The University of Chicago

Paving the Path to Effective Programming: A Comparative Case Study on Experiential Programming in United States Prisons and Jails

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A thesis submitted for partial fulfillment
of the requirements for a Bachelor of Arts degree in

Public Policy Studies

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April 2022

Abstract

In this study, I answer the research question: which aspects of experiential education should be prioritized for individuals in jails versus prisons to make programming the most effective for those in the United States correctional system? While research has been done on the efficacy of prison programming generally, little research has been done on *experiential* programming in both jails and prisons. Current programming has the potential to be easily tailored to experiential programming, which has been shown to have vastly positive benefits. Thus, analyzing which factors within experiential programming are likely to have the greatest benefit on individuals may help improve key metrics such as recidivism rates.

Through my comparative case study, I explore the factors that should be prioritized in experiential programming via interviews with 15 program administrators, academics, and experts in the field. I use the qualitative coding software Dedoose to organize my interview transcriptions into overarching themes and sub-themes to analyze the interview data and produce my findings. I find that experiential programming in prisons should prioritize a continuum of care and put an emphasis on empowerment, while experiential programming in jails should be shorter-term and emphasize healing. In both prisons and jails, programming that develops a sense of human connection and personalized care, specifically via mentor figures and trusted peers with similar life experiences, is most important.

My policy recommendations regarding what experiential correctional programs should prioritize directly mirror my findings, as outlined above. By making small strategic changes to pre-existing programming, higher degrees of program effectiveness including a more stable return to society for those who have experienced incarceration are possible at minimal cost.

Acknowledgments

This thesis would not have been possible without the help of many key individuals. First, I'd like to thank my thesis preceptor, Kelsey Berryman, who was crucial to my thesis writing process. Every Monday evening, Kelsey was there to not only provide helpful feedback, but encouragement and moral support that guided me throughout. Her infectious smile and words of wisdom never failed to cheer me up even during the most difficult and ambiguous parts of the process.

I would also like to thank my Second Reader, Professor Chad Broughton. Professor Broughton's feedback and support throughout the process, whether it be helping me brainstorm experts in my area of research or answering my many clarification questions, helped ground me during the BA thesis process and I am thankful for his continued mentorship.

I would also like to thank all my expert interviewees for taking the time out of their days to answer my questions and give thoughtful responses. In addition to providing me with meaningful stories and answers to my many questions, my interviewees shared their personal experiences with me, which not only helped me better understand and orient myself in the context of my research but also inspired me to dig deeper and keep asking questions. I am continuously inspired by their dedication to helping some of the most vulnerable individuals in our society today break out of the cycle of recidivism and I am appreciative or their trust and belief in me throughout this process.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents whose love and support have shown up in the most heartfelt of places during the thesis writing process: going on midnight coffee runs for me during the first couple weeks of winter quarter in Korea so that I could wake up to my favorite caffeinated drink just in time for a virtual class or thesis interview, stocking up the pantry with all the best thesis writing snacks, and the endless words of encouragement that they shared with me over winter break, as I headed towards my penultimate quarter at UChicago. Thank you for always being my biggest cheerleaders.

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Introduction

In 1974, the American sociologist Robert Martinson's study called "What Works? Questions and Answers About Prison Reform" infamously concluded that "with few and isolated exceptions, the rehabilitative efforts that have been reported so far have had no appreciable effect on recidivism" (Martinson 1994). Mass incarceration and high recidivism rates have historically plagued the United States. Long-term unemployment and a lack of education lie at the heart of these two issues, resulting in individuals resorting to crime, and for many, starting the vicious cycle where they end up reoffending and returning to prison (also known as recidivating), after their initial sentence (Lageson and Uggen 2013; Vacca 2004). Societal structures such as inequitable hiring practices create additional hurdles for these individuals to fully reintegrate, ultimately playing a role in individuals recidivating (Flores 2018; Decenzo 2009). Despite the quadrupling of total state spending on corrections in the past two decades, with the most recent figure hovering around $52 billion, there has been little improvement shown overall in regard to recidivism, with more than four out of ten American offenders still returning to prison within three years post-release (The Pew Center on the States 2011). Thus, many of the efforts that have been made in the past have fallen short, doing little to deter individuals who have previously engaged in crime from re-engaging in criminal behavior upon leaving prison and in turn, putting the safety of American communities in jeopardy as well (The Pew Center on the States 2011).

However, a significant body of research has also been dedicated to figuring out how to combat some of the more systemic issues that make individuals more prone to reoffend and how to make correctional programming the most effective. For one, educational programs in the correctional system that target a specific population such as those who are the most educationally disadvantaged have been shown to be most effective in reducing recidivism (Cronin 2011;

Adams 1994). The finding that targeting specific types of individuals (e.g., those who may not have strong educational backgrounds prior to being incarcerated) suggests that educational programming in the correctional system shouldn't be a one-size-fits-all solution and that funding for such programs should be more specific and intentional. In a similar vein, individuals who are in jail have several important differentiating characteristics from those who are serving time in prison. One fundamental difference is that the jail population is much more transient in nature, with many individuals either awaiting trial or serving a relatively shorter sentence, depending on the nature and number of offenses committed (Cox and Furst 2018). On the other hand, prison populations on average, are serving increasingly longer sentences of 10+ years (Urban Institute 2017). Another differentiating factor between jail and prison populations is the average age of individuals residing in the facilities – many jail inmates are 18 and younger while a vast majority of inmates in prisons are over 36 years old (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention 2020; Federal Bureau of Prisons 2021). Thus, given the younger and more transient nature of jail populations and the increasingly older populations serving longer times in prison, effective programming and programming implementation must consider the distinguishing characteristics between the two populations.

A significant body of research has also been done in the field of experiential education in a variety of environments for both students and non-students. Experiential education, at its core, is learning by doing, especially in the context of practical, real-world skills and applications (Gentry 1990). Broadly speaking, experiential learning has also been shown to have positive effects on individuals in the correctional system, with one study describing it as "a creative and practical path to knowledge-building" (Allred 2009).

While existing studies and programs have established that providing experiential education services in the United States correctional system has a positive effect in reducing key metrics such as recidivism, little has been done to understand the unique types of experiential educational programming that may be the most effective for the vastly different individuals who are in jail versus prison. Thus, the research question that I hope to answer in this study is: *Which aspects of experiential education should be prioritized for individuals in jails versus prisons in order to make programming the most effective for those in the United States correctional system?*

In this study, I address this question and gap in the research via a comprehensive, interview-based comparative case study where I gather data from 15 program administrators, academics, and experts in the field of correctional programming to paint a fuller picture of the different and diverse needs of individuals in jails and prisons. These expert interviews shed light on six key findings that can be organized into three main categories: experiential programming in the context of prisons, experiential programming in the context of jails, and common themes of effective experiential programming in prisons and jails. Under specific programmatic considerations that should be made for prison programs, I find that prisons must prioritize a continuum of care for when the individual is released and aim to develop programming that puts an emphasis on the empowerment of individuals. For experiential jail programming, I find that the prioritization of short-term term curricula as well as a focus on healing in the programming are two key factors to take into consideration when developing curricula. Finally, when it comes to common themes of effective experiential programming in both prisons and jails, I find that developing a sense of human connection and personalized care is of utmost importance,

specifically via mentor figures as well as trusted peers who individuals in the correctional system can look up to.

By more accurately targeting the needs of each population via tailored experiential programming, correctional program efficacy will increase, ultimately leading to reduced rates of recidivism. Channeling increasing amounts of taxpayer dollars into prisons is not a sustainable, long-term solution to the astronomically high recidivism rates that the US continues to face. As such, further research specifically into what works to reduce recidivism in specific programs and strategies that have track records of success will allow policymakers and practitioners to get a better understanding of how to use the resources that are available in a more targeted and effective way.

Literature Review

The Current State of Prison Education and Experiential Prison Programming

An extensive body of research has been done on the topic of prison education programs. There has been a particularly special emphasis put on implementing educational programs in prisons as countless studies have shown in the past that educational opportunities are crucial to reducing recidivism rates – when done correctly, education can be a gateway to both economic and social mobility (Center for American Progress 2018). Studies have shown that those who participate in any educational programs in prison (e.g., adult basic education, high school/GED prep programs, vocational certification programs) are approximately 43% less likely to reoffend and return to prison (Davis et. al. 2014). When it comes to employment opportunities post-release (a highly related factor to consider with the rate of recidivating), however, the same study showed that individuals who received this form of education, only had a 13% increased likelihood of finding post release employment (Davis et. al. 2014). While this study helpfully

shows that there is potential for growth and improvement in the current prison education system, little guidance is given in terms of how specifically we can aim to improve them or what factors we should be focusing on to make the programs that are currently in place even more effective (i.e., at reducing recidivism/helping newly released individuals find sustained employment). Other studies have supported the notion that certain prison programming may be at best statistically insignificant. Research done by Glaser (1969) shows that those who were academically educated in prison returned at a rate of 39% while those who were not recidivated at a rate of 33%. The higher recidivation rate for those who were academically educated in prison suggests that the prison education did not significantly help the participants and that not all prison education programs are created equally. Glaser suggests that the quality of education that is offered and the attitudes of the students in the classes are key to determining whether they see successful results from the education they attain in prison (Glaser 1969). Here, it is important to note that Glaser's findings from the second half of the twentieth century may not perfectly apply to more modern-day conditions. Furthermore, Glaser does not specifically describe in great detail what "academically educated" entails, introducing a degree of ambiguity when it comes to his findings. However, his study shows that the quality of programs being offered in prison is critical (as indicated by the wide-ranging results of prison program efficacy) but also the way in which the education is received and whether the education is impacting those receiving the education in a meaningful way.

In an attempt to make prison programming more meaningful and effective, initial research has been done on prison programs focusing exclusively on experiential education, or interactive, hands-on learning. One study done by Leberman establishes the benefits of experiential learning on prison populations. In his study he points to the idea that many

participants of experiential prison programming indicate an increase in self-confidence and self-awareness as a result of the programming offered (Leberman 2007). The personal development that Leberman explores in his paper is specifically attributed to the various factors that are involved in the experiential learning process including mentorship from instructors as well as opportunities for creative, emotional, and personal reflection (Leberman 2007). Other studies have indicated that experiential learning in prison contexts is particularly effective for inmates as it often allows them to home in on topics that are practical and useful to them within the scope of their everyday lives outside of prison, ultimately leading them to form a greater purpose in their lives (Harris 2018).

While there is an overall benefit to experiential education in prisons, many prisons across the United States lack any form of it (Leberman 2007; Harris 2018). Additionally, Leberman and Harris' studies do not expand on what specific aspects of experiential education are particularly important to emphasize for those who tend to serve longer sentences in prison for more serious crimes. Furthermore, the current literature does not give a clear answer as to *why* these aspects of experiential education are particularly meaningful for incarcerated individuals.

The Current State of Jail Education and Experiential Jail Programming

Much of the research that has been done so far on systems of education in the carceral system has been done on prisons. In contrast, there exists a much more limited scope of research and studies dedicated to programming (both experiential and not) in jails. Educational programming in jails mostly revolve around basic adult education (GED, ESL, and literacy programs), putting much less of an emphasis on any experiential aspect where individuals may proactively learn outside of the traditional classroom method (Sawyer and Cosgrove 1989).

Existing studies on jail-specific programming have been mostly treatment-based in nature (ie. programs that target mental health and addictions) and have not been conducted on a large scale (Collica-Cox 2021). Furthermore, the studies that attempted to implement experiential curricula in jails were simply modeled after pre-existing programs in prisons and only incorporated limited aspects of experiential education such as icebreakers and group discussions on the topics featured in the curriculum (Allred 2009).

Part of the challenge in implementing educational programming in jails stems from the fact that jail populations tend to constantly be in flux due to relatively shorter sentences (Richie 2003). Given this constantly changing population, jails have been largely overlooked as research sites, and thus, places where higher education programs and other experiential programs can be implemented (Aiello and Duffy-Comparone 2018). Jails, however, remain as the "gateway to the criminal justice system" for both pre-trial detainees in addition to individuals who are serving jail sentences (Aiello and Duffy-Comparone 2018). Given that over nineteen times as many individuals go through jails as they do prisons, with approximately 12 million jail admissions every year nationwide, it is crucial that policymakers and researchers consider the specific needs of incarcerated individuals in jails (Rabuy and Wagner 2015; Subramanian et al. 2015). Thus, jails face a host of challenges specific to implementing educational programs and one critical issue is that the rapid turnovers in jails prevent individuals from receiving the education over an extended period of time (i.e., the course of several months). Experiential education, which can be more readily tailored to serve shorter sentences due to its flexible nature especially in content/curriculum, may be an effective alternative for programming in jails (Kolb and Kolb 2017).

Thesis Contributions

Overall, while the existing literature touches on the effectiveness of general programming that has been implemented in the carceral system, very little has been studied about the effects of experiential programming in particular, in both the jail setting and prison setting. Furthermore, little research has been done on the programs that exist in jails due to the fact that far fewer programs are run in jails compared to prisons. The objective of my thesis is to not only further contribute to the pre-existing literature on effective programming for those experiencing incarceration, but more specifically, to elucidate the particular benefits of experiential programming for the two different populations: those who are in jail and those who are in prison. Given that each group of individuals faces a different set of circumstances surrounding their incarceration, my research will aim to provide insight into how experiential programming can match their specific needs to best help them rebuild and strengthen their lives during and after their time in the correctional system. Thus, my research in understanding the key differences in the needs of these two groups of individuals and exploring experiential education as the vehicle through which long-lasting positive change is implemented will help future program administrators determine which aspects of experiential education should be prioritized to reduce recidivism rates and maximize the outcomes for those in prisons and jails.

Theoretical Framework

"Experiential learning", or interactive, hands-on learning, is a type of learning that, by incorporating both social and interactive measures, not only allows the individual to acquire knowledge but also gain life skills. Experiential learning is a holistic type of learning that is not often emphasized in conventional classroom settings but allows for genuine growth and

development (Dewey 1938; Lewin 1939; Rogers 1959; Kolb 1984). This paper is mainly grounded in John Dewey's seminal framework of Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), which states that learning should emphasize social interaction and practical, real-life experiences rather than the rote manner of instruction and learning that occurs in traditional educational institutions (Dewey 1938). However, this paper will also take into consideration further developments to the original framework to ultimately accommodate the more modern-day implications of Dewey's theory that can apply to a wider range of settings including education in the correctional system. In using the expanded version of the original framework, my paper will more comprehensively assess the breadth of the benefits that experiential education can bring to the jail and prison setting.

Much of experiential learning as we know of it today stemmed from John Dewey's original Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) – the first theory that argued that learning is best done in an active manner involving connecting with other individuals and experiencing, rather than in a classroom setting with rote teaching, studying, and memorization (Dewey 1938). Dewey called this active form of student-centered learning *genuine* learning claiming that it is only through this form of practical education, where students meet and resolve their challenges and difficulties in a hands-on manner, that learning can be an active experience where a deeper form of learning takes place (1899). Dewey's ELT includes two key components for the learning to be experiential in nature: interaction (where the experience must meet the individual's personal goals) and continuity (where the learning must "propel the person to learn more" by leading to further experiences) (Dewey 1938).

Recent work in the experiential education/active learning sphere has bolstered Dewey's initial support of "learning by doing" (Benek-Rivera and Mathews 2004; Bonwell and Eison

1991; Watkins 2005; Weimer 1991). In particular, Bonwell and Eison (1991) have established a more practical set of criteria to outline the characteristics of active learning including: students are involved in more ways than just by listening to the instructor; instruction must have a focus on student skills development as opposed to simply conveying information; students should be able to "develop higher order thinking skills" including analysis, synthesis, and evaluation skills; learners must be actively engaged in the tasks at hand; and students must have opportunities to explore their own values and attitudes while performing the tasks. This modern-day approach echoes Dewey's initial learning framework that ensures that students not only learn in the traditional sense but also understand and process the knowledge that they've gained in unforgettable ways (Dewey 1938).

Though Dewey's framework was originally created with the school setting in mind, I assume that Dewey's core tenets of interaction and continuity as well as its modern-day applications as described above can be effectively applied to the carceral education landscape. Specifically, Dewey's framework has been shown to help incarcerated individuals hone more of the problem-solving skills that they will need in situations "within the scope of their ordinary life experience" (Harris 2018). Dewey's model of experiential learning is thus particularly helpful for incarcerated individuals as it allows them to not only consciously practice working through everyday problems in a structured and meaningful way but also gain valuable life skills whether it be through experiential vocational training or an interactive course on effective communication. Dewey's model has often been attributed as the vehicle through which incarcerated individuals are able to form a structured purpose and meaning in their lives, ultimately helping them achieve fundamental behavioral changes and "genuine learning" of the life skills that contribute to preventing recidivation (Harris 2018).

Rogers (1959) adds to ELT, stating that for a person to grow and reach a point of "self-actualization" where they wish to "maintain and enhance" their current experiential state, there are five parameters that must be met: they must be open to both positive and negative experiences, be in touch with the various experiences that occur to them (avoiding judgment and preconceptions), be listened to and trusted, be risk-taking and creative, and strive for fulfillment in life by looking for new challenges and experiences. In maintaining these assumptions, especially through the mechanisms provided by experiential learning opportunities, Rogers argues that people will exhibit continued growth. While many experiential correctional programming incorporates Dewey's model at their core, not all of its applications (including Rogers' additions) are prioritized in programming. Given the assumption that Rogers' contributions can apply to the correctional education landscape, his nuanced additions to Dewey's original model shed light on how experiential correctional programming can be enhanced in order to help program participants maintain and improve upon their desires to continue growing and cultivating healthy behaviors.

Kolb (1984) also adds to Dewey's model of ELT by providing his own nuanced interpretation of the theory. Kolb states that Dewey's ELT can be split up into four distinct yet related modes of experience in the Experiential Learning Cycle: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation (Kolb 1984). Concrete Experience consists of the physical act of having an experience, including encountering a new situation or reinterpreting a pre-existing experience. Reflective Observation involves both reviewing and reflecting upon the experience that was had, in order to help foster a deeper meaning behind the activity that was performed as well as to help practice envisioning the situation from multiple perspectives. Abstract Conceptualization consists of the process and

conclusion of learning from the experience, which involves completely understanding the main purpose and ideas of the activity. Active Experimentation consists of implementing or putting into action what was learned from the prior experience (1984). While an individual's concrete learning experiences serve as the "basis for observations and reflection", Kolb argues that these experiences, which allow for further thinking, let the learner assimilate and distill the lessons learned to new contexts that they encounter in the future (1984). Ultimately, the reflection and observation that occurs in experiential learning contexts allow learners to grow and apply their learnings to new settings, preparing them for further development (1984).

Under Kolb's model, I assume that each "step" is done distinctly and consecutively like a neat progression. While this progression may not always occur in an organized manner in the learning environment, Kolb's contributions nonetheless provide distinct considerations for how experiential correctional programming should be developed and organized to achieve maximum effectiveness. Furthermore, while few correctional programs emphasize these four aspects explicitly, proper consideration and implementation of the four parts of the cycle may encourage further growth and learning from program participants by helping them take the lessons they learn from the experiential programming into the outside world. The personal growth that students experience through a structured program that incorporates the four modes of learning may pave a way for smoother re-entry into society and lessen the likelihood of individuals recidivating.

The effects of experiential education specifically in a group setting are also noted in the theory and literature. Experiential learning often happens in the presence of others or in group work (Lewin 1939). In these group settings, experiential learning is especially powerful as individuals with differing backgrounds and dispositions come together to achieve a common

objective, encouraging interdependence, and motivating each person in the group to become a part of the "dynamic whole" in achieving the goal (Lewin 1939; Johnson and Johnson 2018). More precisely, in Lewin's field theory (1936), there is a particular emphasis that is put on the environment of the individual. Specifically, Kolb, in analyzing Lewin's theory, found that experiential learning was best facilitated in open environments where "inputs from each perspective could challenge and stimulate the other" and that in such environments, there was "remarkable vitality and creativity" (Kolb 1984). It is in this way that individuals, as members of a team, learn how to cooperate and help each other develop in pursuit of their shared goal, furthering their knowledge of not just the task at hand, but also how to function in society (Johnson and Johnson 2018).

In the context of creating effective correctional programming both in jails and prisons, understanding the effect of group work and teamwork is critical. Unfortunately, in the prison/jail setting, such group work is not always possible due to the varying degrees of stringency that exist within the institutions. Assuming that some group work and interaction is permitted, however, the theory and literature show that working in a team helps individuals develop interpersonal skills that allow them to develop personally and consider themselves as a part of the larger community, or, the "dynamic whole". Feelings of inclusion and individual significance as a member of community, are important qualities that many who are in the correctional system often lack (Haney 2001). By building "communities", individuals form relationships with one another and share a sense of meaningful interconnectedness that adds to their learning experience in a way that traditional textbook learning in a classroom setting cannot (Watkins 2005). Experiential group/teamwork and activities that involve giving feedback have the potential to not only bolster feelings of self-worth and importance but help them develop a more positive attitude

towards failure and a keener sense of how to move forward in the outside world upon their release (Politis and Gabrielsson 2009).

Methods

Data Sources & Collection

While both the theory and literature point to the benefits of experiential programming on the learner in both correctional and non-correctional settings, little is said about how experiential programming should be tailored to best fit the needs of individuals residing in jails versus those residing in prisons. To answer this question, over the course of several months, I collected data in the form of 15 qualitative interviews with a wide range of stakeholders. Interviews were the main medium of analysis as they allowed for the most holistic understanding of which experiential parts of the program have been the most effective for the participants. Furthermore, given the highly qualitative and conceptual nature of experiential learning in and of itself, the interview format allowed my expert interviewees to fully express which concepts behind experiential learning seem to be the most effective for the participants while giving them the space to make relevant connections in their responses.

The first group of people I interviewed were directors or administrators of organizations that run experiential prison/jail-based programming. As organizations and individuals with on-the-ground, lived experiences, this group was able to shed practical light on what parts of their experiential programming they believed to be the most effective in improving program participant outcomes in the context of recidivism rates, and where they thought there could be improvement. The second group of individuals that I interviewed involved policy experts and research directors whose work focuses on determining prison and jail program efficacy. These individuals work in *collaboration* with the aforementioned organizations and provide third-party

analysis for their program outcomes. For the purposes of my thesis, these experts were able to shed light on more of the policy or implementation-side issues that arise with attempting to conduct effective experiential correctional programming.

Data Analysis

After collecting the interview data, I transcribed the interviews through otter.ai, a transcription platform, and imported the transcriptions to the qualitative coding software, Dedoose in order to organize the transcriptions into overarching themes and sub-themes that occurred throughout my interviews. During the qualitative coding process, I developed a code book and assigned attributes to key phrases and ideas that I saw repeated throughout my various interviews (i.e., "mentorship in jail", "mentorship in prison"). After aggregating the code occurrences to see what specific factors were the most common across all of my interviews, I grouped/organized the codes into three overarching categories (experiential programming factors to consider in jails, experiential programming factors to consider in prisons, and experiential programming factors to consider in jails/prisons). Given that many of my expert interviewees often had experiences pertaining to experiential education in both jails and prisons that they could speak to, many of my interviews covered themes (and subsequently, codes) across both. As such, a significant number of my qualitative interviews contributed to all three overarching categories described above. From there, by comparing and contrasting the data analysis from all my interviewees with experiences across both jails and prisons, I provide three strategic recommendations on how aspects of experiential learning can be harnessed in unique ways in the programming offered in jails and prisons.

By following the above procedure, I was able to cull the most important features of experiential learning in the jail context and the prison context and compare and contrast what parts of experiential programming seem to be the most effective in each. The results of my comparative case study will help shed light on how and where current experiential programming can be improved in the correctional setting. Furthermore, my research will help show that different considerations should be made when rolling out programming in prisons versus jails in order to maximize programmatic efficacy and reduce recidivism rates.

Limitations

Qualitative interviews can be helpful in providing great depth of information on a particular organization or individual's work and offer more color and nuance into the lived experiences of those who have contributed to or participated in the programs. However, there are also limitations to this approach. The most jarring limitation is sample size – given that my research did not span over thousands of interviews with individuals who developed experiential prison and jail programming, I understand that I may not be grasping the full picture. I will attempt to address this limitation by interviewing organizations and individuals who come from diverse backgrounds as opposed to solely the more popular and widely known correctional programs.

A second limitation is the inherent bias that my interviewees may have in favor of their programs. Given that some of my data sources will consist of individuals who work intimately with either the program participants or in the creation/implementation of the program, they may unintentionally exhibit a positive bias towards the aspects of their program that they will speak about. To address this limitation, I will try to incorporate a relatively even balance between the

number of individuals who work on the policy/academic side of experiential prison and jail programming and the administrators of the programs themselves, to best provide an unbiased analysis.

Finally, as someone who comes from an educational background that has consistently emphasized experiential learning methods, it is possible that I may naturally tend to have a favorable bias towards experiential learning in general. In order to mitigate the extent of this bias, I will be extremely intentional in my questioning during my interviews and encourage the interviewees to speak to the limitations of the experiential approach where appropriate and possible. By explicitly asking questions about the limitations of the experiential approach, I hope to paint a fuller picture of how experiential education can be differently beneficial in both the context of jails and prisons.

Data/Findings

In order to answer my research question about which aspects of experiential education should be prioritized for individuals in jails versus prisons to make programming the most effective for those in the United States correctional system, I interviewed 15 experts. Experts included research directors, co-founders and leaders of nonprofits, graduate/doctoral students, and instructors. All interviews were conducted over the video call platform, Zoom. First, I start by discussing the importance of two key factors that should be taken into consideration in experiential programming that is implemented in prisons: having a continuum of care and focusing on incorporating programming that empowers the individuals. Second, I share my findings that experiential programming in jails should aim to be shorter-form and potentially focus more on teaching avenues of healing for the individual. Finally, I discuss a major area of

overlap between effective experiential prison and jail programming: having effective mentors as well as the particular benefits of having peer mentors with similar lived experiences.

Experiential Programming in the Context of Prisons: The Importance of a Continuum of Care

My findings suggest that when it comes to experiential programming that is conducted in prisons, it is important to prioritize a continuum of care that starts when individuals are still in prison all the way to when they are released and appropriately re-integrated into society. A continuum of care is critical for individuals in prison as oftentimes, when they are released, they do not have the appropriate skills, connections, or resources in the outside world to help themselves get back on their feet and ensure that they are not in a position that will put them at risk of recidivating.

In an interview with Professor Matt Epperson, an Associate Professor at the Crown School of Social Service and Faculty Director of the Smart Decarceration Project, he notes that one particular challenge that individuals often face upon leaving prison is that even if they learn various skills and trades within prison, there is no guarantee that they will be able to use it upon release. He shared the following anecdote:

> In Michigan, when I worked in the jail, I found out that they were doing programs in some of the Michigan prisons, to train people who are locked up to be barbers, you know, so they're training them on cutting hair and things, which is great. The problem is all these people have felony convictions. And in Michigan, you could not, at least at the time, be licensed as a barber, if you had a felony conviction. So, they're learning a skill set that most of them will not be able to apply in a licensed professional trajectory.

> They'll have to do it on their own, like in their basement, or with friends as a self-employed kind of thing and not be able to work in an actual salon because they can't be licensed.

Professor Epperson's story sheds light on the fact that while experiential prison programming, such as vocational training, can be useful to roll out in the prison setting since individuals often have longer sentences in prison and time to fully learn a trade, ensuring that the training that is being offered can be used in a practical way once they are released is critical. This is often the missing link in many prison programs today. The implications of having impractical experiential programming in prisons is that individuals who have the drive and desire to find employment and rebuild their lives post-release will face a barrier to full reintegration if they are unable to find employers and jobs that are willing to work with their prior convictions and prison sentences. Thus, if the training, vocational or otherwise, that is provided in prisons does not appropriately match up with the needs in the outside world, individuals experiencing incarceration may find themselves looking for alternative ways to support themselves, and be at greater risk of recidivating.

In one of my interviews with an Executive Director at Defy Ventures, she also emphasized the importance of building a support network that can help guide individuals post-release: during their main programming, "CEO of Your New Life" (CEO YNL), incarcerated individuals work with volunteers – Co-founders and CEOs of local businesses – who coach the incarcerated individuals on how to hone their business and leadership skills. After the programming is over and participants re-enter society, through Defy Ventures, they are connected to local community providers who continue to provide them with resources for employment and re-entry as well as Defy's accelerator program, where they can apply for

funding to start the businesses they envisioned while participating in the program. The Executive Director points out:

> When people graduate from CEO YNL and they're coming back home, they can connect with us for additional services…We want to make sure that people get a living wage, that they're not just going into substandard work when they come home. We want to ensure that there's something with a career trajectory there…We build relationships with other providers in the community so that there is a continuum of care.

By providing continued care post-release, these "additional services" help formerly incarcerated individuals gain footing in their lives outside of prison. Especially after an experiential program such as the one that Defy offers, individuals who have experienced incarceration are in more of a stable position to apply the skills that they learned in the programming. Furthermore, participating in the programming with the understanding that they will have a team of individuals willing to be their support network post-release will relieve any additional emotional and mental burden that these formerly incarcerated individuals may face on their reintegration journeys. As such, they may be able to dedicate more time to working and productively transitioning back into their lives post-release, creating as seamless of a transition as they can for themselves. Defy also makes a point of offering consistent workshops post-release that help further develop individuals' job-related skills as well, including workshops on how to use and navigate LinkedIn, financial literacy, and resume-building. While there is a great body of research showing that connecting formerly incarcerated individuals to social services and employment resources reduce the risk of recidivism (Duran et al. 2013), smoothly connecting these individuals to resources and employment opportunities in which they can use the skills they learned in prison programming has the potential to further keep that risk down.

In addition to transitional prison programming that helps individuals with their hard skills (ie. vocational training, securing employment, etc.), my interviews showed that a similar emphasis should be placed on transitional programming that is based on helping individuals continue developing their soft skills post-release as well. The importance of continuing to help formerly incarcerated individuals develop soft skills in transitional programming was solidified in one of my interviews with a Research Director at the Crime Labs, who worked on a project with READI, an 18-month program that targets individuals in the South and West sides of Chicago who experience the highest rates of gun violence and have had prior contact with the criminal legal system and incarceration. In our interview, she revealed that some of the most effective and successful programming that READI offers is the cognitive behavioral therapy program, which helps these high-risk individuals learn how to de-escalate from intense, potentially violent situations and confrontations that they may experience in their everyday lives. She explained:

> A lot of the men that we've interviewed in the past have said, 'You know, I wasn't brought up in a home where we talked about feelings. I'm not used to this, it took me a long time to get accustomed to talking about these things, especially when you're unpacking a lot of trauma in front of other people'. But surprisingly, cognitive behavioral therapy is often the component that men in the program come back for.

While READI offers a transitional job program as well, the Research Director believes that the cognitive behavioral therapy sessions are of particular importance since "job readiness" involves "both the professional development component but also how you build relationships with your co-workers" – both of which go hand in hand. In her words, "there are very few jobs that you do in isolation – we're bound to communicate with people." Through READI, we see that continued

training in soft skill development (i.e., via cognitive behavioral therapy) is not only crucial to these individuals' safe and holistic reintegration into society but also something that they *want more of*. Thus, the desire and need for soft skill training match, indicating that implementing similar measures in other experiential prison programming may be highly beneficial at both helping the individuals heal and reducing rates of recidivism.

Mr. Leonard Rubio, the Director of the Insight Prison Project, who experienced incarceration in San Quentin for 20+ years and facilitated a program called the Victim/Offender Education Group (VOEG) shared a similar sentiment regarding the importance of programming that emphasizes developing soft skills both pre and post release. In our interview, he explained:

> With [VOEG]…we deal a lot with unprocessed traumas. And helping individuals get to a point of understanding how they got to the point where they were wanting to commit the crime that they did. And a lot of that is opening up some of those unprocessed traumas from the way a person is brought up. And it's not to use that as an excuse for what they did. It's just to understand what brought them to the point they were willing to do what they did, how to be accountable for that. How to build empathy and understanding for what people experience from the harm they've caused. And just dealing with a lot of the issues that unfortunately, in our society, we typically don't teach in our education system. We focus a lot on education, and I understand the need for that. At the same time, we are not focusing at all on emotional intelligence, right? And yet we want everyone to get along with each other.

Thus, while continued vocational support and social services are a key component to helping individuals successfully transition back into society, giving them the opportunity to develop their soft skills is just as important to their healthy reintegration. In particular, processing the trauma

that has been caused as a result of one's actions is a critical yet often neglected component to healing and learning from one's experiences. By continuing to focus on not just the educational aspect, in the words of Mr. Rubio, but also communication and empathy-building, prison programs may be able to become more effective at reducing recidivism, as they will provide these individuals with an opportunity to hone their full reintegration toolkit. This reintegration toolkit includes self-development and socio-emotional learning – both skills that will be crucial to have immediately upon their re-entry into society.

In one of my interviews with a PhD student specializing in criminal justice at the Crown School of Social Work, she noted that the educational goal in prisons is to force individuals to "work so much harder to get back from [the offense]. And it's all about getting that individual to accept this narrative that's spun about them and not paying attention to the other factors…and how society has pushed them into that role". In that sense, she claims that "the victim has to work extra hard to rectify the situation, placing the burden on the victim rather than the structures." By providing connective resources like the ones that Defy Ventures offers, programming offered in prisons may prove to be even more effective in practice when individuals transition from prison to the outside world. For those who served longer sentences, the world that they come back out into may be a completely different one than when they first entered prison. Unfortunately, for these often highly stigmatized individuals, re-entry is even more of a disorienting experience. However, a continuum of care that includes experiential training in both hard and soft skills will help provide the full range of support that they need to effectively rehabilitate and return to society.

Experiential Programming in the Context of Prisons: Developing Empowering Programming

My interviews with experts in the field of prison education also strongly pointed to the idea that experiential programming done in prisons should aim to empower the individuals experiencing incarceration. The empowerment of individuals should be prioritized in experiential prison education because many individuals in prison tend to have longer sentences (ie. compared to those who are serving time in jail) and as a result, lose hope or purpose while serving their time. Losing a sense of purpose while in prison can have a severely detrimental effect on the individual as effective reintegration into society requires not just an adequate continuum of care, as explained above, but also the personal desire and aspiration to rebuild and maintain one's life post-release. It is precisely when these two pieces come together that individuals are much less likely to avoid resorting to alternative measures to make ends meet and potentially end up recidivating.

In one of my interviews with Faith Fuller, the Co-Founder of Choices for Freedom (a program dedicated to providing experiential curricula in both jails and prisons), she described:

> What [Choices For Freedom] is looking for is just to try to get an emotional connection with them, to try to get them a sense of hope, and purpose and dignity and self-worth. Because the biggest, biggest thing about breaking through that barrier, and this is maybe more so in prison is… that they have lost hope. They have given up. So, if you can engage them in some way that gives them some hope, some vision, some self-respect, dignity, feeling of self-worth, that's really the entry point to rehabilitation.

What Ms. Fuller highlights is the idea that providing incarcerated individuals with an education solely for the sake of learning and providing them with an education is not enough. An important part of the teaching/learning process that is often neglected is the way that the information is

conveyed to them in the program and whether the participants are able to find personal significance and meaning in what is taught in the programming. Providing experiential programming that focuses on empowerment – encouraging those experiencing incarceration to find hope and purpose while they are in prison – is a critical missing piece in many of the prison programs that exists today.

My interview with Karen Hsueh and Ginny Oshiro, two organizers in the Transformative In-Prison Workgroup (TPW) revealed that one way that experiential programming can be made empowering is by choosing activities that restore purpose through the creation of a like-minded community. For Ms. Oshiro, as a formerly incarcerated individual, she reflects on her experience with Project Rebound (a selective program that directly matriculates formerly incarcerated individuals to California higher education institutions) in particular, where she found empowerment in studying alongside individuals who were also formerly incarcerated:

> We start the curriculum at the same place, we started developing our skills at the same time. And, I think through that process, because it's experiential, you're in motion in a lot of ways, and you're working through a curriculum and the effect is that, for me, personally – and I've seen this with other folks – connection builds between participants, connection between program providers and people in the program. And because we're all doing something together, and when the connection builds and community grows, when you're developing a skill, it empowered me, and it started to build up my self-esteem. I started to have friends; we had a purpose. It felt safe to work with somebody towards a common goal…And it's always about that connection. And the connection is built in groups.

By being a part of a close-knit intellectual community with similar goals, Ms. Oshiro felt empowered to continue her studies and to successfully complete her degree. By being a part of a small cohort, she felt as though she had the opportunity to create genuine relationships with individuals who understood her and were on the same journey as her, inspiring her to continue studying and pursuing her goals. By conducting experiential programming in small cohorts that have a dedicated focus such as Project Rebound, individuals can build empathy and trust in a community that they feel safe in. By creating safe spaces for these individuals to grow and learn in, programs can build communities that not only create a sense of individual significance, but also interconnectedness – both key traits that can help those experiencing incarceration reintegrate to society in their post-prison journeys. Thus, upon leaving prison, the program participants may feel as though they have a supportive community that has their back and is rooting for them – furthering the stakes for success with peer motivation – ultimately leading to empowerment that can help decrease the likelihood that they will recidivate. For Ms. Oshiro, the inspiration that she gained from her like-minded cohort members inspired her even after graduating from Project Rebound, and today, she is getting her PhD in Criminology, Law and Society from the University of California - Irvine.

Ms. Hsueh believes that TPW's member organizations (many of which are organizations that run experiential programs in prisons) provide a similar opportunity for small cohort growth and development. In one notable part of my interview, Ms. Hsueh noted that "healing is a big underscore" to the programs under TPW and that TPW's gardening program, dog training program, higher education program, and Shakespeare program, among others "all have pathways to healing – components of empowerment, and dignity building – in them". Ms. Oshiro adds:

> I hear people [in TPW's programming] refer to people like, 'Oh, I learned that in group!" And I think it could be any group, it could be IGP [Insight Garden Project], it could be Creative Acts, it could be anything. But the idea is like, you're in this cohort, working towards this thing, and a lot of magic and healing happens.

It is evident that empowerment can happen in many different types of programming and activities. In particular, small group activities can give individuals something that they can look forward to on a regular basis and simulate goal setting, which encourages a positive growth mindset and self-improvement. The skills that are honed in small cohorts can further inspire feelings of teamwork and problem-solving as well, which are all highly beneficial soft skills that will come in handy when the individuals embark on their paths post-release.

My interview with Mr. Tarik Ross Jr., a Program Coordinator from the Prison Education Project (an organization that enlists the help of volunteer students/teachers to teach courses in 25 different facilities around the US) yielded similar findings concerning the benefits of small cohort sizes even from an administrative standpoint. According to Mr. Ross, bigger groups of students tend to be more challenging to handle from the teacher's perspective, as it is more difficult to create a close-knit feeling of intellectual community. He further notes that the behavior of the larger groups tends to be heavily influenced by the officer who is on duty that day.

> If there is an officer who they are not too fond of, they're a little bit more rowdy, not as focused. So the bigger the class size, the more those variables have an impact. If it's a smaller group, no matter what the variables are, we're able to still kind of stay in tune with them as individuals, we don't lose them as much to the other dynamics that play a part with those larger groups.

From an administrative standpoint, when the cohort sizes are smaller, teachers are better able to provide the experiential programming with fewer distractions that impact the group as a whole. With fewer students to manage, at a very basic level, teachers may also have an easier time learning the students' names, getting to know them as people, and developing stronger relationships with them. Furthermore, with small cohorts, teachers have the chance to become more in-tune with each student's needs and individual circumstances. In doing so, students are able to receive more personal, individualized attention and encouragement from the teacher, which can act as a positive reinforcement in their learning. Thus, with smaller cohort sizes, program participants have a greater opportunity to gain something positive from the experience and engage in the intellectual and emotional community of their classroom. As a result, they are ultimately provided with the opportunity to feel a greater sense of personal empowerment from the classroom experience.

One limitation to implementing experiential education that prioritizes both a continuum of care (starting from while individuals are in prison to after their release) and empowerment via mechanisms such as small cohorts, is that depending on the politics of the state as well as differences in individual prison policies (i.e., their degree of stringency), it may not be possible to implement programs that require individuals to have a certain degree of freedom. For instance, prisons differ in their levels of security (i.e., high security, medium security, low security, etc.) and higher security prisons may not be willing or able to accommodate programs like the gardening or dog training program, as described above. While higher security level prisons in particular face this limitation, it is important to note that there are still many lower and medium security level prisons that can leverage the opportunity to make small changes to their pre-existing programming to include resources for individuals post-release as well as low-cost small

group activities for currently incarcerated individuals. Such small changes can still help foster feelings of self-empowerment and community. Thus, though it is difficult to estimate just how great of an effect the aforementioned changes can make on a national scale due to the varying degrees of prison stringency and policies, encouraging institutions that do allow programming to implement those changes may help spark the catalyst for future changes to the narrative of prison programming policy at all prison security levels.

Experiential Programming in the Context of Jails: Prioritization of Short-Term Curricula

A major issue area that was brought up in many of my interviews with experts was the fact that jail programming as it exists today, does not account for the transitory nature of individuals in jail. Instead, programs that are implemented in prisons, where people tend to serve longer sentences, are often transferred to the jail setting without any changes made to the curricula. In the jail setting, ensuring that shorter form curricula exist is crucial, since attempting to fit curricula that is meant to benefit those serving longer sentences in prisons will only be effective if individuals are in jails for extended period of time. However, since jails tend to serve mostly as a transitional place, individuals are unable to reap the benefits of long-form curricula, ultimately leading to an ineffective use of resources and curricula that fail to consider and target the shorter-term needs of the individuals in jails.

In my interview with Mr. Ross at PEP, he notes that one difficulty that he and his team have faced is in assessing the impact of their programming on the jail population. PEP has been facing assessment difficulties because of two reasons: the programming they currently offer is not adaptable to people’s short/unpredictable length of stays in jail and they don't have any means of staying in touch with them once they leave. He remarked that, “finding out where

they're being transferred to, all that information is internal to the facility. The only thing we do on our end is do our best to ensure that they have our contact information for whenever they get out." Thus, the challenge that faces experiential programs offered in jails is two-fold: the transitional nature of jails makes it difficult to form any lasting feelings of community and as such, it can be difficult for individuals to feel like whatever they accomplish in jail will be worthwhile, especially since there will likely be no follow-through or the ability for the programs that they participate in to follow-up.

A similar concern was raised in one of my interviews with Dr. Dikcis, the previous Director of the Cook County Jail Partnership for the Northwestern Prison Education Program (NPEP), who argued that much of the current curricula that are offered in jails are formatted to be executed over an extended period of time (i.e., an entire year). Thus, there seems to be a mismatch in timing, with many of the students who take these courses in jail either serving relatively shorter sentences or awaiting trial. In the case of the students who are awaiting trial, many live in a constant state of unpredictability, not knowing when they will be called to court or sentenced to prison. Dr. Dikcis recounts:

> Many of my students had to miss class because they had a meeting with their lawyer, or they had to go to court. Some of our students were convicted mid-class session and had to leave. They would come back saying 'I was sentenced for 15 years, so I will never see you again'. And that was very difficult.

Hence, given this state of constant unpredictability, individuals who are offered programming may be less inclined to fully partake in the learning opportunity because much of their headspace is occupied by fear and anxiety of what may come next. Such fear and anxiety makes it impossible for them to focus or work towards any substantive goal while they are in jail.

Furthermore, what limited experiential programming that *is* offered in jails fails to account for the transitory nature of many of the individuals who are there. Thus, when those who are pre-trial are summoned to court and given a sudden sentencing, any learning that may have occurred through the experiential program may become undone or be replaced by the trauma that unfolds after the sentencing to prison. In other words, the experiential program may become less effective at instilling positive behaviors and productive lessons within the individual. In the words of Dr. Kyla Bourne, a Masters Teaching Fellow in Sociology at the University of Chicago, who reflected back on her time working with individuals who were awaiting trial for multiple years, "Jail has this transitoriness, which means it's almost like, it's like this gray space, this holding pattern, or a holding cell." Dr. Bourne also points out an apparent irony of those who end up spending an extended period of time in jail:

> Jail is a very transitory thing, unlike prison. So, a lot of the folks I've talked to are excited to go to prison, because then they can get kind of a stable programming thing that's actually paid for and state funded, whereas the jail is county funded… In prison, if you're there for five years, or whatever, 10 years, life, God knows – there's this stability there that isn't quite there in the jail, where the jail is kind of just like more crisis, because you're always adding new people, there's always this churn, people are going away and coming in.

With much of the focus on jail security as opposed to rehabilitation and effective programming for these individuals who have solely been labeled as "transitory" and thus less in need of programming, those who are kept in these "holding cells" are often forgotten about as they are forced to just wait for their trial.

To Dr. Bourne's point, however, one may argue that county-funded jails generally do not even have the necessary funding to roll out more extensive programs and that the great "churn" in jails is a major limitation to implementing any sort of programming that could be effective for individuals in jail. These concerns are both true and valid, however, much of the experiential programming that exists today has the potential to be tailored more effectively to account for the unpredictability of jail settings at a low-cost.

For instance, Ms. Hsueh from the TPW is also a program coordinator at the Insight Garden Program (IGP), which provides a low-cost innovative curriculum that focuses on connecting individuals to the natural world. IGP's activities consist of gardening and landscaping training for individuals in prison to help them connect to themselves, the community, as well as the natural world. She believes that while IGP is currently only operating in prisons, they are well-equipped to expand to the county jail system as well. In response to the idea of IGP operating in county jails, she expressed:

> I think it wouldn't be a huge lift for us to pull out the essential lessons. And we're also currently looking at our curriculum like, are we wedded to the fact that you have to go through a year's worth? Or can it really be like, hop in whenever you want, and you can still get a lot out of it. I guess if I'm dreaming here, it seems like the ideal situation would be that you'd be a bridge program. So like, you'd have your in-jail program, but hopefully they could participate in your program still once they got out. Because it's like the continuity, community building continuity, the trust-building that feels like the most important pieces to figure out when we know folks are only going to be there for a short term.

Programs like IGP are well positioned to be tailored to shorter programming in jail settings because of their strong focus on experiential learning (ie. gardening and landscaping training) rather than a strict syllabus with academic instruction for an entire year. By providing individuals who are serving time in jail the opportunity to engage in shorter-form curricula that does not depend as heavily on the length of time they stay in the jail, the programs have the potential to be more impactful and relevant. In particular, with activities such as gardening and landscaping, individuals may use the short-form experiential opportunities in jail to consider trades that they have not considered before. In doing so, should they be transferred across institutions or even to prison, they may be more inclined to pursue the activity as a potential career path upon their release, ultimately helping them reintegrate back into society and reducing the likelihood of them recidivating. Incorporating shorter-form experiential programming is also helpful for individuals in jail for a very practical reason as well. Ms. Oshiro points out:

> It's important for people to be able to show that they participated in programs not only for time off their sentence, but because if they're going to parole, parole likes to see that you've been programming. And if you've been stuck in a jail, you know, for a couple of years, and by the time you get transferred to prison and you go to parole you haven't done anything, they'll deny you for parole.

It is clear that there is a lot of potential for jail programming to be made effective with minimal changes to curricula that are already in place for many different experiential programs. As Ms. Hsueh points out, IGP's experiential programming has the potential to have an impact even as shorter-form curricula. This type of programming becomes even more crucial for those who end up having to await trial for an extended period of time in jail since programming can not only help them to reduce the amount of time they potentially spend in prison but also help them when

it comes to their eligibility for parole. The benefits of experiential short-form programming, however, extend beyond the possibility of reduced time in prison. By creating programming that is intentionally tailored to suit the unpredictable and transitory nature of time served in jails, pre-trial individuals in particular may be able benefit from learning skills that they can take with them no matter their future outcome.

Experiential Programming in the Context of Jails: Focusing on Healing

My interviews with experts in the field of correctional education also pointed to the importance of prioritizing healing in the experiential education curricula offered in jails as opposed to a traditional academic education. Healing should be prioritized in the jail setting as individuals who are in jail experience a great degree of unpredictability concerning their futures (given the transitional nature of jails), and as a result, are under large amounts of stress and anxiety. Such stress and anxiety not only lead to an environment that is not conducive to concentrating but also make it difficult for individuals to fully benefit from the material offered in traditional academic curricula.

As a PhD student specializing in criminal justice at the Crown School of Social Work put it, “most people move through the jail system, in the sense that you're in jail before you're convicted of a felony, you're in jail before you’re actually transferred to a prison. And that length of stay in jail is so variable.” As previously described, this sudden movement and displacement of individuals makes it difficult for the vast majority of programs to create an impact on the individuals there. Furthermore, individuals who are sent to jail are often left with great trauma and fear of the unknown precisely because of the unpredictability of their futures. As the Crown PhD student shared, many are awaiting trial, not knowing what the outcomes of the trial will be.

Dr. Bourne described her 6+ years of experience leading a weekly meditation program for the individuals in the Cook County Jail by saying “You know, I meditate with these guys to help them not go crazy, because they're being held in cages.” When asked about what aspects of programming should be treated differently in the jail setting, Professor Epperson echoed the sentiment that it’s more than just the unpredictability but also the trauma of being in jail that has made programming historically difficult to implement in jails:

> I think the difference is not just the unpredictability, but that they may be actively engaged, even if the court hearings are spread out, in a process that is probably taking the bulk of their intention and their focus, because they're fighting a case to try not to go to prison. And so with that population of folks who are in jail long term going through trial it might be kinds of services and supports that are more around coping with the stresses that are going on [that might be more helpful]. If I'm in prison, and I have a two-year sentence, and I know I'm getting out in two years, and there's a vocational program, I might think, ‘Okay, I see where I'll be able to put that to use, right, I get out in 2024, or whatever’. Whereas if I'm in jail, awaiting trial on a serious charge, and there's vocational programming, I might think, ‘Well, I guess that could be helpful and pass the time. But I don't know if I'm going to be able to use that’. Now, like, my case might get dismissed next week, and I might be out, or it may drag on for months and months and I end up with a prison sentence. So how you can think about when you'll apply [that vocational programming] would be a challenge. And that's why some folks also look at the terms of coping like mindfulness-based interventions.

Professor Epperson points out that individuals who are in jails may find it more useful or productive to engage in programming that helps to alleviate some of the stresses they may be

enduring while awaiting trial since many individuals who are in jail are in a state of limbo. Through classes that teach meditation or yoga, for instance, individuals may learn how to feel more centered and have some tools at their disposal that they can use when facing the unpredictability of their future. As a result, individuals facing incarceration may be better able to process and learn to deal with the various forms of trauma that they may be enduring. Furthermore, focusing on soft skills such as meditation and yoga have the potential to create lasting effects. Similar to the programming offered by Mr. Rubio's Victim Offender Education Group under the Insight Prison Project, the soft skills of de-escalating from and processing intense negative emotions have the potential to help individuals feel more grounded in the longer term. Given that the jail setting is one of the most extreme instances where individuals must face the turbulence of their futures head-on, self-grounding practices may be all the more crucial and effective to have. Professor Epperson further emphasizes the importance of individuals in jail honing their mindfulness skills while awaiting trial:

> If there's one thing that cannot be taken from you, in a jail or prison setting, it's yourself, you're always with yourself. And that's a part of what can be so harmful about this since you're literally isolated in a way. But [jail] is a place where you can practice mindfulness, and in many ways, it might be more conducive to practicing mindfulness. So that's one place where I could see maybe [programming] being useful for a jail, a person in jail, going through trial, because [mindfulness] is also a transferable skill, right? Mindfulness as a way to approach stress to approach problem solving. You know, I can apply that right now. Right now, as I'm sitting in my cell. So I think the greater the degree to which these things can be put into play immediately the better.

A key benefit to focusing on activities and education centered around healing methods is, as Professor Epperson says, the immediate practicality of it. While vocational training may be helpful later on down the road (ie. when individuals are no longer experiencing incarceration), the benefits to pursuing that education may be hazy in the moment for these individuals since there is no *immediate* benefit in doing so. On the other hand, personal development via healing is something that can show immediate results and one that may produce great benefits for those who are being forced to confront many different possibilities during their time in prison. Additionally, self-grounding practices such as meditation are highly transferable to and can be coupled with other experiential activities. For instance, with pre-existing programs like the Insight Garden Project that take place in nature, further healing can be encouraged with meditative activities being included in the curriculum. By being in nature and being given the opportunity to meditate and reflect, individuals who are facing these extremely uncertain futures can still extract something of benefit to them from their given circumstances. As such, experiential activities focused on healing are highly flexible and easy to include in pre-existing programs. In a similar vein, Ms. Oshiro, when reflecting on her lived experience as a formerly incarcerated individual explained how a program focusing on yoga or meditation would have helped her greatly while she was in the jail system:

> I'm also thinking that there's so many programs like the Prison Yoga Project, that I'm pretty sure if I did one session of yoga, you know, while I was in jail, it would actually have a transformative effect on me. And so there's so many programs, I think, that are, good fits – maybe not every program – like maybe a program that has a really intense curriculum would not be a good fit, but yoga, even dog programs, where you're learning a

skill, you're learning empathy, and you're able to do that in a pretty short amount of time. And, you know, it's better suited, for that [jail] type of environment.

Ms. Oshiro points out that programs focused on healing can also have positive (unintended) consequences on the participating individuals, such as learning how to be more empathetic. In promoting programs that allow individuals to heal via the activity (ie. teaching pre-trial individuals how to do yoga or train dogs), program administrators may also have less of the organizational burden that intensely academic experiential programs face in trying to create educational curricula/syllabi for individuals. An added administrative benefit is that healing-centered activities are less resource-intensive – they do not require books and materials that would incur additional costs for the programming. Overall, the flexible programs outlined above can create positive results by incorporating experiential curricula that do more than just "fill up the time" – a shared concern that several of my interviewees raised when discussing the pitfalls to present day programming.

One may assert that reflective exercises such as yoga and meditation won't work for all people and that not everyone shares Ms. Oshiro's perspective that yoga classes can contribute to helping people heal from their trauma. It is true that not *everyone* may find that meditative practices are what work best for them to process what they are going through. However, the beauty of practices that promote self-awareness, such as meditation, lies in the fact that they can be taught *and* learned quickly. In other words, once individuals are taught how to practice self-reflection and meditation, they can easily spread this knowledge to those around them, some of whom may find meditative practices highly (immediately) useful to their healing process. Thus, reflective exercises have some of the greatest potential to help the largest number of people at little cost.

It is true that experiential programming must consider the generally transitory nature of individuals in jails. However, my analysis shows that this aspect need not necessarily be a severe limitation to creating and implementing effective programming that can benefit individuals. The implications of my findings are such that short term experiential programs are simply programs with a different set of strengths that can be harnessed than longer term programs that are more commonly implemented in prisons. By creating short-term experiential programming that focuses on healing, individuals who are pre-trial or facing longer term incarceration can be given a practical opportunity to hone skills that will be beneficial to them regardless of what their future holds. By providing opportunities for learning and healing in jail, individuals may be more primed to approach their futures with healthier mindsets than without the programming. By starting this process of building up healthy mindsets in jail, those who may end up experiencing incarceration for longer periods of time can re-enter society on more stable footing, putting them in positions where they may be less likely to recidivate.

Common Themes of Effective Experiential Programming in Prisons and Jails: Developing a sense of human connection and personalized care

The Power of Mentors

Despite all the different nuances in experiential programming that should be considered when implementing programs in prisons versus jails, when it comes to experiential education in both institutions, it is critical to consider developing curricula that involve a sense of human connection and personalized care. Mentors, in particular, have a large positive impact on individuals experiencing incarceration as they allow the individual to feel seen, heard, and cared about as human beings.

One way that human connection can be established through experiential programming is via personalized communication from mentor figures. In particular, in Dr. Dikcis' work for the Cook County Jail Partnership, she mentioned that at the end of the program she and other fellow program administrators and instructors wrote letters expressing how proud they were of their students and all the work they did to complete the program. This small gesture is something that she recalls having a large emotional impact on the students as it was proof that their instructors cared about their intellectual growth and personal wellbeing. Many of her students, she recalls, also faced great fear concerning their uncertain futures, with many of them being "scared that they might lose their one grasp on society and community and this kind of intellectual engagement". Thus, for students who were pre-trial, this gesture of letter-writing also symbolized hope, providing a sense of some stability in their highly unstable worlds. Furthermore, though the letters were but small pieces of paper, some of these students could also show these documents as testaments to their character to their lawyers and judges in the future (i.e., when they are up for parole). As a result, such letters could end up making a real impact on their lives. Thus, despite the highly transitory nature of jail, creating these empathetic and intellectual communities is still crucial, as it creates a sense of hope for the students.

When it comes to the importance of personalized care in creating effective programming in both jails and prisons, my interview with Defy Ventures revealed that having supportive mentor figures leading the programming is also critical. For instance, in CEO of Your New Life (CEO YNL), business executives help the program participants create and be engaged in intellectual, entrepreneurial communities. I learned that Defy's intentional incorporation of mentorship into their programming gives individuals the opportunity to naturally develop growth mindsets as the like-minded individuals surrounding the entrepreneurs became a motivating

factor. An Executive Director at Defy Ventures pointed out that “that’s why the [executive] volunteer aspect is so vital… we’re about building humanizing and empathetic relationships and having that human connection, I’d say, is even more important than just learning about profit and loss and how to do a SWOT analysis.” Being a part of communities that inspire growth mindsets, according to the Executive Director, helps individuals who have been in the correctional system build out their definition of freedom, even if, in the most extreme case, they are serving life sentences without parole. This freedom in turn breeds hope and personal growth, which Defy identifies as the true meaning of rehabilitation in the prison setting.

In one of my interviews with a Sociology PhD student at the University of Chicago, she reflects on her experience teaching at the Cheshire Correctional Facility in Connecticut and how oftentimes, what the individuals need is someone who believes in them:

> Something that I found most important was individualized mentorship, treating people like they were smart, and treating people like what they had to say was worthwhile. I had one student who came in and was like, ‘I'm not fucking doing this, like, I'm just doing this because I have to, I hate being here and I don’t like you’. And I remember in math, we got to the geometry unit, and all of a sudden, for some reason, geometry is what did it for her. And once she realized she was good at something academic, obviously, I would gas her up because she was crushing it and I would have her demo stuff. Once she realized that I didn't think she was dumb, and she didn't think she was dumb and she was actually really talented and smart, she contributed to the classroom atmosphere, and it totally changed. She was so fully engaged in the rest of the class when I would come in…But like, small class, you know, it's individualized mentorship, coming at it from respects from a place of respect and care.

Suzanne Campbell, one of the founders of UndergroundGRIT, an organization that helps individuals with re-entry, shares a similar sentiment:

> People are relational. You can have the best program, you know, research based, spiffy brochures, and manuals and paperwork and everything. But if somebody doesn't feel like they're cared about, they're not coming back. Right? If you don't feel like somebody cares about you, and what happens to you, at the end of the day, you're not coming back, and especially people who have experienced high levels of trauma.

In systems of incarceration, having mentors who personally pay attention to the growth and well-being of the individuals can make a great difference. By being afforded individual attention and care from mentor figures, individuals in jail and prison may feel more encouraged and as though someone cares and believes in them, inspiring them to believe in themselves and their own growth too. More broadly, being able to establish instructors such as Dr. Dikcis and the entrepreneur-mentors at Defy Ventures as guiding figures has greater implications: for many individuals facing incarceration, mentors become their first opportunity at creating a community. In settings where it is incredibly difficult for individuals to find hope and purpose, mentors may even serve as the catalyst for individuals to become stronger and find meaning despite their unpredictable circumstances. The effects of such mentorship – knowing that people believe in you and are rooting for your success and wellbeing – can last well beyond the time that the individuals may serve in prison and can encourage them to continue developing and pursuing paths of growth upon re-entering society. Thus, the positive mentor figures in experiential correctional programming can end up serving as role models or even as a type of life coach for individuals. In being these inspirational figures, mentors can ultimately help directly reduce the likelihood that people experiencing incarceration will recidivate upon release.

Trusted Peer Mentors

In addition to having mentors to look up to, having trusted peers as mentors as a part of the experiential education curricula can also be incredibly beneficial for individuals in the correctional system. Having peers who have gone through similar life experiences and can serve as formal and informal mentors is critical because such human connections allow feelings of mutual trust and empathy. Feeling fully understood by peer mentors with shared experiences can help individuals heal on a personal level that rote programming (experiential or otherwise) may not be able to directly address.

READI, for instance, has a mentorship program woven into the fabric of its programming – program participants who were deemed at high-risk of recidivating are paired up with men in the community ("outreach workers") who grew up in the same communities and had experiences that ran parallel to those of the at-risk individuals. Forming these relationships with trusted community figures had a profound effect on program participants. Given that a common theme among READI's participants was that they believed that "outsiders just wouldn't understand", having mentors who were empathetic to their specific struggles and came from similar backgrounds who could coach them had a powerful effect on READI participants, as they formed close and trusted communities with their cohort members and mentors. The Prison Education Project (PEP) employs a similar model where many of their volunteer teachers who go into the prisons and jails to teach individuals in the carceral system have previously experienced incarceration themselves. Mr. Ross explains that this aspect of PEP and the diversity of their teachers, especially in "sharing their experiences to essentially show their humanity" is precisely

what helps the students feel heard from their fellow teachers who have gone through similar experiences as them. He explains:

> I think the more we are able to share who we are, the better connected they feel to really understanding who we are beyond, you know, the lower level. [They are] really connecting with us as people and feeling as though we're there because we care.

Thus, having mentors with shared experiences can allow those currently experiencing incarceration to trust their mentors more deeply and learn from them, initiating a deeper form of rehabilitation. Having trusted peer mentors in particular can also establish an added sense of credibility and relatability due to the understanding that the mentor knows precisely what they are going through. Thus, the mentee will be able to practice building trust in a safe space. By learning to accept and build the relationship with their mentor, individuals will have the opportunity to experience creating profound relationships and support systems firsthand. In doing so, they may be better equipped to figure out how to establish such support systems that can help them gain their footing upon re-entry as well. Feelings of trust and support can help the individual feel more guided and confident upon their re-entry and make it less likely that they will recidivate.

The wide-ranging positive effects of forming trusting relationships with peer mentor figures was clearly illustrated in my interview with Dr. Ryan Shanahan from the Vera Institute of Justice as well. In my interview, Dr. Shanahan spoke about a pilot project involving building housing units in prisons to mimic the conditions of a village. In this pilot model, individuals who are serving longer sentences are chosen and asked to take on roles of leadership, living in the housing units with the younger people and acting as mentor figures for them. In stepping into the role of leader, the older individuals serving longer sentences are reconnected to a version of

society and normalcy – they are "reconnected to *culture* because prison in the process of dehumanizing strips people, their identity, often their language, their clothing, anything that makes them a person, and they're given an ID number." In this "village", individuals are given full agency (within the structural confines of the prison) to create programming for themselves (led by other individuals in the village). Dr. Shanahan provides an example:

> One thing the mentors designed in one of our states is what they call a "third shift", which is that they're "on-call" from lights out, to waking up. And if a young person is having a bad night, nightmares, can't sleep, losing their shit, that mentor will go and sit with that young person. This is unheard of in traditional corrections. And what that young person is, if we try to thread the needle back to…experiential learning, what does that person learn during that time, right? The impact of having someone who cares for you and loves you in a place where you're told you don't deserve it, you committed a crime, and you've been put away and you are undeserving of core components of human dignity. But [the mentors] are also learning how to resolve conflict because you're watching how other people resolve conflict, you're being called in and held accountable. You're learning and watching other people heal.

While the village program is certainly not a traditional approach in the American correctional system as it stands today, Dr. Shanahan's story sheds light on how incredibly effective peer-to-peer learning and support can be. In particular, in a setting like the one described above, where individuals are encouraged to trust and rely on each other, the learning goes both ways: from the mentees to the mentors and vice versa. The village model highlights the importance of developing leadership from within, from a subset of individuals who understand and can empathize with each other and using that skill to the program's advantage. Building systems of

leadership from within create more than just the mentor-mentee relationship – it furthers the sense of community and humanity – two factors that have time and again shown up in my expert interviews to be some of the most important but are often neglected when developing correctional programming in the United States. Communities, such as the ones described by Dr. Shanahan, provide individuals with real-life opportunities to actively participate in healthy social systems – to learn to give and receive support. The skills that are honed in these communities from within can ultimately transfer to these individuals' lives post-release, and help make the transition back into society smoother and less daunting since they have experienced it before. Dr. Shanahan's model community also provides an interesting broader insight into how we tend to approach creating programmatic solutions for the corrections system in the United States today: often, we adopt the perspective that solutions must come from the outside. If we see that there is a certain curriculum that has been found to produce great results among a certain set of jails and prisons, it is easy to think that it could replicated across many others. However, as is the case with Dr. Shanahan's example, such curricula may miss out on instilling skills in the program participants that can't necessarily be taught in a rigid way but can be felt – skills such as community-building, communicating, and being a good neighbor. Thus, building communities with a network of mentees and mentors from within have the potential to fill the gap that rigid academically oriented curricula alone may not necessarily be able to target. And, by harnessing the distinct abilities and skillsets of the individuals from within the correctional facilities, individuals in both jails and prisons may be able to jumpstart their process of healing and rehabilitation in fundamental ways.

One large reservation that people may have with the idea of endorsing such extensive mentorship networks (peer mentors like the ones in Dr. Shanahan's pilot model and external

mentors generally) could be that we are placing trust in individuals whose crimes may indicate that they have forfeited their right to be trusted by society. Those who hold this belief may argue that we shouldn't give these individuals experiencing incarceration our trust. While this concern is an understandable one, I would argue that the alternative – not attempting to foster networks and communities where the individuals learn to trust and live together – may lead to more dire consequences. This sentiment rings true in particular for individuals who will one day have the opportunity to re-enter society. If such individuals are unable to experience healthy modes of interaction and community-building while they are incarcerated, upon their release, it may prove to be even more difficult for them to get readjusted to living in a society that they have not been a part of for an extended period of time. Feelings of social, economic, and emotional insecurity may unknowingly push these individuals to resort to alternative measures to fill that gap in ways that create harmful consequences for them/those around them and as a result, potentially lead them to recidivate. Thus, giving these individuals the opportunity to exercise and experience realistic phenomena that happens in society outside of the corrections system is in many ways a win-win solution that can lower recidivism rates and increase public safety.

Policy Recommendations

My findings indicate that there are unique needs that must be met when developing and implementing experiential programming to accommodate for the different individuals in prisons versus jails. My interviews also show that there are important areas of overlap that both jail programming and prison programming should strive to incorporate in order to provide the most effective program that helps individuals in both the short and long term and ultimately lower recidivism rates.

The first recommendation is prison-specific: experiential prison programming should aim to incorporate an empowering continuum of care that supports individuals from inside the prison to well afterwards as they settle into their lives post-release. As exemplified in my interviews with the Executive Director from Defy Ventures and the Research Director from the Crime Labs, programs with cohorts similar in nature to Defy Ventures and READI can both empower and train individuals with practical life skills (i.e., entrepreneurial skills). Specifically, by instilling productive, entrepreneurial mindsets in individuals and providing them with relevant experiential programming that they can use post-release, individuals may feel a greater sense of purpose and drive, which can then translate to their lives outside of prison. Using relatively small cohorts can also help bolster this effect, as like-minded program participants can help motivate and support each other on their post-incarceration journeys. By ensuring that programs have measures and resources in place to guide formerly incarcerated graduates of the program, individuals may also feel more supported in rebuilding their lives post-release. Examples of resources may include monthly check-ins with a program outreach coordinator and weekly workshops reviewing the concepts that were covered while they were in the program in prison. As it stands, many prison programs today, experiential or not, fail to provide any form of care after the individual re-enters society. A lack of support post-release can be highly detrimental for the returning individual, as oftentimes, they do not have the resources or knowledge of where they can go to in order to get back up on their feet upon their release. Furthermore, individuals who may have served longer prison sentences and are returning to a completely unfamiliar world face even larger struggles transitioning back into society. By providing a structured continuum of care with a focus on empowerment as a part of prison programming, individuals may feel more supported in their

transition back into society and feel less of a need to have to resort to alternate methods which may lead to them recidivating.

Creating a transitional program (such as the examples provided above with READI and Defy Ventures) entirely from scratch is a highly costly endeavor especially given limited government approval and funding. Thus, one implementation issue to consider is the cost of carrying out such empowering transitional programming. However, it is important to note that many of the experiential prison programs that exist in the United States today have the potential to make minor changes to their pre-existing programming to make them better tailored to individuals experiencing incarceration without breaking the bank. For instance, large experiential prison programs could consider hiring a couple more instructors or coordinators to help make programming cohorts smaller. A slight change such as creating smaller cohorts in experiential prison programming may increase the effectiveness of programming as each individual participating may feel more personally engaged with the instructor, initiating feelings of empowerment. A second consideration that would help address the issue of cost would be to make effective use of outdoor/common spaces (a freely available resource) for programming whenever possible, similar to the way that the Insight Garden Project carries out their programming. More spacious areas can serve as areas of open community-building that can add on to the benefits of the programming. Thus, taking advantage of the pre-existing structures and programs and making minor modifications can still help make programming more efficacious for those participating while not being extravagantly costly.

The second recommendation is specific to the implementation of experiential programming in jails: given that the jail population is much more transient, experiential jail programs must seek to make shorter-form programming that minimizes the detrimental effects of

having programming cut short (ie. by the student having to go to court and being sentenced) while maximizing healing. Offering experiential programming that is not as heavily contingent upon a set year-long curricula and instead can be administered on a month-long basis may reduce the trauma that is incurred when students are forced to leave the program. Shorter programming, however, can still provide the students with a helpful foundation that fosters personal growth and development moving forward. In particular, as explicitly emphasized in my interviews with Karen Hsueh from the Insight Garden Project (IGP), the PhD student from the Crown School of Social Work, Dr. Kyla Bourne, and Professor Epperson, by creating programming that focuses on aspects of mental healing via mindfulness, yoga, gardening, or meditation (among many others), individuals who are waiting pre-trial in jail may feel better prepared to face their uncertain futures. Though programming that focuses on healing may not be a silver bullet for these individuals on their healing and development journeys, in the long run, it may prove to have a greater impact than a set weekly educational curriculum that could be terminated for them at any given moment. Programming focusing on mental health and healing may also have more of an immediate effect that helps the individual during their shorter stay in jail rather than a set vocational training curriculum that requires an extensive, long-term time commitment for proper and successful completion.

While tailoring prison curricula to the jail setting may seem like a big programmatic shift that would require many resources, my interviews indicate that this is not necessarily the case. The feasibility of this type of programming that focuses on healing and mindfulness is exemplified by my interview with Ms. Hsueh – IGP is considering implementing a shorter version of their prison curricula (based on landscaping and gardening) to the jail setting. Ms. Hsueh pointed out that IGP's consideration of making such a shift indicates that the transition

may not be as big of a reach, especially for programs of a similar nature that already operate in prisons. Furthermore, many of the experts that I interviewed spoke extensively about their experiences volunteering in jails and prisons (ex., both Dr. Dikcis and Dr. Bourne's experiences volunteering at the Cook County Jail, a Sociology PhD student who taught at the Cheshire Correctional Facility, etc.). As such, pre-existing prison programs that focus on healing are not only perfectly positioned to adapt/tailor their programming to a shorter length for those in jail but can also leverage the help of volunteers who are already offering their time and energy to such programs. By prioritizing programs that focus on healing, individuals who are in jail may be able to receive more apt forms of programming that can help them in both the short and long run, despite their unpredictable futures.

Despite the aforementioned ways in which programming can be effectively and efficiently be carried out in jails, there are still several implementation issues that must be considered. First, and often overlooked, there must be interest in the activity/program. One method of gaging interest would be to conduct a quick survey, jail policy permitting, on what reflective activities might be most helpful for the individuals. In my interview with Dr. Dikcis, she emphasized the benefits of surveys and the importance of ensuring that there is sufficient interest in the planned activities, since at the end of the day, students are more invested in learning when they want to learn. In her experience using "exit surveys", she explained that students helpfully suggested different types of classes that NPEP volunteers could teach in future iterations of the program. In conducting such surveys, interest can best be matched with availability, and make for the most effective and enjoyable learning experience possible. Second, experiential programs offered in jails must consider staff availability. Despite the fact that effective experiential programming need not require lavish structures or resources, sufficient

volunteer/staff interest must be generated to teach the curricula. As mentioned previously, many volunteer programs currently operate in jails. One common way of volunteering that surfaced in my expert interviews was via partnerships with universities. Through such partnerships, programs may be able to generate larger volunteer bases with individuals who have expertise in the types of content that individuals are interested in learning. Finally, given that many varieties of short-form experiential programming may require open spaces, outdoor/indoor space availability should also be taken into consideration in order to implement larger group programming.

The third recommendation involves strategies that both prisons and jails should strive to incorporate when developing their experiential programming: programs must prioritize developing a sense of personalized human connection and community that can reinforce the notion of humanization for those who are in the correctional system. Specifically, by incorporating mentor figures or trusted peers who have been through similar shared experiences, individuals currently experiencing incarceration may develop greater feelings of trust and hope. This type of community-building also need not be extravagantly costly. For instance, something as simple as weekly check-ins with formerly incarcerated individuals who are serving as community volunteers (i.e., READI's programming with "outreach workers") or a version of the "housing village" that Dr. Shanahan described in our interview where incarcerated individuals are given opportunities to serve as mentors for younger people in their facility, have the potential to inspire feelings of humanization, trust, and community in both jail and prison settings. Such communities can also inspire hope by being the first step in a long journey that helps individuals feel as though they are a part of the broader society rather than being shut off from the outside world, thus breaking down the "us versus them" rhetoric. These feelings of connectedness within

the correctional facility also have the potential to transfer over to individuals' lives post-release and ultimately help in their reintegration into society.

In practically developing and carrying out programming that puts an emphasis on building personalized care and humanization, there are several implementation issues that must be considered. One issue that must be addressed is ensuring that safe communities of mentors and mentees can be developed. For instance, Dr. Shanahan's "housing village" model was incredibly successful because individuals had to earn their spots to join that community. Being a part of the housing village was a privilege – one that individuals in the prison could only attain if they exhibited good behavior. Thus, ensuring that there is a set rigorous selection method with incentivization is crucial to developing a safe community where individuals can learn and grow from each other. Another issue that must be considered in developing effective mentor-mentee dynamics is ensuring that there are accurate and up-to-date record-keeping systems that keep track of whether meetings are regularly happening. More specifically, one issue that READI faced in its mentorship program involving "outreach workers" was that the outreach workers at times faced great difficulty getting in touch with their mentees, leading to outcomes that were helpful for some, but not as helpful for others in the program. To ensure consistency in mentorship meetings, an attendance log/sign in sheet or weekly reminders may be beneficial to consider.

To evaluate the effectiveness of implementing the programmatic recommendations (in part or altogether) described above, jails and prisons in the long run, in collaboration with the US Department of Justice, must maintain records of each facility's re-entrants. Key metrics such as employment and recidivism status for those who participated in the program must be recorded. In the short run, to gain a sense of whether the aforementioned recommendations are effective,

individual facilities or organizations working with the jail/prison should create surveys or questionnaires for program participants that include questions about the topicality of the content that is being taught as well as a section for general input that participants may wish to provide. By creating a back-and-forth with the program participants, individual facilities can work towards developing experiential programs that best fit the needs of the individuals while maximizing the potential for program effectiveness.

Ultimately, by prioritizing the factors listed above when developing, implementing, and evaluating the effectiveness of experiential programming in both prison and jail settings, individuals in the correctional system will feel better supported on their journeys. These recommended considerations, as outlined above, need not be costly, but are important to incorporate into programming in order to maximize effectiveness. Ensuring that some of the most vulnerable individuals in our society are able to feel supported in their reintegration journeys and connected to the correct resources is key to reducing recidivism.

Conclusion

This study aimed to understand the differences in characteristics between individuals who are experiencing incarceration in jails and prisons in the United States. By better understanding the differences, the study aimed to explore the different types of experiential programming that could be implemented in order to best help those experiencing incarceration, ultimately in order to increase the effectiveness of pre-existing programs and to reduce recidivism rates. I find that current programming efforts, with slight changes, could be made much more tailored to both individuals in jails and prisons so that they are able to maximize what they are able to take away from the programs. By focusing experiential programming efforts in prisons to consider ways

that we can empower individuals while also equipping them with the tools and resources necessary through a continuum of care that supports them after they are released, individuals will be able to experience a healthier, more holistic return to society that has the potential to prevent them from returning to alternative methods of survival through crime. By putting an emphasis on making programming in jails more short-term and focused on healing, it is possible to provide more appropriate care for those who could be facing a time of great uncertainty, leading to additional trauma caused by the experience. In contrast to many experiential programs in the carceral system as they exist today, by encouraging pre-existing experiential programming to tailor to and address the specific needs of the individuals in jails and prisons, we could make better use of the current resources that are going into programming and make a greater impact on the lives of those experiencing incarceration. Though experiential education in the past has solely focused on the prison setting or non-correctional setting, by being more critical about which aspects of experiential education should be prioritized in both prisons and jails, we can take the lessons learned about the benefits of experiential education in the literature to better address the needs of the individuals in the carceral system and help them heal/prepare for their re-entry into society.

Looking beyond the scope of what specific practical factors should be implemented in programming to help individuals make progress and rehabilitate, in order for such programs to carry greater societal weight, larger conversations must be had to emphasize the importance of humanizing the individuals who are facing incarceration. Mr. Rubio, the Director of the Insight Prison Project, who himself experienced incarceration in San Quentin for 20+ years, elaborates:

> We've committed harm… we've committed harm to people, and in some cases, very great harm. There's a reason to feel guilt, there can even be a reason to feel shame. At

> what point do you choose to overcome the toxic shame? Because if you don't deal with that shame, you can just continue to spiral down out of control. And so, what we talk about is being able to find that healing for ourselves to be able to move forward.

Thus, a two-way effort is required for programmatic efforts like the ones that I've described in this study to be fully effective and carry weight: individuals must be given the tools necessary to achieve healing but the societal narrative towards individuals experiencing incarceration must also change and become more humanizing. A mutual understanding between these two groups is essential to creating sustained change and a deeper empathy that not only heals but allows individuals to productively return to society.

Ultimately, further avenues of research exploring specific strategies that can effectively shift the narrative/dismantle unproductive stereotypes about individuals experiencing incarceration should be conducted to maximize the long-term effectiveness of the programmatic efforts outlined in my study. Further research into ways that we as a society can work to destigmatize individuals returning to society may include studying the effects of changing the language we use to refer to those who have experienced incarceration in our school systems and beyond, as well as measuring the effects of introducing legislation that helps previously incarcerated individuals reintegrate into society through various forms of sustained, productive employment (perhaps even starting from when they are still in jail or prison). Most importantly, however, investigating which of these strategies will maximally aid and expedite the reintegration process will help in not just protecting some of the most vulnerable individuals in our society today break free from the vicious cycle of recidivism but also in maintaining a safer, more productive community for all.

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