Dignity and Safety for Young Adults in Prison: Qualitative Findings from a Collaborative Randomized Control Trial in South Carolina

Selma Djokovic

Ryan Shanahan

Ofonzo Staton

George Villa

September
2025

Vera INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE

Contents

From the Director

When a person is sentenced to prison, the punishment should be the deprivation of liberty—not brutal living conditions or the often-humiliating treatment people receive while incarcerated. And yet, many United States prisons create dehumanizing experiences for the people who live and work in them.

Restoring Promise, an initiative of the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera), posits that human dignity should be the foundational organizing principle of the nation's corrections systems. Human dignity recognizes every person's intrinsic worth and capacity for self-control, autonomy, and rationality.[1] Vera researchers set out in 2016 to see if conditions and treatment could change if incarcerated people and corrections officers worked together in a different way to build community and connection—a place where everyone is cared for because everyone is caring.[2] Initial results from culture surveys of staff and incarcerated people suggested that change was possible—and it fostered safety, a sense of purpose in work and daily life, and a culture of mutual fairness and respect.

In 2019, Vera turned to capturing evidence that this approach led to positive results by conducting a randomized control trial (RCT) in prisons in South Carolina. In 2023, the research team published the quantitative findings from the study, which found that living in a Restoring Promise young adult housing unit decreased people's chances of receiving a violent infraction by 73 percent and reduced young adults' chances of experiencing a stay in a restrictive housing unit by 83 percent, when compared to those incarcerated in a traditional housing unit.[3] To bolster the quantitative findings and capture the stories behind the numbers, Vera researchers conducted interviews in July 2022—uncovering how changing prison culture affected those it impacts most: incarcerated people. Along the way, Vera collaborated with a group of incarcerated people to ground the research process in their expertise.

Collaborative research methods allowed Vera researchers to stay grounded in the actual experiences of people in prison, especially

during the challenging period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The collaborative research approach also made the research decision-making process more responsive to their conditions. The research became a continuous cycle of teaching and learning, resulting in findings that underscore the urgent need for prison reform. Vera aims for this work not only to raise awareness of the experiences within prisons but also to highlight the resilience of the people who live and work there and what is possible when they work together to create something transformative and inspiring.

This report provides an opportunity to hear from incarcerated people about their experiences of prison culture, gain insight into the impact of changing prison culture, and learn about the impact of collaborative research in a prison setting.

Chloe Aquart
Director, Restoring Promise
Vera Institute of Justce

Introduction

What does it look like to center human dignity in a prison setting—especially for young adults navigating a critical stage of development behind bars? This report examines that question through a qualitative study on the impact of changing prison culture on the experiences of incarcerated young adults—specifically drawing on the work of the Vera Institute of Justice's (Vera's) Restoring Promise initiative in two South Carolina prisons.[4] The study was conducted in partnership with the MILPA Collective and with funding from Arnold Ventures.*

Restoring Promise works with corrections leaders to reimagine housing units for young adults in prison and shift policies and practices to reflect a commitment to treating people with human dignity. Young adulthood (ages 18 to 25 in this report) is a period of significant emotional and cognitive development, during which young people are particularly at risk of ending up in prison.[5] In fact, young adults represent about 10 percent of the population in the United States, yet they make up 21 percent of people admitted to prison.[6]

› The report covers analysis of interviews conducted in July 2022 with 23 young adults who were participants in a larger quantitative randomized control trial (RCT) study—13 interviews with young adults randomly assigned to a housing unit supported by Restoring Promise (from the treatment group) and 10 interviews with young adults randomly assigned to a regular housing unit (from the control group). The interviews were delayed because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and therefore participants were asked to respond to questions based on the time period for the larger quantitative study (July 2019 to February 2021) depending on when they were randomly selected. Vera conducted the study in collaboration with a team of people incarcerated at Lee Correctional Institution in Bishopville, South Carolina.

* Although this study and publication were conducted during the partnership between MILPA and Vera, as of summer 2024, MILPA is no longer partnered with Restoring Promise.

The findings overwhelmingly suggest that young adults' experiences are more positive when they are exposed to prison culture change that reflects a commitment to human dignity— treatment group participants reported feeling safer and more connected to supportive people, having a stronger sense of purpose, and being treated more fairly, compared to the participants in the control group. The findings also uncover elements that the two groups share: complex relationships with staff and a desire for more access to mental health care.

The report offers corrections leaders and professionals, as well as advocates, insight into the struggles young adults face in prison and the positive impact that shifting prison practices can have. The results in the report reflect years of hard work and dedication from corrections professionals at South Carolina Department of Corrections (SCDC) and commitment to staying the course from SCDC leadership. There is a long road ahead for corrections agencies aiming to cultivate healthy prison cultures that reflect human dignity, and SCDC's commitment to learning from this work will benefit the field.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

› All young adults in the Restoring Promise housing unit treatment group reported feeling safe, while young adults in the regular housing unit control group were split on their perceptions and feelings of safety. A common theme that emerged from the interviews was the connection of safety to the presence and absence of weapons and to individual and community responsibility.

› Young adults in the treatment group engaged in diverse activities and community interactions that foster purpose and connection, while control group participants described a mundane routine focused on passing time. Relationships in the unit had a huge bearing on facilitating personal growth and improving the experience of incarceration for treatment group participants.

› Young adults in the treatment group reported that responding to misconduct using restorative practices promoted fairness

and fostered accountability, while control group participants reported that disciplinary processes were discretionary and led to excessive punishment. (See "Restorative Practices" at the end of this section.)

› People in both the treatment and control groups reported having strong relationships with their peers—for treatment group members, the housing unit culture facilitated strong bonds among the community, whereas control group members reported being more strategic and selective in their relationships.

› Relationships with staff, access to mental health support, and opportunities for self-expression were struggles for both the treatment and control groups.

› The treatment group shared that the unit's family orientation and engagement events were a positive part of their experience and that their families were comforted knowing that they were living in a Restoring Promise housing unit. Treatment and control group participants also shared challenges in maintaining quality contact—specifically in-person visitation—with family during the COVID-19 pandemic. Control group participants shared about their limited contact with family due to institutional barriers, which were exacerbated by the pandemic.

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

Restorative practices, a broader term than restorative justice, is a field of study focused on "how to strengthen relationships between individuals as well as social connections within communities."[a]

One of Restoring Promise's core tenets is the use of restorative practices for relationship-building, conflict resolution, and accountability. Restoring Promise uses restorative practices to guide the approach to creating housing units for young adults and the response when, inevitably, a community agreement is broken once the housing unit is operational.

When a community agreement is broken, unit staff, mentors, and mentees form a circle to unpack what occurred, how people have been impacted, and what needs to happen so the harm can be repaired and everyone can confidently move forward. This is often referred to as a "circle" or "accountability" process.

Note: a. International Institute for Restorative Practices, "Restorative Practices: Explained," accessed May 14, 2024, https://perma.cc/4W4S-78DM.

Background

The rise of mass incarceration led to the rapid expansion of prisons to confine the millions of people swept up in the "War on Crime."[7] The creation of these dehumanizing spaces was accompanied by a culture of punishment within many departments of corrections that negatively harms the people who work and are incarcerated within the walls— impacts that ripple out to their families and communities.[8]

Although policing and prosecution in cities drove much of the demand for more prisons, they were increasingly built in rural locations—deepening the social isolation of the people incarcerated in them.[9] This social isolation is also embedded in how these facilities are built—with little access to natural light or fresh air for staff or incarcerated people; living spaces that are cramped, overcrowded, and lack privacy; communal spaces that are devoid of natural elements (such as grass or plants) and filled with metal furniture; and spaces to host families and community members that are cold and not appropriate for children.[10]

The culture within prisons both reflects and perpetuates design choices that dehumanize incarcerated people. Staffing choices, too, reflect an overwhelming focus on security—with large shares of corrections budgets going toward officers charged with custody and control.[11] Many departments of corrections' missions focus on protecting the community from incarcerated people rather than keeping incarcerated people safe during their time in prison or, even further, helping them. Additionally, policies and trainings restrict officers' ability to connect with the people who are incarcerated: staff are trained to address incarcerated people by their numbers and last names; there are "undue familiarity" policies in place that punish staff who take time to get to know incarcerated people; and, in some extreme instances, an officer must remove themself from the area—or risk being punished—if they know an incarcerated person or members of their family outside of the prison.[12]

When incarcerated people break prison rules, they are typically punished with solitary confinement—an approach that is considered torture by the

larger global corrections community and which has a negative impact on the incarcerated person's physical and mental health.[13]

There is a growing body of evidence that the combination of punishing spaces and culture negatively impacts the people working and incarcerated inside U.S. prisons. There are about 351,000 staff working in prisons, and research shows they suffer from poor health outcomes, comparable rates of post-traumatic stress disorder to that of returning veterans of war, and more than double the suicide rate of police officers.[14]

The trauma that is often associated with time spent in prison is well documented.[15] Of utmost concern are the statistics regarding loss of life for incarcerated people. One hundred and forty three people were murdered in prison in 2019—a homicide rate of 12 in 100,000 incarcerated people, marking the highest homicide rate since the federal government began collecting the data in 2001.[16] Prisons also negatively impact incarcerated people's mental health. Incarceration not only increases the likelihood of experiencing a mental health crisis, but it also creates the conditions for crises to occur.[17] People in prison experience post-traumatic stress disorder, hypervigilance, anxiety, depression, avoidance, suicidality, flashbacks, and difficulty with emotional regulation.[18]

Punitive prison stays also impact the families and communities that incarcerated people are taken from and to which they will return. Research estimates that half the people in the United States have family members who have been incarcerated.[19] People who experience a family member's incarceration have a projected 2.6-year reduction in life expectancy compared to those with no family member incarceration experience.[20] New research shows that incarceration has an economic impact for families as well, costing nearly $350 billion each year in the form of lost wages and increased out-of-pocket spending.[21] Not all communities bear the weight equally. Criminal justice policies and practices have historically and unjustifiably targeted Black people and communities of color.[22]

> **There is a growing body of evidence that the combination of punishing spaces and culture negatively impacts the people working and incarcerated inside U.S. prisons.**

OVERVIEW OF RESTORING PROMISE

Restoring Promise is a Vera initiative that partners with corrections leaders to reimagine housing units for young adults in prison and realign corrections policies and practices with a commitment to fostering human dignity. Transforming the U.S. prison system has been the goal of Vera's work with corrections agencies since 2016, when Vera and the MILPA Collective opened the first of now seven young adult housing units in five states. The housing units are rooted in four key pillars based on research on juvenile justice and international experience about what works to reduce violence: safety, family engagement, fairness, and purpose. Trained corrections professionals and mentors—incarcerated adults older than 25 who are serving long (often life) sentences and live in the unit with young adults—lead the housing units. Mentors are selected through a rigorous application and interview process. Young adult participation includes living in a designated housing unit for young adults, being connected to mentors, developing leadership skills, enhancing connections to family and community, and designing and participating in specialized programs and activities.

Figure 1 compares general prison operations in an average U.S. maximum-security prison to the operative elements in Restoring Promise young adult housing units. Restoring Promise units differ based on each agency's staffing capacity and resources as well as the physical space available in the prison. Listed in the figure are the components that are most consistent across the Restoring Promise young adult housing units.

FIGURE 1

Comparison of general population in maximum-security prisons and Restoring Promise young adult housing units

	Generic General Population	Restoring Promise Units
Out-of-cell time	There is a wide range, but with no job or school, many maximum-security prisons reduce out-of-cell time to two to five hours.	15 hours out-of-cell time.
Staffing ratio (officers: incarcerated people)	There is a wide range from 1:16 to 1:120.	There is a range from 1:8 to 1:20.
Family engagement	Visits twice a month if they are not restricted because of lockdowns or disciplinary sanctions. Often visits are no-contact (no/limited physical contact).[a]	Orientation sessions for families; meetings among corrections professionals, mentors, and families; and meaningful time with family to discuss goals and progress. Visits at least four times a month.
Unit responsibilities	Certain incarcerated people are assigned cleaning tasks.	Everyone contributes to the unit—chores are assigned to distribute the responsibility of keeping the unit clean across everyone who lives there.
Recreation spaces	None or limited to one general communal space (day room).	Units create community spaces designed by the incarcerated people. Examples include refurbished cells converted to rooms for meditation and religion, computers, library, self-expression/conflict resolution, barbering, and laundry.
Outdoor space	Outdoor space restricted to recreation time.	Unlimited or extended access to outdoor space during out-of-cell time.
Access to workshops and learning	Limited slots available for facility-wide programming or education classes.	Unlimited slots for programs in the unit designed by staff, mentors, and young adults or offered by outside volunteers. Examples of workshops designed and run by people living or working in the unit: personal finances, business planning, art and culture, conflict resolution, emotional regulation, life choices, and parenting.
Mentorship	Informal mentorship, if any.	Mentors live and work in the unit.
Community-building	Not applicable.	Two daily "check-ins" to celebrate accomplishments, monitor people's mental and emotional well-being, and intervene in crises.
Discipline and accountability	Typically, highly punitive processes that lead to sanctions that can include loss of good time, loss of phone calls and visits, and solitary confinement.	For most infractions, a restorative circle is held, and sanctions are replaced by restorative justice responses that do not include solitary confinement or loss of family contact (phone calls and visits).[b]

Notes:

a. A lockdown is when a prison restricts people's movement—they are not allowed to come out of their rooms; access educational services, recreation, or programming; or spend time with their families (known institutionally as "visitation").

b. Which infractions go through traditional processes varies by state. However, in most cases, severe or violent infractions are dealt with traditionally.

WHY YOUNG ADULTS?

With so much potential for change and impact across everyone who is incarcerated, Restoring Promise focuses on the experiences of young adults for four reasons. Restoring Promise

1. is committed to ending mass incarceration, and young adults are disproportionately represented at every stage in the criminal justice system. One in five prison admissions are people between the ages of 18 and 24, and more than one in three people in state prison were first arrested at 15 years old or younger.[23]

2. is committed to race equity, and the racial disparities across the criminal justice system are most acute among young adults. As one example, although Black men of all ages are six times more likely to be imprisoned than white men, 18- to 25-year-old Black men are up to nine times more likely to be imprisoned than white men of the same age group, and almost two-thirds of young people in prison are Black or Latinx.[24]

3. seeks to make prisons safer places for the people who work or are incarcerated there. While in prison, people younger than 25 are the most at risk of being harmed by violence: for example, 11 percent of all young adult deaths in prisons from 2001 to 2014 were due to homicide—the highest percentage of any age group.[25]

> **Young adults are in a time of learning, and prisons are not equipped to provide the kind of learning that is beneficial for them.**

4. wants communities to be safe. Young adults are the most likely age group to return to prison—with three-quarters of young adults returning to prison within three years of being released.[26]

Moreover, young adults are learning the direction in which to take their lives, how to interact socially, and what kinds of decisions they would like to make. Young adults are in a time of learning, and prisons are not equipped to provide the kind of learning that is beneficial for them.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

This report shares findings from the qualitative portion of a larger collaborative randomized control study with South Carolina Department of Corrections (SCDC), which consists of a randomized control trial (RCT), a propensity score matching study, and qualitative interviews with a subset of RCT participants. The study is organized around the following research questions:

5. Does Restoring Promise reduce violence/misconduct for young adults exposed to the new approach, and by how much?

6. What impact does Restoring Promise have on the experience of incarceration—specifically on perceptions of purpose, safety, fairness, well-being, cultural healing, and connection?

7. What elements of Restoring Promise contribute to improved outcomes?

8. Do outcomes for young adults who volunteer to participate in Restoring Promise differ in important ways from those who do not elect to participate?

Study setting and implementation

The larger study took place in two SCDC prisons. Turbeville Correctional Institution (Turbeville) is a medium-security prison that houses young men sentenced under South Carolina's Youthful Offender Act (YOA).[27] Lee Correctional Institution (Lee) houses young men serving long sentences, typically for violent crimes. It is a maximum-security prison that has historically reported higher rates of violence than other facilities in the SCDC system and has limited staffing, programming, and educational and vocational opportunities.[28]

The qualitative portion of the study took place only at Lee. The young adult housing unit in Lee Correctional Institution is named Cadre of HOPE, which stands for "Helping Other People Evolve." At the time of the evaluation, 16 mentors lived in the unit and, over the course of the random selection, Vera selected 30 young adults to live in the unit.

Four key tenets underlie the implementation of Restoring Promise in Cadre of HOPE:

1. Trained staff, mentors, and their families support young adults.

2. Restorative justice replaces traditional disciplinary processes.

3. Young adults participate in a daily routine that is structured and organized with meaningful programs and activities that help them navigate success in prison and prepare for reentry.

4. Young adults, mentors, and staff participate in daily community-building activities such as check-ins to celebrate accomplishments, monitor people's mental and emotional well-being, and intervene in crises.

Design and Methods

This report shares findings from the qualitative portion of a larger randomized control trial (RCT) that was part of a multi-method study examining the components and outcomes of Restoring Promise. This section describes the research design and methods of the larger study. For more detailed information, see the Vera report *Restoring Promise: A Randomized Control Trial Examining the Impact of an Innovative Young Adult Housing on Reducing Violence.*[29]

RANDOMIZED CONTROL TRIAL

Vera randomly selected 200 young adults from a Restoring Promise applicant pool in 10 waves—with 20 people selected per wave—over the course of 14 months between January 2019 and March 2020). From this sample, Vera randomly selected 100 people to live in one of the two Restoring Promise units and 100 to stay in the general population and tracked outcomes for participants for one year. The study compared outcomes derived from department administrative data that included disciplinary misconduct, violent misconduct, restrictive housing unit stays, grievances, and management information notes (which included data from a tracking system of serious incidences/events that occur in each facility: injuries, suicide or self-harm, use of force incidents, and medical or mental health interventions). The study used an "intent-to-treat design," meaning that the analysis included participants' outcomes in the treatment group regardless of how much—or how little—time the young person spent living in the Restoring Promise unit.

Young adults living in a Restoring Promise unit experienced a 73 percent reduction in the likelihood of a conviction for a violent infraction and an 83 percent reduction in the likelihood of a restrictive housing stay during their first year of participation compared to the control group in general population. These numbers account for a range of factors that may have implications

for the outcomes (including custody level, education level, pre-treatment outcomes, length of time in the study, race, and age). Researchers did not find significant treatment effects for the other outcomes explored (disciplinary misconduct, grievances, injuries, staff use of force, and medical/mental health interventions).

PROPENSITY SCORE MATCHING STUDY

To understand if young adults who choose to apply to Restoring Promise units experience different outcomes from those who, given the opportunity, choose not to apply, researchers also conducted a propensity score matching analysis. This is a statistical analysis that allowed researchers to compare the outcomes for two groups of young adults: the control group from the RCT and a matched group of nonapplicants from the general population. Vera researchers analyzed outcomes for both groups for one year using the same administrative data sources as the RCT.

The propensity score matching study findings showed no significant differences in violent outcomes between RCT control group applicants (who applied for but did not receive a spot in the program) and the nonapplicant comparison group. Although further exploration is needed, the findings show that those who apply to be housed in Restoring Promise units, but do not participate, are similar and experience similar outcomes to those who do not apply. This suggests that the differences in violent outcomes observed in the main RCT are due to the Restoring Promise housing units and not to characteristics of people who choose to apply to participate. The results indicate that similar program benefits could be expected if the system opened more units.

CROSS-SITE ANALYSIS

To examine how Restoring Promise is implemented and experienced across diverse correctional environments, Vera conducted a cross-site analysis of Restoring Promise units in three states and five units—a men's jail in Massachusetts, a women's

and a men's prison in Connecticut, and two men's prisons in South Carolina. The researchers also used latent class analysis to identify patterns in responses to the Restoring Promise Prison Culture Survey from incarcerated young adults and staff in the three agencies. The survey covers a variety of questions related to the conditions, perceptions, and experiences of living and working in prisons. The analysis found that the Restoring Promise approach, while tailored to each prison setting, has several fundamental components that are consistent across sites. Findings from the latent class analysis showed that across all locations, young adults and staff reported positive experiences resulting from the changes to prison culture Restoring Promise implemented. Furthermore, corrections professionals working on Restoring Promise housing units reported feeling safe and finding purpose in their work.

QUALITATIVE STUDY

Relying solely on administrative data limits the number and types of outcomes researchers can explore. To address this limitation and to contextualize the findings from the quantitative analysis, Restoring Promise conducted a qualitative study that included 23 interviews (10 from the control group and 13 from the treatment group) from a sample of RCT participants at Lee in July 2022. Researchers did not recruit a sample from Turbeville because of the impact on data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic—by the time the research team gained access to facilities, a significant amount of time had passed, and many participants from the prison had already been released.

As part of the RCT at Lee, 60 young adults were randomly selected to move into the Cadre of HOPE unit or stay in the general population in three waves that spanned eight months (July 2019–February 2020).[30] The research team recruited a sub-sample for the qualitative study (n=30) with representation from each wave of randomization.[31] Treatment group participants were randomly sampled from each wave. Control group participants were purposively sampled based on their wave and location (11 were still incarcerated at Lee, and four were incarcerated in nearby facilities).

Five control group participants declined to be interviewed. Two Vera researchers conducted the interviews in person, with one asking questions and the other taking notes. Interviews were conducted within SCDC facilities. Treatment group interviews were conducted in private spaces on the Restoring Promise unit (such as in a staff member's office or a classroom), and control group interviews were conducted in the prison's visiting room. The interview protocol questions were designed by researchers to probe the participants to reflect on experiences within the first year after random selection.[32] Interviews lasted 45 to 60 minutes.

Researchers conducted the study with a team of people incarcerated at Lee—five mentors from the Cadre of HOPE unit (Khalil, James who goes by AZ, Todd, Asherdon, and Frank, acknowledged here by their first names at the request of SCDC). The incarcerated team worked alongside the Vera research team to develop the interview protocol, assist with data collection planning, code and analyze interviews for control group participants, and write findings.

The expanded outcomes, based on Vera's Prison Culture Survey, which the qualitative data focused on and the administrative data did not include, were young people's perceptions of:

› **Safety:** An environment with the absence of violence, chaos, stress, and fear and the presence of connection, care, and trust.

› **Purpose:** An environment supporting people in achieving personal goals/growth by providing a meaningful daily schedule and tools and programmatic/educational opportunities.

› **Fairness:** A fair and inclusive environment that prioritizes accountability over punishment, ensuring people who are incarcerated feel heard, respected, and included in decision-making without bias or discrimination.

› **Connection** (relationships with family, staff, and peers): An environment that acknowledges, respects, and facilitates strong connections between incarcerated people and their peers, loved ones/support systems, and staff.

› **Cultural healing:** An environment that aids reconnection with ancestry, community, self, and culture while also supporting

the processing and validation of generational/personal traumas through healing resources and opportunities.

Interview notes were coded using a team-based, systematic approach and inspired by guidelines recommended by Vonna L. Hemmler and colleagues and using Dedoose software.[33] To organize the data, researchers used a list of predetermined categories, called deductive codes, based on interview questions and early notes, and created new codes for themes that emerged during analysis. The research team used three steps of analysis. Initially, one researcher coded the treatment group interviews while another focused on the control group. In the next step, two additional researchers coded a random sample of interviews independently. Later, incarcerated co-researchers manually coded the control group interviews. After each coding round, the team held meetings to resolve any discrepancies and ensure consistency. Finalized codes were then used for thematic analysis, which involved labeling individual observations and quotations with themes that emerged from coding. The themes reflected recurring perceptions, experiences, or other phenomena that emerged from the data across multiple participants. Researchers held weekly meetings to discuss preliminary findings.

LIMITATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic delayed data collection until three years after the first cohort was randomized. The delay caused significant attrition of research participants, primarily at Turbeville due to re-lease from incarceration. As a result, researchers could only interview participants from Lee and had to conduct retrospective interviews.

Restoring Promise asked treatment group participants to reflect on their first year in the unit while control group participants were given specific dates on which to reflect. Although researchers asked participants to speak about their perceptions and experiences—and attempted to mitigate the potential for responses to reflect experiences that occurred outside of the timeline—the comparison between the two time periods could be negatively impacted.

An additional limitation worth considering is the impact of social desirability or response bias.[34] As the study is about the impact of prison culture change, interview participants may have provided the response they believed was viewed favorably by others. Additionally, given that the study used internal researchers to conduct the interviews, treatment group participants could have felt pressured to focus on positives or limited sharing their negative opinions. To minimize bias, the team sent researchers who did not have any relationship with the unit. Even if the research participants did not have an existing relationship to the interviewer, they may have felt compelled to speak positively because the researcher was part of the larger Restoring Promise team.

Finally, while the goal was to have a blended team of incarcerated and non-incarcerated researchers, Vera was limited in its ability to fully integrate the incarcerated researchers. Vera researchers decided to limit the role of incarcerated researchers during data collection and coding/analysis. Conducting interviews with other incarcerated people raised concerns about response bias and the potential impact on confidentiality. Additionally, because the co-researchers were mentors in the unit, Vera decided that the mentors would only read notes from control group interviews to protect the privacy of treatment participants, which limited their ability to conduct a comparative analysis. These challenges reflect the complexities of balancing ethical considerations, institutional dynamics, and privacy concerns while striving for equitable collaboration within a research process.
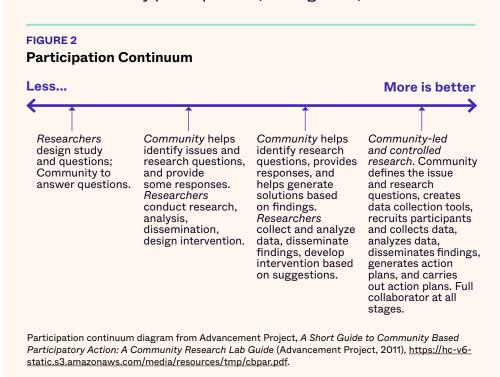
PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Traditional research methods create a hierarchy between researchers and subjects, limiting participation to responding to an outside researcher's agenda. In the 1940s, a new approach began to emerge that partnered researchers with community members to develop research protocols.[35] The strategy, which came to be known as Participatory Action Research (PAR), aimed to generate more useful knowledge while cultivating more investment by community members in research outcomes. The civic engagement spurred by community self-surveys in cities

nationwide resulted in policy changes around discriminatory housing bans and fair employment laws.[36] In subsequent decades, PAR became even more firmly rooted in social action through the work of Central and South American theorists and practitioners who equipped oppressed people to lead—not just be part of—the transformation of their environment.[37]

PAR is now defined as a framework for research that prioritizes the people who are most impacted by research findings and uses the resulting knowledge to generate social change.[38] Historically oppressed people hold deep knowledge about the social problems that researchers seek to understand. Their expertise, therefore, should create the research questions, methods, interpretations, and products that affect their circumstances.

Restoring Promise research draws on the core tenets of PAR. Although there are positive ripple effects for families and communities, the people most impacted by Restoring Promise are incarcerated people and corrections officers. The PAR framework exists on a continuum—from less to more community participation. (See Figure 2.)

FIGURE 2
Participation Continuum

Less...   **More is better**

Researchers design study and questions; Community to answer questions.

Community helps identify issues and research questions, and provide some responses. *Researchers* conduct research, analysis, dissemination, design intervention.

Community helps identify research questions, provides responses, and helps generate solutions based on findings. *Researchers* collect and analyze data, disseminate findings, develop intervention based on suggestions.

Community-led and controlled research. Community defines the issue and research questions, creates data collection tools, recruits participants and collects data, analyzes data, disseminates findings, generates action plans, and carries out action plans. Full collaborator at all stages.

Participation continuum diagram from Advancement Project, *A Short Guide to Community Based Participatory Action: A Community Research Lab Guide* (Advancement Project, 2011), https://hc-v6-static.s3.amazonaws.com/media/resources/tmp/cbpar.pdf.

Conducting research in accordance with PAR principles is difficult in prison. Applied research in prisons led by nonprofits has unique challenges when compared to academic research, including, often, more rigid deadlines and budget constraints. The goals of nonprofit research also constrain collaboration in a way that differs from academia. Because Restoring Promise's research is intended to inform its programmatic work by answering specific questions, the community it is conducting the research in solidarity with is not "driving" the lines of inquiry in the way that, for example, communities conducting critical PAR initiate entire projects. In order to acknowledge these restrictions, Restoring Promise chose to distinguish its research from that of PAR by conducting what it calls "collaborative participatory action research."

In an ideal setting, Restoring Promise would engage the most impacted people (incarcerated people and corrections officers) at each stage of the research: design, data collection, data analysis, and reporting out the findings. For this study, Vera focused on the people incarcerated with SCDC and, therefore, throughout the rest of the paper any time "impacted people" is used, Vera is referring to incarcerated people. The original researchers, employees of Vera who did not have a history of incarceration, wrote the design of the study independently. Engagement with impacted people came after the grant was awarded, but, importantly, before the start of the study. As a first step, the original researchers met with the mentors from each housing unit to ask their permission to go forward with the study—after providing education about RCTs, sharing the study design and steps, and discussing how they would be involved. A subset of mentors who volunteered to be co-researchers went through research training and worked alongside the research team for the qualitative study to develop the interview protocol, assist with data collection planning, code and analyze control group interviews, and write findings.

Findings

Data analysis of interviews with the control and treatment groups suggests that young adults' experiences are more positive when they are exposed to prison culture change that reflects a commitment to human dignity—the treatment group reported feeling safe, feeling connected to supportive people, having a sense of purpose, and being treated fairly.

> **Young adults' experiences are more positive when they are exposed to prison culture change that reflects a commitment to human dignity.**

SAFETY

Vera researchers defined safety as an environment with the absence of violence, chaos, stress, and fear and the presence of connection, care, and trust. Both the treatment and control groups connected the idea of "safety" to the presence and absence of weapons, footwear choices, and the environment. Treatment participants shared that violence was virtually nonexistent in the Cadre of HOPE unit, while young adults in the control group shared mixed responses to the prevalence of violence, with seven out of 10 reflecting that violence is an expected part of the prison experience.

Prevalence of violence

Young adults in the control group shared that violence is a prevalent and expected part of the environment. One young adult shared, "People plan for people to get hurt. There is a lot of violence, a lot that ain't seen, violence I can't even talk about."

There was also a sentiment that young adults became desensitized to violence—for example, disregarding a violent interaction if it did not involve weapons. To demonstrate, a young adult from the control group shared, "Sometimes it can get crazy, but it never comes to knives, and there's always people who step up and do their best to stop it before knives get drawn." Another young adult shared, "Violence has calmed down since the [2018] riot, they

shipped a lot of people and rearranged a lot of things. There's fights but as far as stabbings and murders, it's rare." The analysis suggests that young adults in the control group expected violence and learned to tolerate it to an extent.

The same young adult who spoke about a night of violence in 2018 also shared that the way people were treated in his unit contributed to violence.

> The way [the unit is] set up plays a big part [in the violence], when I was living in the West yard, they had so many people who needed to go to lock up but it was full so they turned the whole unit into lockup, they'd be so short [staffed] we would rarely come out—we might shower two times a week, that's the whole unit. Trays would be late, we went to canteen, talking to doctors/dental in that dorm was almost impossible, nobody would get seen.

The quotation reflects the young adult's analysis of root causes of violence—that environmental factors are responsible for the level or prevalence of violence.

In contrast, all young adults in the treatment group shared that there is virtually no violence in the Restoring Promise unit, and some were even surprised by the question. One young adult said "This unit? There is no violence. These words don't register." Another young adult shared, "The violence? There wasn't no violence."

The young adults clarified that there was conflict in the unit, but participants made it clear that conflict never turned into violence: "No violence. People might argue over basketball, something trivial, but no violence." Another young adult shared, "No, there was really no violence. The only time that got really hazy was when we were in a circle [a restorative practice to navigate and repair conflict] and we had disagreements."

There was a stark difference between the control and treatment groups related to violence. People in the control group, living in general population, spoke about regularly witnessing and

experiencing violence—though their definitions of violence varied—while people in the treatment group reported no violence in the Restoring Promise unit.

Weapons

One of the strongest themes emerging from the interviews with young people in both groups was the connection between safety and weapons carried by incarcerated people. The data suggests that weapons are pervasive across SCDC prisons. Eight out of 10 control group respondents affirmed the presence of weapons, and the two other young adults declined to answer the questions on this topic. In the control group, one young man shared:

> In my mindset, everyone is trying to make it home one way or another. You have great individuals, but you have some people that are provoked easily . . . having [a weapon] is needed. I understand that is wrong and is still a charge, but [it] is my life [on] the line, not yours.

Another young man responded to the question about whether he thought weapons were necessary: "Yes, because I saw my surroundings. It was simply because I saw how easy it was to die out here."

In contrast, no young adults from the treatment group reported needing weapons. A young man from the treatment group shared, "Never in Restoring Promise have I ever felt that I needed a weapon. Some of the other places, absolutely, yeah. The first thing they say [when you get to prison] is if you buy anything, buy a knife." Another young adult shared, "There's no need for weapons because we use our words."

The control group responses reflect an unfortunate reality in SCDC, which at the start of the partnership was deemed one of the deadliest prison systems in the country.[39] The data from the treatment group suggests that changing prison culture could be an effective intervention for reducing the prevalence of weapons across the system.

Footwear choices

Young adults in both groups mentioned footwear as a necessary part of safety in the prison, and that the footwear worn by people in a unit reflects how safe or unsafe they feel. One control group participant shared, "I had to be on high alert. I had to use boots in the shower because it's the best time to get you. I have seen it happening plenty of times. I was myself, but I stayed on point of my surroundings."

A young adult in the treatment group stated, "I see people in their Crocs [in Restoring Promise]. I'm good, people are in their Crocs, everything is good, you feel me. In [general population] you didn't see that. Everybody was in their shoes." Another treatment group participant shared, "This [Restoring Promise unit] made me feel more relaxed because people could walk around in Crocs instead of boots and shoes, it was a breath of fresh air. I felt a whole lot better seeing that too."

Something as seemingly trivial as footwear choices can, in prison settings, be an indicator of safety. Without the qualitative data, an indicator of safety like footwear would be overlooked.

Safety as an individual or community responsibility

Young adults in the control group reported that in the general population, people are responsible for their own safety because of the staff and administration's inability to protect them. One young adult reported:

> I feel safe because of myself, not because of the yard. The officers are trained to leave if something [violent] happens, there have been situations where someone gets stabbed and the officers leave and call medical attention, but it takes so long [that] someone can die, that's happened before.

Another young adult in the control group shared, "You have to defend yourself. [It's] do or die. Literally. There is no police that is going to save you. You have to save yourself. Literally." The protocol that the young adults are referring to—that officers leave when

violence erupts—is, as Vera understands it, a directive for officers to leave the unit until backup can arrive, related to staffing shortages. During the time period covered in this study, the staff ratio at Lee was 1:120.

Treatment group participants, on the other hand, reported that the community that emerged within Cadre of HOPE—specifically resolving conflict through the restorative circle process, strong communication, and camaraderie—as contributing to their feelings of safety. One young adult shared, "I know no one here is going to put me in harm's way; I don't feel like I need to guard myself." Similarly, another respondent said, "If you ain't got that banger [weapon] on you, you ain't gonna need it or want it. . . . We just be in there communicating like a motherf---er." Another young adult shared, "Only thing you have in the unit then was verbal disputes. I really felt like I was in debate club because I'm so used to being hands on, but we couldn't be; we had a lot of tension and we had to vocalize what we were really beefing about."

The analysis suggests that young adults in the control group isolate and feel the burden of responsibility for safety is theirs alone. The treatment group data stands in stark contrast. The young adults in the treatment group experienced safety as a community responsibility. This finding suggests that cultivating relationships in a housing unit can contribute to more safe spaces within prisons.

> **The young adults in the treatment group experienced safety as a community responsibility.**

Can prisons be safe spaces?

Young adults in both groups were asked the question, "Can prison be safe?" The responses were mixed across both groups. Some young adults believed prisons, by design, are inherently unsafe, while others shared that efforts like Restoring Promise could make prisons safe—or at least bring them closer to safety.

Seven out of 10 young adults in the control group shared that prisons could never be safe places because of the multitude of people and personalities. One young adult who responded to the interview question about whether prisons can be safe spaces shared, "No,

because you got some people who just don't got nothing to care or lose. Some people can't be helped." Another young adult similarly said, "No. Because you always [have] people that you gotta think for and people that can't think. There are people that come from a certain lifestyle."

The same young adult from the control group said that efforts to change prison culture, like Restoring Promise, could make prisons safer: "If there were more stuff like your program, you could get people thinking and have a positive environment." Another young adult in the control group shared a similar sentiment, "I think it [prisons] could be a whole lot better than what it is, if more people like y'all come in [Restoring Promise], especially formerly incarcerated because you understand, [and] things can get done."

> **"It's not that there's violence in prison just because it's prison; it's because there are unmet needs within it."**

Three participants shared that they thought prison could be safe depending on the people who make up the space. Reflecting the sentiment expressed by all three, one participant shared, "I believe prison can be safe with the right people in the right positions, you have some intelligent inmates who keep violence at a minimum." Similarly, young adults in the treatment group shared mixed feelings about this question, with nine saying that it was possible if they operated like Restoring Promise. One young adult said, "If every dorm was like Restoring Promise, then yes, absolutely. Here we aren't focused on fighting and weapons." Another young adult shared, "If the whole prison was like Restoring Promise, it would be a good space. You'll have altercations no matter what, but it's how you handle it."

Young adults also specifically spoke about how certain opportunities in Restoring Promise translated to a safer environment:

> They can be safe by having different ways of thinking; if everyone had the opportunity that we [in Restoring Promise] have. . . . If people could get their basic needs met, that would make it a safe space. It's not that there's violence in prison just because it's prison; it's because there are unmet needs within it.

Another young adult said:

> Yeah and no. Yeah because when you have an environment like Restoring Promise, it allows everyone's minds to change because it's relaxing and less stressed. . . . But you have other units where there's not much going on so people can't get out of their room and do what needs to be done; here people can do what they need to and therefore relax. You can even have types of therapy like going to mentors and playing games and doing origami—there's various opportunities for forms of therapy.

Taken together, the data on safety suggests that young adults in specialized housing units like Restoring Promise feel safer than those in general population. The qualitative data illuminates the way safety comes in concrete ways that could be tracked through administrative data, such as the prevalence of violence and weapons, and in *signifiers* of safety (the use of soft footwear, a sense of community) that administrative data sets could not capture but are no less important. The findings also suggest that prison administrators can focus on culture change to increase the safety for everyone.

PURPOSE

The research team defined the category of purpose as an environment supporting people in achieving personal goals or growth by providing a meaningful daily schedule that included programmatic or educational opportunities. The findings suggest that young adults in the treatment group engaged in diverse activities and community interactions that fostered purpose and connection, while control group participants described a mundane routine focused on passing time.

Daily schedule

Young adults in the treatment group reported that their daily schedule facilitated their personal growth and development. Their days were full of classes, activities, and time to connect with the rest of the community, including peers, mentors, and staff. One

young adult shared that his typical day consisted of "getting up early, going to classes, [and simply] having something to look forward to, not just coming out of the room on some bulls---. [We play] games, watch tv, watch sports together." Another young adult shared, "Them days used to be flying, that was the best time in my prison bid. The vibes was just good. Classes and rec time would go by so fast. . . . It's so much confusion and bulls--- in the other dorm. Restoring Promise is solid and righteous."

In contrast, control group participants shared that their daily schedule primarily consisted of an individualized responsibility to find ways to "stay busy." One described his day by saying:

> I had a little routine; at 6 a.m. [corrections officers would] pop [our] doors, [we'd] go to breakfast, [then] come back and go back to bed, [then] wake up at 10, go outside if we had recreation, go upstairs and workout; other than that, spend the day chilling in the room watching tv, [using] the tablet, writing/reading.

Another stated, "[We are] . . . locked down behind the door all day—read on my tablet, [watch] TV. I love reading."

Additionally, just more than half of the control group participants (six out of 10) shared that there were few to no opportunities to aid them in achieving personal goals, except what could be done independently. One young adult shared that the prison gave him access to tablets and that he would "stay in that law library. I had to help myself." One interviewee also described institutional barriers to success when opportunities were available: "I got enrolled in a welding program and got two certificates. . . . I didn't get to finish all the way because I got shipped [moved to another facility]."

Although both treatment and control group participants shared daily routines consisting of independent activities (like reading or going on a tablet and working on one's case), this made up the bulk of the daily schedule for most control group participants. In contrast, independent activities only made up a part of the daily schedule for treatment group participants, which featured more

time with others. As one treatment group participant shared, "[My] typical day was playing basketball, reading—and I started paralegal studies, and got my paralegal license—but a lot of reading. It was a lot of fellowship going on [too]; we had different events and had [family day] going on, which was great."

Relationships are a critical factor for personal growth

The data showed that relationships were significant in facilitating personal growth and improving the experience of incarceration for treatment group participants—a theme that did not come up in control group interviews. Many young adults in the treatment group spoke about opportunities to confide in everyone in the community— peers, mentors, and staff—and how that was beneficial to their development. As one young adult put it, "Over here, you can go talk to anybody. But when I got here, it wasn't me yet. I wouldn't talk. It helped me a lot to be in [Restoring Promise], to open a lot, rethink stuff, change." Another mentee shared a similar sentiment, "I can go to anyone; people may not deal with everyone directly, but if I need something I can go to anyone, like if I need advice . . . someone is always there for anything."

> Young adults in specialized units, like Restoring Promise, have a stronger sense of purpose— connected to their level of activity and learning in the unit and the relationships they build.

The data suggests that young adults in specialized units, like Restoring Promise, have a stronger sense of purpose— connected to their level of activity and learning in the unit and the relationships they build. The connection between relationships and purpose expands Restoring Promise's original definition of purpose: that incarcerated people "can pursue personal goals and self-discovery through a meaningful and consistent daily schedule that includes workshops and educational opportunities; and that incarcerated people have a voice and choice in decisions that impact them."[40] The young adults' identification of relationships as a critical factor to feeling like the time they spend in prison is purposeful is a prime area for future research.

FAIRNESS

Vera defines fairness in carceral settings as "equitable treatment for all people—without personal biases, discrimination, or judgment."[41] Additionally, fairness is present when incarcerated people believe they are respected and included in decision-making.

Overall, young adults in the treatment group felt that the accountability process used by Restoring Promise to replace punishment for breaking rules was fair and/or effective (11 of 13). There was a diversity of responses within the treatment group as to *why* the accountability process was effective. One young adult highlighted the collaborative nature of using restorative justice practices: "The circle process is a great process, but whatever decision is made, you have to back it up. The staff, officers, everyone else must back up the decision, it's a community decision." Another young adult shared that engaging in the accountability process allowed him to learn: "It was effective because it opened a different perspective to me about conflict resolution, like learning how to handle problems with family and how to facilitate."

Only one young adult from the treatment group did not agree that the accountability process was fair or effective.[42] He struggled with the power given to mentors in effecting accountability in the unit and the frequency of circles held. He shared that it was overkill—with mentors calling circles for small things that would not be considered an infraction in a traditional unit. The quantitative portion of the study confirmed this young person's experience—the mentors developed an overreliance on restorative circles instead of talking through disagreements or minor bad behaviors.

In contrast to the overarching sentiment in the treatment group that disciplinary processes were fair and effective, young adults in the control group spoke about highly punitive and arbitrary practices in the disciplinary process. One young adult shared, "I mean, it depends . . . they [staff] are petty and they would lie and

make false reports and all of the sudden you get a charge. I've gotten some petty charges in the prison." Another young adult shared, "We don't get no say. Your voice don't matter. The officer could say something and that is not what you did."

Many young adults in the control group recounted how cruel the system and punishment could be. One interviewee shared, "Last time they slaved me. They took my stuff forever. They took my property for a year, and everything else for four months. No canteen, no phone, visitation restrictions, so it was a lot of stuff." Another young adult shared:

> [The disciplinary system is] more defective than effective. Now, I can't call my family for 90 days. I can't get canteen or my tablet for 90 days; these aren't privileges. I don't get it—how is talking to my family a privilege? The food is bad here. For 90 whole days I can't buy other food from the canteen. It's psychological warfare. They discipline you with visits, phone calls, and canteen. I can't talk to my family, I can't see them, I can't eat. They limit your basic human necessities.

The findings suggest that young adults in the treatment group perceived disciplinary processes as fair and effective, while people in the control group reported punitive disciplinary practices that felt excessive and counterproductive. The data also shows perceiving the system as fair requires a diversity of components: replacing punishment with restorative practices is important, but that process needs to have input from everyone in the community for it to be effectively seen as fair.

CONNECTION

Connection, in this report, refers to an environment that acknowledges, respects, and facilitates meaningful relationships between incarcerated people and their peers, loved ones/support systems, and staff. The findings suggest that most treatment group participants have positive relationships with peers and staff and that living in the unit has provided their family with solace. Control group participants maintained mostly positive peer relationships

but emphasized neutrality with staff and faced limitations in family contact due to disciplinary actions and lockdowns.

Relationships with staff

Most control group respondents (seven of 10) reported having positive relationships with staff; however, some responses equated neutrality with positivity: "It was pretty good, I don't have a negative relationship with them, I don't really talk to them, I try to stay out of their way." Another young adult expressed:

> I would say good. I wasn't getting at many police [corrections staff]. I was not trying to talk to them unless I needed something. You've got people [corrections staff] who would abuse their authority but that is normal.

Additionally, another participant said, "In my mind, as long as they [corrections staff] leave me alone, I leave them alone. Show me respect, I'll show you respect." One participant, however, expressed the need to maintain a good rapport with staff—something beyond neutrality—because he needed them. He stated, "Good because I still need them at the end of the day, so I wouldn't get on their bad side."

Treatment group responses about staff relationships were more detailed, and the positivity was connected to treatment and behavior, not the absence of interaction. For example, one respondent described his experience: "It changed. It was an experience to be treated humanely like being hugged by staff, like, wow, you're a real person; being able to speak freely with them, it was so different than in other units." Another young adult reported,

> We surprised [the staff] and they surprised us; it was surprising for everyone how we could come together; it shows that anything is possible with change and growth—you can change the environment. The respect was mutual, and it was earned."

Another young adult shared: "Treating us like humans helped to build the trust."

Not all treatment group respondents were so positive. Some young adults in the treatment group (three of 13) struggled with their relationships with staff. One quotation reflects the tension the treatment groups felt in their relationships with corrections staff: "No cap [lie], I don't like police, still to this day. I am understandable of what they stand on and I can speak with them to get on mutual ground, but I don't think I will ever like them."

The findings suggest that relationships with staff, while complicated by power and authority, are overall positive for both treatment and control groups. The finding is a testament to the ability of staff to build positive relationships in trying environments that are understaffed and under-resourced.

Relationships with other incarcerated people

Overall, young adults from both the treatment and the control groups had positive relationships with other incarcerated people. All young adults interviewed in the treatment group said that they had a positive relationship with other incarcerated people—with mentorship emerging as one of the strongest patterns. One young adult reported:

> Pretty good, everyone staff and mentors and mentees were friendly; at first it bugged me because I'm not used to niceness and everyone being so helpful; because at home people are nice for an end goal, not for the sake of being nice.

Another young adult stated:

> I thought those guys were weird. I thought it was weird. As I said, I'm coming from a different unit where there is just chaos, and a different mentality. And they come here asking me about personal stuff just trying to figure me out, I don't know, but it was worth it as I grew.

Control group participants shared that they had positive relationships with their peers, with four sharing the caveat that it

is necessary to know how to socially maneuver in the environment. One young person provided this context:

> You have to be mentally aware of the individuals you surround yourself with. You have a lot of different personalities and definitions of loyalty. There are people that use you for certain things, some that want to genuinely see you succeed; it's hard to decipher sometimes.

Another participant said, "I would talk to the same people every day. . . . We know what we got to do to get out of here. I would surround myself with people that wanted the same as me. Prison is not it." Responding along the same lines, another young adult described his relationships: "The people I surround myself with are pretty positive and we have family that is looking out for us."

Mentorship emerged as a theme in two control group interviews as well, with participants sharing that they received support and guidance from elders/more experienced incarcerated people. One young adult reflected, "When I first came on the yard, I didn't know anyone, the older guys came to me and helped me and asked me if I had all my legal paperwork in order." The other young adult shared, "I'm young, so most of the brothers have been through what I've been through, I'd sit down and listen to them let them give me their wisdom."

The study's findings suggest that relationships with incarcerated peers are generally positive and play a significant role in shaping the experiences of those in prison. Mentorship, whether formal or informal, emerged as a shared theme. Additionally, spaces like the Restoring Promise unit and interventions that foster—and teach about—community and healthy relationships show potential for addressing concerns raised in control group interviews about the challenges and caution needed when forming peer relationships.

Family

Young adults in the treatment group spoke about how living in the Restoring Promise unit provided solace to their family members. They attributed their families' ease to more frequent

contact, increased information provided by SCDC, and improved communication between SCDC staff and their families. Two quotations summarize the general sentiment seen in the treatment group's responses:

> I reach out to my people every day. When we had a [family] orientation here, that made them [my family] feel a lot better. They see where I'm now. I'm in a new position, they don't have to worry about me being in incidents. They get to see the people I'm working with.

> It definitely helped my mother, my grandmother, and my father just knowing that I felt safe, and I was comfortable was it [sic]. I have a 30-year sentence, for them it was a breakthrough for them to know that I'm here.

Young adults in the treatment group also spoke about events centered on family ("family days") and the positive experiences that came from them. One treatment group participant, whose brother was also incarcerated at Lee, though in a different unit, shared: "[W]e had a family day and being able to have my family be together and they allowed my brother to come to the family day. It was good to be able to embrace assurance for them, knowing he was safe." The young adult went on to explain that his brother was able to join family day because the corrections professionals working in the Cadre of HOPE housing unit were empowered to use their discretion, with approval from the warden, to allow otherwise restricted visitors to join the unit for special events, like family day. The corrections professionals' advocacy brought comfort to the family by enabling their child in the Restoring Promise unit to connect with loved ones and also provided them with reassurance regarding their other son.

Another treatment group participant shared:

> The family day. It was great. . . . I ain't seen no day better, that was my best day. My people came into my room, helped me make my bed. . . . My girl and my mom had their footprints in my room, [nobody] got no story on the street where they can say they got to see their people's room in prison in SCDC . . . good family connections in this [unit].

In contrast, young adults in the control group described limited contact with their loved ones. Young adults attributed the agency's disciplinary policies—loss of phone and visit privileges for certain offenses (see "Fairness" on page 33)—and institutional lockdowns—the entire prison is remanded to their cells for things such as not having enough security staff or a violent incident occurring—as factors driving the inability to stay connected to family. One participant expressed, "I get visits about every two weeks, that's if the unit isn't on lockdown. I talk with my girlfriend on the phone."

The data analysis suggests that changing prison culture positively impacts the quantity and quality of family engagement for young adults. Young adults reported that their family members benefited from receiving more information about their progress and living quarters and more contact with staff, both of which helped alleviate their anxieties. This analysis also reinforces a well-established body of research demonstrating that strong social relationships are critical to the mental and physical well-being of incarcerated people. Maintaining connections with family and loved ones during incarceration is associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety, reduced recidivism, and even improved physical health outcomes.[43] SCDC staff who work in Restoring Promise units made strong efforts to cultivate opportunities to connect with family, providing a promising framework from which the field can learn.

> **Family members benefited from receiving more information about their progress and living quarters and more contact with staff, both of which helped alleviate their anxieties.**

CULTURAL HEALING

Cultural healing is present when a carceral environment aids reconnection with ancestry, community, self, and culture while also supporting the processing and validation of generational/personal traumas through healing resources and opportunities. The findings indicate a lack of formal trauma support for young adults in both the treatment and control groups. Coping mechanisms such as

suppression (keeping feelings and emotions to themselves or trying to ignore them) or isolation (dealing with their struggles alone) were common among participants, though some in the treatment group found solace and community support within the Restoring Promise unit. Both groups had varied feelings about expressing themselves openly.

Trauma

Although there are mental health staff at the prison, the findings suggest little to no assistance with the trauma experienced by young adults who are not on the mental health caseload (that is, have significant mental health diagnoses). A young adult in the treatment group stated:

> [Counseling] was . . . very beneficial, but we don't have anyone now. No counselors or staff for therapy. There is one who does a great job, but he has 500 people on his caseload, so he can't help everyone.

Similarly, a young person from the control group expressed his attempt to retain assistance: "I was trying to get on [the] Mental Health [caseload] so I could have a counselor to talk to, but it never happened. I guess they just thought I wasn't serious." Without mental health counseling available, young adults expressed finding ways to manage—reflecting other findings, control group participants reported relying on themselves, and treatment group participants leaned on others in their housing unit.

Control group participants shared that their primary method of addressing trauma was just "dealing with it." One young adult said: "[Trauma is] something that you just get used to." Another said, "I really kept it [trauma] all inside of me." Treatment group participants shared similar methods of just "dealing with it," not dealing with it at all, or just keeping it in. One young adult expressed: "(laughing) I never dealt with it. I just (shrugging). . . . A lot of people have gone through things, that is how I feel about it. I don't know how to deal with it." Another young adult said, "I don't know. I like to keep a lot of stuff in. I still haven't dealt with a lot of stuff. Some stuff gets better. I don't wake up with cold sweats as

I used to. I am getting [peace]. But one step at a time. It's a lot of trauma." Another interviewee stated, "I keep my trauma to myself."

Treatment group participants also recognized that the community facilitated healing. One young adult shared, "My case was so high profile, they put my case on the news, so before I got there, they knew me, but then they actually got to know me they made me remember . . . who you are, you were someone before you got here." Another young adult shared, "I just see a lot of the guys being transparent as much as they can be, knowing that they will bring up to the table if they are not feeling well. Some guys come blatantly out, saying that they feel they can't grow up because of past trauma. It's definitely a community."

Self-expression

Both the control and treatment groups reflected on their struggles with self-expression in the context of prison. Control group participants were split regarding whether they felt they could bring their full selves to their housing unit. One young adult who reported he did feel comfortable being himself in the unit said, "I always am going to be myself. I'm not different from anybody. I'm going to be me. Fully. I can't be treating myself as they want to treat me." Another young adult answered similarly, saying, "Yeah . . . . I got to show my leadership skills. I know how to think. I am not going for anything I don't believe [is right]."

Those who said they could not bring their full selves talked about the dangers of doing that. One participant shared:

> [I don't] because certain elements of my personality I would never present in this environment. That's more like a mental block for myself. Overall, I'm a nice dude, I'm a nice guy, but this is not the kind of place where you want to be nice.

Another responded, "No, I still recover from the shock of being incarcerated, so I'm never gonna be myself here," and, "No, in a sense, your environment will rub off on you, you have to adapt to survive its nature."

Interestingly, both groups that answered affirmatively and negatively to this question did so because they believed that bringing their full selves (or not) would bring them the greatest levels of safety.

Treatment participants similarly had mixed feelings about whether they could express themselves fully. Some felt that they would never be able to express themselves in prison or just do not open up in that way generally. For example, one young adult shared, "No 'cause I'm incarcerated. There is a different me on the streets." Another young adult said, "Nahhh . . . nothing to do with the initiative personally, but I just don't ever show all my cards."

Other young adults shared that they were still growing individually and learning how to express themselves: "I can't because I am still learning myself and who I am. . . . If I knew myself, then I would know how to act and be sure of myself. [I]f I don't know myself, I can't bring myself." Another young adult shared a similar sentiment: "I have a potential to. I still have to work on it. I was just having a conversation with a mentor about that. I get secluded in myself. I still have to get out of my comfort zone."

A few shared that being in the Restoring Promise unit allowed them to express themselves more freely: "Yeah. Cause I didn't have to hide who I was. I didn't have to worry." Another young adult shared, "Yeah, I definitely felt comfortable with being me. . . . I was fine with everything from the jump. I came from over there [another housing unit in general population]. This [Restoring Promise] was a blessing for me."

Like control group participants, several young adults in the treatment group shared that they could express themselves fully no matter where they were. For example, one young adult said, "Yes. I bring myself regardless. I am grounded in myself, and I know who I am," and another young adult shared, "I don't think I have ever hidden parts of myself."

The findings suggest that healing is difficult in prison settings—regardless of the work that is done to change the culture. Both groups reported that they did not have access to the mental health

care and counseling they need, nor did they all feel free to be themselves. While treatment group members saw the ways that their housing unit's culture supported healing, they still craved formal support and pointed to a need for more mental health interventions. The data suggests there is more to be done and that this is an area for future research to uncover the best ways to provide everyone in prison with the support they need to heal.

A NOTE ON SUSTAINABILITY: CHALLENGES AND RESILIENCE IN A POST-COVID WORLD

The data for this study is based on interviews conducted in July 2022 of young adults regarding their first year of living in a Restoring Promise housing unit, Cadre of HOPE, which variously spanned July 2019 to February 2021. There was a significant gap between the young adults' experiences and the interviews—and that time was marked by the COVID-19 pandemic.

To understand changes to the original approach, if any, researchers convened all young adults and mentors who were living in the Cadre of HOPE unit after completing interviews. The research team asked participants to share what was working in the unit and what areas needed additional support.

Young adults and mentors reported that the unit continued to be a safe place. They spoke positively about the unit's structure (the daily schedule and the way staff and mentors are organized) and the classes and activities offered. They also described a strong sense of brotherhood, a peaceful environment in which people could relax and be themselves, and pride in there being little to no violence in the unit.

Regarding challenges, young adults and mentors highlighted staffing and activities. Related to staff, they shared that the unit did not have enough trained, dedicated staff—a problem exacerbated by an unprecedented staffing shortage post-COVID. They shared that one negative

impact of untrained staff assigned to the unit is their traditional, punitive practices at times, instead of the restorative practices that were part of the original design. They also described frustration with the extension of a COVID-related pause on family engagement events.

Young adults and mentors reported a dearth of opportunities for vocational programming and certification, which left them feeling unprepared for parole hearings and transitioning out of prison. They described a lack of infrastructure support that was part of the original design discussions—for example, computer and exercise equipment, as well as furniture. Mentors highlighted a need for more support from prison and SCDC leadership to do their jobs successfully, which they must do on top of teaching classes in the unit and maintaining their individual personhood and relationships with family.

As of this publication, both CORE and Cadre of HOPE still operate in Turbeville and Lee, respectively. SCDC and Restoring Promise technical assistance staff are working collaboratively to reestablish some of the original concepts in a corrections world still grappling with the effects of the pandemic. The past few years have reflected challenges and a tremendous display of resilience from the people living and working in Restoring Promise units.

Although Restoring Promise provides corrections agencies with a framework and process, the corrections professionals and leaders have to do the hard work to ensure sustainability—evaluating policy and practice recommendations, dedicating themselves to continuous learning, and committing to trying different approaches. Change is difficult and requires trust. Vera is grateful to the SCDC for continuing to trust Vera researchers to partner with them in their change process with the goal of supporting young adults in prison.

The Restoring Promise research staff plans to conduct further studies to understand the sustainability of Restoring

Promise housing units. As of this publication, Vera reflected on the lessons of how Restoring Promise could operate differently going forward:

› **Leverage technology.** During the periods of restricted travel due to COVID-19 and its variants, Restoring Promise pivoted to using virtual methods of connecting with department of corrections staff and incarcerated people on Restoring Promise units—a method previously not available. The virtual access to incarcerated people has positively impacted Restoring Promise's approach to support mentors and staff in three ways. First, it has increased communication and connection between mentors and corrections staff and Restoring Promise staff—with virtual visits continuing after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted in addition to routine in-person visits. Second, Restoring Promise now holds virtual meetings with mentors and staff from different Restoring Promise states to facilitate cross-site learning—previously impossible due to restrictions on communication between incarcerated people from different prisons. Third, access to technology allowed a group of mentors from South Carolina to take a research methods class (with mentors from other states where Restoring Promise works), which supported their ability to participate on the research team for this study. Restoring Promise will continue to leverage technology moving forward to support prison culture change in ways that center the leadership and expertise of staff and incarcerated people.

› **Commit to consistency.** Restoring Promise learned that consistency is invaluable to maintaining support and momentum for the changes the approach requires of corrections professionals and leadership. Restoring Promise operates with a lot of flexibility—what might work in one prison does not always translate to a different prison, even in the same state. Moving forward, Restoring Promise is committing to a new level of consistency in what is expected from departments of

corrections related to dignity. The team published a report in 2024, *Dignity Principles: A Guide to Ensure the Humane Treatment of People in U.S. Carceral Settings*, and will use this to guide its work to open housing units. As Restoring Promise strives for more consistent expectations of departments of corrections, it will communicate more clearly with staff and mentors about anticipated changes and set realistic goals. This will help reduce disappointment and frustration when the pace of change does not align with their vision.

› **Support a strong bench.** The Restoring Promise process for opening a pilot housing unit takes a significant amount of time and resources from key departments of corrections leadership—most often, one person emerges as the point of contact who navigates the path to operationalizing the changes to prison culture and practices. Relying on a single point of contact, while efficient and effective in the short term, has negative repercussions when staff change positions, get promoted, or retire/leave the department of corrections. A lesson learned through the study is for Restoring Promise to pay greater attention to building "a strong bench"—using a sports metaphor to cultivate talent beyond the starting lineup. Broader support, along with more leaders who are invested in prison culture change, will enhance the Restoring Promise team's ability to pivot when there are inevitable changes to staffing or leadership.

Policy and Research Recommendations

The study findings suggest that young adults fare better when living in housing units designed to support their growth. Based on the study's findings, Restoring Promise recommends that departments of corrections consider implementing the following changes to policy and practice. It is important to note that these recommendations are inspired by, and build on, previous recommendations—specifically Restoring Promise's *Dignity Principles* report and Vera's *Reimaging Prison* report.[44]

›   **Young adults deserve special attention.** Young adulthood marks a unique life stage between childhood and adulthood. It is a time of risk-taking and boundary testing. For young adults, both in and out of prison, this can mean acting out, being impulsive, testing relationships, and breaking rules. Departments of corrections should provide training on young adult development to all staff and should consider creating housing units with specialized staff and mentors dedicated to young adults.

›   **Relationships are key.** Young adults in prison do better when they are connected to people inside and outside of prison. Departments of corrections should modify policies related to staff conduct and should train staff in how to create and sustain healthy, professional relationships with incarcerated people. Departments of corrections should support opportunities for mentorship from older adults in prison. Finally, departments of corrections should reallocate resources to cultivate meaningful opportunities for the people who support young adults outside of prison to connect with their loved ones in prison.

›   **Investment in culture change is an investment in staff morale and well-being.** While the study focused on the impact of Restoring Promise's work with SCDC on young adults, changing the culture and conditions of the unit had a positive impact on

the staff who worked there as well. Findings from surveys given to staff in SCDC and other Restoring Promise units demonstrate the benefit that changing prison culture has on staff morale and well-being. Corrections departments should invest in culture change efforts to build a healthier and more sustainable system for all stakeholders involved.[45]

› **Without safety, any other changes are ineffective.** Prisons are often places of security but not safety. Dynamic, or relational, safety is a concept in corrections that recognizes the importance of understanding and getting to know incarcerated people as a strategy to keep everyone safe.[46] Departments of corrections should revise policies and train on best practices related to dynamic safety.

› **Pay attention to trauma.** There are high numbers of people who enter prison with a history of trauma. Additionally, imprisonment is traumatizing—and the effect of the trauma from prison has the potential to be felt especially harshly by young people because of their developmental stage.[47] Departments of corrections should allocate resources to evidence-based programs and interventions that provide support for everyone in prison's mental health with a special focus on young adults.[48]

› **Replace punitive responses with restorative practices.** Excessively punitive reactions have the potential to create hostile environments and incubate violence. Departments of corrections should eliminate the practices of mass punishments (such as full-unit lockdowns) and taking away contact with family and access to commissary as responses to disciplinary infractions. Additionally, departments of corrections should use separation (removal of the person from their housing unit) "only in exceptional cases as a last resort, for as short a time as possible and subject to independent review."[49] Disciplinary policies should be amended to include restorative practices that foster accountability. Findings from this study demonstrate that it is possible to do so without compromising safety. Such efforts will take political will, but this study shows that change is possible—and beneficial.

› **Research and data collection are critical to effective implementation.** Research and data collection provide a continuous feedback loop that supports change efforts by highlighting what is effective and where adjustments may be needed. By consistently gathering data, practitioners can make informed decisions and thoughtfully adapt interventions to enhance impact over time.

› **Conduct collaborative research.** The team makeup—including researchers both with and without formal training and researchers who are both incarcerated and non-incarcerated—enhanced the research for this study. Those conducting research inside prisons should collaborate as much as possible with the people who are impacted most by their findings—incarcerated people and corrections officers—to develop and implement a research agenda. This collaboration ensures that knowledge production (and the policy/practice changes informed by it) is grounded in the expertise of people who are most affected by prison systems and how they operate, and thereby generates more accurate and nuanced insights.

Conclusion

Prison culture needs to change to ensure that young adults are in living situations grounded in human dignity with support from staff and mentors. The quantitative study on Restoring Promise units showed impressive outcomes, indicating that young adults living in a Restoring Promise unit experienced a 73 percent decrease in their chances of receiving a violent infraction and an 83 percent decrease in their chances of experiencing solitary confinement compared to those housed in the general population.[50] The stories behind these numbers provide insight into this impact—young adults feeling safer, a greater sense of purpose, more connected to themselves and their families, and more strongly connected to staff and mentors who are helping ensure they succeed.

The young adults in the control group described a difficult living environment of hypervigilance, strategic relationship-building that keeps one safe, and isolation from trusting, caring people inside and outside of the prison walls. Those conditions do not set anyone up for a successful transition out of prison—and especially not young adults.

Staff are a key component of this work—not only in contributing to the success of Restoring Promise, but also as critical recipients of its benefits. Preliminary findings from research conducted on Restoring Promise units over the years show that staff who work in them experience job satisfaction, good quality of life, and heightened morale.[51] Further research from Restoring Promise will continue to seek the drivers, impediments, and impacts of culture change in prison for *everyone* involved.

Departments of corrections across the country should recognize the benefits of integrating the key elements of Restoring Promise within their facilities and systems, thereby fostering safer, healthier, and more productive environments for young adults—a population that presents unique challenges and opportunities.

> **Only by valuing and investing in people incarcerated and working in prisons can we build a system that truly reflects a commitment to human dignity.**

The challenges faced within the prison system—both by the staff who dedicate their lives to working there and by the people incarcerated there—are often overlooked. Maintaining a focus on solutions and affirming the inherent worth of all people impacted by the prison system is essential to meaningful reform. Only by valuing and investing in people incarcerated and working in prisons can we build a system that truly reflects a commitment to human dignity.

ENDNOTES

1   Ruth Delaney, Ram Subramanian, Alison Shames, and Nicholas Turner, *Reimagining Prison* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2018), 46, https://www.vera.org/publications/reimagining-prison-print-report.

2   Ryan Shanahan first heard the phrase, "Everyone is cared for because everyone is caring," during a presentation by Sandra Kim from her work at WildSeed Society. For more information, see WildSeed Society, "About the Team," https://perma.cc/ZN6S-E65B.

3   Ryan Shanahan, Selma Djokovic, and Lidia Vásquez, *Restoring Promise: A Randomized Control Trial Examining the Impact of an Innovative Young Adult Housing on Reducing Violence* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2023), select: Policy Brief, 1, https://www.vera.org/publications/restoring-promise-a-randomized-control-trial-examining-the-impact-of-an-innovative-young-adult-housing-on-reducing-violence.

4   The qualitative study builds on a quantitative study funded by the National Institute of Justice. See Shanahan, Djokovic, and Vásquez, *Restoring Promise: A Randomized Control Trial*, 2023.

5   See Sara B. Johnson, Robert W. Blum, and Jay N. Giedd, "Adolescent Maturity and the Brain: The Promise and Pitfalls of Neuroscience Research in Adolescent Health Policy," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 45, no. 3 (2009), 216–221, https://perma.cc/K2P9-8YB4; and Mariam Arain, Maliha Haque, Lina Johal, et al., "Maturation of the Adolescent Brain," *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment*, 9 (2013), 449–461, https://perma.cc/D8GN-FE5U.

6   Justice Policy Institute, *Improving Approaches to Serving Young Adults in the Justice System* (Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute, 2016), 1, https://perma.cc/A3RE-3XK9.

7   Suzanne M. Kirchhoff, *Economic Impacts of Prison Growth* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2010), https://perma.cc/X8YP-JCQN.

8   Anne-Marie Cusac, "Culture of Punishment in the USA," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2017), https://oxfordre.com/criminology/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264079.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264079-e-44#acrefore-9780190264079-e-44-div1-6.

9   See Matthew D. Vanden Bosch, "Rural Prison Siting: Problems and Promises," *Mid-Southern Journal of Criminal Justice* 19, no. 1 (2020), article 5, 3–5, https://mds.marshall.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=msjcj.

10   See Kelsey V. Engstrom and Esther F.J.C. van Ginneken, "Ethical Prison Architecture: A Systematic Literature Review of Prison Design Features Related to Wellbeing," *Space and Culture* 25, no. 3 (2022), 479–503, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/12063312221104211.

11   Richard C. Auxier, Tracy Gordon, Nancy G. La Vigne, and Kim S. Rueben, "Criminal Justice Finance in the COVID-19 Recession and Beyond," Urban Wire, August 7, 2020, https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/criminal-justice-finance-covid-19-recession-and-beyond.

12   National Institute of Corrections, "Undue Familiarity: Establishing and Maintaining Professional Boundaries," e-course accessible through https://learn.nicic.gov/.

13   United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, "United States:

Prolonged Solitary Confinement Amounts to Psychological Torture, Says UN Expert," press release (Geneva, Switzerland: United Nations, February 28, 2020), https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/02/united-states-prolonged-solitary-confinement-amounts-psychological-torture.

14   U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics," May 2023, https://www.bls.gov/oes/2023/may/oes333012.htm#(1); Lois James and Natalie Todak, "Prison Employment and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: Risk and Protective Factors," *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* 61 , no. 9 (2018), 725–732, https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29896918/; National Institute of Justice (NIJ), "Research on the Mounting Problem of Correctional Officer Stress: Highlights from the 2023 National Institute of Justice Research Conference," NIJ, December 1, 2023, https://perma.cc/CHX5-7PTG.

15   Mika'il DeVeaux, "The Trauma of the Incarceration Experience," *Harvard Civil Rights–Civil Liberties Law Review* 48, no. 1 (2013), 257–277, https://perma.cc/RT39-D72U.

16   E. Ann Carson, *Mortality in State and Federal Prisons, 2001–2019 – Statistical Tables* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021), 2, https://perma.cc/8C9D-NK3K.

17   See Timothy E. Edgemon and Jody Clay-Warner, "Inmate Mental Health and the Pains of Imprisonment," *Society and Mental Health* 9, no. 1 (2018), https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/2156869318785424; and A. Goomany and T. Dickinson, "The Influence of Prison Climate on the Mental Health of Adult Prisoners: A Literature Review," *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* 22, no. 6 (2015), 413–422, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jpm.12231?casa_token=yDpmdoC_3DgAAAAA%3AmcTZp7yGgPJ4moMEYc-C4GoEkoMSQJnhSdetEtwuZbF6_8RPbXu-UUi-fjbY5jUAyQ2O8uXiSXQIMFHs.

18   Gergõ Baranyi, Megan Cassidy, Seena Fazel, et al., "Prevalence of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Prisoners," *Epidemiologic Reviews* 40, no. 1 (2018), 134–145, https://perma.cc/LEG8-W7CV; and Katie Rose Quandt and Alexi Jones, "Research Roundup: Incarceration Can Cause Lasting Damage to Mental Health," Prison Policy Initiative, May 13, 2021, https://perma.cc/E57P-3JSM.

19   Brian Elderbroom, Laura Bennett, Shanna Gong, et al., *Every Second: The Impact of the Incarceration Crisis on America's Families* (Washington, DC: FWD.us, 2018), 10, https://perma.cc/LJG4-UA9S.

20   Ram Sundaresh, Youngmin Yi, Tyler D. Harvey, et al., "Exposure to Family Member Incarceration and Adult Well-Being in the United States," *JAMA Network Open* (2021), https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2780438.

21   Brian Elderbroom, Peter Mayer, and Felicity Rose, *We Can't Afford It: Mass Incarceration and the Family Tax* (Washington, DC: FWD.us, 2025), select: Read the Report, 4, https://www.wecantaffordit.us.

22   See generally Elizabeth Hinton, LeShae Henderson, and Cindy Reed, *An Unjust Burden: The Disparate Treatment of Black Americans in the Criminal Justice System* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2018), https://www.vera.org/publications/for-the-record-unjust-burden.

23   See Justice Policy Institute, *Improving Approaches*, 2016; and Wendy Sawyer, "More Than 1 in 3 People in State Prison Were First Arrested Before Their 16th Birthday," Prison Policy Initiative, 2022, https://perma.cc/JLS5-PEJK.

24   See Justice Policy Institute, *Improving Approaches to Serving Young Adults in the*

Justice System (Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute, 2016), 8, https://perma.cc/KNH3-ECRR; Pew Center on the States, *One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008* (Washington, DC: Pew Charitable Trusts, 2008), https://perma.cc/34TE-4MTR; and Wendy Sawyer, "Almost Two-Thirds of Young People in Prison Are Black or Hispanic," Prison Policy Initiative, 2022, https://perma.cc/L3ET-TFKQ.

25   E. Ann Carson, *Mortality in State and Federal Prisons, 2001–2019 - Statistical Tables* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021), 16, https://perma.cc/LZ4N-VTTS.

26   See Kim Steven Hunt and Billy Easley II, *The Effects of Aging on Recidivism Among Federal Offenders* (Washington, DC: U.S. Sentencing Commission, 2017), https://perma.cc/Y3WU-4S3Q; Massachusetts Coalition for Juvenile Justice Reform, "Testimony to the Joint Committee on the Judiciary in Support of An Act to Promote Public Safety and Better Outcomes for Young Adults S.920/H.1826," November 5, 2021, https://perma.cc/7DVL-93F3; and Council of State Governments Justice Center, *Reducing Recidivism and Improving Other Outcomes for Young Adults in the Juvenile and Adult Criminal Justice Systems* (New York: Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2015), https://perma.cc/VE4M-BDQM.

27   The Youthful Offender Act (YOA) provides for a maximum sentence of four years with conditional release or six years with unconditional release if the sentenced person participates in various carceral programs. YOA also mandates an intensive supervision officer who works with the sentenced person throughout their time in prison to help plan for reentry and continues supervision once released to the community. Judges can sentence people between 18 and 25 years old to YOA who are convicted of first-time, nonviolent offenses. S.C. Code Unann. § 24-19 (2016), https://www.scstatehouse.gov/code/t24c019.php.

28   Internal analysis conducted by the Vera Institute of Justice, on file with Vera.

29   Shanahan, Djokovic, and Vásquez, *Restoring Promise: A Randomized Control Trial*, 2023.

30   Wave 1 was selected in July 2019; Wave 2 was selected in January 2020; and Wave 3 in February 2020.

31   Five control group participants declined to be interviewed. Vera recruited and interviewed 15 people from the treatment group, but a data storage error led to 13 usable transcripts.

32   To align with the observation timeline used in the quantitative analysis, researchers asked participants to respond to questions based on those specific time periods.

33   See Vonna L. Hemmler, Allison W. Kenney, Susan Dulong Langley, et al., "Beyond a Coefficient: An Interactive Process for Achieving Inter-Rater Consistency in Qualitative Coding," *Qualitative Research* 22, no. 2 (2020), 194–219, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1468794120976072.

34   José Patrício Bispo Jr., "Social Desirability Bias in Qualitative Health Research," *Rev Saude Publica* (2022), https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9749714/.

35   See María Elena Torre, Michelle Fine, Brett G. Stoudt, and Madeline Fox, "Critical Participatory Action Research as Public Science," in *APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology: Vol. 2. Research Designs: Quantitative, Qualitative, Neuropsychological, and Biological*, edited by Harris Cooper et al. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2012), 171–184.

36   See Frances Cherry and Catherine Borshuk, "Social Action Research and the

Commission on Community Interrelations," *Journal of Social Issues* 54, no. 1 (1998), 120–139, https://spssi.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1998.tb01210.x; and Kurt Lewin, "Action Research and Minority Problems," in *Resolving Social Conflicts*, edited by Gertrud Weiss Lewin (New York: Harper & Row, 1948), 201–216.

37 Michelle Fine, María Elena Torre, Kathy Boudin, et al., "Participatory Action Research: From Within and Beyond Prison Bars," in *Qualitative Research in Psychology: Expanding Perspectives in Methodology and Design*, edited by Paul M. Camic, Jean E. Rhodes, and Lucy Yardley (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003), 173–198, 175, https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2F10595-010.

38 María Elena Torre, "Participatory Action Research," Public Science Project, 2009, https://perma.cc/NP2W-AXYY.

39 Meg Kinnard, "South Carolina's Prisons Among the Deadliest in the US," *Savannah Morning News*, April 18, 2018, https://www.savannahnow.com/story/news/2018/04/18/south-carolinas-prisons-among-deadliest-in-us/12670494007/.

40 Clinique Chapman, Brittany Brown, Selma Djokovic, et al., *Dignity Principles: A Guide to Ensure the Humane Treatment of People in U.S. Carceral Settings* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2023), https://www.vera.org/publications/dignity-principles.

41 Ibid.

42 Another young adult never experienced the disciplinary process personally and chose to skip the question.

43 Johanna B. Folk, Jeffrey Stuewig, Debra Mashek, et al., "Behind Bars but Connected to Family: Evidence for the Benefits of Family Contact During Incarceration," *Journal of Family Psychology* 33, no. 4 (2019), 453–464, https://perma.cc/F8XH-Y7FN; and Leah Wang, "Research Roundup: The Positive Impacts of Family Contact for Incarcerated People and Their Families," Prison Policy Initiative, December 21, 2021, https://perma.cc/2B62-GPZD.

44 See Chapman, Brown, Djokovic, et al., *Dignity Principles*, 2023; and Delaney, Subramanian, Shames, and Turner, *Reimaging Prison*, 2018.

45 Selma Djokovic and Ryan Shanahan, *Changing Prison Culture Reduces Violence* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2023), https://vera-institute.files.svdcdn.com/production/downloads/publications/RP_PolicyBrief_final.pdf.

46 For more, see generally Ahmed Ajil, Guido Sturny, Laura von Mandach, and Claude Tacchini, *Dynamic Security in Penal Settings: Handbook* (Fribourg, Switzerland: Swiss Centre of Expertise in Prison and Probation, 2021) (handbook from Switzerland's Department of Corrections), https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ahmed-Ajil-2/publication/349117461_Handbook_on_Dynamic_Security_in_Penal_Settings/links/60218a194585158939900dae/Handbook-on-Dynamic-Security-in-Penal-Settings.pdf.

47 Maria Morrison, Carrie Pettus-Davis, Tanya Renn, et al., "What Trauma Looks Like for Incarcerated Men: A Study of Men's Lifetime Trauma Exposure in Two State Prisons," *Journal of Traumatic Stress Disorders and Treatment* 8, no. 1 (2018), https://perma.cc/P22P-4Q2J.

48 Sharyn Adams, Jaclyn Houston-Kolnik, and Jessica Reichert, "Trauma-Informed and Evidence-Based Practices and Programs to Address Trauma in Correctional Settings," Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, July 25, 2017, https://perma.cc/7ZLA-L7E7.

49   When separation from the general population is deemed absolutely necessary because of a safety concern, Restoring Promise recommends following the guidelines set forth in the Unlock the Box Campaign's *A Blueprint for Ending Solitary Confinement by the Federal Government*. Federal Anti-Solitary Taskforce, *A Blueprint for Ending Solitary Confinement by the Federal Government* (Washington, DC: Unlock the Box Campaign, 2021), https://perma.cc/B5QR-BCCV.

50   Shanahan, Djokovic, and Vásquez, *Restoring Promise: A Randomized Control Trial*, 2023, 1.

51   Djokovic and Shanahan, *Changing Prison Culture*, 2023, 6.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

About citations

As researchers and readers alike increasingly rely on public knowledge made available online, "link rot" has become a widely acknowledged problem for creating useful and sustainable citations. To address this issue, the Vera Institute of Justice is experimenting with the use of Perma.cc (https://perma.cc), a

service that helps scholars, journals, and courts create permanent links to the online sources cited in their work.

Credits

The Vera Institute of Justice is powered by hundreds of advocates, researchers, and policy experts working to transform the criminal legal and immigration systems until they're fair for all. Founded in 1961 to advocate for alternatives to money bail in New York City, Vera is now a national organization that partners with impacted communities and government leaders for change. We develop just, antiracist solutions so that money doesn't determine freedom; fewer people are in jails, prisons, and immigration detention; and everyone is treated with dignity. Vera's headquarters is in Brooklyn, New York, with offices in Washington, DC, New Orleans, and Los Angeles. For more information, visit vera.org. For more information about this report, contact Selma Djokovic, associate director of research, Restoring Promise, at sdjokovic@vera.org.

Suggested citation

Selma Djokovic, Ryan Shanahan, Ofonzo Staton, and George Villa, *Dignity and Safety for Young Adults in Prison: Qualitative Findings from a Collaborative Randomized Control Trial in South Carolina* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2025).

Vera INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE