Digital Literacy for Returning Citizens

"I need assistance with the most basic things. That does make me somewhat defensive, and I'll end up trying to do things on my own and then I crash and burn" ~Pablo (1)

The Case of Illinois

Approximately 1000 additional prisoners are to be imminently released due to Covid-19 concerns. (2)

According to the Illinois Department of Corrections:

- 20,443 people exited prison in 2020 (excluding those who died while incarcerated)
- 1,329 were released in January of 2021
- The longest serving incarcerated person in the state of Illinois began his sentence in 1963
- In June of 2020, over 8,000 people were incarcerated for homicide, the sentence for which is, on average, 24.1 years, excluding any additional time served for parole violations (3)

Many would benefit from reentry preparation that emphasizes the importance of digital literacy.

What is "digital literacy"?

"Digital literacy is the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills."
~The American Library Association

Who are "returning citizens"?

Returning citizens are formerly incarcerated people who have recently been released and are in the process of reintegration

Why research it?

The Covid-19 pandemic has precipitated an upsurge in our reliance on technology, and digital literacy has become even more critical to job-seeking, interpersonal relationship maintenance, healthcare management, and parole compliance. In the United States, where criminal sentencing can last decades, there exists an urgent and ever-increasing need to prepare returning citizens for the unfamiliar technological demands of life outside.

Research Questions

- How does post-carceral digital disenfranchisement impact returning citizens?
- What technical skills are most significant for returning citizens and why?

Method

Examining the experiences of recent returnees through semistructured, collaborative interviews and sythensizing documentary analysis of Department of Corrections publications and non-profit guidances.

Post-Release Deportation

The majority of "interior removals" are of those who have been justice impacted. (4)

Formerly incarcerated people who face deportation are additionally burdened by the complexities of their forced return

They may heavily rely on technology for basic informational needs –especially if they left their country of origin in childhood– as they manage the difficulties of reconstructing their life in an unfamiliar place and complete task such as health insurance registration or basic GPS navigation.

Recently deported people often leave families and communities behind, thereby increasing the importance of communications technologies.

DEPORTATION IS ALSO FAMILY SEPARATION

Other 8%

Criminal Charges/Convictions 92%

Initial Findings

Material Consequences

Technical knowledge is an essential component of reintegration for returning citizens. Priorities include:
- Digital Payment Systems (recently released people may only have access to their pandemic relief funds on a debit card, for example)
- BI SmartLink App (when requisite for continued supervision)
- Professional digital communications including email, Linkedin, and Zoom

Psychological Considerations

Given the context of the pandemic and the increased use of communications technology, insufficient technical expertise could lead to feelings of alienation for recent returnees. On the other hand, technological fluency may improve a person's sense of agency and self-reliance. Consequently, digital literacy may both ease the logistical burden of reentry and support the returnees general wellbeing.
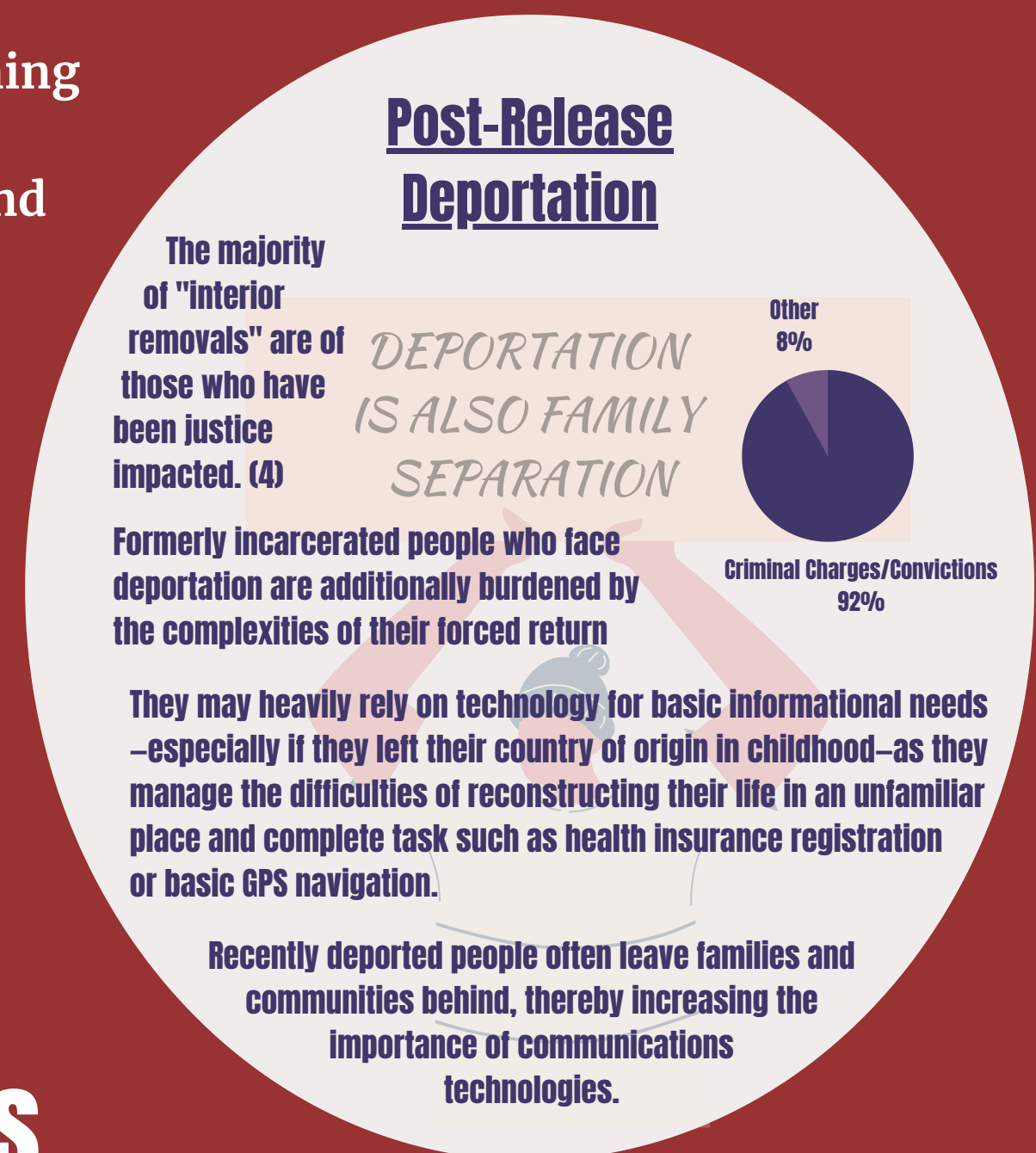
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