chicopee (“Women’s) jails and houses of corrections in Hampden County, using a mode of protest that had become especially popular during the Covid-19 pandemic. We met in the parking lot of a nearby bowling alley, where Aime Matos, the partner of an organizer incarcerated in the Hampden County Jail, and Cassandra Bensahih, a formerly incarcerated organizer, spoke about the conditions within prisons and jails under Covid. After decorating our vehicles, writing out some of the demands of incarcerated people in the jail on posters or on the sides of our cars, we drove out to each jail, and honked and yelled out the windows as our cars wove back and forth, trying to make ourselves as audible as possible to people inside. To coincide with the car protest we organized a phone zap, encouraging community members to call the sheriff’s department to amplify the demands of people in the jail for adequate food, access to cleaning supplies, and access to video calls with loved ones and for the larger need to decarcerate as the only way to address the pandemic. Enough people called that the sheriff’s department changed their voice mail to notify callers that there would be delays because of the protest, naming Decarcerate Western Massachusetts specifically within the message. After the protests, the sheriff’s department reached out to Decarcerate Western Mass to set up a zoom meeting which I describe below. As this meeting demonstrates, the interactions between abolitionist and
decarceration-oriented activists and the carceral state are more ambivalent than purely antagonistic. In the following chapter I explore more fully how the “stickiness” of the progressive jail, and especially its commitment to care, complicates efforts towards prison abolition.

Decarcerate Western Mass and Mass Bail Fund Meeting w/ Sheriff Cocchi
June 18, 2020, Thursday 4pm, Zoom Meeting

When I sign onto the call, an organizer from Unitarian Universalist Mass Action is already on. I say hi and ask how she’s doing. An activist from Defund413 joins soon after and we say hi and talk for a second before Sheriff Cocchi joins the call. The Zoom “room” gets very quiet and I feel awkward. Cocchi says hello to us. We explain that we’re still waiting for other people to join us. I would have preferred to follow the lead of A., whose partner is incarcerated in the jail, but she hasn’t joined the call yet.

Sheriff Cocchi’s offer to meet with us immediately after our car rally protest caught us off guard, and we were scrambling to figure out how to approach it. As a coalition, we had started planning for this meeting only a couple days prior. We were coordinating over text until the meeting’s start time to see who was going to speak, and most of our people weren’t even on the call yet. More activists from Decarcerate join the call, as well as an organizer from Massachusetts Against Solitary Confinement, one of the coordinators of the Massachusetts Bail Fund, and an organizer from the American Friends Service Committee.

As people sign on to the call, Cocchi says hi to each person, using the first names that are displayed next to each of our videos. He’s sitting in a fluorescently-lit office, wearing a Hampden County Sheriff’s Department windbreaker. This is the first time I’ve seen him wearing glasses. He looks engaged but at ease, or at least he’s giving that impression. He’s the only person on the call from the sheriff’s department, which surprises me. I had expected other administrative staff or public relations people to be there. He greets each of us and everyone on the call responds in a cordial tone. I try to keep a flat affect but I find it hard to not respond in kind when he greets me warmly and thanks us for having this meeting with him.

He begins speaking, saying that he wants to turn the conversation over to us, but first he “wants to commend us on the drive-by,” which he felt was “done with class, and done in an appropriate fashion.” I feel annoyed. I try to make eye contact with other people on the call but I remember we’re on Zoom and no one can tell who I’m looking at, so I text the Decarcerate group chat that it sounds like we need to be more disruptive next time. Cocchi talks a while longer, saying how glad he is for our input, and finally gives up the floor that he’s taken within the meeting, saying “I’m all yours.”

C., the organizer from Massachusetts Against Solitary Confinement (MASC), introduces herself. She cites her involvement in the Criminal Justice Reform act passed in Massachusetts in 2018 and its requirement of tracking the use of solitary confinement as a step towards decreasing and eventually ending the use of solitary confinement. She states how, according to MASC, “solitary confinement is torture,” but it continues to be used in Massachusetts with virtually no oversight. This has been exacerbated, C. argues, under Covid-19, where prisons and jails have used solitary confinement as a tool to stop the spread of the pandemic, at the mental health and well-being cost of prisoners who may be sick and isolated without support. C. tells Cocchi that we’re worried
about people in his jail who are either being isolated, or are hiding their symptoms for fear of being put in solitary. Cocchi, who seems increasingly agitated, interrupts to say that people with symptoms are being placed in a separate unit for testing, and that the whole unit has been converted as a quarantine unit and they’re not being placed into solitary confinement.

As Cocchi tries to continue speaking, several people from our group intervene, and ask him to let us finish, and especially to let A. have a turn to speak, the partner of a man incarcerated in the jail, who has helped lead the campaign from the inside, speak. Cocchi objects at being cut-off from answering the question but eventually stops speaking.

A. politely thanks Cocchi for inviting us to meet with him and explains that she’s going to read our demands. She lists the need for sufficient medical attention to people, like her partner, who require care for pre-existing issues and are more vulnerable to Covid-19; the need for video-conferencing since in-person visits have been prohibited since March; and the need for better food.

Cocchi objects to the word “demands” and says that he’ll consider them as suggestions, since the word “demands” is so “aggressive” and he is committed to working with us. He responds to each of the issues, saying that he’ll investigate issues with medical attention; that Hampden County has been doing thousands of free video calls, more than any other jail; and that the meals had been limited during the two-week lockdown in response to Covid-19 infections, but since then they were back to normal.

A. responds, emphasizing that these demands were based on what people inside are experiencing and that she, as the loved one of someone inside, feels especially responsible for supporting people inside and in their rehabilitation. She explains that her bigger goal, beyond this current action, is to have more resources for people coming out. Cocchi responds with praise for A. and her passion. He asks A. and C. specifically, and anyone else in the group, if they’d be interested in touring the jails to see what conditions are like. He then suggests that we could start a group or a program within the sheriff’s existing After Incarceration Support System (AISS) to support rehabilitation and reentry. A. says she’ll consider it. The meeting ends with an invitation from the sheriff to stay in communication. On our side, we reiterate the need for the sheriff to meet the demands of the protesters, and to welcome external, independent oversight to ensure that our demands have been met.
CHAPTER 7
CONTESTING CARE

The organizing campaigns and abolitionist projects that I took part in worked to build the power of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people and to support their efforts towards decarceration. Decarcerate Western Mass and other groups have used the term “decarceration” as a concept bridging abolition – what can be thought of as total decarceration – and reforms oriented towards decreasing the number of people incarcerated and the reach of prisons and jails. This concept allowed activists who disagreed about whether abolition was realistic or desirable to work together and to oppose reforms that expanded or maintained incarceration. Alongside efforts to confront the carceral state, organizers also sought to provide care to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people within prisons and jails. This took the form of actions like emotional support through letter-writing and phone calls, raising money for bail, raising money for food and cleaning supplies, and rides and encouragement after release from jail.

Through the course of my fieldwork, organizers increasingly invoked discourses of care within their critiques of jails and articulations of what an abolitionist future might look like. This emphasis grew in response to the heightened dangers of Covid-19 within and beyond prisons, and as discourses centering “care” within activist and abolitionist communities became more prominent in general, drawing especially on frameworks of disability justice.

Meanwhile – and to the dismay of abolitionists - sheriffs in Western Massachusetts also invoked discourses of care in describing their jails’ orientations towards rehabilitation and treatment. This became more prominent in response to heightened national and local concern with the impact of opioids, and again in response to Covid-19. In this context, care emerged as a common theme and as a terrain of conflict, between the sheriffs who operate jails, and the organizers trying to reform them, or shut them down entirely - with each group claiming to care more about those who are incarcerated than the other.
The Anthropology of Care

In recent ethnographies, anthropologists have reflected on the ambiguity of care and the need for more ethnographic attention to how people enact, experience, and talk about care (Mulla 2014, Aulino 2019, Jackson 2021, Martin 2021, Routon 2021). Especially relevant to the context of jails and abolition, Arnold and Aulino (2021), in their review of recent anthropological research on care “A Call to Care,” describe some of the “conundrums of care” that anthropologists have explored. They highlight the fraught relationship between care and power:

Care can do violence, and violence can also be felt as care. Indeed, habits of action in homes and at bedsides as well as in boardrooms and faculty meetings, can serve to continually reproduce power structures that directly harm us or that we ourselves, ironically, are explicitly attempting to dismantle. And yet we rely on these norms, feel cared for by them, and care for others under their frameworks.” (Arnold and Aulino 2021).

As Cook and Trundel describe in their introduction to “Unsettling Anthropologies of Care” in Anthropology and Humanism (2020) how:

Underfunded, stressed, and compromised systems of care become tools of governance, within which various racial, gender, and class-based structures of inequality get reproduced. Anthropologists have shown the double-edged risks of care work, as it becomes entangled with state violence, emergent inequalities, exclusion and dispossession, and the expansion of capital” (Cook and Trundel 2020: 179).

Within the context of incarceration and decarceration in Western Massachusetts, the “conundrums” and “double-edged risks” of care abound. In the following sections I consider: the “carceral care” enacted by progressive jails; “community care” as imagined by reformers and abolitionists; and the tensions and overlaps between these modes.

Carceral Care

Ren-Yo Hwang’s concept of “carceral care” is especially helpful for describing the assemblage of care enacted by progressive jails in Western Massachusetts. In their article on organizing by and in support of trans prisoners in California, Hwang offers the concept of “carceral care” as a means:
… to name the deathly liberal impulse of asking the prisons to do better, a compulsion by both advocates and state actors to demand piecemeal reforms from institutions like the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR). Progressive discourses concerning carceral reform as carceral care often gain traction because of some combination of investigative reporting, lawsuits, state audits, or prison reform policy initiatives—and such efforts often fail to credit the very extensive and direct action and labor of protest, political unrest, and organizing by those most impacted on the inside… Carceral care thus denotes the messy and entangled conglomerate of discretionary practices, performative measures, and material actions used to forestall the possibility of future interference and/or interrogation of the underlying institutional violences of carceral spaces (Hwang 2019: 560-561).

While Hwang’s framework of “carceral care” is an explicit critique of the effects that progressive, “piecemeal reforms” can have on undermining more radical change, Liam Martin in his ethnography *Halfway House: Prisoner Reentry and the Shadow of Carceral Care*, uses the concept of carceral care ambivalently, to analyze the tensions within which halfway houses operate. Halfway houses are residential programs that offer temporary housing for individuals returning from incarceration, many of whom are required to take part in some kind of addiction or recovery programming or therapy. Focusing on a halfway house in the greater Boston area:

> The term ‘carceral care’ is intended to spotlight the institutional tensions of a halfway house meeting essential social needs while adopting an uneasy combination of roles – care and control, reform and repression, punishment and social welfare – placing them at the center of the analysis developed in this book (Martin 2021: 6).

Martin centers the story of a half-way house resident, Joe Badillo, who says “the halfway house saved his life and he will be forever grateful for the support he received there,” (Martin 2021: 6). The halfway house provided Joe with housing stability and a community of support, which made it more possible for him to weather serious health issues and addressing his long-term addiction to heroin. At the same time, Martin shows that Joe and the other residents faced ongoing surveillance and constant suspicion from half-way house staff. They were required to be at the house in a way that made securing employment and re-connecting with family even more difficult. As sincere as Joe’s gratitude might be, Martin demonstrates that the care that was enacted by the halfway house made residents less likely to be able to leave it, and did nothing to help residents’ families or communities to prepare to receive them.

*Care for the incarcerated*
As Carolyn Sufrin (2017) points out, because of prohibitions against cruel and unusual punishment, incarcerated people, ironically, are one of the only categories of individuals in the United States who have a constitutionally-recognized right to medical care. While proponents of a punishment-oriented approach to jail might see this right to care as undeserved, in the progressive context of Western Massachusetts, the idea of care is central to how incarceration is discussed and enacted. Local and national media publicize how their jails demonstrate care - towards the people they incarcerate, towards people who have been harmed, and towards the broader community in which they are based. Sheriffs join task forces with public health officials to develop “evidence-based” responses to opioid addiction and engage in roundtables with advocacy organizations like the Reform Alliance to discuss parole reform. When describing the people that they incarcerate, sheriffs often refer to incarcerated people as being “in their care.” This simple shift in language reframes the relationship between sheriffs and people “in custody.” It indicates an affective relationship in alignment with the demands of outside activists.

Indeed, in Western Massachusetts, sheriffs have responded to community campaigns demanding better conditions by expanding the function and capacity of the jail, seeking new funding from the state and from grants for specific initiatives to increase the ways in which they demonstrate care. The outcome of some of these initiatives has been to incarcerate more people for a larger range of reasons, such as civil commitments for addiction. While Hampden County was the only sheriff’s department in the country using jail facilities to incarcerate individuals for civil commitment at the time of my fieldwork, legislation proposed in the fall of 2021, during the writing of this chapter had the potential to allow for civil commitments in Suffolk County jails in Boston as well. In response to the proposed legislation, Sheriff Tompkins of Suffolk County stated:

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71 The REFORM Alliance is “a national advocacy organization that aims to transform probation and parole by changing laws, systems and culture to create real pathways to work and wellbeing” https://www.facebook.com/reform/
72 Also referred to as Section 35, civil commitments are court orders through which individuals can be detained for their own safety or for the safety of others, often in relation to addiction.
What I would like is for there to be health care facilities established outside of a correctional facility that would tend to these needs,” Tompkins said. “That said, in the absence of enough of those beds, in the absence of enough of that type of care, I’m willing to be part of the solution to help people suffering from mental health or substance use issues.73

Within this framework, sheriffs like Tompkins in Suffolk County and Cocchi in Hampden County see themselves as stepping in to provide for unmet care needs in the community. Their commitment to care is applauded by local media and encouraged through collaborations with community organizations like the Pioneer Valley Project in Springfield.

“As the opioid crisis continues to grow, the research shows that addiction rates are growing much faster among women than among men. In order to respond to this reality, it is essential that women have equitable access to opportunities for treatment and recovery. The stark reality is that currently in Massachusetts, there are far fewer female beds at treatment facilities and in the case of female beds under the new Section 35 law, there are none for women in all of western Massachusetts. PVP members are partnering with Sheriff Cocchi and our legislative delegation to address this glaring inequity and we won’t quit until women have the same access to treatment as men do. (Pioneer Valley Project website, “Our Successes”)

Under Covid, the debate about releasing incarcerated people before the completion of their sentence was also framed within a rubric of care. Sheriffs argued that people released early from incarceration would be likely to harm themselves, especially through opioid overdose, or could harm other members of the community. In a statement to local press, Sheriff Cocchi cited the re-arrest of people who had been released early under Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court order for new crimes as evidence for the risk posed to the community by releasing incarcerated people still awaiting trial. Speaking to the Springfield Republican newspaper’s Mass Live website:

This is literally a circus and it’s unfolding right before my very eyes. This is a serious public safety threat and many of these people also are dangers to themselves,” Cocchi said. “They get out of jail to escape COVID-19 and go back to far more dangerous and risky environments. It

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73 [https://commonwealthmagazine.org/criminal-justice/bill-would-let-tompkins-hold-men-solely-for-substance-use-treatment/?fbclid=IwAR3BoWmYx-xWgvW0xsOnSuJj4oAy2PBi6IKMxPQbUDfhQV2MDs7jsRPWCw](https://commonwealthmagazine.org/criminal-justice/bill-would-let-tompkins-hold-men-solely-for-substance-use-treatment/?fbclid=IwAR3BoWmYx-xWgvW0xsOnSuJj4oAy2PBi6IKMxPQbUDfhQV2MDs7jsRPWCw)
makes absolutely no sense.⁷⁴

In his public statements, Cocchi positions himself as fighting for safety - including the safety of the incarcerated people who are being released. In Cocchi’s estimation, it is the activists and the courts who are working to have incarcerated people released who do not care about incarcerated peoples’ well-being or the safety of people they may harm.

Carceral care in the community

As I described within the qualities of the progressive jail assemblage, sheriff’s departments in Western Massachusetts also oriented their care outwards towards the larger community. This is notable in 2021 social media post by the Hampden County Sheriff’s Office:

As the role of sheriff in Massachusetts has evolved from care in custody to prevention before incarceration and community outreach, Sheriff Nick Cocchi has ensured the Hampden County Sheriff’s Office is spearheading initiatives that help define a modern sheriff’s office.

With initiatives like the Marine Patrol Unit or the regional Special Response Team (SWAT), the department has bridged the divide between a need in the community and specially trained law enforcement divisions.

At the same time, the creation of the TRIAD program for senior citizens and the Emotional Support Division of therapy dogs have provided dynamic community engagement opportunities that fill a real world need and build the relationship between law enforcement and the members of the community they serve.

In this presentation, Sheriff Cocchi explained both the importance and complications of creating a modern law enforcement agency focused on quality care in custody, compassionate community engagement and community policing⁷⁵.


⁷⁵ Hampden County Sheriff’s Department Facebook November 9, 2021: https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064529656460
Sheriffs in Western Massachusetts made interventions into the broader community, through policing interventions and through programs like TRIAD. TRIAD is an initiative created by the American Association of Retired Persons, International Association of Chiefs of Police and the National Sheriffs’ Association, in which local sheriffs or other law enforcement officers partner with older adults, and organizations that work with seniors to “reduce crime against older adults and to reduce the fear of crime older adults often experience.” In Hampden County, TRIAD program activities involve things like bringing buckets of sand to the houses of senior citizens to help in the winter with icy driveways and sidewalks, and operating a hotline to help seniors sign up for Covid-19 vaccine appointments. Outreach oriented toward youth included shopping for back-school-supplies and hosting basketball tournaments. These acts of care bring sheriff’s deputies into closer and more regular contact with community members, expanding the carceral care of the progressive jail beyond the jail itself. For the community members who show up to events and who like and respond encouragingly to social media posts, these interventions respond to concrete needs. The sheriff’s office has stepped in where other state agencies previously took on these roles.

Carceral care in comparison

Ethnographers have explored the theme of care in contexts that are analogous to the carceral care of progressive jailing. These have included: the potentially re-traumatizing care enacted by forensic nurses at the intersection of legal and medical systems in response to rape and sexual assault (Mulla 2014), the use of violence by evangelical congregations as a form of care for addressing drug addiction in Mexico (Garcia 2015), and care as a form of “armed love” exercised by the French state towards asylum seekers (Ticktin 2011). In The Violence of Care, Mulla (2014) explores several themes that are relevant to carceral care. One is the complexity of intentions. As Mulla argues:

76 “About Triad” National Sheriffs’ Association: https://www.sheriffs.org/programs/about-triad
… the particular form of care that emerges from the interaction of legal and therapeutic practices imposes a particular violence on victims of sexual assault. This violence is not born from the intentions of individual forensic nurses who consciously set out to alienate the victim-patient with whom they are working, but rather from the particular institutional, professional, and historical location of forensic sexual assault intervention (Mulla 2014: 217).

Forensic nurses provide care for their patients, with the intention of addressing both their medical needs, and legal desires as survivors of sexual assault to have their assault documented. Regardless of their intentions, many patients experience this care as an alienating and violent experience in itself. The nurses Mulla worked with did not express an intention to inflict further harm on their patients, but these encounters were nonetheless experienced by patients as such. As Mulla argues, the violence patients experience through medical care, is not a reflection of the nurses intentions, but of the converging interests of the medical and legal fields.

Angela Garcia’s 2015 article “Serenity: Violence, Inequality, and Recovery on the Edge of Mexico City,” documents care practices within anexos of Mexico City, a “hybrid institution composed of parts 12-step program, mental asylum, prison, and church” (Garcia 2015). Within the anexo that Garcia describes, violence is part of care. Violence has therapeutic value. The anexos’ practices parallel those of local, Catholic religious observations that re-enact the suffering and passion of Christ, as well as the violence of the drug war and the methods of cartels in ways that participants describe as deeply impactful and transformative. Family members pay anexos to take their loved ones and to use coercion, deprivation and even physical abuse to help them desist from using drugs. They view anexos as saving their loved ones from the possibility of death by overdose or as a victim of state or gang violence. This coercive mode of care physically isolates the individuals who are put through anexos - but it also brings them into long-lasting relationships of community, as some graduates of these programs and their family members have taken on roles as staff and opened new facilities themselves. In the context of the Hampden County Sheriff’s Department and the use of “involuntary civil commitments,” some families, as well as currently and formerly incarcerated people, expressed a similar gratitude for the “tough love” of the sheriff – crediting incarceration as saving their lives. Comparable to the anexos, the care enacted by the sheriff’s office created a community of some long-lasting relationships, in which formerly incarcerated individuals
return to the jail to mentor and encourage currently incarcerated individuals, working as both staff and in volunteer positions.

In *Casualties of Care* (2011), Miriam Ticktin explores what she describes as “regimes of care”—diverse sets of actors, discourses and practices that converge around the “moral imperative to relieve suffering.” These regimes include movements for human rights, NGOs, legal regimes, corporations, militaries and governments. She focuses on the experience of undocumented immigrants in France and the pressures they face from the state to claim “victim-hood” in order to have a more sympathetic asylum claim. Ticktin argues that these regimes that seek to aid survivors of violence simultaneously “displace possibilities for larger forms of collective change, particularly for those most disenfranchised” (Ticktin 2011: 3). Immigrants are seen as victims of racialized and gendered violence, not as equals to citizens, or as individuals with their own agency and desires. The care that is shown towards them reduces them from being political actors. But any failure on their part to perform victim-hood also makes them less sympathetic and less likely to receive any political recognition.

Currently and formerly-incarcerated individuals in progressive jails expressed similar frustration at being required to participate in programs such as addiction treatment, despite not having an addiction. They described how jail administrators saw their refusal to take part in recovery programming as evidence of the inmates’ refusal to acknowledge their addiction. The jail takes away the physical freedom of incarcerated people, while also undermining the ability of incarcerated people to define themselves and their needs. Carceral care requires that they must also demonstrate a willingness to be ‘cured’ by the treatment programs. For Izzy and Messiah, the experience of being forced into addiction programs and never-ending resume writing workshops made incarceration worse, wearing down their motivation and taking up time they could have put towards other projects and goals for self-improvement. Other people that I met while volunteering within progressive jails expressed a desire to be incarcerated somewhere with less intensive programming – where they could do their time on their own terms. The assemblage of care they were subject to during and after incarceration denied them the power to define their own needs and undermined their sense of self, running them through a battery of risk and needs assessments, and
assigning them an itinerary of required programs that encouraged particular narratives of recovery. At the same time, some incarcerated individuals and their families were grateful for the support and resources they received through progressive jails which they may not have otherwise been able to access, echoing what Martin (2021) found among residents of halfway houses.

In contrast to the punitive and incapacitation-focused policies of mass incarceration, Martin sees the carceral care of halfway houses as a potentially transformative intervention. Martin describes halfway houses as “an opening to provide material support to people in desperate situations and introduce ideals of care into a brutal carceral system” (Martin 2021: 209). Counter to Martin’s analysis, I argue that, within the specific history of incarceration in New England, care has always been, and continues to be, a dominant justification for incarceration. Various forms of care have been used to justify locking people up since the beginning of European settler colonization – to promote the civilization of racialized others, or the spiritual salvation of wayward community members. The brutal, carceral system of mass incarceration that Martin describes was built through an assemblage of caring actors, impulses and institutions. The reform efforts that have produced halfway houses and other projects of support and rehabilitation are part of, and not a new challenge to, this legacy. The progressive jail assemblage is filling the gaps that were left by a retreating welfare state under neoliberalism.

Schept (2022) uses the framework of “carceral social reproduction” to situate the construction of federal and state prisons within a larger history and context of extractive and waste industries in Appalachia. Local politicians and business leaders promoted prisons as a replacement for the waning coal industry, promising economic revitalization, but effectively keeping Appalachian towns in a continuous role of political and economic exploitation for regional and global networks. Prisons have helped to sustain and reproduce rural communities, but in ways that maintain their classed and racialized other-ness. In Western Massachusetts, the “carceral social reproduction” of county jails is premised less on exploited labor, and more on the enrollment of incarcerated people as objects of intervention for various caring disciplines. Sheriffs and other jail administrators have created mutually beneficial relationships with partners in the healthcare, educational, social service and various other non-profit industries.
In the next section, I analyze how community organizers discussed care within decarceral and abolitionist frameworks. Though their visions of care are proposed in contrast to the care exercised in New England jailing, I also discuss where they overlap, and where activists and organizers have been recruited into the reproduction of jailing as care.

Community and Collective Care

During my fieldwork, abolitionist organizers framed their protests and mutual aid interventions as rooted in visions of care. Whether in the form of enacting direct support between neighbors, or demanding the creation of alternatives to police, activists presented “care” as an alternative to coercive state interventions, using phrases like “care not cops,” “collective care,” and “community care.”

Demanding Care

In 2020 in Northampton, Massachusetts - as in cities around the world – thousands of people took to the streets to protests the police killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police. Initial protests in Northampton, as in Springfield and Greenfield, were called for and led by high school students. Protests grew as new activists joined more experienced organizers in loose coalitions like Defund 413 and Stay Woke, Stay Active. In Northampton, community members joined zoom city council meetings to express critiques of local policing and demand the defunding of the Northampton Police Department. After months of protests the city council announced the formation of a Northampton Policing Review Commission and agreed to decrease the city police funding by 10% (to $882,602 for 2021). Community members, including activists from the emergent organization Northampton Abolition Now campaigned to move these funds away from the city’s police department and into alternative crisis responses through the
creation of a new Department of Community Care, which the Northampton Policing Review Commission supported, and to which the city ultimately agreed.

Northampton Department of Community Care
Job Listing: Director
“The 2020 killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Rayshard Brooks sparked national protest, once again exposing historic inequities and systemic racism in policing and our society at large in the United States,” the job listing reads. “Propelled by these tragic events nationally and their connection to 400 years of racial injustice, hundreds of Northampton residents called upon their elected leaders to rethink the city’s approach to policing. The director would build out the department’s staff, develop policies and plan the scope of services, relying on the Policing Review Commission’s March 2021 report “Reimagining Safety.” That report described ways the new department could take over some of the responsibilities of police officers by sending unarmed peer responders to threats of suicide, suspicious person calls and other non-violent or non-criminal matters.”

During and before my fieldwork, I organized with many of the community members who drove the creation of this new department, from the abolitionists who coordinated mass protests to demand defunding from the Northampton Police department, to members of the Policing Review Commission. My organizing work also overlapped with Sean Donovan, an abolitionist who was hired as the “implementation director” for the new department. Donovan brought experience doing harm reduction work and organizing against incarceration as a project coordinator with the Wildflower Alliance, a peer-support organization in which people with lived experiences of psychiatric diagnoses, incarceration, homelessness, substance-use operate drop-in spaces, visit community members in locked psychiatric facilities, and run programs of mutual aid.

In this context, activists presented divestment from policing as an opportunity to re-invest in “community care.” Rather than sending police officers who might escalate a crisis, and/or initiate a process of incarceration, the Department of Community Care could send trained, peer responders to help assist people in crisis or de-escalate potential conflicts. Care is presented in opposition to the criminal justice apparatus.

https://www.gazettenet.com/Northampton-seeks-implementation-director-for-new-Department-of-Community-Care-41844397
In the following section of the Autumn 2021 *Decarcerate Western Mass* newsletter, Haley Fortin writes against the “care” that Cocchi and other sheriffs in Western Mass claim to be committed to:

“Countering Propaganda”

One of the most frustrating aspects about the Connecticut River Valley and liberalism in general is the persistent myth that the carceral state is less violent in liberal areas. Most notably, police and sheriff’s departments in Western Massachusetts constantly create and propagate the fictitious narrative that carceral violence does not occur here because jails are focused on “treatment” for substance use or mental health. In this way, much of our work in Decarcerate Western MA has focused on countering propaganda from local police and sheriff’s departments. To elaborate, the Hampden County Sheriff’s Department (HCSD) and Sheriff Nick Cocchi uphold the narrative that incarceration may be brutal in other, more conservative parts of the country but here in Western MA the prison system is far more humane with a focus on mental health and substance healing. This is evidenced by this recent post from the Hampden County Sheriff’s Department, declaring that HCSD had “helped” thousands of people with substance use. In reality, the HCSD causes immeasurable harm to families and communities by breaking them up and putting people in cages. Putting someone in a cage, away from their family, community, and potential support systems will not help with substance use in any way, shape, or form. It does the exact opposite. In fact, the trauma of incarceration is directly related to substance use. Furthermore, drug users are human beings who deserve compassion, housing, food, and safety. Instead of trying to ensure sobriety, we must tackle the systems of why many people need to get high: poverty caused by capitalism, the stress and trauma of being a marginalized person, and/or the trauma of incarceration or having a loved one be incarcerated. Zoë Dodd and Alexander McClelland expand on the problems with idealizing sobriety in their piece, “The Revolution Will Not be Sober: the problem with notions of ‘radical sobriety’ & ‘intoxication culture.’” Moreover, by highlighting prisons, jails, and incarceration as some sort of treatment for drug use, the HCSD position themselves and the carceral state as justifying carceral violence by providing “care” to incarcerated people. In countering this narrative, Decarcerate Western Mass understands how the lens of “care” can be a lens of violence. Care is the opposite of incarceration. Care is not coercive. Care requires community support, rather than capitalist individualism. Disabled people and disability justice activists have long been creating pathways for community care rooted in compassion, justice, and collective liberation. Writer and disability/ transformative justice worker Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha discusses the radical potential of care in her book *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*. In addition to the HCSD’s insistence that they provide healing for substance use, Sheriff Cocchi tries to position them as a pillar of mental health support and awareness. In an almost comical post, the HCSD boasts of having a therapy dog. This type of feel-good pro-police propaganda has a far more sinister purpose of obscuring the fact that incarceration is inherently traumatic. Our incarcerated comrades are frequently subject to all types of degrading abuse and torture. Solitary confinement is one of the worst forms of psychological torture that has devastating impacts on mental health. Therefore, no matter how many therapy dogs the HCSD has, prisons are diametrically opposed to mental health and healing. Decarcerate Western MA’s social media presence has focused in part on responding to these carceral lies from Sheriff Cocchi and the HCSD. Above all, our response is rooted in the rejection of liberal reforms to prisons and police. Our social media responses underscore the notion that therapy dogs, substance counselors, or “progressive” faces do not lessen the violence of incarceration. We must continue to hold uncompromising abolitionist principles when facing the HCSD propaganda.”
In this passage, Fortin rejects the sheriff’s department’s vision of itself as a care provider. To Fortin, “care is the opposite of incarceration,” it requires “community support, rather than capitalist individualism.” This commitment was expressed within Decarcerate Western Mass and other abolitionist organizing spaces.

**Mutual Aid**

Among activists, “community” and “collective” care took the form of small but regular practices like: opening go-around, “check-in” questions at the beginning of every meeting, one-on-one walks and phone calls, sharing food and rides to meetings and events, and concern for making physical and virtual organizing spaces more accessible for more people. Care was extended between activists on the outside and inside through letters and phone calls, and towards family members of incarcerated comrades. In "Captivity, Kinship, and Black Masculine Care Work under Domestic Warfare” (2021), Orisanmi Burton describes similar, “reciprocal relationships and care and community” between Black men, including letter writing relationships and prison yard “healing circles” (Burton 2021: 8). Hwang describes the “deviant care” enacted by trans prisoners in California, who create networks of support, acquire and create contraband gender-affirming supplies, and encourage each other in making demands on the prison system. As Hwang argues, this mode of care differs from the individualizing care of the progressive jail: practices of relationality inhabit a radical deviance and a deviant relationship to care, whereby the social categorization and interpellation of a singular self-subject is queered, made less discreet and less “self-evident.” Such deviations allow us to further disorganize the inevitability of those who become passive and self-evidencing objects of carceral care (Hwang 2019: 564).

This emphasis on relationality, and a desire to dissolve distinctions between those who give and receive care was present in abolitionist organizing in Western Massachusetts as well. In response to the pandemic, more activists began using the concept of “mutual aid,” drawing on long legacies within social movements as well as marginalized ethnic and queer communities. This concept was used within abolitionist movements to describe acts of material support like donations to bail funds and commissary
funds. Dean Spade, one of the key scholar-activists whose work abolitionists in Western Massachusetts and elsewhere cited during the time of my fieldwork, defined mutual aid as “collective coordination to meet each other’s needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them” (Spade 2021: 7) According to Dean Spade, there are three key elements that distinguish mutual aid projects:

1) “Mutual aid projects work to meet survival needs and build shared understanding about why people do not have what they need” (Spade 2020: 9)
2) “Mutual aid projects mobilize people, expand solidarity, and build movements (Spade 2020: 12)
3) “Mutual aid projects are participatory, solving problems through collective action rather than waiting for saviors” (Spade 2020: 16).

In Western Massachusetts, networks of community members coordinated grocery deliveries and distribution of personal protective equipment over online platforms like Slack, Zoom and Google Sheets. Groups like Decarcerate Western Mass, the Trans Asylum Seekers Support Network, Touch The Sky/Pioneer Valley Housing Now, and Western Massachusetts Community Mutual Aid circulated requests for mutual aid via the social media application Instagram. Volunteers within these networks helped create calls for support and amplify them and to re-distribute donations. Below are examples of mutual aid requests posted on Instagram by Decarcerate Western Mass (left) and Western Massachusetts Community Mutual Aid (right two):
While progressive jail interventions emphasized self-reliance, mutual aid requests emphasized community responsibility. In some cases, mutual aid requests named the person receiving support, in others the identities of individuals or families were kept private, but in most cases they included terms like “our friend,” a “community member,” or the city where they live to emphasize their belonging to the community. Groups would post updates on whether fundraising goals were met or not. Even in the case of successful fundraising efforts, the same individuals’ names would re-appear within weeks or months as their needs persisted or new challenges arose. These mutual aid efforts made visible the kinds of challenges community members faced with health, housing, employment and more, as well as the scale of these problems. They also demonstrated material ways that other community members could help to meet these needs and alleviate some of the challenges their neighbors were facing, even if only temporarily.
In 2021, Sylvan Bachbauer, a Hampshire College student who had taken Grassroots Community Organizing, and also done some organizing with Decarcerate Western Mass, wrote an undergraduate student thesis (called a “Division III”) entitled “Our Magic is Beyond Survival Reflections Care, Community, and Capitalism in a Time of Crisis.” In it, she interviewed myself and Aya, another organizer with Decarcerate Western Mass as well as Catherine, a staff member from Safe Passage, an emergency shelter for survivors of domestic violence. In the quotes from conversations with Aya and with Catherine below, each discuss their visions of community care and mutual aid in the context of Covid-19 but also within abolition work more generally.

_Sylvan:_ How has your conception of community care changed during the pandemic?

_Aya (Decarcerate Western Mass):_ My dreams of community care have changed during the pandemic. I feel like I've been imagining a lot of what is possible. I know a lot is possible during the pandemic and we've shown up in in beautiful ways, but I think a lot of my energy is about dreaming into what community care could look like, or actually needs to look like in order for abolition to work. Alexis Pauline Gumbs wrote this beautiful essay called freedom seeds and it uses the metaphor of a garden as the after care beyond abolition. I [spend so much time] thinking and imagining what we need to make this actually work. I’m really excited by that and also like excited the inevitable messy spontaneity of it, because if it's based on listening to each other then it's never going to be fully planned out or from one perspective. It's going to need to be the merging of many perspectives and many needs. There's this loose scaffolding, and then community care, I think, is going to blow our minds beyond the pandemic.

_Catherine (of Safe Passage):_ In response to community care and systems of care: the word really is empowerment. We’re talking about relational power dynamics and power—who has it who doesn't have it, who uses it, and how they use it. In domestic violence work, we don't give someone power, sometimes we would use our power on their behalf by advocating for them, etc. For somebody who's been stripped of their sense of personal power, that has to be restored. How do you restore your own sense of power? I think that's really still useful paradigm for understanding community care and communities. When you're talking about caring for others, you have to talk about power because caring for others can be dominating and disempowering and it can also be supportive and empowering. As an advocate or community member involved in community care, you could hold power over them and disempower them and threaten them in your effort to help. Or you can join with them and share power and try to determine how to empower them. Whether it's a provider or a neighbor or a family member or a friend or a system or an organization, we have to talk about power dynamics and how we use power.

In Aya’s response, community care is described in terms of dreaming and imagining and listening and “messy spontaneity.” It is the “merging of many perspectives and many needs.” Community care is what
emerges from listening, like a garden in fruits in ways we can’t even anticipate. Catherine’s response in contrast, is focused on relations of power. Catherine blends the type of empowerment discourse that Cruikshank (1999) has analyzed as encouraging neoliberal governmentality, with a critique of advocates or community members who hold “power over” and “disempower others,” and a call to join and share power. Both responses are critical of the domination that is characteristic of the carceral state, of the disempowerment and imposition of a single perspective. While Catherine wants us to “talk about power dynamics and how we use power,” Aya encourages us to imagine care that is contingent and determined in an ongoing and collective way. While they seek to replace prisons, jails and police with community care, they also under-appreciate the adaptability of the progressive jail assemblage, and the ways in which listening and empowerment are also tools of carceral care.

Tensions and Overlaps

In this context, both abolitionists and sheriffs claimed care as central to their work. This shared emphasis on care places them within a shared terrain of struggle - over what care means, and what the purpose of care is, and how it should be provided. But it also creates the possibility of collaboration. Despite their intentions otherwise, abolitionists working to support incarcerated organizers run a risk of contributing to the progressive jail assemblage, aiding the sheriffs and other actors within the assemblage who are committed to expanding the carceral system’s reach and capacity. While abolitionists like those in Decarcerate Western Mass sought to oppose the sheriffs, sheriffs were very willing to collaborate with projects that helped support their progressive image and/or expand the resources at their disposal.

In some cases, collaborations between abolitionists and sheriffs have been the result of intentional compromises by individual abolitionists or campaigns. Other convergences have been unintentional. Members of abolitionist organizations working to ensure that eligible incarcerated people had access to voting were obligated to work with sheriff’s department employees, in order to get voter registration and ballot request forms to incarcerated people. Victories hard-won by community organizers were later
claimed by sheriff’s departments as evidence of their progressive commitments, such as the fight for voting rights or for greater access to medical care. In the example from Khalil, outreach efforts by formerly incarcerated mentors were being surreptitiously monitored for use by police.

Thinking about the progressive jail as an assemblage helps us to understand how so many actors and ideas become incorporated into its work. Lancione (2014) uses the concept of “assemblages of care” to describe the city of Turin’s various approaches towards homelessness and the ways they shape the experience of being homeless. Tsing uses the concept of assemblage to describe how various actors can become unintentional collaborators (Tsing 2016). The concept of assemblage is useful for describing how the progressive jail can incorporate even those who oppose its existence, but who nonetheless are engaged in care towards incarcerated people, and to help ameliorate harmful and oppressive conditions people face within the jails. Researchers considering the long legacy of prison reform have analyzed how they incorporate new ideas and technologies. Martin (2021) writing about half-way houses in Massachusetts describes how shifts towards more of these kinds of “alternatives” to prison represent an extension and re-tooling of carceral logics, rather than any kind of radical break:

At some level, any transfer of people from prisons to halfway houses is not really decarceration at all, but a movement from one kind of incarceration to another, a shift in styles of social control. More broadly, what passes for reentry reform in the United States involves little more than expanding carceral surveillance in ghettos and barrios that are already subject to violent, militarized policing and historically high rates of imprisonment (Martin 2021: 201).

As Martin points out, however punitive these other kinds of incarceration are, they are also providing desperately needed support, and support that is in high demand. In their defense, Martin argues that demands for more care, can create more pressure on carceral systems to address the needs of formerly incarcerated individuals and reverse the tendency towards “incapacitation” that has been central to much of the penological theory and practice in the United States from the late 1970s to the early 2000s. In the absence of larger structural change to welfare policies and non-carceral alternatives, care-oriented reforms can result in programs and opportunities that save some lives.
A fundamental problem with progressive reforms however, even those based in care, is their tendency to reinforce individualizing blame for what are structural, collective problems. Recurring calls for more care continue to center the rehabilitation of individuals, rather than the social dynamics in which harm takes place. This myopic focus on the reform of individuals exists among progressive and conservative reformers alike. While conservatives may demand more severe punishment of people who have done harm, the progressive call for more rehabilitation - through more workshops for employability, more college classes, more addiction treatment – also locate individuals as the site of intervention. Neither focus draws attention to the ongoing social dynamics within which harm takes place or prioritizes working to change those. Neither individualizing approach allocates more resources for communities to address the causes of violence and conditions within which harm occurs - from inadequate support for mental and behavioral health, to the absence of resources for conflict mediation, to the stresses of poverty and exploitation. Some of these resources are available through the progressive jail, but only after someone has been tried, convicted and sentenced. Moving resources that are currently allocated to incarceration towards transforming conditions that lead to harm would undermine the power of sheriffs and of the larger carceral and caring assemblage. Using the framework of mutual aid, abolitionists have sought to make care more relational, but as the examples of the Instagram calls for mutual aid illustrate, they can also, though not exclusively, take the form of individualizing appeals to aid particular community members or families.

The focus on care within carceral contexts allows sheriffs and those in assemblage with sheriffs to reform the jail without shifting power from themselves. Sheriffs’ embrace of the concept of care makes some demands of community organizers more likely to be supported than others. This presents a risk for community organizers working towards decarceration, that sheriffs can incorporate the work of organizers, increasing their own power to incarcerate, through expanded budgets and through policies that allow for new types of incarceration. This orientation to incarceration is not new, it has been present throughout the history of incarceration. As historian Jen Manion describes with regard to the introduction of the modern penitentiary system:
Punishment in the early national penitentiary was a generous gift of benevolent statesmen who could have resorted to more barbaric practices if they wished, but they did not. Rather, the founding generation are culpable for the expansion and misuse of the carceral state in the present because they designed and celebrated a system alleged to be more gentle, fair, and humane. This justified its expansive reach and alleviated whatever lingering concerns others might have about this great show of force. The penitentiary made the systemic manipulation of individuals, the classification and assessment of difference, and the restriction of one’s life chances based on these differences seem both natural and neutral – a legacy with profoundly devastating consequences for American justice (Manion 2015: 196).

The institutions of the jail and the sheriff’s department have, so far, withstood or absorbed most organizing efforts. Given their institutional longevity and political influence, sheriffs’ departments are able to re-frame hard-won organizing victories as evidence of their own commitment to reform, whether they initially opposed those reforms or not. By contrast, the longevity of community organizations is far shorter, and their access to public platforms has to be won constantly, so organizers remain at a disadvantage in their ability to remind the larger community of what past community members have fought for and won.

As ethnographers have noted in other contexts, these conflicts are productive, often generating new forms of incarceration at the same time as they produce new configurations of resistance. Documenting the provision of “legal care” to migrant families within detention centers in the United States, Routon describes tensions between legal advocates and detention center administrators. Routon draws on Tsing’s concept of “friction” to describe how their opposing views of care interact, producing conflicts as well as “new arrangements of culture and power” (Routon 2021: 315):

the friction itself results from the existence of legal advocates, as caregivers, in these spaces. It is precisely both their active contestation of what administrators implicitly or explicitly define as care and their attention to the diverse needs of their clients that cause frictions. While administrative authorities repeatedly deploy putative care in ways that reinforce oppressive orders (Ticktin 2011), legal advocates redraw the borders of care through practice to resist. Power is effectively asserted and contested through care. (Routon 2021: 332).

Routon notes how frictions exist between legal advocates and detention center administrators, but also within legal advocates’ competing goals. Providing legal care compromises their ability to work towards ending the practice of detention, as legal advocates, through their care work helps these facilities to operate:
While trying to effect the collapse of the facility’s operation, drawing attention to the ways in which these forms of incarceration should not exist, advocates’ everyday work involves managing the very mechanisms of the operation. This in itself creates a form of friction, as one goal, ending family detention, grates against another, providing daily legal care to as many detainees as possible. (Routon 2021: 333).

In relation to progressive jailing, the contestation between abolitionists and sheriffs over what counts as care have generated similar frictions, but sheriffs have proven especially adept at using the discursive framework of care and assemblage-like mode of progressive jailing to incorporate activist challenges.

**Conclusion**

Abolitionists who oppose the growing reach of the progressive jail are forced to confront not only the cruelty that jails impose, but also the care that is enacted through them. Debating whether sheriffs truly care about the people they incarcerate, avoids interrogating larger questions of how and why it is that sheriffs and jails have taken on the responsibility of implementing care-oriented programming in the first place. Within the context of the progressive jail, demanding more care from the state is likely to reinforce the power sheriffs hold rather than undermine it. To organize towards decarceration, and abolition, requires more than an insistence on care, it requires shifting power to those who are the objects of that care, supporting their agency and subjecthood and that of the people in their communities, including people who have been harmed. In the overlap between carceral care and community-based care, the people who receive that care often become objects of intervention, though of varying ideological commitments. They are the subjects of mutual aid posts on social media, though not part of the organizing meetings. They may be the reformed addict who becomes a peer mentor, but are not likely to become part of the jail administration. Their analyses and directly-informed perspectives are often excluded from debate and decision-making, usually through indirect means – barriers to higher education, unstable employment and housing, lack of steady access to the internet. Even for community-based care initiatives, forms of care that fail to address power inequalities risk imposing their own paternalistic interventions.
that re-inscribe currently and formerly incarcerated individuals as objects of care, rather than as protagonists in their own struggles, or as collaborators in collective action.

Proponents of the framework of mutual aid, which became especially prevalent among responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, distinguish it from charity in that it is intended to build relationships and build power towards ending the conditions in which aid is needed. If mutual aid projects shift decision-making power and the power to call for and lead organizing - from those who have no history or experience of incarceration to those who do - then they are working towards radical social change. If they provide care - without addressing the reasons why communities are occupied by police, why members of those communities are incarcerated at far higher rates, and how those communities are made unable to meet their own needs - then they are further entrenching the carceral system, albeit in its more progressive form.

Published by Verso in 2020, amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, a collection of essays titled “The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence” offers “a radical vision demanding we put care at the very heart of our lives and politics,” in opposition to the seeming abandonment of care on behalf of national governments pushing people to return to work despite the risk of illness and death. The Care Manifesto picks up on a thread of political and ethical arguments for centering care which the political scientist Joan Tronto has been a key thinker. Joan Tronto and her collaborator Berenice Fisher define care as “a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we may live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (Tronto 2015: 3). For abolitionists, fighting against the progressive jail assemblage has meant being against care, or at least the carceral care enacted through the jail.

As this chapter demonstrates, care is already – and has been - at the center of carceral politics in progressive contexts like Western Massachusetts. The growing number of activists demanding that the state center “care” should consider the example of the progressive jail, that care is compatible with violence and dehumanization, that care need not be synonymous with safety or healing, and that care can
has long been an effective tool for reinforcing structural inequality and oppression. If care is the means to “maintain, continue and repair our world,” then envisioning a world without prisons and jails requires rejecting the forms of care that sustain the world as it exists. In the next chapter I expand more on how abolitionists have struggled with these tensions within care, and the attempts they have made to find more liberatory ways of being in struggle together.
CHAPTER 8

COLLABORATIONS: HARM REDUCTION, MUTUAL AID, AND CATEGORICAL ABOLITION

This chapter draws on the scholarship of Black feminist theorists Christina Sharpe and Denise Ferreira da Silva and their theorization of wake work (Sharpe 2016) and Black Feminist poethics (2014) to think through two concepts – harm reduction and mutual aid. These have been used by abolitionists to describe modes of care, through which activists seek to address inequalities in power, and which have the potential to address some of the issues formerly incarcerated organizers raised. I close by considering the conceptual abolition work necessary to imagine a world without the carceral abuse or care of prisons, jail, and police. As I explored in the previous chapters, abolitionists in Western Massachusetts confronting progressive incarceration are forced to contend with both the confrontations and convergences between their efforts to end the use of prisons and jails, and sheriffs and their allies' efforts to expand these institutions’ reach.

Like sheriffs, the social workers, therapists, and medical staff who work within jails, prisoner rights advocates and community organizers that work against the progressive jail assemblage can provide care in ways alienate themselves from their clients, the people they fight for, and the communities in which they organize. If some members of the community are perpetually on the receiving end of care and others are always in the position of giving it, if some members of the community are always the ones making decisions about care provision, and others are never part of those coordinating conversations, then inequalities in power can become re-instantiated in ways that begin to resemble the care provided through the progressive jail assemblage. Out of concern for over-burdening recently-released prisoners, activists from various iterations of the bail fund hesitated to actively recruit people returning from jail to participate in organizing meetings. When formerly incarcerated community members were reached out to, the many challenges they faced in re-starting their lives after incarceration made participation difficult.
As organizers, we sought to make meetings more accessible to address this, offering to help connect people to organizing meetings over the phone – which felt especially easy since they were happening remotely already - and doing outreach through flyers, social media, and word of mouth to let formerly incarcerated people know how they could get involved. However, the unfamiliarity of the zoom conference format and unpredictability of the lives of formerly incarcerated people and their families still made it hard for them to take part, as several people stated after coming to one or two meetings, or to explain why they couldn’t come intermittently.

In the Decarcerate Western Mass Outreach + Accountability committee, we sought to create mechanisms for bringing in the participation and perspectives of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people, but we did not radically reimagine how organizing might take place in order to involve people who may have been interested but faced barriers to involvement. This was not out of a lack of interest, but a result of capacity limits, logistical challenges with geographical distances, Covid and the limitation that New England winters place an outside meetings, and likely, an inability on our parts to imagine how to organize outside of the models in which we were familiar. Don Perry saw himself as working against the exclusion of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people from reform work, drawing on his own experiences and frustrations. According to Don, organizations trying to reform prisons and jails need to do the following:

… first of all respecting these people as human beings, right? Treating them like human beings. And including them in their, in their efforts. Not just, I'm just gonna come in and fix you, and that's what you, we mentioned earlier about, about having, one of the things you learn about the necessity of including people. And a lot of this so-called reform stuff. And the reason why that's important is because people oftentimes impose their own beliefs and values without, I mean, you know, I mean, or they sell out, they just ultimately sell out, they get a little status, you know what I mean, and they feel like they're powerful, and then they're gonna tell you what you need to do, or how you need to fix your, your life and wait - you don't even know me!

… I mean I went through all that. I've been fighting. One of my main fights is that people that have situated themselves in positions of being community leaders, community advocates, all this kind of stuff like that. They've created little niches, little fiefdoms, right? And they don't want anyone coming in that's gonna rock that boat, right? But that's what I do. I rock boats. You know what I'm saying? That's what I do.
My objective is to get more community involved, community grounded – this is about the narrative, right? This is about going to the communities, right? And hearing what their concerns are, right? Rather than, typically the people in the spokesman role, doing advocacy work, they come into community, they have agendas. The only the only agenda I have is to come in and give people voice to what their concerns are and, and for them, for us to have a conversation about what they think is the best strategies to start addressing these issues.

This is an opportune moment man, to start getting to more strategically and effectively address a lot more criminal justice reform right, but we got to get the communities involved, because other people can no longer speak for us, man we need to speak for ourselves.

Messiah Allah made a similar case in my interview with him, not just for the ethical importance of including people who are directly impacted by incarceration, but with the reasoning that their perspectives would lead to better-informed activism:

Prison reform is a bottom up type of thing, you know like grassroots. From the lowest to the top, those that are the lowest are the individuals that are incarcerated, who have the best experience, as it relates to what’s needed, you feel what I’m saying? In the lives of those who have been incarcerated or those who are currently incarcerated, get me?

When you have these talks you need to speak to the people that’s most affected, that’s the people that’s still in jail. Those are the people that’s in prison.

The exclusion of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people from decision-making reform movements that Don and Messiah speak out against is an exclusion that replicates the deeply unequal power dynamics of the prisons and jails they are confronting. This is true even when that exclusion is unintentional, or- as abolitionists experienced it in my field site – as a recognized, but enduring challenge. Many organizers are trying to structure leadership and participation in inclusive ways, while also attempting to address the larger systemic inequalities that have made engagement harder for the people most directly-impacted by incarceration. And yet these inequalities persist, and in some cases converge with progressive jail assemblage, as activists are recruited into collaboration.

These efforts to address the barriers to decision-making power for currently and formerly incarcerated people are reflected in the focus on voting rights among the incarcerated organizers who called for the
2018 Nationwide Prison Strike, the 2019 Mass POWER campaign, the Election Protection Behind Bars campaign in 2020 and the organizing by the Democracy Behind Bars Coalition to pass jail-based voting rights legislation in 2021 to 2022. In their announcement in June 2022 of the successful passing of legislation to ensure access to voting in jail, an incarcerated organizer with the African American Coalition Committee in MCI-Norfolk described their efforts:

We in the AACC have been fighting for our political rights and the political power of all people impacted by incarceration from behind the wall,” says Al-Ameen Patterson, Chair of the AACC and co-chair of the DBBC, “And today, this is our win.”

Abolitionist Experiments: Harm Reduction, Mutual Aid, Decarceration

Activists use the term “harm reduction” to describe projects that seek to minimize the risks faced by marginalized populations, without stigmatizing them or trying to impose behavioral changes on them. Mariam Kaba and Shira Hassan in their Fumbling Towards Repair: A workbook for community accountability facilitators (2019) define harm reduction as:

... a philosophy of living, surviving, and resisting oppression and violence that centers self-determination and non-condemning access to an array of options.

Harm reduction is a set of practices that has been gifted to us by Queer and Transgender people of color, drug users, people in the sex trade and survivors of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Harm reduction is not a public health intervention or a social work intervention, even though it has been used effectively in those fields (Kaba and Hassan 2019: 7).

Andrew Dilts in Punishment and Inclusion (2014) discusses what is at stake in the right to vote, and in its denial: Our right to vote derives a considerable part of its value because of our refusal to let some persons vote. Moreover, it has been a powerful tool in the production and maintenance of white supremacy as a political system in the United States for nearly two centuries. Its ability to do this is directly linked to its role in the work of race-making, of policing the boundaries not simply of the polity but of the normatively white polity and of whiteness itself. In short, we must confront the fact that it does work for us and that this work may be deeply pernicious (the establishment and maintenance of white supremacy) as well as subtle (marking voting as a praiseworthy action of moral superiority) (Dilts 2014: 202)
Harm reduction projects include actions like: providing new syringes for intravenous drug use, kits to test drug quality, or safe locations for drug use, supporting sex workers by providing STI screening and contraceptives, safe locations for conducting sex work, etc. One “harm reduction” activity that groups supporting incarcerated people engage in is bailing people out. In most places, people who have been accused of a crime have the possibility of being assigned a “bail,” an amount of money that they must deposit with a court so they can be released until their case is resolved.

The statewide, *Massachusetts Bail Fund (MBF)* and locally-affiliated Decarcerate Western Mass Bailout Project (which was preceded by the Western Mass Prison Abolition Network) coordinated with public defenders, and the family members of incarcerated individuals to pay bail for those who cannot afford to pay their bail. Once someone is referred to the fund and a bail amount is confirmed, a volunteer brings money from the fund to a jail or courthouse to post that person’s bail which is then returned by the courts to the fund once that person’s case is closed. Volunteers often drive people home or to a homeless shelter from jail and may offer backpacks with resources like socks and underwear, snacks, first aid, resource lists and gift cards for people leaving jail.

From the Massachusetts Bail Fund website\(^{79}\):

“The Massachusetts Bail Fund pays up to $500 bail so that low-income people can stay free while they work towards resolving their case, allowing individuals, families, and communities to stay productive, together, and stable. The Massachusetts Bail Fund is committed to the harm reduction of freeing individuals serving pre-trial sentences, and to abolishing pre-trial detention and supervision in the long-term.”

Two other projects that engaged in harm reduction work supporting incarcerated people during my fieldwork were Great Falls Books Through Bars and Black & Pink. Each of these provided different kinds of support but with a shared commitment to both abolition and centering the interests and desires or incarcerated people.

\(^{79}\)“About the Massachusetts Bail Fund”: https://www.massbailfund.org/about.html
Great Falls Books Through Bars is a project based in Franklin County, Massachusetts that I helped to start up and organized with for five years. The organization sends free books and reading material to people who are incarcerated in prisons and jails around the country. The group also hosts public film screenings and discussions on topics related to incarceration, policing, and activism. As the Great Falls Books Through Bars website describes:

We’re an all-volunteer group inspired by prison book initiatives around the country, which have come into being during a massive increase in imprisonment since the late twentieth century. We distribute books to contribute to the education, entertainment and support of incarcerated people. We recognize that educational programs and libraries in prisons are severely limited or lacking.

It is important to us to open up lines of communication between incarcerated people and people outside the walls, and to deepen our understanding of both the causes and effects of the rapid expansion of mass incarceration in recent decades. Ultimately, we believe in the possibility of a world without prisons, where no one profits from anyone else’s misery, and where everyone in our community has their needs met and the opportunity to develop their potential in any way they desire.

Black and Pink is a national organization that began in Massachusetts with the goal of supporting LGBTQIA prisoners, initially through pen pal matching and a monthly newsletter that showcases writing by and for queer and trans prisoners, including poetry and personal ads, but also strategies for accessing resources and legal support. Black and Pink now also runs programs to support queer and trans prisoners who are leaving prison, including a program focused specifically on supporting trans women who face extremely high rates of violence and discrimination. From their website:

Black and Pink's mission is to abolish the criminal punishment system and to liberate LGBTQIA2S+ people/people living with HIV who are affected by that system, through advocacy, support, and organizing.

The Black & Pink story begins in 2005 when our founder Jason Lydon decided to institute an organization that was rooted in abolishing the prison industrial complex. The organization began as an explicitly anarchist project, so the name - Black & Pink - was chosen to represent the black flag of anarchism and the power of queer politics and experience. We collaborated with Brothers Behind Bars, the prison pen pal project of the Radical Faeries - sowing the seeds for what would become a pivotal aspect of our programming, our own pen pal system. Jason began writing to others who were incarcerated alongside him, and more through word of mouth.

In 2006, Black & Pink officially launched our first website and the pen pal database went live. That same year we had our first public action, disrupting the Cambridge, MA National Coming

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80 “Our Story” Black and Pink Website: https://www.blackandpink.org/our-story
Out Day event at City Hall and we co-organized with the Statewide Harm Reduction Coalition, SHaRC, in efforts to stop the Chicopee Women’s Jail. By the end of the year, 150 prison members were with us.

…As we continue to grow as an organization, as a family, and as a community of accomplices - we will always hold true to our foundational and radical beliefs in the capacity for good, in the abilities of all people to be the best versions of themselves, and to dismantle the systems that plague our communities. We will always be accomplices to those impacted by the prison industrial complex, the atrocities it enacts, and we will not rest until it is completely dismantled. Because we not only imagine a world without prisons, we demand it. Now, we go onward, into a hopeful and powerful future.

Each of these projects is grounded in explicit commitments to abolition: the specific abolition of pre-trial detention, the dismantling the prison industrial complex completely, or working towards a world without prisons. Practically, they connect incarcerated people to different kinds of resources, with the goal of supporting prisoners’ survival, their physical and emotional well-being, and their agency in making decisions about their own needs and interests.

Looking only at the material impact of their harm reduction interventions, these organizations might be considered as subsidizing, or at least allowing the continuation of the prison industrial complex. Great Falls Books Through Bars supplements under-funded prison libraries through free book donations and volunteer labor. Black and Pink provides unpaid, emotional support as well as entertainment and community for highly-vulnerable populations within prisons. The Massachusetts Bail Fund pays bail money and non-refundable fees to bail commissioners, allowing the bail system to continue to operate, and even increasing the number of people who pay bail. They prioritize meeting the needs of people who are incarcerated, that often requires that these groups work within the system they oppose.

**Harm reduction and “wake work”**

Theorist Christina Sharpe uses the concept of “wake work” to describe “modes of attending to Black life and Black suffering” in the ongoing aftermath of chattel slavery that continues to shape Black “non/being” as well as Black resistance (Sharpe 2016: 22). For Sharpe, this work poses and commits to the question of: “How might we stay in the wake with and as those whom the state positions to die
un grievable deaths and live lives meant to be unlivable?” (Sharpe 2016: 22). The examples Sharpe gives of doing “wake work” include bearing witness to her brother Stephen’s untimely death due to exposure to asbestos, in which she sat vigil for his passing while simultaneously celebrating his life with family members and friends. Wake work draws attention to the ongoing violence and death that mark Black life. And it offers an analytic for understanding what can be seen or comprehended, if the wake is conceived of as an ongoing framework for Black experience today.

“At stake,” Sharpe argues, “then is to stay in this wake time toward inhabiting a blackened consciousness that would rupture the structural silences produced and facilitated by, and that produce and facilitate, Black social and physical death. For, if we are lucky, we live in the knowledge that the wake has positioned us as no-citizen (Sharpe 2016: 22). Sitting in the wake, Sharpe argues, makes possible a “blackened consciousness,” one that would understand that Black people as outside of citizenship and even outside of “being.” Wake work rupture silences that perpetuate and are perpetuated by Black social and physical death, by telling stories that cannot be told, about lives that were meant to be unlivable.

Christina Sharpe’s concept of wake work speaks from and to Blackness, and so it should not be applied to the experience of all incarcerated people. Although the United States disproportionately arrests and incarcerates Black people, most prisoners in the US are white or Latinx and among prisoners there is a huge range of experiences based on race as well as gender, sexuality, class, etc. While they are not the same, the concept of wake work resonates with the ways in which harm reduction groups attend to the slow “ungrievable” social and physical deaths that many incarcerated people face, either in prison itself, or in the marginalization that many people who have been incarcerated face afterwards, through housing discrimination, job discrimination, untreated trauma, and state-enforced social isolation.

People engaged in harm reduction accompany prisoners - either in person, or through correspondence. In acknowledging and addressing the ways in which people suffer, they also make problems more visible, problems like the incarceration of poor people through the bail system, the increased violence and isolation the LGFBTQIA prisoners face, or the lack of resources/connections to
education and the outside world. These projects rupture silences that allow these problems to continue and that allow prisoners to be considered socially dead, and as non-citizens in the first place.

Not only do harm reduction organizations provide resources and support towards the goal of keeping prisoners alive day to day, they also offer support towards the political organizing and resistance of prisoners. During a nationwide Prison Strike in 2018, volunteers from Great Falls Books Through Bars and the Abolition Network took part in “phone zap” campaigns to call prison and state officials in support of prisoners facing retaliation for organizing work stoppages to demand an end to prison slavery. Through these phone zap campaigns, as well as public protests and online petitions, volunteers on the outside pressured prison officials to end retaliation against incarcerated organizers.

The strike fell far short from threatening the institution of the prison – and phone zaps were basically appeals for mercy and threats of negative public image for politicians - but the strike created moments of fugitivity from otherwise totalizing prison authority. During the strike and in general, the wake work and care work of harm reduction organizations rupture the silences enforced by prison walls. They offered a way of being with prisoners - a category of people treated as non-citizens, and arguably as non-people, those outside of society.

**Reform and abolition**

Sharpe, da Silva, and other Black theorists, argue that anti-black racism is so deeply embedded in the constitution of racialized, capitalist modernity that any reforms to it will only perpetuate white supremacy further. Mariam Kaba and Shira Hassan (2019) have similarly argued that the abolition of prisons and jails requires ending the world as it exists since so many institutions, but also ways of seeing and being in the world are entangled in carceral logics. For the harm reduction organizations described, prison reform is talked about disparagingly, as ineffective, as working to re-entrench the prison system, or as a way of co-opting dissent into less threatening channels. Discursively, harm reduction organizations
have tended to maintain a principle of general opposition to reform. In practice, they have supported some reform efforts.

We can see this in several examples, during the 2018 Prison Strike, all three organizations used social media to share demands of the strike organizers that included policies for extending minimum wage requirements to prisoners, including state funding for rehabilitation services, and re-establishing Pell Grants for education. These organizations also supported a state constitutional amendment campaign in 2019 to re-instate voting rights for incarcerated people in Massachusetts. The Western Mass Prison Abolition Network stated that they supported “strategic abolitionist reforms.” For Great Falls Books Through Bars, the decision to endorse voting rights policies and the reforms demanded by the prison strike was based on the distinction that these policies were called for by prisoners themselves and would increase the power of prisoners. Black and Pink also includes advocacy as part of its work and the national organization and local chapters routinely share news about proposed legislation and political organizing to improve the conditions for queer and trans prisoners, in Massachusetts this has included demanding policies requiring prisons to keep track of how long and for what reasons they place people in solitary confinement, a practice which is routinely used to isolate LGBTQIA prisoners.

While there is some variation in how these organizations engage with prison reform, they generally do so by endorsing other groups’ reform work, and only when that is perceived as led or informed by prisoners themselves, and when it is felt to be decreasing the reach of prisons. They share a commitment to abolition, but this is complicated by their prioritizing of trying to meet the survival needs of prisoners. Wake work as Christina Sharpe defines it, acknowledges Black resistance, as it exists against and alongside suffering and social and physical death. The only way out of anti-Blackness is to end the world as it exists – to abolish the world. Harm reduction projects similarly attend to suffering and attempt to sustain the survival of prisoners within the prison industrial complex. Rather than waiting for reforms to improve conditions, or waiting even for revolutionary change, harm reduction activists act within the conditions that exist. A harm reduction orientation, like mutual aid, has the potential of helping to disrupt
hierarchical and othering categories by distributing who is seen as an expert. Within harm reduction, those who are closest to the issue are the experts on what they need.

**Reproducing otherness through care**

Denise Ferreira da Silva, in her analysis of the production of racial difference, describes the distinction between a “transparent” I, a European/Western/White transcendental subject, capable of interiority, and the non-European other, marked by its “affectability” by external forces (da Silva 2007: 127). da Silva traces how European and US-based social scientists and philosophers have modified the terms of this divide, naming biological race, then cultural difference, then historical processes as responsible for the unequal advancement dominance of Europe overs its “affectable” others. da Silva uses the examples of concerns about “gang bangers” and “welfare queens” to name a recent iteration of this dynamic:

What the prevailing strategy of racial subjection in the United States indicates is not that the racial explains class subjections but that the association of criminality and material (economic) dispossession has become the new signifier of the affectability of the racial subaltern (da Silva 2007: 265).

Experiences of poverty and criminality mark the “affectable” other, which remains a racialized category, though it might not be expressed in explicitly racial terms. da Silva argues that to counter this ongoing project of categorizing some as requires us to:

…trace every and each articulation of raciality, including those that profess its irrelevance, trace at each moment how it rewrites the racial subaltern in affectability, producing statements that not only excuse the violent effects of this rewriting but also redeploy the transparency thesis” (da Silva 2007: 267)

da Silva’s framework of “affectability” is helpful for us in understanding not just how prisons and jails produce racial subalterns, but also how movements against prisons and jails reproduce categories of “affectable” others – in contrast to the unmarked, transparent subjects who take the role of allies. The harm reduction organizations above describe the people who their projects are working in support of as:

“incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people,” “those impacted by the prison industrial complex,” “Black and brown communities,” “low-income people,” “vulnerable and marginalized,” “LGBTQIA2S+
people/people living with HIV.” With the exceptions of Black and Pink’s reference to founder Jason Lydon as formerly incarcerated, and of the larger Black & Pink organization “as a family, and as a community of accomplices,” and Great Falls Books Through Bars description as “all-volunteer,” there is little to no description of who the organizers behind these efforts are.

Using da Silva’s terms, the people that harm reduction groups serve are marked by their affectability by state violence, economic dispossession, HIV exposure, and histories of racialization. In contrast, the volunteers/program staff are all but invisible, especially in terms of their affectability. The volunteers and staff are represented by their actions, their self-defined values and analyses. They are the ones who do things (ex. the Bail Fund pays, the Abolition Network centers, we acknowledge, counter, abolish, liberate, fight). The organization members’ complex interiority is made visible through their political analyses that define them. They are abolitionists. At the same time, the people who are the objects of their work are flattened, are known by what has been done to them. These experiences are made to be a permanent part of their identities. Throughout this dissertation, I myself use the category of “formerly incarcerated” people, which reduces individuals’ temporary and often traumatic experience into a permanent state. In this linguistic framework, once they have become incarcerated, they are forever either currently or formerly incarcerated. This is where harm reduction organizations, and other abolitionist projects can fail to “undermine the political or symbolic arsenal – the tools of obliteration” that subjugate people to the role of other that they are intending to confront, we re-enact a division between ourselves and an affectable other produced through the progressive jail assemblage (da Silva 2007: 267).

One step towards undermining this could be for organizations to take stock of who their people are and how they themselves are situated in relation to incarceration. None of these organizations states that their non-incarcerated, outside supporters are predominately white and college-educated, and disproportionately women and gender non-conforming individuals. The broadness/vagueness of who is in the group can be welcoming, in that it might convey that groups are open to anyone who supports the cause. But the absence of self-description from these groups’ accounting of themselves avoids an
opportunity to reflect, on their position in relation to the people who receive their assistance. Who are the different people in this group, what has their trajectory been, what motivates their desire to work against incarceration, and also - how have they come to be in a position to offer harm reduction support rather than to receive it.

When those who give care in these instances are made to be invisible, there is less potential for acknowledging their complexity as well – their identities and motivations, their personalities, what is at stake for them, the shared positionalities with those who are the objects of care that they might inhabit, and even the ways that they might be complicit in the systems that they are fighting. It makes assessing demographic patterns of who is and who is not present among those offering care more difficult. Organizing that doesn’t consider who is giving care undermines opportunities for building deeper solidarity, by re-instantiating prisoners as affectable others, and non-prisoners as transcendent, unaffected individuals offering their help. Inequalities within the group - in access to higher education, stable housing, and employment - are especially relevant for abolitionist organizing. Abolitionists could use those inequalities in the service of undermining them. One example of leveraging privilege within harm reduction efforts is volunteers with good credit offering to be co-signers on apartment or car lease applications for individuals returning from incarceration who have no or bad credit.

An example of a tension present within abolitionist organizing that could be addressed through more collaborative approaches is the issue of gender-based harassment. In abolitionist projects in Western Massachusetts and elsewhere, non-incarcerated pen pals of incarcerated letter-writers sometimes received unwelcome romantic or sexual messages. Incarcerated men who receive letters from pen-pals (who are more often female and/or read as female) can sometimes assume that care across gender lines represents romantic or sexual interest. Or they may treat the letter-writing relationship as an opportunity to pursue a possible romantic or sexual connection in a way that makes their non-incarcerated pen pal uncomfortable. These issues are often addressed quietly, as a challenge within an individual letter-writing relationship, or preempted with framing that tries to clarify what the purpose of a particular letter-writing project might be. But this issue, and issues like it, are common across organizing projects and could be explicit topics of
collective discussion, as collaborative work for pen-pals and larger organizations to address. A more collaborative approach could look like: conversations directly addressing sexism within organizing; an invitation for letter-writing participants to collaborate on thinking how to shift assumptions about gender and care so that organizing outreach is not seen as an invitation to romantic overtures and sexualization; and/or inviting reflection on why so few men engage in letter-writing support on the outside.

Activists who avoid engaging more openly with incarcerated or formerly incarcerated people in conversations about these kinds of fraught and complicated issues can be well-intended. The problem of unwanted romantic or sexual advances can feed into racist stereotypes and fears about communicating with incarcerated men, and especially with Black and Latino men who are disproportionately incarcerated. These conversations can also lead to more conflict. They can be unsafe for some people to engage in, or triggering for some pen-pals and they require thoughtfulness about who should lead them or be involved and a lot of trust and collaboration. But they can also become a bridge for connecting across marginalized identities and addressing lateral violence, as explored by scholar-activists working in transformative and restorative justice projects in their own communities (Chen, Dulani and Piepzn-Samarasinha 2011, Kaba and Hassan 2019, Kaba 2021).

But by not acknowledging these issues, and by not working on them together, abolitionists are helping to perpetuate a hierarchy that ignores the capacity of incarcerated people to participate in and contribute to organizing. People who have been incarcerated bring diverse analyses and commitments that could help with this and other issues, but only if people are engaged with - in all of their complexity. Abolition cannot happen without re-conceptualizing who counts as part of “we” and who does not, who provides support and who receives it, who is included in difficult conversations and who is excluded.

**Mutual Aid and Collaboration**

As discussed in the previous chapter, alongside harm reduction, and community care, abolitionists in Western Massachusetts put forward the concept of “mutual aid” in opposition to the progressive jail.
Activists worked to build collaborative relationships, in which individuals could support each other as peers, working to meet each other’s needs outside of existing state and private systems. In practice, some of the same inequities persisted through mutual aid projects, where many of the recipients of aid were not part of the decision-making or coordinating of those projects. As Aya Mares of Decarcerate Western Mass describes in Sylvan Bachbauer’s DIV III, differentiating mutual aid projects from charity work was both important to abolitionists, and difficult to achieve.

*Sylvan:* What do you think it means for mutual aid to be genuinely mutual?

*Aya:* Mutuality is super important and it's so easy to slip into charity models or accidentally fall into archetypes of the savior. I think perpetually checking in about that is really important for me personally. The prison industrial complex is so big and impossible feeling, at times, and it's hard to stop the stream of need. That's also part of the design, so I feel more empowered when I like can remember that [all the need] is part of the horror of the PIC. At those moments I really I really have to sink into allowing the mutuality of my relationships with people who are locked up. So, that being the brilliance in the letters, the curiosity in the letters, the shimmering scraps of human ingenuity and imagination, that is so alive, even in jails. That feeds me. So in feeling the magic of that and softening into, that is, when I feel like this is mutual. Our magic is beyond the carceral state. They don't let books on spells and sorcery get into the jails in the Commonwealth, because I think they're threatened by the human imagination and magic and I like to be reminded of that.

Aya describes being fed by the brilliance, curiosity, ingenuity and imagination in the letters that they exchanged with incarcerated organizers. Aya and Decarcerate Western Mass built a mutual relationship through the movement of material goods like money for bail and commissary and the exchange of ideas and inspiration. This magic, as Aya describes, is what makes these relationships mutual. Rather than seeing the recipients of mutual aid donations as one-dimensional, “affectable” others in need of charity, Aya and others engaged with people inside as collaborators, in the ways that formerly incarcerated organizers like Don Perry and Messiah Allah also emphasized as critical. Incarcerated and outside collaborators worked on political campaigns, but also shared art and ideas, and dreamt up new worlds, ones without prisons, police or incarceration. As Danielle Squillante of Decarcerate Western Mass writes:

It is critical to abolitionist praxis to forge reciprocal and collaborative relationships with people behind the wall, not only because they are most impacted by the criminal legal system. They are
also best positioned to inform organizers on the conditions inside jails and prisons and co-develop strategic responses to existing issues (Decarcerate Western Mass newsletter Fall 2021).

The term “collaboration” is especially apt in this context. In its literal definition, it describes “laboring with.” Activists on the outside and behind the wall collaborate as partners in a shared project, drawing on their different experiences and resources to develop relationships and work strategically towards abolition. A collaborator is also a term used to describe traitors, those who are accomplices to enemies. Abolitionists who are building power with incarcerated people are engaging in a form of treason. They are working against a social order that deprives incarcerated people of connection with the outside world, and of political power. In doing so, they are arguably acting against their own class privilege. On the other hand, activists also collaborate with prisons and jails – intentionally and incidentally. Collaboration is thus accurate because it is fraught. Collaboration between many different actors create the assemblage of the progressive jail, and collaborations across the walls can also be a means to undermine it. An abolitionist praxis that is “reciprocal and collaborative” has the potential to disrupt some of the social hierarchies that the progressive jail relies on.

Mutual aid, harm reduction and collaboration threaten even the most caring of progressive jails when they work against the hierarchies that progressive jails perpetuate, when abolitionists on the outside see those on the inside as collaborators and not as objects of care. This requires listening to and valuing the knowledge and analysis of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals, and working to eliminate the specific barriers and challenges that undermine their opportunities to build power, but to do so without re-entrenching the caste-like distinctions produced through incarceration. This can only happen through deep, collaborative and mutually transformative relationships. All parties must become transformed through these relationships.

Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble and George Lipsitz consider the example of musical improvisation, and what it can (and has) offered to civil rights activists and others working for social change. “Listening” they describe, “is a crucial form of agency that generates ethical and artistic imperatives, like those
generated in an improvisation founded on the capacity to hear the other in ways that change one’s own contribution to the collective narrative” (Fischlin, Heble and Lipsitz 2013: 232). Like improvisational artists, abolitionists working to co-create new worlds, must commit to listening to each other, to changing in response to each other’s needs, and to being open to surprise as new worlds and new selves are made in the process.

Categorical Abolition

In this final section, I draw on da Silva’s work for inspiration in trying to think outside of the categories that sustain incarceration, to find where abolitionists can go even further towards unthinking the prison system and building other worlds. Part of da Silva’s response to the anti-black racism fundamental to modern thought is to find practices that interrupt the reduction of the world into the very categories we use. To break from modern, racial capitalism, da Silva proposes a “Black Feminist Poethics” that pushes “existence toward the beyond of Space-time, where The Thing resists dissolving any attempt to reduce what exists - anyone and everything - to the register of the object, the other, and the commodity” (da Silva 2014: 90-91). Rather than re-ordering the existing categories to preference Black over white (or incarcerated and non-incarcerated), da Silva insists on the necessity of disrupting the processes by which the world is reduced into categories, and specifically that which produces a “self-contained and coherent image of the Subject,” which, da Silva argues:

necessitates and lives off the translation of the historical effects of the colonial architectures that allowed the expropriation of the total value produced by native lands and slave labor (juridico economic effect) into the mental (moral and intellectual) deficiencies (natural lack) signified by the Category of Blackness every time it is articulated to justify otherwise untenable deployments of racial violence (da Silva 2014: 94-95)

The production of a Subject requires an excluded other, defined through histories of racial violence.

Rather than trying to produce a more expanded, inclusive Subject that brings Blackness into proper Subject-hood, da Silva argues for a refusal of “self-containment and coherence.” For da Silva, a “Black
feminist poethics” looks like “matter imaged as contingency and possibility rather than necessity and determinacy (da Silva 2014: 92-93).

Prison abolitionists can, and should, also think outside of the categories that separate those who give and those who receive care, those who have been incarcerated and those who have not. This kind of categorical abolition could refuse to see “formerly incarcerated” people as a fixed category, but rather recognize them as split, contingent and inter-connected selves who are simultaneously individuals and relationships, who exist before incarceration, during, and after. Moving towards such an understanding could center possibility and potential rather than reduction. It could mean opening up to the “magic” that Aya Mares describes in the letter-writing and world-building that happens between incarcerated activists and those on the outside. Likewise, destabilizing the “transparent” subject of the caregiver can help us understand each mutual aid activist and harm reduction organization as also an assemblage of multiple, simultaneous, and potentially contradictory elements and intersections, with various stakes in collective liberation as well as ongoing domination through prisons and jails. This isn’t a call for rejecting care, but for attention to what care is doing and could do. Hwang (2019) uses the concept of “deviant care” to describe “practices of relationality” that:

…inhabit a radical deviance and a deviant relationship to care, whereby the social categorization and interpellation of a singular self-subject is queered, made less discreet and less “self-evident.” Such deviations allow us to further disorganize the inevitability of those who become passive and self-evidencing objects of carceral care” (Hwang 2019: 564).

Unless abolitionists are actively working to disrupt the categories that maintain incarcerated people as objects of carceral care, harm reduction projects and mutual aid projects risk reproducing the de-humanizing logics of the progressive jail. Building a world without prisons and jails requires abolitionists to commit to a collaborative practice that undoes the stability of their own worlds and identities too.
McDonald’s on Appleton

I like to write at the McDonald’s on Appleton in Holyoke because it has wifi and outlets, it’s close to my house, and it’s open late. On the negative side, there’s usually a police officer stationed in the lobby whose roles are, primarily: helping the manager of the McDonald’s shoo away non-customers who come in trying to use the bathroom, and looking suspiciously at everyone else. Fortunately he isn’t here today. As I write, a steady stream of people, mostly younger women, come in, trying to cajole the manager to buzz them into the locked bathroom – the only semi-public bathroom open at this hour. Occasionally the manager relents to the more determined, and especially those who can sweet-talk him in Spanish.

I’m surprised to see R. from Think Tank comes in and goes straight to the soda fountain. His face and body are covered in tattoos, some conspicuously referencing the Latin Kings. In jail, he was physically much bigger than he is now on the outside, a common phenomenon for many incarcerated men who have little else to do in jail besides work out. Still, he has an imposing presence, accentuated by the large beard he’s grown since the last time I saw him. I remember the first time I saw him in the jail I thought he might be one of the most intimidating people I’ve ever seen. In the “inside-out” community college class that we were both a part of, and later in the Think Tank, it became clear he was just as inclined towards joking, and playfulness, and showing concern for everyone in the room. Over months of weekly meetings, I would come to learn he was a writer and a poet, as well as a gang member.

Now on the outside, at a McDonald’s in Holyoke, R. walks over to me smiling, recognizing me and asking how I’d been and about everyone back in the Think Tank. I ask how he’s doing and he updates me on his new baby and new apartment in Springfield. He says about to catch the bus back from Holyoke and asks if I’m going that way. I wasn’t planning on going anywhere, but I offer him a ride so he doesn’t have to
take the bus. On the drive, he turns the volume up on the radio, Hot 93.7, and a song comes on that he says reminds him of his son. In a quiet voice, he says how he’s trying to be a good example for his kids but it’s hard, hard to get a job and make a living. I tell him I remember how good his writing is, and how he could continue college classes if he was ever interested. I try to be encouraging and offer to help him connect with AISS or any other agencies for help with employment, but he says he’s been through them already and is understandably skeptical. I tell him about the organizing I’m part of, bailing people out and trying to connect with more incarcerated people who are organizing inside. He doesn’t really respond. When I get to his place I hand him the cash I have on me, feeling at a loss of what else I can do to help him, but I’m glad I got to see him and to talk for a minute. I drop him off and say goodbye.

The approach that I have taken in this dissertation, of embracing an antropología comprometida, has entailed describing, acting, and learning through my own activist commitments – including the ways they have succeeded and the ways they have fallen short (Aguirre Beltran 1977, Fultz 2010, Hernández Castillo 2018⁸¹). Paying attention to my multiple positions as a researcher, organizer, and volunteer – not to mention, friend, neighbor, classmate, etc. - and the ways that they enhance, compromise and inflect each other, has allowed me to see through my own experiences, how the progressive jail functions as an assemblage. Like the jail that I study, I am also entangled with universities, non-profit social services, and activist interventions.

Situating myself - and contemplating the ways that I am already situated - within the entanglement of incarceration, academia and abolition, has allowed me to see how these strands interweave and to reflect on my own positions within them. It has pushed me to recognize the humanity of those I vehemently disagree with, to amplify the voices I think should be heard more, and to critically reflect on myself and my comrades while working towards the total decarceration of the committees of

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which I am a part. Engaging in multiple roles, across different spaces, has allowed me to hear how people talk about ideas like progress, reform, and care, and to see how they circulate within and between jails, community organizing, and academia.

The progressive jail uses care, alongside force and the threat of force, to maintain a power imbalance in favor of the sheriff’s department and partner institutions. The modes of ongoing reform that sheriffs and their allies engage in generally serve to reinforce that imbalance. However, formerly incarcerated organizer’s trajectories from incarceration to reform work, demonstrate openings, even within jail-affiliated programs, through which those who are incarcerated or formerly incarcerated are able to build collective power and fight for more transformative reforms, including some aimed at decreasing the reach and power of the jail - or abolishing the jail altogether.

Even where organizers are not demanding radical changes, supporting the capacity of currently and formerly incarcerated organizers to make decisions about their lives shifts power from those who do the incarcerating (or collaborate in it) to those who are incarcerated. Demands for limited reforms that come from those with less institutional power pose a deeper challenge to the progressive jail than more radical demands which leave unequal relationships of power intact. This dissertation calling for abolition, coming from an academic, poses less of a disruption to the jail’s functioning than those who have been incarcerated organizing to use their experience and relationships to challenge the power of sheriffs and demand better conditions; or those who are currently incarcerated reclaiming their right to vote and be part of deciding who should even be sheriff.

Interventions

This dissertation emerged from a set of activist concerns. Living and organizing in Western Massachusetts from 2011 to 2021, I was surprised by what seemed like a limited amount of organizing focused on prison abolition, especially given the region’s long history of radical social movements. In the organizing that did exist, there was little to no involvement of incarcerated people, especially those within local jails. And only a small number of people who identified as formerly incarcerated were active in
these spaces either. Even more surprising to me was the positive regard for jails and local sheriffs I heard expressed within progressive communities. The following questions emerged from these experiences, and from my commitments to working for prison abolition and to centering incarcerated people within that work:

- How do prison abolitionists work towards decarceration and abolition when the criminal justice system itself professes a commitment to reform?
- How do activists respond when they and the sheriff they oppose both claim to represent the community?
- Given the millions of people who have been incarcerated in prisons and jails in the United States and the growing interest in ending mass incarceration, why aren’t more formerly incarcerated individuals involved in organizing and advocacy for criminal justice reform and/or decarceration?

These questions guided me in researching the terrain of decarceration and prison abolition from several angles. One, is how incarceration takes shape within a specific political, cultural, and historical context. In this study I focused on county jails in New England, in communities where sheriffs have espoused an explicit commitment to progressive reform. The second is how activism, organizing and advocacy interact with the jail, and how the particularities of incarceration in this context inform that work. Lastly, I set out to understand how formerly incarcerated individuals move from incarceration to activism, organizing and advocacy work.

From my position as a university-based academic, how can I support more abolitionist organizing in Western Massachusetts, and support greater involvement and leadership from formerly incarcerated individuals? In the spirit of harm reduction, mutual aid, collaboration, and antropología comprometida, I have tried to answer this question in the following ways:

1) Providing material support for mutual aid and for organizing, and for supporting the leadership of people who are directly impacted
   - Using research funds and time
     - Helping to secure external grant funds
     - Using campus spaces for abolitionist organizing
   - Centering lived perspectives of incarceration in class curriculum, connecting students with organizers and people with lived experiences, and opening classes to students who are incarcerated or formerly incarcerated
     - Getting organizers paid for speaking or co-teaching, getting class credits for organizers as students

2) Amplifying the perspectives of people who are directly impacted, and of decarceration-oriented and abolitionist perspectives
   - Supporting the creation of in-person places of peer-support and mutual aid, and supporting the publication and sharing of the perspectives of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people
- Critiquing systemic oppression and stigmas that devalue the perspectives of those who have experienced incarceration

3) Through the previous modes, opening up this question to more people, especially those who have been incarcerated or who are incarcerated.
- Letter-writing
- This dissertation research as an offering of my perspective to those I organize with

In the next two sections I expand on two ideas that emerged out of fieldwork conversations, neither of which are mine:

**Idea: Improving access to college**

Several of the formerly incarcerated organizers I interviewed described their participation in college courses, either during or after incarceration, as being critical to their trajectory in becoming politically involved. They described college classes, or creative-writing workshops, as spaces where they developed a more structural analysis of the issues they faced, or as a stepping-stone for gaining credentials.

In 2019, Dr. Susan (Sue) Hyatt (Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis), an alumna of the UMass Anthropology department and I facilitated a workshop for the UMass Anthropology 50th Anniversary Conference on the subject of barriers to higher education for formerly incarcerated students. Susan Hyatt has written previously on the potential of Inside-Out Prison Exchange programs, college courses that bring incarcerated and non-incarcerated students into a shared classroom, to create opportunities for students to question their assumptions and find common ground (Hyatt 2009). The workshop we organized included a panel of speakers and then a collective brainstorming session to think through how to make college, and especially UMass, more accessible for formerly incarcerated students. The panelists included Dr. Toussaint Losier of the Afro-American Studies Department and Social Thought and Political Economy program, and Israel “Izzy” Rivera. Liz Milhans, an organizer with Massachusetts Against Solitary Confinement, had issues with her car and was not able to make it in time for the panel, but we were able to meet up and talk over lunch afterwards. The participants in the
workshop included instructors from Holyoke Community College, academic advisors from Greenfield Community Colleges, UMass professors from Anthropology and Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies, and UMass students.

**Barriers to Higher Education for Formerly Incarcerated Students**
**UMass Anthropology 50th Anniversary Conference**
Facilitators: Dr. Sue Hyatt and Justin Helepololei

*Description:*  
The notion that there is a school-to-prison pipeline has become part of our commonplace understanding of the social causes of mass incarceration. Far less attention, however, has been given to the consequences of the barriers that formerly incarcerated individuals confront when they try to pursue opportunities for post-secondary education after their release. In this session, we invite college students, who struggled to access post-secondary education following a period of incarceration, and educators, who work with formerly incarcerated students, to share their successes and to discuss the obstacles they have faced.

Sue and I began the session by asking the panelists questions about their experiences either: navigating higher education as someone who has been incarcerated, or as someone supporting students who have been incarcerated. Izzy described the struggle he faced in gaining admission to UMass after excelling at Holyoke Community College and being more-than-qualified for the Mass Transfer program. Under the Massachusetts Department of Education’s Mass Transfer program, students at any Massachusetts community college who attain an Associate’s Degree with at least a B-average are promised “guaranteed admission” to the University of Massachusetts or any state university. Despite meeting the program requirements, Izzy was denied admission under the discretion of the admissions department, specifically because of his criminal record. This record had not prevented the Hampden County Sheriff’s Department-coordinated and Holyoke Police Department-affiliated “Holyoke Safe and Successful Youth Initiative” from reaching out to hire Izzy to mentor youth (quite the opposite), but he was denied admission to UMass because of it.

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82 [https://www.mass.edu/masstransfer/](https://www.mass.edu/masstransfer/)
In the workshop session, Sue and I facilitated a collective brainstorming of how we might, as a group and in our own positions, address some of these issues that Izzy described, and also name some other challenges formerly incarcerated students face. Workshop participants identified the following goals, allies who might help us in working towards those goals, enemies who might oppose us, and barriers that we might face.

**Goals:**
Admissions policy changes
Programming and training for instructors of formerly incarcerated students
On campus
- Hub/Center for Formerly Incarcerated Students
- Specific advising + support systems
- Advocates, intermediaries

**Allies:**
Community colleges – admissions staff and offices
Inside Out Programs
Bard Prison Initiative + Bard Micro-College @ the Care Center (Holyoke)
- Care Center “helps mothers and low-income women go to college”
Mass Prison Education Consortium
- Boston University, Tufts, MIT (Accessible only for currently-incarcerated students)
State Legislature
- Funding, policies
AISS, After Incarceration Support Systems
Pathways to College Programs
California schools: Underground Scholars Program
People:
- Liz Milhans (MASC)
- Cassandra Bensahih (MASC)
- Jose Bou (Holyoke Public Schools, formerly incarcerated)
Family and friend networks

**Opponents + Barriers**
Some teachers + staff @ community colleges
Guards + prisons, local jails, privatization
Admissions – No advocates, no advisors, not compatible with non-traditional students
AISS
Housing – Section 8
Police
Parole System
Funding System (grants)
No communication between departments, fragmentation
Culture of inclusion that does not include formerly incarcerated students
Stigma
Miseducation of people who teach work readiness
Some participants of the workshop have continued to work towards these goals through their teaching, advising or administrative roles, and others have also been working to improve college accessibility for formerly incarcerated students. Through the new UMass Prison Education Initiative, UMass faculty have begun teaching credit-bearing courses at local jails for which all tuition fees have been waived. The initiative intends to develop advising and financial support with the hope of encouraging incarcerated students to continue after their release. In August 2022, Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies faculty and Decarcerate Western Mass collaborator Dr. Laura Ciolkowski announced a collaboration between UMass and the Petey Greene Program, in which incarcerated students will be connected to volunteer academic tutors.

As my interviews with formerly incarcerated organizers suggest, these programs are likely to generate more community organizers and more advocates with lived experience of incarceration. More potential leaders with direct understandings of prisons and jails can lead to better informed research and better informed policies. Interactions between students who have experienced incarceration and students and faculty who have not can also be deeply transformative for both groups and encourage thoughtful discussions and potential collaboration.

One danger that this poses for abolition is that programming that makes college more accessible for currently or formerly incarcerated students also contributes resources and legitimacy to the progressive jail assemblage. Sheriffs in Western Massachusetts tout access to college courses in their election campaigns and when appealing to the state legislators who fund their departments. Students who successfully navigate carceral academic partnerships are propped up as evidence of effective corrections at work. Even if the content of our courses is critical of policing, prisons, and jails, the collaborations between jail administrations and educators add credibility to jails and sheriff’s departments when they present themselves as providing caring and enlightened corrections. The emphasis on an individualizing education within universities and colleges continues the emphasis on individualizing treatment and
rehabilitation within progressive jails. Both of which promise upward mobility to individuals while neglecting systemic dynamics that cause inequality.

A second danger that university and college involvement in criminal justice reform poses for abolition is the risk of contributing to the production of gatekeepers and unaccountable leaders within local organizing. The credentialing of some formerly-incarcerated leaders poses the risk of reinforcing inequalities within the community, as particular leaders become de facto spokespeople. This is especially true of individuals who are able to more effectively navigate academic cultural norms. This is a danger when some more effective social justice entrepreneurs have greater access to resources and recognition than other community members.

**Idea: Getting out of the way**

A concern, and an idea, that Messiah Allah raised during our interview was what he saw as the absence of physical and programmatic spaces intended specifically for formerly incarcerated individuals to connect and support each other, without the mediation of the sheriff’s office, social service agency, or non-profit organization. As Messiah described, in Western Massachusetts there is:

No place where formerly-incarcerated individuals can come together, not by design of a government funded program. Not one program that is solely for incarcerated individuals, nowhere individuals can go as a center, as an individual place, that place right there serves the overall well-being of formerly-incarcerated individuals.

He compares this idea of space to the Wildflower Alliance’s Drop-In Centers that are open to anyone looking for help connecting to mental health, addiction, or economic support resources, to socialize, or just for a place to rest during the day, and are operated by staff who identify as peers. Messiah expressed a desire for a similar space, but one more specifically intended for people who are returning from incarceration, or their families, to be able to connect with each other. The key difference for Messiah is that this space would not be “by design of a government funded program” - unlike the After Incarceration Support Systems/All-Inclusive Support Services program of the Hampden County Sheriff’s Department.
Such a space could be conducive to the kinds of mentoring that formerly incarcerated organizers described as being a critical step in their trajectories, the mentoring that came from other people with lived experiences of incarceration, relationships that weren’t mediated by prison or jail staff, non-profit staff, outside activists or academics. Jackie Velez made a similar critique about a lack of organizations specifically dedicated to addressing criminal justice reform in Western Massachusetts and has been among the organizers working to fill that void.

Supporting the kind of space Messiah describes, one that is intended to facilitate people who’ve been incarcerated being able to meet with each other without imposing an agenda or purpose is a vague proposal, but it’s one that addresses needs that formerly incarcerated organizers have described. A challenge for this is to find enough resources to support an ongoing or recurring space or program, while still maintaining its autonomy and dedicated purpose.

**Antropología Comprometida, Uncompromising Abolition**

“Without clear revolutionary content, mutual aid, survival programs, and even horizontalist organizing can be co-opted and absorbed into the state’s infrastructure. We must be unabsorbable” (Anderson 2021: 179).

- William C. Anderson in *The Nation on no map: Black Anarchism and abolition* (2021)

Thinking with the concept of an antropología comprometida has helped me to consider the collaborations and entanglements that sustain carceral assemblages. In doing so, it has also helped me to appreciate the refusals and uncompromising stances that are necessary to distinguish abolition from reform.

Conflicts can arise between the goals of collaborating with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people, and rejecting the acceptability of reformed prisons and jails. Like the majority of people in the United States, the vast majority of people I have met who are incarcerated or have been incarcerated in the United States do not consider abolition to be a realistic or even desirable goal. But true collaboration can involve disagreement. Solidarity does not mean blanket support. Part of what I have contributed in
organizing spaces and a contribution I want to make here is to insist on abolition in the face of carceral care and progressive jail.

Reforms that do not work towards the abolition of incarceration are at best a form of harm reduction. They address some of the conditions without changing the systemic inequalities – the racism, capitalism, transphobia and other structural oppressions - through which those conditions came to be, all but guaranteeing the continuous need to fight for people’s survival and dignity. Incarceration has not, and does not make us safer. It generates more harm through the coercive separation of families, through social isolation, and through heightened exposure to abuse and exploitation. It has no proven efficacy in reducing violence, and often results in greater violence. It takes resources and energy that could be put towards addressing the causes of harm. Prisons and jails make problems less visible without solving them. They help us to feel like we’re doing something to respond to harm in our communities.

As public health scholars have argued, the therapeutic interventions that take place through the progressive jail would be far more effective outside of a carceral context. Based on the experience of incarcerated students who struggle to find quiet or time to study, so to would education. Harm needs to be addressed, but in ways that are specific to the situation, responsive to the people involved, and that engage with the concerns and needs of those who have experienced harm. Our responses to harm should be designed to change the conditions in which people have done harm, to make it less, not more likely, that that harm happens again. The educational opportunities, vocational training, therapeutic resources and other modes of intellectual and emotional engagement that are provided through the progressive jail after someone is incarcerated, could and should be accessible to everyone. Providing these things without waiting for someone to commit harm could prevent some of the harm for which people are incarcerated. Why wait until someone is locked up to make sure that they have access to therapy? To mindfulness? Food? Housing?

A corrections officer I once talked with, as he dragged his feet letting me into a jail classroom, told me he thought that prisoners shouldn’t have access to free college, especially if they (the guards) don’t. His intention was punitive. Jail’s supposed to be a punishment, he reasoned, not an opportunity for
a free ride. But his complaint raised the larger issue - that all of this programming could be universally accessible. And at less financial and human cost than prisons and jails. “You’re right,” I told him. “You should have free college too. Everyone should.” There are so many changes we could make if we weren’t locking people up. Transforming the conditions through which millions of people are incarcerated also necessarily means transforming our communities altogether.
CHAPTER 10
CONCLUSIONS

In this dissertation I have sought to describe and analyze the dense fields of contention and convergence in which formerly incarcerated organizers, abolitionists, and people who work within the progressive jail assemblage interact. The modes of care that sheriffs enact provide sorely needed resources, notably addiction treatment and mental and behavioral health programming, which some community members credit with saving lives. At the same time, formerly incarcerated community organizers critiqued the ways that jail rehabilitation programs undermined personal agency and collective power. This took several forms: One, was imposing rehabilitation without considering individuals’ needs, as in the case of obligatory addiction treatment even for non-addicts, which Izzy and others have described within Western Massachusetts jails. This orientation towards categorizing all incarcerated people as in-need-of-treatment is significant. It marks incarcerated people as also a potential threat to themselves, adding an additional justification to incarceration beyond arguments for protecting members of the public from incarcerated people.

This conception of care has undermined collective agency by emphasizing the individual as the object of reform and the proper agent of uplift, disregarding the structural inequalities that formerly incarcerated people face. Many prisoners within local jails go through job training programs and safety certifications to improve their “work-readiness.” At the same time, state laws allow employers to continue to discriminate on the basis of possessing a criminal record - even after organizers successfully campaigned to “ban the box” asking about criminal history on most employment applications. As Messiah argued, the problem for most incarcerated people isn’t a lack of resume-writing workshops - he described having to take the same resume-writing workshop multiple times - but rather a shortage of dignified jobs, and a shortage among those of employers willing to hire formerly incarcerated people. The same issue was true for many people in search of affordable housing, who were competing within an already difficult housing market.
Within the progressive jail assemblage, programming heavily mediated how current and formerly incarcerated people could interact with each other. Reentry programs run by the sheriff’s department emphasized personal responsibility and took the form of individualized case management. Through the mentoring program, volunteer mentors and professional caseworkers helped some individuals navigate the requirements for public assistance programs. Because some people did successfully find employment and housing, any failures to do so, or to meet with the attendance requirements of the program, were attributed to a lack of commitment on the part of the formerly incarcerated person. These were not seen as structural issues for collective action, but individualized problems to solve. Mentoring and caseworker meetings took place within the jail or other sheriff’s department facilities. As Messiah pointed out, there were no spaces specifically for formerly incarcerated people to meet and support each other that were outside the surveillance of the sheriff’s department.

While grassroots community organizations and activist collectives expressed a commitment (and desire) to support the leadership of currently and formerly incarcerated organizers, each of the projects I was part of struggled to find or build up new leaders from among current and formerly incarcerated community members. Several formerly incarcerated organizers had prominent roles in leadership within campaigns and some specific projects, but the majority of organizers and activists did not identify as formerly incarcerated. Much of the week-to-week organizing work and decision-making was carried out by activists from less-policed and less-incarcerated demographics. Most were college-educated or college-affiliated, in their 20s or 30s, majority white, and majority female or gender-non-conforming. IN Decarcerate Western Mass, we sought to address the absence of formerly incarcerated people within organizing spaces through intentional outreach in the form of: meetings to invite community members into organizing work and to share their stories and priorities, one-on-one outreach to family members, and intentional letter-writing to currently incarcerated individuals to solicit input for organizing.

In these attempts we struggled to connect with formerly incarcerated individuals looking to get more involved. The additional disruption of Covid-19 and lockdown protocols that jails enacted in response made connecting with incarcerated people even more difficult as most in-person visits were
stopped. Incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people received support in the form of bail money, car rides, free books, commissary money and more. But few of these interactions led to sustained involvement in the coordinating of that support, or in the larger decision-making of the group. At times, activists and organizers enacted modes of care that overlapped with the carceral care of progressive jails. The Pioneer Valley Project, whose members were concerned about the lack of addiction treatment options for women in Springfield, collaborated with the Hampden County Sheriff’s Department to try and secure more state funding in order to expand involuntary civil commitments to include women. The Democracy Behind Bars Coalition and Mass POWER-related campaigns to protect the civil rights of eligible voters within county jails required collaborating with jail administrators across the state, working especially education departments to educate incarcerated voters about their rights, and to ensure access to ballots. Money raised to pay bail, to make phone calls, to help incarcerated people with commissary – all intended to support the comfort and dignity of incarcerated people – have helped to fund the jail and the companies profiting from the jail. Phone calls helped to fund jail programming through a profit-sharing scheme between the telecommunications company ICSolutions and the sheriff’s department that generated $850,000 for the department in 2020 (link to Prisoners Legal Services report for No Cost Calls bill in 2020, S.1372).

Successful policy reforms can have important effects in the lives of incarcerated people, and they can fail to redistribute power to those most impacted. Likewise, the extension of care to incarcerated people can provide needed material support, and it can perpetuate power differences between those who make decisions about whom care goes to, and those who receive it. Building on the analyses of abolitionist scholars, I argue that an abolitionist politics requires working also to abolish hierarchies within our movements, not only supporting the leadership of those directly affected but working to dissolve the structural differences that make it easier for some activists to take part in organizing than others. If not, we risk remaining complicit with the carceral care of progressive jailing (Davis 2003, James 2005, Gilmore 2007, Kaba 2021).
As a framework for thinking about and providing care, harm reduction, I would argue, better centers the agency of people receiving care, while still acknowledges the limits that care can provide towards addressing the deeper structural causes of harm. A harm reduction approach to care connects people to resources and support, and respects their autonomy in deciding if and how to engage with that support. This is in contrast to the carceral approach of the jail that uses force and coercion to impose care on prisoners and situates blame (and the potential for rehabilitation) on the individual, or as reentry program staff referred to, on their “mindset.”

Mutual aid, premised on the voluntary interchange of support among peers, provides another alternative framework for thinking about care (Spade 2020). Recognizing that community members may have different needs and different capacities, mutual aid is an approach to assistance that considers each person to be equally-important in making decisions about the care they receive and offer. Within a mutual aid framework, who is giving or receiving care can vary at different times. In contrast to carceral models of care, people consent to give or receive care, and are free to leave mutual aid projects or relationships at will. Both of these orientations towards care emerge out of struggles for social change. They pose a potential challenge to the carceral care employed by progressive jails and to the hierarchies that persist within social movements.

**Lessons Learned**

In this section I highlight three conversations that this research contributes to. I consider how this work might inform future research as well as abolitionist organizing: 1) the relationship between progressive jailing and decarceration; 2) the contested terrain of care; and 3) insights for abolitionist scholar-activism.

**The relationship between progressive jailing and decarceration**

Jails are not a monolith. They are shaped by, and shape their contexts and the shapes they take can vary
widely. For activists working towards decarceration, these differences matter. Critiques of incarceration from one context won’t be as effective in other contexts. Organizing that doesn’t take local histories and political economies into consideration can have unintended consequences. By distinguishing these different modes of incarceration from each other, scholars of incarceration can provide more useful analyses for activists, policymakers, and members of the public. In this research I have focused on progressive jailing, which I have characterized with the following qualities: an orientation towards reform, an emphasis on rehabilitation, intensive community engagement, and the use of an overarching framework of care.

In my field site, sheriffs’ departments expressed a commitment to reform. They touted “enlightened and effective corrections” and “evidence-based” practices. They sought grants to implement new programming, and partnered with scholars from the University of Massachusetts review their interventions and look for places to improve. Their jails’ emphasis on rehabilitation meant that some incarcerated peoples’ daily schedules were saturated with required programming, from job training to substance abuse treatment to creative writing. Caseworkers used assessment techniques to diagnose prisoners and assign them treatment programs. Programming stretched from the time prisoners entered the jail to the time they left, at which point some continued through re-entry support programs. All of this is made possible by the jail’s engagement with non-profit organizations, hospitals, volunteers, mentors, and other actors.

Each of these qualities of progressive jailing creates challenges for decarceration. Concerns about overcrowding and deteriorating facilities helped to justify the construction of new jails in Pittsfield and Springfield, and the renovation and expansion of the Greenfield jail. Concerns about a lack of resources for incarcerated women and their families were used to justify the construction of a regional, women’s jail in Chicopee. Within progressive contexts, protests against poor conditions in jails can become a pretext
for expanding the jails organizers hoped to shut down. Concerns about safety can be a justification for locking up more people.

Below are several major critiques of incarceration that scholars and activists have raised. Drawing on my fieldwork, I consider how progressive jails in the context of Western Massachusetts have responded to, or complicate these critiques.

*Prisons and jails should be shut down because they are sites of abuse and neglect*

Sheriffs responded to concerns about prisoner welfare, first by denying them, and then by reaffirming their commitment to prisoner well-being, using the opportunity as a platform to advertise the ways they enact care towards those they incarcerate. When pressed to intervene, local politicians deferred to sheriffs’ public narratives of care, conveying surprise that there might be issues within local, progressive jails. Legislators declined to use their statutory privilege to inspect the jails, and made no public statements criticizing, or even questioning the sheriffs. By contrast, local legislators did conduct unannounced visits to investigate abuse at state prisons during this same time period - emphasizing the trust or deference give to local sheriffs, even over the state Department of Corrections.

In Hampden County, Sheriff Cocchi responded to Decarcerate Western Mass’ campaign for decarceration and an end to medical neglect under Covid-19 with a press conference extolling the care that prisoners received at the jail. Prisoners, Cocchi argued, would be without such care if they were to be released. In Hampshire County, Sheriff Cahillane made a similar argument through the local Hampshire Daily Gazette. Both sheriffs referenced testimonies from incarcerated individuals and their families who were grateful for the care they had received through the jail. When Decarcerate Western Massachusetts met with Sheriff Cocchi to amplify the demands of incarcerated people for more medical care and an end to abuse, we were thanked for our concerns and countered with a list of ways that the jail was supporting
incarcerated people. The sheriff closed the meeting by inviting us to tour the jail and to work with him to bring more programming into his department. The assemblage-like nature of the progressive jail presents a challenge to decarceration in that it allows new actors into the work of “jailcare” (Sufrin 2017). Demands for reform can be met with invitations to join in and become part of the constantly-reforming landscape of collaborators that sustain the programming of the progressive jail and carry out its work of rehabilitation and care.

*Incarceration is driven by white supremacy*

Jails, like prisons, are deeply racialized and racializing institutions, and the progressive jail is no exception. In Western Massachusetts, jails disproportionately incarcerate Black and Puerto Rican prisoners. Like state and federal prisons, jails are not required to pay incarcerated workers at all, a holdover from the incomplete abolition of slavery under the 13th Amendment. Jail populations also grew under the wars on crime and on drugs and the policies that led to the hyper policing and incarceration of Black and brown communities.

In addition to these dynamics, which jails share with incarceration throughout the United States, progressive jails have their own histories and functions. The jail’s history in New England is as a civilizing, colonial institution, directed towards internal deviants as much as racialized others and throughout its history, the jail has been adapted as a tool for managing the social underclass (Irwin 1985). Progressive jailing emerges from a running lineage of social reform movements and this history is important for considering how the contemporary jail will fare under contemporary critiques of structural racism and white supremacy.

In Western Massachusetts, sheriffs have used social media to highlight the racial diversity of their staff, to celebrate events like Black History Month, and to advertise their outreach into Black and brown
communities, through initiatives like back to school shopping and basketball tournaments. While all four sheriffs in Western Massachusetts are white - and 90% of sheriffs in the United States are white men – nationally, the office of the sheriff is becoming more diverse. The Reflective Democracy Campaign states in its “Confronting the Democracy of Power: America’s Sheriffs” report that, “In competitive elections for sheriff, our data show that diverse candidates who reflect all their constituents are winning.” Examples include counties in Wisconsin and New Hampshire that recently elected Black sheriffs for the first time, and an election in 2018, in which the seven largest counties in North Carolina each elected African American sheriffs.

Efforts to defund the police failed in most cities and towns in Western Massachusetts, not because of an overwhelming conservative majority prevented them, but because these efforts failed to mobilize the majority of progressives and liberals. In Springfield and Holyoke, the most racially-diverse cities in the region, organizers felt that their bases would not support calls for police defunding, even after the Springfield Police Department was investigated by the United States Department of Justice for a history of abuse.

Incarceration is driven by neoliberal disinvestment in social welfare

Recent critiques of incarceration in the United States have focused on neoliberalism’s role as a driver of mass, or hyper-incarceration(Gottschalk 2006, Gilmore 2007, Wacquant 2010, Schept 2015). Along with prisons, jail populations grew as state and federal governments invested more in policing and prisons and less in social safety nets. Progressive jailing complicates this picture. Many of the care-based elements of the progressive jail were in place long before the rise of neoliberalism, as described in the first two chapters. From the colonial period onward, jails in New England have been sites of rehabilitation and

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81 Reflective Democracy Campaign report, Women Donor’s Network (June 2020) “Confronting the Democracy of Power: America’s Sheriffs”
social reform as well as sites of policing and coercion. This entangling has continued to present and seems likely to grow.

During the time of my fieldwork, local sheriffs enjoyed a high degree of support from the public and from legislators. The majority of sheriffs’ funding came from the state budget, though they were also active in pursuing federal grants and took a cut from the contracts for jail phone providers. Support from legislators and community members was especially visible for initiatives expanding the use of public resources for drug addiction and recovery, in the form of medically-assisted treatment in jails and the expansion of involuntary civil commitments. For people leaving jail, Massachusetts’ state health insurance has funded a large and growing network of halfway houses and treatment programs (Martin 2021). Within education, the planned restoration of federal Pell Grants for incarcerated people will lead to more educational programming for incarcerated people. Through these initiatives, jails are an access point to public health care, public higher education, and public housing. Where the expansion of the carceral state has been attributed to a retraction in social welfare (Wacquant 2010, Sufrin 2018), the progressive jail demonstrates how both punitive and caring elements can, and have long been, woven together. In this context, greater public investment in healthcare and education is more likely to increase, rather than decrease, the power of the progressive jail.

The theorization of neoliberal governmentality is helpful, especially for describing the rehabilitative programming that prisoners are subject to: incarcerated individuals are entreated to become active, self-governing “responsibilized” subjects - able to “make good choices,” and rehabilitated into “productive members of society” (Cruikshank 1999, Lyon-Callo 2008, Hackett 2013, Lyon-Callo del Percio 2018). But such a framework misses other contours of the progressive jail and its commitment to care. The

neoliberal model of rehabilitation through responsibilization, is embedded within a growing public safety net. In the refurbishment of empty jail space into the Stonybrook Stabilization and Treatment Center, the sheriff opened more space to house involuntary civil commitments. In the re-branding of “After-Incarceration Support Systems” to “All-Inclusive Support Services,” the Hampden County Sheriff opened his reentry agency to welcome anyone from the community looking for assistance accessing social welfare programs or seeking mentorship. The care of the jail is not limited to incarcerated people or even people charged with any crime.

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These are some examples of the ways that sheriffs and the many others who assemble the progressive jail interact with critiques of incarceration. A product of continuous reinvention, the progressive jail has proven compatible with any number of reforms, provided that those reforms do not fundamentally shift power towards those who are incarcerated. This is very apparent within the terrain of care, a concept that is embraced by progressive sheriffs within my fieldwork and beyond. The convergence between sheriffs and decarceral activists on the terrain of care is a particular challenge that I explore in detail below.

**The contested terrain of care**

An unexpected finding from this research was the prominence of talk about care – within the assemblage of the progressive jail, and among activists organizing for decarceration and abolition. In a fundamental sense, sheriffs and organizers working for decarceration are diametrically-opposed in their goals, with the former attempting to expand the jail’s reach by applying jail capacity to a larger range of interventions, and the latter working to decrease the use of jails, or to abolish them entirely.

Where Martin has argued that an expansion of halfway houses in Massachusetts could create “introduce
ideals of care into a brutal carceral system,” I argue that ideals of care are a part of the brutal carceral system, and have been (Martin 2021: 209). Care has been a key discourse for sheriffs, jails, police, courts, half-way houses, reentry agencies, parole officers in New England - since the establishment of these institutions. And care remains central to how these and other agents justify and shape the incapacitation, surveillance, and discipline of other humans. This is not a story of carceral actors co-opting the language of care. Care is also their language.

The phenomenon of jails embracing a framework of care is not specific to New England. This tendency is growing in places around the country. New York City has announced plans to close the notoriously overcrowded and violent Riker’s Island jail and replace it with a “smaller network of safer, modern jails.” In California, prisoner-led hunger strikes and legal challenges have sought to compel greater attention to medical care (Sufrin 2017) and have also pushed for care specific to LGBTQIA+ prisoners (Hwang 2019). Schept (2015) has documented progressive jail reforms in Indiana, and other parts of the Midwest have followed.

A sheriff in Wisconsin announced in August of 2021 that he would encourage the staff at his jail to stop using the term “inmates” and “instead refer to them as "residents" or "those who are in our care." In a press conference he cited a meeting with formerly incarcerated individuals from the Nehemiah Center for Urban Leadership Development, as well as his department’s commitment to addressing the stigma that people leaving jail face in helping him to make this change. Sheriff Kalvin Barret is quoted in the Wisconsin State Journal, stating that he views “this change in name as a way to humanize those who are within our care.” The Journal notes also that the Dane County Sheriff’s Office is undertaking a major jail renovation project that is expected to exceed the budget of $148 million.

85 https://rikers.cityofnewyork.us/).
The care offered by the progressive jail falls somewhere between the biopolitical and necropolitical (Mbembe 2003, Rouse 2021). Progressive jail care is presented by sheriffs, and even by some families of incarcerated people, as working to save lives. While they are incarcerated, the sheriff argues, they can be placed in mandatory drug treatment and taken out of contexts where they are more likely to use and overdose on drugs like heroin and fentanyl. At the same time, the resistance of sheriffs to decreasing the population of their jails, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, has meant exposing prisoners to a higher risk of death through contracting Covid-19 and other diseases (UCLA 2021). A grim irony is that prisoners are also at a heightened risk of dying by overdose immediately after incarceration, as they return with little support and a lower tolerance opioids. This “exposure to premature death” is in addition to the generalized exposure to violence and enforced isolation that accompanies being incarcerated (Gilmore 2007). The progressive jail accepts the possibility of some forms of death for incarcerated people, while working to prevent others.

Care, seen in these competing modes, is so broad that it can incorporate radically-opposed and contentious movements. Jails use coercive power to enact carceral care and abolitionists promise collective liberation through community care. From Arnold and Aulino’s (2021) definition of care as “providing for others,” we can consider how care requires an “other,” a process of differentiation between provider and recipient. In this sense, care is an othering bond. It is also an unavoidable part of the human experience. It can reinforce hierarchies and it can create relationships of mutuality across difference. Care can become oppressive when some people get stuck in particular roles, without their consent, and when those roles re-inscribe existing power inequalities.

During the period of my field work, a growing number of decarceration and abolition-oriented activists drew on concepts of care within their organizing. This work connected opposition to prisons and police with critiques of the state in failing to provide protection or support during the Covid-19 pandemic. The
city of Northampton, responding to pressure from community members and activists Northampton
Abolition Now created the Department of Community Care to create alternatives to police responses for
some mental health crises. One of Decarcerate Western Mass’ working groups, “Collective Care,”
organized letter-writing and commissary support for incarcerated community members, and our
campaigns against Sheriff Cocchi and other local sheriffs decried a lack of medical care at the Hampden
County Jail. An article in Decarcerate’s monthly newsletter connects their call for greater attention to care
to the writing of disability justice and transformative justice theorists who have drawn attention to the
care work that is necessary for sustaining everyday life, and especially for organizing and activism
towards abolitionist futures (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2016, Piepzna-Samarasinha and Dixon 2020, Kaba
2021).

The focus on care within organizing presents challenges for the goal of abolition however. Where the
progressive jail transforms prisoners into problems needing correction, some activist care practices hold
out prisoners as causes to support, flattened into “infographics” and reduced to donation requests. In this
mode, collective care risks becoming a substitute for collective liberation, rather than a necessary part of
it. Without reciprocity between who gives care and who receives care, if the same people are fixed as only
care-givers and others as only receivers – and more importantly - if the same people remain in decision-
making roles, then these projects are failing to find mutuality. Mutual aid or harm reduction projects that
aren’t confronting power inequalities within those projects risk keeping incarcerated and formerly
incarcerated people stuck in roles of subordination. Further, they risk becoming complicit with the
carceral care of progressive jails.

Demands for more care from prisons and jails can displace demands for rights, or detract from more
liberatory organizing towards revolutionary change. The Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee
operates on a model of organizing prisoners as workers, mobilizing strikes as a mode of resistance.
Building on earlier Black and Third World liberation models of prisoners as potential comrades in a
revolutionary class, Burton (2021) describes Black prisoners as prisoners of war within a framework of domestic warfare.

**Insights for abolitionist scholar-activism**

This ethnography has sought to make several interventions. One is to center the voices of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people - community members who are often dismissed as dangerous or untrustworthy; romanticized into figures of inherent radical political alignment; or reduced into objects requiring care and rehabilitation.

For me, a commitment to activist ethnography has meant taking seriously the commitments of the people involved in the care work of the jail, including sheriffs, re-entry program staff and the mentors I volunteered alongside. In my research I have sought to understand their mode of supporting people, while still fundamentally disagreeing with their attachment to incarceration. I’ve volunteered within the jail, while still maintaining a commitment to abolishing it as an institution. Any intervention that can help people that takes place within the jail, could do far more good outside of it.

As a university-based researcher I have tried to take action to support the goal of abolition, and support incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people building political power. Much of this has taken the form of channeling resources to support the slow work of relationship building and capacity building to support local community organizing and advocacy. Some examples have been: using university resources like premium Zoom accounts to host weekly organizing meeting, reserving campus spaces for outreach and planning meetings, and inviting organizers to speak in classes and at events for which they have been compensated. With the UMass Alliance for Community Transformation, I have had classes collaborate with formerly incarcerated community organizers engaged in criminal justice reform, including Cassandra through EPOCA and MASC and Katie and Neighbor 2 Neighbor, and I have brought in community
organizers and activists as participants in credited classes. I have also been part of efforts to change discriminatory admissions policies that have prevented formerly incarcerated students from attending UMass.

Each of these efforts are also deeply fraught. To Messiah’s concerns, some individual organizers or advocates end up with regular invitations to speak on panels and in classes, limiting the number of voices that are brought into academic spaces and making them into un-elected representatives of formerly incarcerated people. Academics are biased in who we choose to partner with, and limited in the number of people with whom we can partner as collaborators.

Without creating broader academic, financial, housing, and emotional support, simply ending the admissions policies that discriminate against students with criminal records is also unlikely to lead to a large number of formerly incarcerated students being able to enter, let alone graduate, from the university. The few who succeed, through their own will and networks of support, can serve to improve the image of the university, while still excluding the vast majority of formerly incarcerated, potential students. Without active recruitment and admissions advising, and substantial ongoing university support, the majority of potential formerly incarcerated students who might otherwise be interested will likely still be too discouraged by experiences of educational discrimination, or in too precarious an economic situation to do so.

**Future Research and Compromised Action**

Amidst these contradictions and challenges, there are still ways that academics and activists can still work towards decarceration, and the abolition of prisons and jails. We can continue to amplify the voices of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated organizers. Michel Foucault and other activists of the Groupe d’informations sur les prisons (GIP) sought, from 1970-1973, to “donner la parole aux prisonniers” or
give the floor to prisoners, to speak through to the conditions of incarceration they experienced (Zurn and Dilts 2015). Building sustained channels for communication remains necessary work, as is making sure that these channels are accessible to diverse modes of communicating and being in the world.

Academics and activists can continue to use institutional and grassroots resources to make organizing and advocacy work more accessible. This could look like building up the leadership of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people to take power within the existing institutions of the overlapping prison-industrial-academic-non-profit-treatment assemblages, so that people with lived experience are deciding the policies that affect them and their communities. Just Leadership USA is exemplary within this mode, as is Black and Pink and the National Council for Incarcerated Women and Girls. Projects like Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity (BOLD) and UACT’s Organizing for New Movement Leaders do similar work, though with a broader focus.

The assemblage of the jail is resilient. Sheriffs find new reasons to lock people up, new reasons to surveil them, new roles for their deputies and houses of corrections, new modalities of correction, and new visions of a “corrected” prisoner. Sheriffs and others working within progressive jails and the larger carceral assemblage are constantly updating the system, incorporating new programs, new prisoners, new discourses, and new collaborators.

For abolitionists, seeking to end the progressive jail requires being against care, or at least the forms of care that the jail provides. This is a difficult stance within a context where support is badly needed. But only the abolition of that system – through decarceration, and through defunding the prison and police – can create the space needed to scale-up forms of care, and responses to harm, that are not paternalistic, that do not center the state, or exist to benefit the industries that make up the prison industrial complex. Formerly incarcerated organizers did not name the care of the progressive jail, or of community-based projects, as what supported them in becoming organizers, but projects that encouraged their agency, their
analysis of the larger structures in which their incarceration took place, and relationships that they built with mentors and with peers.

Liberatory forms of collective care and transformative justice are already being imagined and practiced in communities, in transformative justice projects, in harm reduction projects, often building on pre-existing practices and relationships that have long been neglected or targeted by the police and prison system.\(^{87}\) Interventions can look like: training community members in mediation and de-escalation of conflict, building community accountability processes to support those who have been harmed and those who have done harm, ensuring access to safe housing for people in crisis. The ubiquity of carceral care and of the progressive jail assemblage means that there are also a multitude of places from which to confront them.

The Puritan: Carceral care and a glimmer of abolition

In downtown Springfield, next to the central public library, a massive bronze sculpture of Deacon Samuel Chapin, one of the city’s founders, looms in the middle of a small park, overlooking the busy intersection of Chestnut and State streets and staring down towards the rest of downtown Springfield. Chapin is portrayed mid-stride, a staff in one hand, a large bible gripped in the other, his cape flowing behind him. His expression is severe.

Chapin, a faith leader who moved his family from England to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, was among the Puritan settlers engaged in the colonization of what would become New England. In the settlement of Springfield, on occupied Pocumtuck land, he was elected by a town meeting of free white men to the first board of selectmen to govern the town’s affairs. He was later appointed a town commissioner, which included the judicial authority to decide criminal and civil cases, inflict punishments, and to swear-in constables. Chapin, as commissioner, selectman, and deacon, was a religious and civic leader, who embodied an intertwining of authority, punishment, and paternalistic moral guidance.\(^8\) This model continues in the form of the county sheriffs, who oversee their respective counties, imposing violence as a form of care and moral leadership.

A twist in the story of “the Puritan” statue is an argument made by a local historian, that the artist’s inspiration for the face of the statue was not the wealthy Chapin descendant who commissioned the statue, but rather the abolitionist John Brown, another Chapin descendant, nicknamed “the Puritan” for his political fervor, and who had visited Springfield to assist in organizing safehouses and armed defense committees to resist slavecatchers\(^9\). Brown was executed after an attempt to instigate a slave rebellion in Virginia in 1859, and his efforts in coordination with Black organizers are credited with helping to start the Civil War. The artist, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, was among many Northern abolitionist admirers of John Brown and local historian Stephen Jendrysik argues that this statue secretly references this other historical figure. Embedded even in this monument to carceral care is a threat of abolitionist possibility.

APPENDIX

ADDITIONAL NOTES


Figure 9: Map of Abolitionist Projects

Prison Abolition Organizing Landscape in Western Massachusetts

**Jails and Houses of Corrections:**
- Greenfield – Franklin County jail and House of Corrections
- Pittsfield – Berkshire County jail and House of Corrections
- Northampton – Hampshire County Jail and House of Corrections

**Centralized Western Mass Regional Women’s Correctional Center:**
- Ludlow – Hampden County Jail and House of Corrections
- Stonehill – Single Whitlock Stabilization and Treatment Center
- Springfield – Western Massachusetts Recovery and Wellness Center (Mill Street)

**All-Inclusive Support Services (AIS):**
- Statewide harm reduction coalition (SIRRC) – opposition to the Chopineau Women’s Jail construction and Greenfield Jail renovation (2009)
- Justice for Charles, Justice for Ayoub
- Prison Birth Project – anti-stigmatizing for incarcerated women giving birth (2014)
- Massachusetts Prisoners and Organizers Working for Environmental Justice (2009)

**New Instantiation of the “Progressive Jail Assemblage” since Writing:**

413Cares: Connecting People with Resources (Summer 2022): https://www.413cares.org/

As the website describes: “413Cares is an innovative community portal that provides online access for residents of Western Massachusetts to available resources from housing, to healthcare, early education and more.” The coalition includes Holyoke Safe Neighborhood Initiative, a project of the Hampden County Sheriff’s Office on the advisory committee, and the “Hampden County Mentoring” which includes the Hampden County Sheriff’s Department, District Attorney’s Office, and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention as partners.

**Western Mass (Multiple Counties):**
- Decarcerate Western Mass
- Wildflower Alliance
- Trans Asylum Seekers Support Network
- Western Mass Community Mutual Aid Coalition for Abolition
- Reforming and Decarceration (Jails With Justice)
- Pioneer Valley Workers Center

**Hampshire County:**
- Real Cost of Prisons, Prison Policy Initiative
- The Resource Center (FASCR), Northampton Abolition Now, DFrench3
- Hampden County People’s Fund

**Hampden County (Multiple Counties):**
- Collective Justice Network
- Pioneer Valley Workers Center
- The Shoestring, Long River Street Media Collective

**Statewide/Central/Eastern MA:**
- Families for Justice as Healing (FJAH)
- Incarceration Initiative
- Black and Pink
- SURJ, Massachusetts Against Solitary Confinement
- DePrisoners and Prisoners Organizing for Community Advancement (Worcester)
- Deeper Than Water, League of Women Voters
- Mass Abolitionist Coalition

**Historic Precedents:**
- Northampton Association of Education and Industry (1842-1846)
- League of Gleaners (Springfield – 1833)
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