

COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS WORKING WITH THE INCARCERATED:
CHANGING LIVES INSIDE AND OUT

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This research is dedicated to all those individuals focused on seeing humanity in those who are incarcerated. They are doing the difficult work of shifting punitive systems to rehabilitative ones, which creates hope and progress. They are sharing the insights and implications they have discovered that positive human connections heal a lifetime of trauma which results in a better and safer society. Their dedication helps transform lives and lower recidivism rates.

A special acknowledgment to the residents and staff at San Quentin Rehabilitation Center, who have warmly welcomed me into their community and made me feel safe and valued. And to Marcus Henderson, who invited me into the San Quentin Media Center and encouraged me to volunteer. Marcus was released from San Quentin in late 2024 and passed away the following May. My life has been changed for the better because he demonstrated that individuals can be rehabilitated and contribute positively to society.



This study examines the role of community volunteers working with the incarcerated and the impact on recidivism rates, with a focus on California. It highlights the interplay of factors driving mass incarceration in the United States, such as childhood trauma, social isolation, low educational attainment, poverty, homelessness, over-policing of disadvantaged neighborhoods, punitive policies, and the criminalization of mental illness and addiction, the destabilizing effects on families and communities, as well as the perpetuation of recidivism. The literature review reveals inconsistent methods for calculating recidivism and identifies numerous contributing factors, including the significant role of policy decisions. Existing research also highlights the effectiveness of rehabilitation over retribution, the health issues associated with social isolation, and the value of positive human connections in offsetting its effects. Original research conducted for this project, using surveys and interviews with formerly incarcerated individuals, identifies key themes for successful rehabilitation: the importance of personal growth, the challenges posed by prison culture, the value of volunteer-led initiatives, and recommendations to enhance volunteer effectiveness. The study concludes with recommendations to create opportunities for improved or additional interactions between incarcerated individuals and community volunteers, as well as to improve the success of rehabilitation programs within prisons and families.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 – The Statement of the Problem	Page 1
Positionality Statement	Page 3
Key Components and Personal Risk Factors that Contribute to Mass Incarceration	Page 4
Childhood Trauma	Page 6
Social Isolation Related to Adverse Childhood Experiences	Page 9
Low Levels of Educational Attainment	Page 12
Poverty and Homelessness	Page 14
Poverty	Page 15
Homelessness	Page 17
Over-policing of Disadvantaged Neighborhoods	Page 19
Policy Drives Incarceration	Page 22
Criminalization of Mental Illness and Addiction	Page 27
Criminalization of Addiction	Page 27
Criminalization of Mental Illness	Page 31
Emphasis on Security Impacts Prison Culture	Page 33
Family and Community Destabilization	Page 36
Conclusion	Page 39
Chapter 2 – Literature Review	Page 41
Recidivism	Page 41
Defining and Measuring Recidivism	Page 41
Causes of Recidivism	Page 47
Policy Affects Recidivism	Page 53
Potential Solutions to Address Recidivism	Page 58
Rehabilitation	Page 61

Rehabilitation Compared with Retribution,	
Deterrence and Incarceration	Page 61
Harsh Prison Culture Impacts Rehabilitation	Page 63
Impact on Prison Staff	Page 64
Types of Rehabilitation Programs	Page 65
Cost Effectiveness of Rehabilitation	Page 66
Insufficient number of Rehabilitation Programs	Page 67
Benefits of Rehabilitation	Page 67
Rehabilitation's Impact on Recidivism Rates	Page 70
Value of Community Volunteers	Page 73
Rehabilitation in CDCR	Page 74
Social Connection	Page 78
Benefits of Social Connection	Page 79
Importance of Social Capital	Page 82
Theories Supporting Social Connection	Page 84
Civic and Social Engagement in Prison	Page 86
Value of Volunteers in Prison	Page 90
Gaps in Research	Page 93
Chapter 3 – Research Data and Methods	Page 96
Research Questions	Page 96
Methods and Data	Page 97
Research Design	Page 97
Design Limitations	Page 98
Data Collection	Page 99
Survey Collection and Respondent	
Characteristics	Page 100

Interviews	Page 103
Additional Data Sources	Page 103
Beneficiaries, Stakeholders, and Detractors	Page 104
Conclusion	Page 108
Chapter 4 – Research Findings	Page 109
Desire for Personal Growth	Page 110
Moment of Change	Page 110
Motivation for Rehabilitation	Page 112
Attitudes Towards Learning	Page 114
Challenges of Existing Prison Culture	Page 116
Benefits of Rehabilitation	Page 118
Addressing Issues that Led Them to Prison	Page 118
Work Opportunities	Page 119
Human Connection Over Curriculum	Page 120
Socialization	Page 121
Value of Volunteers	Page 123
Humanization	Page 125
Changes in Prison Culture	Page 126
Create Safe Places	Page 127
Role Models	Page 128
Sense of Inclusion	Page 130
Seen as Colleagues	Page 131
Feeling Cared For	Page 132
Feeling Welcomed Home	Page 132
Appreciating the Giving of Time	Page 134
Drawbacks of Volunteers	Page 135

Formerly Incarcerated Volunteers - Role Models	
for the Future	Page 137
San Quentin Stands Out	Page 138
Improvements in the Volunteer Experience	Page 141
More Volunteers	Page 141
Minimize Red Tape	Page 142
More Socialization Opportunities	Page 143
More Comprehensive Volunteer Training	Page 144
Conclusion	Page 145
Chapter 5 – Summary, Recommendations, and Additional	
Research	Page 147
Summary of Findings	Page 147
Recommendations	Page 149
Identify Correctional Officers Supportive	
of Rehabilitation	Page 151
Enhance Volunteer Training	Page 152
Customized Learning Plan for the Incarcerated	Page 154
Strengthen Communication Skills	Page 155
Computer Reentry Game	Page 155
Encourage Family to Participate in Rehabilitation	Page 157
#Rehabilitationworks Movement	Page 158
Increase Criminal Justice Reform Funding	Page 158
Value of Recommendations	Page 159
Limitations of the Study	Page 160
Future Studies	Page 162

Conclusion	Page 164
References	Page 166
Author Biography	

Tables

Table 1.1 10 Areas of Childhood Trauma	Page 6
Table 1.2 ACEs US population vs Incarcerated	Page 7
Table 1.3 Areas of Trauma Children Tried as Adults	Page 8
Table 2.1 Rehabilitation Programs Offered in California	Page 75
Table 3.1 Nonprofits Receiving Surveys	Page 99
Table 3.2 Survey Questions	Page 101
Table 3.3 Quantitative Results from Survey	Page 102
Table 3.4 Interview Questions	Page 105
Table 4.1 Key Themes for Successful Rehabilitation	Page 110
Table 4.2 Time of Moment of Change	Page 111
Table 4.3 Survey Results on Value of Volunteer Interactions	Page 124
Table 5.1 Implementation Ideas	Page 151

Figures

Figure 1.1 Key Components and Personal Risk Factors that
Contribute to Mass Incarceration

Page 5

Chapter 1 – Statement of the Problem

When research for this study began in 2023, two distinct programs at San Quentin Rehabilitation Center (SQRC) had achieved zero recidivism rates (Yoo, 2023; Friends of SQN, 2023). One was San Quentin News, an incarcerated-written newspaper that is delivered to California prisons and to an outside readership. The news staff learns how to write effectively as journalists through a journalism guild program. They develop critical thinking, broaden their perspective on the world, and acquire essential social skills, including interviewing incarcerated individuals, prison administrators, politicians, and external guests. These skills are transferable to employment outside and in engaging in pro-social activities in society. The other program is the 1,000 Mile Club. The members of this group train for an annual marathon held at SQRC. The members learn and practice essential soft skills, including dedication, perseverance, endurance, discipline, and camaraderie.

Given their different missions and purposes, the question arose: why did both have a zero recidivism rate, while the state of California's recidivism rate is 39.1% (CDCR, 2025)? What they had in common was a dedicated group of community volunteers who consistently supported them. This became the basis for the research questions of this project:

- What are the benefits of community volunteers working with incarcerated individuals?
- Does this collaboration between community volunteers and the incarcerated affect recidivism?
- What challenges arise when community volunteers and the incarcerated work together?
- How can these challenges be addressed?

To answer these questions, it is helpful to understand the problem at hand: mass incarceration. Garland (2001) defined mass incarceration in terms of two key features. The first

is that the imprisonment rate and prison population size are substantially higher than historical and comparative norms for similar societies. The United States (US) has the largest population of incarcerated individuals in the world at 1,808,100 (World Population Review, 2025). It ranks fifth worldwide in the number of individuals per 100,000, at 541. The countries with a higher number of individuals per 100,000 are El Salvador, Cuba, Rwanda, and Turkmenistan (World Population Review, 2025). Compared with the US, Western countries have substantially lower rates per 100,000, including the United Kingdom (139), France and Spain (117), and Canada (90) (World Population Review, 2025).

The second feature of mass incarceration, as outlined by Garland (2001), is when the focus turns away from incarcerating individuals for specific offenses and instead incarcerates groups of people based on criteria such as race and age (Garland, 2001). In the US, that group of people is young Black men who disproportionately fill prisons (Garland, 2001). There are more young (20-34-year-old) Black men without a high school diploma or GED behind bars (37%) than employed (26%) (The Pew Charitable Trust, 2010). Based on these facts, the US meets the definition of mass incarceration.

An important aspect of mass incarceration is the racism that is built into the system. Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow*, found in her research that the criminal justice system is racialized and functions similarly to Jim Crow (2020). It is understood that racial inequality is built into mass incarceration at every stage of the criminal justice system (Sawyer, 2020). That being said, this research will focus more on the personal risk factors that feed into the structure of mass incarceration rather than the reasons the US has a system of mass incarceration.

Before addressing the key components of mass incarceration, it is important to understand the author's background and position on this research.

Positionality Statement

I am a white, middle-aged woman from a higher socio-economic background who has volunteered at SQRC since 2019. My journey began when I joined programs focused on financial literacy, communication skills, and core values. Prior to stepping into the role of a volunteer within the prison system, I had never been incarcerated myself, nor had I personally known anyone who had experienced incarceration.

Having no direct contact with the incarcerated population and being exposed only to societal narratives and media portrayals, these shaped my perceptions about who is in prison and what their stories might be. My assumptions did not prepare me for the diversity of experiences, backgrounds, and motivations I encountered. Through my work at SQRC, I have had the privilege of engaging with individuals whose resilience, intelligence, compassion, and capacity for transformation and personal growth have altered my initial perceptions of who is in prison and the vitality of rehabilitation.

The relationships and interactions I have built over time with incarcerated individuals have changed my worldview. I have come to recognize the humanity and complexity of each person, seeing beyond the label of "incarcerated" to understand their values, aspirations, histories of childhood trauma, and their unique journeys.

Volunteering at SQRC has also revealed to me the mutual benefits that arise when volunteers and the incarcerated work together. While my purpose was to contribute my skills

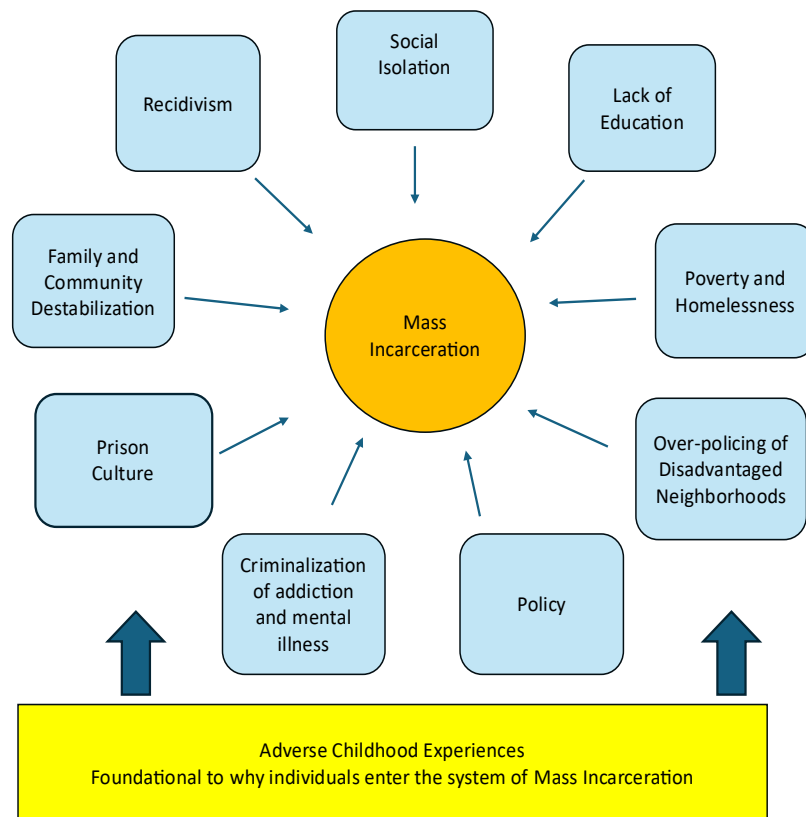
and knowledge, I have received invaluable lessons in resilience, empathy, humility, and the transformative power of genuine connection. The collaborative learning environment created fosters personal growth for everyone involved, breaking down stereotypes and building bridges of understanding.

As I continue my work within SQRC, I am learning how my positionality creates opportunities to overcome learned biases. I am also aware that my experiences with the incarcerated at SQRC, which is a progressive prison focused on rehabilitation, can bias my views as a researcher.

Key Components and Personal Risk Factors that Contribute to Mass Incarceration

Mass incarceration is a complex problem comprised of many different significant social issues like childhood trauma, social isolation, lack of education, poverty, homelessness, over-policing in disadvantaged communities, criminalization of mental illness and addiction, policies that support a culture of punishment (Resney, 2019), prison culture, family and community destabilization, and recidivism. Figure 1.1..illustrates how adverse childhood experiences form the foundational layer that underpins multiple, interconnected personal risk components contributing to mass incarceration. Each component—ranging from social and economic factors to systemic policies and cultural dynamics—builds upon this foundation, creating a complex matrix that perpetuates high incarceration rates.

Figure 1.1 Key Components and Contributing Personal Risk Factors that Contribute to Mass Incarceration



Recognizing that no single intervention can effectively address the whole problem, this study focuses on one type of intervention that could help disrupt the negative effects of social isolation, prison culture, and family destabilization: the capacity of community volunteers working with the incarcerated to address social isolation and recidivism through positive human connection.

It is important to understand the depth of the social issue in each component to better grasp the complexity and challenges of addressing the systems that sustain mass incarceration.

The foundation of these components of mass incarceration begins with childhood trauma, which is measured through an assessment called Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES).

Childhood Trauma

ACES originated in a groundbreaking 1995 study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Kaiser Permanente in California. In that study, “ACES” referred to three specific kinds of adversity children faced in the home environment: 1) various forms of physical and emotional abuse, 2) neglect, and 3) household dysfunction (Center on the Developing Child, 2018). The study focused on 10 areas of traumatic experience, as shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Ten Areas of Childhood Trauma

Domestic Violence: Witnessing violence between adults at home
Substance Use: Living with someone who misuses alcohol or drugs
Mental Health Condition: Living with someone who has a mental health condition or has experienced suicidal thoughts or behaviors
Parental Separation or Divorce: Losing a parent through separation, divorce, or abandonment
Incarceration: Living with someone who went to jail or prison
Emotional Abuse: Being sworn at, humiliated, or threatened
Physical Abuse: Being hit, pushed, or physically harmed
Sexual Abuse: Being touched or harmed in a sexual way
Emotional Neglect: Feeling unsupported or ignored
Physical Neglect: Lacking food, clothing, or medical care

Source: The Mulberry Bush, 2025

The measurement of ACES is important for incarcerated individuals. There is a correlation between experiencing more ACES and the likelihood of poor outcomes later in life (Center on the Developing Child, 2018), including criminal behavior (Boppre, 2023). This can be seen in the high levels of ACEs in the incarcerated population.

The incarcerated experience childhood trauma at higher frequencies than individuals in non-incarcerated populations (Browne et al, 1999; Bosgelmez et al, 2010; Kao et al, 2014). According to a 10-question assessment, 98% of the US prison population has at least one ACE (Compassion Prison Project, 2025) as compared with 64% of the US population (Child Trauma Sherpa, 2023). More than 75% of incarcerated individuals have four or more ACES, which is considered a significant history of trauma (Compassion Prison Project, 2025). This is compared to 17.3% of the US population experiencing four or more ACES (Swedo, et al, 2023). Additional comparisons are presented in Table 1.2, where a selection of ACES questions is compared.

Table 1.2: ACEs for the US General Population Compared to the Incarcerated

Category of Trauma	US General Population	Incarcerated
Emotional Abuse	35%	63%
Physical Abuse	39%	68%
Emotional Neglect	13%	51%
Physical Neglect	11%	22%
Parents Living Apart	28%	79%
Family Member Incarcerated	9%	45%

Source: Compassion Prison Project, 2025

In one study, children who had been tried as adults had an average score of 7.06 on the 10-point ACES scale (Human Rights for Kids, 2025). In that study of 1,202 individuals, the participants experienced high levels of trauma, as shown in Table 1.3.

ACES also contribute to mental health disorders. Childhood trauma is like a brain injury; when one is constantly experiencing trauma, they are always in a heightened state of fear. This can do physical damage to their brains, including causing different ways of thinking, as well as participating in risky behaviors as a coping mechanism (Child Trauma Sherpa, 2023). Exposure to

four or more ACES increases the risk of mental health disorders, which interfere with learning how to find healthy ways to manage emotions. This leads to the adoption of risky behavior (Boppre, 2023). Examples of risky behavior include smoking, alcohol abuse, illicit drugs, and engaging in risky sexual behavior (Dube et al., 2003; Felitti et al., 1998; Strine, 2012).

Table 1.3: Areas of Trauma Experienced by Children Tried as Adults

Emotional Abuse	84.21%
Physical Abuse	81.58%
Sexual Abuse	51.58%
Household Substance Abuse	61.58%
Emotional Neglect	81.05%
Physical Neglect	58.42%

Source: Human Rights for Kids, 2025

When untreated, mental health issues can lead to incarceration. Forty-three percent of people incarcerated in state prisons have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder (Marushcak et al., 2016). People with mental health disorders are overrepresented in prisons relative to the general public (Prins, 2014). Social isolation is a symptom of mental health issues (Cherry, 2025) and can hamper building positive social skills.

Childhood experiences play a crucial role in the acquisition and development of social skills (Blechner et al., 2024). Positive experiences promote healthy social interactions by teaching individuals to communicate effectively, modeling positive social roles, cultivating empathy, and helping them get along with others. They also help resolve conflicts (Blechner et al., 2024). Negative experiences, such as ACES, contribute to challenges in creating healthy social relationships (Blechner et al., 2024).

ACES disrupt the ability to form healthy relationships (Misiak et al., 2022). They also contribute to low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety, which can contribute to loneliness (Blechner et al., 2024). Children experiencing these psychological effects may withdraw from social interactions, further isolating them (Landry et al., 2022). Prolonged exposure to ACES, sometimes referred to as toxic stress, can negatively affect children's attention, decision-making, and learning. Children growing up with toxic stress may have difficulty forming healthy and stable relationships (Shonkoff et al., 2012), which could lead to social isolation. Social isolation is considered an epidemic by the World Health Organization (2025) and the US Surgeon General (2023). It affects people worldwide for different reasons. For the incarcerated, social isolation can be the result of coping with ACES.

🔗 Social Isolation Related to Adverse Childhood Experiences

Social isolation is a global epidemic with numerous adverse health and life outcomes (WHO, 2025; US Surgeon General, 2023). The broader topic of social isolation is discussed in the next chapter. However, social isolation specifically can be tied to ACES because it is an outcome of coping mechanisms for children who have a history of high levels of trauma. A history of any trauma, physical, sexual, or crime-related has been consistently linked to lower social support (Kao et al, 2014).

High levels of childhood trauma can lead to behavior that results in social isolation, such as staying in their room, replacing personal interaction with digital interactions, avoiding school, and declining invitations to spend time with others. Substance abuse is one of the most common ACES. Parents who are on drugs or drink excessive amounts of alcohol may be unable

to properly care for their children, neglect them, or be removed from the household for different reasons, including incarceration (Child Traum Sherpa, 2023). This disruption can lead to a lack of social support and a retreat from spending time with others.

Substance abuse as a coping mechanism by the child can also lead to feeling isolated. In a study of formerly incarcerated men, they felt wounded and disconnected as boys from the adults in their lives, with 49% of them turning to drugs to cope with their painful emotions (Davis et al., 2023). Substance abuse can prioritize their substance over social relationships and isolate them from family and friends, which damages relationships (Turning Point Care, 2024).

Children who are treated badly by their parents, such as physical or emotional abuse, limit their ability to develop emotional intelligence and negatively affect a person's desire to seek out and establish social ties (Germine et al., 2015). Adults who were exposed to high levels of adversity as children may be less socially engaged and therefore less likely to form social networks because of a lack of trust, social awareness, or knowledge of how to process trauma (Kjellstrand et al., 2023).

Acting out in violence can be an outward expression of emotions. In the study of formerly incarcerated individuals, as boys, they did not understand and could not control their feelings, and used violence to express themselves (Davis et al., 2023). Acting violently can lead to isolation, as no one wants to be around a child likely to act aggressively (Davis et al., 2023). The men in this study also said that they felt alone as children as they tried to manage their trauma, and that they felt emotionally detached from people around them (Davis et al., 2023). Although ACES do not directly cause social isolation, there is evidence that children socially isolate themselves as a coping mechanism.

If the trauma from ACES is left untreated, there is evidence that incarceration is a likely outcome (Boppre, 2023; Child Trauma Sherpa, 2023). The mistreatment of children significantly increased the risk of incarceration in adulthood (Roos et al., 2016). People who have experienced four or more ACES are 7 times more likely to go to prison (Compassion Prison Project, 2025). Experiencing trauma as a child can lead to feelings of being isolated, which leads to undeveloped social skills and the adoption of harmful coping mechanisms. These behaviors are linked to criminal behavior, which can result in incarceration (Boppre, 2023).

Trauma exposure has often been linked directly and indirectly to involvement in the criminal justice system (Asberg & Renk, 2013; DeHart, 2008; Curtis et al, 2001; Thornberry et al., 2010; Kao, 2014). Social isolation is a precursor to acts of mass violence (West & Thompson, 2023). Social isolation can lead to gang membership as a means of finding a sense of belonging (McCoy et al., 2022; Kalmoe & Mason, 2019; Argo Benitzhak et al., 2019; US Surgeon General, 2023). Childhood trauma has direct links to incarceration (Boppres, 2023).

While incarcerated, social isolation continues because individuals have created a persona to protect themselves from being exploited, but it can lead to alienating themselves from others. This affects social interaction and relationships, and they find that they have created a distance between themselves and others that is difficult to fix (Haney, 2002).

Some prisoners learn to find safety in social invisibility by becoming as disconnected from others as possible. This social withdrawal and isolation may result in trusting no one and adjusting to the stresses of prison by leading isolated lives (Haney, 2010). Social isolation can result from a coping mechanism from exposure to high levels of childhood trauma, and it can be

exacerbated due to time spent in prison. The trauma experienced as a child does not excuse the behavior that led them to prison, but it helps to understand what needs to be healed.

In addition to the problems already identified, untreated trauma can lead to lower levels of educational attainment, which is connected to poverty, homelessness, and exposure to the police.

Low Levels of Educational Attainment

As mentioned earlier, childhood trauma is like a brain injury. When individuals are constantly experiencing trauma, they are always in a heightened state of fear. This can cause physical damage to their brains (Child Trauma Sherpa, 2023), significantly diminishing a child's ability to learn over their lifetime (Center on the Developing Child, 2010).

Stress, caused by childhood trauma, can inhibit early learning and affect interactions with school, work, and in the community. Toxic stress can lead to learning, relational, and behavioral difficulties in school (Bhushan, 2021).

The effects of toxic stress in the classroom can be seen in trouble concentrating, lack of engagement, missing homework assignments, learning disabilities, absenteeism, repeating a grade, and dropping out (Bhushan, 2021). Children with four or more ACES are 32 times more likely to struggle with their learning and behavior (Burke et al., 2011).

As mentioned earlier, childhood trauma can make it difficult to establish social relationships, and a coping mechanism is violence or other risky behavior. This can create trouble at school due to the school's zero-tolerance policies. Zero-tolerance policies in schools

permit suspensions for any infractions (Tynan & Warren, 2025). Suspensions keep students out of school, a leading factor in their underperformance (Peguero & Bracy, 2015), and students who have been suspended throughout their schooling are less likely to graduate (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2019). Students who do not graduate high school are three and a half times more likely to end up incarcerated than their peers who do graduate (Literacy Mid-South, 2025).

Almost 80 percent of those incarcerated are high school dropouts or recipients of the General Educational Development (GED) credential. More than half of incarcerated individuals with a GED earned it while incarcerated. About 41 percent of all incarcerated individuals have no high school credential (Romero, 2014). State prisoners have an average of a 10th-grade education (Western & Pettit, 2010).

The connection between dropping out of high school and incarceration is disproportionate for Black high school students. The likelihood of interaction with the criminal justice system is higher among people of color and individuals with lower levels of education (Weller et al., 2022). Almost 70% of Black high school dropouts in 2009 had been imprisoned by the age of 30, which was four and a half times higher than the rate of white high school dropouts (Pettit et al., 2009). Prison time has become a regular life event for African American men who have dropped out of high school. Sixty-eight percent of these men born since the mid-1970s have prison records (Western & Pettit, 2010). The impact this has on their children and their academic opportunities is devastating.

Children with a parent in prison have a more difficult time in school than those who do not have an incarcerated parent. In one study, 23% of children with a father who served time in

jail or prison have been expelled or suspended from school compared to 4% who did not have an incarcerated father (The Pew Charitable Trust, 2010). One cause of the suspensions is associated with boys with an incarcerated father, as they act more aggressively, leading to school disciplinary actions (The Pew Charitable Trust, 2010).

Teachers also treat children with incarcerated parents differently. Teachers ascribe more behavioral issues to children with an incarcerated father. In other cases, teachers rate children as less competent when their mothers are imprisoned (Dallaire et al., 2010; Wildeman et al., 2017).

There is an apparent connection between low educational attainment and employment. Labor market opportunities for men with no more than a high school education have diminished over time (Western & Pettit, 2010). Moreover, low-wage jobs can lead to a life of poverty, particularly among high school dropouts (Romero, 2014). Black men are particularly affected by not finishing high school, as they are more likely to be incarcerated than in an office (The Pew Charitable Trust, 2010; Western & Pettit, 2010). The impact of lower levels of education resulting in poorer-paying jobs can result in individuals living in poverty and possibly being unhoused.

Poverty and Homelessness

Poverty and homelessness share many social, economic, and structural issues. However, poverty affects far more individuals and families than homelessness.

Poverty

The US Census Bureau's 2024 report (Shrider & Bijou, 2025) indicates that 10.6 percent of the population, or 35.9 million people, are living in poverty. Poverty levels are determined by family size. For example, for a single individual under age 65, the poverty threshold was \$16,320. For a family of four, two adults and two children, the poverty threshold in 2024 was \$31,812 (Dalaker, 2024).

There are many causes of poverty, but rarely a single one. Instead, it is typically a combination of forces that lead someone into poverty. These potential causes include low wages and inconsistent work, unemployment or underemployment, high cost of living, lack of educational attainment, inequality and discrimination, family instability or single-income households, health and disability challenges, weak social safety nets, housing instability and rising rents, mass incarceration and criminal records, intergenerational cycle of poverty, and economic conditions (National Equity Atlas, 2025). Many of these causes are included in the key components of mass incarceration, including employment challenges, educational attainment, inequality and discrimination, family instability, and incarceration.

Poverty can lead to incarceration, and incarceration can keep an individual in poverty. Living in poverty increases exposure to criminalized environments (Bauman et al., 2018). Economic desperation can drive survival-based offenses, leading to criminal behavior (Bauman et al., 2018). The US prison system is full of people who have not had full access to the economy and who have neither a quality education nor access to good jobs. People in prison are among the poorest in the country (Rabuy & Kopf, 2015).

Incarceration creates a group of individuals that share the connection of incarceration, crime, poverty, racial minority, and low education (Western & Pettit, 2010). Incarcerated individuals typically come from the lowest rungs in society, and mass incarceration deepens the disadvantage for the poorest in society. (Western & Pettit, 2010).

Men and women enter prison with limited marketable work experience, low levels of educational or vocational skills, and many health-related issues ranging from mental health needs to substance abuse histories and high rates of communicable disease. During incarceration, they lose opportunities to gain marketable work experience and to maintain professional and social connections that could lead to legal employment upon release (Western et al., 2001). When they leave prison, these challenges remain and affect neighborhoods, families, and society at large (Baer et al., 2006).

After serving a sentence, the formerly incarcerated must deal with the stigma of having a criminal record, which can inhibit the ability to get hired (Bauman, 2018). Formerly incarcerated people experience unemployment rates of over 27%, nearly five times the rate for the general population (Couloute & Kopf, 2018). A criminal record reduces callbacks from prospective employers by approximately 50% (Western & Pettit, 2010) because formerly incarcerated individuals are viewed unfavorably by employers (The Pew Charitable Trust, 2010). The formerly incarcerated experience high levels of unemployment and below-average earnings in part because of their work history and low levels of education (The Pew Charitable Trust, 2010). As a result of the challenges in finding economically sustainable work, formerly incarcerated Americans see their subsequent earnings reduced by an average of 52% (Craigie et al., 2020).

Mass incarceration also affects the financial wealth of families with an incarcerated family member. Having an incarcerated family member can impact wealth in two ways. It makes it harder for households to save and build wealth, and lower incomes force families to take on more costly debt, such as credit cards, to pay their bills (Weller et al., 2022).

Households with an incarcerated family member are more likely to have lower incomes, be unemployed, rely on public assistance, lack health insurance, and have unstable incomes. They are also likely to live in unsafe and undesirable neighborhoods that are over-policed (Weller et al., 2022).

Another barrier for families is that they are paying a significant portion of their earnings toward legal fees, fines, other criminal justice debt, and costs of communication and visitation (deVuono-Powell et al., 2015). Sixty-five percent of families with an incarcerated loved one were unable to meet their family's basic needs, such as food and housing (deVuono-Powell et al., 2015). These costs of incarceration carried by families perpetuate cycles of poverty (Elderbroom et al., 2025).

Mass incarceration has become a significant driver of poverty and racial inequality (Weller et al., 2022) in the US. One specific outcome of poverty that is connected to incarceration is homelessness.

Homelessness

Homelessness affects a smaller portion of the population than poverty. The 2024 point-in-time count was 771,480 people experiencing homelessness in the US on a single night (de Sousa & Henry, 2024), compared to 35.9 million affected by poverty annually (Shrider & Bijou,

2025). There are overlapping issues that make up the causes of homelessness and poverty.

Homelessness is not typically a single event but a combination of events such as the cost of the housing market, poverty and economic stability, physical and mental health-related factors, addiction, family conflict, including domestic violence, transitions from institutional care such as prison or foster care, social isolation, discrimination, and traumatic experiences such as ACES or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Scarcity of decent, safe, and affordable housing contributes to an increase in unsheltered homelessness (CSG, 2019). Once homeless, people can be arrested for living in public spaces even when they have no other alternatives (Bauman, 2018). Lack of stable housing increases exposure to police and risk of incarceration; homeless people are as much as 11 times more likely to experience incarceration than those in the general population (Bauman, 2018). It is a common misconception that homeless people do not work--but many do--and criminalization laws threaten their employment (Bauman, 2018). When the homeless are arrested and jailed for living in a public space, they can miss work, which can result in them losing their job (Bauman, 2018).

Not only does being imprisoned jeopardize employment, but it can also disrupt people's health care and disconnect them from their communities, possibly worsening underlying mental illnesses and substance abuse disorders and creating additional barriers to their ability to secure housing. (CSG, 2019). Disruptions in health care benefits can disrupt the cash flow needed to pay for housing.

Disabled individuals who were incarcerated can have their benefits suspended and, if incarcerated for over a year, terminated. They must apply for benefits upon release, and the process may take time if they are reinstated. This leaves people with disabilities returning from prison with no ability to pay for housing, leaving them prone to homelessness (Bauman, 2018).

Having a criminal record also makes it challenging to secure appropriate housing, if available. Landlords can refuse to rent to people with criminal histories, which contributes to homelessness (Bauman, 2018).

Because the one-time count for the unhoused is a point in time, it does not provide a complete picture of the connection between incarceration and homelessness. From criminal justice studies, we do know that of the eleven million people admitted to jail annually, nearly 1.65 million, or 15%, experienced homelessness the year prior (Greenberg & Rosenhack, 2008). This high percentage relates in part to criminalizing the social issue of being poor and unhoused.

On top of criminalizing poverty and homelessness, poorer neighborhoods are also policed more often. This increases the likelihood that people living in poor neighborhoods will interact with law enforcement.

Over-Policing of Disadvantaged Neighborhoods

Our society has, in the name of tough-on-crime, made a series of policy choices that have fueled a cycle of poverty and incarceration (Rabuy and Kopf, 2015). Households with lower wealth are more likely to live in neighborhoods with higher police presence or surveillance.

They are then more likely than wealthier households to face frequent interactions with the criminal legal system (Weller et al., 2022).

Disparities in policing can be explained by three theories: majority-minority communities theory, conflict theory of law, and minority threat hypothesis-group threat theory (Zare, 2024). In majority-minority communities, the high level of violent crime leads to more police encounters and a greater need for police presence (Holmes et al., 2019). In majority-minority communities, individuals living in lower-income, distressed communities of color with higher poverty rates, greater residential segregation, and elevated levels of violent crime are more likely to experience higher levels of policing (Zare, 2024).

Conflict theory of law suggests that policing enforces social control that benefits those in power. This means that areas with a higher population of non-whites could have larger police forces mainly because of the white's fear and perceived economic threat (Stults & Baumer, 2007).

Minority threat hypothesis-group threat theory proposes that minority-serving areas and socially marginalized populations experience more aggressive policing and lethal outcomes because these groups are seen as threatening the established order and power structure (Blalock, 1967). Police are more likely to use fatal force in areas with economic disadvantage, racial conflict, high crime rates, and a higher proportion of vulnerable and low-income populations, more specifically, communities of color (Zare et al., 2022).

Over-policing in low-income neighborhoods not only results in more opportunities to be involved in the criminal justice system, but it also impacts minors and their success in school.

An arrest or other negative encounters with police are disruptive, particularly for school-aged minors. It can cause students to miss school or fall behind on schoolwork, receive harsher treatment from family, and carry a criminal record, which can affect them when they apply for college or employment (Stagoff-Belfort et al., 2022).

Continuous police interactions with minors increase the chance of arrests or formal sanctions, which can lead to issues at school due to “zero tolerance” disciplinary policies, as discussed earlier. (Stagoff-Belfort et al., 2022). Teens with these experiences typically have lower grade-point averages, score lower on standardized tests, and take less advanced coursework. They are more likely not to complete high school and less likely to enroll in college. Educational outcomes of young Black men suffer, in part because they are more likely to be stopped, arrested, or mistreated by law enforcement in these low-income neighborhoods (Stagoff-Belfort et al., 2022). Police contact is associated with lower rates of high school graduation and college enrollment (Stagoff-Belfort et al., 2022). Even if young people do not have direct encounters with the police, living in a heavily policed neighborhood may negatively affect their educational development (Stagoff-Belfort et al., 2022).

In addition to the impact of over-policing on youth and their education, arrests can limit access to credit and wealth-building, constrain employment opportunities, and undermine housing security (Stagoff-Belfort et al., 2022). When someone in a household loses employment following an arrest, the household may be unable to afford food, housing, or childcare (Stagoff-Belfort et al., 2022).

Police presence is concentrated in poorer areas with high poverty rates, public housing, and racially marginalized populations. Increased policing in low-income neighborhoods leads to more arrests and criminal records. These barriers restrict educational and employment opportunities, trapping individuals and families in a cycle of poverty that is difficult to escape.

The choice to address social issues like poverty, homelessness, lack of education, and unemployment as crimes to be punished rather than community issues to be solved is dictated by the policies that are put into place. Currently, scholars argue that the US uses the criminal justice system to punish those who are poor and unhoused (Bauman et al., 2018). When we do this, prisons become the default solution.

Policy Drives Incarceration

The US imprisons more people than any country in the world, with approximately 1.8 million incarcerated individuals in prisons, jails, and detention centers (Statista, 2025). The US has the fifth-highest rate of incarceration behind El Salvador, Cuba, Rwanda, and Turkmenistan (Statista, 2025). In addition to having the most incarcerated individuals in the world, the US also chooses to locate prisons in places of social and physical isolation, most of which are located in remote areas away from major cities (Hopwood, 2021; Eisen, 2024). This creates separation from families and social and employment contacts, limits opportunities to interact with community members, and results in a lack of rehabilitative programs (Nelson et al., 2023). This makes it difficult to know what happens in prison (Simon, 2018). Given the location of most of America's prisons, it has been too easy for policymakers and communities to lose sight of prison activity and the people sent away (National Research Council, 2014; Eisen, 2024).

The US prison system is unlikely to change because prison activity, whether constructive or destructive, occurs behind closed doors, out of public view (Eisen, 2024). Prison operations are often invisible because they are conducted primarily in private, making it difficult for policymakers and the public to understand what happens behind prison walls (Eisen, 2024). Whether the activities are harmful or productive, prison activities need to be more transparent to develop the best policies for public safety. Because of the lack of transparency, policies that have historically been put into place have kept people in prison for longer. As a result, the incarcerated have also been exposed to the adverse physical and mental effects of being socially isolated.

Rehabilitation was standard in prisons until the early 1970s (Matthews, 2015). In 1974, a report by Robert Martinson, who had reviewed US correctional programs, concluded that nothing works for rehabilitation (Martinson, 1974). The timing of the report was crucial to its effect on the dismantling of rehabilitation. It followed the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Attica and San Quentin prison riots. There was distrust in the government because of the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War, which triggered bipartisan support to shift from rehabilitation to a culture of punishment and a tough-on-crime position (Matthews, 2015; Belanger, 2021).

Unfortunately, Martinson's report was inaccurate (Belanger, 2021; Matthews, 2015), a fact Martinson acknowledged in an updated report in 1979 (Martinson, 1979). However, the damage was done, and mass incarceration ensued for 40 years, leading the US to have the highest rate of incarceration in the world (World Population Review, 2025). During the 1990s

and 2000s, the prison population increased 400%, and a new prison was built every 10 days (Kirchhoff, 2010).

The tough-on-crime approach increased incarceration based on policies initiated by President Nixon, established by President Reagan, and continued with Presidents Bush and Clinton. This approach included the war on drugs, longer sentences, more life sentences, minimum mandatory sentence laws, and the Three Strikes and Truth in Sentencing laws (Fair Fight Initiative, 2025). All these led to more people being in prison for more extended periods of time, which exposes the incarcerated to the harshness of prison.

Criminal justice policies were not always established in response to rising criminal activity. In 1968, President Nixon established the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) to imprison certain people. John Erlichman, Nixon's Assistant to the President for Domestic Affairs, stated in an interview,

The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the anti-war left and Black people. You understand what I'm saying? We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or Black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and Blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course, we did (Baum, 1994).

The effects of the tough-on-crime approach were evident in the growth of the prison population, which increased from 1961 to an all-time high of 220,149 (Langan et al., 1988), and then to a historical high of 1,613,740 incarcerated individuals in 2009 (Carson, 2022). As of 2025, the prison population has grown to approximately 1.8 million (Statista, 2025). This growth

was primarily driven by changes in the law rather than by increases in crime (Nellis, 2023; Phelps & Pager, 2016; Travis & Western, 2014).

Crime in the US peaked in 1991 (Ghandnoosh & Budd, 2024); however, in 1994, President Clinton signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, also known as the 1994 Crime Bill, into law. The bill included banning different types of semiautomatic weapons and included the Violence Against Women Act, but also authorized the death penalty for existing and newly defined federal crimes, required life imprisonment for a third violent felony (Three Strikes law), and established funding for states that implemented laws that lengthened sentences (Eisen, 2024). Although the federal and state prison systems are separate, the federal government used funding to incentivize states and to support the prison-building boom (Eisen, 2019).

A study on the Violent Offender Incarceration and Truth-in-Sentencing grant programs reports that the federal government was encouraging states to increase incarceration (Sabol et al., 2002), primarily through truth-in-sentencing laws. These laws aim to ensure that offenders serve prison sentences commensurate with those imposed by judges (Sabol et al., 2002). The federal requirement was that offenders serve at least 85% of the sentence issued by the judge (Sabol, et al., 2002). However, these grant programs were established to ensure that states with truth-in-sentencing laws would qualify for funding. This represented 30 states. Twelve states increased the severity of their existing truth-in-sentencing laws to be eligible for funding (Sobol, et al., 2002). Sabol et al. (2002) found that the federal grant program did not necessarily

influence all states, as many already had qualifying laws in place, and other states may have been establishing them before the grant program's inception.

Although crime rates continued to fall from 1993 to 2022 (Gramlich, 2024), incarceration rates in the US increased from 1993 to the early 2000s, then decreased through 2020, and increased by 2% from 2022 to 2023 (Carson & Kluckow, 2023). The increase in imprisonment is expected to continue, not because of rising crime rates, but because courts have recovered from the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many states are either reversing criminal justice reforms or enacting new legislation to extend people's time in prison (Sawyer, 2023).

Crime rates are not the determining factor in the increase in incarceration starting in the 1970s. It has been shown that the political climate, which drives changes in policies and laws, contributes significantly to the number of people incarcerated and how long they stay in prison (National Resource Council, 2014). The longer they stay in prison, the greater the economic impact on them and their families, as well as the loss of social connection with family and their community. These make it difficult upon reentry to find housing and employment, bond with their families, get appropriate health care and addiction support, and successfully reintegrate into society. The fact that social issues like mental illness and drug addiction are punished instead of treated challenges the likelihood of remaining out of prison.

Criminalization of Addiction and Mental Illness

Researchers find links between high incarceration rates and policy changes that criminalize social problems experienced by many people living in poverty. These challenges include mental illness and substance abuse. The result perpetuates poverty and racial inequality both within and across generations (Western & Pettit, 2010). Black people and people of color are disproportionately harmed by criminalizing drug use rather than treating it as a matter of public health (Mitchell & Caudy, 2015). Compared to white people, Black and Hispanic people are more likely to be imprisoned after a drug arrest than to be provided a drug treatment program (Nicosia et al., 2013).

There is a choice of how to handle addiction and mental illness. The US chooses to rely on law enforcement to address these social issues (APHA, 2018), even when medical evidence indicates they are health issues requiring treatment (Volkow, 2021).

As mentioned earlier, ACES and social isolation contribute to both substance abuse and mental health conditions in children as they try to cope with the trauma they have experienced growing up. The effects of social isolation and ACES when left untreated lead to risky behavior, criminal activity, and ultimately incarceration. These conditions are currently treated more as crimes to be punished than as emotional and physical health issues to be healed (Volkow, 2021).

Criminalization of Addiction

Addiction and substance abuse are significant underlying factors in why people end up in the criminal justice system. Addiction does not just go away because an addict is convicted,

sentenced, and jailed (Gemme, 2025). After all, addiction is a health issue. It is widely accepted that addiction is a disease that affects one's brain and behavior, rather than a moral failing (NIDA, 2020). Addiction is a health issue needing treatment rather than a character flaw or social deviance needing punishment (Volkow, 2021). Understandably, addiction is prevalent among the incarcerated.

In the US, 1.16 million Americans are arrested annually for the sale, manufacture, or possession of illegal substances (NCDAS, 2025). Multiple sources report differently, though, on how many people are actually sent to prison annually for drug-related crimes, ranging from 244,000 (NCDAS, 2025) to 366,000 (Sawyer & Wagner, 2025). A high percentage of incarcerated individuals meet the criteria for drug dependence or abuse, ranging from 59% (Bronson et al., 2017) to 65% (NIH, 2020). In comparison, approximately 5% of the total general population age 18 or older met the criteria for drug dependence or abuse (Bronson et al., 2017). The importance of getting treatment for an addiction for those convicted of a crime is crucial. However, there are disagreements as to how to address addiction within the criminal justice system.

There is a debate over whether it is more effective to incarcerate or treat those who have committed crimes under the influence of an illegal substance to address their addiction (Inmate Aid, 2024). The challenge is balancing the emotions of retribution, justice, rehabilitation, and public safety (Inmate Aid, 2024). The argument for treatment is that it addresses the underlying addiction. The benefits of treatment include addressing the root cause of addiction, being cost-efficient, reducing recidivism, and improving health outcomes (Inmate Aid, 2024).

The argument for incarceration is that individuals must be held accountable for their actions, there needs to be justice for the victims, and that immediate public safety is provided (Inmate Aid, 2024). Those who argue that incarceration is the answer state that it provides accountability, deterrence, and uniform sentencing (Inmate Aid, 2024). However, critics of incarceration state that if the root cause of the problem is not addressed, individuals will continue to commit crimes, jeopardizing public safety (Inmate Aid, 2024). Additionally, opponents of the use of incarceration doubt that stiffer prison terms deter drug use and the distribution of drugs. They also feel that incarceration is ineffective and costly for drug addiction (Gelb, 2017).

Treatment can be an option instead of prison, or while incarcerated. Treatment while incarcerated works, reducing both drug use and crime after reentry to society (Mitchell et al., 2012). Treatment is crucial to reducing crime and social challenges such as lost job productivity, family disintegration, and recidivism. Research shows that treatment of those with Substance Use Disorders (SUD) in the criminal justice system can change their behaviors toward drug use, avoid relapse, and stop leading a life of substance abuse and crime (Kinlock et al., 2009; Wakeman & Rich, 2015; Lee et al., 2016).

However, only a small percentage of those who need treatment while incarcerated receive it, or the treatment is inadequate (NIH, 2020). Only 5% of people with opioid use disorder in jail and prison received medical treatment (Committee on Medication-Assisted Treatment for Opioid Use Disorder et al., 2019). Inadequate treatment while incarcerated contributes to overdoses and deaths upon reentry to society (NIH, 2020).

The option to treat addiction rather than incarcerate the individual is another option. Across the US, there are more than 3,000 drug courts (Gemme, 2025). A review of drug courts in 30 states showed that a combination of drug treatments and an individualized approach to care is effective when treating individuals with severe addictions (Mitchell et al., 2012). Participants reported less criminal activity, fewer rearrests, and less drug use (Gemme, 2025). However, the government still pours vast amounts of resources into the processing and punishment of minor drug offenses (Gemme, 2025).

Arresting and convicting individuals with drug addictions can be costly to the taxpayers as well as create social repercussions for the addicted individual. One report shows that the cost to society for drug use in 2007 was \$193 billion, with \$113 billion associated with drug-related crime. The cost of treating drug addiction was estimated to be \$14.6 billion, which is substantially less (US DOJ, 2011). Lengthy prison sentences for drug offenders are also costly to taxpayers, and alternatives like drug courts and stronger community supervision have proven more effective (Gelb, 2027). Putting more drug offenders behind bars for longer periods of time has not improved public safety. However, it has been costly to taxpayers (Gelb, 2017) and to those incarcerated and their families left behind.

As stated previously, involvement with the criminal justice system affects individuals socially and economically, leading to worse life outcomes. An arrest for possession of even a small amount of marijuana can leave the individual with a criminal record, which can limit their future education and employment opportunities (Kirk & Sampson, 2013). Incarceration can also exacerbate addiction as it can lead to isolation, which is a factor for drug misuse, addiction, and relapse (Kajeepeta et al., 2021). Prison is also traumatizing, creates stigma, and decreases

connections with society. The limits to vocational and educational opportunities make the transition into society challenging. These stresses can increase the risk of relapse and impact public safety (Johnstone et al., 2022).

Lastly, opioid use disorders create the most significant risk for overdoses. When someone is incarcerated, their tolerance for the drug drops because they have stopped using the drug. Without treatment, upon release from prison, not being aware of the lower tolerance to the drug, they take the same levels as they did prior to going to prison, which increases the risk of an overdose and death (Krinsky et al., 2009).

Criminalization of drug addiction is an open debate. There does seem to be agreement that whether someone is incarcerated or diverted to a treatment program in society, that treatment is crucial for the individual, their families, and for public safety. However, the question of whether to criminalize mental illness is an entirely different question, as mental illness is acknowledged as a health condition, versus a moral question of whether the individual is a deviant making a bad choice.

Criminalization of Mental Illness

Severe mental illness is so common in the US corrections system that prisons and jails are called “the new asylums” (Treatment Advocacy Center, 2016). People with mental illness in the US are 10 times more likely to be incarcerated than they are to be hospitalized (Cherson, 2025). With prisons and jails having a higher percentage of mental health patients than the general population, correctional facilities have subsequently become our de facto mental health hospitals (Bao, 2020).

In 2012, there were an estimated 356,268 incarcerated individuals with severe mental issues as compared to 35,000 in mental health institutions (Torrey et. al., 2014; Parker & Andrade, 2015). The issue related to mental illness is that prisons are not prepared or equipped to address mental illness and “usually simply warehouse sick people without treating them” (Austin et al., 2016, p. 11). The reason for prisons becoming the warehouse for the mentally ill is due to the patients being released from mental health hospitals in the 1960s. The two main reasons for releasing patients were the development of effective anti-psychotic medications and increased funding for the establishment of community mental health centers. At that time, there were over half a million Americans in state mental hospitals (Canales, 2012). Unfortunately, the community mental health centers were never developed, leaving individuals with no resources for treatment (Canales, 2012). Because of the limited treatment available to the mentally ill, prisons have become the new mental health system (Canales, 2012). As Alisa Roth states in her 2020 book, *Insane: America’s Criminal Treatment of Mental Illness*, America has made mental illness a crime.

More than 70% of people in US jails and prisons have at least one diagnosed mental illness or substance use disorder or both, and up to one third of incarcerated individuals have serious mental health issues (Warth, 2022). A problem with the high level of mental illness in prison is that only 38% of these individuals receive prescription medication while incarcerated, and even fewer receive counseling or both (Bronson & Berzofsky, 2017).

Prison is not a place for healing. Overcrowding, understaffing, and a lack of specialized training mean people with mental illness rarely receive adequate treatment behind bars (Cherson, 2025). In fact, prison worsens mental illness. Isolation, loss of control, exposure to

violence, and the trauma of solitary confinement can cause conditions to deteriorate (Cherson, 2025). The main reason prisons are not a place for healing is that security is prioritized by the correctional staff.

Security is central to prison staff, who emphasize custody and control. In doing so, prisons demonstrate that they are not in the health care business (Warth, 2022). In a statement by Undersecretary of Corrections, Kevin Carruth to Judge Henderson in a health care case within the CDCR, stated, “Medical care is not a priority within CDCR, is not considered a ‘core competency’ of the Department, and is not the business of the CDCR, and it will never be the business of the Department of Corrections to provide medical care” (Simon, 2016, p. 100).

This statement helps to understand that prisons are not set up to care for health care issues like drug addiction and mental illness. It leaves open the question as to why these health issues are being criminalized instead of being treated. The fact that prisons are set up to emphasize custody and control versus treatment is fundamental to the harsh and dangerous culture in prison.

Emphasis on Security Impacts Prison Culture

Prison culture is shaped primarily by a focus on custody and security, implemented by the prison administration and correctional officers rather than on rehabilitation. The emphasis on custody and security results in harsh conditions, which encourage social isolation. Overcrowding, the remote physical location of the prisons, dangerous conditions, and the use of solitary confinement add to the isolating experience in prison. These conditions exacerbate mental health conditions, add to the adverse effects of social isolation, and result in a loss of

independence and agency for the incarcerated. Additionally, overcrowding and the rapid expansion of the prison system across the US adversely affect the living conditions in many prisons, jeopardizing prisoner safety, compromising prison management, and significantly limiting prisoner access to meaningful programming (Haney, 2002). These add to the stressful conditions in prison and impact physical and mental health.

Prisons are located as far from society as possible, in the name of public safety (Hopwood, 2021; Eisen, 2024). The remote physical location of many prisons, along with a focus on punishment versus rehabilitation, makes it difficult for family, friends, community volunteers, and community-based programs to visit with the incarcerated (Haney, 2002; Nelson et al., 2023). These social connections are known to lower recidivism rates (Duwe & Johnson, 2016) and improve behavior in prison (Kjellstrand et al., 2022), which calls into question the decision to locate prisons in remote locations for public safety.

Prison is painful, and incarcerated persons often suffer long-term consequences from having been subjected to pain, deprivation, and atypical patterns and norms of living and interacting with others (Haney, 2002). Higher security prisons can frequently be on lockdown, which keeps the incarcerated locked in their cells for long periods of time, keeping them from socializing with others and accessing rehabilitation programs and community volunteers.

Due to the tough-on-crime policies, the incarcerated have been subjected to negative prison culture for extended periods of time and will return to communities that have already been disadvantaged by a lack of social services and resources (Haney, 2002). Individuals can also be institutionalized, which is where the incarcerated are transformed by the institutional

environment in which they live (Haney, 2002). Institutionalization is the adverse psychological effects of imprisonment. It is the incorporation of prison norms into one's habits of thinking, feeling, and acting (Haney, 2002). The longer someone is incarcerated, the more significant the institutional transformation (Haney, 2002).

Over time, due to institutionalization, the incarcerated may succumb to the loss of self-initiative and independence that prison requires and become increasingly dependent on institutional standards (Haney, 2002). Prison culture can erode agency and independent thinking, and prisoners gradually lose the capacity to make decisions independently (Haney, 2002). The longer someone remains in an institution, the greater the likelihood that the process will transform them (Haney, 2002). This makes the transition back into society more challenging and increases the likelihood of recidivism.

Prisons are stressful and dangerous, and there is nowhere for the incarcerated to go to escape the danger, so they become hypervigilant and ever-alert for signs of threat and personal risk. This can result in interpersonal distrust and suspicion of others (Haney, 2002). The danger in prisons can lead individuals to spend more time in their cells for safety (Haney, 2002).

More extended periods of cell isolation can also be attributed to the widespread use of solitary confinement. Solitary confinement adds to the negative culture in prison. Individuals are locked in a cell for 23 hours a day with limited access to others and no access to rehabilitative programs (Kiebala et al., 2023). The United Nations has determined it is harmful to keep anyone in solitary confinement for longer than 15 consecutive days (Mendez, 2011).

And yet, individuals in the US have been known to be kept in solitary confinement for years if not decades (Kiebala et al., 2023).

The isolation of prison, based on its physical location as well as limitations on visitation with family, friends, and access to rehabilitation programs, not only affects the incarcerated population. It also has a significant negative impact on families trying to remain connected.

Family and Community Destabilization

As stated earlier, poverty is a consistent trait of many people in prison. Inequalities in the carceral system affect not just those who go to prison but also families and children (Western & Pettit, 2010). Losing a breadwinner to incarceration hurts the family left behind, particularly the children. The families may experience divorce, further poverty, and homelessness. The children experience instability, which can affect their education and create a higher likelihood of entering the criminal justice system themselves.

Families of incarcerated men often experience economic hardship. Studies suggest that families with a father in prison are more prone to homelessness, difficulty meeting basic needs, and greater use of social assistance (National Research Council, 2014). Incarceration can also disrupt spousal relationships, parent-child relationships, and family networks (Travis et al., 2014; Prison Policy Initiative, 2015). Due to the burdens of incarceration on women who are left behind to raise families, incarceration is strongly associated with divorce and separation (Western & Pettit, 2010), which is destabilizing for children.

Incarceration can lead to forced moves and sometimes homelessness (Elderbroom et al., 2025). They may become homeless or temporarily unhoused because the incarcerated individual was the primary income earner, was the only name on the lease, and/or because rent money has to go to legal and court fees (Elderbroom et al., 2025). More than 1 in 5 family members are forced to relocate due to a family member's incarceration, and 18% of children of incarcerated parents became at least temporarily unhoused due to a parent being incarcerated (Elderbroom et al., 2025).

Although maintaining family connections is known to lower recidivism rates (Duwe & Johnson, 2016), the challenges of maintaining contact due to transportation costs to distant prisons, financial barriers, and emotional strains cause more than 50% of incarcerated parents to report never having received a personal visit from their children (Mumola, 2000). This family tax required to maintain relationships is a financial burden on the family. Families are taking on exorbitant costs to stay connected with their incarcerated loved ones and make sure they have the necessities to survive in prison (Elderbroom et al., 2025). Individuals with a loved one in prison or jail for more than three months spend an average of \$4,195 per incarcerated family member to stay in touch and care for their loved one (Elderbroom et al., 2025). This represents 27% of a person's total income at the federal poverty line (Elderbroom et al., 2025). There is still the expectation for families to be able to feed their children and pay their rent while trying to support their family members in prison.

Because Black individuals represent a disproportionate number of people in prison, Black families spend 2.5 times as much as white families because of the higher likelihood of

having multiple family members incarcerated at the same time (Elderbroom et al., 2025). This is one reason for intergenerational poverty and a racial wealth gap (Elderbroom et al., 2025).

Incarceration costs US families \$348 billion annually (Elderbroom et al., 2025). This compares with the \$89 billion it costs to operate corrections (Buehler, 2021). This excessive financial burden directly impacts children by having fewer educational and recreational opportunities, experiencing the trauma of family separation, risk of housing instability or homelessness, and poorer physical health (Lee et al., 2016; Miller & Barnes, 2016; Turney, 2014). They experience emotional and psychological trauma of separation from their parent(s) and an increased likelihood of being involved in the criminal justice system (The Pew Charitable Trust, 2010).

When an incarcerated family member does eventually come home, the financial burden can remain. Due to the difficulty of finding employment, a family may have one more mouth to feed with no additional income. Also, the transition from prison to home can be challenging, as the institutionalization of the incarcerated affects their return to family life. Given their inability to make choices and structure routines independently, it is difficult for them to organize their children's lives (Haney, 2002). Moreover, those who are distrusting and hypervigilant as a result of the prison culture find it challenging to provide trust and authenticity with their children (Haney, 2002).

The stresses on the family and the challenges of maintaining cohesion can create family instability. In addition, low levels of educational attainment, poverty, lack of job skills, challenges in finding employment, going home to a neighborhood that is economically challenged and

over-policed, a history of trauma for the incarcerated as well as their children, possible mental illness and drug addiction issues exacerbated by the harsh culture in prison, makes it very difficult for individuals not to recidivate.

9

The complexities and interrelatedness of the key components and personal risk factors that feed into the structure of mass incarceration are important to understand. This research seeks to better understand the value and benefits of community volunteers working with incarcerated individuals and the impact of this work on recidivism rates.

As previously discussed, when someone is convicted of a crime and imprisoned, they often begin or continue to live a life of isolation. Prisons are typically located in remote areas, making it difficult for families and volunteers to visit and limiting social contact. Social connections have been shown to improve behavior while incarcerated and reduce recidivism. The remoteness of prison locations also impacts the number of rehabilitation programs available to the incarcerated. Rehabilitation programs, which typically incorporate community volunteers, are also known to lower recidivism. This data suggests that rehabilitation programs that incorporate positive social connections through community volunteers can lead to lower recidivism rates.

Recidivism will be covered in depth in the following chapter; however, the personal risk factors and other social issues covered in the key components of mass incarceration lead to high recidivism rates. In addition to these personal and social issues, there is also a racial basis,

particularly against young Black men. This study focuses on how to disrupt mass incarceration at a single-entry point; community volunteers working with those currently incarcerated to address the ill effects of social isolation, resulting in lower recidivism. What if the impact of social isolation can be offset with positive human connections with community volunteers? Could this help prepare incarcerated individuals for successful reentry into society, decrease recidivism, and improve public safety? If that is the case, then there is a vital role for community volunteers in prison.

The following chapter will cover existing research on recidivism, rehabilitation, social isolation, and human connection. This will demonstrate why the research questions about whether there are benefits to community volunteers working with incarcerated individuals are relevant.



This purposeful literature review highlights the interconnections among recidivism, rehabilitation, social isolation, and social connection. One potential benefit of community volunteers working with incarcerated individuals is a reduction in recidivism rates. The high rate of recidivism is a problem that each state and most nations are trying to address (Yukhnenko, et al., 2023). Rehabilitation is one approach to reducing recidivism, and the introduction of social connection through community volunteers is a specific focus on how to make rehabilitation more effective, thereby lowering recidivism.

This literature review is divided into three separate sections: recidivism, rehabilitation, and social isolation and connection. Recidivism is the first section, as it is a measurement used to determine the success of rehabilitation programs in prison. The second section covers rehabilitation, an approach to changing the behavior of incarcerated individuals. The last section covers social isolation and social connection through community volunteers, a specific approach to making rehabilitation programs more effective.

Recidivism

Defining and Measuring Recidivism

Recidivism is the most commonly used metric for assessing the success of rehabilitation; however, it is problematic because it is calculated differently across jurisdictions and measures failure rather than success. Failure can be defined as returning to prison. Success could be

defined not only as staying out of prison but also as holding down a job, supporting a family, and giving back to the community. Currently, there is no metric to measure an individual's successful return to society. Recidivism is currently the most commonly used metric.

Recidivism measures the frequency with which individuals return to prison after being released. For most states in the US and countries worldwide, there is a focus on reducing recidivism because the rates are considered too high. In the US, 45% of individuals released from prison are reconvicted of a new crime within 3 years (World Population Review, 2025). The State of California has a slightly lower rate of 39.1% (CDCR, 2025), although still considered high. Lower recidivism rates lead to fewer crimes, creating safer communities and saving money by reducing reincarceration costs.

One problem is that there is no one standard definition of recidivism. Definitions include, the percentage of formerly incarcerated who are rearrested (Banda, 2019); committing a crime after being released from prison (Zainal, et al., 2024); a relapse into criminal behavior (Smith, 2023; Butler & Taylor, 2022); not just the behavior of the formerly incarcerated but also the correctional system's response to the criminal behavior (CSG Justice Center, 2024); a persistent pattern of reoffending (Haque, 2024); a measure to evaluate the effectiveness of the criminal justice system (Hernandez & Georgoulas-Sherry, 2024); the rate which people return to prison (La Vigne and Lopez, 2021); a measure of harm (Staudt, 2025); and the tendency to reoffend after an initial conviction (Rainey, 2024). Another problem with recidivism rates is the inconsistent methodology and findings (Nickerson, 2023). This makes it challenging to assess the effectiveness of preparing the incarcerated for reentry and compare recidivism rates across state and federal prison systems, as well as international jurisdictions. There is no standard for

measuring recidivism, with variations including the period measured, whether the new infraction led to rearrest, reconviction, or reincarceration, and who is included in the analysis (CSG Justice Center, 2024). The longer the follow-up time, the greater the opportunity for an individual to reoffend, resulting in higher recidivism rates (Nickerson, 2023). The CSG Justice Center (2024) recommends that state recidivism rates not be compared directly across states because of variations in how they are calculated. Measuring recidivism rates across countries is also inconsistent due to the varying methods used to measure and report them. Comparing recidivism rates between countries can reflect reporting practices more than a meaningful difference in the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs (Yuknenko, et al., 2023).

Beyond the challenge of comparing recidivism rates between states and countries lies the difference in what is measured: re-arrest, reconviction, or reincarceration. This is challenging because the rearrest category can include individuals with a technical parole violation, such as missing a parole officer meeting or failing a drug test (Staudt, 2025). Violations of release conditions are not new crimes but can be counted as rearrests (Staudt, 2025). Rearrest can also involve those who were arrested but never convicted of a crime. Additionally, some neighborhoods have a higher police presence than others, which can lead to potential re-arrests. Black and Brown communities are policed more heavily than white neighborhoods, leading to arrests for minor offenses (Staudt, 2025).

Adding to the confusion around recidivism numbers, authors differ on the most common time measure. LaVigne and Lopez (2021) stated that the most common time measure of recidivism is the return to prison within three years of release. The CSG Justice Center (2024) and the State of Virginia (Virginia Department of Corrections, 2024) agreed that a 3-year term

and reincarceration were the most common. The State of California uses a three-year reconviction rate but also tracks rearrests and reincarceration (CDCR, 2024). The Bureau of Justice Statistics lists recidivism rates using a 10-year follow-up window for rearrests (BJS, 2021). Yuknenko et al. (2023) stated that the two-year reconviction rate was the most commonly reported outcome internationally. These inconsistencies in time periods make it difficult to compare the effectiveness of each prison system in preparing the incarcerated for reentry.

It is crucial with these follow-up studies measuring recidivism to understand that cohort studies are weighted toward people who serve short sentences, many of whom cycle in and out of prison (LaVigne & Lopez, 2021). This can skew results because cohorts can include frequent recidivists, which results in a higher recidivism rate than the broader population with criminal histories (Kuehn & Vosgerau, 2025).

Additionally, recidivism rates can be misleading due to differences in laws and policies across states. California saw a 44 percentage-point decrease in reincarceration rates, coinciding with the implementation of California Realignment (2011 AB 109), which shifted supervision from parole to probation and revocations from prison to jail (CSG Justice Center, 2024). In California, parole is administered by the CDCR, whereas probation is not. The CDCR's recidivism reports include only those who return to prison, not to jails. Recidivism rates can also be misleading when groups are measured in aggregate. For example, the three-year reconviction rate for California's 2018-2019 cohort was 41.9% (CDCR, 2024). However, in the 18-19-year-old category, the recidivism rate was 61.1%, and for those 60 or older, it was 16.5% (CDCR, 2024).

The type of crime and the activities in which the incarcerated are involved also show the differences in recidivism rates. Non-serious/non-violent property and drug crimes are associated with higher recidivism rates than serious and violent crimes (CDCR, 2024). For those participating in rehabilitation programs or demonstrating good behavior, the CDCR awards earnings credits for completing educational and rehabilitative programs. These earning credits were established under California's Prop 57 in 2016. One element of Prop 57 was to give incarcerated individuals the opportunity to earn credits for good behavior and participation in rehabilitative, educational, and career training programs. The intent was that they would be better prepared to succeed upon reentry and less likely to recidivate (CDCR, 2026). Those who earned good-time credits had a recidivism rate of 39.2%, compared to 45.6% for those with no credits (CDCR, 2024). Additionally, individuals with educational credits had a recidivism rate of 26.1%, while those with rehabilitative credits had a rate of 21.1% (CDCR, 2024).

In addition to age, crime type, and participation in rehabilitation programs, the type of sentence also affects recidivism rates. Those sentenced in California to a specific term (determinate) had a recidivism rate of 42.7% (CDCR, 2024). This is compared with those sentenced to an indeterminate sentence, such as 25 years to life. These individuals must wait for the Parole Board to determine their suitability, or they may receive a court order for their release. Those with indeterminate sentences are sometimes referred to as lifers. Their recidivism rate is 2% (CDCR, 2024).

Breaking down the recidivism data into distinct sections helps provide accurate, consistent recidivism information, which is essential for decision-makers, such as landlords, employers, and parole boards, who significantly affect the success of an individual's reentry into

society (Kuehn & Vosgerau, 2025). Without this data, individuals cannot gauge the likelihood that someone will reoffend. A study found that individuals tend to overestimate the likelihood that first-time arrestees will commit another crime (Kuehn & Vosgerau, 2025). Communicating the declining risk of recidivism for different groups of returned citizens would help to create more just treatment. However, methodological differences in recidivism measurement make comparative analysis difficult, state by state or country by country (Yuknenko et al., 2023), thereby complicating the provision of accurate and consistent reports. This not only makes it challenging to know if rehabilitation programs are effectively addressing the causes of recidivism, but it also results in potential unfair treatment of the formerly incarcerated.

The inconsistencies in recidivism data and the fact that it merely measures involvement with the criminal justice system have led some authors to question whether recidivism is the most accurate measure to gauge the success of rehabilitation programs. Others default to the fact that recidivism is quantitatively measurable, even if it does not capture the full benefits of rehabilitation.

Measuring recidivism is considered limiting. It does not fully capture the changes in the individual (Chan, 2024) and does not directly measure an individual's success. It only measures failure. Desistance is offered as an alternative measure intended to demonstrate that an individual has ceased thinking criminally. However, the available literature did not provide a clear answer on how desistance could be measured.

Although recidivism rate calculations are inconsistent and do not measure the ability to positively interact in society, they are currently the most widely used measure of an individual's

likelihood of returning to the criminal justice system. With no other metric currently in use, improvements could be made using recidivism data. The data could be more effective if there were consistency in what is measured and in the time periods used, and if data were broken down by age, sentence type, gender, and participation in rehabilitation programs, to provide more accurate measures of the likelihood of recidivism.

Causes of Recidivism

Regardless of how recidivism is measured or defined, there are numerous causes, many of which are interrelated. These causes include social stigma, lack of housing and employment opportunities, lack of education, lack of vocational training, lack of rehabilitation programs while incarcerated, and addiction and mental illness issues (Biggers, 2024; Bunn, 2018; Sawyer & Wagner, 2019; Hwang & Phillips, 2020; Nickerson, 2023; Coy, 2023). In addition, the type of neighborhood to which someone is paroled, the legal financial obligations owed, technical parole violations, policy, and public opinion all play a role.

Stigma is an issue related to not being welcomed back into society (Sinko et al., 2020). It labels the formerly incarcerated negatively based on assumptions built on their crime rather than their rehabilitation. It can make it difficult to reintegrate into society and lead to further crimes (Nickerson, 2023). Stigma prevents individuals from obtaining employment (Green, 2024) and contributes to recidivism (Hwang & Phillips, 2020). Stigma can also affect the ability to get affordable housing because landlords refuse to rent to the formerly incarcerated due to societal preconceptions (Green, 2024).

Formerly incarcerated people typically return to low-income communities where resources, like affordable housing, are scarce (Green, 2024). A conviction or arrest record poses an additional barrier to accessing housing. These barriers place people impacted by the criminal-legal system at risk of housing instability, homelessness, and reincarceration (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2024).

The stigma of being incarcerated can lead to landlords declining applications for housing, not just from personal preference but because of existing laws and processes that allow them to refuse to lease a property (Keene et al., 2018). The formerly incarcerated face criminal justice and social welfare policies that restrict their ability to find housing and employment (Keene, et al., 2018). Some of these restrictions include where formerly incarcerated individuals are allowed to live. Public housing authorities, by law, have to abide by the exclusions on people who are lifetime registered sex offenders or who have been convicted of producing methamphetamine on public housing property (Bae, 2023). This restricts individuals from living with family members who might qualify for public housing or are already living in it. Housing authorities can also exclude people with other types of criminal history because they have broad discretion when screening applicants and writing eviction policies (Bae, 2023).

Finding affordable housing in acceptable neighborhoods is challenging. Some post-release housing, based on location, socioeconomic conditions, and criminal activity, can encourage criminal activity that leads to recidivism (Lehmann et al., 2020). These barriers to housing also influence the ability to find work.

Unemployment is another significant challenge for returning citizens because it hinders their ability to secure food and shelter (Butler & Taylor, 2022). Formerly incarcerated individuals are unemployed at a rate of over 27%, which is higher than the US unemployment rate (Couloute, 2018). Those who have been incarcerated are impacted by limited job experience, which inhibits their ability to find work that pays a living wage. Complicating this issue, background checks make it hard to find employment (Biggers, 2024). A criminal record decreases the likelihood of a job callback or offer by approximately 50% (Solomon, 2012). The stigma of being formerly incarcerated limits employment options (Hwang & Phillips, 2020). A lack of education related to vocational skills or academic programs also hinders the ability to secure employment (Green, 2024).

Individuals with higher levels of education tend to exhibit lower levels of criminal thinking and have better chances of securing employment (Folk et al., 2018). More than 60% of all incarcerated individuals in the US are functionally illiterate. Over 70% of incarcerated individuals in America's prisons cannot read at a fourth-grade level or higher (Advocates for the Voiceless, 2024). This hinders their ability to find jobs that pay a living wage. Without the opportunity to get an education while incarcerated, this lack of education causes recidivism (Banda, 2019).

A lack of resources, like education, while incarcerated, contributes to recidivism because the incarcerated do not have the tools to reconnect to society in pro-social ways (Butler & Taylor, 2022). A lack of resources in prisons is partly due to decreasing budgets and longer sentences. This can lead to overcrowding of prisons, less access to rehabilitation programs, and warehousing of individuals, making them unprepared to reenter society (Coy, 2023). Under the

right circumstances, prison can become a school of crime and a breeding ground for criminal socialization (Nickerson, 2023). Association with people in prison can increase criminal behavior or reinforce antisocial thinking (Solomon, 2012).

In addition to a lack of resources, high levels of mental illness can contribute to recidivism. Mental illness is so common in the US corrections system that prisons and jails are called “the new asylums” (Fuller, et al., 2017) because prisons disproportionately house individuals with diagnosed mental illness (Prins, 2014). Individuals with mental illness are three times more likely to get arrested (Hoch et al., 2009). Forty-three percent of state prisoners have a history of mental illness (Maruschak & Bronson, 2021) as compared to 23.1% of the adult US population (NIH, 2024). Prison systems were not designed or equipped to provide mental health services and treatment (Prins, 2014). This is evidenced by a US judge naming a receiver to manage the mental health program in California prisons due to its noncompliance (Thompson, 2025).

Exacerbating mental illness issues is the use of solitary confinement. Social isolation is known to harm both physical and psychological health. It reinforces antisocial behavior by limiting access to programming, potentially leaving individuals ill-prepared to enter society (Lamarre, 2025). Many authors agree that exposure to solitary confinement increases the odds of being rearrested (Butler et al., 2020; Lovell et al., 2007; Silverthorn & Zgoba, 2024), but some studies find no effect of solitary confinement on recidivism (Clark and Duwe, 2019). Whether the incarcerated have documented mental illness or mental illness is exacerbated by social isolation, like solitary confinement, unaddressed mental illness issues can contribute to

recidivism, especially if the incarcerated return to under-resourced neighborhoods where health care is inadequate or hard to access.

There was general agreement that the type of neighborhood someone returns to can contribute to recidivism. Returning to communities plagued by poverty, unemployment, crime, and resource deprivation (Rainey, 2024), as well as over-policing, poses significant challenges for the returned citizen. This can lead individuals to return to crime to survive and care for their families. The culture of these poorer neighborhoods can contribute to criminal social networking, which is a cause of recidivism (Banda, 2019).

If families in these neighborhoods cannot meet the basic needs of the returning family member, this can lead to recidivism. In general, poor community functioning can turn an individual back to substance abuse and crime (Banda, 2019). In addition to returning to under-resourced neighborhoods with limited opportunities to earn a living, fines for involvement in the criminal justice system can lead to further criminal behavior as a means of paying penalties or avoiding automatic collection.

Legal financial obligations (LFO) are associated with higher rates of recidivism in some cases. LFOs include court-imposed fines, fees, restitution orders, and other monetary penalties (Ostermann et al., 2024). LFO debt differs from civil debt, such as credit card debt, because missed payments can result in suspension of a driver's license, which is often necessary for employment (Joyce et al., 2020). LFOs, unlike civil debt, cannot be wiped out through bankruptcy (Ostermann et al., 2024). Collection of LFO debt can be accomplished by garnishing wages from a legitimate employer. Owing this debt can incentivize individuals to seek

illegitimate means of generating revenue (Link & Roman, 2017) to avoid wage garnishment, which can lead to recidivism.

Although authors agreed that LFOs do not contribute to recidivism for everyone, the most likely connection between LFOs and recidivism is with individuals who repeatedly enter and exit prison, increasing the number of fines accrued (Ostermann, et al., 2024). Rotating in and out of prison can result from criminal behavior, but it can also stem from technical violations committed while on parole. Technical violations can lead to arrest and imprisonment even though no new crime has been committed.

Although 14 states do not have a parole process, the remaining states have some form of parole. Individuals on parole remain under the supervision of the Department of Corrections or another government agency (Wong, 2025). Individuals deemed suitable for parole are released from prison early and serve the remainder of their term in the community under the guidance and supervision of a parole officer employed by the Department of Corrections. They are expected to follow rules such as attending parole appointments, maintaining employment, abstaining from drugs and alcohol, and paying required fees (Velazquez and Horowitz, 2019). Failure to follow the rules is considered a technical violation, which can result in the termination of parole supervision and, in some instances, a return to prison (Velazquez and Horowitz, 2019). Some returned citizens, as they acclimate to a less structured environment, struggle to understand and comply with supervision conditions (Green, 2024), which may lead to rule violations. According to the CSG Justice Center (2019), 25% of all state prison admissions in 2021 involved individuals with technical parole or probation violations. The nationwide cost of

reincarceration due to violations during supervision is \$9.3 billion, of which \$2.8 billion is for incarceration for technical violations (NCSL, 2022).

Based on the cost to each state for reincarcerating for technical violations, the Justice Reinvestment Initiative (JRI), a public-private partnership with Pew Charitable, the US Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance, state governments, and technical assistance providers, have a goal to improve public safety and control costs by providing alternatives to prison for those not deemed a risk to public safety (Velazquez & Horowitz, 2019). As of 2022, 34 states had passed policies to reduce the number of people in prison for technical violations (NCSL, 2022). These types of policies impact the culture surrounding incarceration and recidivism rates. The following section will highlight policies that affect recidivism.

Policy Affects Recidivism

Policy plays a crucial role in shaping the culture of rehabilitation or retribution and the effects on recidivism. As discussed earlier in Chapter 1, beginning in the 1970s, government policies encouraged a culture of retribution in the prison system. Since then, laws have been passed to support rehabilitation and reduce recidivism.

One example of these laws is the Second Chance Act (SCA), passed in 2008, which supports nonprofits in reducing recidivism and improving outcomes for those returning home from the carceral system (CSG Justice Center, 2024). Since 2008, SCA has invested \$1.2 billion to help states improve outcomes for people reentering society from prison and jail (CSG Justice

Center, 2024). This Act has connected various state, local, tribal, and federal reentry initiatives that were previously unconnected (CSG Justice Center, 2024).

Under SCA, the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) began funding programs. The National Institute on Justice (NIJ) was asked to evaluate the BJA-funded programs. Participating in an SCA-funded program increased participants' access to and receipt of reentry services and programs and improved their partnerships with community agencies. Participation did not affect substance use and compliance with supervision, and most importantly, involvement in SCA programming did not significantly reduce the likelihood of recidivism (NIJ, 2018).

In contrast, the CSG Justice Center (2024) reported nationwide declines in recidivism in states due to SCA. According to CSG, this has resulted in the country saving governments money, keeping neighborhoods safer, and allowing people to thrive upon reentering society (CSG Justice Center, 2024). The mixed results regarding the effectiveness of SCA on recidivism make assessing its benefits challenging.

By comparison, the First Step Act (FSA) was signed into law in 2018. The FSA focuses on federal prisoners. It requires that federal prisoners be assessed for recidivism risk and placed in programs and activities that reduce it, thereby promoting productive outcomes (James, 2019). In addition, the FSA requires the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) to assist incarcerated individuals in applying for federal and state benefits and obtaining identification, including a Social Security card, a driver's license, or other photo identification, and a birth certificate, to facilitate a smoother reentry process (James, 2019). It also allows federal incarcerated individuals to earn up to 54 days of good-time credit per year of their sentence (James, 2019).

Although the intention to promote a rehabilitative culture is positive, Congress missed the mark by excluding a long list of violent offenders and non-violent offenders involved in immigration and drug trafficking (Wilson, 2024). It is suggested that the exclusionary list was a political move rather than one based on reforms proven effective (Wilson, 2024).

In addition to laws enacted to support rehabilitation and reduce recidivism, it was suggested that the Federal government implement initiatives to facilitate successful reentry. Incentivizing employers through federal initiatives, such as the Work Opportunity Tax Credit and the Federal Bonding Program, can help mitigate hiring barriers for formerly incarcerated individuals. The Work Opportunity Tax Credit provides a tax credit to employers who hire individuals facing barriers to employment, including those formerly incarcerated (IRS, 2025).

The U.S. Department of Labor established the Federal Bonding Program in 1966 to provide Fidelity Bonds for “at-risk,” hard-to-place job seekers. The bonds cover the first six months of employment at no cost to the job applicant or the employer (The Federal Bonding Program, 2022). These initiatives have potential but remain underutilized (Bushway & Pickett, 2024). And while these initiatives provide monetary incentives to employers, they do not address the stigma and biases held by the general public regarding the incarcerated. Public opinion plays a crucial role in the success of reentry programs and in reducing recidivism rates.

Public opinion about incarceration and incarcerated individuals and the nature of fair and just punishment has drawn the attention of prison reformers (Lehmann et al., 2020). Recent research indicates widespread public support for rehabilitation and second chances for the incarcerated (Vera Institute, 2018; Fwd.us, 2024; Butler et al., 2020; Hannan et al., 2023).

The public is aware of the ineffectiveness of the criminal justice system and how incarceration may perpetuate crime (Lehmann et al., 2020), and there is a strong public interest in reducing recidivism since the majority of the incarcerated will return home during their lifetime (Wilson, 2024). Even crime victims want a chance to make their neighborhoods safer, rather than advocating for tougher punishments (Sawyer & Wagner, 2025).

Although the public is supportive of rehabilitation and second chances, one study shows that the public tends to consider the formerly incarcerated as one homogenous group, even though recidivism rates tell a different story (Kuehn & Vosgeran, 2025). Other studies indicate that the public is more suspicious of convicted individuals and tends to dislike interacting with them (Clear et al., 2001; Helfgott, 1997; Burns et al., 2023). The public labels them as dangerous, dishonest, or otherwise disreputable (Shi et al., 2022), underestimates their redeemability, and overestimates the stability of their immorality over time (Kuehn & Vosgerau, 2022). The public has exaggerated views of crime rates due to biased reporting in the news media (Rosenberger & Callanan, 2011; O'Hear, 2020).

This disconnect between a desire to improve the system and personal beliefs about the incarcerated creates a challenge for key stakeholders like legislators, landlords, and employers who control the success of reentry into society. Public opinion can contribute to stigma and punitive attitudes toward the incarcerated, which can undermine successful rehabilitation and reentry efforts (Kuehn and Vosgeran, 2025). At the same time, public opinion can influence elected leaders and the policies they create and decide on by highlighting what is important to constituents, act as a check against powerful interest groups by showing what is important to

citizens, and help elected officials set priorities (The Pew Charitable Trust, 2024). The literature review revealed several approaches to addressing this disconnect.

Disseminating accurate information about the declining risk of recidivism to both society and key stakeholders is vital for formulating and implementing criminal justice reforms (Kuehn & Vosgeran, 2025). The different levels of recidivism for various groups of people based on crime, rehabilitation programs, age, and sentence are important to highlight and disseminate to landlords, employers, and parole boards (Kuehn & Vosgeran, 2025). Based on recidivism rates provided by the CDCR, employers and landlords should know that considering someone who is over the age of 60, has a life sentence, committed a violent crime, and participated in rehabilitation programs, particularly educational programs, has a 2% or less chance of recidivism (CDCR, 2024). This specific and accurate information is essential because public opinion significantly impacts the creation and implementation of effective public policy (Pepperdine, 2023).

Research shows that when the public is equipped with accurate information, it is more willing to challenge the media's portrayal of the incarcerated as unable to change their ways (Kuehn & Vosgeran, 2025). These changes in public opinion create informed voters who can influence legislators to enact and vote for fair and just laws.

I have discussed the different causes of recidivism and the challenges that are faced by the incarcerated when they are released from prison. Given the prevalence of recidivism, many are seeking to address it, and numerous solutions are being implemented to determine what is

most effective. We will now focus on some of these solutions to address the high recidivism rate.

Potential Solutions to Address Recidivism

There is much agreement on potential solutions regarding recidivism. Differences of opinion arose regarding the effectiveness and sufficiency of the solutions, as well as the reasons for their effectiveness. Rehabilitation will be addressed in depth in the next section. The potential solutions suggested here are limited to reentry programs for the incarcerated. It is important to note that none of the articles supporting the programs' effectiveness examined the value of community volunteers in delivering the programs, a gap this research aims to address.

Upon their return to society, strong, positive family bonds and legitimate social ties help reduce recidivism (Coy, 2023). Increasing access to treatment, mental health services, medical care, employment preparation, and stable housing also reduces recidivism (CSG Justice Center, 2024). These programs are often delivered through reentry services. Effective reentry services can help decrease recidivism (Castillo et al., 2024). However, participants need to access these services more frequently (Castillo et al., 2024), and more reentry services should be made accessible to as many returned citizens as possible. Kevin McCracken, founder of The Last Mile, a nonprofit organization at SQRC, states that there are no robust support systems in place for people returning home (Biggers, 2024).

The Last Mile (TLM) trains incarcerated individuals in coding and audio-visual production within the CDCR. TLM offers a comprehensive re-entry program that provides training in

computer skills, interview skills, resume writing, and financial literacy. They also offer a laptop program, allowing individuals returning home to have the necessary work equipment. TLM graduates have a 4% recidivism rate (Biggers, 2024).

Not all reentry services are equally effective in reducing recidivism, though. Some research suggests that peer support, mentoring, and job-related services have the greatest impact (Castillo et al., 2024). However, there was no consensus on this conclusion. Some research has shown that reentry programs focused on individual needs, like mental health and substance addiction, are more effective at reducing recidivism than generalized programs (Green, 2024). However, the results of reentry programs varied. Some members received job training, housing, and mentorship, whereas others reported that these services were overly restrictive or insufficiently supportive (Green, 2024). There are also situations where results are unknown, as in California.

California spent \$600 million annually on a privately run rehabilitation program to prevent recidivism, but there is little evidence to suggest that it was effective (Lyons, 2024). The state does not collect data on whether participants found jobs or returned to prison (Lyons, 2024). The feedback from participants was mixed: some saw the transitional housing as helpful, while others found it restrictive, limiting their ability to hold a job (Lyons, 2024). Effective reentry programs include technical job training and comprehensive wrap-around services, which encompass mentorship, transportation, temporary housing, and access to necessities. Nonprofit programs such as Persevere, Crop, and The Last Mile are examples of holistic programs that engage community members in their services.

In addition to wrap-around reentry services, employment opportunities that help reduce recidivism can be approached in several ways. Broader government-sponsored job programs that provide wage subsidies to businesses that hire workers with criminal records could help mitigate the stigma and risks associated with such hires (Smith, 2023; Williams, 2022). Additionally, incarcerated individuals could be trained to become self-employed, thereby removing barriers to employment.

Entrepreneurship training eliminates the need to be employed by others. Formerly incarcerated individuals are 45% more likely to become entrepreneurs than non-system-impacted individuals (Williams, 2022). Entrepreneurship offers community acceptance, financial freedom, and helps overcome employment barriers and stigma (Zainal et al., 2024). Entrepreneurship is said to reduce recidivism (Zainal et al., 2024). Suggestions on how to support entrepreneurs include reducing barriers to capital to help individuals fund new businesses (Williams, 2022), adding entrepreneurial programs (Zainal, et al., 2024), and sealing or expunging records for returned citizens (Biggers, 2024). This could include establishing government-funded pre-release entrepreneurship programs and expanding post-release programs to include self-employment training and support (Williams, 2022). Additionally, prison systems could offer incentive credits for rehabilitation programs to better prepare individuals for employment upon reentry. California offers good-time credits under Prop 57 and educational and rehabilitation credits for completed programs (CDCR, 2024).

Rehabilitation

This section of the literature review will address what rehabilitation is, the effect prison culture has on rehabilitation, the importance of prison staff to successful rehabilitation, the types of rehabilitation programs, the cost-effectiveness of rehabilitation, the lack of rehabilitation programs, the benefits of rehabilitation, the effectiveness of lowering recidivism rates, and the benefits of community volunteers participating. It will also include how rehabilitation is delivered in California because of the emphasis being placed on rehabilitation. Understanding the different purposes of criminal punishment helps clarify the concept of rehabilitation. The four typical models include retribution, deterrence, incapacitation, and rehabilitation (Glass, 2024).

Rehabilitation Compared with Retribution, Deterrence, and Incarceration

Retribution is based on a moral standpoint that those who do wrong should be punished because they deserve to be punished (Glass, 2024). Retribution is the sentence given based on what the crime deserves (Longley, 2022). Retribution overlooks societal issues that contribute to why someone commits a crime (Glass, 2024).

Deterrence incentivizes people to follow the rules because the cost of breaking them is substantial (Glass, 2024). Deterrence is primarily based on the fear of punishment, with the hope that it will deter criminal activity (Glass, 2024). There are two types of deterrence: general and specific. General deterrence helps people avoid committing crimes. Specific deterrence helps prevent individuals from returning to prison (Glass, 2024; Longley, 2022). Like deterrence,

incapacitation aims to prevent criminal activity. Instead of deterring crime, it removes the individual from society to protect the public (Glass, 2024). Rehabilitation, on the other hand, prioritizes education and provision of job and life skills to enable individuals to be successful upon reentering society (Glass, 2024).

In the US, we have historically shifted back and forth between punishment and rehabilitation (Clair, 2024). The transition from punitive measures to rehabilitation has significantly advanced both theory and practice, although the field remains evolving (Tsimmerman, 2024; The Colleges of Law, 2025; Miller, 2025; Astrada, 2018).

Critics of rehabilitation argue that the practice is effective in welfare states, such as those in Scandinavia, but that capitalist countries should employ retribution as a more effective approach (Tang, 2023). There is also a debate about whether individuals can be rehabilitated (Akkoyun, 2024). Critics suggest that some incarcerated individuals may not respond to rehabilitation efforts and that a punitive approach may serve as a stronger deterrent to criminal activities (Berger, 2025; Logan et al., 2025).

Although the cultures of Scandinavian countries differ from those of the US, their rehabilitation philosophy for reducing recidivism rates provides a model for correctional systems (Akkoyun, 2024). California has adopted this approach by creating the California Model, which focuses on rehabilitation (Williams et al., 2024).

The purpose of rehabilitation varies from personal development for an individual, addressing the causes that led them to prison, and/or helping them live successful lives upon returning to society (CDCR, 2024; Payne et al., 2024; La Vigne, 2024; Glass, 2024; Duwe, et al.,

2023). It also includes developing programs to prevent individuals from reoffending (Levy, 2025; Akkoyun, 2024; Mitchell & Hassan, 2025). Rehabilitative programs are designed to serve the rehabilitation purpose of each prison system. As the research shows, some approaches are more effective than others. The culture of each prison can determine whether the prison system adopts a retributive culture or prioritizes rehabilitation programs.

Harsh Prison Culture Impacts Rehabilitation

Prison culture typically is a command-and-control mindset that builds distrust with the incarcerated (La Vigne, 2024). It removes all agency from the incarcerated, making it hard for them to be prepared to make good decisions and adopt healthy habits upon reentry (La Vigne, 2024). Prisons do not create positive outcomes for residents, staff, or victim/survivors. Evidence shows that prisons undermine the health and well-being of not only the incarcerated but also the staff (Williams et al., 2024).

Prison culture subjects the incarcerated to loss of liberty, separation from family and social supports, loss of personal control, and choice. They face loss of self-worth, loneliness, heightened uncertainty and fear, and prolonged periods of idleness (Visser, 2021).

Prison's punitive culture can jeopardize the personal traits required to be good employees, family members, and community members. Coupled with this is the lack of education, job training, and community connections, which will make it challenging for incarcerated individuals to reintegrate into society (Visser, 2021). The overall harmful and unhealthy prison culture will impact rehabilitation for the incarcerated (Levy, 2025).

However, a culture of rehabilitation offsets the negative prison culture. Rehabilitation has become a critical component of the correctional process (Akkoyun, 2024), and prison leadership should foster a rehabilitation-focused culture (Williams et al., 2024). A culture of rehabilitation requires that every staff position be reoriented toward rehabilitation and successful reentry (Williams et al., 2024). Positive and restorative approaches should include fostering social connectedness, service to others, spiritual experiences, personal integrity, and identity change. These are more effective than punitive approaches (Duwe et al., 2023). Normalizing prison environments with rehabilitative programs will help individuals reenter society (Visher, 2021).

Although most research on rehabilitation focused on the incarcerated population, an essential component of creating a thriving rehabilitation culture is the involvement of prison staff, particularly correctional officers. Without their cooperation, rehabilitation programs will not be effective.

Impact on Prison Staff

Prison staff, especially correctional officers, work within the confines of the prison, which can be dangerous. Prison officers can either enhance or detract from the goals of the prison in which they work, and either motivate or demotivate incarcerated individuals (Kjelsberg et al., 2007). Prison staff's interactions with the incarcerated contribute to the effectiveness of programming (Clair, 2024). If the harmful effects of prison culture challenge correctional officers, they may not be ready to support rehabilitative programs.

Correctional officers are subject to a lot of the trauma that the incarcerated are subject to, based on the prison environment. Their roles expose them to emotional, psychological, and physical harm (Shen, 2024). Thirty-four percent of Correctional officers suffer from PTSD compared to 14% of military veterans. That is higher than the 18% of incarcerated men who suffer from PTSD. Correctional staff also have higher rates of depression and substance abuse than the general public (Williams et al., 2024). Correctional officers have a 40% higher rate of suicide than the general working-age public (Williams et al., 2024). The average life expectancy of a correctional officer is 14-21 years shorter than that of Americans who do not work in prisons (Brower, 2013). Prison staff in the US experience higher rates of chronic, stress-related conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease (Williams et al., 2024).

In California, correctional staff receive insufficient professional training to support rehabilitation (Williams et al., 2024). Toxic interactions between the correctional officers and the incarcerated impact the health and well-being of the staff (Williams et al., 2024). Improving professional interactions between the incarcerated and staff can hopefully minimize the health impacts on the staff and encourage support of rehabilitative programming (Williams et al., 2024).

Types of Rehabilitation Programs

The rehabilitative programming prison staff can support depends on the management of each state's prison system and the security level at each prison. There are different types of rehabilitation programs within prisons. The prison's security level can limit or alter the mix of available programs for incarcerated individuals. Some prison systems offer a great variety of

programs to make sure the incarcerated have the resources to help them prepare to go back into society. Providing a wide range of programs raises the question of whether rehabilitation programs are cost-effective.

Cost-Effectiveness of Rehabilitation Programs

Community-Based Organization (CBO) programs offered in prisons primarily rely on volunteers and external private funding, thereby not increasing the prison system's direct expenses (Duwe et al., 2023; Boyle, 2024; Stickle & Schuster, 2023). The InnerChange Freedom Initiative, based in Minnesota, is a non-profit program that has shown a \$3 million benefit, equivalent to nearly \$8,300 per participant (Duwe & Johnson, 2016).

A RAND Corporation study reported that every dollar invested in prison education programs saves taxpayers, on average, \$5 in reincarceration costs (Davis & Steele, 2014). Low recidivism rates in firefighting programs translate into a \$5.96 return on every \$1 invested in reduced incarceration costs (Crilley, 2025). CALPIA CTE program, which has a low recidivism rate of 7.13%, saved \$9.5 million and \$10.1 million in recidivism cost avoidance from 2007-2008 through 2010-2011 (Hess and Turner, 2021).

The most significant economic impact appears to be a reduction in recidivism rates. Further research is needed to quantify the benefits of rehabilitative programs and to determine whether there are financial benefits to society and the prison system.

If these programs are cost-effective, particularly those delivered by CBOs, they should encourage prisons to offer more of them. Research indicates that there are insufficient

programs available, and when they are available, the incarcerated individuals are often unaware of what is available (Chan, 2024; Williams et al., 2024).

Insufficient Number of Rehabilitation Programs

The lack of programs is evident in the long waiting lists for services (Chan, 2024; Williams et al., 2024), as well as a shortage of staff and inadequate facilities (Williams et al., 2024). In addition, program waitlists are unclear and complex to the incarcerated in the CDCR. Many residents believe it takes too long to access essential programs, such as education (Williams et al., 2024).

This is evidenced by the fact that thirty-eight percent of individuals at SQRC lack a GED or high school diploma. Only 26% of this group is currently enrolled in a programming course. SQRC struggles to hire and retain teachers and facilitators (Williams et al., 2024). Interest in programming for religious purposes exceeds the available resources (Duwe et al., 2023). There is a common concern about the lack of sufficient education programs within the prison system (Parrilla, 2024).

Benefits of Rehabilitation

Despite the lack of programs, research indicates that rehabilitation programs are beneficial and help reduce recidivism rates among participants (Roessger et al., 2021; Levya, 2025; Bond et al., 2024; Vera Institute, 2019; Clair, 2024; Denney & Tynes, 2021; Erisman & Bayer Contardo, 2005; Kim & Clark, 2013; Pompoco et al., 2017; Easton, 2022; Han et al., 2018; Watkins, 2025; Boyle, 2024; Parrilla, 2024; Lerman et. al., 2022; Berg and Huebner, 2011; Esparaza Flores, 2018; Corleto, 2018; Keller, 2022; Johnson, 2004; Byrne, 2022). For prison

systems with a focus on rehabilitation, finding ways to provide more programs would be beneficial in preparing the incarcerated population for reentry and lowering recidivism rates, as it appears that the benefits of rehabilitation programs are worth the effort.

The list of benefits to the incarcerated community participating in different rehabilitation programs is long. In general, involvement in rehabilitation programs reduces the likelihood of trouble in prison and upon reentry (Hess and Turner, 2021).

Dog training programs enhance the mental and physical well-being of the dog handler, promote personal development, improve employability skills, boost confidence, foster leadership skills, cultivate a positive self-image, and strengthen bonds with others. Puppy training also provides incarcerated dog handlers with a sense of purpose and a means of giving back to the communities they have harmed (Han et al., 2018). Dog training also fosters positive social connections, life skills, empathy, responsibility, self-control, anger management, and patience. It helps reduce the stigma associated with being labeled a prisoner (EBPS Society, 2017). Dog training helps with strong communication skills, commitment, self-discipline, teamwork, leadership, and empathy (Nelson, 2012).

Another example is Shakespeare programs in prisons where incarcerated individuals read and perform plays. This helps increase critical thinking, provide a new lens through which to view the world, foster understanding of diverse perspectives, help individuals find their voice, and promote educational and empathetic development (Boyle, 2024). Shakespeare offers opportunities to heal, discover one's humanity, cultivate creativity, promote personal growth and self-expression, and learn to work together (MacDonald, 2025).

Additionally, fire camps for the incarcerated and fire training programs provide a sense of purpose through work (Crimley et al., 2025). They are confidence-building and prepare incarcerated or formerly incarcerated individuals for a career in firefighting. These programs also provide proactive social skills and a strong drive for excellence. They enable the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated to give back to the society that they have harmed (Crimley et al., 2025).

Another community-building example is how sports in prison help with physical and mental well-being, behavior modification, and educational enhancement (Libbrecht et al., 2024). Sports can disrupt hypermasculinity, promote inclusiveness and a sense of belonging, and teach discipline, respect, achievement, cooperation, ambition, and optimism (Libbrecht et al., 2024).

As important as the previous examples are, one of the most significant positive impacts for incarcerated individuals is prison education programs. Education builds confidence in achieving goals, makes individuals feel valued and respected, and helps them practice their social skills. It also gives them confidence and teaches values and habits that they can use throughout their lives (Lerman & Sadin, 2022). Education motivates individuals to pursue a better future and alleviates the monotony of prison life (Dai, 2024). In addition, education can help transform incarcerated individuals into civic leaders (Flaherty, 2024).

It's critical to note that the impact of rehabilitation extends beyond the benefits afforded to the incarcerated individual to the prison community. Those participating in religious programs were less likely to engage in fights and arguments with other incarcerated individuals

and prison staff (Duwe et al, 2023), creating a safer and less stressful environment. Dog training also helps to decrease prison misconduct, resulting in a safer prison environment (Han et al., 2018). The presence of dogs can also boost morale and improve the prison environment (EBPS Society, 2017). Housing a college within a prison positively influences the broader prison community (Lerman & Sadin, 2022) and enhances safety (Farley & Pike, 2016).

In addition to helping the incarcerated population and the prison community, rehabilitation programs help support outside communities. Although little research has been conducted on this topic, there are several examples of the societal benefits of rehabilitation programs. A couple of social benefits are that rehabilitation programs reduce recidivism rates and contribute to safer communities. An example of a specific prison program that supports the outside community is the dog training programs, as mentioned previously. The incarcerated assist in training dogs with behavioral issues to become better socialized and find their forever homes, or in training service dogs to assist community members who need a dog's support (Han et al., 2018). Dog training in prison yields a higher success rate in developing puppies into service dogs, resulting in more dogs available to assist those in need (Nelson, 2017).

We have explored the impact of rehabilitation programs on the incarcerated, the prison community, and society. Next, we will discuss the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs on recidivism rates.

Rehabilitation's Impact on Recidivism Rates

Research shows that rehabilitation programs helps to lower recidivism rates for many whether it is education, gardening, yoga, dog training, religion, the arts, behavior modification

programs, vocational training or sports (Rosessger et al., 2021; Levya, 2025; Bond, 2024; Vera Institute, 2025; Clair, 2024; Denney & Tynes, 2021; Duwe & Clark, 2014; Erisman & Bayer Contardo, 2005; Kim & Clark, 2013; Pompoco et al., 2017; Winterfield et al., 2009; Easton, 2022; Han et al., 2018; Watkins, 2025; Moran & Jewkes, 2022; Boyle, 2024; Parrilla, 2024; Pompoco, 2021; Haque, 2022; Calhoun, et al., 2024). This section will specifically highlight programs that utilize community volunteers and their effects on recidivism.

Consistent with the consensus that rehabilitation programs help to lower recidivism rates, research also indicates that some programs are more effective at reducing recidivism rates than others. These programs included community volunteers or mentors, regardless of whether participants were learning job skills, pursuing higher education, or participating in a sport. Below are examples of rehabilitation programs that utilize community volunteers that have achieved a recidivism rate lower than the aggregate rate.

The Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program in California, which helps formerly incarcerated individuals gain additional skills and knowledge to work in the fire and forestry sector, has a recidivism rate of 10%, compared with California's 41.9% (Crilley et al., 2025). Bard Prison Initiative (BPI), based in New York, operates a prison education program that offers associate and bachelor's degrees. BPI has a 3.5% recidivism rate, compared with New York State's 43% (Chan, 2024). Despite their geographic locations on opposite coasts and their differing programs, it appears that adding community volunteers could help lower recidivism rates.

Guiding Rage into Power (GRIP) is a year-long comprehensive offender accountability program based on a trauma-healing and somatic awareness-centered model. It aims to help violent offenders stop violent behavior, cultivate mindfulness, and develop emotional intelligence, increasing awareness about victim impact. Community volunteers, including formerly incarcerated individuals, actively participate in this program. The recidivism rate for GRIP is .2% (Calhoun et al., 2024).

The CALPIA Career Technical Education (CTE) program provides incarcerated individuals with work training and opportunities to earn accredited certifications, and also partners with trade unions, non-profit organizations, and public or private companies. The recidivism rate for CTE is 7.13% (Hess & Turner, 2021). As a comparison, other CALPIA programs that teach job skills in prison with no community involvement have a 47%-50 % recidivism rate. It is better than the overall CDCR rate for the time period of 2008-2011 (Hess & Turner, 2021), but still much higher than programs that include community connections.

Research on higher education and the arts highlights the impact these programs have had in transforming the character of incarcerated individuals. There was an overall agreement that education and the arts transform lives (Parrilla, 2024; Boyle, 2024; Lerman & Sadin, 2022). Some programs reported that individuals were transformed into servant leaders (Parrilla, 2024), while others reported that their programs required participants to view the world through a new lens to effect transformation (Boyle, 2024).

Many education programs reported that the transformation occurred when incarcerated individuals could shed the label of prisoner and adopt the label of student (Lerman & Sadin,

2022; Parrilla, 2024; Chan, 2024). Education also helped shape self-efficacy and civic engagement (Lerman & Sadin, 2022). All programs listed above that emphasized the value of transformation were Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) with community volunteers. Although the topic is under-researched, the articles reviewed included a few comments on the value of community volunteers.

Value of Community Volunteers

The impact of community volunteers needs to be researched more fully to determine if recidivism rates are impacted when volunteers interact with the incarcerated and why. The current research suggests that the benefits include helping incarcerated individuals feel seen and not talked down to (Flaherty, 2024) and character transformation. Volunteers also witness personal growth and serve as a bridge between the inside and outside worlds, bringing in new perspectives (Arjona & Van Lith, 2024). Volunteers are role models who live by example. They demonstrate dedication, a strong work ethic, and a willingness to learn from incarcerated individuals (Crilley et al., 2025). They also foster trust, showing incarcerated individuals that they are seen and valued regardless of their past (Crilley et al., 2025). In dog training programs, external dog trainers fostered a sense of teamwork by sending incarcerated dog handlers photographs and notes about what the puppy had done while the dogs were away from prison (EBPS Society, 2017).

Most of the literature has focused on CBOs rather than on the individual connections volunteers provide. A leader in the CDCR stated that CBOs are a personal connection to the outside world. They let incarcerated people know they are seen, cared for, and valued (Williams

et al., 2024). Additional research is needed to move beyond the CBO level and examine the actual impact of volunteers on incarcerated individuals. This is the most significant gap in the literature regarding rehabilitation: the impact that individual volunteers have working with the incarcerated and the effect on recidivism.

The literature did highlight California's emphasis on rehabilitation and its use of community volunteers. A focus on California is important because of its focus on rehabilitation and the use of community volunteers in these programs.

Rehabilitation in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation

California's Governor, Gavin Newsom, established what he calls the California Model, focused on rehabilitation. It is based on best global practices in prisons to change prison culture and improve the correctional environment through training and resources that focus on the overall well-being of those who work and live in them (California Model Magazine, 2024). California is shifting its culture from punitive to rehabilitative, ensuring that people serve their time in a more humane environment (Williams et al., 2024). Newsom utilizes SQRC as its flagship location. SQRC has strong programming and a relatively positive culture focused on rehabilitation (Williams et al., 2024). It also has the best rehabilitative culture in the CDCR (Williams et al., 2024).

There are four pillars of CDCR's California Model: dynamic security, peer mentorship, normalization, and trauma-informed care (Williams et al., 2024; California Model Magazine, 2024). Dynamic security fosters professional relationships between staff and incarcerated individuals. Normalization aims to bring life in prison as close as possible to life outside prison.

Peer mentorship aims to create opportunities for incarcerated individuals to receive training that enables them to draw on their lived experiences to support and mentor peers. Being a trauma-informed organization means that there is recognition that both staff and the incarcerated may have experienced a history of trauma before coming to prison (Williams et al., 2024).

With its focus on rehabilitation and the California Model, the state offers a wide range of rehabilitative programs, though not all are available at every prison (CDCR, 2025). The different types of rehabilitative programs are presented in Table 2.1 below.

Table 2.1 Rehabilitation Programs Offered in California

Veterans Support
Reentry Preparation
Victim Awareness
Parenting/Family Support
Anger Management
Cultural Groups
Vocational Education
Education – Literacy, GED, and higher education
Substance Abuse
Criminal and Addictive Thinking
Youth Diversion Programs
Visual and Performing Arts
Media Training – Journalism, video production, film making, and podcasts
Sports Groups
Religious Groups
Firefighting
Dog Training
Domestic Violence
Mental Health

Source: CDCR

In 2023, California began piloting the California Model in 8 of its 31 prisons, which include Central California Women’s Facility, Corcoran, R.J. Donovan Correctional Facility, Sacramento, Substance Abuse Treatment Facility in Corcoran, San Quentin Rehabilitation Center, Salinas Valley, and Valley State Prison (California Model Magazine, 2024). Many events have been held since 2023 in these pilot prisons and in other prisons in California.

Examples of events that highlight the four pillars of the California Model include an all-incarcerated softball game in which the California Medical Facility in Vacaville bused its softball team to SQRC to play against the SQRC team (CDCR, 2026). SQRC has also hosted the San Quentin Film Festival in 2024 and 2025, featuring films produced in its media center by incarcerated individuals and by outside filmmakers focused on criminal justice. The outside filmmakers vote on films made inside the prison, and the incarcerated vote on films made by the outside filmmakers (CDCR, 2026).

At another location, Ironwood Prison initiated a micro-gardening program not only to provide gardening opportunities in a primarily cement environment but also to enable access to fresh fruits and vegetables. The Substance Abuse Treatment Facility hosted a music festival focused on Mexican regional music (CDCR, 2026).

At one of the two women’s prisons in California, Central California Women’s Facility, the first Peer Support Specialists Program (PSSP) graduates nationwide graduated (CDCR, 2026). The participants draw on their lived experiences to provide valuable, trusted support to their peers. They receive training and complete the required hours to obtain their PSSP certification. Upon

release from prison, they only need to pass the PSSP certification exam to become a PSSP counselor (CDCR, 2026).

Lastly, R.J. Donovan Correctional Facility had 23 incarcerated individuals graduate from UC Irvine with bachelor's degrees through a unique partnership with the University of California (CDCR, 2026). At the same time, Valley State prison graduated 80 individuals across various programs, including 23 who earned associate degrees, 33 who secured high school diplomas or GEDs, and 24 who received Career Technical Education certificates.

These programs are authorized by the State but primarily facilitated by community-based organizations and their volunteers. An overlooked factor, the prison's location, can determine the number of programs and volunteers. Because of its central location in the San Francisco Bay Area, SQRC hosts more than 1,000 volunteers annually, more than any other prison in California. Before 2023, when the California Model was implemented, SQRC already hosted more than 80 rehabilitative programs known to lower recidivism rates.

Many programs at SQRC provide incarcerated individuals with opportunities to work and play alongside community volunteers. One example is sports programs, which provide incarcerated individuals with the opportunity to interact with community members who come to compete against prison teams.

Unique to SQRC is Mount Tamalpais College (MTC), the only college in the US whose student body comprises solely incarcerated individuals, with volunteer educators teaching its classes. The combination of education and community involvement has resulted in a 4% recidivism rate for MTC (Lerman & Sadin, 2022).

The Thousand Mile Club, a running club at SQRC, and San Quentin News (SQN), an incarcerated-run newspaper, have loyal groups of volunteers who consistently support the incarcerated while in prison and upon their return. Both programs, as of 2023, had zero recidivism rates (Bleier, 2024; Vazquez, personal communication, 2023).

Community volunteers bring society into prisons, helping the incarcerated feel a part of the society that they have been separated from. One contribution of community volunteers is the positive human connection they form with incarcerated individuals.

The final section of the literature review highlights the importance of human connection, both in general and specifically in prison settings. As stated in Chapter 1, social isolation has adverse effects on physical and mental health, as well as on life outcomes. Human connection has been shown to protect against these issues and help offset the effects of social isolation. Rehabilitation programs that incorporate community volunteers can foster human connection and reduce recidivism, thereby enhancing public safety.

Social Connection

The earlier discussion of social isolation and loneliness in Chapter 1 helps set the stage for the importance of positive social connections provided by community volunteers. As a reminder, social isolation and loneliness are major public health issues that affect people worldwide (WHO, 2025; US Surgeon General, 2023). This includes inside prisons. Social isolation and loneliness are widespread and have under-recognized health, social, and economic impacts (WHO, 2025). Loneliness and isolation pose profound threats to health and well-being

(U.S. Surgeon General, 2023). Both the World Health Organization (2025) and the US Surgeon General (2023) have identified social isolation and loneliness as public health epidemics.

Loneliness is defined as a subjective experience of perceived isolation resulting from insufficient meaningful connections (Prohaska et al., 2020; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020). Social Isolation is defined objectively as having few social relationships, social roles, group involvement, and infrequent social interactions (Holt-Lunstad & Steptoe, 2022). Loneliness and social isolation are not synonymous, but both can co-occur.

Social isolation harms human health and well-being (WHO, 2025). Social isolation and loneliness increase the risk for premature death (Holt-Lundstad et al., 2015; WHO, 2025; US Surgeon General, 2023). It is also associated with an increase in disease, including heart disease and stroke. There is an increased risk for anxiety, depression, and dementia. Additionally, it may increase susceptibility to viruses and respiratory illnesses (US Surgeon General, 2023; WHO, 2025). The mortality impact of being socially disconnected is similar to that caused by smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day (Holt-Lundstad et al., 2017)

Benefit of Social Connection

An antidote to social isolation is social connection. Social connection includes the size and range of one's social network and roles, the functions these relationships serve, and their positive or negative qualities (US Surgeon General, 2023). It includes close relationships and casual encounters (Holt-Lunstad, 2025). Social connection is essential to the health of individuals and societies and is fundamental to stronger communities (WHO, 2025), although it has been neglected in physical and mental health research (WHO, 2025).

There are three components of social connections: structure, function, and quality (Holt-Lunstad, 2025). Structure concerns the size, diversity, and frequency of social interactions, while function concerns who supports us and whom we can rely on. Finally, quality is simply the positive or negative impact of social connections. Supportive people can mitigate the effects of stress (Holt-Lunstad, 2025). Positive relationships are associated with less persistent conflict and higher levels of happiness. Negative relationships include frequent conflicts and stress, resulting in adverse health outcomes (Holt-Lunstad, 2025).

Humans require social connections, which is why they have developed larger brains to process the complexity of social interactions (WHO, 2025). In other words, we are biologically wired to form social connections. Social connection is a fundamental human need, as essential to survival as food, water, and shelter (US Surgeon General, 2023). Social connection is not only a basic human need but also a factor that benefits mental and physical health and life expectancy. Social connection increases the odds of survival by 50% (Holt-Lundstad et al., 2010; US Surgeon General, 2023). Frequently confiding in others is associated with up to 15% reduced odds of developing depression among people who are already at higher risk due to their history of traumatic or otherwise adverse life experiences (Choi et al., 2020; US Surgeon General, 2023).

There is a link between a lack of social connection and suicide. Social connection may protect against suicide as a cause of death, especially for men (US Surgeon General, 2023). Social connection may be one of the strongest protective factors against self-harm and suicide among people with and without serious underlying mental health challenges (US Surgeon General, 2023).

Social connection is also essential in building strong communities. The impact of social connections on social and economic development includes positive effects on education, community safety, civic engagement, and economic growth and innovation (WHO, 2025). Strong social infrastructure (policies, services, resources, and spaces that enable individuals to participate in social, civic, and economic life) fosters social connection. Community members can interact, form networks, and meet people they might not otherwise meet, thereby building social capital (WHO, 2025).

Social connections are key to overall health (Holt-Lunstad, 2025), but they have declined over time, even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Robert Putnam, a well-known American political scientist and Harvard University professor, is known for his research on social capital, civic engagement, and community decline. He wrote about the decline of social connections in *Bowling Alone* in 2000. The onset of the pandemic, however, accompanied by restrictions on movement, raised the issue of connection and highlighted it as a critical, ongoing public health concern (US Surgeon General, 2023; WHO, 2025). Loneliness and isolation during the pandemic became a way of life for many. Meaningful celebrations, such as birthdays, graduations, and weddings, were postponed or canceled. Many people lost their jobs and homes. Visiting with family members became impossible. Many lost loved ones. Feelings of anxiety, stress, fear, sadness, grief, anger, and pain were experienced because of the loss of these opportunities to spend time with loved ones (US Surgeon General, 2023).

What was experienced by the general population during the pandemic is a common experience for the incarcerated. They miss important family get-togethers, and they have lost jobs, homes, and marriages. Visiting with family members can be logistically tricky. The

incarcerated's contact with their close friends and family is usually controlled and limited (Biggam & Power, 1997; Kao et al., 2014). The incarcerated often receive inadequate social support (Asberg & Renk, 2012; Kao et al., 2014), even though the importance of social support for individuals incarcerated is well recognized.

Low perceived social support inside and outside of prison is associated with more suicide attempts in prison (Meltzer et al., 2003), difficulties in community re-entry, substance use relapse, and recidivism (Parson & Warner-Robbins, 2002; Liao et al., 2004; Benda, 2005; Kao et al., 2014). The importance of social connection and reducing social isolation within the prison system is as crucial as it is in the free world.

Importance of Social Capital

Social capital is built on social connections. Social connection refers to the relationships between individuals, and social capital is the value derived from those connections (Mask, 2025). Putnam (1993) defines social capital as the networking, coordination, and cooperation among individuals that benefit them mutually. Putnam argues that social capital is critical to success in government, the economy, and the social sector. The value of coming together, exemplified by voter turnout, newspaper readership, and membership in book clubs, choirs, civic clubs, and sports, is a cornerstone of success. He emphasizes the importance of trust and reciprocity. When these aspects of civic life are absent, people feel powerless, exploited, and unhappy, and are more likely to break the law, while simultaneously wanting stricter discipline for those who do. Overall, Putnam argues that the erosion of social capital contributes to social ills (Putnam, 1993).

Social capital, in general, includes trust, a sense of safety, reciprocity, formal and informal networks, civic engagement, and agency, which result in mutual benefit. Still, these do not necessarily transfer or are less effective in prison (Lafferty et al., 2020). A question arises as to whether sufficient attention is paid to building and maintaining social capital in prisons, given that Putnam (1993) states that it is fundamental to a prosperous society.

The social infrastructure of a community shapes its social capital. This includes community programs such as sports groups, religious organizations, and non-profit organizations, as well as policies related to housing, safety, education, and physical elements that bring people together within a community. Social infrastructure may help a community foster social connections (US Surgeon General, 2023). The same is true within the prison setting.

Wolff and Draine (2004) focus on prisoners' social capital and its connection to criminal behavior and recidivism. The key topics include the strength of connections, the ability to put them into practice, the capacity of social connections to support incarcerated individuals, and the social context of the relationship. They suggest that not all social capital is positive and that prison social capital has both pros and cons for building prosocial behavior.

The definition of social capital (Putnam, 1993; Lafferty, 2020) is broad and implies networking with individuals who provide needed resources and mutual benefit. However, many studies on prisons restrict the concept of social capital to family and friends (Anderson et al., 2022). They highlight the importance of social capital but overlook the potential of incorporating the value of volunteers into the social network. Volunteers can provide new

learning opportunities, new perspectives, and encouragement to participate in rehabilitative programs.

The exclusion of community members in existing research is understandable, as Wolff and Draine's (2004) and Anderson et al.'s (2022) studies analyzed prison experiences as homogeneous. Nevertheless, there are different types of prisons based on security level, ranging from minimum-security to super-maximum. The Anderson et al. study (2022) did not include prisons with minimum or medium security levels. Lafferty et al. (2020) examined different levels of prisons and found that security levels affected trust and feelings of safety. There is less access to the incarcerated in higher-level security prisons, as well as on death row, especially as it relates to providing rehabilitative programming delivered by non-profits and their volunteers.

Putnam (1993) emphasizes that without social capital, systems fall apart. The American prison system is widely regarded as falling apart and in need of reform (Laska, 2019). Social capital built on human connections can enhance outcomes in rehabilitative prison programs. Based on Putnam's emphasis on the importance of social capital, he might conclude that community volunteers, with the connections and resources that they provide, should be included in this reform. Underlying this reform are important theories that guide progress.

Theories that Support Social Connection

Various theories related to social connection support prison system reform. Anderson et al. (2022) applied the social capital theory, which states that social networks are valuable because they provide needed resources to individuals. They also employed the social control

theory, which posits that individuals who feel integrated into institutions such as family, marriage, and church are less likely to participate in criminal behavior (Duwe & Johnson, 2016; Anderson et al., 2022).

General strain theory suggests that social support can reduce recidivism by alleviating the stresses associated with reentry (Duwe & Johnson, 2016). Differential association theory holds that not returning to a life of crime is more likely when the strength of an individual's pro-social connections outweighs the influence of anti-social relationships (Duwe & Johnson, 2016). Life course theorists suggest that attachment to supportive friends and family members can provide the opportunity and inspiration to avoid recidivism (Duwe & Johnson, 2016). Self-categorization theory posits that the more individuals define themselves as members of a specific group, the more they accept the group's norms (Livingston et al., 2011; Turner et al., 2012). Self-expansion theory emphasizes the impact of incorporating others into one's identity on how individuals perceive and interact within the social world (Aron et al., 1992). The theory of criminal social identity posits that having a criminal identity, including association with peers involved in criminal activities, leads individuals to engage in criminal behavior (Hogg, 2016). Civic engagement theory refers to individuals' connections with their communities, encompassing not only political engagement (Putnam, 1995) but also broader forms of community involvement.

All of these theories emphasize the importance of building and maintaining positive social connections with individuals in prison and upon their reentry. Civic engagement theory highlights the importance of community connections, which can be challenging in prison.

Civic and Social Engagement in Prison

Where social connection addresses the question of feeling connected to and belonging with others, and social capital addresses what we can do together because of our connection, civic engagement addresses whether we participate in the life and governance of a community. The incarcerated are separated from the community, which can make civic engagement challenging. However, the presence of community volunteers who bring knowledge and lived experiences can help incarcerated individuals feel part of a community they currently cannot participate in.

Putnam (1993) emphasizes the importance of civic engagement as a foundation for societal success. Lafferty et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of civic engagement, but they also demonstrate the challenges it presents in a prison setting. Lafferty et. al (2020) conducted interviews in the New South Wales prison system to determine the effectiveness of social connection with a group of incarcerated individuals diagnosed with Hepatitis C. They found that the process fostered civic engagement, treating incarcerated individuals as people rather than criminals and enabling them to have safe conversations with members of society. Lafferty et al. (2020) concluded that the interview process gave the men a voice and a sense of citizenship, and that, given the chance, they would participate in more opportunities to interact with members of society. This conclusion is fundamental to the current research questions, which are:

- What are the benefits of community volunteers working with incarcerated individuals?
- Does this collaboration between community volunteers and the incarcerated affect recidivism?
- What challenges arise when community volunteers and the incarcerated work together?

- How can these challenges be addressed?

SQRC exemplifies civic engagement. It provides incarcerated individuals with opportunities to engage with community members, and it gives them a voice through programs such as Mt. Tamalpais College, *San Quentin News*, Forward This Productions, *Uncuffed: The Podcast*, *Ear Hustle*, San Quentin TV, and Marin Shakespeare. These programs help incarcerated individuals be seen as individuals rather than criminals and help them see themselves positively engaging with the community upon release.

Lafferty et al. (2020) found that acknowledging incarcerated individuals in any capacity, whether as patients, students, or employees, increased perceptions of trustworthiness. Feeling treated as a human being rather than a criminal is vital for incarcerated individuals (Schuhmann et al., 2018). The incarcerated will stop criminal behavior when they feel heard, seen, and treated as human beings (Pasma et al., 2023), which is why building social connections with volunteers is vital for incarcerated individuals.

Wolff and Draine (2004) and Anderson et al. (2020) demonstrate the importance of social connection in prison. The issues and concerns they have shared regarding social connection as defined by family and friends, which include the distance to the prison, a lack of family and friends, or family and friends who lack social and community connections, show the importance of including the opportunity to build social support with volunteers to minimize those concerns.

There are four types of social support: emotional, instrumental (tangible goods and money), companionship, and informational (Kjellstrand et al., 2022). All of these can be

addressed through close social networks, such as family and friends, as well as more distant ones, including coworkers, interest groups, or religious communities (Kjellstrand et al., 2022). The authors did not refer to volunteers as part of the social networks, but volunteers could provide social support for three of the four types. Volunteers in the US would be discouraged from giving tangible goods or money while someone was incarcerated and could lose their access to the prison.

Social support is a necessary mechanism for reducing crime and recidivism and is critical during the initial months of reentry, including housing, financial assistance, reentry navigation, and emotional support for those released from prison (Kjellstrand et al., 2022). Kjellstrand et al. (2022) also state that individuals with higher levels of social support are more likely to obtain employment, experience better physical and emotional health, and exhibit lower hostility. In effect, social support helps individuals avoid a life of crime. And social support not only helps during reentry; Kjellstrand et al. (2022) found that it also reduces prison violations. However, while Kjellstrand et al.'s (2022) contribution to social support and its effects on a successful entry is helpful, they did not include volunteers in their definition of social support.

Prison visitation has been shown to reduce recidivism (Duwe & Johnson, 2016). This helps support the value of social connection. Still, the authors limited their research to clergy and mentors. They omitted the broader category of volunteers who assist in nonprofit rehabilitative programs, including education, athletics, the arts, and media.

Some analysts argue that race, gender, and poverty limit access to social networks (Wolff & Draine, 2004; Anderson et al., 2020). Deficiencies in social capital in poor Black and Latino

communities mean they lack connection and, therefore, miss out on opportunities like employment and education (Putnam, 1993). In prison, through rehabilitative programming and the presence of community members who provide instruction and volunteer, social networking opportunities can be established for participants.

Wolff and Draine (2004) suggest that social skills can be lost because of a lack of opportunities to practice them. At SQRC, rehabilitative programming runs throughout the week, enabling residents to interact with volunteers and practice social skills. Distance from family and friends was raised as an issue by Wolff and Draine (2004) and Anderson et al. (2022). The further an incarcerated person is from family and friends, the less frequently in-person interactions occur. Anderson et al. (2022) found that more social connections reduce social isolation only when individuals remain connected to their outside social networks. For the incarcerated in prisons with rehabilitative programs, the issue of distance from family and friends can be addressed with the addition of community members interacting with the incarcerated through rehabilitative programs. Wolff and Draine (2004) also suggest that expanding connections beyond an impoverished family network is beneficial, but they do not specify how to achieve this. Including volunteers in the literature review could have suggested that community members involved in rehabilitative programming can help expand connections.

Wolff and Draine (2004), Anderson et al. (2022), and Lafferty et al. (2016) emphasize that prison culture impacts the ability to build and maintain social connections. Wolff and Draine (2004) suggest that success in maintaining and creating social connections is possible if it starts when someone enters prison and continues until their release. Volunteers in prisons can

help maintain continuity in social networks, which are key to successful reentry and reducing recidivism.

Value of Volunteers in Prison

From the limited studies on prison volunteers (Lazzari et al., 2023; Pasma et al., 2023; Kjellstrand et al., 2023; Tewksbury and Dabney, 2008), there are many benefits that volunteers bring to the incarcerated population. Studies to date have limited the definition of volunteers to include mentors who are community members spending one-on-one time with the incarcerated (Duwe and Johnson, 2016), mentors who are formerly incarcerated (Lazzari et al., 2023), and clergy (Duwe and Johnson, 2016). There is a need to broaden the scope to include volunteers who provide rehabilitative programs focusing on education, athletics, visual and performing arts, culinary arts, and media, among others.

Volunteers can offer incarcerated individuals a rare opportunity for a confidential, private conversation, away from the harsh realities of prison (Schuhmann et al., 2018). These conversations emphasize the importance of maintaining confidentiality, avoiding judgment and prejudice, and demonstrating the volunteer's genuine interest in the incarcerated individual (Schuhmann et al., 2018). As stated previously, confiding in others is associated with up to 15% reduced odds of developing depression among people who are already at higher risk due to their history of traumatic or otherwise adverse life experiences (Choi, et al., 2020; US Surgeon General, 2023). The incarcerated feel that volunteers take them seriously and are curious about who they are as individuals (Schuhmann et al., 2018). Additionally, the volunteers dedicate their

time and energy to them without receiving any financial compensation or being part of the prison system (Schuhmann et al., 2018).

Schuhmann et al. (2018) interviewed the incarcerated in Dutch prisons. In that study, the incarcerated stated that reciprocity in sharing personal information was necessary. Volunteers are encouraged to share details of their personal lives. In the CDCR, volunteers are discouraged from sharing personal information. Incarcerated individuals in Dutch prisons also appreciated hugs from their volunteers, which are not permitted in the CDCR. Physical contact, such as hugs, is not allowed in CDCR. Handshakes or fist bumps are the only forms of physical contact permitted between volunteers and incarcerated individuals.

Volunteers serve as coaches, providing real-world advice and helping incarcerated individuals consider different possibilities (Schuhmann et al., 2018; Harris, 2025). They provide inspiring examples of how to live that may differ significantly from what incarcerated individuals experienced prior to entering prison. They are role models who demonstrate that it is possible to lead a stable, crime-free life (Schuhmann et al., 2018; Laub & Sampson, 2021). Volunteers counter hostile prison culture and provide practical advice that incarcerated individuals may not otherwise have access to (Schuhmann et al., 2018). The incarcerated draw hope, strength, and self-respect from volunteers; they do not feel written off by society but begin to feel included in it, even from prison (Schuhmann et al., 2018).

Pasma et al. (2023), who conducted a study across 26 Dutch institutions, examined incarcerated individuals' re-entry preparedness through interactions with prison- and community-based professionals, focusing on employment, housing, finances, healthcare, and

obtaining valid identification. The value of this study lies in the conclusion that incarcerated individuals should be managed throughout their entire sentences by a combination of prison-based and community-based professionals to make them feel better prepared for reentry. Two drawbacks of this study, as it relates to volunteers, are that volunteers were grouped with other community-based individuals, including social services staff, mentors, and parole officers (Pasma et al., 2023), making it difficult to determine the specific benefits they provided. The other drawback was that this study measured how prepared the incarcerated felt about reentering society, but did not measure any recidivism based on their reentry (Pasma et al., 2023).

Volunteers are also uniquely positioned to provide social support to individuals who may have few or no established social ties. Incarcerated individuals with high childhood adversity, who were in the foster care system, or who were challenged with mental illness, are known to have lower levels of social support (Kjellstrand et al., 2023). Adults who were exposed to high levels of childhood adversity may be less socially engaged and therefore less likely to form social networks (Kjellstrand et al., 2023). For instance, children in foster care cannot consistently maintain social connections because of the number of times they are moved from parents to foster parents and to new schools. Those with mental health challenges tend to have lower social connections because they have destroyed them through their addiction. Although these individuals may lack strong social connections during incarceration, volunteers can help bridge that gap and establish and strengthen social support. Social support is essential, and a continuum of support from prison to the community could produce improved recidivism outcomes (Duwe & Johnson, 2016). Nonprofit rehabilitative programming, supported by

community volunteers who witness the rehabilitation process, could help establish this continuum.

The prison system is increasingly reliant on prison volunteers (Tewksbury & Dabney, 2008). In correspondence from the CDCR, Kathleen Allison, Secretary of CDCR, commented on the value of the programs and events that volunteers provide to the incarcerated population. She said that the volunteers' work provides life skills and education, as well as positive outlets for self-expression. Lastly, she noted that volunteers demonstrate that incarcerated individuals are valued and cared for (Allison, 2022). It is essential to conduct further research on the impact of volunteers on incarcerated individuals during incarceration and upon reentry. Existing literature highlights these research gaps.

Gaps in Research

Consistently, the literature notes the lack of knowledge about social connections and prisons. Lazzari et al. (2023) note that there is limited knowledge about prison volunteers and even less about peer mentors. In addition, little is known about the contributions of prison- and community-based professionals supporting incarcerated individuals during reentry (Pasma et al., 2023). Pasma et al. (2023) also note that little attention has been paid to outcomes involving prison- and community-based professionals providing reentry support. The literature on professional reentry support is scarce and fragmented, with mixed findings (Pasma et al., 2023). Kjellstrand et al. (2022) note that limited information is available on factors that may influence social support networks among incarcerated individuals. Information is also limited regarding which factors may influence the social support of incarcerated individuals (Kjellstrand et al.,

2022). Furthermore, there is insufficient literature describing programs delivered by volunteers (Tewksbury & Dabney, 2008).

Literature suggests that further research should be conducted on the social connections between the community and individuals who are incarcerated. One suggestion was that interviewing incarcerated individuals after their release would provide more insight into the value of visitation for reentry (Schuhmann et al., 2018). This current study will address this by interviewing men who have been out of prison for at least three years without a reconviction to find out how social connections, while incarcerated, impacted the success of their re-entry.

Additional research is needed to investigate the nature of volunteer activities and the potential impact that peer volunteers have on the reentry success of individuals who have been incarcerated (Lazzari et al., 2023). Pasma et al. (2023) also suggest conducting research to assess professional interactions between prisons and communities related to reentry, including whether recidivism rates are decreasing. Duwe and Johnson (2016) agree that it is essential to determine whether volunteer-based programs can effectively reduce recidivism without imposing additional costs on the prison system. Duwe and Johnson (2016) also suggest that the lack of social support for the incarcerated should be addressed based on studies that show that increased social support lowers the rate of recidivism.

Tewksbury and Dabney (2008) suggest that more research is needed to describe and appraise volunteer programs in prisons. The prison system needs to study the nature and dynamics of volunteer efforts more. They determined that the rehabilitative programs exist, but no one in the prison system is taking the time to assess them. More attention must be directed

toward building and strengthening social support during incarceration (Kjellstrand et al., 2022). The current project's focus on volunteers and nonprofit programming will help close this gap by conducting interviews and surveys that demonstrate the connection between volunteers and successful reentry.

The literature highlighted the importance of social connection and the devastating impact of social isolation for everyone worldwide, which includes the incarcerated. Social connection improves the odds of survival, protects against physical and mental health issues, decreases the likelihood of self-harm and suicide, and helps to build strong communities. The literature suggests that human connection can improve the lives of incarcerated individuals; however, there is very little research on the impact of community volunteers in delivering this connection. This research study aims to demonstrate specifically the value that community volunteers bring by establishing social connections.

The next chapter will discuss the methods used in conducting research with a group of formerly incarcerated men who have returned to society and remained free from the criminal justice system.

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This chapter presents the research methods and data sources for this project. It begins with the research questions and end with identifying the key stakeholders and detractors of this study. This chapter details the research design and its limitations, describes the development of survey and interview questions in relation to the study's focus on social isolation, and explains the selection process for survey respondents and interview participants. The chapter also outlines the procedures for coding and analyzing responses to identify key themes and summarizes additional data sources used in the research.

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This study asks :

- What are the benefits of community volunteers working with incarcerated individuals?
- Does this collaboration between community volunteers and the incarcerated affect recidivism?
- What challenges arise when community volunteers and the incarcerated work together?
- How can these challenges be addressed?

The research looks at key components of mass incarceration and focuses on one potential solution: engaging community volunteers to provide positive human connection in order to reduce social isolation among incarcerated individuals. It investigates how positive social connections formed through these volunteers can help lessen social isolation in prisons and examines the impact these connections may have on reducing recidivism rates.

Methods and Data

Research Design

This research project employed a mixed-methods approach, combining a survey to assess whether community volunteers in prison made a difference to incarcerated individuals, with guided qualitative interviews to explore how and why they did so. The outcomes of the interviews and surveys help tell a story from the perspective of the formerly incarcerated, drawing on their insights, descriptions, and experiences (Tenny et al., 2022).

The research questions and problem statement helped frame the survey and interview questions. The Interview questions enabled participants to share stories about their rehabilitation and the impact of community volunteers on their prison experiences and reentry. They were also allowed to identify ways to improve their volunteer experience in prison. This research examined how interactions with community volunteers and incarcerated individuals affected respondents, positively or negatively. These lived experiences help reveal the benefits and drawbacks of community volunteers in prison (Tenny et al., 2022).

Respondents were selected based on whether they had been out of prison for at least three years, served time in a men's prison in the CDCR, and had not been reconvicted of a crime. The three-year period and the absence of reconviction were selected because these factors are used to calculate the recidivism rate for the State of California (CDCR, 2025). Men's prisons were selected because California has 29 men's prisons, compared with only two women's prisons, and men's prisons have greater access to rehabilitation programs. According to Jesse Vasquez, Executive Director of Pollen Initiative, "The men have always gotten the

majority of attention because there are far more men. Most of the programming, most of the services revolve around the majority of people they're going to serve," (Rainey, 2025, para. 16).

California was chosen because Governor Newsom emphasizes rehabilitation in the CDCR (Governor Newsom, 2023). He refers to the project as The California Model, which is modeled after global best practices in rehabilitation (Governor Newsom, 2023).

The researcher is a volunteer at SQRC, although ethnography was not used as the research method (Tenny et al., 2022). Those surveyed and interviewed did not all serve time at SQRC, and if they did, they were not necessarily incarcerated during the same time period as the researcher's volunteer work. None of the respondents was currently incarcerated.

Design Limitations

This research focuses narrowly on the impact that social connections through community volunteers have on incarcerated individuals and the effect on recidivism. The focus of the study was not addressing all of the components of mass incarceration because it is a complex problem comprised of many different significant social issues, like childhood trauma, social isolation, lack of educational attainment, poverty, homelessness, over-policing of disadvantaged neighborhoods, policy, criminalization of addiction and mental health, prison culture, family and community destabilization, and recidivism. Community volunteers working in prison can best address the ill effects of social isolation of the incarcerated through positive human connections.

Data Collection

The first step in data collection was to contact nonprofit organizations in California that work with formerly incarcerated individuals. An effort was made to contact nonprofit organizations in both Northern and Southern California. A request was made to send an anonymous survey to them for distribution to their community of formerly incarcerated individuals. The organizations that received the anonymous survey are shown in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Nonprofit Organizations Receiving Surveys

Anti-Recidivism Coalition
Awareness Into Domestic Abuse
Bonafide
CROP
Defy Ventures
Dream.Org
Ear Hustle
Ella Baker Center
Empowerment Avenue
GRIP
Hidden Genius Project
Homeboy Industries
Humans of San Quentin
Kaleidoscope
KALW/Uncuffed
Marin Shakespeare Company
Mend Collaborative
Mt. Tamalpais College
Pollen Initiative
Project Rebound
The Last Mile

Survey Collection and Respondent Characteristics

Surveys were sent via e-mail to 20 California nonprofit organizations. The individual organizations forwarded the survey to individuals who met the study's criteria: serving time in a men's prison in CDCR, having been released at least 3 years ago, and not having been reconvicted of a new crime. This resulted in 20 surveys being completed. Of those surveys, 11 individuals indicated they were willing to be interviewed. The survey results were collected via Qualtrics and were anonymous unless a respondent chose to participate in an interview.

The survey questions collected data on time served, the number of prisons they lived in, and the type of sentence received. The survey highlighted experiences that can contribute to social isolation and asked about the positive and negative impacts that community volunteers had on their prison experience. The survey questions are presented in Table 3.2.

These questions regarding the number of prisons and time served demonstrate the connection between social isolation and prison experiences. The average number of prisons where respondents lived was 5.45, with a range of 1 to 13. As stated in Chapter 1, frequent moves from prison to prison disrupt rehabilitative programs, add stress and trauma to the incarcerated, sever trust established with peers, community volunteers, and prison staff, and disrupt visits with family and community members.

Table 3.3. summarizes general characteristics of the survey respondents.

Table 3.2: Survey Questions

1. Did you serve in a men’s prison in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, have been out of prison at least three years, and have not been reconvicted?
2. How many prisons did you live in while in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation?
3. What was the length of your sentence?
4. How many years did you serve in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation?
5. How was your release determined? Determinate sentence, parole board, resentenced, commutation?
6. Which, if any, rehabilitation programs did you participate in while in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation?
7. If there was a moment in time when you decided to participate in rehabilitative programs, how old were you?
8. If there was a moment in time when you decided to begin participating in rehabilitative programs, how many years into your sentence did you make this decision?
9. What programs, if any, meaningfully helped you with your personal development?
10. Thinking about the programs you participated in that included community volunteers, how impactful were the interactions with the volunteers? 1 = no impact, 5 = very high impact
11. Please describe any benefits or drawbacks you may have experienced interacting with community volunteers.
12. How important was it to you to have access to community volunteers while in prison? 1 = not important, 5 = very important

There are instances in which a transfer to a different prison could be considered beneficial. CDCR uses a risk-based point system. The incarcerated are assigned points based on six factors that relate to in-prison misconduct. The factors are 1) age at first arrest, 2) age at time of assessment, 3) length of sentence, 4) gang affiliation, 5) number of prior incarcerations, and 6) behavior during prior incarcerations (Petek, 2019). Points are deducted annually for good behavior and added for poor behavior. Lower total points create an opportunity to be

transferred to a lower-security level prison, where there may be more opportunities for rehabilitative programs and access to community volunteers (Petek, 2019).

Table 3.3: Characteristics of Formerly Incarcerated Responding to the Survey

Question	Average	Range
Average number of prisons lived in	5.45	1-13 prisons
Average length of sentence - determinant	19.5 years	1-13 years
Average length of sentence - Life	36.5 years	15 to life - 85 to life plus 2 life sentences
Time Actually Served - Determinant	12 years	1-27 years
Time Actually Served - Life	23 years	13-37 years

The length of time served in prison affects the psychological state of incarcerated individuals (Haney, 2002). In this study, the average length of incarceration ranged from 12 to 23 years, depending on whether the individual had a determinate or life sentence. The longer an individual is incarcerated, the more significant the process of prison transformation becomes (Haney, 2002). Entry into prison requires the incarcerated to accept the rigid and often harsh routine of prison. The longer they are incarcerated, the more normalized the reactions to prison life become (Haney, 2002). The incarcerated can lose the ability to make choices, become acutely aware of danger and potential threats, choose to stay alone in their cell rather than face the chaos in the prison, hide their emotions, and withdraw socially from people and events (Haney, 2002). In effect, prison culture promotes social isolation.

Interviews

The interviews employed a guided approach, centered on core questions designed to explore the impact of community volunteers on respondents' rehabilitation and reentry. Table 3.4 lists the core questions asked.

These questions enabled respondents to provide more detailed and richer responses than they could in the survey. Their insights and responses yielded several themes, which also guided how to move forward and improve the process of including community volunteers in prisons. The findings from the interviews and surveys on the impact of human connection through rehabilitation programs will be discussed in the next chapter.

The interviews were conducted on Zoom and recorded. The recordings were transcribed and labeled as Returned Citizen, each with a corresponding number. The author reviewed the transcriptions to identify keywords. They were then reread to identify key themes related to the keywords, capturing similar themes that may have been phrased differently across respondents. Key themes were identified, and interview quotes were categorized accordingly. The key themes tie back to the problem of social isolation as well as the research question relating to any benefits of community volunteers working with the incarcerated.

Additional Data Sources

In addition to the survey and interviews, research also included secondary data gathered from sources providing data and statistics such as California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, IZA Institute of Labor Economics, The Council of State Governments

Justice Center, Washington State Statistical Analysis Center, National Institute of Mental Health, National Institute of Justice, and Virginia Department of Corrections. In addition to using data gathered from these sources, a comprehensive literature review was conducted, providing additional information. Conversations with nonprofit leaders in the criminal justice sector and formerly incarcerated individuals informed the selection of additional sources.

Online search terms used to guide additional sources of information included social isolation, human connection, recidivism, rehabilitation, reentry, solitary confinement, mass incarceration, prison culture, California Department of Corrections, criminal behavior, childhood trauma, and adverse childhood experiences.

Beneficiaries, Stakeholders, and Detractors

Understanding who the beneficiaries, partners, and stakeholders of a project are and what changes are required to achieve the final goal is crucial (Harries et al., 2014). There is an overlap between the beneficiaries and stakeholders in the State of California. Those integral to effecting change—such as prison staff, volunteers, the incarcerated, and the State of California—will also benefit.

The State of California, both a stakeholder and a beneficiary, benefits from understanding how community interactions help lower recidivism rates. The advisory board created by Governor Newsom to recommend changes to SQRC recommends closing prisons and releasing eligible incarcerated individuals to avoid prison overcrowding (Williams et al., 2024). This study could help the state select which prisons to close. It could also help the state adjust its budget to shift

prison operating costs toward rehabilitative programs and initiatives known to prevent or reduce incarceration. One result could be improved public safety.

Table 3.4: Interview Questions

1. What motivated you to participate in rehabilitative programs?
2. You stated in your survey that you had a moment of change. What was that moment?
3. What were the most meaningful programs you participated in and why?
4. What programs would you recommend and why?
5. What were the interactions like with community volunteers?
6. If a level of trust was established, how was the trust built with the community volunteer?
7. Please describe any benefits you experienced interacting with community volunteers. Feel free to provide an example of an interaction.
8. Please describe any drawbacks you experienced interacting with community volunteers. Feel free to provide an example of an interaction.
9. If you interacted with community volunteers who were formerly incarcerated, describe how those interactions were different, if they were in any way.
10. If you were to describe the importance of having access to community volunteers while in prison, what would you say?
11. If volunteers wrote letters of support for the parole board or resentencing, how helpful do you think the letters were in the decision to release you from prison?
12. How are interactions with community volunteers different from those with prison staff?
13. How would you improve the community volunteer experience?
14. What challenges did you encounter upon release?
15. Who helped you overcome those challenges?
16. What kind of support, if any, did you receive from community volunteers during reentry?
17. If community volunteers met you at the gate upon your release, how did that make you feel?
18. What haven't I asked that you would like to share about your interactions with community volunteers while incarcerated and upon reentry?

The CDCR, also a stakeholder and beneficiary, would benefit from this study, as it focuses on rehabilitation, particularly at SQRC, which has been renamed a rehabilitation center (Williams et al., 2024). The CDCR could use this information to allow more non-profit programming, expand access to SQRC and other prisons for volunteers, and establish detailed, personalized rehabilitation programs upon incarcerated individuals' entry into prison (Williams et al., 2024), including community interactions. The community benefits because lower recidivism results in fewer crimes committed by those returning to society. It is estimated that 95% of those in prison will return to society (Hughes & Wilson, 2004), so lower recidivism equates to a safer community.

Families of the incarcerated benefit from this study by keeping families together and eliminating disruptions due to individuals returning to prison. Children, in particular, would benefit from having their rehabilitated parents home instead of having to visit their parents in prison. Incarceration disrupts spousal and parent-child relationships because the loss of a family member to the carceral system means negative changes to family structure, financial support, emotional support, and living arrangements (Sullivan et. al., 2006).

Nonprofit rehabilitation programs could benefit by expanding their programs, providing more robust volunteer training, securing additional funding, and attracting more volunteers. The incarcerated population benefits by having more rehabilitative programs available and more access to community members who can support their rehabilitation and minimize the adverse effects of social isolation.

Not everyone believes that rehabilitating the incarcerated is a productive use of resources. Funders of the abolitionist movement would like to see funds directed away from the

carceral system and toward community organizations that provide housing, employment, treatment options, and other services to keep people out of prison in the first place (CCJFG, 2023). In addition, advocacy groups are fighting for fewer people in prison, fewer prisons, and a shift in budget allocations to communities (CCJFG, 2023). Nonprofit organizations fighting for human rights argue that humane conditions cannot be provided when people are locked up; therefore, efforts should focus on closing prisons rather than improving them (ABC 7 Bay Area News, March 2023).

Victims and their families may feel that the perpetrator who caused harm to their loved one should only be punished rather than rehabilitated. However, that is not true in every case. Jess Nichols, a sister of Polly Klaus, who was kidnapped and murdered in California in 1993 when she was 12 years old, states in an editorial in the *Marin IJ* (2025) that victims prefer rehabilitation and community investment rather than extended prison terms. She went on to say, “I’ve learned through my own healing journey that real change happens through connection, understanding, and genuine accountability — not through punishment, shame, or control.” The voting public may also have strong feelings about rehabilitation versus punishment. Online comments regarding the transformation of SQRC included [@jh225](#), commenting on the news story titled ‘Former San Quentin inmate weighs in on Gov. Newsom's plan to transform the max security prison’, “I will never vote to help fix any of this” (ABC 7 Bay Area News, 2023).

Inside a prison, correctional officers may not embrace the shift toward rehabilitation. According to James King, Co-director of Programs for the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights and a formerly incarcerated individual at SQRC, the correctional officers are trained to believe

that those in prison are a threat to public safety (ABC 7 Bay Area News, 2023). Some correctional officers may not want to be retrained.

There are economic reasons to resist rehabilitation if the outcome is having fewer incarcerated individuals. Federal funding to states helps keep prisons full (Eisen, 2021). Correctional officer unions can influence the maintenance of higher incarceration rates (Duara & Kimmelman, 2024). In addition, towns where prisons account for a large share of commerce may resist rehabilitation and prison closures (Duara & Kimmelman, 2024). In California, cities like Susanville, California City, and Blythe, all slated to close their prisons, built their economies around prison employment (Duara, 2023).

9

The survey and interview questions helped to answer the research questions for this project. The research questions are:

- What are the benefits of community volunteers working with incarcerated individuals?
- Does this collaboration between community volunteers and the incarcerated affect recidivism?
- What challenges arise when community volunteers and the incarcerated work together?
- How can these challenges be addressed?

These questions will be answered from the findings of the interviews and surveys in the next chapter. Key themes from the collected data are shared to support the positive impact of human connection from volunteers working with the incarcerated, healing the effects of social isolation, and reducing recidivism.



This study focuses on a potential solution to address key components of mass incarceration. It examines the impact of community volunteers on incarcerated individuals and whether this work is associated with reduced recidivism. The incarcerated typically have endured a lifetime of trauma, which can lead to social isolation, which can then lead to criminal behavior and incarceration, thus inflicting more social isolation. Positive human connections are known to heal the physical and mental effects of social isolation. This study examines, in greater detail, the potential benefits of positive human connections between community volunteers and incarcerated individuals.

The survey and interview questions helped uncover incarcerated individuals' desire for personal growth, how prison culture can impede rehabilitation, the benefits of rehabilitation, the value of volunteers, and areas for improving the relationship between volunteers and the incarcerated. The responses to the questions provided rich insights into the impact of prison rehabilitation and how community volunteers can enhance the experience.

The literature review showed that there is very little existing research related to the connection between community volunteers and the incarcerated and the impact on recidivism rates. The results from the surveys and interviews will show a strong connection.

The original research for this project focused on individuals who had been out of prison for at least 3 years, had served time in a men's prison within the CDCR, and had not been reconvicted of a crime. The focus of the survey and interviews was to gain a better

understanding of the impact of community volunteers on incarcerated individuals and of the connections they had to their reentry into society. The survey and interviews yielded five key themes related to the research questions and social isolation in prison. The five key themes are shown in Table 4.1. Respondents are labeled as a Returned Citizen (RC) following their quotes.

Table 4.1: Key Themes for Successful Rehabilitation

Desire for Personal Growth
Challenges of Existing Prison Culture
Benefits of Rehabilitation
Value of Volunteers
Improvements for Volunteer Impact

Desire for Personal Growth

The desire for personal growth is divided into three subsections. They include a moment of change, a motivation for rehabilitation, and a positive attitude toward learning, all of which are sequential. First comes the spark to change, then the motivation to participate in rehabilitation programs, and lastly, the desire to learn.

Moment of Change

The moment of change is crucial to this research question because it serves as a stepping stone. It shifts the incarcerated individual's mindset toward openness to rehabilitation and access to community volunteers.

One of the survey questions asked whether the formerly incarcerated participants had experienced a moment of change, and, if so, how old they were and how long they had been incarcerated. Although the moment of change was not defined for the respondents, they all

experienced one, and they knew precisely when it occurred. It was a memorable occasion when they decided to end the life that had led to prison and to create a better future for themselves. Table 4.2 presents the respondents' ages at the time of change and the prison time they had served.

Table 4.2: Moments of Change Among Respondents

	Average	Range
Reported Age at Moment of Change	28 years	20-37 years
Years Served Before the Moment of Change	6.6 years	0-16 years

It is presumed that the respondents were exposed to high levels of childhood trauma based on statistics already provided, so it was interesting that many of the moments of change related to additional traumatic experiences that were tipping points for them to want change in their lives. One gentleman knew immediately after being arrested that he wanted to change.

I was arrested for a gang-related murder, and my mother and little brother were killed in retaliation. And, it put me in a place to begin to have empathy for others, 'cause it allowed me to realize all the harm that I had been imposing on my community, right? And now, it had come back on me in a way that made me want to change. At that point, I dedicated my life to change and do better, on day one, when I was in a holding tank, in the substation of the LAPD (RC #8).

Another individual experienced a change in the prison yard following a traumatic event.

I remember a guy got stabbed right in front of me. We were both doing dips on the same dip bar. He got stabbed, and I saw him just bleed out five feet from me. It kind of did something to me internally. I wanted to change because I knew that something was wrong with me internally. I had become calloused to human suffering, and I hadn't reckoned with the fact that taking a human life is an absolute act. There's no reset. You can't go back on it. I remember wanting something better for myself, if not for my own redemption, but at least for a better life in spite of the fact that I had a life sentence. That was the moment that

actually caused me to reflect that I need to start thinking differently about what the heck I'm doing in here (RC #4).

These moments of change fostered a mindset of motivation to participate in rehabilitation programs in prison. Participating in programs introduces these individuals to community volunteers.

Motivation for Rehabilitation

The motivation for rehabilitation is a natural consequence of the moment when an incarcerated person decides to change. There are various reasons individuals seek participation in rehabilitation programs. As previously discussed, rehabilitation programs help incarcerated individuals change their perspectives, make informed choices, interact with community volunteers, and acquire essential skills that facilitate their reentry into society. There were three primary drivers for participating in rehabilitation programs. The first goal was to switch from a high-security yard, which is both dangerous and unsuitable for rehabilitation. The second was the chance to be released from prison and go home. And the third was a connection with their family.

As described earlier, the dangerous environment in prison can contribute to social isolation either because individuals are isolating themselves to remain safe or because the prisons have frequent lockdowns, which keep individuals in their cells for long periods of time with no access to programs or other individuals. Therefore, the desire to participate in programs that lead to lower-level security yards and eventually return home is compelling. One gentleman, referring to the danger in prison, stated, "I think looking at the world and the people

around me in there I found myself saying, I don't belong here. This isn't me. I'm not these gang members and tattoo people. And I'm scared. Really, really scared" (RC # 12).

Many of the men expressed a desire to participate in rehabilitation programs to prepare for going home. One gentleman stated, "My main motivation was I came to the realization, if I'm ever gonna get outta here, I gotta do some programs" (RC #1). Even with motivation to participate, a common complaint was that prisons lacked available programs. One individual shared,

I wanted to get off the (high security) yard, but it wasn't until I would say maybe 10 years into my incarceration that I was even in a yard that had a program. I was never anywhere that had programming, period. There was no AA, no NA, nothing. Programming seemed like a foreign concept to me (RC #2).

Another respondent stated that he did not lack motivation to rehabilitate; he did not have access to the necessary programs.

It wasn't that I lacked the initiative to participate in programming. Most of the facilities that I was at for the first 13 or 14 years didn't have any rehabilitative programs. I think the only programs that they had were NA and AA, which are more recovery-based. I was never a drug addict or an alcoholic (RC #4).

Sometimes prisons did not offer programs, but one individual also noted that higher-security yards make it challenging to attend programs. "Level four yards, didn't have any self-help programs. And if they did, you didn't attend anyway, because you were always on lockdown, right?" (RC #1).

Family relations also played a role in motivating individuals to participate in rehabilitation programs. One gentleman shared,

My grandmother was getting older. I think at that time, she might have been in her 70's or something. You know, she's the one person I love above anything in this world. I just hated the thought of her passing away, and me not living to what she believed would be my full potential. This would have just been heartbreaking (RC #9).

Another gentleman shared that the pain he was causing his mother was what motivated him to start rehabilitation programs. "She was sitting across from me, I remember, the whole visit was a blur, but I do remember her saying, 'Man, you're still causing me pain,' and that was enough to really wake me up" (RC #6).

As shown, the primary motivations expressed by the interviewees were safety, release from prison, or addressing family dynamics. This is insufficient to affect real change. There has to be a desire to learn as well

Attitude Towards Learning

The next natural step after wanting to change and being motivated to try rehabilitation programs is the desire to learn. The consistent message from the interviewees was the importance of trying something new, whether learning new skills, becoming a new person, or pursuing something new for themselves. This attitude toward learning, combined with a desire to change and a willingness to try rehabilitative programs, is the trifecta for incarcerated individuals participating in rehabilitation programs and being introduced to community volunteers. This can reduce social isolation and initiate the healing effects of human connection.

One gentleman's desire for something new led to his transfer to SQRC for the college program. He said,

I just wanted something new for myself. Wanting to change was there, but not knowing how because of the limited programs at the time. I thought, I will dive into school. I heard about Mt. Tamalpais College, and I wrote and asked if I could be accepted into their college program. I was accepted into their program, and about a month later, I was on a bus heading to San Quentin (R #9).

Another individual stated that his motivation to learn was driven by his desire to become a better person. He went on to say,

I wanted to have better intellectual capacities. I wanted to have better emotional intelligence. I wanted to have better self-discipline when it came to anger management. I wanted to have better recall in my memory, and I also wanted to have more communication skills (RC #4).

Another said his desire to learn came when he realized he didn't want to be gang-affiliated anymore.

I went to prison wanting to be a gang member. I did everything to become a gang member. I went to a higher-level facility because that's where they said the gangs are. I realized it wasn't what it was cracked up to be, to be honest with you. I started thinking differently. I was like, I don't want to be a gang member anymore. So let me educate myself and see what else I can do with my life (RC #10).

The desire to change, to participate in programs, and learn new ways of thinking and skills is crucial to the success of rehabilitation. However, standing in the way of these desires is the prison's culture. If the prison culture is not supportive of rehabilitation, there will be fewer programs and fewer volunteers.

9. Prison Culture and Rehabilitation

If a prison has not adopted a culture of rehabilitation, it is not conducive to rehabilitation for many reasons. The interviewees stated that prison culture is divisive and confrontational; day-to-day life is filled with ultimatums and threats; it is dark, hopeless, and full of despair; and it is anti-social and dangerous. Correctional officers set the tone for the prison's culture. One gentleman stated that "Prison guards create a sense of division and separation. That is the prison dynamics. Prison guards get indoctrinated into it when first coming in as cadets. They are told, these are your enemies. They're policing. They're hostile" (RC #2).

The violence in prison also affects the ability to participate in programs.

There are certain times in those maximum security level four facilities, you see a person die, you know, weekly at times, and then you go on lockdown. And then you're good for six months, and then you come back out, and you see another two or three deaths, and then you go back on lockdown for another six months to a year (RC #4).

Extended lockdowns exacerbate the adverse effects of social isolation, interrupt rehabilitation programs, and hinder access to community volunteers. Violence also inhibits the desire to rehabilitate because the incarcerated are focused on their own safety.

I was sent to a level four maximum security (prison). At that point, I had just turned 19. It was a very violent yard. And so I wasn't even thinking about working on myself. I wasn't even thinking about rehabilitation. I was like, I'm trying to survive the day. I am just trying to survive, not getting killed or stabbed. That was the mentality. It wasn't a conducive environment for rehabilitation (RC #1).

The violent nature of prison also creates a culture of social isolation.

Going in at 18 years old, I was thrust into a level four facility where there's an extreme amount of violence. There are months and years of being locked down. And there's nothing accorded, not even a book. It's just like me and a roommate for years, and we are not allowed out of the cell (RC #11).

The invisibility of prison operations also contributes to the culture that exists.

CDCR has this weird ideology where they believe that they don't need oversight or they don't want anyone to see what's behind these gates, and it's for the best, for public safety, and it's for rehabilitation efforts. Everyone needs to be isolated from the rest of society to be healed and rehabilitated. Instead, they just don't want people watching what they're doing, breaking the rules, and creating a cruel environment in which it is (RC #7).

Consistent with the research that the incarcerated have experienced high levels of childhood trauma leading to social isolation and prison, one gentleman connects incarceration and isolation. "These people have been ostracized. But at the same time, they've been ostracized before they even went to prison. That's why they did what they did to go to prison" (RC #10).

Integral to this research is whether positive human connections can offset the trauma experienced as children. One avenue for delivering human connections is through rehabilitation programs, often facilitated by community-based organizations and their volunteers. The next section will focus on the benefits of rehabilitation and where community volunteers' contributions are beneficial, before examining the direct impact of community volunteers when working with incarcerated individuals.

Benefits of Rehabilitation

Research reviewed indicates that rehabilitation programs reduce recidivism, with some more effective than others. According to the gentlemen interviewed for this project, the benefits of rehabilitation fell into three main categories: addressing the issues that led to their imprisonment, providing job opportunities upon release, and offering opportunities for socialization.

Addressing issues that Led Them to Prison

Wanting to change, motivated to participate in programs, and a desire to learn help the incarcerated become exposed to programs that address understanding the false belief systems and culture that led them to prison. Exposure to programs also gives incarcerated individuals access to community volunteers. One individual shared that,

Rehabilitation programs were meaningful to me because they addressed some, if not all, of the issues of what led me to prison. And so, that was very meaningful to understand about getting out, because at the time, I didn't know if I was getting out, if I ever was going to get out (RC #9).

Another gentleman commented that programs that counter the culture in which they were raised helped them rethink how they want to be in the world. Community volunteers were helping to provide a different perspective.

All of the programs were basically run by community volunteers, and the reason why I feel like they were so meaningful, is they provided what I needed at the moment, like in Alternatives to Violence. Like, my whole life was based on violence. I witnessed domestic violence growing up, I was part of violence, I perpetuated violence. So here's a program offering alternatives to violence, and it is introducing me to concepts on how to be assertive and effective in how to communicate, and how to control your emotions. Like,

all these were revolutionary concepts. I questioned, is this such a thing? The environment on the street to a worse environment in prison, and you're talking about non-violence (RC #6).

Several of those interviewed also commented not only on the value of rehabilitation programs that address the causes that led to their incarceration, but also on the value of their peers modeling the way, as they had done more rehabilitative work.

When I started going to those groups, people were further along in their healing journey than I was. They felt more vulnerable, more confident; they shared things that they went through as children. They're learning what they did wrong and the connections they've been able to make with their lifestyle that led them to prison. All of that started resonating with me. I can work on myself so that I will not harm anybody again. And not just not harm anybody again, but also go above that to live in honor of those I've harmed (RC #1).

Not only do rehabilitation programs help address the root causes of criminal behavior and, through community volunteers, learn different perspectives, but they also provide skills and connections for work opportunities upon the individual's return to society.

Work Opportunities

Rehabilitation programs in prisons are valuable for the skills they develop and the connections they establish with community members. A purpose of those programs is to prepare incarcerated individuals for successful lives after release. One gentleman shared just how many opportunities he had because of the programs he participated in and the people he met.

They were good because of the things that I learned that eventually I took with me to do others things inside and outside of prison. I know a lot of people that have been incarcerated that eventually go to work for an organization where they were a facilitator

in a program. They paroled and had a job, right? Like good jobs too. Like for them, that was the same way. I remember when I was paroled, I was like, Man, I got so many options. What do I want to do? Or what do I need to do? What's the thing that is going to help me out of my re-entry? I felt I had a lot of opportunities, and all of those opportunities were with people I knew, that I met, that were coming in from different organizations, and some of them were volunteers. I got work, which is important, but I had real opportunities (RC #2).

Another participant emphasized the importance of a human connection with a community member, which helped him grow and apply the skills and insights the facilitator shared.

I think I've learned a lot of things that I use in my work today that all came from her mentorship, her giving me coach status. We were working towards coach status with her and then using that on the yard, which allowed me to be able to work with youth, work with formerly incarcerated adults, work in a college setting, and just grow naturally in the roles I'm doing today (RC #7).

As important as the rehabilitation programs are in helping the incarcerated address the causes of what led them to prison, many of them emphasized that the human connection with community volunteers was more important than the curriculum.

Human Connection Over Curriculum

The comment below summarizes the interviewees' views on the value of human connection in rehabilitation programs.

When you talk about community work, and you talk about volunteerism, and how that changed the dynamics of the institution, by far, it's a huge difference. It's a complete difference, you know, and it's not necessarily the courses. It's not the college classes, it's not the vocational classes, it's not GRIP, it's not any of these groups. It's the dynamic of the people that you're around that changes the behavior of how you want to carry yourself when you come home. It does. And that's just the bottom line (RC #10).

Socialization

Consistent with the value of human connection offered through rehabilitation programs, socialization skills are also included, which many felt they either missed growing up or lost while incarcerated due to the level of social isolation in prison. The gentlemen interviewed reported feeling uncomfortable interacting with community members due to their limited experience with prosocial encounters. They also said that social isolation in prison inhibited their ability to practice their social skills.

A lack of social skills may stem from a lifetime of social isolation, as described in Chapter One. One individual shared that he had socially isolated himself during childhood, but working with volunteers helped him.

The volunteer aspect of it was really impactful because for so long I've been isolating myself from the larger society. Even before I was in prison, I just stayed around my so-called neighborhood and really didn't know what the world looked like outside of my neighborhood. And so interacting with volunteers helped a lot. It opened my eyes, it opened my world, really. You know, it helped me build confidence in myself to speak to other people who look different than me and sound different than me. It knocked away preconceived biases that I may have had. It helped me to be open and to talk to people and just to trust people again (RC #8).

This gentleman went on to say that he originally struggled with socializing because of the trauma he experienced as a child.

For me, it was about learning how to communicate. It was just that I didn't really know how to socialize in that environment, and I really had issues communicating with women. Like, those were issues that I had as a teenager, as a young person, that were connected to a lot of childhood trauma that I experienced (RC #8).

Many shared that their primary conversations were either with prison residents, who do not provide new perspectives on how to socialize, or with prison staff, who tended to be negative. Rehabilitation programs and access to community volunteers or programs supplied incarcerated individuals with opportunities to learn prosocial skills. One gentleman shared, “You learn how to socialize in a different way that many of us haven’t had the experience to do in sometimes years and decades, in some instances” (RC #2).

Another individual noted that the prosocial skills he was learning benefited not only him but also the prison community.

I started being able to see how every pro-social development skill that I developed was for the common good of everybody in my cohort, or my group, or my community. That is what I really loved about those programs, I was able to flourish as a person (RC #4).

One individual distinguished prison work programs from rehabilitation programs regarding socialization.

It’s more personal when you’re dealing with certain self-help groups at San Quentin as opposed to vocational. In vocation, you’re basically learning life skills to survive. As opposed to figuring out what your personal issues are. And how you can be more pro-social in an environment where there are a lot of people. As opposed to me just wanting to be an engineer, and I can go down here in this well by myself, and I don’t have to be pro-social. I don’t have to talk to nobody. I can just get a job and go to work in this well for the rest of my life, you know? As opposed to me sitting in a group and having to tell people what my issues are, what my upbringing is, how I got to be here, you know? You didn’t have to do that in a vocational class. You just need to acquire skills. You don’t need to learn how to function in society (RC #10).

Another participant reported that communicating with volunteers elevated their social skills. He shared,

We are learning how to talk to folks at a higher level. It's empowering, and it's educational. We are learning a lot of skills. San Quentin News was one of those places that was a whole different world within the world of prison that was happening. It is not every day you're just hanging out and working with UC Berkeley School of Journalism folks (RC #2).

Ultimately, those interviewed felt that knowing how to function in society in a prosocial manner was a key to successful reintegration. The programs are beneficial, but social connections and skills are what support their healing and preparation for life after prison. Social skills were among the many benefits that the interviewees reported from working with community volunteers.

Value of Volunteers

The value of volunteers was expressed in various ways. Volunteers help the incarcerated feel human, teach social skills, provide a human connection, change the prison culture, create a safe space, act as role models, make the incarcerated feel like they are part of a society they are physically separated from, felt seen as a colleague and a peer, give of their time, make the incarcerated feel cared for, and make them feel welcomed when they come after being released from prison. These benefits help to heal the adverse effects of social isolation. Although the positives outweigh the negatives, there were some drawbacks in working with volunteers, which will be discussed.

The survey included two questions related to the value of community volunteers. Of the 20 respondents, three responses were excluded because they reported not having access to

community volunteers while incarcerated. The questions were rated on a 5-point scale, with 5 indicating the highest importance or impact. The results are presented in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3: Survey Results on Value of Volunteer Interactions

Thinking about the programs you participated in that included community volunteers, how impactful were the interactions with the volunteers	4.94
How important was it to you to have access to community volunteers while in prison?	5

The results of these two survey questions show how important community volunteers are to the incarcerated population. The first question included those who had direct access to community volunteers through rehabilitation programs. The prison's location and security level affected the number and frequency of interactions with community volunteers, resulting in a rating just below 5. However, the second question concerned the perceived value of community volunteers, regardless of whether they interacted with them. The perception was that community volunteers were highly important to them.

The comments from those interviewed help provide color to support the two survey questions. The overall value of volunteers is expressed well by this gentleman.

I was locked up for 20 years on this last sentence, and before that, I was in for two years as a juvenile. I had so many gaps in my life. I didn't know how to balance a checkbook or how to pay a car note. I didn't know how to do all of these things that I didn't have to before I was inside because I was inside for so long. I learned all of that stuff from volunteers, from them sharing their life experiences and their lived experiences in the same way that we value on the outside. They call us prison experts. But what about the volunteers who come in? These are life experts. They can teach you how to live because they've been successful at it, and they're coming in to help you by sharing that knowledge and awareness (RC #4).

Humanization

According to those interviewed, the primary value of community volunteers was that they made incarcerated individuals feel human. All eleven interviewed participants commented on the importance of this to their rehabilitation.

One gentleman put the value of being seen as human in very succinct terms. “The importance of community volunteers is definitely being accepted as a living human being. Otherwise, you’re socially dead”(RC #3).

Being perceived as human can also help break the conviction that one is identified as a criminal. One gentleman shared,

Volunteers help keep people connected to their humanity. Cause there are lessons. Whether they’re formal lessons or not, there are informal lessons that keep happening. Sometimes your commitment to that criminal identity has everything to do with your removal from those connections to the free world (RC #5).

Volunteers' identification of the incarcerated as human is important because it contrasts with how prison staff typically identify them. This gentleman describes his experience of being identified differently.

When you are in prison, the guards are trained a certain way. They are trained to dehumanize you. And then a volunteer comes in, and they’re treating you almost as an equal, it’s like, whoa! For me, at least, I started seeing the humanity in myself. You’re dehumanized so much inside there, and then someone comes in and treats you as if you are one of them. It’s like, we start seeing it in ourselves, right? Like what is possible and that I am human. I can be a community member. I am this, you know? And for me, that was hugely important (RC #1).

Humanizing the incarcerated helps break the feeling of being socially isolated due to a lack of meaningful connections with others. When you don't feel seen, it is hard to establish a human connection. One gentleman shared what it was like to feel seen by volunteers. "I felt seen. It went from being an invisible ghost. You're not alive, you're not dead. You're a ghost, and you don't exist. And so, for somebody to see me, it restored that cup of humanity and hope" (RC #12).

Volunteers cannot only change individuals' lives through positive human connections, but also improve prison culture.

Changes in Prison Culture

As stated in Chapter One, prisons exemplify social isolation. The physical location makes it challenging for family members, friends, volunteers, and community-based organizations to visit regularly (Hopwood, 2021; Eisen, 2024). The violence in prison makes it dangerous, and individuals may select to remain in their cells as a form of safety, albeit it is socially isolating. Higher-security prisons are frequently on lockdown, which makes interaction with others and community volunteers challenging. Solitary confinement further socially isolates individuals by being locked up 23 hours a day (Kiebala et al., 2023). However, the interviewees stated that volunteers help change the prison culture. This benefits not only the incarcerated individuals but also the prison staff.

As noted earlier, prison staff help establish and enforce the prison culture, whether punitive or rehabilitative. One gentleman shared,

If volunteers came in and they were happy, it rubbed off on the staff, the guards became happy. Volunteers come in, and they're changing the culture and the way people see themselves and the way they interact. People are letting their guards down. They're happier, they're more motivated. And so that brings more peace, that brings more openness, and then that rubs off on officers. That rubs off on the administration. And so before you know it, we start having conversations. More and more conversations happen between blue and green, volunteer and administration, so that it becomes a free-flowing place of another potential (RE #11).

Another individual explains that the cultural change results from the ripple effect of what incarcerated individuals learn from volunteers and how they share it with their peers.

They have the ability and the power to change the culture on prison yards, right? Because there is so much craziness going on in the yard that people look to groups for an escape. And so, if you find a good enough program and volunteer, they could really make the difference in what happens back on the yard when they start to internalize some of the things that community volunteers are teaching (RC #6).

Volunteers, in addition to helping to change the culture of a prison, also have the opportunity to create a safe environment in which incarcerated individuals can socialize and learn. This allows incarcerated individuals to form positive human connections, thereby mitigating the adverse effects of social isolation.

Create Safe Places

Creating a safe place in some prisons is not easy, but the presence of volunteers makes it possible. One gentleman shared,

There's trauma. There's violence that's perpetrated. And every day is a day that you have to put this armor on, and your body is completely tense. You're hyper vigilant. And so when somebody comes in, you get to let that down. You get to let your shield down. You get to let somebody in. You get to be seen just for a little bit. You get to be happy. You get to be that kid in elementary school at recess, where there are no worries, you are

vulnerable, and there is hope. And then volunteers leave. You've got to go right back and put that armor on and be somebody you're not (RC #11).

Another gentleman offered that creating a safe space allows him to open up, learn, and change.

In thinking about my own experience, people showed up for me, and so because they showed up, I showed up, and at a time when I was clueless. I didn't know what change looked like. I just know that I needed it, and so these community volunteers came, and they brought their love, they brought their connection, and it created a safe space for me to open up (RC #6).

Research has shown that volunteer work with incarcerated individuals is effective in helping them feel human, promoting prosocial behavior, changing prison culture, and creating safe places to learn. The only way to achieve this is to allow volunteers to enter prison settings and serve as role models.

Role Models

The individuals interviewed for this project did not have role models who looked different from them or lived outside their neighborhoods. Many indicated that they lacked access to positive role models with diverse life experiences. One gentleman commented on the importance of community volunteers visiting prisons and serving as role models.

The way to show individuals how to be successful in the community is by giving them positive role models, and the only way that you can do that inside of an institution is by allowing the community to come in and be a part of their lives. Being a daily presence of light, professionalism, and modeling the characteristics that make for a successful human being, a successful business person (RC #4).

He goes on to say that you cannot separate the incarcerated from society and then expect them to be successful when they are released. He shares,

You can't isolate people from a community of holistic values and opportunities and expect them to come out and flourish. You have to give them the opportunity to witness what it's like to show human kindness, compassion, love, empathy, and be groomed by people who have succeeded for 20, 30, 40 years. Who are coming into these prisons to try and give them some light and some hope (RC #4).

Another participant reports that observing positive behavior in a volunteer inspires him to believe that he can do it too. In addition, having a volunteer believe in him revealed that he could also believe in himself.

And for me, it's about what we have in common as human beings, because if I see it in you and it's possible, then I know that I can do it too. If you are able to empathize with me and demonstrate that I'm a human being and that I can change, and you believe in that, your demonstrating that will definitely have an impact. If nothing else, I'll be like, you know what? She thinks I can do it. I can do it! (RC #8).

Volunteers model appropriate conduct when interacting with incarcerated individuals. This creates a ripple effect among the incarcerated and their community. As one gentleman stated, "When I see other people wanting to help me, it makes me want to help other people" (RC #10).

The presence of community volunteers not only provides a model of appropriate social behavior but also helps incarcerated individuals feel part of a society from which they have been physically separated.

Sense of Inclusion

In addition to helping incarcerated individuals learn to socialize and interact with community members, volunteers were also integral to their sense of inclusion in society. The incarcerated are physically removed from society while they are in prison. In the majority of states, incarcerated individuals do not have the right to vote (NCSL, 2025). Their ability to interact with society is limited, and they find it challenging to meet new individuals. However, the benefit of having community volunteers visit prisons is that they can bring a sense of community, helping incarcerated individuals feel connected. One individual articulated the value of his sense of belonging to society while incarcerated.

When someone actually feels that they're part of the community, they're less likely to cause harm to that community because they feel part of the community. When that community welcomes them back, they're less likely to create harm in that community because that community welcomes them. The vast majority of people who are welcomed, especially right from the gate, are going to feel motivated to not just not harm the community but even serve that community. And if you're being of service, you are not harming the community (RC #1).

Because prisons are meant to be isolating for the incarcerated, having community volunteers establish a connection to society was essential to those interviewed. One gentleman shared,

It felt organic, and it also just felt like being part of a society again. Prisons are meant to be isolating places. They're so far from communities and certain neighborhoods. And so to have community members coming to a prison, it kind of connects you that way (RC #9).

Another acknowledged the value of being introduced to individuals entering prison and the human connections he established. He said,

Like in life, we were getting introduced to people that were coming in, human beings, that were coming. It became a community in a lot of ways. This was over 10 years ago, almost 15 years, and I still know all those folks (RC #2).

Once incarcerated individuals were introduced to community volunteers and other community members, a transformative aspect of those relationships was that they felt known as colleagues and peers rather than as convicted criminals.

Seen as Colleagues

The impact of being identified as a colleague, rather than a prisoner, strengthens human connections. One gentleman described it this way.

People took you seriously. And they don't treat you like you're somebody that's incarcerated. They said 'I see you as somebody who's a professional in the work that you're doing here.' They treated you like a colleague. It was something very positive about that because then you take yourself seriously. And then you end up learning responsibility because, in prison, you are being told what to do and to do it, and that's it (RC #2).

The care that volunteers show to incarcerated individuals is evident in the comments from those interviewed about the benefits of volunteering. A reason a sense of care is vital for incarcerated individuals is that, according to those interviewed, many have not experienced the same level of care in their lives as they have received from volunteers.

A majority of incarcerated individuals have experienced a history of childhood trauma. A notable absence in their upbringings was a sense of being cared for. This lack of care can lead to

social isolation, which is a precursor to criminal behavior. Giving the incarcerated individuals an opportunity to feel cared for can help heal the negative effects of social isolation.

Feeling Cared For

Feeling cared for is an element of positive human connection, which is known to heal the adverse effects of social isolation (WHO, 2025; US Surgeon General, 2023). One of the gentlemen highlighted that care from volunteers may be the first time they have ever felt cared for. “And so with that right there, saying this volunteer cares. Some people in there have never been able to say that about anybody in their lives” (RC #7).

Another element of care is the feeling that the volunteers wanted to spend their time helping them. Here is what one gentleman said.

It was the way they were showing up that demonstrated to me there was some care there. That they do care. And the fact that they care enough to come in, and, you know, they’re coming in with the idea of serving me, right? Of helping me (RC #8).

This element of care continued when the men were released from prison and welcomed home by individuals, including volunteers they had met while incarcerated.

Feeling Welcomed Home

As one gentleman shared above, when you are welcomed by society, you are less likely to hurt that society. Volunteers can actively participate in welcoming incarcerated individuals home by greeting them at the gate on the day of release, taking them out for a meal, connecting them to jobs, or offering resources such as computers or cars.

One gentleman shared what it was like to be welcomed by one of the groups he participated in.

I was in the running club. When I came home, their tradition was we had a run in Marin. Here I am with the running club volunteers. We're having breakfast. And that had nothing to do with the job, it had nothing to do with anything. It just had to do with community. They welcomed me home, and it was good because those things are important (RC #2).

In many instances, those released from prison lack family support, and volunteers and other individuals help fill that gap. Here is what one gentleman shared.

I got a lot of support from community volunteers when I got out. He took me out to lunch. It was cool. It was heartfelt. Just a presence reaching out with encouragement. Their emotional support was very instrumental. They were excited for me, validating what I was doing. I did not receive the type of reception I was looking for from my family, so it became my surrogate family. It kept me going (RC #6).

In addition to feeling supported, many individuals received resources to facilitate their reintegration into society. This gentleman shared his experience.

Having them outside of the gate just further confirmed that trust. I wasn't alone. One gave me a car. Another one gave me a ride to where I needed to go. Continued friendship. Called to check up, checking on me and things like that. It was those things that the community participants provided for me (RC #9).

The importance of helping incarcerated individuals feel part of a community bridges the volunteers' efforts to foster a sense of belonging while incarcerated. One gentleman shares his view on the importance of community.

I needed that community. I needed the people to tell me, 'hey, you can do it.' I needed those smiles to hit me in the face when I came home, to let me know that 'you are welcome'. You are not ostracized despite what you did. It was welcoming knowing that I

was going to be safe, which was a huge help for me. Security is what I needed, and they offered that security to be able to walk on my own. That's huge to have that continued support. I know I couldn't have done it without my community, period (RC #10).

The culmination of the benefits of volunteering is the gratitude and awe that incarcerated individuals felt for the time volunteers invested in them.

Appreciating the Giving of Time

Those who were interviewed overwhelmingly expressed appreciation for the time volunteers took out of their days to spend with them. They mentioned that the time volunteers gave helped reduce their sense of isolation, gave them hope, and fostered investment in the process. There is a sense of respect and gratitude that people cared about them.

One gentleman highlighted how the time spent with him made him feel less isolated.

Knowing that people were willing to take that trip and come to those gates for you, that made you feel less isolated. Cause when you feel like you are completely cut off from that free world, you start to accept that. And sometimes it's really nice to just see somebody who is willing to come in here, spend time, and try to help us do anything. It didn't matter what it was. That was always a kind of a ray of light (RC #5).

Another individual highlighted the value of investing in incarcerated individuals and the hope it provides.

The presence of a community volunteer inside an institution speaks to the volume of their willingness to sacrifice on your behalf, and nothing matters more to somebody in prison with no hope than somebody investing time and effort into them (RC #4).

One individual expresses admiration for the time volunteers spend with incarcerated individuals.

I think about all of the community volunteers for us that go inside and what they give; they give to so many people. They help so many people. They care deeply. You know, where does it come from? How do they manage their time? Where do they begin to have the capacity to want to give and to share and to donate? The one thing that is fleeting in life is time. You can't put money on it, and they give it away (RC #11).

Despite the numerous benefits reported by respondents, there were some drawbacks to volunteering.

Drawbacks of Volunteers

There were two primary drawbacks related to volunteers. One was the desire to fix or save the incarcerated, and the other was overfamiliarity. The desire to fix or save someone was not appreciated by the incarcerated, and overfamiliarity has the potential to jeopardize programs' continuity or harm the incarcerated emotionally.

Familiarity, as defined by California Code Regulations, Title 15, Section 8115, is engaging in conversation with the incarcerated that includes personal topics. In work settings, conversations are limited to work-related topics only (Cornell Law School, 2026). The general nature of the definition of a personal topic creates confusion about what can be said in conversations. The definition should be clearer to delineate the difference between sharing your favorite sports team and giving an incarcerated individual your home address.

The CDCR Operations Manual for Adult Institutions, Programs, and Parole states that employees can be disciplined for overfamiliarity (2023). At the same time, the California Model promotes normalization, which is hard to achieve when conversations between staff and the incarcerated are limited. There does not appear to be specific language regarding

overfamiliarity between volunteers and the incarcerated. This lack of clarity is challenging as these were the important relationships that those interviewed brought up. Volunteers create benefits when working with the incarcerated. It is important, then, that there is a clear understanding of what constitutes overfamiliarity, so that the benefits of positive human connection can continue without concern about overstepping the rules.

Regarding overfamiliarity, CDCR volunteers are told not to share personal information with incarcerated individuals, and physical contact is limited to fist bumps and handshakes. This includes establishing an intimate relationship with an incarcerated individual. But sometimes, a line gets crossed, which either jeopardizes other volunteers or programs or emotionally harms the incarcerated. This gentleman describes the impact he has observed associated with overfamiliarity.

Over-familiarity is definitely something that we want to be aware of because it can hinder a program. It can cause unnecessary scrutiny on people who are not involved in those types of activities. They have to have a real understanding about why a person is there, right? It's hard when you're dealing with matters of the heart, though (RC #8).

Another gentleman shares how it felt when a volunteer played with his heart through overfamiliarity. "I got my heart broken by a volunteer. She was able to tease a man, and I fell head over heels. For a couple of months, I was devastated, and I was as low as you can go" (RC #3).

The incarcerated were adamant that it is not good behavior on behalf of the volunteer to try to fix or save them. One gentleman shared his thoughts regarding volunteers trying to fix people. "I have run into the types that feel like they need to fix other human beings. They

shouldn't. We have got to make clear that that's not what's happening. Somehow, some way, I think that message should be expressed" (RC #5). Another gentleman shares his thoughts on what he calls the savior complex.

You don't want people to come in feeling like they're going to save people. That's a huge drawback. I've seen it play out where you have volunteers come in, and they think they know what is best for you, not realizing who you are, what kind of lifestyle you had, you know, but they're telling you what you need to do. That's not the right way to go about doing it (RC #10).

In addition to volunteers trying to fix or save the incarcerated and overfamiliarity, there was mention that volunteers do not look like the incarcerated and do not have the same life experiences. One of the specific questions asked in this research to help address this concern was about their experience with formerly incarcerated individuals returning to prison to participate in programs. All of those interviewed stated that the most significant value of having formerly incarcerated individuals return to prison was their ability to serve as role models and demonstrate what is possible.

Formerly Incarcerated Volunteers – Role Models for the Future

The value of the formerly incarcerated returning to prison was not limited to those who volunteered. Many of those interviewed have returned to prison under the auspices of an employer to work with incarcerated individuals. The most significant value of the formerly incarcerated in returning to work with incarcerated individuals is that they serve as role models.

Being a role model demonstrated what was possible, provided motivation to persevere, and showed that if formerly incarcerated individuals can succeed, so can those currently

incarcerated. One gentleman said, “Was seeing somebody that was successful after parole helpful? Yes. It is helpful because it is always helpful to have a role model, somebody to look up to, proof that things are still possible” (RC #3).

As it relates to motivation, this gentleman shared,

When I was incarcerated, and I would see people who were formerly incarcerated coming in, it was motivation. And it motivated me because, for all intents and purposes, they appeared to be successful. I would see him come in, dressing all sharp and smiling and shining, right? And I’m like, I want that. Oh, wow, he’s doing great. Wow. You know? So, whenever somebody comes in, they’re coming in as a model of what success looks like, that you too can get out and make it and be successful (RC #8).

The formerly incarcerated encourage the incarcerated. Demonstrably, this gentleman shared,

It is definitely encouraging that they were able to get out. It definitely does something when you see somebody that you spent time with succeed and flourish in the community, and now comes back in a suit and tie. It definitely gave us a sense of encouragement to know that if they can do it, maybe one day we will too (RC #4).

Whether the volunteers are formerly incarcerated or community members who have never been system-impacted, they make a difference in the lives of the incarcerated, no matter where they were imprisoned. However, SQRC stood out from other California prisons, in part due to the influence of community volunteers.

San Quentin Stands Out

All 11 individuals interviewed commented that the culture at SQRC is distinct. Six of those interviewed had never lived at SQRC, but they were familiar with its distinct culture, and some expressed wishing they had been transferred there.

According to the interviewees, SQRC has a distinct culture for several reasons. One is its convenient location in the San Francisco Bay Area. SQRC's location is a key reason it attracts more than 1,000 volunteers annually and offers numerous rehabilitative programs (Allison, 2022). Many of those interviewed stated that the different culture at SQRC provides them with opportunities not available at other prisons. They also credited the volunteers for helping to change the culture at SQRC. Credit also goes to the SQRC prison administration, which embraces rehabilitation.

The presence of volunteers at SQRC is evident to both those who have lived there and those who have never had the opportunity. One gentleman stated, "There are volunteers everywhere. There are people doing this, they're doing that, and that's not how really any other prison operates, right?" (RC #2).

Another individual noted that the presence of volunteers affects the staff.

The vast majority of staff act differently when volunteers are there compared to when the volunteers are gone. And I think San Quentin, because there are so many volunteers there all of the time, created that culture shift where even a lot of the staff started acting differently and kept it because the volunteers aren't just coming for an hour or two a night. They're like here all of the time. So it just creates that culture shift (RC #1).

In addition to the presence of volunteers, the number of rehabilitation programs fosters a culture of learning and growth. One individual shared,

When I got to San Quentin, it was unlike any other prison that I've ever been in in the state of California. So the thing about San Quentin was, I saw men in blue standing up in groups, taking total accountability for the murders that they committed, expressing insight into what motivated their behaviors for committing those crimes, and I was like, what is in the water?! (RC #8).

The distinct atmosphere at SQRC often feels like culture shock to newcomers.

When we got to San Quentin, we were really in this mind frame of we need to protect ourselves. We noticed the environment and the way that people were carrying themselves, it was very different than other institutions that we had been at. And it was a culture shock for us because it reminded us of an opportunity. That's what it reminded us of. It's like we finally got away from the madness of prison, and this is an opportunity to breathe. And that's what it gave us. It gave us an opportunity to let our guards down and breathe for once. And it was refreshing. It was refreshing not to just be so wound up and nervous, and on edge, that you can literally just take your shoes off, and be comfortable. And that's something that I never had a chance to do while in prison. And for the first time, I got an opportunity to do that when I was at San Quentin (RC #10).

The variety of programs offered uniquely at SQRC also created a culture shock for some.

This individual is commenting on the 1,000 Mile Club, a running club that helps residents train for an annual marathon held at SQRC.

I remember a lot of guys coming to San Quentin for the first time and coming from all these different prisons. You don't go to prison to see people running in the yard, together like that. I remember, people would ask, 'What are they all doing running together? Where are they running to? What are you all doing together?' It was a little bit of a culture shock (RC #2).

SQRC not only provides a variety of rehabilitative programs but also actively encourages individuals to participate. This reflects the rehabilitation culture embraced at SQRC.

When I arrived in 2007, you know, it was always like. 'Hey, why don't you get into college? Hey, why don't you go to school? Hey, why don't you go to this program? Hey, why don't you try out this degree?' And it was mind-blowing to know that there were so many opportunities here to better myself, to learn, to meet people, new people, you know, who are willing to help me learn. That was a huge difference (RC #10).

The human connection and socialization fostered by rehabilitation programs, together with community volunteers, create a prison like no other, according to those interviewed. The

difference between other prisons and SQRC is “night and day, to be honest with you. It’s other prisons compared to, I can go home” (RC #10).

The value of community volunteers in providing human connection, life experience, resources, and socialization opportunities helps offset the adverse effects of social isolation. Given this impact, it is vital to make volunteer experience with incarcerated individuals as positive as possible. Those interviewed had many ideas for improving the volunteer experience.

Improvements in the Volunteer Experience

Suggested improvements by those interviewed fell under several different categories. The need for more volunteers, especially at remote prison locations; for more comprehensive volunteer training; for reducing bureaucratic hurdles to clearing volunteers to enter prisons; and for providing more opportunities for volunteers to socialize with the incarcerated outside of programs.

More Volunteers

More volunteers are needed, especially at prisons located in outlying areas. As stated earlier, SQRC has over 1,000 volunteers annually, the most in California, primarily due to its central location within the San Francisco Bay Area. Outlying prisons have fewer, if any, volunteers. One individual suggested, “I think building out more of the volunteer base that can go to prisons like Coalinga and go without breaking the bank of an organization. There is no one there who can volunteer, so you have to bring the people there” (RC #2).

This suggestion was supported by another gentleman, who proposed a possible solution.

We almost have to invest enough in folks where people are going out three or four times a year. That it is part of the California budget where people are staying in these outlying places to do the work. And they are paid to do it sometimes because it is hard for people to travel nine hours to get to these places and have to come back. I would love to see that someday (RC #5).

In addition to recruiting volunteers for all prisons, there is the challenge of ensuring they are cleared to enter the prison. Many of those interviewed suggested that the approval process for volunteers to enter prisons should be simplified.

Minimize Red Tape

There are security measures in place to protect the prison, its volunteers, and the incarcerated, but many respondents reported that the volunteer clearance process was overly cumbersome and challenging. One gentleman stated,

I would change the policies that the Department of Corrections has. There's a lot of red tape. The three fundamental things we need to check for in volunteers are whether they have something of substance to contribute, whether they are not a liability to the state or to yourself, and whether they can be trusted. I would do away with the policies so that it would be easier for community volunteers to actually get in with no resistance, not jumping through hoops (RC #4).

In addition to the procedural red tape, there was a sense that prison administration was making it difficult by failing to see the value of the volunteers.

I think that the administration should appreciate them more. They should treat them with the utmost respect and not make the process difficult. 'Cause I've seen the process be so difficult that you almost can't help but think, "Are you trying to discourage them from coming in?" (RC #6).

Once the volunteers are in the gates, many believe there is value in identifying opportunities for the incarcerated and the volunteers to spend time together outside scheduled programs.

More Socialization Opportunities

The two leading suggestions for increasing opportunities for socialization are allocating time for volunteers to interact with incarcerated individuals outside program hours and providing a mechanism for incarcerated individuals who are not participating to meet with volunteers. Volunteers typically meet incarcerated individuals participating in programs. One gentleman, as it relates to more social time with the incarcerated, mentioned,

I would create space for more pro-social development on a personal level, where it is just recreational. What about the volunteers who just want to sit there with somebody and just have a book club or share poetry or spoken word? Why can't we just have that as a normal part of prison? Where volunteers feel they are welcome and part of this community. We want you to feel like you can walk anywhere, talk to anyone, sit wherever you want, and so on. To be able to socialize with individuals so that they can actually get a sense of who you are as a person (RC #4).

Given the value of volunteers in prisons, another individual asked how to introduce volunteers to individuals who are not currently participating in programs. He questioned,

How do we open access up, because maybe they're not going through programs yet, but maybe having some type of interaction with outside volunteers, on the yard or in the day room, would help. Just kind of like, 'hey, what's going on?' You know, maybe that could inspire someone to start working on themselves, you know? Or maybe a community event inside the prison where volunteers come in and mingle to build that relationship (RC #1).

To expand opportunities for volunteers to spend more time with incarcerated individuals outside of programs, it is prudent to adopt a more holistic approach to volunteer training.

Those interviewed agreed that volunteer training needs to be enhanced.

More Comprehensive Volunteer Training

Current volunteer training at SQRC includes CDCR-delivered instruction on rules and regulations delivered by Correctional Officers. Those interviewed suggested that, in addition to sharing the rules and regulations, the training should be more comprehensive. One suggestion was to include incarcerated individuals in the training.

What if you have people that are incarcerated say, hey, this is who we are. This is why we want to join programs. These are our intentions. This is why we need this. This is why it's important for you guys to come in, and this is how we see you guys. I hope you see us in this way. Instead of prison guards or staff telling people not to share their first name, and that people are going to hurt you if you give them a chance (RC #2).

Another gentleman offered that the training needs to be more realistic. "I would provide them with more of a comprehensive, realistic orientation. Most of the training that the department does is geared towards safety and security and overfamiliarity, which are all abstract security concepts to the general public" (RC #4).

Another individual suggested that volunteers should also be included in the training program. "I think it should be a mix of what CDCR teaches, but also for more experienced volunteers to be able to put something together to share what they feel was really helpful to them that they didn't know before" (RC #8).

Based on these suggestions, improvements to the training program should include safety and security measures appropriate for visiting prisons, incorporate the voices of experienced volunteers and incarcerated individuals, and highlight the benefits of volunteering.

Whether volunteers serve at SQRC or other California prisons, they provide benefits to the incarcerated population. These benefits include feeling human, teaching social skills, providing a human connection, changing the prison culture, creating a safe space, acting as role models, making the incarcerated feel like they are part of a society they are physically separated from, feeling seen as a colleague and a peer, giving of their time, making the incarcerated feel cared for, and making them feel welcomed when they are released from prison. There is a unique benefit that formerly incarcerated individuals provide when they return to prison to help with rehabilitation programs.

Two main drawbacks were identified regarding volunteers. Volunteers who are trying to fix or save the incarcerated or become overly familiar with them were not well received by the incarcerated. Those interviewed also offered suggestions for improving the overall volunteer experience.

Overall, the benefits of having community volunteers in prisons far outweigh the drawbacks, as evidenced by this individual's observation.

There are no immediate drawbacks to the collective concept of having community volunteers inside the prison. There's no way for you to mitigate the fact that there are some volunteers who come in with self-serving purposes. There is always the off-chance that a volunteer who is well-meaning crosses the line and brings in a cell phone or some contraband for somebody. But other than the rogue volunteer, I think there is no drawback to having volunteer engagement inside the institutions. I think the good will always outweigh the bad (RC #4).

The findings from this research helped to inform the recommendations presented in the final chapter.

deemed an epidemic in the world. Social isolation is the cause of physical and mental health issues, as well as negatively impacting life achievements; it is also directly connected to criminal behavior, and criminal behavior can lead to prison, which is an example of social isolation. The length of time spent in prison is dictated by policy. The longer people are incarcerated, the more they are impacted by the adverse effects of social isolation. A solution to addressing the devastating effects of social isolation is positive human connections in prison. This relates in part to having access to community volunteers through rehabilitation programs who can create positive interactions with the incarcerated, helping to heal the effects of social isolation and helping the incarcerated successfully return home, thereby lowering recidivism rates.

The research from the literature review, as well as the original research conducted through a survey and interviews, shows that community volunteers help to offset the adverse effects of a lifetime of social isolation for the incarcerated. The incarcerated contribute to their healing through moments of change, a motivation to rehabilitate, and a desire to learn new ways of thinking and acting. The prison culture can either enhance or detract from a culture of rehabilitation. In prisons, the positive benefits of rehabilitation programs are evident.

According to the interviewees, the benefits of volunteering outweigh the drawbacks, but there is room for improvement in preparing volunteers for prison settings. Those interviewed offered several suggestions for improving the effectiveness and impact of volunteer training.

In addition to mitigating the adverse effects of social isolation, the 20 men participating in the study reported that their interactions with community volunteers contributed to their

reentry and their ability to remain integrated into society. This indicates that one benefit of interactions between community volunteers and incarcerated individuals is a reduction in recidivism.

This research helped identify seven recommendations that would help improve interactions of community volunteers with the incarcerated, as well as prepare the incarcerated for reentry into society. This research also identified areas needing further study.

Recommendations will be discussed first.

Recommendations

Implementing recommendations will require the support and approval of state leaders, including the governor, as well as the correctional leadership, staff, and key stakeholders. These stakeholders include community-based organizations that provide rehabilitation programs, their staff and volunteers, incarcerated individuals and their family members, and the voting public.

The power differential within this group is vast. The incarcerated have relatively no power, while government officials and correctional administration hold most of the power. Although each state operates its own prisons, the federal government has been known to indirectly assert its power by offering funding for certain policies and procedures it would like each state to follow (Eisen, 2021). The general public has voting power, but the invisible nature of prisons makes it difficult for voters to make informed decisions.

In California, leadership for rehabilitation is coming from Governor Gavin Newsom. He exemplifies shared leadership by setting the focus and direction on rehabilitation and by granting CDCR the authority to implement changes to support it.

He created an advisory committee of CDCR staff, peace officers, nonprofit leaders, and formerly incarcerated individuals (Governor Gavin Newsom, 2023) to write the plan for The California Model. In addition, Newsom has asked a group of incarcerated individuals at SQRC to contribute to the overall strategy.

In addition to prioritizing rehabilitation, the California Penal Code was amended to align with the California Model. The penal code was changed to state that the loss of liberty is punishment enough and that the purpose of incarceration is to rehabilitate and prepare the incarcerated for a successful reentry, which results in safer and stronger communities. It also states that community-based organizations are integral to ensuring incarcerated individuals have access to rehabilitative programs (Alameda Post, 2023).

Although the recommendations could be applied to any U.S. prison system, California's focus on rehabilitation supports their feasibility. These ideas underscore the importance of community volunteers in prisons and create opportunities for incarcerated individuals to prepare for reentry into society.

The recommended actions are summarized in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1: Recommendations

Identify correctional officers who support rehabilitation
Enhance volunteer training
Customize learning plans for the incarcerated
Strengthen communication skills for the incarcerated
Create a computer reentry game
Encourage the family to participate in rehabilitation
Create a #rehabilitationworks movement
Increase Criminal Justice Reform Funding

Identify Correctional Officers Supportive of Rehabilitation

Because correctional officers set the tone for prison culture, prison administrations need to identify officers who support rehabilitation and are willing to receive training in dynamic security to help eliminate the “us versus them” culture. This is an opportunity to develop leadership within the ranks of the correctional officers. These officers can model dynamic security, fostering positive professional relationships between staff and incarcerated individuals (Williams et al., 2024). In addition, prison administration, the incarcerated, and the correctional officers need to create opportunities for interaction with each other in pro-social ways to encourage a supportive versus a combative relationship. Redefining overfamiliarity would be instrumental in building appropriate and encouraging relationships between incarcerated individuals and staff.

This recommendation will face many challenges. The prison administration must demonstrate a genuine commitment to rehabilitation. The prison culture must support rehabilitation and encourage incarcerated individuals to participate in programs. The administration will need to determine whether it has a core group of correctional officers who

embrace rehabilitation. The administration will also need to educate correctional staff on the benefits of working in a culture of rehabilitation rather than retribution.

The incarcerated will also need to embrace the desire to rehabilitate. The research showed that incarcerated individuals typically require a moment of change to participate in programs. And they also have to have a genuine desire to learn in order to drop the false belief systems that brought them to prison.

Although this recommendation may be challenging, it is possible under the right circumstances.

Enhance Volunteer Training

The presence of community volunteers, as noted by several interviewees in this study, fosters prosocial relationships among community volunteers, incarcerated individuals, and prison staff. To further enhance the impact of prison volunteers, the volunteer training program should be strengthened. Currently, the training at SQRC is delivered solely by prison staff.

Implementing a more holistic training approach could begin with a forum that brings together current volunteers and incarcerated individuals to better understand each group, to identify what motivates them to participate in rehabilitation programs, and to determine how they can best support one another. The outcome of the forum would be two-fold.

The first is that volunteer training could include not only security-related training delivered by the prison administration, but also opportunities for volunteers to share their experiences and what they have learned to do and avoid. Training could also include

incarcerated individuals sharing their reasons for participating in rehabilitation programs and the impact of community volunteers on them and their peers.

Secondly, a volunteer handbook should be created. This would include input from prison administration, prison staff, the incarcerated, community-based organizations, and their volunteers. The importance of diverse perspectives lies in recognizing that prisons have their own cultures, which most community volunteers are unaware of. Understanding the perspectives of those who work in and live in prisons will help volunteers be better informed, as outlined in a comprehensive handbook.

In addition to training and the handbook, hosting a volunteer appreciation day during Volunteer Appreciation Week in April would be helpful. As several of those interviewed noted, volunteers require greater access to incarcerated individuals. Those interactions could spark someone's interest in trying a rehabilitation program. Additionally, several interviewees reported that they did not have sufficient time to interact with volunteers because volunteers follow a set schedule for attending programs.

A volunteer day would provide a casual opportunity for volunteers and incarcerated individuals to interact and get to know one another, while remaining within guidelines on over-familiarity. Food could be served, games could be available, and other opportunities could be provided for volunteers and incarcerated individuals to interact in prosocial ways.

Customize Learning Plans for the Incarcerated

Regarding the preparation of incarcerated individuals for successful reintegration into society, there are two implementation ideas. Many of those interviewed reported not knowing how to locate programs or whether they even existed. Research showed that a majority of those in prison have not finished high school and, therefore, are not accustomed to seeking out and organizing an educational plan for themselves. The first idea is to help each access the programs they need by creating a customized development schedule. The plan should be developed upon admission to prison and updated upon transfer to another facility, where different programs may be available.

This study showed that each person had their own moment of change when they were ready to change and willing to learn. The customized development schedule would not require everyone to start rehabilitation immediately; when they were ready, they would have a plan to follow to begin. A learning plan also plants the seed that education and personal development are choices available to them.

The personalized learning plan could be updated each time an individual goes to the parole board. If the parole board declines the request for parole, it often recommends programs the individual must complete to be ready for the next parole hearing. These suggestions should be added to the personalized learning plan. Additionally, the prison administration needs to ensure that the programs recommended by the parole board are available to incarcerated individuals.

Strengthen Communication Skills

As a volunteer at SQRC, I hear the incarcerated individuals state that they are very uncomfortable initiating conversations with visitors at the prison. They also stated that they do not believe they have the communication skills to interact with the general public upon returning home. Those who are comfortable speaking with volunteers share that it is because they can talk about life in prison, as the volunteers are aware of their incarceration. However, they are not sure what they would talk about with people in society if they did not want to bring up their prison history in a casual conversation.

One solution to this challenge is to organize periodic informal gatherings in a social setting where food and drink can be shared, such as a coffee shop. The incarcerated could participate in social conversations with volunteers. This would help build their confidence in social interactions and foster a sense of social normalization.

Computer Reentry Game

Rehabilitation helps the incarcerated get prepared for reentry, but it does not necessarily help them envision what reentry might be like, including the challenges they will face. This recommendation requires leadership that includes creativity, immersive learning opportunities, and storytelling, which help incarcerated individuals see the future while still in prison and prepare for reentry into society (Johansen, 2017).

Experiential education is beneficial in prisons because many incarcerated individuals missed opportunities to practice prosocial behavior prior to incarceration, such as applying for a

job, leasing an apartment, or conversing with people from different neighborhoods. Giving the incarcerated a way to learn and practice before being released from prison could help lower recidivism rates.

Creating a reentry computer game to help incarcerated people step back into society while still incarcerated could help them better prepare for their release from prison. They could choose their character and encounter employment barriers, housing challenges, limited access to education, and other obstacles. They could also see what it is like to create a schedule and then attend their various appointments, including meeting with their parole officer. They could switch characters to those with higher levels of education or stronger community ties and examine how their experiences might differ. This could encourage them to participate in additional rehabilitative programs while in prison, or interact more with community volunteers, helping them overcome as many barriers as possible before release.

This computer game would also be available to the general public, allowing them to experience what it is like to leave prison and navigate society. They may become frustrated upon being rearrested for missing a meeting with their parole officer because the bus did not arrive. They would also face additional hurdles common to individuals with felony records. This would help educate the general public about the invisible nature of the criminal justice system and reentry, so they would be better informed when voting on issues related to crime and incarceration.

Encourage Family to Participate in Rehabilitation

This recommendation addresses the challenges families face in maintaining and reestablishing connections upon a family member's release from prison. As several of the gentlemen interviewed noted, there are numerous rehabilitation opportunities at SQRC. These individuals are progressing in their thinking, learning, and perspectives. However, family members are not getting the same opportunity for self-help. As the research showed, they are working hard to make ends meet; they likely do not have time to take classes and keep pace with their incarcerated loved one.

This creates a learning gap between the incarcerated and their families, which could pose a challenge when the incarcerated is released, and they find that they are in different places on their personal journeys. This could result in the incarcerated returning to old ways to maintain family harmony or separating themselves from the family to hold on to their new way of life. Either way, it is disruptive to the family. One way to address this would be to offer similar programming to families via virtual platforms.

This would not work for every program, but for some self-help programs, the nonprofit could offer the incarcerated individual's family a weekly virtual overview of the individual's learning that week. This would provide education for family members and offer opportunities to foster productive family discussions, helping maintain the family's strength and unity.

Create a #rehabilitationworks Movement

As mentioned earlier, the public holds power through voting; however, because the prison system is largely invisible to most people, voters find it difficult to become well-informed about ballot measures. One strategy for educating the public is to leverage network leadership within prison-related nonprofits. By networking these rehabilitation-focused nonprofits, more data and stories can be consistently disseminated, helping to inform the public about the value of rehabilitation and the necessity of maintaining community safety.

A movement of #rehabilitationworks, supported by non-profit organizations that provide rehabilitation programs, can help the public and legislators understand the social conditions and experiences that have heavily contributed to criminal behavior, and how rehabilitation programs delivered by community volunteers can change behavior, reduce recidivism, and improve public safety.

Increase Criminal Justice Reform Funding

The criminal justice sector is underfunded compared to prisons. Funding for criminal justice reform was approximately \$341 billion, which represented 1.5% of public charitable funding in 2021 (Don, 2024). This charitable funding competes with budgets for mass incarceration, which totaled \$445 billion (Kang-Brown & Wagner, 2026).

Research showed that the system of mass incarceration tends to be cyclical and does not solve the problem of mass incarceration. If improvement is to be made in helping rehabilitate individuals who enter prison with high levels of childhood trauma and are suffering from the

effects of social isolation, more funding is necessary to reform the system of mass incarceration instead of strengthening it. Rehabilitation is known to reduce recidivism rates, resulting in fewer crimes committed by the formerly incarcerated.

For funders interested in criminal justice reform, this research highlights several considerations. Prison programs focused on education, curricula that emphasize improved self-image, programs that address false belief systems, and interventions that change criminal thinking were emphasized for their meaningful contributions to rehabilitation and to reducing recidivism rates. In addition to focusing on reforming incarcerated individuals through curriculum, interviewees emphasized that interactions with community volunteers were more important than the curriculum itself. Therefore, funders should seek programs described above that include community volunteers.

Value of Recommendations

These recommendations offer community volunteers opportunities to foster positive human connections with incarcerated individuals and to help them feel valued and worthy of investment. Feeling treated as a human being rather than a criminal is essential for incarcerated individuals (Schuhmann et al., 2018). The incarcerated will stop criminal behavior when they feel heard, seen, and treated as human beings (Pasma et al., 2023). This is the power of human connection offsetting the effects of social isolation. Community volunteers have the opportunity to build human connections and change lives. One formerly incarcerated individual said it this way,

I spent 30 years behind prison walls, three decades of isolation, routine dehumanization, and a system that tried every day to convince me I was disposable. In that darkness, volunteers were a lifeline. They were often the only connection to a world that still saw us as human. Alongside our families, they reminded us that we still mattered, that we still had something worth saving. To those who choose to walk into these spaces – spaces designed to erase and discard – thank you. Your presence is an act of resistance. Your compassion is a form of justice. And your willingness to see us not for what we have done, but for who we are and who we can become, is a light in places built to extinguish hope (GE, personal communication, 2025).

Limitations of the Study

This study had a limited scope. The qualitative research focused on individuals who served time in men's prisons in California, had been out of prison for at least 3 years, and had not been reconvicted. California was selected because of its focus on rehabilitation. Men's prisons were chosen because they have more access to rehabilitation programs and community volunteers. Ensuring that individuals have been out of prison for at least 3 years and have not been reconvicted of a crime aligns with California's methodology for calculating its recidivism rate.

Limiting the study to men's prisons in California did not allow for an investigation into the differences in community volunteers working with women, regarding rehabilitation, and the impact on recidivism. Every state in the US runs its own prison system, so limiting the study to California, which focuses on rehabilitation, did not allow for an assessment of the impact of community volunteers in states where rehabilitation is not a priority.

A strength of this research was the identification of formerly incarcerated individuals with experience working with community volunteers while incarcerated. A weakness of the study is that only 11 participants were interviewed, all of whom were in Northern California. They did not all serve time at SQRC, so there was a variety of experiences. All those interviewed served in at least 3 California prisons, with one serving in 13. However, the study could have been stronger with a larger number of respondents from across California.

One challenge highlighted by the study is replicating SQRC's positive prison culture in other prisons. SQRC's proximity to universities, employers, and community volunteers in the San Francisco Bay Area makes it challenging to replicate the benefits experienced there.

The study identified the benefits of community volunteers working with the incarcerated as well as some drawbacks. It demonstrated the importance of a willingness to change and to learn new belief systems and skills among incarcerated individuals. It highlighted the vital role of prison culture in learning and growth. Moreover, it included suggestions for improving the volunteer/incarcerated experience. However, with the focus solely on men's prisons in California, the study misses the opportunity to understand the impact community volunteers have on prison cultures with women residents, and prisons focused more on retribution rather than rehabilitation.

The study's results include recommendations to introduce new programs or enhance existing processes to improve outcomes for community volunteers working with incarcerated individuals. The study also identified future research opportunities to strengthen the field.

Future Studies

Because of the limited scope of this study, future research should focus on volunteer engagement in women's prisons, in prisons outside California, and on a larger study of men's prisons within California. Gender as well as geographic locations of prisons in the US could result in different outcomes as it relates to community volunteers working with the incarcerated and the impact on recidivism rates. As stated earlier, recidivism does not measure the success of rehabilitation but rather its failure. New research is therefore also needed to capture the experiences of those returning to society and to measure the benefits of rehabilitation, and not just a return to the criminal justice system.

There are many reasons why the recidivism rate for those with life sentences is substantially lower than that for those with determinate sentences. It could be a combination of access to rehabilitation programs, age, the belief that these individuals would never return to society, and access to the outside community through community volunteers. This subject needs further research to identify why there is such a difference in the recidivism rate of those given life sentences versus those given determinate sentences.

Volunteers are asked to write letters of support for individuals they have come to know and have witnessed growth in character. These letters are provided to the parole board for their review. Further research should be conducted to determine the impact of those letters on parole board members, compared with letters from family and friends. In addition, it would be useful to know whether support letters from prison staff carry more weight than those from family and volunteers.

The parole board process in California is subjective. Research could be conducted to determine whether parole board members would like objective data on the likelihood of an individual recidivating. This information could help support their decision-making process.

Correctional officers play a significant role in shaping prison culture. It is essential to better understand whether correctional officers can help shift a prison culture from punitive to rehabilitative.

As mentioned earlier, a challenge identified in this study is the rehabilitative success at SQRC, given its physical proximity to universities, employers, and community volunteers. Research should examine how the rehabilitative culture and delivery of rehabilitation programs could be replicated in other, more remote prisons.

Although some studies have examined the impact of prison volunteering on volunteers, more research is needed. Each prison has its own culture, and each state has its own policies regarding volunteers. Future studies could account for this difference to assess its impact on volunteers' experiences.

Lastly, research should be conducted to determine whether prison volunteers help improve the perspectives and outcomes of the outside community. The US Surgeon General (2023) suggests that higher levels of social connectedness are associated with better community outcomes, including population health, community safety, resilience, prosperity, and representative government; lower levels of social connectedness are associated with worse outcomes across these areas. Future studies could examine whether prison volunteers who share their experiences can positively affect the outside community.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the key components of mass incarceration and how it creates generational social issues, including childhood trauma, social isolation, lack of education, poverty, homelessness, and incarceration. Disrupting these components requires input at different points and from different sources. For this study, the entry point is working with community volunteers who can foster positive human connections with incarcerated individuals to mitigate and address the adverse effects of social isolation. The results helped to answer the question regarding the impact community volunteers can have on recidivism when working with the incarcerated.

The interviews with formerly incarcerated men revealed that interactions with community volunteers had a positive impact on their lives. They first needed to recognize the need for change, a desire to rehabilitate, and a willingness to learn new ways of thinking and acting. They shared how prison culture either promotes or inhibits the ability to rehabilitate and the benefits of rehabilitation. Although interacting with community volunteers was not always positive, these gentlemen overwhelmingly found great value in having access to them. This led to suggestions for improving the volunteer/incarcerated experience.

In closing, this comment from a formerly incarcerated individual who recently returned home illustrates the value of his interactions with community volunteers for his future.

When I was transferred to San Quentin in 2018, it was not what I wanted. But I never imagined the turns my life would take in this place, or what a blessing that transfer would turn out to be because of San Quentin News. I am so thankful to all of the volunteers and advisors who come in, sacrificing your time, and giving it so freely. I have

learned so much from all of you. I have been incarcerated repeatedly since I was 25, and common wisdom says men like me never learn and never change. But for the first time ever, my life has purpose. And that's because of you guys and your instruction, and your endless patience and support of the work we do. For me personally, you have shown me something in myself that has worth and value, and given me a skill that will provide opportunities out there in the world. You can't possibly know how monumental your gift is to me, or how grateful I am to all of you (AH, personal communication, 2023).

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