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REDUCING RECIDIVISM THROUGH FAITH-BASED PRISON PROGRAMS

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TOPLINE POINTS

- In the U.S. there are nearly [2 million](#) incarcerated individuals in prisons and jails.
- According to a Department of Justice study that [tracked recidivism patterns](#) from 2005–2014, approximately 68% of formerly incarcerated individuals were rearrested within three years.
- Without addressing the root factors that make criminal behavior more likely, our Nation will not be able to address this problem effectively.
- Faith-based prison programs offer a proven solution for promoting feelings of hope and self-worth, which can play a major role in reducing recidivism.

Background

It is no secret that the United States is struggling to maintain law and order amid the massive crime increase raging across this country. Murder rates have dramatically increased, the American people feel unsafe in their communities, and law enforcement officers are leaving the profession in droves.

In the wake of protests after George Floyd's death in 2020 and calls to "Defund the Police," chaos ensued with rioting and looting that left the American people with a heightened sense of insecurity. Nationwide, murders increased by 30% between 2019 and 2020—the largest single-year increase ever reported in the U.S. Today, murder rates remain at that historic high in our Nation's major cities. Law and order must be upheld at all costs, but this problem goes beyond what our law enforcement officers can control.

The increase in crime showcases many problems with our culture and the mental health of our citizens. A contributing factor to crime rates is repeat criminality. Our Nation has some of the world's highest rates of recidivism ([Yukhnenko et al., 2021](#)). According to one analysis from 2021, 60% of U.S. federal prisoners were reincarcerated within two years of being released ([Yukhnenko et al., 2021](#)).

Prisons are essential to a functioning society—they are designed to punish those who break the law, keep dangerous criminals off the streets, and disincentivize people from committing crimes in the first

place. Our Nation's safety depends on them. However, for over 95% of the prison population, the day eventually comes when they are released and re-enter society ([James, 2015](#)). As a result, we must remember that prisoners are still people, and almost all of them will someday leave their prison cells and be our neighbors.

Not only is recidivism dangerous for our communities, but it is also costly to our criminal justice system. For example, after 401,288 state prisoners were released in 2005, nearly 2 million arrests of those released within the following nine years took place—this is an average of approximately five arrests per released prisoner ([Alper et al., 2018](#)). High levels of rearrests and recidivism rates signal ineffective mechanisms for reform and show that America has serious problems in this area today.

An effective approach for consideration to reform the criminal justice system is the further integration of faith-based prison programs. Data demonstrates that faith-based prison programs reduce recidivism by instilling spiritual responsibility and lasting moral influence on prisoners within prison culture. Faith-based prison programs have the potential to reconstruct all aspects of prison life, from the individual to the community to the social environment. These programs transform prison culture from a space that encourages the continuation of criminal conduct to one that promotes positive change. Additionally, they enable prisoners to become more religiously involved, which can instill a greater sense of purpose in

their lives and steer them away from a path of criminality.

The Many Factors that Contribute to Recidivism

Mental illness often goes hand-in-hand with incarceration. People with mental illnesses are far more likely to end up in prison than in a psychiatric facility. Sadly, data shows that around 37% of prisoners, and 44% of jail inmates, have mental health problems ([Bronson & Berzofsky, 2017](#)).

The odds of repeat criminality are, unfortunately, quite high. In a Department of Justice study that tracked recidivism patterns for released inmates over nine years, around 68% of those formerly incarcerated were rearrested within three years, 79% were rearrested within six years, and 83% were rearrested within nine years ([Alper et al., 2018](#)).

Psychologists have found that recidivism occurs when four forces converge: thinking patterns that promote criminal behavior, personality patterns that facilitate criminal behavior, involvement with other individuals who participate in criminal behavior, and having a history of engaging in criminal behavior ([Visher & Eason, 2021](#)).

It is paramount that prisoners receive proper and appropriate assistance if they are to become productive and valuable members of society upon their release. Without rehabilitation and reintegration programs, America's *former* convicts will become its *future* convicts. At this point, most U.S. prisons have several services available, including work training and

placement, counseling, and housing assistance. Some of these programs are more effective than others at reducing recidivism.

Incarcerated people often struggle to reform their identities after they are released from prison. People often adopt or reinforce criminogenic characteristics while incarcerated, such as violent behavioral tendencies, but must later shed these characteristics when they assimilate to life outside of prison. This psychological effect is called "prisonization" to describe the transformation of inmates as they begin to adjust to the abnormal and dangerous qualities of prison life ([Haney, 2001](#)).

A concept known as Identity Behavior Theory can provide more insights into the recidivism discussion. According to the Identity Behavior Theory, identity is a determinant of behavior and dictates whether the execution of such behavior will be successful. In addition, identity is a crucial part of "one's internalized perception of self" and influences "behavioral performance" ([Simons, 2021](#)). Possessing a secure identity and internal strength increases the chances of behaving in ways that reflect positive growth. "When doubt of identity creeps in, action is paralyzed. Only full commitment to one's identity permits a full picture of motivation" ([Foote, 1951](#)). For prisoners, the identity-reformation process is vital for a successful transition because the freedom that accompanies reentry requires more decision-making skills.

The Costs of Recidivism

The criminal justice system costs the U.S. more than \$270 billion annually (Council of Economic Advisors, 2018). A deeper dive into the data of just one individual state evaluates the isolated costs of recidivism. Illinois is about average in recidivism and incarceration rates compared to the rest of the country, so it provides a good case study. According to a report from the Illinois Sentencing Policy Advisory Council (SPAC), one recidivism event costs on average \$151,662 when looking at the cost to the taxpayer, cost to victims, and indirect costs. (Illinois, 2018). Their report estimated that just one year of recidivism in Illinois costs the State \$1.5 billion, over 5 years the costs accumulate to an estimated \$13 Billion (Illinois, 2018).

Recidivism costs money—a *lot* of hard-earned taxpayer money. This is where faith-based programs come into play, as research suggests they can save significant funds.

According to a Baylor University study published in the International Journal of Criminology and Sociology, the efforts of one faith-based prisoner reentry program in Minnesota saved taxpayers around \$3 million by reducing recidivism (Goodrich, 2013). The study analyzed the cost benefits of the InnerChange Freedom Initiative, a volunteer-based and privately funded program. Researchers and co-authors Grant Duwe and Byron Johnson calculated the program's financial impact by examining post-release employment and recidivism outcomes (Goodrich, 2013). They concluded that the program—consisting of 366 participants—generated a benefit of

about \$8,300 per participant. Additionally, their research found that the faith-based program reduced rearrests by 26%, reconvictions by 35%, and reimprisonment for a new offense by 40% (Duwe & Johnson, 2013). This was only *one* program in *one* state, and the participants constituted a very small percentage of all incarcerated inmates in the U.S. Imagine how many lives—and how much money—Americans could save if faith-based programs existed more broadly prisons nationwide.

Understanding Faith-Based Programs

Faith-based prison programs have been proven to reduce recidivism effectively. There is a distinction between helping prisoners meet basic needs after their release and helping them reduce their chances of being reincarcerated after prison life—though these two dimensions of help are, of course, not independent. Faith-based programs fulfill both needs, but they especially focus on addressing criminogenic factors more so than non-criminogenic needs. Criminogenic factors directly relate to recidivism, including antisocial attitudes and values, antisocial peers, impulsive behavior, a lack of self-control, ineffective coping skills, poor work, and school performance, and the absence of healthy relationships (Latessa, 2020).

On the other hand, non-criminogenic needs include medical care, mental health, transportation, housing, a lack of childcare, and low self-esteem (Latessa, 2020). Though both categories are vital for successful reentry, criminogenic factors must be appropriately addressed before

our Nation can see a significant reduction in recidivism.

Faith-based prison programs rely on the tenets, practices, and transformative power of religion to inculcate moral acceptance and responsibility. Religious involvement can reinforce the internalization of moral ideologies, which can then promote self-control through remorse and spiritual repentance. Religious participation also assists in overcoming the depression, guilt, and self-loathing that prevails in prison culture (Cox & Matthews, 2007). In this way, faith-based prison programs provide prisoners with an avenue through which they understand the true extent of their actions, accept the consequences of their actions, repent of those actions, and assess how they can make things right and move forward in life. In addition, these programs also aid in the development of prosocial skills and behavior—actions that emphasize concern for other people’s welfare, which can promote feelings of empathy and compassion, thus lessening the chances of committing acts that would hurt others (Johnson, 2008).

Faith-based prison programs provide an environment of support and companionship through a social community. The concepts of faith and religion often accompany the notion of a social institution in which members can participate in traditions and activities. The more attachment and purpose a person feels in connection to his religious institution, the less likely he is to commit a crime because he perceives that he has more to lose (Cox & Matthews, 2007). Connections with a community founded on faith can help to “develop a socialized mind

and integrate individuals into a larger social context for individuals who find themselves most isolated” (Mowen et al., 2017).

In addition, building relationships with others involved in faith-based programs can establish dependability and hold individuals accountable for their actions and behaviors. In such communities, it would be unacceptable to act in ways that may be admissible in traditional prison culture. Accordingly, faith-based programs would work to change prison culture through the formation of fellowship and community.

One recent study of faith-based, short-term programs for trauma healing conducted on 349 inmates found that the “Correctional Trauma Healing Program” they employed acted to reduce the “negative consequences of trauma by increasing religiosity and other positive attributes,” while also decreasing vengefulness via increased religiosity (Jang et al., 2022). The addition of a religious aspect provided by the faith-based program sets it apart from rehabilitation efforts that do not incorporate a faith-based approach. The study concludes that there is “evidence in support of ‘spiritual criminology’ given that the promotion of positive experiences was facilitated by a faith-based program designed to help inmates heal from their traumatic experiences through spiritual integration, that is, a new or renewed relationship with God” (Jang et al., 2022).

Additionally, the Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion (Johnson, 2008), details several benefits that faith-programs

nurture and several negative effects that they ultimately discourage. As Bryon Johnson writes in “The Faith Factor and Prisoner Reentry,” “the faith-based program enjoyed an atmosphere that promoted forgiveness, honesty, and personal accountability. [Faith-based prison programs] are designed to discourage antisocial and destructive behavior and to encourage transparency, contrition, and spiritual transformation, all of which run counter to the pervasive prison code.”

Faith-based prison programs can assist in identity transformation through an internal shift in external awareness and self-perception. Spiritual change often guides formerly incarcerated individuals in constructing new identities centered around qualities such as compassion, nonviolence, and patience. This level of character development influenced by spiritual experience has the potential to “facilitate an identity transformation along existential and cognitive dimensions” ([Mowen et al., 2017](#)).

Several types of faith-based prison programs exist today. The Buddhist Association of the United States Prison Program helps Buddhist prisoners obtain vegetarian meals, sends Buddhist books to prison libraries, helps prisoners integrate Buddhism into their lives, fosters skillful states of mind such as equanimity and compassion, and emphasizes meditation, mindfulness, and anger and stress management ([Buddhist Association](#)). Another nonprofit institution is the Tayba Foundation, an Islamic organization that provides Islamic teachings within U.S. prisons and incorporates holistic

education, life skills, and reentry support into its services ([Tayba Foundation](#)).

The Aleph Institute is a nonprofit Jewish organization that assists and cares for the well-being of prisoners, U.S. military personnel, and institutionalized people at risk of incarceration from mental illness or addiction ([Aleph Institute](#)). This institute welcomes people of all faiths and backgrounds but emphasizes the teachings of the Torah. In addition, the Aleph Institute is committed to “recidivism reduction through preventative education and faith-based rehabilitation programs, reentry assistance, alternative sentencing guidance and counsel, and policy research and recommendations” while also helping prisoners “develop their spiritual lives and maintain contact with their families” ([Aleph Institute](#)).

Horizon Communities in Prison is a multi-faith community built on the idea that “preparing inmates for reentry should begin the moment they first enter the prison system” ([Horizon Communities](#)). This organization emphasizes the teachings of life skills, self-actualization, discipline, integrity, and morality; in addition, the graduates of this program demonstrated a recidivism rate of 11–17% depending on the state ([Horizon Communities](#)).

There is a myriad of faith-based programs, in addition to the ones listed above, that are either directed toward a specific religion or open to all faiths and backgrounds. The outcomes of these programs can be monumental, which further advances the argument that faith-based prison programs are part of the answer to reducing recidivism, keeping our

communities safe, and saving taxpayers money.

Breaking the Victim-to-Offender Cycle

Research shows that most criminals—especially those with a background of violent behavior—were victims themselves at some earlier point in their lives ([Visher & Eason, 2021](#)). While most victims of abuse do not become offenders themselves, most offenders have been victims at one point ([DeLong & Reichert, 2019](#)). The overlap between victimization and perpetration has been well documented and detected across intergenerational relationships, creating a vicious cycle of violence derived from vengeance and resentment. Children who have been abused or neglected are more likely to commit violent crimes and be arrested as juveniles and adults, and victimized children commit about twice as many crimes as non-abused children ([US Department of Justice, 1999](#)). Moreover, one study showed 70% of juveniles in state operated prisons came from single parent households ([Beck, Kline, Greenfeld, 1988](#)). Another study reported that 51% of state inmate population are fathers and 63% of federal male inmates are fathers, meaning that their children are fatherless, thus perpetuating the cycle ([Glaze & Maruschak, 2010](#)).

This disheartening information reveals another way that faith-based prison programs can help reduce crime and recidivism. Faith-based programs provide counseling and other essential services to victims of abuse, promoting spiritual renewal and the restoration of hope. In this way, faith-based prison programs

empower prisoners to challenge their previous notions of self-image and explore the immensity of their worth as human beings made in the image of God. Therefore, faith-based prison programs would help not only those who already *want* to be better but also those who do not yet realize they *can* be better.

Faith-based prison programs aim to end the cycle of crime. Research has found that criminal behavior can be intercepted by certain social bonds, including stable relationships with one's family, school, and peers during adolescence and stable partnerships and employment during adulthood ([Bushway, 2020](#)). Learning prosocial skills, acquiring social bonds, and understanding how to sustain stable relationships are critical principles of faith-based prison programs. Participation in religious programs can promote feelings of hope and self-worth, thus "increasing the likelihood that a person after release can cope with stresses and strains without the use of crime, drugs or alcohol" ([Stansfield & Mowen, 2018](#)).

Faith-Based Programs in Contrast to Other Programs to Reduce Recidivism

A study that sought to understand the impact of religion on prisoners' adjustment to incarceration interviewed more than 700 male inmates housed in 20 prisons nationwide. The results revealed that religion helps prisoners cope with loss, deal with guilt, learn how to forgive (not just others but also themselves), regain self-respect, and find new ways to experience spiritual growth ([Clear et al., 1992](#)).

An article from the Federal Probation Journal, consisting of a literature review on faith-based programming, discusses several studies that conclude an inverse relationship between religiosity and delinquency. The article maintains that faith-based programs affect risk factors for criminal behavior—including antisocial peers, antisocial attitudes, and community participation—and concludes that faith-based programs encourage prosocial behavior and contribute to an individual’s moral development ([Cox & Matthews, 2007](#)). In addition, the literature review reveals shared findings from the integration of faith-based programs in correctional settings, such as “reductions in violence, recidivism, and disciplinary infractions, and improvements in literacy and prison adjustment” ([Cox & Matthews, 2007](#)).

Accordingly, faith-based programs have a tangible effect on the rate of recidivism. According to one study, only 8% of prisoners who participated in the InnerChange Freedom Initiative experienced recidivism, compared to a 20% rate of recidivism for offenders who chose not to participate in the program ([Johnson & Larson, 2008](#)). In the same vein, the Prisoner Entrepreneurship Fellowship’s faith-based correctional rehabilitation program boasts a 7% rate of recidivism for participants over a three-year span, compared to a 24% rate for applicants who did not participate, according to a Baylor University study ([Johnson, Schroeder, and Wubbenhorst, 2013](#)).

Furthermore, data from the Minnesota Department of Corrections shows that

regular visitation significantly reduces recidivism, and visitation from members of the clergy is particularly effective. According to one study, regular visits to prisoners from clergy were correlated to lowering the rate of reconviction by 24% ([Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2011](#)).

Faith-based programs have a myriad of benefits that sets them apart from other rehabilitation programs. Many programs specifically target issues such as mental health, trauma, and victimization, but faith-based programs do that *and more*. As previously mentioned, faith-based programs offer counseling and mentorship, like other programs ungrounded in faith do. Interestingly, inmates who have been paired with a faith-based mentor are significantly less likely to be rearrested after their release ([Mowen et al., 2017](#)). Moreover, faith-based programs go one step further by fostering moral responsibility and a sense of devotion to something greater than oneself. Faith-based prison programs are holistic in their remedial approach by mending multiple dimensions of wellness and restoring the union between them. These programs teach prisoners to see themselves as humans made by God, capable of change and worthy of salvation. These programs, paired with counseling and guidance, have a real impact on people and can make a change that persists throughout time. “[A] faith-based program combining education, work, life skills, mentoring and aftercare has the potential to influence the way corrections professionals think about issues like recidivism and the successful return of inmates to society in a paradigm-shifting way.” From Byron Johnson in “Can a Faith-

Based Prison Reduce Recidivism?”
([Johnson, 2012](#))

Research addressing how religious prison programs intersect crime and delinquency is limited. However, some studies have shown that religious involvement reduces delinquent behavior. A systematic review of 40 studies found that religiosity and delinquency share an inverse relationship ([Duwe & Johnson, 2013](#)). More specifically, research has revealed that church attendance has a positive correlation with delinquency reduction. Additionally, church attendance has an independent impact on the amount of non-drug crimes, drug use, and drug dealing among disadvantaged youth and specifically young black males ([Johnson & Siegel, 2008](#)). For example, religious teens living in high-crime areas are less likely to use drugs than less religious teens living in middle-class suburban communities ([Johnson, 2008](#)). A systematic review of 766 studies found that “higher levels of religious involvement” are linked to “reduced hypertension, longer survival, less depression, lower levels of drug and alcohol use and abuse, less promiscuous sexual behaviors, reduced likelihood of suicide, lower rates of delinquency among youth, and reduced criminal activity among adults” as well as increased levels of “well-being, hope, purpose, meaning in life, and educational attainment” ([Johnson et al., 2008](#)).

Conclusion

With the law-and-order crisis on our hands, Americans are feeling the pressure

to secure their communities. We need to uphold safety in our communities, we need to rebuild respect for our law enforcement officers, and we need to address mental health issues of those leaving our prisons. The U.S. has a high rate of recidivism, with 68% of released prisoners being rearrested within just three years of their release ([Alper et al., 2018](#)). Prisons are essential to a functioning society and serve a necessary purpose of punishing those who break the law, keeping dangerous criminals off the streets, and disincentivizing people from committing crimes in the first place. However, to further secure our cities and keep American families safe, we must closely examine further ways to reduce recidivism in our Nation.

Faith-based prison programs employ holistic approaches to reduce recidivism rates, transform prison culture, and create a safer and more stable environment for prisoners. These programs are prospective solutions to the recidivism problem and are beginning to secure the attention they need to gain purposeful advancement. Now, we must maintain momentum and remember why we put our faith in God. Religion offers truth, an antidote to society’s ills, and asylum from the tumult that often surrounds us.

Robust faith-based prison programs should be an option in every prison in every state, and every prisoner should get the opportunity to participate because it just might change their lives.

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