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# Challenges to community reintegration for those convicted of a felony in Harrisonburg, Virginia

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Challenges to Community Reintegration for Those Convicted of a Felony in  
Harrisonburg, Virginia

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A Project Presented to  
the Faculty of the Undergraduate  
College of Health and Behavioral Studies  
James Madison University

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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Bachelor of Social Work

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by Sarah Elizabeth Stack

May 2014

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Social Work, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Social Work.

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## **Abstract**

The topic of felon disenfranchisement and discrimination is a contentious one in the United States. Some individuals and legislators feel that people who commit felonies deserve the punishments they receive even after released. Whereas, others feel that felons should eventually be fully reintegrated back into society, once they serve their time. States have different policies and programs concerning felons, including reintegration programs. The purpose of this research project is to understand how the city of Harrisonburg, Virginia treats people with felonies in all aspects of their lives as they reintegrate back to society. The research question guiding the project was “What challenges do people with felony convictions experience when they seek reintegration into the community of Harrisonburg?” Qualitative methods were chosen for this project in order to gather rich and personal data to explore this challenging issue. The project began with a literature review to research the treatment of felons as a whole in the United States and develop questions for the research. The next step was to interview key informants in Harrisonburg about the issue. Content analysis was used in this project in the hopes that detailed analysis and specific themes could be identified from the transcripts of the interviews with the informants. The project developed a deeper understanding about how felons are actually treated in Harrisonburg and may create opportunities for additional discussion and perhaps policies and additional programming in the future.

**Keywords:** Felons, marginalized, qualitative research, key informants, disenfranchisement

## **Literature Review**

Reintegration of persons convicted of felonies back into society after incarceration has been a controversial topic in the United States. Felons are defined as a person convicted of a felony, which is a crime more serious than a misdemeanor and is punishable by being incarcerated for more than a year and a day. There are both violent and non-violent felons. These classifications may have an impact on whether the individuals are able to get any type of rights back after they are released as well as how they are treated in their communities. Felons can feel discrimination in all aspects of their lives from getting back the right to vote, serving on a jury, finding proper housing or finding employment. The formal removals of voting rights as well as informal discrimination faced by felons in housing and unemployment have lengthy histories in this country.

For as long as there has been civilization, societies have been taking away a lawbreaker's right to vote (Felon Voting Rights, 2013). This idea of taking away voting and other rights for felons may have devastating consequences for the felons themselves, but can also have secondary impacts on our welfare system and our jails (Pogorzelski, Wolff, Pan & Blitz, 2005). Not only do many felons get their voting rights taken away, but they also have major issues finding employment, housing and have problems integrating back into society. Not being able to find housing or employment can lead to recidivism among the felon population. From an experiment conducted by Uggen (2000), offenders who are given any type of employment opportunities are less likely to reoffend than those not provided the opportunities. Recidivism can have a lot to do with ex-offenders chaotic lifestyles and the lack of economic opportunities that they are afforded (Sung & Richter, 2006). It is evident that the opportunities felons are given when released from prison can have an effect on the rate of recidivism.

In the early 1800's, many states passed disenfranchisement laws that took away the right to vote for individuals with felonies on their record (Burkhardt, 2011). In the states that do not allow felons to have their rights back, there are a disproportionate number of people of color that are incarcerated. In the late 1800's and early 1900's, racial tensions seemed to play an integral role in disenfranchisement (Burkhardt, 2011). The literature demonstrates that states that had a significantly lower level of African Americans in the jails were more likely to extend voting rights. So, while this might not be the current motivating factor for disenfranchisement, racism played an important role in why certain groups were not allowed to vote and many people today still feel that discrimination against felons disproportionately affects the minority population (Burkhardt, 2011). According to Siegel (2011), there are a disproportionate number of African American and other men of color who comprise the makeup of prisons and have felony convictions. Minority groups are further marginalized because of these felony convictions and are not able to advocate on their own behalf. Minority disenfranchisement is something that is currently being examined and discussed in the United States (Siegel, 2011). It is imperative that a solution is needed to solve this controversial issue.

In the post-Civil War era, disenfranchisement for felons became a noted and accepted idea. The Supreme Court upheld *Richardson v Ramirez* which found that keeping felons from voting is not a violation of the 14th amendment (Brenner & Caste, 2003). There have been additional cases adjudicated over the years that have discussed whether or not this is an acceptable punishment for felons. Over time, the courts have held that voting restrictions for felons are civil and acceptable (Dawson-Edwards, 2008).

Public opinion in America has evolved over the past 60 years on what kind of punishment is acceptable for people in prison. Some individuals think that the punishment should

end once the felons serve their time in prison. Others disagree and think that the felons should continue paying for their crimes even after released. There are four main reasons that society justifies punishing people and they are as follows: retribution, deterrence, incapacitation and rehabilitation (Dawson-Edwards, 2008).

Retribution is punishment that is justified as being morally right and deserved by the offender. Deterrence is considered acceptable because it is a punishment inflicted to try and get the offender to not do the crime again (basically negative motivation). Incapacitation is just a punishment to stop them from doing something. It is meant to remove the criminal from the situation, so they no longer commit the illegal act. Finally, rehabilitation is justified as a punishment that is meant to help restore someone to be useful in society. Most of the public thinks that felons can get voting rights back if they follow a set of rules and pay their debt to the state, but this is rarely the case (Brenner & Caste, 2003). Based on these four types of arguments, taking away the right to vote seems like a questionable punishment. It is denying these individuals from contributing to decision making with the rest of the country (Anonymous, 1989). Legislators justify this idea because felons have “broken the social contract.” This means they are not following social order, so they need to be punished (Anonymous, 1989). Another justification method is that they should be excluded because only moral, virtuous people should participate in government decisions (Anonymous, 1989). These two reasons are the main explanations people give for not allowing felons to vote.

There are different categories of being disenfranchised from voting. Some states never take away the right to vote, others have a certain period of time you must wait before getting them back, and still others have a difficult application process you must go through to get them back, which is the case in Virginia. “According to The Sentencing Project, 5.3 million

Americans were unable to vote due to a felony conviction in the 2008 elections (Felon Voting Rights, 2013). This has the possibility of making an impact in the outcome of an election. The process to get the voting rights back is a long and complicated one. It is a complicated process because there are so many different rules for all of the states. There is a voluminous amount of paperwork to fill out and the process generally involves many different agencies (Felon Voting Rights, 2013). The communication between these agencies is not always efficient and can lead to long lag times so, even if felons are allowed to get their rights back, it can take years. This process of filling out paperwork is a long and complex one. Overall, even after a felon serves his/her time, they still have to struggle to re-integrate into society when they are out (Felon Voting Rights, 2013).

Many politicians and researchers question whether felons would vote if they were given the opportunity once they were released from prison. In 1997, the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth was conducted to examine if disenfranchised citizens would vote if they were given the ability to do so. They found that in all presidential elections from 1972 to 2000, only about 35 percent of disenfranchised citizens would have actually voted (Hjalmarrson & Lopez, 2010). The survey also found that felons are not as engaged in the political system as non-criminals. This leads legislators to question whether felons would utilize their voting rights if they could (Hjalmarrson & Lopez, 2010). Although this study found that criminal are not as engaged in the voting process as non-criminals, there are still a substantial number who would vote and could make a difference in the voting process (especially in swing states). It could make the difference in elections if they are close races, emphasizing why it is important to push for the rights of all people to be able actively participate in our democratic processes.

Beyond voting rights, the history of discrimination against felons, even nonviolent criminals, is long and bleak. Throughout history, they have been denied from most types of public assistance. They have never been able to receive Section 8 housing or any type of cash assistance (Pogorzelski, Wolff, Pan & Blitz, 2005). Section 8 housing apartments are subsidized by the federal government.

Public assistance is another controversial topic in the United States. Many citizens do not support public assistance because it is a redistributive policy. This just means that money gets taken from upper and middle class individuals (through taxes) and given to individuals on welfare. And when you consider expanding public assistance to felons, the support continues to decrease. Many people do not think felons should qualify for public assistance of any kind because of crimes they committed in the past. Many housing districts in the United States do not allow felons to rent houses which can cause a major problem for people coming out of prison. There are certain lifetime restrictions that a felon faces after being convicted. Felons with a drug distribution conviction are banned from assistance; ex-offenders are not allowed to access public housing if they have a history of violence; child custody and visitation can be limited or removed, and more (Pogorzelski, Wolff, Pan & Blitz, 2005). When a felon cannot receive public assistance, they are experiencing barriers to reintegration, also known as “invisible punishments” (Pogorzelski, Wolff, Pan & Blitz, 2005). Invisible punishments are civil restrictions that can hinder a felon from moving forward in their lives. In 2005, the United States passed the Second Chance Act of 2005. It was a federal policy that called for expanding reentry services for people leaving prison (Pogorzelski, Wolff, Pan & Blitz, 2005). It was a federal effort to try and integrate these released prisoners back into society. The bill calls for creating community services for felons; these services would include housing assistance, job training and more. Many legislators

hoped that this would reduce recidivism and would give them a second chance at being productive members of society. Recidivism is the likelihood of a felon to reoffend or commit a similar crime after they are released (Uggen, 2008). This act is an all-encompassing federal policy that assists in all aspects of a felon's life, but it has not solved some of the chronic problems.

Convicted felons can have many problems successfully reintegrating due to the barriers that are placed in front of them. Many companies will not hire anyone with a felony record, especially for violent crimes. Landlords have the right to refuse felons to live on their property (if it is privately owned); this is just one way felons are discriminated against (Lam & Harcourt, 2003). Employers have responsibilities to protect their customers and employees which can influence their hiring decisions. If they believe someone would be an unsafe hire (a violent felon, perhaps) then they may choose to not hire this person (Lam & Harcourt, 2003). Employers have the right to create a safe work environment. Felons are not a protected class of people, so this discrimination is perfectly legal. Depending on the severity of the crime, felons may gain some of these rights back when released, but the status of these rights depends on the class and the state (Lam & Harcourt, 2003). According to a study done by Pager and Quillian (2005), employers who indicated that they would hire convicted felons were no more likely to actually hire them than any other employer. So, even if an employer thinks they have a fair hiring practice, this might not be the case. There is also a discrepancy between hiring white and black felons (Pager & Quillian, 2005). The researchers concluded that the struggle of being hired was even more difficult for black offenders. Even employers who think they are open to this class, do not often end up hiring the felons (Pager & Quillian, 2005). It has been found that re-offending occurs because felons have unstable housing after released and have a lack of economic

opportunities (Sung & Richter, 2006). So, an important form of punishment would be rehabilitation because it could help the ex-offenders settle down and have more opportunities. The data shows that employment can help to reintegrate felons back into society and that they are less likely to reoffend if they can find a stable job (Sung & Richter, 2006). From this information, it is evident that there is still heavy discrimination against felons in all aspects of life.

From reviewing many journal articles and current events, felons are slowly getting some of their rights back (Atkins, 2013; Pogorzelski 2005 & Payton 2013). Over the last decade, several states have moved toward giving felons some rights back (like the right to vote). However, felons do not have all of their rights and this can have negative impacts on the felons and their families. A possible solution to this problem would be to continue to push for restoration of rights. The Second Chance Act is an effective policy that works on restoring rights for felons, in all aspects of their lives. This is an important policy to support and possibly expand. It needs to be well-funded and help to reach all areas of a felon's life, including research to determine the impact of the restoration of rights.

Previously in the state of Virginia, felons had an incredibly difficult time getting their right to vote back. Virginia and Kentucky were the only two states that had no process to get rights back unless special cases were granted by the governor. However, in Virginia, there have been some steps in restoring these rights for felons. Governor Bob McDonnell was relatively progressive in his movement to restore voting rights and in 2010, he stated, "I believe that when we restore offenders as full participants in our society, it helps them become more productive citizens and it helps make our commonwealth a safer and better place," (Atkins, 2013). He has worked to speed up the process of recovering rights by reducing the waiting period and shortening the time for the paperwork process. In May of 2013, Governor Bob McDonnell

started the process of restoring voting rights to all nonviolent felons automatically, once they have finished serving their complete sentence. He has lifted the two year waiting period that had been in place in Virginia (Payton, 2013). This is a huge step for the state of Virginia; now, the people of the state have to watch to see if this bill is successfully implemented. We now have a new governor in the state of Virginia, Terry McAuliffe, and the state and legislators are watching to see how he will handle voting rights for felons.

In other areas of felon rights, there has not been much substantial progress. Convicted felons in Virginia are not allowed to serve on juries, although some legislators are trying to change this. Felons continue to be discriminated against when applying for housing or any type of public assistance. There are many non-violent felons who have to struggle for the rest of their lives because of simple drug charges (Pogorzelski, Wolff, Pan & Blitz, 2005). There have been efforts by local community resources to help reduce recidivism in felons by creating resources for the felons to use to support their reintegration efforts (Pogorzelski, Wolff, Pan & Blitz, 2005). While these community resources are helpful in reintegrating felons back into society, stigma and problems finding stable employment continue to exist.

From this review of the literature, it is clear how much convicted felons are marginalized. Many states have made it incredibly difficult (if not impossible) to gain the right to vote back. This takes away the voice of this entire group of individuals. In turn, taking away the right to vote can have an impact on multiple other aspects of the convicted felons' lives. They are barred from many different employment opportunities. Felons often cannot find proper housing or live successful lives because they often cannot find a job (or at least a well-paying job). It is evident that there is a downward spiral in the lives of convicted felons. They are an extremely marginalized group who cannot really speak out for themselves. Recently, in the United States, it

can be seen that felons' rights are improving incrementally. Many states now allow voting rights and there are advances in services for employment and housing opportunities for felons in many states. This research will investigate the situation in Harrisonburg, Virginia.

## Methodology

When I embarked on the journey to better understand the treatment of felons in Harrisonburg, I decided that I initially needed to become educated on the topic in general. So, I began with a literature review of the history of rights for felons in the United States. The research started nationally and then led to a focus on what is currently happening in Virginia. As I read the literature, I broadened my focus beyond voting rights to also explore additional challenges discussed in the literature. Using the literature review, I refined my research question and decided that I wanted to explore the reintegration of felons in the areas of voting, employment and housing in the Harrisonburg community. My research question is as follows: What challenges do people with felony convictions experience when they seek reintegration into the community of Harrisonburg, Virginia? I wanted to do an exploratory research project in order to begin to understand what the issues for felons are for the Harrisonburg area. Because I chose a project that was looking to explore the situation, qualitative research seemed like the best fit. According to Padgett (2008), qualitative is insider rather than outside perspective, is centered on people instead of variables and covers depth as opposed to breadth. I wanted an insider and people-centered project so that it would be relevant to the city of Harrisonburg and deepen the understanding of the challenge that felons face in reintegrating back into the community.

Once the literature review was complete and my research question was set, I decided to speak with key informants who work with felons in the Harrisonburg area. I chose key informants because they are individuals who have specialist knowledge due to their position (Payne, 2004). So, they know more about the topic of felon discrimination than other individuals. I applied for IRB approval and developed a research protocol with the questions I planned to ask each informant. I used the literature review to inform the questions that I asked to each to each of my informants. The questions were designed to be open-ended to encourage broad discussion

and allow for potential follow-up questions with the respondents. I also attached a confidentiality form to the IRB approval stating that I would not break the confidentiality of the informants who spoke to me. The research protocol and confidentiality forms are attached in this paper as Appendices A and B. The research plan was approved by the IRB committee

I conducted in-depth interviews, lasting between 45 minutes to an hour and a half, to investigate the opinions of the key informants and explore what they thought about the local situation in Harrisonburg. As stated earlier, I decided to use a qualitative approach to this project because I want an in-depth look at the treatment of felons beyond the statistics and numbers. Once I transcribed each interview, I conducted a content analysis on the qualitative data gathered to analyze the information received from the key informants to obtain an in-depth look. I chose to code my interviews by hand in order to become more familiar with the data. According to Padgett (2008), coding allows for deeper interpretation. It is a method of data analysis that allows the researcher to become more immersed in their topic. Coding starts at a descriptive levels and leads to broader conceptualization and more room for interpretation. I was able to identify broad themes from the data which addressed my research question and could be used as the basis for further research and program development.

## Results

	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Job</b>
<b>Informant 1</b>	Late 20's	African American	Male	Works with transitional housing
<b>Informant 2</b>	Late 50's	Caucasian	Male	Has a position on city council
<b>Informant 3</b>	Early to mid-50's	Asian American	Male	Works in housing division
<b>Informant 4</b>	Late 40's	Caucasian	Female	Works as a prosecutor of felony crimes

In total, I was able to interview four key informants from the city of Harrisonburg. These included legislators in the local government community, social workers and individuals in administrative positions in the community. I found these informants by looking at all of the resources we have in the community and contacting those who I thought would have relevant and important ideas about the treatment of felons in Harrisonburg. There was a research protocol with each of the people interviewed and then the informants each expanded the topic from there. From the conversations with each of the individuals, there were several main themes that emerged. These were things that all of the individuals had similar opinions on and so they are themes that I find are crucially important to understand about felons in the city of Harrisonburg.

## **Violent Versus Non-violent**

The first theme that I identified from talking with the key informants in the area was the difference between violent and non-violent felons in the city. The general consensus amongst the key informants was that the different classifications that a felon can have may have an impact on what kind of services and treatment that they receive once they are released. Some of the statements the informants had concerning the classification of a felon included:

*“...depending on what type of felony, whether it is a violent offense or drug type of related offense, it could impact them from getting services for the rest of their lives.”*

*“It depends again on what type of felon and what type of charge. If it is a violent or a drug offense, they could be banned for life depending on what type of activity it was.”*

*“...and we only house non-violent, non-sexual crimes and non-gang affiliated. So a lot of times we run into problems when guys who are gang affiliated or have sexual crimes or have violent crimes, we have nothing for them.”*

*“Once they [employers] see felony, it is almost like everything else is written off. They also need to hear your story and stuff like that.”*

In the city of Harrisonburg, the range of services may vary depending on the type of felony. The above quotes show the difference among treatment of non-violent versus violent. The last statement showcases a differing opinion about the treatment of violent versus non-violent felons. While this individual's view was not the majority, it is still important to keep in mind. In the city of Harrisonburg, and possibly in many other places in the United States, it seems like it really depends on a case by case basis and from organization or organization. Overall, it seemed like the general consensus was that while all felons have a tough time re-integrating back into society, it is even harder for felons with a violent or dangerous history.

## Feasibility of Returning Voting Rights

Something that all of the informants talked about was the recent move towards giving felons their voting rights back, in Virginia. While I was interviewing all of the individuals, the state was in the middle of passing the new legislation that would allow for felons to get their voting rights back automatically. Listed below are some of the comments from the informants concerning voting rights for felons.

*“Voter Restoration Act. I think it’s okay if they served their time to the Commonwealth and met all the requirements of the sentencing for the restoration of voter rights in the state.”*

*“I don’t think anything is easy when it comes to government. Reintroduction is something new and there is a learning curve.”*

*“...I think the challenge is that there have been very little resources to support that type of program...principle is great, unless you back it up with the resources or funds to be able to make it happen, it’s kind of like talking out of one side of the mouth.”*

*“We haven’t seen it really start yet. But we handle a lot of the restorations for people even on violent sex offenses that have rights restored or pardons. So, we’re very careful about that, particularly in violent cases, because what we don’t want to do is nullify the penalties the victims saw happen.”*

While it seems like a progressive policy, automatic restoration of rights might not be as feasible as one may hope. This was something that came up in my literature review often (Atkins, 2013 & “Felon Voting Rights, 2013). The quotes from the informants indicate that returning voting rights might not be incredibly feasible or have a smooth transition. The informants wanted to make sure that the felons had properly paid their debt to society; this was a common worry about giving voting rights back to felons. From the literature review, it became evident that legislators want to make sure they balance the rights of victims with the rights of

felons. So, from my interviews with the individuals, they seem to be in agreement that it is a worthwhile attempt to install automatic restoration of rights for felons. The respondents all seem to be hesitant on whether the process will go as smoothly as everyone hopes but overall, they seemed to remain hopeful that this policy should positively impact Harrisonburg and Virginia.

## The Effect of Stigma

Stigma is a huge problem that all felons have to face when they are released from prison. Stigma is the shame or humiliation that someone feels when they do something that is regarded as socially unacceptable (“What is Stigma,” n.d.). It can affect felons in many different ways and all of the informants mentioned stigma as a problem they see in the city. It can affect what kind of jobs an individual can get as well as just day to day general functioning, as the quotes below show.

*“The hard part of dealing with the population though is so many times there is so much self-fulfilling prophecy, where people fulfill the things that have been said about them.”*

*“There’s a lot of stigma and variables associated with being a felon that creates significant challenges for individuals to be able to overcome...”*

*“I think females sometimes have greater opportunities to get in entry level jobs...the perception is different.”*

*“...in regard to stigma, but yea, I think it’s high. I think both of them [men and women] will admit it’s a serious stigma.”*

*“Someone who cares to sit down and wants to see these people succeed and not ostracize them. Not everybody needs ostracizing.”*

A couple of the individuals mentioned the difference between male and female felons and how they were able to survive in the city. This goes along with the stigma piece in that women felons are viewed differently than male felons. From all of these statements by these individuals in town, it is evident that stigma can affect both how felons feel about themselves and how successful they can be. This theme has less to do with services and care that felons need and more about the general attitude of the town and the people in it. One of the individuals said this

statement, which pretty much sums up the attitude in Harrisonburg “*The other part that makes it hard is in Harrisonburg, as a convicted felon, you’re going to stand out.*”

## Issues in Finding Housing and Employment

One of the most discussed themes that I found when interviewing all of my key informants was that there are many different issues when felons try to find housing and employment. This was also the theme that I found most closely related to the ideas I had going into the project. I had assumed that felons had a lot of trouble finding housing and employment and it was something that came up regularly in the literature (Lam, 2003; Pager, 2005 & Pogorzelski, 2005). I pulled out a few key quotes from the informants about this topic.

*“The thing that I do see is guys that have special skill sets, it’s hard for them to find jobs within their skills sets...a lot of guys are trade workers; so, Harrisonburg is not a lot of trade work, it’s a lot of factory work.”*

*“But there is a past history just like a work history is involved in any type of hiring decision – it’s one piece of the puzzle.”*

*“Access to employment, housing, integrating back into the community and becoming a contributing member of the community.”*

*“A lot of that has to do with their ability to present themselves and be able to explain out the felony charge and the situation and whether they have any tangible skills that makes them employable.”*

*“There are some disqualifications [for housing] if you’re a felon. So, what happens is many people end up living illegally with girlfriends.”*

*“Get them a job, get them an idea of where they can live, help them, help us all.”*

These quotes show the importance of felons to present themselves carefully when trying to find work. However, even if felons discuss their felony charge in the “right” way, it might not be enough. There are a lot of barriers towards finding employment and housing in the community. These statements highlight the fact that when society takes the rights of felons away,

it does not just impact the felon but it impacts their families, the community and the economy in general.

## **Lack of Follow up Services**

While the last four themes were extremely important and came up in all of my interviews, this theme stands out as being the one that all people mentioned as being absolutely crucial – and totally lacking in the city of Harrisonburg. This theme is the idea that there are no follow up services for felons when they are released from prison. Much of the conversations about this topic stemmed from a question that I asked each person. This question was “Given infinite resources, what changes for felons would you make in the city?” This elicited many responses from the individuals and almost all of them had to do with the lack of follow up services in the community.

Respondents seem to agree on what services Harrisonburg is lacking. The following statements reflect the viewpoints on how Harrisonburg handles follow up services with felons.

*“...coming up with reentry plans, providing case management when people are coming out, doing classes, and providing education...but there is no day care organization or individual who is responsible for doing that...”*

*“...funding for CSB is pitiful and the funding, you can't expect people to succeed if you're not treating the underlying issues off mental health and alcohol and drugs.”*

*“So, where we [Harrisonburg] lack are our services.”*

*“It worries me because they [felons] come back in and I see them on their 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> probation and it's heartbreaking. They're begging me for chances and I'm trying, but at some point, we don't have resources.”*

When asked about what they would do for felons if they were given infinite resources, all of the participants had similar answers.

*“More mentorship and housing, how can I say it, supervised housing, not subsidized housing.”*

*“...have an aggressive, in house planning process where you have a clear reentry plan with resources available to support individuals...then fade those resources away.”*

*“I would have a task force that dealt specifically with reentry...like an interdisciplinary team.”*

*“Long term, working on a fiscally responsible as well as a socially responsible program for re-introduction would probably be the best as well as maintaining a sense of order and peace in the community.”*

It is evident from these statements that people from all different organizations feel that there is a lack of follow up services with felons. But, Harrisonburg is not the only city to suffer from this problem. One individual summed it up by saying *“I think everyone is lacking in regard to reentry services.”*

After conducting my interviews, these five themes emerged as being common factors that respondents found to be important concerning the treatment of felons in Harrisonburg. There were many useful topics brought up during the interview, but these five issues were the ones that came up most often. Overall, using the opinions and statements of the four individuals interviewed, it seems like Harrisonburg is lacking in follow up services and resources overall for felons. There is also a great deal of stigma in the community that can impact how felons are able to function. I think the public needs to be educated on how detrimental judging and ostracizing this population can be. While Harrisonburg does not seem to be lagging too far behind other communities in the area, there are definitely areas for improvement and for more research.

## **Conclusion**

By using qualitative methods for this research project, I was able to acquire specific, detailed opinions from a few key informants in the city of Harrisonburg. This method of study was beneficial because it allowed me to understand how administrators in the city felt about felons and what programs were available. One of the downsides to using this method was that it is not transferable to other places and communities. This study is only relevant in the city of Harrisonburg. However, the information in the study is important and show what Harrisonburg needs to improve and work on if we want to see the treatment of felons become any better. Based on the literature review, it is likely that many of these issues may be relevant in other cities in Virginia and beyond. More research is needed in this area.

However, after conducting and analyzing this project, it seems that Harrisonburg is on par with a lot of other communities in the United States. I went into the project thinking that Harrisonburg, being a small, southern, conservative town, would be severely lacking in services for felons and would stand much further behind then others. While the themes were developed from interviews with the key informants identified some issues that needed to be fixed, respondents also indicated that they did not believe Harrisonburg was far behind on the issue as compared to other communities. Findings from the interviews with key informants showed that the issues Harrisonburg are facing are the same things that many communities across America are facing.

By doing this project, I found that there were a couple different pros and cons to using qualitative research. I was only able to interview four informants, which meant my information is not universal. It does not relate to communities all over the world and it does not even speak to the opinions of everyone in the community of Harrisonburg. However, I find that the value of qualitative data is in the details. I now have a specific, real look at how important individuals in

the community feel and think about felon treatment. By using qualitative data, I am able to get detailed analysis and my exploratory research is more relevant to the specific city of Harrisonburg, although it could possibly have relevance to other small cities in Virginia or beyond.

I think this project demonstrated that more research is needed on the topic. There needs to be research on how re-integrating felons into the community could benefit each community as a whole. It is an issue that needs further discussion at the local, state and national levels. The issue of felon disenfranchisement is something that has been going on for hundreds of years and has not yet been solved. There are many conflicting opinions on felon rights and there needs to be more discussions among legislators of every community to find out what the most successful approach is to re-integrating felons back into society. Overall, after interviewing my key informants and performing qualitative analysis, I believe there needs to be an increase of funding for a re-integration programs and follow up care. This funding could prevent the high costs of recidivism by saving additional money necessary when re-integration fails and offenders return to incarceration.

## **Appendix A**

**Consent letter** for *Challenges to Community Reintegration for Those Convicted of a Felony in Harrisonburg, Virginia*

### **Consent to Participate in Research**

#### **Identification of Investigators & Purpose of Study**

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Sarah Stack from James Madison University. The purpose of this study is to do a community needs assessment for the city of Harrisonburg, looking at how they handle recently released felons. This study will contribute to the researcher's completion of her senior honors thesis and add to existing knowledge on the topic.

#### **Research Procedures**

Should you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form once all your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. This study consists of an interview that will be administered to individual participants in the participant's office or preferred location. You will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to the community needs assessment for Harrisonburg, concerning the treatment of felons. I will be audio recording the participants in order to be able to transcribe the information for the thesis.

#### **Time Required**

Participation in this study will require 45-75 minutes of your time.

#### **Risks**

The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your involvement in this study (that is, no risks beyond the risks associated with everyday life).

All the information will be kept confidential and the participants are invited not to answer certain questions if they feel uncomfortable with it. The data will be kept safe on a locked computer; the audio files will be kept in a secure location as well.

#### **Benefits**

Potential benefits from participation in this study include increased knowledge about the condition of the city of Harrisonburg. It has the benefit of helping the community to grow and learn about what Harrisonburg does for felons. The participants might feel a sense of achievement when talking about what they know about felons. It also might move them to start or enact something in the community. Each participant will be offered a copy of the Executive Summary for their information.

## **Confidentiality**

The results of this project will be coded in such a way that the respondent's identity will not be attached to the final form of this study. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. While individual responses are confidential, aggregate data will be presented representing averages or generalizations about the responses as a whole. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up individual respondents with their answers (including the recorded audio tapes) will be destroyed. The results of this research will be presented at a social work conference in the spring. It is attended by many students in the major as well as most faculty.

## **Participation & Withdrawal**

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

## **Questions about the Study**

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this study, or after its completion or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

Researcher's Name: Sarah Stack

Advisor's Name: Lisa McGuire

Department: Social Work

Department: Social Work

James Madison University

James Madison University

Email Address: stackse@dukes.jmu.edu

Telephone: (540) 568-6980

Email Address: mcguirle@jmu.edu

## **Questions about Your Rights as a Research Subject**

Dr. David Cockley

Chair, Institutional Review Board

James Madison University

(540) 568-2834

[cocklede@jmu.edu](mailto:cocklede@jmu.edu)

## Giving of Consent

I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

I give consent to be audio taped during my interview. \_\_\_\_\_ (initials)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (Printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (Signed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher (Signed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix B

What are your thoughts about the treatment of felons in the United States?

Virginia?

What are your thoughts on Governor Bob McDonnell's recent actions on restoring felon voting rights in Virginia? Do you think his actions will make an impact given the current political situation in Virginia?

From what you've seen in Harrisonburg, do you think felons are able to live successful lives in the city? Are they able to find adequate housing and jobs that can support them and their families?

What programs in Harrisonburg are available (to your knowledge) for felons?

Given infinite resources, what changes for felons would you make in the city of Harrisonburg?

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