

**Twenty Years of Incarceration in the Garden State:
Reflecting on the Barriers and Facilitators in the
Desistance Process**

Stephon Whitley with a forward by Nathan W. Link

**FROM STUDENT TO COLLABORATOR:
INSIGHTS ON DESISTANCE FROM A FORMERLY
INCARCERATED STUDENT**

I teach at Rutgers University in Camden, New Jersey. A few years ago, I was fortunate to have Stephon Whitley in one of my classes. At the time, he was living in a halfway house in Camden, technically still in the custody of the New Jersey Department of Corrections. Stephon was taking advantage of a Rutgers educational program for incarcerated people called NJ-STEP. A couple times per week, he was permitted to leave the halfway house to attend classes. My course was the senior seminar – *Ethics and Policy in Criminal Justice* – which takes a critical look at problems with criminal justice processes and institutions at various stages of the system. Stephon’s analytical and critical mind made him stand out immediately – he was always able to engage the material in a way that, frankly, made my job seem a bit superfluous. For every concept we discussed, he could bring the material to life by sharing a relevant story. It was no surprise to me that he ended up graduating with a 3.9 GPA and was conferred with a prestigious academic award at commencement. Through discussions inside and outside of class, he and I became friends and have maintained contact since his graduation. There is little symmetry between the lives we were born into, yet we share an interest in exposing the truth and engaging in a dialogue on how prisons and other social systems can be improved. I am excited to continue to learn from him and to see what he produces in the decades to come.

In 2019, the New Jersey legislature considered a bill that puts limits on who and for how long someone could be subjected to solitary confinement – a particularly brutal yet prevalent practice in American prisons. Because I knew about Stephon’s experiences with solitary, I floated the idea that he could write an op-ed about his experiences, and that I could help him shape it and pitch it to an editor. He bravely produced a very descriptive account of the deplorable conditions of solitary confinement in New Jersey and *The Star Ledger* – New Jersey’s largest newspaper – published it right around the time the reform bill passed (see Whitley, 2019). It was widely shared on social media, with nearly 7,000 shares on Facebook and Twitter alone.¹

Fast forward to the present, I encouraged Stephon to write more about his lived experiences and to consider submitting parts of his story to this special issue. Again, Stephon was intrigued by the possibility, eager to tell the all-too-often forgotten perspective. Thus, in the following essay he reflects on his prison time and the consequential events, practices, institutions, and processes that shaped him for better or worse. A few of these experiences acted as facilitators of desistance – they helped his own personal growth – while many others were barriers that diminished opportunities and the possibility of positive change. In some cases, these barriers even increased antisocial behaviour, and he elucidates these processes with rich and compelling examples.

Stephon can identify the life factors that motivated him and helped to bring about change. He focuses on the importance of family and visitation, religion and education, and how these led to changes in personal identity and goals. Research supporting the role of these institutions in the desistance process exists (e.g. Brown & Bloom, 2018; Sampson & Laub, 1995), yet he is able to colour in some of those general research ideas with detailed personal narratives, offering fresh insights into why they matter.

Stephon takes a highly critical stance toward the police and the prison system. The criticisms of prisons can be broadly categorized into three inter-related themes: 1) dehumanization and degradation; 2) a lack of work and income opportunities; and 3) cultures of violence and abuse. With few exceptions (e.g. Christian, 2005), the desistance literature places a greater emphasis on aspects that help to facilitate positive change, while relatively less research focuses on the specific state-sanctioned practices and processes that serve to diminish or even eliminate the possibility of growth and desistance. Heavily focusing on these highly problematic aspects of the system, Stephon's ultimate goal is to accelerate the crescendo calling for a total overhaul of dehumanizing prisons and the unjust societies that overfeed them. Toward this end, one of his more immediate objectives is to illuminate the critical barriers – ones that can be addressed through advocacy and policy reform – that incarcerated people face in their process of desisting from crime. He achieves this well and should be applauded for his detailed examples and insights, as well as for the bravery to reflect in public on a lifetime of adversity.

– Nathan W. Link

BARRIERS TO MY DESISTANCE

Stresses in the Transition to Living in Prison

Before I was sentenced to prison, I spent a total of twenty months in county jails. As a result, I was tired of not being able to touch my children when they were visiting, of being forced to buy snacks and cosmetics from the jail for a premium, not being able to go outside and breathe fresh air, and sleeping on a mattress that was two inches thick when new, but had been flattened to about an inch from the numerous people who had used it before me. I was told stories about East Jersey State Prison (a.k.a. Rahway State) and how the prisoners were allowed to go outside for recreation for hours, how you could sit next to and touch your visitors, and even run around and play with your children when they came to visit. If one was to do time, I heard that, overall, this was a decent place to do it. So, I wanted to be classified to that prison to do my 24-year sentence that stipulated I serve 85% of the time, totaling 20 years and four months.

To my “pleasure”, I was assigned to live in East Jersey State Prison. The perks of being able to go outside, touching my family during visits, and having a TV – which they charged four times the amount that stores do – initially cheered me up a bit. However, that joy and relief did not last. We were transported to the prison on a bus full of handcuffed men tethered together with chains around our waists and ankles. When we got on the bus, the first thing I noticed was how dark it was inside the bus. I soon realized that was because they painted the windows black so we could not look out of them. So, we sat in the dark, rows of men, shackled, in pairs of two. As we were driven to our new living quarters – a bus full of mostly black men escorted by two white officers holding shotguns – I could not help but think how similar this ride was to the slave ships that brought Africans away from their countries and to this land.

Once we all were taken inside the prison, we were lined up, side-by-side, and given directives. They made us strip naked, open our mouths, and run our fingers along our gums, lift our penises and testicles, turn around, spread our cheeks, bend down, and cough. Then, we were told to go in the showers, together, and wash with lice shampoo. All of this was done by the biggest white men I had ever seen. I would say I did not understand why they did any of it, but I understood this was about dehumanizing us and exercising their authority. It meant: “Welcome to *our* house”.

The prison seemed like an island, far away from the rest of the world. Behind the tall brick walls and barbed wires was what seemed to be a massive building complex. The lights were bright, but there was a sense of gloominess that encompassed the entire place. The brick walls were noticeably old, even with the depressing grey paint on the walls. However, it did not feel so massive once I began to walk through the main building, being escorted to my cell. That was because everywhere I looked there were prisoners. Some were walking, purposefully to a destination, and some were just sitting there, languishing in cages. Then, when we entered the housing wing, I was astonished by what seemed like a mile of cells, but when I looked up, I could see there were two more floors of cells, identical to the bottom floor I was standing on. There must have been hundreds of prisoners in that wing alone, and I saw at least three more wings as we walked to this one. On each of the three floors there were about 50 five-by-ten-foot cells and each cell had two prisoners inside of them. So, there were 150 cells, with 300 men in total on that wing. I later learned there were over 1,200 prisoners in that prison. Shockingly, that prison had the lowest number of prisoners out of all the maximum-security state prisons in New Jersey.

Out of all the prisons, East Jersey was the oldest. It is considered a historical site, but it is uninhabitable as a place for humans to live. The roofs throughout the entire prison leak whenever it rains; they have for over 30 years. At one point during my sentence, I was assigned as part of a crew of prisoners who were directed to install protective scaffolding so that falling bricks would not fall directly on our heads in the hallways. The scaffolding resembled the kind that were used to hold public executions. Many of the windows are cracked or broken. As a result, the winter months were extremely cold. I shared the first cell I was assigned to with another man. With the bunk beds, two tall lockers, two footlockers, shelves, and a toilet with an attached sink, there was not enough room for the two of us to walk around the space at the same time. So, one person would stay on his bed if the other was standing on the floor. We had to share that one toilet and, even worse, if one of us had to defecate while the other was in the room, that person would put a sheet up as a visual “block”. However, there was no way to block out the sound or smell of waste coming out of that other human being. Because of the smells and decrepit condition of the building, birds, rats, insects,

and other living things were constantly visiting us. On some mornings I would find a bird sitting on top of my covers.

The architecture and the animals were not even the most stressful aspects of the transition to prison. The officers were. They were the dominant gang of the prison. After my first week, I started to feel the same tension and stress I felt on the streets of Newark, but worse. On the streets, as a drug dealer, I was constantly in fear that someone might rob me. However, the worst threat was the potential police abuse every Black man in America knows he is subject to, at any given moment, simply due to the colour of his skin. However, in prison it was different. I felt the threat of violence with every step I took. There was a constant threat of officers ganging up and beating and/or killing me and other prisoners. It was psychological torture. I say this because every time prisoners came in contact with officers – there were a few good officers, but they had no control of the bad ones – they would harass us and behave in a menacing manner. Their demeanour expressed: “We will hurt you and there’s nothing you can do about it because we have the uniforms”.

Three days after I entered the prison, while we were locked in our cells, I saw about five officers walk past my cell, and they were walking as if they had a purpose. My cellmate and I went to the door to listen – we could not see down the hall. Moments later an officer said, “Open cell 124”. Then, I could hear the officer telling one prisoner to step out and go wait at the front of the tier. Moments later you could hear sounds of someone being beaten and a prisoner screaming in pain. I later learned they beat the prisoner who was still in the cell because the officer felt he had looked at him too hard (i.e. intensely). These types of incidents occurred frequently and, I think on purpose, in full view of prisoners. It worked – prisoners lived in constant fear of violence from the officers. But their violence, compared to police violence on the streets, was different because of the fact that the prison was a “total institution” with no external visibility (Goffman, 1958). We prisoners could not run away and hide. Officers could come and beat you nearly to death, and there was nothing you could do about it. It was their word over yours and they knew the recipe to get away with it: write in the incident report that the prisoner assaulted the officer and suffered injuries as a result of officers trying to restrain him. This is the context I lived in for two decades.

DEHUMANIZING AND DEGRADING TREATMENT

The Department of Corrections in New Jersey keeps its prisoners in a constant state of stress and strain. Sharing a five-by-ten-foot cell with another man is the most basic example. Whenever one would be reassigned, another would come to replace him. Often these individuals were angry about how much time they had left to serve in prison, over problems with their significant others who remained on the streets, a lack of money to feed themselves, psychological and physical abuse from the officers, and over the cramped living conditions. We had to breathe it when the other person passed gas, went to the bathroom or were smelly because of being generally unclean. This was not the only instance in which prisoners being forced to be in small spaces endangered people's safety, even put their lives in jeopardy.

A daily practice that minimized our humanity and caused a lot of conflict was how we were packed into a cage like sardines in a can to leave the mess hall. On average there were about 200 prisoners in the mess hall at a time. It was a huge space with high ceilings and surrounded by dirty white brick walls. They would give us about 30 minutes to eat, but half of the time was spent standing in line waiting to get food. If you were late returning to your housing wing, the officers could write you up with a disciplinary charge that carried serious consequences. The problem was that to get back to the wing, we had to go through a cage that was about five-by-ten feet and nine feet tall. This cage was made out of thick steel in a crisscross pattern and was painted black. Another cage was centred on top of this cage, in which an officer would sit, survey the prisoners, and operate the gate to let prisoners in and out. The gate that prisoners would use to enter the cage could open to about four feet wide, but the officers would usually only open it about two-and-a-half feet, forcing the prisoners to squeeze their way in. Once inside, the smells kicked in – the space would take on the odors of 20 or so men in the cage, many of whom had not been allowed to shower yet.

Individuals were constantly stressed about returning late to their wings. Because we were always at risk of getting in trouble for returning late, prisoners would smush up against each other waiting for the gate to open and, when it did, guys would push and shove one another and squeeze against each other to fit into the gate before it closed. The officer would then close the cage. Several minutes later, they opened the other side of the cage

and let people out so they could go back to their units. As soon as they let people out, they would open the first gate and fill the cage again. Again and again, they opened it, overfilled it, and emptied it with human beings. This was one the most inhumane and degrading rituals we had to go through, and we did it every day. It was a heavy metal gate and on many occasions I witnessed officers slamming the gate, causing it to hit prisoners who were trying to fit. This process could take 10 to 15 minutes, sometimes longer, because there would be a group of officers in the hall harassing prisoners. If a fight took place or movement was stopped for any reason, those stuck in the cage could be there for 30 minutes or longer, especially if the officer was especially spiteful. The inhumane process for guys coming in from the yard was the same, except the cage was bigger so it held more prisoners. Unfortunately, the inhumanity of the whole process led to prisoners getting frustrated with one another, often leading to someone getting threatened. Guys would exchange unpleasant words with each other, which would cause lingering hostility that would at times lead to a fight or someone getting stabbed. No doubt about it, those experiences in those cages made me more aggressive.

The practice of being put in the cages was counterproductive to my transformation for the better. I was bullied and beaten up a lot as a youth, and I grew up in a neighbourhood in Newark, NJ where violence was a constant and people were killed. I suffer from PTSD as a result. I learned early on that for me to survive, I had to become comfortable with violence. The cages, the angry roommates, and violent officers only triggered my fight or flight mindset (and remember there was nowhere to run). I became very aggressive and was always ready to defend myself. I refused to allow anyone to touch me when we entered the cages. In my mind, I was refusing to be treated like an animal, rejecting the prison's attempt to dehumanize me. I hated it and so I realized quickly that if I could buy commissary food instead, I could be free of the necessity to go in the mess hall cage three times per day. The problem was I did not have an income.

Employment and Income in Prison

In New Jersey, the Department of Corrections has various jobs that prisoners can work, but there are not enough jobs that every person can have one. From the time I entered the prison, I was trying to get a job. I signed up for jobs in the kitchen, the trash and laundry details, and cleaning the yard. For

years, I simply got responses that I was placed on the waiting list. What I did not know was that the jobs were rarely filled based on the list and timing of applications. Instead, prisoners were usually hired because of connections; either an officer or current worker-inmate recommending the person. Unfortunately, I did not have the social capital to get a job in my early years. This meant I had to struggle to feed myself and would often go hungry, like many other prisoners.

Similar to welfare for the jobless in America, if you do not have a job in prison they give you \$27.00 per month. However, if you owe fines or fees they take a third of that money. As a result, I was receiving \$18.00 per month. However, a bar of Dove soap was \$3.00 alone. Therefore, the \$18.00 was not enough for us to buy basic cosmetics and toilet tissue for the month. So, being able to buy food to supplement what the jail was providing (or the lack thereof), or to have the option to skip the meals that did not resemble food was not an option for me. This put me under an enormous amount of strain. I did not feel comfortable with reaching out to my family every month for money. It was bad enough that they had to pay outrageous and exploitive phone rates just to talk to me. After a few hungry nights, I made the choice to go back to the way I knew how to generate income: selling drugs.

I will be the first to agree that human agency is real, but I was being incapacitated in a prison that gave me little opportunity to use that agency to better myself. The state invested \$55,000 per year to incarcerate me, yet I was being exploited by having to pay highly marked up rates for commissary items. In addition, I was not granted the ability to work – never mind the fact that those jobs paid between \$1.80 - \$4.00 *per day*. This only reaffirmed what I had come to believe from my years of experience as a Black person in America: the system does not work for poor people of colour. As a result, early in my prison term I had no incentive – felt no need – to desist. Instead, I sold small amounts of drugs during my first seven years in prison to feed myself things I bought at the commissary. There were other prisoners who sold drugs while inside for this reason. Others sold to generate funds knowing they would be released back into society where there would be more employment barriers for them due to their incarceration. Unfortunately, being caught by prison authorities was not the only danger one who sold drugs inside prison faced.

Cultures of Abuse and Violence

Prison culture forces one to rely on violence. Just like I was inclined to turn back to drug dealing as a way of survival, there were many prisoners whose mode of survival in society was to commit robberies and, much like me, they found it in their best interest to continue to do so while in prison. This reality caused me to always be on the defensive. There was not a day of my 20-year sentence that I did not watch for potential attacks. I was on edge constantly. One can be judgmental and argue that a human being should never take from another, but when one has been cultured to feed himself by any means, with the understanding that not only can he not depend on the system to feed him, but the same system is preventing others from feeding him, his anger and deprivation will often push him to take from others. Like with animals in the wild, we humans become part of a social hierarchical food chain. I understood this. Thus, every day – like when I was on the streets – I was prepared to defend myself with violence.

Worse than all of this was the dehumanizing and sometimes violent way that officers treated us. I remember an ex-correctional officer, who was incarcerated with us, saying that officers were taught during their training that they should not look at prisoners as humans so that they can do their job effectively. It helped me understand how the officers behaved so much worse than the meanest prisoner. We would walk to go from one part of the prison to another, and there would be ten or more officers standing in a line harassing prisoners, with the understood implication that those officers were waiting to violate someone physically or psychologically. I remember being in my cell and watching four officers beat a prisoner they had already handcuffed, who was on the ground. One of the officers was a white woman about six feet tall and 220 pounds. She jumped up and down on his head with both feet – in boots – while holding onto a gate to keep her balance.

The psychological abuse of solitary confinement (“administrative segregation” or “ad-seg” in New Jersey) was especially devastating to prisoners’ well-being. I was in solitary confinement for one year because I had a cell phone. At the time I thought it was necessary because the prison phone calls were very expensive. A local 15-minute call was about \$4.00. To call my relatives long distance was \$18.00 or more for 15 minutes. So, I decided to get a cell phone. I had no idea that being caught with it would cause me to receive such a long sentence in solitary because I knew that individuals usually received four to six months for possession of a knife, something that could kill

someone. I also did not expect the living conditions of solitary confinement to be much different than the regular day-to-day prison experience other than prisoners were restricted to their cells. However, in my opinion, other than chattel slavery, there are very few practices more dehumanizing – and worse for the desistance process – than solitary confinement.

The cell was six-by-eight feet, made out of metal, and included a bed, sink, and two small shelves. In the back wall of the cell there was a space cut out that was about three feet tall, two feet wide, and 18 inches deep. This is where we were supposed to go to the bathroom. It was designed like a porta-potty that could not be flushed, but was cleaned out every couple days. It reeked.

It was loud all the time. It seemed as if 100 people were yelling. But talking loudly and yelling was the only way we could communicate with one another, and how we passed the time while being caged for 23 hours a day. The noise and stench of urine and feces were constants. The place was also infested with mice. They scurried into our cells day and night. One prisoner was so lonely that he caught one, put it on a string, and kept it as a pet. The administration did not do anything about the mice, and in all stories about ad-seg I heard over 20 years, the mice were always there.

There were no windows and it got so hot that the metal walls would sweat. My fan broke during the summer and it had to be nearly 100 degrees during the day. I had to wait two weeks to order another fan, but when we got commissary my fan was not in my bag of items. This went on for over a month. The only relief I was given was being allowed to buy a small bag of ice every day for 75 cents. I used it to cool my face, but it provided minimal relief as it melted within minutes.

Every time I left the cell I had to be strip-searched, which meant getting naked, opening my mouth, running my fingers through my mouth, lifting my genitals, bending over, and coughing. Sometimes, after officers would ask me to lift my genitals, they would order me to start over and open my mouth, because they wanted me to put my fingers in my mouth after having touched my genitals. I constantly grappled with whether going outside or getting a visit was worth letting a corrections officer look inside me. On most occasions when I went through the process, I felt awful. But it was either that or sit in the room alone with not much to do and risk losing my mind. I did witness several people lose their grip on reality while in solitary; it devastated their mental health. They played with their own feces. Some attempted suicide. The psychiatrist walked through the tier once a

week, slowed down by each cell, and asked through the bars: “Are you okay in there? Do you feel like harming yourself?” Prisoners never answered affirmatively. This was because one’s neighbours could hear this inquiry and being unable to deal with solitary was a sign of weakness, which one should not display in prison.

These different forms of degradation made me very angry and cemented the notion that the criminal justice system is unjust and illegitimate. I would find myself walking around the prison in disgust of the officers. In all my years of being surrounded by criminals, I never met a group of people more disrespectful or harsh. However, there was very little recourse for us prisoners. Reporting officers was a waste of time because the people to which we were to submit complaints were sergeants and lieutenants – their coworkers who had the same culture of “us against them”, “good guys versus bad guys”. Even the Internal Affairs officers were ex-corrections officers. This meant they had relationships and bonds with each other. Like most prisoners, I understood that it would be unwise to confront a disrespectful officer. So, like most prisoners, I just walked around angry all the time.

In his book *Wretched of The Earth*, Frantz Fanon (2007) wrote about how in colonization, the colonized understood they could not retaliate against the colonizers, who had weaponry, because it could mean death. As a result, those who were colonized were quick to take out their frustration on other colonized people, even for the slightest crossing of boundaries. It makes little sense, but I perceived this dynamic during my time in prison. I almost always felt that I would never tolerate disrespect from another prisoner. I found myself letting out my frustration with the officers on other prisoners. This is one of the reasons incarcerated individuals return to society so violent. They were assaulted, and/or disrespected repeatedly by officers while inside, yet could not retaliate against them. As a result, they return to society with festering, extreme anger.

I conclude the first half of this paper by stating, firmly and unequivocally, that the prison system I experienced was not designed to help those convicted of crimes desist from criminality. To the contrary, the ways in which the prisons were designed and operated produced more aggressive criminals who were now equipped with legitimate grievances against the state. In contrast to the above experiences, my connections and relationships with family, my religion, and education allowed me to grow as a human being in more positive ways, which I elaborate on below.

FACILITATORS OF MY DESISTANCE

Many people think that harsh punishment will deter a person who lived a criminal lifestyle from committing future crimes. This certainly was not the case for me. I tried crime because it was a norm in my neighbourhood. I believed that poor people were at a disadvantage and would have trouble attaining wealth. In response, I chose to rebel and innovate in search of prosperity (Merton, 1938). It was easy for me to risk my freedom because I grew up in a heavily policed, carceral space that was not much different from prison. For instance, my schools – which had bars on the windows, chains on the doors, security guards with metal detectors at the doors, and my ability to do something as human as use the bathroom was decided by teachers who were given power over me – were akin to prison. Plus, a good portion of the men in my community were either in or had been in prison. Thus, I accepted the reality that incarceration was likely. After years of criminality, I rationalized that people were going to buy their drugs from somebody and that those whom I harmed were bad people who deserved it. Besides, I did not know any other way for a poor Black man to achieve financial independence. The prison system did not provide anything to help me facilitate my desistance journey. Instead, my family and their visits, religion, and access to education helped me to grow and change. It was through these institutions and opportunities that I was able to credibly develop a new identity (Maruna, 2001).

Family

I remember the first time my daughter came to visit me in prison. At 11-years-old, she said to me, “Daddy, just because you’re in jail does not mean you’re supposed to stop taking care of me”. It broke my heart because I was so limited in what I could do for her. I knew that I needed to do everything in my power to let my children know they were loved and I started there. I would write letters and call on the phone. But my favourite moments were when my children came to visit. Unfortunately, officers again would make it difficult to enjoy our visits.

Prisons and their staff would create additional barriers to family who were lucky enough to find transportation to prison (Christian, 2005). They would hassle and harass our visitors during the process of visitor registration, scrutinizing their clothing, and scrutinizing how much contact we had with

them. Often when I entered the visiting area my family would be upset. I would learn that the officers gave them a difficult time and treated them as if they were committing crimes. I concluded from the frequency and intensity of such treatment that officers were trying to discourage visitors from returning to visit their family. Sadly enough, it worked with many visitors. I would mentally prepare my family and warn them not to allow the officers to discourage and run them away. Some of my loved ones decided they were not willing to take the officers' harassment and stopped visiting. It is said, "when you go to jail, you take your family with you". That saying should be revised to reflect that you also subject them to being degraded for having the audacity to support and love you.

I also realized that my choices to commit crimes and the consequences of those actions impacted my family a great deal. I became honest with myself that it was selfish. I hated seeing the pain they were enduring. I told myself "you do not hurt those you love", and that was just what I had done. So, the thought of leaving the drug trade and criminality as a whole started entering my mind more and more. These sentiments were strengthened as my faith in my religion and knowledge of its teachings grew.

Religion

In every religion there is a promise of everlasting peace if you do what is right in this world. It also gave me a new identity – I was a Muslim. And with that came new precepts I lived by. As I learned more about my religion, I felt ashamed that I was selling drugs and so I would hide it. This helped in the sense that I no longer felt it was okay to sell drugs; I could no longer rationalize my behaviour. At the same time, I began to feel that my attention needed to be focused on doing good in the world. Over time, the deeper I got into religion, the more I began to truly feel criminality was wrong.

Although religion helped me to believe committing crime was morally wrong, it did not happen immediately. My views on criminality, especially that among Blacks, changed in an incremental way over time as my faith developed. In the beginning, I rationalized that alcohol and guns were legal to sell, and if you had the resources and access to capitalize off those trade markets, both products were more harmful than drugs. I also would argue that some drugs were actually legal to sell as well, but that the laws in this country criminalized the drug trade among the poor. With this rationalization, undergirded by an understanding of the laws and history of this country, I

was firm in my view that selling drugs, as well as the violence that came along with it, were not problems (see Sykes & Matza, 1957).

During my incarceration, the prison did not offer anything that helped me feel differently. They offered a cognitive-behavioural program called “Thinking for a Change”, which is an inappropriate name for a person like me who has had to constantly think about survival my whole life. Nevertheless, the goal was to help prisoners think differently. Such programs were for two hours, twice a week, for 12 to 18 weeks. In these programs there was a facilitator and about 15 to 20 prisoners. The curriculum centred on discussions to encourage thinking differently and pointing out that we would likely return to prison if we did not. One problem with that was that every person who committed the same crimes repeatedly in the class had made the conscious decision that they were willing to go to prison for whatever was to be gained from their criminality. The programs aimed to use the idea of being free as motivation to change. However, as I mentioned earlier, for a poor Black person relegated to living in the segregated and heavily policed ghetto of Newark, the notion of being free is complicated.

Education

The last facilitator, education, was extremely crucial for my desistance. As a child I was somewhat of a nerd – I loved school. However, I never made it past the ninth grade. So when I went to prison, I earned my general equivalency diploma. However, that was the highest level of education available in New Jersey prisons. Fortunately, in 2013, a group of citizens got together and found wealthy individuals and groups who were willing to donate money if they could develop an education program specifically for those in New Jersey prisons. The group put together a program called NJ-STEP, which consisted of a consortium of professors from some of the top colleges and universities in the state, including Rutgers and Princeton. More importantly, the prisoners were able to earn degrees from accredited colleges such as Rutgers (the program is offering up to a master’s degree currently). This program is completely independent of the Department of Corrections.

Initially, I was intimidated because I never even graduated high school. I also did not know of anyone in my family or community who had graduated college. I believed college was for those with a level of intelligence well above my own. However, I had great professors and a strong work ethic

and desire to excel that made me a good student. I was always a thinker, so I would read all the books that were given to us. One professor, Chris Hedges – a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and New York Times best-selling author – would give us six to eight books to read in a single semester and I read them as carefully as possible. I would question why the writer chose certain words, research the etymology of the words, notice certain patterns in the writings, pay attention to the literary devices like tone, irony, and so on. Then, I would argue in my writings what I thought the writers were saying and/or trying to convey. Through access to my professors, along with their positive feedback on my writings and oral arguments in class, I began to believe for the first time that I too could do well in college.

Two readings, in particular, had the biggest impact on my realization that I did not have to be permanently relegated to criminality or the ghetto. The first was in the book *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. There was a part in which he wrote about his slave master reprimanding his wife for teaching Douglass how to read. Douglass said his key to freedom was when the slave master said, “By teaching him how to read, he will be unfit to be a slave”, and from that point his focus was learning to read, which greatly facilitated his escape from slavery (Douglass & Jacobs, 2000). I applied that to myself and decided I would also use education as my way to freedom.

The second was another idea from Frantz Fanon’s (2007) book, in which he said something along the lines of “the first thing the native learns is to stay in his place and not go beyond certain limits”. He was specifically writing about the colonized, but I see many similarities between the colonized and the poor person living in the ghetto. I immediately began to think of how the police would stop us when we were trying to go to affluent neighbourhoods, telling us we do not belong there and not to return. I thought of how the schools were designed to produce low-level workers, as well as how police officers would search us almost every day, placing us in the back of their police cars for long periods of time after they had already searched us and found nothing illegal. I realized that was a form of conditioning us to be comfortable with and normalized to detention and surveillance. At that moment I decided I was going to undo the conditioning that had been done to me. At that moment I strengthened my commitment to desist and to not allow incarceration, which the 13th Amendment says is the only time it is legal to enslave a person, to be something that would enslave my future.

CONCLUSION

America's prison system is not designed to assist those who are incarcerated to desist from criminality. Instead, the culture of dehumanizing practices that defines prison systems has an adverse effect on many people, as it did with me. Fortunately, I found strength, power, and the will to change in family, religion, and education. Unfortunately, the practices and policies of those running the prisons hindered the full potential of each one of those positive institutions, which made my transition to desistance more difficult and lengthier. America prides itself as being an advanced, first-world society that values freedom and equality, but those ideals are undermined and contradicted by our prisons. Their scale, their history, their colour, their conditions, and the inhumane treatment of the human beings subjected to them suggests America has a long way to go.

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