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Citizen Volunteers in Prison: Bringing the Outside in, Taking the Inside out

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Abstract

The United States correctional system relies heavily on citizen volunteers, but there is little contemporary research on prison volunteers, which is further limited by sample and geographic region. The purpose of this project was to explore the role of citizen volunteers, including investigating why they volunteer and what their experiences with inmates and prison staff are like. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with citizen volunteers in the penal system of a Midwestern state. Volunteers had altruistic or faith-based motivations, viewing themselves as ‘seed planters’ but not saviors, and placing priority on building relationships. They described how volunteering transformed their views on inmates and the prison system. Volunteers appeared to gain awareness of and appreciation for the problems associated with both serving time and reentry. Additional research on the role of citizen volunteers is needed to improve recruiting and retention of volunteers, and to better evaluate and develop programs for current and reentering inmates.

Keywords: volunteers, prison, corrections

Introduction

In 2012, the United States had nearly 1.6 million people imprisoned at state and federal prisons, a rate of 480 per every 100,000 American adults (Carson and Mulako-Wangota 2013a, 2013b). Since the early 1980s, correctional spending among states had quadrupled, reaching 48.5 billion dollars in 2010 (Kyckelhahn 2012). In the past several years, the rapid increases in the incarceration rate have slowed and spending has stabilized, while the correctional system has confronted mandates to provide more services with fewer resources. The Federal Bureau of Prisons (2009) readily notes that it does not have the resources to meet all inmate needs, so it depends on volunteers to support the services it provides.

According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons (2009), more than 10,000 people volunteered four or more times in federal facilities during fiscal year 2009. In the federal system, volunteers provide religious, counseling, parenting, recreational, educational, vocational, and release preparation programs. They also are involved in training inmates in health and nutrition; teaching employment, finance, and consumer skills; and providing assistance in accessing community resources. Volunteers spend time visiting with and mentoring inmates, as well as guiding leisure-time activities. As two state examples, the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services (n.d.) and the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (n.d.) list similar kinds of activities for volunteers.

The correctional system at federal and state levels relies on volunteers to supplement facilities' programming and to provide direct services for inmates that the facilities cannot offer due to costs and resource limitations (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2009, 2010). The Federal Bureau of Prisons (2009) concludes, 'Without citizen volunteers, it would be virtually impossible to maintain inmate programs at the current level' (14). For instance, one study of a South Carolina prison noted that 232 volunteers contributed over 21,000 hours of work, the equivalent of 11 full-time paid positions, keeping programmatic costs for the prison's religious activities to about \$150 to \$200 per inmate per year (O'Connor and Perryclear 2002). At the state level, 1400 volunteers in religious programming within the Oregon Department of Corrections donated approximately 250,000 hours in 2005, equaling 121 full-time positions, a value exceeding 4 million dollars (O'Connor,

Duncan, and Quillard 2006). Volunteers are filling a vital gap in correctional activities.

Despite the emphasis placed on the role of volunteers in the prison system, the research in this area is limited. First, volunteers are frequently talked about but are seldom talked to (Camp et al., 2006; Hercik et al. 2004; Mills, Meek, and Gojkovic 2011; Pew Research Center 2012; Yoon and Nickel 2008); thus, we know very little about who they are, why the volunteer, and their experiences. Second, the contemporary research that does exist focuses heavily on religiously oriented volunteers. Third, this research is regional in nature, drawn from facilities in Southern states, so that we know little about the volunteer experience in other regions. As a result of this limited research, we lack an understanding of the nature of prison volunteering at a time when facilities, and thereby state and federal governments, are increasingly reliant on citizen volunteers.

Recent research on volunteers who work in other areas of the criminal justice system is also sparse, but tends to focus on community-based efforts like restorative justice (e.g., Karp, Bazemore, and Chesire 2004) and reentry services (e.g., Denney and Tewksbury 2013). Although people who volunteer to work with offenders within the justice system may share some similar motivations or characteristics, those volunteers who choose to enter prisons may be qualitatively different than those who choose to volunteer in other capacities. The prison setting is unique, bearing a certain social mystique, and prisoners are subject to a range of negative stereotypes (Freeman 2001, Ross 2012). In short, prisons are deemed scary and dangerous, and prisoners are othered. An individual willing to enter this environment has to confront and overcome these societal beliefs. Thus, research on citizen volunteers in prison is vital if we are to understand how to best recruit, train, and retain volunteers in that setting.

Prior research

Although the correctional system seems to place emphasis on the role of prison volunteering, little contemporary research has examined the volunteers themselves. Earlier research was devoted to examining how volunteers might complement the work and tasks of the correctional facility (Kiessling 1975; Kratcoski 1982; Scioli and Cook 1976).

One study of volunteers in four Canadian facilities found that volunteers, rather than volunteering for entirely altruistic or personal reasons (e.g., past experiences, religious motivations), most frequently cited interests in the correctional system, inmate needs, and influences from another organization as motivations for choosing to work with prisoners (Gandy 1977). The tasks and activities of these volunteers fell roughly into two categories, one which prioritized the volunteer-inmate relationship through support and counseling activities, and one which prioritized task-oriented involvement with inmates through organized activities, religious instruction, and life skills training. Volunteers' perceptions of their contributions reflected these categories, so that about half felt their most important contribution was providing inmates a connection to the community, and half felt their contribution was providing services different than those offered by the institution.

Since the 1970s, the correctional system has expanded dramatically and shifted in purpose (Frost and Clear 2012), yet research has only recently returned to the issue of prison volunteers. The contemporary research that examines volunteers largely focuses on prison chaplains or ministry workers, and may or may not distinguish between staff (paid) chaplains and volunteers. This body of research provides some insight into who volunteers are, what motivates them, and what they gain from their experiences. Although the scarcity of research makes it difficult to generate a firm profile describing volunteers, the extant research suggests that volunteers tend to be socially stable compared to the general population. Volunteers are more educated, higher paid, married, and more involved with their church and other civic activities (O'Connor, Duncan, and Quillard 2006). However, some volunteers do have prior experience with the justice system (Tewksbury and Collins 2005). In terms of other characteristics, prison volunteers are more likely to be white and middle-aged, but the distribution of volunteers by sex appears to depend on where the sample is drawn (Tewksbury and Collins 2005; Tewksbury and Dabney 2004). Volunteers to prison ministry activities are most commonly Christian, particularly self-identified Protestants or Evangelicals (Pew Research Center 2012; Tewksbury and Collins 2005).

Studies of ministry workers and volunteers in Southern states have revealed several common motives for getting involved with the prison and its inmates (Kerley et al. 2010; Kerley, Matthews, and Shoemaker

2009; Tewksbury and Collins 2005; Tewksbury and Dabney 2004). Similar motives have also been reported by volunteers in halfway houses (Denney and Tewksbury 2013). First, not surprisingly among ministry workers and volunteers, feeling 'called' to ministry or to fulfill scriptural imperatives motivates their involvement with prison inmates. Besides feeling called to prison ministry, ministry workers also describe how their personal experiences with the justice system, or those of people in their social networks, led them to their work in the prison. A second common feature among studies is that volunteers see themselves as providing support to inmates, such as offering encouragement in times of crisis. Third, volunteers feel that they are making a difference by demonstrating compassion for inmates and building relationships with them. Fourth, religiously converting inmates is placed secondary to other activities. Although volunteering may provide an opportunity to share their faith, people in these studies talk of respecting inmates' religious backgrounds.

Research also illustrates volunteers' sense of commitment to their work and satisfaction with their service experiences. Religious volunteers demonstrate commitment in terms of time, consistency, and duration of involvement, and report being highly dedicated to their work and highly satisfied with their experiences (Tewksbury and Collins 2005; Tewksbury and Dabney 2004). The most frequently reported personal rewards among prison chapel volunteers are feeling they are serving God, feeling a sense of purpose, and mentoring inmates (Tewksbury and Collins 2005). They may also experience a boost to their own self-esteem, as well as feeling humble, experiences which engender a sense of gratitude (Denney and Tewksbury 2013). Volunteers report favorable views of inmates and feeling a sense of comfort with inmates (Tewksbury and Dabney 2004). Volunteers in a halfway house also find benefits in building relationships with people they ordinarily would not have known (Denney and Tewksbury 2013). Indeed, volunteers often redefine or soften their earlier views of inmates and prisons as a result of their experiences (Denney and Tewksbury 2013; Kerley et al. 2010).

Beyond prison ministry, the above descriptions provided by the Federal Bureau of Prisons and states' corrections departments indicate a variety of other volunteer activities that are part of the prison system, yet very little is known about volunteers in these areas. This in part may be due to the relatively large number of volunteers in

prisons who are faith-motivated or who are recruited from faith communities, essentially making religious programs more visible (Camp et al. 2006; Johnson 2004). However, faith-motivated volunteers are as likely to be involved in life skills training, GED instruction, family classes, or anger management classes as they are to be involved in explicitly religious activities (Hercik et al. 2004; Johnson 2008). Similar to studies of individuals who volunteered, an Urban Institute survey of faith-based corrections and reentry programs found that religious activities and/or spiritual transformation were not vital to their programs. Rather, they identified secular programs, such as skills and job training, building and repairing support networks, and providing supportive relationships, as central activities (Willison, Brazzell, and Kim 2010). Prison volunteers who are not in ministry or not associated with a faith-based service organization are essentially invisible in the literature.

Current study

Given the paucity of contemporary research on prison volunteers, yet the reliance of the correctional system on citizen volunteers to support and maintain a variety of services for inmates, the purpose of this project was to shed additional light on the role of citizen volunteers. In particular, the study addressed gaps in the literature by directly interviewing volunteers themselves, by examining the Midwest, and by reaching beyond volunteers specifically devoted to ministry. The study explored the nature of prison volunteering and the experiences of volunteers, investigating issues such as why people volunteer in prisons, what their experiences with inmates and prison staff are like, and what benefits, challenges, and disappointments volunteers face in their work.

Methods

The intended sampling plan was to draw lists from the department of corrections in a Midwestern state. However, at least at the time of the study, there was no statewide coordinator who maintained such a list. Rather, each facility designated a staff person to manage volunteers in that specific facility. Therefore, there was no consistency

across facilities in which staff person held the volunteer coordinator role. Example designees included a correctional officer, a recreational coordinator, and a religious coordinator. Several phone calls to facilities in an attempt to reach their designee went unreturned. Thus, the decision was made to contact organizations providing programming or services to the facilities. The sampling began with organizations discovered through news stories, an internet search, and word of mouth.

Initial contact was made with four non-profit organizations that operated programming within the prison system of a Midwestern state. At the initial contact meetings, the lead researcher introduced the study to the organization's leader or designee. The researcher also interviewed the organizations' representatives to learn about their programs' activities and volunteer recruiting and training procedures. One organization also arranged for the lead researcher to take part in the volunteer orientation and training at one of the state's facilities. At the invitation of another organization's leader, both researchers also attended a meeting of corrections stakeholders (e.g., administrators from the Department of Corrections; a representative from parole services; and community service providers, such as a drug counselor) who met regularly to discuss transition and reentry efforts. Attending this meeting allowed us to gain a sense of statewide efforts in transition and reentry programming in and out of facilities, as well as providing insight into stakeholder attitudes in this regard.

Sampling started with three faith-based organizations that were mostly providing life skills-related programming, including parenting skills, training in how to look for and be interviewed for work, and training in money management. Separate from these programs, the organizations also offered faith-based studies and provided volunteers for chapel services. Sampling continued with the fourth organization, a dog training program. The contact people at each of the organizations put a call out to their volunteers and also provided the lead researcher with the names of individuals volunteering via other organizations (including, for example, another religious organization and another dog training program). Additional contacts were made with volunteers via personal referrals from interviewed respondents or referrals from people familiar with the research project. Appointments for interviews were made either when the lead researcher contacted a potential respondent, or when a referred respondent contacted the researcher.

In total, of the 20 people contacted or who made contact, 19 individuals completed an interview. This sample included 10 men and 9 women, ranging from their mid-20s to mid-70s, with a mean age of about 55 years. The majority of respondents were over 50 years old. All but one of the respondents were white. Respondents represented a range of professions (either current or retired), from trucking to human resources, although most occupations could be described as white collar. Each state-operated prison was represented by at least one respondent, including the maximum/medium security facilities, the medium/minimum security facilities, and the women's facility. One respondent volunteered at a county jail. A few participants had also volunteered in prisons in surrounding states. The sample represented a mix of people in direct ministry, faith-based study programs, secular programs (e.g., parenting skills, work-readiness, money management, dog training), and independent volunteers (e.g., mentoring).

Open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face in a location of the respondent's choosing, including private offices, coffee shops, and homes. Interviews were conducted in 2012. Appendix A lists the questions that guided the interviews. The interview protocol centered on how the respondents became involved in volunteering in prison, their reasons for volunteering, the activities in which they engaged, and their experiences with inmates and facility staff. The protocol was used as a guide rather than a means to direct the interview, allowing conversations to flow freely. Interviews were conducted by the lead researcher and ranged in length from 20 minutes to 2 hours, depending on the respondent's talkativeness. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed by trained transcriptionists.

Initial analytic themes were identified from the lead researcher's field notes and the second researcher's review of the transcripts. The interviews were then coded according to these themes using QSR NVivo 7 qualitative data analysis software (NVivo 2006). Additional themes were also identified during the coding process. The researchers met to discuss the coding results and reach consensus regarding themes. To protect the anonymity of the respondents, names were not associated with the transcriptions, pseudonyms were used, and any identifying information (e.g., the facility where the volunteer worked) was removed from the analyses.

Results

The analyses revealed several themes. First, volunteers described their reasons or motives for volunteering in the prison system and why they continued as volunteers. The second theme centered on the personal characteristics of the volunteers, such as their altruism and openness, and how those characteristics were incorporated into their volunteering. Third, volunteers shared their emotional and personal challenges of working with inmates, leading to a picture of how those challenges affected the volunteers themselves. A fourth theme highlighted volunteers' different interactions with the prison system and the facilities' staffs. A final theme emerging from the interviews was the volunteers' views on the larger criminal justice system.

Reasons for volunteering and staying

The decision to volunteer in prison is multifaceted. Similar to prior research, many of the respondents felt a calling to prison volunteering or expressed deep passion for the work. One partner of a couple who volunteered together put it this way: 'It felt like this was where we were directed to go ... We felt like we were funneled here.' In addition, respondents described altruistic and faith-based imperatives as motivations for volunteering. They expressed the importance of giving back, helping others, sharing their own blessings with others, and letting inmates know that they are not forgotten. Some respondents also pointed to the teachings of their faith, which directed them to reach out to 'the least of these' and forgotten members of society. Philip, another volunteer, said, 'I'm just trying to do what Jesus told me to do, which is to remember prisoners and to care about them. I'm hoping they change. I'm praying they change. I would like to see them change. But even if they don't change my obligation is to love them.' However, it is important to note that faith may have been a factor for some respondents' decisions to volunteer, but they made it clear that conversion was not a driving force and showed a clear desire to respect others' beliefs. For example, Philip continued, 'I don't go in there with the Bible and say "Let's open up to Matthew chapter 3." I don't do that. I just go in there and say, "How's it going, what's new," [because] they have issues they're dealing with.'

Some respondents described their own troubled past as a motivation for volunteering. These respondents recognized that they, too, could have easily been in prison because of bad choices. Their biographies included run-ins with the law and/or substance use problems. As Peter stated, 'We identify with them, probably most of us should be in there.' A few respondents reported other personal connections with the criminal justice system, such as family members or friends who had been or were currently incarcerated, which led them to get involved with volunteering. On the other hand, respondents who shared about their troubled personal histories also observed that other volunteers had very different backgrounds from the inmates - no earlier legal troubles or substance use, stable family and work histories, and higher levels of education. However, these respondents expressed no judgment against volunteers who appeared dissimilar either to themselves or the inmate population, and acknowledged their contributions to the overall work.

Recruiting volunteers is one thing; retaining them is another. Indeed, conversations with organizations' leaders revealed this challenge. Prisons, particularly the more secure facilities, are high-stress environments, and inmates may be a challenging population with whom to work, both of which appeared to contribute to volunteer turnover. Respondents discussed several reasons why they continued as volunteers. Some respondents reported that something 'clicked' for them, even if they had reservations at first. They expressed knowing that volunteering in a prison was a 'fit' once they got started and/or found the right type of volunteering activity within the system for them. As Gideon put it, 'At the first weekend, I knew this is where I should be.' Perhaps borne out of repeated contact, respondents also described their personal commitment to the work they were doing and to the inmates themselves. Abe expressed, 'The worst thing you can do is show up on these guys and bail, because they've had a lot of that in their life and they don't need somebody who says, yeah, I'm going to show up and do these things, and then you don't follow through.' Essentially, volunteers who stayed had a willingness to stick it out.

Volunteers were also motivated to continue when they felt they were making a difference, however small. None of the volunteers expressed an expectation that they were going to change every inmate or fix the whole system. Yet, many stated that they keep coming back to the prisons because they saw changes or growth in inmates, at least

once in a while. After describing a transformation by one of the inmates, Leah offered, 'That's a success story to me. That's all we can do, and if [we] can do that on some regular basis, I'll keep going back. I don't have to see it every time, but as long as I know it will happen once in a while, that will keep me coming back.'

Most respondents eschewed the notion that they volunteered for their own personal benefit. Nonetheless, their conversations revealed that personal benefits kept them coming back to the facilities. Respondents described their work as challenging and fulfilling of their faith, but also 'uplifting' and 'worthwhile,' and felt it was 'rewarding to make a difference.' Deborah reflected, 'The benefit to us as the volunteers - how do you even quantify or articulate that? . . . We get more going in than we think we bring in.' In other words, although volunteers may become involved for selfless reasons, they come to find their work personally rewarding.

Characteristics of volunteers

The interviews revealed several personal characteristics that volunteers brought to their work. As noted above, volunteers could be characterized by their selflessness or altruism. None of the respondents were looking for personal benefit or gain from volunteering. As Abe put it, 'I'm not volunteering to get something out of it . . . It was about doing something to help somebody.' Indeed, a few respondents stated that having a 'selfish agenda' could do more harm than good for the inmates. Among those respondents who mentioned that they were fulfilling religious mandates to serve or help others, none seemed to view volunteering as garnering themselves any spiritual courtesies. Instead, several described how their experiences with inmates drew them deeper into their own faith in ways they did not necessarily expect.

A common theme among volunteers was the notion that they were 'seed planters,' offering inmates life skills and support for change. This was true of volunteers affiliated with both religious and secular programs. The notion of seed planting may have religious overtones, but volunteers with religious motivations appeared to keep those very tempered and explicitly stated that they did not want to force religion on anyone. Rather, the seed planting notion seemed to be rooted in the nature of volunteering itself. Most of the programs were structured

so that volunteers would have contact with different inmates every rotation. Although they may establish a relationship with an inmate, those relationships typically end once the program is done. Other volunteers, such as those involved in direct ministry or mentoring programs, had more extended contact. The nature of the prison system itself, however, also limits long-term relationships, as inmates could be transferred to other facilities or released, effectively terminating relationships.

Thus, volunteers recognized that their interactions with inmates may be limited or restricted and that they may never know what kind of impact they had on inmates. Riley observed, 'It's not the end game yet. We don't know how it's going to turn out. Whatever positive seeds I try to sow may be reap[ed] down the road at some later stage when he matures or someone else comes along and invests in him again.' By viewing themselves as seed planters, volunteers appeared to be able to resolve the emotional or cognitive challenge of not knowing inmates' long-term outcomes.

Another characteristic of volunteers was their openness. They described the need to remain honest, to be sensitive to inmates, to remain flexible to the direction of a conversation or activity, to remain steady and not be 'undone' by inmates' crises, and to simply be willing to show up and listen. At the same time, they also recognized the importance of drawing the line between being open and becoming too personal with inmates.

Indeed, many respondents alluded to the need to remain on emotional and cognitive guard around inmates. As one respondent succinctly put it, volunteers need to have a 'bullshit meter.' Part of the training that most volunteers had experienced, either within their organizations and/or during a facility's volunteer orientation, emphasized the importance of remaining aware of one's surroundings and aware of the psychological realities of working with a prison population. In short, this amounted to not being manipulated by inmates. Each facility has a set of rules governing inmate-volunteer contact. For example, volunteers are not to bring items into the facility or take items out at an inmate's request without the consent of the facility. Volunteers are also not to do favors or errands on the 'outside' for an inmate, such as making phone calls to relatives, without the consent of the facility. However, violations of these rules do sometimes happen, as several respondents related anecdotes of such incidents that ended

poorly for either the volunteer or the inmate. These respondents emphasized the importance of volunteers 'remembering the rules,' exercising a 'healthy fear and skepticism' of inmates, as well as 'not playing favorites' among inmates, which could leave one vulnerable to manipulation. They felt volunteers should be street-wise and needed to know where to draw the lines between themselves and the inmates. Remembering that line was generally viewed to be in the best interests of the inmates, the volunteers, and the program they supported.

Working with inmates

The interviews captured the emotional work volunteers must do to maintain a balance between keeping an appropriate distance from inmates, while also providing them with services and support. As Aaron put it, 'It's a challenge to learn how to talk to people without necessarily accepting everything they've done, in a civil manner, or I would say in a loving matter.' One way volunteers achieved this balance was to view themselves as building relationships, but not friendships, with inmates. Setting personal boundaries was an important component. Essentially, the respondents implied that friendships have a give-and-take quality, whereas relationships do not, and this distinction was important for the volunteer and the inmate. David shared, 'Even though over time somebody might go from being a stranger to being in a very intimate relationship emotionally and spiritually with me, I don't ever go in thinking I'm going to get a friend out of this. I would never place that burden on them.' Respondents also felt that relationships, above and beyond any specific program or activity, were the basis for inmates' change or ultimate success. In short, respondents suggested that inmates did not need another friend, but they did need support and encouragement from a 'straight' person.

Respondents were not naïve about some inmates' motives for participating in a program. They recognized instances when inmates were in programs because they had to be in order, for example, to earn privileges in the facility. According to a few respondents, these people were usually 'weeded out,' either by the prison administration (e.g., an infraction can be grounds for dismissal) or the individual's own lack of commitment to the program (e.g., repeated absences can be grounds for dismissal). Volunteers said that they dealt with this challenge by focusing on the inmates who appearing genuinely willing to be there.

Another challenge volunteers faced was coping with inmates' feelings. Respondents noted inmates' emotional hardness or anger, as well as their feelings of stigma and worthlessness. Helping inmates work through these feelings posed programmatic and emotional challenges. At the programming level, this meant being flexible, such as putting aside the day's topic and instead focusing on the participants' needs. At the emotional level, the volunteers spoke of their own challenges in helping inmates overcome their negative self-perceptions and see themselves differently. Volunteers acknowledged that they were not going to be able to change everyone; at the same time, they seemed to view the inmates' emotional struggles as impediments to change.

For many volunteers, working with inmates also had the effect of altering their perceptions of the inmates themselves. Essentially, this meant that volunteers were able to overcome stereotypes and came to see inmates as people instead of 'others.' Several respondents related that they entered the correctional facilities with preconceived notions of the kind of people inmates were and how they lived inside of prison. However, as their contact with inmates increased, they found these stereotypes eroded. For example, one respondent who worked in a dog training program recalled a graduation event when an inmate handed the leash to the dog's new owner, a young person with special needs, and described the patience and calm of the inmate. Recalling all the graduation events, she said, 'I've never yet seen an inmate do it with a dry eye.' Respondents described inmates as 'parents who love their kids,' 'polite,' 'appreciative,' 'grateful,' 'sharp,' 'changing,' and changeable. Mary said, 'I've been one of those that think of the inmates as second class citizens. But then once you get inside and you're reminded that, yeah, they did something that they have to pay for, but they're still people.' A common refrain was that the inmates were not bad people, but people who had made mistakes and engaged in harmful behaviors.

Likewise, working with inmates led some volunteers to recognize the limitations that inmates face during incarceration and after release. Despite an inmates' efforts or change in a program, Riley articulated, 'There's some substantial impediments and other factors that will also be challenging him all along the way at every step.' Having the perspective of inmates' personal histories (e.g., childhood neglect and abuse, lack of education, lack of family support, substance

abuse, mental illness), volunteers had a sense of the challenges with which the inmates would have to cope on their own. Some volunteers also noted the stark differences in structure and support between inmates' lives in prison compared to their lives in the community. They felt that these differences would also impede inmates' later successes. In sum, through their contact with inmates, volunteers appeared to gain awareness of and appreciation for the personal problems associated with both serving time and reentry.

Interacting with the prison system

In addition to new perspectives on who inmates are and what challenges they face, volunteers also gained insight into the system itself. At the interpersonal level, the respondents talked about their face-to-face interactions with facility staff, but there was a wide degree of variation. None of the respondents had wholly negative experiences with staff, and only a few described wholly positive interactions. Most commonly, respondents described a mix of experiences, but these differences did not seem to correspond to either respondents' characteristics or the population they served. Some felt they could trust the staff when it came to security; others did not. Some staff were described as unwelcoming, irritated, indifferent, or imposed upon. Others were described as callous to the inmates or suspicious of the volunteers. In contrast, some staff were described as polite and helpful, even supportive of the programming the volunteers provided, especially if they saw changes in the inmates. More experienced volunteers, who were familiar with the security challenges that having citizens in the prison posed for staff or who were understanding of the stress experienced by staff, tended to be more accepting of the variability of staff attitudes.

Most volunteers did not have direct contact with prison administrators. However, some respondents did feel certain administrative policies could be a barrier to recruiting or retaining volunteers. Several respondents pointed to the volunteer orientation as unnecessarily frightening or dramatic. Some mentioned the bureaucratic hassles that could impede or slow entry into a facility even for scheduled visits or classes, resulting in either less time or cancellation of the planned event. Others suggested that the negative attitudes of at least some staff could also be an impediment for retaining volunteers.

A few respondents who were program coordinators did have some contact with administrators. These respondents commented on how administrative issues could be a barrier. They noted how the administrative philosophy does not always trickle down. One respondent disclosed, 'I actually know a few wardens. At the top the philosophy is wonderful, in terms of what they believe and how they feel prisoners are taught. They don't want the hard-nose guards, all of that. But the thing is, it's hard to get that all the way down.' While respondents like this tended to acknowledge the 'importance of right policy and enforcement of those policies,' they also expressed frustration with administrative decisions that affected programming. For example, because of a mandate for equal time for religious programming and a facility's inability to provide resources for all such programming (e.g., staff time, space), one respondent mentioned that all 'extra' religious programming (e.g., music groups) was cut. Another issue had to do with facility or system-wide lock-downs. When a facility was under lock-down, sometimes for extended or indeterminate periods, all externally provided programming was suspended, except personal visits from clergy registered with the facility. Even if they understood the administrative and security needs posed by lock-downs, respondents expressed frustration with not being allowed to keep the momentum of a program going, which they argued negatively impacted its participants, as well as potentially affecting volunteer readiness and retention.

Views on the criminal justice system

As with their views on inmates, volunteers found their views on the criminal justice system itself shifting as a result of their experiences. Some volunteers conceded to the role of prisons as a tool of the justice system or as providing for public safety in the short term, but most spoke of the failures of the current model of justice. Hannah exemplified this transition: 'I used to think it was kind of unfair that the government would be taxing us so much and so much has to go to these facilities and institutions, but you really understand that the more money you put into it while they're in there, the less likely they are to reenter.' Volunteers have come to view the prison as inefficient in providing resources and ineffective in rehabilitation. Despite the frustrations they might have with the inmates or the system, volunteers

expressed how the personal growth that resulted from volunteering changed their mindset, and made them more vocal about who inmates were, their needs, the gaps in the system, and what other people could do to help.

Several respondents spoke cynically about the political and cultural impetus that underscores mass incarceration. Philip observed that people make money from prisons being full and that ‘the prison system is not unique to any other system. It’s a political system. It’s about power and money . . . Every politician is rallying “tough on crime.” They’re not going to put more resources into helping prisoners. No one gets more votes by saying ‘I’m going to help the prisoner.’ Among all volunteers, the bottom line, rooted in their experiences, was that prison is not the solution. Anna argued, ‘I think most people are afraid so they’re into locking them up and most of our laws are about harsher penalties and keeping people in there longer, and that’s not realistic, it’s not practical, it’s expensive. But it also doesn’t work.’

In addition to coming to understand the individual challenges inmates face after release, volunteers also discussed reentry issues more broadly. As Leah bluntly put it, ‘The system is set up for these gentlemen to fail.’ An overarching theme was concern about the lack of social support and lack of resources available to people after they are released, ranging from connecting a release with a mentor/sponsor to providing continuity of mental health care. Volunteers were also aware of the social stigma placed on former prisoners and its implications for finding work, finding a place to live, and finding acceptance. In sum, volunteers recognized that their efforts were only part of the picture and that reentry issues impact former inmates’ ultimate success.

Conclusions

Correctional systems in the United States continue to rely on and even expand their reliance on citizen volunteers. Given that inmate programs could not be maintained without citizen volunteers, it is vital for recruitment and retention to understand why people volunteer and what their experiences are like. The primary goal of this study was to shed light on the role of citizen volunteers by directly interviewing volunteers themselves, examining the Midwest, and reaching beyond volunteers specifically devoted to ministry.

The citizen volunteers interviewed for the study were similar to those described in previous research focused on prison ministries in Southern states (Kerley et al. 2010; Kerley, Matthews, and Shoemaker 2009; Tewksbury and Collins 2005; Tewksbury and Dabney 2004). They were mostly white, middle-aged, and held white-collar jobs, although they were equally distributed by sex. They were altruistically motivated, as well as enthusiastic and dedicated to their work. Faith-based motivations were a factor for some volunteers, in that they felt called or religiously-convicted to volunteer, but conversion was not a driving force. The volunteers, whether faith-motivated or otherwise, did not view themselves as saviors, nor were they overly optimistic about their ability to change inmates. Rather, being present and willing to develop relationships was a priority, with the hope that doing so might plant seeds of change. The respondents in this study also bore some similarity to volunteers working in halfway houses. Like Denney and Tewksbury (2013), respondents experienced hesitancy about their effectiveness in helping inmates while also deriving unexpected personal benefits from making connections with inmates. Although further research is needed to understand this similarity, it is likely that individuals willing to work with current or former inmates have been able to overcome the stereotypes often associated with those populations.

The effects of volunteering itself, once people begin, may be one reason that volunteers can move beyond stereotypes and view inmates as people. The citizen volunteers in this study experienced a transformative effect noted in other studies of people working with inmates (Filek et al. 2013; Denney and Tewksbury 2013; Kerley et al. 2010). Volunteers described a shift in how they thought about inmates and about the system itself. Unlike earlier research, however, the transformation experienced by the volunteers was less tied to their calling or their sense of humility; rather, they were galvanized by their insights. Whether intentional or not, many of the volunteers interviewed in this study sounded like advocates for inmate welfare and prison reform.

There were limitations to the study. First, because the sample was restricted to one Midwestern state, it is not possible to generalize to surrounding locations. Second, as noted, the sample size was restricted by the challenges of obtaining or accessing a list of volunteers. Third, this small sample should not be considered representative of all prison volunteers in the state or region. Because some

of the initial recruiting points were faith-based Christian organizations, it is likely that other faiths, organizations, and program types were under-represented. The sample did include volunteers not associated with faith-based organizations, but volunteers not affiliated with a particular program or organization were also underrepresented. Fourth, although the themes derived in the analysis did not appear to vary substantially by either volunteer characteristics or facility type, interviews with a larger sample may have uncovered such differences. Thus, a larger scale study of volunteers is necessary to paint a broader picture.

Keeping these limitations in mind, the study nonetheless provides insight into citizen volunteers in prison, an understudied group of people within the correctional enterprise, and a starting point for future research. The trend among policy makers has been to encourage the use of volunteers in prisons while at the same time reducing funding for training and supporting volunteers (O'Connor, Duncan, and Quillard 2006). Paralleling this trend, criminologists have advocated for evaluating prison programming and program implementation, but make little mention of the individuals who engage with the inmates, be they paid staff or volunteers (e.g., Frost and Clear 2012). However, this study demonstrated that volunteers play an important role in programming, and they may impact program and inmate success in both tangible and intangible ways. The extant research suggests that religious-based programming attracts the most volunteers, both for personal reasons and for reasons relating to political support for faith-based initiatives (Johnson 2004). Understanding people who contribute to other educational, vocational, or cultural programs can inform recruiting efforts in those areas as well.

If the correctional system is to rely on volunteers, continued research regarding the role of volunteers is central to developing new programs, recruiting and screening volunteers, and gaining staff support. Additional research is necessary to understand volunteer satisfaction and retention. Maintaining a group of committed volunteers who bring the "outside" into prisons is likely to benefit inmates, as well as the overall health of the program. Moreover, as this study suggests, volunteers can become advocates for change. Retaining satisfied volunteers who take their experiences on the 'inside' out to their communities may have the latent effect of generating support for reforming the criminal justice system.

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Appendix A: Interview questions

1. I'd like to know your age and what you do for a living.
2. How did you get involved in volunteering in the correctional system?
3. What were your main reasons for volunteering?
4. Describe some of the activities you participated in as part of volunteering.
5. How would you characterize your relationships with inmates? Please remember not to use anyone's name.
6. How would you characterize your relationships with the facility's staff?
7. What do you think the benefits of volunteering at a correctional facility are?
8. What are some of the challenges?
9. What was your best experience as a volunteer? The worst?
10. Would you recommend to someone that he/she should volunteer in a prison setting? Why or why not?
11. What recommendations would you make to improve the role of volunteers in the prison system?
12. Would anyone like to add anything else?