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# Reincarceration Risk Among Men with Mental Illnesses Leaving Prison: A Risk Environment Analysis

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**Abstract** Reentry interventions for persons with mental illness leaving prison have consisted primarily of linkage to mental health services and have produced mixed results on psychiatric and criminal recidivism. These interventions primarily focus on intra-individual risk factors. However, social and environmental factors may also increase risk of reincarceration by constraining choices and pro-social opportunities for community reintegration upon release from prison. In order to add to the knowledge base on understanding reincarceration risk for men with mental illnesses leaving prison, we examined interpersonal and environmental factors that exposed men to heightened risk for reincarceration. As part of a larger study examining the effectiveness of Critical Time Intervention for men with mental illness leaving prison, in-depth interviews were conducted with 28 men within 6 months of release from prison. Policies and practices at local and state levels, community conditions, and interpersonal obligation and conflict were identified as increasing risk for reincarceration.

**Keywords** Community reentry from prison · Mental illness · Risk environment · Recidivism · Critical time intervention

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## Introduction

Persons with mental illnesses are overrepresented within the criminal justice system (Teplin 1994; Steadman et al 2009) and most also have a co-occurring substance use disorder (Drake et al. 2004). Once released, they have high rates of returns to jail or prison (Cloyes et al. 2010; Lovell et al. 2002). This churning between the criminal justice system and the community poses significant health risks for individuals. For example, Binswanger et al. (2007) found that prisoners have a 13-fold increase in risk of death from cardiovascular disease, homicide, suicide, and drug overdose in the first two weeks after prison release as compared to a similar demographic sample. Reentry interventions for persons with mental illness leaving jail or prison have produced mixed results on both returns to jail and linkage to mental health or substance abuse services (Martin 2011; Skeem et al. 2011).

Risk for criminality is commonly thought of as residing primarily within the individual as exemplified by the General Personality and Cognitive Social Learning (GPCSL) model (Andrews and Bonta 1994). Criminal history, procriminal companions, antisocial personality patterns, and procriminal attitudes and cognitions are the big four factors contributing to criminality in the model. In addition to these, the moderate four characteristics, education/employment, family/marital, substance abuse, and leisure/recreation are often referred to the central eight risk/need factors (Andrews and Bonta 2010). Of these, criminal history is considered a static risk factor, while the other, dynamic factors are ripe as targets of interventions (Bonta et al. 2014). This focus on dynamic risk factors coupled with a dominant discourse of criminalization of mental illness has resulted in reentry interventions for persons with mental illnesses focusing almost exclusively on these intra-individual

factors such as criminogenic thinking or treatment non-compliance, without consideration of broader social and environmental factors that may contribute to risk of reincarceration (Epperson et al. 2014). Consequently, intervention efforts may meet with limited success because they neglect upstream causes of recidivism, like concentrated poverty, high unemployment, widespread drug use, and other social disadvantage common to locales to which such persons typically return.

The GPCSL model also includes factors like neighborhood, age, ethnicity, family of origin, and temperament/mental health as contributing to criminality, but these distal factors are considered minor risk factors (Bonta et al. 2014). However, distal factors are considered fundamental causes of disease (Link and Phelan 1995) and are crucial to consider when addressing health disparities. These, or other, distal factors may also be fundamental causes of reincarceration. Hartwell and colleagues (2016) recently found that age, being on parole, and having a drug-related crime were protective factors for recidivism, but race and criminal history increased risk, suggesting the relationship between static and dynamic and distal and proximal factors in contributing to reincarceration is complex. One way of uncovering distal causes that may be contributing to reincarceration is to examine what predisposes individuals to risky behaviors that put them at risk of reincarceration by contextualizing their environments (Link and Phelan 1995). For example, this perspective has shown that some policies preventing needle exchanges may increase syringe sharing among intravenous drug users thereby increasing the risk of HIV infection (Rhodes et al. 2005).

Contextualizing the environmental and social context that individuals face when returning to the community from prison will highlight the circumstances that shape their exposure to certain risk or protective factors (Rhodes et al. 2005). These factors that shape the environment may be stronger as explanatory factors in reincarceration, or at the very least, show environmental factors that influence individual level decisions that put individuals at risk of reincarceration (Denton et al. 2015). Unlike individual factors, contextual factors like poverty or race envelop everyone in the setting, and thus are more difficult to avoid arrest through personal action.

This paper advances such an examination by adopting a risk environment framework, which categorizes political, economic, social, or physical aspects of the environment and posits that these factors may exert influences through both micro (individual, community) and macro (structures, policies) levels to shape protective or risky behavior (Rhodes and Simic 2005). This study examined, as elements of the reentry risk environment, structures, including local, state, and national policies, and interpersonal relationships, and asked this research question: What contributes to the production of risk of reincarceration for men with mental illnesses leaving prison? Our goal was to expand understanding of the risk for reincarceration by examining the social and environmental risk or protective factors contributing to or preventing reincarceration among persons with mental illness.

## Methods

This qualitative study was embedded with a randomized control trial testing the effectiveness of Critical Time Intervention (CTI) for men with mental illnesses leaving prison in New Jersey and residing in Camden County (Authors). CTI is a nine-month, three-stage intervention to ease the transition from institutional settings to the community. CTI has been effective for persons with serious mental illness leaving homeless shelters and psychiatric hospitals (Herman et al. 2011; Susser et al. 1997), but this was the first trial applied to individuals leaving prison. A convenience sample of subjects participating in the larger trial who had been recently released from prison was recruited to participate in the qualitative arm of the study. Interviews were conducted from July 2010 to April 2012 and 28 subjects participated in a total of 38 interviews, ranging from 1 to 5 interviews with each subject. Interviews asked about the transition from prison, access to treatment, sources of social and tangible support, criminal justice involvement since release, goals and future plans, and barriers to reintegrating into the community. Interviews lasted from 40 to 90 min and were conducted by the first and third author either conjointly or separately in participants' homes, social service agencies, public spaces, or anywhere participants preferred. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition to interviews with subjects, six CTI staff participated in interviews, researchers accompanied subjects and case managers in daily tasks, and researchers attended team meetings.

Edited, transcribed interviews were entered into Hyper-Research (Researchware Inc. 2009), used for coding and organizing the data analysis and were coded using constructivist grounded theory methods (Charmaz 2006). Open coding using substantial, in vivo, and theoretical codes was conducted on the first ten interviews (Oktay 2012). Theoretically derived codes were drawn from the risk environment literature. This initial round of coding led to the development of axial codes, which were then used to code larger chunks of data in the remaining 28 interviews. During this process we also engaged in both open and focused coding with the rest of the interviews, continuing to engage in constant comparative analysis in order to identify potential new codes and to allow comparisons across and between cases.

We finally engaged in theoretical coding by focusing additional coding around three analytic frames of *Changing Ways, Transitioning to the Community*, and *Dealing with Reality*, which captured the chronological process of community reentry from prison. However, in finalizing substantive codes, determining relationships between categories, and making the connections between the environmental context and its influence on the process of community reentry for men, these frames were reorganized into a figure showing the production of risk for reincarceration at the individual, interpersonal, and environmental levels (see Fig. 1). Throughout data collection and analysis, memo writing aided in developing an audit trail and in moving the analysis forward. Other strategies to maximize rigor included triangulation of data, peer debriefing, and member checking (Padgett 2008). Participant interviews are the primary source of data for this paper as a way to understand participants' perspectives during community reentry from prison; however, data was triangulated with staff interviews and meetings, and observations. The institutional review boards at the respective organizations involved in this research approved this study. All authors certify responsibility for the manuscript and report no competing or conflicts of interest.

## Results

The sample consisted of 28 men with a mean age of 34.5 years (range 21–52). All had been released from prison in the past 1–6 months. Sixteen participants were African–American, six were Hispanic, and six were Caucasian.

The initial findings showing the chronology of release from prison with mental illnesses are presented first with the analytic frames of *Changing Ways, Transitioning to the Community*, and *Dealing with Reality*. This will show both individuals' orientation upon release and their experiences in the first few months of community reentry from prison. Then a working model of the production of risk for reincarceration in this environment will be presented (see Fig. 1). This model is organized around individual, interpersonal, and environmental factors contributing to the risk of reincarceration, which shows the connections between men's initial orientation upon release from prison, their interpersonal challenges, their interactions with policies and practices comprising the risk environment, and their response to the risk environment.

## Changing Ways

Most of the men leaving prison were invested in changing their ways, as their desire to stay out of prison was strong in the earliest days post-release. Men envisioned changing their ways in two major ways, by *avoiding old patterns* and *doing things differently*.

Avoiding old patterns is a commitment to eluding activities and situations that would put them on track back to jail or prison. This included criminal activity, substance use, or hanging out on the streets. Most men felt these activities should to be avoided at all costs and employed the narrative of "People, Places, and Things" common to *Alcoholics Anonymous* when talking about what they needed to avoid
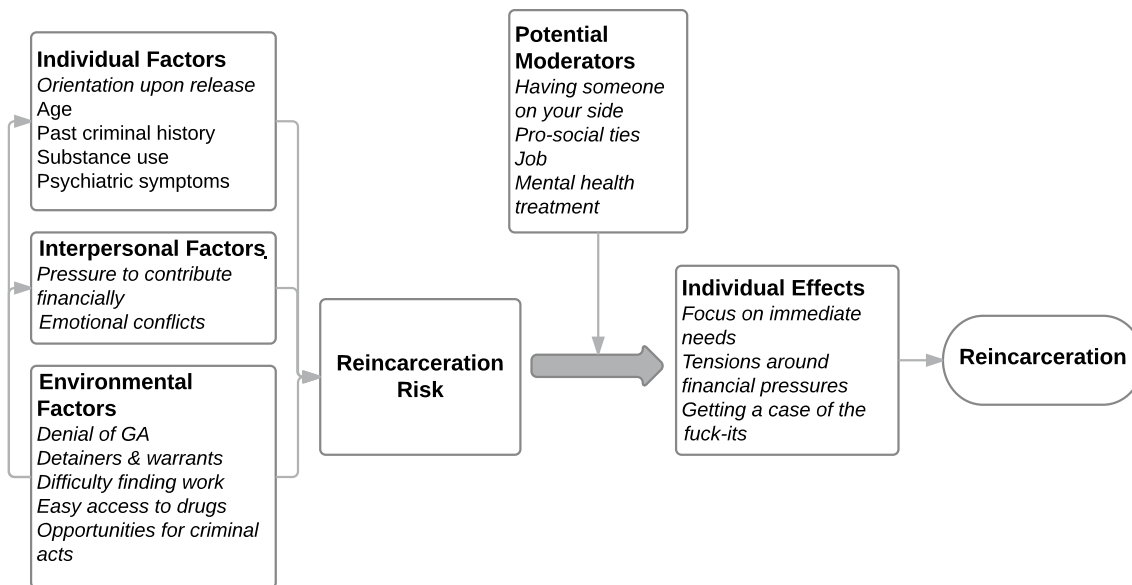


**Fig. 1** Risk for Reincarceration

to remain in the community. Tony (all names are pseudonyms) expressed this sentiment, "I go home. I go to the program...Usually it [substance use] was based on...the people, places, and things that I was around". Men took great pains to avoid old acquaintances or potential new acquaintances that could draw them back in to criminal activity or substance use, thinking that this was the only way to ensure community tenure as Andre revealed, "If you hang with a bad crowd, you know, bad things are going to happen... if you involve yourself with good people, good things are going to happen, you know?".

Committing to doing things differently encapsulated a conscious effort to do change one's ways. One man described it as, "choosing not to cheat." This sentiment also included a desire to change as a person as Jerrod stated,

"I wasn't worried about hanging on the corner anymore. I had enough of that. I made up my mind [while] being incarcerated; I'm over that. I'm tired now. This [being incarcerated] taught me a lesson. I missed my family too much and I'm ready to really be a man. This is not being a man, sitting in [prison]."

Motivation to stay out of prison was a part of this category, but more importantly it was a desire to prove themselves to parents, siblings, significant others, and children. Marlon expressed his desire to show his family that he was serious about doing things differently this time.

"I'm not gonna let myself down first of all and I ain't gonna let them [my family] down. I'm not gonna go back out there and keep my same mistakes over and over again... It's either grow up now or not. I'm choosing to grow up. I'm choosing to mature...If they [my family] are willing to help me, then I need to first of all help myself to want to change."

### Transitioning to Community

When individuals leave prison, they have needs in a broad range of domains, including finding a place to live, generating income, and connecting with mental health or substance use treatment. In addition, they have been in prisons located far away from family and friends, making staying connected to a support system difficult.

During the time of this study, New Jersey had strict limitations to general assistance for those with drug convictions as Darius revealed, "Yeah, we tried [applying for general assistance]...but since I have a drug charge, they won't give me no money. But they said for coupons [food stamps] I'll have to do a drug program to get my certificate saying that I passed it." Without general assistance, it was very difficult to obtain temporary medical and housing benefits, which forced men to rely on assistance from family members.

Garland explained how his efforts to secure funding was thwarted due to his past drug conviction despite having a medical condition that resulted in him having a colostomy bag,

"Well, the day I [was] released I was staying with my sister-in-law and brother and I went to welfare and they shot me down 'cause I had a drug charge...and then we kept tryin' to go back to welfare about my medical condition and all that and they still would shoot me down so I finally came here [to live with my brother permanently]."

These exclusions occurred when their needs are the greatest in the first weeks after release, making this transition from prison to the community a higher risk endeavor for men with drug convictions.

Housing resources for men leaving prison for Camden County were limited due in part to Federal housing policies, but also due to local practices. Alejandro explained how these policies worked, but also the feeling that the system was rigged against him, "I got drug charges and they don't want to put me in a Sect. 8 house...[there are] certain things you just can't get...with certain charges so it makes it harder... They make it real hard and people get frustrated". Formal housing options like homeless shelters, transitional housing, or halfway houses are few and difficult to access.

Staying at a homeless shelter was another possibility; however, here too, policies made access difficult. For instance, men had to prove their homelessness by providing a notarized letter from family saying they cannot stay with them. Also if a man was perceived as contributing to his own homelessness, for example refusing to stay a place that is not safe or where illegal activity is taking place, he was not eligible to stay at the shelter. Most who stayed at the shelter, felt it was a breeding ground for drug use and other illegal activities. Additionally, some men could not endure the shelter living conditions as Jerrod explained, "I didn't stay there [shelter] long. Oh wee...living conditions, yuck! We're talking about roaches and bugs. I came out and moved in with my mother here though. I didn't stay there long. I couldn't take it". Other men avoided the shelter altogether, opting for the streets, yet this posed a problem as stated by Reggie,

"No, never do [feel safe sleeping outside] and that's when my mental illness kicks in, when it gets dark out there and I'm laying [sic] down. I don't who's coming up or might come and try to hurt me, or whatever, so I'm always on the defense."

Against this backdrop, men attempted to find work, get connected to medical and psychiatric services, reunite with family, and become a contributing member of society.

Obtaining gainful employment was a major goal for most men; however, this goal proved elusive for most. This study took place during the aftermath of the great recession of 2007; unemployment was high, and screening for criminal records was the rule rather than the exception. Some men did not initially realize the impact that having a conviction would do to their hiring prospects as Garland recounted, "They [public defenders] want you to cop out to something. That's the conviction on you, that goes on your jacket and your record and anytime you look for a job, anything, you have a conviction, they don't wanna hire you". This forced Ignacio, after months of applying for jobs to no avail despite having a good work history, to take the drastic step of lying on his job applications,

> "I'm going to start lying on my applications, and tell them I don't have a record...I hope I land one of the twenty percent that don't run a background check... It's a waste of time telling them you got a record. And even if I can work for two months before they find out that I get a record and fire me, oh well, at least I made two months' worth of money."

These circumstances coupled with men who lacked legitimate work history and tangible job skills contributed to making this endeavor unsuccessful for most.

Men who were successful in finding work either had significant work skills or secured a job with a recommendation. Once work was secured, two problems still persisted, maintaining employment over time and making enough money to support them or their family. Many jobs were temporary; the work was physically difficult, wages were low, and working conditions were poor as described by Marlon,

> "Working for the [temporary] agency is horrible... One day you got a job and the next day you come and they don't need you. I don't do well with that...I want to work my eight hours and then go home. You work one or two days, and then they don't need you, that's not fair."

Difficulties in finding work and securing housing led many men rely on informal mechanisms such as family members, girlfriends, or acquaintances for tangible support, even when many of these households had little room or financial resources. Even with the informal tangible support, men had to rotate through several households so not to put too much financial or emotional strain on any one household. These circumstances led to a nomadic existence, making it difficult for men to secure and maintain connections to service providers and employers. Some men living with family felt pressured to contribute financially to the household especially when they previously were providers, as this Sam recounted,

> "See, so that's the only bad thing about [selling] drugs is [that] the money is lucrative, but it's the outcome, losing your kids, your family for a year or two when you go to prison...And see, that's another thing, too, with the kids [being used to living a certain lifestyle], but I explained to them that no, this is going to be a tough summer [because I don't have the money to buy them the things they want]."

Those individuals having difficulty finding work reported feeling obligated to contribute to the family in some other way: doing chores, providing childcare, or performing minor household repairs. Even if money was not an issue, there were often family tensions around men's criminal histories. Ignacio explained how he had to earn his family's trust again after being incarcerated,

> "No. You, kind of, got to earn people's trust back again after [being in prison] … so, they don't worry about you going out and doing something stupid, and leaving them again. So, there's, sort of...a distance in the beginning, until they realize… see that you've changed a little bit, and you're not the same person."

The return of the individual from prison could reignite longstanding tensions within the family, place extra financial burdens on a household, and subject the individual leaving prison to intense pressure to reintegrate into society. The tensions exhausted fagile family resources and stretched already meager households to their limits.

At this point in their release (3–6 months) many men discussed a daily struggle in dealing with their emotions as a result of the stress in dealing with these reentry challenges. While some men displayed psychiatric symptoms (depression, hypomania, responding to internal stimuli) during interviews, this was not commonplace. Most of the men were taking medication and felt it lessened the intensity of these feelings; however, they still experienced daily anger, anxiety, and frustration. This likely represents a limit to what medications can offer men in their situations. Their emotional needs are not only managing symptoms associated with a mental illness, but also dealing with the adjustment from a strictly controlled environment to an environment with more freedom, while also experiencing intense scrutiny and multiple obstacles to getting their lives back on track.

Experiencing feelings of stress and anger complicated men's relationships with family members, girlfriends, case managers, and other providers. Feeling anger because he could not find a job and start contributing to the household, Malik reported that his frustration and anger about his situation was directed to those closest to him,

> "It's hard and now it's to the point where everything makes me aggravated. It don't aggravate me to the

point where I want to [do something]…I find little things to take out on her [his girlfriend], her mother, my sisters, my brothers…They, everybody, established as far as living arrangements and whatever… I'm trying to do it all the same way they doing it and trying to go down the same route instead of going down the wrong route and going back to the streets."

Dealing with emotions was a novel situation for many of these men who were used to dampening emotions through drug use, avoiding meaningful social relationships, or having to tamp them down while in prison. Experiencing these emotions and acting or not acting on them was another factor contributing to an uneasy transition to community living.

## Dealing with Reality

Several months post-release, men realized that finding and maintaining work is extremely elusive, if not impossible, reuniting with family members is fraught with difficulties, and an eroding safety net does not include them. While some were able to escape the risks associated with the urban environment by living with family members in the suburbs of Camden County, many continued to live in the city of Camden and had to negotiate its risks on a daily basis. The city of Camden was plagued with easy access to drugs and criminal activity. These conditions, coupled with high police scrutiny, made men with criminal records targets for arrest. Men would engage in multiple strategies to minimize both the temptation of drugs and criminal activity, but also employed strategies to avoid "getting caught in someone else's mess." Being in the wrong place at the wrong time was a very real fear for men who could only afford an apartment in the city or had to travel to Camden for services. These tensions were related by Ezekiel, who because of his conviction could not reside with children, thus preventing him from residing with any family members. Instead, his family pooled resources to rent him an apartment in Camden,

"Mm-hmm. I don't really stay there [at his apartment in Camden] or nothing. They sell drugs around there…You walk into the store and the cops come and raid…and I get hanged up with it. The drugs, they got hidden somewhere and all of a sudden I'm trying to explain like 'I had nothing to do with it.' So I just go to sleep over there [his apartment in Camden], go to work, and I come here [my sister's place]. Then when it's time to go to sleep I go back over there."

In addition to these concerns, men were troubled that a return to drug use would inevitably mean a return to jail or prison. Paul shared this belief, "If I never picked up

drugs I never would've went to prison but once I do pick up drugs I'm going back to prison. It's inevitable…I need more money and I go right to crime". This path would happen in one of three ways: arrests for drug use or possession; committing crimes, like robbery or burglary, to support a drug habit; and being under the influence of drugs which compromises judgment leading to criminal activity.

Besides using drugs, the illegal activity that most participants discussed was selling drugs. This endeavor was particularly tempting for those having trouble meeting basic financial needs and/or trying to contribute to the family household as stated by Terrell,

But when I came home this time I started selling drugs again. I started again…I tried to go get a job too. It's not like I didn't try to go get a job first…But the only job I had wasn't taking care of me…Personal hygiene things, paying my bills, things that I need, not that I want; and I couldn't even get the things that I needed so I had to do what I had to do.

Many poor, urban areas operate within and around an underground economy (Venkatesh 2006), and Camden is no exception. Whether it was participating in the trade of potentially stolen goods or operating an unsanctioned business (handyman, barber, car detailer), these avenues were often more accessible ways of generating income than sanctioned, legitimate work.

Warrants could be issued for new criminal charges, nonpayment of fees and fines, or nonpayment of child support. There was a 90-day moratorium on issuing warrants for nonpayment of fees and fines after release from prison: however, paying these fines was not a priority for most, especially when one was struggling to secure permanent housing, to find work, or to provide for a family. Men could not be certain when a warrant for nonpayment of fines would be issued and often would not know they had been issued a warrant until they were stopped by the police and were returned to jail. Bruno was picked up on a warrant for a charge prior to his prison sentence, "I had a warrant when I was in jail but they said that it would probably be time served for that. I never got time served. So I come out now and…a warrant pop up". These returns to jail impeded progress on other legitimate, pro-social goals such as completing a Social Security applications, keeping doctor appointments for medical or psychiatric care, working with the DMV to get a driver's license reinstated, and most importantly, rebuilding relationships severed from a prison stay.

Heightened police scrutiny was a basic factor of life for those living in Camden. Men talked extensively of taking measures to not attract the attention of police even when they were not engaging in illegal activity. Terrell recounted his experiences with the police, "They lock you up for

every little thing…It's like it's a police state. Like if you ain't a cop and you ain't this and you ain't nothing, you going to jail. It's just that simple". Men felt that they could get stopped for any reason, police would possibly search them, and police would definitely run their name for any outstanding warrants. There was a sense of helplessness that refraining from breaking the law was not enough to stay out of jail as Garland related, "I don't sell the drugs. I was with somebody [who does], and they even told the police that [the drugs] was theirs and they still locked me up". This threat was an additional consideration in the daily internal struggle to stay clean despite environmental and structural conditions pushing individuals towards a return to illegal activity.

### Effect on Individual

Continued entanglement with the criminal justice system seems inevitable for men leaving prison. Even if one refrains from engaging in criminal activity, non-payment of court fees or fines and child support can land one back in jail. This happens against a backdrop of policies and practices making it difficult for men leaving prison to access resources, like stable housing or work, towards a more pro-social life. These circumstances combined with a dangerous and poor environment with many opportunities to re-offend all contribute to a heightened risk towards reoffending.

All of these factors have an effect on men's orientation upon release and initial resolve to change their ways. The lack of resources and difficulty securing stable, safe housing and regular, well-paying work contributed to men being focused primarily on immediate needs which prevented thinking and planning towards a more stable future. Terrell showed this struggle between what he knows he should do and what he felt he needed to do, "I wanna get trained and I wanna get my GED. I wanna go to school but I can't go to school if I ain't got no money. I gotta eat. I gotta pay rent. I gotta pay bills". This focus on immediate needs was related to tensions with families around financial pressures. Men could be a drain on meager household resources and even if families were not directly pressuring individuals for monetary contributions, there was still the feeling they had to contribute. With these pressures, some men considered returning to the previous ways they knew how to make money as Cecil stated,

> That's the main thing about this…I can support myself if I want to go back to selling drugs, but I'm not tryin', I don't want to do that. I'm trying hard to stay away from it, but, you know, everyday, day-to-day obstacles and stuff push you further and further away [from staying away from criminal activity].

These tensions around finances and basic needs that extended many months after individuals' return to the community tested men's resolve, frustration tolerance, and emotional stability. Everyday men had to recommit to changing their ways and maintaining a positive outlook, which was key to keeping them out of prison as Paul revealed, "Yeah, like I have to be positive. Once I get in the negative it's just a downward spiral". This man referred to this downward spiral as "getting a case of the fuck-its" which was echoed by other men also struggling with remaining committed to staying straight. Likewise, Sam related his internal struggle with deciding to return to criminal activity to provide for his family and what impact it would have on him and his family if he was caught,

> And say like, 'Fuck it,' you know what I mean? Boom, go back to the streets. And that's what's been killing me the most…knowing that I could be making money on the streets, but I want to keep my freedom. I want to keep my sanity. I want to stay a family.

### Production of Risk

The risk for reincarceration is heightened through policies and practices that impede a smooth transition out of prison and extend punishment into the community. Figure 1 represents the reincarceration risk production across individual, interpersonal, and environmental domains. In an attempt to provide an inclusive and relevant model, the model includes the individual level factors that have been associated previously with reincarceration along with the interpersonal and environmental factors found in this study (which are in italics). We show both the factors that can contribute to reincarceration and the interplay between these factors and how they work in concert to produce risk toward reoffending. In this model, environmental factors like denial of general assistance benefits due to a drug conviction; issuing of warrants for previous charges or nonpayment of fees, fines, and child support; hiring practices that weed out those with criminal histories; the prevalence of drugs and illegal activity; and criminal justice policies and surveillance practices that make men feel like they are living in a police state contribute to constrain choices for pro-social activities. In addition, these environmental conditions ensure reliance on informal sources of support, which can contribute to increasing interpersonal tensions around contributing financially to households or reigniting longstanding familial conflicts. Finally, many men seemed poorly equipped to emotionally withstand the pressures of their environmental reality and expectations for engaging in pro-social behaviors. These factors combine with individual level factors such as age, substance use, criminal history, and orientation upon release to produce heightened risk for reincarceration.

These influences make a personal commitment to changing ways a decision that one has to recommit to every single day. The environmental, interpersonal, and individual risk factors produce individual effects that impact some individuals' thinking and action as men prioritized meeting immediate needs rather than long-term goals and planning, like job training or residential treatment for substance use. The tensions around financial needs and external pressures from family to contribute financially to households in this context of restrained opportunities and increased risk contributed to some men "getting a case of the fuck-its", where the attempt for a pro-social life is abandoned and a return to drug use and criminal activity starts a journey back to jail.

Other factors in the environment may be protective in reducing reincarceration risk and these are shown as potential moderators in the model. Men talked about the importance of having someone who believed in them, being able to re-establish pro-social relationships, having a stable and financially profitable job, and accessing mental health treatment as all positive factors in their lives. However, the effects of these factors may be buffered within this risk environment context.

The CTI case managers became increasingly aware of the environmental challenges for men with mental illnesses leaving prison as the study progressed. Initially unaware of the GA restrictions for those with drug convictions, they were surprised by the restriction. Over time, they addressed this barrier by informing men of this limitation prior to release from prison and redoubling efforts to connect men to families who could provide housing and other tangible support. They also spent a considerable amount of time assisting men in searching for employment, as this was the only option for income for some of the men. Given the risks and restraints in the environment, we found that CTI workers relied primarily on emotional support for men leaving prison, especially when resources were limited or difficult to obtain (Angell et al. 2014).

Our model for the production of risk shows the specific factors of this particular environment for men with mental illnesses leaving prison and some of these factors may be specific to this geographic area. Table 1 shows both specific and general factors of the physical, social, economic, and political types of the risk environment and their influences at the micro and macro environment levels. These examples show the context that needs to be considered in community reentry for persons with mental illnesses leaving prison.

## Discussion

This paper shows that individuals quickly encountered obstacles to successful community reintegration through restrictive public policies, discriminating employers, and few resources from which to draw on to build a new life. These structural factors may work in tandem with individual or interpersonal factors to heighten risk as men become thwarted by the obstacles and return to previous criminal ways. These conditions contribute to an "invisible punishment" (Chesney-Lind and Mauer 2003) that follows men from prison in to the community. Men leaving prison are oriented to avoiding prison through changing their behavior and avoiding individuals and situations that may lead them back to criminal activity and this orientation has been reflected in other research on reentry (Kenmore & Roldan 2006). Much of the research on recidivism has focused on the individual level risk factors and some interpersonal factors that predispose individuals to re-offend (Andrews and Bonta 2006). These factors have shown to be related to reincarceration for this population, but there is little knowledge about how these factors put individuals at risk of reincarceration. Denton and colleagues (2015) found that entrenchment with the criminal justice system and lack of access to substance use treatment indicated a return to risk behaviors, primarily through substance use and suicidality

**Table 1** The risk environment for community reentry from prison for those with mental illnesses

|  | Micro-environment | Macro-environment |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Physical | Homeless shelters<br>Street corners<br>Day reporting centers | Areas of concentrated poverty<br>Racial and economic segregation |
| Social | Peer and social norms<br>Familial conflicts<br>Heightened police surveillance | Stigma of persons with mental illness and those who have been incarcerated<br>Marginalization of persons with mental illness and those who have been incarcerated |
| Economic | Income generation<br>Cost of living<br>Court fees and fines<br>Employment norms and practices | Deindustrialization and declining tax base<br>Growth of temporary work practices<br>Informal economies |
| Political | City shelter regulations<br>General assistance regulations<br>Funding for treatment services | Federal housing policies<br>Federal entitlement policies<br>Laws governing possession and use of drugs |

among men leaving prison. With the implementation of the Affordable Care Act, a drug conviction no longer excludes individuals from obtaining Medicaid in New Jersey, which improves access to mental health and substance abuse treatment (Drug Policy Alliance 2014). This is a change in right direction, as individuals' criminal status will no long trump their patient status.

External factors have the potential for risk for reincarceration for this population. It is important to note that these environmental factors are outside individuals' control and work to increase the risk for reincarceration even for those wanting to leave life of crime behind. Similarly, in an analysis of over 1000 formerly incarcerated individuals with mental health problems, Hartwell and colleagues (2016) found race and criminal history to be risk factors for rearrest within two years of release. While race is endogenous to an individual, in our society it operates on a structural level as exemplified by racial disparities in the criminal justice system, concentrated poverty in certain neighborhoods, and employment discrimination for men of color, especially those with criminal justice histories. These factors are encapsulated formally, as policies, and informally, as practices, and are evidenced in the problems with housing, work, and heightened police surveillance that men encountered upon their release from prison. While these environmental factors seem challenging to address through interventions, there are structural interventions in HIV treatment and prevention (Adimora and Auerbach 2010) and homelessness (Padgett et al. 2006) that have improved outcomes and decreased health disparities. In comparing experiences of parolees in a housing program with a comparison group not in a housing program, Pleggenkuhle et al. (2015) found that housing contributed to feelings of stability, a sense of agency, and a commitment to change, showing a potential link between structural interventions and community tenure for those recently released from prison. We may need just such a shift in perspective within mental health and criminal justice services research to impact reincarceration within this population.

This study has some limitations, including small sample size, limited to Camden County, and is limited to individuals who agreed to participate in the randomized control trial. While some of the policies and practices uncovered in this study may be unique to Camden County, we expect similar policies and practices exist in communities throughout the United States. Men who participated in the study may have been inclined to portray themselves in a favorable light, especially around changing their ways. While we relied primarily on narrative data, triangulation of data and extended contact with some of the participants (through repeated interviews) addresses some, but not all, of the problems with self-reported data. We also recognize that the process of "making good" (Maruna 2001) may be

important as a part of desistance from criminal activity. Additionally, while we attained the goal of understanding the production of risk for reincarceration for men leaving prison, these findings have yet to be linked to recidivism for individuals through quantitative analysis. However, our model for the production of risk across individual, interpersonal, and environmental domains is a potentially useful framework for future studies examining these risk factors. This approach can identify structural interventions at the individual, organizational, and environmental levels (Blankenship et al. 2000) and can include things like community mobilization and economic or educational interventions (Blankenship et al. 2006). Furthermore, identifying factors unique to specific locations or social contexts makes structural interventions more effective (Adimora and Auerbach 2010). This approach often requires changes in laws, policies, or social processes, which requires collaboration between many groups, but has the potential to have far greater reach than individual level interventions (Blankenship et al. 2006). This study provides a first step in identifying environmental impediments to successful community reentry, more research is needed to make the direct link to reincarceration and identifying and implementing possible structural interventions to improve community tenure upon release from prison.

While many of these risk factors have been well documented among the general incarcerated population (Chesney-Lind and Mauer 2003), there has been little documentation of these factors also extending to the population of persons with mental illnesses. The failure to recognize and address these risk factors may contribute to the ineffectiveness of interventions for this population. Understanding how these policies contribute to increased risk of reincarceration for individuals leaving jail or prison will identify policies that need to be changed or augmented as they prohibit successful community reintegration.

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