

Worcester House of Corrections: Explorations of Pre-Trail Inmates



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Executive Summary

This study focuses on understanding the challenges pre-trial detainees face at the Worcester House of Correction (WHOC), especially after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a combination of information sessions and group discussions, we aim to shed light on their experiences and provide recommendations for the institution.

In recent times, the experience of pre-trial detainees has gained attention. Recognizing the importance of this issue, Superintendent David Tuttle asked Legendary Legacies Inc. to conduct an in-depth study at WHOC.

We started with information sessions across various blocks at WHOC, followed by group discussions. The questions and topics were designed in collaboration with WHOC and the research team at Legendary Legacies Inc.

Brief Participant Findings

Initially, some participants were hesitant and skeptical about the study's intent and outcomes. However, as discussions progressed, they began to share more openly, offering deeper insights into their experiences. There was a strong desire among inmates to understand topics related to fatherhood and their roles in society. Many were also keen on utilizing idle time to engage in educational programming focused on their needs like substance use disorders and mental health. Many inmates expressed a genuine interest in engaging in programs if they were made available to them, indicating a positive outlook toward personal growth and rehabilitation.

Overall, the majority of inmates felt they were not provided enough official information about life at WHOC. Therefore, they often relied on other inmates for details about the facility's rules and procedures. This lack of formal orientation also meant their families were often left in the dark about visiting procedures and other key processes.

This study has highlighted the pressing challenges faced by pre-trial detainees at WHOC. By addressing these concerns, WHOC can create a more supportive environment and better align with its goals of rehabilitating inmates.

Brief Literature Review

In the United States, 2/3 of people held in jails have not been convicted of a crime (Digard & Swavola, 2019). For every 100,000 people in Massachusetts, 126 are being detained pre-trial, with the overall rate of pre-trial detention increasing 7% from 2005 to 2015 (Henrichson et al., 2019). With these rates of pre-trial detention, it is imperative to understand factors that impact pre-trial detainees' wellbeing and recidivism.

More recently, correctional facilities began to adopt rehabilitation models that prioritize funding for wellbeing, educational, and vocational programming. Historical and contemporary correctional education and vocational programs demonstrate the ability to address the psychological needs of inmates (Gaes, 2008) reduce barriers for successful reintegration (e.g., develop personal and prosocial skills; Pelletier & Evans, 2019) and significantly reduce recidivism rates (Rodriguez & Usman, 2023). Such programs provide pathways for self-sufficiency, creating greater access to education and employment opportunities pre and post release (Gaes, 2008).

Despite the success of correctional education programs, many incarcerated people lack access to education and programming like vocational training. The lack of access to education and job training disproportionately increases the employment challenges and hurdles faced by Black and Brown incarcerated men as they strive for economic stability. Over one third of offenders never find employment following release from prison (Nally, Lockwood, Ho, & Knutson, 2014). This can be in part because of job-related issues (e.g., inadequate skills, limited experience), as well as the impact of disability and limited literacy levels amongst ex-prisoners (Graffam, Shinkfield & Hardcastle, 2008).

Although formerly incarcerated people prioritize and seek out economic stability and self-sufficiency post-release, their efforts are often hindered by structural policies and practices intended to promote economic exclusion and decrease their economic mobility (Wang & Bertram, 2022). As a way to combat further exclusion, formerly incarcerated Black and Brown men prioritize vocational training, because highly-skilled, labor-intensive jobs like HVAC or plumbing are likely more concerned with job performance than ex-con status. Employer emphasis on performance tended to decrease the stigma associated with their ex-con status. As such, wellbeing, education, and job training can support formerly incarcerated people in acquiring jobs that support their reentry.



Overall, the **psychological experience** of pre-trial detention puts additional strain on detainees exacerbating and contributing to trauma, while providing less support around personal development, healing, and mental health.

Trauma and Pre -Trial

To engage with and discuss the experiences of incarcerated Black and Brown men, we have to incorporate an understanding of trauma into our analysis. **Traumatic experiences are all too common; 83% of adults in the United States have experienced at least one type of traumatic event during their lives (Hatch & Dohrenwend, 2007).** Trauma is not distributed equally across demographics; factors such as race/ethnic minority status, low socioeconomic status, and being a young adult have shown to be associated with exposure to traumatic events (Hatch & Dohrenwend, 2007). These same populations, youth, racial/ethnic minorities, and low-socioeconomic status individuals are represented at a higher rate in Massachusetts jails (Henrichson et al., 2019). It is understood that individuals bring their existing trauma, including histories of abuse, threats to life, poverty, and cultural trauma, with them when they are incarcerated (Steiner et al., 2014). As such, it is an unavoidable reality that a large portion of our pre-trial jail population is actively coping with trauma.

When grappling with trauma, the experience of pre-trial detention itself can be particularly activating. **Jails have been found to be more traumatizing and emotionally straining than a state prison (May et al., 2014).** Specific qualities of jails likely exacerbate trauma. It is not uncommon for jails to have a high degree of staff and clientele turnover (Leip & Stinchomb, 2013; Minton & Zeng, 2015).

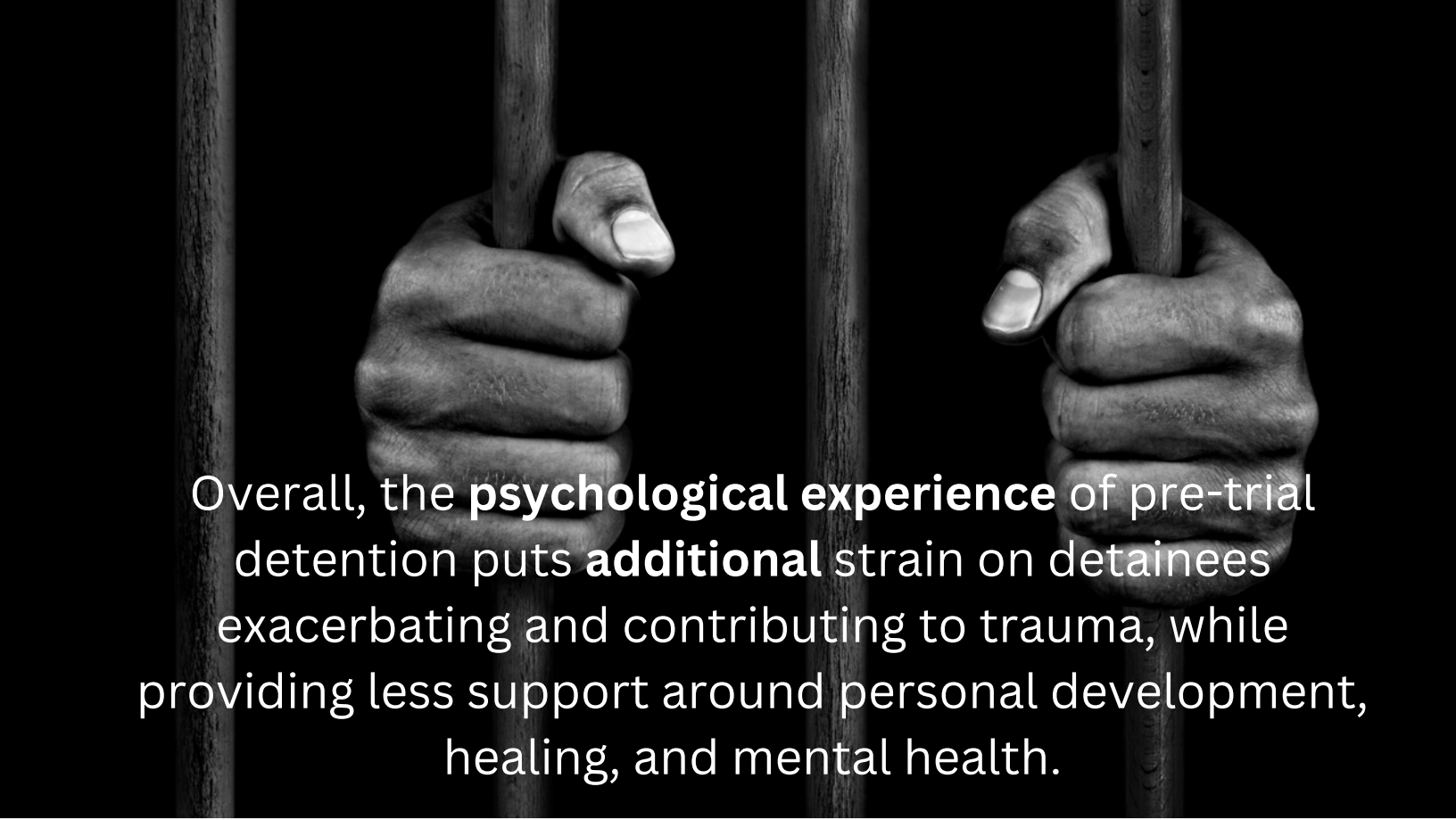
When grappling with trauma, the experience of pre-trial detention itself can be particularly activating. Jails have been found to be more traumatizing and emotionally straining than a state prison (May et al., 2014). Specific qualities of jails likely exacerbate trauma. It is not uncommon for jails to have a high degree of staff and clientele turnover (Leip & Stinchomb, 2013; Minton & Zeng, 2015). People coping with trauma may struggle with rapidly changing and confusing situations like these, as it can make one feel like they have no control over their life, a feeling that often mirrors the realities of one's past traumatic experiences. Regarding the jail population, individuals being held pretrial are jailed for a wide range of reasons, with varying severity of charges (Digard & Swivola, 2019). The diversity of the population paired with a constantly changing staff can result in jails being unpredictable and violent at times (Digard & Swivola, 2019). **Not only can these factors exacerbate existing mental health challenges (Hassine, 2009), but they can also lead to more traumatic experiences (Blevins et al., 2010).**

While there is a need for further support, the reality is that people have less access to the resources they need to be well during pre-trial detention. While prisons tend to have more services available to inmates, jails often have fewer resources for programs to support mental health and substance use recovery (Taxman et al, 2007).

This can result in worsening mental health conditions and deteriorating clinical progress while being detained. The impact of pretrial detention appears to be felt most acutely immediately after arrest, experienced as a high-stress and high-intensity time in one's engagement with the legal system (Harvey, 2005). Suicide attempts are more common in the first month after arrest (Mumola, 2005), reflecting a sincere need for more supports and resources for pre-trial detainees. Further, being separated from one's relationships, children, and community network is traumatizing. Being held pretrial for any amount of time can provide disruptions to a person's life and relationships, a troublesome effect if we consider how important community and relational support is for reentry and preventing recidivism (Digard & Swavola, 2019).

Finally, some fundamental qualities of pre-trial detention are detrimental to those coping with trauma. Researchers have described how the bureaucratic and seemingly arbitrary process can cause people to question their beliefs about the world (Giddens, 1991). Further, it becomes impossible to plan without knowing if you will be convicted and how long you will have to serve (Crewe, 2011).

Further, being held pretrial can impact a detainee's current employment and creates gaps in their resume that can impact future employment potential. Reliability, predictability, and being able to plan for the future are crucial factors in healing from trauma. For people with trauma, this lack of control over trigger related feelings associated with having been unable to prevent previous trauma. Overall, the psychological experience of pre-trial detention puts additional strain on detainees exacerbating and contributing to trauma, while providing less support around personal development, healing, and mental health.



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Current study

Research has emphasized the role that programs and services play for individuals in prisons, but less is known about the potential for these programs in pre-trial populations. Because of this gap in our knowledge, the main goal of the current work is to examine the unique experiences and challenges of pretrial detainees through the perspectives of Black and Brown men. The stories of pretrial detainees were central to our understanding of pretrial conditions and evaluations of resources provided by the House of Corrections. The stories presented in the following section of the report contribute to and expand the theoretical landscape of pretrial experiences, barriers to success and life beyond incarceration for Black and Brown men.

The setting

During our focus groups with the pre-trial inmates, it became evident that the Worcester House of Correction faces significant space and infrastructure limitations, which had a direct impact on the availability of crucial programs. It is worth noting that, during our research, the WHOC was able to bring in two new program trailers, which has already begun to offer programs to pre-trial inmates.

The limited infrastructure underscored hardships faced by individuals awaiting trial. It was clear that infrastructure improvements within the Worcester House of Correction would aid in facilitating that pre-trial individuals have access to vital programs that can contribute to personal growth and the potential to break the cycle of incarceration.

A man with dark hair and a mustache, wearing a white shirt, is shown in profile, looking down with a thoughtful expression. The background is a simple room with a wooden door and a framed picture on the wall.

Life experiences

Many incarcerated people enter the criminal justice system with prior histories of substance use, victimization and trauma that are left untreated and undiagnosed (Quandt & Jones, 2021). Shuffled through the system, most incarcerated people struggling with substance use reportedly do not receive the care needed to facilitate recovery, reduce impulsive behaviors leading to recidivism, and improve quality of life. As a result, incarcerated people leave correctional facilities with exacerbated levels of depression, anxiety and stress compared to when they entered.

Emerging literature focused on the social, cognitive and psychological effects of substance misuse posits that incarcerated people who engage in substance use are among the most vulnerable populations. Research demonstrates that prior history of substance misuse exacerbates pre-existing mental health

conditions (National Institute on Drugs, 2022) and increases abnormal activity in the frontal cortex, an area of the brain responsible for impulse control.

These neurological impacts can increase the likelihood of relapse. Consistent with this literature, more than half of the participants in this study reported that addiction and/or substance misuse contributed to their incarceration and, possibly, their recidivism. Despite the need, correctional rehabilitation programs are not easily accessible to pre-trial detainees, nor are programs tailored to meet the basic needs of people attending programs. Such negligence can lead to participants feeling like programs are not beneficial.



Pre - Trial Conditions

Overall Availability of and Quality of Care

During the process of pre-trial, detainees rely on internal support systems as they navigate the criminal justice system. Internal support systems in this context are defined as internal staff within the criminal justice system whom detainees engage with throughout their process. Participants described the relationship with internal staff and support as inadequate. For example, participants expressed that

- Correctional facility staff do not provide information on available programs and training that could enhance their personal and professional growth
- Understaffing is an issue and could possibly be a contributing factor to limited availability for mental health professionals
- Lawyers are unresponsive to calls and therefore are unable to provide adequate legal representation

Overall, participants indicated being dissatisfied with evaluation of the quality of care provided by internal staff.

Social Support

Participants often use their support system as a liaison between criminal justice staff to access external resources and/or utilize legal representation to advocate for their needs. However, support systems are left in the dark as much as pre-trial detainees. For example, the majority of participants indicated that family members were not equipped with the proper knowledge and process to set up, finance and effectively use a Securus account. This can cause financial distress on families and limit the amount of communication detainees have with their loved ones outside.

Pre Trial Conditions

Many people being held pretrial are waiting for their day in court, often with many delays along the way and little-to-no communication about their status and process. Because of these factors, pre-trial detention is characterized by uncertainty. Timely and thorough information can support detainees in facing this uncertainty. Though some correctional facilities have implemented an orientation program to reduce stress and anxiety about the criminal justice process by educating detainees on the process, very few detainees have access to these orientations. Further, the information offered in orientations may not reflect the uncertain and constantly changing process. Due to the lack of knowledge and resources provided, pre-trial detainees often characterized the pre-trial process as stressful, uncertain and retraumatizing for both themselves and their families.

Consistent with the literature, participants repeatedly indicated the need for orientation and critiqued staff for the lack of urgency to provide this service. For example, when asked if participants know what to expect throughout the court and pre-trial detention process, participants responded: “ No orientation to what the rules are” and “Orientation is still a problem”.

Another participant responded “ There are things I don’t know. 6 months in and I don’t know who our counselor is” . Generally, participants repeatedly highlighted limited accessibility and introduction to (1) pre-trial procedural information, (2) rules and regulations of the correctional facility, and (3) information about services provided.

Providing this information to people early in their detention helps illuminate the process and creates predictability, routine, and a sense of purpose, which can likely decrease behavioral issues while detained and after release. Lack of access to information about the facility also exacerbates pre-existing mental health conditions like anxiety, depression, and substance use. One explanation for these outcomes is that it becomes impossible to plan for the future, when you lack knowledge on how the jail and the overall system operates. Further, continual changes to one’s situation and unpredictability can trigger anxiety and hypervigilance.

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Accessibility of and evaluation of mental health services

Correctional rehabilitation models do not have the proper infrastructure to provide adequate mental health services that facilitate healing and improve the quality of life of patients receiving services. The goal of correctional facilities rehabilitation services should be to provide equitable, high-quality health services and care to patients regardless of social status and criminal history. However, correctional facilities have repeatedly failed to meet this standard. The current model of correctional facility mental health service emphasizes managing behaviors and symptoms, rather than providing services that generate positive outcomes post release. (insert stats on mentally ill inmates and not being provided services).

Consistent with the literature, participants described limited access to services and poor quality of service and care provided. For example, several participants discussed internal staffs' lack of urgency in providing services and responding to calls for additional support. Participants describes the quality of care as follows:

“Give people support, they need a number to call. We sit thrown to wolves and then back here. I put in 6 slips & no one got back to me”

“Whenever I ask for a program. I am told I am pre trial”

Participants also expressed interest in receiving access to mental health-based education through classes, such as anger management and substance use programs. Attending such classes can provide participants with a deeper understanding of themselves and their life experiences. Research shows that participating in trauma-based education fosters the development of new identities, allowing for participants to reimagine new possibilities and boost self esteem and confidence. Accessibility to these classes will also boost engagement and attendance with other programs.

Pre Trial Conditions

Mental health education can also potentially decrease stressors associated with the social stigma of incarceration, promote self seeking behaviors and healthy coping skills. If offered, participants are committed to attending mental health classes focused on substance use and trauma on a regular basis. These conditions can exacerbate pre-existing feelings of inadequacy, loss of control, powerlessness and hopelessness associated with substance misuse. Some of the suggestions for mental health topics include PTSD, social-cognitive-psychological and somatic effects of trauma and addiction, relapse prevention, stress and effective coping skills and strategies.

Depriving detainees of access to education and vocational training strips incarcerated people of their humanity and discourages self-governance, both crucial components of successful recovery and reentry. Due to the structural and systematic systems of oppression and deeply rooted perceptions of crime and punishment, incarcerated people are at a constant battle to retain their basic human rights. For incarcerated people those basic rights include access to high quality education and rehabilitation and this cannot exclude people being detained pre-trial.

Correctional vocational training programs are crucial for promoting self-sufficiency and preparing incarcerated people with the skills to transition into a career upon release. Research indicates that incarcerated people who participate in vocational training programs are more likely to secure employment upon release, which reduces the likelihood of recidivism (Duwe & Henry-Nickie, 2021).

Benefits of access to mental health based education:

- Empower participants to have an active role in recovery
- Reduce impulsive activity
- Provide practical skills to address stress, anxiety and environmental stressors

“A lot of us inmates want to get into real estate but aren’t sure of the avenues to take. With an introduction class, it is sure to set us up for success when we get into the real world”.

Consistent with research, participants highlighted that vocational programs are most beneficial when (1) programs are offered in trades aligned with contemporary labor market demands and (2) program goals are aligned with providing pathways to success post-graduation. For example, participants described stated:

“With the classes and certifications set in place, we are being set up for success with a positive direction in the working field”

“A lot of us inmates want to get into real estate but aren’t sure of the avenues to take. With an introduction class, it is sure to set us up for success when we get into the real world”

As illustrated by the quotations above, participants acknowledge the economic demands for highly skilled credential workers, the competitiveness of laborious jobs and the importance of receiving need- based education that creates pathways of success post release.

Participants also listed HVAC, plumbing, electrical and construction as top choices of trades that would potentially provide economic stability and expansion post release.

Lastly, participants suggested that tailoring classes to their needs could potentially boost engagement and participation.

Due to the vulnerability of incarcerated people, providing quality of education for this population requires establishing high standards for educators beyond traditional metrics of educational experiences and instructional knowledge. While participants were adamant about having access to Black and Brown educators, reliability and commitment to provide high quality education and positive learning environments was top priority. For example, one participant stated “Someone who cares about teaching, not people coming for a check”. This quote demonstrates detainees' request for high quality education to be administered through educators' commitment to their educational trajectory. Therefore, the chosen educator (1) should have the similar background as the people that they serve and (2) be equipped with the skills to provide culturally responsive teaching practices and expansive learning modalities to accommodate different learning styles and (3) be equipped to provide high levels of care.

Most Desired Vocational Training



HVAC



Plumbing



Electric

Most Desired Educational Classes



Mental Health Based



Fatherhood Parenting



Financial Literary

Educator Recommendations

Access to Black & Brown teachers

Participants indicated having access to a BIPOC educator was important.

1

Teacher reliability

Participants indicated teacher relatability and retainability as important factors to receiving education

2

Teacher commitment

Participants indicated the need for educators who are committed to providing high quality education and care through with deep commitment to the growth of participants.

4

Pathways to Success

Participants indicated the importance of utilizing education and vocational opportunities as a pathway to success post release.

LEGENDARY LEGACIES



Post Incarceration

Many incarcerated people experience anxiety and stress as they reintegrate into the community. Successful re entry requires healthy ecosystems of recovery support and networks, healthy mentorship relationships, stability and independence. In addition, futuristic planning and execution of plan not only augments successful re entry but reduces the likelihood of recidivism. Similarly, participants indicated that their top four priorities among release are the following:

- Fatherhood
- Maintaining and sustaining healthy relationships with their social support system
- Establishing stability in different domains
- Obtaining access reentry services and programs

The aforementioned list of priorities should be utilized to inform education program efforts.



LEGENDARY LEGACIES

Conclusion

Overall, participants in this study shared that there is a severe lack in access to and quality of services for pre-trial detainees. Our results indicated that despite their interest to attend, participants were not receiving adequate orientation, mental health, or vocational services and were interested in more support in these areas. Access to the aforementioned services are basic human rights obligated to every citizen and any denial of treatment constitutes a violation of basic human rights. However, those basic human rights are denied to incarcerated people whose criminality pushes the boundaries for citizenship and care provided by the state.

Having associations to criminality places constraints and contingencies on access to and/or exclusion of human rights based on presumption of legal guilt. The contingencies associated with incarceration include the loss of agency and autonomy over one's body, time, space (Sykes, 1958), choices and decisions (Haney, 2001) and, the exclusion from education, services and programs.

Despite the unwavering conditions, participants were hopeful to participate in this research study in hopes that the information informs material change at WHOC. It should be considered admirable that WHOC is interested in centering the voices of the pretrial population. Centering incarcerated people's perspective helps us to (1) effectively design programs that take into account the transient nature of the pre trial population and (2) intentionally evaluate the quality of the services and care provided by mental health professionals from the perspective of those receiving the services provided (i.e., incarcerated patients).

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