PJP PRISON JOURNALISM PROJECT

FEATURE

Why Older People Worry About Leaving Prison

The world is different from the one they left when they came here.

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Photo Illustration by Sarah Rogers. Photos from Adobe Stock

John R. left our prison in March. His departure should have inspired excitement — and to some extent it did. But it also stirred up questions and anxiety for the 68-year-old.

“Where am I gonna go?” John R. said in an interview. “I’ve been in this place damn near 40 years. Got no family left. Can’t work anymore. I take enough pills every day to stock a Walgreens. You tell me, what am I supposed to do?”

This apprehension is common among the aging population at my prison. People who are 55 and older are one of the fastest-growing prison demographics. The number of people 55 and older in U.S. prisons has climbed from **48,000 to 154,000** over roughly the last two decades, according to the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Statistics.

Despite this massive population increase, very few correctional programs in South Carolina are specifically tailored to address the unique needs and barriers aging people face after release. In particular, these older folks have told me they have concerns over finding housing, securing affordable health care, and accessing the social safety net. Everyone I spoke to for this story asked me not to print their full name because they had privacy concerns connected to their release from prison.

Public housing, and even federally subsidized private housing, can deny placement for people convicted of drug or sex crimes. Landlords are also given great discretion on renting to convicted felons. It's no wonder that, as Prison Policy Initiative reported in March 2025, formerly incarcerated people are **10 times more likely** to be homeless.

After 18 years in prison, Jack M., 76, said retirement homes are denying his admission on the grounds of his felony conviction. The Freemasons, a group he belongs to, also will not provide him housing.

"I was a Mason and a Shriner for years, but when I tried to reserve a place at the Masonic Retirement Center, I was told they couldn't accept me," Jack said.

Virtually all pre-release and reentry programs offered in South Carolina are geared to assist younger adults, mostly focused on returning them to the workforce. Funds are heavily dedicated to providing training in resume writing, job interview skills, money management and relapse prevention. But there is little geared toward helping older adults readjust to the outside, according to Lewis Whitmire, deputy director of **Our Journey**, a nonprofit transition service in nearby North Carolina. I interviewed Whitmire over electronic communication and phone calls.

"Seniors are not going out to pound the pavement, putting in employment applications," Whitmire said. "If the U.S. criminal justice system is going to continue keeping people locked up until they are well beyond working age, then some attention needs to be diverted to what they are to do upon release."

George L., 69, is set to leave prison in December after 24 years behind bars. He said he could use a program dedicated to teaching him about the latest technology, such as smartphones.

“Man, I ain’t never even been on the internet, and I don’t care how many cellphones they say are floatin’ around here. I ain’t got one!” George said. “I’m like a dinosaur, man. Like one of them ‘Bill and Ted’ movies with a dude from the past. I’ll be lost, man!”

Continuity in health care for chronic conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, arthritis, heart disease and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease is another burden for older people living in prison, according to a report in the 2023 International Journal of Prisoner Health.

Rita Crapps, assistant deputy director of the South Carolina Department of Corrections, told me in an interview, conducted through the mail, that the state prison system does help people get enrolled in social safety net programs when they leave prison.

“Prior to release, offenders sit down with a reentry specialist to go over all the individual may need upon release,” Crapps said. “We enroll or refer individuals, through SC Thrive and other providers, in essential services like SNAP benefits, Social Security, Medicare. We talk through housing needs, transportation, food, clothing, employment, everything. SCDC doesn’t leave the returning citizen to ‘figure things out.’”

But Crapps did say that “there is no program that covers all of this.” Enrolling people in these programs is largely left to either volunteers or staff reentry coordinators, who are already stretched thin due to staffing shortages.

One possible solution may lie in a unique program in San Francisco. The **Senior-Ex Offender Program** is a transition service specifically tailored to meet the comprehensive needs of aging formerly incarcerated people.

Working with local community partners including San Francisco Human Services, the San Francisco Mayor’s Office and Wells Fargo Bank, the Senior Ex-Offender Program works to provide a new start for formerly incarcerated elderly by providing intensive case management, various social activities and classes, and access to health care, counseling, housing, personal care aides, meals, and physical, occupational and speech therapy.

Could such a program work in South Carolina? It could be called a Program for Older Prisoners, or POPs for short.

For now, not enough is being done to help aging people prepare for a return to freedom. Since 1993, there has been a 400% increase in people older than 55 in South Carolina state prisons, according to Whitmire. According to the latest data from 2019, about 2,500 people 55 and older are in South Carolina state prisons.

Hundreds and potentially thousands of these people will reenter society in coming years and decades. And they will do so without an adequate plan to help them return successfully.