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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Structural barriers explain the link between negative community re-entry experiences and motives for illegal behavior in street-identified Black men and women

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Abstract

This study examines how the re-entry process is related to structural barriers in the community and to motives for engaging in illegal behavior—two key risk factors for recidivism. We analyzed survey data collected on perceptions of community re-entry, employment opportunities, neighborhood violence, and illegal behavior motives from 379 formerly incarcerated and street-identified Black-American community members residing in Wilmington, Delaware (M_{age} = 32.3/8.9 years old; 77.0% men; 100% Black) by employing Street Participatory Action Research (Street PAR) methodology. We found that negative perceptions of re-entry correlated positively with (i) hardship caused by structural barriers in the community, specifically blocked employment opportunities and neighborhood violence, and (ii) motives for engaging in illegal behavior. Notably, the link between negative perceptions of re-entry and motives for illegal behavior became significantly weaker when the influence of structural barriers on these individual-level factors was included in a multivariate model. Results suggest negative views of the re-entry process reflect the resource-scarce and stressful environments people are living in, and structural barriers can account for the relationship between negative re-entry experiences and why individuals are motivated to engage in illegal behavior. Findings underscore the importance of improving the economic conditions of communities with high numbers of returning citizens.

KEYWORDS

minority, neighborhood violence, recidivism, Street Participatory Action Research (Street PAR), stress, unemployment

Keypoints

- Structural barriers in the community correlate with greater re-entry difficulty.
- Negative experiences of re-entry correlate with motivations for illegal behavior.
- Structural barriers account for link between re-entry difficulties and motives for illegal behaviors.

INTRODUCTION

> "These masses of marginalized young men and women are dumped on a daily basis into the segregated neighborhoods of urban containment from which they were forcefully removed months, years, or decades earlier. […] Once back on the streets, caught between the daily realities of poverty, homelessness, illness, addiction, and the looming threat of reincarceration, most of them will scramble to survive … " (De Giorgi, 2017)

Black-American communities are disproportionately affected by mass incarceration, with entry into the criminal legal system conferring the risk for a lifetime of imprisonment and recidivism (Middlemass, 2017; Miller, 2021; Nowotny & Kuptsevych-Timmer, 2018). According to the US Department of Justice, Black males are at an increased risk of imprisonment compared with White males (Bonczar, 2019; Carson & Sabol, 2012), with incarceration leading to a multitude of poor mental, physical, and social outcomes that erode the overall wealth, health, and well-being of communities (Clear, 2009; Comfort, 2009). The removal of Black men—as fathers, uncles, brothers, and sons—from Black communities has critical, negative intergenerational consequences for family stability and economic security (Lyles-Chockley, 2008). Moreover, Black formerly incarcerated adults have disproportionately higher levels of recidivism, often resulting in a cycle of reoffending, reconviction, and readmission into prison (Reisig et al., 2007). Scholars argue that Black men have long been the targets of this "mass supervision," or the growing number of marginalized populations under correctional supervision and postrelease control (Miller, 2014). Relegated to second-class citizenship, Black men who return home in the "afterlife" of incarceration, wade through a carceral web of challenges and threats to their humanity (Miller & Stuart, 2017; Miller, 2021).

One group that is highly affected by the criminal legal system are individuals who identify as involved in the streets. "Street life," "the streets," or a "street" identity is phenomenological language used to describe an intergenerational, cultural ideology or "street code" centered on personal, social, and economic survival through illegal means when necessary (Payne & Bryant, 2018; Payne, 2011). A "street" identity or street culture speaks to the worldview and lived experiences of persons who are actively involved with crime (i.e., gang members, drug dealers). Put simply, some Black men and women draw on a street-oriented social identity to navigate unstable sociostructural environments. Street identity is not understood as "deviant" or "maladaptive," but rather is argued to be an expression of resilience used to enhance the survivability of persons involved in the streets (Payne & Bryant, 2018; Payne, 2011). Studies of perceptions of re-entry among street-identified Black populations find that while they often hold positive aspirations about the prospects of returning home, these aspirations are often mired by the realities of a racialized structural violence complex—one where felony convictions, systemic obstacles to employment, and ongoing community violence alter their abilities to survive (Payne & Brown, 2022; Payne et al., 2019; Yu & Hope House Men and Alumni, 2018). Street life, then, becomes an adaptive response to adverse structural conditions, all of which are risk factors for further involvement in the criminal legal system. To begin to better understand the lived experiences of street-identified Black adults re-entering into society, this study examines how perceptions of barriers to successful community re-entry relate to risk factors for reincarceration from the vantage point of street-identified Black-American men and women.

It is also important to acknowledge the impact of intersecting identities in systems of oppression, particularly as it relates to the criminal legal system. System-impacted women of color inhabit multiple identities and social categories of marginalization that jointly shape their re-entry experience and risk for recidivism (Spjeldnes & Goodkind, 2009; Williams et al., 2021). The paucity of scholarship on the unique needs of racial minority women returning to the community means that re-entry programs, and the criminal legal system more broadly, are ill-equipped to meet the specific barriers to re-entry experienced by Black women. The finding that re-entering Black women report lower income as well as greater experiences of adversity (e.g., trauma, mental health difficulties) than re-entering men (Bostrom & Tasca, 2018) is consistent with research showing that Black women juggle unique racialized and gendered precarity when returning home, particularly as mothers and community caregivers (Gurusami, 2017; Hitchens & Payne, 2017; Leverentz, 2014). These racialized and gendered social experiences may influence their motives for engaging in illegal behavior. In addition, research shows that Americans with a disability are disproportionately represented in the legal system (e.g., Appleman, 2018; Leotti & Slayter, 2022). Research has shown that individuals with a disability are more likely to receive insufficient accommodations during incarceration (Oberholtzer, 2017), leading to an increased risk for recidivism among re-entering citizens with a disability (Blanck, 2017). As argued by Vallas (2016), disability status interacts with other marginalized identities (e.g., race, class) to exacerbate the likelihood of discriminatory criminal practices and risk for recidivism. Taken together, these data highlight the many intersecting systems of oppression that impact all aspects of the criminal legal system, including during the re-entry process following incarceration. The staggering scope of the re-entry problem underscores the need for research focused on improving the outcomes of Black returning citizens and increasing their chances of breaking free from the "revolving door" of incarceration.

Structural barriers and re-entry

Scholarly work reveals that the transition from institutionalization to community living is often extremely stressful for individuals, as it constitutes an abrupt shift in social position from incarcerated person to returning citizen (Martin, 2018). Many are returning to marginalized communities with few of the system-level resources needed to overcome the challenges associated with attaining housing, finding employment, and meeting

other basic needs that are essential for a successful transition (Martin, 2018; Wakefield & Uggen, 2010). De Giorgi (2017) reasons that formerly incarcerated Black men often return home and "come back to nothing," and that prison re-entry continues to be a feature of the punitive governance of the racialized poor (see also Campbell et al., 2009; Hallett, 2012). Marked with stigma and pervasive marginality, returning citizens are substantially less likely to secure employment than nonincarcerated individuals (Silver et al., 2021), they report more stress associated with strained family relationships (Liu & Visher, 2019; Liu et al., 2021), and the majority do not have access to needed medical or psychiatric care (Mallik-Kane & Visher, 2008; Salem et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2020). In their qualitative study of Black fathers, Dill et al. (2016) identified several barriers impeding community transition and healthy family relationships, including difficulty accessing affordable housing and obtaining financial stability. These findings highlight the diverse unmet needs of Black returning citizens and the hurdles they face during reintegration into under-resourced, low-income communities.

Scholars have applied a structural violence framework to help explain the disproportionate and cyclical nature of re-entry among marginalized Black communities (Payne & Brown, 2022; Payne et al., 2019). Unlike more direct forms of interpersonal violence (e.g., physical assault), structural violence contributes to preventable morbidity and mortality indirectly through social forces and policies that perpetuate health inequalities, including racism, discrimination, and poverty (DeVerteuil, 2015). Structural violence is enacted through large-scale social systems, such as legislation and government policies that impact educational and employment opportunities, housing options, and the distribution of wealth, which prevent individuals in marginalized communities from meeting their basic needs. Through these actions, structural violence transmits risk by contributing to health disparities (e.g., avoidable injuries, premature death) and the continuation of marginalization (Rylko-Bauer & Farmer, 2016).

One powerful example is the oppressive and discriminatory traditions that are embedded in all stages of the criminal legal system that contribute to the perpetuation of racial inequalities in the penal system and during re-entry (Carson & Sabol, 2012; Nebbitt & Lombe, 2007). During the re-entry process, structural violence may manifest through the criminal legal system via post-release community supervision (e.g., probation and/or parole), which some view as an attempt to continue the disenfranchisement of re-entering citizens (Martin, 2018). Indeed, research shows that formerly incarcerated Black men report financial difficulties (e.g., expensive fines), loss of autonomy (e.g., rigid curfews), and mandated social isolation from others in their communities (e.g., no contact with "known felons") as a result of these criminal practices (Smith, 2014; Trimbur, 2009). Blocked employment opportunities for individuals with felony convictions as a function of restrictions on the types of jobs available to re-entering citizens is another form of structural violence. Recent epidemiological research shows that the number of policies restricting employment for individuals with felony convictions across states in the United States ranges from 200 to 900 restrictions, and states with more restrictions or "hidden sentences" have worse employment outcomes for formerly incarcerated individuals (Warner et al., 2020). In addition to these restrictions, research indicates that employers are less willing to hire individuals with a history of incarceration than those without, even when equating work credentials and experience (Larson et al., 2022; Pager, 2003). For re-entering citizens who do find work, they are more likely to be hired for low-wage jobs than adults without a felony conviction, employment that is not effective at reducing poverty or recidivism (Holzer, 2022; LaBriola, 2020). Research has shown that recently released individuals are at an increased risk for death (Binswanger et al., 2007), with Black re-entering individuals returning to areas characterized by greater disadvantage, including poverty and housing instability (Harding et al., 2013). Interestingly, in a recent qualitative study, re-entering individuals identified re-entry programs as unhelpful and complicit in perpetuating structural violence against low-income Black communities (Payne & Brown, 2022). Together, these data show that structural violence these policies contribute to greater difficulties for re-entering citizens motivated to reintegrate into their communities and avoid reincarceration. In these ways, the concentration of returning citizens into socioeconomically disadvantaged communities represents a form of structural violence that re-entry scholars posit contributes to the enduring rates of recidivism in certain communities (Yu & Hope House Men and Alumni, 2018).

Experiences of the re-entry process

In addition to structural barriers, it is important to consider how returning citizens experience the re-entry process. To clarify, our use of the term "experiences of reentry" is not intended to suggest that negative views of the re-entry process or perceived barriers to re-entry are entirely subjective and based solely on an individual's beliefs. Rather, we use this phrase to differentiate an individual's internal experience of the re-entry processes from structural barriers to re-entry rooted in the environment. Although there is a rich body of qualitative literature that disentangles how an individual's perceptions of re-entry shape their behavior and worldview, fewer quantitative studies have explored how returning citizens' perceptions of the hurdles they face relate to risk for recidivism (for exceptions, see Liu et al., 2021; Semenza & Link, 2019). Liu et al. (2021) found that

individuals with more "unfilled reentry needs," such as strains from financial difficulty and family neglect, reported greater postrelease criminality and re-entry failure. In a large secondary analysis of data from formerly incarcerated men, Semenza and Link (2019) find that hardship during the re-entry process and self-reported health showed reciprocal relationships in the first 15 months postrelease, with cumulative barriers to re-entry decreasing physical and mental wellness, and physical and mental health symptoms positively predicting negative perceptions of re-entry. Liu and Visher (2019) argue that this "reciprocal relationship" also expands to the family members of the formerly incarcerated, finding that strain-induced negative emotions exacerbate antisocial behavior such as drinking.

Qualitative analysis of re-entry suggests that a combination of both structural opportunity and cognitive, inner processing are critical for overcoming re-entry barriers. Given that attitudes and beliefs are important determinants of behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005), perceptions of the re-entry process among returning citizens may be an important predictor of behavior as individuals transition back to the community. Giordano et al. (2002) contend that returning citizens who adopt prosocial "hooks for change," or cognitive shifts in their capability to transform their lives, are both less likely to recidivate and more likely to benefit from employment and marriage (see also Paternoster et al., 2015). Hlavka et al. (2015) assert that offenders who can manage the stigma of "spoiled identities" are better placed to obtain successful re-entry. Positive beliefs about one's future self related to success and accomplishment, such as the need for redemption or a "second chance" are also integral in overcoming re-entry barriers (Dill et al., 2016; Giordano et al., 2002; Gurusami, 2017). Such studies highlight the complex nature of the re-entry process and provide evidence that varied perceptions of re-entry influence the behavior of returning citizens.

Present study: re-entry and risk for recidivism

Studies on re-entry have rarely included the voices of active street-identified Black men and women, a particularly relevant group for understanding obstacles to re-entry and how they impact reincarceration. In the present study, we tested three hypotheses about relations between perceptions of the re-entry process and risk factors for recidivism. First, we hypothesized that more negative views of the re-entry process would be positively associated with reports of blocked employment opportunities and neighborhood violence (e.g., the "exploited community"; Yu & Hope House Men and Alumni, 2018). Second, we expected negative perceptions of the re-entry process to correlate positively with motives for illegal behavior, based on the theory that these motives are adaptations to the structural barriers faced by re-entering citizens. Third, we hypothesized that structural barriers to re-entry would account for any positive association between negative perceptions of the re-entry process and motives for illegal behavior.

METHODS

Participants

Participants were 379 street-identified community members ages 16–54 ($M/SD = 32.25/8.90$) residing in Wilmington, Delaware (77.0% male; 100% Black) who had previously been incarcerated at least once. Sample characteristics can be found in Table 1. Overall, the sample was diverse in terms of incarceration frequency and the security level of the institutions of their most recent incarceration, suggesting our sample of re-entering citizens represented a range of severity in terms of their incarceration experiences before the re-entry process. Data were collected from a larger study that primarily examined attitudes toward, and experiences with,

TABLE 1 Demographic and incarceration history characteristics.

Variable	*M/SD or %*
Age (in years)	32.25/8.90
Gender	
Male	77.0%
Female	23.0%
Race	
Black/African American	100.0%
Employment status	
Employed, Full-time	23.5%
Employed, Part-time	15.8%
Unemployed, Looking for Work	50.7%
Unemployed, Not Looking for Work	8.7%
Educational attainment	
High school diploma	48.7%
GED	42.7%
Bachelor's degree	0.7%
Other	8.0%
Lifetime number of incarcerations	4.72/9.48
Most recent incarceration	
Minimum level security	25.6%
Medium level security	34.6%
Maximum level security	33.0%

Note: $N = 379$. 1.3% were missing on employment status. 6.6% were missing on the security level of their most recent incarceration.

violence in the Northside and Westside sections of Wilmington, Delaware. This study used a Street Participatory Action Research (Street PAR) methodological approach developed by one of the coauthors (Payne & Brown, 2016; Payne & Bryant, 2018; Payne, 2006, 2013, 2017). Street PAR explicitly organizes low-income persons of color who are actively and formerly involved *with the streets* and criminal legal system in the research process to more accurately analyze the lived experiences of this population. Involvement in "the streets" or "street life" is conceptualized as a fluid behavior, one that can vary or change in saliency dependent on many internal (e.g., motivations) or external factors (e.g., structural shifts, life chances). Within this fluidity, street-identified individuals can alter their level of participation in illegal activities (e.g., desistance from drug sale due to gaining legal employment; or temporarily exiting street life due to new motherhood/fatherhood roles). Thus, those who are "formerly involved" in the streets no longer actually engage in illegal activities. For more information on the methods and goals of Street PAR (see Payne, 2017).

Procedures

Study design

Street PAR is a research design that directly involves individuals formally involved in the streets and/or criminal legal system as active members of the research team throughout the research process (referred to below as Street PAR "Associates"). Street PAR also serves as a re-entry intervention program that involves returning citizens and local communities. Street PAR's mandate for activism requires research projects to provide "action" or activism on two levels. The first is to leverage Street PAR as an opportunity to increase personal and professional goal attainment for the Associates through research training and support, and the second involves engagement in local activism in the study participants' neighborhoods. Associates were recruited from a prior Street PAR study that took place in another section of Wilmington, DE. More specifically, nine members of the previous study's 15-member team participated as Street PAR Associates in the current study. The remaining five members were identified by the current study's coproject director who was also a senior-level Street PAR Associate. Associates received monetary compensation for their efforts on the project. Additional details about the intervention components of Street PAR are elaborated on in the Epilogue of this manuscript, which provides information on the academic/professional outcomes of the Associates and local activism efforts. Street PAR Associates received monetary compensation for their efforts on the project. Although none of the original Associates are coauthors on this particular paper due to time constraints, Associates have been presented with and approved a draft of this article. Moreover, this article theoretically expands previous publications on re-entry coauthored with Street PAR Associates (Payne et al., 2019; Payne, et al., 2023).

Human subjects protections

The University Institutional Review Board approved all protocols and procedures outlined in this study (Protocol #: 1448364). This article is a secondary analysis of a larger study focused on experiences with and attitudes toward violence. Before participation, informed consent was obtained for all individuals 18 years of age and older. We also sought to include younger street-identified individuals (i.e., ages 16 and 17) who were involved in the streets. Given research demonstrating that street-identified youth are often not in good standing with their guardians or parents (Payne, 2006, 2013), we were approved to recruit participants ages 16 and 17 who completed assent to research and a waiver of consent from their parents before study participation. All project participants, including minors, were also covered by a Certificate of Confidentiality, which provided extra protection given the nature and sensitivity of the project.

Recruitment

We relied on the Street PAR Associates to identify individuals who are "street-identified" to avoid potential harmful legal implications of documenting current engagement in illegal behavior. Given that it would be unethical to directly ask someone if they are "street" or engage in illegal activity, as it could jeopardize safety, we used snowball sampling to collect data through study participants and Street PAR Associates. Specifically, Street PAR Associates' social networks were used to identify and recruit potential respondents, a technique useful for collecting data from fringe, sparse, and/or sensitive populations (Sadler et al., 2010). First, we asked Street PAR Associates to complete a written grid and provide data on biological and "informal" family or friends who are street-identified, along with familiar places (e.g., barbershops, particular blocks, street corners, etc.) that are potentially frequented by street-identified populations. We then expanded from this group by asking where and how we can locate other persons who fit the sample criteria. Surveys were conducted primarily at local community centers that were chosen for their proximity to the center of key neighborhoods and were often in close proximity to locations where violence, crime, or street activity occurs frequently. Fewer surveys were collected in "cool" sites or areas of low street activity (e.g., near a church or library) and "warm" sites or areas of moderate street activity (e.g., a local barbershop or corner store) in these

neighborhoods. In each location, Street PAR Associates identified a set of "street allies" or gatekeepers (well-known or respected residents in the neighborhoods) who provided access to street communities. Further, a stratified quota design was used to ensure age groups reflected the percentage of the total population of Black adults in the local neighborhoods. Street PAR associates and other team members ensured completeness, consistency, and accuracy during data collection using an iterative, hands-on approach. Associates were physically on site to help participants complete surveys and even read sections of the survey aloud when needed. Participants were free to refuse to answer any question but given the length of the survey, we often reviewed any missing data with the participant to ensure the items were not accidentally overlooked.

Measures

Data for the present analysis were collected as part of a larger battery of surveys that was developed in collaboration with the Street PAR Associates. The 45-page survey packet used to collect the current data was based on a previous 18-page questionnaire conducted by this Street PAR program in the Eastside and Southbridge sections of Wilmington, Delaware. The current study builds on this earlier study's survey design by implementing it in the Northside and Westside sections of Wilmington. All Street PAR Associates were involved in the critical reviewing, approval, organization, and administration of the 45-page survey packet. More specifically, during an intensive 11-session research methods training (organized before any Street PAR study begins), Street PAR Associates were exposed to the concept of survey design (i.e., factor analysis, scale development) and then participated in the development of this study's questionnaires, including on structural barriers in the community and attitudes about community re-entry.

Negative re-entry experiences

Perceptions of the re-entry process were measured using items from the Attitudes Toward the Reentry Process Scale (Payne, 2013). Participants responded to six items related to difficulties with finances (e.g., "Things are tough financially for people who have recently returned to the community from prison."), housing attainment (e.g., "People returning from prison have difficulty finding stable housing."), and job opportunities (e.g., "It's difficult to get a job if you have a felony conviction."). For each item, respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they agree with the statement on a four-point scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 4 (*Strongly Agree*). Responses were normalized using a Blom transformation to reduce skewness and averaged, with higher scores indicating more difficulty with the re-entry process ($M/SD = -0.02/0.63$; skewness/kurtosis = –0.08/–0.32; Cronbach's α = .86).

Motives for illegal behavior

We administered a created scale designed to assess why people engage in illegal behavior (seven items; Payne, 2022). In collaboration with Street PAR Associates, eight items were originally developed to reflect the team's cultural perspective of why people engage in illegal behaviors. Respondents rated how strongly they agreed with statements about different motivations for engaging in criminal behavior, including financial reasons (e.g., "for economic survival."), safety (e.g., "for protection."), social connection (e.g., "as a way to find a family."), and societal contributors (e.g., "The *system* is designed for people to sell drugs and go to prison.") on a 4-point scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 4 (*Strongly Agree*). Examination of the internal consistency revealed that one item "Crime is not a good way to make a living" substantially lowered the consistency of the scale, and thus, was moved from the scale. Responses were normalized using a Blom transformation to reduce skewness and averaged, with higher scores reflecting more motivation to engage in criminal activity ($M/SD = -0.02/0.57$; skewness/kurtosis = –0.05/0.48; Cronbach's α = .80).

Structural barriers to re-entry

Two measures were administered to assess structural inequalities that may hinder successful re-entry and confer risk for reincarceration: Blocked Employment Opportunities and Neighborhood Violence.

Blocked employment opportunities

The availability and quality of local job opportunities were assessed with eight items that asked respondents to select how true statements were on a four-point scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 4 (*Strongly Agree*). Example items included "There are enough jobs in my community." (reverse-scored), "Unemployment plays a role in community violence.", and "The Federal government should raise the minimum wage." Responses were normalized using a Blom transformation to reduce skewness and averaged so that a higher total score reflects fewer quality employment opportunities in the local community ($M/SD = -0.03/0.48$; skewness/kurtosis = 0.15/–0.47; Cronbach's α = .72).

Neighborhood violence

Neighborhood safety was measured with items from the Attitudes Toward the Community measure (Aneshensel & Sucoff, 1996; Nebbitt & Lombe, 2007), which asked

participants to respond to seven statements about community safety on a four-point scale from 4 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 1 (*Strongly Agree*). Sample items include "This is a safe place to live." and "My neighborhood is safe from crime." Responses were normalized using a Blom transformation to reduce skewness and averaged to create a total score, with higher scores indicative of greater concerns about community safety ($M/SD = 0.04/0.62$; skewness/kurtosis = 0.26/–0.69; Cronbach's α = .75).

Data analysis

Analyses were conducted using SPSS version 28 (IBM Corp, 2021) and Mplus 8.7 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). All tests were two-tailed. Maximum missingness on any variable was 6.8%. Hierarchical linear regressions were employed to evaluate associations between perceptions of re-entry and risk factors for recidivism (i.e., structural inequalities and motives for illegal behavior). Age and gender were included as covariates in all analyses. We used robust maximum likelihood (MLR) estimation for the structural equation analyses, which accounts for any nonnormality of variables. Effect sizes are represented using standardized beta coefficients.

RESULTS

Negative re-entry experiences correlate with recidivism risk factors

To test the hypothesis that perceptions of the re-entry process are associated with risk factors for recidivism, we regressed re-entry perceptions on structural barriers and motives for illegal behaviors. Results of these analyses are presented in Table 2.

We first examined how perceptions of the re-entry process relate to structural barriers that confer risk for recidivism, testing the hypothesis that they reflect, in part, the stressful nature of the environmental contexts individuals are returning to postincarceration. As expected, negative perceptions of the re-entry process were moderately positively associated with blocked employment opportunities (standardized $\beta = .46$, $p < .001$) and neighborhood violence (standardized $\beta = .32$, $p < .001$). These findings suggest individuals who reported greater difficulties with the re-entry process were returning to neighborhoods with fewer employment opportunities and higher levels of community violence.

Next, we examined how perceptions of the re-entry process relate to thinking patterns that confer risk for reincarceration, specifically motives for illegal behavior. As expected, the tendency to view the re-entry process as difficult for individuals returning to the community was positively associated with the tendency to view illegal behavior as necessary for survival (standardized $\beta = .45$, $p < .001$). In other words, individuals who viewed the re-entry process as filled with obstacles also endorsed more motives for engaging in illegal behavior.

Negative re-entry experiences and motives for illegal behavior are linked by structural barriers

Next, we tested the hypothesis that the presence of structural barriers in marginalized communities is critical for explaining associations between negative perceptions of the re-entry process and motives for illegal behavior. Using structural equation modeling, we created a latent structural barrier variable with blocked employment opportunities and neighborhood violence as indicators, which both loaded significantly on the latent variable (p's <.001; Figure 1). We then examined relations between this latent variable, re-entry perceptions, and motives for illegal behavior. Results of the final model are presented in Figure 1. The latent structural barrier variable was positively associated with negative perceptions of re-entry ($\beta = .60$, $p < .001$, 95% confidence interval [CI] [0.50, 0.70] and with motives for illegal behavior ($\beta = .53$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.40, 0.65]. Notably, the association between negative perceptions of re-entry and motives for illegal behavior was substantially reduced with the latent structural barrier variable included in the model ($\beta = .20$, $p = .005$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.35]). We compared the magnitude of the associations between re-entry perceptions and motives

TABLE 2 Negative experiences with re-entry relate to risk factors for recidivism.

	Blocked employment opportunities		Neighborhood violence		Motives for illegal behavior	
	B [+ /−95% CI]	*p value*	*B [+ /−95% CI]*	*p value*	*B [+ /−95% CI]*	*p value*
Block 1						
Age	0.004 [–0.001, 0.010]	.150	0.000 [–0.007, 0.008]	.933	0.001 [–0.005, 0.008]	.676
Gender	–0.033 [–0.151, 0.085]	.581	−0.091 [−0.245, 0.062]	.243	**–0.290 [–0.428, −0.153]**	**<.001**
Block2						
Negative Re-entry Experiences	**0.349 [0.281, 0.417]**	**<.001**	**0.314 [0.219, 0.409]**	**<.001**	**0.408 [0.329, 0.488]**	**<.001**

Note: *B* = Unstandardized betas. Blocked Employment Opportunities: *Block 1* $R^2 = 0.006$, *Block 2* $\Delta R^2 = 0.214$**. Neighborhood Violence: *Block 1* $R^2 = 0.004$, *Block 2* $\Delta R^2 = 0.102$**. Motives for Illegal Behavior: *Block 1* $R^2 = 0.045$** *Block 2* $\Delta R^2 = 0.205$**. **$p < .001$. Bold values represent significant effects.

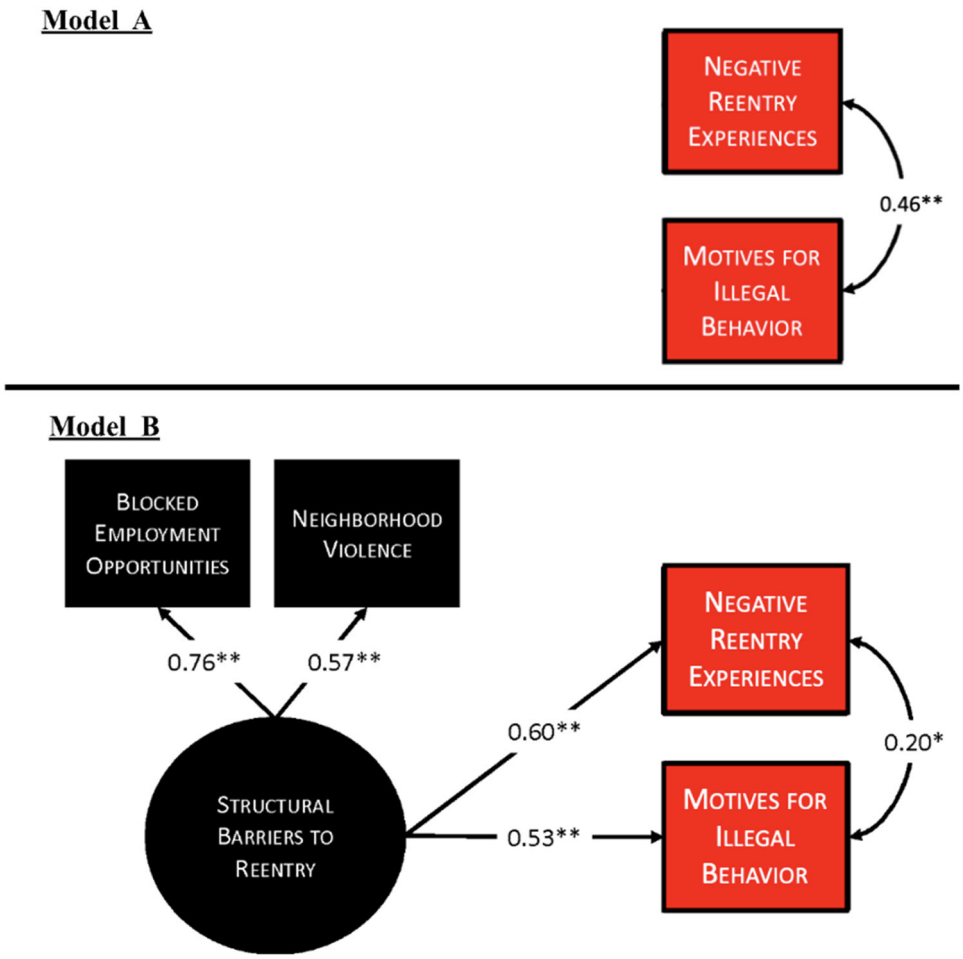

FIGURE 1 Structural barriers weaken the association between negative re-entry experiences and motives for illegal behavior among street-identified Black men and women. The magnitude of the association between re-entry experiences and motives for illegal behavior in the top and bottom models were significantly different (Model A: 95% confidence interval [CI] [0.38, 0.54]. Model B: 95% CI [0.10, 0.29]. $N = 379$. Age and gender were included as covariates in this model but are not depicted. $^{**}p < .001$. $^{*}p < .01$.

for illegal behavior in models with and without structural barriers by calculating and comparing their 95% confidence intervals (Figure 1: Model A 95% CI [0.38, 0.54], Model B 95% CI [0.10, 0.29]. This analysis indicated the association between re-entry perceptions and motives for illegal behavior was significantly weakened when accounting for the influence of structural barriers on these variables. This finding highlights the importance of blocked employment opportunities and neighborhood violence for understanding the link between negative re-entry perceptions and criminal patterns of thinking. In total, the model accounted for 36.2% of the variance in re-entry perceptions ($p < .001$) and 27.8% of the variance in motives for illegal behavior ($p < .001$).

Alternative hypothesis

Given that the data were cross-sectional and temporal ordering is not possible, we also tested the alternative hypothesis that motives for illegal behavior could account for the association between re-entry perceptions and structural barriers. In this model, the path from motives for illegal behavior to negative perceptions of re-entry was significant ($\beta = .46$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.35, 0.53] as was the path from motives for illegal behavior to the latent structural barriers variable ($\beta = .52$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.40, 0.64]. The positive correlation between negative re-entry perceptions and the latent structural barriers variable remained significant, however, ($\beta = .47$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.34, 0.57] after accounting for their relations with criminal motives, indicating that motives for illegal behavior did not account for the association between re-entry perceptions and structural barriers. The model accounted for 20.9% of the variance in re-entry perceptions ($p < .001$) and 26.7% of the variance in structural barriers ($p < .001$).

DISCUSSION

Although Black-Americans are disproportionately affected by mass incarceration, their voices are rarely included in the discourse on the re-entry process. To better understand how

the obstacles faced by returning Black citizens may impact the re-entry process, we examined relations between experiences of re-entry and key risk factors for recidivism in a large community sample of formerly incarcerated street-identified Black adults. As expected, negative perceptions of the re-entry process were positively associated with sociostructural and individual-level risk factors for reincarceration. Specifically, Black adults who viewed the re-entry process as riddled with more obstacles reported fewer quality employment opportunities, higher rates of neighborhood violence, and more motives for illegal behavior than those with relatively more positive views of community re-entry. A closer analysis of these relationships revealed that structural barriers to re-entry accounted for the association between perceptions of re-entry and motives for illegal behavior in a multivariate model, underscoring the importance of modeling the sociostructural disparities that contribute to recidivism in Black communities. Findings suggest that while the re-entry process represents a stressful transition period for most returning citizens, the sociostructural barriers faced by Black-Americans for achieving economic and psychological security pose further hardship toward successful reintegration.

Negative experiences with re-entry relate to risk factors for recidivism

In the current study, we deviated from traditional notions of re-entry by surveying active street-identified Black adults from neighborhoods disproportionately affected by legal-system involvement about their perceptions of obstacles they face during the re-entry process. This novel methodology revealed that formerly incarcerated individuals who viewed the re-entry process as more difficult and riddled with obstacles also evidenced higher risk for reincarceration based on their endorsement of street life and sociostructural barriers in their communities. These findings suggest that negative experiences with re-entry may be an indirect indicator of risk for recidivism, as they index the cognitive and structural hurdles individuals must navigate as they transition back to society. Given the tremendous obstacles returning citizens face (e.g., Martin, 2018; Wakefield & Uggen, 2010), our findings suggest difficulties during the re-entry process are an important factor that is currently missing from models of recidivism risk for returning citizens that tend to focus on criminogenic risk factors, like attitudes and cognitions (e.g., the risk-need-responsivity model; Blanchette & Brown, 2006; Bonta & Andrews, 2016; Ward et al., 2007). Thus, the assessment of negative re-entry experiences may be useful for identifying individuals who require additional resources and support as they return to their neighborhoods. Research that directly examines prospective relations between the re-entry process and recidivism, however, is needed to establish the predictive utility of negative re-entry experiences.

A substantial body of research has emphasized a link between motives for illegal behavior and engagement in criminal behavior, and consequently, attitudes toward crime are often included in risk assessments (Banse et al., 2013; Bolaños et al., 2020; Campbell et al., 2009; Walters & Cohen, 2016). Given the predominant focus on individual-level risk factors in the literature (e.g., cognitive processes, mental health), considerably less is known about how sociostructural factors relate to person-centered risk factors associated with recidivism, like motives for criminal behavior. Findings from this study revealed that, while more negative perceptions of the re-entry process were associated with greater motives for illegal behavior, the strength of this association was diminished when considering sociostructural barriers. After accounting for the degree of violence exposure and blocked employment opportunities in the communities, experiences of re-entry difficulties were no longer associated with greater motives for illegal behaviors. Notably, the same was not true of the explanatory power of illegal behavior motives for delineating the relationship between perceptions of the re-entry process and sociostructural barriers.

These findings converge with recent work challenging the assumption that criminogenic thinking *alone* is a useful intervention target for reducing recidivism and advocate for the incorporation of social conditions in the conceptualization of recidivism risk (Prins, 2019). Instead, the current findings suggest that negative views of the re-entry process reflect the resource-scarce and stressful environments individuals are living in, and these structural barriers to re-entry can account for the relationship between negative re-entry perceptions and motives for engaging in illegal behavior. Accordingly, examining motives for crime alone, or without consideration of the presence of structural barriers, may lead to an incomplete conceptualization of recidivism risk, which may partially explain the continued high rates of the "revolving door of incarceration." An important direction for future research is incorporating multilevel examinations of risk and resilience factors into models of community re-entry to better contextualize how individual characteristics and broader sociostructural forces uniquely and interactively explain re-entry success and recidivism.

Informed policy implications by "the people"

This is the first study to employ a street participatory action research (Street PAR) approach to illuminate sociostructural factors that impact the re-entry process and cognitive risk factors for recidivism among returning citizens. This approach allowed for an empirical test of relevant factors that influence the re-entry process from the perspectives of people who are the most impacted. Although preliminary, the findings from the study have

potentially important policy implications that could improve on re-entry outcomes. Namely, our results point to the importance of examining the interplay of structural barriers and difficulties during the re-entry process to fully conceptualize motives for illegal behavior, and subsequently recidivism risk, among returning citizens. Indeed, understanding the influence of structural barriers is an important step in the determination of interventions seeking to restore functioning. Our findings suggest that large-scale, structural interventions are needed that specifically address factors that attenuate motivations for criminal activity among reentering citizens, which ultimately may curb recidivism in this group.

As part of the Street PAR approach (Payne & Bryant, 2018; Payne, 2017), our team has implemented some of these intervention efforts as it relates to Wilmington, Delaware. For example, our team of researchers and PAR Associates have provided case management for returning citizens in the community, presented study findings at various local programs that highlight the characteristics, needs, and experiences of returning citizens, and conducted "cultural sensitivity workshops" for police, correctional, educational, and public health staff. Our team has also worked in collaboration with other initiatives to engage in policy development and criminal justice reform. For instance, we worked with local governments to advocate for the "Ban the Box" policy to remove questions about criminal history from job applications in Wilmington, Delaware. Notably, in 2014, the state Governor signed the "Ban the Box" policy into state law. Policy changes like these have direct relevance to blocked employment opportunities reported in the present study, and our findings suggest that continued policy advocacy efforts can have translational implications for future criminal activity among reentering adults. Similarly, public health policies targeting violence and associated mental health programming are essential to mitigating recidivism risk among reentering citizens. As mentioned in Yu & Hope House Men and Alumni, (2018), these interventions must be trauma-informed given the high rates of exposure to violence and nonviolent traumatic experiences (e.g., injuries, deaths) among re-entering citizens. Further, we argue that all re-entry services (e.g., re-entry programs, probation/parole officers, employment assistance programs) should be trained in trauma-informed practices to adequately promote healing and success during the re-entry process (for more information on trauma-responsive re-entry, see Pettus, 2023).

This would be a shift from current re-entry interventions that tend to target individual-level factors, like pro-criminal attitudes and motivations for change, and instead would highlight the necessity of contextualizing these factors in the environment, and by extension, intervening at the system level. For example, motives for illegal behavior may function to facilitate survival in resource-scarce environments, a notion that is supported by results showing a positive association between perceived re-entry difficulties and attitudes toward crime. Although inferences about causality cannot be established due to the cross-sectional nature of the data, one potential interpretation is that greater motives for illegal behavior emerge as a result of obstacles to a successful re-entry postincarceration. This would be supported by our main finding that this link weakens after accounting for structural barriers in the community. Together, these findings suggest that reallocating resources into communities with high levels of unemployment and violence may help to alleviate motives for illegal behavior, and ultimately, risk for recidivism.

Strengths and limitations

As with any study, there are limitations that should be considered when interpreting the study findings. First, men were overrepresented in the sample, and the study was underpowered to test for gender moderation. Although the gender breakdown in the sample composition parallels the uneven representation of men and women in the criminal legal system, the perspectives of formerly incarcerated women may not be well represented in the study findings. Future research should investigate potential gender differences in postincarceration re-entry difficulties and how these relate to motives for criminal behavior. Second, all the data in this study were collected cross-sectionally, which limits our ability to infer causality between study variables. The field would benefit from prospective designs that can examine potential transactional effects of motives for illegal behavior and perceptions of re-entry over time. In addition, many of the measures included in this study were created by the study team, and thus, were not psychometrically validated. Future studies should seek to replicate these findings using validated measures of re-entry difficulties and motives for illegal behavior to strengthen these empirical findings. Relatedly, although we measured a key predictor of recidivism, motives for illegal behavior, we did not directly measure recidivism. To determine the translational utility of perceptions of re-entry for assessment and intervention, future prospective studies are needed that measure the associations between perceptions of re-entry and reoffending over time. Additionally, it is important to recognize that intersectional identities (gender, disability status, among others) increase the risk for incarceration and recidivism (e.g., Hitchens & Payne, 2017; Leotti & Slayter, 2022) and, consequently, an intersectional approach is necessary to move the field forward. Although examining how multiple marginalized identities impact the re-entry process was outside the scope of the current study, research on this topic is necessary to better inform and shape the policies and programming that affect

reentering citizens. Finally, we did not collect information on the severity (e.g., felony vs. misdemeanor) or types of charges and convictions that led to incarceration across the lifespan for each participant. Future studies on barriers to community re-entry may benefit from a close examination of how the severity and type of illegal behavior an individual is convicted of impacts hardships experienced during the transition back into the community.

Despite these limitations, the study has several notable strengths, including the use of an innovative Street-PAR design, the investigation of an understudied topic, and the recruitment of a large community sample of street-identified Black-American men and women with a history of incarceration. The inclusion of women in the sample is particularly notable, given that women are often neglected in re-entry studies. Although outside of the scope of the present study, an interesting future study direction would be to examine gender differences in the interplay between structural barriers and perceptions of the re-entry process, which is an important next step toward the development of appropriate risk models for women. Moreover, the participation of the Street PAR Associates in the research design, including the development of the survey items, provides unprecedented insight into the experiences and perspectives of street-identified Black Americans, a highly marginalized group whose viewpoints have been largely excluded from research. This aspect of the research design strengthens the validity of the study because the constructs and research questions examined were constructed jointly by researchers and participants, increasing the likelihood the experiences of returning citizens are accurately portrayed and embedded in their cultural, social, political contexts (Ponterotto, 2005). This study also advances prior research by modeling the interplay of multiple levels of analysis (i.e., individual and community level factors), which is rare in research on re-entering citizens and recidivism. Taken together, findings indicate that societal level influences that impact motives for illegal behavior, which holds promise for developing models that shift the focus from traditional deficit-focused models at the individual level to a more balanced approach that also considers the influence of structural barriers on returning citizens and their communities.

Epilogue: Involvement and outcomes of street PAR associates

A Street PAR project is more robust than recruiting returning citizens to collect data for publications by university researchers. Rather, Street PAR is also a community-based research methodology that was used as a re-entry intervention for the 14 Street PAR Associates that worked on this study. Associates are called on to specifically contribute to analysis, publications, and presentations. And it is in this process, from methods training to publication—along with case management, that associates receive sustained support and transferable research skills which will greatly increase the potential to achieve personal and professional goals. In addition to presenting results or findings from the larger study on street-identified participants (which is the main brunt of this article), we also provide some discussion on how Street PAR is a useful intervention for returning citizens and/or persons previously and currently involved in street culture. Given that the goals of Street PAR are to increase personal and professional goal attainment for the Associates and engage in local activism in the study participants' neighborhoods, we focus on these outcomes below.

The third and fourth authors with eight other university researchers (i.e., students, one postdoc, and faculty member) worked with four associates over a 2-year period, to organize and generate a preliminary analysis of survey and interview data. Data management and analysis meetings were approximately 2 h; and much of our preliminary analysis focused on the project's re-entry, arrest and incarceration, and violence data. There are several writing groups conducting secondary analysis, with approximately 10 university researchers and an assortment of associates working in smaller writing groups.

Additionally, four of the 14 associates involved with the study enrolled in college and of those four, two completed their Bachelor of Arts (BA). The other two associates enrolled in college but discontinued due to failing a "criminal background check." And one of the associates who discontinued has re-enrolled in another university and is still pursuing his BA. Also, three additional associates involved with this study already had their BA before the start of this study—for a total of five associates with BA's. Furthermore, three of these five associates completed their Master of Arts (MA) degrees after working on a previous Street PAR project in Wilmington with the first and second authors. Also, two associates with an MA enrolled in doctoral programs and one has completed their doctorate in education. Moreover, it should be noted that one of these associate's methods course requirements for his BA was waived after the department reviewed the curriculum designed for the methods training developed for associates. This associate was also hired as a Criminal Justice Campaign Organizer by the ACLU-Delaware. The second associate who completed their BA was hired as a Community Engagement Specialist by Delaware's Department of Justice and he plans to enroll in law school. The third associate that remains in a BA program received a full pardon from the Governor's office which allowed him to re-enroll at another university. He also is the Project Director of another Street PAR project in Wilmington and also employed in the Public Defender's Office in Wilmington. A fourth associate who received his MA is

now employed as a case manager for the Delaware Center for Justice. And the two other associates who enrolled in doctoral programs are Executive Directors of their own nonprofits: Center for Structural Equity (Wilmington) and the Fathership Foundation (Philadelphia). Also, it should be noted all 14 associates are gainfully employed; and most associates are working on other funded Street PAR projects carried out by the larger research program.

Moreover, as mandated by the Street PAR methodology (Payne & Bryant, 2018; Payne, 2017), the second level of action requires neighborhood-based activism. And this Street PAR project has certainly and consistently engaged in advocacy, policy development, and grassroots activism around re-entry, gun violence, and structural inequality during and after this study's funding period. Much of the activism and all Street PAR projects in Wilmington including one national Street PAR project is also organized out of the Center for Structural Equity in Wilmington, Delaware; a nonprofit headed by a senior associate and Co-Project Director of this study.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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