

Worker-Owned Cooperatives for Formerly Incarcerated People:

Avenues for Racial and Economic Justice

**By Kendall Johnson, Eric Larson, Trisha Oliver,
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Executive Summary

People with criminal records are locked out of good jobs. In an era of “color-blind” racism, employers, landlords, and others can legally discriminate on the basis of criminal record.¹ The gap between the rich and the poor is growing, and the system of mass incarceration and the long-term collateral consequences of punishment serve as a “central engine of American inequality” (Hinton 2021, p. 1). Today in the U.S., nearly 100 million adults have a criminal record, as the criminal legal system ensnares an ever-growing spectrum of our friends, family, and neighbors. Born in systemic racism, our system of policing and imprisonment continues to disproportionately impact Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color (BIPOC). Employers continue to deny jobs to people both because of their criminal record as well as their race. Far from improving, the racial wealth gap has actually been growing. As one analysis shows, “[i]n 2019, Black Americans held just 17 cents on average for every white dollar of wealth” (Derenoncourt et al. 2022).

This report, which is intended for community members, elected officials, and activists, explores one potential solution: worker-owned cooperative businesses. It examines the impacts of worker-owned cooperatives created by and for formerly incarcerated people. It considers the potential and future impacts of these cooperatives as well. This report argues that creating these kinds of worker-owned, democratically run businesses can forge avenues for racial and economic justice. They can give people hope. They can create pathways to community control and collective benefit, even as they provide necessary income for survival and sustenance. They can inspire new and more equitable ways of building relationships with others. Through interviews, documentary research, and focus groups, our team has found that the impacts of these cooperatives are wide-ranging, and could provide a vital pathway in our home state of Rhode Island for seeking new kinds of community economic vitality.

Introduction

Few people who return home from prison find good jobs. That's not to say they don't look. They take job training courses and obtain certifications. They scour the "help wanted" ads. They ask their friends and relatives. They build relationships with prison re-entry agencies and social justice organizations. They take jobs that have no future. They remain in jobs where employers take advantage of their situation. Formerly incarcerated people have continuously attested that society locks them out of good jobs. In an era of "colorblind" racism, employers, landlords, and authors can legally discriminate on the basis of criminal record. Our economic system relies on keeping some groups on the bottom, and the criminal legal system today serves as a crucial "engine for ensuring American inequality" (Hinton 2021, p. 1). The solution for poverty and inequality? It's usually more of the same – punishment. The U.S. has the biggest prison population in the world (ICPR 2021).

The system ensnares an ever-growing spectrum of our friends, family, neighbors, and even children. It disproportionately impacts Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color. Scholar James Forman, Jr. has noted that "[i]n the era of mass incarceration, poor African Americans are not given the option of great schools, community investment, and job training" (Forman, Jr. 2012). Instead, society gives them over-policing and prisons. As a system shaped during the enslavement of Africans, it creates scapegoats rather than confront the root causes of complex social problems.

It's a violent cycle.² Media outlets gain viewers by whipping up panic about Black criminality, and in doing so justify failed policies and punishments like the War on Drugs. Blacks and whites use and sell drugs at similar rates, yet drug arrests of Black people far out-pace those of whites. Even in an era of gradual cannabis legalization, the system continues to disproportionately imprison Black and brown people on marijuana charges. It's a system that entraps Black and brown youth and children. Police have arrested Black girls as young as six years old at school (Jones 2022). The wealth gap between Blacks and whites hasn't improved since the 1950s. In fact, it is worse than in the 1980s (Derenoncourt et al. 2022). For every dollar of wealth a single white man has, a single Black man has 17 cents. A single Black woman has less than 9 cents (Chang, Kent, and McCulloch 2021).

Some community organizations call for imagining new forms of accountability and transformative justice. Some call for "Jobs, not Jails." Youth groups call for "Counselors, not Cops." The Movement for Black Lives has confronted systemic racism and police brutality. Yet the criminal legal system remains powerful and expansive. Of the hundreds of thousands of people released from prisons each year, the majority end up returning.³ Today in the U.S., between 70 million and 100 million U.S. adults have some type of criminal record, which is nearly

one in three adults (Avery, Emsellem, and Lu 2019; Vallas and Dietrich 2014). Thirty-three percent are Black, despite Blacks only constituting 12 percent of the population (Gramlich 2019). Black women, and women in general, have seen some of the fastest-rising incarceration rates in recent years (The Sentencing Project 2022). In addition, women's prisons tend to offer the fewest kinds of job training or employment services.

In this kind of a society, people returning home from prison face a range of obstacles in trying to get a good job, particularly if they already face barriers because of their race, gender, sexual identity, and other factors. Recognizing the interrelated oppressions of racism and barriers against those with criminal records, in particular, helped lead us to start thinking about what it means for formerly incarcerated people to create their own companies, thus creating their own jobs.

Our focus has been on creating not just jobs, but “jobs with justice”: jobs that also provide people with dignity, democracy, and a living wage.⁴ Jobs that create careers and opportunities for collective ownership and stability. Partly inspired by the cooperatives that incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people have created in other countries, our community-based research project has sought to learn more about how formerly incarcerated people can create worker-owned cooperative businesses to build wealth and create jobs for themselves and their communities.⁵

A worker-owned cooperative business is one in which all workers are also part-owners. Instead of individual ownership, it's about collective and community ownership. Cooperative businesses focus on the “bottom-line,” but also on benefits for the community. In a society where we are trained to focus on “me” rather than “us,” a worker-owned cooperative allows both individuals and the collective to benefit, economically and socially. In a society where we are trained to step on someone else to get ahead, a cooperative is a democratic business that worker-owners run together. It's a democratic enterprise in which its worker-owners make the rules. What could creating worker-owned cooperatives mean for the formerly incarcerated, particularly in Rhode Island? That's the subject of this report.

The Team

This project, guided by a Participatory Action Research methodology, was carried out by a Research Team of six individuals. The Research Associates were Kendall Johnson, Trisha Oliver, Alexis Morales, David-Allen “Bear” Sumner, and Tunji Yerima. The Facilitator was Eric Larson, Associate Professor of Crime and Justice Studies at the University of Massachusetts. The individuals listed below are co-authors of this report

Biographies:

Kendall Johnson

My name is Kendall Johnson. I’m 33 years old. I served 12 years and a few months in jail from the ages of 20-32. I did 10 years in the Adult Correctional Institution in Rhode Island and two years and change in the federal system at FCI Berlin.⁶ I’ve been in medium, maximum, and high security, and spent a year in segregation in high security. I was released April 15, 2021. I hit the ground running. I had two jobs lined up and I was able to obtain a third. I am currently pursuing a business degree at the Community College of Rhode Island. I am also working with the Social Enterprise Greenhouse (in Providence, Rhode Island) to develop a business idea, and I am exploring an opportunity in owning a legal cannabis dispensary.

Eric Larson

Hi everyone. I’m Eric Larson. I’m an associate professor at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. Through my work in the Crime and Justice Studies program I have researched alternative forms of justice and the potential impacts of building worker-owned cooperatives. As a longtime Rhode Island resident, I have participated in community-based research projects about systemic racism and barriers for formerly incarcerated Rhode Islanders, including joint work with Fuerza Laboral/Power of Workers, my students at UMass Dartmouth, and Dr. prabhdeep singh kehal (University of Wisconsin).

Trisha Oliver

Hi, my name is Trisha Oliver. I am 39 years old. I served four years in the women’s Adult Correctional Institution (Rhode Island). I began my sentence in 2016 and was released on parole in 2020 during the pandemic. At the ACI there was very little training and educational programs for women, and there was no discharge planning upon release, so I came home with nothing but the clothes I went in with. But I was determined. Even though it was difficult I found a low-end job and returned to school. Now I am a manager at a store and I just finished my case management certification from Roger Williams University. I lost two friends to mental health struggles upon their release from prison, and I am

passionate about advocating for mental health support for people both in prison and outside.

David-Allen (a.k.a “Bear”) Sumner Sr.

My name is David-Allen Sumner, (aka Bear). I was released from the ACI in 1991 after doing 13 years of a 40-year sentence. In 1996 I decided to give my life to changing the culture for and of our youth. I have worked in the South Providence community for over 20 years and counting. Most people know me for working at Davey Lopes Recreational Center in South Providence or coaching AAU basketball, or refereeing for the Recreational League. I helped spearhead a program working with troubled teens from the training school and the neighborhoods that were at risk. I also was the first “Street Worker” with The Institute For The Study And Practice Of Nonviolence with Teny Gross.

Tunji Yerima

My name is Tunji Yerima and I’m a 45 year-old father of 2 boys and I’m a returning citizen from incarceration. I am a member of the Behind the Walls Committee of Direct Action for Rights and Equality and Black and Pink of Providence. The organizations stand up and devote their time to fight against the injustice of yesterday’s norm by seeking today’s and tomorrow’s social justice and criminal justice reform. I am also trying to bring Clean Slate to Rhode Island. This is a movement/law that is sweeping the country. It automatically expunges and/or seals the felonies on individuals’ criminal records.

Methodology and Background

The study consisted of a research phase and a community action phase.

Research phase

We initiated the research phase with an orientation process. Orientation involved us being trained in cooperative economics from the Kola Nut collaborative in Chicago (<https://kolanutcollab.org/>). The Kola Nut collaborative's workshops offered an introduction to worker-owned cooperative businesses, situating cooperative economics in Black history.

The research phase revolved around several different kinds of research methods:

- Interviews with existing cooperatives: We interviewed or gathered information about cooperatives created by formerly incarcerated people in Los Angeles, CA; Washington, D.C.; Chicago, IL; Guayama, Puerto Rico; Greenfield, MA; and Worcester, MA. We also interviewed people creating cooperatives of formerly incarcerated people in Brockton, MA, and gathered information about a similar effort in Springfield, MA. Interviews were held via Zoom, and were conducted by members of the Research Team. We selected cooperatives to interview after conducting online research into existing cooperatives, asking cooperators in our networks for references to cooperative projects they knew about, and meeting other worker-owners in regional events.
- We carried out interviews with organizations supporting cooperatives and other businesses. These interviews ranged from representatives of the U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives to local cooperative promoters with expertise in specific industries. We conducted a total of eight interviews for this part of the research. We also had meetings with Small Business Administration representatives and entrepreneurs.
- We held focus groups about cooperatives with formerly incarcerated people. We held three focus groups of six formerly incarcerated people each to understand their thoughts about cooperative businesses. Our approach to recruit focus group participants was to promote the opportunity at probation offices, at reentry agencies, at local social organizations, and within social networks of Research Team members. Our focus was to recruit participants from Rhode Island, since our community-based project would soon be launching a community action campaign about the barriers formerly incarcerated people in Rhode Island face.

Community Action phase

As noted above, this project consisted of both a research phase and a community action phase. Our community action phase has been dedicated to incubating worker-owned cooperatives with formerly incarcerated people in Rhode Island. Through the process of working with community members, we have created a new cooperative organization: the Break the Cycle Cooperative Hub. Break the Cycle's mission is "to create and promote access to ownership and employment through worker-owned cooperatives for formerly incarcerated people and BIPOC communities, thereby creating avenues for economic and racial justice."⁷

Limitations of this Research Study

As with all studies, our team has considered the limitations of our research. We did not interview all existing cooperatives created by or with formerly incarcerated people in the country. This study only represents a sample of them (Section III). In terms of our research sample size, funding constraints made it difficult to recruit more formerly incarcerated participants to the focus groups. Since many of our participants in the focus groups were drawn from referrals from reentry agencies or social organizations, we may have inadvertently drawn from a subset of formerly incarcerated who had been exposed to messages of working together to enact social change or social justice. As further explained Methodological Appendix I, we took steps to ensure that all interview scripts and focus group workshops were value neutral and balanced (Section IV). Lastly, our focus groups mainly included residents of Rhode Island, and were 72 percent men, both of which limit the implications and relevance for other states and other populations (Section IV). Note that our interviewees, as opposed to our focus group participants, represent more geographical and gender diversity. Demographic information for all study participants is available in Methodological Appendix II.

Section I.

Barriers to Employment for Formerly Incarcerated People

Getting a job is difficult for people with criminal convictions, but getting a *good* job is almost impossible, especially if you're Black. As one of our Research Team members has summarized, "Once a felon, always a felon."

Scholars and advocates have noted how having a felony on your record can bar you from everything from public assistance to college loans, not to mention employment. Studies indicate that the unemployment rate for formerly incarcerated people is commonly around five times higher than the national unemployment rate. For formerly incarcerated people, it's like living through the Great Depression – or worse. The unemployment rate was 27 percent for formerly incarcerated people in 2017 (Couloute and Kopf 2018). Employers have indicated that they are less likely to hire someone they think is an "ex-offender" than from any other social group or background (Holzer, Raphael, and Stoll 2001).

Job training programs in jails and prisons are minimal, particularly for women. In addition, they are generally oriented to low-waged work. In some cases, people have been trained in prison for a job, only to learn upon release that their criminal record bars them from employment in that field. Over the last year, many participants in this study have alluded to the psychological damage of continually getting rejected, particularly after putting time and effort into job training and professional certificates. As noted earlier, far from a small minority of our population, nearly one in three U.S. adults has some kind of criminal record (Avery, Emsellem, and Lu 2019).

Barriers to *good* jobs force people to accept the *worst* jobs, and those are sometimes denied to them as well (Pager, Western, and Bonikowski 2009). These low-paying jobs are dangerous. They're onerous. They violate people's dignity and sense of worth. And there's lots of risk for abuse. Creating bad jobs with low wages may benefit the big employers, but it creates ripple effects of harm for formerly incarcerated people and their communities. The stigma of the criminal record makes it hard for people to escape. Many choose not to apply for better jobs, or access educational and governmental opportunities, for fear that their record will be discovered (Lageson 2016). Nationally, studies show how wage growth over time among people who have been incarcerated is lower than for the general population (Lyons and Pettit 2011). Many work two or three poorly paying jobs just to get by, or turn to work in illicit economies. Either way, these scenarios can create unsustainable cycles, running people into exhaustion, straining their mental health, and often leading to more contact with police.

Barriers to good jobs are especially pronounced for Black people with criminal records (Couloute and Kopf 2018). They continue to be “last hired, first fired.” In one study of male job applicants, Black men with records got called back 40 percent less than white men with records with the same qualifications. In another segment of the study, Black men with no criminal records got less call-backs than white applicants with the similar qualifications – even though the white applicants had recently been released from prison (Pager 2003). Women, and particularly Black women, face compounding forms of barriers as they are often the primary or secondary caregivers of others, and battle entrenched sexism in labor markets. One study indicates that a criminal record for women is even more harmful than for men when it comes to getting a job. In another study, Black women and Latinas with records were called back for jobs at only a fraction of the rate of white women with records. Even when employers don’t check criminal records, they “perceive criminality” amongst Black job applicants and hire them less, or “channel” them into lower-rung jobs (Holzer, Raphael, and Stoll 2006; Pager, Western, and Bonikowski 2009; Couloute and Kopf 2018).

For our research team, the lack of good jobs available for formerly incarcerated people led us to ask how and if people with criminal records could create their own jobs – by creating worker-owned, cooperative businesses.

Key Benefits of Cooperative Businesses

1

Connection: The criminal legal system separates and isolates people. Cooperatives are about connecting with people in new ways.

2

Control: Disenfranchised people have been denied having a say in the decisions that affect them. In cooperatives, everyone makes the rules together.

3

Income: Worker-owners value good jobs with living wages and educational opportunities.

4

Trust: Co-ops help forge new ways to trust and build relationships by working together.

5

Wealth: Worker-owned businesses can create generational wealth, as all worker-owners have a stake in ownership.

6

Community: Unlike other businesses, cooperatives stay in their communities and are controlled by the community members who work there - not outside shareholders.

7

Resilience: When times get tough, cooperatives have proven to be more resilient than other businesses.

8

Togetherness: Worker-run co-ops are part of an international cooperative movement, with resources, funds, grants, and support from cooperatives all over the world.

9

Regeneration: Co-ops are businesses that serve community needs rather than extract community resources.

10

Hope: A cooperative business can give someone hope and security for the future.

Section II.

Building Worker-Owned Cooperative Businesses

A worker-owned cooperative business is owned by the employees of the company. These “worker-owners” both work at the company and own it. They run it together. They receive a wage for their labor, and they share profits and losses together.

Just as formerly incarcerated people are denied opportunities, they have also been denied ownership. Whether in terms of owning a home, owning a business, or even owning their own labor, communities most impacted by mass incarceration have often been controlled by real estate developers, elected officials, bankers, employers, and other elites.⁸

As scholar-activist Jessica Gordon Nembhard and others have shown, oppressed communities have often used cooperation as a way to overcome barriers. Whether the free Black people in Rhode Island centuries ago or the Latin American and Caribbean diasporic communities more recently, they have created cooperative stores and businesses as ways to ensure their communities have the products and jobs they need (DuBois 1907; Gordon Nembhard 2015).⁹

While a big corporation exists primarily to make a profit, a cooperative business exists primarily to benefit its worker-owners and their communities. Cooperatives around the country, and around the world, run on participatory, democratic methods. They strive for equality. They use open communication to build trust. They make their decisions through dialogue and try to achieve consensus.¹⁰

In a “dog eat dog” world, cooperatives strive for something different. While society tells us we have to step on someone else to get ahead, in cooperative economics everyone steps together. It’s not about tearing each other down. It’s not a “crabs in a barrel” mentality. Instead, it’s about individual benefit as tied to collective benefit. It’s about “me,” but also about “we.”

Section III.

The Impact of Cooperatives Created by Returning Individuals

Formerly incarcerated cooperators attest to how their cooperatives have generated significant positive impacts at the personal, household, and community levels, both in terms of economics as well as in terms of environmental justice, mental health, and community building and economic development. This section is primarily based on a selection of our interviews with worker-owned cooperatives created by formerly incarcerated people, as well as with one organization (Collective Remake) that works to incubate and support these kinds of co-ops.

ChiFresh Kitchen (Chicago)¹¹

ChiFresh Kitchen in Chicago is a catering business founded by formerly incarcerated people in 2020 and currently makes several hundred meals a day for schools, transitional homes, and senior centers. The business, which is led by Black women, recently acquired its own building, and plans to generate as many as 5000 meals per day as well as operate as a restaurant and market for local urban farmers.

We interviewed two of their founding worker-owners in Fall 2021.

One of them, named Kimberly, told us that *“ChiFresh definitely helped me out of a dark space, not just financially, but mentally as well. It gave me the motivation to know that I not only deserved the second chance, but I had a second chance and I could make what I wanted to make out of that second chance. I love my atmosphere, I love our gumption, how we just go get it on a daily basis. Knowing that all five of us came from the background that we came from being reformed and everything, it’s just amazing to me and it’s daily motivation and encouragement to know that we are accomplishing the things that we are accomplishing, and also making a difference in society.”*

As another worker-owner (Renée) said, the impact has been felt at the household and community levels as well.

“We both came from the same place, we went through the same transitional house, experiencing the homelessness, being hungry at times, and not really knowing what your employment status will be. For me, coming out, that was a problem for me because I felt like I wouldn’t be able to make it out here because

of the background and not being able to find employment.”

“With ChiFresh, it’s helping us all, but it’s just helping me to be able to maintain what I had already started to establish and build. ... [W]ith the help of ChiFresh and my living wage, I am trying to transition into a home. Now as we speak, I am actually house hunting for a house, so it’s really been great. ... I think [the greater effect will be to] create more job opportunities to have a greater effect just to employ people so that they can be able to earn a living wage and be able to live and make it out here because it is not easy. It’s not easy out here, coming out not knowing how you’re going to sleep, not knowing how you’re going to survive, so just to be able to create that platform for people, I think that’s a great thing.”

They see their main product – food – as part of creating a healthier economic and educational ecosystem in Chicago.

As Kimberly said,

“Our passion is targeting transitional homes, where we know that a lot of homeless people reside. We [also] have a few [worker-owners] that have young kids that experience just being hungry, trying to salvage through what they were being fed at school as well, because the food was unappetizing. Those two things are dear to our hearts being as though a couple of us have experienced being inside a transitional home and knowing what their meals are like, as well as a couple with small kids who come home from school hungry all the time, because they couldn’t eat what they were being served for lunch.”

She noted that hungry students perform worse in school, and the co-op’s focus on serving culturally appropriate food (e.g., soul food) helps generate healthy and culturally relevant alternatives. “Everyone is connected to food,” she said.

“ChiFresh definitely helped me out of a dark space, not just financially, but mentally as well. It gave me the motivation to know that I not only deserved the second chance, but I had a second chance and I could make what I wanted to make out of that second chance”

– Kimberly, ChiFresh

Collective Remake (Los Angeles)¹²



Collective Remake

For members of Collective Remake in Los Angeles, the personal experiences in cooperative economics have been particularly transformative. Collective Remake is an organization dedicated to promoting cooperative economic solutions for people returning home from prison. Initiated in 2016, its members have successfully created a cooperative art business named L.A. Eco Arts. Like others we interviewed, their focus has been on creating economic solutions that regenerate (give back to) their communities rather than extract from them. The L.A. Eco Arts cooperative is dedicated to using sustainable and reused materials to create art, and affirms that “[w]e are reclaiming lives and protecting the environment.” In addition to supporting L.A. Eco Arts, Collective Remake is also incubating a recycling cooperative.

For members of Collective Remake, the impact of exploring cooperative economic practices has been important for them, socially, emotionally, and economically.

As Regina said,

“You meet people and the surroundings and these teachings, and you build a comradery. We started trusting one another through the principles. And believe

it or not, slowly but surely it started just falling into place. You build a trust that you probably never had with strangers. These strangers are there for you. The like-mindedness is from where you come from. Excuse my expression, but the majority of us come from a messed up situation before or during [incarceration], or sometimes after.

She continued to say,

“I didn’t even know anything about co-ops. I was astonished at how far back they go. ... The things that we learned and how people were willing to teach one another – this was a space where you can open up. When you open up, you cause other people to open up. When you help other people, they learn how to accept that and help others. Going through all of this and trying to get these co-ops established, a lot came with it. I learned a lot. I changed a lot and I feel safe in saying that the people around me did, too.”

For LaRae,

“My experience is that when people have been oppressed a lot in a lot of different systems, then it’s hard for us to break out of the individual mindset that I got to do everything by myself and to work collaboratively. I found it very important for the principles and values to be the glue that people are going back to that touchdown of life, “We’re doing this work together and we’re doing it in this way.” These are the practices, these are the things we uphold so that it helps us move through those rough moments.”

Even for people more broadly,

“I think it’s really difficult for someone to transform their thinking from being an employee. That’s what we’re taught from school: wear the uniform, do all the things, pass the test, be an employee. The community that has stuck together, it allows for people whenever they’re ready to take that jump and be like ‘Yes, you know what? I could do cooperative economics.’”

Down the Road Movers (Rhode Island)¹³

One new cooperative, Down the Road Movers, Inc., has witnessed both the benefits and barriers for these kinds of businesses. Founded in late 2021, its founding worker-owners had spent years organizing for the rights of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people through the community organization Direct Action for Rights and Equality. Down the Road Movers specializes in short-distance and long-distance moving but also does home staging, foreclosure cleanouts, and “white glove” moving services.

The cooperative makes it clear on its web site that it is a mission-driven business dedicated to “break[ing] generational cycles of poverty and incarceration.” It employs “formerly incarcerated people because we recognize that many of us grew up in heavily under-resourced and policed neighborhoods; that many of us turned to criminalized work because it was the only opportunity to survive and possibly thrive; and that with support, people are always capable of growth.”

For Down the Road, “We believe that everybody deserves respectful and meaningful employment and a livable income. Through a co-op model, our workers have ownership over our shared work and our business.” Acknowledging the pressures and inequalities in gentrifying cities like Providence, R.I., they offer sliding scale services for people of different income levels. Much of their marketing and networking is done through Instagram and word-of-mouth. For one of its founding worker-owners, Juan Turbidez, it “feels good to help people in one of the most stressful periods of their life” (e.g., coming home from prison). The experience has also helped him to see that, as he told the *Boston Globe*, “I’m an asset to my community.” Through his work with Down the Road Movers, “we help people” (Cronin 2022).

Tightshift Laboring Cooperative (Washington, D.C.)¹⁴

Tightshift was a cooperative business that existed between 2016 and 2019. It specialized in general labor, hauling, and cleaning services. Its founding worker-owners decided to end its operations in 2019 as they sought to find ways to create cooperative housing for people coming out of prison, who often ended up homeless given the increasing rent prices in Washington. They are currently in rural Virginia creating opportunities for housing and cooperative land ownership for formerly incarcerated people.

When asked about the impacts of their cooperative, one founding worker-owner, Juan Reid, said that “[i]t impacted me personally because people could see where I had come from. Now that I was [creating a cooperative business], that meant, matter of fact, that people can change their own life for the better.” Another founding worker-owner, Rae Basille, noted that the presence of the co-op meant that “everyone knew there was a community workplace. You knew someone was looking for work and they knew who to call. We really worked with pretty much anybody who at least gave anybody a try, who was serious about trying to do these things.”

For Reid, cooperative economics meant approaching work, business, and communities with different kinds of values. While learning about cooperative principles, he said that “[i]t call[ed] me to be your own boss. Just seeing how coops can work, that shit was motivating. It was inspiring to know we ain’t got to lean on the same system that shuns us.” He noted that “[i]f we’re working for someone else and they aren’t sharing the profits or leaving space for you to influence decisions, it’s just exploitation. Cooperatives show that people don’t have to exploit other people in order to have a business,” Reid said (Barrett 2019).

The Tightshift cooperative incorporated collective storytelling into its model to create ways for members to deal with the traumas of incarceration and inequality. Reid said that “[i]t’s hard, man, with a lot of hard-ass running from the streets.” Noting the pain and violence people have endured, Reid said that the

trauma people have endured “has to be addressed unless, you’re going to have a disposable type culture where like ... ‘You’re messing up? You gone.’” He said that “If your son messes up, you aren’t going to say, ‘You got to go.’” Instead, he said, “You’re going to be there. For your family, your brother, your mother, you’re going to be there. Why can’t we look at each other as family? We try to approach the co-op as a family. We’re family first. Let’s make this the most important thing of our relationship.”



Tightshift Laboring Cooperative

Section IV.

Potential and Future Impacts of Cooperatives for Formerly Incarcerated People

Our study has also sought to examine how and if broader segments of the formerly incarcerated population think cooperatives could be a good idea. To examine the future prospects, we carried out three focus groups of six formerly incarcerated people each. Before participating, each participant attended two workshops that presented the benefits and challenges of cooperative businesses, with a focus on cooperatives for formerly incarcerated people.

The participants in our focus groups overwhelmingly agreed that starting cooperatives by and for formerly incarcerated people constituted a good economic opportunity. Only two of the 18 participants expressed hesitation or concern, and both of their sources of concern were less about cooperatives themselves and more about structural barriers that constrain formerly incarcerated people in business-related opportunities more generally.

Some responded to our question about if cooperatives constitute a good economic opportunity by noting how exploitative labor conditions are in general for formerly incarcerated people. For one participant,

“[Y]ou’re at the bottom of the barrel when it comes to job opportunities, so you’re going to have to take what you can get. Whether they pay them minimum wage or less than minimum wage, or under the table, you got to just take what you can get because your record is going to always present itself in a negative way. ... With a co-op, you’re being your own boss. You can tell yourself how you feel, pay yourself how you [want] ... ‘That shit pay me \$20 an hour ... [but] that should’ve been a \$50-an-hour job or something.’ ... [B]ecause you’re a formerly incarcerated individual, now, you are subjected to getting the bare minimum.”

After asking them what they thought of cooperatives as economic opportunities, we also asked about the specific things they liked about the idea of cooperatives. In these answers, the participants took the discussion beyond the “economic opportunity” of cooperatives and focused more on the social and personal implications. They took the discussion beyond wages and profit, and more into how working at a worker-owned cooperative could allow them to enjoy a fuller and more complete life in general – something denied to them when they were incarcerated.

Some focused on how they were tired of being judged by others, and a cooperative would allow them to escape the constant surveillance and judgment they had so often experienced. For some, the “judgment” they referred to meant the broader judgements they faced in society. For one, that judgment meant the constant gaze of the employer, imploring you to work faster. Working at a cooperative, particularly one for and by formerly incarcerated people, would allow them to escape the constant presence of the surveilling gaze. One said that

“[After prison] it took me 16 months to get a job, a correct job because a lot of people don’t feel comfortable around us. If I’m around the same people with the same strike, we’re going to feel comfortable with each other. A lot of folks don’t want us around because they’re afraid of us, for other reasons, for the past. Like the young lady said earlier, ‘We all deserve a second chance in life.’ It’s very hard to find a comfortable job where everyone is on the same page.”

Two other focus group participants complained about how they were forced to work temporary jobs or entry-level jobs because of their criminal record. It was humiliating to do so. One participant recently quit her job because the work conditions were so alienating to her. Among other things, the young teenagers she was working with didn’t know how to react when she told them she had recently been released from prison.

Other participants focused on how a cooperative would allow them to have a well-rounded life where they could prioritize work but also maintain boundaries and have time and resources to care for themselves and loved ones. One woman mentioned how she wanted a job where she could create schedules that would allow her to attend to her children and attend medical appointments. One said, “What’s the one thing that is most appealing about the co-op business? It is about having a say over the wages, having a say over your scheduling, having hope, helping your community, or whatever else, being your boss – that’s the single most appealing thing.”

For another, the ability to plan his own schedule was key. Having to sit at work even when there was nothing to do, just to gain an hourly wage, seemed like such a waste. He wanted to be able to choose to focus on spending time with his daughter and others when he wants to. For another, a cooperative business would allow him to have a “career” instead of a mere “job.” It would allow him to make a living but simultaneously have something to care about. He said that ...

“To me, the most appealing thing is seeing something grow. Starting whatever business that you’re working towards or getting into, seeing it from its infancy. It’s like your baby; your heart’s in it. What you’re doing is what you want to do in life. ... What I would get into it would be giving back to the community, the homeless, people who are struggling with substance abuse. That’s the field that I used to work in and I’m training for now. I don’t think of it as a job. See, when you think of something as a job, you don’t want to get up in the morning. When it feels like it’s not a job, it’s something that you’re passionate about and you want to do, you jump up off the bed in the morning. You can see the fruits of your labor. That’s what I think the best aspect of it is.”

The two participants who expressed significant hesitation or concern about cooperatives both attended Focus Group 1. Given the barriers formerly incarcerated people face, how could they be successful? How could they get the start-up money? One argued that laws create so many obstacles for formerly incarcerated people that they should be fighting to change broader legal or social systems rather than working to create cooperatives, which would constantly face difficulties given those laws and barriers. Note that neither of the negative responses about cooperatives were about problems or weakness of the cooperative model itself – both were about how barriers were too daunting.

Other participants responded by pushing back against the negative responses. One, in particular, discussed at length how despite the discriminatory laws, if cooperatives were strategic about confronting such barriers and if they sold a good product, they could overcome obstacles. “If you are selling gold, people will buy – it doesn’t matter about your record,” he said.

This active debate reflected a pattern seen in each of the three workshops. Those who answered positively about cooperatives were not offering “rote” answers or telling us what they thought we wanted to hear. They grounded the ideas in their own realities. Several examples serve as proof of this. In Focus Group two, some participants creatively re-articulated the definition of cooperatives in their own words. One, for instance, said that cooperatives are basically like the musical group the Wu-Tang Clan. Unlike groups like Boyz II Men, which are “manager-led,” Wu-Tang Clan was a group where everyone worked together, without being led by a manager, and where “everyone is bringing their specific skill into [the] group and showcasing it.”

Others took up the issue of cooperatives and applied them to their daily lives as well. One began asking the focus group if her counseling service could be converted into a cooperative. During one focus group, one participant mentioned he would be willing to do additional activities about cooperatives, with the Research Team. He would be happy to do more as a volunteer (as opposed to receiving compensation). In the week following the workshops, three participants reached out to the Research Team. They said they were “interested” and “inspired” about cooperatives and would like to participate more (either paid or unpaid.) Another, in a phone call after the focus groups, said the workshops were “awesome.” She recruited two more participants to our study after she took part in the first information workshop. Another mentioned in her focus group that she had been telling her classmates about cooperatives earlier that day.

While our research indicates that cooperatives for formerly incarcerated people could indeed lead to pathways for economic and racial justice, it’s also clear that they face a range of challenges and barriers. With that in mind, the next two sections of the report focus on resources and ideas for formerly incarcerated people considering creating cooperatives.

In the following section, we focus on our home state of Rhode Island by looking at two organizations supporting formerly incarcerated or low-income people seeking to form cooperatives. We highlight Fuerza Laboral and Roots2Empower.

Resources for Cooperatives in Rhode Island

Fuerza Laboral

Fuerza Laboral is a workers' rights center in Central Falls whose mission is to shift the balance of power in our economy towards working people partly through its POWER Network Co-op Incubator program. As the leading incubator of worker-owned cooperatives in Rhode Island, Fuerza Laboral seeks to generate worker-owned co-ops that will provide living-wage employment instead of the low-wage, exploitative jobs typically reserved for immigrants and people of color. In 2018 it led a successful public campaign to allow cooperatives to incorporate as businesses under Rhode Island state law. In 2016 it incubated its first cooperative, the Healthy Planet Cleaning cooperative, a residential and commercial cleaning business dedicated to using cleaning agents that are healthy for the workers, the community, and the planet. The organization offers a cooperative academy (free of charge) to community members twice per year, and is currently incubating several worker-owned cooperatives in Rhode Island. One new effort is to create a construction cooperative. With support from the local International Union of Painters and Allied Trades, the effort is to both create good jobs and a democratic business practice for local workers, and particularly women workers of color historically locked out of unionized building trades.

As Fuerza Laboral's Cooperative Program Director, Raul Figueroa, explained,

“What really motivated us to start with cooperatives was that our primary campaigns are around workers and immigrant rights. A lot of people who came to our office, came due to labor violations. But whether we were able to help them find a solution for their problems, they would always come back. We were sending them back to the same company or industries, because these people needed a job and the employers knew they could abuse them ... we weren't fixing anything. It was a temporary solution.”

He continued to say that ...

“To really look into it long-term ... Why don’t we think about forming worker cooperatives? [These workers] have the skills and knowledge, but don’t have means for themselves, but if they do it collectively, it gives them a better chance. So we wanted Fuerza Laboral to be more proactive. ‘My employer hasn’t paid me.’ We were helping them, since these cooperatives are an alternative to really have a little more control over your work. Once we had the Healthy Planet co-op [running], we had something we could point to. ‘Look, they did this and it is working.’”



Fuerza Laboral

Roots2Empower

Roots2Empower is an organization dedicated to improving the lives of people, families, and communities impacted by the criminal legal system. Its founder, Tarshire Battle, is a trailblazer for promoting cooperatives for formerly incarcerated people in Rhode Island. Roots2Empower, she explained, “started because of my work at the [Department of Corrections], as well as lived experience with my brother and my son who both were incarcerated for five years, separate times, but incarcerated in their lifetimes.” Roots2Empower is inspired by cooperative models, but it helps train people to create a variety of kinds of business and organizations.

As Battle explained, “[i]t’s like teaching people the skill set and figuring out what the individual or what the group wants. I like the [idea] of worker-owners because that was my thing – the co-ops. But I also realized the importance of [Limited Liability Corporations] too. I also realized the benefit of someone with lived experience who wants to give back to the community by starting a non-profit. I would say any model that a person chooses or a group of people that I speak to chooses to go after, I can help them with the start-up.”

Battle, who holds a master’s of public administration from Northeastern University and a master’s in mental health counseling from Boston University, has years of experience working with homeless people. She helped create the “Gather Together as One” organization, and is dedicated to ensuring that people who know the impacts of mass incarceration and inequality are at the forefront of the social change organizations. “Who better to do that than somebody who has lived experience?,” she asked. “It can’t be us.”

A key part of Roots2Empower is its urban farm. Battle, who comes from a long line of farmers and is a certified Master Gardener, seeks to use agriculture as a way to help people build business acumen as well as find the healing property of working with the land. “To me,” she said, “agriculture is two fold: It serves to heal when someone is connected to earth as they see their work evolve from seed to food. But it also serves as a means to teach business skills by involving them in the process of business planning” (Gagosz 2022).

While people can enter into the organization through its entrepreneurial workshops and trainings, she seeks to build and empower a community rather than just assisting “clients.” “I thought to myself, ‘Why not use a cooperative model as a way of bringing business ownership to people who are formerly incarcerated that have barriers to employment,’” she said. “Let’s connect this co-op model with a nonprofit training model to see if it works” (Kelly 2020).



Tarshire Battle / Roots2Empower

Industries where Co-ops Could Succeed

Given the barriers that exist both for cooperatives and for the formerly incarcerated, there are no easy strategies for success. However, this section of the report seeks to identify business opportunities that may deserve the attention of returning citizens interested in building cooperative businesses.

Some of the business opportunities named here come from the insights of formerly incarcerated people who have participated in this research project, either as interviewees, focus group participants, or research associates. Others originate from our study of market research. We sought out industries that have relatively few formal legal barriers to people with criminal records. Since formerly incarcerated people are not homogenous, and they have different needs, desires, and dreams, we looked for business opportunities in a wide array of industries.

Cannabis Retail

In a significant victory for worker-owned cooperatives, the recently passed Rhode Island Cannabis Act – which legalizes adult-use cannabis in Rhode Island – mandates that 25 percent of all adult-use cannabis dispensaries be worker-owned cooperative businesses. Legal cannabis is a growing, billion-dollar industry, and dispensary workers tend to make more than \$50,000 annually. In addition, Rhode Island state law provides avenues for people from communities impacted by mass incarceration and the War on Drugs into the industry (e.g., through a “social equity fund” to grant assistance to applicants from those communities). That said, similar laws in other states have their own social equity pledges, yet BIPOC communities and formerly incarcerated people there continue to face significant barriers.¹⁵ Obstacles include the uncertainty of state regulations, uncertainties about start-up capital, and the way that existing medical marijuana retailers will have a head start into the industry. Break the Cycle Cooperative Hub, along with other organizations active in cannabis justice in Rhode Island, are recruiting for cannabis cooperatives in Rhode Island. These other organizations include Fuerza Laboral, Direct Action for Rights and Equality, Reclaim RI, the United Food and Commercial Workers, and the Formerly Incarcerated Union.

Online Resale

This expansive and multi-faceted industry could create avenues for economic security. During the year of our work with formerly incarcerated people, we heard several stories of people with criminal records selling new or used items online for profit, whether through Etsy.com, Ebay.com, creating an Amazon

store, Facebook marketplace, or other venues. Vintage items, such as antiques or vintage electronics and video games, are some of the most profitable items to sell online (Blum 2022a). Others have noted opportunities in re-selling sneakers, toys, women's clothing, and collectibles like Pokémon.

The skills and duties required to run a successful online resale business would be varied. One task would be to seek out used goods (e.g., at estate sales) and find good deals on new or rare goods. Since each product line requires specialized knowledge, possibilities could include developing internship opportunities with local university and high school students who could share their knowledge about niche markets (e.g., vintage video games, collectibles, sneakers) and help orient cooperative worker-owners to new possibilities.

Particularly as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, observers note that online resale is very popular for consumers who prefer the convenience or safety of staying at home. They also note that resale clothing, in particular, will likely grow significantly in the next five years, particularly with young consumers entering high-wage earning years. Among the obstacles, though, will likely be increasing numbers of sellers (Blum 2022a). Another potential obstacle for businesses in this industry is that people leaving prison have been denied opportunities to keep up with technological trends and may need training.

Fitness Consulting

Several men from our study have described their passion for fitness and exercise, and how they used their time incarcerated to learn more about training, health, and muscle development. They've noted the mental as well as physical benefits to exercise, both for themselves and community members and potential clients. The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that the fitness profession will have a growth rate of 39 percent between 2020 and 2030. Fitness instructors in Rhode Island tend to earn between \$34,000 to \$64,000 per year, while personal trainers in Rhode Island earn a median salary of \$67,415. While many fitness and personal trainers are employed by fitness centers, others create their own small businesses. That said, competition for fitness industry jobs and market share is high (Blum 2022b).

Personal training and fitness work is most available in urban areas, and personal training clients tend to be high-income earners. The highest earning fitness instructors and personal trainers have been certified by accredited training programs, and/or obtain specialized certification in areas like nutrition, weight management, or corrective or rehabilitative training (Blum 2022b). That said, a college degree is not a requirement for employment in the industry. Several national associations offer certificates, some for less than \$1,000. Working for a fitness club as a fitness trainer can create a pathway to benefits and health insurance, yet trainers only make a small percentage of what clients pay. In addition, formerly incarcerated job applicants may face discrimination on the basis of their criminal record or race.

Going independent is another option. While small or “boutique” fitness centers occupy a growing part of the market, rent and competition is high. Some fitness centers allow independent personal trainers to use their facilities to train clients if they pay a small fee or pay for membership, although the majority have their own staff of personal trainers. Potential options for formerly incarcerated people in particular may be to explore focusing on serving populations over the age of 50, a growing population group looking for fitness options geared toward their specific needs. Another growing option is online training sessions for at-home workouts, which allow trainers and instructors to seek clients beyond their local community, bypass expensive urban rent costs, and appeal to those most interested in home-workouts due to their schedules, cost concerns, or Covid-related health concerns.

Barbering / Hairstyling

Barbering and hairstyling constitute potential options for people getting out of prison in Rhode Island. Some formerly incarcerated people can receive (or have received) barber training in informal or formal apprenticeships with barbers in the state, thereby learning skills without having to pay for expensive barber schools. While barbers can work in Rhode Island without having a barber’s license, the Rhode Island Department of Corrections offers a Barbershop Apprenticeship program that can lead to incarcerated people getting their licenses.¹⁶ That said, space limits and the inconsistency of course offerings, particularly on the women’s side, can make it hard for incarcerated Rhode Islanders to complete the program.

Also, as with fitness and other industries, barbering services can facilitate broad community benefits beyond economics. Some organizations are exploring and recognizing how barbers and hairstylists can serve roles as “non-traditional mental health counselors” for their clients, or even be first responders in the case of mental health crises.¹⁷ Break the Cycle Cooperative Hub has been exploring incubating a cooperative barbershop for formerly incarcerated barbers as part of a broader non-profit organization dedicated to training local youth in barbering, cooperative economics, and entrepreneurship.

In our conversations with local barbers and preliminary industry analysis, we have found that barbering is a stable, if competitive, industry (Davis 2022). One barber noted how there are many barbershops in Rhode Island, but often not enough barbers. Securing retirement options and healthcare coverage is a challenge for barbershops, as with most small businesses. One of the keys, according to local barbers, is to deliver value-added specialty services (e.g., hair coloring, beard trimming) that can provide extra income. Barbers in nearby Massachusetts may also operate barbershops out of their own homes.

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Methodological Appendix I: Focus Groups

Focus Groups: Format and Sampling

Focus groups with formerly incarcerated people were one hour, and were carried out on Zoom. We focused on recruiting formerly incarcerated individuals from our home state of Rhode Island, as our community action work is directly related to creating social change in Rhode Island. We assessed their qualifications by asking them to verbally confirm that they had been incarcerated. All focus group participants received a \$100 gift card for their time, and were assured that they would receive the gift card regardless of how they responded to questions and comments in the focus groups. Before each focus group, the research team assured participants that “there are no right or wrong answers.”

Ultimately, our 18 focus group participants came from a total of 8 different agencies, organizations, or social networks. Fifteen were from Rhode Island, two were from Massachusetts, and one was from Georgia. Before our first workshop, we asked the participants “if they had heard of cooperatives before.” Fifteen answered that they had “never or only once before heard of cooperatives.” Three answered that they had heard of cooperatives “a few times.”

We carried out three focus groups, which averaged six people in size. Of our 18 total focus group participants, 13 identified as male or men, and 5 identified as women or female. Ten identified as African American or Black, three identified as white, four identified as Spanish or Latino, and one identified as “Cape Verdean/Indian.” (See Appendix II for complete demographic information of all study participants.)

Format:

Before attending their focus group, each participant attended two one-hour workshops about cooperatives for formerly incarcerated people. The workshops were designed by the Research Team.

Recruitment of Participants and Sample:

We sought to recruit from public agencies like probation offices and through advertisements on public busses, but those options turned out to be difficult because of three main reasons: the financial limitations of our research budget, the wish to keep people away from public spaces due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the inaccessibility of Rhode Island probation offices.¹⁸ In addition, we decided to recruit from agencies and organizations dedicated to successful reentry processes because we needed people who demonstrated some level of comfort in making known their status as formerly incarcerated. (Because of the stigma of incarceration, some do not wish to make that known.) We sought to include in our sample individuals who would be evaluating the economic opportunity of cooperatives on their own terms, and not offering negative responses to the prospect of cooperatives because they would not wish to be part of something that may publicly market itself as consisting of formerly incarcerated people. Some participants were drawn through snowball sampling through the social networks of the Research Team.

Workshops

Participants attended two informational workshops about cooperatives. Then, they attended a focus group session where they were asked their opinions about the information presented.

The workshops were designed to not “promote” cooperatives for formerly incarcerated people but rather to “provide information.” We presented cooperatives in terms of both benefits and challenges. We explained that our research team was tasked with investigating how and if cooperatives could be a good economic opportunity for formerly incarcerated people. Since our investigation was ongoing, we did not yet have a “yes” or “no” answer to that question.

In the first workshop, the Research Team briefly defined cooperatives, and one member discussed why he chose to join the project. Then, a founding worker-owner from a local cleaning cooperative (one incubated by Fuerza Laboral in Rhode Island) discussed the process for creating cooperatives.

In the second workshop, the Research Team discussed some of the challenges and opportunities of finding start-up funding for cooperatives. Then, worker-owners from ChiFresh Kitchen in Chicago (which consists of formerly incarcerated people), joined the meeting to discuss the benefits and challenges of cooperatives from their experiences.

Methodological Appendix II: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Race	Total Participant Count	In Focus Groups
“Black,” “African American,” or “Black – Cuban”	19	10
“white”	11	5
“Latino,” “Spanish,” or “white/Spanish”	3	2
“Cape Verdean/Indian,” or “mixed race”	2	1
“Asian”	1	
“Human”	1	
Total	37	18

Gender	Total Participant Count	In Focus Groups
“man” or “male”	21	13
“woman” or “female”	15	5
“human”	1	
Total	37	18

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Endnotes

- 1 See the work of Bonilla-Silva on “colorblind” racism. Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*.
- 2 The “cycle” metaphor has inspired the name of the cooperative hub that the Research Team has recently created: the “Break the Cycle Cooperative Hub.”
- 3 One recent study of people leaving state prisons in 24 states found that 82 percent returned within 10 years. See Antenangeli and Durose, “Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 24 States in 2008: A 10-Year Follow-Up Period (2008–2018).”
- 4 “Jobs with Justice” is also a national organization dedicated to fighting for workers’ rights. See jwj.org.
- 5 Forthcoming research from Dr. Jessica Gordon Nembhard and Esther West documents the impacts of worker-owned cooperatives inside prisons around the world. See Nembhard Gordon and West, “Socio-Economic Impacts of Incarcerated Worker Co-ops, especially on people of color.” Working Paper, Institute for the Study of Employee Ownership and Profit Sharing, Rutgers University School of Management and Labor Relations (forthcoming).
- 6 The Federal Correctional Institution (Berlin) is located in New Hampshire.
- 7 The Facebook page of the organization is the following: <https://www.facebook.com/Break-theCycleCooperativeHub>
- 8 Dr. Assata Richards, the founding board president of the Community Care Cooperative and the Executive Director of the Sankofa Research Institute, has stated that “[p]eople of African descent have never fully owned their labor in this country.” See <https://ncbaclusa.coop/blog/dr-assata-nicole-richards-a-cooperative-leader-invested-in-liberation/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CPeople%20of%20African%20descent%20have,of%20work%20as%20a%20plantation..>
- 9 For a recent analysis, see Freilla, “Sustaining the Rising Tide of Black Co-Ops.” See also Sutton, “Cooperative Cities.”
- 10 The International Co-operative Alliance adopted the Seven Cooperative Principles in 1995. They are: 1. Voluntary & Open Membership; 2. Democratic Member Control; 3. Members’ Economic Participation; 4. Autonomy & Independence; 5. Education, Training and Information; 6. Cooperation among Cooperatives; and 7. Concern for Community.
- 11 <https://www.chifreshkitchen.com/>
- 12 <https://collectiveremake.com/>
- 13 <https://www.downtheroadmovers.org/>
- 14 Barrett, “Labor Co-Op Tightshift Gives Ex-Prisoners a New Way to Work.”
- 15 Lewis, “America’s Whites-Only Weed Boom.”
- 16 Direct Action for Rights and Equality led a successful fight to make licensing procedures in general less discriminatory in Rhode Island. For a national perspective see “Fair Chance Licensing Project.”

17 See Bhargava and Connection Lab LLC, “Mental Health and Racial Equity In CHNA 17 Exploring the Experiences of American-Born Blacks in Arlington, Belmont, Cambridge, Somerville, Waltham and Watertown.” Thanks to Carolyn Edsell-Vetter from the Cooperative Fund of New England for the reference. See also the work of the Confess Project (www.theconfessproject.com) and <https://ct.counseling.org/2021/05/investigating-the-impact-of-barbershops-on-african-american-males-mental-health/>

18 The research team made around two dozen calls to different probation officers and offices in Rhode Island. The team various voicemails messages with probation officers and probation supervisors, noting that the team had an opportunity for formerly incarcerated people to earn a gift card. Only one supervisor returned the research team’s calls. For the three offices that picked up the team’s calls, one probation officer said that “we don’t usually do that” when asked about distributing a recruitment flyer for the focus groups. A U.S. Federal probation supervisor was the one person who called our team back. He stated that if their office was open, he “would be open” to hanging up a flyer. However, the office was closed due to Covid-19 and they could not email the flyer or information to their clients, since that would constitute “implied coercion,” even if they indicated in their messages that they were only sending it for informational purposes.