



# Peer Support & Engagement in Advocacy Opportunities:



Key Elements for the Mental and Emotional  
Health of Exonerees

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# Disclosure Statement

I have no relevant financial relationships with any commercial interest to disclose.

# **Dedication**

**This presentation is dedicated to each exoneree who participated in this study and for their willingness to share their individual experiences to benefit other exonerees across the country.**





# California Exoneree Health & Well Being (CEHW) Research Project Team



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# Outline

- Background
- Specific Aims
- Methods
- Results
- Conclusions
- Limitations & Strengths



# Background

- Estimated - 5,000 - 10,000 wrongful convictions annually in the U.S. (Zalman, 2011)
- Total number of California exonerees = 206 – *4<sup>th</sup> Leading US state in exonerations*
- Average length of imprisonment is 8.33 years.



Demographics	CA Exonerees (n=206)	US Exonerees (N=2501)
Male	89%	92%
Caucasian	40%	39%
African American	29%	47%
Hispanic/Latinx	27%	12%
Other Race	4%	2%



# Background

- No assistance from state or federal government post-exoneration.
- Few exonerees are compensated and many denied access to reentry services
- Upon release, exonerees face:
  - Homelessness
  - Joblessness
  - Chronic illness
  - Ongoing trauma of their wrongful conviction

# Study Aim

To conduct in-person key informant interviews with California exonerees to assess and describe their health status and their needs for immediate and long-term support.



# Research Methods Recruitment



- Convenience sample
- Utilized an existing contact list from EN (N=25) to randomly select 14 exonerees to participate.
- EN emailed invitations and followed-up with phone calls.
- Exonerees were invited to participate in 1-3 hour in-person qualitative interviews.

# Research Methods

## Data Collection



- One-on-one interviews: Conducted by the CEHW research team in private conference facilities located in Northern and Southern California
- Participants provided \$150 Visa gift card as an incentive

# Research Methods

## *Qualitative Interview*

- Guided conversation
- Recorded with permission

### The Exoneration Process

1. Tell me about your release from prison. How did that happen?
2. How did you feel when you heard you were going to be released from prison?

### Life in the first months after release from prison

1. What was life like when you were first released from prison?  
**Prompts:** What did you do? Where did you go? Who did you see? Where did you live?
2. Can you tell me about some of the challenges you faced in those first months after being released?
3. How did you handle those challenges?  
**Prompts:** Did you get any help? What type of help?
4. What was your mental and physical health like when you were first released from prison?  
**Prompts:** Were you able to get the medical attention that you needed? Where was that?

### **Probe: If emotional struggles/challenges are identified-**

- Did you have a counselor or therapist to talk to?
- Did you have the support of family, friends, peer support group, reentry support organization, legal counsel?
- What type of support did you receive (e.g., housing, emotional/social, financial)?



# Research Methods

## *Analysis*

- Interviews were recorded and transcribed
- Grounded approach used to analyze transcripts (Addison, 1992)
- Emerging themes grouped into 5 domains corresponding to questions in interview guide

# Results

# Demographics

n=12

- ▶ 10 are men
- ▶ 9 have health insurance
- ▶ 6 are married
- ▶ 6 have some college education
- ▶ Age:
  - 30-39: 3
  - 40-49: 2
  - 50-59: 3
  - 60+: 4
- ▶ Race/Ethnicity:
  - White: (6)
  - African American (3)
  - Hispanic/Latinx (3)
- ▶ Sentences ranged from 5 to 27 years
- ▶ 10 received life sentences
- ▶ 168 Total Years Served
- ▶ 2 received compensation



# Information on Wrongful Convictions n=12

## ► Wrongful Convictions:

- Murder (7)
- Attempted Murder (1)
- Rape (1)
- Sexual Assault (2)
- Kidnapping (1)
- Unknown (1)

## ► Reasons for Wrongful Conviction:

- Neglectful counsel: 8
- Perjury/False Accusation: 8
- Government, Official, Prosecutorial Misconduct: 6
- Mistaken Eyewitness Identification: 6
- False Misleading or Forensic Evidence: 3
- Snitches: 3
- False Confession: 1

# Irreversible & Psychological Trauma of Wrongful Conviction

- “I have went through so much trauma, and I have been damaged, I have been damaged to the point to where just being released wasn’t giving me a cure, it may have seemed like it was a cure through a blessing, but then after the blessing go away, the cure is just like a wall, a damaged wall, and that’s how I’m feeling now.” (African American male, 20 years served) 003
- “... ....if people don’t have cancer, they might as well because there is a scar in their brain that’s never going away... .... we’ll never be whole again. We’ll never feel whole” (White male, 23 years served) 010

# Mental & Emotional Health Coping Mechanisms

While the “psychological  
trauma suffered from  
wrongful conviction is  
“irreversible” exonerees  
sought healing through  
*Peer Support and  
Advocacy Engagement*





# Peer Support

*“... ..we talk our own language “(Latinx male, 13 years served) 004*

*“....there's other individuals here that went through and are going through the same things as you are ... .. you know what, I can relate to him”  
(Latinx male, 7 years served) 009*



# Peer Support

## Organized Convening

### Healing Circles

- “I didn't realize how important we are to each other, because when we're in a room, we talk ... we relate to each other, but it's that kind of communication and what we do for each other that help[s] each other break down those walls.” (Latinx male, 13 years served) 004
- “I am sitting in a circle with these guys, sitting in the fire, which is the terminology, and I was able to see all these other OGs are affected as much as I am because for 28 years I think it was before I actually sat with these guys, I thought I was alone. I didn't know anybody like me.... I thought I was broken... meeting other exonerees and sitting in the fire with them is immeasurable. It's helping me heal so much.” (Latinx male, 9 years served) 002



## Peer Support Organized Convening Meetings

*“I got to do [it] more often... I could feel it, right, when I was in that room with those exonerees, I just felt it, it was like wow, it was the healing and being able to talk to each other the way we do and understand each other, it was beyond like a brother, like a family, it was just, it was deep and it was very healing. It felt good.”(Latinx male, 13 years served)004*





# Peer Support Informal Networking

- “I would say to make sure you have the resources that you need... .. get with other people who have been exonerated that can help steer you in the right direction.”(White male, 26 years served) 006
- “so for me to be able to reach out to my brothers over there and just ask them like hey, do the sleeping pattern wear off or hey,... .. is this normal, and just to get that validation, it helps to make me not feel as though like I’m alone... ..“  
(African American male, 16 years served) 012

# Peer Support Informal Networking

- “I wish... honestly I wish more exonerees would get together... . . . . None of the women reach out. Like I know all the guys, I know them all, but it’s the women, like where are the moms? Where are the moms that have kids, like that’s what I mean... . . . . And the women don’t stay together.” (White female) 011

# Advocacy – Policy Change

- “....I’ve been lobbying in the state capital, testifying for new laws ... ....[to provide a] better understanding to ways of dealing with exonerees and wrongful convictions because there is no law, there is no statutes in place to deal with wrongful conviction, so I’ve been sharing my story... giving testimony to what’s the best way for an exoneree to be able to cope with life and be able to get through.” (African American male, 20 years served) 003





# Advocacy - Storytelling

“ [By sharing my story, I understand] how much I can help people, how it educates, how it empowers, how it motivates and inspires ... .. So now ... as painful as it may be sometimes, [I see] how much good comes out of it, to take and turn a negative to a positive and these -- it can be something that can hurt us and keep us limited and suffering our whole lives or it can be something ... .. that you can offer the world and seeing what my story, my struggle, my pain, my experience can do for people, I just want to keep sharing it. “( Latinx male, 13 years served )004

# Conclusions

- Peer support from fellow exonerees serves as a vital coping mechanism to aid as a therapeutic healing response
- Exoneree engagement in educating, generating awareness, and advocating about wrongful conviction and the power of having the human voice and face in front of legislators, the public, and the media allows exonerees to “give back and reclaim their own voices”
- Advocacy through storytelling is a powerful healing mechanism for exonerees

# Study Limitations & Strengths

## Limitations

- Sample not representative of all California exonerees
- Convenience sample
- Women and African Americans were not representative of national or state exoneree demographics

## Strengths

- Exoneree was an integral research team member
- Findings serve as foundation for future research
- Findings provide recommendations to agencies providing services to exonerees



# Thank You!

- Questions?



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