

Addressing the Recidivism Challenge in San Diego County: *Learning from Lived Experience Approaches*

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The problem is as old as the justice system itself—how to reduce the chance that an individual reoffends after they commit an offense and become involved with the justice system. This challenge of reducing recidivism remains critical. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, there are over 120,000 individuals in state prisons in California. Another 380,000 cycle through jails in California every year. In 2021, roughly 25,000 individuals were released from prison in California each year. This is the scope of the challenge.

In San Diego County, a wide variety of agencies and organizations are working to address the recidivism challenge. In addition, although there is no way to measure this accurately, there is a willingness across the spectrum to experiment with new approaches and solutions. This report focuses on one area of relatively new and promising approaches—those that elevate the talent and expertise of individuals with “lived experience” with the justice system.

Support for lived experience approaches is growing both nationally and in San Diego. Beyond the rising number of lived experience initiatives, this type of work in San Diego has become largely normalized. There is broad agreement that lived experience work should be part of the portfolio used to reduce recidivism, with clear demand from stakeholders involved in reentry, including law enforcement officials, service providers, community members, and, crucially, justice-involved individuals. Given the growing prevalence of and support for lived experience approaches in San Diego, it is important to create a deeper understanding of how to increase the impact of these approaches. **Toward that end, this report identifies strengths of lived experience approaches to amplify, challenges of lived experience approaches to mitigate, and lessons from lived experience approaches that can be applied more broadly.**

Based on a review of the research and dozens of conversations held with stakeholders in San Diego, we identified the following **strengths** of lived experience approaches:

- They can engage successfully with justice-involved individuals;
- They can provide a model of success;
- They are skilled navigators of the social service and justice systems;
- They bring a long-term approach to their work; and
- They have specific expertise that helps them help others.

To amplify these strengths, we suggest: (a) deploy lived experience practitioners during acute situations, (b) leverage lived experience practitioners not only within programs but also as navigators across programs, (c) build flexibility into programs that include lived experience practitioners, (d) encourage lived experience practitioners to role model success without being directive, and (e) continue efforts to normalize lived experience approaches.

We also identified **challenges** of lived experience approaches, particularly related to scaling the approaches more widely. These include:

- The personalistic nature of many lived experience initiatives;
- The difficulty of finding, vetting, hiring, and training sufficient lived experience practitioners;
- The toll the immersive nature of the work takes on practitioners; and
- The potential reputational risks lived experience approaches present to individuals, organizations, and agencies.

To mitigate these challenges, we recommend (a) creating training and certification programs for lived experience practitioners, (b) developing standards of practice, (c) creating organizational capacity-building initiatives for lived experience organizations, (d) pairing lived experience with non-lived-experience practitioners, (e) treating lived experience individuals as professional staff, and (f) developing a lived experience advocacy coalition.

Furthermore, seeking a broader impact, we identified **five key lessons** from lived experience approaches that are transferable and can be applied by those without lived experience who are designing and implementing initiatives to prevent recidivism. The lessons are:

1. Create supportive spaces for justice-involved individuals to work through challenges;
2. Design programs with flexibility so support can be tailored to individuals;
3. Ease navigation of services and improve coordination among providers;
4. Engage justice-involved individuals with consistency and long-term vision; and
5. Commit to providing trauma-informed care.

We conclude this report by noting the longstanding good practice in the social services field to design initiatives with the input of those impacted by them. The key lessons identified from lived experience practitioners can be viewed in this way. They provide insight on how to design more effective recidivism reduction initiatives based on the experience and expertise of those who previously lived the challenges the initiatives are designed to address.

The Challenge

The problem is as old as the justice system itself—how to reduce the chance that an individual reoffends after they commit an offense and become involved with the justice system. This challenge of reducing recidivism, as it is called in modern parlance, remains critical. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, there are over 120,000 individuals in state prisons in California. Another 380,000 cycle through jails in California every year.¹ In 2021, 25,000 individuals were released from prison in California. This number is lower than previous years but is likely to rise again as there was a 14% increase in the admission of sentenced prisoners to California from 2020–2021.² This is the scope of the challenge.

The importance of the challenge comes from recidivism being so costly—to the individuals incarcerated, to their families, to their communities, and to society. In addition, reoffending necessarily means new victims suffered; therefore, preventing recidivism is not only a sound use of public resources but also an ethical imperative for public safety.

Unfortunately, recidivism rates among adults in California have remained stubbornly consistent at around 50%.³ Thus, it is not a surprise that numerous examples of research, looking at a wide variety of initiatives intended to support reentry, found these had no effects⁴ or, in some cases, even negative effects. This includes findings from research conducted in San Diego County.⁵ As a 2018 review of research on recidivism by the National Institute of Justice concluded, “We don’t have a strong understanding of what works and what doesn’t.”⁶

The Purpose of This Report

There is a willingness across the spectrum to experiment with new approaches and solutions. This is not surprising given how stubborn the recidivism challenge is and given we do not have a clear consensus yet regarding the most effective approaches to reduce recidivism. In this report, we focus on one family of relatively new approaches—approaches using the talent and expertise of individuals with “lived experience” with the justice system. For this report, lived experience means having direct experience with the justice system, ranging from being arrested, being on probation or parole, or serving a jail or prison sentence. Lived experience approaches are programs or initiatives designed and/or implemented by individuals with lived experience. These programs can be implemented entirely by those with lived experience or can be a partnership between lived experience individuals and non-lived-experience individuals.⁷

Although both cultural and bureaucratic resistance remains, support for lived experience approaches is growing both nationally and in San Diego. Beyond the simple number of lived experience initiatives, lived experience work in San Diego has become largely normalized. The consistent message received during the research in San Diego was that although there are pockets of resistance and many challenges, there is broad consensus that lived experience work should be part of the portfolio of approaches used to address recidivism. In short, lived experience approaches appear to be here to stay.

Given the growing prevalence of and support for lived experience approaches in San Diego, it is important to create a deeper understanding of how to increase the impact of these approaches. To do this, we first provide a review of the research focused on lived experience initiatives. Then, based on the review of the research, and the research conducted in San Diego⁸, we:

1. Identify key strengths of lived experience approaches and provide recommendations on how to amplify those strengths.
2. Identify key challenges with lived experience approaches and provide recommendations on how to mitigate those challenges.
3. Assess what lessons can be learned from lived experience approaches that can apply more broadly to recidivism prevention. There are many without lived experience working on recidivism prevention programs, so it is important to understand what lessons from lived experience approaches can inform the broader recidivism prevention field.

We first conclude there are concrete strategies that should be used to increase the impact of lived experience approaches; second, there are important lessons that can be learned from lived experience approaches that, if leveraged, have the potential to improve the overall effectiveness of recidivism prevention initiatives, regardless of who implements them.

General Research

There is growing evidence that lived experience initiatives do have a positive impact on reducing recidivism among both youth and adults⁹. Sells et al. conducted a pilot randomized controlled trial evaluation of the impact of peer mentorship on reentry, finding “clients receiving standard reentry services plus peer mentorship showed significantly lower levels of recidivism than those receiving standard reentry services alone.”¹⁰ One important limitation was the small size of the observed sample population.

Gonzales et al. assessed a similar question with a rigorous, qualitative study, namely whether peer reentry specialists with lived experience could reduce recidivism among adults in three locations in Texas. They concluded “peer reentry specialists have the capacity to affect widespread recidivism by easing the reentry process.”¹¹

There are also several evaluations of programs using some form of “credible messengers” that have found promising results. For example:

- An evaluation of the Arches Transformative Mentoring Program, a credible messenger program in New York City, found the program had an impact on reducing the rate of reconviction at 12 and 24 months post-release.¹²
- An assessment conducted of the nationwide Youth Advocate Program, which uses credible messengers to support high-risk youth, found 86% of Youth Advocate Program participants avoided arrest.¹³ The program, however, did not have a control group, so the ability to attribute outcomes to the program was weakened.
- An evaluation of the Advocate, Intervene, Mentor (AIM) Program found “recidivism rates... were relatively low compared with NYC youth in placement before the implementation of AIM.”¹⁴
- In New York City’s Wounded Healers: Findings From a Study of Credible Messengers, the Urban Institute analyzed the evidence base by conducting a cross-program qualitative landscape scan of “credible messengers” and “lived experience” programs. In unpacking reasons behind the perceived success, the Urban Institute noted, among other channels of influence, credible messengers “help[ed] reduce contact between police and their communities by providing alternative prevention strategies to address harm and violence. [Credible messengers] mentor and empower people who are vulnerable to criminal legal contact and give them the support, tools, and resources they need to thrive.”¹⁵
- An assessment of the Boston-based organization Roca, which serves high-risk youth through “transformational relations” with “youth workers,” found 98% of graduates avoided recidivism.¹⁶

- In Richmond, an evaluation of Operation Peacemaker of the Office of Neighborhood Safety found 84% of “fellows” who participated in the program from 2010–2013 had not sustained a gun-related injury, and 79% of fellows participating in the program “ha[d] not been arrested or charged for gun-related activity since becoming fellows.”¹⁷ Although there was not a control group in this research, fellowships were provided to the most active firearms offenders, so there is reason to believe the program had an effect. The project includes an intensive mentoring program with a lived experience “Neighborhood Change Agent.” One fellow noted, “[The Fellowship] changed me. I don’t carry guns, and I don’t hang with guys with guns.”¹⁸

Overall, the broader research on the effectiveness of lived experience programming is promising. There are numerous studies that have pointed to the positive impact of these approaches; however, it is important to be cautious in interpreting these results given the number of studies is still relatively limited and varies regarding methodological quality. This is unsurprising given lived experience approaches only began to be studied systematically in the last 10–20 years. Building up a cohesive and rigorous evidence base takes a great deal of time. Research on youth mentoring, for example, has been going on for well over 100 years.

San Diego Research

There has been little systematic research on the effectiveness of lived experience approaches in San Diego. We could find no initiative that has designed research with the goal of isolating the impact of lived experience approaches nor research on lived experience approaches using experimental or quasi-experimental methods. Moreover, although many organizations implementing lived experience initiatives are collecting data, the data are collected primarily to report to funders and have not been collected in a way that allows rigorous conclusions to be drawn about the effectiveness of lived experience approaches. This knowledge gap was a challenge identified throughout our conversations in San Diego.

The strongest evidence for the effectiveness of lived experience approaches in San Diego, therefore, is the endorsement of these approaches from experts—law enforcement officials, practitioners, justice-involved individuals, and others working on preventing violence, reducing recidivism, and reforming the criminal justice system. There is a broad, if not universal, consensus that lived experience approaches do play an important role in reducing recidivism. This consensus manifests in several ways.

Research done in communities in San Diego, for instance, found community members supported lived experience approaches. In July 2022, the SANDAG report, “Data-Driven Approach to Protecting Public Safety, Improving and Expanding Rehabilitative Treatment and Services, and Advancing Equity Through Alternatives to Incarceration,” recommended, based on feedback from the Advisory Group and community engagement, the County provide “more mentorship and increase collaboration with those with lived experience who have successfully reentered the community.”¹⁹ Based on responses to a community survey, the report also concluded, “Creating more ways for the community to provide mentorship, especially those with lived experience, should be a key goal as alternatives to incarceration are expanded in the region.”²⁰

The support from communities has been echoed at the institutional level. For instance, a recommendation from the County of San Diego Board of Supervisors, regarding Successful Implementation of Juvenile Justice Realignment, SB 823, called for the subcommittee of the Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council to include, among others, “individuals with lived experience.”²¹ It further noted, “Probation and community partners will continue meeting with local community college districts to gauge interest in a robust partnership that includes dedicated counseling and academic navigation from lived experience individuals who can help youth thrive while in custody and after release,”²² and “probation will seek to maximize the use of lived experience contract staff who can help Behavioral Health Services and Probation staff inspire transformational changes in youth.”²³

There are many other examples of institutional support for lived experience approaches. For example, Pastor Jesus Sandoval, a former member of a gang, heads the City of San Diego Gang Prevention and Intervention Commission and founded an initiative, Community Wraparound, which is staffed almost entirely by lived experience individuals. The San Diego County Probation Department has integrated lived experience individuals fully into their work at the Community Transition Center. Similarly, the San Diego Sheriff’s Department partners with the Neighborhood House Association to use lived experience individuals to transmit COVID-19 information to the reentry population within the Sheriff’s Department detention and reentry facilities.

Importantly, much of the support for lived experience approaches is not simply rhetorical but has come with funding. Recently, the City of San Diego was awarded \$3.65M by the State of California’s Violence Intervention and Prevention Grant Program for Project Peacemaker, a violence prevention initiative integrating lived experience approaches. In addition, in the last couple years, the Department of Justice, California’s Bureau of State and Community Corrections, and the County of San Diego all have provided significant support to lived experience organizations. Finally, although they are not a funder, the San Diego County Probation Department has made an organizational commitment and devoted organizational resources to lived experience approaches through efforts such as their integration of lived experience practitioners into their work on the Community Transition Center or their partnership with Oceanside Resilience.

Through the research for this report, we found similar sentiments across a broad range of the individuals interviewed. Again and again, law enforcement officials, service providers, and justice-involved individuals all spoke to the importance of lived experience. Next is a small sample of what we heard:

From an adult male, who was recently released from prison, on lived experience service providers:

“Anything they can do, they do. Anything you need. They go above and beyond. If you need something, they’ll get it. Take you to appointments. Help you get documents. Everyone messes up, but if you ask for help, they will help. Lived experience helps them balance support and accountability. They know if someone wants to help themselves. They’ve been through it, they know when you’re ready, they are there for you.”

From an adult woman who was recently released from prison:

“If I walk into a room and see you [Andrew] or [a lived experience practitioner], I will look for someone that’s the same color, that has had the same experiences. Even if it’s just helping me with a resume, I may need to talk about other issues, maybe something with my kids getting beat up, or not having food. I may need someone who understand those issues, even to do simple things. I can relate to her. I know she can help me.”

From a law enforcement official:

“It was difficult to connect with [a justice-involved youth] as a young officer. Don’t have history and knowledge. Can’t say I really do know what you’re going through. Couldn’t be an example that overcame. [Lived experience practitioners] created connection, they respected them. See someone in front of them that did it—the are thinking maybe I can do it too.”

From a non-lived-experience practitioner:

“[Lived experience practitioners] build that connection faster and easier. With kids, there is lots of distrust especially with outsiders. Knowing that there some common experience really helps. Breaks down some of the barriers, with young people especially.”

From a lived experience practitioner:

“I’ve been there done that. I don’t know what you’re thinking, but I know how you’re thinking. I get why you’re doing what you’re doing. Most of these kids are black and brown kids. We can be credible messengers. We look like them. It is easier for them to be open and vulnerable with us. Everywhere else they have to be tough—with family, friends, strangers.”

In sum, a wide range of individuals, from social service providers, to law enforcement, to justice-involved, consider lived experience approaches effective. Moreover, these approaches have received institutional endorsement from government bodies through the provision of funding and through the commitment of organizational resources at the programmatic level.

This support from experts working day to day on the problem of recidivism is an important source of evidence for the effectiveness of lived experience approaches; however, one function of research is to test the beliefs of individuals and organizations. To do this, a multiyear, multisite lived experience demonstration project should be launched in the near future. To gauge the project's impact, a rigorous research design should be developed and integrated into such a demonstration project from the beginning. Given the growth and increasing sophistication of lived experience work in San Diego, the region is ripe for such an effort.

Lived experience work in San Diego can be placed roughly into two categories. The first category consists of initiatives designed and implemented by organizations led by individuals with lived experience and infused with a lived experience ethos from the start. Many individuals with whom we spoke for this report were from organizations or managed initiatives falling into this category. These include Youth Empowerment, Project AWARE, Women Initiating Success Envisioned, Oceanside Resilience, and the Community Wraparound initiative.

A second category of lived experience work in San Diego consists of organizations and initiatives that include lived experience practitioners but that are not designed from the beginning from a lived experience perspective. This includes:

- Restoring Citizens, a largely traditional drug-free transitional housing initiative, is managed by two individuals with lived experience.
- Center for Employment Opportunities, a transitional employment organization, includes several individuals with lived experience on their staff.
- The Community Transition Center, a transitional housing facility managed by the Probation Department in collaboration with Lighthouse residential community, integrates lived experience practitioners into their everyday work, beginning with lived experience practitioners picking individuals up at California prisons when they are released.

There are some examples of lived experience initiatives, and there are others, but almost all fall into one of these two categories. The arguments in the following section, unless otherwise specified, apply to both categories, so it is important to keep both types of lived experience approaches in mind.

Strengths

Through the course of the research and the dozens of conversations with practitioners and program participants in San Diego, a relatively clear consensus emerged about the strengths of lived experience approaches.

Ability to Engage

Perhaps unsurprisingly, during our research in San Diego, the most commonly noted strength of lived experience practitioners was their ability to engage successfully with justice-involved individuals. Words and phrases often heard to describe this strength include “rapport,” “credibility,” “relatability,” and “shared identity.”²⁴ The central idea here is that lived experience practitioners can create trusted relationships in ways those without lived experience cannot.

Lived experience practitioners and non-lived-experience practitioners emphasized to us the importance of developing relationships with the individuals with whom they were working and lived experience practitioners’ special ability to do this.²⁵ It was evident this ability to create strong relationships quickly was particularly relevant for youth, who often have less desire to change their ways, according to those with whom we spoke, and who are more likely to be mandated to participate in programs. One practitioner with whom we spoke said they only had a few weeks to make these youths want to keep coming, and lived experience practitioners often created an initial willingness on the part of youth to participate in a meaningful way.

Role Modeling

The question of role modeling is a nuanced one. Justice-involved individuals working with lived experience practitioners in San Diego often talked to us about the importance of seeing individuals with lived experience who succeeded in building a new life. “It gives you that ray of hope when you really need that,” said one individual. The importance of this has been supported by the broader research as well.²⁶

Lived experience practitioners, however, almost never foreground this as part of their work and rarely put themselves forward as role models. Instead, lived experience practitioners more often focused on support and accompaniment than role modeling, often emphasizing that they were still on their own reentry journey. We also often heard criticism from lived experience practitioners directed at individuals who thought just talking about their experience, talking about what they did to be successful, or providing advice to justice-involved youth or adults would be effective.²⁷ Instead, the lived experience practitioners with whom we talked used a strategy that might be called passive role modeling. The lived experience is in the background and serves as reminders of what is possible, but the actual work is more about providing support and space for individuals to develop their own strategies for success.

Navigation

Researchers have noted lived experience practitioners act as de facto caseworkers²⁸ who can serve “as bridges between community-based organizations, community members, agencies, and policymakers.”²⁹ Our research in San Diego reached similar conclusions: Lived experience practitioners in San Diego played an important role in helping those with whom they work navigate the social service system, the justice system, and the other challenges reentry poses.

First, lived experience practitioners play a crucial role in the initial engagement with program participants who may have very little motivation to participate in a program or accept other services. One lived experience practitioner with whom we spoke said she worked with adults on having “confidence in society,” meaning believing people were willing and able to help him if he was willing to accept services. This echoes what has been found in the broader research. In one study on lived experience approaches for incarcerated adults, an interviewee said, “I don’t do much of the programs here, they’re BS. With him [a lived experience practitioner], I feel a level of confidence that he’ll help us on the outside.”³⁰

This ability to get justice-involved individuals to accept services is born, in part, out of lived experience practitioners’ willingness to go the extra mile to help these individuals access the services needed. This willingness to do all the “big little things” to ensure individuals get the help they need is not unique to lived experience practitioners, but they seem uncommonly willing to do so. This is perhaps because they have direct experience with how difficult accessing and navigating services can be, particularly when recently released individuals are trying to solve multiple challenges all at the same time, and how important the little things can be during reentry. Again and again, we heard stories of lived experience practitioners working to obtain needed documents, transport clients to appointments, helping them follow treatment plans,³¹ accompany clients to probation appointments, or being available to talk on the phone at all hours to solve problems or manage crises.

Contributing to this willingness to do whatever it takes was also a deep commitment to flexible approaches to providing support. We heard stories about driving to Target late at night to pick up a recently released individual who had nowhere to go, a commitment to having an open-door policy at their organization to help anyone who walked through their door, a willingness to have youth come back and hang out at an organization for as long as they wanted, and so on. Conversely, there was significant dislike among the lived experience practitioners with whom we spoke for overly structured, rigid programmatic approaches. There was widespread frustration, for instance, in the structured curricula programs often are required to use.³²

Lastly, regarding navigation, the research in San Diego illustrated much research on preventing recidivism in general, and lived experience approaches in particular, has assessed the impact of specific programs.³³ More research is needed on issues such as individual's willingness to participate in programs, how programmatic and nonprogrammatic interventions can be combined to increase effectiveness, and the role lived experience plays in helping individuals navigate the broader landscape of issues within which specific programs are implemented.

Long Term

The research in San Diego surfaced another key strength of lived experience practitioners: They seem to take a long-term approach to their work instinctively. We spoke with many individuals going through reentry who expressed frustration at the short-term nature of the support they were offered (e.g., 90 days of subsidized housing). Lived experience practitioners, because they have gone through the process, appeared to understand at a deeper level that re-entry is a long-term process and normally spoke in terms of years, not weeks or months. All the lived experience organizations with whom we spoke emphasized how they worked to stay in touch with their program participants and how program participants could always come back or reach out to them by phone. None of these organizations saw programs as something participants simply participated in, graduated from, and then moved on from.

Relatedly, lived experience practitioners also seemed to understand the process is not linear; there will be setbacks along the way, whether that is a drug and alcohol relapse or a return to prison. The long-term focus comes with a patience to support individuals through these setbacks.³⁴ Arthur Soriano, for instance, in a case study on Youth Empowerment, the San Diego organization he founded, said, "Took me a long time, took me a lot of times, everyone's got their time."³⁵

Expertise

A final strength of lived experience practitioners is straightforward but less often discussed. Lived experience practitioners have a specific type of expertise that helps them help others. As one researcher noted, "Application of peer mentorship is premised on the notion that someone who has navigated a complex task is uniquely positioned to support and guide another who is facing a comparable task."³⁶ In our conversations in San Diego, the issue of expertise manifested primarily as frustration among lived experience practitioners in that their background was seen as a challenge to overcome as opposed to an asset to be leveraged. One practitioner, for instance, said he had spent 20 years building up expertise about incarceration, "Why isn't that valued?"

Although there was increased openness to discussing lived experience practitioners as “credible” or “street smart” or as relationship builders, there appeared to be more reluctance to acknowledge them as experts. Very few non-lived-experience practitioners with whom we spoke discussed what lived experience practitioners bring in terms of expertise. There was also not much in the broader research analyzing in more detail what kinds of expertise lived experience practitioners have and how it is deployed, although this expertise is core to what lived experience practitioners do.

Recommendations for Amplifying Strengths

How can we best leverage the strengths of lived experience practitioners to increase their impact? Based on the strengths identified previously, strategies should include:

- *Deploy lived experience practitioners in more acute situations:* Given the often-limited number of lived experience practitioners, it is likely decisions will need to be made regarding when drawing on lived experience can create the biggest impact. One conclusion from the research in San Diego was that lived experience can be of most use in acute, as opposed to routine, situations. We heard how lived experience can be useful in situations such as (a) initial outreach during incarceration, (b) a youth’s first days in a program, (c) when an individual is first released from prison, and (d) when individuals hit a challenge or are in a crisis and need help to get back on track. Lived experience can still be useful but is likely less important for more routine interactions (e.g., ongoing job training).
- *Leverage lived experience practitioners as navigators:* Government agencies and nonprofit organizations often think in terms of projects and programs; however, lived experience practitioners often are not at their most valuable when they work within a program but rather when they help individuals navigate the various programs, social services, and justice service requirements they face.
- *Build flexibility into programs that include lived experience practitioners:* As noted previously, lived experience practitioners often do whatever it takes to support the individuals with whom they work and are often available at all hours to support these individuals. In many cases, however, they are doing this off the clock and, as a result, not getting paid, or are underpaid, for these efforts.³⁷ Organizations should develop flexible program models that leverage, reward, and professionalize lived experience practitioners’ willingness to provide this kind of responsive support.
- *Use passive role modeling:* It is important to connect lived experience practitioners who have been successful to youth and adults working to change their lives. Seeing examples of success does matter. At the same time, lived experience practitioners should not be expected to be prescriptive in their role modeling. Speaking to individuals with messages like, “I did this, and it worked, so you should do the same,” have been shown to be ineffective and are not aligned with how most lived experience individuals want to work. Lived experience is most effective when it is not directive, when it holds space for individuals to change, and when the goal is accompaniment rather than instruction.

- *Support continued efforts to normalize lived experience:* There is momentum in San Diego County related to the expanded use of lived experience practitioners. To maintain this momentum, it is important to continue advocating for the importance of lived experience work and to normalize inclusion of lived experience practitioners throughout the justice system and across all social service sectors.³⁸ This includes lived experience practitioners getting involved upstream in policy and program implementation and in the design of criminal justice and social service policies.³⁹

Challenges

Perhaps surprisingly, challenges posed by lived experience approaches are discussed less widely in the broader research.⁴⁰ However, based on research conducted in San Diego, there is a relatively strong consensus on the challenges these approaches pose.

Some of these limitations are more inherent to lived experience approaches, and some are caused by the current state of the lived experience field or the interaction of these approaches with current strategies for delivering social services. Challenges include:

Personalistic Nature of Many Lived Experience Initiatives

One type of challenge is the often personalistic nature of many lived experience initiatives and organizations. These approaches, by definition, are centered on individuals with lived experience. What this has meant in practice in San Diego is that initiatives often have relied on the energy and charisma of one individual or a small number of individuals. This energy and charisma can create results but is difficult to transfer to others, even others with lived experience. We were told youth participants often want to engage with the leader of an organization but not the other mentors. The identification of organizations with their leaders also can contribute to the under-institutionalization of organizations.

Professionalization of small, community-based organizations is always difficult but is made more difficult when the work of the organization relies on the talents of a certain type of individual as opposed to delivering certain types of services. This creates difficulties for lived experience organizations and initiatives when they seek to scale their approaches and their impact. In San Diego, for instance, there are no larger lived experience organizations that have scaled their approach successfully.

Finding, Vetting, Hiring, and Training Lived Experience Practitioners

A second challenge also contributes to the difficulty of scaling lived experience approaches. Lived experience organizations in San Diego shared hiring lived experience individuals with the requisite skills is difficult.⁴¹ This difficulty is caused by several factors:

- The pool of individuals who can serve as lived experience practitioners is always limited. Individuals need to have lived experience, have made the necessary changes to move away from their previous lifestyle, can leverage their experience to build relationships with clients, and be able to serve as a professional staff member of an organization.
- Given lived experience individuals may have served many years in prison, they may lack certain professional skills, such as familiarity with computer software, which is necessary to be successful as a staff person in an organization. Moreover, given most lived experience organizations are small, they often do not have the capacity to provide training and professional development to potential hires.
- Similarly, to date, few lived experience practitioners have important clinical skills. In our research, we were told mental health is a significant challenge justice-involved individuals face, both youth and adult. The broader research has shown intensive therapy-based models such as functional family therapy (FFT) and multi-systemic therapy (MST) are among the most effective approaches to preventing recidivism among youth.⁴² However, with the partial exception of substance abuse counseling, the number of lived experience practitioners with professional training in therapy, counseling, or the provision of other mental health services is small.
- Many lived experience practitioners serve as mentors. The role of mentor often is seen as a part-time, volunteer position as opposed to a full-time professional role. One lived experience organization told us funders either did not provide funds to pay for mentors or would provide funding for 6 months or a year at a time, making it difficult to hire mentors as paid, full-time, professional staff. We also heard of tension between mentors at different organizations resulting from some organizations treating their mentors more as professional staff and some treating them more as volunteers or independent contractors.
- Lived experience individuals require more significant vetting, both formal and informal, than other types of employees. As discussed next, lived experience organizations know their reputation depends on their staff, and their margin for error is small, so they vet individuals very carefully.

A final challenge regarding hiring is the high turnover of lived experience staff, so hiring is continuous challenge. This turnover is caused in part by some of the factors listed previously but also by the demanding nature of the work, which will be discussed next.

Immersive Nature of Lived Experience Work

In many areas of service provision (e.g., mental health providers), practices have been developed over decades to create certain kinds of boundaries between provider and clients. These practices are designed to protect both the client from various kinds of harm and exploitation but also the well-being of the provider. The nature of lived experience work often undermines these kinds of boundaries. First, lived experience approaches rely on the creation of deep personal relationships. Second, as noted previously, lived experience practitioners often make themselves available 24/7 and are committed to doing whatever it takes to support those with whom they are working. This is a strength of lived experience approaches but also places a huge burden on practitioners who are never “off the job.”

One lived experience organization we spoke with also noted their mentors are often from and live in the same neighborhoods as their mentees, families, and friends. This may be helpful for building rapport but also further erodes any kind of boundaries, and worst case, may pull lived experience practitioners back into their previous networks in ways that can cause harm.⁴³ This same organization told us that given what they had seen about the toll the work had taken on previous mentors, they were now asking interviewees about self-care strategies, vetting mentors to try to assess how prepared to handle the strains of immersive work they were, and so on. Another lived experience practitioner just said, “self-care” when asked about how they ensure mentors can handle the stresses of the work.⁴⁴

Reputational Risks of Lived Experience Work

A fourth set of challenges results from the reputational risk lived experience practitioners can pose. Although many are working to change stigmas and preconceptions around those who have been justice-involved or formerly-incarcerated, the reality is there is little margin for error for organizations or agencies who work with lived experience individuals. A single incident—an attack, a theft, or even a car accident—can generate a great deal of negative publicity, as can working with individuals who have not left their old life fully behind.⁴⁵

In our research, we did not hear about any major negative incidents, although we did hear about lived experience mentors who had left programs and were struggling with substance abuse. These are more minor problems but still create reputational risks if those in the community see a former mentor engaging in illegal and harmful behavior. One lived experience practitioner with whom we spoke acknowledged these risks, noting, “We’re tougher than the cops, we have zero tolerance, everyone knows what’s at stake.” Similarly, one law enforcement official with whom we spoke, who supports lived experience approaches, said, “If one of my guys [with lived experience] did something, everyone would know about it. They’d say, ‘Why were you working with that guy?’”

To date, these kinds of reputational risks have not posed an existential threat to lived experience initiatives in San Diego. Given lived experience approaches continue to expand in San Diego, the perceived benefits of these initiatives appear to be outweighing the risks; however, the risks have exacerbated the challenges described previously. First, it increases the problem of personalistic programs. To overcome the fear of reputational damage, individuals only want to work with a small number of colleagues they already know and trust. Second, the risks increase the challenge of hiring and ever more stringent vetting of lived experience practitioners. One lived experience organization bemoaned the fact that government agencies would disallow individuals from being hired as mentors with little explanation or feedback: “We get a mentor all ready to start, and then they tell us we can’t use them, but they don’t say why, and we’ve got to find someone else,” the leader of this organization told us.

Recommendations for Mitigating Limitations

The challenges described previously hinder the more widespread application of lived experience approaches. There are a variety of things those working on recidivism prevention in San Diego could do to help mitigate these challenges, including:

- *Create training and certification programs for lived experience practitioners:* Given how difficult it is for small lived experience organizations to find and train candidates on their own, it could be useful to create independent training initiatives. The Peer Reentry Leadership Academy is one promising model to build upon.⁴⁶ Examples exist outside of San Diego as well. The Urban Peace Academy at the Urban Peace Institute in Los Angeles is a well-known example of this type of training program.⁴⁷ Ideally, these initiatives would provide a widely accepted certification to help with the challenge of vetting and mitigating reputational risk. Although some certifications exist,⁴⁸ and various organizations have their own professional standards to guide vetting and hiring, there is not one certification widely accepted as a common standard in the lived experience field.

In our conversations in San Diego, the need for both technical training and a certification process were highlighted consistently, with partners often concluding a local “Lived Experience Academy,” with reach across San Diego County, ought to be created. The skills and certification such an academy could offer to individuals also would signal a “professionalization” of the lived experience approach within the wider ecosystem of reentry initiatives.

- *Develop standards of practice for lived experience practitioners:* Standards of practice should be developed and adopted to create guidance for organizations regarding the demands that can be placed on lived experience practitioners. For instance, a standard could be that mentors are not required to be available by phone after business hours but must respond to their mentee within 24 hours. Such standards are needed to protect the wellness of lived experience practitioners and ensure the sustainability of lived experience initiatives. Although there are some standards for vetting and hiring lived experience individuals, we found almost no standards focused on organizations' responsibilities and duty of care toward lived experience practitioners.⁴⁹
- *Create organizational capacity-building initiatives:* It is important for funders interested in supporting lived experience approaches to provide resources for capacity building for lived experience organizations. The Kroc IPJ's case study on Youth Empowerment noted 90% of their funding was for programs.⁵⁰ Youth Empowerment leadership expressed frustration at having very few resources to invest in strengthening their organization because of this.
- *Pair lived experience practitioners with non-lived-experience practitioners:* Creating these kinds of teams would allow each type of practitioner to leverage their strengths while learning from each other. Lived experience practitioners are very good at the initial engagement with justice-involved individuals and at creating an initial willingness to accept help, particularly with youth. After this initial stage, a non-lived-experience practitioner with more clinical training could engage the youth as part of FFT or MST once an initial willingness to accept help has been established. Such pairs also would be a way for lived experience practitioners to strengthen their professional and clinical skills.
- *Treat lived experience individuals as staff:* There is no reason lived experience individuals should be seen as volunteers, part-time staff, casual employees, and so on. They should be seen simply as staff. One thing that could be done in the short term to move toward this goal is to stop using the term "mentor." As mentioned previously, the term mentor has a connotation of a part-time, volunteer role. Organizations in other cities have started referring to their lived experience staff as their "workforce" and use terms like "peer support worker," "violence prevention professional," or "staff member." Using these types of terms would help lived experience organizations make the case that these workers should be seen as full-time, professional staff—and paid and supported accordingly.

Moreover, the expertise and interests of lived experience practitioners is far from uniform, and intentionality is required to maximize an individual's impact. To do so, organizations should deploy lived experience individuals in roles that best fit their unique skill set and not confine them to a limited number of roles they traditionally have been seen as suited for (e.g., mentors or outreach workers). Some lived experience individuals may be great inspirational speakers for large audiences, whereas others will be much better in administrative roles or as facilitators working through issues with small groups. Just like staff in any professional organization, appropriate specialization in roles, and leveraging existent and developing expertise, is key to maximizing impact.

- Develop an advocacy coalition, network, or committee: There would be significant benefits for the lived experience community in San Diego if members of that community could speak more effectively with a unified voice and act in a unified way. On the issue of reputational risk, for instance, a coalition of organizations could work proactively to reduce the stigmas creating this risk, respond when incidents occur to mitigate the fallout, and drive forward a narrative of lived experience approaches as an important public safety tool.

More broadly, an advocacy coalition also is crucial to push forward many of this report's recommendations for both amplifying strengths and mitigating challenges. For example, working together, the group could undertake efforts such as (a) seeking to generate additional resources (e.g., submitting joint applications for highly competitive grants), (b) acting as a hub for professionalization and training, (c) researching and systematically documenting the impact of lived experience approaches, and/or (d) helping to coordinate services to ease navigation.

None of these strategies are easy to implement. Even moving away from calling individuals "mentors" would not be simple. However, there are models from other cities and/or other social service fields on which to draw for all of them. Even implementing some of them would help place lived experience initiatives on firmer footing in San Diego and allow lived experience practitioners to grow their impact.

The recommendations shared in this report, aiming to amplify the strengths and mitigate the weaknesses of lived experience approaches, are one way to grow the impact of these approaches. A second way to leverage lived experience expertise for a larger impact is to identify and amplify lessons from lived experience approaches that can be applied by non-lived-experience practitioners.

There are, of course, certain elements of lived experience approaches that are not transferable. These elements include the trust lived experience practitioners can create with justice-involved individuals based on their shared experiences, their ability to model change and provide an example of a success story, and the expertise they have built through their involvement with the justice system.

Other lessons learned from lived experience approaches are more transferable or replicable. Based on the research conducted for this report, we identified five key lessons anyone can apply when designing and implementing initiatives to prevent recidivism:

1. *Create supportive spaces:* Lived experience individuals appear to understand the importance of creating supportive spaces where justice-involved individuals can work through challenges at their own pace and in their own way. The approach deprioritizes structured programming and the delivery of advice and instead prioritizes presence, accompaniment, time, and often literal space for individuals to process change and the many simultaneous challenges they face during the reentry journey. One lived experience practitioner highlighted the importance of “listening, not preaching.” Non-lived-experience practitioners can also, when designing programs, be more intentional about creating less programmed, less directive spaces that provide support while fostering agency and the kind of introspection necessary for individuals to initiate and maintain the requisite life changes.
2. *Design programs with flexibility:* Lived experience practitioners approach their work with an understanding that the most effective support is tailored to individuals. Moreover, they understand that what is needed and when it is needed is almost always unpredictable. Using a tailored, individual-centered approach is important. First, justice-involved individuals have very different needs and are not at a monolithic population. Second, given all that justice-involved individuals are navigating, it is easy to overwhelm them by providing programs and services they do not need.⁵¹

Non-lived-experience practitioners can also be intentional about building flexibility, adaptability, and just-in-time support into their programs, which means committing to a focus on the person first, not on the program, to align support with the predictable unpredictability of the reentry journey.

- 3. Ease navigation and improve coordination:* An additional aspect of taking an individual-centered approach is to take the navigation challenge seriously. Lived experience practitioners have demonstrated a deep understanding of the psychological and logistical barriers keeping individuals from accessing available services. There is a reason lived experience individuals are working consistently to provide bus passes, help individuals get documentation, accompany individuals to social service providers to help with paperwork, and so on. They understand how easy it is for progress to be derailed by issues that seem small, such as not having enough money for gas to get to an appointment. Beyond the logistical challenges, lived experience individuals understand the psychological challenges associated with getting individuals who are marginalized, and often traumatized, to accept help and access the services that are offered.

It may be difficult for many non-lived-experience practitioners to help individuals overcome the psychological barriers to accessing services. For this, lived experience may be necessary. It is nonetheless important for non-lived-experience practitioners to have a deep awareness of both the psychological and logistical challenges and create strategies to address them. At an individual level, this means understanding the navigation challenges clients are facing and working to mitigate them. For instance, one suggestion we heard was to ensure individuals have all their documents before they leave prison instead of having to scramble to obtain them once they are released. At a more systemic level, this means tackling fundamental logistical challenges around coordination. Many lived experience practitioners with whom we spoke emphasized that what is needed is not so much new or more services but rather better coordination of services and fewer barriers to access those services.

- 4. Engage with consistency and a long-term vision:* Lived experience practitioners understand reentry and leaving criminal activity or substance abuse behind is both a long-term and a nonlinear process. As mentioned previously, when talking about how much time is needed to create lasting change for their clients, lived experience practitioners speak consistently in terms of years as opposed to weeks or months. They also understand intuitively that there will be challenges, crises, and setbacks, and it is key to continue accompanying and supporting individuals when these setbacks happen.

The lesson for non-lived-experience practitioners is to be realistic about time frames and adopt a long-term perspective. Even if a particular program has a shorter duration, which the nature of social service programming and funding often requires, that program should be seen as part of a much longer term process. In addition, non-lived-experience practitioners should build in specific strategies to address setbacks. How will you stay in touch with an individual if they drop out of a program? If they do drop out of a program, are they eligible to re-enroll in the future or not? There are many other questions like this that could be asked, but the main point is to build in initiatives and intentional strategies to deal with the nonlinearity of reentry.

5. *Provide trauma-informed support:* Tragically, one aspect of expertise lived experience practitioners have is the impact of trauma on behavior. If unaddressed, this trauma can lead to a variety of harmful behaviors (e.g., self-medication) that can derail individuals and contribute to recidivism. Thus, part of the purpose of creating the supportive spaces discussed previously is to begin to address this trauma. Similarly, lived experience organizations in San Diego also helped to develop the Trauma Informed Care Code of Conduct.⁵² The basic message is that support to clients should be provided using trauma-informed approaches and that strategies to address trauma should be integrated into the support provided.

Trauma-informed approaches are not new. Particularly in San Diego, these approaches are now well established. Thus, what is needed is a commitment among both lived experience and non-lived-experience practitioners to ensure trauma-informed approaches and capacities are integrated at a fundamental level into their work and a trauma-informed ethos is adopted throughout organizations working on the recidivism challenge.

Rise Up Industries and Applying Lessons From Lived Experience

Many systems and processes in place to provide social services can make it difficult to apply the lessons from lived experience described previously. The nature of much funding for social services makes it challenging to implement longer term, flexibly designed programs; however, there are organizations applying these lessons successfully. Rise Up Industries in San Diego is one.⁵³

The Rise Up reentry program is centered on a paid, full-time, 18-month job training program that prepares participants for a career as a machine tool operator. The reentry program is not led by those with lived experience but applies many lessons from lived experience, including:

- *Supportive spaces:* Rise Up Industries creates supportive spaces through organizing activities such as book clubs and on-site, 12-step meetings. More generally, staff talk consistently about a “culture of care” and their commitment to creating a supportive environment within Rise Up.⁵⁴
- *Flexibility and navigation:* Rise Up creates an individualized support plan for each participant. The plan helps participants access the services they need—as needed and only if needed. Moreover, they are paid for the hours they need to access those services (e.g., tattoo removal) and can access those services as part of their normal 8-hour day at Rise Up rather than before or after the normal work day.⁵⁵
- *Long-term vision:* Rise Up’s job training program is 18 months, which is one of longest programs we are aware of in San Diego, and Rise Up continues to provide support for program graduates after they have been placed into jobs.⁵⁶

These are a few examples of how Rise Up applies lessons from lived experience practitioners both in regard to specific practices and more generally in regard to their overall organizational ethos. To date, Rise Up’s approach has produced positive results but on a very small scale. That is, 14 participants have graduated the program, and one graduate has been reconvicted, for a recidivism rate of 7%. In addition, the case study found Rise Up’s model is cost effective.⁵⁷

The Lessons as Good Practice

There are of course other non-lived-experience practitioners applying the lessons laid out in this report. This is not surprising. There is a longstanding belief in the social services field that initiatives should be designed in a participatory way, namely with the input of those who will be impacted by them. Lessons from lived experience practitioners can be viewed in this way. They provide insight on how to design more effective initiatives based on the experience and expertise of those who previously have lived the challenges the initiatives are designed to address. The best practitioners are already applying these lessons, as the best practitioners already employ participatory approaches. As a result, these lessons should be seen not necessarily as new insights or innovations but as reminders of the core elements of good practice and as a spur to create the kind of changes in our social services systems that allow initiatives aligned with these lessons to be implemented fully.

The starting point for this report was the increased support for and prevalence of lived experience approaches to recidivism prevention in San Diego. Given this, it is important to understand how to leverage these approaches better to have a meaningful impact on reducing recidivism in San Diego. The report identifies two key ways to do this. First, it is important to implement strategies to amplify the strengths of and mitigate the challenges posed by lived experience approaches. Second, there are key lessons to be drawn from lived experience approaches that can be applied more broadly by both lived experience and non-lived-experience practitioners.

Some recommendations in the report are easier to implement, and some are much harder. The good news is that most of the recommendations align with the types of good practice we should be working toward anyway. This is unsurprising, as learning from those who have been impacted directly by the problems we are trying to solve is always a good practice. In the case of the stubborn challenge of reducing recidivism, and all the social and human costs associated with it, that means learning from those with lived experience of the justice system.

As part of the efforts to gather input and represent the perspectives from stakeholders and lived experience individuals in the development of this report, the Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice at the University of San Diego hosted an on-campus feedback workshop on Friday, February 10, 2023. Attendees received a draft of this report in advance and were invited to share their feedback, both big picture and detailed, through written comments and/or during the workshop discussion. We presented the report, moderated an open discussion, collected notes, and integrated their feedback throughout the current version of this report. We would like to thank and recognize those who attended the feedback workshop for sharing their invaluable expertise and critical feedback. The wide range of multidisciplinary expertise, perspective, and lived experience presented during the feedback workshop represented the final step in a methodological approach of learning with the community of San Diego in producing this report.

Participants

- Charlene Autolino, San Diego Reentry Roundtable
- Steve Boyle, Rise Up Industries
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- Jason Druxman, Probation Department, County of San Diego
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- Jackie Reed, Women Initiating Success Envisioned (WISE)
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- Marquitta Barnes, Project A.W.A.R.E.

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- Andrew Blum
- Alfredo Malaret Baldo
- Tori Mullenix-Luna

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- 45 This 2017 story from Chicago, in which a credible messenger was still involved with gangs, is an example of what can go wrong and how problems like this can damage reputations. Ann Givens, “Feds Say One of Chicago’s Last ‘Violence Interrupters’ Was Really a Gang Leader,” *The Trace*, June 2, 2017, <https://www.thetrace.org/2017/06/chicago-violence-interrupter-cure-violence/>
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- 47 For more information, see Urban Peace Institute, Urban Peace Academy, <https://www.urbanpeaceinstitute.org/our-work-urban-peace-academy>
- 48 The Health Alliance for Violence Intervention provides training and certification for individuals working in the field of hospital-based violence intervention. See <https://www.thehavi.org/violence-prevention-professional-training>
- 49 One exception is the Healing Justice Alliance, “Best Practices for Supporting Violence Intervention Workers,” 2019. <https://www.youthalive.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Best-Practices-for-Supporting-Frontline-Violence-Intervention-Workers.pdf>
- 50 Andrew Blum and Nohelia Ramos, “Youth Empowerment: Case Study and Learning Strategy,” University of San Diego, April 19, 2022, <https://digital.sandiego.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=ipj-research>
- 51 Jennifer L. Doleac, “Wrap-Around Services Don’t Improve Prisoner Reentry Outcomes,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 38, no. 2 (2019): 508–514.
- 52 Youth Empowerment, “Transforming Trauma Campaign,” <https://www.youthempowermentsd.com/transforming-trauma>
- 53 The section is primarily based on a previous case study written by the Kroc IPJ on Rise Up Industries: Andrew Blum, “Rise Up Industries and the Challenge of Reentry for Formerly-Incarcerated Individuals,” Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice, September 2022.
- 54 Blum, “Rise Up Industries and the Challenge of Reentry for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals,” 7.
- 55 Blum, “Rise Up Industries and the Challenge of Reentry for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals,” 5–6.
- 56 Blum, “Rise Up Industries and the Challenge of Reentry for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals,” 7.
- 57 Blum, “Rise Up Industries and the Challenge of Reentry for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals,” 10–11.

