

**Proceedings of the Conference on Social and
Ecological Infrastructure for Recidivism Reduction**

Co-convened by Boston College and the Yale School of the Environment

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Summary and notes from the workshop on next steps

Compiled in May 2021 by Matt DelSesto (delsesma@bc.edu)

This final session of the conference, *Workshop on Next Steps*, took place on Tuesday the 20th of April 2021. The workshop was designed to be a space where attendees and presenters could reflect on possible next steps and what could emerge from this conference, to strengthen local work and grow a community of practice. About 30 participants met in small groups with guided reflection and discussion on learnings from the conference, in addition to needs, opportunities, and strategies for advancing the field. Discussion was oriented towards reflection on participants evolving individual and organizational practice, overall impressions and insights from the conference, and key needs for future research and practice, and considerations for future events. Notes are in two sections: (PART 1) useful knowledge and learning that came from the sessions and (PART 2) needs, opportunities and strategies for advancing the field. Workshop co-facilitators included: Amanda Berger, Kelli Bush, Matt DelSesto, Daniela Jauk, William Jett, Christine Norton, and Erika Rumbley.

PART 1: USEFUL KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING

to advance individual or local projects

ROLE OF FORMERLY INCARCERATED PEOPLE

- There is a need to center those who are currently or formerly incarcerated in practice (that programs or interventions will be more likely to engage incarcerated participants if they include “credible messengers” who have direct experiences facing the same issues) and in research (in helping to frame studies in ways that are most relevant to people’s experience of desistance)
- Having formerly incarcerated speakers share about their experience is one way to show public or administration how these programs make a difference
- Key to pursue collaborations to ensure we are elevating the voices of the individuals that went through the program

BEYOND PRISON SPACES

- It’s important to move beyond prison spaces as both as an object of study and as a site of intervention... because recidivism reduction goals are not met only within prison, there needs to be a focus beyond prison—developing research objects and processes that take the transitional nature into consideration (for instance from in-prison program to reentry program)... also developing collaborative interventions that ensure adequate “handoffs” or connections to community-based opportunities or services
- Social and ecological infrastructure for recidivism reduction does not just need corrections administrators, but other governmental agencies and community-based organizations are key actors in implementing
- Relationship between jail and public institutions like science museum seems important... for instance in the presenters from a STEM program with family members of people who are incarcerated in Louisiana... incarcerated fathers to become educators themselves... this could be an important model for programs in other states programs to borrow ideas from developing relationships with the museum, STEM resources, train the trainer type of program, and giving power back to folks to be role models, educators.
- Importance of reentry and making connections to good job opportunities who are willing to hire people coming out of prison

ENGAGING CONTRADICTIONS

- Presentations didn't shy away from the sometimes-complicated relationships between community-based organizations, researchers, and correctional institutions... Corrections may initially see horticultural programs as a security challenge, researchers may see corrections as an obstacle to data, and service providers may see corrections as unnecessarily rigid... key for all to try to work with each other
- Community based organizations, university researchers and corrections may see the purpose of “green” or sustainability programs differently. Important to ask larger questions like what

is the prisons system for, how can we be part of larger transformations or bring a change - what does it say about the ideals of the country?

- Should be aware of these contradictions but they shouldn't stop people from trying to engage. There are so many different ways to have a direct impact or support incarcerated people related to ecology, food, and sustainability
- Implementation requires rather intense logistics at correctional or community level... key to hold the paradox of engaging with... abolition, green washing, mass incarceration.
- There is a contradiction of our work creating gardens in prisons in the context of larger carceral logics and greenwashing. Who initiates a program or space seems to matter, for example the Texas group of COs who were initially competing to improve the food... they created the garden program and it benefited everyone (incarcerated people and officers)
- Gardens can be subversive in disruption of current culture
- Key to distinguish between making prisons nicer and decarceration— in intentions, curriculum and program/partnership structure
- Important to remember that abolition is about presence not absence... for example, carceral systems break people up, hide people away, they break communities up and dehumanize people and identities. A lot of the work people at the conference are trying to do is the counter to this, providing an element of humanity and connection. Even just being there, being the witness, community, co-worker -- making their presence known. Biggest social service provider is jails/prisons - an example of presence vs absence.

STRENGTH OF INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

- Was valuable to connect with both researchers and practitioners from across different disciplines in the same virtual space
- Making a successful program or project happen requires support and connection with other groups and also colleges can help get programs more accredited and reputable...
- Interdisciplinary research perspectives may help to better understand impact—for example in mental health, education, job training, ecology, food, economic development
- What can fields like social work and ecological restoration learn from each other to better understand incarceration? for example the “reciprocal restoration model” – transforming lives and lands ... it can be hard to capture program effects with only single disciplinary response
- It is helpful to have a cross section to see all of the ways that people are approaching the work
- We all represent different connections from different disciplines – as we take this back to our various fields we could be more powerful.

POWER OF COLLABORATION

- Although formal funding institutional funding and support can be important, some of the most powerful collaborations involve resource sharing and mutual aid
- Partnerships between corrections and non-profit/ community-based organizations are necessary for effective in-prison programs... key is finding right match between community based orgs. and corrections...

- Working within an environment where personal ideals may not be represented, but conference was a space where multiple perspectives could be heard
- One theme across our introductions and the conference- having found each other, not being alone in this work
- Was inspiring to hear the stories of how the programs were developed/got started, with the resilience and commitment of all involved
- A formal network could be helpful for the following reasons
 - This is not a niche topic
 - So many people doing this work in very intentional ways
 - Empowering to meet lots of people from all over doing this work
 - If we can do this work in spite of all the challenges, what else can we do in a more organized fashion
 - Learning from other groups--empowering, breaking isolation
 - Interesting to hear about prisons across the country and how they function/what is an option
- Especially for those who are new to the work it's great to meet people who have been doing this for a while and connect with people to learn how to make programs possible
- Key to build in more leadership opportunities for program participants, for example for peer led teaching.... working in a jail setting there are students who have been in the program longer than they thought and how to manage between "veteran" students and new students. Really thinking about how to empower program participants to be leaders
- Some find that there is a challenge in convincing business owners to hire formerly incarcerated people... important to participate in advocating/ shifting the culture
- Programs are effective when DOC staff are true partners with community based organizations/ less alienation of DOC staff/administration

IMPORTANCE OF CLARIFYING GOALS AND VALUES

- How do we see the overarching goal of the conference? What kind of country do we want, what kind of people do we want to be? Do we see the issues of incarceration in relationship to the larger problems of the country?
- Important not to forget the context, in the ways prisons have been used to oppress people. Prison systems take away a person's freedom of movement, but shouldn't take away a person's citizenship or humanity away... incarcerated people still have certain legal rights, humanity is still present - having the capacity for love, compassion, critical thinking
- 13th amendment confuses the restriction of movement with slavery. Prisons are often thought of as an institution of slavery and this can distort our thinking in the US
- If we are a real democracy, should we be viewing people as property? What does it mean to live in a democratic society? Dewey's perspective - democracy as a way of life
- Gardening should be looked at as more powerful than just deterring people from a life of crime. Measuring the success of a sociological ecosystem in a prison system - need to measure the total individual person - and not just recidivism.
- What are the common goals/values that should be driving this work?
- A strengths-based focus is key—for example some positive criminology and theories of desistance, look at pathways to positive human development rather than focusing on negative outcomes

PART 2: NEEDS, OPPORTUNITIES AND STRATEGIES **for advancing the field**

SECURING FUNDING COLLABORATIVELY

- Funding: Could a national network help create partnerships with the USDA or other governmental agencies depending on program type?
- Partnerships with researchers and practitioners
- Would be great to not reinvent the wheel... hopeful to write grants and identify sources collectively through an email list or other contacts – great mechanism to start working together.
- Value in working together and not competing against each other.

DEVELOPING COMMUNICATION AND ADVOCACY STRATEGIES

- Plans for conference book, and publications, that share case studies and research on program effectiveness are in the works
- May be worthwhile to explore ongoing collaborative publications
- Important to show what's possible and helping show prisons what we can do
- Advocating for change at a state/national level --could we have a campaign
- Would be helpful to share ideas for research or advocacy that are in development and not fully formed - learning from each other has been invaluable in this conference

COORDINATING RESEARCH, POLICY, AND PRACTICE

- Potential role of research as a way to clarify and communicate impact – from anecdotes to the kind of evidence-based practices that many in govt. are seeking
- Researchers need to learn from the actual programs/interventions, just as much as programs need research to validate or adjust their work.
- A means to effect larger change too, researchers can also impact policy makers
- Strengthening connections between research, policy, and practice
- Could write up recommendations to advocate for: Federal legislation on wages; design of prisons or justice institutions; psychological assessments to incorporate horticultural therapy, incorporate gardens into mental health regimen; workforce training assessment at prisons when you enter

CREATING A DATABASE OR PLATFORM FOR SHARING RESOURCES

- Directory
- Publications/research

- Access to resources/shared information about funding, security issues, longevity, curriculum, garden maintenance, expansion etc.
- Facing challenges and sharing that knowledge
- More working papers that are useful to people getting started
- Ways to exchange
- Avoid redundancy - not make the same mistakes
- Measurement/evaluation tools
- Resources on good plants to grow
- This could be in the form of a website where we can all connect, a community forum—for example, to share what everyone is working on so we can leverage resources and ensure redundancies aren't occurring
- Would be helpful to have space for shared resources on farming/gardening
- Plant lists
- ag/industry connections
- Crop analysis
- Pest mitigation

CLARIFYING VALUES AND LANGUAGE

- Commitment to humanizing language
- Commitment to justice and decarceration
- Need community organizers/intentional movement building as part of conversation
- Getting clear on values
- Building relationships
- Infrastructure for this network housed at an institution like Yale?
- Clarifying shared values and politics
- Sharing research across programs
- Being able to align our messaging; using research that others have been able to carry out to validate our work.
- What kinds of language will invite people to collaborate? How can we bring others to the table, people from corrections, advocacy, or academia?
- Many program providers or initiators feel lost in trying to “speak that language with Corrections”... need to make bridges to see how programs or research might meet needs
- The word recidivism may be an issue to best understand the effect of programs, it ignores the whole person. IN this moment of reimagining the world we want to be in, really looking at abolition vs reform, really asking ourselves what is justice vs opportunity to heal and repair.
- A good focus could be the creation of healing environments. Work of prison gardens is creating healing environments and incorporates everyone (not just the individuals incarcerated, but also staff from the wardens on down). Those who perpetrate oppression need just as much healing as those who are oppressed.
- To heal the entire system, to work towards that a new system... need to explore how we align this value with actually exiting programs

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS, HOSTING EVENTS, STAYING CONNECTED

- Need for some kind of structure, such as a steering committee or advisory group
- Spring 2022 in-person conference details coming this summer
- Quarterly virtual meetings?
- May be easier to focus first on state-wide and regional gatherings
- Site visits
- Role model/mentorship for people who are just getting started
- Connecting programs who are already going to help build longevity and strength
- Formal connectors between people in prison programs and other groups across different states

CREATING CONNECTIONS AND EXPANDING THE NETWORK

- Outreach beyond in-prison programs is key
- Interactive map with farms/schools/enviro orgs where people can get hired after release
- Not just where are the jobs but where are the living wage jobs and pipelines to success
- Partnerships with ag/industries for donations/supplies and hiring
- Understanding where the living wage jobs are
- Create in interactive map of green hiring options for states, regions, nation
- Develop partnerships with industries for donations, supplies, and hiring
- Develop a better understanding of the living wage jobs and pipelines to success for green industry in each region