

Reentry Ecology: A Systems-Based Framework for Reentry Reform (Executive Summary)**Dr. Ashley Goldon, DSW | Impact(FUL) Consulting****April 26, 2025****Introduction**

Reentry Ecology is an original conceptual framework developed by Dr. Ashley Goldon that repositions reentry outcomes within an ecological and systemic analysis. Drawing upon Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) and informed by the engineering science of human centered design, Reentry Ecology asserts that post-carcer outcomes are shaped by the dynamic interplay of individual, community, structural, and historical forces.

Rather than attributing successful reintegration solely to individual characteristics or risk factors, Reentry Ecology situates reentry within a broader ecological system — one influenced by localized community conditions, institutional structures, and the systemic implications of historical policy decisions. This framework demands a fundamental shift in how reentry is understood, designed, and supported across research, practice, and policy domains.

Limitations of Traditional Models

Dominant reentry paradigms, particularly those centered on criminogenic risk assessment, focus narrowly on modifying individual behavior while overlooking systemic, environmental, and historical factors. This perspective has proven limited in that it not only obscures the structural roots of reentry barriers but also reinforces deficit-based narratives that perpetuate stigma, negative self-concept, and economic inequities. Reentry Ecology advances a holistic framework that demands structural intervention — not merely individual rehabilitation.

Design Principles of Reentry Ecology

- **Systems Thinking:** Reentry outcomes emerge from multi-level environmental interactions across time.
- **Community Contexts:** Local social conditions, institutional availability, and community health critically influence reintegration.

- **Institutional Structures:** Policies (administrative and legislative), procedures, and organizational practices either mitigate or exacerbate reentry barriers.
- **Historical Forces:** Racialized and economic systems of exclusion have enduring impacts on post-incarceration trajectories.
- **Knowledge Liberation:** Impacted individuals must co-create and control research, program design, and policy advocacy.

Ecological Structure

Reentry Ecology identifies four interrelated domains that structure reentry outcomes:

- **Micro Level:** Individual attributes, skills, resilience, social capital, and direct experiences with incarceration.
- **Meso Level:** Organizational and community environments, including service delivery systems, local economies, social networks, and nonprofit infrastructures.
- **Macro Level:** National and state-level policies that yield collateral consequences (NICCC, 2022), mainstream cultural narratives, media, and political and economic trends.
- **Historical Level (Chronosystem):** Legacy effects of slavery, Jim Crow, WW2, Redlining, NAFTA, the War on Drugs, and Tough on Crime eras that continue to amalgamate into mass incarceration (Western, 2006).

This ecological analysis highlights the necessity of multi-level intervention strategies for sustainable reintegration.

Practical Applications

Reentry Ecology offers a theoretical and practical framework to guide:

- Program Design and Evaluation
- Systems Change and Policy Advocacy
- Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)
- Philanthropic Strategy Development
- Public Systems Reform
- Multi-sector Coordination of Care

Implications for the Field

Reentry Ecology has significant implications for practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and funders engaged in criminal justice reform, reentry services, and systemic change initiatives.

By framing reentry as an ecological outcome rather than an individual achievement, this framework demands a reassessment of how success is defined, measured, and supported post-incarceration. It challenges traditional deficit-based models that isolate individual behavior from environmental context, offering a path toward more equitable, effective, and sustainable reentry interventions.

For researchers, Reentry Ecology encourages multi-level, interdisciplinary inquiry that situates individual experiences within systemic and historical frameworks. For practitioners, it calls for programmatic designs that address barriers across micro, meso, macro, and historical levels simultaneously. For policymakers and funders, it elevates the need to invest in structural reforms and community ecosystems, rather than narrowly targeting individual "risk factors."

Special Consideration for Corrections Officers & Administrators: For corrections administrators, probation and parole agencies, and reentry service coordinators, Reentry Ecology offers a paradigm for transforming operational approaches to reentry. Rather than measuring success solely through compliance and absconding rates, Reentry Ecology encourages systems to examine how institutional practices, community conditions, and structural inequities shape reentry trajectories. Integrating an ecological lens into corrections-based reentry planning can lead to more effective reintegration outcomes, reduce revocations, and contribute to public safety by addressing systemic barriers, not just individual behaviors.

Special Consideration for Social Work Practice: For social workers committed to advancing the Grand Challenge of Smart Decarceration (Epperson et. al., 2017), Reentry Ecology offers a critical theoretical tool. By moving beyond individual-level interventions to embrace ecological and structural change strategies, Reentry Ecology aligns with the profession's ethical imperatives to dismantle oppressive systems and promote social justice.

It supports efforts to design reentry initiatives that are community-driven, sustainable, and grounded in a systemic understanding of incarceration's enduring impacts. Adopting an ecological lens in reentry work will lead to more durable outcomes, reduce recidivism, and advance broader goals of racial, economic, and social justice.

Limitations

- *Conceptual Breadth:*
Multi-level ecological analysis (micro, meso, macro, historical) can present challenges for practitioners seeking immediate, easily operationalized interventions. Further development of practice-oriented tools and implementation guides will be necessary.
- *Measurement Challenges:*
As a new theoretical model, Reentry Ecology has not yet been fully operationalized into standardized quantitative metrics or evaluation frameworks. Future research is needed to develop indicators and assessment tools that capture ecological reentry outcomes.
- *Systems Resistance:*
Institutions that have traditionally emphasized individual compliance and behavior modification may resist the structural critique embedded within Reentry Ecology, limiting initial uptake or adaptation within corrections, probation, and parole systems.
- *Need for Empirical Validation:*
While grounded in existing empirical research and interdisciplinary theory, the Reentry Ecology framework itself requires further empirical testing and validation through longitudinal studies, participatory action research, and applied evaluations across diverse contexts.

Conclusion

Reentry Ecology offers a paradigm shift in how post-carceral outcomes are conceptualized, analyzed, and addressed. By expanding beyond individual-focused models to embrace a systemic, historical, and ecological perspective, it provides a comprehensive framework for sustainable reintegration.

Addressing reentry challenges requires interventions at every level of the ecosystem — from individual empowerment to community infrastructure, from institutional accountability to historical reckoning.

As systems actors, researchers, and practitioners seek to advance justice reform efforts, Reentry Ecology offers a theoretical and practical foundation for creating the conditions necessary for lasting, transformative change.

References

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