REENTRY ECOLOGY & COLLECTIVE CARCERAL IMPACT ™

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I. The Problem: Collective Carceral Impact

The cause of failed reentry in the United States has been misdiagnosed for decades. Dominant models frame reentry as a problem of individual motivation, attitude, psychology, and compliance. Programs and policies assume that if a person simply "works their plan," avoids violations, and engages in services, successful reintegration will follow. Yet research consistently shows that the strongest predictors of recidivism are not psychological traits but **structural and environmental conditions** (Alper, Durose, & Markman, 2018; National Research Council, 2014).

Collective Carceral Impact (CCI) reframes the problem by naming the layered ecological forces that shape post-carceral outcomes. ***CCI is an ecological approach to understanding how individuals, families, and communities experience the accumulated effects of policies, institutional practices, and neighborhood and social conditions that persist long after release*** (Goldon, 2023).

At the micro level, people face immediate survival challenges—identification, transportation, trauma, medical care, family reunification, and housing eligibility. At the meso level, they return to communities characterized by decades of underinvestment, fragmented services, and limited infrastructure; community-based organizations that are culturally grounded but chronically underfunded; and service systems strained by contradictory requirements (Urban Institute, 2021). And at the macro level, they encounter policy structures—housing bans, supervision rules, occupational licensing restrictions, data silos, resource allocation patterns, and political disenfranchisement—that reproduce barriers irrespective of individual effort (Pager, 2003; Shriver Center, 2016; Hinton, Henderson, & Reed, 2018).

These conditions do not operate independently. They interact, compound, and reinforce one another across levels of the system. Taken together, these forces reveal the truth: **recidivism is not the result of individual deficits. It is an ecological outcome.**

No amount of motivation or personal reform can overcome the structural contradictions produced by fragmented systems and punitive policy design. The field has invested billions in individual-level change, when the challenge has always been structural, environmental, and collective.

Understanding the problem as ecological requires more than expanding the scope of analysis. It requires a different way of organizing how we understand systems, power, and change. This paper introduces an integrated framework for doing so:

Reentry Ecology defines the **structure** of the system—organizing reentry across micro, meso, and macro levels, and across the domains that shape reintegration.

Human-centered design clarifies how **power operates within that structure**, distinguishing among beneficiaries, users, and gatekeepers across all levels of the ecosystem.

Social Movement Ecology explains how **change occurs across the system**, identifying the roles and relationships required to realign actors, resources, and incentives toward structural transformation.

Together, these lenses form a unified model for understanding reentry not as a series of disconnected challenges, but as a coordinated system that produces—and can therefore be redesigned to change—outcomes.

II. Defining Reentry Through an Ecological Lens

Reentry has long been treated as a discrete moment—release from incarceration—or as a programmatic phase focused on service delivery. This framing is incomplete. Reentry is not an *event* or a *program*. It is a system-level process.

Reentry Ecology defines reentry as the ecological process through which individuals, families, and communities renegotiate their place in society after carceral separation, and the set of systems that structure the conditions of that return. This definition shifts the unit of analysis. Reentry is no longer understood as a transition managed by individuals, but as a coordinated interaction across multiple, interdependent systems.

That process unfolds across eight interconnected domains that shape reintegration: social and civic life, physical and behavioral health, education, transportation, legal and corrections infrastructure, finance and technology, employment and labor markets, and housing and neighborhood ecosystems (Visher, Yahner, & La Vigne, 2008; Western, 2018).

These domains do not operate independently. They collide, compound, and cascade. A missing ID prevents access to housing; without housing, employment becomes unattainable; without transportation, compliance becomes impossible; and technical violations—often unrelated to new criminal conduct—drive unnecessary reincarceration (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2019).

Reentry outcomes are produced through the interaction of systems—not the behavior of individuals alone. Reentry Ecology organizes this interaction as a structured ecosystem. It locates reentry within interdependent domains and within a structured ecological system, establishing the foundation for understanding how conditions are produced, maintained, and experienced.

This structural lens shifts the focus of intervention. Reentry is not a problem to be solved at the level of the individual, but a system to be understood—not as a static structure, but as a dynamic mechanism in which interdependent domains and system levels must move in coordination to produce successful outcomes.

III. Visualizing the Ecosystem: Micro, Meso, and Macro Levels

To operationalize this paradigm, Reentry Ecology builds on ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), mapping reentry across three interdependent levels:

- **The micro level** encompasses individual needs and intimate networks: documentation, behavioral health, trauma, family dynamics, and basic survival needs.
- **The meso level** encompasses the organizational and community environment: reentry hubs, local nonprofits, behavioral health networks, transit systems, schools, workforce partners, and informal networks that mediate access to opportunities.
- **The macro level** encompasses policy architecture and governance: statutes, budgets, data systems, contracting rules, supervision regimes, zoning codes, and labor policies that construct the structural environment into which people return.

Within the macro level, Reentry Ecology further distinguishes between:

- **Macro-administrative systems**, which implement and enforce policy (e.g., housing authorities, workforce agencies, corrections departments); and
- **Macro-high authority systems**, which establish the rules, incentives, and resource flows that govern the ecosystem (e.g., legislatures, courts, executive leadership, and philanthropic strategy actors).

These levels are interdependent. No single domain or level operates in isolation. Misalignment at any point in the system produces cascading effects across the ecosystem.

A fourth level — the chronosystem — accounts for the historical forces that shape ecological conditions over time, including the legacy effects of slavery, Jim Crow, redlining, the War on Drugs, and Tough on Crime era policy. Full elaboration of the chronosystem and its integration into the Reentry Ecology framework is developed in a forthcoming iteration.

IV. Designing Ecological Interventions

Most reentry interventions are designed to operate at the micro level—targeting individual behavior change through cognitive-behavioral therapy, case management, workforce training, or compliance-based programming. While these approaches can provide meaningful support, they are structurally limited when meso- and macro-level conditions remain misaligned (National Academy of Sciences, 2014).

Ecological redesign requires coordinated intervention across all levels of the system. This is where human-centered design becomes essential—not as a structural framework, but as a way of understanding how power operates within that structure.

Reentry Ecology defines **where activity occurs within the system**: micro, meso, and macro. Human-centered design clarifies **how key stakeholders function within those environments**, differentiating among beneficiaries, users, and gatekeepers (IDEO.org, 2015). These roles are not fixed to a single level of the system. They are present across all ecological layers and shift depending on context.

At the micro level, individuals navigate systems as beneficiaries of services, as users of programs and institutions, and as decision-makers within families and informal networks. At the meso level, organizations operate as users when delivering services, and as gatekeepers when determining access, eligibility, and opportunity. At the macro level, institutions function as both users of policy frameworks and gatekeepers of resources, rules, and enforcement.

Reentry is not simply about improving outcomes for beneficiaries at the point of release. It is about restructuring the conditions under which power is exercised across the entire ecosystem. Justice-impacted people are central to this design—not as a target population, but as actors embedded across levels and roles. They navigate systems as beneficiaries, shape them as users, and increasingly influence them as gatekeepers. Their cross-level presence is what connects the system in practice.

Designing ecological interventions, therefore, requires more than service delivery. It requires:

- Designing for lived experience at the point of impact;
- Strengthening the capacity of organizations that translate systems into practice;
- Restructuring the incentives and constraints that govern institutional decision-making.

Beneficiaries illuminate where systems fail. Users reveal how systems function. Gatekeepers determine whether systems change. Effective ecological interventions must engage all three simultaneously. This includes investing in community-rooted organizations, aligning supervision with mobility and opportunity, integrating transportation and employment systems, reforming licensing and housing barriers, and building non-carceral infrastructure that supports reintegration across domains.

Measurement must also shift accordingly—from tracking individual compliance to assessing ecosystem performance. This includes metrics such as time to identification, time to housing, access to transportation, employer participation, and cross-system data integration (NYC Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice, 2023; Michigan DOC, 2023).

Ecological design is not a programmatic adjustment. It is a reorganization of how systems distribute access, opportunity, and power.

V. Where Movement Ecology Meets Reentry Ecology

Reentry is not transformed through isolated interventions. It changes when actors across the ecosystem align their roles, resources, and strategies toward structural redesign. Social Movement Ecology identifies a set of coordinated roles necessary for systemic change: grassroots leaders, organizational implementers, demonstrators, inside-game actors, and research and narrative institutions (Ganz, 2010; Ayni Institute, 2017). These roles do not exist outside the reentry ecosystem—they are embedded within it, operating across micro, meso, and macro levels.

At the micro level, justice-impacted individuals and grassroots leaders generate lived insight, narrative clarity, and political energy. They surface the contradictions within the system and articulate the conditions necessary for meaningful reintegration.

At the meso level, community-based organizations, service providers, and system intermediaries translate that insight into practice. They design and implement programs, pilot new models, and coordinate across fragmented systems. Demonstrators—often rooted in impacted communities—play a critical role here, prototyping solutions that reflect ecological realities rather than institutional assumptions.

At the macro level, policymakers, agency leaders, researchers, and philanthropic institutions shape the broader environment. They control the rules, resources, and narratives that determine whether innovations remain localized or scale across systems. Inside-game actors work within these institutions to shift policy, funding, and regulatory conditions, while research and narrative institutions legitimize and disseminate new ways of understanding the problem and its solutions.

These roles are not hierarchical, nor are they confined to a single level. They are interdependent and reinforcing. Grassroots leadership without institutional alignment struggles to scale. Institutional reform without community grounding reproduces the same failures under new language. Demonstration without narrative fails to influence policy. Narrative without implementation fails to produce change.

Movement, therefore, is not a separate layer of the ecosystem—it is the mechanism through which the ecosystem reorganizes itself. When aligned, these roles activate change across the full ecology of reentry. They reshape how systems function within each domain—housing, employment, health, education, transportation, legal infrastructure, finance, and civic life—and how those domains interact with one another.

Justice-impacted people remain central to this process, not as symbolic representatives, but as actors whose cross-level presence enables alignment. A foundational principle of the formerly incarcerated people's movement holds that, “those closest to the problem are closest to the solution, but furthest from power and resources,” (Martin, 2017). People with lived experience carry knowledge across systems, connect lived experience to institutional design, and anchor accountability across roles; and peer models have been used widely across the service sector (Hyde et al., 2022; Ray et al., 2021).

Reentry is not a programmatic challenge to be solved within a single system. It is a coordinated effort to realign actors, redistribute power, and redesign environments across the entire ecosystem. Movement Ecology does not sit alongside Reentry Ecology—it activates it.

VI. Institutional Levers for Ecological Transformation

Institutions operating within the macro layer, particularly philanthropy, have a critical role in enabling ecological transformation. Positioned at the level where resources, incentives, and priorities are shaped, these actors influence how systems are funded, coordinated, and scaled. Philanthropy is uniquely positioned to take risks, convene cross-sector actors, support community-rooted organizations, and invest in the infrastructure required for long-term system alignment. It can fund demonstration efforts, strengthen leadership pipelines, and build the data and narrative architecture necessary to accelerate change (Shriver Center, 2016; Urban Institute, 2022).

Within an ecological framework, this role is not about directing isolated interventions, but about enabling coordinated movement across the system. This includes:

- Supporting the adoption and dissemination of Reentry Ecology as a unifying framework;
- Investing in ecological metrics and cross-system data infrastructure;
- Resourcing organizations led by formerly incarcerated people that have historically been excluded from funding;
- Strengthening research and narrative capacity to shift public and political understanding;
- Aligning funding strategies with the movement roles required for structural realignment.

Philanthropy is not the center of the ecosystem, but it is one of its most influential levers—capable of accelerating alignment, resourcing innovation, and shaping the conditions under which systems evolve.

VII. Implications for the Field of Social Work

The Reentry Ecology framework has direct implications for the field of social work, particularly in relation to its leadership in the Grand Challenges for Social Work, including Smart Decarceration (Williams, 2016; Pettus-Davis & Epperson, 2015). While social work has long embraced person-in-environment theory, its application to carceral systems has remained limited. In practice, reentry has been operationalized at the individual level—through clinical intervention, case management, and behavioral compliance—despite clear evidence that structural and environmental conditions drive outcomes. The ecological lens has not been meaningfully applied to the design, coordination, or evaluation of reentry systems.

Reentry Ecology addresses this gap by repositioning reentry as a systems-level process and, in doing so, redefining the role of social work. It challenges the field's reliance on individual-level assessment and intervention and calls for ecological approaches that evaluate system

performance across the full set of interdependent reentry domains, as well as the policies that shape them. It expands the scope of practice beyond the micro level, positioning social workers as actors across ecological layers—supporting individuals, coordinating systems, and influencing institutional behavior and resource allocation.

Finally, Reentry Ecology centers power and system performance as core concerns for social work practice. By distinguishing among beneficiaries, users, and gatekeepers, it makes visible how access to opportunity is structured and controlled across systems. This shift requires moving beyond individual compliance as a measure of success and toward ecological indicators—such as time to housing, access to identification, and cross-agency coordination—that reflect how systems function. In this way, Reentry Ecology calls on social work to fully realize its ecological commitments by applying them to one of the most systemically structured challenges of our time.

VIII. Conclusion

Collective Carceral Impact names the problem: reentry outcomes are ecological, not individual. Reentry Ecology provides the structural model—organizing the system across micro, meso, and macro levels, and distinguishing between administrative and high-authority functions within the macro layer. Human-centered design clarifies how actors engage within that structure as beneficiaries, users, and gatekeepers. These roles operate across all levels of the ecosystem and shape how power is experienced and exercised within and between systems. Social Movement Ecology identifies the roles required to activate change across this architecture—linking grassroots leadership, service delivery, institutional actors, and narrative infrastructure into a coordinated strategy for system transformation. Together, these frameworks form a unified model for understanding and redesigning the reentry ecosystem. They shift the field beyond a focus on individual success toward a systemic understanding of how environments produce outcomes.

The question is no longer what people must do to succeed. The question is what systems must do to receive people home.

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Appendix A.

Integrated Ecological Matrix: Structural and System Levels (Ecological Theory)

System	MICRO	MESO	MACRO (Administrative)	MACRO (High Authority)
Structure Level	Individuals & families	CBOs; coalitions; service providers	State agencies implementing policy (DOL, Medicaid, Housing Authorities, Workforce Boards)	Legislatures; courts; governors; federal agencies (HUD, DOL, HHS, DOJ)

Integrated Ecological Matrix: Mapping Stakeholder Power & Resources (Human Centered Design)

Role	MICRO	MESO	MACRO (Administrative)	MACRO (High Authority)
Beneficiaries	Individuals navigating services, families	Community members accessing programs	Populations impacted by policy implementation	Populations impacted by policy design
Users	Individuals engaging systems, peer leaders	Service providers, CBOs, intermediaries	Agencies implementing policy and programs	Institutions operationalizing strategy
Gatekeepers	Household decision-makers, informal power actors	Organizations controlling access and eligibility	Agencies enforcing rules and distributing resources	Policymakers, funders, institutional leaders

***Note:** Stakeholder roles (beneficiary, user, gatekeeper) are positional, not fixed. Each role operates across all ecological levels, with variation in concentration depending on context. Justice-impacted individuals occupy all three roles across the ecosystem.

Integrated Ecological Matrix: Social Movement Ecology Roles

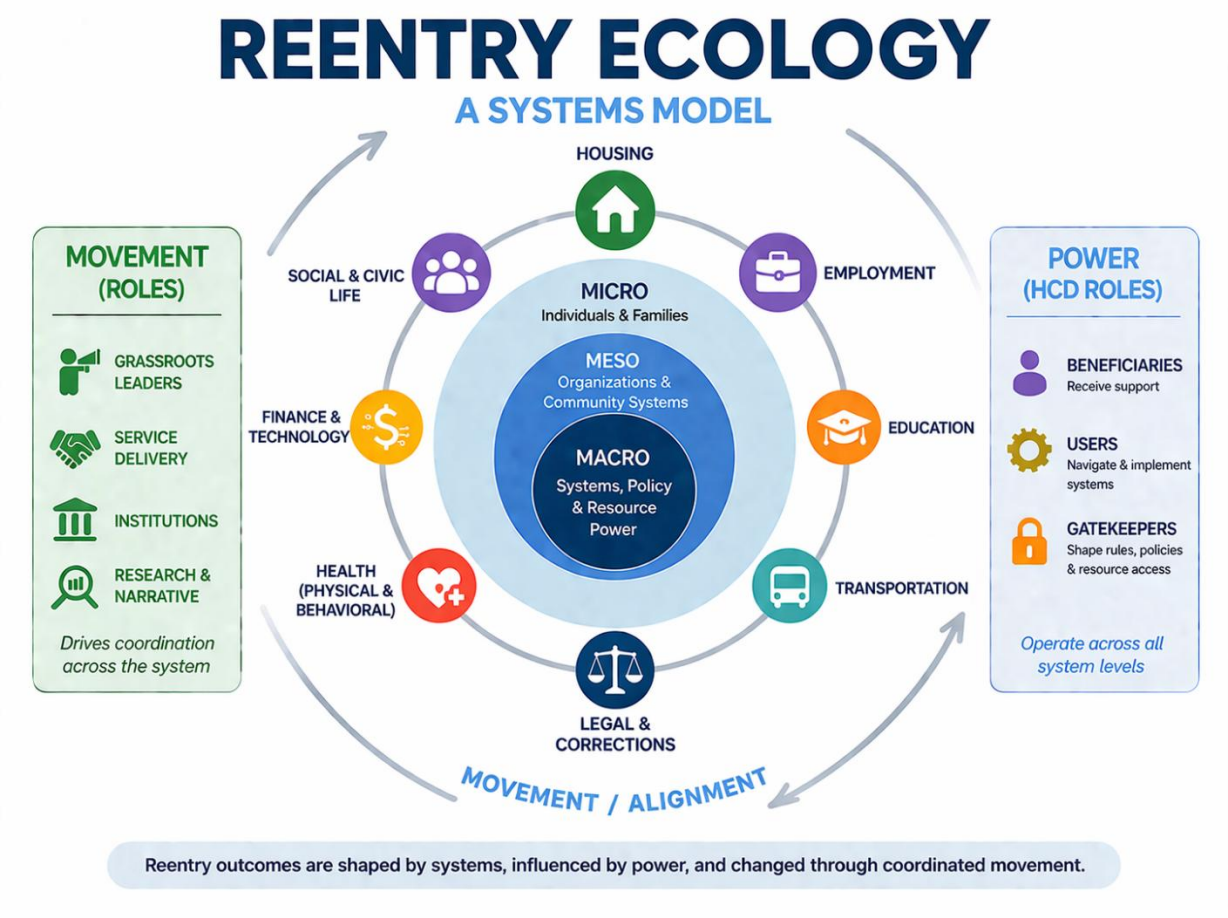
Level	MICRO	MESO	MACRO (Administrative)	MACRO (High Authority)
Movement Role	Grassroots leaders, impacted communities	Service providers, demonstrators, intermediaries	Inside-game actors (agency leadership, implementation partners)	Decision-makers, funders, research & narrative institutions

***Note:** Movement roles operate across levels but differ in function. Demonstrators, often rooted in impacted communities, bridge micro and meso levels by translating lived experience into scalable models.

Appendix B.

This diagram provides a visual representation of the Reentry Ecology framework, illustrating the interaction between system structure (micro, meso, macro), stakeholder power roles (beneficiaries, users, gatekeepers), and movement roles across eight interdependent reentry domains.

The model emphasizes that reentry outcomes are produced through coordinated movement across system levels, domains, and roles—not through isolated interventions.



The diagram should be interpreted as a dynamic system, in which alignment across domains, levels, and roles determines outcomes.