

Sites of Agency, Sites of Growth:

Elements of Success for Formerly Incarcerated Adult Graduates of an Alternative High School

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## Table of Contents

<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Review of Literature</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Chapter 3: Methodology</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Chapter 4: Findings</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Chapter 5: Conclusions</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Appendix 1: Sample Interview Questions</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>58</b>

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

High school dropouts face a wide array of individual costs when they leave school: their lifetime earning potential is drastically reduced, their health is likely to be poorer than that of high school graduates and their health care costs higher (Tyler and Lofstrom, 2009), and they are much more likely than their counterparts with high school diplomas to be incarcerated (Bloom, 2010). Despite the risks associated with dropping out of high school, roughly one million high school students in the United States drop out every year (Tyler and Lofstrom, 2009). As both Bloom and Tyler and Lofstrom note, it is difficult enough for scholars to agree on dropout statistics (Tyler and Lofstrom 2009, p.78). It is even more challenging to track what happens to those teens and young adult dropouts who are incarcerated and are eventually released as adults. The United States is home to a large and growing population of adults who have served time in prison and were subsequently released, and who now face a combination of employment difficulties: a criminal record, a short or nonexistent work history and the lack of a high school diploma. Thousands of adults in the United States find themselves in their thirties or older, leaving prison with few alternatives to illegal markets for employment.

For formerly incarcerated adults who hope to stay out of prison but who lack a high school diploma, gaining educational credentials is a significant challenge. Many attempt to earn a General Educational Development credential (GED), but this test-based program is impractically difficult, both during and after a prison sentence. Many incarcerated adults attempt to earn their GED in prison classes, but GED educational programs are subject to the whim of prison policy makers and the availability of state funding. Further, the usual qualification for teachers of these courses is merely that they passed the GED themselves. The waiting lists in prisons for GED classes can be months or even years long, and prisoners who are transferred to other facilities are moved to the bottom of the waiting

list at their new institution<sup>1</sup>.

For people who do manage to enroll in a GED class of substance, the test itself is difficult. Many of the adults who take the GED exam do not pass all five sections of the seven-and-a-half-hour test the first time (Dowdy, 2003). Left with the need to re-take a portion of a stressful, expensive exam – all while striving to reconnect with estranged family members and maintain employment – these adults often become discouraged and give up yet again.

Very few educational programs cater specifically to the needs of formerly incarcerated adults and take into account the learning disabilities and test anxiety that the vast majority of the members of this population experience. St. Martin's Adult High School<sup>2</sup> in Chicago, however, is one of the few programs that do this.

This qualitative case study explores how the post-incarceration experiences and geographical locations of formerly incarcerated adult graduates of the St. Martin's Adult High School program impact their lifestyle choices. As incarceration rates in the United States continue to rise (Sabol, 2007), the already-staggering number of American adults who are formerly incarcerated is growing rapidly. A paucity of educational programming exists for this population. One program that has had success with assisting formerly incarcerated adults who are earning their high school diploma and securing employment, housing and other life necessities is St. Martin's Adult High School, a part of St. Martin's Ministries in Chicago<sup>3</sup>. As a former staff member at St. Martin's who saw first-hand some of the successes of that program, I wanted to learn more about what makes the St. Martin's program work for its participants, and how much of a difference the adult high school program has made in the after-prison life choices of those participants.

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1 My work with formerly incarcerated adults has supplied a wealth of anecdotal evidence to this effect.

2 All names of persons, places and institutions have been changed unless otherwise noted.

3 It is worth noting that, while St. Martin's Ministries is a religious nonprofit and is part of the Episcopal Charities network, it does not discriminate on the basis of religion. Space is provided for spiritual practice on the campus of St. Martin's, but no public prayer or church attendance is required of residents.

In addition to educational struggles, there are other difficulties facing formerly incarcerated adults who are working to re-enter society as productive individuals. Formerly incarcerated adults are stigmatized as unapproachable, dangerous and hopeless – policy makers are much more interested in the education of children. On a practical level, formerly incarcerated adults are difficult to study in large numbers because they are a transient population, moving frequently as they work to secure jobs and permanent housing. Literature does exist about educational programs within prisons<sup>4</sup>, but there is very little written about post-incarceration education, and most extant research about programs during or after imprisonment is quantitative in nature, looking strictly at the numbers (how many bodies are locked up or released, income levels, rates of re-offense) rather than underlying causes for the choices formerly incarcerated adults make. This study aims to describe the impact of a post-incarceration alternative high school program on the lifestyle choices of the adults who participate in and graduate from that program. This study further makes the case that more programs like St. Martin’s should exist in the United States to serve this large and growing population.

In the next chapter, I will present a review of some pertinent literature. This will include some figures about incarceration rates and especially the rates of incarceration among high school dropouts in the United States in general and the state of Illinois in particular. Chapter two will also provide some history of education – and the lack thereof – in penal institutions in the United States, and examine some alternative schooling models – both in the form of alternatives to traditional high school and adult educational programs. The literature review will also discuss what is commonly referred to as the achievement gap or the opportunity gap in the United States educational system: the definition of the achievement gap, societal factors that have played into the achievement gap, recent scholarship about it, and some efforts to close the gap. In chapter two I will also review the literature of leaders in

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4 See Weis and Fine, 2004; Tyler and Kling, 2006; Gibson and Duncan, 2008; Reagan and Stoughton, 1976.

alternative education including Dr. Erica Meiners<sup>5</sup>, co-founder of the St. Martin's high school program, which will allow a look into the program's structure, history, track record and alumni. Chapter three will explore the critical framework and methodology framing this study, including the timeline, an overview of the process of data analysis, a look at some limitations of the study, and an overview of the study's subjects. Chapter four will look at major themes that emerged from the data. At the end of chapter four, I draw conclusions about the importance of the St. Martin's program in the life choices of its graduates, as well as the crucial role location played in those life choices. I will also explore the concept that I am calling "sites of agency" and will give some consideration to what those sites are and are not. Finally, chapter five will draw concrete conclusions about the study, and will present suggestions for further discussion, research, and action that may come out of this study.

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5 With her permission, I refer to Dr. Meiners by her actual name throughout this thesis.

## Chapter 2: Review of Literature

### Location as a factor in life choices

St. Martin's Ministries is located on the west side of Chicago, very near the site of a former large housing project, a current low-rise housing project, and the extensive parking lots for a large sports arena. St. Martin's is in a familiar location for many of its residents, as the majority of them grew up in or near those housing projects and know the neighborhood well. This makes St. Martin's a halfway house in more than one sense: residents can live in a familiar setting while navigating the change from incarceration to relative freedom.

Meiners examined the importance of location in the lives of the St. Martin's students after incarceration, highlighted in the title of her article: "Uneasy Locations". The importance of the location of these students' lives before prison cannot be ignored, either: both subjects of this study were raised in racially segregated areas of Chicago. Each of them noted the importance of both race and geography in their lives.

Bottoms and Wiles give a concise definition of Environmental Criminology:

Environmental criminology is the study of crime, criminality and victimization as they relate, first, to particular *places* and, secondly, to the way that individuals and organizations shape their activities *spatially*, and in doing so are in turn influenced by *place-based* or *spatial* factors (2002, p. 620, author's emphasis).

The two subjects of this study showed that several critical moments of their lives were deeply influenced by place-based factors: the location of an attempted drug deal, a change in school location as a child, and a casual stroll down a particular alley were all place-based situations that had lasting, arguably life-changing ramifications for the two subjects of the study. Places as general as the city of Chicago and as specific as an individual prison cell held sway on consequences and life decisions of these two individuals.

It is helpful to consider the locations and concepts explored in the rest of this literature review



within the framework of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory. This theory states that child development reflects the influence of several nested environmental systems: the microsystem, such as the family or classroom; the mesosystem, which is two microsystems in interaction; the exosystem, external environments which indirectly influence development, e.g., parental workplace; and the macrosystem, or the larger socio-cultural context. Each system contains roles, norms and rules that can powerfully shape development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In a later publication, Bronfenbrenner pointed out that, while his theory of nested systems still works to examine the external influences on personal development, his writing was sometimes erroneously interpreted to mean that humans have no role in that development. He clarified this misperception by noting that the human is not an "empty organism" affected only by the systems around her, but rather individual humans become "both the product and partial producer of developmental processes" (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). While systems are extremely influential and worth examining, Bronfenbrenner left space for agency in personal development.

In the two subjects of this research study, we will see the heavy influences of the nested systems that affected their lives as well as the role personal agency played, and continues to play, in their personal development.

When she was in middle school, Tonya, one of the subjects of this study, experienced a schooling environment designed for wealthier students, but she had to travel a long distance to get there each day: this was not a school for her community. When she later attended a more local school, she was the victim of a particularly brutal crime. Location and crime were bound up together in her life. For Carl, the other subject of this study, school was neither a safe space nor a logical one: attendance was taken only at the beginning of the day, during home room, so students would arrive at school, stay for twenty minutes or so, and leave. For him, leaving school was a matter of self-preservation, as kids from a local gang would otherwise ambush him in the hallway. Race, space and place are key to how young people move through the city. From my experience working with other

members of this community, neither of the subjects of this study was exposed to unusual events at school when they were victims of crimes that were generally overlooked by school officials.

### **The Achievement/ Opportunity Gap**

St. Martin's Adult High School students of today are yesterday's "failed" high school students, primarily from Chicago Public Schools. This is the living result of the decades-long achievement gap – the gap in success rates between white students and students of color – in public schooling.

Dunbar (2001) notes that one-fifth of all black males<sup>6</sup> drop out of high school. Those who remain in high school tend to perform less well than their white and Latino counterparts, struggling within what is known as the achievement gap. This gap is measured with standardized test scores, which claim to be neutral measures of student achievement. It is recommended that the following statistics should be taken with a grain of salt, but they are indicative of the framework within which high school students of color are working and are being labeled as "not successful". In 1999 on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, seventeen-year-old black students scored 7 and 31 points less than their Latino and white counterparts, respectively, in Reading, 10 and 32 points lower in Mathematics, and 22 and 52 points lower in Science (Campbell et al., 2000). Over three decades of that exam, African-American students of all ages have consistently scored the lowest in their age groups on these tests. Tonya and Carl, the participants in this research study, are products of an educational environment that labeled them as even less successful than their "low-performing" peers.

According to the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University:

Compared to whites, significant gaps for African-American and Hispanic students are evident in virtually every measure of achievement: NAEP math and reading test scores, high school completion rates, college enrollment and college completion rates. In addition, there is wide variability across states in educational investment and outcomes. There are virtually no racial or social class differences in mental ability among

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6 I use the terms "black" and "African-American" interchangeably in this thesis. Generally I follow the terms used by the authors and reports cited.

infants before their first birthday and a few social class indicators are able to explain the small differences that do exist.” (AGI, 2010)

As Paige and Witty explained in their 2009 book, *The Black-White Achievement Gap: Why Closing it is the Greatest Civil Rights Issue of Our Time*:

Nationally, and in many states and districts, the gap has become smaller over time due to the greater gains made by black students relative to white peers. *But in no place is the achievement gap anywhere close to zero.* In fact, we must bear in mind that, on average, the reading and math proficiency of the eighth-grade black students in this country is much closer to that of white *fourth graders* than it is to white eighth graders (2009, p. 36).

The achievement gap is a problem of which most educators are aware, but whose solutions are challenging to identify. Discouragingly, despite much recent study on the achievement gap, a study released in 2010 by the Council of the Great City Schools in Washington, DC illustrated that the achievement gap is not closing. It is notably widening for black boys, in particular.

Linda Darling-Hammond frames the “achievement gap” as an “opportunity gap”. As she has noted in numerous publications, policymakers are expecting minority students to achieve more with less resources, more crowded schools, poorly trained teachers, less access to programs like special education classes and foreign language curricula, and less individual attention (1998). To call the resulting failure of students to thrive an “achievement gap” is to frame the problem as a lack of student ambition, rather than to examine what can be done to close the gaps in school funding, teacher preparedness and class sizes that are making school success so challenging for students in schools with less resources - predominantly urban schools with minority students.

Fordham (1996) explored the challenges faced by African-American students in public high school settings in the early 1980s, and found that students tend to make one of two choices: they either reject the dominant discourse of success as oppressive, or they work to prove themselves as better than the stereotype of underachiever and risk being marginalized by both white and black populations.

Adding this cultural confusion to high school, when students are already working to establish their identities, creates a dangerous conflict. Black students who are less sure of themselves, or feel they have to prove themselves, often find pseudo-acceptance in street gangs, which leads to criminal behavior and eventual incarceration.

### **The School-to-Prison Pipeline**

As Fordham's observation shows, the achievement/opportunity gap feeds into what is known as the school-to-prison pipeline: children who are perceived as "failing" in school are funneled into low-achieving schools and classes. For various reasons, those children are frustrated and either drop out or become involved in the juvenile justice system. Without comprehensive education or high school diplomas, job prospects are scarce, and the likelihood of arrest is high.

Noguera, citing Oakes, notes that "when students are labeled and sorted into groups on the basis of their academic ability or behavior, the behaviors that were ostensibly targeted for treatment are often reinforced instead of being ameliorated" (Noguera 2008, p. xx). The black boy who acts out in class – perhaps as a reaction to being hungry or in pain or simply confused by the class work – is often singled out and sent to the principal's office for "being bad". It does not take long for a child to learn what the expectations are for him: he's the "bad boy" in class.

As Ann Ferguson (2000) observed in her ethnographic study *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*, public schools are often responsible for reinforcing the image of the "unsalvageable" black male student who has "a prison cell with his name on it". Children as young as the age of ten were categorized in this way in the liberal, racially diverse California public school Ferguson studied for three and a half years. Ferguson found a hidden curriculum lurking beneath what appeared to be simply the rules of the school – a curriculum that effectively gave up on troubled students when they were still just children, and tracked them toward incarceration.

When expectations are shifted, however, even students who come from the most troubled

neighborhoods can achieve academic success. In Chicago, City Achievement Academy is one exception to the trend of black boys failing out of school. In 2010, every member of the senior class of this all-boys charter school in the high-crime, low-income inner-city neighborhood of Englewood was accepted into a four-year college (Eldeib, 2010). This was not without an intense investment of time and energy on the part of the school's faculty, administration and students. But the success story of City Achievement leaves the question open about why other public schools are not able to achieve similar success, and why so many urban students – especially minorities, and especially males, are failing out of school.

Meiners points out that the achievement gap is not limited to schools. Cultural expectations for entire populations have different orientations. For example, Meiners points out that the phrase “going downstate” in the state of Illinois means two different things: For middle-class, mostly white Illinoisans, “going downstate” means traveling south of Chicago, often to the college towns that house state universities such as University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. For low-income, primarily minority populations in Illinois, the term “going downstate” more often means traveling to one of the many prisons located far from Chicago in southern rural towns of Illinois (Meiners, 2010). Fundamental ideas of geography are centered on the institutions that have deepest meaning to their populations.

The divide in language and perception in Illinois touches on the renewed academic interest in the study of the “culture of poverty” in recent years. Though American sociologists were trained over the last forty years to avoid discussing culture as an element of the experience of poverty – and as a possible contributor to generational cycles of poverty – recent research has shown that such cultures do exist, thrive and contribute to the life choices made by people in poverty (Cohen, 2010). Sampson and Loeffler state that, though scholarship about crime and criminals is well established, a consideration of the populations that disproportionately experience incarceration is still a rare and fairly recent interest in the academy. Sampson and Loeffler note that:

While the concept of “hot spots” for crime is widely acknowledged, the sources and consequences of incarceration’s “hot spots” are not understood as well. Although the inhabitants of such communities experience incarceration as a disturbingly common occurrence, for most other communities and most other Americans incarceration is quite rare. This spatial inequality in punishment helps explain the widespread invisibility of mass incarceration to the average American. (2010, p. 20).

Sampson and Loeffler touch upon one of the great frustrations of studying “the prison problem” academically: Mass incarceration is so widespread and affects so many people in the United States that, in communities like the one from which the subjects of this study hail, it is unusual to meet someone who has not served time in prison. But that experience is so localized that policymakers and citizens of privilege essentially never see it. There is a Cassandra-like quality in warning policymakers about the influx of traumatized, poorly-educated, formerly incarcerated individuals into their communities: for the seven million plus people who make up that influx, and for their families, neighbors and friends, the reality of the situation is so obvious and intimate that it hardly seems to be worth mentioning. For people of privilege who do not face the ongoing threat of arrest – generally the population from which lawmakers are elected – the reality of mass incarceration is so divorced from their own reality that it is overlooked.

### **Imprisonment**

At the beginning of 2008, the state and federal prison population of the United States of America had reached 1,596,127. With another 723,131 in local jails, the total adult inmate count at the beginning of 2008 stood at 2,319,258. With the number of adults in the United States just shy of 230 million, the actual incarceration rate at the start of 2008 was 1 in every 99.1 adults (Pew, 2008). Including jails, parole and probation, over 7.3 million United States citizens were under some version of government supervision or detention in 2009 (Pew, 2009). In the state of Illinois, current prison populations are growing rapidly as the economy is hemorrhaging. This pair of factors is leading to overcrowding and lack of prison resources. As of late 2010, the state’s prison population hovered

around 49,000 inmates while the state Department of Corrections is so far behind on paying vendors – with a deficit of \$95 million and counting – that some vendors are refusing credit to the state anymore (Grimm, 2010).

Meanwhile, about 40% of State prison inmates, 27% of federal inmates, 47% of inmates in local jails and 31% of individuals serving probation sentences had not earned high school diplomas or GED credentials, compared to the 18% of the general public who lacked diplomas (Harlow, 2003). This problem is not a new one. In *Back on the Street: From Prison to Poverty*, Horowitz (1976) noted that 61% of state inmates incarcerated in January, 1974, had failed to receive a high school diploma, compared to 36% of the general male population over 18 at that time. Rates of education for incarcerated persons have improved slightly, but the fact remains that prison populations are consistently less educated than the population at large.

### **Prison: Trauma Before, During, After**

Prison inmates are not only more likely to be lacking education and more likely to have had negative school experiences than non-prisoners, they are also practically guaranteed to have suffered significant trauma while in prison. Both men (Hochstetler, 2004) and women (Lawston and Schlesinger, 2009) in prison have endured trauma before and within prison. Once these adults are released from prison, the sudden responsibilities of freedom can add more traumas to an already injured psyche. There is not a great deal of research that has been done on these layers of trauma for prisoners, despite findings that former inmates suffer a much higher rate of Post-Traumatic Stress than the general population (Hochstetler, 2004). This is certainly a factor in their behavior within and after prison and their potential for recidivism.

Hochstetler's study of 208 men in work-release programs in Illinois showed that these men were victims of or witnesses to violent crimes an average of almost once a month (2004, p. 444). Hochstetler notes that, "Even a single nonviolent offense committed against free citizens can have

lasting psychological consequences and affect future perceptions of security” (2004, p. 440). Indeed, it is considered reasonable for the victim of a burglary to feel nervous for months afterward. However, former prisoners are expected to function “normally” when they are victimized at a rate of roughly once a month, when they live with their attackers, and when they have been cut off from support systems. The expectation is unreasonable, at best, and crystallizes class disparities of the prison system: middle-class victims of occasional crime are given space, time and sometimes counseling to work through trauma. Low-income crime victims – and especially incarcerated crime victims – are expected to accept violence as a part of life. Any effects of traumatic experiences prisoners experience can be exacerbated by practices including solitary confinement. Despite overwhelming evidence of extremely negative psychological effects on prisoners of such isolation <sup>7</sup>, prison systems have continued to increase their use of traumatic punitive measures, including segregation<sup>8</sup>, at a rapid rate (Marx, 2009).

Beyond a need for more research into post-traumatic stress of prisoners, Hochstetler states that “Rehabilitative efforts should help inmates recover from trauma occurring inside and outside prison” (2004, p. 452). His plea has been answered in a very limited way by programs like St. Martin’s Ministries, the umbrella organization that includes St. Martin’s Adult High School. At St. Martin’s Ministries, parolees are provided with “wrap-around services”: necessities including housing, clothing and meals, of course, but also group therapy, one-on-one counseling, job training and education. Though this organization receives some funding from the Department of Corrections and its costs per capita are considerably lower than the cost of incarceration, programs like St. Martin’s are not a priority of the state. They should be: Residents of St. Martin’s Ministries recidivate at a much lower rate than the general post-prison population.

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7 "There is not a single published study of solitary or supermax-like confinement in which nonvoluntary confinement lasting (sic) for longer than 10 days, where participants were unable to terminate their isolation at will, that failed to result in negative psychological effects." (Haney 2003, p.132)

8 "Segregation", in prison jargon, is the term of art for solitary confinement. That it is a punishment so frequently imposed on minorities is presumably coincidental.



## **Prison Education**

Study after study has shown that educational programs help reduce recidivism: College study within prison (Weis and Fine, 2004), high school equivalency study within prisons (Tyler and Kling, 2006), literacy education within prisons (Reagan and Stoughton, 1976), job training and re-entry preparation programs within prisons (Robinson, 2000), and job training programs for parolees (Robinson, 2000) have all been shown to have some success in giving formerly incarcerated adults the tools they need to stay out of prison. Attention also has been paid to juvenile offenders and their needs during and after incarceration, both educationally and psycho-socially (Gibson & Duncan, 2008).

There are two disconnects I have found with the above statistics: First, federal policy has essentially ignored the efficacy of schooling programs within prisons, working to limit funding across the board for prison college programs (Weis & Fine, 2004) and, effective January 2009, cutting access to educational funding for adults who have been convicted of sex offenses (Norton, 2008). These policy decisions do not reflect the consistent findings that formerly incarcerated adults, and by extension society at large, can benefit from educational programs within and after prison.

Another void in the research community is any examination of alternative high school programs for formerly incarcerated adults. Though I could find information about GED learning both within and outside of prison, very few adults lacking high school diplomas are able to pass the GED exam. In 2000, only 1.5% of the adults who did not graduate from high school attempted GED tests. Of those, only 1% earned the high school equivalency credential (Dowdy, 2003). Meanwhile, adult alternative high school programs that were not dependent upon passage of a standardized test were notable in their absence, with the exception of an article written by one of the co-founders of this specific program (Meiners, 2004). Like Meiners, I will repeat a call for more to be done: the few dozen graduates who come out of the St. Martin's program each year are a small drop in a vast ocean of seven million-plus people.

From an educational point of view, the lack of resources dedicated to the education of formerly incarcerated adults is especially disheartening. The level of test anxiety, pervasive learning disabilities<sup>9</sup> and overall negative school and testing experiences endured by the majority of adults who have been imprisoned is very high. If continued schooling assists formerly incarcerated adults in making the transition from prison to public life, and some adults have extreme difficulties taking standardized tests, it should stand that an alternative schooling environment for members of this population, free of high-stakes testing, should be in place in every state of the union. Many community colleges do seem to reach out to formerly incarcerated adults who are seeking career training – but they must already have high school diplomas or GED credentials before they may enroll. The gap between the need of this population and the services provided to it seems obvious, but it is clearly not addressed well enough – and in most of the country it is simply not addressed at all.

## **Recidivism**

The primary goal of any prison or re-entry education or training program is to reduce recidivism. A Pew Center on the States study gave the following concise definition of recidivism:

Recidivism is the act of reengaging in criminal offending despite having been punished. The prison recidivism rate... is the proportion of persons released from prison who are rearrested, reconvicted or returned to custody within a specific time period. Typically, recidivism studies follow released offenders for three years following their release from prison or placement on probation. Offenders are returned to prison for one of two reasons: 1) For committing a new crime that results in a new conviction, or 2) For a technical violation of supervision, such as not reporting to their parole or probation officer or failing a drug test. (Pew, 2011 p.7)

In the simplest terms, recidivism is the return to prison of a formerly incarcerated individual. There has been some debate as to whether being arrested or violating parole but not returning to prison can be

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9 The occurrence of learning disabilities in prison populations is so pervasive that the United States Department of Justice maintains separate statistics on them: The latest available data show that 66% of state prison inmates with learning disabilities had not completed a high school diploma or GED (Harlow 2003). However, it is difficult to find scholarship that addresses whether programs are being developed for the many inmates with learning difficulties who are lacking their high school diplomas or the equivalent. It appears that this population is observed, but not assisted in any noticeable way.

considered recidivism, or what the time period considered should be. In recent years, however, the generally agreed-upon definition for measuring rates of recidivism has been whether a formerly incarcerated individual becomes re-incarcerated within 36 months (Weis and Fine, 2004; Corrections, 2004). This can include being re-arrested for committing another crime or being re-incarcerated for violating the terms of parole. The Pew study showed that in many states, the majority of recidivism cases were for parole violation rather than committing more crimes, which is an indication that something about the parole system may not be working as well as it should.

### **Mentoring**

A possible factor in the failure of parole systems to keep former inmates out of prison is the lack of connection with anyone with resources in the community. One commonality among alternative high school success stories, both in Loutzenheiser's (2002) study of young women in an alternative school and in anecdotal accounts from St. Martin's Adult High School, is the presence of a mentor or other adult role model who establishes a close relationship of trust with an individual student and guides that student toward better decision making. Successful mentorship models for adults abound in the professions: in undergraduate education (Smith, 2007), library science (Ghouse, 2008) in elementary and high school teaching professions (Carnoy, 2007), and in the corporate world (Zey, 1984; Kram, 1985), mentoring is seen as a proven method to lead less-experienced adults toward familiarity in new organizational structures and to improve retention rates of desirable employees. Mentoring is also a standard practice of drug abuse recovery programs, including Alcoholics Anonymous and its many offshoots, which use the concept of "sponsorship", wherein recovering addicts with more experience help usher new members toward sober living (AAWS, 1983). This is a model with which formerly incarcerated adults are quite familiar, as a vast majority of them are also recovering addicts.

Though there is such a strong showing of research for the value of mentoring in educational

settings, in adult work settings, in drug dependence recovery programs, and even in prison transition and parole programs, there is not the rich body of research one would expect on mentoring programs for the population standing at the intersection of these worlds. Though informal networks of friends and neighbors do exist, formally organized support networks for formerly incarcerated adults are extremely rare. This may explain the lack of scholarship.

### **Adult Alternative Education as an Imperative**

While public school attendance is mandated by state and federal law, and K-12 schools for minors are strictly regulated, adult education is generally managed at the local level or not at all: there is no national oversight board for adult education, and the only nationally standardized tool of adult education is the GED – a problematic standardized test.

Despite the lack of general oversight or federal support for adult education, such programs are needed in this country for many reasons, especially for formerly incarcerated adults attempting to become productive members of society. In explaining an “ontological” approach to learning, Wortham (2004) states:

Learning changes not just what the learner knows (which would be simply “epistemological”) but also who the learner is. To learn is to take up a new practice, to change one’s position in a community. Thus, learning can change identity and the self. (p.716)

St. Martin’s adult high school program illustrates this ontological approach to learning in practice: graduates of the program commonly state that the most important thing they learned is that they can learn, and that they are learners. The identity of the adults who go through this program is fundamentally changed by their experience in the program.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

As noted in the review of literature, there is a lack of scholarship surrounding the re-entry experiences of formerly incarcerated adults, and especially a lack of examination of educational experiences of that population. This study begins to outline the impact of a post-incarceration alternative high school program on the lifestyle choices of the adults who participate in and graduate from that program. This study further makes the claim that more programs like St. Martin's should exist in the United States to serve this large and growing population. This chapter gives an overview of the site of the study, the methods used to find subjects and obtain and analyze data, and some of the limitations of this research. This chapter will also review some scholarship on and definitions of case study methodology, as well as the rationale behind choosing this particular methodology.

#### **Site overview**

St. Martin's Adult High School began in 2002 in response to the needs of participants in its two residential facilities, St. Martin's House for men and Hearth House for women (Meiners, 2004). St. Martin's House has been housing ex-offenders since 1954 – it began as a “halfway house” for men who had been released from the Cook County jail and had no place to call home. St. Martin's has grown from one three-flat apartment building that housed a handful of men to an agency housing 50 recently released male Illinois State prison parolees and 20-25 female parolees at Hearth House. These people reside there for 6 to 10 months and are provided with food, clothing, shelter, psychological services, education and job training, and job placement assistance. St. Martin's also recently opened a longer-term transitional housing apartment building for men who cannot live on their own, usually for reasons of physical impairment, and is moving forward with plans to open a longer-term housing program for women in the near future.

The adult high school program at St. Martin's started as a response to the concerns of St. Martin's and Hearth House residents who were seeking more educational credentials as they worked to

improve their lives. Classes at the adult high school are kept small – usually 25 participants – and meet in the evenings to accommodate work and therapy schedules. St. Martin’s courses are taught by volunteers, mostly college instructors, who teach one adult high school class per week. Courses meet for 15 weeks, and the course load at St. Martin’s is considered a senior-year equivalent. The average St. Martin’s student dropped out of high school during sophomore or junior year, and students “fill in the blanks” of course credit with Life Experience credits (Meiners, 2004). This model is used in other institutions, including the nearby DePaul University School for New Learning, which grants college credit for life experience to nontraditional undergraduates. Accreditation is maintained for St. Martin’s Adult High School through a partnership with a local private Catholic high school, whose board occasionally reviews St. Martin’s curriculum. St. Martin’s Adult High School accepts non-residents who are formerly incarcerated, and classes are comprised of a mix of residents and non-residents, women and men.

## **Methodology**

I approached this study from a critical standpoint. Rubin and Rubin neatly encapsulate the critical approach to research:

Research that follows the critical theory (Kinchloe and McLaren 2000) paradigm emphasizes the importance of discovering and rectifying societal problems. Rather than advocating neutrality, critical researchers emphasize action research, arguing that research should redress past oppression, bring problems to light, and help minorities, the poor, the sidelined, and the silenced. (2005, 25)

The need for more programs like the high school at St. Martin’s appears clear to me, and my hope with this study is that it will shed some light on the effectiveness of the St. Martin’s program in assisting ex-offenders who want to improve their lives, and with that will make the case for more programs like St. Martin’s to be started. Additionally, this study aimed to be an opportunity for the participants to reflect on the meaning education has had in their lives.

This project is a case study of two individuals who graduated from the St. Martin's program two or more years ago and have since maintained lives that are crime-free and productive by their own definition of the term. One subject, Tonya, is a female who graduated in 2008. Tonya was not a resident of Hearth House, but was referred by a nearby drug abuse recovery home, Midwest, where she had taken up residence at the beginning of her parole. Tonya now works at Midwest as a certified drug abuse recovery counselor. The other subject, Carl, is a male parolee who graduated in December 2004. Carl was a resident of St. Martin's House when he was a student at the adult high school. Carl is now on the full-time staff of St. Martin's House. Both subjects are still working to make up for the time they lost in prison, but both of them are productive by their own definition and by standard measures of recidivism rates: both subjects are employed full-time in work they find meaningful, both are pursuing higher education, and both are making connections with friends and loved ones from whom they were estranged during their incarceration.

### **Case Studies: a non-standard standard**

While case studies are perhaps the most common qualitative research methodology for psychologists, medical and legal scholars and political scientists (Creswell, 2007), there is still some dispute within the research community about whether case study research can be counted as a methodology at all: Stake is frequently cited (Creswell, 2007; Schram, 2006) for maintaining that case study is not a methodology but a choice of what is to be studied. Creswell calls case study “a methodology, a type of design in qualitative research, or an object of study, as well as a product of the inquiry” (Creswell, 2007). This could possibly be construed as an overly-broad concept of case study, but Creswell goes on to say that a case study is necessarily bounded, either around a single bounded case or multiple bounded systems (case or cases). Schram attempts to simplify the debate over the definition of case study by claiming that it is “defined by an analytic focus on an individual event,

activity, episode or other specific phenomenon, not necessarily by the methods used for investigation” (Schram, 106), which still leaves the researcher with room to maneuver in the world of the case study. Yin acknowledges the debate about case study, but uses it to point out the flexibility of the methodology: case studies can be quantitative, qualitative, or both; they can explain, describe and illustrate topics in a manner that other methodologies cannot; and they can include many disciplines. Yin describes the Washington Post report on the Watergate scandal as a fine example of an effective case study (Yin, 1994).

The “cases” in this research project are bounded in a fairly straightforward sense: each of these cases is an individual person who graduated from the St. Martin’s adult alternative high school program. Interviewing two such individuals allowed me to gain some insight into what their experience was in an adult alternative high school setting geared specifically toward formerly incarcerated adults, and to see whether that program had an impact on their later lifestyle choices, including post-secondary education and career choices. As should be expected in one-on-one, confidential interviews, I was allowed insight into many departments of the subjects’ lives. Selecting a case study, rather than an ethnographic study of a larger group of St. Martin’s students, allowed me to explore many of the facets of an individual’s life that are altered by incarceration and its repercussions.

## **Methods**

Data was collected via semistructured one-on-one interviews. I determined that interviews would be the most appropriate method for gathering data because I was seeking information on the impact the St. Martin’s Adult High School program had on the lives of its graduates, and this impact is best understood in the context of the graduate’s whole life. To have asked for information in a survey format would have meant receiving incomplete information at best. The interview format gave me as the interviewer the opportunity to ask immediate follow-up questions, to zero in on unexpected topics



and, throughout the process, to ensure that the voices of the research subjects were being heard. As Rubin and Rubin note, “Unlike survey research, in which exactly the same questions are asked to each individual, in qualitative interviews each conversation is unique, as researchers match their questions to what each interviewee knows and is willing to share” (2005, p. 4).

As I noted in some field notes for the pilot project of this study, I was surprised to find the degree to which interviews differed between subjects. I had expected each interview to proceed in a similar fashion: the graduate student asks questions and receives responses. But each interview became, as Rubin and Rubin highlight, a “conversation”. This approach fits perfectly with the community and the mission of St. Martin’s as well as the critical standpoint of this research study.

The standard questions used in each interview can be found in Appendix I. Fieldwork was conducted via semistructured interviews on location at St. Martin’s house. Though each interview took place in a different room on the campus of St. Martin’s Ministries, staff of the program allowed me to use private offices and conference rooms with doors that could close. This allowed subjects to feel comfortable that their responses were confidential and, on a more practical level, kept the ambient noise level to a minimum, which allowed me to record the interviews for later transcription.

I sought out graduates of the St. Martin’s program who have stayed out of prison for three or more years. Federal and Illinois recidivism tracking data use three years as the standard time frame for measurement: in the state of Illinois, the recidivism rate – the rate of people who have been released from state prisons and have returned, either for committing another crime or for parole violations – has hovered between fifty and sixty percent for most of the past decade (Illinois Department of Corrections, 2004). Since three years is the accepted standard for calculating recidivism rates, I hoped to study formerly incarcerated adults who have “beaten the odds” and have remained out of prison for longer than three years.

As with many things that take place in the St. Martin's community, selecting subjects for this study was partly the result of my planning and design, and partly the result of luck, goodwill and word of mouth. I learned about a high school alumni meeting taking place on a Saturday in February 2009 at St. Martin's Ministries. At that meeting, I introduced myself and got to know several alumni who had recently graduated from the program. This is ultimately how I met Tonya, who was in attendance at the meeting and tried to stay involved in alumni events between her full-time job and caring for her family. I have interviewed Tonya three times: in January and February of 2009 and in August of 2010.

Carl is a member of the St. Martin's staff whom I have known since he was a student of the program in 2004. In late spring of 2010 when I was seeking out alumni for this study, I saw Carl at a St. Martin's event and asked him if he would be willing to be interviewed for the study. He agreed and showed an interest in the study, and we scheduled our first interview for August of 2010. We had a follow-up interview in December of 2010.

All interviews were conducted through semistructured interview questions – included in Appendix I – and follow-up questions as appropriate. Interviews were recorded with the subjects' consent with a USB digital audio recorder and then transcribed by me on my home computer. When appropriate, follow-up interviews were conducted. Subjects were given the option at the start of each interview to opt out of the study. With each interview, the subjects agreed to the interview being recorded, and also showed an interest in the overall study. Subjects are not named in this paper to keep their identities confidential. Though interviews were structured and I aimed to ask each subject the same questions, I utilized what Fontana and Frey refer to as “empathetic interviewing”:

The new empathetic approaches take an ethical stance in favor of the individual or group being studied. The interviewer becomes an advocate and partner in the study, hoping to be able to use the results to advocate social policies and ameliorate the conditions of the interviewee. The preference is to study oppressed and underdeveloped groups (2008, p.17).

As part of this approach, follow-up interviews were largely based on the information given to me by the two research subjects in initial interviews. Tonya and Carl informed not only the content of the study, but also the direction of the fieldwork as it was in process.

Once I transcribed the interviews, I read through the transcripts and made notes of recurring themes and topics. Using these themes, I then developed general coding categories. On a second review of the transcripts, notes were refined: I assigned each note to its appropriate coding category. Initial coding categories were expanded or removed altogether depending on how applicable they were to the data at hand.

After two reviews of the transcripts, I entered my coding notes into a data spreadsheet. Using the alphabetical sort feature, I sorted codes by categories to identify clusters of codes. From this I was able to identify broad themes, determine if follow-up interviews were necessary, and in some cases identify further need for research to add to my review of literature.

### **Subjects of the Study**

The two subjects interviewed in this study are both formerly incarcerated adults who live and work in the city of Chicago. Both subjects served time in Illinois State Penitentiaries and both were paroled back to Chicago – the city where they both grew up.

“Tonya” is an African-American woman in her thirties. She grew up in a middle-class household on the West Side of Chicago. Her father was a police officer and her mother worked for the Chicago Transit Authority. Tonya was their only child together; they divorced when Tonya was three years old.

Starting in first grade, Tonya was bussed to a previously all-white grade school in the affluent suburb of Wilmette. The bussing program was canceled after Tonya was in second grade, so she took a

train every day from the west side of Chicago to Wilmette, where she was eventually the only black child in the school. For most of her grade school years she had two identities: during the day she was the representative black individual in an all-white school, and the rest of the time in her neighborhood she was considered an outsider by neighborhood kids:

I grew up with a lot of self-esteem issues because of that. And then coming back to the west side of Chicago, and then they was callin' me little white girl over here when I get home, and then when I get there, I was the butt of a lot of jokes. Even though these were kids that I grew up with at school – but I was different. My parents used to make me spend two weekends a month with a family that I went to school with so I could do Girl Scouts and ice skating, and all of those things... but it was just really, really hard because I was always different. And people always looked at me differently. So I started out with a good upbringing, education-wise, but these streets was calling me. I was so sheltered and had to do all of that, that the minute that my family gave me any air, I went wild.

Tonya's parents provided her with material goods and the means to a good education, but they each started new families and did not give their shared daughter a great deal of attention.

Tonya attended Lewis Parker High School in Chicago for her freshman year, but when she was fourteen years old, she and her best friend were abducted, forcibly detained, and raped over the course of several days. Tonya's friend died. Tonya was able to escape, and she eventually testified at the trial of her kidnappers. She did not return to school for two years, and instead spent some of that time institutionalized at a mental hospital with severe post-traumatic stress. When she returned to high school at the age of sixteen, she went to Lincoln Franklin High School, a struggling Chicago Public School on the West side of Chicago. She finished her junior year of high school, but dropped out in 1981. The next year, her father encouraged her to enroll in a private alternative high school, Cosmopolitan Prep, for which he paid her tuition. Tonya completed the requirements of the diploma at Cosmopolitan Prep in 1983, and she then thought that she had a state-recognized high school diploma.

In 1998, Tonya was arrested and sent to Cook County Jail. She spent two years at Cook County jail awaiting trial, then spent two and a half more years in Illinois State Penitentiaries. While she was

incarcerated, Tonya participated in very few programs. She was released in November of 2002. After some time receiving treatment at Midwest, a recovery home for women, she began working there. In 2008 her employer informed her that her listed high school diploma was not legitimate. She learned that Cosmopolitan Prep had not been an accredited high school, and her employer gave her six months to get a GED or a high school diploma, or lose her job. She heard about St. Martin's through a friend, and she was accepted to the fall 2008 class. She graduated from St. Martin's in December of 2008.

Tonya is now working full-time at Midwest as a licensed drug and alcohol recovery counselor. She lives with her sister, whom she helped "clean up" from drug dependency, and she takes an active role in caring for members of her extended family.

Carl is a thirty-three-year-old African-American man. He was born and raised on the west side of Chicago, on the border between two low-income neighborhoods: West Garfield Park and Austin. His father died when he was five months old, and his mother was held responsible for the death – she spent five years in a penitentiary during Carl's early childhood. Carl and his siblings lived with their grandmother for two of those years, until their grandmother's death, and then became wards of the state when no other relatives were willing to care for the children. Carl's mother did not regain custody of her children until Carl was seven years old. Carl described himself and his siblings "raising themselves" at that time:

Yeah, we raised ourselves. You know, um, people say it's impossible – it's not. At the age of seven, eight years old, we were out at gas stations pumping gas for quarters, dimes, nickels. Um, we were collecting pop bottles and taking them to the grocery store and collecting ten cents per bottle. You know, we was stealing gas caps and selling them for a dollar. We were stealing clothes off of people's backyard clothesline for to have cleaner, decent clothes...

Carl's two older brothers were heavily involved in the Vice Lords gang. His immediately older brother reached the rank of prince, and Carl was expected to follow suit. By the age of fifteen he was attempting to sell drugs, though he established that he was "the dumbest drug dealer" when he got

arrested three times in the same day at the same place by the same police officer. As a more lucrative alternative, he began robbing drug dealers, which he did with some success for about two years with a group of friends from his gang. He was arrested in a sting operation that was a case of mistaken identity: the police thought he was his cousin. After his arrest, he spent months in the Cook County jail awaiting trial. He was finally convicted of armed robbery for allegedly robbing a white woman. He had never met her.

...when I was in court, um, there was two people that came there that I had never set eyes on before. And I had no idea what was going on, and, um, the lady pointed me out, stated that I robbed her. And, now I know, I'm not a racist, this is a probably like thirty-year-old Caucasian woman, um, and I [laughing] had never been out of my community!

Both Carl's arrest and conviction were cases of mistaken identity – he was arrested because he looked like one of his cousins, and he was convicted for an armed robbery he did not commit. He “always expected to get arrested”, since every other member of his immediate family has done time in a correctional institution. What he did not anticipate was the length of his armed robbery sentence.

Carl spent eight years and seven months incarcerated. Of that time, he spent approximately twelve months in segregation, or solitary confinement, mostly due to creating discipline problems and getting into arguments with guards. He was released from prison on his twenty-seventh birthday, in June of 2004. He briefly lived at a halfway house that was scarcely regulated – on the first day he was there, he encountered residents gambling in the hallway, drinking beer, and snorting heroin. He heard about St. Martin's House from his sister, and after a few weeks was able to move in to St. Martin's, where he enrolled in the adult high school program that fall. He worked during the days and went to school at night, and graduated with his high school diploma in December 2004.

Carl is now a full-time employee of St. Martin's House and is attending college part-time. He shares custody of his fourteen-year-old son, who was born just after he was arrested, and is engaged to a woman who is a drug counselor and a graduate student in the mental health field. He says he is lucky

he didn't have the chance to follow in his brother's footsteps in the Vice Lords gang – his unexpectedly long prison sentence “threw the game plan off.”

### **Limitations of the research design**

One limiting factor of this research is my own personal involvement with the program at St. Martin's. From 2004-2007, I was employed at St. Martin's as the sole full-time staff person of the adult alternative high school program. My role included screening and registering students, maintaining school records, acting as a guidance counselor, and being a general sounding board for the adult high school students as they navigated a project that most of them admitted they would never have thought possible: finishing their high school diplomas.

My work at St. Martin's began as part of a full-time volunteer program through Dominican Volunteers USA<sup>10</sup>. After 10 months as a volunteer, I was hired on at St. Martin's and continued working in the same capacity. A running joke about many full-time volunteer programs is that they guarantee work one will love and for which one is grossly under-qualified. I felt that was true when I was working at St. Martin's, and I left my work there in January of 2007 when I was offered employment that would offset the costs of my graduate studies in education. It has been my intention to use my master's degree to work for a program like St. Martin's in the future.

In short, the St. Martin's program changed my life along with the lives of those with whom I worked: I saw in the re-entry population my vocation. With this in mind, I entered into the work of beginning a qualitative research study with some trepidation about my own biases and limitations. I know that formerly incarcerated adults are flawed individuals who have committed crimes. At the same time, I am aware of my tendency to see the best in this population. This balance is one I needed to

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<sup>10</sup> This is the actual name of the program. DVUSA maintains several volunteer placements across the city of Chicago, and in other parts of the United States.

strike when I was an employee of St. Martin's, and is one I have continued to strike in my work in this project. Fortunately, both Tonya and Carl offered realistic assessments of their own flaws.

This research is further limited by my own lack of similar experience: Tonya and Carl are both African-American individuals who grew up in lower-income urban areas, and they have both been incarcerated. I am a Caucasian woman who was raised in a small rural town in the Midwest, and I have never been incarcerated. This gap in experience was helpful in its way, as it informed my choice of the semistructured interview for gathering data. That format allowed me to utilize my strengths as a graduate student in education to create the framework for the study, while allowing the study's content and focus to be greatly informed by the experiences of the research subjects.

Another limitation to this study was time. Tonya, Carl, and I were all juggling full-time employment and family responsibilities. I believe that this limitation has added some strength to the study, however: First, we shared a mutual respect and understanding for the daily grind. All three of us work in nonprofit organizations and felt a certain kinship in that regard. Second, because there was a lag in time between initial and follow-up interviews, I was allowed the opportunity to ask about updates and changes in the subjects' lives. In short, I had not intended for this study to become longer-term than six or eight months, but despite my plans, it spanned a longer time. The data is arguably stronger because of that extra time.



## Chapter 4: Findings

Over the course of several interviews, Carl and Tonya related their experiences growing up in Chicago, attending Chicago public schools, being arrested, spending time in jail and then in state prison, and being released. Though both their lives follow this general pattern of events, they each had a unique and challenging journey. From both of their stories, certain themes arose.

### **Schools as locations of symbolic and actual violence**

For both Carl and Tonya, school was not a safe space. Tonya's earlier school experiences – being bussed from her West Side home to an affluent, mostly-white suburban school – left her feeling like she never belonged in her surroundings:

I grew up with a lot of self-esteem issues because of that. And then coming back to the West side of Chicago, and then they was calling me “little white girl” over here when I get home, and then when I get there... I was the butt of a lot of jokes. Even though these were kids that I grew up with at school, but I was different.

W.E.B. DuBois coined the term “double consciousness” to describe the phenomenon experienced by African-Americans of functioning in two worlds, and never completely belonging to either:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (1969 (1903), p.7)

For a high school student, the “dogged strength” required to keep from being torn asunder by the strains of existing in two worlds can prove to be too difficult to maintain, especially without a support system. This began to be the case for Tonya. Despite her fairly privileged grade-school educational background and her early success in schooling, as she grew older she became more aware of the two worlds she was bridging. She began to care less about her school performance and made more effort to fit in with anyone who would accept her without judgment – this search eventually led

her to spend time with members of a street gang.

Later, in her public high school closer to home, she was the victim of a particularly brutal crime. Tonya's assault changed the course of her life. For high-school age girls, sexual assault is almost common. According to the National Victim Center and Crime Research Center report *Rape in America*, almost half of all rape victims are under eighteen, and of those, two-thirds are between twelve and seventeen (from Hersch 1998, p. 253). Despite this, school staffs are not prepared to give support to girls who are victims of sexual violence. For Tonya, returning to school after over a year away meant re-entering a space where she was isolated from the classmates who had moved on without her, and where she had no support from teachers or administrators after enduring an extremely traumatic experience. She shifted from being an academically bright student to an assault victim who had given up:

So I ended up, after being out of school for like two years, I ended up going to Lincoln Franklin high school, which was on the same block that my grandmother lived on, and that's when the weed, and the drinking and the, I was like super self-destructive. I just didn't care any more.

For Carl, school was an extension of the rest of his life – it was just another site of gang-related turf battles. Kids from a rival gang would wait for him in the hallway. For Carl, even though he “did the work” and “got reasonable grades”, leaving the school building as soon as possible was a form of self-preservation:

I didn't do too well when I was in school, public school, and it wasn't that I didn't have the smarts for it, it was just that I never went. I never went because I was heavy up into the gangbanging and the school that I was going to was predominantly rivals. So whenever I did go to school, more than likely, at lunch period they would be waiting on me in the hallway, and you know, they'd get theirs out on me, so I'd leave school, come back, and I mean, use your imagination on that.

For Carl, the fairly constant threat of violence in school was eventually the cause for him to drop out of school altogether in ninth grade. For Tonya, school was a relatively benign place to be on a daily basis

– she was accustomed to an undercurrent of racial tension – but being the victim of a single traumatic crime changed her school trajectory permanently. For both subjects, school became a site of violence, trauma, and little support from adults. It became a place to be avoided.

Bernasco and Black, discussing the findings in “Where Offenders Choose to Attack”, note that high schools are a common location for robberies, and consider why that may be:

High schools may be places where good targets can be found, but they could be nodes in the routine activities of offenders as well. The pupils themselves may be victims, the offenders, or both. (2009)

This states that high schools are something of a microcosm of the communities in which low-income minorities exist: both Carl and Tonya were alternatively offender and victim, as were their targets: In their later teens, Carl robbed drug dealers and Tonya would steal money from johns who had picked her up as a prostitute. The line between victim and offender is blurred when all parties involved play both roles.

The administration of these schools did not prioritize their students’ best interest, let alone their education. For Carl and Tonya, the experiences of being unsupported when facing real violence in school is an example of the theory of symbolic violence developed by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron in 1974. Bourdieu and Passeron agreed with earlier scholars Bowles and Gintis that education serves to reproduce the social relations of production – for instance, public school children are being prepared to work in factories in many ways, including changing classes when bells ring and other disciplinary customs<sup>11</sup>.

Bourdieu noted that symbolic violence occurs when an exchange takes place between a person with more power and privilege and a person with less. One example he gives to illustrate this is exchanging a gift. While on its face, giving a gift may appear to be merely a gesture of goodwill, when

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<sup>11</sup> In my own public elementary school, children were punished with "pink slips" - little pink-hued paper disciplinary sheets - which were used to communicate to the principal what the student had done wrong. I learned at the age of eight to fear receiving a pink slip, even though I wouldn't understand what that actually meant for another decade.

a gift is given from a person of greater privilege to a person with lesser privilege; the giving of the gift is an act of symbolic violence – emphasizing the privileged position of the giver and the lack of privilege of the receiver.

There exists in school settings a similar dynamic of seemingly charitable actions that are, in reality, acts of symbolic violence: a hierarchy is in place from day one of schooling, in which the teacher is the holder of knowledge, handing down learning from a seat of privilege. Students are being given knowledge at a rate and in a style that is determined by the teacher and administrators. Students lack the cultural capital to control their own schooling destinies.

This dynamic is complicated by class. As Enora Brown notes, the manner in which knowledge is meted out to students varies greatly between school systems, and children of privilege are offered space to explore – what Brown refers to as “freedom to become”. Meanwhile, high school students in lower-income areas, on the other hand, are held on lockdown, searched with metal detectors, and constantly exposed to harsh discipline. The messages for students at the two schools Brown studied in her 2005 article “Freedom for Some, Discipline for ‘Others’: The Structure of Inequity in Education” were clear, as the expectations had been clearly laid out for them by their schooling environments: students of privilege are being groomed to lead and succeed, while students lacking inherited cultural capital are trained to obey or face strict consequences.

Both Carl and Tonya expressed their initial surprise at what a safe and welcoming space St. Martin’s adult high school had created for its students – for both of them, as for many students at St. Martin’s, their earlier experiences of high school could be described as neither safe nor welcoming. Their school experience was unique to neither Chicago nor the 1980s: In their recent study of Baltimore-area school children, Milam, Furr-Holden and Leaf (2010) found that real and perceived incidences of violence among school children are significant enough to affect children’s performance on standardized tests. There are several ways to possibly explain this situation: children who are fearful

for their safety may have difficulty concentrating on tests or during review sessions; they may – like Carl– not have difficulty in class at the times they attend, but be more likely to leave school out of concern for their personal safety, or – as the authors propose as another explanation – the correlation that exists between children experiencing violence and threats of violence and children experiencing poverty is very strong: “neighborhood violence may simply be a proxy for neighborhood disadvantage or poverty” (Milam et al 2010, p. 465).

To counteract the negative school experiences of students’ pasts, St. Martin’s adult high school is designed to feel like a safe location. Purple and teal coloring in the classrooms, shared tables and padded school chairs, potted plants, a lending library, and posters with encouraging messages are all an intentional part of the school environment. The main classroom for the adult high school is on the top floor of the building, a dedicated space for learning that is used for tutoring during daytime periods. The physical environment reflects the commitment of the faculty and staff to make the school a welcoming space. Alumni of the program noticed this as students and recall it with fondness. The welcoming environment of St. Martin’s adult high school provides an especially stark contrast to the most recent experience of the students there – a term in a state penitentiary.

### **Prison Life**

All St. Martin’s Adult High School students have one thing in common: every one of them has been incarcerated. These are the alumni, so to speak, of the school-to-prison pipeline, and the statistical expectation is that they will continue to re-offend and be re-arrested. Many St. Martin’s students were first arrested in their late teens, usually for drug-related crimes. Generally they had already dropped out of high school before their first arrest. Juveniles who are incarcerated are required to attend GED courses in juvenile detention. An inmate who is eighteen or older, however, is not automatically enrolled in those courses, and if he is in a state penitentiary he will have to join the waiting list for school enrollment. If he is transferred to another prison, he moves to the bottom of that institution’s

waiting list. Adult inmates generally wait years before they are given the option of GED training.

In the meantime, without school options, there are sometimes other programs inmates may participate in, but an eighteen-year-old man from the streets is not often inclined to join such programs. Carl was a fairly typical example. While he was incarcerated, he “did nothing”. He described his mind-numbing daily routine on the days when he was not in solitary confinement:

Carl: I had, I had no interest in, um, in anything when, um, when I was in prison. Like I said, I had five things that I did every day...

MHB: Yeah.

Carl: I would get up, go and eat breakfast, come back, make my little wake-me-up concoction of oatmeal, rice, peanut butter and crackers mixed in together, go out to the yard, work out for two hours, come back, go straight to the poker table, play poker four or five hours, go to the evening yard, come back, eat the same little meal, go back to the poker table until lock up –

MHB: wow.

Carl: and at night time I would sit up all night, watch TV from maybe eleven, twelve at night to five, six in the morning.

MHB: So did you sleep much?

Carl: I slept, um, I would say I got maybe a good two, maybe three hours sleep. Maybe, nah, maybe within the entire day, probably got about a good six hours' sleep, because I would sleep during lockup periods.

MHB: Oh, OK.

Carl: Well, that was when I was in medium, in medium-maximum, but when I was in maximum, you know, I couldn't do nothing *but* sleep. Because we couldn't come outside. Period.

Carl fought so much and so often that he was well known to segregation guards. As is fairly common with inmates who are discipline problems, he was transferred to different penitentiaries at least 5 times in 8 years. While he was incarcerated, he was – after several years – given the option of enrolling in GED classes, which would have required turning down his prison job. His income was \$30 a month, so Carl chose to maintain the job and turn down school. He essentially lacked any sense of foresight or investment in himself. To be frank, Carl was not a model prisoner. He mentioned several times that he was extremely aggressive while incarcerated. Noguera notes that black males in America feel compelled to act aggressively as a matter of protection (2008, p. xvi), which appears to be what

Carl was doing.

Tonya also noted that she did nothing while she was locked up: no school, no job programs. She did not care about anything:

[I] did absolutely nothing when I was in there... when I went in there, it was my first time, and I basically just did what everybody else did around there, just trying to survive. I didn't get into any drug treatment programs, I didn't go to school, I didn't do anything while I was in there. I just did time.

She was also, by her own estimation, depressed. During the time Tonya was incarcerated, her mother died. The rest of her family had basically no contact with her – she received no mail and no visits during the years she was locked up. This isolation took its toll on Tonya's mental health.

Their own anger, post-traumatic stress, and occasional stubbornness, combined with the wholly inadequate system of schooling and training in prisons in the state of Illinois, left both Carl and Tonya completely unprepared for the world that awaited them when they were released from prison. This is unfortunately typical for formerly incarcerated adults in Illinois and across the country, and these adults are not helped by the parole system once they are released.

### **Deficiencies of the Parole System/Location Matters**

Both participants of this study were paroled into untenable and even dangerous situations after their time in prison. In both cases, their determination to stay out of prison led them to change locations to a healthier, more suitable placement. In neither case was the move to a more appropriate parole location spearheaded by a parole agent. The parole board requires only an address from which parolees report in on a regular basis. The actual location of that address – and the appropriateness of the placement – is not a priority for the overworked parole officers or the parole board.

Parole officers in Illinois, as in most states, are overwhelmed. In the state of Illinois, over 45,000 adults were under state supervision (incarceration, probation or parole) in 2008. In 1990, that number was 27,516 (USCB 2011, p. 215). In eighteen years, the workload of the state prison system

has nearly doubled, though its capacity has not kept pace. With such an overload of cases, parole officers are left to the occasional check-in at a parole placement and depend on tools like ankle-bracelet monitoring devices to keep track of their scores of charges. As the state faces growing budget shortfalls, the resources available to parole departments will only be constrained further.

These budget considerations have caused politicians in the past to consider policies like releasing prisoners early based on “good time” credit. Though this is a wise fiscal policy because it saves state dollars that would be spent on warehousing prisoners, it has shown to be both a costly political tactic – Illinois Governor Patrick Quinn was lambasted in his 2010 re-election campaign for “letting criminals out on the streets” – and it adds even more pressure to the already overtaxed parole system and the inadequate social service network in Chicago.

Having a sense of agency about where they were located – changing the circumstances of their day-to-day lives – was the first major step in the right direction for each of the research subjects. For both of them, changing their initial post-prison location was the first step in self-determination.

Tonya was paroled to her old family home, but when she got to the address she was horrified to learn that the house had burnt down and no one was living there. She was suddenly completely homeless:

So I called the jail, called back to the penitentiary, and I’m like, my house has burned down, I don’t have anywhere to go, it’s ten o’clock at night, and they sent me to this shelter at 51st and Winchester, and it was like, when I got there, this lady signed my name, and gave me a cot, a mat, to go lay on the floor and go to sleep. And there was bag ladies in there, and it was just... ugh. *I was like, wanting to go back to jail...* anyway, you know, they put everybody out the shelter at five o’clock in the morning, but me being from IDOC [Illinois Department of Corrections], I couldn’t leave anywhere. So they sent me down to this women and children program, it was a shelter for women and children, and I had to wait there for my parole officer. And I had maybe fifty dollars in my pocket. And I’m waiting down there with all these kids, and these women, and I’m sitting on a bench, in the hall, it was nowhere for me to be alone. I’m just supposed to sit on this bench for, one to two days, whenever my parole officer comes. *So I went out and I got high.*



Tonya had the presence of mind to realize that she was re-entering a pattern of behavior that would only get her back in prison – which, despite her desperation, was not what she wanted to do.

Being forced to wait for days in an inappropriate parole placement was not an experience unique to Tonya's situation. Carl was made to wait three weeks before the Department of Corrections officer arrived at the halfway house to which he had been assigned to give him his ankle radio monitor. This meant three weeks of remaining inside a poorly-run halfway house surrounded by active drug users and gamblers. After nearly nine years in state penitentiaries, he knew that this was not an appropriate setting to re-enter society. His sister told him about St. Martin's. He visited and submitted an application as soon as he was allowed to leave the halfway house. He moved to St. Martin's shortly thereafter. When both Carl and Tonya settled into more appropriate residential settings, Midwest for Tonya and St. Martin's for Carl, they began to rebuild their support systems.

Parole can and should be a useful tool for re-introducing incarcerated persons to society, and the shortfalls of the parole system as it exists in Illinois present a lost opportunity to keep ex-offenders out of prison. As an alternative example to the Illinois model of parole, the state of Michigan has been employing a series of tactics since 2003 to prepare inmates for their eventual release, and then to monitor parolees carefully after they are released:

MPRI [Michigan Prisoner Reentry Initiative] begins at intake, when a prisoner's risk, needs and strengths are measured to develop individualized programming. Prior to parole, offenders are transferred to a reentry facility, and a transition plan, which addresses employment, housing, transportation, mentoring, counseling and any necessary treatment for mental illness or addictions, is finalized in close collaboration with community service providers. After release, officers use firm but flexible graduated sanctions – including short stays in a reentry center if needed – to manage rule breaking before it escalated to more serious transgressions. (Pew, 2011)

This program was put into place as a way to save shrinking state budget dollars for prisons. The Pew

report notes that this appears to be working: “Overall, post-2007 preliminary figures from the Michigan Department of Corrections show that parolees released through the MPRI are returning to prison 33 percent less frequently than similar offenders who do not participate in the program (Pew 2011, p. 21).” The report went on to note that parole revocations in Michigan were at their lowest level since record keeping began 23 years ago.

### **Family: Keeping Parolees on the Straight and Narrow**

Both Tonya and Carl spoke extensively about their families during their interviews. For both participants, family members sparked the complicated mix of emotions evoked by many families. For both participants, family was a source of pride and stress, love and struggle. Each participant stated the crucial importance of their family members and their deep desire to remain connected to their families. Additionally, they each pointed to their children as a source of inspiration to keep doing the right thing.

In Carl’s life, family provides a motivation to work hard and be successful, but is a stressor at the same time. He now shares custody of his teenage son, and he worries about having enough money to provide his child with items like new shoes. He is concerned his son is going to start “running with the wrong crowd,” and he shared his deep worry about becoming a parent who loses his child. His son is a top priority in his life, and Carl chose to establish a relationship with his son before he fully committed to going back to school. In fact, he cites his son as the reason he turned his life around altogether:

MHB: So you got out from prison. What changed your mind and got you interested in a place like St. Martin’s?

C: Honestly, my son.

With this succinct statement, Carl defined the most significant change in his identity from his pre-incarceration days. When Carl was arrested, his girlfriend was four months pregnant with their son. He did not get to see his son in person until he was almost nine years old. Missing out on his son’s childhood is one of his life’s bigger regrets, and his son continues to be a driving force for him to be

the best father and the best man he can be.

Carl has also reached out to his siblings and extended family. He noted that he hopes one of his brothers might enroll in the St. Martin's program after he is released from prison. He said that his father's side of the family is very supportive of all the work he has been doing. Furthermore, Carl is building his own new family, having recently become engaged to a woman who, like him, is working at a social service agency and attending school part-time. Their shared values, including a commitment to education, are an important part of their relationship for Carl.

Tonya also finds her family to be a source of both strength and stress. Her sister was addicted to street drugs but, with Tonya's help, she has been clean for several years. Tonya and her sister have lived together for several years and are sharing care of their mentally ill brother. Tonya cited her family as an inspiration to keep working hard. She wants to be a role model to her siblings, her nieces and nephews and her community. She has a daughter who was adopted out of state when she was incarcerated, but she still cites her daughter as an inspiration to work hard, refrain from using illegal substances, and do the right thing.

While their family relationships may be complicated, both Tonya and Carl mentioned the importance of contact with their family members when they were incarcerated, and their deep disappointment at the lack of that contact. Carl delayed being moved to a state prison from the county jail after he was sentenced because he had hopes that his girlfriend would visit with their baby son. He was desperate for news of his young son during the years he was in prison, and he shared his frustration at the lack of updates.

Tonya was even more cut off from her family, to such an extent that her mother died and her childhood home was destroyed in a fire and she learned about both facts after she was released from prison. She received no mail and no visits from her family in the time she was locked up, and this depressed her.

The lack of contact from both participants' families was not just a fluke. The location of prisons primarily in downstate rural Illinois is engineered to isolate prisoners, who mostly hail from urban areas like Chicago, from their families. Carl's girlfriend may not have been forthcoming with mail, but a visit was out of the question: to travel to one of the prisons where he was being held would require a multi-hour drive each way, and no public transit reaches from Chicago to most of the small towns where state prisons are located, so she would require a reliable vehicle to make the trip. Though there are charitable organizations like the Lutheran Social Services Prison and Family Ministry in Chicago, which organize family bus trips to women's prisons, even these groups only have the resources to visit a particular prison once or twice a year. Extreme isolation from family and friends is part of the trauma of incarceration, in Illinois and in many other states, and the effects of that trauma affect not just the incarcerated people themselves, but their families, who are without husbands and wives, sisters, brothers, or significant others. Children of inmates who may not see their parent for many years are prone to depression, poor behavior, and lower grades in school. The parent or other caretaker who remains with custody of the child can feel overwhelmed with the responsibility of being a single parent and resentful of the incarcerated parent who has left them behind. Relationships can take years to repair when inmates return. Tonya and Carl both referred to their relationships with their family members as "works in progress", even after several years of difficult work.

This isolation by design is beneficial to no one, and the subjects of this study made clear that being cut off from their loved ones was detrimental. Tonya was depressed and refused to enroll in any special prison programs. Carl was a constant disciplinary problem, moving into and out of solitary confinement and being transferred to multiple prisons over the course of his sentence. For both of them, as for many inmates, more regular contact with relatives and friends during incarceration could have allowed them to take advantage of the few prison programs afforded to them, and could have kept disciplinary issues at bay.

## **The LEAD document**

Both participants in this research study, as well as participants in a pilot study for this thesis, noted that producing the LEAD document was a crucial element of the St. Martin's adult high school learning experience for them. This is gratifying to me, as a former staff member of the high school, because the LEAD, as part of each graduate's final portfolio of high school work, is a cornerstone of the St. Martin's curriculum. Meiners (2004) explains the LEAD:

A key piece of this program is to give academic credit for life experiences. To graduate, participants need to be able to produce a document 'Life Experience and Achievement Document' (LEAD) that itemizes their life experiences in terms of academic competencies. For example, if a participant is a parent or has engaged in childcare, they have competencies in the areas of childhood education, budgeting, reading, health-care, supervision, etc. If a participant has experiences working as a cashier they have competencies in mathematics, public relations, time management, etc. The school works to assist them to frame their life experiences to acquire the most academic credit possible (p. 9).

The LEAD is not merely a self-esteem boosting project for St. Martin's students. It provides both a venue for students to recognize and claim their marketable skills and a significant academic milestone: the LEAD requires autobiographical reading, analysis and writing, which cultivate literacy and research skills. In this requirement, St. Martin's is not unique: using autobiography to cause student reflection and to hone student writing skills has been used successfully in other academic arenas, including in a college transitional program at North Carolina State University in Raleigh (Spire et al, 1998).

Though, as noted above, the LEAD is not intended to be an ego-boosting exercise, a side-effect of producing a LEAD document for many St. Martin's students is the recognition of real skills acquired along the way of life. It was common, upon the completion of the LEAD document and the rest of the portfolio required for graduation, to hear a St. Martin's participant say that he or she had learned above all "that I'm a learner."

Carl said the three things he found most "useful" in the St. Martin's high school experience

were the LEAD document, three particular teachers who helped him, and the experience of graduation.

Tonya also stated that the LEAD was a challenging and rewarding requirement of the St. Martin's Adult High School Experience – this is telling, because Tonya had entered the program after thinking she had already earned a high school diploma.

That both participants in this study cited the LEAD as a vital part of the St. Martin's Adult High School experience communicates that the school is doing something right with this requirement. Rather than requiring the passage of a standardized test, St. Martin's requires the equivalent of a senior thesis in the LEAD, and though the students who are working on it tend to complain that the project is overly demanding, the lasting benefit of reflecting on one's personal skills and writing those skills out on paper can be seen in the ongoing academic success of the program's alumni.

### **Giving Back, Paying It Forward**

Tonya and Carl have both found fulfillment in work that offers a service to men and women in need. Carl works at St. Martin's House, the men's residential program of St. Martin's Ministries. Tonya works as a counselor at Midwest, a drug rehabilitation program.

Carl speaks about how he was given so much, and he wants to give some of it back:

Carl: You know, I'm not really here for the pay. Because if money was a big issue for me, I would quit this job and I would get a job where they pay me a fistful of dollars.

MHB: Right.

Carl: Um, but I like what I do. This is where I got my start, and I believe – not saying that I was the worst-off person ever – you know, there's a lot of people who's ten times worse or had it ten times worse. But I wasn't an angel when I came here and I made a complete transformation, and a good transformation, and a whole new outlook on life. So for what was given to me, I want to give it back. I tell people all the time my inspiration is *Pay It Forward*... that inspired me. But it's just like that, for what was given to me, I want to give it to everybody that I can, and I want them to give it to more people.

*Pay It Forward*, the 2000 motion picture starring Kevin Spacey and Helen Hunt to which Carl alluded, centers around the story of a troubled school child who is given an assignment to make the

world a better place, and decides to start a project wherein people repay good deeds done for them by doing something good for someone else: “paying it forward”. The concept for someone like Carl is logical and offers something of a relief. Though Carl says, “I want to give it back,” it would not be possible to pay back the people who assisted him at St. Martin’s in a way that would have the same impact. What he can do, however, is pay the deed forward by helping other men who are in the early stages of post-conviction life.

Carl: No matter what’s going on, when I wake up in the morning, I may have a thousand problems, I do not let it bother me.

MHB: Good.

Carl: I just say, well, I’ll deal with it as best I can, And I get up and come to work and I do what I do every day, and I do it because I love what I do.

I get to help somebody just as somebody helped me. And that’s what matters.

Tonya also finds meaning in her day-to-day work. As a former drug addict, her day job in a drug abuse recovery home serves as a reminder, a warning and a motivation to stay on her current path:

MHB: In five years, where do you want to be?

Tonya: Having a few recovery homes, being the manager of a few recovery homes. That’s what I wanna do. Of my own. I love the field that I’m in, I love seeing those women come in broken, and leave like flowers: happy, confident... because I relate so much of that to my own life. I love my job, though... they just need to pay me more!

Both Carl and Tonya note that they are not being paid well for the work they are doing – a common complaint among social service workers – but that they do the work for rewards beyond money. Tonya stated several times during interviews that the work she does, helping addicts get clean, keeps her away from drug use. She is provided with a daily reminder of where she used to be and how far she has progressed.

Both Tonya and Carl have shown that formerly incarcerated adults who are offered adequate post-incarceration support can not only stay out of prison, but can discover a vocation, secure appropriate employment and start improving the lives of people around them. Both Midwest and St.

Martin's invested less than a year of residential time and resources to Tonya and Carl. The good work these two organizations have received in turn from each of them has lasted years, is not limited to just those two agencies, and is just beginning.

### **Looking ahead, Continuing education**

Both Carl and Tonya are committed to continuing their education, even while working full time and caring for their families. Tonya has become a licensed drug and alcohol counselor since she graduated from St. Martin's adult high school and is making plans to earn a bachelor's degree in the near future. Carl is going to college on nights and weekends, also with hopes to earn his bachelor's degree within the next five years. Both subjects are planning to use their education to continue doing work in the field in which they are currently employed: Carl has dreams of eventually being the executive director of St. Martin's Ministries, and Tonya wants to run her own group of recovery homes for women. Both of them see education as a means to achieving those long-term goals.

The contrast between these two working adults with five-year plans tackling college coursework while juggling family responsibilities and full-time employment and the people they were only a few years ago reflects the enormous human capacity for adaptation. Carl was a violent thug who was best known by prison guards as a disciplinary problem. Tonya was a drug-addicted prostitute with a history of trauma and an estranged family. In a few years, with a relatively small investment in educational programs and the encouragement of a growing support system, these two people underwent a complete turnaround. Now they are working daily to provide the same chance to others. Tonya and Carl are living evidence that the Prison Industrial Complex and the parole system do not work, if the goal is to habilitate people to be a part of the outside world. For less expense, in a shorter time, programs like St. Leonard's Adult High School prepare troubled people for the realities of life "on the outside". What Tonya and Carl needed, like many formerly incarcerated adults, was a site of agency



where they could work through the traumas of prison and their early childhood, get empowered through education, and reflect on their roles in the world. They used those sites as they are designed: to help them get on their feet and, essentially, get out the door in to the world after prison. Their short time at St. Martin's Adult High School was more valuable than any of the time they wiled away in jails and prisons.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions

The original research question of this thesis project focused on the role that mentors have in the lifestyle choices of St. Martin's students. As the study progressed, it became clear that, while the influence and encouragement of dedicated faculty and staff at St. Martin's are an important element in student success, the forces at work in the lives of successful St. Martin's students are larger than their relationships with an assigned mentor, and that something different undergirded the success of these two individuals. This is why a case study consisting of one-on-one interviews is valuable, because even when I was asking what was the wrong question, I was able to get an informative account from the research subjects – one made more informative because it was in their own voices.

As interviews with these two subjects progressed, two concepts surfaced that affected them both more than any individual mentor's contribution: location and personal agency. Each of these subjects came of age in a geographical location riddled with social, racial and economic problems – essentially, spaces that were abandoned by the state and lacking in basic services for their residents. Carl “never left” the specified gang territory in which he lived. Tonya, on the other hand, was made painfully aware of the different opportunities in different locations every day when she was bussed to a more affluent – and racially separate – neighborhood to attend grade school. For both subjects, the nested systems of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory worked to reinforce that they, as young students of color, and later as incarcerated adults, were not deserving of the opportunities that exist in other locations. They were barred from systems and sites of privilege.

St. Martin's, by reaching out to formerly incarcerated adults in a location that is still home to subsidized housing projects, is making a statement every day regarding to whom opportunity should be afforded, and what the level of agency should be of individuals in that location.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, St. Martin's Ministries is able to serve only a tiny fraction of

the large and growing population of formerly incarcerated adults that exists in Chicago and across the United States.

As is shown by the success of Tonya, Carl, and the majority of the graduates of the St. Martin's Adult High School program, St. Martin's is a location where people who have survived the traumas of prison and of poor schooling environments can recognize their own skills and abilities and begin to use them to improve their lives. In short, St. Martin's can be called a *site of agency* for formerly incarcerated adults. It is important to note that the students themselves are doing the work, but St. Martin's gives those students the space – both literally in its classrooms, offices and hallways and figuratively in the support and encouragement that students are given – to recognize their capacity as learners, their potential as citizens, and the power they have over their own lives.

In contrast, the high school environments specifically and the nested systems in general that Carl and Tonya experienced when they were teenagers did not encourage self-determination or agency. Further, their prison experiences strongly discouraged any sense of personal power or even involvement in their own day-to-day lives. These poor schooling environments and state penitentiaries could be called *sites of apathy*: both subjects repeatedly claimed that, when they were incarcerated, they just “didn't care” what would happen to them. For both of them, nearly a decade of their lives was spent in a numbing, repetitive limbo where inactivity was encouraged and formal schooling was a privilege for very few. Tragically, not everyone who has been in prison is able to escape that apathy and respond to new opportunities. For many, this is because the opportunities themselves never appear.

As illustrated both by St. Martin's Ministries and by City Achievement Academy<sup>12</sup>, a site of agency does not need to be located in an affluent neighborhood. Indeed, it appears to be more effective if it is located where educational opportunities tend to be scarce: both sites have great success with their students while being located in higher-crime, lower-income urban neighborhoods. When Tonya

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12 Mentioned on page 13 of this thesis

was bussed to a school in an affluent neighborhood, the daily message was clear: high-quality education is something that is offered far away from home, in areas where property values are high, the corresponding tax base can support palaces of learning, and a majority of the students served are not African-American. Sites like City Achievement Academy and St. Martin's tell their students a different story.

Failing to address the needs of formerly incarcerated adults has been a matter of policy in the United States for quite some time; however, it has not made the problems of crime and recidivism disappear. There are, of course, moral arguments to make against the mass imprisonment of millions of citizens. There are also compelling economic arguments for educating current and former prison inmates. By ignoring these individuals, the United States is depriving itself of a large source of human capital. If formerly incarcerated adults had universal access to education and job training, as well as counseling and other social services to manage the aftermath of prison's traumas, an investment of a few years and several thousand dollars could pay off in the form of decades of tax revenue and the many societal benefits that result from competent, educated adults participating in a community rather than preying upon it. Additionally, lower recidivism rates would help reduce over-extension of prison resources and could move the state of incarceration in the United States back toward its original intent of rehabilitation, as opposed to the current state of merely warehousing supposed criminals.

Several areas of research would benefit from further study. First, there has been recent growth in nontraditional education at the college level: collegiate programs geared toward adult students who, for whatever reason, did not enroll in an undergraduate college immediately after high school. There is also a loose network of institutions across the country that provides Adult *Basic* Education, often using the baseline of literacy-level learning as a starting point. Both ends of the educational spectrum are addressed more than the middle: adult high-school-level learners. The assumption, as has been mentioned in this study already, is that an adult who is learning at a high-school level will simply take

and pass the GED exam, which leaves the only study around this topic to be GED-related: is the test and its related preparation sufficient, who passes it and how quickly. Educators need to invest more creativity in alternatives to test-based diplomas. A livelier scholarly discussion should surround alternatives to the GED.

It is interesting that, while the increased reliance on standardized testing in public elementary and high schools is a topic of discourse, scholarship and often-heated debate, educators and policymakers take for granted the premise that as soon as a high-school dropout turns eighteen years of age, his options for a high school diploma should be drastically cut down to one: passing a standardized test. The GED testing program works for a small minority of adults without high school diplomas. There may be lessons to learn from the limited utility of that testing protocol when educators are examining the increasing use of standardized testing in traditional education.

An area requiring further action – beyond just research – is the large number of formerly incarcerated adults who have little to no access to education that can end the revolving door of recidivism for them. Educators must create more sites of agency like St. Martin’s to meet the needs of this growing population. As Tonya and Carl have shown, success stories are not only common at a place like St. Martin’s, they are self-perpetuating: students who are deeply affected by the commitment and support of their teachers become pillars of their families and the community, guiding others to a life of being drug-free, employed, respected, and – crucially for policymakers – contributing tax dollars to the state, rather than costing them through incarceration.

For both Tonya and Carl, the moment that made a crucial difference in their life stories was the moment when they moved from an inappropriate and possibly dangerous parole location to a place where they felt safe and supported. More research and more advocacy needs to revolve around creating re-entry initiatives that meet the needs of formerly incarcerated adults. Though community groups have made attempts, as with the Chicago Collaborative on Re-entry, to work together to provide a

network of services for former prisoners, the common experience for adults leaving prison in Illinois and in most other states is much more often one of chance: if someone is able to secure a bed in one of the small number of re-entry housing programs like St. Martin's, then parole can actually be time spent getting life affairs back in order and becoming a more equipped member of society. If one cannot, however, one will likely be placed in an inappropriate, unsupportive parole environment and essentially left to their own devices. Somehow one is expected to find legal employment and safe housing after enduring years of trauma and receiving no education, job training or counseling.

That "if" is entirely too large. Both Tonya and Carl have family members who have been incarcerated, but each of them were the only member of their families to make it to a re-entry housing program supportive enough to truly assist them in making a positive transition to non-incarcerated life.

St. Martin's is a special place. But there is no reason the St. Martin's experience should be so uncommon for formerly incarcerated adults. Sites of agency should be a standard component of a well-executed probation and parole system. Educators – not police or parole officers – are best equipped to establish these sites of agency. Just as educators are at the heart of the St. Martin's success story, high-school level, non-test-based re-entry education should be the cornerstone of any initiative that is aimed at reducing recidivism. In states like Michigan, post-incarceration education is a component of the package of services that is offered to adults who are leaving the penal system. As noted in chapter 4, those services have helped reduce that state's recidivism rate, which has saved scarce state dollars in two ways: keeping people out of prison reduces incarceration costs, and helping people become – and remain – legally employed increases the state's tax revenue. Providing educational opportunities to formerly incarcerated adults is not merely a charitable idea – it's a policy that improves the community to which these individuals inevitably return. As Tonya and Carl show in their commitment to working with at-risk populations, it's also a policy that has the potential for a ripple effect, reducing recidivism more widely as newly educated and engaged members of the community stay to help their neighbors

and relatives live a better life.

Beyond the immediate need for comprehensive post-incarceration education lies a need to improve the education that many student of color encounter as children. For both Tonya and Carl, their schooling journey stalled in urban public schools that were overcrowded, under funded, and unsafe. Their teachers were doing the bare minimum – taking attendance only at the start of the day, or ignoring a young woman who had been deeply traumatized – because they lacked the time and the resources to do more. Unfortunately, especially in the city of Chicago, many of the fixes proposed to the crumbling public schooling system have entailed privatizing education and converting former public schools to charter schools and military academies. Frustratingly, policy makers in Chicago are willing to think creatively about funding private-school vouchers and charter schools, but are not interested in re-thinking a central problem of school resources: namely, that a majority of school funding derives from local property taxes. Enora Brown colorfully illustrated the difference a local tax base makes when she compared the two schools she called Mountain View Township and Groundview Technical, two public schools that are close to each other geographically but worlds apart in terms of available resources, because they are both funded by local property taxes. Using a property-tax base to fund local schools perpetuates cycles of poverty by keeping resources limited to neighborhoods where residents are already wealthy. Low-income children of color who live in poorer neighborhoods are sent to public schools where funding is scarce, because their neighborhood's property tax base is low, while wealthy children in affluent neighborhoods where property tax revenue is high are afforded modern school buildings, teachers who are well paid and well trained, and books that are updated frequently. The message to low-income children is that the best they can hope for is to stay out of trouble and out of jail, while affluent children are expected to attend college and professional school and achieve the kind of wealth they were born into.

Real school reform should start with a realignment of school funding. In Illinois, per-pupil

spending on public schools varies wildly, from \$72,000 per student over the course of three years in one affluent school district in suburban Chicago, to less than \$30,000 per student over that same time period in a rural school district downstate<sup>13</sup>. Establishing a base line of per-pupil funding, with funding that is distributed equally across school districts, would be a step in the direction of actual school reform and would decrease the prevalence of sites of apathy in public education.

Each subject of this study has pointed to locations, to sites, and ultimately to systems where groups of people involved were pushing them to become more, to work harder, and to do better. For each of them, St. Martin's Adult High School was a central site for that encouragement. While an individual mentor can be an excellent resource for a person who has just been released from prison, the hundreds of thousands of people who are leaving prisons in this country every year need more than individuals who are willing to help. They need systems in place that will counteract the systems that drew them in to incarceration. They need to function in sites that will support and guide them back to being productive members of society. St. Martin's should not be a unique entity – schools following the St. Martin's model should be standard public policy.

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<sup>13</sup> These figures are from an analysis by the Chicago Reporter of school funding statistics provided by the Illinois Department of Education in 2008.



## **Appendix I: Interview Questions**

When did you attend St. Martin's adult high school?

Before you came to St. Martin's, how long had you been incarcerated?

When you were incarcerated, what kinds of programs did you participate in?

How did you learn about St. Martin's? How did you learn about the high school?

Was there anything about the high school program that you found useful?

Was there anything about the high school program that surprised you?

Was there anything about the high school program that you think should be changed or improved?

What have you been doing since you graduated from the high school program?

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