

Recovery Finance Financial Impacts Mapping Workshop

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Background

People who are incarcerated often face enormous financial challenges when they leave prison, such as debt, damaged credit, and inability to access financial services. People who are structurally marginalized due to racism and mental health stigma are even more likely than others to have these financial problems, which layer onto post-release challenges related to relationships, employment, housing, health care and more, creating ever-higher barriers to successful reentry.

The Recovery Finance project addresses the financial well-being of justice involved people with mental health challenges. We are working with community partners across the New Haven region, including the City of New Haven's Financial Empowerment Center, to implement an intervention targeting community level determinants of financial well-being for this population. We will be offering individuals one-on-one coaching with peer support and access to financial tools and services. We will also be offering training to people who provide services to this population as well as bank and credit union staff to understand their needs and reduce discrimination. We also support collaborative community efforts working towards upstream policy and legal reforms to reduce the incidence of those financial challenges.

The Financial Impacts Mapping Workshop

To understand how involvement in the criminal legal system impacts a person's finances, we organized an adapted Sequential Intercept Mapping workshop. The Sequential Intercept Mapping (SIM) model was developed to identify ways to help people with behavioral health challenges avoid incarceration; during SIM workshops stakeholders and service providers use the model to collaboratively identify 'intercept points' at which to intervene to help divert people from the criminal legal system.

We adapted the SIM model, terming our version a "Financial Impacts Mapping" exercise. Our goal was to bring together people with lived experience of incarceration to:

1. Develop a shared understanding of how people's finances are impacted as they move through the carceral/justice system, particularly people with mental illness.
2. Identify the community's resources, gaps, and opportunities to minimize the negative impact on finances at each period of a person's journey through the carceral/justice system.

We invited people from the New Haven area who had personal experience with incarceration, either having been incarcerated themselves, or having a close family member be incarcerated, to the workshop. We wanted to maximize the effectiveness of the workshop, thus wanted to draw on personal lived experience. We know that the financial pressures associated with incarceration have a significant impact both on the individual locked up, and their loved ones.

The Financial Impacts Mapping workshop took place at the PRCH office at 319 Peck Street in New Haven, on July 12, 2023, over a two-hour period. Twenty-one people attended.

Dr. Harper began the workshop with a brief overview of the Recovery Finance project, an explanation of the SIM method, and our adaptation of SIM into the Financial Impacts Mapping exercise. After a brief Q&A, the participants were divided into three groups. Each group was asked to focus on a particular stage in the criminal legal pathway.

1. Group one discussed how finances and mental health are impacted before incarceration (arrest, court, sentencing).
2. Group two discussed how finances and mental health are impacted while a person is in prison.
3. Group three discussed how finances and mental health are impacted after release.

Each group was assigned a separate space in which to have their discussion and was provided with flipcharts and pens. The groups were asked to assign a person who would take notes on the flipchart (PRCH interns were also assigned to each breakout group to take detailed notes on their laptops), and were asked to discuss the following questions:

1. How are finances and mental health impacted at this stage and what are the consequences?
2. What can we do to reduce negative impact on finances at this stage?
3. Who must be involved and at what level to make change at this stage?

4. How do we better engage people at this stage around mental health and substance use challenges?

After 45 minutes, the groups reconvened. Each group presented on their findings, which was followed by a general discussion. All groups found a tight interconnection between finances, mental health, and the criminal legal process. The findings from the FIM exercise were presented to the next Recovery Finance Community Advisory Board (CAB) meeting in September 2023; members of the CAB made some additional suggestions. Below is a brief narrative summary of the findings including the additions from the CAB.

Impact of Incarceration on Finances and Mental Health

Group One: Arrest/Pre-Incarceration

Group one discussed the ways that both finances and mental health are impacted during the time after a person has been arrested but has not yet gone to prison. Themes from group one's discussion include:

- Many people dealing with arrest and mental health problems face long-standing financial challenges stemming from deep-rooted racism and classism in our political, economic, and educational systems that impact different groups' ability to generate and keep wealth. These challenges are intersectional and cannot be understood in isolation. As one person put it, "we were set back from the beginning".
- Many crimes stem directly from mental health, substance use and/or poverty. Some people commit crimes to try to address financial problems – being over-indebted, unable to pay bills etc.
- Being arrested costs money - posting bail, hiring a lawyer. If you can't pay for a lawyer, you are more likely to get convicted/have a longer sentence – "public defenders have too many cases". "When I had a private lawyer, it brought my time from 15 years to less than 5."
- Some people said that the police steal money during arrest. These costs are often borne by family members which can cause tension in important relationships. One person said that their car was taken from them on arrest and not returned; after their release 8 years later, they owed back taxes as the plates had not been cancelled.
- Being arrested is chaotic and is designed to deny a person the ability to control their own life. After arrest, people lose control of their finances and of their important documents,

particularly if they do not have family members who can take responsibility for these issues. Losing control in this way damages a person's sense of identity and causes mental stress and anger.

- It is usually impossible to plan ahead financially for incarceration; arrest is never part of someone's plan and is almost always unexpected. This means that people don't have the time or knowledge to put their financial affairs in order. As one person said, "you never plan to go to jail... [you don't think] before I rob this store, I'm going to make sure all my bills are paid".
- People in the target population are already marginalized from the financial system, so likely lack knowledge about what they can do to get their finances in order in preparation for a period in prison.
- Plea bargains (when a person is pressured to agree to plead guilty in exchange for lesser charges) can be very damaging to people's lives.
- Definitions of trauma are shaped by racist systems; situations impacting primarily White people are more likely to be seen as trauma than situations impacting primarily Black people. One person said, "When someone gets shot in Hillhouse [a High School in New Haven attended by predominantly Black students] it's not traumatic, but with Sandy Hook it is".

Group Two: During Incarceration

Group two discussed the ways that finances and mental health are impacted while a person is incarcerated. Themes from group two's discussion include:

- People may get evicted due to non-payment of rent while they are not able to earn. Having an eviction record makes it harder to find housing after release.
- There are few to no opportunities to earn income while in prison. A person in federal prison can earn up to \$300-400 per month, but in state prisons it is much less – only 75 cents per day.
- Disability benefits stop while you are incarcerated.
- Lack of income makes it impossible for an incarcerated person to support their families outside; they may even have to borrow from family to be able to make essential commissary purchases in prison. One person said, "you get 75 cents a day and a ramen noodle packet is 89 cents".

- Financial obligations people had prior to being incarcerated may continue - bills, debts etc. – unless the person is able to suspend those payments. These include child support, student loans, and car related payments. Cars may get impounded or repossessed, and inability to pay child support can break-up families.
- Family support is essential. As someone put it, "your network is your net worth". Family networks can be damaged when the person who is incarcerated cannot provide for their families - including pay child support. As one person said, "I can't provide so I can't see my kid". This can damage incarcerated person's self-esteem. Also, people with criminal charges are prevented from visiting their loved ones who are incarcerated, as one person said, "I couldn't visit my loved one in prison because of my charges, had to write the warden".
- People lose control of their financial situations while they are in prison - "I need to know who is controlling my money, where is it at?". You need help from someone else to help with banking – you can't call bank directly because someone needs to press to accept the call. Can't do 3-way calls. Even if you leave your finances in the hands of someone you trust, it "sends them down the wrong path".
- People are deeply traumatized by the experience of incarceration. One person said, "If I had a dollar for every time I heard a crisis call for suicide I could pay my insurance" and another described the desperate measures people go to in order to be heard, "people swallow fingernail clippers and batteries". It can be very difficult to access needed mental health services after release.

Group Three: After Release/Reentry

Group three discussed the ways that finances and mental health are further impacted after a person is released from prison. Themes from group three's discussion include:

- People are released with absolutely nothing – no phone, no clothing. This is especially true for people who were in prison without trial (they can be there for up to 120 days) as they are not eligible for supports. As one person said, you "leave pretrial in prison clothes".
- People come out having to pay for both current expenses and unpaid bills from the past. As one person explained, "All that stuff just mounted up until it caught up with me when I tried to do something new. I couldn't afford to try and live now and pay the stuff in the past at the same time. It's impossible".

- People have student loan arrears, child support arrears, and damaged credit. About student loan debt, one person said, "when I went in, I didn't know I should have freezed it".
- It is difficult to find employment after having been in prison. Some jobs are closed to people with certain criminal records.
- People said that it's "almost impossible" to be approved for disability benefits.
- It can be difficult to get health insurance.
- There are limits on accessing financial aid to be able to study.
- It is extremely difficult to find housing: Rents are too high, so many people must stay with family. But HUD restrictions limit people's ability to stay with their families. People are restricted from staying with a person who had a restraining order against them, even if they are reconciled. A prior eviction (often due to incarceration) can get in the way of finding housing. One person said, "One of the consequences of being evicted is not being able to get housing when you do come home". Too little is being done to provide affordable housing – as one person put it, "abandoned buildings all over the place, not renovating them". It is difficult to get help with housing and other resources – "211 takes 10 hours to get through". People must navigate a system that is very user-unfriendly, as one person said, "they send you to all these places, its borderline a joke all the time".
- Many people lack ID, which impacts ability to find employment or open a bank account, but it is difficult to take the steps needed to recover ID.
- The DOC lien means that if people get an inheritance, lawsuit or gambling winnings they have to pay up to half of it to the DOC.
- Many people do not have good connections with their families and other social networks, so have little social support.
- People have low self-esteem due to their inability to support their families. One person said, "they have this mindset that they are not enough". A CAB member told a story of a person escaping from the halfway house because he needed to provide for his family.
- People face racism and other types of discrimination.
- People are obliged to attend programs that are not helpful – they have little control over their treatment plan. As one person explained, "you are forcefully put in a program that you don't want, you are forced to sit in an hour". The system prevents people from being honest about their substance use – "you cannot be honest with providers, you'll end up back in jail".

- The mental health system perpetuates racism. One person explained, "most mental health providers are white, [they] don't understand the systemic reasons ...".
- There is too little peer support on offer, and it also lacks people trained to address prison related trauma; even when people have some training it is often inadequate - "Is it just clickclickclick and get your certificate?"

Recommendations to Reduce the Negative Impact of Incarceration on Finances and Mental Health

Group One: Arrest/Pre-Incarceration

1. Reduce the number of people entering incarceration in the first place: Systems in place that reduce the number of people entering the carceral system, such as pre-trial diversion for people with mental health problems, and harm reduction and coaching and other forms of substance use treatment.
2. Keep the police accountable: Need to keep the police accountable to the community to avoid situations where police take advantage of people being arrested – one person said we need to "police the police".
3. Enable people to keep control of their financial affairs: these could include having tools that enable family and friends to help (such as a power of attorney, or convenience accounts), and tools that allow the person who has been arrested/incarcerated to remain in control of their finances, or at least to be able to keep an eye on what is happening to their money even if they can't control it directly.
4. Provide financial advice to people entering the carceral system so that they know what steps to take to keep their finances in order while they are incarcerated – "someone to call who you can trust".
5. Get rid of cash bail.
6. Make it easier to avoid plea bargains.
7. Improve engagement around mental health: Reduce mental health taboo in minority communities by involving preachers. Improve services through better support offered at arrest and pre-trial diversion, provide day programs and recovery groups.

Group Two: During Incarceration

1. Enable people to afford the basics and save while incarcerated. Provide money to people when in prison or jail and create a starter kit/work savings program so that they have savings when they are released.
2. Increase tenant protections/prevent unnecessary eviction records: Have systems in place to ensure that landlords do not abuse incarcerated tenants. Allow evictions that happen when a person is incarcerated to be removed from record.
3. Help families stay together: Encourage visits, including children visiting their fathers even if he is unable to provide financially for them. Allow people with criminal histories to visit their loved ones when incarcerated.
4. Give people an option of a trusted third party to take care of their finances while they're inside.
5. Freeze loan obligations while incarcerated: Make it easy to freeze child support, student loans and DMV fines and fees while incarcerated – "[According to] the date of incarceration (...) you should waive the [motor vehicle suspension] fee."
6. Create programs to prepare people for employment: Offer people training in fields not affected by criminal history, and provide people with needed clothing, haircut etc.
7. Set up disability benefits and health insurance before release: Enable people to take steps needed to reinstate or apply for disability benefits and insurance while still incarcerated so that they have an income and healthcare as soon as they are released.
8. Ensure that people have ID before they leave incarceration: "you could just have an ID center right in jail".
9. Include service connection in discharge planning: Have "Someone to connect you with services...come home with those services already in place". Mental health providers should visit people before release so that the connection is already there, and medication must be available immediately after release.
10. Educate mental health providers and legislators about poverty, incarceration, and mental health: Use storytelling to help people empathize. Have legislators tour not just jails but also poor neighborhoods so they can see first-hand the negative mental health impacts of both poverty and incarceration.

Group Three: After Incarceration/Reentry

1. Ensure that people have their basic needs met: People need help getting their phones turned back on, and more shelter beds need to be made available, as well as more affordable housing, including by renovating abandoned buildings. People need to have needed medication as soon as they are released.
2. Start while people are still inside and help them make the right decision the moment they step out: Even if we can't provide guidance in prison, share materials so that people can connect right away and get on the right path.
3. Provide support for people as they try to rebuild their social networks.
4. Provide relevant financial education: Teach people how to repair/build their credit.
5. Support people to make their own choices: Provide support to people that helps them to develop personal accountability and build the skills to make choices that they may have lost while in prison. As one person said, "In prison it is completely different when you come out, you have the freedom of choice". This might include allowing people to play a greater role in determining which programs to attend after release.
6. Educate mental health providers and diversify the workforce: We need more psychologists of color, who have received high quality training to enable them to deal with prison-related trauma, and who understand impacts of structural racism on mental health. Providers need to allow people to be honest about relapse without threatening a return to prison.
7. Non-police crisis response.
8. Strengthen peer support.
9. Pharmacies must be convenient and friendly.
10. Work with landlords so that they don't automatically put 'no criminal record' on apartment listings.

Who Needs to Be Involved in Making Needed Change Happen?

The attendees discussed in their groups, and in general discussion, who should be involved in making change happen. We agreed that making change needs to involve everyone from people who are and have been incarcerated themselves and their family members, to service providers, to policy makers and representatives from multiple state level departments representatives - "the people at the top".

The list of people includes: Returning citizens, family members, conservators, landlords, Housing Authorities, lawyers, probation officers, social service providers, pharmacies, medication providers, policy makers, legislators, Department of Corrections, Department of Social Services, Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, Department of Children and Families, Department of Motor Vehicles, and Department of Labor.

We discussed the importance of including people who have power, but also acknowledged that there are limits to what can be done working with those who already have positions of power. As one person put it, "you can't ask the oppressor to reform; the system has to be knocked down and built back up".