

# Working as peer-support specialist helps people with criminal and psychiatric histories

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At a time when increasing numbers of prisoners are released early from houses of detention to reduce crowding during the coronavirus pandemic, one avenue to reintegration appears to hold promise for individuals who have personal experience with incarceration and mental illness: working as a peer-support specialist in a mental health setting.

Stacey L. Barrenger of New York University's Silver School of Social Work and Katherine Maurer of McGill University found that serving as a trained peer support specialist in a mental health treatment setting can be beneficial to individuals who have "lived experiences" with psychiatric and criminal histories, helping them with their own recovery and leading more empowered, meaningful, and productive lives.

The researchers' study, "Mental Health Recovery: Peer Specialists with Mental Health and Incarceration Experiences," was published in the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, and is based on 45 in-depth interviews with 15 peer specialists. The authors noted that this type of paid health care provider position is increasingly common, though it has received little attention from researchers who specialize in [mental health care](#) and recovery.

"With their psychiatric and [criminal histories](#), many participants anticipated limited opportunities for work, but becoming a peer support specialist offered a possibility for employment despite their past histories and offered a new identity different from their current identities as patients or criminals," they write. The study participants reported becoming "more hopeful about their futures, their capacity to change, and ability to remain in the community."

**More information:** Stacey L. Barrenger et al, Mental health recovery: Peer specialists with mental health and incarceration experiences., *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* (2020). [DOI: 10.1037/ort0000450](https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000450)

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