

**Life on Parole (LOP) Case Study:
Measuring the Impact of *The New York Times* and *Frontline's*
Collaboration on Connecticut and Beyond**

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September 2017 – January 2019



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Executive Summary

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This state-wide case study measures the impact of the *Frontline* and *New York Times* media project *On the Outside* (OTO) - which includes articles, video shorts, and the documentary *Life on Parole* (LOP) – as utilized in a structured dissemination strategy over the course of a year and a half. In this evaluation, we aim to provide some understanding as to how documentary storytelling about reentry from the perspective of those directly affected can best be used to empower communities and individuals impacted by mass incarceration, and to inform public attitudes and organizational practices that influence the trajectories of returning citizens and their families.

In 2014, Purple States and DCTV began to develop the idea of a multi-platform, short-and-long-form documentary that would bring the reentry experience to life through the stories of an ‘ordinary’ and representative group of prisoners – not the extreme cases always in the public eye. With the assistance of local criminal justice system stakeholders, DCTV and Purple States was given unprecedented access to the world of parole and reentry in CT. They enlisted high-profile platform partners: *Frontline*, and the *New York Times*. Filming began in the fall of 2015. The experience of 12 individuals were documented continuously for a year.

Beginning September 2017, Central Connecticut State University’s Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy (IMRP) partnered with Purple States, DCTV and the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven to:

- a) engage a diverse group of stakeholders in gathering perspectives on the “Life on Parole” documentary and elicit their support in incorporating additional facts, perspectives, resources, and research to be used for supplementary materials;
- b) develop and implement a distribution and engagement strategy in CT that utilizes *On the Outside* and other footage, as appropriate, for community engagement, public awareness, and / or professional development; and
- c) develop and share a case study to assess the influence of LOP materials on local (CT) and national conversations / awareness, and the effectiveness of the strategy for disseminating these stories.

Stakeholders, representatives from CT nonprofit providers, advocacy groups, victims’ organizations, returning citizens, legislators, criminal justice system personnel, academics, business and community members whose work relates to reentry, were invited to play a meaningful role at all stages of this project. Participants representing this diverse group of stakeholders attended one of two focus groups during June and July of 2017. Focus group participants were then invited to join the OTO Project Leadership Team if they wanted to play an active role in the project.

This Leadership Team met monthly from October 2017 to June 2018, and then periodically during Fall of 2018. Upon first meeting, the Leadership Team reviewed results of the previous focus groups and developed an engagement and distribution strategy, which included: (a)

general screenings followed by discussions throughout the state (short term), and (b) working with selected partners to develop more in-depth usage of LOP in specific settings (long term).

Beginning in Fall of 2017, over 17 public screenings of the *NY Times and Frontline's* documentary 'Life on Parole' (LOP) were held throughout the state of Connecticut, including in: Bloomfield, Manchester, Southport, Enfield, Eastern Connecticut State University (ECSU – Willimantic), New Haven Public Library, Hartford Public Library, Farmington, Harriet Beecher Stowe Center (Hartford), Best Video (New Haven), UCONN (Hartford), and Manchester Public Library. The mix of urban and suburban locations was purposely selected to engage a cross-section of Connecticut. Given IMRP's objective to use the LOP documentary to inform the public about the complexities of reentry, the LOP leadership Team developed a brief survey to capture attendees' perspectives on the film and the issue of parole in general. This survey was developed through several iterations, which emerged from topics discussed in the two stakeholder focus groups. Out of approximately 250 participants, 232 completed the surveys for a 92% completion rate. Detailed results of the surveys are presented.

To assist in the educational impact of OTO, the IMRP created a project website: <http://www.ccsu.edu/imrp/projects/OntheOutside.html> The website contains a link to LOP, the OTO NYT articles, as well as CT specific information related to prisons and prisoner reentry. In addition, Leadership Team created a screening Toolkit, called "On the Edge of Possibility: *Life on Parole* and the Justice System in CT and Beyond: A Resource Guide for Public Screenings", which was piloted at the follow up focus group to stakeholders in November 2018 and received positive reviews. This purpose of the toolkit is to give individuals, organizations, and communities a deeper understanding of incarceration, parole, and reentry in Connecticut and beyond.

Throughout the project, the Project Leadership Team made efforts to engage multiple-levels of stakeholders, including: the Connecticut State Department of Correction, state policymakers, higher education, national stakeholders, parolees and parole officers featured in the OTO materials, as well as the general public (various communities across the state). The efforts to engage each of these groups are described in detail.

Results

OTO Content: Accurate & Compelling. Given the depth of this analysis, it can be concluded that, overall, *the On the Outside* media project is an accurate portrayal of the complexities of parole through the lens of multiple viewpoints. Stakeholders felt that the stories / backgrounds of the sample of the 12 individuals recorded were representative of the state's parole population terms of demographics, but more importantly content and context, capturing the complexities from the viewpoints of both the P.O. and the parolee. Specifically, drug addiction, the stress of parole, the stipulations are made to be broken, PO's unilateral decision-making, but their tendency to show restraint are all accurate portrayals of the issue.

OTO Impact on Parolees. From the perspective of the four parolees interviewed for this project, the OTO media release is an accurate portrayal of the parole / reentry experience and can be a useful tool for engaging the public. During Jeff's interview of Bobby, whose experiences on parole were filmed but his story was not included in the final cut, he said that the documentary was "pretty good," and that it "could be used to show it to people who have never really been in the system, to know what it's like...it's oppressive..." Regarding being filmed for the documentary, Bobby said, "I enjoyed your company. I was a good feel'n to be followed and filmed. I really enjoyed it. I appreciated being followed for the film...it was a good experience for me. Ya'll good people, man. I respect what you all are doing."

Jessica's experiences on parole were a major focus of the LOP film. She remained on the outside and even served on a LOP screening panel at the 2018 New Haven Film festival in May, 2018. Before the film screening, Jessica was interviewed by Jeff Arak. Of her experienced being filmed for LOP, Jessica said "I felt like it (the documentary) was awesome. I got a lot of positive feedback about it. I felt like a lot was left out, but it was seen by a lot. Maybe it made a difference to some people...there are people in authority who are willing to give help and not just lock someone up. Whereas though beforehand, I didn't experience it. I wasn't willing to accept the help. I hope (the documentary) will be used for educational purposes, to educate the public on people go through things in life. You know, things happen and it's all up to that person and society to better ourselves. I've had people stop me and thank me and say that I'm an inspiration and wish me luck on my journey. That makes me feel good."

Project evaluator Jacob Werblow interviewed two former parolees ('Warren' and 'Keith'), who also served as panelists for the community conversations after the film screenings. Regarding their response to the OTO materials, both men felt that the *film was accurate and portrayed the challenges that parolees and POs are under*. They said that they were both encouraged of IMRP's effort in hosting public screening in various communities around Connecticut. Regarding LOP, Warren commented that although it's impossible to cover every issue in one hour, he felt that one thing missing from the film was more of a focus on the trauma that the parolees had experienced. He felt that if the cause of the trauma is not addressed in prison or reentry, then it is unlikely that the returning individual will ever be able to successfully reintegrate into society. On the other hand, Keith felt that the most important factor in determining the success of returning individuals is making better choices and learning to ask for help. According to Keith, when parolees are ready to follow the rules and decide to change, they will be successful.

Impact on the DOC. The CT DOC deserves praise for allowing unprecedented access to the DCTV filmmakers to capture the realness and complexity of parole in CT. This shows clear openness and leadership from the top levels of the administration. According to Jeff Arak, a co-producer of the OTO, when the DOC was shown the final cut of the film, they were pleased with it, calling it "very accurate" and "balanced." Months later, however, after the documentary was aired nationally, Andrew Clark and Jacob Werblow met with the DOC administration, and received a more reserved response. At this time, the DOC indicated that they were not interested in: (a) using the film for any educational or professional development purposes within the DOC, (b) participating in public screenings or community conversations, (c) nor in

providing a public statement about the film and its impact. Because of this response, the OTO project might have actually had a *disempowering* impact on the CT DOC. Initially, the Leadership Team planned to develop curriculum and learning modules for screenings within the DOC, but because of their lack of interest, we chose to focus our efforts on other venues and audiences.

Impact on Higher Education. From the perspective of institutions of higher education in Connecticut, OTO has had a very positive impact. At the time of writing the report our distribution strategy, has and continues to successfully impacted universities across the state of Connecticut. Thus far, we have screened LOP to over 500 university students at Eastern Connecticut State University, Central Connecticut State University, and UCONN, and have received very positive results in the audience surveys. Future screenings are also confirmed at Quinnipiac School of Law. In most cases, audience surveys have been collected at each of the screenings. Results are provided in the following section.

Impact on the General Public. Given IMRP's objective to use the *Life on Parole* (LOP) documentary to inform the public about the complexities of reentry, the LOP leadership Team developed a brief survey to capture attendees' perspectives on the film and the issue of parole in general. This survey was developed through several iterations, which emerged from topics discussed in the two stakeholder focus groups. Out of approximately 250 participants, 232 completed the surveys - for a 92% completion rate.

When asked, "What is the most important idea that you will take away from tonight's presentation?" the following themes emerged in the attendees' responses (presented from most frequent to least):

- (a) *the system is broken / doesn't work,*
- (b) *LOP is an accurate portrayal of the system,*
- (c) *LOP screening & discussion humanizes the issue,*
- (d) *supports are unknown / insufficient, (e) POs are inconsistent, need better training,*
- (e) *POs have a tension between helping vs. punishing,*
- (f) *hopeful that there's an effort to change the system,*
- (g) *"If parolees work hard, they can be successful."*

When asked, "Suggestions: What's missing from tonight's film and discussion?" the following themes emerged in the attendees' responses (presented from most frequent to least):

- (a) *nothing missing,*
- (b) *need for models that work (other states / countries),*
- (c) *better discussion / facilitation,*
- (d) *need for more diverse perspectives in the film (esp. women),*
- (e) *need to see impact of parole / incarceration on youth / families,*
- (f) *need for more diverse perspectives of parolees (panel), and*
- (g) *CT PO trainings? How to improve?*

At the time of writing this report, seven more screenings across CT are confirmed through April 4th, 2019.

Impact on the Media. To investigate the landscape of US media coverage on issues of re-entry and to follow the conversation generated by the *Frontline* broadcast and the *New York Times Coverage*, *Media Cloud* was used to analyze the impact of the broadcast of LOP. *Media Cloud* is a system for tracking discourse in digital media. The analysis uncovered some interesting findings: media covers 'parole' far less than 'recidivism' and 'reentry.' Results of their analysis suggest that 'parole' only appears to get the media's attention as an anomaly or a case-by-case basis (ex. O.J. Simpson, the Cheshire Murders) and not as a policy/program. The *OTO* media release did not appear to have drastically changed the trend in media coverage on the issue of 'parole.' Some suggestions for *Media Cloud* to consider for future analyses are given.

Follow-Up Stakeholder Focus Group

Nine individuals participated in a follow-up focus group on October 7th, 2018 at IMRP. In attendance were individuals representing the Malta Justice Initiative, the Reentry Roundtables, IMRP, the Department of Corrections (retired), and Family ReEntry.¹

Of the items discussed, participants agreed that LOP was an accurate portrayal of CT's current system of parole. Attendees expressed that the frustration of the POs as depicted in the film was "clear and real," and acknowledged that "Parole officers have a difficult job with limited supports." Regarding positive policy changes, which may or may not be as a result of the film, two individuals stated that POs are now making referrals to the local Alternative in the Community Programs (AIC), of which there are 19 in the state. Since September, Hartford PO's have made at least 25 referrals, which participants found commendable. There is concern, however, that risk and needs assessments aren't being conducted when individuals are given parole, so parolees are being referred to AIC only after they have committed a violation.

Participants also expressed the need for better communication between the DOC and support networks during reentry. One individual expressed, "There is little connection between the good things that (inmates do) during incarceration and when (they are) on parole. Programs need to have better knowledge what each returning citizen has accomplished (during incarceration). If it's not followed up in the community, how can they be successful?" In addition, there was a general consensus that all CT POs should have the same supports that exist in the TRUE Unit. Regarding halfway houses, participants were clearly frustrated with the lack of oversight. There was a general frustration with the lack of willingness of the DOC to support this project and to support meaningful change in parole / re-entry. Recommendations to the CT Department of Corrections and for future grant funders and media projects to consider are also provided.

¹ Interview via telephone after the meeting.

Conclusions and Significance:

This project is unique in the complexity of its content, engagement strategy, and multi-layered evaluation design. It is important to note that stakeholder perspectives were central to this project's direction. Specifically, multiple stakeholders were involved in: (a) determining the measures of success of the evaluation and appropriateness of the project; (b) serving as panelists following film screenings; and (c) assisting in the coordination and the dissemination of the engagement strategy.

Stakeholder perspectives were also essential in determining the significant gaps that the OTO media release did not adequately address, so that we could provide supplementary resources to the general public as well as organizations or individuals interested in facilitating a film screening and community conversation. For example, stakeholders repeatedly stated (both in the focus groups and in screening participant surveys) a desire to know more about 'what works' or 'best-practice' in reentry. Thus, among other topics, we have identified and provided supplementary resources highlighting the German / Finnish models, as they are widely recognized as two of the most successful prison and reentry systems in the world.

Given the depth of this analysis, it can be concluded that, overall, the OTO media project is an accurate portrayal of the complexities of parole through the lens of multiple viewpoints. Stakeholders felt that the stories / backgrounds of the sample of the 12 individuals recorded were representative of the state's parole population in terms of demographics, content, and context, and adequately captured the complexities of reentry from the viewpoints of both the P.O. and the parolee. Stakeholders strongly agreed that the specific topics of drug addiction, stress, that stipulations are made to be broken, PO's unilateral decision-making balanced with a tendency to show restraint, are all accurate portrayals of the issue. In addition, OTO gives attention to the following topics, all of which are worthy of exploration: the importance of family supports, effective drug treatment, childhood trauma, CIP perspectives, pressure to ensure public safety, likelihood that parolees will recidivate, storytelling and providing generalizable data, and humanizing the issue. In this way, LOP sufficiently captures the complexity of 'parole' accurately, from the viewpoints of multiple stakeholders, which is, in itself, a commendable task in a 55-minute time period. As a result of public screenings of LOP and OTO materials, we were further able to strengthen the impact of this effort by being able to expand and promote effective conversations on this sensitive and important topic. Recommendations for the CT DOC and for Future Media Coverage are also provided.

Awards and Recognition. According to numerous conversations, interviews, and surveys with multiple stakeholders (e.g., former parolees, former DOC administrators, academics, reentry service providers, and members of the general public), LOP appears to be an accurate and robust portrayal of parole in CT. By exploring the topic of parole in this way, LOP brings attention to an issue of national importance, one that directly impacts hundreds of millions of people around the nation, yet has historically received little, if any, national media coverage. Because of this, and the unique collaboration that was required, and the quality of the

documentary, LOP aired twice nationally and received two prestigious national media awards in 2018. In December 2018, *Frontline* was awarded the *DuPont-Columbia Gold Baton Award*, a prestigious award for excellence in journalism that hasn't been given in over a decade. LOP was specifically mentioned in the award letter from the DuPont-Columbia Award committee. LOP was also awarded the winner of the *2018 Media for a Just Society* in the TV/Video category.

Next Steps:

One of the main takeaways from the multiple discussions centering around LOP is the intense pressure on the point of reentry from prison – both on the returning citizen and the supervision authority. The overwhelming consensus from participants in these discussions is that we can get better outcomes than we currently achieve. Numerous studies suggest ways in which either the system or the individual could adapt to realize greater results through particular programming. But what if success lies more in the overall culture, and not any particular program or individual action?

Referenced in LOP are Connecticut's *Second Chance* reform efforts under former Governor Dannel Malloy. Not highlighted in the film are newer iterations of these reforms, most notably those resulting from Gov. Malloy and Com. Semple's trip overseas to visit Germany's prison system. Upon their return, both individuals spoke of the immense value in being exposed to a system rooted in an entirely different culture – one that values rehabilitation and resocialization as the primary directives in a corrections environment. They learned that this approach yields significant better reentry results than those achieved across the US. As a result, they began to experiment with change in CT prisons through the establishment of specialized units based on the German model. These changes, although lauded both in state and across the country, have been relatively small in scope. The vexing issue is what would allow for a more wide scale implementation of these changes?

To address this question, the IMRP believes it important to recreate the immersion experience. This time, however, the focus would be on prisoner reentry and would explore the role of the rehabilitative prison environment on individual successes. It will involve documenting the experiences of small group of grassroots stakeholders from Connecticut (DOC staff, former CT parolees and family members, policymakers, scholars, and students, etc.) in touring some of the world's most successful prison re-entry systems. We anticipate this research would have state and national implications.