USC Race and Equity Center

WHO ARE FORMERLY INCARCERATED STUDENTS?

Javier Rodriguez and Jennifer Grijalva

Humanizing, Caring, and Supporting People's Identities

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BIOGRAPHY

Javier Rodriguez
(he/him/his)

Javier Rodriguez grew up in Watts and South Central Los Angeles , He is a son of Mexican immigrants and a formerly incarcerated professional. He currently serves as a consultant; specifically partners with universities and college campuses; provides support to programs serving students impacted by the criminal justice system. Javier earned his Bachelors in Anthropology and Masters of Social Welfare from the Luskin School of Public Affairs at UCLA. During his time at UCLA, he co-founded the Underground Scholars Initiative (USI) UCLA Chapter and founder of Legacy Changes Consulting (LCC). Javier is a proud alumni of Los Angeles Southwest College and a humanitarian at heart.

BIOGRAPHY

**Jennifer Grijalva
(she/her/ella)**
Consultant

Jennifer Grijalva grew up in Los Angeles, California, specifically Koreatown and South Central. She is the daughter of Guatemalan immigrants and is a first-generation college graduate. She obtained a bachelor's degree in Psychology from UCLA and earned her Masters of Social Welfare from the Luskin School of Public Affairs at UCLA. After completing her master's degree, Jennifer worked as a bilingual therapist in community mental health organizations serving students and families. Jennifer continues to focus on mental health equity and community advocacy work and is currently a Consultant at Legacy Changes.

"In an effort to assist our transition from prison to our communities as responsible citizens and to create a more positive human image of ourselves, we are asking everyone to stop using these negative terms and simply refer to us as PEOPLE. People currently or formerly incarcerated, PEOPLE on parole, PEOPLE recently released from prison, PEOPLE in prison, PEOPLE with criminal convictions, but PEOPLE."

- An *Open Letter* to Our Friends on the Question of Language, Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions

Through this brief we hope to honor our loved ones and community members who have been impacted by the injustices of the carceral system and whose lives we have lost due to police and gun violence. We hope it serves as a call to action towards social equity as we urge colleges to fill a gap in needs and provide formerly incarcerated students with the services they deserve.

WHAT BARRIERS DO STUDENTS FACE WHILE REENTERING THE SOCIETY AND REMAINING IN PURSUIT OF HIGHER EDUCATION?

"My future looks bright with an educated mind"
- Javier Rodriguez

Formerly incarcerated students enrolled in CCC, CSU, and the UC campuses experience many barriers in their educational pursuits. These barriers range from housing insecurity, employment opportunities, lack of student support (e.g., tutoring, peer support groups, financial aid), minimal guidance with life transitions and continued hyper surveillance by the parole and probation

systems ([The Possibility Report](#)). However, these are only a few of the many barriers that formerly incarcerated students face.

While there are many barriers and challenges that system impacted students face, obtaining an education can be life changing as it can transform the individual's way of life, challenge stigma and provide social and financial mobility. Empowering formerly incarcerated students throughout their educational journey and providing supportive services can change their life trajectory and that of their families and community.

Practitioners can make a positive impact on the educational journey of formerly incarcerated students. For instance, practitioners can mentor students, orient students to the campus, and provide resources and letters of recommendation. Even walking a student to the financial aid office can be helpful and can ensure that the student feels supported.

Barriers/Needs that Formerly Incarcerated Students Face	Possible centers/ student services that can address these needs	What resources does the college have?
Housing and Food Insecurity	College Housing and Basic Needs Center	How many formerly incarcerated students are accessing college housing?
Financial Insecurity	Financial Aid Office	Are formerly incarcerated students receiving guidance on how to navigate the financial aid process?
Transportation	The Basic Needs Center	Can colleges provide vouchers to cover transportation costs (e.g., public transportation passes, rideshares, gas costs)?
Employment Insecurity	Career Center	Are your current career counselors equipped to advise on career barriers for students with convictions?

Emancipation of the legal system	Letters of Support, Letters of Reference	Is there a counselor that can assist with navigating the probation parole system?
Diverse Learning Abilities/PTSD	Disabilities Services	Are professors and practitioners knowledgeable about trauma informed practices?
Mental Health and Wellness	Psychological Services	Can colleges provide health insurance or affordable referrals to support students mental health needs?
Sense of belonging	Peer to Peer/ Mentorship Multicultural Center	Can faculty create connections with students to foster a sense of community and provide mentorship? Can colleges support more Peer to Peer/ Student Clubs? Can colleges provide spaces for students?
Computer literacy	Tutoring and Mentorship	Do students have access to computers, free printing, and guidance on how to utilize computer software?
Childcare	Basic Needs Center	Does your college currently have any childcare resources for students who are parents?
Hope	Guided degree pathways	TBD

Below we describe policies that have shaped today's incarceration system. The purpose of sharing this is to show how structural racism and discriminatory policies continue to impact the lives of Black and Brown individuals.

- School to prison pipeline: Policies and practices such as use of court referrals, suspensions and expulsions disproportionately push Black and Brown children out of school and into incarceration. Studies have shown that Black and Brown students are disciplined more harshly at school than White students even when the behaviors are the same. According to the Department of Education, Black students are suspended [three times](#) as often as White peers. These differences begin to happen as soon as students enter pre-school.
- Tough on crime policies: A series of policies since the 1970s that harshened sentencing, increased police presence, hyper-criminalized communities of color, and over-criminalized drug abuse. It hyper-focused on Black and Brown, low-income communities and used framing tactics to create a culture of fear in the U.S.
- Zero-Tolerance Policies: Policies that mandate predetermined consequences or punishments for special offenses and gradually expanded to cover ambiguous, non-violent offenses such as insubordination and school disturbances.

Policies like the ones discussed above have led to increased mass incarceration and more specifically harm to Black and Brown communities. Before the 1980s, the prison population did not exceed 300,000 people; however, by the end of 2021, there were roughly more than 1.2 million individuals in prison. These [statistics](#) show a change in the system to incarcerate people, specifically Black and Brown individuals. Today, Black and Brown youth continue to make up the majority of incarcerated youth. Without intervention and supportive services, the youth could continue to fall into institutional racism and systemic discrimination and end up back in the prison system.

It is critical to generate consciousness around the experiences of formerly incarcerated students of color, as the same communities of color are overrepresented in the incarcerated population while being underrepresented in higher education. California's college system has a unique positionality in that it has the power and resources to help reduce recidivism among people who were formerly incarcerated. *It is estimated that there are over 10,000 formerly incarcerated students* enrolled in the California Community Colleges (CCC), California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC) campuses.

Below we articulate the path from incarceration to higher education in three sections. This is designed to serve as a starting point for practitioners, educators, and allies to address inequities that formerly incarcerated students encounter during their pursuit of advanced degrees.

THE PATH FROM INCARCERATION TO HIGHER EDUCATION: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

"We rather be judged by 12 than carried by 6"

The quote above is a common phrase often used in Black and Brown communities that are plagued by gun violence, hyper-policing and eventually incarceration. For many, it means that we rather risk going to jail than end up facing death. I, Javier, as a youth had to make adult decisions while trying to survive the conditions that I was born into. Looking back, there was no other choice but to risk our freedom and engage in the culture that was outside my front door.

WHAT CONDITIONS LEAD TO INDIVIDUALS RISKING THEIR FREEDOM AND FACING INCARCERATION?

Poverty, systemic oppression, lack of resources, and generational trauma are all common for many Black and Brown communities. For many individuals, the reality is that growing up in environments with little resources means **struggling to survive**. It is important to remember that these conditions of immense poverty and violence are not coincidental but rather a result of structural racism.

The following chart illustrates how youth can end up in the incarceration system due to them having to engage in activities to address their basic needs due to poverty.

Need	Examples of Crimes as a Survival Mechanism
Shelter	Loitering
Food Security	Theft
Safety	Carrying a Gun/Knife
Financial Security	Selling drugs
Driving/Transportation	Grand Theft Auto

Take Away and Recommendation #1:

Be mindful of the language you use towards formerly incarcerated people and when speaking about formerly incarcerated people.

[The table below is adapted from the Breaking Bars Community Network.]

Language to Use (Person Centered Language)	Language to Avoid
"Students with Incarcerated Experiences"	Inmate
Formerly Incarcerated	Convict
Just call them students	Parolee
System Impacted	Felon
Questions to avoid asking	
Carceral System	What were you incarcerated for?
(In) Justice System	How long were you incarcerated?
Criminal Legal System	Were you in a gang? Where were you from?
	Questions regarding an individual's time while incarcerated
	Mentioning prison politics or stereotypes learned from the media.

Take Away #2:

In the last few decades, California has invested more in the carceral system then in higher education. Systemic oppression and poverty makes individuals more at risk for incarceration due to the lack of resources available to meet basic needs. Law enforcement criminalizes poverty and it leads Black and Brown youth and adults into incarceration.

Recommendation #2:

It is important for practitioners, staff and faculty to listen and understand the student's background and identity without judgment or making assumptions. The student's background should be seen as a strength in the classroom. We encourage practitioners to reflect and identify any biases and assumptions they might have regarding formerly incarcerated individuals. We also suggest that practitioners start by utilizing human-centered language highlighted in this brief.

Take Away #3:

The barriers are complex and individualized therefore, colleges should take a student centered approach that allows the student experience to inform the solutions to remove those barriers. Many of the needs that formerly incarcerated students have are not currently being met by the colleges. We ask that practitioners think critically about the resources that your college offers to formerly incarcerated students and to advocate for equitable services to be provided on campus.

Recommendation #3:

We encourage practitioners to collaborate with formerly incarcerated students on their campus in order to create tailored systems that will work for their college and meet the needs of the students. For example, campuses can create a warm hand-off process that serves to familiarize the student with campus resources and points of contact to ensure support services are being provided for college success. A welcoming environment would decrease isolation by helping students to feel connected to different departments (e.g., financial aid, housing department, student counseling) rather than having to navigate higher ed on their own. A warm handoff ensures that the individual receiving care has all relevant documentation and information to allow smooth.

CITY OF LOST ANGELS
BY JAVIER RODRIGUEZ

I'm from the City of Lost Angels

Growing up in W.A.T.T.S We Are Taught To Survive

Where we rather be judged by twelve than carried by six

It's the only way to feel some kind of peace

I remember being paranoid walking down the block

Looking over my shoulder with my hand on my glock

Bullets flying through the sky

Mothers shedding tears seeing their youth dead

with open eyes

Turning brothers into enemies and families into memories

Real moments filled with tragedy

The harsh realities of youth from the hood living fast

Never thinking of the consequence never learning from the past

Every death in the city is less than one mile apart

Our little homies getting murdered at our neighborhood parks

The vicious cycle continues to repeat

While the future in the hood continues to look bleak

You see I'm from Watts town and when it goes down on my block

More than likely I knew the gunner and the one that hit the ground

They used to be sandbox boys playing with toys

And when you passed by you wouldn't even tell

Comes to show you how we are destroying ourselves

At age 13 I wanted to be the baddest, gangster, gunner and dope dealer

Thinking it was cool

Now that I reflect it's such a rough life but we put it on a pedestal

Trying to climbs rank using hate as a stepping stool

I began reading books and made it out the hood

Now my future looks bright with an educated mind.

Finally opened my eyes and refuse to be blind

Refuse to normalize the sound of the Ghetto Birds and ambulance

Praying for those families suffering from homicides and gun violence

Rest in peace to those fallen victims to the streets

Never forget those moments shared with my loved ones looking over me

This one's for all the Lost Angels

TERMS TO DEFINE

Formerly Incarcerated Person: refers to anyone who has been in a carceral setting and is now released. Prison, immigration detention centers, local jails, juvenile detention centers, etc. are included under this umbrella term.

System Impacted: includes those who have been incarcerated, those with arrests/convictions but no incarceration and those who have been directly impacted by a loved one being incarcerated (i.e., parents, children, siblings).
Berkeley Undergraduate Scholars

Survivors Guilt: a condition of persistent mental and emotional stress experienced by someone who has survived an incident in which others died.

Generational trauma: trauma passed down from those who directly experience it to those without firsthand exposure to the original traumatic event. Research has shown that generational trauma (e.g., slavery, incarceration) can be passed down genetically, through DNA.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD: A disorder that can occur when an individual has experienced and/or witnessed a traumatic event.

Post Prison Traumatic Stress - PPTS: People that have been previously incarcerated experience confined and hostile conditions. Creating a relationship between incarceration and PTSD. - Breaking Bars Community Network

Imposter syndrome: the persistent inability to believe that one's success is deserved or has been legitimately achieved due to one's own efforts or skills.

Recidivism: an individual's re-arrest or return to incarceration for a new crime or a violation of parole supervision after a previous period of incarceration or other sanctions. One of the strongest predictors of recidivism is poverty.

Institutional Racism: The systemic distribution of resources, power, and opportunity in our society to the benefit of people who are white and to the exclusion of people of color. - National Equity Project

Systemic Oppression: The intentional disadvantaging of groups of people based on their identity while advantaging members of the dominant group (e.g., gender, race, class, sexual orientation, language, etc.) - National Equity Project

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