

## ARTICLE PRE-PRINT

### **Time Well Spent: Misery, Meaning, and the Opportunity of Incarceration**

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#### **Abstract**

People often leave prison worse than when they arrived; sometimes, they leave the same. People could leave prison better than when they arrived through a reimagined response to crime. They could be set up to live sustainable, fulfilling, and meaningful lives after prison. This approach could be informed by research on what makes for a meaningful life—regardless of whether a person has come into contact with the criminal justice system. A reimagined corrections could view time spent in prison as an opportunity rather than solely as a punishment; an opportunity to repair harm, empower people, and promote public safety.

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*I would be dead if not for prison.* Varrone White proclaims that with certainty. It is truth. Varrone has spent his last two decades behind bars and is sure prison interrupted his descent into the violence of gang life. Varrone escaped death on the streets, paid in full by the social death brought on by his incarceration. In 2022, he returns to those streets. What happened in the last twenty years to the twenty-one year old young man who became a forty-one year old adult? Varrone has no blemishes on his prison record; he never got into a fight, never brought in contraband, and never stood in a place he should not be standing. He has supplied over 20,000 hours of prison labor, progressing from work in the kitchen through various assignments to his current role as clerk for the chaplain at forty cents an hour. He graduated top of the class from the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, co-founded the Arizona Transformation Project, and co-authored an academic article (Thrasher *et al.* In Press). He also graduated from, and then clerked for, the Impact of Crime on Victims Class—and he embodies the restorative principles of that class better than anyone.<sup>1</sup> But mostly he is ‘not dead.’

Prison life is a stagnant existence for most people on the inside in the United States (U.S.). It is mundane and repetitive. Prison may halt the bad, like violence on the outside, but it also halts the good, like the development of responsible and mature behavior (Dmitrieva *et al.* 2012). People in prison are medically older than they should be (Binswanger, Krueger, and Steiner 2009), and they leave prison at an increased risk of early death (Binswanger *et al.* 2007; Patterson 2013). Much of reentry preparation is accounting for the deficits created by removing people from society for a significant length of time. This stands in stark contrast to the earliest penitentiaries in the U.S., resting upon the idea that productive time spent in prison could produce productive people that lead productive lives on the outside. What happens in prison matters for what happens after

prison, and time well spent ensures that this time contributes toward a productive and meaningful life for people who are incarcerated.

What has been learned over the last twenty years? Too many people are under correctional supervision for too long, and the management of groups of people takes precedence over the treatment of individual men and women (Austin and Irwin 2012; Feeley and Simon 1992). This leaves departments of correction scrambling for how to best rehabilitate with limited resources, and the U.S. answer has been to reduce the risk of reoffending by addressing needs. Risks and needs assessments are intended to guide programming designed to replace antisocial attitudes and behaviors with prosocial attitudes and behaviors. The last twenty years, and the twenty years before that, have shown what works best for whom and under what conditions. But this knowledge coexists alongside findings that one of two people released from U.S. prisons are reincarcerated within three years (Durose, Cooper, and Snyder 2014), that gold-standard programming to reduce recidivism struggles at scale (Parsons, Weiss, and Wei 2016; Visher *et al.* 2017), and that Second Chance Act programs fall short of creating second opportunities (D'Amico, Geckeler, and Kim 2017). Some scholars have made the uneasy conclusion that prison may increase future criminal behavior (Cullen, Jonson, and Nagin 2011), and many others have grappled with the uncomfortable reality that the imprisonment of individuals affects families, children, and communities (Clear 2007; Wakefield and Wildeman 2013; Western 2018). The last two decades of correctional research have advanced knowledge on individual treatment that are over-shadowed by the mass removal of people from society.

What could be learned in the next twenty years? People often leave prison worse than when they came in; sometimes, they leave the same. People could leave prison *better* than when they arrived through a reimagined response to crime. They could be set up to live sustainable, fulfilling,

and meaningful lives after prison. This approach could be informed by research on what makes for a meaningful life—regardless of whether a person has come into contact with the criminal justice system. People who do come into contact with the system have unique perspectives and experiences that lend well toward creating a meaningful life for themselves and others. The goals of rehabilitation could shift from ensuring people are *not* something—not dead, not recidivated—to ensuring that people *are* something—a loving parent, a successful business owner. A reimagined corrections could view time spent in prison as an opportunity rather than solely as a punishment; an opportunity to repair harm, empower people, and promote public safety.

### **Glancing Back**

The correctional research of the last twenty years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was about *if* people can change their attitudes and behaviors (Andrews *et al.* 1990; Whitehead and Lab 1989). Correctional research of these first twenty years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been about *how* people can change their attitudes and behaviors. Researchers make decisions about sample, method, terminology, and perspective that produce different answers to the same question of how people change. North America *or* Europe. Large samples *or* small samples. Quantitative *or* qualitative. State intervention *or* human agency. Official records *or* self-report. Criminal justice *or* criminology. Criminal career paradigm *or* life-course criminology. Survival analyses *or* personal narratives. Recidivism *or* desistance. Risk, Needs, and Responsivity (RNR) *or* Good Lives Model (GLM). These differences in research approach produce different implications for practice, and they inspire healthy debates that can give way to defensive disputes. ‘*Or*’ demands attention and restrains progress. It seems clear now that something works; disagreement over what that something is means uncertainty in how people in prison could best serve their time.

The potential of repeat criminal behavior dominates the approach to U.S. corrections in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior, and people who come into contact with the criminal justice system have shown a potential for unlawful behavior. They are therefore a risk to do it again, and the aim is to reduce this risk in the name of public safety. Who is risky? Why are they risky? And what can be done about it? The psychologists behind the RNR are credited with saving rehabilitation and providing a definitive answer to what works to reduce recidivism (Cullen 2005). The *risk* principle of the RNR paradigm states that risky people have both unchanging and dynamic characteristics that are related to antisocial behavior. These characteristics can be measured, and they provide an assessment of who is at a high risk and should be treated and who is at a low risk and should be left alone. The *need* principle of RNR states that risky people have unmet criminogenic needs. These needs are correlated with antisocial behavior, such as holding antisocial attitudes, and if left unaddressed they make a person risky because unlawful behavior is an appealing option to satisfy these needs. The *responsivity* principle of the RNR paradigm states that risky people respond best to cognitive behavioral therapy that is delivered by a firm, fair, and supportive provider, and that individual differences in domains like personality traits should be taken into account when delivering treatment (Bonta and Andrews 2017). RNR provides an answer to the question of what works by identifying what works for whom under what conditions, and has provided a blueprint for correctional systems—both institutional and within the community—that has set the standard for U.S. evidence-based practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Cullen 2012). People would spend their time in prison in ways that lessened their risk of ever coming back to prison. The goal is to make sure people are not criminals; what they are instead is irrelevant.

While almost everyone was focused on making people not criminals, a smaller group was focused on building up the strengths of people in the system to ensure that they were something else. A number of creative approaches outside the U.S. emerged as alternatives or complements to RNR, with the most well-known being the GLM (Brayford, Cowe, and Deering 2010). GLM supporters view people holistically rather than as simply an accumulation of risk, and they believe the best way to reduce risk is by helping people live meaningful lives (Ward and Maruna 2007). People enjoy meaningful lives when they are able to satisfy their needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan and Deci 2000). According to the GLM, meeting these basic needs should guide an enhancement model of rehabilitation resting on the principle that “all human lives should reflect the best possible outcomes rather the least worst possibilities” (Ward and Stewart 2003, p.143). The GLM addresses needs that all incarcerated and nonincarcerated humans possess, such as generative roles and relationships, by developing coherent life plans that add to existing capacities of personal functioning—it seeks to build a good life for people rather than simply reduce a bad life (Ward and Brown 2004). If the theme of RNR could be ‘work on your weaknesses’ then the theme of GLM could be ‘play to your strengths.’ People would spend their time in prison in ways that ensured their positive characteristics and identities were leveraged and allowed to flourish.

The GLM challenge to RNR was contentious at first, simmering to a resigned acknowledgement that each might learn something from the other’s approach, with RNR retaining its prominence in U.S. corrections. GLM proponents contended that RNR was a problem-focused perspective that did little to promote constructive alternative identities (Ward and Stewart 2003). Ordinary people faced a number of additional personal and community obstacles when they were labeled risky people, and time spent in prison under this model was mere risk management that

arguably made people worse. RNR proponents contended that GLM neglected the context of criminal behavior and assumed self-determination was correlated with positive well-being (Bonta and Andrews 2003). People in prison would have their criminogenic needs go unaddressed, and time spent in prison under this model was a wasteful return to unstructured program delivery that made people worse. RNR proponents then agreed they could better focus on responsivity in identifying people's motivations for change (Andrews, Bonta, and Wormith 2011; but see Bourgon and Bonta 2014), and GLM proponents agreed they could better focus on establishing empirical support for the relationship between human goods and criminal behavior (Whitehead, Ward, and Collie 2007; but see Fortune, Ward, and Willis 2012). Now GLM at its strongest is viewed as a complement to RNR (Whitehead *et al.* 2007) and at its weakest is swallowed up by RNR (Cullen 2012; Ogloff and Davis 2004). The potential risk of repeat criminal behavior continues to dominate the U.S. approach to corrections in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. People spend time in prison in ways that reduce the odds of them ever returning, with productive prison time in the form of treatment reserved for those identified to most need it. If a person is low-risk, not returning to society for a while, or not returning to society at all, then they spend their time in a stagnant existence.

### **Surging Forward**

Researchers that make decisions about sample, method, terminology, and perspective could pool their knowledge to reimagine the approach to corrections. North America *and* Europe. Large samples *and* small samples. Quantitative *and* qualitative. State intervention *and* human agency. Official records *and* self-report. Criminal justice *and* criminology. Criminal career paradigm *and* life-course criminology. Survival analyses *and* personal narratives. Recidivism *and* desistance. RNR *and* GLM. '*And*' requests collaboration and promotes growth. Rather than alternatives, rather than complements, rather than have one subsumed under the other—RNR and GLM could be part

of the same framework of a continuity of care that considers incarceration as an opportunity and sets the agenda for time well spent in prison.

On a continuum where the left endpoint (-1) is a *miserable life* and the right endpoint (1) is a *meaningful life*, RNR can bring a person from the left endpoint to the center (0), but may be less able to foster an alternative prosocial lifestyle that is intrinsically meaningful for the person. GLM can bring someone from the center (0) to the right endpoint (1), but may be less able to account for the built history that puts someone at risk for continued antisocial behavior. RNR is past- and present-oriented and effectively handles previous and current addictions, traumatization, victimizations, and antisocial attitudes and behaviors that characterize the lives of people involved in the system. GLM is present- and future-oriented and effectively handles the creation of a fulfilling life for people who are incarcerated now and more importantly, creates a sustainable and meaningful life for the future. If -1 is the miserable life and 1 is the meaningful life, then RNR could restore a person from -1 to 0 and GLM could elevate them from 0 to 1. -1 to 0 could be about creating primary desistance and 0 to 1 could be about creating secondary desistance (Maruna and Farrall 2004). 0 could be “not crime,” and it is often noted that rehabilitation, restoration, or reintegration assumes the person was well-positioned to start. The opportunity of incarceration is in being unsatisfied with rehabilitation meaning 0. Time well spent in prison could be organized around getting as many people as close as possible to 1.

Presenting on a continuum and speaking in terms of past and future implies a natural temporal ordering to how time should be spent in prison, perhaps representing an end-to-end theoretical integration of RNR and GLM. This could be helpful heuristically, but it would be better to consider the continuum as flexible and dynamic. A strict ordering could otherwise widen the divide between security staff (-1 to 0) and programming staff (0 to 1), as well as ostracize people

in the -1 to 0 from people in the 0 to 1. People closest to -1 should not simply replace people previously considered to be high risk, with limited focus on them to the exclusion of everyone else. GLM principles should not wait until someone hits 0, however defined, and RNR principles should not cease when someone hits 0, however defined. Again, the goal is to get as many people as possible to 1. This could mean that state intervention is high at -1 and recedes as a person moves to 1; 0 to 1 could become more about creating autonomy and intrinsic value, perhaps while beginning the generativity process as a mentor to someone else in prison.<sup>2</sup> This also allows people to enter prison above 0—a lapse in judgement in an otherwise prosocial and meaningful life should not start someone at -1. Their time in prison could be spent maintaining and growing their existing strengths, ideally shared with others in a mentorship role. It also allows people to move back and forth along the continuum, where a transgression means moving to the left rather than absolute failure, which is consistent with a nonlinear path of desistance (Carlsson 2013; Paternoster and Bushway 2009)

Both RNR and GLM models undoubtedly lay claim to encompass the entire continuum, but they are simply better suited to focus on one side of a continuity of care and to add strength where the other has weakness (Ward and Maruna 2007). To RNR supporters, all of this could look like -1 meaning high risk and 1 meaning low risk, but a low risk to recidivate does not make a meaningful life when true meaning is derived outside of criminal justice system involvement. To GLM supporters, -1 to 0 could look like an unnecessary and pessimistic problem-focused on a past ‘bad life’ that cannot be changed, but the path to a meaningful life cannot be walked without first addressing existing attitudes and behaviors that will resist that path; rewriting the past is critical for envisioning a productive future (Maruna 2001). Getting people from -1 to 0 could continue to follow the well-established principles of effective correctional intervention (Smith, Gendreau, and

Swartz 2009).<sup>3</sup> Getting people from 0 to 1 requires integrating knowledge from across multiple disciplines, with a specific focus for how incarceration can be an opportunity to creating a more meaningful life.

### **A Meaningful Life**

People try to make sense of their life when it is coming to an end. Few proclaim from their deathbed that they wished they had spent more time working. Dying people instead wish they had spent more time with the ones that they love (Ware 2012). They find meaning at the end of life in recognition of all of the people they have loved and who have loved them, and in the contributions that they have made for a greater good. People in prison cannot get time back and neither can people outside of prison. But they can plan for time in the future, and the reflections of people who are at a later stage of their life can inform upon how time can be best spent. People identify a meaningful life as one where they belonged to communities and relationships, had a purpose that served a greater good, overcame something negative and turned it into a positive, and experienced things greater than themselves (Smith 2017; cf. Weaver and McNeill 2015). One can wait until their deathbed to assess if their life had meaning, or they could work now to ensure they follow a path to personal fulfillment.

So what does a meaningful life look like? A happy life is a useful starting point to understand a meaningful life. Correctional personnel often invoke Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs to explain why rehabilitation is so difficult: people in prison have unmet basic individual needs that prevent them from ever realizing any advanced social needs reflective of societal integration. Happiness is having these basic needs met: food, shelter, and clothing; protection and safety. Happy people are healthier, more successful, and more socially engaged than unhappy people (Seligman *et al.* 2005). The current approach to rehabilitation through rewarding positive

attitudes and behaviors can create people who have the opportunity to meet these basic needs and live a happy life.

A happy life could be a good life, but that does not mean that it is a life filled with meaning. ‘Making people happy’ as an explicit goal of rehabilitation would be a nonstarter for those concerned with reducing the risks of recidivism, and the happy person merely resembles “an animal with perhaps some added complexity” anyway (Baumeister *et al.* 2013, p.516; but see Nikolic-Ristanovic 2014). People in prison, like all people, seek meaning in their life, and they are not simply animals to be satisfied by external rewards and punishments (Maruna 2001). When people engage in behavior because it leads to rewards and avoids punishments, their motivation to act is controlled by those rewards and punishments, and their motivation to walk the line can stray when the value of rewards diminish or when alternative behaviors promise greater rewards (Ryan and Deci 2000).

The example of earning a job upon release from prison shows the challenges in managing human behavior through rewards and punishment. The person is rewarded with employment that can help meet basic needs as a result of a cognitive restructuring that values legitimate means of satisfying those needs. But eventually a job becomes work, and if the person does not engage in that work because it is intrinsically meaningful to them, then the external control of that reward may weaken. If the job is a low-wage job with limited opportunities for personal growth and career advancement, then the happy employee quickly becomes a disgruntled employee whose desire to work lacks internal motivation (Ryan and Deci 2000). Easy and perhaps fun money becomes more appealing when the dollar value exceeds that earned by forty-hour work weeks—they relapse. The same outcome could be true of externally controlled motivation to achieve basic needs through maintaining healthy social relationships and the effective use of leisure time. Rehabilitation is

about fixing what is deemed to be broken rather than nurturing healthy and prosocial outcomes (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). The happy life, controlled by rewards and punishments, could be 0 on the continuum. A happy, meaningless life is shallow, and people who live it can still be self-absorbed (Baumeister *et al.* 2013). A happy, meaningless life is ‘not dead.’

A meaningful life creates opportunities for people to meet their higher-level needs. When people are *internally motivated* for self-growth, they do things because it is important to them rather than because it will result in a reward or avoid a punishment. It is authentic motivation rather than controlled motivation. Social contexts like prisons can create these opportunities, and people are more self-motivated, energized, and integrated in situations where they can work on their need for competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Ryan and Deci 2000). People are driven to meaning when they have choice and control over their lives, when they have opportunities to get better at things that matter to them, and when they are able to contribute to a greater good (Pink 2009). This greater good is reflective of a social concern for the well-being of others (Agnew 2014), and a meaningful life of one person positively impacts the lives of others. The miserable life is instead controlled by others, it is stagnant and limited, and it is shallow and self-absorbed. Time spent in prison is miserable. Most people believe time spent in prison should be miserable, but they also express dismay at a broken system that does little to reduce future criminal behavior. Time well spent in prison signals that time will be spent well outside of prison (Bushway and Apel 2012). The path to a meaningful life begins for people the day they enter prison. This is the opportunity of incarceration.

### **Creating Meaning in Prison**

*Incarcerated: Creativity within Confinement* was a prison art show that took place in Phoenix, Arizona, in the summer of 2017. Freshmen students in a yearlong project-based learning class at

Arizona State University created *Incarcerated* as way to show the humanity behind the walls and to display the power of rehabilitative programming through the arts. They had spent much of their class time speaking to people who live and work in prisons in order to best understand how to reduce recidivism in the U.S. state of Arizona. They secured the partnership of the Arizona Department of Corrections to collect and display art created by incarcerated men at a professional gallery in downtown Phoenix during the city’s monthly art walk, First Fridays. The students talked to the artists and ensured that their voice and perspective was included in the curating of the show. On the night of the art show, all seventy-five works of art—ranging from a cardboard military tank to a coffee-ground portrait of Martin Luther King, Jr. to an oil painting of a blue whale and her calf—were sold to the general public and the students raised over three thousand dollars for donation. A second *Incarcerated* in 2019 raised another five thousand dollars for donation.

It is difficult to determine if this prison art show worked to reduce recidivism. But the men were provided autonomy to decide what they would create and how they would create it. The men were provided mastery in being challenged to do their best work and to go through multiple drafts before submitting their art. And the men were provided purpose: the three thousand dollars was donated to two children’s charities. The Children First Leadership Academy Community Schools Initiative provides after-school activities for homeless youth at risk for human trafficking. The Pinal County Family Advocacy Center provides support for victims of child abuse and sexual assault. The students asked all the artists to write down their inspiration for their work of art. More than half simply wrote: “For the kids.” When a student told one of the artists that some of the money was used to buy pediatric smocks, he simply walked away to hide his emotion. The art show may not have reduced recidivism, but it provided meaning to the men.

The art show most directly impacted the men, and the child beneficiaries of their efforts, but a number of indirect impacts are also difficult to measure quantitatively. Staff at the prisons seemed to enjoy the break in monotony of prison life and were helpful in coordinating the production and distribution of the art outside of the walls. A number of staff attended the show and purchased art themselves. The prison community was positively impacted by the show, as it generated collective excitement and healthy competitions on the prison yards, and the show and its artists were featured positively in the local media. If nothing else, the art show occupied time that could otherwise have been spent engaging in unproductive and even destructive behavior. The general community was positively impacted by the show, and they filled up a comment book regarding their experiences from attending *Inkarcerated* to be shared with the artists. There was no compensation or notoriety for participating in the show, and the artists contributed more to charity than most people do, all from the confines of a prison. It is “earned redemption” (Bazemore 1999) working toward “reputational redemption” (Maruna 2012). It is rehabilitation for the benefit of the men rather than rehabilitation to protect the rest of society (McNeill *et al.* 2012). And it is a kind of motivational justice moving toward the 1 of a meaningful life that turns a negative into a positive and contributes to a good that is greater than oneself.

The missed opportunity of incarceration is in thinking people should be locked away as noncontributing members of society. They become a sea of whatever color uniform is required as residents of the department of corrections, and when they are released they all adopt the same name: felon. It is difficult to set oneself apart from the rest of the group in any meaningful way; motivation to do much of anything is stifled (Maruna, Wilson, and Curran 2006). Time well spent would allow for meaningful separation between people in prison. It could create pathways whereby men and women in prison could earn their way back as productive members of society, and it is

likely that the general community would be more receptive to their return when their redemption is earned (Burnett and Maruna 2006; Maruna and LeBel 2003). Prison is miserable. Providing opportunities for people to better themselves in prison does not mean giving handouts or creating a comfortable life: the monotony of the pains of imprisonment is devastating and unavoidable (Sykes 1958). And it is simply a waste of resources to have people return to society no better than when they left it and possibly worse. The time spent in prison could be structured so that men and women thrive to become contributing members of society through their own personal fulfillment in education and work.

### **Education and Work**

Education provides people in prison with an opportunity to achieve personal growth that is intrinsically meaningful. Teachers and students at Temple University created the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program in 1997 in the state of Pennsylvania, where university “outside” students and incarcerated “inside” students learn together over a semester in a prison setting (Pompa 2013). Twenty years later, in the state of Arizona, inside students initially enrolled in an Inside-Out course because they were externally motivated (a desire to get good grades, and to get better grades than the other men) and when they graduated the class they did so because they became intrinsically motivated (Shaun Mills forever reminds everyone of his “thirst for knowledge”). Men from that class, who acknowledged that they were previously ‘just existing,’ have gone on to create a program for the military veterans on the unit, have revived and improved an impact of crime on victims class, and have engaged in scholarship designed to better the system by informing policymakers. Inside-Out is the rare opportunity to enhance the lives of people in prison through learning while keeping them connected to the outside world (Wright and Jonson 2018). Autonomy

and mastery in achieving purpose through educational attainment provide a way out of a miserable life that is controlled, stagnant, and self-absorbed.

Work can provide people in prison with a purpose and an opportunity to contribute to society in ways that transcend themselves. Women who worked at an in-prison call center assumed new identities grounded in respect that impacted both their productivity and their well-being (Rogers, Corley, and Ashworth 2017). Men who manned telephones on the outside as part of the Citizens Advice Bureaux in England found achievement in helping others who may find themselves in dire circumstances (Burnett and Maruna 2006). And men who left the prison yard to fight fires in remote areas had the opportunity to make choices that impacted the health and well-being of the community to which they would one day return; they were heroes, revered by their families and strangers for their tireless efforts in protecting others. Their identities were reflective of a shift to imagine a different future for themselves, with one man saying, “I’m figuring out that this is who I am...I wouldn’t get to do this if I never left the yard” (Feldman 2018, p.27). Autonomy and mastery in achieving purpose through work—in jobs that transcend mere maintenance of the prison—provide a way out of a miserable life that is controlled, stagnant, and self-absorbed.

### **Markers of the Meaningful Life**

People in prison can signal that they are different than other people in prison in ways that identify them as prospects for a productive life on the outside. A good signal is one that is voluntary, attainable by a comparatively small proportion of the population, and has opportunity costs that contribute toward a sustainable and fulfilling lifestyle (Bushway and Apel 2012). Good signals in prison become predictors of desistance, and they put the effort and reward of moving toward a meaningful life on the shoulders of the future desister (Maruna 2012). Educational attainment is a

signal; in the face of resource constraints, structural constraints, cultural constraints, and constraints of the imprisoned mind and body, people who earn educational degrees in prison are making a statement. The same is true for people who are achieving mastery in workforce skills development that will translate to opportunities for meaningful work on the outside. People in prison who would otherwise resist advancement in work and education could choose to do so when they see that program enrollment and completion are used to signal desistance (Bushway and Apel 2012; see also Mears and Mestre 2012). Education and work are critical signals, and each of those paired together and in combination with other efforts toward living a meaningful life in prison could provide a stronger signal than any one of them separately (Bloom 2012). People in prison can signal that they are different, but only when they are provided the opportunity to establish those signals.

A signal is only good if it is visible to others and a number of tangible indicators can identify earned redeemers. Certificates of relief or certificates of rehabilitation indicate that people have achieved some level of rehabilitation and are deemed less of a risk to add to their criminal past. A criminal record is a stigmatizing signal, a certificate of rehabilitation is a reintegrative signal. But certificates of rehabilitation can still be stigmatizing. Given the choice between someone who obtained (but needed) a certificate of rehabilitation and a similarly situated—or perhaps even less qualified—never incarcerated person who did not need that certificate, it is difficult to believe someone would choose the redeemed person (see especially Denver In Press). These certificates carry an assumption that a person was criminal, and they merely state the person is now not criminal. What is needed is a signal that shows someone can give to society rather than a signal that shows they will not take from society.

A “life resume” could identify how someone has spent their prison years in the areas of education, employment, recreation time, and other areas. Past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior, and an employer could want to know a person’s employment history for the last five years to determine whether they would make for a good employee. This is a different approach than the “ban the box” movement in the U.S. and addresses some of the concerns with using (or eliminating) indicators of criminal involvement (see, for example, Agan and Starr 2017). Whether a person was in prison or not, an employer could want to know what explains the gap in work history for the last five years. If there is no gap to explain, and that gap is instead filled with productive employment characterized by achievement and advancement, then the person has signaled that they could make for a good employee. The same is true for admissions decisions to continue education or for opportunities that require a certain level of education. Although perhaps less explicit, an ex or future partner could want to know what a person has been doing to determine whether they would make for a good partner or parent. Certificates of rehabilitation can create an “other” class; life resumes, however, keep people in line with what is traditionally expected of prospective employees, clients, partners, and so forth. The best life resumes would look no different than regular employment resumes, and the best resumes of people who had spent time in prison would identify a life filled with meaning. Life resumes are consistent with calls for changing policies to limit the stigma associated with incarceration in order to provide employment, housing, treatment, and other opportunities for ex-prisoners.<sup>4</sup> These men and women would achieve meaning in the face of significant adversity, and while they will have indicated that they are a low risk for something bad, they will have more importantly indicated a high potential for something good.

## Time Well Spent

Varrone White is not dead. Varrone White's life resume for the last twenty years is the number of hours worked to maintain the prison and a whole bunch of absent things that would otherwise have made his time spent look miserable: no drugs, no assaults, no incidents of insubordination, and no attempts at escape. But Varrone White is alive. His prison resume could list his degrees, courses completed, grade point average (GPA), courses developed, courses taught, talks and presentations, mentees, accomplishments of mentees, money raised for charity, awards and honors, written works and their outlets, skills, certificates and certifications and licenses, organizations, roles in those organizations, patents, projects completed, volunteer hours, and people to contact to provide references on his behalf. The fact that his twenty years of productivity took place in prison would be irrelevant, unless one wanted to count these as more impressive given that he accomplished all of this while confined. Varrone's story, the *Incarcerated* Art Show, and the Inside Out Prison Exchange Program are meant to be illustrative and are not substitutes for empirical support. The way scholars do their research and think about people in prison could change significantly, with few opportunity costs for thinking of incarceration as an opportunity to create meaningful lives.

Criminologists study crime. The last twenty years of correctional research, and the twenty years before that, have been dominated by the question of what reduces recidivism. This relentless focus on the one outcome of crime has limited creativity in how prison time could be better structured (Duncker 1945); the search has been on for solutions that reduce the bad rather than those that promote the good (Lee and Stohr 2012; McNeill 2015). It is an exhausting search, one that is unlikely to produce any definitive answers as human behavior is complex and rarely fits into tidy X leads to Y equations. The complexity of 'what works for whom and under what conditions' reluctantly, but conveniently, reduces to 'what works.' It is unlikely that any one

program will ever work to make a sizeable dent in recidivism. The variability within and across treatments (what works), people (for whom), and settings (what conditions) ensures no silver bullets (cf. Porporino 2010). Scholars who study crime could identify additional indicators of effectiveness (McNeill *et al.* 2012), and a focus on other correlates and outcomes could include the successful people who otherwise disappear in recidivism studies: one in two people *do not return to prison* within three years (Durose *et al.* 2014). Scholars who study people, who could engage in crime like they could engage in philanthropy, have much to offer in concert with criminologists who wish to study how to create meaningful lives.

The current approach to correctional research as recidivism reduction places ‘crime’ on one end of the spectrum and ‘not crime’ on the other end. Rethinking ‘not crime’ as zero, the middle of the spectrum, requires turning attention to a number of other concepts to create meaning. Altruism, anticipation, appreciativeness, authenticity, autonomy, bravery, competency, courage, creativity, credibility, curiosity, empathy, fairness, forgiveness, future outlook, gratitude, grit, happiness, hope, humility, humor, kindness, knowledge, leadership, love, mature coping, open-mindedness, optimism, originality, perseverance, persistence, perspective, positive emotionality, relatedness, responsibility, teamwork, trustworthiness, vulnerability, and wisdom could all be of value to creating meaningful lives through the opportunity of incarceration. The immediate rebuttal to this suggestion may be that these are unrelated to crime, and detractors could point to the person who derives much meaning through persistent criminal behavior. That could be true, but that shows the limited thinking of corrections as recidivism reduction, and these concepts could instead be related to an identity that is more than just not crime (see Bersani and Doherty 2018). Research can help sort this out: are positive characteristics like persistence simply the opposite of negative characteristics like low self-control? (Dickson, Willis, and Mather 2018; Harris and Rice 2015).

Or do they represent different constructs and different continuums for understanding human behavior? How well do recidivism-reduction constructs like criminogenic needs explain positive social identities? How well do protective factor assessments explain recidivism and the above concepts as compared to and in combination with risk assessments? (Kewley 2017; Polaschek 2016; Serin, Chadwick, and Lloyd 2016). The next twenty years of corrections research could continue to ask more than just what reduces recidivism and could acknowledge that people make decisions based on someone's trustworthiness, credibility, and responsibility rather than simply their assumed objective risk to recidivate (Denver and Ewald 2018).

There is an eagerness and enthusiasm for reimagining the approach to justice, seen at both ends of the U.S. political spectrum, through people who have gone through the system and people who have not, and especially in the next generation of criminologists. But it is quickly pointed out that correctional administrators will always be judged on recidivism reduction (Latessa 2012). If incarceration is instead thought of as an opportunity to create a meaningful life then a number of different institutions become responsible for how time is spent in prison. Correctional systems can focus on not crime while departments of housing focus on providing people with shelter, departments of health services focus on maintaining healthy lifestyles, and child protective services focus on parenting. All of these entities can collaborate and share the responsibility of co-creation of meaningful lives, whereas in the past the under-resourced departments of correction were expected to fix everything. Likewise, criminologists can focus on not crime, if they choose, alongside counseling psychologists who coach people in healthy ways to manage relationship stress, developmental psychologists who better understand how to create meaning for impulsive Varrone at age 20 rather than contemplative Varrone at age 40, and computer scientists who can unlock the massive potential of tele-everything in prison without compromising safety and

security. Risk-reduction and behavior management have roots in psychology, but there is so much more in psychology and other disciplines that can be applied to restructure time spent in prison so that recidivism is not the sole criterion of evaluation (McNeill 2012).

A reinvigoration in the study of motivation could enhance correctional research that asks questions beyond what reduces recidivism. Lost in the state intervention *or* human agency discussions are the more complex relationships between state intervention *and* human agency. Treatment specialists, people in prison, and the general public are all resigned to say, “They have to want to change” when pointing out the challenges of intervening in the lives of others (Maruna 2017). People who are identified as most in need of treatment are also the people who are least likely to complete it (Olver, Stockdale, and Wormith 2011; Wormith *et al.* 2007), and so continued research on the complex issue of voluntary or mandatory treatment can identify how best to create meaning for people in prison (Hogan, Barton-Bellessa, and Lambert 2015; Parhar *et al.* 2008; Werb *et al.* 2016). Requiring treatment could change someone’s life or requiring treatment could make them rebel against the system and the people in it (McMurrin and Ward 2004; Porporino 2010). A hybrid of mandatory and voluntary components to programming could allow people to signal their earned redemption through choice. More autonomy in prison could move people closer to a meaningful life and a shift from doing things because they were rewarded (or punished) to doing things because they were intrinsically motivated to do so (see especially Auty and Liebling In Press). Moving motivation in prison research forward requires desistance researchers to acknowledge and work in concert with recidivism reduction researchers to better understand how meaning can be created during incarceration.

Incarceration can also provide opportunity for a meaningful life for the men and women who rely on prisons for employment. People who *work* in prison, who have a direct impact on the

opportunity to create meaning for people who *live* in prison, could have opportunities for autonomy, mastery, and purpose in their own work. Correctional staff are often underpaid and overworked and yet they assume a fundamental role in ensuring people return from prison better than when they entered (Liebling 2004). To think of correctional staff as employees to nurture and move toward a meaningful life means moving beyond research that asks whether prison is a stressful environment (it is), whether that stress impacts the well-being of staff (it does), and whether their well-being leads to burnout, turnover, or suicide (it does). People who work in prison are apt to say ‘I hope I never see you again’ to the men and women who leave prison. But this means that all they see is failure; they only see the people that return, and it makes for a hardened and cynical staff member when their efforts seem meaningless. Correctional staff could learn from the experience of university call-center representatives who were charged with raising alumni funds. These workers were more effective and found their job to be more meaningful when they were introduced to a student whose academic scholarship was supported by their fund-raising efforts (Grant *et al.* 2007). Like those call-center representatives, if staff could see the value of their work, perhaps in the form of a flyer posted in the unit of a now successful person who was formerly incarcerated, then it may move them closer to a meaningful life. Staff could be givers, invested in the success of creating a meaningful life for people in prison, through the simple act of writing a letter of recommendation. While people who work in prison may find meaning in keeping other people safe, this is dependent on an event not happening, and contributing instead to the visible success of people in prison ensures the safety of others and also ensures that staff are intrinsically rewarded for their efforts.

Thinking of incarceration as an opportunity may rankle both ends of the U.S. political spectrum. People on the right may choose to think of prison as punishment without opportunity

for advancement; people on the left might choose to think that opportunity for advancement through incarceration encourages continued reliance on overincarceration. But people who work in healthcare acknowledge the opportunity of incarceration to reach underserved populations that are likely to use social and health services on the outside (Dumont *et al.* 2012). From a utilitarian standpoint, these are people who will strain the health, financial, mental health, and criminal justice systems. From a humanistic standpoint, these are people who deserve the opportunity to be healthy, financially secure, and free from system involvement. People who have spent time in prison are uniquely positioned to support and mentor others who are on similar pathways (LeBel, Richie, and Maruna 2015). People in prison for long sentences, including for the rest of their life, are uniquely positioned to find meaning in the support and mentoring of others on the yard (Kreager *et al.* 2017). Enabling environments nurture and promote personal growth and prisons can be structured so they are more than just safe and secure facilities (Liebling *et al.* 2019). Prisons can be a ‘reinventive institution’ where opportunities to derive meaning exist above and beyond that offered by formal programming (Crewe and Ievins In Press). This opportunity for meaning can extend to people on supervision in the community where correctional officers could be coaches that value exceptional performance in something else besides not crime (Lovins *et al.* 2018; see also McNeill 2006; McNeill *et al.* 2012; Weaver 2014). The correctional system can be an opportunity to enhance the lives of individuals, and to enhance the lives of their families, children, and communities.

People who live in prison are people. People who work in prison are people. People first language is meaningless without a people first practice. We are people, too, and we too make choices in how to effectively spend our time. We could choose to acknowledge that human behavior is unpredictable and messy and merge all of our resources together to figure this out. Here risk- and strength-based approaches coexist and complement each other with a common goal:

get as many people as close as possible to 1. Earned redemption through creating meaning within the opportunity of incarceration is politically digestible; no one is handed anything, no one is left to rot. It is consistent with calls to reimagine how we sanction people convicted of crimes, and a reduced reliance on incarceration means that people who are incarcerated could benefit from a better distribution of limited programming resources.<sup>5</sup> It shares responsibility of time well spent in prison among many agencies and organizations while nurturing and elevating the people who do the work. Doing time should not be about waiting for time to pass, it could be about capitalizing on an opportunity to create meaning, and life resumes filled with signals of growth and productivity show time spent in prison is not lost. Time spent in prison or not, we will all one day reflect on our lives to search for that meaning. A meaningful life is one where you leave things a little better than when you found them. People who live in prison, people who work in prison, and people who study prison could all make the choice to spend their time making meaning for themselves and others.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Inside Out Prison Exchange Program combines incarcerated students with nonincarcerated students to learn together over a semester in a prison setting (see <http://www.insideoutcenter.org>). The Arizona Transformation Project is an Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program think tank founded in 2016 that brings together ASU faculty, students, and incarcerated men (see <http://www.aztransform.org>). The Impact of Crime on Victims Class is a class offered within the Arizona Department of Corrections where victims speak to incarcerated men and women about the impact of crime on their lives.

<sup>2</sup> In generativity a person “nurtures, teaches, leads, and promotes the next generation while generating life products and outcomes that benefit the social system and promote its continuity from one generation to the next” (McAdams and de St. Aubin 1992, p. 1003). Generativity themes were more likely to be featured in the self-narratives of desisters as compared to persisters in Maruna’s (2001) sample of 50 people in the Liverpool Desistance Study, where generative pursuits provided fulfillment, exoneration, legitimacy, and therapy to men and women who previously lived an active criminal lifestyle. These other-centered pursuits could be achieved through mentoring others who are currently incarcerated, but also through providing goods and services that benefit the larger community, such as that provided by currently incarcerated men and women

who protect communities through their work on prison wildfire crews (Feldman 2018; see the discussion in Morse and Wright In Press).

<sup>3</sup> The principles of effective correctional intervention distinguish between the characteristics of treatment programs that work to reduce recidivism from those that do not work (Andrews *et al.* 1990; see Andrews 1995; Gendreau 1996; Gendreau *et al.* 1994 for early formulations). The principles include a consideration for organizational culture, program implementation/maintenance, management/staff characteristics, client risk/need practices, program characteristics, core correctional practice, and inter-agency communication (Gendreau *et al.* 2009) and adherence to the principles can be documented through program assessments like the Correctional Program Assessment Inventory and the Correctional Program Checklist (see especially Duriez *et al.* 2018).

<sup>4</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for making this point.

<sup>5</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for making this point.

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