



Acts of Altruism Behind Bars: The Impact of Inmate Altruism on Inmates

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Abstract:

Objective: This study's objective was to evaluate the extent to which voluntary inmate altruism impacts incarcerated individuals' long-term experiences within the prison system.

Methods: Using the Delphi study design, interviews were conducted with three criminal defense attorneys, as well as three formerly incarcerated individuals. Criminal defense attorneys provided professional perspectives on inmate altruism within correctional facilities today, while ex-convicts provided insight into their firsthand experiences, motivations, and outcomes. Data from these interviews were collected and organized through a series of tables, analyzing the responses.

Results: Inmate altruism was found to facilitate personal growth, reduce disciplinary conflicts, and improve institutional solidarity in prisons. Both reported challenges, such as bureaucratic constraints and institutional distrust. Against that backdrop, inmate-initiated altruism was reported to result in rehabilitation, give meaning to people, improve psychological well-being, etc.

Conclusion: Voluntary prisoner altruism is a unique form of rehabilitation that benefits both the participants and the prison society and yields outcomes that most of the current rehabilitative efforts are prone to overlook. By immersing offenders in the activities of leading, creating, and giving, altruistic programs rehabilitate prisoners' selves beyond their crimes. These outcomes suggest the necessity of incorporating inmate-initiated programs into prison reform policy.

Introduction: Voluntary inmate altruism refers to incarcerated people who engage in certain activities or programs for the betterment of the community or even the world with little to no personal gain. This body of literature contains research on how incarcerated individuals create passion projects and partake in altruistic activities to benefit society and how this impacts their long-term experience in prison, as well as their purpose in life, whether it be inside or outside of the prison environment. The question that is being researched is, "To what extent does self-involvement in inmate altruism within incarcerated individuals impact prisoners and their long-term experience in prison?"

Literature Review: Individuals sentenced to life without parole (LWOP) are incarcerated people who are sentenced to spend the rest of their lives in prison without the possibility of freedom. In the United States, it is common for these incarcerated people to want to better their lives while in jail. For many, this can consist of rehabilitative services, and even more significantly, voluntary inmate altruism.

Many of these incarcerated individuals under life without parole are known and labeled for the horrific crimes they may have committed. However, these people's backstories and their



justification of their motives for committing certain crimes are heavily overlooked. Considering these people's backstories, in the United States, "1 in 6 male inmates reported being physically or sexually abused" before the age of 18, with even more being a part of or witnessing interpersonal violence (Wolff & Shi). 56% of male inmates in America have also reported having experienced "childhood physical trauma," and "over one-quarter of incarcerated men" reported having been abandoned by a guardian during their childhood or adolescence (Wolff & Shi). As shown in the evidence above, childhood and adolescent experiences of abuse have some sort of an impact on shaping the people they become in the future. It is clear that these are some of the main and most common driving factors that cause these people to end up committing these crimes.

While sentenced to life in prison, many of these individuals spend a large amount of time rehabilitating themselves to separate themselves from their crimes in an effort to move past them and be able to live a life that they can be somewhat proud of and content with. Rehabilitative incarceration comes in many different forms. Some of the most common forms include restorative justice and inmate altruism. Restorative justice refers to incarcerated offenders attempting to bring justice to the people harmed by their crime while also holding the offender accountable. An example of this is the Insight Prison Project (IPP). The IPP began in 1997 and "aims to help incarcerated men learn new emotional skills and correct problem behaviors," which sets them up for a more successful life, whether it is in or out of prison (Suttie). Specifically, the IPP provides trained facilitators who help grant "victims and incarcerated people an opportunity to work together," which can be therapeutic for both parties (Suttie). Another example of rehabilitative incarceration, which was mentioned earlier and will mainly be used throughout this paper, would be voluntary inmate altruism. This differs from restorative justice in that this form of rehabilitation consists of things such as passion projects, reforms, and ways to benefit society, which are initiated and executed by the incarcerated individual themselves, with no personal gain. According to a study conducted by Hans Toch titled "Altruistic Activity as Correctional Treatment", altruistic behaviors and activities within prisoners enhance "self-esteem due to awareness of the impact of the activity" in other people's lives (Toch). This goes to show that when an imprisoned person or people partake in altruism within a community, they get to see the fruits of their labor and truly understand what difference they can make in life. This can cause these imprisoned people to have more awareness of bringing good to the world.

In some cases, altruistic activity has been used for reasons other than rehabilitation. Many incarcerated people who are sentenced to life without parole have spent a significant amount of their lives rehabilitating themselves. This is why some may partake in these activities simply because they want to have an impact on the world and do as much as they can while being in the permanent imprisonment they are in. A current and ongoing example of this is displayed with the Eric and Lyle Menendez Case, which became widely popular around America in the 1990s. The Menendez Brothers were convicted of first-degree murder of their parents after two series of trials, with defense evidence of sexual abuse at the hands of their father. In March of 1996, they were sentenced to life without parole. The two brothers have spent 34 years in prison and were separated for 22 of those years, but were recently reunited for the first time in 2018 at the Richard J. Donovan Correctional Facility in San Diego, California. As their life without parole sentence continues, the brothers have displayed many types of voluntary inmate altruism.



Recently, Lyle has been working on “The Greenspace Project” with Rehabilitation Through Beautification (RTB). The Greenspace Project aims to reduce recidivism by creating a better-fitting and more welcoming jail environment for prisoners. It is also meant to create a better sense of community “through the construction of specialized outdoor classrooms, group meeting spaces, and large areas of artificial grass with tables” in the courtyard of the Richard J. Donovan Correctional Facility (Green Space). Eric, along with other incarcerated individuals within the Correctional Facility, has contributed to this by creating a large, continuous mural depicting a green and scenic environment along the prison exercise wall. Through this, Eric, Lyle, and the many people involved in this project hope to give incarcerated people who are not permanently in prison “the opportunity to learn the skills to re-assimilate” into normal society once released, and this starts by creating a better environment in prisons (Jeong). Through this, it can be inferred that rehabilitation does not only need to be provided by others for prisoners but can also be started by the prisoners themselves with inmate altruism. Eric and Lyle hope to be able to spread change in prisons all around the United States.

Method:

Participants: This correlational study is in the form of a Delphi study. The participants who will be used in this Delphi research study are Collin County Criminal Defense Attorneys and previously imprisoned individuals from the state of Texas. These individuals will provide valuable insight into the topic because the criminal defense attorneys have first-hand experience with prisoners who have been incarcerated for very long amounts of time, so they are knowledgeable and familiar with their growth, progress, and experiences while being in prison. It would also be highly beneficial to incorporate the prisoners themselves within this research study in order to explore different perspectives on the matter and to avoid any biased answers from the district attorneys. Communicating with the prisoners directly will also expose me to their personal situations and points of view, which could benefit the research to an even greater extent.

Materials and Procedure: This Delphi Study consists of a series of interviews held with professionals in the subject matter. This qualitative data consists of three experts in criminal justice (Collin County District Attorneys) who will be given a series of questions about their views on altruistic behaviors within the criminal justice system and what they have observed within prisons. Three previously imprisoned personnel will also be questioned about their personal experiences in prison and whether they have participated in altruistic activities or have seen it among other inmates during their time in prison. All participants were interviewed via phone calls and Zoom meetings. The questions that will be asked during the interviews are listed below.

For the District Attorneys:

1. Are there any altruistic programs (e.g., mentoring, teaching, peer support, etc.) occurring with any inmates serving sentences? If so, what types?
2. How have these forms of altruistic behavior impacted the way inmates interact with each other?



3. From what you've seen, what factors do you think drive these inmates to participate in these forms of rehabilitation and altruistic behaviors out of their own initiative?
4. What are some barriers that come in the way when incarcerated individuals create and execute their own passion projects?
5. Do you think the backgrounds that these imprisoned individuals come from and the crimes they have committed impact the likelihood of them getting help in prison, and even helping others?
6. What would you say is the primary difference between rehabilitative programs for prisoners and programs that prisoners willingly participate in, attempting to rehabilitate and help others (whether it be other prisoners or the general public)?
7. In what ways do you think prisoner-led altruistic programs can impact prisoners' outlooks on their future in prison, as well as their general experience in prison?
8. Do you see religion influencing incarcerated individuals' decisions to seek help, engage in rehabilitation programs, or participate in altruistic activities within the jail? If not, what other factors can motivate these changes?

For the Ex-Convicts:

1. When participating in certain programs that aim towards helping others, do you feel you are trying to, in a sense, move past your crimes?
2. What motivates you to participate in these activities and programs that benefit others?
3. How did these self-initiated programs impact your general experiences in prison (socially, emotionally, psychologically, etc.)?
4. In what ways do you think people who have experienced similar things to you in life are impacted by your help?
5. What are you trying to achieve by helping others through specialized programs?

With the qualitative data received from these questions, the goal is to understand more about what makes individuals want to create their own projects in the hope of helping others, and in what ways this will impact the prisoners themselves, as well as their long-term experience in prison. This topic also sheds light on prison reform and its impacts and implementations in our society today. In all, this methodology of research will benefit the academic conversation of this topic as a whole because of its newfound information on the perspectives of incarcerated individuals on their altruistic behavior, and in turn, will provide information about the impacts of those behaviors on prisoners' experience in prison and on the current criminal justice system.

Results:

Questions Directed Towards Criminal Defense Attorneys

Question asked: Are there any altruistic programs (e.g., mentoring, teaching, peer support, etc.) occurring with any inmates serving sentences? If so, what types?

Answers:

"Yes, we're seeing more inmate-led programs emerging in facilities across the state—things like peer mentorship groups, GED tutoring, and even restorative justice circles. These aren't mandated, which makes them really interesting from a behavioral standpoint." (District Attorney A)

"Inmates serving life sentences often lead peer support programs, especially around addiction recovery and anger management. These programs aren't mandatory, but we see a lot of genuine participation because they are inmate-driven." (District Attorney B)

"There are programs where lifers teach classes like parenting from prison, meditation, and even conflict resolution. Some facilities now encourage inmates to design and run their own workshops." (District Attorney C)

Question asked: How have these forms of altruistic behavior impacted the way inmates interact with each other?

Answers:

"When inmates take ownership of helping others, it often transforms their relationships with one another. They become mediators, role models—people start seeing each other beyond the crimes they committed." (District Attorney A)

"Inmates who lead or join altruistic programs tend to act as stabilizing forces. We see fewer fights, fewer disciplinary incidents. They create informal support networks that the official system often fails to provide." (District Attorney B)

"I've observed that in units where peer-led support exists, inmates form real bonds. There's more respect, fewer racial divides, and a sense of community responsibility that can't be manufactured by staff alone." (District Attorney C)

Question Asked: From what you've seen, what factors do you think drive these inmates to participate in these forms of rehabilitation and altruistic behaviors out of their own initiative?

Answers:

"I think the motivation stems from a mix of wanting redemption, boredom, and the human need for purpose. Especially those serving life without parole—they're thinking legacy, not release." (District Attorney A)

"The drive behind inmate altruism usually boils down to needing purpose. Many recognize that they can't undo their pasts, but they can try to build something meaningful with the life they still have." (District Attorney B)



"Most of these inmates are motivated by two things: regret and hope. Regret for the harm they caused, and hope that they can still leave a mark on the world, even if it's behind bars." (District Attorney C)

"Some guys were moved by books, others by letters from their kids. Anything that reminds you you're still human—that's what sparks change." (Ex-Convict A)

Question Asked: What are some barriers that come in the way when incarcerated individuals create and execute their own passion projects?

Answers:

"Barriers? Tons. Bureaucracy, lack of institutional trust, funding, and sometimes even retaliation from fellow inmates who view these programs as 'brown-nosing' or threatening to the prison hierarchy." (District Attorney A)

"Red tape is a huge issue. Even if an inmate has a solid idea for a project, getting the necessary permissions can be nearly impossible. Plus, there's often suspicion from both staff and inmates." (District Attorney B)

"The system is still very slow to trust inmates with leadership. Some staff worry about security risks, and sometimes, the inmates themselves are discouraged by their peers." (District Attorney C)

Question Asked: Do you think the backgrounds that these imprisoned individuals come from and the crimes they have committed impact the likelihood of them getting help in prison, and even helping others?

Answers:

"Unfortunately, yes—an inmate's background and the nature of their crime can influence who gets access to certain programs, especially if the crime was high-profile or involves certain stigmatized offenses." (District Attorney A)

"There is definitely bias based on crime type. Those convicted of certain crimes, especially crimes against children, are often barred from participating or even face hostility from others if they try." (District Attorney B)

"The nature of their crime definitely plays a role. Some inmates are automatically labeled as irredeemable because of what they did, no matter how much they've changed." (District Attorney C)

Question Asked: What would you say is the primary difference between rehabilitative programs for prisoners and programs that prisoners willingly participate in, attempting to rehabilitate and help others (whether it be other prisoners or the general public)?

Answers:



"When an inmate volunteers to lead or create something, it's an identity shift. They're not just offenders anymore. They're teachers, mentors, leaders. That's something no court or warden can hand them." (District Attorney B)

"Rehabilitative programs *give* inmates tools. Altruistic inmate-led programs *build* character. That's the fundamental difference." (District Attorney C)

Question Asked: In what ways do you think prisoner-led altruistic programs can impact prisoners' outlooks on their future in prison?

Answers:

"When you create something meaningful and self-led, especially inside a dehumanizing space like prison, it reframes your future. It doesn't matter if you're never getting out. You still matter." (District Attorney A)

"I've seen men facing life sentences completely transform their sense of future because they found meaning in helping others. It doesn't shorten their sentence, but it changes how they live it." (District Attorney B)

"When inmates create and run programs, they're investing in a future—even if it's a future only inside those walls. It gives them hope, pride, and a reason to get up in the morning." (District Attorney C)

"Once you start helping others, you start helping yourself. You talk more. You open up. You stop seeing other people as threats." (Ex-convict A)

Question Asked: Do you see religion influencing incarcerated individuals' decisions to seek help, engage in rehabilitation programs, or participate in altruistic activities within the jail? If not, what other factors can motivate these changes?

Answers:

"Religion absolutely plays a role. But so does fatherhood, grief, trauma, and the desire to leave something behind. Altruism becomes a way to reclaim control over your narrative." (District Attorney A)

"Religious faith is a major driver for some, but not all. For many, hitting rock bottom—not faith—is what triggers a need to seek redemption or to give back." (District Attorney B)

"Religion can be a powerful motivator, but so can mentorship. Some guys find a new purpose when an older inmate sees something in them and says, 'You can be better.' That simple encouragement can spark huge change." (District Attorney C)

Questions Directed Towards Ex-Convicts



Question Asked: When participating in certain programs that aim towards helping others, do you feel you are trying to move past your crimes?

Answers:

"Yeah, I'd say so. You can't erase what you did, but you can try to shift the balance. Helping others gave me something that felt like a step in the right direction." (Ex-Convict A)

"It's a step toward redemption, yeah. Helping others let me build a new chapter, instead of being stuck." (Ex-Convict C)

Question Asked: What motivates you to participate in these activities and programs that benefit others?

Answers:

"I think regret. I got to a point where I realized I wanted to turn my life around, and I found happiness in helping others." (Ex-Convict B)

Question Asked: How do these self-initiated programs impact your general experiences in prison (Socially, emotionally, psychologically, etc.)?

Answers:

"It gave my time meaning. Socially, I met new people, learned new things, and created a better life for myself, even if it was in prison. I think in many ways it saved me from self-destruction." (Ex-Convict A)

"I broadened my perspective, and it gave me new opportunities I never knew I could have in prison. It really just gave me purpose, which is something everyone in prison needs." (Ex-Convict B)

"I think it gave me peace. When I spent time helping others, I started to realize that I could still contribute." (Ex-Convict C)

Question Asked: In what ways do you think people who have experienced similar things to you in life are impacted by your help?

Answers:

"They listen differently. I've been there. I know what it's like. So, it hits different for them." (Ex-Convict A)

"It gives people hope to know that I have been in their position and am still standing, and to know that they aren't alone." (Ex-Convict B)



Question Asked: What are you trying to achieve by helping others through specialized programs?

Answers:

"I just want to leave something good behind. I can't undo the past, but I can try to live a life that I can be proud of." (Ex-Convict A)

"To show that healing is possible. I've made some bad choices, but I can still be part of something good." (Ex-Convict B)

"I want to have a positive effect on people, almost like a legacy." (Ex-Convict C)

Interview Analysis

Table 1: Common Themes from Criminal Justice Experts' Interviews

Theme	Participants Mentioning
Recent growth of inmate altruistic activities in prison	3/3
Altruism causing positive inmate behavior	3/3
A sense of purpose being the main motivation for altruism	2/3
There are institutional barriers for prisoners	3/3
Altruism serves as a way to reframe a prisoner's future	3/3

Table 2:

Common Themes from Ex-Convicts' Interviews

Theme	Participants Mentioning
Altruism serves as a step toward redemption for prisoners	3/3
Regret and finding purpose are key motivators of altruism	3/3
Self-initiated programs provide social and emotional healing	2/3
Participating in inmate altruism provided structure and meaning to life in prison	3/3
Altruistic efforts give prisoners more opportunities for building a future	3/3
Shared experiences among prisoners strengthen bonds and connections	2/3
Current rehabilitative efforts are ineffective because of the lack of personalization	3/3
Inmate Altruism is better personalized for prisoners	3/3

Discussion: Interviews with the district attorneys reflected five main themes shown in Table 1. Table 1 also shows how many of the three Collin County District Attorneys mentioned this theme

throughout their interviews. Table 2 reflects eight main themes from the interviews conducted with the ex-convicts, also showing how many of the three participants within that section mentioned the theme in their interviews. Findings across both sections, interviews with the district attorneys, and the exconvicts suggest that inmate altruism within prisons serves as an effective form of rehabilitation not only to other prisoners, but to the inmate partaking in altruistic activities. We also find that not only is it rehabilitative to the individual participating in inmate altruism, but it has also led to things such as inmates developing purpose, hope, passion, and even helps in building better futures for themselves. Many of the ex-convicts who were interviewed mentioned that they wanted to move past their crimes and be able to live a life they could be proud of, which is exactly how inmate altruism helps them achieve that. These inmates do not have to be defined by their crime for the rest of their lives. Helping other people often gives these inmates hope that they can make a difference and turn their own lives around. Both groups discussed the barriers that are present within the justice system. These barriers often affect inmates' ability to create programs and participate in inmate altruism. Both groups also highlighted the motivating factors that cause inmates to participate in inmate altruistic activities. The majority of these motivations are regret, hope, and purpose. The consensus also showed that inmates benefited psychologically and socially, strengthening the claim that inmate altruism plays a significant role in reframing prisoners' lives.

Although a majority of the data collected from the district attorneys comes from a professional criminal justice standpoint, a lot of the data from ex-convicts comes from their personal experiences, which diversifies my data in that it encompasses the first-hand experiences from prisoners, as well as the systematic law/criminal defense perspective. Gathering both sides of this research was essential to ensure more effective data collection, providing ample evidence to support the claim

One of the main limitations of this research is that the interviewed district attorneys and ex-convicts were all males. This could cause a gender bias because of the unintentional exclusion of female perspectives in this study. This slightly limits the scope of the study, considering women may demonstrate and engage in inmate altruism differently. Women could also face different impacts from altruism, considering that male and female correctional facilities have many administrative differences. Another limitation is that all personnel interviewed reside in the state of Texas. This is a limitation because, due to the differing federal and state laws, each state's criminal justice system works slightly differently, which would cause variation among data from different states if the data were collected nationwide. Lastly, every individual has unique and different experiences depending on external factors such as the prison, the environment, the people, etc., and also internal factors such as personality, mindset, past experiences, etc. This means that every single participant has experienced things differently, which could potentially cause variation among the data; however, this also brings more diversity to the data because it encompasses different types of people with different experiences.

Conclusion and Final Research: In conclusion, the information discussed in this paper shows that inmate altruism serves as a viable form of inmate rehabilitation for all types of prisoners. Inmate Altruism helps solve the issue of current rehabilitation programs implemented by prisons not helping prisoners, by having prisoners themselves implement the programs to be more specialized for prisoners, because they themselves know what is needed to be rehabilitated and



create a better future. Collectively, the data presented in this research shows that inmate altruism fosters positive relationships, social and psychological awareness, and can restore humanity among prisoners. The data also adds to the whole body of knowledge in that it provides valuable information that can be used for prison reform to facilitate more meaningful rehabilitation among prisoners. Correctional facilities risk ineffective rehabilitation by overlooking the importance of inmate altruism. This research study leads to new lines of inquiry that can be used for future research and implications. This can include, but is not limited to, focusing on certain age groups, ethnicities, different sentences given to prisoners, etc.



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