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# What Aspects of Emotional Intelligence Help Former Prisoners Make Decisions to Desist Crime?

## Abstract

Making good post-incarceration decisions are important for helping formerly incarcerated individuals avoid a return to prison. This is the first study to look at emotional intelligence (EI) components formerly incarcerated men considered important for post-prison criminal desistance. This study explored six former New York state male prisoner's individual experiences developing EI competencies, and how those EI skills contributed to their post-release decisions to desist crime. Research participants spent an average 7.5 years in a New York state prison, and have been out of prison and living in the community for an average 3.6 years without recommitting a criminal offense. Research interviews revealed that the internal process of self-reflection instigates an increased state of self-awareness. Self-awareness is the foundation for developing responsible decision-making skills and the motivation to desist crime. In addition, participants' decisions to desist crime were also mediated by external factors including pro-social relationships with family members and friends, and having gainful employment.

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What Aspects of Emotional Intelligence Help Former Prisoners Make Decisions to Desist  
Crime?

By

Craig A. Waleed

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

Dr. Guillermo Montes

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Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

St. John Fisher College

December 2017

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2017

## **Dedication**

My gratitude and respect is extended to those men who participated in this research. Without out their willingness to share their stories and experiences, this project would not have been possible.

This study is dedicated to the many different people who were instrumental in helping me complete this project. First on my list is my wife Saarah, and our two sons, Ismail and Isa Waleed, who tolerated me during my many moments of frustration, yet continued to encourage me. Second, it is important for me to acknowledge my sister, Joyce E. (Marshall) Kinsey for teaching me at an early age the power of literacy and learning. This study is also dedicated to my late uncle Charles L. Davis, Esq., and my brothers, Harold Marshall and Lamar Marshall for exemplifying for me the qualities of a gentleman and a scholar.

I am also grateful to have been guided by my Dissertation Committee Chair and Co-chair persons, Dr. Guillermo Montes and Dr. Tisha Smith. Simply writing “thank you!” cannot capture the magnitude of my appreciation for their contributions and encouragement. I am also grateful to those who mentored me, including Dr. Irshad Altheimer and Ed Minardo from Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), and Ann Graham, from Delphi Drug and Alcohol Counseling and Prevention Health Education. In addition, I give recognition to my close friend and "brother," Dr. Hassan Jones, and my comrades, Dr. Rafael Outland and Dr. Thomas Noel for their inspiration and encouragement.

Finally, I dedicate this study to the Consortium of the Niagara Frontier (Daemen College, Canisius College, and Niagara University) and their professors for providing college level instruction, and an opportunity to earn an Associates of Arts degree to myself and other men who were incarcerated in the New York State Department of Corrections during the 1990s.

### **Biographical Sketch**

Craig A. Waleed currently works as a Transitional Studies Adjunct Professor at Monroe Community College in Rochester, New York. Mr. Waleed received a Bachelor of Science Degree in Health Science in the year 2004 from the College at Brockport, SUNY. He also received his Master of Science Degree in Mental Health Counseling from the College at Brockport, SUNY in 2010. He came to St. John Fisher College in the summer of 2015 and began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership. Mr. Waleed pursued research exploring the influence of emotional intelligence on the process of criminal desistance under the direction of Dr. Guillermo Montes and Dr. Tisha Smith, and received the Ed.D. degree in 2017.

## **Abstract**

Making good post-incarceration decisions are important for helping formerly incarcerated individuals avoid a return to prison. This is the first study to look at emotional intelligence (EI) components formerly incarcerated men considered important for post-prison criminal desistance. This study explored six former New York state male prisoner's individual experiences developing EI competencies, and how those EI skills contributed to their post-release decisions to desist crime. Research participants spent an average 7.5 years in a New York state prison, and have been out of prison and living in the community for an average 3.6 years without recommitting a criminal offense. Research interviews revealed that the internal process of self-reflection instigates an increased state of self-awareness. Self-awareness is the foundation for developing responsible decision-making skills and the motivation to desist crime. In addition, participants' decisions to desist crime were also mediated by external factors including pro-social relationships with family members and friends, and having gainful employment.



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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This study will involve the use of a phenomenological method to examine what aspects of the emotional intelligence (EI) component, self-control, contributes to released prisoner's decisions to desist crime after returning to the community. EI requires the ability to recognize, regulate, and harness emotions in self and others effectively (Wicks, Nakisher, & Grimm, 2014), and to use this insight to effectively guide one's behaviors. In many instances, crimes such as assault, burglary, robbery, rape or even murder occur because of impulsive decision-making. Lack of self-control is a strong predictor of crime and similar behaviors (Watts & McNulty, 2016). Because many released prisoners return to live in social environments with various criminogenic influences and few community supports (Visser & Travis, 2003), they remain at increased risk of making criminal decisions and being rearrested. Persistent criminal behavior is indicative of arrested emotional development and low levels of EI. Sharma et al. (2015), explain that EI is "deeply related to aggression and offending" (p. 55), and that those with low levels of EI are more likely to engage in risky behaviors and show little or no empathy for others. Nevertheless, released prisoners are ultimately responsible for deciding to persistently engage in crime or desist crime.

### **Problem Statement**

Most prisoners in the US eventually return to society, and approximately two thirds of them will be rearrested, with roughly half being re-incarcerated within 3 years of release (Bowman & Travis, 2012; Stahler et al., 2013). Currently, approximately 23% of

adults exiting prison on parole return to prison because of a new conviction (Binswanger et al., 2011; Bucklen & Zajac, 2009). Research by Watts and McNulty (2016) found that lack of self-control predicts a wide variety of criminal behavior. Other evidence also suggests low self-control correlates with unlawful and divergent behavior (Cohn & Farrington, 1999; Pratt & Cullen, 2000; Watts & McNulty, 2016;). In addition, continued reactive criminal thinking, and deviant and illegal behaviors help perpetuate ongoing engagement in crime (Walters, 2016). In sum, an inability to moderate emotion and impulsivity, along with dysfunctional personal attributes, are central in determining many former prisoner's abilities to demonstrate behaviors consistent with avoiding criminal recidivism and re-incarceration.

**Prison and jail.** There is a distinction between jail and prison. Prisons are secure facilities operated by the state or federal government, and usually detain people convicted for serious felony offenses, and others with sentences of one-year or more (Carson, 2015; Siegal & Worrall, 2015). On the other hand, jails differ because they are locally operated, short-term facilities for holding the accused awaiting trial or sentencing, or both, and those sentenced to a term of less than 1 year (Carson, 2015).

**Incarceration as punishment.** Prisons and jails have traditionally been reserved for detaining and punishing people suspected of, or found guilty of a criminal offense. A criminal offense is normally described as “a violation of social norms, or generally accepted standards of social behavior described by criminal law” (Laub & Sampson, 2003). Prior to the development of prisons and jails, societies banished wrongdoers to the wilderness (Barnes, 1921; Pollock, 2005) to incapacitate them, deter future criminal behavior, and protect society. However, locking up offenders for periods of time did not

begin in America until the 19th century (Siegel & Worrall, 2015). Modern forms of imprisonment can be traced to the construction of the first jail, the High Street Jail, in 1682 in Philadelphia (Barnes, 1921; Siegel & Worrall, 2015). Almost 100 years later, a separate unit was created in Philadelphia's Walnut Street jail where those convicted of felony offenses were separated from minor offenders, separated from each other, and not allowed to speak to other prisoners (Barnes, 1921; Travis, 2005). In addition to these restrictions, the imprisoned were made to engage in hard labor; this technique became the foundation for today's prison system (Pollock, 2005).

When compared against earlier forms of corporal punishments, prison was considered a more humane penalty, however, it was not considered a reformatory method (Pollock, 2005). Prisons became a tool used as punishment for most crimes (Barnes, 1921; Pollock, 2005). Many modern prisons were constructed in isolated areas far from urban environments, and came to represent a type of banishment; in a sense, "prisons became the new wilderness" (Pollock, 2005, p. 10). Prison management focused on separation, obedience, and labor. This approach to imprisonment aimed to ensure prison life would be uncomfortable, and even painful to deter others from committing crime (Pollock, 2005) and not risk returning to prison. To maintain order and safety, encourage lawful norms of behavior, and to help divert crime, America built lock-ups, detention centers, asylums, jails, and prisons (Travis, Western, & Redburn, 2014) as an alternative to corporal punishment or banishment to the wilderness as a penalty for criminal conduct.

### **Recidivism**

Recidivism essentially means to return to a prior state or behavior. The word recidivism appears to be related to and possibly rooted in the term recede, which implies



to move back, away, or moving backward (The American Heritage Dictionary, 2013).

The American Heritage dictionary further defines recidivism as a tendency to relapse or return to a previous condition. Many criminal justice circles traditionally define recidivism as a return to criminal behavior that results in rearrest, reconviction, or a return to prison with or without a new sentence (Deady, 2014).

Almost all prisoners will eventually return to the streets. Each year large numbers of individuals are being released from prison and returning to their communities.

Binswanger et al. (2011) report that 95% of all prisoners will be released from state and federal custody. When people are released from prison they usually hope to never return, however, their options are often bleak. Newly released prisoners must navigate the unfamiliar terrain of social and economic (re)integration, often without access to proper housing, gainful employment or pro-social associates (Travis, 2005). Thus, the unfortunate truth is that most released prisoners in the United States will be back in prison within a short time. There is no singular explanation to criminal recidivism.

However, studies show that a significant percent of criminal recidivism occurs during the first year after release (Bowman & Travis, 2012; Rolison et al., 2013). For example, criminal recidivism within the first year after release has remained around 44% (Binswanger et al., 2011; Bowman & Travis, 2012) in the United States. In addition, Langan and Levin, 2002, estimate approximately two thirds (68.7%) of state prisoners are rearrested within 3 years of release, and within 5 years of release, about three-quarters (76.6 %) of released prisoners are rearrested (Mears et al., 2014). Figure 1.1, Figure 1.2, and Figure 1.3 provide an illustration of the rates of recidivism.

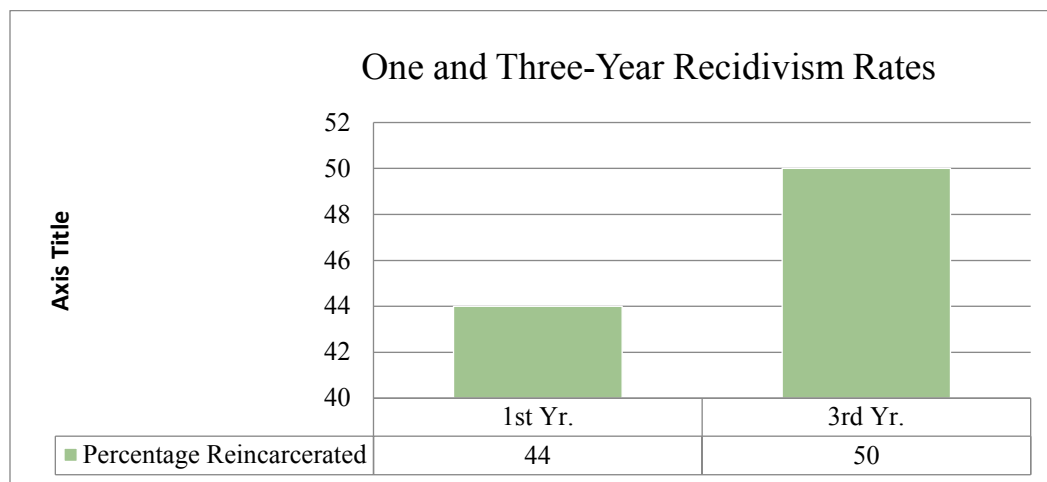


Figure 1.1. One and three-year recidivism.

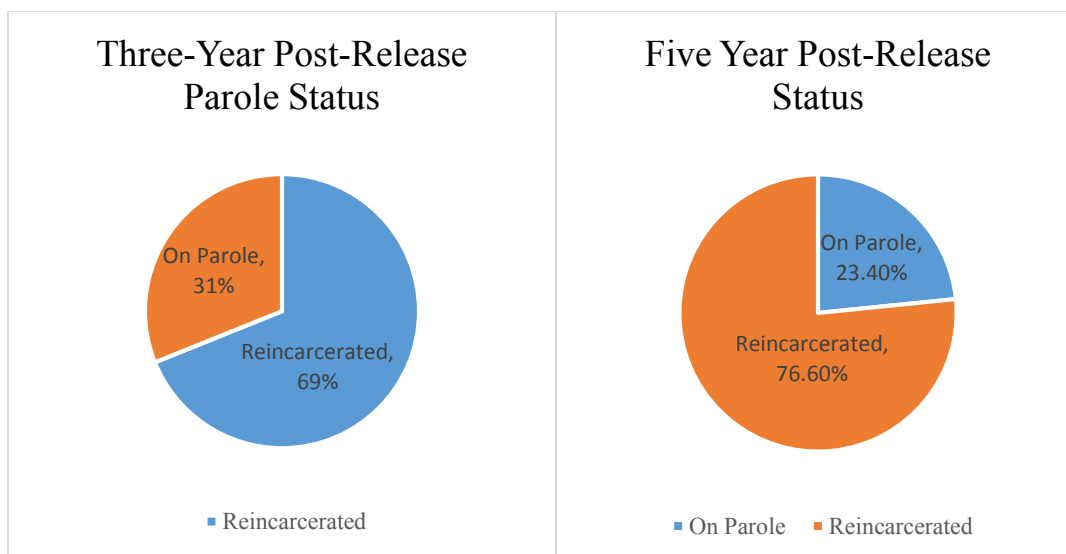


Figure 1.2. Three-year post-release.

Figure 2.3. Five-year post-release.

Living under community parole supervision is a high-stakes affair where it is difficult for many parolees to be successfully discharged. Individuals who have been successfully discharged are those released who have completed a term of parole supervision following their release from prison. In juxtaposition, an unsuccessful discharge includes revocation of parole, which often results in a return to prison or jail for not abiding by the conditions of release. Parole can also be rescinded for absconding,

which happens when someone under parole supervision leaves a jurisdiction or area without approval of their parole officer (Carson, 2015).

There are more than one or two reasons why a released prisoner can be returned to prison. There are numerous and multidimensional individual and community risk factors for recidivism (Bowman & Travis, 2012; Bucklen & Zajac, 2009; Rolison et al., 2013; Visser, Debus-Sherrill, & Yahner, 2011). Individual obstacles and risk factors that increase chances to recidivate include, but are not limited to being young, male, and a minority (Visser et al., 2011; Bowman & Travis, 2012). Other risk-factors might also consist of unemployment, homelessness, low educational attainment, limited chances for advancement, prior criminal history, limited or no access to transportation, and having mental health or substance use disorders (Stahler et al., 2013), which may or may not have been previously diagnosed. Community-risk factors for recidivism can include low socioeconomic status or poverty, little or no family support, lack of pro-social associates, limited neighborhood institutional resources (i.e., employment opportunities, vocational/educational training, safe-affordable housing, and healthy food options) or an inability to access them (Binswanger et al., 2011). In a study about personal and neighborhood features, and communication of disease predicting re-incarceration on a sample of released Pennsylvania state prisoners, Stahler, et al. (2013) found that drug involvement, being younger, male, African American, and living in areas with high rates of crime and recidivism are risk factors for re-incarceration. In contrast, these researchers also discovered older offenders, and those with violent or drug-related offenses were less likely to be re-incarcerated as compared to non-violent/non-drug involved offenders. However, specific risk factors for re-incarceration for violent offenders included: drug

involvement, younger age, and spatial contagion. Overall, researchers found this range of risk factors and challenges help make successful post-incarceration community reintegration, and recidivism a common occurrence.

In part, high prison return rates speak to how challenging the transition from prison to the community is for large numbers of ex-offenders. Perhaps an amalgamation of psychosocial conditions, new arrest, and technical parole violations equally contribute to the problem of criminal recidivism.

**Contributions to recidivism.** There is a multiplicity of systemic and intrapersonal impediments that make successful community reintegration after prison difficult for ex-offenders (Bahr, Armstrong, Gibbs, Harris, & Fisher 2005; Bowman & Travis, 2012; Ng et al., 2013; Rolison et al., 2013). Many obstacles faced by those reentering society after incarceration may be issues that preexisted incarceration, or were developed or exacerbated while incarcerated; these challenges could extend far beyond an individual's release date. Incarceration and re-incarceration appear to be cyclical occurrences with long-lasting negative effects, impacting former prisoners, their families, and society.

Transitioning from prison to society has always been difficult. The cycle of incarceration and release can be more than challenging for the person and their family members caught-up in its causal nexus. Released prisoners face many obstacles to successful community reintegration. President George W. Bush, in his 2004 State of the Union Address, acknowledged the challenges released prisoners face when he said, "we know from long experience that if they can't find work, or a home, or help, they are more likely to commit more crimes and return to prison" (Reiman, 2013). Many released

prisoners identify poor transitional preparation preceding release, and inadequate or absent continuity of mental and physical health care after release as some of the major challenges to successful community reintegration (Binswanger et al., 2011). Many released prisoners are not prepared for life on the outside. Released prisoners receiving little to no assistance in their reintegration are more likely to be at risk of failed post-incarceration community reentry (Visser & Travis, 2003).

Rates of re-incarceration and recidivism cannot be attributed to a singular cause. However, a variety of internal and external factors such as a dysfunctional attitude and behavior, lack of pro-social support, disorganized and disenfranchised neighborhoods, social stigma, and institutional policies help create denied opportunities and the perpetuation of recidivism (Bowman and Travis, 2012). Readmitting parole violators to prison overshadows the number of new prison admissions. A third of those admitted to prison were previously released from prison, and are returning for new crimes or technical violations of their release conditions (Bucklen & Zajac, 2009; Visser et al., 2011; Visser & Travis, 2003). Researchers Bowman and Travis (2012) suggest released prisoners re-offend because of:

Dysfunctional personal attributes and a lack of self-control that is less amenable to change, insufficient positive attachment to social groups, institutions and supports, unsavory tendencies in parole supervision, the uniformity and rigidity of the prison experience as a source of institutionalization, and how certain communities burden residents with a stigma, social constraints, territorial confinement and institutional boundaries that foster recidivism through denied opportunities and hyper-scrutiny (p. 11).

Because of the multiplicity of personal and systemic challenges released inmates face when returning to their communities, it is difficult to expect anything short of high return rates. Consider, instead of subjecting released prisoners to a control-oriented parole system that emphasizes surveillance and punishment, released prisoners would be better served by a parole system that refocuses on assistance and community reintegration. However, the sad reality about reentry is expressed by Petersilia's (2003) depiction of our nation's corrections culture as a series of pre and post-release programs that do not support recently released inmates' successful transition into society. This reemphasizes the observable truth that many released prisoners are ill-equipped with limited job skills, low academic achievement, drug and alcohol addictions, and psychosocial problems that contribute to their re-incarceration. Additional policy implications will be discussed next in this paper.

**Post-incarceration (re-entry) policies.** This section will discuss post-incarceration policies impacting former prisoners, their families, and communities. Post-release policies can be wide-ranging and complex, including a variety of community, economic, scholastic, residential, and health care law and guidelines at national, state, and local levels (Bahr et al., 2005; Baron, 2013; Bowman & Travis, 2012; Visser et al., 2011) often resulting in more punitive consequences for incarceration in some states than in other states (Bahr et al., 2005; Bowman & Travis, 2012; Ng et al., 2013; Visser et al., 2011). These policies can negatively impact individuals in reentry, other social policies and programs, and society. In theory, post-incarceration policies are meant to facilitate prisoner reentry into communities, monitor post-incarceration behaviors, punish those who violate their conditions of release, and to ensure public safety (Baron, 2013;

Bowman & Travis, 2012;). However, many policies that are intended to deter crime often have unintended negative physical and social consequences for former prisoners attempting to reintegrate community and family life (Baron, 2013). For example, some state and federal policies allow former prisoners to be punished or sanctioned by use of short-term detention, routine drug testing, community service, curfews, electronic monitoring, and fines (Baron, 2013; Bowman & Travis, 2012). In addition, many post-incarceration policies between state and federal governments are incongruent with one another, and in other cases, unfairly punitive, ineffective, and unduly discriminatory (Bowman & Travis, 2012).

A part of parole's purpose is to oversee and support released prisoners' reintegration back into the community. This supervision and support is supposed to benefit the wider community, because it is assumed to help reduce the risk of released prisoners committing additional crimes once in the community (Bahr et al., 2005, Tewksbury, Vito, & Higgins, 2012). However, many post-release conditions appear to do very little to help released prisoners in the community reintegration process. For example, because of the tough-on-crime stance, drug testing, home confinement, and electronic monitoring are common post-release supervision practices —these measures have been shown to not be effective at producing rehabilitative and recidivism-reducing outcomes (Petersilia, 2003). Instead, in some cases, parole conditions cause released prisoners to be totally isolated and removed from family members, friends, and prior social networks, which may or may not include past criminal associates (Bowman & Travis, 2012; Hattery & Smith, 2014). For instance, most parole conditions require those under parole supervision to not associate with others on parole or probation (Bahr et al., 2005). This

mandate might be difficult to meet if family members or neighbors are under post-incarceration supervision too. In some instances, released prisoners are required as part of their release conditions to live in unfamiliar areas while under post-incarceration community supervision.

Post-release residence is significant because it often plays a role in how individuals commit offenses and obtain criminal charges (Bowman & Travis, 2012). Research notes that crime is influenced or discouraged by the reinforcements released prisoners receive from principal groups like family and peers (Bahr et al., 2005). When released prisoners return to families and communities where drug activity or other illegal behaviors are prevalent, it may be hard avoiding crime. If their friends and family use drugs or violate other laws, released prisoners may be apt to follow their peers and risk violating their release conditions. Neighborhood influence on released prisoner's parole outcomes is vital, to say the least. Bahr et al. (2005) positively correlated (re)incarceration with: (a) socializing with (criminal) associates four or more times per week; (b) the number of disagreeable relationships within their family; and (c) having family members who had been, or are on probation/parole or in jail/prison. Living in familiar neighborhoods and communities can (re)expose former offenders to family members and friends who may be actively involved with illegal drugs, and other violations of the law; in situations like this, avoiding criminal behavior and an eventual return to prison may be difficult.

Some states, more than others, have additional punitive consequences that create obstacles for released prisoners. For example, contingent upon the state one lives, someone convicted of a first-time felony drug possession can be banned from getting



welfare benefits for life, barred from living in public housing, denied student loans, never allowed to vote, and if they are not a citizen, they get deported (Kubrin et al., 2007). Additionally, Bowman and Travis (2012) found that certain communities stigmatize former offenders, use social limitations and territorial confinement, and create institutional boundaries that help perpetuate reoffending and recidivism through denied opportunities and hyper-scrutiny or excessive critique. The continued practice of institutional and societal exclusion, appear to serve as impediments that help keep many American citizens marginalized and entrapped in the cycle of arrest-release and-rearrest. Some features of the cycle of arrest-release and rearrest might include mandatory minimum sentences; stricter sentencing guidelines; a dearth of alternatives to incarceration; difficulty getting paroled; an increased ease of returning parole violators to prison; and the War on Drugs (Bowman & Travis, 2012). The FBI (2015) recorded more than 1.5 million drug arrests in the US in 2014; the majority—more than 80 %—were for possession only (FBI, 2015). On any given night in United States of America, almost 500,000 people are behind bars for a drug law violation (Wagner & Rabuy, 2015); that is 10 times the total in 1980 (Reuter, 2013). Because of the punitive post-incarceration consequences of federal, state, and local government, a disenfranchised underclass of ex-offenders has developed.

Policies that create additional challenges for individuals released from prison further limit their basic rights as a citizen to work, obtain suitable housing, vote, drive automobiles, and educate themselves (Bowman & Travis, 2012; Visser et al., 2011). Many post-incarceration policies prevent former prisoners access to community resources needed to remain crime free (Bowman & Travis, 2012; Visser, et al., 2011). For example,

research indicates that Federal Public Housing Authority (PHA) policy includes an option for local PHA Associations to deliberately focus primarily on families with alcohol, drug, or criminal histories to omit them from public housing eligibility (Bowman & Travis, 2012; Visser et al., 2011). Securing suitable housing is a primary reentry challenge that many people face after being released from prison. Stable housing is a literal and figurative foundation for successful reentry and reintegration. Safe and affordable housing can provide motivated former offenders a stable platform from which they can launch toward a more successful post-release reintegration experience.

Punitive post-incarceration policies can make re-incarceration for a technical violation more likely than successful community reintegration (Bowman & Travis, 2012). This means that alarming numbers of released prisoners are returning to prison because they are unable to meet, adhere to, acknowledge or be cognizant of the nuances of their release conditions. Bowman and Travis (2012) and Baron (2013) learned that many individuals recently released from prison find themselves unable to meet the demands and conditions of parole or community supervision. Post-release community supervision policies intended to prevent recently released inmates from engaging in further criminal activity, and negatively influencing one another, can also cut them off from valuable referrals such as health-care services, job opportunities, affordable and safe housing, pro-social family and friends, and substance abuse and mental health treatment (Baron, 2013; Bucklen & Zajac, 2009; Hattery & Smith, 2014; Visser et al., 2011). Moreover, post-incarceration policies aimed at preventing people described as criminals from accessing community resources can present substantial social, financial, educational, housing, and health care impediments to community reentry and reintegration (Baron, 2013; Bucklen

& Zajac, 2009; Hattery & Smith, 2014; Visser et al., 2011). Furthermore, these policies have many unintended consequences, including limited ability to improve the educational attainment of low-skilled workers. For example, participants in a study conducted by Bowman and Travis (2012) discussed how job skills acquired in prison were in many instances incongruent with skillsets needed in the contemporary workplace. Participants further reported that opportunities to learn significant job skills during incarceration that will be applicable after release were minimal.

Bowman and Travis (2012) conducted 12 focus groups in areas of Los Angeles with high concentrations of parolees and probationers. One hundred and twenty-eight formerly incarcerated prisoners, their family members, parole officers, and reentry service providers discussed their perspectives about post-incarceration conditions, recidivism, and opportunities for improvement. Many participants described the criminal justice system as having a great deal of influence on their lives through the development and enforcement of policies, and what they believed to be a deliberate cycle of incarceration, limiting their chance for post-incarceration success. In addition, many participants also shared their belief that certain socioeconomic groups and communities were disproportionately targeted by the criminal justice system. Both study participants and service providers thought the criminal justice system is preoccupied with collateral problems stemming from overcrowding. Furthermore, they believed that this preoccupation causes inadequacies to happen through-out the incarceration and reentry process, including programming, transitional planning, parole orientation, caseload management, and court processes. Other participants also believed their chances for

success were being undermined, and there were others who accepted such circumstances as just another part of life.

### **Theoretical Rationale**

It is logical to assume people's emotions are influenced by external factors urging them to move, act, or behave within a social context. By default, emotion and intellect become intermingled through social engagement, suggesting a symbiotic relationship between emotion and social exchange. Adding credence to the implication of a socio-emotional relationship, University of Wisconsin Neuroscientist, Richard Davidson said: “all emotions are social,” and that “our social interactions are what drives our emotions” (Goleman, 2006, p. 83). Therefore, simply understanding the interrelationship between thought, emotion, and behavior appear not to be enough, and knowing how to apply such knowledge to a variety of social situations is more important.

Being able to effectively deal with and process one's own and other's emotions is an example of what Goleman (2006) might consider a reflection of non-cognitive aptitude, or social intelligence. Goleman considers social intelligence an essential element of EI and suggests that social intelligence is a two-part construct comprised of social awareness--what is sensed about others and social facility--builds on awareness to facilitate fluid interpersonal interaction. Goleman gives greater detail about social intelligence describing social awareness and social facility in the following:

Social awareness refers to a spectrum that runs from instantaneously sensing another's inner state, to understanding their feelings, and thoughts, to "getting" complicated situations. It includes the following: (a) primal empathy: feeling with others; sensing non-verbal emotional signals; (b) attunement: listening with full receptivity;

attuning to a person; (c) empathic accuracy: Understanding another person's thoughts, feelings, and intentions; and (d) social cognition: knowing how the social world works; Simply sensing how another feels or knowing what they think or intend, does not guarantee fluid interpersonal interaction; and social facility builds on self-awareness to allow smooth, effective interactions. The spectrum of social facility includes the following: (a) synchrony: interacting smoothly at the nonverbal level; (b) self-presentation: presenting self effectively; (c) influence: shaping the outcome of social interactions; and (d) concerns: caring about others' needs and acting accordingly (Goleman, 2006).

Social-emotionally intelligent people are thought to have good social skills. Moreover, the social-emotionally intelligent individual is thought to be resilient, and has a positive impact on others (Morton, 2012). Social intelligence and emotional intelligence go together.

### **Statement of Purpose**

This research project aims to gain clearer insight into the components of emotional intelligence that contributes to former prisoners' decisions to not reengage in crime after being released from prison. Learning about thinking strategies former prisoners developed and applied to desist crime can be instrumental in helping reduce recidivism rates, increase public safety, improve parole completion outcomes, and save taxpayers money. By participating in this project, research participants had an opportunity to share critical insights about how the emotional intelligence component, self-control contributed to their decisions to demonstrate behaviors consistent with not re-offending after returning to the community.

## **Research Questions**

The current research project will focus on the following questions:

1. What aspects of emotional intelligence are important in helping former prisoners demonstrate behaviors that are consistent with avoiding re-offending, rearrests and criminal recidivism?
2. What factors influence former offender's decisions not to re-offend?

## **Problems That May Affect the Results of the Study**

Potential obstacles impacting the study results might include but are not limited to research participants rearrests, illness, or untimely demise. A new arrest and being placed in jail creates an almost impenetrable barrier between the researcher and research participant(s). This barrier will prove problematic for conducting required in-depth interviews with research participants. Additionally, illness can serve to incapacitate a research participant for prolonged periods. An inability to interview one or more identified research participants will cause a delay in continuation and completion of the research process. Death of a research participant during the research process would eliminate an opportunity for follow-up questions, and clarifications.

## **Significance of the Study**

This study has the potential to add new knowledge to those fields of study focusing on rehabilitative and other treatment services targeting criminal justice populations. This research will provide personal insights and examples of released prison inmates' psycho-emotional processes used to make decisions consistent with avoiding re-offending, rearrests, and recidivism. Implications of this study could be significant to corrections and community professionals, and family members and friends providing

treatment and reintegration support to individuals returning to their communities' post-incarceration. In addition, this study has the potential to inform the public about the benefits of developing EI and the social and financial cost associated with failure to invest in EI training, in particular with at-risk youth and corrections populations.

### **Definitions of Terms**

**African American or Black (American):** “An ethnic group of Americans with total or partial ancestry from any of the Black racial groups of Africa” (The American Heritage Dictionary, 2013, p. 23).

**Community:** “A city or neighborhood where the formerly incarcerated will live. People convicted of criminal offenses are increasingly moving into the most impoverished areas of the inner city” (Petersilia, 2003, p. 8).

**Conviction:** “A decision that results when a court of law finds someone guilty of a crime” (The American Heritage Dictionary, 2013, p. 305).

**Criminality:** “A certain personality profile that causes the most alarming sorts of crimes” (Wilson, 1987, p. 16-285).

**Criminogenic:** “Producing or leading to crime” (American Heritage Dictionary, 2013, p. 327).

**Desistance:** “criminal desistance refers to a cessation of offending activity among those who have offended in the past” (Laub & Sampson, 2003, p. 17).

**Emotional Intelligence:** “the ability to engage in sophisticated information processing about one's own and others' emotions and the ability to use this information as a guide to thinking and behavior” (Mayer, et al., 2008, p. 503).

**Felony:** “A crime typically involving violence, and regarded as more serious usually punishable by imprisonment for more than one year or by death” (Siegal & Worrall, 2015, p. 66).

**Formerly Incarcerated:** A person who has lived one or more years in a state, federal, or privately-owned prison (this definition will be used for purposes of this study).

**Impulse or Self-Control:** “A disorder characterized by impulsivity – failure to resist a temptation, urge or impulse that may harm oneself or others” (Watts, & McNulty, 2016, p. 471).

**Incarceration:** “To be confined in prison or jail” (Siegal & Worrall, 2015, p. 213).

**Indictment:** “A formal charge or accusation of a serious crime” (Siegal & Worrall, 2015, p. 187).

**Jail:** “locally operated, short-term facilities for holding the accused awaiting trial or sentencing, or both, and those sentenced to a term of less than 1 year” (Siegal & Worrall, 2015, p. 266).

**Misdemeanor:** “A minor offense that does not require indictment; regarded as less serious than a felony” (Siegal & Worrall, 2015, p. 66).

**Offender:** “A person who commits an illegal act; someone that does something wrong, or causes problems” (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 5th edition, 2013, p. 947).

**Parole (Post-release supervision):** “The legal responsibility of a parole supervision agency to supervise an offender who has been released from prison. Supervision activities include monitoring for compliance with release conditions (or



agreement) and regular contacts with an offender (parolee) in an office setting or in the community. Another key responsibility is detecting violations of parole and bringing such” (Burke & Tonry, 2006, p. 8).

**Prison:** “Prisons are long-term facilities operated by the state or the federal government, and typically hold people convicted for serious felony offenses, and others with sentences of 1 year or more” (Carson, 2015; Siegal & Worrall, 2015, p. 266).

**Probation:** “A type of sentence for criminal defendants. Probation allows a convicted person to avoid prison or jail with a suspended sentence for a period of time during good behavior. Probationers are supervised by a probation officer and must fulfill certain conditions. If they violate a condition of probation, the court may place additional restrictions on them or order them to time in jail or prison” (Siegal & Worrall, 2015, p. 238).

**Recidivism:** “Recidivism essentially means to return to a prior state or behavior. The word recidivism appears to be related to and possibly rooted in the term recede, which implies to move back, away, or moving backwards” (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 5th edition, 2013, p. 1140). The American Heritage College dictionary further defines recidivism as a tendency to relapse or return to a previous condition or mode of behavior.

**Release:** “To be discharged from all legal obligations; released at the expiration of sentence” (Tewksbury et al., 2012, p. 71).

**Success:** Avoiding rearrest and re-incarceration up to, and beyond three years after release.

**Technical violation:** “Misbehavior by an offender under supervision that is not by itself a criminal offense and generally does not result in arrest” (e.g., failing to report for a scheduled office visit, positive drug test) (Burke & Tonry, 2006, p. 12).

**Parole violation:** “is non-compliance with some condition of supervised release. A parole violation may be criminal in nature standard condition requires parolees to remain crime-free” (Burke & Tonry, 2006, p. 12).

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter 1 provides a definition of EI, and explains that increased levels of EI negatively correlate with criminal behavior, and that lower levels of EI positively correspond with criminal behavior and reoffending. Many offenders who have been released from prison, return to custody within a short time after their release because of a myriad of personal, systemic, and environmental challenges. Low self-control and emotional regulation were identified as primary contributors to a persistent criminal mind-set, reoffending and recidivism. In addition, federal, state, and local laws and policies that restrict the formerly incarcerated, might also help contribute to the nonstop cycle of criminal engagement and recidivism. Relevant terms are defined and the proposed research design is briefly summarized. The following chapters will provide more detail about empirical findings related to this study and describe the research design and methodology. Chapter 2 gives a review of the literature used in this study. Chapter 3 describes the research design methodology used to collect and analyze data for this study. Chapter 4 presents a discussion of the research conclusions, and Chapter 5 provides an interpretation and explanation of the research findings.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction and Purpose**

Chapter 2 provides a review of empirical literature identifying the emotional intelligence (EI) component, self-control, which might contribute to released inmate's decision to desist crime. EI theory emphasizes the importance of acquiring and applying intellectual and social intelligence as essential to success in everyday life. Social competencies like practical intelligence, internal motivation, emotional adjustment, and emotional sensitivity help contribute to an individual's success. EI also emphasizes the importance of character and self-control, which includes an ability to suspend gratification, control impulses, and tolerate frustration (Matthews, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2002). Goleman (2006) proclaims EI is more important for achieving success in life than intellectual intelligence. Current information suggests that emotional intelligence theory provides a path toward inner personal growth and social development, and its principles are thought to be beneficial to individuals, families, and the larger society.

This chapter will review strategies that have been considered to improve post-prison release success in prior research studies. Sections in this chapter will also include (a) parameters and justification, and (b) key words and their justification. Based on the assessment of the reviewed literature, gaps are identified and recommendations are provided for future directions in research and practice.

## Literature Search Process

**Everything has a beginning.** The study of intelligence can be traced to the inception of the intelligence quotient (IQ) test (Matthews et al., 2002). In 1917, during World War I, Stanford psychologist Lewis Terman was instrumental in developing intelligence tests for the army (Goleman, 2006). Terman's IQ test was the first mass paper-and-pencil form of the IQ test, leading to decades of what came to be called the "IQ way of thinking," which proposed there was just one monolithic kind of intelligence (Goleman, 2006). Later, in 1966 the first clinical notion of emotional intelligence was mentioned in a German article named (in translation) "Emotional Intelligence and Emancipation," published in the journal *Praxis der Kinderpsychologie und Kinderpsychiatrie*, by Leuner (Matthews et al., 2002). Years later, in 1983, Harvard School of Education psychologist Howard Gardner's book *Frames of Mind* refuted the IQ view of intelligence. Gardner instead insisted there is a wide variety of intelligences with seven important sub-components that include: academic kinds: (a) verbal, (b) mathematical-logical alacrity, (c) spatial capacity, (d) kinesthetic genius, (e) musical gifts; and the personal intelligences: (f) interpersonal skills, and (g) intrapsychic capacity (Goleman, 2006). Gardner's multiple view of intelligence concluded that the most important aspects of what he called the "personal intelligences" are *interpersonal intelligence*—an ability to understand people, and *intrapersonal intelligence*— "the key to self-knowledge"— the ability to accurately identify and differentiate one's own feelings to help guide social behavior (Goleman, 2006).

The first definitive application of the concept of emotional intelligence in English appeared in 1986, in an unpublished doctoral dissertation by Payne (Matthews et al.,

2006). Emotional intelligence (EI) was not mentioned again in American psychological literature until after the book *Emotional Intelligence*, by Daniel Goleman was first published in 1995 (Matthews, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2002). Goleman's book has since been republished in 1997, 2005, and 2006, suggesting EI theory may have significant influence and implications for the psychological community today. Evidence supporting the growing influence of EI is witnessed by the recent proliferation of literature on self-help, wellness, and emotional intelligence (Matthews, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2002). However, IQ scores continue to be used today as a standard for determining aptitude and intelligence. Yet, scholarly thinking about intelligence continues to evolve, noting there is not a singular dimension of intelligence, but that intelligence is broad and multifaceted (Goleman, 2006; Megreya, 2015).

Certain crimes and low levels of intelligence are closely related. Research by Megreya (2015) determined that on average, offenders had lower levels of EI than non-offenders, with links between criminality, cognitive intelligence and personality traits. Some personality variables related to criminal behavior include limited self-control, and elevated levels of negative emotional expression related to difficulty in impulse control (Megreya, 2015). In this study, links between EI and criminal behavior were related by the type of offenses. EI levels declined in degree with crime severity; those charged with murder reflected lower levels of EI aptitude than those charged with dealing drugs and stealing. This study illustrates that deficits in EI range amongst offender types, and without proper treatment and attention to these impairments, the cycle of offending and recidivism will continue for the released prisoner.

**Emotional intelligence (EI).** Emotional intelligence involves the capacity to

identify, recognize, and regulate emotion (Megreya, 2015; Sharma et al., 2015), or the ability to effectively notice and process emotion (Megreya, 2015; Sharma et al., 2015). EI is more acutely defined as a capacity to correctly notice, consider, and express emotion; the ability to identify or produce feelings when they are stimulated by thought; understanding emotion; and the capability to control emotions to further encourage personal emotional and intellectual growth of one's self and others (Goleman, 2006).

According to this model, EI can be approached using two theoretical methods: (a) characteristic or trait, and (b) intellectual or learned ability (Hemmati et al., 2004). Trait EI refers to a person's proclivity to manage their emotions (e.g., responsiveness, firmness, hopefulness, and flexibility). Trait EI is evaluated like personality, with self-report questionnaires (Megreya, 2015) like the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue) (Petrides et al., 2007) that asks respondents to assess their own level of particular emotional abilities (Hemmati et al., 2004; Megreya, 2015); or the Mangal Emotional Intelligence Inventory (MEII) (Megreya, 2015), which contains 100 "yes" or "no" items, with 25 items for each of the four areas of EI it measures: (a) intrapersonal awareness (knowing about one's own emotion), (b) interpersonal awareness (knowing about other's emotion), (iii) intrapersonal management (managing one's own emotion), and (iv) interpersonal management (managing others emotion). Whereas ability EI identifies intellect and intellectual abilities as primary factors responsible for facilitating the use of emotion as part of the intellectual processes (Megreya, 2015).

Conversely, ability EI places emphasis on identification of emotions, and it is evaluated as intelligence with performance measures like the Mayer Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT) (Megreya et al., 2015).

Recognizing, processing, and effectively dealing with one's own, and others' emotions are key elements of EI. Developing proficient EI skills is crucial to individual well-being (Goleman, 2006). A failure to develop proficiency in EI can result in maladjustment and failure to reach desired goals (Sharma et al., 2015).

**Measuring EI.** Reliability of measurement is a central concern about EI. Researchers Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (2008) aver EI is a “measurable ability” where many functions can be interrelated and used to measure ability, and that ability increases as individuals mature” (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008).

The first commercially available operational tool for assessing EI was developed by Reuven Bar-On (Hemmati et al., 2004); it is the Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i). Bar-On thought of EI as a collection of emotional proficiencies that impact one's potential to succeed in managing environmental demands and pressures. Additionally, Bar-On suggested that EI contributes to psychological well-being. He suggested that the EQ-i test can contribute to helping understand people and their potential to successfully overcome life's various obstacles (Hemmati, et al, 2004). For instance, in a 2004 study, Hemmati explored the validity of the Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i). The study's participants included 119 male inmates in a federal medium security prison who were administered the EQ-i. The EQ-i measures five sub-categories of EI: (a) intrapersonal intelligence, (b) interpersonal intelligence, (c) adaptability, (d) stress-management, and (e) general mood. Additional tools for measuring EI were developed after the creation of the EQ-i, some of the most prevalent measurement tools are the Multifactor Emotional Intelligence Scale (MEIS), and the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT); The MSCEIT is a revised version of the MEIS. A leading supposition about

the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso model is that EI represents an intelligence that processes emotional information, and it does not embody fundamental aspects of well-established systems of intelligence.

The Emotional and Social Competency Inventory (ESCI), developed by Richard E. Boyatzis, measures both emotional intelligence competencies and social competencies. Each of the research measurement methods uncovered during the article search was considered validated instruments. The Delis-Kaplan Executive Function System (D-KEFS) test was another tool used for cognitive flexibility. The D-KEFS measures risk factors for criminality that can include poor cognitive flexibility; limited intellectual plasticity can lead to deficient problem-solving skills (Feitchinger, 2007). Feitchinger (2007) measured cognitive flexibility amongst a forensic population housed at the Washington County Community Corrections (WCCC) facility in Hillsboro, Oregon. This study sampled one hundred incarcerated adults, using the Delis-Kaplan Executive Function System (D-KEFS) to estimate executive functioning and cognitive flexibility. Participants were labeled violent or non-violent and administered various test measuring cognitive abilities, the tests included: The Wechsler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence Vocabulary and Block Design; Rey-Osterrieth Complex Figure Test (Rey-O); Wechsler Individual Achievement Test; Word Reading and Spelling; California Verbal Learning Test-II; Wechsler Memory Scales Digit Span and Spatial Span; DelisKaplan Executive Function System (D-KEFS) Trails; Color-Word Interference; Card Sort; Tower Tests, and the Woodcock-Johnson-III-Pair Cancellation. Researchers found that only the D-KEFS Sorting Test was of value in discerning between those in the study population who had committed violent versus nonviolent crimes. An additional example of cognitive



measurement tools is shown in a study by Qualter, Ireland, and Gardner (2010), where they inquired about which current EI measures could be reliably applied to non-general samples. The participants were a sample of 225 adult male prisoners taken from three medium security prisons. Participants completed the Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Scale (SSREI). Analysis of the data led authors to determine the SSREI can be specified for multi-dimensional samples, however, they remained unclear about its specific utility for forensic populations. The authors suggested social situations that incite emotional responses are different for offenders and non-offenders. The authors also suggested the need for an EI trait measure specially designed to address the challenges faced by forensic populations. Clearly, there are more than enough empirical measurement tools available for assessing EI, and as the field of study advances, surely additional measurement tools will continue to be developed.

**Criticisms of EI.** Almost anything new and different is subject to sharp criticism and challenge. Since EI was introduced it has been the subject of numerous studies that exposed the controversy around its conceptualization and nature (Raz, & Zysberg, 2014). Some initial questions about EI asked if EI is just a repackaging of preexisting concepts, such as empathy and self-awareness? Or, if EI could be empirically measured and assessed, and can these measures account for anything in the real world above and beyond what is already known (Raz & Zysberg, 2014)? Authors Matthews, et al., (2002) suggest EI mirrors positive and negative aspects of cultural mores. For instance, positive cultural mores are reflected by the way EI underscores the importance of emotional aptitude and personal attributes for successfully navigating the social landscape. These qualities include emotional understanding, awareness of self and others, emotional-

regulation or self-control, and adaptive coping or adjustment. In contrast, Matthews et al., (2002) note the negative side of EI includes its emphasis on emotional aptitude over intellectual intelligence. Moreover, the literature does not provide a clear, consensual definition of EI. There are many conceptualizations of EI ranging from an ability to process emotional information, govern the intellect, and respond appropriately (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2000a), to an intricate correspondence between personality, emotions, mood, and social environment that can be useful in interpersonal and intrapersonal situations (Bar-On, 2000). There is not a consensus over whether EI signifies cognitive aptitude or an innate ability to adjust to challenges. Current definitions in existing literature make it difficult to definitively label EI. It is anticipated, however that as the study of EI continues to evolve, researchers will be able to provide greater clarity about the construct, answer unresolved inquiries, and continue to illuminate a variety of useful and beneficial aspects about this concept and theory.

**Levels of EI and crime.** This portion of the literature review will discuss the relationship between EI and criminal behavior. The literature shows a correlation between criminal behavior and low levels of EI amongst offender populations. Amongst offender populations there is a prevalence of deficiencies in subcomponents of EI, such as self-regard, social competency, social problem-solving, and empathy (Fix & Fix, 2015; Goleman, 2006; Megreya, 2015; Rolison et al., 2013). An individual's level of EI might determine the difference between their failure and success. Studies have found that low levels of emotional intelligence (EI) correlate with instability and failure to reach desired goals (Megreya et al, 2015; Sharma et al., 2015). In addition, offender populations have also been found to demonstrate lower levels of flexibility and higher rates of impulsivity

than the general population, and tend to adopt aggressive problem-solving strategies (Sharma et al., 2015). Dysfunctional personal attributes, difficulty regulating emotions, and haphazard behaviors put many released prisoners at increased risk for (re)offending and recidivism. Because low levels of EI are related to aggression and offending (Megreya, 2015; Sharma et al., 2015), it would be sensible to think those with high levels of EI are more capable of moderating their emotions and are less impulsive. For example, Megreya (2015) conducted a study comparing 100 hundred Egyptian adult male offenders, against 100 non-offenders to examine the association between emotional intelligence (EI) and criminal behavior. Administering the Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i), Megreya (2015) found passive aggression necessitates social intelligence more than physical aggression, and concluded that according to an offender's offense, they had lower levels of EI than non-offenders. Other empirical studies identified a positive relationship between EI and social function, and a negative one between EI and conflicted social relationships (Megreya, 2015; Sharma et al., 2015). Additionally, people with deficient levels of EI are at increased risk for engaging in dangerous behavior. Moreover, they might also have trouble understanding others' perspectives, and therefore, have less empathy for other people (Feichtinger 2007; Megreya, 2015; Rolison et al., 2013; Sharma et al., 2015). Sharma et al., (2015) assessed levels of EI in 101 convicted offenders and a comparison group of laypersons. Researchers administered the General Health Questionnaire-12, (a self-administered screening test designed to detect symptoms of psychiatric disorders), and the Mangal Emotional Intelligence Inventory (MEII) (a tool for measuring EI). Results reflected lower levels of EI among inmates than laypeople, suggesting perhaps those engaged in a criminal lifestyle typically have lower

levels of emotional intelligence than those not engaged in criminal activity. The authors suggest intensive EI enhancement programs begin in prisons with extended community EI training after release.

Some researchers have concluded that a reduced capacity to regulate emotion is instrumental in maintaining aberrant patterns of behavior in criminal offenders (Feichtinger, 2007; Hanoch et al., 2012; Megreya, 2015; Rolison et al., 2013; Sharma et al., 2015). Hanoch et al., (2012), used the General Theory of Crime to describe criminal behavior as “a function of opportunity and impulsivity; usually considered as quick processing of information, novelty seeking, and inability to delay gratification with a large body of evidence supporting a connection between impulsivity and criminality” (p. 1).

Hanoch et al. (2012) examined the connection between impulsivity and delinquent behavior among 44 male offenders and 46 non-offenders by initially having them complete the Eysenck Impulsivity Questionnaire, followed by having the second digit and fourth digit (2D:4D) ratio measured. Findings showed that offenders had lesser right-hand finger ratio measurements than non-offenders, and offenders had higher impulsivity scores than non-offenders. Hanoch suggested that there may be a connection between a biotic indicator and imprudent behavior among offenders. In another study, Wall et al. (2013) evaluated intelligence as a positive aspect of psychopathy. Psychopathy is defined as an unexplainable network of thought consisting of cold-heartedness, egotism, a lack of empathy, and impulsive behavior (Fix & Fix, 2015). This research showed a negative relationship between intellectual abilities and aggressive behavior. A total of 372 undergraduate college students were sampled; the sampled students were

given the Psychopathic Personality Inventory-Revised, Shipley-2, and the Antisocial Behavior Questionnaire. Intelligence (particularly verbal intelligence) regulated the relationship amongst neurosis and criminal behavior to the point that those with acute psychopathy and higher levels of intelligence engaged in less crime and anti-social behavior. The researchers concluded that intelligence serves to offset non-criminal psychopathy. Other compensatory factors could also include, but is not limited to, intelligence, special talent, educational achievement, and socioeconomic standing (Hall & Benning 2006). People with higher intelligence had less involvement in any type of aggression, including hostile posturing and violent language. Additional research findings support that higher intelligence negatively corresponds with criminal behavior and can be a protective factor against overt criminal conduct (Bartels et al., 2010; Beaver & Wright, 2011).

High trait neurosis is related to low levels of EI and amplified involvement in criminal conduct. Individuals with psychopathic traits are stereotypically described as having emotive relational, and behavior characteristics, like cold-heartedness, overconfidence, dishonesty, impulsivity, and violence and aggression (Fix and Fix, 2015). Attempting to explain the relationship between high trait psychopathy and emotional functioning, Fix and Fix (2015) sampled 111 college students. Research results found that elevated levels of trait neurosis were associated with less empathy for others, internal understanding, general mood, improved interpersonal communication, and managing stress. Additionally, trait neurosis was identified as an indicator of violence, and of community property and drug offenses.

Despite the negative qualities attributed to criminal thinking and psychopathology, researchers suggest these modes of thinking could also be considered as efficacious (i.e., those remaining in the community displaying traits of psychopathy) or unsuccessful (those who have been/are incarcerated and exhibit(s) traits of psychopathy). Key differences between successful and unsuccessful psychopathy is best observed through the lens of interpersonal relationships (Fix & Fix, 2015). “A common idea of the unsuccessful psychopath is of someone who is highly manipulative with no empathic concern for others” (Fix & Fix, 2015, p. 187). Such observations might suggest that successful people with psychopathic traits are manipulative and display deviant behaviors like unsuccessful people with psychopathic traits. However, those with neurosis that achieve success, might possess the capacity to understand interpersonal subtleties well enough to correctly respond to others more than unsuccessful psychopaths (Fix & Fix, 2015). Dissimilar to the common ideal of an unsuccessful psychopathic person, Fix and Fix (2015) detected that interpersonal skills, more than empathy or social accountability positively predict neurosis, and that increased levels of trait psychopathy are significantly related to low levels of empathy. In addition, high levels of trait psychopathy correspond with lower levels of emotional intelligence, which is positively related to illegal behavior. Emotional intelligence levels have been shown to be low amongst offender populations (Fix & Fix, 2015; McCoy et al., 2006; Sharma et al., 2015; Wall et al., 2013), and laypersons exhibiting high psychopathic behaviors demonstrate comparable cognitive and emotional deficiencies to incarcerated populations experiencing psychopathic symptoms (Fix & Fix, 2015). The researchers contend that EI is important for predicting neurosis,

and that trait neurosis is a predictor of all categories of illegal behaviors among non-incarcerated people.

**EI as an intervention.** Emotional intelligence has a positive correlation with academic success, professional success, and emotional well-being (Goleman, 2006). Evidence shows that EI as a concept and measure, can be useful for gaining insight into a broad range of behaviors and functions beyond what existing concepts and measures offer from education, school performance and learning, through work and organizational behavior, all the way to physical and mental health and wellbeing (Goleman, 2006; Matthews, et al., 2002;). Other evidence also points to EI's potential use as a tool for interventions, using principles based on concepts of EI (Raz, & Zysberg, 2014).

An intervention model using EI concepts is social emotional learning (SEL). SEL helps children and adults gain information to effectually use in developing skills needed to understand and manage self and others' emotions (CASEL, n.d.). SEL also helps those engaged in the intervention process develop and realize constructive goals, learn to feel and show empathy for others, develop and sustain positive and supportive relationships, and responsible decision making (CASEL, n.d.).

After many school-based, SEL interventions underwent meta-analyses and systematic reviews by researchers, results demonstrated that SEL curricula can help augment academic outcomes and decrease drug and alcohol use, violence and hostility, and other behaviors that do not align with social norms (Aviles, Anderson, & Davila, 2006; Chung & McBride, 2015; January, Casey, & Paulson, 2011; Jones et al., 2015). Efforts to help pre-adolescent children develop EI skills provide primary prevention outcomes, reducing emotive problems later in life (Aviles et al., 2006). Development of

social and emotional skills are an important part of becoming a productive student and citizen. A social emotional learning (SEL) infused curriculum is thought best for helping students develop social and emotional skills, and reduce or prevent risky behavior (e.g., drug and alcohol use, aggression, intimidation and harassment, and school drop-out) (CASEL, n.d.).

Criminal behavior is normally attributed to young people. Criminal behavior typically starts in pre-adolescence, crests during teenage years, and swiftly declines during the shift into early adulthood (Laub & Sampson, 2003). In addition, an early start to a life of illegal behavior and delinquency is more probable if a person's connection to society is weak or damaged (Laub & Sampson, 2003). A future possibility of committing crime positively correlates with non-cognitive processes in development; and the lack of self-control in childhood is prognostic of adulthood consequences that may range from physical well-being, to crime, to alcohol and drug abuse (Jones et al., 2015). However, diversionary efforts have been most effective when infused with an EI curriculum. Many well-developed school-based youth expansion initiatives continue to positively impact a range of social, health, and academic outcomes (Chung & McBride, 2015; Jones et al., 2015). For example, researchers Kress & Elias, (2007) identify the Handbook of Child Psychology by Damon et al. (2006) as providing successful SEL approaches that include explicit training in social and emotional skill development, and opportunities to practice applying these skills in different social contexts.

**Health care.** This section will discuss some of the healthcare challenges recently released prisoners are confronted with upon returning to the larger community, and their implications for avoiding recidivism. Former inmates are often faced with multiple, and



possibly overwhelming challenges that are likely contributors to their low health outcomes, including taking one's own life and decompensating medical conditions (Baron, 2013; Binswanger et al., 2011). Incarcerated individuals who have a co-occurring mental illness and drug and alcohol use disorder may face significant challenges locating and accessing proper community-based treatment services after their release (Baron, 2013; Binswanger, 2011; Fiechtinger, 2007). In addition, many released prisoners also face various socioeconomic obstacles to community reentry (Baron, 2013; Binswanger, 2011; Fiechtinger, 2007). For example, numerous former inmates lack economic resources, are without health insurance or government assistance, are returning to impoverished communities, and have little if any family support. Prisoners with these challenges are at risk of poorer reentry outcomes (Rolison et al., 2013). Binswanger et al. (2011) reported that ex-prisoners identified numerous challenges to successful community reentry, ranging from poor pre-release transitional preparation, to insufficient or limited continuity health care after release. This research suggested that compromised health may be related to variables associated with a high-risk and difficult lifestyle that can be exacerbated by emotional distress. Former prisoners with mental illness were reported to be more likely homeless or un-domiciled, and unemployed than their counterparts, and to be at increased risk for criminal recidivism and re-incarceration (Bahr et al., 2005).

Both mental and physical health, are found to be determinants of post-release outcomes. Visher and O'Connell (2012) used the general gain theory to examine in-prison circumstances of 800 prisoners as possible predictors of optimism. Pre-release surveys and interviews were utilized to explore the impact of family relationships on

individuals' self-perceptions prior to them exiting prison. Researchers indicated their results positively correlated with harmful family relationships (incarcerated or drug using family members), longer prison sentences, a history of serious drug use, and a reduced sense of optimism about post-release success. Whereas increased post-release optimism correlated with supportive networks of family and friends, and substance abuse treatment while incarcerated. Intervention suggestions were to increase psycho-educational training to individuals in custody, and for systems to create policies that will better facilitate family (re)unification, to help encourage a greater sense of post-release hope. Individuals with an optimistic and hopeful attitude before leaving prison may be better prepared to successfully navigate disappointments, opportunities and impediments often faced after a period of incarceration (LeBel et al., 2008) than those with pessimistic dispositions.

**Employment and housing.** This section will discuss the importance of safe affordable housing and gainful employment for former prisoners who have recently been released from custody. Employment and safe shelter are predominant basic human health needs. It is necessary for anyone, especially former inmates to establish a stable residence, which can only be obtained and kept by finding and maintaining employment with a living wage. Unfortunately, many former prisoners are returning to communities that are economically distressed and distal, and often unable to provide post-incarceration access to community assets to assist with stabilization needs (Bahr, 2005; Bucklen & Zajac, 2009; Visser et al., 2011). In addition, in many states, individuals who have felony drug-related convictions might not be eligible to receive subsidized housing, food stamps, or other forms of government assistance (Hattery & Smith, 2014). Not having access to safe and affordable housing, food and other basic amenities, or secure and gainful

employment could create or significantly contribute to circumstances that may put released prisoners at risk for return to prison (Baron, 2013; Binswanger, 2011; Fiechter, 2007).

The difficulties former prisoners have seeking, finding, and keeping employment was illustrated in a study by Baron (2013) of recently released prisoners diagnosed with mental illness. The primary source of data for this study was information collected from participants during unstructured interviews. The research concluded that connections to the paid workforce for this demographic were often unstable before, and long after their incarceration. Baron also found psychiatric symptoms, including drug and alcohol addiction, a limited number of pro-social connections, and other individual-level factors negatively impact connections to the paid workforce too. However, the most harmful impediments to obtaining safe and affordable housing, and gainful employment post-incarceration were found to be reentry policies and laws, community attitudes, and other social and economic affairs (Baron, 2013) like mandatory sentencing, strict post-release supervision, Section 8 Housing prohibitions against felony offenders, community structures that allow employers to discriminate against those with criminal records, social stigmatization that serves to diminish the convicted person's social capital, and other social and economic affairs such as no transportation or an inability to pay for transportation to-and-from employment, and low academic achievement or vocational certification (Alexander, 2012; Baron, 2013) further limiting the released prisoners' ability to compete for wages in the legal marketplace. Many of these laws, rules, and regulations help drive discrimination against people with felony offenses and create roadblocks to equal and full participation in the larger society.

Additional factors influencing employment outcomes after release from prison were identified in a mixed method study by Visser et al. (2011). The researchers found that being gainfully employed post-incarceration, getting (re)connected to a potential employer(s) before release, and having stable, supportive pro-social family relationships help increase the released person's chance of obtaining, and remaining gainful employment after release. On the opposite end, Visser et al. (2011) also point out that those in their study who recidivated to criminal behavior, and drug and alcohol abuse after release had lifelong physical or mental health problems, were nonwhite or older, and least likely to be employed post-incarceration. Without equal opportunity and access to gainful employment, the released prisoner is without a reliable and sustainable source of income to help meet the financial requirements and demands of life in society. As a result, one of the limited options a released prisoner might consider for meeting their needs is to return to unlawful activity.

### **Chapter Summary**

The literature revealed: (a) There is a negative correlation between criminal behavior and high levels of EI; (b) restrictive legal and social policies impede released prisoner's community reintegration; (c) prisoners receive poor prerelease transitional preparation, and insufficient or no continuity of health care following their release and (d) psychiatric symptoms can impact post-release outcomes including employment. Table 2.1 provides a more focused summation of the literature.

Table 2.1

*Focused Summary of Chapter 2*

EI and CRIME	POLICY	HEALTH CARE	EMPLOYMENT
There is a positive relationship between EI and social function, and a negative relationship between conflicts in social relationships (Sharma et al., 2015; Megreya, 2015).	In many states, those who have been convicted of felony drug-related offenses may be ineligible for subsidized housing, food stamps, and other government assistance (Hattery & Smith, 2014).	Former inmates are more often than not faced with multiple and possibly overwhelming challenges that can potentially cause negative emotional reactions which are likely contributors to poor health outcomes, including suicidality and decompensated medical conditions (Baron, 2013; Binswanger et al., 2011; Fix & Fix, 2015).	Connections to the paid workforce for this demographic is often unstable before, and long after their incarceration (Baron, 2013).
Higher intelligence negatively corresponds with criminal behavior (Bartels et al. 2010; Beaver & Wright 2011).	Reentry laws and policy like mandatory sentencing and strict post-release supervision , Section 8 Housing		Psychiatric symptoms, including addiction, and the lack of prosocial connections are other individual-level factors found to affect employment (Baron, 2013).
Low levels of emotional intelligence (EI) correlate with instability and failure to reach desired goals (Sharma et al., 2015; Megreya et al., 2015).	prohibitions against felony offenders; community structures that allow employers to discriminate against those with criminal records; social stigmatization that serves to diminish the convicted person's social capitol; and other social and economic affairs such as lack of transportation or an inability to pay for transportation to-and-from employment, and low academic achievement or vocational certification (Alexander, 2010 2012; Baron, 2013)	Former inmates identified multiple challenges, such as poor transitional preparation preceding release, and inadequate or absent continuity of mental and physical health care following their release (Binswanger et al., 2011).	Being gainfully employment post-incarceration, (re)connection to potential employer(s) before release, and stable and supportive family relationships help increase the likelihood of sustained gainful employment after release (Visser et al., 2011)
Low levels of EI are related to aggression and offending (Sharma et al., 2015; Megreya, 2015).			
Individuals with low EI levels are more likely to engage in risky behavior, and they might also have a hard time understanding situations from the perspective of others, and therefore, tend to be less empathetic (Rolison et al., 2013; Feichtinger 2007; Sharma et al., 2015; Megreya, 2015).		Former prisoners with mental illness are reported to be more likely un-domiciled, and unemployed than their counterparts (Haney, 2003; Bahr et al., 2005). Prisoners with these challenges are at risk of poorer reentry outcomes (Zhang et al., 2006; Rolison et al., 2013).	
“Emotional intelligence is important for predicting psychopathy; trait psychopathy is a strong predictor of all types of illegal behaviors among the non-incarcerated population” (Fix & Fix, 2015).			

It seems logical that policy-makers and officials would begin thinking that because most prison inmates are eventually released back into the community, it would be good practice, from both a public safety and public health perspective to begin understanding and addressing the barriers to successful community reentry. Many studies have highlighted criminal recidivism and the reasons former prisoners return to custody. However, little research has been conducted on how the emotional intelligence component—self-control, contributes to former prisoner's decisions to desist crime. Though large numbers of released prisoners return to custody within a short period, little is known about former prisoners who do not re-offend.

## **Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology**

### **Introduction**

This chapter describes the research design and methodology for a qualitative phenomenological study. A phenomenological approach was used because it allowed the researcher to capture the essence of the human experience (Creswell, 2014). This study explored how the emotional intelligence component, self-control contributes to released prisoner's decisions to desist crime.

### **Research Context**

**Upstate New York.** This research took place in Rochester, N.Y., a city in one of nine Upstate urban counties in New York State. Rochester has a population of approximately 749, 606, and criminal recidivism rates are some of the highest in the state (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). In 2011, approximately 1,025 released state prisoners returned to Monroe County under parole community supervision (State of New York Department of Corrections and Community Supervision [NYSDOCCS], 2011). That same year, released prisoners from Upstate urban counties, which included Monroe County, had the highest parole violation return rates in the state (NYSDOCCS, 2011). Counties with the highest violator return rates included Erie (45%), and Monroe (42%). Overall, about 49 % of the released prisoners committed from Upstate urban counties returned to custody (NYSDOCCS, 2011).

**Study design.** This was a phenomenological study. A phenomenological inquiry concentrates on what is experienced and how it is experienced (Giorgi, 2009). The goal is

to have participants reconstruct their experience within the topic under study (Seidman, 2006). This method requires the researcher to attend to the descriptions of the phenomenon given by participants. These descriptions are rigorously deciphered by the researcher to discover the essential meanings and the interrelationship(s) of meaning given to the phenomenon as described by those who have lived through the experience (Giorgi, 2009). This study explored the phenomenon of people who have remained out of prison for 3 or more years.

**The researcher.** Personal biases can influence the trustworthiness of qualitative studies. To understand the phenomenon at a deeper level, it is incumbent upon the researcher(s) to “bracket” or put their own experience(s), biases, and past knowledge aside. This process is identified as epoché (Vagle, Hughes, and Durbin, 2009), and it is meant to help the researcher focus on immediate data of experience, and suspend their preconceived expectation of research outcomes. Utilizing this approach helped facilitate the researcher’s ability to authentically explore, experience, and interpret participant’s lived experience(s).

The researcher has experience as a New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (NYSDOCCS) inmate and parolee. The researcher served 8 consecutive years in prison and was under community parolee supervision for an additional 4 years before being successfully discharged from NYSDOCCS’ supervision in 2001. This researcher has witnessed and experienced many of the challenges faced by this demographic. In addition, the researcher has 10 years’ experience working in a professional capacity providing substance abuse, mental health, and life-skills counseling to individuals recently released from prison. Over the duration of time, the researcher has



also established personal and professional relationships in the community with people who have been to prison, and with those who provide post-release services. The researcher's experience was suspended when data was analyzed.

**Study site.** A private room located inside one of several Monroe County libraries, central to the participant's neighborhood was used as a site to conduct several research interviews for this study. However, some study sites varied, as research interviews were conducted at participant's homes in a private area. Each interview site allowed undisturbed audio recording of the research interviews.

### **Research Participants**

Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to recruit participants for this research project. Purposive sampling specifically recruits individuals because they have the experience under investigation; and snowball sampling includes inquiring of interviewees about other potential participants who had similar experiences (Rosenthal, 2016).

Normally, approximately two thirds of all released prisoner are rearrested, and roughly one-half of them will be re-incarcerated within 3 years following release (Binswanger et al., 2011; Bowman & Travis, 2012; Stahler et al., 2013). However, this group of research participants has successfully demonstrated behaviors consistent with avoiding rearrest, re-incarceration, and recidivism for 3 years or more following their release from prison. For this study, successful community reentry is defined as completing post-release supervision without engaging in criminal behavior or being (re)arrested within 3 years' post-release.

**Inclusion.** Residents currently living in Rochester, N.Y. who have served at least

one term of incarceration in New York State's Department of Corrections prisons for a violent offense were targeted for research participation. Violent crime consists of rape and sex crimes, homicide, robbery and burglary, and assault (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014). Individuals with a history of violent offenses were selected because low levels of EI are related to aggression and offending (Megreya, 2015; Sharma et al., 2015). This study included six men that were once NYSDOCCS prisoners who have completed parole supervision in New York state 3 or more years ago without a new arrest. Research participants were identified using the researcher's personal knowledge of individual people who have completed a prison sentence and community supervision 3 or more years ago without incurring a new criminal offense.

**Exclusion.** Non-violent offenders were not included in this research project. Nonviolent crimes are considered acts against property, drug possession and distribution, and public (dis)order offenses, which are not a threat of harm or an actual attack on another person (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014). Research shows that non-violent offenders engage in various forms of indirect aggression, and indirect aggression requires more social intelligence (which is a component of EI) than physical aggression (Megreya, 2015). Non-violent offenders represent a group possessing higher levels of EI, who are likely more capable of moderating their emotions, are less impulsive and potentially least likely to engage in behavior(s) that will increase their chances of rearrest, re-incarceration, and recidivism.

### **Data Collection**

This section describes the data collection instrumentation and analysis methods used in this qualitative study exploring the relationship between emotional intelligence

and released prisoner's ability to demonstrate behaviors consistent with desisting crime.

**Instruments.** To gain greater insight into the cognitive processes of those who have decided to discontinue committing crime(s) and have consequently avoided rearrest, re-incarceration and recidivism, the primary data collection instrument for this qualitative inquiry was the researcher. Open-ended research questions developed by the researcher were asked as part of the qualitative data collection process (See Appendix A & B).

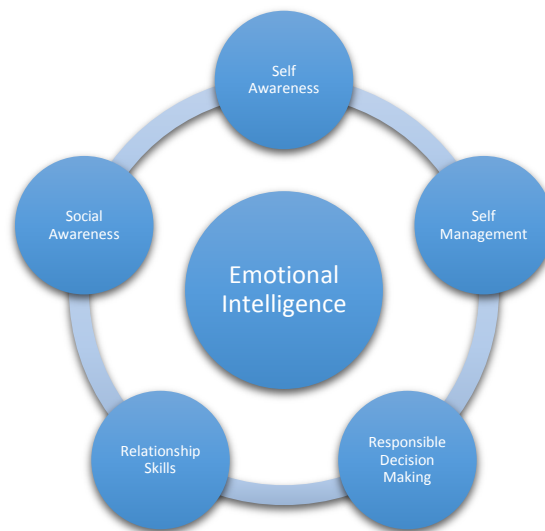
Qualitative interviews aimed to answer the following queries:

1. What aspects of emotional intelligence are important in helping former prisoners demonstrate behaviors that are consistent with avoiding re-offending, rearrests and criminal recidivism?
2. What factors influence former offender's decisions not to re-offend?

Each interview was recorded using an Olympus VN-7200 digital voice recorder, and additional field notes, questions, and observations were also collected in a research journal. Because a replicable study was not identified to inform the instrument design, the researcher used a pilot test approach to determine if research questions would adequately help research participants identify components of emotional intelligence and self-control.

**Procedure.** Six community members who were released from prison 3 or more years ago without returning to custody were selected to participate in this project. The researcher knew enough people in the immediate community who have either been incarcerated or who knows another person that has been impacted by incarceration, that recruiting research participants was not challenging. Recruitment efforts allowed the researcher to provide potential research participants an overview of the project, and to schedule a time to conduct research interviews.

Each research participant was interviewed in person to ensure audible qualitative interview data was adequately recorded, and to provide the researcher an opportunity to witness and interpret participants' non-verbal responses. The researcher took precaution against potentially revictimizing participants by guiding research participants to describe self-perceived factors that have contributed to their post-prison success. The qualitative interview began with research participants being consented. The researcher and research participant then created a pseudonym for the participant. The researcher then engaged each research participant in a singular, individualized, in-depth, open-ended qualitative interview. The research interview proceeded with the introduction of a visual model of EI (Figure. 3.1), and a verbal explanation from the researcher about each of EIs components. The researcher then asked the research participant to discuss the components displayed in the EI model that resonate most with them, regarding their post-incarceration experience.



*Figure 3.1.* Emotional Intelligence Model (CASEL, 2015).

Each qualitative interview took approximately 1 hour. Open-ended interview questions were used to answer the research question: What aspects of emotional intelligence help former prisoners make decisions to desist crime?

### **Data Analysis**

Voice recorded research data was transcribed by a professional transcriptionist, and participant's non-verbal responses were recorded by hand in the researcher's journal. The data was analyzed and coded using inductive and deductive methods. An inductive process was applied to read and review interview transcripts multiple times to manually extract pertinent passages and emergent themes from the transcript. Color codes were used in a deductive fashion to identify emerging themes and categorize pertinent quotes within the transcript. Open coding was the initial data analysis approach. Open coding data analysis fractures or splits the data into individually coded segments (Saldana, 2016). Those individually coded segments were literally and metaphorically compared, reorganized, and categorized during a second coding cycle. Continued analysis and refinement of the data allowed the researcher to make connections between two or more codes, and merge them into one theme or core category; this is known as axial coding (Saldana, 2016). A third data analysis process included using pre-determined codes (see Appendix C) derived from emotional intelligence and CASEL competencies to identify statements that align with them. Interpretation of data was determined by the researcher's consideration of how research results answer the research questions. The emerging themes are reviewed in Chapter 4.

## **Summary**

A phenomenological methodological approach was used in this study. A qualitative phenomenological-research model is an ideal research design to investigate experiences of persons who have lived experiences in the phenomenon under exploration (Moustakas, 1994). A singular, individualized, in-depth, open-ended qualitative interview was audibly recorded to capture participants' stories of their lived experiences as released prisoners attempting to develop pro-social habits, attitudes, and behaviors. Each interview was transcribed by a professional transcriptionist and analyzed by the researcher to identify patterns and themes around factors that influence released prisoner's self-control and decision-making skills.

## **Chapter 4: Research Findings**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore how the emotional intelligence (EI) component, self-control influences former prisoner's decisions to demonstrate behavior(s) consistent with desisting crime after their release from prison. The research identified internal thinking processes and external variables and circumstances as responsible for influencing pro-social and criminal desistant behavior choices. Qualitative data was gathered during semi-structured, individual, 1 hour interviews. Data collected from the interviews were transcribed and analyzed for consistently emergent themes. Excerpts from the interviews supported those themes that consistently emerged throughout the research interviews.

### **Participant Demographics**

Each research participant in this study except for one were adult males of African American descent; one research participant was an adult male of Italian American heritage. Research participants' latest release from New York State prison was between the years 2002 and 2012. Half of the research participants reported serving two terms of incarceration, and two-thirds of participants reported being rearrested after their initial release. Out of this group, three participants violated rules of their release conditions and were returned to custody to complete a portion of their sentence before being released back into the community again. The remaining participant reported receiving a new criminal charge and sentence for violating his release conditions. The overall average

amount of time served in prison amongst participants was an estimated 7.5 years and the average time that has passed since research participant's last release from custody has been 3.6 years. Participants served time in prison for one or more of the following crimes: criminal possession of a weapon, rape, assault, burglary, and possession of drugs. Open coding was the initial data analysis approach. Axial coding was the secondary data analysis approach, and a third data analysis process included using pre-determined codes derived from emotional intelligence and CASEL competencies. These frameworks were applied to answer the following questions:

1. What aspects of emotional intelligence are important in helping former prisoners demonstrate behaviors that are consistent with desisting crime?
2. What factors influence former offender's decisions not to re-offend?

Research participant's responses to the research questions were coded for themes and categorized. Emergent categories revealed that the lived experiences of participants' post-prison reintegration were framed by the following interrelated themes:

1. **Self-Awareness:** being able to identify and acknowledge self-evident truths that highlight individualistic attributes and impediments.
2. **Self-Management:** taking a moment to pause and consider behaviors before engaging.
3. **Responsible Decision-Making:** making constructive decisions about personal behavior and social interactions. Accurately evaluating various actions, and having consideration about the well-being of others and oneself.
4. **Planning for Success:** preparation of prosocial post-release strategies and goals.



5. **Motivation to Desist:** the reason(s) for choosing to disengage from criminal activity.
6. **Keys to Success:** insights and guidance for prosocial ant-recidivistic thinking and behavior.

### **Theme 1: Self-Awareness**

Five of the six research participants discussed how after undergoing a self-initiated, thorough and realistic self-evaluation process, they were unable to ignore their personal attitudes, beliefs, and habits of thought and behavior that contributed to their incarceration. Each participant underwent an individual internal experience of transformative thought processes that began with identifying their own thinking errors and developing thinking and behavior habits consistent with maintaining post-incarceration liberation.

Consider research participant Tu, who served two separate terms of incarceration, spending a total of 9 years in the system. After both his first and second sentences, he was returned to prison after violating conditions of parole. His last release from prison was in 2002. Tu explained that during his final stay in prison he began to feel tired of going through the repetitive cycle of “arrests-incarceration-release-arrests.” Because he was tired of the prison experience, Tu was encouraged to identify, confront, and eventually correct his own habits of criminal thinking and behavior. He thought the individual person is ultimately responsible for shifting their orientation from criminal to non-criminal. He continued to clarify his point, providing a prescription for correcting errant thoughts and behavior. “If you go there [to prison], and don't wait for them [NYSDOCCS treatment providers] to rehabilitate you, [and instead] you rehabilitate

yourself, [then] you will grow” (p. 15)! Tu described his self-rehabilitation as an internal process that did not require a special technique or guidance from a skilled and educated professional to determine his own truths. He explained, “I had many talked [talks] with myself. I didn't answer myself a lot [I had many uncertainties], but I came up with the answer [I figured out what I needed to know]. But that's rehabilitating yourself; you have that talk with yourself” (p. 15).

He details how after an arduous internal trek searching for meaning, truth, and direction, he found within his own sense of logic and reasoning, a personal solution for staying out of prison. Tu explains that rehabilitation is an individualized and unique experience that happens when one looks within themselves and begins to address and answer inherent truths. Tu provided additional insight about how self-rehabilitation works and simplified it by expressively saying:

You can't lie to yourself. You can sit there and tell yourself a lie, but you know it's a lie! But when you be [are] there [in prison], and you be [become] honest with yourself, you know what you can do and what you can't do. (p. 17)

Frank Black (FB) also served two separate sentences. He spent a total of 10 years in the system, and the last time he was released from custody was in 2010. And like Tu, it was during his second sentence when FB began to confront the motivation behind his own criminal thinking and behavior. After weighing the risks and rewards of continued criminal engagement, he admitted to himself the dangers associated with his criminal lifestyle were not worth the chances and anxiety:

I can make it [a criminal lifestyle] sound like a golden dream, and then I could turn around and tell you, “[I] always looked over my back. Always!” [And] when

I rolled up [drove my car] to my house, I went [drove] around the block a couple times or whatever, to make sure there wasn't nobody [a criminal or police] out there [waiting at my house for me]. When I see a car [driving behind me while I am driving], I'm always in [checking] my mirrors. [If] I see a car [that I think is following me], I [will] turn two, [or] three corners, and [if] it's [still] behind me, I'm [I become] paranoid if somebody behind me. It was a downfall. (p.17)

LV also served two terms inside of prison totaling 10 years. His last release was in 2010 and he completed parole supervision in 2012. Like FB and Tu, while incarcerated LV found himself at some decisional crossroads to either continue or desist illegal behavior. He explained sincerely deciding to himself he would retire from crime. "I just knew I had enough [of arrests and incarcerations]. I was tired of that life [criminal lifestyle], I didn't want that life no more" (p. 7). When asked by the researcher to expound more about his decisions to stop committing crime, LV admitted if he continued to make the same criminal decisions, he would either die a premature death in the streets or spend the rest of his life in prison:

There was [were] two options in life if I didn't change. It was [either] prison for the rest of my life or definitely death, [and] I didn't want neither [any] one of those. There was only one way to go . . . why not try this [a pro-social crime-free lifestyle] way? I tried every other possible way to self-destruct my life. So, I said [to myself] "let me try this way for once, why not"? I got nothing to lose! (p. 14)

AJ served one prison sentence for 2 years and was released in 2010. Since his release, he has not reengaged in illegal activity or returned to prison. AJ also shared that while incarcerated, he began identifying and confronting his thought and decision-

making processes that culminated in his prison sentence. AJ shared a recognition of how prior to incarceration he did not appreciate his freedom, and that he went to prison because “I took it [freedom] for granted, and so much [many] stuff [resources] available, so many things [prosocial and positive activities] you [I] could do” (p. 11). AJ also shared that while he was incarcerated he faced his own history of faulty thinking and behavior that lead to his arrest and imprisonment and began to re-socialize himself by engaging in activities that would help enrich his thinking, decision making, and behavior outcomes. “I felt it was time to start doing some of those [prosocial and positive activities] things and really trying to fix things [my thinking and behavior].”

Mr. C. has served only one prison sentence. However, he spent more time in prison than all other research participants: he served 17 years for burglary, rape, and assault. Mr. C. was originally released from prison in 2005. However, he was returned to prison twice for technical violations of parole conditions. His last release from prison was in 2012, and he completed parole supervision in 2013, nevertheless, he must remain registered as a sex offender.

Similar, to the research participants mentioned before him, Mr. C. learned to trust and depend on his own thinking and logic. He explains that after being wrongly convicted and sentenced, he lost trust in the legal system and in many other public systems and instead chooses to rely primarily on his own sense of logic and reasoning to help guide his post-release decisions. Mr. C. stated: “I learned the system [the Law], and I no longer have faith in the system, but what I had was faith in me! That I will endure, and this too shall pass. Period. That's what I do” (p. 12)! However, Mr. C exclaimed “I no longer do that [trust the system]. I'm more about logistics. I'm a little more about loss and

gain. I don't expect anyone to do for me what I can't do for myself" (p. 13). The ability to honestly evaluate themselves encouraged research participants to identify and eliminate attitudes and behaviors they determined detrimental to establishing and continuing pro-social habits.

## **Theme 2: Self-Management**

Five of the six participants in this study discussed their evolution from a criminal mind to desisting crime. After serving one sentence, two research participants described becoming motivated to change their relationship with crime and those who commit crime. Another subsection of this group of participants describe beginning to change their thinking about crime after their second term of incarceration. Participants described internal thought processes and self-dialogue as their guide to making pro-social decisions, and ultimately eliminating behaviors that could result in their return to prison. During this research, it became apparent that participants mutually identified internal personal attributes as primary agents responsible for their success after release from prison. Participants discussed how after being incarcerated one or more times, teaching themselves to make decisions that align with the norms and expectations of mainstream society became a primary and conscious decision that mostly included cultivating pro-social thought and behavior.

After serving a 2-year sentence, AJ explained he has been able to stay out of prison by exercising what he called the I over E theory—"intelligence over emotion" (p. 17). He explained that applying I over E only requires him to "take a second to think, and then things come into play" (p. 17). AJ suggests that by not rushing into decisions and taking a moment to pause and consider the best course of action, he always anticipates

positive outcomes. He continued to explain that learning I over E is an internal process that helps to recreate perception and promote self-control and deter impulsive and emotional decision making. “When you change your mindset, you handle things differently, when you mean it within yourself. It's [changing your mindset] a process of rebuilding. It's [changing your mindset] a program. It's constantly programming” (p. 19).

Roc (Roc) served 3 years and 6 months in prison. He was released from prison in 2010 and completed parole supervision in 2015. He also discussed how his thinking changed after being released from prison. Roc explained that after being released from prison he returned to criminal behavior. However, he began to question his motives for continuing to commit crime. Because he was unable to logically justify his behavior, Roc stopped taking criminal risk and directed his attention and efforts towards law-abiding, pro-social outcomes. When the researcher asked Roc “how did you know you were ready to stop engaging in crime”? Roc shared the internal conflict he experienced as he wrestled with thoughts of criminal persistence or desistance:

I was thinking [about quitting criminal behavior], and why I still would do it [commit crimes]? I more so was ready [to change] and I knew that I shouldn't be doing it [committing crimes] some more [again]. And I was ready to transform into a better person, and a new, different life. (p. 7)

Like Roc and AJ, Mr. C. offered additional insights about making decisions and exhibiting behaviors that align with pro-social values and community expectations. He explained that staying out of prison after being released requires the ability to think globally. Mr. C. explained that by developed a broad range of knowledge and understanding and respect for himself and the world as he knows it, he is equipped to

make informed decisions that are likely to have positive outcomes. Mr. C. said his success after prison has been the result of him following several principles, including “humility, patience, self-respect, world respect, understand[ing] the law, accept[ing] the law even if you don't like the law. . . It's about [the] quality of life. It's about thinking before the fact” (p. 7)!

Mr. C understands that living in the community means he is a member of an interconnected social system that requires him and all its participants to adhere to expectations, standards, and norms. Like a chess player who considers as many possibilities before making a move, Mr. C. is an informed thinker who depends on what he knows to successfully navigate post-release community life. He explains, “I focus. I have that focus to [on] where "I got to do what I got to do" [I do what is most important]” (p. 13).

While serving time for a second sentence, FB explained that while exploring his history and patterns of thinking and behavior, he realized each time he was arrested and incarcerated it was because he engaged in illogical and emotional behavior. After teaching himself to identify and separate his emotions and thoughts, FB began thinking about the consequences of his behaviors before engaging:

I became more of a thinker! [Now] I think before I react, and I learned that [to think first]. And that [not thinking first] was my whole problem growing up. I just snapped [responded impulsively]! and didn't think about it [the consequences of my behavior] [until] later. That wasn't good. (p.11)

While he was incarcerated the second time, LV also began weighing his decisions. He was determined to change his thinking and behavior habits from criminal to

lawful. LV described drawing on his personal and internal resources of knowledge, wisdom, and understanding to guide his post-release decision making and behavior. He explained that disengaging from a criminal lifestyle can only be achieved when the individual seeking change is able to identify and adhere to their internal truth that he described as emanating from the depths of every person. He explains, when following his internal guide, he would not be misled:

I knew it [the ability to desist] all comes within yourself. If you set your mind to it [desisting crime] and you do the right things, you know you won't come back [to prison]. You know, after doing it [going to prison] for so long, you know what can get you back [in prison] and you know what can keep you out [of prison]. (p. 7)

Tu also described how important he thought readjusted thinking is to make decisions that demonstrate behavior consistent with avoiding criminal recidivism, and re-incarceration after returning to the community. He explained, “I put emphasis on that [thinking through a problem], and I'm not big enough, or think I know enough, not to take suggestions [from others] today. You [I] have to take suggestions [from others]” (p. 17). Tu admitted to not having all the answers, and for this reason, he remains open and willing to receive input from others about correcting or adjusting his personal attitude and behavior.

Research participants articulated an understanding of the interrelationship between their own emotions, thoughts and behavior outcomes. This understanding encouraged research participants to make pro-active conscious decisions to deliberately identify and redirect their own potentially errant thinking and behavior habits. An ability



to self-monitor and identify one's own potential for criminal thinking and behavior is what determines, at large, if someone released from prison will persistently engage in unlawful activity or desist criminal habits. This ability to self-monitor positively correlates with the EI component self-management.

### **Theme 3: Responsible Decision Making**

There were a variety of reflections among research participants when asked to discuss what they were thinking to themselves about living a life of desistance or re-engaging in criminal behavior after they got out of prison. Each research participant stated in different terms that there came a time when they were certain they would not re-offend after being released from prison. Some participants described themselves as refusing to make decisions that would return them to prison; being tired of going back-and-forth to prison, and confident that experiencing prison once convinced them not to re-offend.

When asked how much of a challenge it was for him to not re-engage in illegal activity after his last release from prison, Tu explained that returning to prison was no longer an acceptable option. He passionately exclaimed to the researcher, "I refuse to be locked up again for some dumbness, for something dumb! That's my thoughts" (p. 15). Tu continued to explain that once he returned to the community he would remain dedicated to making decisions that would promote maintaining his freedom. And almost as if delivering a rousing speech at a rally, he sat up erect, and waved his finger in the air and proudly proclaimed: "I had made my mind up [to use] the same energy that I went after my drugs, I was gonna [going to] put it into going after my freedom" (p. 13)!

Like Tu, LV made a final determination and commitment to stop breaking the law. LV recalled on the day of his final release from prison, he was thinking intensely to himself about not returning to prison again. He explained how after a long history of incarceration he was tired of the experience and confident he would no longer engage in activities that would put him at risk of returning to prison. LV recalled as he walked out of prison for the last time:

I felt like, “okay, this [release from prison] was it [the last time]”! This [release from prison] was my last stop. “I’m okay with this [being released]”! I’ve done it [gone to prison] for too long. I’m good [I do not care for more], I don’t ever want to come back [to prison]! I just knew I had enough, I was tired of that life [getting arrested and incarcerated]. I didn’t want that life no more. I knew I was done. I knew I was tired of this life and I did it for so long in and out. That was my final, like, “I’m done”! (p. 7-8)

Remember that Roc continued to engage in criminal behavior shortly after being released from prison; he was motivated to steal money. However, unlike the other research participants who began the transition toward desistance while still on the inside, Roc did not start to reconsider his criminal career until the post-release phase of his incarceration. He explained that after he initially began reassessing his motivation to commit crime, he began to realize the risks were not worth the rewards, and made the decision to desist criminal activity:

It’s [my thinking] changing day by day. I would say how I think now, I just see that you can [earn] a fast dollar. You can get a fast dollar and it may come easy,

and [but] it's not going to be easy. Just as fast as it come[s] is as fast as it go [goes]. (p.10)

AJ's experience was like Roc's. He shared that after "knowing the risk involved now, after getting in trouble" (p. 5), he became motivated to make decisions demonstrative of someone who valued the liberties of living in the community. AJ remembered facing many challenges after his release and return to the community that could have lured him back into criminal behavior. However, he explains having confidence in his authority to determine the course of his behavior, and an understanding that his behavior was not subject to the whim of circumstance. He explains that when someone is released from prison "you got [have] a choice to make. You could either say, "Okay, this is how it is", or you could try to adjust [and] see how you can build a better you to present for them [the broader community]" (p. 12).

Mr. C. also expressed understanding the distinction between responsible and irresponsible decision making. He explained that since being released from prison in 2012, he has made irresponsible decisions, but emphasized those decisions were not criminal or a violation of ordinances or agreements. When asked to talk more about his decisions, he stated, "responsible decisions? Yeah, [I make them] most of the time. [However] I've made some irresponsible decisions [too], but not criminal decisions" (p. 12). Mr. C. explained how after enduring almost two decades in prison for a crime he did not commit, he was proud of himself for not emerging from prison seething with anger and seeking revenge, but instead returning to the community motivated to acquiesce to the norms, mores, and expectations of living in the broader community:

I don't want to hurt people. I don't want to take advantage of a situation. I want to work. I want to be responsible for my life! So, taking responsibility for my life is a good thing. I'm not going to go into society and take from society because I mismanaged something somewhere. (p. 14)

FB's experience correlates with the previously mentioned research participants' discussion about arriving at the decision to desist crime. He shared that during his second and final incarceration he was 34 years old and ready to settle down. FB explained that during his last release from prison he asked himself, "what am I going to do now" (p. 7)? He determined to himself: "[I] got [have] one of two choices, get yourself together [begin making responsible decisions] or turn around and walk right back in this door [the prison door]" (p. 7). He remembers telling himself "I'm not coming back through this [the prison's] gate! I'm not coming back" (p. 7)! He continued to explain that avoiding another return to prison required good decision-making skills which he thought could only develop through experience and maturity:

It's [staying out of prison] decision making. If your decision making is average, you can survive [not violate parole or reoffend]. See, when you're older, [you] start thinking different, then crime becomes your choice, versus [an] inability to make the right decisions because you're young. You're easily influenced, da, da, da, but if you're of that age and you're making them decisions, then that's your choice. The blame is on nothing but yourself. (p. 6)

Participants description of their choice to make decisions and display behaviors consistent with avoiding criminal recidivism, and re-incarceration after returning to the community is reminiscent of the EI component responsible decision-making, where

individuals explained their capacity to make productive choices about their individual behavior and social interactions.

#### **Theme 4: Planning for Success**

Research participants agreed that it is of vital importance to develop a post-release plan before being released from prison. Each research participant indicated post-release planning played a crucial role in their success in the community. Participants agreed that to not have a post-release plan may be indicative of a lack of direction and purpose, which places the released prisoner at increased risk of reoffending or violating their release conditions, and a return to prison.

Roc was honest and shared he did not have a post-release plan when he was released from prison and found himself engaged in risky behavior. However, shortly after his return to the community, Roc developed a plan for success. Without a post-release plan, he realized he was like the metaphoric leaf blowing in the wind; the leaf does not have control of its destiny, like the person who does not have purpose and direction. For better or worse, they become susceptible to being victims of circumstance, and at increased risk for recidivism. To limit the chances of falling victim to circumstance, Roc developed and implemented a post-release plan for success to be used as a navigational reference and reminder of his main concerns and not as a calculated and rigid religious protocol. He explains, “as long as [If] you have a plan set in stone [a final plan], you don't have to follow that plan like, dot-dot-dot-dot-dot [step-by-step]. But if you have a plan set-up, [then] you know where you're trying to go” (p. 13).

Like Roc, Mr. C. also thought post-release planning was essential for success after release. Mr. C. did not to limit himself to a singular approach to post-release

planning. As a person who completed his sentence and community parole supervision, Mr. C. shares experienced insights about what it takes to be successful in the community after being released from prison. He explained the importance of having several contingency plans in place if primary ideas for success after prison fail. He shared that he began developing a series of post-release plans during his incarceration. Mr. C. is confident that a failure to plan for success after release from prison is a plan to return to prison. He suggests when people are released from prison, “if they don't have a plan coming out, the chance of them staying out are kind of minimal. I'm talking about plan A, plan B, plan C, plan D” (p. 22).

Before his final release from prison, LV identified people, places and things he thought could put him at risk of returning to prison, and he planned to disassociate from them. He shared that after his last release from prison “I left the whole hood [high-crime neighborhood and associates] alone when I got out” (p. 17). He believed if he maintained relationships with criminal associates and high-crime neighborhoods, he would become influenced to re-engage in criminal endeavors. When asked to describe what steps he took to end relationships with his criminal past, he explained:

So, I'm going to eliminate everything possible out of my life that can lead me back in that direction [back to crime and prison]. If you [I] don't eliminate that [negative influences], you'll [I will] never be successful. You [I] could never be successful if you[I] do the same thing over-and-over again. (p. 7)

FB explained in a matter-of-fact and confident tone that after getting out of prison for the last time, “I knew I wasn't coming back” (p. 7)! He expressed ideas about the

importance of having a post-release plan for success that correlated with Roc, LV and Mr. C.'s perspectives:

Coming out of prison, you've got to have a plan. If you don't have a plan, you're bound to fail [be rearrested] if you don't know what you're going to do! Yeah, it's important to have a plan before you step through that door [out of prison]. I mean you can come out without a plan and make a plan, but it's advisable to come out with a plan. You've got to know your first step coming through that door. (p. 8)

AJ described his post-release planning as a process of self-development that he started while inside prison. He explained, "what I did was rebuilt myself there" (p.6). This conjures the image of a demolished interior of a structure that has been cleared out and reassembled or rehabilitated. When asked to expand on what it means to rebuild oneself, AJ explained that "when you're rebuilding, you're preparing yourself to be something. So, for me, I prepared myself to be a better father, a better son, a better friend, [and] a better person" (p. 6).

Tu explained that he began to envision and plan what he wanted his life to be like once he returned to the community. Before his final release from prison in 2002, he described creating vision boards and picture collages to help envision and idealize the pro-social and desistant, post-release life he planned to build for himself following his release from prison:

I bought notebooks. And I'd get in my cell, or even my bunk, wherever I was, [and I would] write, write, write [make detailed plans]. [When I get out, I am going to] Do this, I'm a [I will] do this. And then I made a collage when I was in

there [prison]. And everything that I put on this collage, I said I want. That's what I did with my time in Southport [the name of a New York State prison]. (p. 9)

Planning for success allowed research participants to think about identifying, accessing and organizing resources and activities to help them achieve their goal of not re-offending, being re-arrested and recidivating. Post-release planning helped research participants navigate the challenges associated with re-acclimating to living in the community. In addition, having a post-release plan provided participants self-imposed expectations and direction they trusted would help increase their chance of not returning to prison after being released. All participants agreed that having a plan for success before being released is the best approach to avoiding recidivism after returning to the community.

#### **Theme 5: Motivation to Desist**

**Pro-social supports.** Prosocial behavior is any act meant to encourage (or avoid a decline in) another person's well-being (Boothy & Clark, 2014). Three research participants discussed people and environments that helped them develop prosocial attitudes and behaviors. Participants' pro-social supportive networks primarily consisted of family and close friends who did not engage in criminal activity. Their family and friends not only provided tangible and material help but also modeled appropriate behaviors for participants to copy in their daily social interactions.

Research participant LV shared that after his second prison sentence he sought the guidance of people he considered successful to teach him to make good decisions and achieve his own level of success, which included to a large degree, staying out of prison.



He explained that during his post-release transition, he had mentors who modeled prosocial attitudes and behaviors for him to follow:

I walked [spent time] with them because I'd seen how successful they were, so, I piqued their brain. I hung around them. I did whatever I had to do to learn how to be that person (p.17). I had a group of them. Each person gave me something different . . . taught me something different. (p.18)

LV continued to express his sincere belief that a person being released from prison will benefit from having a positive community-based mentor or role model. He explained how having prosocial associates and friends works to encourage each other to remain engaged in constructive endeavors. Drawing from his personal experience, LV strongly suggested newly released prisoners align themselves with others who encourage constructive thinking and are engaged in progressive endeavors:

Find a mentor. Follow somebody, [but] It can't be someone that was part of your negative life. Find someone to help guide you. The most important thing you could do is get with the right crowd and follow the right people. You'll see the difference from living righteous [righteously] to living in that negative life. (p. 17)

Roc confirms the importance of having prosocial supports not just after the person is released from custody, but while they are incarcerated too. He provided a personal example of how having prosocial support during his incarceration helped him to eventually adopt non-criminal attitudes:

I know just from being in there [in prison]. When you don't have a support system, even if it's just simple stuff, [like] somebody sending a simple letter. Somebody could write you two sentences. Just knowing that you got some love. I

think that plays a big part [on the choice to desist or persist criminal behavior].

Genuine love and compassion and caring for people, if you have that around you, it bleeds-out [eliminates] for lack of a better word, negative energy. Good vibes create good vibes, man! Good energy is going to reciprocate good energy. (p. 9)

AJ, like other research participants, agreed that having a prosocial supportive network can be instrumental in encouraging non-criminal decisions. He said having “a good support system. A good support system, and the will to do better” (p. 15) helped encourage him to stop engaging in criminal activity. He explains that since his release, he continues to seek and receive encouragement and guidance from the same people who supported him while he was on the inside. He explained, “[I] try to surround yourself [myself] to what [with who] matters most [to me], because man, them was [they were] the people I cared about [who supported me] when I was gone” (p. 28)!

**Social awareness.** Research participants identified and described various individualistic reasons for choosing to remain disengaged from criminal activities. Participants discussed the concern with loss or weakening of familial ties, obtaining and maintaining gainful employment, and having supportive pro-social relationships as the impetus or influence supporting their decisions to continue desisting criminality. Four of the six research participants discussed the negative impact their incarceration had on familial ties as a force motivating them to desist criminal involvement. Each participant discussed how the emotional discomfort and separation created by their incarceration motivated them to begin confronting and correcting their own criminal thinking, and to develop a criminally desistant orientation. LV shared that while he was incarcerated he began to consider the implications being in prison and away from his children would

have on their relationships with him:

I didn't want to let my kids down [disappoint] no more. Yeah, that big six-year stretch [time in prison] took me away from them [my children] for a long time. I didn't want to look them [my children] in their eyes no more and let them down [disappoint] no more. (p. 8)

AJ also explained how his relationships with his family members were strained because of his imprisonment. He described realizing the emotional distress and grief he caused his family by being incarcerated. He also discussed the pain associated with only being able to experience and witness the growth of his children through photographs and strictly supervised visits in the prison's visiting area:

I'm watching the pain of [in] my mother's eyes, and she had to leave me [in prison after visiting]. And watching my sons; my youngest boy would run from his mom just to get one last hug [at the end of a prison visit]. I had to watch my daughter walk for the first time, [while I was] locked up. [After all of that] I said, "Forget everything [criminal activity]"! That [family visits] tore me up [caused me great distress]. Visits would tear me up! (p. 7)

Roc added to the discussion explaining that his incarceration was a "strain and a stress on the family" (p. 7) too. He explained that after being released from prison he decided to desist criminal behavior, and instead invest in obtaining gainful employment and strengthening family ties. His decision to desist criminal involvement was influenced by his consideration of how another incarceration for him would impact his family:

What really made me really, really buckle down [get serious] and start changing, was, I would say, my family. I didn't want to put my mom through another bid

[prison sentence]. [And] my younger siblings. I didn't want them to be without me again. That [the changes I made] was more so than me wanting to do it for myself [were for my family]. I really wanted to do it [change] for them. I didn't want to have to put them through that [a prison sentence] again. (p.7)

Like Roc, AJ and, LV, Tu related a story involving his family that drove him to disavow the criminal lifestyle and to seek alternative pro-social ways to live. Tu explained how he and his brother were both brought from separate prisons to their father's funeral service with shackled hands and feet. Tu described feeling embarrassed, powerless and at his lowest point. He explained that while at the funeral "[I] look over there [and] see your [my] mother's crying, in tears, [and] you [I] can't do nothing 'cause [because] you [I] is [am] locked up man, with some damn chains around your [my] hand and shackled like a slave (p. 9)! During the funeral, Tu made the decision to redirect his life. He exclaimed, "that was the worst experience, one of the worst moments in my life! [However], that was a drive [motivation], man. It drove [motivated] me so much" (p. 9).

Research participants reported having strong family ties that were at risk of loss or continued weakening because of the separation and stain incarceration placed on those relationships. Because of these risks, research participants were internally motivated to abandon criminal attitudes and behavior and reinvest in their relationships with supportive family members. Having supportive pro-social family relationships helped encouraging participants to redirect their criminal attitudes and behaviors and desist crime. Moreover, the time participants spent reconnecting and solidifying familial relations limited opportunities for them to be re-exposed to negative influences and criminally inclined peers, thus reducing their risk of recidivism.

Affiliation with law-abiding people encouraged research participants to develop attitudes, thoughts, and behavior congruent with the community and their parole release expectations. There is an old saying that goes, “birds of a feather flock together”. This signifies that who released prisoners spend their time with following release, can be a determinant of their ability to fully transition their thinking and behavior from a criminal to non-criminal disposition.

**Employment.** To obtain and keep gainful employment proved to be a motivational force and protective factor against desisting crime and recidivism. Full-time employment appeared to provide meaningful and structured activity, leaving less time for potential criminal proclivities to manifest. The expectations and rewards of being employed encouraged participants to further cultivate attitudes and behaviors that are amenable to the norms of society. Moreover, having a satisfying job seemed to also help participants develop a sense of identity and meaning for their lives. Three research participants discussed the contribution and influence gainful employment has had on their motivation and decisions to continue desisting crime.

Research participant AJ shared that obtaining employment after being released from prison was instrumental in helping him stay out of prison. He explained that post-release employment helped him adjust his thinking and behavior patterns to align with commonly accepted norms of general society and to become more responsible. When asked “what does it mean to be successful after release from prison”? He describes an ability to seek and maintain employment and get-along with others as an indicator of post-release success:

It [post-release success] means a lot. A lot of things to actions and ways of thinking. It means caring more about freedom. It also means having things to show that you care, like a job! You know what I'm saying? But, being able to get up and go to work and actually care about what you're doing, and behave accordingly at work, you know, be a professional. So, it's, and it's, that's important, man, like just the whole readjustment of your thinking process. (p. 3-4)

FB talked about the financial security gainful employment provided as an incentive not to commit illegal acts to accrue money. However, he explained that because he was used to earning illegal income and not used to the structure of a job, he initially struggled after his release acclimating to being employed. He notes that he continues to adjust to the lifestyle change:

It [getting used to going to work] took me a long time. It [getting used to going to work] took me some years to get used to it, [to] the 9 to 5 [9:00 a.m-to-5:00 p.m. work schedule]. It's [getting used to going to work] hard! It's [getting used to going to work] [has]been hard! And don't get me wrong, I'm still not a hundred percent used to it, but, I'm like 90 percent there. (p. 17)

Roc also shared a point during his post-release transition back into the community when he made a conscious decision to stop engaging in unlawful behavior to earn money and instead, sought employment. He explained that after obtaining reliable and gainful employment, he can meet his needs and crime is no longer an option:

Now I can say I've got to the point where I got a solid job [gainfully employed]. I'm blessed to be making a decent amount of money. There's always room for more and [I] always can grow, but I'm able to take care of my household, [having]

that peace of mind. Not having to be worried about is this [reciprocal consequences of crime] going to happen or [is] that [reciprocal consequences of crime] going to happen. I really just worry about making it to work the next day [and] just creating [good] habits. (p 10)

Stable and gainful employment provided research participants a sense of financial stability, responsibility, and trust. Participants may have also developed new insights and perspectives about themselves or had different social experiences through interactions with coworkers and the employer that positively influenced their future trajectory. Gainful employment gave these participants a sense of financial security providing opportunity and support for the formerly incarcerated to (re)establish themselves as law-abiding, tax-paying citizens.

**Religion.** One research participant, AJ, shared that while incarcerated he revisited the teachings and beliefs of the religion he grew up with. He explained that his religious beliefs and spiritual practices helped him develop a better moral-conscious to guide his thinking and conduct in a pro-social manner. He also noted that internalizing his religious beliefs and practices helped him become a better person:

I got closer to God. I felt like “if you profess a certain religion, you should study that [religion]”. What I found is, the teachings aren't wrong, people do it wrong. If you try to align yourself with what's right, and not worry about what [other] people do, it helps. It does. It just makes you a better person. (p.9)

Various influential factors contributed to research participants motivation and ability to remain focused on creating habits of thought and behavior amenable to social and legal expectations. Developing the motivation and insight to discontinue a life of

crime is an individual decision that can be supported but not driven by external sources. The life areas represented by these subthemes, research participants were required to abandon previously held beliefs and behaviors and adopt a prosocial disposition.

**Social impediments.** Because of the extreme discontent society has historically shown people who have not only been convicted of a felony but who have also been to prison, many formerly incarcerated individuals face the challenge of circumnavigating various forms of social bias imposed upon them, which causes social exclusion after returning to the community. Both Tu and AJ explained how this form of social rejection makes it difficult for the formerly incarcerated person to meet their needs. Tu describes how after getting out of prison, he knew he would be returning “to [a] society that don't want me to succeed” (p.18). Tu described the invisible social perimeters that make it hard to (re)gain full social participation after serving a sentence in prison. “I already know society don't look good at you if you [are] coming from prison. They [are] looking at you as second-hand [second-class] citizen” (p. 18).

Research participant AJ shared similar thoughts about the unseen social barriers newly released prisoners face after returning to the community. He thought that after completing his prison sentence and consistently exhibiting socially acceptable behaviors that community reintegration would not be difficult. However, he explains that after he was denied multiple opportunities for employment and housing, AJ realized social institutions and laypersons have a silent policy of exclusion against formerly incarcerated individuals:

You come out [of prison] with a new mindset, [and] you think the world should accept you as a new person, and they don't! You a [are perceived as a] stone-cold



[hard-core] criminal in their eyes, and that, it's not fair! But you come out [of prison], and that's [a hard-core criminal] what you're labeled as. (p.12)

To be viewed as a second-class citizen, one's rights and opportunities are considered less important than others within their same society. With one's rights and opportunities devalued, restricted or eliminated, the challenge to (re)gain full capacity as a citizen becomes seemingly insurmountable for many formerly incarcerated individuals. The unseen social barriers faced by formerly incarcerated individuals create unnecessary challenges to developing and sustaining stability in the community after release. These invisible and unofficial restrictions might be partially responsible for influencing released prisoners to re-engage in behaviors that increase their risk for reincarceration.

#### **Theme 6: Keys to Success**

**Be careful of others.** All research participants provided insightful advice for others who want to discontinue returning to prison after being released. Two participants explained because other people who are not under parole supervision can unknowingly jeopardize their freedom, it is vital to be cautious when interacting with others. FB said he would suggest the newly released person to “cut your grass lower, [which means] pay more attention to who you're being around. [Do not] trust nobody, and make better decisions” (p.21). With an almost identical perspective about how other people can unknowingly endanger the recently released person's post-incarceration liberty, Mr. C. suggests, “[when] you get out of prison, you can't trust your mama [mother], your girlfriend, your cousin, [or] your little nephew! Nobody! Because they ain't [are not] on [being supervised by] parole! They're not on parole” (p.22)!

**Patience.** Developing patience was also identified by two research participants as

vital to achieving sustainable post-release success. Roc explained that “patience, man, that's the biggest thing I could say” (p. 13) is important for a person being released from prison to have. He continued to explain that “nothing comes overnight” (p. 13), meaning that all levels of success are achieved through incremental steps. Tu also suggested it was important for the person interested in discontinuing return trips to prison to develop patience. “Be patient, number one. Patient [learn to be patient], get your spirituality in check. Number two [and number three], get around people that's [that are] doing what you want to do [prosocial engagement]” (p.18). LV also suggested developing patience and personal emotional attributes to help formerly incarcerated and newly released persons increase their rate of post-release success:

Be a good person, walk humble, take baby steps, [and] don't overthink life.

[When] you're doing the right things and you're doing good, all that's ever going to come your way is good. But if you have bad thoughts and bad intentions in anything that you do, that's the results you'll get. [So], every day [it is important to] be humble, be loving, be caring, be giving. (p. 18)

In addition to developing internal personal attributes, research participant AJ also suggested achieving practical skills to help improve quality of life. He suggested professional training and certification is important because it promotes access to greater financial security. AJ suggested “educate yourself [and] see how many certificates of relief you need to get rid of [expunge or seal] whatever was done [your criminal record]” (p.27). With appropriate levels of training and certification, formerly incarcerated individuals have a better chance to compete for adequate wages. He continued to

encourage formal training as a viable option for anyone emerging from prison who wants to take charge of their projected post-release trajectory:

Go back to school right away if you can! ...get some kind of degree behind you, 'cause [because] that means a lot. 'Cause [Because] sometimes, a lot of your past can be overlooked with degrees. And then you can kind of make your own way if you want. (p. 27)

## **Conclusion**

These results present a reflection of the perceptions of former New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (NYSDOCCS) inmates who have lived in Rochester, New York for three years or longer without recidivating after their release from prison. Many of the strategies, personal qualities, and motivational factors research participants developed and relied upon to make prosocial post-release decisions to maintain liberty were explored. Passages from qualitative research interviews with research participants illustrate the themes developed. A more detailed discussion and summary will be provided in the following chapter.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Introduction**

This qualitative research investigated the combined force of internal and external factors that encouraged research participants to develop pro-social habits of thought and behavior. This chapter discusses the findings of this phenomenological study exploring the presence and influence of EI components in the decision-making processes of six released prisoners' efforts to desist crime. This chapter summarizes the research process and offers suggestions for executive leaders, criminal justice practitioners, therapy providers, and current and former prisoners. Topics included in this chapter are: (a) summary of the research process, (b) discussion, (c) implications for practice, (d) limitations, (e) recommendations for future research, and (f) conclusion.

### **Summary of Research Process**

This project used the responses of a selected group of men who returned to Rochester, New York following their release from the New York State prison system. Participants were selected because they served time in prison for violent criminal offenses and had not been rearrested or reincarcerated for 3 years or more since their last release. Research participants provided rich insight into how they developed and maintained pro-social attitudes and behaviors to help ensure their post-release success for more than three years. Six qualitative interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and coded for themes. This study used direct content analysis and incorporated the emotional intelligence (EI) and social emotional learning (SEL) models as the theoretical

framework to identify themes, codes, and categories for developing themes. Analysis of participant interviews found that successful community reentry for formerly incarcerated persons primarily balances on the released individuals' intrinsic motivation to change.

This study's goal was to learn how EI contributes to released prisoner's ability to demonstrate behavior consistent with desisting crime and consequently avoid criminal recidivism and re-incarceration. Understanding the influence EI has on pro-social post-release decision making can help inform and encourage executive leaders, criminal justice practitioners, and former prisoners to develop EI competencies to help reduce rearrests, recidivism and re-incarceration.

### **Discussion of Research Findings**

**An internal process.** As discussed in Chapter 4, reconditioning one's self to make responsible decisions is key to formerly incarcerated and recently released individuals remaining free. This study found that the individual is responsible for making decisions to continue committing crime or desist crime. However, making consistent decisions to desist crime is a gradual, and often difficult and uncomfortable process that requires internal motivation, that is best facilitated by first developing an acute awareness of one's emotional self. Five of six research participants described gaining an awareness of self during an ongoing process of self-reflection while incarcerated in prison. Each participant shed light on how they taught themselves to recognize the influence their emotions, thoughts, and values have on their own behaviors. With an increased awareness of their tendencies, participants could identify and regulate their emotions and thoughts. An ability to self-regulate helped participants divert criminal inclinations and create responsible decision-making habits to help promote continued pro-social attitudes

and behavior. This is reflective of Goleman's (2005) explanation that "the self-aware person has some sophistication about their emotional lives, are in good psychological health and tend to have a positive outlook on life" (p.48). Participants' ability to develop and display pro-social dispositions contributed to them establishing and maintain healthy, supportive and rewarding relationships with family members, diverse individuals and groups, and community resources, which were vital to their post-release success.

**Developing EI.** Megreya (2015) defined EI abilities as either characteristic or trait, which refers to a person's proclivity to manage their emotions and intellectual or learned, denoting intellect and intellectual abilities as primary factors responsible for facilitating the use of emotion as part of the intellectual processes. To further encourage the development of criminally desistant, pro-social decision-making habits, research participants overwhelmingly described embodying and implementing attitudes and behaviors reminiscent of intellectual or learned EI in their post-release activities and decisions. According to Megreya (2015) high levels of EI help compel people away from illegal behavior, and additional research by Bartels et al. (2010) report that higher emotional intelligence negatively correlates with criminal behavior. At the start of their criminal careers, participants in this study displayed low or non-existent levels of EI as they expressed little or no concern about the ramifications of their criminal behavior. However, while serving a prison sentence or after release, research participants described gaining internal motivation to desist crime. Desistance is a process of social transition that evolves over time (Laub & Sampson, 2003). Each research participant described embarking upon an internal psycho-emotional journey toward desisting crime that matches the stages of Prochaska and DiClemente's (1982) Transtheoretical Model of

Change which explains how through intentional decision making, individuals can change a problematic behavior or learn a positive behavior. This model implies people go through a series of psycho-emotional stages when a change occurs. The stages are: (a) pre-contemplation—the individual is not thinking about change, (b) contemplation—the individual is undecided about change, (c) preparation—the individual has some practice with change and is currently trying to change, (d) action—the individual is engaged in actively working in the direction of desired behavioral change, including change of their environment and behavior, and (e) maintenance—the individual is focused on continuing to actively work at maintaining changes made and preventing relapse.

Developing and applying EI principles can be achieved through a process and practice of personal awareness that begins within the individual's own mind. Because research participants have developed, implemented and maintained long-term pro-social strategies of thought and behavior, might it imply they represent a minority of released prisoners with elevated levels of EI?

**EI strategies.** EI theory emphasizes the importance of acquiring and applying intellectual and social intelligence as essential to success in everyday life (Matthews et al., 2002). During research interviews, participants' responses reflected the influence EI principles have had on their post-release decisions to discontinue crime. Participants described using strategies reminiscent of EI components described by Matthews et al. (2002) that focuses on character and self-control, like the ability to postpone gratification, deal with frustration, and control impulses. Participants also shed light on social competencies such as emotional adjustment, emotional sensitivity, practical intelligence, and motivation to facilitate pro-social decision making. By adopting ways of thinking and

behavior that resemble or mimic aspects of EI, research participants were also able to develop constructive and sensible post-release plans to aide in benefitting themselves, their families, and society after their release.

Prisoner community reentry has been plagued by rearrests and recidivism. In 2010, 42 % of those released from a NYS prison were recommitted within 3 years of release; this return rate is slightly higher than the 41% rate recorded for 2009 releases (NYSDOCCS, 2014). Similarly, Western New York had approximately 80% of released prisoners returned to prison within 3 years of release (Klofas & Porter, 2010). However, there are cohorts of released prisoners who have retrained themselves to identify and redirect their own criminal thoughts and intentions. Through this research, the EI components self-awareness, social awareness, and self-management were identified as most influential in helping research participants' make post-release decisions to desist crime. Participants in this research represent those released individuals who have not been reincarcerated because of their conscious decisions to develop strategies to desist crime. Participants described using intuition and personal experience to develop thinking strategies and behavior patterns that correspond with EI theory to better inform their post-release behavior choices. For example, one participant's description of his pro-social method for handling turbulent emotions and thoughts captures similar sentiments of the other research participants:

Managing all those triggers [impulsive responses] [and] finding the alternatives [learning not to be impulsive] to what your triggers are [is what helps make better decisions]. When you feel those triggers, how [are] you going to manage them? How [are] you going to find something different to do instead of going back to



what you really know [illegal habits]? That's how you manage it [impulsive responses]. You have to [must] manage it! control it! tame it! You know? It's [managing emotions and decisions] not easy! You really got to dig in within yourself to do it, because it's really easy to go back to who you were [reengaging in crime], where you were [in prison] [and] how you were [criminal minded]. It's [returning to criminal behavior] real [really] easy to do. It's not an easy thing [to discontinue criminal habits of thought and behavior]. (p. 9)

Prisoner's release and return to the community continues to be characterized by continued criminality and repeat returns to prison. However, these research participants demonstrate in part that the cycle of recidivism can be interrupted when individuals acknowledge and redirect their habits of illicit thought and behavior towards pro-social, criminally desistant objectives. It is from the examples of these and similar groups of released prisoners that researchers, treatment providers, and policymakers will be able to find strategies that can help slow recidivism and rearrests.

**Self-control.** Self-control is the capacity to moderate and control one's own behavior in appropriate ways; it is inner control (Goleman, 2005). Self-control was anticipated to be a relevant factor in participants' ability to develop and maintain a pro-social, crime-free lifestyle. Impetuous behavior is one of the most significant characteristics of the criminal personality, because it causes many current and former offenders to act haphazardly (Sharma et al., 2015). However, developing impulse control, problem-solving, and social skills was not a challenge for this group of research participants. Developing self-control contributed to these research participants' propensity to make post-prison decisions that demonstrate behavior consistent with

criminal desistance. During the research interview process, the concept self-control manifests repeatedly as participants described using self-management, social awareness, and responsible decision-making skills to successfully navigate their post-incarceration world. Making pro-social decisions is an internal individual process that can be best facilitated by developing and applying principles of thought and behavior that closely resemble aspects of EI theory. However, a lack of EI could result in maladjustment and failure to achieve goals (Sharma et al., 2015), and without awareness of how one's own emotions work to influence one's behavior, the formerly incarcerated individual may be at increased risk of rearrests and recidivism. Though, after interviewing research participants and analyzing the data, it was clear this group's reliance on personal agency and personal insights to transition from criminally persistent to desisting crime significantly reduced their odds of re-arrests and recidivism.

**Employment.** Traditionally, this demographic has had a poor and unstable history with the paid workforce, before and after their incarceration (Baron, 2013). Only two research participants discussed the stigma associated with incarceration that often makes it difficult to secure jobs post-release. However, all the men interviewed for this study eventually acquired and remained gainfully employment after their release from prison. Each participant identified finding and maintaining gainful employment as a principal component in their adjustment to life after prison and the transformation of their identity. Laub and Sampson (2003) found that job stability was strongly related to desistance, and explained that employment "provides both structure and meaningful activity" (p. 46), and not much time to engage in deviance. In this sense, the structure provided by employment worked for the men in this study as an informal social control that helped prevent

criminal behavior.

**Pro-social relationships.** Participants in this study were not like many other samples of men recently released from prison who struggle with social obstacles and disadvantages, including, but not limited to homelessness, addiction, unemployment, and separation from their families. These participants had pro-social supports when they were released from prison. Their emotional investment in their relationships with significant others, their children, and girlfriends or wives also seemed to act as informal social controls encouraging the men to remain dedicated to a desistant lifestyle. However, research participants explained that despite having all the support and resources required to ensure success after prison, if they had not changed their mind to desist, they would once again find themselves at risk for rearrests and recidivism. Research notes that crime is influenced or discouraged by the reinforcements released prisoners receive from primary groups such as family and peers (Bahr et al., 2005). Therefore, interpersonal post-release relationships can be detrimental or instrumental to formerly incarcerated and recently released men's ability and potential to remain free. According to the life-course theory, crucial transitions and the supports provided by social bonds are important in helping individuals make important changes (Bahr et al., 2005). It was determined through participants narratives, their investment in interdependent pro-social relationships with parents, siblings, children, friends, and co-workers reinforced and supported their decisions to desist crime. The development of pro-social bonds in adulthood elucidates pathways to criminal desistance, and that these relationships "serve as the catalyst for sustaining long-term behavioral change" (Laub & Sampson, 2003, p. 149).

## **Conclusion**

Despite the many challenges faced by those returning to the community after a term of incarceration, their post-release decisions can determine if they are rearrested and returned to prison for a new offense or violation of their parole release conditions, or remain in the community to complete their sentence. Every research participant described undergoing a process of self-reflection. During self-reflection, participants describe teaching themselves to recognize and understand how their thoughts and emotions inform their behaviors, and how their behaviors can impact others, thus moving their sense of self-awareness to a newly enlightened domain. With an increased sense of self-awareness, participants developed post-release decision making and behavior habits consistent with EI principles, to further assist them in their effort to desist crime. Several external variables also influenced participants' determination to desist crime, however, the internal quality, self-awareness was the executive function directly responsible for participants' decisional outcomes. Collectively, the interviews provided an understanding of how EI principles help inform formerly incarcerated men's post-release decisions to desist crime.

## **Recommendations for Currently and Previously Incarcerated People**

Desisting crime and successfully transitioning from prison back into the community is not a one-time event that occurs the moment of release, but is instead a process of maturation and self-discovery. The research interviews revealed that to be successful after getting out of prison, you will first need to gain an increased awareness and understanding of your emotional self (self-awareness), and the people, places and things (social-awareness) that can be instrumental or detrimental to your post-release

decisions (responsible decision making) and outcomes. This section will describe the stages involved in transitioning from a criminal mindset to desisting crime, and will also provide pre-release and post-release recommendations to currently and previously incarcerated individuals for developing prosocial behaviors and a criminally desistant mindset.

### **Process of Desistance**

To complete a process, a cycle or a series of cycles must ensue. In similar fashion, transitioning from a criminal mindset to deliberately desisting crime is an internal cognitive process that also occurs in cycles. If you want to stay out of prison after your release, it is of critical importance that you go through a process of cognitive restructuring to help develop and strengthen your criminal desistant outlook and pro-social attitude.

The cycle of creating and maintain a criminal desistant mentality as described in this research started with developing an ability to accurately identify and understand the impact one's emotions and thoughts have on their behavior; this is self-awareness. Greater awareness creates an opportunity for the individual to practice, develop and implement ethical and constructive choices; this is responsible decision-making habits. The motivation to desist crime is a continuation of making responsible decisions that require an ability to understand social and ethical norms; this is social-awareness. After going through the phases and developing proficiency in those areas, it remains important for the individual to rely on their new-found levels of knowledge, wisdom, and understanding to continue to desist crime.

**Self-awareness.** Behavior is often a result of the corresponding interrelationship between thoughts and emotions that have been shaped by experiences (Goleman, 2005). Emotions can be conscious or unconscious, and those emotions that have not yet become conscious can have a strong influence on thinking and behavior. Bringing emotion into awareness can be encouraged through a process of deep introspection and self-reflection. The self-reflective person will naturally progress to become more self-aware, which means, in-part to “be aware of both our mood and our thoughts about that mood” (p. 46) (Goleman, 1995; 2006) and the mechanisms that contribute to shaping our dispositions. Self-awareness helps provide a deeper understanding of how past experiences have shaped who we are today, and an opportunity to identify and separate what is and is not conducive to developing and maintaining a criminal desistant lifestyle.

**Responsible decision-making.** Decisions determine outcomes. Responsible decisions are the fruit of thought processes where an individual selects a logical choice from available options. Effective and responsible decision making requires an ability to predict potential outcomes and determine the best option. Allen (1903) illuminates the significant impact decisions have on one’s life as he noted:

By the right choice and true application of thought, we ascend to the Divine Perfection; by abuse and wrong application of thought, we descend below the level of the beast. Between these two extremes are all the grades of character. We are our own maker and master. (p. 6)

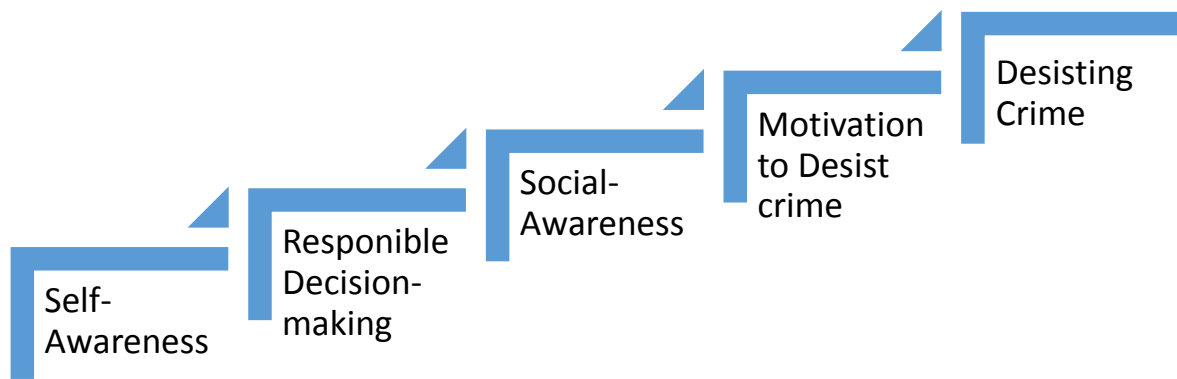
The ability to develop and implement responsible decision-making habits demarcate the turning-point from criminal thinking to desisting crime. It becomes clear that developing a consistent habit of making pro-social, non-criminal decisions will help

reduce the incarcerated and newly released individual's risk of repeating behaviors that could return them to prison.

**Social awareness.** This is an evaluative process requiring an inventory of how the environment can be favorable or detrimental to continued development and implementation of pro-social, criminally desistant decision-making habits. Pro-social family and other social supports can make the difference between post-prison success or failure (Bahr et al., 2005). Unfortunately, not everyone will have appropriate supports. Ask yourself, “who and what are the people, places, and things that will encourage and help me continue making pro-social decisions, or dissuade me from desisting crime”? and “how can I develop relationships that will support my post-incarceration community reintegration”?

**Motivation to desist.** This is a phenomenon that happens within an individual and social context. The data from this research shows that the motivation to desist crime is a developmental and maturational process that strengthened over time as the men in this study invested more into their work and family commitments, and less time with deviant peers. Obtaining and remaining gainfully employed and having pro-social relationships with family and community members are key elements in establishing long-term criminal desistant behavior habits.

**Desisting crime.** Self-addressing the underlying causes motivating criminal behavior is essential for the cessation of illegal behavior. Figure 5.1 Provides a visual illustration of the steps involved in the process of desistance.



*Figure 5.1. Process of Desistance.*

### **Vocational-Educational Training**

Historically, the educational level, work experience, and skills of this demographic group have been very low, which adds to the difficulty of acquiring and keeping stable and gainful employment after release. I suggest currently incarcerated and recently released individuals enroll in formal vocational and academic training to gain proficiency in job skills and enhance their employability. Research indicates that gainful employment is a principal piece of successful reintegration, because connections made with colleagues may act as informal social controls that help avert criminal conduct (Visser et al., 2011). Being able to find and maintain gainful employment or have sustainable income is a crucial element in post-prison success.

### **Recommendations for Service Providers**

Use your resources. Countless interventions have been developed and implemented to address criminogenic factors and help reduce released prisoner's recidivism. Research professionals should consider breaking tradition, and instead of working with another professional researcher, they should work together with former prisoners who continue to live criminal desistant life-styles to develop criminal



interventions that focus on building EI competencies, creating pro-social relationships, and developing vocational and educational skills.

**Change the focus.** Almost everyone who goes to prison eventually returns home (Petersilia, 2003). However, within a short time, a large percentage of them are returned to prison for a new crime or a technical violation (Visher & Travis, 2011). Perhaps, in part, released prisoners continue returning to custody at high rates, due to treatment providers focusing efforts on the wrong points of recovery and rehabilitation. Substance abuse education has been historically used as a panacea to address offender's treatment needs, and less attention has been given to cognitive processes responsible for the shifts that occur during the transition towards desisting crime. Instead of a "one-size-fits-all" approach to rehabilitation and recovery treatment in prison, separate communities using cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) interventions for motivated individuals should be established on prison grounds. CBT suggests most people can learn to become aware of their own thoughts and behaviors and make positive changes to them (NIJ, 2010). In CBT communities, individuals will receive assistance developing individualized thinking strategies consistent with behavior indicative of EI competencies and criminal desistance. Because CBT interventions target the interrelation between thought and behavior, its application would likely help increased levels of EI amongst program participants, and produce lower recidivism outcomes than the status-quo in-prison treatment regiments. Developing proficiency in EI is crucial to individual well-being. Individuals emerging from prison with elevated levels of emotional and social intelligence will be better equipped to successfully navigate the complexities and demands of post-incarceration.

**Begin at the start.** Developing a plan for successful community reintegration should begin early during the sentence with primary treatment concentrating on developing emotional intelligence skills and thinking strategies, and less on drug and alcohol education. Those who provide treatment services to this population should undergo intensive emotional intelligence training to gain an intricate understanding of the interdependent and reciprocal relationship between emotion, thought and behavior. In addition, a corresponding EI curriculum should be developed and inculcated into current or newly developed treatment regimens and implemented or taught by the treatment providers. This should be made available to incarcerated individuals and those who are under community parole supervision; they should be afforded the opportunity to re-enroll in and complete the program multiple times while under NYSDOCCS' jurisdiction. An additional recidivism reduction approach for NYSDOCCS to consider is developing and implementing a comprehensive pre-release program like the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) uses that focuses on six core life areas: (a) health and nutrition, (b) personal growth and development (i.e., self awareness), (c) personal finance and consumer skills (d) employment, (e) release requirements and, (f) procedures, and information on community resources (Petersilia, 2003). In addition, a part of post-release treatment and program requirements for recently released prisoners should be a continuation and review of the six core life areas with an emphasis on personal growth and development. I suggest the trend of reincarceration and recidivism could be significantly impacted if spending were reduced on incarceration and surveillance, and reinvested in mindfulness training and developing the six core life areas.

## **Limitations of the Study**

There were several limitations of this study. One of the limits were that only individuals who were “successful” after prison participated in this study. By only interviewing those who achieved post-release “success” it is unknown if individuals who were not successful after their release underwent a similar internal transformative process, but may have been derailed by other circumstances during their post-release transition into the community.

Another limitation of this study was that all participants were males. It was challenging to locate females who met the specifications for participation in this research. Adding the perspective of successful formerly incarcerated females may have revealed sharp or subtle variances between women and men’s experience of the transitional process of criminal desistance. An additional limitation of this study is that all but one research participant was of African American descent. Perhaps a broader ethnic and gender mix of research participants would have also netted different research findings about the process of criminal desistance.

## **Recommendations for Future Studies**

A recommendation for future studies would be to compare released prisoners who developed EI competencies but failed to achieve post-release success, with other released prisoners who also developed EI competencies but were successful after their release. I think a fitting research question for this study would be, “Why are some released prisoners who have developed proficiency in EI successful and others are not?”

Other future research recommendations for this study include: (a) Replicating the study with female former offenders that have successfully reintegrated into the

community after release from prison, and compare them against a group of female offenders who were unsuccessful after release, and (b) Successful and unsuccessful female cohorts' research outcomes should be analyzed and compared to successful and unsuccessful male research participants' findings. In addition, though most of this study's participants were African American, ethnicity or race did not prove to be a factor. However, a future study like this one should be replicated using research participants that represent an even balance of diverse ethnic groups.

A few final questions to consider for future research are “does the prison experience provoke the impetus to desist crime?” and “does the separation incarceration create from influences that contribute to people's incarceration provide them an opportunity to self-reflect and develop the motivation to desist crime?”

## **Conclusion**

Before a person is released from prison, it is important that their criminogenic needs including education, employment, housing, healthcare, and pro-social support are addressed. However, despite having their needs met, successful community reentry after prison is fraught with challenges and snares that many returning to the community after incarceration are still unable to manage. Few incarcerated men seem to receive the sort of rehabilitation they need because shortly after being released, large numbers return to prison. Many men return to prison after initially being released because they continue to make a series of poor decisions that culminate in new arrests, parole violations and a return to prison. This suggests the criminal interventions many corrections departments across the nation continue to use are not helping released prisoners develop pro-social thinking strategies. This caused me to wonder, “if the interventions corrections

departments are using do not help reduce repeat offenses and recidivism, are they instead adding to the problem?” It is time to rethink the purpose of incarceration, and what needs to happen to people while they are incarcerated. Most people who go to prison will eventually be released (Binswanger et al., 2011). Incarceration and discharge from prison can be either a long or brief process. Most processes produce a changed or new product, item or person. If the process of incarceration simply aims to punish offenders and not provide ample opportunities for self-development, what kind of “finished product” should society expect to emerge from prison and return to communities?

This study revealed that post-prison outcomes are largely influenced by the decisions current and formerly incarcerated individuals make. This study also found that habits of thought and behavior can be conditioned or reconditioned by paying deliberate attention to the impact and influence one’s own emotions have on their thinking and behavior outcomes. In addition, strong pro-social relationships with family members and friends, and having stable employment also served as social controls supporting criminal desistance.

This group of research participants developed EI skills without the assistance of The ability to understand and control emotions to further encourage personal, emotional, and intellectual growth of one’s self and others is EI on display. With the insights gathered and provided through this research process and other studies on reentry, policymakers and service providers, and current and formerly incarcerated individuals should be better equipped to assist individuals emerging from incarceration who are motivated to make changes necessary for successfully acclimating and readjusting to a pro-social and constructive life outside of prison.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Initial Interview Questions**

1. If you've gone to prison more than once, why do you think that is?
2. "Success after prison". What does that mean to you?
3. Will you talk about what you were thinking and feeling the last time you stepped out of prison?
4. Will you talk about what you were taught regarding: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Responsible Decision-Making, Relationship Skills, and Social Awareness?
5. Will you talk about how easy or challenging it was for you not to return to similar behavior(s) you went to prison for?
6. What is the difference between the way you think now, versus your thinking before being locked-up?
7. What caused the shift in your thinking?
8. How exactly have you managed not to return to prison?

## **Appendix B**

### **Demographic Questions**

1. How many bids (terms of incarceration) have you done?
2. When was the last time you were released from prison?
3. If you were under parole supervision, when did you complete parole?
4. Were your offenses violent or non-violent?
5. Have you ever been re-incarcerated for a violation?
6. If yes: how long were you on parole before the violation?
7. What were you re-incarcerated for (new charge or technical)?

## **Appendix C**

### **Pre-established Research Codes**

Self-Awareness (SA)

Managing ones' own Emotions (MOE)

Recognizing Emotions in Others (REO)

Motivating Self (MS)

Relationship Skills (RS)

Social Awareness (SOA)

Concern for Others (CFO)

Responsible Decision Making (RDM)