



Newsletter of the California Exoneree Health & Well-Being Project



A newsletter brought to you by the Touro University California Public Health Program
in Partnership with *Exonerated Nation*

VOL. 2 ISSUE 1

03.02.20



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GREETINGS!

In partnership with Exonerated Nation, Touro University California's Public Health Program conducted a qualitative study to assess the health status and needs of California exonerees for immediate and long-term support in the fall of 2017.

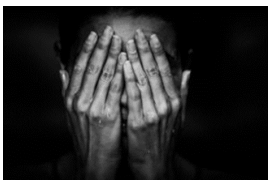
Why is this project important?

An estimated 2.3 million individuals are incarcerated in the U.S., so one might wonder why we are choosing to focus on the unique experiences of exonerees. We believe that by shining a light on the plight of exonerees, we can also draw attention to the public health problems associated with mass incarceration in the U.S. Anyone incarcerated in the U.S. experiences personal trauma, which also impacts their families and communities. The negative impacts of incarceration on exonerees are exacerbated by having served time for crimes they did not commit. This again points to problems in how the U.S. criminal justice system operates, and we hope that our work with exonerees will not only improve their post-incarceration experiences, but also create networks and galvanize support of new allies to discuss the changes needed to reform the criminal justice system as a whole.

Over the last three decades, approximately 2,500 people in the U.S. have been released from prison after being found innocent and exonerated of a crime for which they were wrongfully convicted. Of this number, a total of 209 exonerees have been released from federal and state prisons in California ([National Registry of Exonerations](#), 2020). Post-incarceration, this population faces homelessness, joblessness, chronic illness, and the ongoing trauma of their wrongful conviction. They are provided little support for reentry and access to social services (Wildeman, Costelloe, Schehr et al., 2011). Thankfully, this picture is changing due to the advocacy of California exonerees and allies. [Senate Bill 1050 \(October 2018\)](#), assuring transitional services within 30 days of release, and [Obie's Law - Assembly Bill 672 \(October 2015\)](#) which established the right to these services, have started to address the lack of support for California exonerees in rebuilding their lives and Assembly Bills 701 and 702 (2019) which provides funding for housing upon release and waived tuition or fees for exonerated individuals attending a public college or university in California, respectively. In spite of these legislative victories, a huge gap still remains, as many struggle to find, employment, mental and physical health services.



Preliminary analysis from our study support the following key findings:



The trauma of wrongful imprisonment is irreversible: This trauma manifested in multiple ways, including in feelings of being re-victimized upon release due to the refusal of the jurisdictions that wrongly convicted them to accept accountability for their unjust actions. In fact, some jurisdictions continued to pursue charges against the exonerees, resulting in on-going trauma.

To cope with the myriad mental-health challenges presented by wrongful conviction, exonerees indicated that peer support from fellow exonerees provided high levels of comfort, assurance, and empowerment, as a fellow exoneree understands the unique trauma presented by wrongful incarceration. Advocacy on behalf of fellow exonerees and in the wrongful conviction movement provided avenues for an enhanced sense of well-being.

Comprehensive mental health services are critical to the emotional health and well-being of exonerees, and should be available to all post-release. Our findings identify the added benefits of non-clinical social support and advocacy opportunities to aid in exonerees' healing.

Preliminary analysis from our study support the following key findings continued:



Post-conviction attorney support is a key factor in enabling exonerees rebuild their lives, in the absence of state or federal support: Post-conviction attorneys became a lifeline for many exonerees once they were released, particularly for those who lacked familial or other social support. These attorneys acted as surrogates providing a wide range of support to exonerees, including housing, financial and emotional support, services that go far beyond their legal expertise.

Post-conviction attorneys are vital to exonerees, not only to secure their release from prison, but also to support their post-incarceration transition. This model is not sustainable due to the burden placed upon attorneys. Local, state, and federal governments need to implement legislation to fully support the needs of exonerees post-release, as they were responsible for wrongly incarcerating them in the first place. Further research is needed to understand the experiences of the attorneys as they become more than legal support to their clients.

Recent CEHW Conference Presentations of Study Findings and Manuscripts in Progress:

Replacing the state: The role of post-conviction attorneys in the post-incarceration lives of California's exonerees, 5th International Conference on Law Enforcement and Public Health, Edinburgh, Scotland (October 21-23, 2019)

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Peer support and engagement in advocacy opportunities: Key elements for the mental and emotional health of exonerees, 5th International Conference on Law Enforcement and Public Health Edinburgh, Scotland (October 21-23, 2019)

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Peer Support: A vital coping mechanism for exonerees

Academic and Health Policy Conference on Correctional Health, Las Vegas, NV (March 21—22, 2019)

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California Exonerees Health and Well-Being Project: Assessing the mental, physical, and emotional health of the wrongfully convicted 4th International Conference on Law Enforcement and Public Health, Ontario, Canada (October 21-24, 2018)

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