

‘I’m Scared to Death to Try It on My Own’: I-Poems and the complexities of religious housing support for people on the US sex offender registry

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Abstract

In the US, street-based sex workers and people convicted of sex offences are both ‘special populations’, often with additional conditions of community supervision. People convicted of sex offences experience a complicated mix of assistance and surveillance as they re-enter society post-conviction, including numerous restrictions on housing and employment. As a result, they are especially likely to experience homelessness upon release. This article uses I-Poems drawn from interviews with volunteers and professionals who navigate the obstacles to re-entry that govern people on the sex offender registry. We focus on people with religious affiliations (n=38) who provide urgent support during the re-entry process. I-poems are a feminist technique for analysing qualitative data that forefronts the voices of people not often heard and distils complex experiences into accessible narratives. While few in our study overtly exploited re-entering persons on the registry, most support was problematic in subtler ways: we found that re-entering registrants are asked to accept constrained choices involving labour, religious participation, and romantic and other personal relationships in order to receive assistance. Given the secondary stigma attached to work with people convicted of sex offences, and the obscurity within in which many of these religiously-affiliated programmes operate, I-Poems both humanise and reveal the complexities of coercion, religious calling, and supportive housing.

Keywords: sex offender policies, housing, residency restrictions, re-entry programmes, homelessness

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When people exit prison, where to live is often the primary concern. The Prison Policy Initiative found that formerly incarcerated individuals in the United States (US) experience nearly ten times the risk of homelessness. Formerly incarcerated women and people of colour are especially vulnerable to homelessness. In addition to race and gender, those who have been incarcerated more than once and those who are within two years of release are at higher risk than the general formerly incarcerated population.¹ In 2017, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development found that 51,936 individuals residing in emergency shelter or transitional housing programmes came directly from a correctional facility.² Loss of employment, lack of family support, racial discrimination, and discrimination based on criminal history can all lead to precarious housing or a lack of housing entirely.

In the US, scholars have noted a surprising and unintended consequence: “[R]ecent emphasis on the policing of commercial sex to combat human trafficking has brought with it an increased number of people subject to the monitoring and punishment of the registration system... [including] women in the commercial sex industry, many of whom have themselves faced exploitation and coercion but are charged as the ultimate bad actors”.³

In a few US jurisdictions, conviction for a prostitution charge is itself categorised as a sex offence and requires registration. However, registries are predominantly made up of people who have been convicted of crimes that include possession or transmission of child pornography, child sexual abuse, and sexual assault, as well as some non-contact offences like indecent exposure. In addition, street-based sex workers and people convicted of sex offences⁴ are considered to be part of ‘special populations’ whose conditions of community supervision go beyond those typically enforced, for example, requiring trauma treatment for the former and anger management or sex offender treatment for the latter.⁵ In some jurisdictions, the same specialised probation and parole units handle both groups,

¹ L Couloute, ‘Nowhere to Go: Homelessness among formerly incarcerated people’, Prison Policy Institute, August 2018.

² M Henry *et al.*, *The 2017 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress, Part 2: Estimates of Homelessness in the United States*, US Department of Housing and Urban Development, October 2018.

³ K Mogulescu and L Goodmark, ‘Surveillance and Entanglement: How mandatory sex offender registration impacts criminalised survivors of human trafficking’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 14, 2020, pp. 125–130, p. 126, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.2012201410>.

⁴ We use person-first language and the terms people use about themselves whenever possible, including ‘registrant’ for people on the sex offender registry.

⁵ C S Shdaimah, C S Leon and S A Wiechelt, *The Compassionate Court? Support, Surveillance, and Survival in Prostitution Diversion Programs*, Temple University Press, 2023.

which professionals in our research explain as necessary because their experiences are so ‘extreme’ that other professionals might find them unbelievable. The sex offender registry and the assumptions undergirding specialised prostitution caseloads both compound housing precarity, and survivors of trafficking in the US criminal legal system can be subject to both.

In other work which focuses on street-based sex workers involved in court-based diversion programmes, we have documented the way professionals demonstrate sincere concern for programme participants but are shaped by the broader criminal legal system’s reliance on hyper-responsibilisation, ‘expecting defendants to bootstrap themselves over systemic hurdles with virtually no resources’.⁶ While this kind of ‘targeted sympathy’ is better than the othering and invisibilising that pervades contemporary penalty, it continues to ‘decontextualize individuals and assign blame and accountability’.⁷ A study of Texas diversion programmes for sex workers highlighted that the absence of formal agreements with service providers left participants at the whim of external requirements, even when the requirements bore no relationship to the court’s own directives to the participants.⁸ This complicated mix of assistance, surveillance, and unreviewed discretion is experienced by people who are broadly subject to the control of the criminal legal system, but for people convicted of sex offences, this complexity is compounded by the additional network of post-conviction restrictions aimed at the heterogeneous group called ‘sex offenders’.⁹

Thirty-three US states and numerous local jurisdictions have enacted residency restrictions which prohibit people on the sex offender registry from living, working, and/or going to school within a certain distance of a school, park, daycare, or place where children might congregate.¹⁰ As a result of these limitations, people convicted of sex offences are especially likely to face homelessness when released

⁶ C S Leon and C S Shdaimah, ‘Targeted Sympathy in “Whore Court”: Criminal Justice Actors’ Perceptions of Prostitution Diversion Programs’, *Law & Policy*, vol. 43, issue 2, 2021, pp. 126–148, p. 141, <https://doi.org/10.1111/lapo.12166>.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁸ J M Blakely, D J Mueller, and M Richie, ‘Strengths and Challenges of a Prostitution Court Model’, *Justice System Journal*, vol. 38, issue 4, 2017, pp. 364–379, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0098261X.2017.1327335>.

⁹ C S Leon and A R Kilmer, ‘“Secondary Registrants”: A New conceptualization of the spillover of community surveillance and control’, *Punishment and Society*, Advance online publication, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14624745221094255>.

¹⁰ E Suiter and T S Anderson, ‘Residency Restrictions, Race, and Homelessness Among Registered Sex Offenders’, *Criminal Justice Studies*, vol. 35, issue 2, 2022, pp. 132–144, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1478601X.2022.2026352>.

from incarceration.¹¹ These challenges are multiplied for some subgroups, including Black people¹² and military veterans.¹³ While LGBTQ+ registrants have not been found to face more homelessness or housing insecurity than straight cisgender registrants, they are significantly less likely to own property and more likely to be renters.¹⁴ Public housing authorities and private landlords commonly bar people convicted of sex offences, adding additional barriers beyond what the law requires.¹⁵ In a recent survey of registrants, half reported that a landlord barred them from renting due to their registry status.¹⁶ Our previous research found that tenants who are on the registry report a ‘sex offender surcharge’, the illegal practice of requiring additional rent or other fees that registrants and their families rarely feel able to challenge.¹⁷

Homeless shelters can also be inaccessible to people on the registry because of residency restrictions or organisational policies. In New York City, for example, only four shelters are both in compliance with residency restrictions and able to shelter registrants.¹⁸ Homeless shelters often implement a variety of policies regarding curfews, substance use, and length of stay; employees of these shelters employ discretion and flexibility, and can decide when to break policies in order to achieve their goal of reducing homelessness. These employees, however, seldom approach policies regarding people on the registry with flexibility and rarely break their own rules in order to shelter registrants. When shelters do make

¹¹ J Levenson, ‘Hidden Challenges: Sex offenders legislated into homelessness’, *Journal of Social Work*, vol. 18, issue 3, 2018, pp. 348–363, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017316654811>.

¹² Suiter and Andersen.

¹³ T Byrne *et al.*, ‘Association Between Registered Sex Offender Status and Risk of Housing Instability and Homelessness Among Veterans’, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, vol. 37, issue 7-8, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520959646>. Byrne *et al.* found that veterans on the registry were nearly twice as likely to report housing instability or homelessness than veterans not on the registry (p. 822).

¹⁴ T Hoppe *et al.*, ‘Civil Commitment of People Convicted of Sex Offenses in the United States’, UCLA School of Law Williams Institute, 2020.

¹⁵ The federal government mandates that all public housing authorities (PHAs) must bar people who are required to register as sex offenders for the rest of their lives from public housing, though state laws may dictate that public housing authorities restrict a broader group than lifetime registrants. See M McCarty *et al.*, ‘Drug Testing and Crime-Related Restrictions in TANF, SNAP, and Housing Assistance’, Congressional Research Service, 2015.

¹⁶ Hoppe *et al.*

¹⁷ Leon and Kilmer, p. 9.

¹⁸ A Frankel, ‘Pushed Out and Locked In: The Catch-22 for New York’s Disabled, Homeless Sex-Offender Registrants’, *Yale Law Journal Forum*, vol. 129, 2019, pp. 279–324.

exceptions for registrants, they are more likely to make them for those convicted of less serious offences.¹⁹

Our prior work shows that many people who support registrants out of familial duty or friendship are ‘secondary registrants’ who experience the state’s indirect regulation of their day-to-day lives.²⁰ These secondary registrants support their loved ones by providing financial resources, offering emotional support, and fiercely advocating for their loved ones as they navigate the criminal legal system, and do so while also experiencing significant stigma and other direct effects of the registry. Some of these individuals moderate this stigma through advocacy for registry policy changes through formal roles in non-profits and as members of legal advocacy networks. Those who act as re-entry supporters (the subject of this article) through their formal roles share some features with these family members, including the experience of stigmatisation and the offering of support and advocacy, but little is known about people who support re-entering registrants through formal roles. This research explores the power such re-entry supporters hold over people who can be returned to prison if they fail. We focus on those who do this work within religious organisations because there is a unique presence of Christian ministries that provide housing and other supports to registrants, and even less is known about these organisations.

Methods

To fill this gap, we interviewed people working as what we call ‘re-entry supporters’ in order to distinguish our respondents from probation and parole officers or others working for the state. We focus on non-governmental re-entry supporters who provide urgent assistance with housing, employment, and pastoral care, and with facilitating social or peer support. All research was conducted with Institutional Review Board approval. Participants were recruited through a combination of snowball sampling that began with contacts within our own networks and outreach to organisations found on the internet or in news media. We asked about their motivations for and experiences with working with people on the sex offender registry during in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted over Zoom or by phone with re-entry professionals and volunteers (n=38); each received a USD 20 gift card. The interviews ranged in length from 35 to 84 minutes.

¹⁹ S M Rolfe, R Tewksbury, and R D Schroeder, ‘Homeless Shelters’ Policies on Sex Offenders: Is This Another Collateral Consequence?, *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, vol. 61, issue 16, 2017, pp. 1833–1849, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X1663846>.

²⁰ Leon and Kilmer, p. 9.

We recorded and transcribed interviews. As a feminist practice, we invited participants to choose their own pseudonyms which we use throughout. In order to protect the confidentiality of participants, we removed identifiers, including but not limited to names, when editing the transcriptions of interviews.

We analysed the data using iterative consensus coding: we independently read a subset of interviews that we coded inductively and deductively, line-by-line.²¹ We discussed our independent coding and created a consensus coding scheme which we then applied and further refined. To enhance analytical rigor, we used memoing, peer debriefing, and negative case analysis.²²

Rather than a more traditional presentation of our data, we primarily use I-poems.²³ We constructed these poems using the respondent's words, pulled directly from interview transcripts, to provide a pithy and accessible version of their interview that centres the voices of research respondents.²⁴ To create I-Poems, we used the coding output from interviews with re-entry supporters conducted by the first and second authors by pulling 'I,' 'You,' and 'We' statements in the order they appear in the transcripts. We focused on statements from the interviews that related to motivation, rules, housing, and programme participants' employment. Unlike in other work, we do not provide poems that cover all or nearly all the 'I,' 'You,' and 'We' statements in the entire transcript since the interviews were wide-ranging.²⁵ Instead, we selected thematically relevant phrases. We preserved the words of the respondents, making only minor edits for confidentiality and clarity. We made every effort to contextualise the poems so that they reflect fidelity to the

²¹ K A R Richards and M A Hemphill, 'A Practical Guide to Collaborative Qualitative Data Analysis', *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, vol. 37, issue 2, 2018, pp. 225–231, <https://doi.org/10.1123/jtpe.2017-0084>.

²² D K Padgett, *Qualitative Methods in Social Work Research*, 3rd edition, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 2017.

²³ C Gilligan *et al.*, 'On the Listening Guide: A Voice-Centered Relational Method', in S N Hesse-Biber and P L Leavy (eds.), *Emergent Methods in Social Research*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 2006, pp. 253–272.

²⁴ M Buckridge, J Lowman, and C S Leon, "'I'm gonna speak for me": I-Poems and the Situated Knowledges of Sex Workers', *Ethics and Social Welfare*, vol. 16, issue 2, 2022, pp. 214–218, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17496535.2022.2042039>. See also M Bailey-Kloch, 'Poetry in Street-Based Sex Work', in K Hail-Jares, C S Shdaimah, and C S Leon (eds.), *Challenging Perspectives on Street-Based Sex Work*, Temple University Press, 2017, pp. 227–232.

²⁵ *Ibid.*; for additional I-poems from this and other projects, see also I-Poem Project, 'The Voices of Reentry Workers', 2021, <https://i-poemproject.wixsite.com/udel/poems>.

respondents.²⁶ In a few cases, we also provide short excerpts from the interviews that are not in the form of I-poems but provide important context. We do not, however, provide extensive interpretation or editorialising, in keeping with the intention inherent in the I-poem approach of giving readers a less-mediated version of participant's narratives—it is also pragmatic given the length of the selections used for the I-poems.

We start with short I-Poems from re-entry supporters for whom this work falls under their employment with the United Methodist Church, followed by I-poems that also include people who provide re-entry support for people on the sex offender registry within non-denominational and independent organisations. We conclude with longer I-poems from two re-entry supporters whose own contact with state systems of surveillance and control shaped their programmes, including Richie who himself identifies as a sex offender.

'We Just Push People on the Registry Aside': Obstacles to housing

Paula and Reverend Brian are clergy in the United Methodist Church.²⁷ They described the challenges of a criminal legal system that is apathetic to the plight of the formerly incarcerated, including people on the registry. Their work is shaped by their role in a large institution (the United Methodist Church) and their lived experiences that do not include incarceration.

We just push people on the registry aside: Paula (UMC Pastor)

We just push people on the registry aside and think out of sight, out of mind

We're making people be desperate and having to literally...their addresses are living under a bridge or being transient or their address is on a street corner

We are hurting society by these rules

We're not getting...some of our laws are not keeping people safe there

We're not paying attention to the people who aren't yet on the registry.

Giving fewer fucks: Rev. Brian (UMC Pastor)

²⁶ For a few, we moved quotes from the order they appeared in the transcript, but when we did so it was to preserve the chronological order of their overall story. For example, in Richie's I-poem, we moved a few sections for clarity to describe his trajectory from offending and then prison to running his programme.

²⁷ Both Paula and Rev. Brian are credentialed reverends in the United Methodist Church. We invited all interviewees to select their pseudonym and title. We refer to Paula without a title and to Reverend Brian with his by their explicitly stated preferences.

Enough people are dead
 I was in this position
 I think
 I was more willing to put up with, especially locally elected officials', crap
 I was fearful that
 I would somehow cut the relationship off
 if I was like, too forward, telling them that homeless people are dying
 I wish I had, I had, and you'll have to forgive the language here, but like,
 2019 was my year of giving fewer fucks
 I was like, no, no more of this
 I'm not gonna
 I don't want to play this anymore. If the relationship is done, you don't
 want to talk to me anymore, fine—enough people are dead
 I wish I had started that a little earlier.

Both Paula and Reverend Brian acknowledge the harms of policies focused on registered sex offenders that cause homelessness. Both spoke with indignance and impatience. Reverend Brian shared that as he learns about this unintended consequence, he evolved into a more brash and direct advocate, less concerned about maintaining relationships with officials than with speaking truth to power.

Other interviewees' approaches, careers, and callings were profoundly changed by their personal experiences of incarceration, criminalisation, and homelessness. Robert Falconer is a Christian man who, though he was never incarcerated, experienced homelessness and instability that greatly impacts how he comes to his work with people convicted of sex offences. Richie committed and was incarcerated for a sexual offence, and also brings the perspective of a follower of Christ. Falconer and Richie each founded small religious ministries that provide housing and other support to people on the registry.

Robert Falconer explained that he founded the ministry 'by accident', driven by his calling to help, his connections to other organisations, and the needs of the community. In the interview,²⁸ Robert explained that each programme participant pays USD 400 a month for housing and necessities, excluding food and hygiene products. He explains,

We try to keep it as low as possible because a sex offender has to wear a bracelet [electronic monitoring, common in the US], [for which] they're paying \$275 a month. And they have to go to treatment and they're paying \$275 a month: that's \$550. Now they're only going to probably have a minimum wage job to start with. How are they going to save any money to ever get out of here and

²⁸ While I-poems often convey the crux of interviews, more traditional quotes from respondents can provide important context.

get their own place if we're charging more money? So we're charging as little as we can... And we don't own any of the properties, we rent everything. None of us get paid.

This cognizance of the high costs of demonstrating compliance for people on the sex offender registry is also reflected in his description of his motivation:

**I understand what it's like to be completely alone: Robert Falconer
(Independent Religious Ministry)**

I grew up homeless at times, inner city, drugs, everything
I was young
I was separated from my family
I haven't seen my brothers and sisters, except one, since I was 18
I lived nomadically
I never knew anybody for more than three years
I moved from city to city
I would end up homeless
I understand what it's like to be completely alone, not having anyone to call
I believe Christ changed my life.

I was invited up to the prison with another organisation
I was there
I ran into the warden, and he asked me if we could use the beds for the guys in prison
I said sure
I then ended up interviewing over 30 people
I had no idea what to do
I didn't know anything about the prison system, anything
I went back that night
I got on my knees
and I prayed
and I cried
and I said
Lord, I have no idea who to take out of prison
I'm clueless
I don't know how to go about this
I went back the next day and said, 'we'll take anybody that doesn't have any other place to go.' So, anyone that can go to a pre-release, anyone that has family they can go to, all that, I eliminated them
I had absolutely no idea at the time that that would mean we'd be primarily taking long-term violent offenders and sex offenders.

Robert Falconer reveals the intensity and urgency of his calling to support re-entering registrants, as well as his reliance on divine inspiration. Given his criminal record, he may not have had access to more traditional ways of learning organisation management through formal training or professional experience, instead demonstrating the kind of entrepreneurial, self-help that is evident in international scholarship on re-entry²⁹ but may have particular salience in the US due to its systemic racism and lack of a social safety net.³⁰

Like Robert Falconer, Richie also drew on personal experience and recounted a similar epiphanic realisation that Christ had called him to serve. In the first several stanzas he describes how he became a sex offender, then how he survived in prison and came to feel empathy for others through prison work. He then explains his calling to start a programme that serves people re-entering with arguably the most stigmatised label in the US: those who are not just on the sex offender registry, but sexually violent predators (SVPs).³¹ While most of our respondents were blunt, Richie was uniquely direct, displaying in our interview the same kind of straight talk he described as crucial to his support of re-entering people.

God struck me: Richie (*Independent Religious Ministry*)

I'm a sex offender
 I'm just telling you a life story
 I acted violent
 I was put in homes for kids, until I was 16
 I didn't know how to deal with it [being victimised] so I've learnt to become a sociopath basically
 I went to the most unfathomable thing
 Everyone that I knew in my culture said child molesters should be shot, and I believed that
 If I ran across a halfway house like this [where he works now] where I grew up, we would have burnt it down
 So, I'm a sex offender.

²⁹ L Keena and C Simmons, 'Rethink, Reform, Reenter: An entrepreneurial approach to prison programming', *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, vol. 59, issue 8, 2015, pp. 837–854, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X14523077>.

³⁰ R Smith, "'Gizza a Job, I Can Do That': What the Literature Tells Us About How the Inability to Secure Employment Can Lead to Ex-Offenders Starting a Business", in T M Cooney (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Minority Entrepreneurship*, Springer Nature, Cham, 2021, pp. 289–317.

³¹ Hoppe *et al.*

I'm an alpha male
I didn't get driven into the corner like some of the men I know
I wouldn't let anybody shove me around.
Well, I've seen a lot of people getting shoved around
And I just wanted to be somebody that gave them the ability to regain themselves
I understand what I did, and what they did, is horrible
I accept that
I had no reason to
I'm spinning here
I was a piece of shit—let's be realistic
I did something that should not have been done
And I knew soon as I did it [gasps] and I don't want to do it again.

So when I climbed out of that pile of shit, I knew there were other people stuck in a pile of shit, and they wanted a chance.

I didn't want to do this work.
I'm not going to ask you if you're religious, but I had an epiphany in prison
And God struck me and I opened a house for people like me.

I had to find a way out of my prison in my mind, socially, spiritually
I was that guy, nobody wanted to be around me and I didn't know how to fix that
So, I found my way through with the church and became socially connected again
When I learnt about empathy, I learnt how to care about people again
And I knew that connection, and one of the healing things in my life is when my church embraced me.

I spent two and a half years sitting in my bed thinking about suicide every day
I lost my wife
I lost my family
I lost everything
I became a social pariah
I was watching *The Shawshank Redemption* and there's a line that said, 'either you get busy living, or get busy dying'
And so, in my mind, either I'm going to hang myself or...
So in the morning, I woke up and I got out of the bed, I hit the floor, and said 'I can't'
What I was saying is, 'Open the door and let me out', sort of like when Paul and Barnabas, when they were in prison, and the genuine earthquake happened
That's what I wanted to happen.

But what happened is I started pushing men in wheelchairs across the prison because they were in hospital jail
I had to listen to these men
I went from wanting to beat them with the wheelchair because I didn't want to hear what they said to actually wanting to listen to them

We have a thing where I say, '200% accountability' that means I have to be completely honest with myself [and also you] don't bullshit me
I won't accept it.

I specifically work with SVPs. When they first get here, I tell them, people in prison will always tell you what they think about you
I choose: 'I've got your back'
And I tell them as soon as they come here everybody in the house dotes on everybody else
I ask you to choose their recovery
I can't force you
I care about you enough that I'll put my foot in your ass and tell you what I think.

I'm not a dictator, and the success of this programme is not me, it's them
I help Jimmy, I get better, and when Jimmy helps me, I get better when he helps me: it all gets better, you know the classical peer-to-peer facility.
That's what this is based on. Yeah, but it's got a Jesus twist.

I put on Facebook the name of our housing and movers companies, and everybody in town who knows who we are, knows we are a sex offender programme: our work module will do the moving for you
This is a post-prison ministry, and I put it on Facebook and I haven't been beat up
I think I have a lot of support in the community
I don't know how that happened
And it's not me, it's not my power, it's not my convincing
I believe that the power that brought me to my knees, also gives me a bit of protection in this thing.

The bravado and rugged individualism that Richie exhibits echo many of our other respondents who implemented their own programmes, similarly described as called to do so by God. Sometimes they explicitly acknowledge that they themselves had few other choices, i.e., that they were excluded from traditional employment like the population they chose to serve and that they are aided by the programme themselves, 'the classical peer-to-peer facility... with a Jesus twist.' A few also explicitly indicate that they do not seek or accept any government contracts or state funds in order to operate as independently as possible, making their own rules and determining what works based on their faith and their own experience.

All of our respondents, including the four re-entry supporters featured here, convey their sincere desire to help people on the registry, derived from witnessing and experiencing the harms caused by US sex offender laws and the urgent need for housing and supportive communities. It is stigmatised and risky work.

Conditional Assistance: Labour and religious expectations

Re-entering people and re-entry supporters face urgent pressure to show probation and parole regimes that they are compliant, through evidence of housing and employment. Even compassionate criminal legal system professionals may use the vulnerabilities created by the criminal legal system to coerce compliance with programme fees, rules, or requirements they paternalistically believe to be in participants' best interest, as we have described elsewhere as 'effecting responsabilization for the purposes of rescue and public safety'³² and which we see in this sample of re-entry supporters as well. In this section, we highlight the conditional, coercive, and potentially exploitative effects of the often-unknown rules and practices enforced by re-entry supporters that are made possible by their independence from government funding and related oversight.

It is common for emergency housing shelters in the US to require participants to pay rent as well as additional programme fees and to conform to strict rules that may range from enforcing hours that participants must be out looking for work, prohibitions against romantic relationships, zero-tolerance policies for substance use, or prohibiting the presence of their children over a certain age. One respondent, Sam, an executive director of a religious re-entry and prison ministry, put it succinctly, 'no booze, no drugs, no women.'

Elizabeth is a clergywoman in the United Methodist Church and though her role does not involve formal re-entry ministry, her church provides re-entry support in other ways.³³ Like Paula and Reverend Brian, she lacks personal experience with incarceration. Elizabeth's church, nicknamed 'Church of the Second Chance', offers odd job opportunities to people with a need for cash, including people on the registry.

³² Leon and Shdaimah, p. 138.

³³ Like Paula, Elizabeth is a credentialed clergywoman in the United Methodist Church who chose not to include a title like Reverend in her pseudonym.

Hand up, not a handout: *Elizabeth (UMC Pastor)*

Where we can we employ our people
We help give them ways to have a hand up, not a handout, you know, to
earn it for themselves, and to do for themselves what they can.

We've got a lawn mower and y'all can come mow the lawn this one time
We would love for you to come and weed our flower beds real quick.

Elizabeth was one of many participants to use the phrase 'hand up, not a handout'. The prevalence of this metaphor reveals the emphasis on individual empowerment that motivated many of the programmes. There is an expectation that re-entering persons should be able to 'pull themselves up by their bootstraps' even within the context of penal control. When programme participants or community members cannot obtain formal employment, they may perform labour for churches or other independent religious ministries. While Elizabeth's church offered paid labour options, other ministries may expect that re-entering persons work for their organisations without compensation. Only a very few outliers in our study relayed information that we interpreted as overt exploitation of re-entering persons generally or of those on the registry, for example, requiring them to hand over their identification documents and welfare checks. But re-entry supporters who provide temporary or one-time assistance may also be unintentionally coercive or exploitative: what pressure to perform the manual labour at whatever wage is offered, for example, may someone in Elizabeth's congregation feel? This concern pervades the next I-Poem featuring Bubba, the driver and assistant manager at a re-entry ministry at which he was initially a 'regular resident'. Bubba's experiences are shaped by his disability status and experiences as a person convicted of a sex offense. The I-Poem below reflects the complexity of exploitation, religious calling, and supportive housing.

I'll probably be here for a long time: *Bubba (Independent Religious Ministry)*

I don't get paid
But I do
I still get the, you know, the housing
I pay fees like everybody else
I just, several years ago, I dedicated my life to God and to the ministry.
It's saving my life.

I was a druggie on the street so
I lost everything
I'm on disability. So that's my pay
I also needed a structured environment in my life
I, you know, uh
I'm scared to death to actually go out and try it on my own
I can't afford it, on disability

I don't get more than \$844 a month. That's not much money
 I have a truck
 I pay my insurance
 I'll probably be here for a long time.

Bubba enjoys some additional privileges compared to other residents. But in addition to rent and other programme fees that all residents pay, he also pays for his own car insurance, despite the programme's dependence on his car for transporting the other residents. Bubba's situation underscores the fine line that exists between ministries and other organisations helping re-entering people on the registry get back on their feet, and exploiting their vulnerability, lack of resources, and fear for their free labour. Bubba's lack of resources and difficulty meeting basic needs with only his disability pay benefits the ministry where he resides, because they can count on Bubba as a source of free labour and as a resident paying fees. Re-entering registrants are especially vulnerable as so few of the already scarce pool of support programmes in the US will accept people on the sex offender registry, as noted in the NYC study mentioned above. Thus, re-entering registrants may accept constrained choices involving labour, religious participation, and romantic and other personal relationships in order to receive assistance.

A few registrant re-entry supporters in our sample viewed programme participants as a legitimate audience for their proselytisation. Religiously affiliated shelters and programmes can require prayers and worship services and can condition access to services on religious belief. Some of the programmes made religious expectations explicit, while a few declared on their websites that clients need not be Christian to apply. We asked about these rules and expectations, leading respondents like Richie to distinguish their own approach from one that required religious participation: 'The purpose is to learn to honour people and allow them to come from what they need. If I say to you come to *my* church, I might subvert the Holy Spirit's ability to take you where you need to be.'

Some respondents explained that while they did not expect fidelity to a specific denomination or ideology, some religious identities were patently unacceptable. For example, Sam, an executive director of a religious re-entry and prison ministry, declared, 'if he's a Mormon, or Jehovah Witness, if he's been involved in a cult, that has a different Jesus from the Bible. We don't accept him... If he's a Muslim. God bless him. He's not coming.' Richie also compared his programme's approach, which did not enforce rules with zero tolerance or specific religious declarations or practices, to those who enforced strict rules that included religious participation:

They are more of the rigid Christian thing. But they are the 'last chance ranch' for anybody that can't find something. In other words, when you've exhausted every other house and they laugh when you show up, [the rigid Christian

*programme in town] will take anyone... [But] you have to be broken... Not a lot of people stay, but it does work for people: they're there on a rescue mission of sex offenders. And because they're the last option somebody has, they make the rules whatever they want.*³⁴

This 'rigidity' is in line with the 'sex offender surcharge' that our previous research found among landlords who charge tenants who are on the registry more than their other tenants, exploiting the vulnerability created by US sex offender law.³⁵

Conclusion

Religious re-entry supporters work both within and against the system of obstacles to re-entry and reintegration that govern people on the registry; nearly all of our respondents lacked robust organisational or other support. They may do this work as part of their larger role within a religious organisation (like the pastors) or may be essentially one-person missions, cobbling together resources (like Robert Falconer and Richie). Given the US's lack of a robust social safety net, even those re-entry supporters who are part of larger organisations are severely limited by the paucity of programmes and resources for people living in precarity, though this also creates the opportunity for them to create and enforce their own policies with little oversight, which can be coercive and occasionally outright exploitative.

Re-entry supporters in our sample who had experience working with registrants or were registrants themselves were blunt about the harms caused by US laws targeting sex offenders, in keeping with scholarship that documents that probation and parole officers who work with registrants in the US generally view legal restrictions on where registrants may live and work as ineffective.³⁶ Our respondents were more blunt in describing their struggle to meet urgent needs for housing within a broken and punitive system. Many re-entry supporters struggle against these laws to serve individuals, but usually without advocating for structural change and in some cases further responsibilising ('hand up not handouts'), and thus serving neoliberal penal projects.³⁷ While only a few blatantly exploit the lack of alternatives for registrants with housing precarity and under-

³⁴ Following the interview with Richie, we called the ministry that Richie describes in this quote. After our introduction of the research, the individual on the other end of the phone immediately declined and hung up.

³⁵ Leon and Kilmer, p. 9.

³⁶ L Kaylor *et al.*, 'Input from the Frontlines: Parole and probation officers' perceptions of policies directed at those convicted of sexual offenses', *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, vol. 29, issue 6, 2022, pp. 900-925, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13218719.2021.1995521>.

³⁷ Leon and Shdaimah.

unemployment, others may capitalise on this desperation in order to fulfil their calling or find meaningful work.

We chose to share these perspectives on the struggle to work with and against legal obstacles to housing and employment for people on the registry through I-Poems because they are stark, authentic, and sometimes beautiful. Rather than traditionally crafted poems that may focus on meter and rhyme, I-poems capture our attention with the natural language of participants and allow readers to appreciate the unique perspectives of people who are largely working in obscurity. I-poems centre participants—one small way to counter the lack of autonomy experienced by stigmatised and exploited persons. Re-entry supporters like those we spoke with are rarely recognised or queried about how they negotiate legal obstacles to housing for people on the registry; we hope these I-poems signal the need for more deliberate and further attention, and that future research will use a variety of methods to investigate the opportunities and pitfalls that characterise this heretofore unseen context of religious re-entry programmes and policies for people on the sex offender registry.

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