

# Scarlet Letter of Incarceration: Barriers to Women's Re-entry

## Main Feature Transcript

**JOE BIDEN CAMPAIGN VIDEO:** Equality, equity, fairness, decency. These words are the basis for the American creed. [] That's why I proposed a comprehensive criminal package in this campaign that begins with passing the Safe Justice Act. But my plan goes further: no mandatory minimums, the end of private prisons, bail reform, no juveniles at all in adult prisons, mandatory treatment not jail for those with drug addiction, job training and education while you're in prison . . . for all our problems, I have to say, I've never been more optimistic about the nation's future ...

**AILEE KATZ:** Criminal justice reform. One of the big-ticket items in American politics right now. But, while we wait for reform to come, about 1.9 million people are still being released from women's prisons in jails every year. As they go back to their communities. They're expected to find housing, income, jobs, attend programs, reunite with their family, connect with their kids, and build a support system . . . often without any real help from anybody. This is the process that has come to be known as entry.

**MULTIPLE VOICES:** Re-entry. Re-entry. Re-entry.

**AILEE:** Re-entry into society. Re-entry after serving time in prison. But . . . what does re-entry really look like? When does it begin?

**DEANNA HOSKINS:** The process of reintegration, or even integration, because some people have to be integrated, has to start at arrest.

**AILEE:** What happens in between?

**DEANNA:** Re-entry is a process.

**AILEE:** And, when does it end?

**HARMONY HOPE:** I don't feel that you're ever done with re-entry.

**AILEE:** That is what we set out to find. And what we learned is that re-entry, it doesn't just end when you find a job or find a place to live. It isn't some box that you check, and you're done...

**VIVIAN NIXON:** Like you were a loaf of bread in the oven.

**AILEE:** It is something that stays with you, even 30 years after being released . . . I'm Ailee

**JESSICA GADEA HAWKINS:** And this is Jessica.

**SHIRA FLUGELMAN:** And I'm Shira.

**AILEE:** In this episode, we are asking the question, what does the re-entry experience actually look like? To find out, we spoke with three women.

**VIVIAN:** Hi, I'm Vivian Nixon.

**DEANNA:** DeAnna Hoskins.

**HARMONY:** Hi, this is Harmony.

**AILEE:** DeAnna, Vivian and Harmony are leaders in the field of re-entry, Giants even.

**VIVIAN:** I was the Executive Director of College and Community Fellowship from 2004 until July 1 2021.

**AILEE:** That's Vivian Nixon again. Today she is the Writer in Residence at the Square One Project at the Columbia Justice Lab. Harmony advocates . . .

**HARMONY:** . . . On the radio at WBAI. And I fight for the injustices that are done for people who have justice history. I also am on the women's Community Justice Association. And I sit on the board of directors for the College and Community Fellowship.

**AILEE:** And DeAnna Hoskins, she is . . .

**DEANNA:** President CEO of just leadership USA.

**AILEE:** All three women also have justice histories. They were, decades ago, sentenced for a crime and incarcerated.

**HARMONY:** I was incarcerated back in 1988. So it was what seems like eons ago.

**AILEE:** That's Harmony.

**HARMONY:** And I was a mom right pregnant in Rikers Island, and then being sentenced to two and a half to five years for the sale of a controlled substance worth \$10. And then having to send my new grandbaby to the community so that I can finish my time. 30 years later, when you look at the longevity, I was altogether probably doing almost two years. But one day away from the child that you sent home, it feels like a million years, right?

**AILEE:** For Vivian,

**VIVIAN:** March 17 will be 21 years, I was released.

**AILEE:** And DeAnna, she is...

**DEANNA:** 20 years removed.

**AILEE:** In those 20 years, DeAnna has thrived professionally. She's worked in the upper echelons of the Obama White House as a senior advisor in the Department of Justice. But before she rose to the ranks, things were different.

**DEANNA:** I think back to when I was even pretrial and sitting in the jail every day bored to death. There was nothing to even prepare me if I was going to be released before I was found guilty, right? I would literally sit in this corner bench and just look at life go by outside. The jail where the women's unit sat was on the corner of one of the busiest streets in the city. So I could just see life going back and see people going to work, I could say come home, and I did that for like 90 days. And that was like, Is this really my life?

**AILEE:** DeAnna is talking about pretrial detention when you're held in jail before a case is resolved, and before being sentenced, the experience of prison, where you go after being sentenced is similar. But what we really wanted to focus on is what happens after what happens once you have served your time, quote, paid your debts to society, and are supposed to be able to move on with your life.

*Music Fades.*

**JESSICA:** When we talk about re-entry, people often think about helping a person as soon as they are released: housing, jobs, those first few steps. And those are important first steps. But as we will find out, it really is just the beginning.

**VIVIAN:** When a woman is released from prison . . .

**JESSICA:** That's Vivian Nixon again.

**VIVIAN:** Many people would think about it sort of as a series of mechanical steps, you know. You wake up in the morning, you're given what little belongings you had, and you get a bus ticket. And at least in New York State, 20 years ago, when I was released, you get \$40. You're then dropped off at a bus station, and you had home.

*Bus horns honk. A whistle blows. A bus pulls away.*

**VIVIAN:** But what happens when a woman is released from prison is much more than those steps. It's a series of thoughts about the future, and about the past, and whether or not that \$40 and that bus ticket is going to lead to another dead end, or lead to opportunity.

**JESSICA:** And this is DeAnna Hoskins.

**DEANNA:** I had a shot because I had a roof over my head and I had a car. And I remember saying, I got a shot, I got a shot, I can get somewhere. Housing was only easy because I broke

the law to keep my house. I was technically supposed to report that I was going to have this extended absence from my subsidized unit. I did not because I knew I was not going to be able to get housing if I did. So I literally broke the law to keep and maintain housing. And my family paid my way as if I was still there.

**JESSICA:** So you get out, you find housing. Getting a job is just the next step. There's a term called collateral consequences. Referring to all of the restrictions still imposed on someone even after they've completed their sentence. These are laws in the United States to restrict your housing, income, right to vote, access to programs, loans, and jobs. Employers in New York are not generally allowed to discriminate against someone with a record. But they often do.

**VIVIAN:** I applied for job after job after job with no callbacks. And one of the experiences I remember most vividly is a job where I got a call-back. And I was really excited to get the call-back. And the people were so nice to me. And the interview seemed to go on forever and ever. And then suddenly, they started like, parading different people from the office and asking me to repeat my prison story. And I suddenly realized this was a show for them. But I was humiliated. And even now I choke up because it was humiliating. And I walked out of there, not knowing I could ever put myself in that position again.

**JESSICA:** This was something we heard over and over again.

**HARMONY:** You have no idea that if you apply for a job, and they call you and you fill out the application, you put down that you have justice histories because they ask, and you know how to answer it, you know how to talk about your conviction, but yet when you sleep at night, you automatically set yourself up. "They're not gonna call me because I have justice history."

**JESSICA:** Everyone we've spoken to is full of stories, just like these. Concrete, systematic, systemic barriers to building or rebuilding important parts of life. But we talked to each of these women for over an hour, multiple times. And what stayed with us is the emotional journey of the re-entry process. A dramatic and racialized emotional journey that isn't spoken about enough.

**VIVIAN:** The ability to have a place to live and to get a job. Those are the physical steps that one has to take. But there is an internal journey. There is an emotional journey. One has to release the shame of having been incarcerated. There is still a tremendous amount of stigma attached to being incarcerated, in particular for women. March 17 will be 21 years since I was released, and I cannot say that I am completely free of shame and stigma. Even today, even after a career that most people would say is successful. It's very deep.

**JESSICA:** Releasing this shame, all the emotional and mental healing that's involved, it's particularly hard for women.

**VIVIAN:** I'm going to be 62 years old in less than a month. And there are still I still have my moments, I still have moments of, you know, deep regret deep shame. And I understand why I see the world differently than other people. Because somehow, my trust that the world is a safe place has been broken. And once that is broken, you don't function the same way other people do.

**DEANNA:** For women. I think it's harder because one, society put something on us of being a woman, you shouldn't go to jail. Why, right? You're supposed to be nurturing and caring and care for your kids. You're not a good mother, because you lost custody of your kids.

**HARMONY:** It was difficult as a mom to come out and my son was very young. Because he was so young, he didn't have any idea. Because I did time away from him, he's kind of looking like "who is this?"

**JESSICA:** The shame and social pressures runs deep. But it's also more than that. Vivian told us that the data is very clear. The vast majority of incarcerated women have experienced trauma or several complex traumas in their lives. And [more than 80%, she said, coincide with childhood sexual abuse and intimate partner violence](#), these experiences are replicated in prison.

**VIVIAN:** And that just leads to a lifetime of feeling undervalued feeling shame. Because we were still a society that blames women for their victimization. It's unbelievable how we continue to do that. And so yeah, that trauma doesn't go away. And prison really adds to the trauma because the dynamic in prison is very much the same. It's a very top-down oppressive, male-dominated place. And women are abused tremendously inside of prisons.

**JESSICA:** This fear and retraumatization, it can affect your goals.

**HARMONY:** Now, I don't know whether you guys knew this or not. But Hamony wanted to be a New York State Senator. So I have the... you know... all the bells and whistles, a certificate, and stuff like that. But after a while, the thought of being with other people that are going to be looking at me because you know they are gonna know ... I stayed away from that goal, I went away from it, because I don't want to be targeted as that, you know, as "that's the one that came from prison, that's the one." That it is very, very harmful. It is very traumatizing.

**JESSICA:** It's invisible. But it changes your everyday life. How you move through the world.

**VIVIAN:** Once you've experienced the criminal justice system, for me, the idea of ever having to go through that process again is so paralyzing that I have physical reactions every time I see a police officer...

*Protest chants, "No justice, no peace".*

**HARMONY:** Now, a regular person that wants to protest, I don't protest. And if I do protest, because I went out there a little bit for [George](#), but when they start arresting people, I'm getting up. I'm sorry, I love y'all, but I'm not going to jail. I was too scared to go march! I kind of watch with them [the police]. But I'm not gonna yell out. I'm not gonna say "Defund the police!" I'm not doing none of that. Because I'm too afraid to get arrested because *you* will go home. But guess who won't? You know what I mean? For a simple protest.

**VIVIAN:** And this is not a condemnation of all police officers. It's just what they represent to me is if I make a wrong move, I can end up in a jail cell. I'm just so conscious of everything I say everything I do around law enforcement, a hypersensitivity to getting back in that system. It's

frightening. It doesn't go away. I don't know anybody who says, you know, I now walk freely through the world without fear. It's a horrible experience, and no one wants to repeat it.

**JESSICA:** When we were talking with them. This is what both Vivian and DeAnna refer to as ...

**DEANNA:** The Scarlet Letter.

**VIVIAN:** The Scarlet Letter of incarceration.

**JESSICA:** The idea that the burden of a conviction, it just never goes away.

**DEANNA:** Now I have a pardon, which is the highest level of erasure or closure you could get and still having barriers. It really is a racist system, even if you get a pardon. Because it doesn't matter if I have a "clean slate" or you're saying you can't use my background. It is still being used. When I moved to DC, or I moved to New York I -- 22 years later -- cannot go to a managed apartment complex that has a management system that runs my background, my credit, all of that. My criminal record still comes up and to get me denied housing. So I strategically have to rent from private owners. What extra highest level of redemption can you get to that a person who made it to the White House as a career employee at a high level, but I can't rent an apartment? So is it the criminal record? Or is it a way to continue to oppress a certain population of society?

**AILEE:** Racism. The idea that the real issue, the real reason that people can't move on in their lives after incarceration, it's not because of personal failures. It's not because they haven't paid their debts to society. It's not because they don't deserve to or don't want to, or don't have the ability to. It's because of the role race, and racism plays in this country, especially in the legal system. And that is really nothing new.

**DEANNA:** And no matter what you do, society is never gonna let you forget.

**BARACK OBAMA SPEAKING AT A CONVENTION. APPLAUSE:** *This is not a new topic. I know sometimes. I know sometimes folks discover these things like they just happen.*

**AILEE:** This is President Obama speaking to the NAACP in 2015.

**BARACK OBAMA SPEAKING AT A CONVENTION:** By just about every measure, the life chances for Black and Hispanic youth still lag far behind those of their white peers. Our kids, America's children, so often are isolated, without hope, less likely to graduate from high school, less likely to earn a college degree, less likely to be employed, less likely to have health insurance, less likely to own a home. A part of this is a legacy of hundreds of years of slavery, and segregation, and structural inequalities that compounded over generations. It did not happen by accident.

**DEANNA:** I think we've been conditioned to think re-entry is the problem.

**AILEE:** But guess again, this is DeAnna speaking, by the way.

**DEANNA:** Racism is the problem! Because of who's impacted: black and brown people. It is still very oppressive. That's one of the legacies of slavery. We get to continue to still hold you oppressed of what you have a right to. Even once you have a criminal record. It amazes me. Have we thought about . . . why is it that other countries when you commit a crime, the only Liberty you lose is your freedom? Why in this country do we strip you of all liberties, your voting, your housing, your access to privacy, we stripped people down in a ceremony while you're awaited in the court. You're here to facts against you. The judge has the gavel your citizens. But when we bring you back, we don't have a ceremony.

**AILEE:** Harmony mentioned this to too.

**HARMONY:** So there was no welcoming party!

**AILEE:** Okay, back to DeAnna.

**DEANNA:** We don't reinstitute and give you back all those rights. We say go back out and be successful. But oh, by the way, we didn't give you those liberties back. But we want you to be successful. We don't reinstitute and give you back all those rights. We say go back out and be successful. But oh, by the way, we didn't give you those liberties back. But we want you to be successful.

**HARMONY:** What really bothers me now is that people tend to forget, right? That it is still is a struggle. I now have a 30-year-old son, right 33 to be exact. And he still lives in that same community. I now have other young nieces, nephews, and neighbors who still live in that same community where we still have violence, where we still have racial disparity, right. So we still have some of the same things and people are dealing with it in a different way. So we know that there are more police officers in my community than there are in other communities. So it's going to be more likely that my son will get arrested. We just clump them all together. And you know, "They lazy. They don't want to do nothing. They robbers. That's what they are." But we don't really look at what happened. And it's very daunting to have this conversation because I think it's a bunch of nonsense. I think people do it purposely. People are okay with the fact that some people don't get as much as others. It is very, very difficult to talk about experiences where there's families that are still in those communities and things may not have been as rosy even after freedom. Things are still not as rosy even after freedom. And so, I don't know.

**AILEE:** What they're all saying is that it comes down to racism, all the reasons why some communities are over-policed. And some are not why we still have segregated neighborhoods, why in some places, mass amounts of people, kids, and parents are removed to return weeks, months, or years later, with that \$40 in their pocket, and a whole lot more burden and responsibilities to carry.

**VIVIAN:** Black people are assumed to have some type of deficiency. It's the language we've always used to talk about communities of color in this country, as disadvantaged, as marginalized, as underserved as not meeting the mark in some way. But that's why the burden is

on us. Because we've been marked with these identities, these labels of being less than or being somehow inferior to other people. I mean, I've seen it in family history, it's so clear, there's not one woman in my line of generations, that hasn't been part of some social justice movement while raising a family while working a full-time job, while being very involved in all of these things to give the community, the things that other communities just naturally have.

**AILEE:** So where does this leave us? Where do we go from here?

**SHIRA:** We set out to understand what re-entry looks like.

**JESSICA:** But we ended with a complicated picture of systemic, intergenerational, and personal racism and trauma.

*Joe Biden campaign video fades in.*

**JOE BIDEN CAMPAIGN VIDEO:** "I believe my criminal justice reform practice is as strong or stronger than anyone else. I'm amazed at how far we've come. But I know how much further we have to go and what we're capable of doing. And we can get there together.

**JESSICA:** Vivian spoke about several other challenges that people who have been incarcerated have to navigate. A lot of the same challenges that led to incarceration in the first place, poverty, mental health, physical health, family dynamics. She said it's our responsibility as a society to look out for one another. There's at the very least three other things that we need to do.

**AILEE:** For one, we need to start meeting people where they're at, and recognize that no one is successful all on their own.

**VIVIAN:** Many people who have been incarcerated have multiple other issues that they're facing, which led to incarceration. So with all of these problems, how do you meet someone to their own devices, if they are living in extreme poverty are suffering from addiction or other mental or physical health issues? It is *our* responsibility as a society to look out for one another . . . I fear that we become so attached to the American myth of you know, any individual can pull themselves up by their bootstraps. And you know, if you work hard and do the right thing, you know, the world is at your feet. That narrative is so untrue. Because there's not one person, not one human being from President Barack Obama, to President Donald Trump, to Jeff Bezos to Mark Zuckerberg, who has made it on their own, not one of them made it on their own. Somebody along the way helped them. Somebody gave them access. Somebody mentored them. Somebody paid for their education. So this, this idea that you can make it on your own. It's just a bunch of crap. And we need to stop telling kids that because it's just not true.

**AILEE:** Because with a little help, people can do anything.

**VIVIAN:** Support and opportunity create success. Success doesn't happen in a vacuum, not for formerly incarcerated people and not for anybody else. There is nothing that a formerly incarcerated person cannot do if support and opportunity aren't available. We want them to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, but no one has given them boots.

**JESSICA:** Second, change requires addressing the root causes of women's needs and recognizing people as leaders in their own right.

**DEANNA:** Not only re-entry - prevention, diversion, and incarceration has to be culturally relevant, and trauma-informed, right? Because typically, people don't get to the act of the crime that got them incarcerated. There were traumatic experiences that led up to that, that nobody paid attention to. So all of a sudden we want to pay attention to the trauma. And let's be honest, incarceration itself is a traumatic experience. And then they close the gates, and say go out and be successful . . . I'm still dealing with everything I was dealing with that the crime was a result of all the trauma that still didn't get addressed! People are selling re-entry as the individual's responsibility. It is the individual's responsibility, but the system has to be willing to allow the person to transform. So there's a systemic problem of it. So when we count recidivism, we count it as an individual's failure. We never count it as the systemic failure that actually took place - of why the person couldn't get a job, why the person couldn't get housing, and those different things. Most people have their own opinion on, "Those people get what they deserve." How do you embrace that conversation? How do you lean into conflict? Every person we encounter, we don't see an individual who's been formerly incarcerated, we don't see a person who's been impacted by the criminal justice system, we see an individual who is a leader, and my responsibility is to help unleash the leadership in them so they can utilize their voice and move on.

**JESSICA:** And our last point today. We need to take the time to invest in one another and authentically care.

**HARMONY:** There are so many people that just don't care. People really do not uh want to invest in the way that they should invest in these communities and to see a difference, I've literally felt and seen people say, "If I'm rich, and the crumbs fall off the table, then you'll be able to get something." And really, they have enough money that can change my entire community and everybody else's. But that's not what they choose to do with their money. And so umm whatever we have, we just have to share and make up that community. And so to me, if we want to shift, and we want to change, we have to pour into education from ground zero, right. And so when we start to educate individuals, then they will seek out other opportunities for themselves. But if we continue to want to have a higher class and a lower class, then we will not move it forward. So freedom comes when more people are free. But until we're able to reach people and they understand whichever way freedom is for them, then I will be free. In order for umm Harmony to be free, women must be free. But I never said formerly incarcerated women. In order for Harmony to be free, women must be free (*voice gets emotional*).

**VIVIAN:** Women you are bearing what I call the "The Scarlet Letter of Incarceration," being very public about it all the time, being asked to tell your story over, and over again, sometimes in ways that feel a little inappropriate and voyeuristic. So to just look at that and say, "Oh, what a success!" I feel sometimes the pain of it is invisible. That beneath that success, that under the shadows of that success is a lot of pain, and a lot of umm loneliness that never gets talked about. So while I appreciate the admiration and the accolades, I wish people could really see what it's like.