

## Just Lived Experience And Reentry Research

**Intro** [00:00:01] RTI International's Justice Practice Area presents Just Science.

**Intro** [00:00:08] Welcome to Just Science, a podcast for justice professionals and anyone interested in learning more about forensic science, innovative technology, current research and actionable strategies to improve the criminal justice system. In episode one of our innovations and correction season, Just Science sat down with Dr. Christine Lindquist, director of the Corrections and Reentry Research Program at RTI international, to discuss the importance of consulting individuals with lived experience when designing corrections and reentry research to assist incarcerated individuals who are preparing to reenter their communities. Correctional institutions are rolling out technologies such as reentry planning software or special features on tablets or other devices that could be helpful for developing reentry plans, communicating with service providers, and applying for work opportunities. To investigate the efficacy of these types of technology, it is crucial that researchers consult experts, such as those who were formerly incarcerated, to develop the best research questions and methodologies. Listen along as Dr. Lindquist describes why her team integrates those with lived experience throughout their corrections research, specific examples of how experts have improved research practices, and the impact this work has on individuals who are transitioning out of the correctional system. This episode is funded by RTI International's Justice Practice area. Some content in this podcast may be considered sensitive and may evoke emotional responses or may not be appropriate for younger audiences. Here's your host, Peyton Scalise.

**Peyton Scalise** [00:01:27] Hello and welcome to Just Science. I'm your host, Peyton Scalise, for the Justice Practice Area at RTI International. Today, our topic is learning from people with lived experience when designing a research study about the role of technology in prison reentry planning. Today, we'll be speaking with Dr. Christine Lindquist. She's an expert in evaluating programs and initiatives to facilitate successful reentry into the community after incarceration in a prison or jail. Welcome, Chris.

**Christine Lindquist** [00:01:52] Hi, Peyton. Thank you for having me.

**Peyton Scalise** [00:01:53] Let's start today's episode by asking to provide us with some background on what led you to focus on this topic of learning from people with lived experience when designing a research study about the role of technology in reentry planning.

**Christine Lindquist** [00:02:04] So we have an ongoing research project, which is funded by the National Institute of Justice. And this project focuses on reentry planning software and tablets for educational and skill building purposes. And these tablets and technology are used in North Carolina prisons. So, in this study, we will be collecting and analyzing data to see if technology has tangible benefits in terms of preparing people for successful reentry. And we're designing a new study component where we will be interviewing currently incarcerated people as well as recently released people. So, in designing this new study component, we want to make sure that we are collecting information on the right outcomes, the outcomes that matter not only to correctional administrators, but also to people who are most directly impacted by this topic, which is reentering citizens. So, we are experts in research methods, and we know what the published literature says. But neither I nor my research team has any firsthand experience with incarceration or reentry. And because of this, we might be missing some really important things in the way we design our study. So, we need to experts in the topic itself based on firsthand experience.

**Peyton Scalise** [00:03:09] Wonderful. And how did your team go about finding people with lived experience, and how specifically did you involve them?

**Christine Lindquist** [00:03:15] We worked with an organization called Our Journey. This is a nonprofit organization created by a group of people who were formerly incarcerated in North Carolina prisons. This organization serves reentering people around the state by providing peer to peer learning. They provide reentry kits to people as they're nearing release and other resources. They have a large network of people they work with, and they provided us with a list of potentially interested people. So, we then reached out to them with information on the study and the listening sessions that we wanted to have. We had a lot of interest, and we were able to recruit a diverse group of experts with varying experience in terms of their incarceration history, the specific facilities that they were incarcerated in, their experience with technology, their diversity in terms of age and gender. And after we identified these experts, we held one on one listening sessions where the expert and a member of our research team met over the phone or over zoom. And the main purpose was to guide the content of our interview questions for this new study component, because we wanted to learn what things were important to ask about. So, we asked them about their own reentry planning experiences. So, they shared information about what services they received when they were going through the process, as well as services that they would have wanted but didn't seem available. And then we asked what they thought was important for our research study to ask of incarcerated people to learn about their experiences with technology. The technology that our study focuses on, which is tablets and reentry planning software. So, we got their thoughts on what's important to know about how people use this technology, how we would go about seeing whether that technology made a difference in their lives or not, in terms of helping to prepare them for release. We also asked about what outcomes are important for a research study like ours to examine, to tell if the technology is having a positive impact. So, we had about 12 listening sessions total and we paid them for their time, just like we would for any other expert we consulted with. And this is really important, I think, for other research projects to do, because you definitely want to convey that their time is just as valuable as any other experts, even though some of the people that we spoke with did so not because of the money, but because they wanted to give back.

**Peyton Scalise** [00:05:32] And what were some of the challenges that you encountered in incorporating people who are formerly incarcerated as thought partners in this study?

**Christine Lindquist** [00:05:38] So we didn't have any problems recruiting people who were interested. Many of the people who heard about this opportunity were interested in participating, and they wanted to do this in the hopes that their experience might help improve reentry services for other returning citizens. But one challenge we did encounter was conveying that we were seeking their guidance on our study design, and not that we were involving them as research subjects themselves. So, for some of the experts that we reached out to, the ask was a little bit difficult to understand. And that relates to a second challenge that we encounter, which is that we sort of retrofit this expert engagement into a study that was well underway. It certainly would have been better to do this at the very earliest stages of the project, so that our experts would be fully integrated into all aspects of the project from the beginning. We definitely could have benefited from their experience the whole time, and they also would have had a better understanding of the entire project. So, I think having a regular ongoing consultation is preferable, and we have definitely started doing that with new research projects. But for this project, our philosophy was that

it was better late than never, and we really felt that we had a lot to learn from these experts.

**Peyton Scalise** [00:06:49] And what would you say are some of the things that you learned from the listening sessions you held, maybe things that surprised you even after all of your years of doing reentry research?

**Christine Lindquist** [00:06:57] Yeah, that's a great question. The biggest thing that surprised me was how often the theme of fear came up, and specifically the role of fear in reentry. Those of us who haven't gone through the incarceration and reentry process ourselves may assume that people who are getting close to release are unequivocally excited about getting released. But some of our experts pointed out how scary it is to go from an environment where everything is controlled and done for you, to a setting where you suddenly have to be self-sufficient. And to do this in a world that is different than the one you left behind when you were incarcerated. So, they shared with us their own experiences shortly after release of feeling overwhelmed, feeling unprepared, being uncertain about interacting with people on the outside, and even being scared to walk out the door. So, when it comes to feelings about technology, we knew that some people who are getting released from incarceration would be intimidated by it, especially if they've been incarcerated for a long time and had very limited exposure to technology. And that theme certainly did come up from our experts. They talked about the digital divide, with some of them completely missing out on the rapid rollout of technology in our society that happened during their incarceration. But what we didn't anticipate is that people might feel that technology could actually reduce some of those fears of reentry that our experts talked about. So, not surprisingly, our experts talked about how important it is to have access to technology just to even keep up with the world. But some of our experts also felt that technology, like tablets and reentry planning software, could actually reduce the fear of reentry by, for example, facilitating communication with service providers. And it could provide people who are getting released with more independence if they could do certain tasks for themselves using the technology, rather than having to depend on a case manager or another very overworked staff member to do it. So, an example might be filling out a housing application. If this is something that you could do for yourself on a tablet, instead of having to get a case manager to do for you, that might provide you with more independence and make you less fearful of what's going to happen after release, they also felt the technology could provide a better sense of security because they had documentation that a task was complete and they can actually see it in their software so they can see their housing plan or their employment plan, for example. And interestingly, some felt that technology that can be used on the inside. So, during prison and then continued to be used on the outside, might actually provide a sense of familiarity because of the continuity that's used in that technology. So, it was really surprising to hear about the potential that technology might have in mitigating some of this fear of release that people might have.

**Peyton Scalise** [00:09:41] Out of my own curiosity, was there a large range in the amount of time that people had been incarcerated for the experts that you used in this study?

**Christine Lindquist** [00:09:49] Yes, there was a large range in terms of their most recent incarceration. There was also diversity in terms of people's incarcerations history. Some people had been incarcerated previously in county jails as well as state prison. And I mentioned earlier that there was sort of diversity in terms of each of our experts and that was relevant as well, because this digital divide that they referred to was really much more prominent for people who were older, as well as people who've been incarcerated for a

longer period of time. These were the individuals who really felt like they missed out on the rapid rollout of technology in our society, and that they had the most catching up to do upon release.

**Peyton Scalise** [00:10:26] That makes a lot of sense. And what did the experts recommend that was most helpful for you all in designing your research?

**Christine Lindquist** [00:10:32] So one of the big things that came up was helping us identify reentry outcomes that are important for our study to measure. So, when we look at whether that technology helped facilitate reentry success, how do we go about looking at this as an example of how useful the experts were? They suggested looking at how technology could prepare people emotionally for release. Does it reduce their anxiety? Does it improve other aspects of their mental health? And that relates directly to the important theme of fear that we just talked about. So, knowing that's a relevant outcome to look at was really useful and gave us something to think about. They suggested other outcomes too, that are so important to reentering citizens, but also to correctional agencies and service providers, for example, independence and autonomy in terms of the released person doing things for themselves. So, looking at outcomes such as does the technology make returning citizens less dependent on case managers and correctional staff? They also suggested looking at outcomes like whether the technology helped to develop concrete skills that were important to returning citizens themselves. Did it improve connections with family? Did it improve access to resources? Did it change their attitudes? Help people accomplish their goals? How did it affect their growth? So, a lot of the positive outcomes and interestingly, what wasn't mentioned very much at all was the outcome of recidivism. Reentry studies almost always measure outcomes like re arrest or re incarceration for probation violations or revocation. And there are reasons for this typically happens are measures that are fairly easy to get and to measure with existing data. But we really need better ways to measure the positive outcomes that our experts recommend and that we know are important to everyone.

**Peyton Scalise** [00:12:17] You mentioned earlier that some of the experts were interested in being advisors for your study, because they wanted to make things better for other returning citizens. Can you say a little bit more about that?

**Christine Lindquist** [00:12:26] Yes. Unfortunately, most of the experts we consulted with felt very unprepared when they were getting released. Most did not feel that they had gotten the help they needed. Several said that their reentry planning felt like it was done at the last minute, and that's very limited in terms of what actually was done. For example, some said that all they received was a housing plan that sort of documented where they were going to be living when they got released. Some also talked about how the technology that was used in correctional facilities during their incarceration, like tablets didn't come with any training and that they didn't really know how to use them, and they had to learn from peers. So, they use their personal experience to come up with a lot of recommendations for improving reentry policy, not just how we could improve our study, which was the main thing we wanted to talk to them about. But in terms of improving reentry policy more broadly. So, for example, they talked about the need for much more in-depth reentry classes to prepare people for release learning life skills, money management, employment, but not just in terms of getting a job, but more of building a career. They recommended hands on reentry preparation, where people could go out into the community and get help with the DMV, for example, or getting bank accounts. They talked about the need for more caseworkers and other staff in correctional facilities. They also talked a lot about the need for peer mentors. This was a really big theme. They talked

about the power and community building that comes from learning from people who had been through similar experiences, so they had a lot of very helpful suggestions for improving reentry practices and policies, in addition to helping improve our actual research project.

**Peyton Scalise** [00:14:01] That's amazing. Chris, could you tell us a little bit more about what was included in the listening session, such as the topics you all covered about the experts experience in prison or jails, and some of their recommendations?

**Christine Lindquist** [00:14:14] We weren't asking people directly about their own experiences. We did start off by asking people to tell us a little bit about their reentry experiences and their experiences planning for reentry while they were incarcerated and their experiences with technology, just so we understood what their level of experience was. But really, most of our listening sessions were focused more about our research study. So, we described different elements of our research study and asked some targeted questions to get their feedback. So, for example, we talked about what is important for us to understand about the technology that we're evaluating and what are important outcomes for us to focus on. And I did mention earlier the theme of the need for more training on technology certainly came up. Our advisors had quite a few suggestions on what correctional agencies could do to provide people with better training on technology. And again, this is where a role of peer-to-peer learning came up. They felt that it might be effective to have people learn technology and cohorts and learn from each other, but there definitely was a need for more formalized training as well, in terms of videos or pamphlets helping people figure out how to use the technology and understanding the various features. So, I think the need for more training and a technology that could be used to help people prepare for reentry is something else that came up.

**Peyton Scalise** [00:15:38] That makes a lot of sense. And another question that just popped into my mind is, were there differences between, like, the resources available during incarceration around technology like training and use? Were those different from people who had been incarcerated in county jails versus state prisons, or did it seem kind of the same across the board?

**Christine Lindquist** [00:15:57] That's a good question. All of our experts had been incarcerated recently in a North Carolina prison that was one of our selection criteria. Some of them had been in county jails previously. We didn't get into the differences between jails and prisons in terms of technology, but it's my understanding that technology is more often available in prisons as opposed to county jails and jails typically do less reentry planning, in part because people are often only there for a very short period of time, and also those who are going to be incarcerated longer are typically transfer directly from jail to a state prison to serve out their sentence. So there tends to be less focus on reentry planning for people who are getting released from jails.

**Peyton Scalise** [00:16:40] Interesting. I'm sure there's like a difference, too, between prisons across the state about their availability to like, provide technology and things like that. Did you see anything of that nature reflected in the listening sessions?

**Christine Lindquist** [00:16:52] That didn't come up in the listening sessions, but North Carolina as a state is rolling out technology in all of its correctional institutions, regardless of if they're in an urban or rural area. So, in terms of access to technology, I think it's probably going to be similar no matter where you are incarcerated in the state. But I think one source of variation is though when people get released from an incarceration and you

think about where they are going to be released to in terms of their county, are they being released to a rural area or, you know, an urban area? And I think that's another place where technology can be so useful. If people have technology and can access service providers through the technology, it can help increase access to services, including reentry services for people, even if they live in a rural area that doesn't have physical service providers in the area. And again, it can provide a mechanism for them to communicate with service providers through the technology or request appointments or request referrals. So, I think technology is a potentially very helpful strategy for equalizing access to services, no matter where someone is released to.

**Peyton Scalise** [00:18:04] Is there anything else that you'd like our audience to know regarding the importance of learning from people who are most directly impacted by incarceration when designing a research study about reentry?

**Christine Lindquist** [00:18:14] Well, one thing that I think is important to keep in mind is that the people that we consulted with were successful and that they had not been reincarcerated. These people were getting services through Our Journey, the community-based organization that worked with us to identify the experts. They were giving back, and many of them had good jobs. They certainly still had a lot of struggles, especially with housing, for example. But they were successful in that they hadn't been reincarcerated. So, one thing that our team has thought of is that it may be equally important to consult with people who were not able to avoid reincarceration, and I do wonder, what would we have learned if we could have spoken with people who got released and then ended up back in prison? So, I think it's important to think through all types of experiences that are relevant to the study you're designing.

**Peyton Scalise** [00:19:01] Well, that's all we have time for today. Thank you so much for your time and for sitting down with Just Science to discuss learning from people with lived experience when designing a research study about the role of technology in prison reentry planning.

**Christine Lindquist** [00:19:13] Thank you so much for this opportunity. And I also wanted to thank Our Journey for connecting us with the experts and to give a big thank you to the experts themselves. They were really quite vulnerable and sharing about some of the challenges they faced during their own reentry. And I really appreciate the insights they provided on how to do good research on reentry and technology.

**Peyton Scalise** [00:19:32] Wonderful. And I'd also like to thank you, the listener, for tuning in today. If you enjoyed today's conversation, be sure to like and follow Just Science on your podcast platform of choice. I'm Peyton Scalise, and this has been another episode of Just Science.

**Outro** [00:19:46] Next week, Just Science sits down with Joe Russo to discuss technologies used to monitor individuals on community supervision. Opinions or points of views expressed in this podcast, represent a consensus of the authors, and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of its funding.