

# Research Brief: Bounded Engagement and Institutional Interdependency

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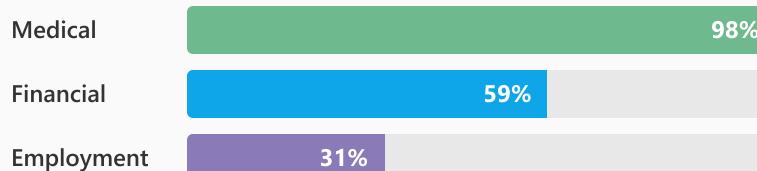
**Research Question:** *Why (or when) do formerly incarcerated adults not engage with formal institutions?*

## Study Design

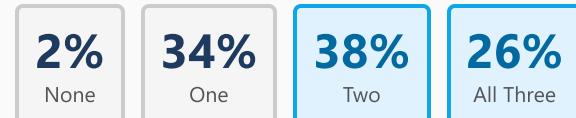
We conducted 97 face-to-face interviews with formerly incarcerated adults in the Greater Boston area to examine (non)engagement with three types of formal institutions: **financial**, **medical**, and **employment**. Our sample was recruited through the Office of Returning Citizens (ORC) and in other ways (referrals, outreach with other community-based organizations, etc.)

## Key Finding #1: Participants Reported High Levels of Formal Engagement

### Engagement by Institution Type



### Number of Formal Institutions Participants Engaged With



## Key Finding #2: Participants Encountered Barriers to Engagement, but Tended to Engage with Formal Institutions When They Could

### Financial Barriers

Limited funds, access issues (e.g., frozen accounts, lack of information), avoiding garnishment

### Employment Barriers

Shared barriers (e.g., criminal record stigma or Supplemental Security Income [SSI] challenges) and individualized barriers

### Institutional Interdependency Barriers

Barriers in one area block access to others (e.g., no ID → can't get formal job → can't open bank account)

**We found evidence of bounded engagement:** People engage with formal institutions when accessible, but are not engaged and/or turn to informal alternatives when barriers exist. Nonengagement is typically temporary and situation-specific—not a wholesale rejection of formal systems. Administrative burdens, rather than a lack of interest or avoidance, tended to drive most nonengagement decisions.

## Policy Recommendations

- **Shift administrative burdens** from individuals to institutions
- **Reduce/remove barriers**, like minimum balance requirements at traditional banks, to improve access
- **Simplify state identification access**, which can have positive accessibility effects across institutions
- **Regulate and strengthen** consumer and worker protections

**Key Takeaways:** The needs this population faces when (re)integrating into society are multifaceted and interconnected. However, the barriers should not be. Reducing or removing barriers to healthcare insurance and access, minimum balance requirements, and burdens placed on job applicants with criminal records can improve institutional engagement. Given the interconnected nature of burdens (or institutional interdependency) that our participants faced, reducing a burden can also have widespread effects.