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### Reflective writing in prisons: Rehabilitation and the power of stories and connections

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In 2016, the United States Department of Justice released a report on nationwide correctional population statistics, affirming that from 2007 to 2016 “the correctional population declined by an average of 1.2 % annually” (Kaeble & Cowhig, 2016). This report made news headlines all over the country comforting US citizens that the government is trying its best to curb what many researchers have called the era of “mass incarceration” in the U.S (Williams, 2016). These headlines make perfect sense because, as per the report, the overall incarceration rate was the lowest since the year 1996 (Kaeble & Cowhig, 2016). Even notable public policy think tanks like the Pew Research Center reaffirmed these findings (Gramlich, 2019). However, one should not be convinced by these numbers alone. Unfortunately, they only tell half the story.

An international database that makes global comparisons reports that the U.S. prison population rate is on a surge, topping the list with 655 people in prison per 100,000 (World Prison Brief, n.d. a). Where this number alone is more than five times that of the incarceration rate of the world’s most populated nation, China, a temporal comparison further highlights the nation’s mass incarceration problem. Not only does the U.S incarcerate ten more people per 100,000 today than it did in the year 2000, currently it also has an average prison occupancy rate of 103.9 percent (World Prison Brief, n.d. b). In other words, despite the United States’ smaller world population ratio, more people are behind bars than the nation’s infrastructure has space for, and the U.S. is incarcerating people at higher rates than any other nation. So far, this other side of the story suggests that the U.S. does indeed have a mass incarceration problem. However, just as any statistic should be closely scrutinized, one could question the validity of these reports. In fact, proponents of the current correctional system may quote the national crime rate trends

that indicate that violent crime has been on a sharp decline since the year 1993.<sup>1</sup> This could be a justification for the high rates of incarceration, whereby the average citizen can be made to believe that since more people are behind bars, society is consequently safer. Yet again, these violent crime statistics don't give us the full picture, and prisoner recidivism rates is the final missing piece that helps clear the narrative of the success/failure of the U.S. carceral system.

Prison recidivism studies take into account three important factors of analysis: an individual's release from prison, a measure of their success/failure to reintegrate into society after release (like committing another crime and/or being sent to prison again) and a follow-up observational period (Alper et al., 2018). These three characteristics guide researchers in assessing the carceral system as a whole. If the rate of recidivism is low, the correctional system is deemed as functioning well and achieving its purpose. However, recidivism rates are not low at all in the U.S. A 2018 Bureau of Justice Statistics study that followed approximately 400,000 prisoners over a nine-year period found that close to half of the released prisoners were re-arrested during their first year of release, with an average of five re-arrests per prisoner and an overall recidivism rate of 83% at the end of the ninth year of the study (Alper et al., 2018). Where one in four of these released prisoners was initially arrested for a violent offense, a majority of the study participants were re-arrested in the first year for committing another violent crime (Alper et al., 2018). Even when many different measures of recidivism are taken into account, as in Figure 1 (see Appendix), the fact remains clear: no matter the specific measure, prison recidivism rates are on the rise in the U.S.

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<sup>1</sup> The two supporting measures are the Uniform Crime Report which is an FBI report of all serious crimes reported annually and the National Crime Victimization Survey, a Bureau of Justice Statistics questionnaire that surveys everyone twelve years and older and asks them to note any crime that affected them, even if it was unreported. See Planty and Langton (2014).

One can then begin to recognize the paradox of the U.S. correctional system: a system of mass incarceration with very high recidivism rates. Not only are more people being incarcerated in the U.S. than in any other part of the world, but more importantly, its system is also not effectively correcting or reforming the behavior of individuals who engage in criminal activity. If offenders continue to offend, even after going through a correctional system designed to address their criminal activity, what is the point of having such a system? Clearly, somewhere in the correctional pathways, be it in accommodating these prisoners and their needs inside the prison or providing them adequate support after release, the current system is flawed. Keeping this in mind, there are three main goals of this essay: 1) establish that the dynamic of corrections in the U.S. is only one of multiple possibilities, where there is no clear consensus on what works “best” in rehabilitation; 2) explore what effective rehabilitation and addressing the needs of the inmates really entails; and 3) propose how an emerging type of program could better address gaps in the system and alleviate some of the current correction-recidivism issues.

### **The Early Correctional Dilemma: To Rehabilitate or Not to Rehabilitate**

There was a time in the history of corrections in the U.S. when the belief that rehabilitation is ineffective for treating prisoners became the norm. In 1974, a research article by Robert E. Martinson spread like fire, where it was concluded that treatment programs in prison had no “appreciable effect” on recidivism given his study’s findings. In other words, he argued that “nothing works” (as cited in Cullen, 2013, p. 326) and people believed him. Despite the empirical limitations of his study which were noted clearly, replication studies done by many criminologists affirmed his findings (Cullen, 2013). For decades, rehabilitation lost its legitimacy and research focusing on what went wrong or what could be done better for prisoners halted (Cullen, 2013). In fact, even policy makers started following these “data proven” results and

their focus changed from creating more rehabilitation spaces in prisons to making prisons more efficient “human warehouses” or punishment bases (Cullen, 2013). This “nothing works” approach lasted until the late 1980s when the work of a few skeptical scientists gave birth to a new line of inquiry: the “What Works” debate (Cullen, 2013, p. 335-336).

Initially, this “What Works” era involved the emergence of several meta-analysis studies that re-evaluated the prison treatment programs using a new methodology (Cullen, 2013). In all of these studies, the common result was a positive mean effect size on the prisoners’ behavior in nearly all of the available treatment programs (Cullen, 2013). Under this newly emerging scientific method, had Martinson’s findings being correct, the evaluations would have resulted in an effect size of zero or negative (Cullen, 2013). Thus, these results were in direct opposition to the “nothing works” argument. Over time, this research evolved and studies began further categorizing the different types of intervention treatments, measuring the effect size of each to see if one type of intervention did a better job of preventing future crime than the others. Surprisingly, it was found that the punitive correctional measures - the ones that policy makers had so enthusiastically vouched for after Martinson’s study - were the ones that yielded close to zero or even negative results in terms of prisoner deterrence, as opposed to the more rehabilitative and less harsh treatment measures (Cullen, 2013). Such crucial findings, consistently in favor of rehabilitation, changed the corrections debate forever. Instead of arguing whether or not rehabilitation works, scholars now began searching for the most effective rehabilitative measures. We moved from, “Nothing Works” to what researchers today call the “What Works” era. The question became, given the finite resources of the carceral system, which practices and programs should be prioritized?

## **The What Works Dilemma: Unlimited Options, Limited Resources**

Where the National Institute of Justice has over fifty different recommended rehabilitation models, literature on prison rehabilitation further suggests that there is no consensus on what works best (National Institute of Justice, n.d.). Research as early as the 1990's indicates that the availability of education programs in prisons enhances an inmate's chances of success upon release, thus making them less likely to recidivate. One such study conducted in the state of Ohio found that inmates enrolled in a prison college program had a recidivism rate of only eighteen percent compared to an overall recidivism rate of forty percent for the state (Vacca, 2004). This finding has been reiterated in many recent studies (David et al., 2014). Contrastingly, research on cognitive behavioral treatment programs suggests that these programs are even more effective at lowering recidivism rates. In 2018, Mpofu et al. conducted a systematic literature review of a decade's worth of empirical cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) studies and found an "overall lower rate of sexual recidivism, violent recidivism and general recidivism" for inmates in CBT programs than those not enrolled in such programs (Mpofu et al., 2018, p. 176). Programs that begin as release approaches, like employment and housing support, have similar empirical support trends (Duwe, 2017). But these varied successes in all directions don't help us definitively answer the question: which programs should we prioritize to achieve the best outcome for those who are incarcerated and for the rest of society? What makes a prisoner less likely to recidivate? In this world of many options, the triad of rehabilitation effectiveness can provide some direction.

### **What Does "Rehabilitation" Mean? The Principles of Effective Rehabilitation**

Where some researchers are interested in testing the efficacy of ongoing corrections programs, others focus on discovering the fundamental differences between successful and

unsuccessful programs. The various components or factors of effective rehabilitation began to emerge as early as the 1990's (Antonowicz & Ross, 1994; Smith & Swartz, 2009). Ross and Antonowicz (1994), two well-known scholars in the field, conducted an analysis of forty-four offender treatment studies spanning over twenty years in the correctional treatment literature. In their evaluation, they found a number of key factors to be the most important in determining a program's success. One of these factors was "multifaceted programming" where seventy percent of the successful programs were those that incorporated a variety of intervention strategies to reform rather than relying on a single technique. Another important factor identified by Ross and Antonowicz (1994) was "targeting criminogenic needs" where ninety percent of the programs found successful "targeted offender characteristics known to be associated with re-offending" (pp.99, 102). Lastly, the most important of the remaining factors was concerned with the extent to which the program changed the offender's thinking, or social cognitive skills. Programs addressing social cognitive skills training were seventy-five percent more successful than programs that did not address this factor (Antonowicz & Ross, 1994). Years later, as noted in a 2009 literature review and a more recent journal publication, the components identified by Antonowicz and Ross were revisited and articulated as the triad of effectiveness: risk, need, and responsivity (Smith & Swartz, 2009; Cullen, 2013).

This triad postulates the same fundamentality that has been found all throughout the correctional literature. The risk factor, for instance, takes the same target-oriented design but expands on how the target can be achieved. It suggests that if recidivism is to be reduced, then inmates who are prone to more risky habits, like lack of self-control, substance abuse, and anti-social behaviors, should be the ones receiving the intervention because, as per research, these individuals are more likely to recidivate than other inmate groups (Smith & Swartz, 2009). In

other words, ensuring such rehabilitation is available for these individuals is important to consider. Similarly, the need factor complements this first principle by suggesting that any rehabilitative measure should be centered around helping the prisoner work through their “criminogenic needs” or problematic behaviors that result in criminal activity like anger management or substance abuse (Cullen, 2013). This is again in line with research, where addressing these issues can definitely reduce, if not completely eradicate, the driving motives for committing crime again (Smith & Swartz, 2009). Lastly the final factor of this trio, responsivity, stresses that any program must root out the cause of the problem, specific to each inmate, and then work with them to address or respond to it (Cullen, 2013). Again, as per research, rehabilitative programs that focus on a perceptual or cognitive restructuring intervention design have the best responsiveness (Smith & Swartz, 2009).

As we now move forward, it is crucial to understand what all these principles unanimously emphasize as being key in rehabilitation: sourcing the problematic behavior of a criminal and helping them address it via a mindset and attitude change. Now we know more broadly what it means to “rehabilitate” an inmate, and how we can help them get on new, changed pathways of life. This new lens can help us better see the “what works” dilemma and will be crucial in evaluating a possible solution.

### **What Could Work: Moving Beyond Correctional Teaching to Creating**

Funding for correctional programs is typically granted on the basis of empirical evidence for the program’s efficacy (Williams & Fonda, 2019). As mentioned earlier, the most important numbers and metrics by far in this conversation are recidivism rates. And how do we lower these recidivist behaviors? As explained above, one has to work with inmates in helping them figure out where exactly they went wrong. However, quite contrarily, typical education programs in



prisons have had crucial problems in addressing these factors influencing recidivism, though on the surface they seem to guarantee a change in the course of lives for the inmates (David et al., 2014; Taliaferro et al., 2016).

A recent survey administered by the advocacy group Families Against Mandatory Minimums revealed that inmates say they are not learning much in their prison-provided classes. This survey revealed what the education options available to some inmates were: “crocheting, how to play bridge or the game show Jeopardy, [and] tips on reviewing movies” (George, 2017, para. 1). One of the inmates even expressed how these prison certifications “don’t really mean anything” (George, 2017, para. 3). There’s an argument to be made about the efficacy of prison education programs broadly. But instead, consider the ideas of Jean Trounstone, co-founder of Changing Lives through Literature, an alternative-sentencing program. Trounstone (2008), in writing *Beyond Prison Education*, says “the un-spoken aim of the education department was to reform the women [inmates]— that is, to enlighten them on what society says is the ‘best’ way to be, to *teach* socially accepted behavior as an antidote to crime” (p. 674). She later argues how typical correctional programs are “problematic for the free thinker who wants to open rather than close doors” (Trounstone, 2008, p. 674). What she says here is very powerful: you cannot teach a prisoner how to live the best, crime-free life, you must instead help them discover that for themselves. Creative prison programs involving writing, art, theatre, dance, and other forms of expression are known for opening up minds.

There is ample empirical evidence that theatre, poetry and painting programs in prison make inmates less likely to recidivate. The very well-known Actors in Gang Prison Project reported that their work reduced disciplinary incidents by eighty-nine percent and recidivism rates are reduced by more than eighty percent for participants of this program (The Actors’

Gang, 2016). Researchers have also specifically evaluated many prison arts programs and their outcomes. One such study in California measured attitudinal and behavioral changes for 110 inmates across four facilities and analyzed the effectiveness of various art, writing, theatre and generally creativity-related programs (Brewster, 2014). Seventy-seven percent of inmates in the writing component of one of the programs said that they got along well with other inmates after enrolling in the program, and about sixty percent also reported improved disciplinary records (Brewster, 2014). Furthermore, in one of the domains of Emotional Control as measured by the researchers, participants enrolled in such programs were found to have better emotional regulation abilities than other inmates, where a large majority of those involved in the program for more than five years reported that the program helped them feel better, relieve stress and even make better life choices (Brewster, 2014). Clearly, creative programs like these are not only addressing important needs that rehabilitation demands but also resulting in positive recidivism outcomes. In many cases, inmates are also likely to be happy to have such mediums to express themselves and channel their problems and thoughts into creative work.

Despite this, these programs have also at times suffered from the mindset of teaching rather than working with the inmates on their journeys. A notable example is the terminology used when these programs and their frameworks are introduced: terms like “poetry class” or “writing class” to enhance the inmates’ skills, to make them better writers, better artists, better actors and so on. This is not to say that there is something wrong with learning and being taught something new. But I think there is something special about the idea of autonomy and allowing the inmates to take control of their journeys of self-discovery that are taking place in prison. I think openness and creative freedom are more powerful for those who live behind bars than forcing them into a restricted and designed formula. As Trounstein (2008) said, it is all about

opening up minds, not restraining them in a certain direction. Fortunately, she is not the only scholar who feels this way. David Coogan, an English professor at the Virginia Commonwealth University, also creates prison projects that emphasize open creativity frameworks.

### **Coogan's Prison Writing Project: An Overview**

From the years 2006 to 2011, Coogan collaborated with ten inmates from the Richmond City Jail to publish a book containing memoirs from these participants' lives - true stories that were inscribed on paper in prison and then later recorded in this book. These memoirs contained each participant's outlook on life where the purpose of the project, as highlighted by Coogan, was to "help [them] write [their] way into a new life without crime..." (Coogan et al., 2015, p. 9). Basic guidelines involving four categories, *The Past*, *The Problem*, *The Punishment*, and *The Possibilities*, were also handed out to these participants along with some writing prompts and questions to reflect on. These questions included, "When did you start to get in trouble? What sort of trouble was it [...] Describe something from your life that gives you hope that things could be different" (Coogan et al., 2015, pp. 10-11). However, beyond these guidelines, each inmate was on a writing journey by themselves. In fact, since they were being transferred from one facility to another as their sentencing progressed, Coogan was not physically present with the majority of these men, especially in the latter half of their writing journeys. His role was just to minimally orient them and be a resource, which often took the form of several letter exchanges. Thus, the inmates' their reflections were all internal and self-driven. Additionally, in the few years that they had together at the Richmond Jail, Coogan also wrote with these participants, so it also wasn't just them writing and him being their "mentor"; they all collaborated together, encouraged one another and ended up becoming a part of each other's life journeys. Every time someone would get frustrated and encounter a stop, the group would help

them by offering a question or a new perspective that would open them up more. Thus, contrary to a typical writing class that helps one develop writing skills, this project's goal was personal development – to help each participant get closer to whoever they thought they were and aspired to be. Over time, taking control of their own life narratives in these written memoirs offered these participants a sense of personal freedom; they told the story of their lives beyond being inmates with serial numbers as their source of identity. They shared their humanity by forming identities as writers.

In their closing memoirs, most of these writers claimed to have found a self-awareness never before realized. One of them even mentioned that he had “grown a new appreciation for life...and a new level of emotional empathy” (Coogan et al., 2015, p. 230). While these are anecdotal verdicts of change, Coogan notes in the end of his book how most of the authors are living changed lives upon release be it in choosing a new career path or getting back to family life (Coogan et al., 2015). Now, that is not to say that writing got these people their jobs or their new pathways in life. However, this project created a meaningful opportunity for the authors to re-orient themselves toward making those possibilities a reality. Most of them note in their memoirs how writing and revisiting their past on paper helped them see the gaps between who they once were, who they ended up becoming, and who they truly aspired to be. Such internal self-realization achieved via writing aligns with the effective recidivism factors of need and responsibility. However, before any conclusion about the efficacy of such expressive and collaborative writing in prison rehabilitation is made, let's explore the writing of one of these authors more closely.

Naji Mujahid<sup>2</sup> is one of the writers who participated in this writing project in jail and throughout his time in the correctional system. For him, writing served to help him understand what went wrong, how it happened that way, where it led to, and what could be done about it. In his memoirs, he first explains how his worldview was misshaped by the early hardships he faced, thereby influencing his life decisions and ultimately landing him in prison. In his own words, writing offered him “an analysis of his life” that he said was much needed (Coogan et al., 2015, p. 232). Thus, as noted in the internal change process below, writing addressed his criminogenic needs by being responsive and offering a perceptual shift - a reiteration of the need and the responsibility principles of the triad. The following quotes and analysis are based on Naji’s original writing as published in the book, *Writing Our Way Out: Memoirs from Jail* (Coogan et al., 2015).

### **The Past**

Naji initially mentions in his writings that his mother died when he was very young, and he was adopted by his grandparents who abused him. Shockingly, one time his grandmother struck him on “every part of his exposed body” (78) with an extension cord, even to a point that he nearly blacked out. On another instance, a rather happy one like Christmas, he was not only beaten but also pushed out of the door by his grandma, leaving him freezing cold in sub-zero temperatures. Likewise, day after day, Naji’s early memoirs are comprised of words like “pain” and “wounds” as he paints a picture of the inhumane maltreatment he underwent by his very own grandmother—a family member one would expect to receive love and warmth from, but Naji only inherits pain and fear. All this converged to one point: this was too much for young Naji to

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<sup>2</sup> Here the author’s real name is used because the published book from which this analysis is drawn from (*Coogan et al., 2015*) features his actual name. Hence, the choice is consistent with that and made to authentically give credit to his work and the memoirs of his life that he contributed with in the book.

bear at his sensitive age and he in his own words was “dramatically changing” in response (79). Moreover, where Naji started to develop this sudden, dark side to him, gradually damaging his core values of compassion and humility, his belief about responsibility and what it meant to be an adult also became distorted. His grandmother once told him, “I’ll be glad when you turn eighteen, cause you’re getting out of this house” (131). His grandfather took him to local bars and “shot houses” and got drunk in front of him (91). This, young Naji came to understand, was normal adult behavior. As unprepared as Naji was for adulthood, coupled with his feelings of low self-confidence and self-esteem, one can infer what happened next. In writing these thoughts down, Naji confirms that it was the presence of these circumstances that were slowly shaping who he became. Indeed, after recognizing the how, the next phase of his writing focused on tracing his life choices.

### **The Problem and the Punishment**

The first of his subsequent decisions involved using drugs. Since Naji was not accepted at home, drugs and partying became a means to achieving social acceptance. In fact, when offered a joint by his friend, Naji mentions using the same two life principles he had indirectly learned before: he signals irresponsibility and a carefree attitude by saying “Fuck it, why not?” (92) when taking the joint, but also juxtaposes the turmoil in his home as driving that decision. Unsurprisingly, in writing these thoughts down, Naji mentions that he once thought that taking drugs not only raised his self-esteem as he started gaining a “semblance of acceptance” (93) amongst his peers, but he also started seeing weed as “a way out” (93). He indicates this acceptance multiple times by mentioning in his memoirs that getting high turned him into “the funniest, coolest and bravest” (95) person and that “suddenly everybody wanted to be around [him]” (95). He also goes on to write about stealing and breaking into stores and homes—

decisions he characterizes in his own words as “feeding his drug habit,” keeping this “cool facade” alive and most importantly, avoiding dealing with his life (93-94).

To reiterate how his early experiences shaped his decisions, Naji mentions gradually “rationalizing this [drugs and crime pathway] as normal” (93). Such analysis signals the depth of reflection Naji was doing to look back at his life and piece together what went wrong. All it seems to have required was a pen, paper, some self-reflection time and a little bit of guidance (i.e. what this writing project indirectly offered). Of course, that is not to say that writing was the only mechanism that brought upon this realization for Naji; there were other events going on in his life that influenced his way of thinking, as recorded in his memoirs. However, undeniably writing about his past and engaging in critical reflections was a factor that helped him make a change.

### **The Possibilities**

After having gained this new understanding of his life, Naji started shaping his actions accordingly. Not only does he first mold himself into a “responsible family man” (208), caring for his fiancé and his ill grandmother despite what she did, but every time he thought of going back to his old lifestyle, his new beliefs contradicted those negative thoughts - something he called an “internal struggle” (208). In fact, writing about his present situation in a correctional facility for his drug usage, he agreed that his perception of the criminal lifestyle was problematic and that he wanted to change (210). Likewise, in his final memoir, Naji affirms that he realizes that his behavior was once driven by his “compulsion issues” (232) from early childhood, and now he is willing to do the hard work to change his character through his work. One of the many examples is when he chooses to stay on the right path still diligently maintaining a work life,

even waking up at 4:00 am to “prepare himself for the day” (208). Ultimately, Naji claimed to have found “a sense of therapy” (232) via this project.

### **Writing and Rehabilitation: The Power of Discovery via Writing**

Indeed, changes in Naji’s perceptions are evident in the variability between his first memoir and his closing piece. Through his writing, one starts to notice how gradually putting down his thoughts and feelings on paper gave him the strength to move forward in a positive direction and away from his distorted worldview. Naji of course is not alone in associating such positive emotions and benefits with writing.

Like Naji, many other *Writing Our Way Out* authors seem to agree that writing helped them find a new purpose and meaning in life. If one trusts what the book and its authors suggest, perhaps these ex-offenders will never willfully return to prison by choosing to re-commit a crime. Given the strong testimonies offered by these inmates, their changed outlook on life and how well some of the principles of the triad of effectiveness were addressed by this writing program, expressive and reflective writing projects and workshops should be considered a model program in the corrections system. Critics might argue that this project relies on too small of a sample size to make a claim of that magnitude, especially when the finding is based solely on anecdotal evidence. Fortunately, however, research studies conducted on writing and its health benefits, even in the context of the corrections system, validate the effectiveness of writing in helping people change their behaviors and thinking processes.

### **Research Evidence: Writing, Attitude Change and Emotional Growth**

Expressive writing has been investigated in the domain of psychology for decades. For instance, a 1998 study re-evaluating earlier research found that writing down emotional thoughts,



especially on traumatic life events, predicted positive health outcomes like better psychological well-being and physiological functioning (Smyth, 1998). These findings were reiterated in a more recent publication where, based on a quantitative analysis, the authors suggested expressive writing as a possible clinical intervention, supporting its efficacy in improving mental health and other dimensions of well-being (Smyth et al., 2008). More importantly, the authors of this book also reported how expressive writing helps people regulate their emotions, assisting the mind with “reorganization of thoughts associated with stressful events and resulting emotions” (Smyth et al., 2008, p. 225). This ability to cause cognitive shifts is a common finding in such research studies. Interestingly, this is also a key feature that resonates with the responsivity principle of the effective rehabilitation triad. Additionally, where these were all studies conducted outside the prison context, upon closer look, one can also see similarities in the methodologies used here and in prison writing projects like Coogan’s.

One such notable similarity was the questions or guidelines that these writing studies give to their participants. For instance, where Smyth et al. (2008) points out that writing studies typically ask participants to “write about anything [they] want...[and] something that has affected [them] very deeply,” (p. 216) Coogan’s questions in the “Past” and “Problem” category address the same issues differently. Essentially, not only do these writing prompts resemble what Coogan had framed a bit differently in his own writing project, but they also manage to achieve fairly similar results when it comes to goals and outcomes. In other words, prison context or not, writing and its positive, rehabilitative properties are undeniable. These research-proven health benefits, especially in the cognitive and psychological domains, are already starting to make the case for more such programs in prisons. Studies evaluating ongoing prison writing programs make the writing and rehabilitation connection even clearer.

In 2006, one such study evaluated the Beat Within writing workshops conducted in San Francisco's juvenile correctional centers. The researcher's aim was to see if these writing and art workshops were actually eliciting the behavioral change in its participants that the organizers claimed they would (i.e. fostering a sense of community and support and using that to progress the participants' process of non-violent behavior) (Urie, 2006). In a triangulated methodology involving ethnographic research, surveys from correctional officers, and a content analysis of the resulting magazine published by the organizers of the workshops, a positive behavior and attitude change was not only independently observed but also reported by the correctional officers (Urie, 2006). Similar programs have followed in California by independent organizations and are conducted all across the U.S by many public and private universities' community engagement and social change departments (Lockard & Robertson, 2011). Likewise, I once myself partook in a similar writing journey with the residents of the Bon Air Juvenile Correctional Center in Richmond, VA.

### **Writing at Bon Air: Journeys of Self Discovery**

Starting his journey in this new teaching environment, Garret Keizer (1996) in his book, *No Place but Here*, writes "I thought I had come to the end of the world and what might as well be the end of my life" (1). These thoughts resonate with my first experience entering Section 54 of the Bon Air Correctional Center in Richmond. That night, I wrote in my reflection, "As I was walking down the hallways, with all the doors and the strong claustrophobia all around me, I was scared...my perception of what inmates look like was almost killing me from the inside" (Kumar, 2019). The fact that I was inside a prison and about to talk to an actual inmate was overpowering to me. I still don't know why. Maybe it was the societal misconceptions I once held. Maybe it was my own prejudice against "criminals" and the negative connotations we all

have about them. It wasn't until this stereotype-confronting experience that I first discovered the power of expressive writing.

As part of a Spring 2019 class, I was fortunate enough to collaborate with and get to know the incarcerated youth at Bon Air. It was very similar to the Coogan Writing Project I mentioned above with the only difference being that I wasn't there to change anything. I was just there to listen, write, and be present with the residents of Bon Air. The goals of our class were simple: build temporary relationships with the residents of Bon Air and discover the power of connections via storytelling and sharing through the medium of writing. And within weeks, I could see writing and our shared responses breaking down societal boundaries - the same walls I had once transcribed in my reflection. I guess people are more honest when they share their thoughts on paper. At least me and my partner, Marc<sup>3</sup>, were. Each visit there, Marc and I would write on a prompt like "What does 'home' mean to you? What's your favorite memory from childhood?" and with each response we shared, our different realities began to emerge. Marc and I obviously had different childhoods but writing about each one, we began to recognize the moments that have influenced who we had become. Even in the midst of our differences, it was shocking to see the similarities starting to emerge - connections I never thought I would build; connections Marc never thought he'd build with someone so privileged like me. While the project was very brief, I knew writing in this collaborative form had a power that could even shed prison walls and transcend social boundaries. Looking back, I wonder if I ever would have connected with someone on the "inside" without this experience; connected so deeply that I cried during our last writing session because saying goodbye was so hard. I wanted to learn more. I

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<sup>3</sup> I've used a pseudonym here in place of my partner's actual name. His real name is anonymized because he was a juvenile and under the age of 18 when we worked together on this project.

wanted to know if writing together with Marc could help him feel like some of us really care and hadn't forgotten him. I wanted to know if our time together had the power to help us both grow as people. Could such different people really connect, over a piece of paper and two pens? Was the wall between us the only thing dividing us?

These are pressing questions that weigh heavily on me. The research I've presented here and the arguments I've made are a byproduct of my internal inquiry and thirst for that information. This essay then serves to make an important point: We should be making lives on the "inside" better, because we can. My project only lasted six months and as I look at the impact it left on me, Marc and all my classmates, I can't help but write in support of it. I look at the work of Coogan with the Richmond incarcerated authors and am happy to see their stories validated and their lives humanized. It is only after this humanization that one can begin to think about change and reform.

Undoubtedly, advocating on behalf of these writing programs, I am not denying the injustices of the judicial system and the race imbalances contained within it or suggesting that these programs will solve everything. I am too young to get prisons to shut down, too naïve to call our judicial system unfair and too uninformed to propose strict changes to it. Yet my research has shown me that creating opportunities for improvements and helping prisoners write their way out seems like a step that I can take and one we all can. Like Malala Yousafzai said, "One pen, one book can change the world" (Yousafzai, 2013). Creating opportunities for the humans on the "inside" to reflect on their lives via writing can make a huge impact. And empowering people to take control of their own lives via this medium is something so costless in comparison to other correctional programs, yet something so valuable and precious, and powerful enough to change lives and perceptions for both people on the inside and the outside.

## Conclusion

The data is clear that high recidivism rates coupled with mass incarceration indicates fundamental problems in how prisoners are treated and rehabilitated in the current U.S. carceral system. Where research indicates that we are still in an era of trying to find the best solutions that address these problems, the well-established principles of effective rehabilitation—the triad of historical and present success factors—serve as a credible source of guidance for adjusting policies and creating new programs. By analyzing what these core principles demand, it has also become clear that programs should focus on an inmate’s criminogenic needs and responsibly address those issues. These principles should be at the heart of prison reform.

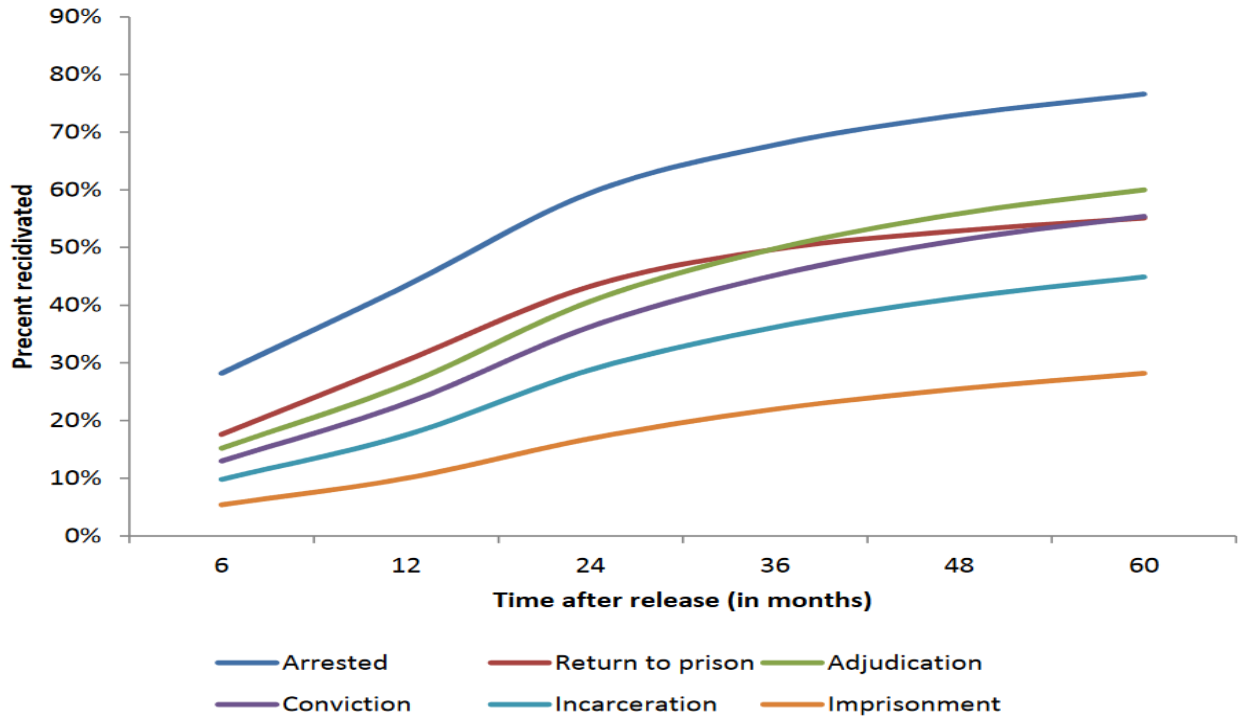
In this regard, reflective writing programs in prisons, though they lack empirical data on commonly measurable outcomes like recidivism rates, are indirectly involved in targeting negative criminal behaviors. Matching the outcomes from writing programs with the demands put forward by the effective rehabilitation triad, there seems to be a high degree of alignment between what needs to be addressed when it comes to accommodating the needs of those who are incarcerated and ensuring that they go on to live healthy, crime-free lives upon release. In fact, as demonstrated in both anecdotal evidence and research studies, participants who undergo these writing programs not only feel they’ve changed but are also actively challenged to reshape their lives, as was the case in Coogan’s writing project and my brief project at Bon Air. These reflective writing opportunities further allow people on the inside to take charge of their own narratives where such mediums enable them to humanize their lives and help us better understand their struggles and needs as people. This humanization also builds inter-personal connections along the way which then become imperative to helping the incarcerated in being more accepted and moving towards a changed lifestyle.

Unfortunately, currently there are not many of these programs available—at least not at a wide-scale, federal level. My work here has attempted to demonstrate that these types of programs, given their merits, need to be given a chance and made more available and accessible. There may be a long way to go and many more things to consider, but I hope that these findings will incite more research in this domain and help set an example that we need to create more creative programs focused on open expression. Over time, I hope that the reflection writing/rehabilitation connection can be further supported and gain more development to be implemented at the national level. In the meantime, I will continue to work with the people on the inside, writing and connecting with them, and advocating for change.

## Appendix

**Figure 1**

*Upward trends in recidivism (James, 2015)*



*Note.* Across all possible measures, the percentage of ex-offenders re-offending varies but it is still consistently rising with time after release.

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