JUSTICE, OPPORTUNITIES, AND REHABILITATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/2997965X.2025.2595340

Community as sanctuary: reentry experiences of formerly incarcerated Muslims

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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study explores the experiences of formerly incarcerated Muslims returning to a small city in upstate New York, highlighting their journey of navigating profound habitus changes, lingering disciplinary behaviors from prison, and the welcoming embrace of local faith communities. Drawing on six months of participant observation and interviews with Imams, chaplains, and congregants at a local masjid, the research identifies four core themes. First, chaplains serve as crucial "liminal figures," bridging highly structured prison life and less regulated community contexts. Second, while institutional routines like "count time" reflexes persist, they represent a starting point from which new habits are formed. Third, the shift from carceral routines to unstructured social environments presents an opportunity for growth and adaptation, supported by the faith community. Finally, Imams and the mosque community play a pivotal role in this transition, providing spiritual guidance, practical resources, and a powerful sense of belonging that fosters successful reintegration. Integrating multiple theoretical frameworks, this study highlights the promise of holistic, culturally sensitive reentry initiatives that empower returning citizens by addressing both material needs and the profound psychological journey of post-incarceration life.

KEYWORDS

reentry; formerly incarcerated Muslims; reintegration; recidivism; institutionalization; faith-based

Introduction

The United States has one of the highest incarceration rates in the world, a reality that has prompted extensive debate over the economic, social, and moral implications of mass incarceration (Kaeble & Cowhig, 2018). Consequently, hundreds of thousands of men and women return to communities across the country each year. While they face compounding obstacles, including the stigma of a criminal record and housing instability (Stansfield & Mowen, 2019), they also bring with them a potential for transformation and renewal.

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Breaking the cycle of recidivism (Lötter, 2020) requires more than short-term job placement. Effective reentry strategies address the whole person: how incarceration shapes an individual's sense of self and how new connections to supportive networks can pave the way for a new future (Garbarino, 2018). As Durkheim (1951) suggested, moving from a highly regulated setting to a less structured environment can be challenging, but with proper support, it can become a journey toward positive integration.

Faith-based organizations have emerged as powerful partners in this process, offering tangible assistance and promoting spiritual, emotional, and communal well-being (Kaufman, 2019; Khan, 2020). The role and governance of religion in carceral settings has become a significant topic of study across various national contexts (Martínez-Ariño & Zwilling, 2020). While much research focuses on Christian models, this study illuminates the unique contributions of Muslim communities (Said & Davidson, 2023). This is particularly important given the significant number of Muslims in the incarcerated population (Christensen et al., 2020) and the additional layers of stigma they may face (Jafri et al., 2025).

This study focuses on the hopeful experiences of formerly incarcerated Muslims in a small city in upstate New York, exploring how they find belonging in local faith communities. Through ethnographic fieldwork, this research illuminates: (1) chaplains as vital guides between prison and community life; (2) the process of overcoming institutional routines; (3) the successful navigation of new social environments; and (4) the critical role of the masjid community in fostering resilience and creating pathways away from isolation and reoffending. This study underscores that successful reentry is a story of cultural and symbolic reorientation, empowered by faith and community.

Literature review

Faith-based reentry programming

Amid the search for effective reentry strategies, faith-based programming has become a focal point. These programs offer unique advantages, providing a ready-made support network, moral guidance, mentorship, and a grounding sense of community (Robinson-Edwards & Kewley, 2018; Said & Davidson, 2023). Studies show that participation in these initiatives can lead to reduced recidivism and positive personal growth (Duwe & Johnson, 2025; Stansfield et al., 2020).

While the mechanisms of "faith" in rehabilitation are complex (Yin, 2019), these programs often facilitate powerful conversion experiences and spiritual renewals that align with established desistance theories (Ellis & Inzana, 2024). Religiosity can foster existential belief and virtues that in turn improve mental health and reduce aggression (Jang et al., 2018). This

study contributes to a growing body of literature that expands beyond Christian contexts to explore the rich potential within Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, and other minority faith communities (Haviv et al., 2020; Teman & Morag, 2018).

Challenges and opportunities for formerly incarcerated Muslims

Formerly incarcerated Muslims, like many others, navigate post-release barriers such as finding housing and employment (Lötter, 2020). They also have unique opportunities for support related to their religious identity. The need for halal meals, prayer schedules, and specialized spiritual counseling can be met by vibrant and welcoming Muslim communities (Bergmann et al., 2024; Lutz et al., 2021).

While negative stereotypes can be a challenge (Jafri et al., 2025), they also present an opportunity for faith communities to demonstrate radical hospitality and counter prejudice. The experience of "jailhouse religion," particularly conversion to Islam, can be a source of profound transformation, helping inmates cope with the strains of incarceration and find a new purpose (Purdie et al., 2022; Teman & Morag, 2021; Wilkinson et al., 2021). Supportive local communities can help bridge the gap between faith found in prison and faith lived out in freedom (Yin et al., 2022). Rather than reinforcing hierarchies (Guzman, 2020), these communities can become places of healing and empowerment.

Masjid and religious leadership

Within Muslim communities, Imams and mosque congregations are powerful catalysts for successful reentry. They act as "hubs" for spiritual mentorship, culturally competent counseling, and positive peer networks (Denney, 2018). Through chaplaincy training and community collaboration, religious leaders can ensure a continuity of care from prison to freedom (Akca et al., 2023; Zawiślak, 2025). The masjid provides structured, positive activities that foster a sense of belonging and purpose.

While some mosques may have limited resources (Bhutta et al., 2019; Kaufman, 2019), many are rising to the occasion with dedicated volunteer programs. The efficacy of the masjid as a sanctuary is a testament to the leadership's capacity to integrate spiritual teaching with a comprehensive suite of support services.

Theoretical frameworks: discipline, anomie, and habitus

Several theoretical perspectives help illuminate the transformative journey of reentry. Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power describes how

prison routines reshape individuals. Post-release, these ingrained habits can be consciously reshaped into new, positive routines. The psychological pressures of incarceration, or "prison strains," can lead to negative emotions like anger and fear, which in turn are linked to deviance (Joon Jang, 2020).

Durkheim's (1951) ideas about anomie highlight the potential disorientation of moving to a less regulated society. However, this transition also represents a move toward freedom and autonomy, where a supportive community can provide a new, healthier form of social integration. Bourdieu's (1977) notion of habitus shows how a "prison habitus" can be transformed. The reentry experience is a process of learning and adapting, where old dispositions are replaced with new ones that align with a positive, prosocial life on the outside, often facilitated by the welcoming norms of the local masjid (Purdie et al., 2022).

Methods

Site selection and participant observation

This research employed a qualitative, ethnographic approach to delve deeply into the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated Muslims reentering a small city in upstate New York. Over six months, I engaged in participant observation at a local masjid and conducted interviews with multiple stakeholders involved in reentry. I selected one masjid with a well-known reentry committee that meets twice a month and collaborates with regional correctional facilities. Gaining permission from the Imam and committee members, I attended prayers, study sessions, social gatherings, and dedicated reentry forums. By immersing myself in the daily life of the mosque, I observed how formerly incarcerated individuals interacted with non-incarcerated congregants, how leadership navigated tensions, and how community support services were organized.

Detailed field notes captured both structured elements—like the reentry committee's official agenda—and informal exchanges (e.g., hallway conversations about job prospects or personal struggles). These observations allowed me to document the masjid's demographic makeup, the roles of chaplains and volunteers, and subtle cultural practices (e.g., the spacing of prayer rows or the tone of communal supplications).

Interviews

To gather a range of perspectives, I conducted 9 semi-structured interviews (45–90 minutes each) with:

- One Imam (Arab American, leading the masjid and coordinating outreach),

- Two chaplains (both African American men, working in local correctional facilities),
- Four formerly incarcerated Muslims (three African American, one Latino; ages 40–60, released within the past five years, varying in length of incarceration and pre-prison occupations from manual labor to sales),
- Two non-incarcerated regular attendees (one a second-generation Arab American small business owner, and the other, an African American public school teacher; both active in the mosque community).

Interview topics included personal and religious backgrounds, prison life and routines, post-release expectations and shocks, the role of faith in coping with reentry stress, and experiences (positive or negative) within the masjid community. All interviews were audio-recorded (with consent) and transcribed. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

Data analysis

I applied thematic analysis guided by core sociological and criminological concepts. Drawing on Durkheim's notion of social regulation, I identified moments where participants struggled with the transition from rigid to unstructured daily life. Foucault's (1977) disciplinary lens highlighted "docile body" phenomena—such as reflexive obedience to count time. Bourdieu's habitus concept illuminated how prison-based social norms endured after release. I also coded for emergent themes, such as the importance of communal prayer, the sense of belonging (or lack thereof) at the mosque, and the roles of chaplains and Imams in facilitating identity shifts.

Throughout this iterative process, I compared field notes, memos, and interview transcripts to ensure internal consistency. My goal was to integrate direct quotations that best illustrated the social dynamics unfolding at the masjid, especially in relation to institutionalized routines, anomie, and community-led support initiatives.

Findings

Chaplains as liminal figures

In both interviews and reentry committee meetings, the chaplains, Rahim and Yusuf, consistently emerged as "liminal figures" straddling prison and community contexts (Purdie et al., 2022). They each spent substantial time working within correctional facilities, facilitating Islamic study circles and offering spiritual counsel. Rahim emphasized how "it's a whole different

culture inside," with strict timetables, pat-downs, and heavily controlled movement. "You can't just walk out of that world and expect to be normal," he added. "Our job is to prepare them for the outside, and prepare the outside for them."

Still, these chaplains were also active outside prison walls, regularly attending the local masjid's events. Their insights allowed them to warn non-incarcerated congregants about the potential culture shock reentrants face. Yusuf explained, "When a brother comes home, he's used to everything being set. That can make our flexible prayer times and casual gatherings feel foreign. We can't just expect him to magically fit in." Chaplains thus played a vital mediator role, guiding the masjid community to avoid unintentionally alienating newly arrived members (Denney, 2018).

Rahim also shared how he himself felt "partly institutionalized" even though he was never incarcerated: "If I'm at someone's house and the door's closed, I wait, thinking it's locked. That's muscle memory from corrections. Imagine someone actually locked up for 15 years." This mirrored some reentrants' stories, underscoring how deep-seated institutional routines can remain.

The lingering impact of institutionalization

Formerly incarcerated participants described ongoing effects of carceral routines. Jamal, age 60, spent over a decade in prison and could not shake the daily count time reflex: "At four o'clock, I literally want to tell everyone to hush. My family thinks it's odd, but it's automatic." Another reentrant, David, noted a different kind of adjustment: "It's the small things you don't think about. The other day, I found myself just standing in the kitchen, waiting, because it wasn't 'mealtime' yet. It's a process, learning to be free again." Rahim and Yusuf, in separate interviews, confirmed they had witnessed many individuals who experienced this same countdown mentality or expected everyday life to unfold under watchful supervision.

Such behaviors illustrate Foucault's (1977) description of how disciplinary power permeates the body, creating "docile bodies" that unreflectively follow regimented patterns. Malik, another formerly incarcerated man, explained, "At first, I was overwhelmed by choices—what time to wake up, where to walk, what to eat, when to pray. Inside, that's all decided for you. Outside, nobody's telling you what to do." The sense of personal agency that many outside communities celebrate instead felt daunting to someone long accustomed to institutional directives (Abrams, 2024).

Drastic change in social environment and habitus

Several participants spoke of a sudden shift in social environments. Kareem recalled how prison-based worship felt intensely communal: "In there, we prayed shoulder-to-shoulder. We had an hour after Jumu'ah to

circle up, talk, share grievances. It was mandatory to stay until the guard let us move." Once released, he experienced the community mosque differently. "People come and go quickly," he said, "and if you move too close in prayer, they might inch away without realizing that, to me, closeness is normal." Malik echoed this sentiment: "Inside, your brothers in faith are your lifeline. Out here, everyone has their own life, their own family. It's not a bad thing, it's just… different. It takes time to find your footing."

From a Durkheimian viewpoint, prisons enforce high levels of social regulation and impose a forced form of integration. Participants described a strong sense of collective identity inside prison, partially due to the strict schedules and the communal nature of group worship. Upon release, the relatively unregulated life in free society can feel chaotic. As Rahim explained, "Some guys tell me prison was simpler. You knew exactly what was expected every moment. Here, no one's giving you that structure."

In Bourdieu's (1977) terms, the prison cultivates a distinct habitus that includes bodily postures (standing close in prayer lines, adopting a stoic demeanor) and assumptions about how people will interact. Outside, many reentrants find themselves in a "fish out of water" scenario: the dispositions they honed inside do not align with the norms of a diverse local masjid where worshipers differ in language, cultural background, and how strictly they line up for prayer.

Building community connections

While the formal reentry committee and assigned mentors offered structured support, interactions with the general congregant population represented a process of building new connections. Observations after Friday prayers revealed a community actively working to be inclusive. Many congregants made a point to offer handshakes and the traditional greeting of "As-salamu alaykum" (peace be upon you) to the formerly incarcerated men. While initial conversations were often brief, they served as important first steps in building new relationships. Rather than social distance, there was a sense of respectful space. In the informal social circles that formed over tea and snacks, new members were given the room to engage at their own pace. This approach stemmed from a place of care; congregants were mindful of not wanting to pry or cause discomfort. Omar, one of the non-incarcerated participants, later explained, "You want to be welcoming, but you also want to be respectful. You don't want to ask the wrong thing, so you start with a smile and a greeting and let them lead." This thoughtful approach, while different from the intense fellowship of prison, was a sign of a community trying to build trust organically.

The Imam and the Masjid community as mediators

Imam Malik—an Arab American deeply engaged in interfaith outreach and chaplain training—described his work with reentering Muslims as a core part of the mosque's mission. "We hold reentry forums so the community understands these brothers' struggles," he explained. "It's not about pity; it's about genuine support. Our faith teaches us that when someone seeks to better themselves, we must be there to help lift them up. If we don't address these challenges, we risk losing them to old habits."

He underscored that his duty extended beyond providing religious education. Many reentrants needed job references, parole-compliant housing, or mental health referrals. "We can't just say, 'Pray and everything will be fine,'" said the Imam. "We coordinate with social service agencies, and we have volunteers who help with resumes or drive them to interviews."

Non-incarcerated congregants like Omar also embraced a mentoring role: "We pair up with guys who just got out, at least for a month or two. It's like a buddy system—help with questions, whether it's 'How do I apply for ID?' or 'Where can I buy halal groceries on a tight budget?' If they sense we truly welcome them, they stick around" (Leary, 2018). David, one of the reentrants, added, "Having Omar to call… it was everything. He didn't treat me like an ex-con, he treated me like a brother. That made all the difference."

Aisha, a public school teacher, active volunteer, and relative of the chaplain Rahim, offered another perspective on the community's role. "As a teacher, I see potential in everyone," she said. "When the brothers come back, it's not about where they've been, it's about where they're going. We can offer tutoring, help them write a resume… it's about giving them the tools to rebuild. That's our responsibility as a community."

Rahim saw these community bonds as critical in preventing recidivism. "If a brother feels lost and unwelcome, he might drift to old networks—people who led him astray in the first place," he noted. "But if the masjid steps up, offers a sense of continuity, he can start building a new identity grounded in healthy habits" (Mowen et al., 2018).

Discussion and conclusion

Broader implications

This ethnographic research illustrates the intricate interplay of institutionalization, identity, and religious community in the lives of formerly incarcerated Muslims. Echoing Durkheim (1951), participants commonly experienced the loosening of prison regulation as jarring, at times triggering feelings of anomie. Foucault's (1977) framework clarifies how carceral routines continue to govern bodily reflexes—seen in the

compulsion to observe "count time" or to refrain from opening doors without permission. Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus further shows how prison fosters embodied dispositions that do not readily adapt to the comparatively informal norms of civilian society, including local mosque settings.

Yet the findings also emphasize the constructive role that chaplains, Imams, and masjid volunteers can play. By recognizing how "prison Islam" diverges from community practice, chaplains act as cultural translators, coaching mosque members about the ingrained behaviors new arrivals might exhibit (Purdie et al., 2022). Imams who downplay superficial differences in prayer style and highlight a shared faith identity help reentrants feel less alienated. Meanwhile, volunteer mentors offer practical assistance—housing referrals, job training—and vital moral support (Said & Davidson, 2023). This process reflects a form of "identity work" where religious narratives help individuals recast their past and build a prosocial future (Hallett, 2023).

Given the high rates of recidivism in the United States (Kaeble & Cowhig, 2018), reentry programs must address not only material needs but also the cultural and psychological dimensions of transitioning from a total institution to a more fluid social world (Jang et al., 2023). Faith-based communities like the one studied here can serve as "sanctuaries," providing belonging, accountability, and spiritual guidance (Khan, 2020). While some Muslims find solace in the structured brotherhood of prison-based worship, releasing them into mosques that are unaware of prison's regimented routines can lead to misunderstanding or even rejection (Yin et al., 2022). In turn, the risk of falling back on old habits or social circles increases, perpetuating cycles of recidivism.

Policy recommendations

- *Facilitate Continuity of Chaplaincy*: Establish mechanisms for prison chaplains to maintain contact with reentrants post-release, easing the abrupt transition to external faith communities (Akca et al., 2023).
- *Cultural Competence Training*: Encourage mosques (and other faith institutions) to offer training sessions that educate congregations on prison culture, institutional routines, and the challenges of reentry.
- *Holistic Support Services*: Expand beyond religious guidance to include practical programs—resume-building workshops, referral systems for mental health support, assistance obtaining IDs, and so forth (Palmer et al., 2025).
- *Mentorship or Buddy Systems*: Develop structured pairs of formerly incarcerated individuals and non-incarcerated members to foster

mutual trust, accountability, and smoother social integration (Leary, 2018).

- *Collaboration with Social Service Agencies*: Strengthen ties between mosques, parole officers, housing programs, and local nonprofits to ensure that returning citizens can access consistent, wrap-around care.

Limitations and future research

This study focuses on one masjid in a small city in upstate New York, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other regions or larger metropolitan contexts, such as New York City. The research also relies on a relatively small sample of participants. Crucially, all of the formerly incarcerated participants were men, and the study does not include the reentry experiences of formerly incarcerated Muslim women, whose pathways and challenges may differ significantly. Future work could expand the scope by including multiple mosques or following the same individuals over a longer period to track changes in religiosity, family dynamics, and community reintegration (Niaz et al., 2024). Additionally, studies comparing the experiences of Muslim reentrants in different cultural contexts—such as large urban areas with multiple mosques—could help refine our understanding of the factors that shape successful reentry (Bergmann et al., 2024).

Conclusion

This study reveals how formerly incarcerated Muslims in a small U.S. city navigate reentry through a delicate interplay of carceral legacies, faith-based support, and community reception. The rigid discipline of prison instills deeply ingrained routines—such as daily "count time" reflexes—that persist long after release, highlighting the lingering reach of institutional power. Yet, as seen in interviews with Imams and chaplains, faith-based communities can serve as a buffer against the disorientation and stigma that often accompany reintegration. By acknowledging how "prison Islam" may differ from everyday worship, mosque leaders and volunteers help returning citizens adapt at both a spiritual and practical level, offering a combination of mentorship, resources, and empathy. In Durkheimian terms, the masjid acts as a site of renewed regulation and social integration, mitigating the anomie that can follow sudden freedom from regimented constraints.

Moving forward, reentry programs would benefit from expanding collaborative links between correctional institutions and local mosques. This would include systematic training for chaplains to better match external community norms with prison-based religious practices, ensuring that

incarcerated Muslims develop routines they can sustain once released. Similarly, mosques that recognize the persistent effects of institutionalization—such as the craving for structure or the lingering fear of surveillance—can devise targeted interventions aimed at normalizing choice and personal autonomy. By coordinating outreach across interfaith coalitions, government agencies, and grassroots organizations, faith communities can amplify the supportive networks available to reentrants, ultimately reducing their vulnerability to recidivism and fostering a renewed sense of purpose (Johnson et al., 2021).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Statement of originality and exclusive submission

I hereby confirm that this manuscript has not been published elsewhere, nor has it been submitted simultaneously for publication in any other journal or publication outlet.

Replication statement

The field notes, reflective journals, and interview transcripts from this study are not available for public distribution to protect participant privacy. Methodological details and analyses are provided in this manuscript for transparency and scholarly review.

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