

Strengthening the Social Capital of Incarcerated and Reentering Individuals: Six Considerations

INTRODUCTION

Incarcerated and reentering populations frequently lack strong, positive relationships for a variety of reasons, including never having these relationships to begin with or having lost connections during their incarceration. When these relationships do exist, they can be very valuable in helping individuals prepare for and succeed in reentry, such as through reducing their risk of recidivism and poverty and improving their well-being and employment prospects, leading to healthier, safer, and more productive communities. However, there is little research on how reentry programs can more intentionally help reentering or incarcerated individuals strengthen and develop relationships by incorporating concepts like social capital to meet these objectives. This brief identifies and analyzes common features and learnings from four programs that emphasize social capital while working with incarcerated or reentering individuals.

“[Social capital](#)” refers to connections, networks, or relationships among people and the value that arises from them and that can be accessed or mobilized to help individuals succeed in life. Social capital is important because robust and supportive networks can improve outcomes for individuals through knowledge, access to resources, emotional or financial support, or other long-lasting resources. Research shows that individuals with higher levels of social capital are happier and healthier, find better jobs, and live longer, and that communities with higher levels of social capital have higher educational achievement, faster economic growth, and less crime.* While social capital can be negative – for example if it involves connections that may encourage illegal activity – this brief focuses on positive social capital.

LESSONS LEARNED AND KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Through conversations with program leaders, staff, clients, and partners, several considerations emerged for integrating a social capital approach that may be specific to incarcerated or reentering populations.

Build relationships with corrections leadership and staff to improve participants’ experiences

All programs operating within correctional facilities (Hudson Link, PFA, and IOP) viewed the partnering relationships with the facilities’ leadership and staff as critically important.

Trust and communication matter, particularly with corrections leadership. When correctional facility leaders and staff trust and appreciate external program staff, those programs will generally be able to operate with fewer restrictions and greater privileges, including potentially having a designated space within the facility’s campus. Participants, by extension, will benefit from the external program being able to operate as intended. If relations with corrections are weak or soured, the program will likely face increased challenges, and participants may suffer as a result. As an example, one PFA program (not the Nebraska women’s academy) faced tremendous challenges in receiving the facility’s permission for various program activities, including for participants to live together in the same room or hall, which is a key part of how the program builds meaningful and useful bonds among participants. However, Hudson Link, PFA, and IOP were generally successful at having strong relationships with facility leadership, and they were able to do this by, for example, being very communicative and by being “more of a convenience than an inconvenience” – relieving the facility’s staff of burden rather than adding to their workloads.

Highlight program benefits to corrections staff. The programs appeared to have more challenges building strong relationships with correctional officers and other “on-the-ground” staff. Interviewees observed that many correctional officers are trained to have a more “punitive” orientation focused on the safety and security of the facility, which sometimes leads to resistance toward programs like these. One approach that seemed effective in overcoming some of this resistance was communicating and explaining how much safer the prison and the officers will be with the program, and that these programs can affect not just the program participants but can gradually affect the whole prison culture. The Hudson Link director communicated to correctional staff his observation that, “The

* For an extensive overview of the literature, see Putnam, R. (2000). “So what?” In *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community* (pp. 287–363). New York: Simon & Schuster. For more recent information, see *What we do together: The state of social capital in America today*, Joint Economic Committee, 115 Cong. (2017) (testimony of Robert Putnam); https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/737fd99b-fff6-4091-94b9-2e57d3b30f8f/what-we-do-together-the-state-of-social-capital-in-america-today.pdf. For more information on the literature, see Abbott, M., & Reilly, A. (2019). *The role of social capital in supporting economic mobility*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Office of Human Services Policy; <https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/aspe-files/261791/socialcapitalsupportingeconomicmobility.pdf>.

OVERVIEW OF PROGRAMS STUDIED

Site visits and phone interviews were conducted with the following programs serving incarcerated or reentering individuals:

- **RecycleForce:** a social enterprise in Indianapolis, Indiana helping formerly incarcerated individuals “rebuild their lives” by providing “comprehensive social services and gainful employment” at a recycling factory. The formal program period is typically 120 days and can last up to about 180 days. The program admits cohorts of roughly 12 people twice a month and has a capacity of 125 at any given time. Social capital activities include a daily “Circle of Trust” gathering among all participants and staff, mentoring (peer, traditional, and informal), and job referrals through an on-site staffing agency.
- **Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison (hereafter “Hudson Link”):** a non-profit that provides college education, life skills, and reentry support to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals to help them “make a positive impact on their own lives, their families, and communities.” It includes Bachelor’s and Associate’s degree programs, plus a college preparatory program. Hudson Link operates in five correctional facilities with eight college partners across New York State. Social capital activities include student interactions during and after classes, alumni gatherings, and ongoing support and encouragement from staff, many of whom are formerly incarcerated.
- **Prison Fellowship Academy at the Nebraska Correctional Center for Women (hereafter “PFA”):** an intensive, biblically based program in York, Nebraska that takes incarcerated

women through a “holistic life transformation process.” Participants are guided by an academy manager and volunteers to “lead lives of purpose and good citizenship.” It is a year-long program with about 500 classroom hours and up to 30 students at a time. It is one of 101 academies across the U.S., all of which are part of the larger Prison Fellowship organization. Social capital activities include meaningful classroom discussions, living together in the same room or hall, one-on-one meetings with the academy manager, and volunteer projects.

- **The Douglas County Community Mental Health Center’s Intensive Outpatient Program (hereafter “IOP”):** a program operated by a community health center in Douglas County, Nebraska (which includes Omaha) that provides 10 weeks and 90+ hours of structured substance use and mental health programming then six months of continuing care / case management. Social capital activities include weekly “coffee chats” with participants and graduates, peer support, family therapy, and meaningful gestures of support from staff (e.g., attending court hearings).

One important way in which the programs differ is in their emphasis on services pre- or post-release. RecycleForce focuses exclusively on post-release, while PFA focuses almost exclusively on the period during incarceration. Hudson Link operates mostly during incarceration and has a post-release component too. IOP’s services begin pre-release and usually extend post-release.

single biggest predictor of a safe prison is having a college program.” When correctional staff become more accepting and appreciative of an external program, the benefits extend to the participants, too. The benefits could include greater freedom and privileges to participate in the external program’s social capital-building activities, as well as feeling supported and encouraged by correctional staff.

Leverage the environment of a correctional facility to build social capital

Interviewees discussed two ways that correctional settings can help participants build social capital while incarcerated.

Take advantage of the physical environment. Programs can use the physical environment of a correctional facility to build social capital, especially bonding social capital (see “Types of Social Capital” box). For example, a key component of PFA’s program is that incarcerated participants live together in community – if not in the same room then at least in the same hall. There was general consensus among key informants about the importance of living together. Having participants live together is believed to improve the program’s effectiveness and further help develop these bonding relationships, though it comes with increased challenges as well. Three or four people living together in a small room inevitably leads to conflict and interpersonal challenges, but as a graduate put it, “It’s part of life and part of healing. [...] I didn’t know how to walk into

conflict before. I learned that through challenges, you form a loving bond. You can’t just move out and avoid it.” The program was also clear that the goal is not to make everyone friends but rather to get to a place where everyone can at least be cordial and live together in a supportive community. As another example, in Douglas County IOP, many valuable organic interactions happen in the program’s common room within the correctional facility. The program’s director said, “Don’t underestimate [the power of] these interactions.”

Types of Social Capital

People need different types of relationships for different types of support. In practice, it is not always clear what type of social capital a person or organization is building. However, researchers generally divide social capital into three types:

- **Bonding** social capital refers to relationships built among individuals with similar characteristics, experiences, or group membership (“people like me”).
- **Bridging** social capital refers to relationships built among individuals, communities, or groups with differing background characteristics or group membership (“people different from me”).
- **Linking** social capital includes networks and organizations that provide connections across power dynamics, giving access to more resources (“individuals or institutions in positions of power”).

CONSIDERATIONS FOR GENERAL HUMAN SERVICES CONTEXT

In this brief, we focus on considerations specific to the incarceration or reentry context. However, previous work identified emerging principles and practices that any human services program using a social capital approach may want to consider. We briefly list them here. More detail can be found at <https://aspe.hhs.gov/strengthening-human-services-through-social-capital>.

Emerging Social Capital Practices

- Peer groups or cohort approaches can help program participants share experiences, build stronger networks, and develop more personal relationships.
- Meaningful engagement with participants can build high quality, positive, reciprocal relationships with each other and program staff.
- Building and leveraging organizational social capital may open doors for program participants, allowing them to more easily build their own one-on-one bridging or linking connections.
- Implementation of technology may help build community or facilitate communications and support. For example, using social media or mobile apps to help participants connect with each other.
- Use of data for social capital decision-making and evaluation can help programs determine the most effective social capital activities or communicate results.
- Creation of space and opportunity for organic connections through taking intentional steps can enable those organic connections to initially form and then grow over time.
- Qualified individuals or alumni in programming and staffing can increase the organization's credibility with current participants and help them establish trusting relationships with staff who have a familiar background.
- Emphasis on accountability can add transparency, consistency, predictability, and longevity to relationships.

In addition to these practices, emerging principles that undergird social capital approaches include an emphasis on people at the center, relationships as assets, staff and participants as partners, cultural competence, and emotional intelligence.

“My life and heart has completely changed. The biggest change has come from hearing others’ stories and knowing I’m not alone. We connected on a deep level. Now we’re friends for life.”

-PFA graduate

Use formal programming to facilitate informal interactions and relationship-building. Hudson Link interviewees spoke of important relationships that developed and strengthened outside of – but facilitated by – regular programming. An academic coordinator observed that classroom activities seeded discussions which then continued organically in the prison yard or the cafeteria, and this is where relationships were really built and strengthened. Similarly, PFA informants noted that, particularly when combined with living together, sharing and hearing personal stories in the classroom appeared to facilitate strong “loving bonds” and personal transformations among participants.

Build trust through assisting with criminal justice requirements

Many incarcerated or reentering individuals have experienced repeated violations of their trust. If they can successfully develop a trusting and caring relationship with a program volunteer or staff person, they can experience a breakthrough in their ability to establish positive connections. Assisting reentering individuals with criminal justice requirements is one potentially valuable way of establishing trust and strengthening relationships. Reentering individuals often have many competing obligations and requirements that need to be met during typical working hours such as meeting with their parole officer or getting a driver's license. RecycleForce developed a system where participants simply ask their manager to sign off on their temporary absence from the employment program, which the manager does almost every time, and the participants (who, at RecycleForce, are employees) still receive payment for their time away. Staff or volunteers often provide transportation assistance, too. This accommodation is not only a practical necessity for many recently reentered individuals, but it can be a meaningful gesture to build trust and rapport. The RecycleForce director stressed the importance of helping participants “move through criminal justice mandates, like getting off the ankle bracelet, as fast as we can.”

Connect participants with graduates and peer leaders to build support, accountability, and hope

All programs studied use peer leaders and/or successful former participants as a positive influence and viewed this as a critical component to the program. Hudson Link in particular, strongly emphasizes employing graduates, including in leadership positions – roughly three-quarters of the staff and leaders are program graduates or formerly incarcerated. Hudson Link's executive director credits much of his success in growing and strengthening the program, including fundraising and developing crucial relationships with facilities, with the fact that he and other staff are program graduates and that correctional staff and other leaders in the community have witnessed their transformation. RecycleForce places less emphasis on employing graduates in leadership positions, but strongly emphasizes building systems and structures in which participants can grow into leadership roles and serve as mentors or models to new participants.

Douglas County IOP connects active clients with graduates through weekly participant-led “coffee chats.” For active clients, the coffee chats provide hope through interactions with graduates who are farther along the recovery path and who can offer tangible supports such as work or housing referrals. For graduates, the coffee chats offer a valuable way to build new connections and strengthen or sustain existing ones. IOP staff and graduates also noted a strong element of mutual accountability that is apparent in these gatherings.

It is important to remember that not all relationships have positive influence and some may make reentry more difficult. As a RecycleForce interviewee put it, “All relationships have value; not all relationships succeed at helping you leave the criminal-justice system.” Programs can use positive systems and culture to reliably ensure that peers influence one another in positive ways.

Connect participants with well-resourced volunteers for community-wide impact

As one of the co-founders of RecycleForce put it, he often thought that the real test of the program is whether it can bridge participants to “the banker on the 25th floor.” He was speaking to the power that can come from bridging individuals with more (or different) resources and connections in a community to those reentering. When these individuals and incarcerated or reentering populations come to really know and care about each other, it can be the seed of community-wide impact. For example, a church community in Nebraska, despite plenty of initial discomfort and resistance, became a key partner for the local PFA program. It started with a few members of the congregation volunteering to go into the facilities once a week to help facilitate classroom discussions. The volunteers developed strong, caring relationships with participants, and eventually the whole congregation became involved with the program, including providing a donation of over \$100,000. The church community is now working to establish a program where a few congregants volunteer to assist reentering PFA participants. As another example, RecycleForce offers participants a one-on-one mentoring arrangement for six hours a month for a year, with the mentor almost always having access to different resources and networks than the participant. These relationships show participants that “more is possible than they think is possible.” RecycleForce also organizes an advisory group made up of senior-level representatives of agencies ranging from workforce development to law enforcement with the goal of ensuring that participants “find gainful employment in high demand occupations in Indianapolis.” Relationships between participants and volunteers are most powerful when they are reciprocal, with both parties benefitting from the relationship.

Keep former participants “part of the family” for sustained positive influence, especially through hard times

All programs emphasized in one way or another that participants remain “part of the family,” even if they are reincarcerated or move away. Hudson Link’s staff offices serve as a kind of shared community gathering space where former participants and graduates regularly drop in. This can be an important way to sustain or strengthen relationships, and it can be particularly valuable for those facing ongoing difficulties. Hudson Link offers tangible assistance such as a clothing closet and laptops, and the staff can help connect individuals with needed resources, such as employment, housing, or transportation assistance. Douglas County IOP has other ways of staying connected with former participants. After clients complete the 10-week formal program, a full-time case manager makes weekly calls to them for six months after graduation to check in and offer individualized assistance – for example, help finding a job, food assistance, or working through custody issues. Also, it is not uncommon for former participants facing difficulties or relapses to return and participate in programming – staff are welcoming and supportive of this. When programs have these kinds of “open-door” practices, trusting, caring relationships are more likely to develop, and reentering individuals have a place to turn to for support when it is most needed.

CONCLUSION

This brief provided six considerations for strengthening social capital specifically for incarcerated and reentering populations. Programs serving these populations with a social capital approach face many complexities and challenges, such as strict correctional facility policies focused on safety and security. However, along with these challenges are also opportunities, such as seeding or encouraging bonding between incarcerated participants outside of formal program activities and by building trust with reentering participants through assisting them with probation and parole requirements. A common approach that seemed effective is connecting active participants with graduates or peer leaders, which can build support, accountability, and hope. Programs that can effectively bridge incarcerated or reentering participants with other volunteers in the community may help spur connections with other resources from the wider community. Programs can sustain their impact by keeping former participants “part of the family” and reminding them that their doors are open, and they are available to assist them through difficulties.