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SOCIAL REINTEGRATION OF FORMER INMATES:

Networked Strategies for Promoting Public Policies
and Strengthening Civil Society Organizations

Index

Introduction	3
Network Initiatives for the Social Reintegration of Former Inmates	5
Effective Network Strategies for Reintegrating Former Inmates	9
Endnotes	11

Introduction

The social reintegration process for former inmates presents challenges that extend beyond the confines of the justice system alone. In the Brazilian context, marked by regional disparities and social, racial, and educational inequalities, the lack of material, financial, and psychosocial support places ex-inmates in a cycle of social rejection and criminality.¹ The deficiency of adequate investments, exacerbated by an emphasis on punishment over post-release reintegration, intensifies these challenges. Thus, it underscores the importance of networked collaboration among public, private, and civil society sectors to optimize resource use, promote integrated solutions, and overcome obstacles in assisting former inmates, providing multidimensional support for social reintegration.

This report outlines the strategies of five network-based initiatives aimed at former inmates,² implemented both in Brazil and globally. The document details how these initiatives contribute to strengthening the social reintegration of former inmates and illustrates how they can serve as models to inspire other coordinated actions in the same field.

Social reintegration³ of former inmates and its related concepts used here synonymously – such as (re)insertion, (re)inclusion, (re)socialization, (re)education, (re)adaptation, and (re)habilitation⁴ – should be seen as a priority not only by the criminal justice system but by all stakeholders who may have a direct or indirect influence on this process.

It is a global challenge that requires reforms in the justice system, strengthening the rule of law, and implementing specific public policies focused on the various challenges these individuals face in their resocialization process, including aspects such as social interaction, employment opportunities, and access to housing, health, and education.

This study acknowledges that the pursuit of social reintegration should be approached from the perspective of ensuring rights and not limited to the view of security and reducing criminal recidivism. This principle was adopted based on the recognition that the criminal justice system is an environment that creates and perpetuates inequalities for the individuals within it. Therefore, ensuring the rights that were denied before, during, and after incarceration is essential for effective social reintegration.

Interventions and programs with multiple approaches for this group are rarely accessible, limited to sporadic opportunities to access essential services. In Brazil, which ranks as the third country worldwide in terms of the absolute number of incarcerated individuals,⁵ there is a significant variation in incarceration rates across states, which highlights the regional disparities. The composition of Brazil's prison population also reflects social, racial, and educational inequalities, emphasizing the selective nature of a justice system which imprisons a disproportionate number of black, young, and uneducated people.

Hence, without adequate preparation and material, financial, psychological, and social support, the challenges to social reintegration often become insurmountable obstacles, contributing to greater community insecurity and constant recidivism. This can lead former inmates into a vicious cycle of criminality and social exclusion, where prison intensifies this cycle and delays their chances of effective reintegration. Additionally, crime brings high social costs, exacerbating situations of poverty and stigmatization, and incurs expenses related to investigations, trials, as well as legal and prison procedures. Because it contributes to prison overcrowding, recidivism is one of the main barriers to improving public safety.

An extremely unequal approach is evident regarding investment in public security in Brazil. In 2022, the budget allocation for law enforcement was R\$35.9 billion, while prisons received R\$8.8 billion, and the post-release segment just R\$13 million, according to Justa platform.⁶

Public and private funding limitations restrict the resources available for reintegration programs for former inmates. In this context, creating networks involving initiatives to develop public policies and strengthen civil society organizations is crucial.

According to Neves (2009),⁷ networks “can be seen as organizational systems capable of bringing together individuals and institutions in a democratic and participatory manner around common goals or achievements.” Networking aims to optimize and enhance resources and efforts, promote integrated solutions, develop public policies, and secure funding to support former inmates.

Adopting a more comprehensive and integrated approach among stakeholders facilitates the development of coordinated strategies that align agendas and minimize duplication in resource allocation and organizational activities. By centralizing coordination and communication between various actors, the social impact of these networks is maximized. Thus, intersectoral collaboration offers a complete perspective that encompasses immediate demands and factors influencing the long-term reintegration process, thereby reducing segmentation and isolation in addressing a topic still neglected by society and the public sector.

Therefore, this report aims to analyze national and international networking initiatives focused on former prison inmates, engaging various governmental levels, civil society, and the private sector. Its purpose is to offer inspiration for implementing actions in this field and highlight the strategies employed by these initiatives.

Network Initiatives for the Social Reintegration of Former Inmates

Networking initiatives aimed at the social reintegration of former inmates can vary greatly. However, they share the characteristic of being systems that unite individuals and institutions in a democratic and participative manner with the common goal of developing solutions. Therefore, this section provides a brief overview of various initiatives dedicated to creating solutions for the challenges faced by people exiting the prison system.

RAESP (Brazil)⁸

The Prison System Ex-inmates' Attention Network (RAESP) initiative involves governmental institutions, civil society organizations (including NGOs, OSCIPs, philanthropic and religious entities, and private companies), social movements, and individuals. This network advocates for social rights and works to improve community reintegration conditions for individuals exiting the prison system.

RAESP's primary goal is to ensure that former inmates have access to a comprehensive suite of public policies. Its strategies include professional training for staff and ex-prisoners, efforts to reform public policies, and conducting and publishing research on prison-related issues. Additionally, it aims to develop an effective communication strategy, mainly through targeted social media campaigns.

Since its establishment in 2006, RAESP has been pivotal in guiding former inmates to institutions that meet their needs. It employs an intersectoral approach to cater to the individual needs of former inmates and their families, leveraging services from both the public sector and civil society to ensure effective community reintegration.

Initially established in Rio de Janeiro, RAESPs now operate across various Brazilian states such as Rio Grande do Norte, Mato Grosso, Ceará, Minas Gerais, Maranhão, Mato Grosso do Sul, and Tocantins. Supported by entities like the National Council of Justice, which acts as a multiplier in strengthening and spreading the development of new networks, along with the Ministry of Justice, the UNDP Brazil, and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, RAESPs has become key interinstitutional coordinators advocating for the social rights of former inmates nationwide. In 2023, the creation of the National Network for Attention to Former Inmates (RENAESP)⁹ centralized these efforts, enhancing coordination, communication, and the sharing of best practices among various actors and local networks.

RAESPs and RENAESP act as platforms for collaboration at both local and national levels, addressing the challenges of social reintegration. By acknowledging regional specificities and focusing on the distinct needs of former inmates, these networks facilitate institutional investment in improvements, promoting a culture of mutual learning and resource optimization.

Community Council (Brazil)¹⁰

Community Councils are essential entities within the Brazilian criminal execution system, as established by the Penal Execution Law (Law No. 7.210/1984). Their role is to monitor inmates and former inmates throughout their sentences and during the process of social reintegration. By legal mandate, these councils must have at least three members appointed by the district's criminal execution judge. Typically, the composition includes a representative from commerce or industry, a lawyer nominated by the local Brazilian Bar Association (OAB), and a social worker designated by the Sectional Office of the National Council of Social Workers.

The law also allows flexibility regarding the total number of members and their qualifications, even making it possible to include current inmates, former inmates, and their family members to enhance the councils' representation.

The Community Councils propose public policies, issue opinions on the allocation of funds and prison conditions and oversee the protection of human rights and the performance of public institutions involved in penal execution. They also support and assist inmates, former inmates, and their families.

However, Community Councils face formalization issues.¹¹ Despite being legally recognized as public entities within the penal execution context, they do not have a dedicated budget or authority to act before the judiciary, and their members are volunteers. To overcome these limitations, some councils have created internal regulations, bylaws, and other instruments that standardize their operations, allowing them to register as private legal entities in the National Register of Corporate Taxpayers (CNPJ). This helps solve bureaucratic issues and facilitates fund acquisition – for instance, allowing for opening bank accounts and formalizing partnerships. Nevertheless, this adaptation can create conceptual and operational challenges due to the overlap or conflict between the public and private spheres. Each council autonomously decides whether to adopt this structure, which can lead to non-standardized fund acquisition and a lack of public incentives for such efforts.

Despite their current limitations, Community Councils are significant mechanisms for social participation, forming a bridge between the public sector and civil society. They effectively represent and mediate community demands, providing comprehensive assistance to ex-inmates and their families. The councils facilitate referrals and develop initiatives for various needs, from material assistance such as clothing, medicines, and hygiene kits to regularizing the documents and political rights and support for professional education, work, housing, and health.

Prison Investment Fund (France)¹²

The Prison Investment Fund is part of France's foundation philanthropic network, which has brought together donors, volunteers, and project leaders for over five decades across France, promoting the funding of social impact projects from other civil society organizations in various fields. Since 2013,¹³ the Prison Fund has been dedicated to providing financial support initiatives focused on the social reintegration of newly released ex-inmates, as well as encouraging cultural projects aimed at reducing the stigmatization of these individuals, thereby decreasing the risks of recidivism.

By 2019, the Prison Fund had supported over 170 projects. The selection criteria for funded projects include ensuring comprehensive support for individuals about to complete their sentences or who have been recently released from prison and valuing network collaboration among different organizations, penal institutions, and common law structures.

The Prison Fund is a strategy that enables mobilizing significant resources to implement and expand projects. By providing financial incentives from individual donations, government grants, and private investments, projects can have a broader, more enduring, and sustainable impact on ex-inmates. Additionally, sharing a common funder also facilitates the creation of a collaborative network among organizations and individuals engaged in common goals, enabling the exchange of resources, knowledge, and experiences.

Empowering Young Actors in Civil Society as Agents of Rehabilitation and Reintegration (Cameroon)¹⁴

In Cameroon, the non-governmental organization Local Youth Corner Cameroon aimed to promote peace, prevent, and combat violent extremism among youth¹⁵ through advocacy, sociocultural dialogue, capacity building, and conducting empirical research. The organization carries out awareness and training activities focused on rehabilitation and reintegration for young activists and young ex-offenders identified as violent extremist offenders¹⁶ across all ten regions of Cameroon. In these debates among youths from diverse backgrounds, the main demands of each territory were identified, and an adapted approach was developed that reflects local particularities and dynamics to create appropriate solutions.

After the training activities, the young activists formulated an action agenda centered on youth and networking.¹⁷ This agenda aimed to promote skill strengthening and the establishment of dialogues, seeking integrated solutions that involve government, international and civil society organizations, religious institutions, prison units, academia, and the private sector. This approach fosters a comprehensive framework for addressing the challenges faced by youths vulnerable to extremism, thereby facilitating their successful reintegration into society.

To implement the recommended strategies, a National Youth Network was formed with representatives from all ten regions of Cameroon, fostering community reintegration projects. In the project's final phase, awareness campaigns were broadcast on the radio, encouraging the participation of other organizations, local authorities, business and community leaders, and the youth in initiatives aimed at reintegrating former offenders.

In this context, the close collaboration between civil society, local and national governments, and the creation of the National Youth Network solidified the commitment of various sectors to the implementation and continuation of actions. Empowering youth, creating dialogue channels, and actively involving other actors, this experience adopts a multifaceted approach tailored to local dynamics, promoting an exchange environment, and strengthening social reintegration efforts.

Youth Justice Reimagined (United States)¹⁸

The "Youth Justice Reimagined" initiative emerged from dissatisfaction with the juvenile probation system in Los Angeles, which was deemed ineffective in re-socializing young offenders. In August 2019, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors unanimously abolished the old juvenile probation system and created a Youth Justice Working Group with participation from over 100 sectors – including civil society, public authorities, private sector, and academia – to restructure the country's most extensive youth criminal system.

This "Youth Justice Reimagined" working group is grounded in core values. These values define how the justice system should interact with other stakeholders, including community-centered focus, power-sharing, coordination, collaboration, system transparency, and accountability. Additional values focus on interactions with youth: adopting a "positive, strength-based" developmental approach, prioritizing the well-being of the youth and their families, implementing health-oriented strategies, promoting harm repair through restorative justice, and basing actions on data and evidence.

Thus, the working group's recommendations¹⁹ advocated for adopting a public safety strategy centered on care, aiming to reduce the focus on incarceration and supervision, instead opting for a community-based and restorative approach. In September 2021, the city of Los Angeles began implementing this initiative. However, it faced challenges due to shortage of budget compared to the funding allocated to the probation department for youth incarceration.

The "Youth Justice Reimagined" experience in Los Angeles underscores the essential role of networking in transforming complex systems such as the juvenile criminal system, considered the largest in the United States. The collaboration among over 100 stakeholders from various sectors demonstrates a synergy of knowledge and experiences aimed at developing collaborative and comprehensive alternatives for the challenges of social reintegration.²⁰

Effective Network Strategies for Reintegrating Former Inmates

In practice, the five initiatives described employ several strategies that can be implemented in combination or individually, adapting to the local context, available resources, and understanding of needs. Each initiative, with its specific objectives, commits to articulating, funding, and shaping society's perception of the issue, influencing private projects and public policies. These efforts strengthen the role of each actor by uniting efforts and sharing resources, ensuring broad dissemination of the initiatives, promoting dialogues and exchanges of experiences among those involved, and encouraging society to engage in the reintegration process actively.

1 Referral to Existing Public Policies

Collaboration is critical in enhancing access to established policies, effectively linking different demands, and aiding in the often complex challenges of referrals. By understanding the available resources and recognizing gaps, meeting demands becomes more streamlined, which helps avoid wasting resources and duplicating efforts. Each institution offers specific services and, when necessary, can guide former inmates to other facilities that will assist in their social reintegration process.

This referral system not only builds a robust support network but also provides former inmates with comprehensive institutional support. The intersectoral approach used in this process allows for more coordinated and effective responses to the complex needs of former inmates. By strategically aligning the involved institution's actions, the quality of the services is significantly improved, minimizing overlaps, and ensuring specialized assistance.

2 Social Participation in Developing, Monitoring, and Evaluating Services for Former Inmates and Their Families

Implementing dialogue channels between public, private, and civil society sectors is a strategic approach to engage various stakeholders in developing, monitoring, and evaluating public policies and private initiatives for former inmates and their families. This approach not only ensures a broad range of knowledge and integrated solutions but also strengthens the democratic and participatory aspects of the process.

Direct collaboration among these sectors is crucial for establishing a common agenda that benefits former inmates. This networked collaboration materializes through active social participation, which includes joint activities in human rights advocacy, strategic litigation, and combined efforts to develop and promote policies and practices that contribute to successful reintegration.

3 Training Civil Society Members for Former Inmate Reintegration

This initiative focuses on training civil society members to serve as rehabilitation and reintegration agents in settings such as schools, urban areas, churches, and private institutions. The aim is to foster inclusive and supportive environments where trained individuals actively work to reduce stigma, facilitate access to their rights, and help reintegrate those who have experienced incarceration. This approach establishes a support network, promotes societal awareness, challenges prejudices, and creates welcoming everyday environments.

4 Monitoring and Data Development

Monitoring and developing data are critical for identifying challenges, overseeing policies, and shaping public safety enhancements. Establishing forums for data production or tracking data across various organizations enhances decision-making and helps craft transparent, collaborative, and evidence-based public policies for former inmates. This strategy ensures that reintegration efforts are well-informed and effectively address the needs of those returning to society.

5 Funding for Civil Society Initiatives and Organizations

This strategy involves using philanthropic or public funds to support civil society initiatives and organizations focused on the social reintegration of former inmates. This approach is vital to ensure the sustainability and breadth of the support offered to these individuals. Additionally, it fosters the creation of cooperative networks among organizations that collaborate to secure funding for targeted projects and among projects supported by a common financier, enhancing collaboration and the development of joint initiatives.

6 Social Communication

This approach tackles the stigma faced by former inmates through various strategies, including information campaigns, research, and diverse media publications such as press news, books, advertisements, films, videos, podcasts, and social media posts. By implementing a cascading effect, the objective is to enhance communication channels and awareness campaigns, improving the understanding of the realities faced by former inmates for both the general public and public and private institutions. Ultimately, this approach promotes cultural change, encouraging the inclusion and acceptance of former inmates in community, institutional, and family-oriented settings.

Endnotes

1. National Council of Justice (CNJ), 2020. [Caderno de Gestão dos Escritórios Sociais I: Guia para Aplicação da Metodologia de Mobilização de Pessoas Pré Egressas.](#)
2. These five initiatives were selected from a database of 511 documents analyzed by the Igarapé Institute, which focused on services for former inmates. The documents included publications in English, Portuguese, and Spanish, sourced from databases such as the Criminal Justice Periodical Index, The Campbell Collaboration Library, Scielo, The Cochrane Collaboration, Red Alyc, LAPTOC, ProQuest, Web of Science, JSTOR, Medline, and the Brazilian Scientific Information Ecosystem (BrCris). We considered only publications from the last ten years (2013-2023). Although the primary goal was to review programs implemented both nationally and internationally, we also conducted searches on Brazilian state government websites to ensure a comprehensive representation of local initiatives. Following the selection of these five initiatives, additional research was conducted to detail the functioning of the specific programs.
3. In this study, as noted by Sá (2001), it is argued that social reintegration should focus not on the nature of the crime or the length of the sentence, but rather on the relationship between the incarcerated individual and their social environment. For more information on this subject, see Sá, Alvino A. "Conception of crime as an expression of a history of conflicts: implications for the social reintegration of those sentenced to deprivation of liberty." *ESMESC Magazine*, v. 7, nº 11, pp. 169-178, 2001.
4. We understand that the concept of social (re)integration and its related terms are contentious, given that the profile of those selected by the criminal justice system is predominantly composed of black populations, with low educational and income levels, who have historically suffered from inequalities and social exclusion.
5. National Council of Justice (CNJ), 2022. [Caderno de Gestão dos Escritórios Sociais IV: Metodologia de Enfrentamento ao Estigma e Plano de Trabalho para sua Implantação.](#)
6. Justa (2022). [O Funil de investimento da segurança pública e prisional no Brasil.](#)
7. Neves, M. N. (2009). *Revista da Católica*. [Rede de Atendimento Social: uma ação possível?](#)
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9. National Council of Justice (CNJ), 2023. [Rede Nacional de Atenção a Pessoas Egressas é lançada em evento no CNJ.](#)
10. Ferreira, J. C. (2014). Master's Thesis. Universidade de São Paulo. [Os conselhos da comunidade e a reintegração social](#); Ministry of Justice and Public Security. Prison National Department (2008). [Conselhos da Comunidade.](#)
11. National Council of Justice (CNJ), 2021. [Os Conselhos da Comunidade no Brasil.](#)
12. Fondation de France. [Prison.](#)
13. Fondation de France (2020). [Après la prison, retrouver sa place dans la société.](#)
14. Global Center on Cooperative Security (2018). [It Takes a Village: An Action Agenda on the Role of Civil Society in the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Those Associated With and Affected by Violent Extremism](#); Local Youth Corner Cameroon (2017). [Youth Positive Practice Memoir on Rehabilitation and Reintegration in Cameroon: Transforming Violent Offenders into Champions of Peace.](#)
15. According to the World Bank, individuals aged 15 to 35, defined by Cameroon's National Youth Policy as the youth age group, make up over 65% of the country's population and are the most targeted and co-opted group by the terrorist organization Boko Haram. To better understand the context of the radicalization of young Cameroonians, please access: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/news/16459>
16. The term "Violent Extremist Offender" (VEO) describes an individual who, through their actions, demonstrates violent behavior due to a political, religious, or social ideology. This individual may be involved in various activities, including planning, promoting, inciting, preparing, or executing violent acts as part of an extremist movement. The specific definitions and characteristics of a VEO can vary according to the authority and legal contexts considered.
17. Local Youth Corner Cameroon (2017). [Last Draft: Action agenda on engaging youth civil society in reintegration and rehabilitation of violent offenders in Cameroon.](#)
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19. W. Haywood Burns Institute (2020). [Recommendations of the Los Angeles County Youth Justice Work Group.](#)
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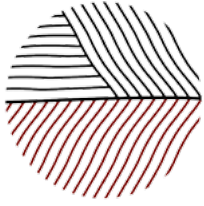
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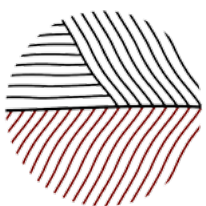
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