EXPLORING INMATES' PRISON PEN-PAL SOLICITING PROFILES ON WWW.WRITEAPRISONER.COM

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by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all the men and women who have lost a significant portion of their lives to unduly lengthy sentences, and to the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals who have found hope and redemption. It is also dedicated to my incredible husband, Patrick. Thank you for your personal sacrifices and selflessness to help make this degree possible. I love and appreciate you more than you know. Esto es para ti mom. Gracias por tu apoyo y tus sacrificios. Tú llegaste con poco y me lo has dado todo. To my brother and sister, thank you for influencing and inspiring me in your own ways and shaping me into who I am today. To my nephews and nieces, may you always chase knowledge and pursue personal growth. Para toda mi familia, soy la primera pero no la última!

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Exploring Inmates' Prison Pen-Pal Soliciting Profiles on
www.writeaprisoner.com
by
Tania Michelle Mejia-O'Donnell
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For many people, sharing content across a range of social media services is a familiar and integral part of life. Yet, the same cannot be said about the 1.5 million incarcerated men and women in U.S. prisons who have limited to no access to the web. Even with strict restriction and regulation, many prisoners have found ways to connect online with friends, relatives, and strangers through contraband cell phones, friends and family who manage their profiles, or third parties that link them to social networks. Moreover, organizations, such as Write a Prisoner, Black and Pink, and Meet an Inmate give prisoners the opportunity to list a profile online in hopes of acquiring a pen-pal, a new friend, and a connection to the outside world. For a population often misrepresented and stigmatized, websites like these open up new ways of reconstructing their identity, finding support, and building social capital.

Despite the potential benefits of prison pen-palling, there is a paucity of research about prison correspondence and support from individuals not known to the inmate prior to incarceration. This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring prison pen-pal soliciting profiles, what common themes exist within these personal ads, what are inmates' motivation for joining Write a Prisoner, what levels of support are inmates seeking in pen-pals, how are inmates expressing desistance and changes in identity on their profiles, and how do inmates perform masculinity on their personal ads. Findings indicate inmates are seeking various types of support including friendship, romance, non-judgmental support, and reentry support. The findings in this study support research on desistance and redemption narratives. Additionally, they bring attention to how inmates present themselves through hegemonic masculinity. The results of this study can help guide appropriate policy regarding inmate personal ads as states move to ban the practice, and lead to the development of befriending and pen-palling programs in the United States.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> A researcher's background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions. (Malterud, 2001, p. 483-484)

The research presented here is rooted in my interests in prison correspondence based on personal experiences of writing letters to incarcerated men across the nation. While I was an undergrad majoring in communication and social advocacy, I studied the nonviolent communication techniques developed by Dr. Rosenberg (2003). The semester I enrolled in the course we were tasked with completing any project related to peace building and conflict resolution strategies. At the time, my interest in corrections had begun to grow as a close family member had recently been sentenced to a prison term. Further, I had just completed a yoga teacher training with Prison Yoga Project (2019), a nonprofit organization that trains yoga teachers to teach mindfulness and yoga behind bars. Keeping in mind that prisons can be sites of violence, I decided my project would be with men in prison, since I believed they could benefit most from peace building and conflict resolution methods.

Based on my mail exchanges with my incarcerated loved one, I was familiar with the value of correspondence behind bars; however, it had never occurred to me to write to strangers. I initially thought it would be difficult to locate incarcerated individuals to write to. I was ready to visit state Department of Corrections' websites and use their inmate locator online tools to find random people I could mail a letter to. However, a quick Google search of 'writing to prisoners' resulted in a list of websites dedicated to listing pen-pal profiles. After clicking around, I discovered the website www.WriteaPrisoner.com. I was surprised at how easy finding potential pen-pals was and at the amount of information listed on each profile. It felt somewhat discomforting and strange to be browsing through profiles on a site that was set up like a dating website. As a result, I randomly selected the first 100 men that

were listed and reached out to them. In my first letter, I mailed information on Dr. Rosenberg's (2003) Four-Part Nonviolent Communication Process and briefly spoke of myself. I told them I was a communication student interested in mindfulness programs behind bars and in prison reform. I sent 100 letters with the assumption that only a small percentage of inmates would respond, but within two weeks I received 51 responses.

Prison pen-palling quickly changed my life. The letters I received were filled with curiosity, joy, pain, and an array of other emotions. Some were short and some were long, but regardless of their content or length, they all expressed gratitude to me for writing to them. Since then, I have continued to write to many of the men who were once part of the project. Our letters are exchanges of our lives at the moment, news, stories, creative work, fun facts, questions, photos from my travels, and resources. Through these letters, I have learned the value for the men in having a connection to the outside world in a setting that is meant to dehumanize people and strip them of their identity. I believe there are many benefits to prison pen-palling, and one of my own pen-pals captures some of this in something he shared:

> I don't think people really understand how big of a deal it really is [prison pen-palling]. Like how it can really bring light into a lot of people's lives in dark places, especially when they need it most. What's even more odd is that although it brings light and hope to people in prison, sometimes it changes the lives of the people out there as well – even more than the people in prison. It's kind of weird. Sort of opens your eyes. You realize that whether in prison or the free world – people are just people. You realize how wrong a lot of the stereotyping and stigmas are. - Jose, Pelican Bay State Prison

Today, I advocate for reintegration through letter writing programs. Due to social media hashtags, such as #snailmail and #prisonpenpals, and my TEDx talk on "Mindfulness Behind Bars" (TEDxTalks, 2017), I find myself occasionally responding to messages from people interested in corresponding with somebody in prison or merely curious about my own exchange of letters. Moreover, I have worked with formerly incarcerated individuals transitioning back to society through the community supervision, education, and employment components of reentry. My correspondence with people behind bars and work with justice-involved individuals sparked an interest in how identity and narrative merge to create pathways towards desistance, redemption, and successful reintegration.

The term desistance refers to cessation of crime and the process of becoming an 'ex-offender' (Bushway, Thornberry, & Krohn, 2003; Laub & Sampson, 2001). Recognized as a process rather than an event, desistance theories reflect the gradual change in behavior (and reduction in criminal activity) that many individuals undertake when moving away from a criminal lifestyle. Research has found several factors contribute to the desistance process, including marriage, employment, education, age maturation, a transformation of identity, and a change in internal narrative (Laub & Sampson, 2001; Maruna, 2001). This thesis seeks to explore some of these topics in regard to prison pen-palling. Specifically, the focus of this thesis is to explore how inmates are presenting themselves online, and how the short narratives they provide contribute to the construction of identity and early stages of the desistance process.

BACKGROUND

For many people, sharing content across a range of social media services is a familiar and integral part of life. Yet, the same cannot be said about the 1.5 million incarcerated men and women in U.S. prisons (Bronson, 2019) who have limited to no access to the web (Hoffman, Dickinson, & Dunn, 2007). Even with strict restriction and regulation, many prisoners have found ways to connect online with friends, relatives, and strangers through contraband cell phones (Grommon, Carter, & Scheer, 2018), friends and family who manage their profiles (J. Smith, 2016), or third parties that link them to social networks (Chammah, 2016). Moreover, organizations, such as Write a Prisoner, Black and Pink, and Meet an Inmate give prisoners the opportunity to list a profile online in hopes of acquiring a pen-pal, a new friend, and a connection to the outside world. For a population often misrepresented and stigmatized, websites like these open up new ways of reconstructing their identity, finding support, and building social capital.

With thousands of profiles listed online, prison pen-palling is an under-investigated area of inquiry. This is true, despite the fact that across the nation, campus groups, churches, and community organizations are organizing and choosing to correspond with incarcerated individuals (Fernandez, 2019; Hoke, 2016; Maloney, 2019; Young, 2010). Further research is particularly important since states like Florida, Indiana, Missouri, Montana, New Mexico, and Pennsylvania have banned prison pen pal soliciting and websites (The Associated Press,

2009; Gresko, 2009; Reutter, 2012). If caught, inmates face disciplinary action (Wilson, 2016) and third parties can potentially receive a fine for listing or updating the inmates' social media accounts (Wiltz, 2017). Despite the lack of evidence on the topic, safety and security are listed as reasons to block such sites. The results of this study can help guide appropriate policy regarding inmate personal ads and pen-palling programs.

For purposes of this thesis, I define prison pen-palling as the exchange of correspondence between an inmate and non-incarcerated individual not previously known to the inmate prior to incarceration. It is important to make clear that WriteAPrisoner.com does not give inmates access to the internet, and it is not a social media platform, since there is no online communication exchanged between the website visitor and the inmate listed. Instead, Write a Prisoner offers website visitors three ways to initiate contact with an inmate listed. One way is to directly send a letter via postal mail to the address listed on the profile. Another option is for website visitors to create an online account with Write a Prisoner, type a message to an inmate, and they print and send the message. The third option is to email an inmate, if the option is available to them. Private prison communication services, such as CorrLinks and JPay, operate email systems that allow inmates to communicate with the outside world. Inmates and outside users pay a fee in order to send or receive emails. For my definition of prison pen-palling, both snail-mail and email forms of communication constitute prison pen-palling.

This thesis explores prison pen-pal soliciting profiles from the website WriteaPrisoner.com. The analysis provided here shows how people behind bars are presenting themselves online and what common themes exist across 100 sampled profiles of incarcerated men. The introductory chapter provides background to how I came to get interested in prison pen-palling and how those experiences shaped the development of this project. Additionally, it provides an overview of prison pen-palling and why research into the topic is important. The chapter concludes with my definition of prison pen-palling and how inmates engage in the process.

Chapter 2 lays the foundation for this thesis. Beginning with mass incarceration and reentry the chapter shifts to an empirical analysis of avenues through which incarcerated individuals maintain contact with family, friends, and community volunteers. Drawing on research from prison visitation, befriending programs, and correspondence I frame how

letters can potentially be beneficial and why the challenges of maintaining contact would lead inmates to seek pen-pals. The subsequent sections in chapter 2 look to research on hope, optimism, isolation, identity, stigma, literacy, and social capital. The sections stem from benefits discussed in the befriending section.

Chapter 3 provides an in-depth description of my methodological approach. It begins with how WriteaPrisoner.com is set-up. Next, it discusses sampling selection and methods used. For this thesis a content analysis and visual analysis were used to fully capture an understanding of how inmates present themselves.

Chapter 4 discusses research findings and themes that emerged in the content and visual analysis. The findings show prisons are seeking various types of support including friendship, romance, non-judgmental, and reentry support. Further, the chapter dives into redemption scripts and how inmates begin to reconstruct their identities and narratives behind bars. Finally, the chapter examines how masculinity arises in the presentation of self and influences language used. The concluding chapter summarizes findings and discusses the limitations and implications of the findings.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

The United States has the highest rate of incarceration in the world. It is home to five percent of the world population, but incarcerates 25 percent of the world's prisoners (Walmsley, 2018). There are 1.5 million people in state and federal prisons (Bronson, 2019), and an estimated 95 percent of them will someday be released (Hughes & Wilson, 2019). According to the United States Department of Justice (Carson & Anderson, 2016), approximately 640,000 people are released annually from state and federal prisons.

The rapid growth in the prison population over the past few decades, alongside changes in policies and public attitudes, have led to a record number of formerly incarcerated people attempting to reintegrate back into the community (Carson & Anderson, 2016). According to The Pew Charitable Trusts (2016) report, from 2010 and 2015, the nation's imprisonment rate fell 8.4 percent with 35 states working to reduce their incarceration rates and California leading the way. Across the nation states have introduced comprehensive bills and legislation to reduce prison populations, cut prison costs, improve public safety, and reduce crime and recidivism.

However, formerly incarcerated individuals face a number of obstacles to successful reintegration, such as debt (including debt related to their incarceration), family issues, homelessness and difficulty finding housing, lack of education, job skills, and social support, physical and mental health problems, stigma of criminalization, substance abuse, and unemployment (Raphael, 2011; Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001). Such obstacles have led to a high recidivism rate, with approximately two-thirds of released prisoners getting re-arrested within three years of release and more than half getting arrested by the end of the first year (Durose, Cooper, & Snyder, 2014). Given that some inmates have a high risk of reoffending, supporting individuals during incarceration and through this transition is crucial in order to

decrease recidivism rates and ensure their success. Multiple studies have found that maintaining social ties to individuals outside of prison while incarcerated may help offenders stop from reoffending and returning to prisons (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2002; Jiang & Winfree, 2006; Tewksbury & DeMichele, 2005).

Previous research suggests that family contact and support aids in reducing recidivism rates and future incarceration costs. In 1972, a California Department of Corrections research report found that there is a positive relationship between parole success and sustaining strong family ties while incarcerated (Holt & Miller, 1972). Researchers found that out of 843 inmates only 50 percent of the inmates who had no contact completed their first year on parole without being arrested, while 70 percent of those with at least three visitors were not arrested within the same period. In addition, the 'loners' were six times more likely to end up back in prison during the first year (Holt & Miller, 1972). These findings were recently validated (Barrick, Lattimore, & Visher, 2014; Cochran, 2014). One longitudinal assessment of 2,617 offenders who were surveyed and interviewed indicates that the strengthening of family relationships throughout the prison sentence lowers the chances that inmates will re-offend (Brunton-Smith & McCarthy, 2016).

Moreover, social support may contribute to desistance process. While research on desistance and recidivism has mostly been independent from one another, emerging research indicates the importance of internal change in offenders (Nakamura & Bucklen, 2014). Nakamura and Bucklen (2014) pinpoint cognitive changes as the main force in desistance and recidivism reduction. They argue, "research on 'what works' indicates that increased opportunities itself would not be sufficient in reducing recidivism if cognitive, motivational change has not taken place" (Nakamura & Bucklen, 2014, p. 392). Social support can transform criminal identities (Cid & Marti, 2017). Further, it can help formerly incarcerated individuals handle the strains and stresses associated with reentry and with the failure to achieve adult conventional roles (Cid & Marti, 2017). Cid and Marti (2017) found that

> although prison was the setting in which most of the participants began to identify a change process and although certain events in their prison lives were reported by participants as relative to their cognitive transformations...these events had a positive impact only when certain external factors—in particular relevant others—catalyzed the change. (p. 1442)

It is evident desistance begins behind bars and is powered by cognitive and identity transformations which can be fueled with social support.

In the following section I discuss research on prison visitation. The majority of research exploring the benefits of prosocial support and ties for incarcerated individuals looks at visitation from family and friends, with emerging research looking at visits from community volunteers. The research on visitation lays the foundation for this research on prison pen-palling, since the same theoretical frameworks are used to explore prison pen-palling. Moreover, I highlight the individual, institutional, and social barriers to visitation to bring attention to why inmates would be seeking support through pen-pal soliciting websites.

PRISON VISITATION

Incarceration disrupts an individual's life and impacts social ties (La Vigne, Cowan, & Brazzell, 2006), and visitation provides a way to maintain social connections with family, friends, and community members (La Vigne, Naser, Brooks, & Castro, 2005). Decades of research indicate that social support, especially visits from family, improve institutional behavior and lower the likelihood of recidivism for inmates (Bales & Mears, 2008; Brunton-Smith & McCarthy, 2016; Cobbina, Huebner, & Berg, 2012; Cochran, 2014; Holt & Miller, 1972; Mears, Cochran, Siennick, & Bales, 2012). A meta-analysis of research on prison visitation's effect on reentry success found that visitation produced a 26 percent decrease in recidivism (Mitchell, Spooner, Jia, & Zhang, 2016). Using data from 7,000 inmates in Florida's Department of Corrections, Bales and Mears (2008) found that any visitation and increased visitation had an effect on reduced recidivism. Interestingly, inmates who reported more visits from spouses had lower recidivism rates while visits from children appeared to increase recidivism rates. Duwe and Clark's (2011) study of 16,420 recently released prisoners in Minnesota also found that prison visits reduced recidivism, although effects varied by type of visitors and the frequency of visits. Specifically, they found that visits from fathers, siblings, in-laws and clergy were the most important in reducing recidivism, while visits from mothers, spouses, and children had less impact (Duwe & Clark, 2011). The researchers speculate visits from spouses and children have less impact and "may be difficult because they create more stress and are often reminders of how their incarceration is preventing them from raising their children or helping provide for their families" (Duwe &

Clark, 2011, p. 290). In addition, the findings suggest that visits from former spouses increased the risk of recidivism. Researchers argue the quality of relationships before incarceration have an effect on prison visitation and recidivism (Atkin-Plunk & Armstrong, 2018). In their study, the quality of relationships prior to incarceration was measured by "the importance of the relationship, the level of warmth and affection received, the amount of support and encouragement received, and the inmate's overall level of satisfaction with the relationship" (Atkin-Plunk & Armstrong, 2018, p. 1513). Taking into consideration these factors it is evident the prison visitation and recidivism relationship is more complex than previously thought.

Previous scholarship suggests that prison visitation helps maintain external social ties during imprisonment, which in turn can help reduce recidivism and improve inmate behavior and post-release outcomes. However, visitation is not something every inmate receives. Tasca (2016) argues that visitation "can be dependent on a host of factors related to family dynamics, institutional barriers, and individual characteristics" (p. 740). Recent statewide studies in Florida (Mears et al., 2012) and Minnesota (Duwe & Clark, 2011) found that only 24 percent and 39 percent of prisoners received one or more visits, perhaps, reflecting how incarceration severs ties. Individual factors that are associated with who gets visited in prison include gender, age, and race and ethnicity. Casey-Acevedo and Bakken (2002) found that women in prison receive visits from family and friends, mostly friends, but not from their children. Further, age plays a role in visitation, with prior research suggesting that younger inmates receive more visits than older inmates (Cochran, Mears, & Bales, 2017). This could be a result of younger inmates still being involved with their family or because their social networks may perceive them as less culpable and vulnerable to prison life than older inmates (Massoglia & Uggen, 2010; Rose & Clear, 2003; Uggen & Wakefield, 2005).

Furthermore, minority groups may experience less visitation because their outside social ties are at a more considerable socioeconomic disadvantage (Cochran et al., 2017). Their social networks may have fewer resources for travel expenses, such as transportation, fuel, lodging, child care, and to take time off work and lose wages (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2002; Christian, 2005; Christian, Mellow, & Thomas, 2006; Fuller, 1993; Hoffman et al., 2007; Tewksbury & DeMichele, 2005). In general, prisoners are likely to have less social connections; therefore, it is possible they have a small number of potential visitors

(Cochran, 2014).There are some exceptions. Adams (1992) argues that Latino inmates receive more social support and visitation due to the tight-knit family structures rooted in Latino culture. Conversely, Cochran, Mears, Bales, and Stewart (2016) found that Latino inmates are housed at a greater distance from home than are Black and white inmates, which can affect the likelihood of prison visitation.

In addition, research suggests other individual factors such as prior record and offense seriousness influences visitation. People incarcerated for repeat offenses or individuals convicted of violent or sex offenses receive fewer visits than inmates with property or drug offenses or probation and parole violations (Cochran et al., 2017). In their examination of who gets visited in prison, Cochran and colleagues (2017) found inmates who are young, female, white or Latino experience the highest amount of visits. In regards to social contexts, researchers found inmates who come from areas with higher prison admission rates and higher levels of charitable giving and altruism experience more visits (Cochran et al., 2017). Notably, they position the disparities in visitation as a 'collateral consequence—a form of additional punishment' (Cochran et al., 2017, p. 560) exceedingly experienced by members of racial and ethnic minorities.

Likewise, families of prisoners experience difficulty visiting prisoners due to institutional barriers. Many inmates are from urban areas but are often housed in rural areas over 100 miles away from their families (Austin & Hardyman, 2004; Holt & Miller, 1972; Tasca, 2016) with an estimated 10 percent living more than 500 miles away (Schirmer, Nellis, & Mauer, 2009). Additional institutional barriers include complex administrative regulations (e.g., proper clothing attire during a visit), costly fees, inability to find or afford childcare, inadequate parking facilities, insensitive staff, insufficient amenities for visitors, intimidating conditions which make visitation difficult for family members, intrusive search procedures, limited child-friendly items and activities, and limited visitation hours (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2002; Christian, 2005; Hoffman et al., 2007; Mumola, 2000; Naser & Visher, 2006; Sturges & Al-Khattar, 2009; Swanson, Chang-Bae, Sansone, & Tatum, 2013; Tewksbury & DeMichele, 2005). The security level of the facility also plays a role as inmates in higher security units have a reduced likelihood of receiving visits (Tasca, 2016). Other barriers include being unable to visit due to criminal records and the undocumented status of visitors (Tasca, 2016).

Studies have consistently found that prisoners who maintain close contact with their family members while incarcerated have better post-release outcomes and lower recidivism rates. However, considering that visits from family and friends may not be feasible for many incarcerated individuals, visits from community members may be as beneficial. Duwe and Johnson (2016) examined the effect of prison visits from community volunteers, mostly clergy and mentors, on offender recidivism. Similar, to Duwe and Clark's (2011) study they found visits from community volunteers reduced the risk of recidivism. In one study (Duwe & Johnson, 2016) visits from community members reduced the risk of recidivism by 25 percent for re-arrest, 20 percent for reconviction, and percent for new offense re-incarceration. When matched to a comparison group (n=418) who did receive visits, but not from community volunteers, Duwe and Johnson (2016) found that inmates who received visits from community volunteers had lower rates of reoffending than the comparison group.

In another study Schuhmann, Kuis, and Goossensen (2018) interviewed 21 inmates who received one-on-one visits from community volunteers. Schuhmann and colleagues (2018) found that the value of the visits was rooted in the harshness of prison life. Visits provided inmates with a human-to-human encounter where they could talk in confidence with a non-judgmental, supportive volunteer and not have to feel like they are 'wearing a mask.' Volunteers provided practical support and offered advice while serving as a role model. Inmates reported feeling peaceful and a restoration of trust and self-esteem through the visiting program (Schuhmann et al., 2018). The results suggest that while visits from friends and family members are important, they may not always be beneficial as found in visits by ex-spouses (Duwe & Clark, 2011).

Several theoretical frameworks can account for these findings. Prison visitation helps create or sustain social relationships which maintain or strengthen social bonds reduce strain, allow for changes labels and identity, and preserves and develops social capital (Agnew, 2006; Bales & Mears, 2008; Christian, 2005; Duwe & Clark, 2011; Maruna, 2001; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Each of these theoretical perspectives suggests that inmate social ties can prevent or reduce criminal behavior, although the way in they do so varies.

In summary, prison visitation provides an avenue through which an inmate can increase his or her hopefulness, motivation, self-esteem, and trust in others (Duncan & Balbar, 2008). Furthermore, visitation can help prevent inmates from adopting a criminal

identity (Clark, 2001; Rocque, Bierie, MacKenzie, 2010). More importantly, maintaining contact with social networks is vital as many reentering individuals depend on family and friends for employment opportunities, financial assistance, and housing needs (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Duwe & Clark, 2011; Visher, La Vigne, & Travis, 2004). While there are benefits to prison visitation, individual, institutional, and social barriers make visiting a rare occurrence for some inmates, and thus befriending programs such as pen-palling are important alternative for some inmates

BEFRIENDING PROGRAMS

In the following section I discuss research on befriending services in the UK. Befriending services offer inmates letters and visits from trained volunteers not known to the individual before their incarceration. There is limited research on prison pen-palling and the existing research does not explore the benefits of correspondence or of having support through a pen-pal. As such, research on befriending services yield the closest insight to the potential impacts of correspondence from a pen-pal.

While there has been limited research regarding prison pen-palling, research on 'befriending' suggests that prison correspondence is critical for improving inmates' incarceration experiences. A UK national partnership of organizations defines 'befriending' as:

> an intervention that is being widely used to address the 'human -to - human' support needs of vulnerable people. It can offer vital support during pivotal or transitional periods in a persons life. . . .For people receiving befriending, the social and emotional support they receive from a befriender can often lead to significant and lasting improvements in their emotional health, wellbeing and quality of life. (Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, 2014)

In the UK there is a well-established tradition of volunteers corresponding and visiting inmates within the prison system known as 'befriending schemes.' These befriending models are facilitated through an organization that recruits, trains, and supports community members. A befriending relationship is not private, and the organization continues to play a role during the length of contact. While befriending models are different from pen-palling, research into befriending services indicates that "long-term befriending of prisoners can help towards successful re-integration into the community and can reduce the likelihood of reoffending" (Rowe, 2012, p. 3).

One organization that runs these befriending services is the New Bridge Foundation. Through their befriending service, they connect men and women in prison to volunteers who write and visit offenders across 80 facilities across the UK. Years of evaluation of New Bridge's Foundation Befriending Service has found positive outcomes. The positive impact of befriending on prisoners includes changes to their wellbeing; improved contact with family, friends, and support organizations; improved self-esteem and confidence; enhanced sense of personal identity; challenging attitudes about life and the future, and reduction in feelings of isolation (Cardoso, 2016; Hales, 2015; Rowe, 2012; Rowe & Kennedy, 2017).

Through questionnaires with prisoners and volunteers, researchers have been able to evaluate the impact of the services on prisoners and review the experience of those involved. Research has found there are four main reasons prisoners apply to the New Bridge services: to write and receive letters and visits; to enhance their support network; to develop a link to the outside world, and; to decrease loneliness, isolation, and depression feelings (Cardoso, 2016). Furthermore, prisoners apply to access non-judgmental support; to have contact with someone outside the prison community; to hear different perspectives; to receive help with building trust; and to gain emotional support (Rowe & Kennedy, 2017). The dominant theme that emerges is prisoners' desire to overcome isolation and loneliness, more by those who mention they have no other contact by mail or in the form of visits (Hales, 2015).

To measure isolation, prisoners were asked if they received letters or visits from anyone other than their New Bridge volunteers. Some inmates report that they do not receive letters or visits, others report receiving letters and fewer report receiving visits (Hales, 2015; Rowe, 2012). Participants report letters and visits that are received are mostly from family members, but also include friends, other prisoners, solicitors and people from other organizations. Further, "In relation to visits and letters there was also the mention of losses through death and divorce and the weakening of other community contacts the longer the person was in custody, which meant for some that they lost all contact with family and friends" (Hales, 2015, p. 9). Hales (2015) notes it was evident from responses that the lack of visits was a result of several barriers including the distance to the prison and aging relatives.

Furthermore, researchers have found befriending services change inmates' attitudes to their offense, changes their behavior in prison, and creates a shift in their thinking to one where the future looks bright (Cardoso, 2016; Hales, 2015; Rowe, 2012; Rowe & Kennedy,

2017). The impact of befriending is notable. Before contacting New Bridge, prisoners typically described feeling depressed, frightened, hopeless, lonely, and unable to trust (Rowe, 2012). However, contact with a New Bridge volunteer had resulted in positive changes in their lives. Befrienders also help promote a positive sense of personal identity for the offender (Cardoso, 2016; Hales, 2015; Rowe, 2012; Rowe & Kennedy, 2017). Participants felt that they were valued as human beings and not defined by their crimes, appearing to be adopting a positive self-identity.

In the surveys, prisoners are asked: "What is the most valuable thing about having a New Bridge Befriender?" Consistently, inmates report receiving letters, knowing someone who is independent of the prison system, the opportunity for long term contact with a volunteer, even if moved, developing a link with the world they will be returning to, receiving visits, having another point of view to test my ideas against, and having a link that may help with my parole applications (Cardoso, 2016; Hales, 2015; Rowe, 2012; Rowe & Kennedy, 2017). It is worth mentioning that some people valued letters more than face-to-face visits. In some cases, prisoners even stated that they did not wish to receive visits, leaving some participants to say that visits were of little value or importance (Rowe & Kennedy, 2017). This is significant, as the difference between Write a Prisoner and the befriending organizations, New Bridge and Prisoners' Penfriends, is that in the UK there is a visiting component. Most research suggests visitations are crucial for inmates to maintain social ties and to reduce the likelihood of recidivism; however, this finding indicates that there is more to understand regarding the benefits of correspondence from a supportive community member.

Interestingly in the 2012 evaluation, respondents supported for up to four years made up 70 percent of the sample. The remaining 30 percent were befriended for five or more years with nine percent having had a connection to the charity for more than ten years. This suggests consistent support and engagement from befrienders (Rowe, 2012). The findings also indicate that New Bridge promotes a link between the offender and the community, indicating increased chances of successful rehabilitation upon release (Rowe, 2012).

One study explored the value of befriending recently released offenders (Rafie, 2016). Rafie (2016) found that while the main aim of befriending is to offer emotional support, befrienders often do more to support their inmate by offering tangible forms of

assistance, such as providing material needs after release and re-connecting incarcerated individuals back with their families. Moreover, the researcher found that the befriending program improves inmates' self- esteem, confidence, and communication skills. More importantly, Rafie (2016) found that befriending creates opportunities for participants to build a new set of social capital and improve their relationship with family members.

Other studies have explored other befriending programs similar to New Bridge Foundation. Convery, Moore, and Wahidin (2014) evaluated the Quaker Connections' Befriending Project at Her Majesty's Prison Maghaberry in Northern Ireland. They found the prisoners' primary reason for joining their befriending service was due to lack of visits. Participants described getting along well with their befriender. In their assessment, one prisoner described the volunteer visitor as his 'carer' while other inmates described the relationship as a friendship (Convery et al., 2014). Another similar study examined Prisoners Penfriends, a small charitable organization in the UK that facilitates and supervises letter writing between inmates and trained volunteers, and found that pen-palling helped prisoners' rehabilitation and wellbeing (Hodgson & Horne, 2015). Benefits described by the 66 prisoners who participated noted relief from isolation, improved self- identity, a mode of self-expression that supports their wellbeing, distraction, happiness, raised hoped for life beyond prison, and self-improvement (Hodgson & Horne, 2015). A few of the imprisoned participants listed joining the group in order to improve their communication and social skills. None of them reported this as a benefit, but the data does suggest that some volunteers may be seeing improvements in prisoners' literacy (Hodgson & Horne, 2015). This is significant as prisoner literacy rates are below average (Shippen, Houchins, Crites, Derzis, & Patterson, 2010).

Furthermore, befriending services impact both the incarcerated participant and the outside volunteer. In Rowe's (2012) evaluation of New Bridge befriending service 90 percent of respondents reported having a greater understanding of prisoners' needs as a result of their voluntary participation in the organization. In another evaluation Hales (2015) found one common theme volunteers shared was the impact the prisoners had on them. A second theme reported on the personal impact of volunteers befriending work was the influence it has on their ways of thinking. Respondents shared statements such as, "Has highlighted the fact that society's attitudes have to change" and "made me aware of injustice within the criminal

justice system" (Hales, 2015, p. 24). Emphasizing the power of letters a prison activist and teacher argues, "the exchange of letters in the context of imprisonment is a profoundly personal and political process, for such letters help to maintain the interpersonal connections that prison too often severs. These interpersonal connections are political because they help to resist the isolation prison imposes on those of us who are incarcerated while also making prison ever-present in the lives of those of us who are free" (Hartnett, Wood, & McCann, 2011, p. 340). These findings suggest that letters are beneficial to people's understanding of incarceration inside and outside of prison.

The impact of exposure to prisoners is important for our criminal justice system. Community members tend to accept negative stereotypical beliefs about justice-involved individuals, such as that they are untrustworthy, unintelligent, and dangerous (Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010), and managers are less willing to employ individuals with criminal records (Pager, 2003). Bazemore and Boba (2007) argue, "The extent to which returning offenders may be expected to be successfully reintegrated is dependent on both the formerly incarcerated person's ability to avoid or resist criminogenic influences linked to recidivism and community capacity for reintegration and receptivity" (p. 29). Boyes-Watson (2004) suggests that there is value in citizen participation in community justice. She argues, "it is important for citizens who do not commit crime to meet and get to know those who do, in order to understand their civic responsibilities in the prevention and reduction of future crime" (Boyes-Watson, 2004, p. 687-688). Considering the fact that people behind bars are typically 'out of sight, out of mind' (Ball, 2011) prison pen-palling provides a way to alter the community's image of people who have been under correctional supervision. In turn, stereotypes and stigma associated with this population can be reduced yielding positive results. For instance, a class project at the University of Miami, Exchange for Change, had students spend a semester exchanging letters with female inmates at Homestead Correctional Institution. One student reported the exchange of letters made her confront her own biases about what she thought about the criminal justice system and who is an inmate (Sayre, 2017).

The most extensive research on the benefits of contact through letters and visits during incarceration emphasizes the importance of social ties for prisoners' rehabilitation and wellbeing. Outside contact helps sustain social bonds, which can help inmates handle the strains and stresses during imprisonment and re-entry while increasing social capital and

contributing to desistance. However, this research was conducted abroad, which means future research can provide an understanding of a similar model in an American context. Additionally, both organizations studied in the UK carefully select and train volunteers before they are allowed to start befriending an inmate, while Write a Prisoner is a public website which gives anybody with internet access interested in corresponding with a prisoner the opportunity to send a letter. In the following section I discuss research on letters in the prison context. Write a Prisoner is a pen-pal website that only offers the opportunity to begin mail exchange, unlike the befriending services which feature a visiting component. As mentioned earlier, some participants in the New Bridge Befriending program report letters as more valuable than visits. While there is little research on the benefits of correspondence the next section discusses their importance in prison.

LETTERS BEHIND BARS

Letters have long been a salient part of the incarceration experience. In their examination of communication policies from 1971-2005 researchers found that the average number of letters inmates send and receive has changed very little over the past 34 years (Hoffman et al., 2007). Tewksbury and DeMichele (2005) found letters is an important means of maintaining contact with inmates. In their survey with 396 visitors to inmates at a medium-security prison, they found nearly 40 percent receive mail from inmates (n =145) and send mail (n = 153) one or more times per week (Tewksbury & DeMichele, 2005, p. 302).

Moreover, Krabill and Aday's (2007) study of female prisoners' social support networks found letter writing is the most common method of communication with loved ones on the outside, followed by phone calls and in prison visits. It is clear letter writing is of utmost value behind bars. As one inmate describes:

> If no one has a phone for the inmate to call, [then] aside from a visit, writing will be the only communication. If an inmate has trouble expressing [himself or herself] verbally, the old trusty written language is the last resort. (Berry, 2014, p. 148).

Barrick et al. (2014) examined the relationship among in-prison social ties (in-person visits, telephone calls, mail correspondence) with family members and friends and perceived family emotional support, post-release social support, and long-term recidivism outcomes for

255 reentering women from six states. In their study, they found mail was the most common type of contact respondents maintained in-prison social ties with family (93 percent) and non-relatives (78 percent) (Barrick et al., 2014, p. 287). Regarding non-family contact, they found phone contact slightly influenced reincarceration, while mail contact and visits were not related with the probability of recidivism. Barrick and colleagues (2014) suggest that "While most prior research has focused on in-prison visits, it is plausible that other forms of social contact may also impact recidivism" (p. 293). Interestingly, across Newbridge's Befriending Service evaluations prisoners rated receiving letters as the number one thing they valued of the befriending service despite the fact they were receiving visits as well and that most of the literature indicates visitation is important for social ties.

Letters allow for people on the outside to provide support and stand in solidarity with people behind bars. By sharing three case studies of their prison activism and pedagogy in action, Hartnett et al. (2011) make a case for different communication strategies in prisons. In it, Wood claims, "Letters from prison offer a hopeful glimpse of the limits of imprisonment, for such communications suggest incarceration can neither stop thought nor prevent words from passing through prison walls" (Hartnett et al., 2011, p. 339). Emphasizing the importance of letters such as Dr. King's "Letter from Birmingham" and George Jackson's *Soledad Brother*, she reminds us that while not everybody is writing for a public audience, letters are still key for the agency of individuals from an oppressed group. Wood (Hartnett et al., 2011) frames letters as both a personal and political act where they serve as tools of interpersonal communication and resistance against state-imposed isolation. Lastly, she notes that, "the path to freedom for many exonerated prisoners in the United States began with a handwritten letter to Innocence Project programs, and that media stories about prison abuses are often triggered by letters prisoners send journalists" (Hartnett et al., 2011, p. 341). The limited research on prison correspondence informs us of the importance of letters behind bars. In the following section I discuss the limitations of prison visitation and correspondence.

RESTRICTIONS ON INMATE–OUTSIDE COMMUNICATIONS

Family contact does have its limitations as prison communication policies have steadily become stricter and as communication costs have increasingly become a burden on inmates and their social networks (Hoffman et al., 2007). Researchers documented correctional institution's policies regarding inmates' visitation, mail correspondence, and telephone calls. Data collected through mailed surveys in 1971, 1981, 1991 and 2005 from state adult maximum security facilities found that prison communication policies are becoming more restrictive on visitation and inmates are taking on more of the expenses for mail correspondence (Hoffman et al., 2007). Telephone usage did get more lenient while leaving families to deal with the burden of costs (Hoffman et al., 2007). In addition, researchers were able to collect information on the internet and e-mail access. Their survey found that correctional facilities prohibit the use of the internet and e-mail access, and that, "This reflects the concern among corrections' officials that inmates may engage in identity theft or a range of other cyber-crimes and attempt to contact victims (Hoffman et al., 2007, p. 55).

Letters have their limitations as prisons have specific mail regulations, and prison officials have been known to tamper with incoming and outgoing mail, have censored, removed, or withheld mail, and inmates are aware they cannot fully disclose themselves knowing correctional officers may read these letters (Farber, 2007). Despite mail restrictions, the Supreme Court has maintained that the First Amendment entitles prisoners to send and receive mail. According to the ACLU National Prison Project (2019), this is, "subject only to the institution's right to censor letters or withhold delivery if necessary to protect institutional security, and if accompanied by appropriate procedural safeguards." For example, in September 2018 Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (PDOC) introduced a ten-million-dollar plan to monitor mail intensely (Norwood, 2019). After reports of contraband and staff and inmates getting sick from unknown substance PDOC no longer lets inmates receive original mail including letters, photographs, and greeting cards (Michaels, 2018). Instead, mail goes to Smart Communications, a private company in Florida, which received the mail, scans it and forwards an electronic copy to the state correctional institution where the inmate resides. Staff at the facility prints a copy and delivers it to the inmate. To no surprise, the

system is problematic with inmates receiving incomplete copies, unreadable copies, and unrecognizable pictures. Inmates have also expressed concern over privacy. Some inmates have gone as far as to ask family not to send mail because of concern about delays, poor quality and privacy (Michaels, 2018). Arkansas Department of Corrections and Virginia Department of Corrections have similar policies, but mail is scanned at the facility (Michaels, 2018). Despite restrictions on correspondence, inmates are still seeking pen-pals for social support. The next section discusses the few studies exploring prison pen-palling and prison personal ads.

PRISON PEN-PALLING

As a result of visiting barriers, high phone call prices (Laird, 2018), and strained relationships prisoners have sought alternatives ways of connecting with people on the outside and building new sets of social networks. Prison pen-palling has been one method facilitated by the internet. A quick Google search of "prison pen pals" produces results of websites with names like WriteaPrisoner.com, FriendsBeyondtheWall.com, MeetanInmate.com, and BlackandPink.com. Each website lists up to thousands of profiles with some emphasizing friendship and support and others focusing on romantic relationship building.

Prison pen-palling is currently an under-investigated area of research with only a few studies done on the topic. One study analyzed 78 female and 78 male profiles from the website www.MeetAnInmate.com to examine prison pen-pal narratives, and understand the content of inmate profiles and their motivation for joining (Cooley, 2015). Cooley (2015) found seven common themes in how prisoners presented themselves on their profiles and their expectations of their partner and pen-pal. Two themes comprised prisoners' lifestyle in prison and outside of prison, which included active, cultural, family, and religious activities. The third theme was the prisoners' motivation for joining the pen-pal website. Responses included for friendship, a romantic connection, or both. The fourth theme included prisoners' description of what they were looking for in their potential writer's personality. Writer's personalities fell into categories of somebody honest, fun-loving, and kind. In regards to physical attributes, the fifth theme, prisoners' described specific physical traits or sexual prowess preferences. Finally, the sixth and seventh theme involved descriptions of the

prisoners' personality and physical attributes, which also included being honest, fun-loving, kind, or sexual (Cooley, 2015).

Weichselbaum (2015) does note that "Prison personals are not explicitly about friendship or flirtation." No academic research known to the researcher is available on who is writing to prisoners and what is exchanged. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that correspondence from pen-pals varies in support and value. Many pen-pals on the outside report feeling they have a positive impact on their lives (S. J. Evans, 2015). In an interview with Arlen Bischke, founder of Meet- An-Inmate, Bischke shared a story of how he notified a jail nurse and a local newspaper reporter about his female pen-pal's claims of sexual abuse by two correctional officers. It prompted an investigation which led to their arrest and resignation. Bischke stated, "Transparency in prisons is important. This makes me feel like I am doing a service to the public" (Weichselbaum, 2015).

Additionally, prison pen-palling can also help with recovery and sobriety (James, 2016). Pen-pals send materials on Alcoholic Anonymous and Narcotic Anonymous. In one case a woman's prison pen-pal, a recovering addict, was not getting access to programs due to his long term sentence. After she wrote a letter, the warden allowed the inmate to enroll in the limited spaced program (James, 2016). Some pen-pals write to specific groups of offenders such as lifers serving time for marijuana-related offenses (Margolin, 2017), LGBTQIA inmates (Sarrubba, 2019), or veterans (KVAL, 2018). Other pen-pals use the letters as opportunities to write about meditation, yoga, and personal growth (Ayrton, 2018). On the other hand, prisoners write about harsh punishment, horrible conditions, and some claim they are innocent (Maloney, 2019). While prison pen-palling may be beneficial for inmates, critics have shamed and banned the practice. In the following section I discuss the legal status of prison pen-palling in the United States. I draw attention to the public and academic scrutiny prison personal ads have come under.

LEGAL STATUS OF PRISON PEN-PALLING

The legal debate over the degree to which prisoners should be permitted to communicate using social media websites and third parties has arisen in a few states with more considering policy changes. For instance, Florida, Indiana, Missouri, Montana, New Mexico, and Pennsylvania have already banned the use of pen-pal websites to request

correspondence for inmates, citing abuse, extortion, and misrepresentation as reasons for doing so. Texas is considering a ban on sex offender prison pen-pal ads (Silver, 2016). Additionally, two online petitions have surfaced calling for senators, governors, and federal and state correctional facilities to stop allowing inmates access to online pen-pal websites (Change.org, n.d.a, n.d.b). Claims of abuse and fraud have been cited and sensationalized (The Associated Press, 2009; Lieb, 2007).

In 2011, a three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit upheld a ruling against prison pen-pal soliciting in Florida Department of Corrections (FDOC) (Hilden, 2012). The reasons for the pen-pal solicitation rule were introduced on claims of fraud, although FDOC was not able to provide any evidence of such fraud (Hilden, 2012). The plaintiffs, Joy Perry who manages two pen-pal services, and Write a Prisoner, argued against the policy on First Amendment grounds; however, in this case, penalogical interests won. Interestingly, in the same claim, the U.S. Court of Appeals ruled organizations could match prisoners to pen-pals, but that prisoners could not solicit pen-pals themselves. Some legal analysts argue the Eleventh Circuit should have required evidence of fraud before disavowing pen-pal solicitation entirely. After all, "Pen-pal arrangements can provide prisoners with vital hope and a precious connection to the outside world; they may also pose some dangers, but those dangers can be warned against" (Hilden, 2012).

Family members of victims and survivors of crime have expressed condemnation over pen-pal soliciting websites (Sylvain, 2012). Pennsylvania's Speaker of the House, Mike Turzai, also expressed outrage stating, "We need to shut this down because of the pain that it's really inflicting on the victims and their families" (Griffin, 2016). It is important to note that, pen-pal websites do provide an avenue for inmates to manipulate the public. In the early 1970s, many gay activists and advocates promoted prison pen-palling as a form of outreach and support. A decade later reports of inmates pretending to be gay or lesbian to scam writers for money and gifts surfaced leading to a decrease of prison pen-pal projects (Kunzel, 2008). Other reports have surfaced of inmates conning individuals for large amounts of money (The Associated Press, 2004; L. Smith, 1990). Such scams have led the U.S. Postal Inspection Service to warn people of prison pen-pal money order scams. A page on their website tells readers what signs to be aware of and the "unusual scheme" in which prisoners attempt to lure pen-pals with letters (United States Postal Inspection Service, n.d.)

However, the findings in a qualitative and cross-sectional design study of 156 inmates using the pen-pal website www.meetaninmate.com found that some prisoners are merely looking for a social connection (Cooley, 2015). Additionally, these fraud schemes may not be as widespread as suggested. As a result, online petitions in support of pen-pal programs and in opposition to policies that punish incarcerated individuals for writing have also been initiated (Change.org, n.d.c, n.d.d). While prisoner profiles should be met with skepticism, Tewksbury (2005) examined the accuracy of the information listed on websites that post-prison inmates personal ads and found many are not as deceptive or manipulative as society at large may think. He compared data from three different pen-pal websites (Inmate.com, WriteAPrisoner.com, and Inmate- Connection.com) to state correctional department websites that provide information on specific inmates for a sampling size of 1,051 cases. His findings reveal that "nearly one third (31.5 percent, n=331) of all inmate personal ads contain at least one inaccurate reporting of three pieces of basic personal information (age, release date, conviction offense)" (Tewksbury, 2005, p. 33). Of these, only two inmates (.02 percent) inaccurately reported all three pieces of information, 52 inmates (4.9 percent) inaccurately reported two of the three pieces of information, and 26.4 percent (n=277) provided inaccurate information of one of the three. Conviction offense and release date were more likely to be inaccurately reported than age. Almost two-thirds of prisoner personal ads verified on in this investigation did not provide inaccurate data, which left him to answer his research question, "Do inmates tell the truth about themselves?" by concluding "some do, sometimes" (Tewksbury, 2005, p. 34).

It should be pointed out that with the rise of computer-mediated communication, self-presentation is not always accurate, honest, or reliable, whether you are incarcerated or not. Personal profiles can be seen by a wide and anonymous audience leading online users to carefully and strategically present themselves on various platforms. As Gonzales and Hancock (2008) highlight, "The internet provides certain features that may influence the nature of self-presentation in important ways. For example, relative to offline self-presentations, self-presentation online is more easily modified, which allows for the presentation of more selective versions of the self" (p. 168). Research suggests that people are constantly engaging in computer-mediated deception for self-serving purposes and that

22 to 25 percent of social interactions are deceptive (George & Robb, 2008). However, we do not hold the public to such scrutiny like people behind bars.

In the previous sections I looked at research into prison visitation, befriending services, letters, and prison pen-palling. Research on befriending services has found participation in these services reduces feelings of isolation, raises inmates hope, helps change their identity, and raises social capital. In the following sections I look at research into these topics in the criminal justice context.

Psychological Effects of Isolation

In the following sections I explore themes that emerged in the befriending literature. Participants in the New Bridge evaluations report that their befrienders reduce feelings of isolation, increase their hope for life beyond prison, help develop a positive sense of personal identity, and increase their social capital. These themes are further analyzed as they related to incarcerated individuals.

Several studies well document the strains of social isolation. For example, a study of long-term inmates found that inmates who felt more isolation reported feeling higher psychological distress (Richards, 1978). Liebling's (1993) research on prisoner suicide identified social isolation as the main factor to inmate self-harm. Loneliness in incarcerated populations is associated with increased rates of suicidal ideation and behavior, depression, and hopelessness (Brown & Day, 2008). Similarly, a study by Bonner and Rich (1990) found that vulnerability factors such as depression, hopelessness, and social alienation paired with jail stress was related to suicide ideation among inmates. Further, researchers have found that depressed and lonely men in prison have more problematic health conditions, illnesses, or diseases (Merten, Bishop, & Williams, 2012).

Reducing feelings of isolation improve inmates' emotional wellbeing. Merten and colleagues (2012) suggest that "improving inmates' internal state can reduce the incidence of illness and disease among older male offenders and associated healthcare costs" (p. 275). Liebling's (1993) interviews with inmates who had attempted suicide found they had fewer friends among fellow prisoners and "received fewer visits, wrote fewer letters, and missed specific people (family members or mates) more" (p. 393). In a study that examined the relationship between emotions and physical and psychological wellbeing among inmates,

researchers found that inmates who experienced negative emotions such as anxiety, regret, and sadness, reported more psychological and physical complaints – having somebody to share their emotions with served as a coping strategy to increase both psychological and physical health (Van Harreveld, Van der Pligt, Claassen, & Van Dijk, 2007). Some research emphasizes the importance of visitation because of the isolation inherent in the incarceration experience.

Moreover, according to Adams' (1992) review of inmate adjustment, social isolation during imprisonment is a critical challenge for prisoners. The psychological effects of isolation and incarceration are compounded by the 'emotional geography' of prison (Crewe, Warr, Bennett, & Smith, 2014). The emotional climate of prison is one of violence and mutual distrust. Inmates often contribute to a culture of machismo and engage in rigorous emotion management tactics. Researchers argue male prisoners engage in these strategies 'to re-establish his sense of masculine self-esteem' (Crewe et al., 2014, p. 61) or for power and status, which in turn, serve as survival mechanisms. In Crewe and colleagues (2014) study they note that in interviews with prisoners, "most often pointed to the protective functions of emotional self-control—the risk that displays of fear or hurt would be interpreted as signs of weakness, which could leave prisoners open to ridicule and exploitation" (p. 62). In order to protect themselves and not appear vulnerable, inmates must 'front' or 'wear a mask.' In their study, inmates reported that they 'locked up' or 'blocked off' their feelings (Crewe et al., 2014). While their research suggests these emotional management tactics vary by locations within prisons, prison spaces are still heavily hardened masculine spaces. The lack of emotional expression due to these masculine norms can be offset by prison correspondence from a supportive community member. Pen-palling can provide a space for inmates to express emotions they traditionally have to suppress to survive in prison. Inmates can find a trustworthy friend who can serve as an emotional outlet and escape from prison life.

Incarceration is a life-altering event that increases feelings of isolation and diminishes a sense of hope. Fear of one's safety and isolation experienced in prison does not stimulate much of a sense of hope (White, Schimmel, & Frickey, 2002). Research makes clear imprisonment takes away inmates' autonomy and freedom while weakening relationships with family and friends and feelings of hopefulness (Merten et al., 2012). Merten and colleagues (2012) argue "that the health of prison inmates is dependent upon how they value

and emotionally feel about life" (p. 276). In their study, inmates who reported a higher sense of hope reported fewer feelings of depression and loneliness. In the following section I look at hope and optimism behind bars and its potential for post-release outcomes.

HOPE AND OPTIMISM

Hope is connected to a wide assortment of positive results, including academic performance and physical and psychological wellbeing (Cheavens, Feldman, Gum, Michael, & Snyder, 2006; Snyder et al., 2002). In prison, hope lies in the future and inmates prospects after release. In the examination of Prisoners Penfriends, researchers found that 54 percent of prisoners in their study said that their contact with their pen friend made them feel more positive about their prospects following release from prison (Hodgson & Horne, 2015). Hodgson and Horne (2015) discuss how this could either be a natural consequence of having contact with the outside or as a result of the change in self-perception and increased confidence due to being accepted by their pen pals. This is important, since research on the narratives of 30 prisoners preparing for release through interviews and questionnaires found that, "From the interviews it appeared that a positive outlook on the future was one of the elements that set apart prisoners who were 'doing well' from those who were 'just doing time'" (Van Ginneken, 2015, p. 11). While prisoners in the one group were getting by in prison, they were negative about their capacity to stop offending, and they lived in quiet desperation. On the other hand, prisoners who were doing well appeared to have found purpose in prison life and were more enthusiastically preparing for release. Van Ginneken (2015) found that hope among the prisoners who were doing well consisted of three components: goal-oriented thoughts (the positive things someone would like to achieve); pathways to achievements (plans about how these goals can be achieved); and agency thoughts (a motivation to achieve these goals as well as a belief in one's ability to reach them).

Moreover, research has found positive aspirations and plans for the future, along with a sense of hope, relate to participation in prison programs, greater contact with family, and increased potential to handle the strains and stresses of imprisonment and reentry (Burnett & Maruna, 2004; LeBel, Burnett, Maruna, & Bushway, 2008; Visher & O'Connell, 2012). Maruna (2001) found that individuals who desisted from crime after release had high levels

of hope and optimism, and a positive attitude. Research has found optimism regarding the future as being related to the development of plans relating to employment, pursuing education, having children, and establishing closer social relationships (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002). These results validate other research showing inmates' motivation and optimism regarding the future to be related to reestablishing family ties and to the desire to be a good parent along with finding employment, housing, avoiding the risk of reoffending, and to be perceived as a valuable person (Carvalho, Capelo, & Nuñez, 2018; Visher & O'Connell, 2012). Overall, research suggests that hope and optimism are essential for rehabilitation and to generate new goals (Vignansky, Addad, & Himi, 2018). Research has also found changes in identity play a role in prison and during reentry. In the next section I look at identity, stigma, and social capital for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals.

IDENTITY, NARRATIVES, STIGMA, AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

In 1940, Clemmer presented the idea of prisonization, the process of inmates adopting "in greater or less degree . . . the folkways, mores, customs, and general culture of the penitentiary" (p. 299). Wellford (1967) later characterized prison culture's inmate code, as "a series of conduct norms that define proper behavior for inmates" (p. 198). Since the norms and values considered acceptable among prisoners clash with societal values, practices considered unacceptable by society everywhere might be encouraged by the prison culture. Becoming prisonized or acculturated to the inmate code involves the adoption, to a greater or lesser degree, of a convict or "thug" identity. This may be a result of the process in which community connections weaken, and the prisoner begins to identify more with the prison culture and internalize the label.

For a population often separated and stigmatized, pen-palling websites open up new ways for inmates to manage this prison institutionalization. This is particularly important since long term prisoners face many identity challenges (J. Frank & Gill, 2015). In a study with 13 prisoners who had served an average of 14 years behind bars and whose ages ranged from 29-60 years, researchers examined problematic integration and prisoner identity. Researchers were able to organize, code, and analyze data from interviews with individual prisoners, focus groups, and reflection journals to understand how inmates communicate

their identity. They suggest many inmates initially adopt the convict label with pride, but as their sentences progress they reach a point of enlightenment. Their newfound maturity, moral identity, and transformation clash with the reality that the prison system and society will still look at them as a convict. Despite experiencing drastic transformation, they believe nobody would view them as reformed (J. Frank & Gill, 2015). Labeling theorists argue this impacts formerly incarcerated individuals as the social stigma they experience is "a recipe for failure and reoffending" (Kelly, 2010, p. 491).

Developing narratives that counter social and media-driven stereotypes can impact justice-involved individuals' identity and stigma. Prison writers demand space for identity narratives that are self rather than media authored. In an analysis of women's prison and jail writing workshops Jacobi (2011) argues:

> While there is much to be gained individually by situating writing primarily as expression and emotional release, there is equally as much to be gained from understanding composition and language use as tools for reclaiming control and power over one's life and future beyond the usual rhetoric of individual responsibility and rehabilitation. (p. 45)

Stanford (2010) frames writing as resistance in its power to foster "a making and remaking of selves despite state attempts to confine, fix, and stabilize" and through the creation of a 'we' that "disrupts the individualistic discourse and practice on which any system of oppression depends" (p. 165). In his work with medical patients, A. Frank (2013) calls this the *restitution narrative*. The restitution narrative is, "a plot of being well, getting sick, having treatment and being restored to an acceptable version of life before illness, with scars of disease being minimized or concealed" (A. Frank, 2016, p. 13). For an ill person this is a process where they minimize the effects of their illness and make sense of their experience through discourse and a story. The restitution narrative is the story people tell in which they go from an ill body towards recovery and normalcy (A. Frank, 2013). A. Frank (2013) suggests storytelling helps restore individuals and make sense of their bodies, illness, and transformation, or in other words it is the script of the 'wounded storyteller.'

Similarly, formerly incarcerated individuals adopt a 'wounded healer' identity and script (LeBel, Richie, & Maruna, 2015). For formerly incarcerated individuals the wounded healer role involves helping others, especially those who are stigmatized (LeBel et al., 2015). The role of the desisting wounded healer carries certain characteristics, such as increased

prosocial associations and behavior, a sense of agency, improved personal identity, and a sense of meaning, purpose, and significance (LeBel et al., 2015). LeBel and colleagues (2015) found the wounded healer role helps formerly incarcerated persons reconcile a criminal past, and is "positively related to perceiving less personal stigma, prosocial attitudes and beliefs, active coping strategies, psychological well-being, and satisfaction with life" (p. 116). This finding is important as it suggests that adopting the role of a wounded healer can act as a management strategy to combat stigma and exclusion (Maruna & LeBel, 2009). In restitution narratives, people with an illness achieve recovery. In desistance narratives, people with criminal records achieve desistance. Both are scripts of transformation and help to manage stigma and reverse labeling (LeBel et al., 2015).

A stigma is any perceived personal, physical, or social characteristic that leads to rejection by a social group and a perception of a 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1963). As a group, prisoners remain the most 'vilified, marginalized and excluded' in society (McNeill & Weaver, 2010). The pervasiveness of stigma associated with justice-involved individuals is well-documented (Owens, 2009; Pager, 2003; Pettit & Western, 2004). A longitudinal study on the effect of stigma on criminal offenders found "that believing others hold negative stereotypes led to agreement with stereotypes, which led to acceptance of those stereotypes as personally descriptive" (Moore, Tangney, & Stuewig, 2016, p. 218). Isolation as a result of stigmatized identities has detrimental effects on current and former prisoners' wellbeing. This "lethal combination of stigma, social exclusion, social learning, temptation, addiction, lack of social bonds, and dangerously low level of human and social capital" can make desisting from crime and successfully reintegrating back into society challenging (Barlow & Maruna, 2012, p. 136).

Overcoming stigma is a critical factor to successful reintegration (Rose & Clear, 2003; Travis, 2005). Stigma can threaten social identity (Major & O'Brien, 2005); however, the development of a pro-social identity helps challenge internalized stigma and external exclusion (Best, 2016). Researchers argue this has multiple implications for formerly incarcerated people who from the point of entry into the system until their eventual release back into society, face social stigmas that often limit opportunities to acquire positive social and human capital (Winnick & Bodkin, 2008). There is little research on formerly incarcerated individuals' stigma management strategies. One exception is Opsal (2011), who

found women behind bars work on socially valued versions of their selves by refusing to accept stigma, using neutralized techniques such as condemning their condemners, insisting that they have become 'different' people, and emphasizing culturally desirable social identities, such as mother. Researchers argue the use of humanizing and respectful language can aid in the reduction of stigma and discrimination (Tran et al., 2018). Prison pen-pals have the potential to help incarcerated individuals create new identities and narratives while reducing stigma.

Furthermore, pen-pals can help create social capital. In an evaluation of the Singapore Care Association Befriending Program, Rafie (2016) in her study found that the service creates opportunities for participants to build a new set of social capital and improve their relationships with family members. Thirteen of the 15 respondents received some form of assistance from their befriender's social networks. Additionally, the befriending program acts as a stepping stone for the formerly incarcerated individuals to build up a new social network for themselves. When participants became a significant part of their befriender's lives the relationship itself provided capital which they could activate. As illustrated below, two respondents in the evaluation were able to meet with community organization through their befrienders' extensive social networks to get specific forms of assistance.

> When I lost my IC or when I have problem in securing housing, my befriender suggested to bring me to one of the Malay ministers whom he knows personally to help me get a subsidized rate. (Rafie, 2016, p. 14)
>
> My befriender invited me for carnivals and a few Grassroots activities and meet a lot of people that are different from my previous life. And I event met an MP from the Grassroots activity. When I was about to be released, he was worried I do not have a place to stay so he started to look for housing alternatives for me like halfway houses etc. (Rafie, 2016, p. 14)

In these cases, the befriender acts as a link to external networks and sources of information. Through the befrienders' networks formerly incarcerated individuals are also able to connect with people who otherwise would not be part of their social circle and help them acquire new pro-social hobbies and activities. As mentioned by the respondents above, the befriending program creates opportunities for them to meet new people which in turn help keep them away from negative influences. It creates opportunities for the participants to build social trust in other people who do not mind accepting them back into the community.

Social capital benefits incarcerated befrienders by helping create an external network, and also benefits their psychological wellbeing. Rivlin, Fazel, Marzano, and Hawton (2012) sought to understand more about the causes and prevention of prisoner suicides by studying 19 incarcerated men in England who were survivors of near-lethal suicide attempts. Rivlin and colleagues (2012) found that social capital is associated with suicide attempts. Inmates who had lowers levels of social support were more likely to attempt to take their life. In regards to social networks, researchers found those making near-lethal suicide attempts were more likely to report "none or few close or good friends outside prison" and more "close or good friends living or working inside prison" than those who had not attempted suicide (Rivlin et al., 2012). In other words, relationships on the inside do not serve as a factor against suicide attempts. The finding suggests that an inmate's social capital is enhanced through social support and with a connection to the outside world. These connections may be significant for prisoners' emotional and psychological wellbeing while incarcerated.

Correspondence with a supportive community member has other benefits. In one New Bridge Befriending Service evaluation volunteers reported an improvement in inmates' literacy and writing skills. Walker-Dalhouse, Sanders, and Dalhouse (2009) analyzed a university and middle-school partnership where they suggest, "Pen pal writing can provide valuable learning experiences for students even though it does not involve direct instruction in writing. It can provide students with language skills, social skills, and an appreciation for cultural diversity" (p. 339). In a similar vein, a study that connected adult ESL students with volunteer English native speakers, researchers found the students were able to develop their writing skills through pen-palling while simultaneously learning about the culture, grammar, language structure, punctuation, and spelling (Larrotta & Serrano, 2012). In this section I explored the role of identity changes and narrative in reducing stigma and increasing social capital. In the next section, I explain the theoretical perspectives that guide my understanding for potential benefits of prison correspondence.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Various theoretical perspectives can help explain the relationship between family contact and reduced recidivism and serve as a framework for this research study. For instance, under social bond theory prison visits can strengthen or sustain social bonds serving

as a mechanism for crime prevention. Social bond theory suggests that attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief deter individuals from engaging in crime. Maintaining social bonds and ties to the outside world are essential while in prison since the theory assumes the relationship must be sustained over time in order to deter criminal behavior (Hirschi, 1969). The strength of these relationships can provide both social control and support that can be applied during imprisonment and post-release as former prisoners deal with the barriers and challenges to successful reentry.

Furthermore, strain theory provides another perspective to which to look at family contact and social support. General strain theory proposes that the lack of coping mechanisms leads to anger and frustration, which leads to crime (Agnew, 1992). If this is the case, then family bonds and social support can help ease the strains related to incarceration and later re-entry. The start for envisioning such an impact stems from the perception that prison involves numerous hardships (Sykes, 1958), including the potential loss of social ties that inmates had before imprisonment (Adams, 1992). As prisoner accounts reflect, one of the focal worries that inmates express is the disconnection from the social networks which they were a part of (Bales & Mears, 2008). From a general strain theory perspective visitation of pen-palling communication may reduce the feelings of frustration, hopelessness, and loss related with having one's connections to family, friends, and the community cut (Bales & Mears, 2008; Maruna, 2001). At the same time, it might give, as Hairston (1988) has contended, a source of support for coping with and surviving prison especially in the absence of positive stimuli. For instance, it can serve as a coping mechanism for inmates by reducing their stress which in turn can lower their chances of criminal behavior.

Theories of desistance that focus on identity and narrative have emerged as explanations for the cessation of crime. Identity theories of desistance suggest that for social control practices to affect behavior, the offender must first adopt a pro-social identity. This implies changes in social and structural support without changes in identity are unlikely to be effective (Giordano et al., 2002; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Vaughan, 2007). Both of these factors are necessarily involved in change. To contribute to this process research has found that those offenders who appear to be desisting engage in a ‘rebiographing’ of their lives (Maruna, 2001) which reframes their past criminal lifestyle in a way that fits their current pro-social identity (Giordano et al., 2002; King, 2013; LeBel et al., 2008; Paternoster

& Bushway, 2009). This rebiographing of their lives is the narrative theory of desistance and is, "fundamentally one of 'narrative repair' of spoiled or stigmatized identities, wherein desisting individuals 'mine' their past experiences for evidence of moral agency and recast negative experiences as redemptive suffering" (Stone, 2016, p. 957).

Maruna's (2001) seminal work based on the Liverpool Desistance Study found five common themes in the rewriting of one's narrative. The themes encompassed: a 'core self' or 'real me', attributing negative behaviors to other characteristics or making excuses and justifications; a comparison to 'real criminals' in order to appear to adopt conventional norms, redemptive suffering, and a rewriting of their narrative that helped them make sense of their life. Maruna (2001) found that individuals who had desisted from crime told a 'redemption script.' The rhetoric of redemption includes themes of hopefulness about one's own ability to overcome challenges, a desire to contribute to altruistic causes, and a belief in one's true, good self. On the other hand, persisting offenders told a 'condemnation script' in which they portrayed themselves as vulnerable to higher forces and therefore 'doomed to deviance' (Maruna, 2001, p. 74).

In the sections above I provided an analysis on prison visitation, befriending programs, and prison pen-palling. I followed it with sections on themes that arose in the befriending services literature. I then provided a description on the theories that are used to explore prison pen-pal soliciting profiles and can help explain why inmates are seeking social support through this medium. Before chapter 2, research method, I summarize this research in the concluding paragraph.

CONCLUSION

Letters allow for people on the outside to provide support and stand in solidarity with people behind bars. Although visits and phone calls are an important means by which inmates maintain relationships, the barriers and obstacles of them can make them costly and rare. As a result, letters remain a vital connection to the outside world. In their examination of communication policies from 1971-2005 researchers found that the average number of letters inmates send and receive has changed very little over the past 34 years (Hoffman et al., 2007). This is significant as snail mail is becoming an antiquated form of communicating for many on the outside, and the internet and e-mail have become the more conventional

mediums. Not only are letters still being sent and received to and from prisons, but with the growth of the internet, inmates are now able to solicit pen-pals from anywhere in the world through third parties. General strain theory and social bond theory have informed us that social support aids in reducing recidivism, but we have understood it from a familial standpoint.

With the growth of these prison pen-pal websites, the benefits of support can be expanded to include pen-pals. The potential benefits are reflected in the work of New Bridge's Befriending Services, Prisoners Penfriends, and Quaker Connections' Befriending Project volunteer programs where improved wellbeing, hope for life after prison, relief from isolation, and more are reported by prisoners as benefits of these services. Changes in identity are commonly cited. Notably, Maruna (2001) calls on criminal justice policies and programs that assist offenders in the development of a pro-social identity. Meanwhile, states in the US have moved forward to ban pen-pal soliciting. Futures areas of research should explore the impact of correspondence and pen-pal programs for inmates. In the following chapter, I explain my methodological process. In chapter 4, I discuss my research findings. Chapter 5 offers a discussion on the relevance of my findings, limitations, and implications.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODS

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What common themes exist on prison pen-pal soliciting profiles?
- What are inmates' motivation for joining Write a Prisoner?
- What levels of support are inmates' seeking in pen-pals?
- How do inmates express desistance and changes in identity through their prison pen-pal soliciting profiles?
- How do inmates perform masculinity in prison and how is that reflected on their personal ads?

OVERVIEW

The goal of the current study was to explore inmates' pen-pal soliciting profiles. There are two primary sources of data in this analysis: "about me" statements from inmate pen-pal profiles and profile images from www.WriteAPrisoner.com. Since the study was not intended to count, measure, or provide statistically representative data qualitative methods and visual analysis were determined to be the best approaches to answer these questions. A qualitative approach was useful since the study was concerned with developing and furthering an understanding of pen-pal soliciting websites and inmates' participation in them. This method revealed representations of inmates' feelings, motivations, and perceptions on the website. Specifically, a qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the sampled prisoners' profiles. There are three approaches to qualitative content analysis: conventional, directed, or summative (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). A directed content analysis was chosen as the most appropriate research method for this study. A direct content analysis begins with relevant research findings or a theory to set initial codes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Previous research from Cooley (2015), Maruna (2001), and on befriending services in the UK

(Cardoso, 2016; Hales, 2015; Rowe, 2012; Rowe & Kennedy, 2017) helped to identify key concepts and determine the initial coding scheme.

The selected texts were read and highlighted for predetermined codes. Themes that emerged within the text and that were not categorized within the initial coding scheme were given a new code for further analysis and to determine whether they represented a new category of if they could be collapsed into an existing code. To increase trustworthiness of coding process the data was first read multiple times before coding began. The main strength of this approach is that it lends credibility to the existing theory and findings. However, it is limited in that data was approached with some bias, since the evidence selected were supportive of prison visitation, befriending, and pen-palling.

There is a lack of research on prison correspondence and prison pen-palling. Cooley's (2015) research is one of the few studies that explored the topic and looked into trends within online inmate profiles. However, this quantitative study fails to capture the lived experiences and meanings represented in the profiles. Further, Cooley's (2015) study focused on www.meet-an-inmate.com, which does not feature as many men and women as www.WriteaPrisoner.com, and it does not include the level of information Write a Prisoner's profiles do.

In the next section I discuss why I chose Write a Prisoner as the pen-pal website for my analysis. I discuss how profiles are presented, how the website is set-up for online visitors, and how inmates have their profiles listed online. Next, I discuss my sampling approach and demographics of my sample. Finally, I discuss the process for my data and photo analysis.

SITE SELECTION

The sampling population was drawn from inmates listed on the site WriteaPrisoner.com. WriteaPrisoner.com was chosen as the pen-pal website from which to draw and select profiles because it provides detailed information on each inmate, has a high number of profiles, and claims to have a high number of online visitors. Each profile includes a picture or pictures, a 250-word "about me" section, and the address to the institution they are housed at. It also includes their incarceration information, including the inmate's earliest release date, latest release date, how long they have been incarcerated for, and what they

were convicted of. Write a Prisoner claims they verify incarceration details with the inmate's respective Department of Corrections. More details may include their astrological sign, date of birth, hometown, marital status, race, religion, sexual orientation, gender, and even color of eyes and hair. Further, it includes whether the inmate is willing to correspond overseas, if they are interested in furthering their education, and if they are seeking legal help or prayer partners. Recently the website added the names of high school and colleges the inmate attended, and if they have served in the military.

Furthermore, their database allows visitors to narrow down their search in several ways. Online visitors can search inmates by gender, age, location, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, years served, whether they are seeking a pen-pal or legal help, and to search for inmates on death row, serving a life sentence, or willing to correspond overseas. Results can be displayed by newest listings, recently updated, age, or randomly sorted. In addition, Write a Prisoner allows users to search potential pen-pals by alphabetical listing of profiles, inmates celebrating birthdays, inmate legal profiles, inmates not receiving mail, inmate counseling profiles, inmate educational profiles, inmate employment profiles, inmate housing profiles, inmate art gallery, inmate blogs, and inmate poetry.

It is important to note how these profiles are listed. Inmates have two ways of getting their profile online. The first is through a brochure, which inmates can request after hearing of the site through word of mouth or through an advertisement. The brochure can also be printed and mailed by a friend or relative. In turn, the inmates fill it out and mail it to Write a Prisoner with a $50 annual membership fee. The second option is to have a friend or family member create the profile and pay the subscription fee. Readers can typically tell what method was utilized by the use of first or third person in the "about me" statement. The majority of profiles listed online are submitted directly by inmates and in this study every sampled profiled was written in the first person.

SAMPLING

The website WriteaPrisoner.com was used to identify inmates for this study. As of April 7, 2019, there were 9,705 profiles listed on WriteaPrisoner.com, with inmates listed in nearly every state in the United States. To obtain my sample, I first used purposive sampling to focus on male inmates in the state of California. Men were selected since they account for

the majority of the incarcerated population and the number of profiles listed online. The state of California was selected due to the researcher's familiarity and involvement with prison populations in this state. Further, there is a high number of inmates housed in Administrative Segregation Units and on death row in California, which could produce varying accounts of incarceration experiences and isolation compared to inmates in less restricted housing using units

After selecting male as the gender and California as the state, a basic search mode was used with standard settings of age 18 to 99, years served from less than one to 50, any ethnicity, any religion, any sexual orientation, and seeking any pen-pal or legal assistance. After basic search settings were selected, results were randomly sorted. This search displayed 1,128 results, and each profile was assigned a number in order of their listing.

For purposes of this study 100 inmates profiles were randomly selected from the sampling frame of 1,128 California male profiles. The online tool Research Randomizer was used to generate random numbers. The lowest and highest value of numbers ranged from 1-1,128 to account for each profile. Two sets of numbers were generated with 100 numbers per set. Two sets of numbers were produced in case a profile selected in the first set did not have a completed profile, such as not having an "about me" or picture(s). Once the sample was determined, their "about me" statements were saved in an Excel document and screenshots were captured for reference.

Table 1. Demographics of Sample

Demographics	**Percent**
Gender	100% male
Race/Ethnicity	26% African American, 3% Asian, 18% Caucasian, 31% Hispanic, 4% Native American, 13% Multi-racial, 2% Other, 3% NA
Sentences	1% Death Row, 32% Life, 67% Non-life
Interested in furthering their education (option selected on profile)	86% No, 14% Yes
Marital Status	80% Single, 11% Divorced, 2% Separated, 0% Married

As Table 1 demonstrates a majority of participants are Hispanic, closely followed by African American men. The demographics are fairly similar to state statistics. In 2016, 29

percent of male prisoners in California state prisons were African American, 43 percent were Latino, 21 percent Caucasian, and seven percent of other races and ethnicities (Goss & Hayes, 2018). Moreover, a high number of individuals selected are serving life sentences (n=32) and one inmate sampled is on death row. The high number of lifers is perhaps reflective of California's incarcerated population. California leads the nation in the number of people serving life sentences with 25 percent of the prison population serving life sentences (Goss & Hayes, 2018). In the following section I discuss how I conducted my profile data analysis.

PROFILE DATA ANALYSIS

In this section, I go into detail on how I carried out my data analysis. Specifically, I discuss the literature that influenced the initial coding theme. In Table 2 I list the themes in Cooley's (2015) and Maruna's (2001) research, as well as relevant research findings in the literature that guided my analysis and determined the initial coding scheme.

Table 2. Initial Codes for Content Analysis

Cooley (2015) themes	Maruna (2001) codes	Literature codes
• Prisoner's lifestyle in prison • Prisoner's lifestyle out of prison • Prisoner's motivation • Prisoner's description of writer's personality • Prisoner's description of writer's physical attributes • Prisoner's description of own personality • Prisoner's description of own physical attributes	• Core self • Define me • Excuses and justifications • Guilt, shame, remorse • Helping others • Making good • Optimistic perception • Real criminal • Redemptive suffering	• Loneliness • Mail • Stigma • Support

After selecting the 100 profiles to be analyzed, I compiled an Excel sheet that included demographic and profile information, including the "about me" statements to be analyzed. I then read these 100 profiles multiple times to assign codes for the different types

of themes. The first codes were identified based on Cooley's (2015) research on trends in online inmate profiles. The common themes observed included: prisoner's lifestyle in prison, prisoner's lifestyle out of prison; prisoner's motivation for joining the site, prisoner's description of writer's personality, prisoner's description of writer's physical attributes, prisoner's own personality description, and prisoner's own physical description. Prisoner's lifestyle in and out of prison consisted of four codes: active, cultural, family, and religion. The active code included any mention of the outdoors, sports, travel, or working out. The cultural code included any mention of artistic contributions, letters, music, or poetry. The family code included any mention of kids, siblings, parents, or friends. The religion code included any mention of bible study, prayer, or reading the bible.

The second set of codes were drawn from Maruna's (2001) study on the narratives of desisting offenders and themes identified in the book. The final set of codes were identified from reading the literature. For example, hope was folded into Maruna's code on optimistic perception. Common themes discovered through review of the statements were divorce and redemption through education, therefore, codes were created for each. The next section looks at how I conducted the photo analysis.

PHOTO ANALYSIS

In addition to the "about me" statements drawn from each profile, a number of images were gathered from a sample of California male inmates to conduct a visual analysis of how prisoners present themselves on a pen-pal soliciting website. Drawing from cultural criminology, this research aims to contribute to the relatively new field of visual criminology. Visual criminology uses images and media to understand representations of crime, control, and power (Brown, 2017). Hayward (2010) argues, "[Criminologists] must approach our subject matter. . . from various angles and from diverse perspectives. If images are creatively constructed, then we must study not just the image itself, but also the process of construction and the subsequent processes of production, framing, and interpretation" (p. 14). As such, visual criminology provides a tool to which to explore prison pen-pal soliciting profiles beyond a content analysis. For this study, it was important to include a visual analysis, since the standard one year profile option offered by Write a Prisoner includes a 250 word "about me" and one photo for $50. Unless inmates are willing to pay the $10 fee for

each additional photo they must carefully select an image that makes them visually appealing and worthy of being written to the profile viewer.

For this part of the study all 1,128 results for California men were included in the sample. For this analysis the first image was selected for analysis, since that is the image that viewers see when scrolling through the site. If the inmate has more than one image included it does not appear unless the viewer clicks on the profile. The first image listed is also of importance as it serves as the first impression in this case. Figure 1 listed shows an example of what a Write a Prisoner profile looks on a computer screen.

Figure 1. Write a prisoner online profile example.

In this chapter I provided thorough detail of my methodological approach to this study. Beginning with my research questions, I then provided an overview of why I chose to conduct a qualitative content analysis. In the sections that followed I discussed why I chose WriteaPrisoner.com and how the website operates. The next section discussed my sampling approach. The last two sections looked at my data and photo analysis. In chapter 4, I explore my findings and the themes that emerged within the sampled profiles.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This research study sought to explore how incarcerated men are presenting themselves on www.WriteAPrisoner.com, and what common themes are represented on their profiles. I present the results of this study in three sections. The first findings section discusses themes of social ties and support. The second findings section discusses how offenders begin to create a narrative of desistance and redemption script while incarcerated. I draw specific attention to higher education and how this may be a result of California's growing "corrections to college movement." In the final section, I discuss masculinity as it relates to carceral settings and how inmates present themselves online with attention to masculine culture.

FORMS OF SUPPORT

Social support has been found to offset the pains of imprisonment, and the relief it provides appears to be the main reason inmates join Write a Prisoner. One participant described joining Write a Prisoner, "to help take my mind off being incarcerated." Across all profiles, there was an overarching theme of social ties and support. Inmates discussed having support from family or friends, having a lack of support, or no support at all. The men with support described their family support as their motivation to do better.

> I have a lot of family support that keeps me focused and gives me the push to keep going. (Nunez)
>
> I come from a loving, caring family. Mom and pops been together forever, I have one older brother and one younger sister. I think of them all the time, they've had my back since day one, never gave up on me, and for that reason is why I'm change myself to become a better person. I miss and love you fam!. (Samyuth)[1]

1 For this study, inmates' "about me" statements were included as they appear on www.WriteaPrisoner.com. There were no changes to grammar, punctuation, or

Men also expressed a lack of support. For some, the lack of support was a result of a divorce. Some men shared they were divorced in their "about me" statements, while others did not mention it, but indicated they are divorced on their marital status (n=11).

> I've been married once before and now I'm not. (Altamarino)
>
> I'm a divorced father of 3. (Boleware)
>
> I'm divorced/single and a proud father of an 8 year old son. (Farias)
>
> I have been divorced since 1997. (La Capria)

Siennick, Stewart, and Staff (2014) explored the effects of incarceration and marriage. They found incarceration increases divorce rates with a 32 percent increase for each additional year behind bars. It is not clear whether that is a result of the strains of separation or the stigma associated with having an incarcerated husband. In line with this research on marital relationships for prisoners, one participant wrote, "I've been single for the past 3 years and incarcerated for the past 7 years," clearly indicating he separated during his imprisonment. Statements about divorce came with mentions of a child or children. The high rates of incarceration have left 2.6 million children to have a parent behind bars (Turney & Goodsell, 2018).

On the other hand, some men expressed having no support for reasons associated with long prison sentences or strained relationships.

> Been down since I was 17, so lost touch with those I used to know. (Aranda, lifer incarcerated since 2005)
>
> Unfortunately, family passed away as well as friends. (Yost/lifer incarcerated since 1995)
>
> I've been betrayed several times by everybody from my mother to the mother of my children so I went into a loner phase. I have no friends at all. (Germain)

The first two statements provide a glimpse into the pains of life sentences as both men are "lifers." Incarceration comes with emotional, financial, and social costs that impact offenders and their families. Distance and lack of communication eventually take a toll leaving prisoners with little to no support.

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spelling.

FRIENDSHIP, ROMANCE, AND FEMALE COMPANIONSHIP

In line with support were prisoners' motivations for soliciting a pen-pal, which mostly consisted of friendship. Friendship entails support by providing support during times of stress and has been consistently found to be associated with good mental and physical health (Marigold, Cavallo, Holmes, & Wood, 2014). Inmates have an understanding of the value of friendship, and it is reflected in their accounts of their desire for companionship for their emotional wellbeing. In some profiles, incarcerated men alluded to the isolation and loneliness experienced while imprisoned. As mentioned in the literature review, there are detrimental effects of psychological and social isolation. For some inmates, Write a Prisoner offers the only form to receive emotional support and relief from loneliness. Crewe and colleagues (2014) found the emotional geography of prison can make it difficult for inmates to express themselves emotionally with other inmates and correctional staff emotionally. The need to stifle their feelings leads them to seek other avenues, such as a pen-pal. Notably, in one "about me" description one man shared:

> I'm seeking a friendship that will offer emotional and mental support; who understands the obstacles and loneliness being locked up can bring. Provide me with the encouragement and help me overcome the challenges faced during my incarceration. (Morales)

In a similar vein, another inmate wrote:

> I've been afforded the privilege to know good friendships, and its positive effects on ones wellbeing, especially in my type of environment with its limitations on the physicality's of being 'present'. (Ortega)

Another inmate alluded to mental wellbeing when describing his interests:

> here's what I'm looking for: A WOMAN to not only encourage and help reach my goals and share my triumphs but also someone I can put some of this weight on. Someone I can talk to and ease my psychological burdens. (Lewis)

Besides emotional support, friends also provide social and material support (Amichai-Hamburger, Kingsbury, & Schneider, 2013); however, friendships through correspondence do not entirely benefit from material support. In regards to monetary support, there are companies, such as JPay, with apps and websites that allow family and friends to send money almost instantaneously which the inmate can spend on their commissary or restitution. Other forms of tangible support such as borrowing objects rely on the physical presence of friends (Wellman & Wortley, 1990), which inmates are not able to benefit from regularly. They do

have access to visits though and as their accounts reflect are also part of the motivation for joining the site. The statements below highlight how prisoners are looking for support through correspondence, but also through visits.

> I hope to find someone who would like to correspond and possibly come visit to help pass the time. (Montag)
>
> I'm looking forward to finding someone who really wants to take time to write and build a relationship or friendship. . . Someone who can come visit me, so we could get to know each other and build a serious relationship. (Ramirez)
>
> If it all works out I am looking for someone willing to drive out and see me…spend some time and have conversation. (Suarez)

Moreover, Glick and Rose (2011) suggest friendship can help build social skills. In the context of incarceration, this is important as inmates may lose social skills during their imprisonment. In addition to friendship, many inmates explicitly stated they were looking for a woman or were interested in a romantic relationship with a woman. With this, some inmates assumed the reader was a female and began their "about me" profile with a greeting to a woman or 'ladies.' The greetings varied but included:

> Hi There Crazy Beautiful. (Yang)
>
> Hi Sweetie. (Ramirez)
>
> Hello ladies, Queens, divas and debutantes. (Germain)
>
> Attn: Lady pen-pals. (Moore)

Some of these labels suggest affection or romance (e.g., terms of endearment such as "sweetie") and are intended to make the reader feel relaxed or wanted. Others did not begin with a greeting, but within the statement refer to a female, which again assumed the reader was a woman. A few inmates wrote why they were specifically interested in corresponding with a woman, which mostly consisted of breaking away from their everyday routine of being surrounded by men.

> I've been around men for the last decade so I'm only looking to correspond with women. (Germain)
>
> I'm seeking female companionship. . . Being around males all day is not nice. (Leon)
>
> Being around men 24/7 I've come to realize the softness of a woman's presence has been lacking from my life, so I seek to regain that by being on this site. (Ortega)

Some inmates went as far as to specifically imagine not just a female reader, but a lonely female reader. In this case, instead of the outside pen-pal serving as the emotional outlet, the inmates positioned themselves as the emotional outlet.

> I won't judge you for being highly emotional and having intensely held opinions on many issues. I'll read your mind and your feelings. I'll make it my job to understand when you're depressed. I'll give you all my time and affection, and I will never reject you. I promise not to pressure you and to allow ample time for you to gather your thoughts before expressing yourself. (Hemphill)
>
> I have a lot to offer as a friend, lover, and soulmate. I'm someone you can come to for comfort, eyes you can look into and trust, a smile that will erase everything and brighten up your day, a heart that's genuine, understanding, and doesn't judge. A supporting shoulder to lean on, arms that are always open and time that is devoted to you alone. (Valles)

Both statements above highlight held assumptions by some inmates. First, they assume that the reader is a woman and single. Therefore, lonely because something must be wrong with her, and that what she needs is male companionship. They seem to believe that if they are on Write a Prisoner, no one wants them, which is why they are resorting to finding and meeting an inmate through the internet. The inmates express some sense of concern and pity and postulate themselves as the man who will accept and love her despite her imperfections. They try to make the reader feel cared about and attempt to offer emotional validation. Although the inmate is more socially disconnected and may experience higher levels of loneliness, they pretend they are a savior who can save the female reader and fix her problems. The belief that if the woman is single, she must be lonely falls in line with a social narrative that women in relationships are happier than depressive, lonely, or shy women. They expect women to live up to societal standards, while they have not. Moreover, men are more reluctant to admit any 'weak' feelings and they may not be expressing how they emotionally feel as a result of their incarceration, because doing so is socially transgressive. They may think that giving a glimpse to some vulnerability will make them unattractive and not desirable as a pen-pal.

Another inmate added to this assumption that the reader is a lonely reader by writing, "There's no reason for us to be suffering by feeling alone. I'm here offering you my friendship" (Ramirez). Media portray women as vulnerable and in need of protection. It is interesting how inmates attempt to portray themselves as these protective companions,

although their incarceration prevents them from being able to protect the individual in an outside prison scenario. Additionally, their incarceration withholds them from being readily available to comfort a partner. Hemphill and Valles say they have the time for a partner, but they do not have the space. Overall, inmates report seeking friendship or a romantic connection, which could lead to correspondence and possibly visits. There are strong stereotypes by prisoners that prison pen-pal writers are female. In the next section, I discuss this commonly held assumption and how it relates to seeking non-judgmental support.

NON-JUDGMENTAL SUPPORT

An analysis of the "about me" statements reveals that many prisoners appear to be seeking a woman for non-judgmental support. The men think of women as nurturing and soft, therefore, accepting and warm. One inmate wrote, "Writing a prisoner only shows your compassion for human life, your big heart!" The following passages demonstrate the desire for non-judgmental support in one way or another.

> On the other hand, I'm seeking someone who's smart, funny, not judgmental, speaks their mind, has drive, compassion, strong-willed, and last but not least has enough attitude to keep me grounded. (Collier)
>
> I strongly agree that nobody is perfect and that everybody has a past, though one might be darker than the other regardless, one should be able to start off fresh without being judged for the mistakes they have made. (Goode)
>
> During times like these we all can us a good friend with Compassion! Can you be that individual? I'm not seeking sympathy, only your empathy. (McKinnon)
>
> …if you're reading my post, chances are you're the perfect pen-pal. Just the simple fact that you're not judging me for past mistakes (and being in jail), tells me that you're a down to earth individual. (Nelson)
>
> I am in search of a female friend, one who is willing to help me through this dark chapter of life with her positive words of encouragement. I seek one who is nonjudgmental, sincere, and understanding. (Wacker)
>
> Those who lack compassion, sincerity and understanding need not read on. (Wright)

Inmates experience considerable stigma and isolation from society. There are plenty of labels (e.g. convicts, offenders, etc.) that are used to stereotype and denounce justice-involved individuals. This stigma shapes people's views and how society perceives incarcerated individuals. As a result, prisoners value non-judgmental support. They want someone who embraces their reality and is available and willing to listen, empathetically and

compassionately. So often they are judged, they do not want a critical or harsh pen-pal who will make them feel ashamed. Inmates want to feel understood, in contrast to attitudes they encounter by prison officials, other inmates, and outside members like their communities, families, and victims. Non-judgmental support may help dispel feelings of guilt and isolation they carry and affirms them as human, not just a criminal, inmate, offender, etc. Prison pen-palling provides an avenue where they can be accepted, feel valued as a person, and talk comfortably and freely about their experiences and feelings without feeling like people are judging them. Inmates want support from compassionate people who can make them feel at ease as opposed to prisoners they may not fully trust or cannot be vulnerable with or with staff who may be judgmental and hold negative perceptions of them.

REENTRY SUPPORT

Previous scholarship has found positive social support networks can facilitate the transition back to society (Pettus-Davis, Veeh, Davis, & Tripodi, 2018). Studies with formerly incarcerated men found social support from family members provided them with emotional support and financial and housing assistance (La Vigne, Shollenberger, & Debus, 2009; Naser & La Vigne, 2006). Prisoners seem to understand the need for social support in their transition back to society, and many men expressed joining the website because they are preparing for release.

> I've decided to sign up with Write A Prisoner because I'm trying to meet some new people that I can get to know and start some new friendships, seeing as I'm only 2 years to the house. (Farias)
>
> I'm looking to meet new friends with positive goals to help me transition back into a society I am a stranger to. (Tello)
>
> I'm desiring to make connections out there in society since that is where I will be in a relatively short time. (Yost)

Furthermore, prisoners expressed also looking for a pen-pal to expand their network with positive people who would enrich their lives and act as prosocial support.

> I would like to meet open minded people who contribute to our society, working class people who are interested in a greater good. (Allen)
>
> I do want to meet people who are trying to win in life and are positive people. (Betts)
>
> A major part in that growth toward my progress is to maintain, nourish and build healthy relationships. (Craig)

> I'm also learning to be a better person and I need good friends to help with that. (Hasting)
>
> I'm looking for a different circle. (Kelley)
>
> Now that I am in a good place mentally, I would like to surround myself with positive people...I want to have people who add value to my life and make me a better person, and vice versa. (Thompson)

The passages above demonstrate inmates' realizations of prosocial support to successfully reintegrate back into society. Inmates are looking for people who will help them build positive and productive lives, despite their past. They have changed and are taking steps to prepare for release, such as seeking a pen-pal, yet they need support to gain stability. The reality of leaving prison and starting again is hitting them. They are looking to build relationships of support to build confidence, trust, and opportunity, and create new networks. Inmates want support that will help them reintegrate and fit into society when they leave prison. Having positive support can lead to other positive outcomes that have been shown to reduce recidivism, such as finding employment, housing, and educational opportunities. Further, if they have positive connections upon release, they have somebody to talk to about their challenges and to engage with in activities that do not involve crime and help them adopt prosocial roles. Furthermore, the statements demonstrate that inmates need positive influences to help them become contributing members of society as they adopt non-criminal identities. Inmates' need for positive relationships shows the massive impact peers have on behavior.

In the sections above I explored the theme of social support and ties that arose in inmates' "about me" statements. The statements show inmates are looking for friendship or romance, as well as non-judgmental and reentry support. In the next section, I explore how their "about me" statements are consistent with a redemption script.

REDEMPTION SCRIPT: CORE SELF

In the desistance literature, the emergence of a redemption script has surfaced as a way for offenders to reconstruct their identity and attempt to 'make good' (Maruna, 2001). Three themes emerge in the narratives of desisters that make their lives different than active offenders. First, there is an establishment of a 'true self' composed of the individual's core beliefs. Second, there is an optimistic perception and sense of control over one's destiny.

Finally, there are generative motivations with a desire to help others and be a productive, contributing member of society. As a whole, these three components contribute to the 'redemption script' (Maruna, 2001).

One of the most significant themes to emerge in the "about me" profiles of each participant in this study was the sense of a core self. Most of the participants framed their crimes and situational circumstances as factors that did not represent their true self. It was a 'mistake,' but did not 'define' who they were as illustrated below.

> This place does not define me, I won't let it. (Carranza)
>
> I've got a horrible past and I've spent about 36 years in prison. I will no longer let that define me. (Hasting)
>
> I am not defined by my worst decisions. (La Capria)
>
> My biggest and most deterrent con is being a lifer, however, that title doesn't define or dictate my character or personality, nor does it make me a bad person, but I did engage in a regrettable mistake that makes me say "Why"? every day. (Luevanos)
>
> I try not to allow these walls to define me and my past mistakes. (Suarez)
>
> My mistakes don't define me but my compassion, deeds and human loving kindness. (Yang)
>
> I am most certainly at a low point in my life. However I was approached by a friend who encouraged me and said I shouldn't let my current tragic circumstances define me. (Galindo)

The repeated use of the word 'define' highlights how inmates attempt to set forth the notion that their circumstances do not reflect who they are. There are plenty of labels assigned to people behind bars. However, instead of referring to themselves by one of those labels, inmates instead allude to some negative event or 'mistake' that does not make them out to be the person the viewer may be assuming they are. In other words, the crime is something external that occurred while internally they are not the morally flawed individuals society believes they are. The passages suggest they are their crime to some extent, but more than that they are a culmination of learned and lived experiences. Instead, inmates suggest they have a life story beyond them committing a crime or causing harm. The last statement reflects how crucial the reconstruction of self is to the individual's identity and in turn wellbeing. So much so, that another inmate experienced this rewriting process, learned it

helped him feel better and cope with his circumstance, and in turn suggested a fellow inmate pursue this reconstruction of self, which appears to be influenced by supportive individuals.

Furthermore, in establishing an inherent 'true self' many desisters compared themselves to "real criminals." In Maruna's (2001) study, he found "desisting participants in this sample seem to have also decided that they are 'better than some common criminal'." In this study, inmates adopted the same strategy in their 'redemption script.'.

> I'm not your typical convict. This is the first time I've ever been locked up. I made a poor choice that ended up with somebody getting shot and dying, and I live with remorse every day. (Allee)

> After my honorable discharge I was employed by I.B.E.W. Local 11, the electrical union out of Los Angeles County, Ca., as well as running my own handy man services outside Riverside, Ca…In 2012, I made a series of poor choices and took the law into my own hands by harming an individual that harmed a love one, which resulted in a 10 year prison sentence for Mayhem. This is my first and last prison term. (Cordova)

The second inmate appears to take his former military and employment status to suggest he is not like other offenders. He briefly gives details of his crime, but frames it in a manner that it was a noble and needed thing to do to protect his loved one or salvage some of the harm caused to them. Another man wrote,

> I am an average person, never in association with a gang and I always used all my time wisely. (Mendoza)

Mendoza describes himself as an average person who got arrested for a crime he seems to frame as a minor crime. He makes it a point to state he has never been in association with a gang, as if to suggest they are the "real criminals" while he is not, since his crime is for receiving a stolen vehicle. Similarly, one man wrote,

> I'm not a sex offender or killer, but in prison for attempted car jacking while intoxicated, this is my 17th year. (Ray)

> My fellow inmates have given me the moniker Noble. Both because of how I carry myself and because I genuinely always try to do what is right. However don't put too much stock in the name noble, the demographics from which I am being measured are all convicted felons! (Lewis)

Notably, the last comment comes from a man serving life for murder, yet he jokes about being given that nickname by other inmates; he seems to suggest that incarcerated individuals are not credible or worthy of commenting on people's character.

To a more extreme extent, one man wrote he, "…got caught up by the shaky arm of the law at age 20 for upholding the outlaw code. I do no harm to women, children or elderly and slay those who do." The outlaw code is an ideological mindset "radically out of step with mainstream society" (Piano, 2018, p. 351) that values brotherhood and violence. Members of motorcycle clubs that abide by the outlaw code commit to a protective role where an assault on one member or their family is an assault on the entire motorcycle club gang. Members take pride in their loyalty to clubs and in their job to protect the women and children. This inmate's statement implies he believes his life sentence for second-degree murder does not make him a real criminal since he was 'upholding the outlaw code' and defending the clubs identity and moral values. In other words, those who harm children, women, and seniors are the real culprits not men like himself who abide by a street code of ethics.

Moreover, the core self involves attributing behavior to some 'it.' For the good person inside to exist there must be some outside negative force responsible. Inmates stressed that they became involved in these activities because of environmental or situational factors such as drugs, gangs, growing up in an impoverished area, or trauma.

> I spent a chunk of my life living wrong and surrounding myself with the wrong crowd. (Kelley)
>
> My upbringing was rough but I was fortunate to have a loving Mother. Unfortunately I chose to go down the wrong path that led to drugs and violence. I joined a gang at that age of 10 and from that point started to live a destructive life that ultimately led to my incarceration at the age of 17. Since being incarcerated I've attended and participated in self-help groups and classes to rehabilitate myself. (Lash)
>
> I have made mistakes from time to time during drug use, from Americas methamphetamine epidemic. (Ray)
>
> …unfortunately, I did give most of my life to gangs on the streets of Casablanca, which ultimately turn me turned its back on me and that is the cause of my incarceration. (Suarez)
>
> I would like to surround myself with positive people. In the past, I sucked in this category, which played a factor in the predicament I am in today. (Thompson)

In some way, all these men imply their true self has always been there, but negative factors pulled them from that inherent self. Some men seem to take responsibility for their crime while at the same time still blaming some other factor. Lash states, 'I chose to go down the wrong path' which implies accountability and a sense of agency, but then he mentions his

gang and how they led to his incarceration. There seems to be a contradiction in how much responsibility inmates are willing to take. Inmates blame negative influences, their childhood, drugs, and gangs. Yet, they simultaneously accept responsibility for their mistakes while blaming their situation and failure to external events.

Similarly, Suarez recognizes he willingly gave up his life to gangs, but when he became incarcerated the gang was at fault. Attributing their negative behavior to some 'it' ties in with the inherent goodness offenders attempt to convey. This finding suggests that identity change and the construction of life scripts to some extent focus on negative influences and circumstances for the inmate to make sense of the past and frame who they are today. In the following section I discuss how redemption scripts also include levels of hope and optimism.

HOPE AND OPTIMISM: "MY FUTURE IS BRIGHT AND FREE"

Maruna (2001) found desisting offenders tend to have an exaggerated sense of control over the future. Similarly, in this study many men expressed a high sense of hope and optimism. In this section I explore how hope and optimism are expressed. Some men talked about their post-release plans and goals for the future. Other men discussed achieving and pursuing success.

> I am paying my debt to society and intend to maximize my opportunities for success, starting from within these prison walls. (Alcantar)
>
> I believe prison can be a minor setback for a major come back, so I am looking forward to turning this negative chapter in my life into a success story! (Allen)

Allen described prison as a minor setback although there are several collateral consequences associated with a criminal conviction (Pinard & Thompson, 2006). Of course, successful reentry is possible (Bahr, Harris, Fisher, & Harker Armstrong, 2010); however, prison is not simply a "minor setback." Inmates expressed hope and optimism in other ways.

> I currently have no one to support me on my journey, but it's okay because I believe in myself. (Betts)
>
> I am enthused about life outside of this place because I had a life prior to prison. (Cain)
>
> Despite my current situation I am very optimistic and focused on my future and what it will bring. (Harris)

> While being surrounded by the loss of hope I maintain hope as my crutch to happiness. (Luevanos)
>
> My future is bright and free. (Rowley)

From a visual perspective, the inmate below displays the high hope and optimism found in desisting offenders. Chang is holding a sign that reads, "I'M THE CEO OF MY OWN LIFE." The backdrop is of Defy Ventures who according to their website, "Defy Ventures transforms the lives of business leaders and people with criminal histories through their collaboration along the entrepreneurial journey" (Defy Ventures, 2017). Their aim to "transform the hustle" of currently and formerly incarcerated men, women, and youth. Being an entrepreneur can be challenging, but participants are trained and encouraged to pursue self-employment and put their business plans into action.

Figure 2. Hope and optimism.

This positive outlook is essential to observe and reflects a sense of agency amongst the sampled offenders. Moreover, this sense of optimism also carries a sense of 'tragic optimism' (see Maruna, 2001) and inmates frame suffering as part of the redemption script. In his analysis of the narratives of offenders who participated in the LDS, Maruna (2001) found that the offenders who successfully desisted from criminal activity had redemptive personal stories that interpreted past failures and traumatic experiences as necessary precursors to current and future success. Often these narratives are positioned as the individual had to overcome challenges to arrive where they are at today. Maruna (2001) writes, "In this case, however, the belief is that one's mistakes can make one a stronger

person… [incarceration] for whatever it is worth, is turned into a strength of the redemption script" (p. 98). The profiles of prisoners demonstrate this redemptive suffering and position incarceration as a necessary part of the story to get where they are now.

> I have been through a lot of hard times and now I find strength and peace being happy with myself. (Cain)
>
> I have a rough past, but don't judge me because I didn't grow up with a silver spoon in my mouth, cuz my rough past is what created this loyal individual. My past gives me the drive to search for the better things in life and it's also opened my eyes to the BS that life has to offer. (Drake)
>
> I grew up in a tough neighborhood of North Hollywood. Despite my situation, I'm proud of where I come from I've learned a lot. (Gonzalez)
>
> Instead of dwelling on the negative aspects of my life I use these experiences and life lessons as tools to grow and learn. (Pennie)

Incarcerated individuals describe suffering as a needed precursor to realize who they are or to get where they needed to be. The redemptive suffering in prisoners' pen-pal soliciting profiles also serves as an act of resistance to a stigmatized identity. Inmates use it as a disclaimer and as grounds to not be judged by the reader. Their rough pasts, rooted in situational circumstances beyond their control, led them to where they are, a negative place, while positively shaping them into the person they are today.

HELPING OTHERS

Desistance from crime is sustained by generative activities and motivations (LeBel et al., 2015). In this study, inmates appeared to regenerate their lives with a moral purpose. The connection to a greater purpose seems to help offenders make meaning out of their pasts and reduce feelings of shame, guilt, and remorse. Further, it helps reduce feelings of alienation and isolation as they feel part of a broader mission and like contributing members of society. If involved in charitable causes or programs inmates made mention of it in their "about me' statements.

> I am currently an offender mentor for the inmate population that are within 24 months of being released. Helping others brings great satisfaction and reflects the change that I have been able to achieve so far. (Alcantar)
>
> I'm enrolled in college and work as a teacher's aide, helping those who aspire to better themselves. (Aranda)
>
> I have been called passionate and outgoing and want to make a positive difference in this world we live in. (Galindo)

> I'm learning how to help people. I'm also learning to be a better person. (Hasting)
>
> My hobbies merged with my desire to help others. In 2010 I founded the Inmate Arts Outreach Project (IAOP) which fundraises for non-profit organizations. Members donate their artwork, crafts or handmade jewelry for auctions to help fund programs. (La Capria)
>
> I help and teach the new generation remember where they came from and who they are. (Lilo)
>
> I try to help others and I'm making myself a better man. (Marchand)
>
> I'm no longer a victim or a little boy and I only tell my story now in order to help someone else understand that they're not alone…I am involved in facilitating anger management groups helping men expose their hidden fears which have continuously plagued their ability to succeed in life. (McDaniel)

Maruna (2001) argues that "the desisting self-narrative frequently involves reworking a delinquent history into a source of wisdom to be drawn from while acting as a drug counselor, youth worker, community volunteer, or mutual-help group member" (p. 117). For instance, the 'lifers' in Liem and Richardson's (2014) study indirectly made amends with their victims by focusing their experiences on mentoring at-risk youth to prevent them from following in their footsteps. Similar findings are found in the profiles of prisoners.

> I believe my purpose in life is to work with the youth and young adults, helping them to realize the importance of making wise and good decisions, while they are young to help them be productive and reaching their full potential in society, and the world, as a whole. (Hunter)

Figure 3. Helping others.

> I've been blessed to be able to speak to at risk youth, so that they can learn from my mistakes and not follow in my footsteps. (Barillas, pictured above)

In the image above, Barillas is holding a microphone and speaking to a group. He made this profile picture to show that despite serving a life sentence for murder, he is a contributing member of society seeking to help the next generation. Both Barillas and Hunter want

younger individuals to learn from their mistakes and to teach them how to make good decisions.

Maruna (2001) found verbalizations of generativity as restitution in the discourse of desisting offenders. He wrote, "the debt that desisting offenders describe if often an abstract, rather than specific, one. The 'score' that [they] feel they need to settle to is generally with society, the community, or God. It is not a direct debt to the individuals whom they have harmed along the way" (Maruna, 2001, p. 123). The same is found in this study where men write about paying their debt.

> I am a good man that made a mistake. I am paying my debt to society. (Alcantar)
>
> I have since endeavored to and continue to better myself as a person, make amends for what I have done, and hopefully help others along this journey through life. (Colver)
>
> Paying my debt to society is inevitable but along the way I am working on change. (Marchand)
>
> For the past four years, I have been working on myself; figuring out who I was as a person and the person I want to be in the future. I have been eliminating all the negativity from my life and attempting to right the wrongs I've created. (Thompson)

Inmates express good intentions and discuss helping others or their desire to do more for a greater good and for the next generation. Prisoners feel they have an obligation to 'do good' as they pay their debt to society and disassociate from their criminal pasts. In the following section, I explore how inmates show their social contributions and express generative motivations through their profile pictures.

GENERATIVITY DISPLAYS

Altruistic motivations can also be visually found in their profiles. Some men include profile pictures of themselves with dogs. California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) offers dog training programs, such as Pawsitive Change Program and Prisoners Overcoming Obstacles and Creating Hope (P.O.O.C.H.). These programs serve two purposes: dog trainer certification training for inmates and to fulfill the organizations' missions. For example, POOCH trains service dogs for wounded veterans and children with autism. The mission of these organizations and the work they do with the volunteers allows inmates to feel like they have a greater sense of purpose. Below are images of the men

photographed with dogs and quotes pulled from their profiles discussing what they do for the program or how the program has impacted their lives.

Figure 4. Inmate A with dog.

I teach service dogs for veterans and first responders who suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. (Blehm)

Figure 5. Inmate B with dog.

I'm a big animal lover who is lucky to partner with the S.P.C.A. recently in an in-prison dog training program where they bring dogs in with various issues, they were just like me, how could I resist? (smile) The program changed my life and softened my heart. (Guevara)

Figure 6. Inmate C with dog.

> As a result of my crime, I have taken much from this world and I have been attempting to give back in whatever form I am able to in my position. I currently work in the prison as a dog educator, preparing dogs for service. These dogs are given to Veterans who suffer from PTSD. I currently am working with a beautiful Labrador named Annie. I have been with her since she was four months old and this has been a very rewarding job :). (Segura)

Figure 7. Inmate D with dog.

> That's me in all 3 photos, at a stage in my life where I feel many empowering things - a sense of purpose, ambition, courage, passion, perseverance and great hope for a bright future… Recently I was accepted into an extraordinary program. It's called "Paws for Life". I'm actually able to care for and train dogs coming from outside shelters…. and that brings me immense joy. Just knowing I'm helping to save an animals life gives me a whole new perspective on life. (Guevara)

In the last example, the inmate shares how the program brings him joy. Not only do these dog training programs assist the dogs and organizations, but they also give inmates a purpose during their incarceration. The sense of purpose appears to improve their wellbeing and provide a sense of achievement. Moreover, the images of them with dogs make them look like caring and loving individuals. It also makes them seem soft. Inmates go through the rigorous work of training the dogs, which they must inevitably form an attachment with, only to later let them go to an individual in need. Not to mention, that Americans love dogs for their companionship and safety. The prisoners' participation in this program can help spark a conversation and draw a writer in.

REDEMPTION THROUGH EDUCATION

Farmer, McAlinden, and Maruna (2015) suggest that references to college in narratives of desisting offenders can be viewed as a form of redemption script where "the individual seeks to make the most of a bad situation, cognitively turning it to their advantage" (p. 11). However, in this study education is more than part of the narrative towards desistance. The references to participation in college reflect California's growing movement of corrections to college. According to a report, "Face-to-face community college unique enrollment inside CDCR rose from zero in 2014 to 4,443 students in fall 2017 – for face-to-face enrollment, that is more than any other state and more than the total number of students enrolled in the federal Second Chance Pell Pilot Program across the nation" (Corrections to College California, 2018, p. 8). The value of postsecondary correctional education (PSCE) has been documented for decades. Chappell (2004) analyzed 15 different studies of PSCE and determined that students who participated in college classes while incarcerated had a significantly lower recidivism rate. Students in prison who participate in correctional education have 43 percent lower odds of recidivating after release than those who do not (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013).

Further, several scholars have argued that education is a beneficial tool to help fight against the persistent and multifaceted aspects of stigma in relation to the formerly incarcerated population (Copenhaver, Edwards-Willey, & Byers, 2007; Link & Phelan, 2001). Research examining the ways in which incarceration and education affected formerly incarcerated students self-stigma found that incarceration influences self-stigma, but education enhances a sense of empowerment and motivation to resist the negative effects of self-stigma (Evans, Pelletier, & Szkola, 2018). Owens (2009) claims college education helps reduce recidivism by working as a mechanism to counter the pervasive effects of stigmas associated with a criminal record. He asserts, "College education creates opportunities by recasting ex-offenders as students in the gaze of others; conferring upon them the social graces afforded to persons with tertiary educational credentials" (Owens, 2009, p. 321). Owens (2009) study was with formerly incarcerated students; however, in this study education also seems to serve as a tool to fight stigma. On their prison pen-pal soliciting profiles, many inmates use their education as a symbol of their transformation as illustrated below by the number of profiles with a picture of the individual in a cap and gown.

Figure 8. Incarcerated graduates.

Education appears to play a role in prisoners' pursuit of redemption. Education serves as a symbol of their progress and accomplishments. Many men shared what degree they were pursuing or have earned, what college they are attending, their expected graduation date, and what courses they are enrolled in. Of the 100 inmates sampled, 28 mentioned college in their "about me" statements. The mention of their college education provides a different lens which to view the individual from. It recasts offenders as individuals who are or were willing to pursue the challenging task of earning a college degree, and attaches conventional aspirations and values that students have to them.

In addition, 31 men listed educational profiles and 14 indicated being interested in furthering their education. The transformative value of education is described in the statements below.

> Now, I'm obviously not perfect; I've made a lot of mistakes when I was young. But in time, I've built upon these shortcomings through education and the pursuit of knowledge. It's allowed me to grow into an intellectually well rounded individual. (Solorio)
>
> I work at improving my circumstances through education. (Michel)

These accounts and images demonstrate how higher education can foster the creation of a new narrative. Sharing that they are pursuing higher education or have already obtained a degree enables them to redirect their labeled identities from inmates towards a positive social role – college student. This suggests that PSCE programs provide inmates with a positive sense of identity that helps to counteract the negative effects of stigma that result from being in prison.

It is important to acknowledge that while education serves as a catalyst for change or is conducive to the will to change, not every inmate is able to participate in higher education programs. Inmates may not be able to participate due to level of educational attainment, which are rooted in social and structural forces (Runell, 2015). Runell (2015) suggests there is a relationship between pre-carceral educational experiences and crime, which varies by the communities youth come from (advantaged or disadvantaged). She claims these experiences are rooted in inequalities related to race, class, and neighborhoods. Runell (2015) argues, "These include cultural pressures related to neighborhood and school settings, the quality of education received and punishments faced for school misconduct" (p. 14).

Further, she argues there is a relationship between incarceration educational experiences and offending. She claims PSCE participation is constrained by facility restrictions, low levels of prior educational attainment and preparedness, conventional support networks are limited and some interactions with inmates may contribute to anti-social behaviors. Moreover, their participation is subject to prison administrators, correctional staff members, prison rules and transfers which influence their access to PSCE programs (Runell, 2015). This is illustrated by one inmate who writes, "I am currently awaiting re-enrollment into college due to my recent transfer" (Rowley). Participation may be limited, but "experiences in PSCE served to embolden progress along alternative pathways to crime regardless of the carceral factors which framed their educational experiences" (Runell, 2018, p. 482). Despite the limitations of accessing PSCE, inmates who are benefiting from educational programs behind bars are proudly doing so as is reflected in

the mention of their educational pursuits and the use of their graduation cap and gown pictures for their profile pictures. In the next section, I discuss another theme that arose in inmates prison pen-pal soliciting profiles, masculinity.

Masculinity and Presentation of Self

Masculinity is not compromised of one standard form of being but instead encompasses a range of gendered expectations concerning manliness that Connell (1995) has termed hegemonic masculinity. Connell (1995) defines hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men the subordination of women" (p. 77). The performance of different masculine personas occurs through symbolic interaction. As Messerschmidt (1993) points out, "Masculinity is never a static or finished product. Rather, men construct masculinities in specific social situations" (p. 31).

As such, Write a Prisoner participants enact a form of masculinity congruent with prison, itself a largely masculine domain. Curtis (2014) argues, "Prison is an institution in which masculinity is (re)constructed, undermined, and (re)affirmed." It is a setting with a heavily masculine culture where men have to wear a mask or put up a front while hiding feelings that may make them seem weak (Crewe et al., 2014). Previous research (Rodriguez, Huemmer, & Blumell, 2016) has found that hegemonic masculinity presentations are centered on masculine and feminine focused language, and also on language about the body. Researchers have found themes in how masculine performances operate within prison settings (De Viggiani, 2012). De Viggiani (2012) found many prisoners 'put up a front' and tried to be something they were not. The front management tactics used include using prison banter, maintaining the appearance of a strong body image, a projection of toughness or machismo, attempting to earn respect through reputation, legitimizing their crime, projecting heterosexism and not vulnerability, and consistently working on not letting their front down (De Viggiani, 2012). Some of these management tactics are directly associated with masculinity and exemplified in the images below of men flexing and visually emphasizing their strength.

Figure 9. Masculinity presentation through physical strength.

In prison, men over-exemplify strength. The men above bring attention to their physique. Their intense build and energy contribute to the macho atmosphere of prison, and suggest the need for "armor" to survive in a prison setting. Besides demonstrating the masculinity behind bars, the images here are about drawing a viewer in to write. Inmates 'show off' their muscles to make themselves sexually appealing to a woman who finds that attractive. It is possible that website viewers select pen-pals based on looks or perceptions associated with physical strength. It is interesting to observe that many of the inmates who reported helping others and pursuing higher education did not use images such as those in Figure 9. Instead, they shared pictures of them with dogs or in a cap and gown. The images selected seem to reflect how they want to be perceived. Jewkes (2005) found the need to maintain a 'hard' form diminished as inmates sentence come to an end. Further, she found inmates also seek to assert or establish their masculinity by constructing new identities, such as a student or a laborer. This contradicts the aggressive masculine identity normally performed in prison; however, the adoption of these new identities is found in working class cultures. Jewkes (2005) argues student and work identities "provide an alternative to the dominant masculine hegemony for middle-class prisoners, where skills ranging from the ability to read to the possession of legal knowledge may provide an opportunity to flaunt oneself symbolically in a kind of 'psychological one-upmanship'" (p. 57). For inmates in Figure 9, it is evident they want to be seen as a tough man and associate with the dominant, masculine, and violent culture of prison.

Previous scholarship has indicated that masculinity language is connected to both direct language about the body and sports and working out language (Miller, 2018). In the

images below, incarcerated men display their masculinity by associating with sports, American football, and their favorite teams. It is interesting that prisons, already identified as heavily masculine spaces, offer the option for inmates to take these pictures. For these images to have been taken, a staff member must have purchased and brought in the props to lay out. Notably, one inmate is holding a football and is standing in front of a football stadium backdrop. The arrangement suggests an effort on behalf of the institution to allow this form of expression. The profiles with sports images all mostly consisted of football images. With a few exceptions, no other sport is represented in this masculine representation. By offering the images as an option, the institution contributes to the hegemonic masculinity behind bars.

Figure 10. Masculinity presentation through sports.

Moreover, manifestations of masculinity include images that show men as physically strong and commanding, while limiting expressions of emotions or other signs of weakness. On Write a Prisoner, some men's profile pictures feature them topless displaying their physique and tattoos to appear strong. My visual analysis revealed that many men posed topless. Most of the images appeared to have been taken inside while others that were shared seemed to be from their lives prior to incarceration. In those images men held cell phones or wore clothes not issued by the state, which suggests they were taken outside of prison. A few images actually appeared to be taken inside of their cells. For those inmates' privacy their

images were not selected for part of the analysis. Inmates are posting topless for multiple reasons: to bring attention to their physique or for sexual appeal or to show their tattoos or a combination of all.

Further, inmates may believe viewers find tattoos attractive or that they like 'bad boys.' Research has found tattoos change people's perceptions of men and the presence of tattoos has a greater impact on how men are rated (Galbarczyk & Ziomkiewicz, 2017). Galbarczyk and Ziomkiewicz (2017) found tattoos on men may attract women as a signal of good health. Further, tattoos on men may serve to intimidate other men and serve as a symbol of physical dominance (Galbarczyk & Ziomkiewicz, 2017). In one study, women rated men with tattoos as more aggressive, dominant, masculine, and healthier while rating them as potentially worse parents or partners (Miłkowska, Ziomkiewicz, & Galbarczyk, 2018). Studies show that tattoos increase women's assessments of masculinity and dominance of men (Miłkowska et al., 2018).

Tattoos represent more than attractiveness, dominance, and masculinity. Tattoos also represent a sense of agency, as tattoos serve as badges of inmates' identities. Some inmates want to 'look the part,' or to represent membership or a part of their lives, or to break the rules. Tattoos are banned in prison due to health concerns (CDC National Prevention Information Network, 2012) and inmates can be disciplined for having tattoos or contraband homemade tattoo guns. Regardless of health concerns or disciplinary infractions, inmates get tattoos to break away from the uniformity of prison life and express their own identity. This is evident in the countless images of tattooed, topless men on Write a Prisoner. Interestingly, some inmates draw attention to their tattoos while others try to let the viewer know they are in search of tattoo laser removal upon release. The men who want tattoo removal could be signaling a pull from the toxic masculinity found in prisons or due to their release they feel they no longer have to put up a front or appear to be tougher than they are. As they reenter society, those personas are frowned upon, or in their case, the stigma associated with being a felon is more than enough.

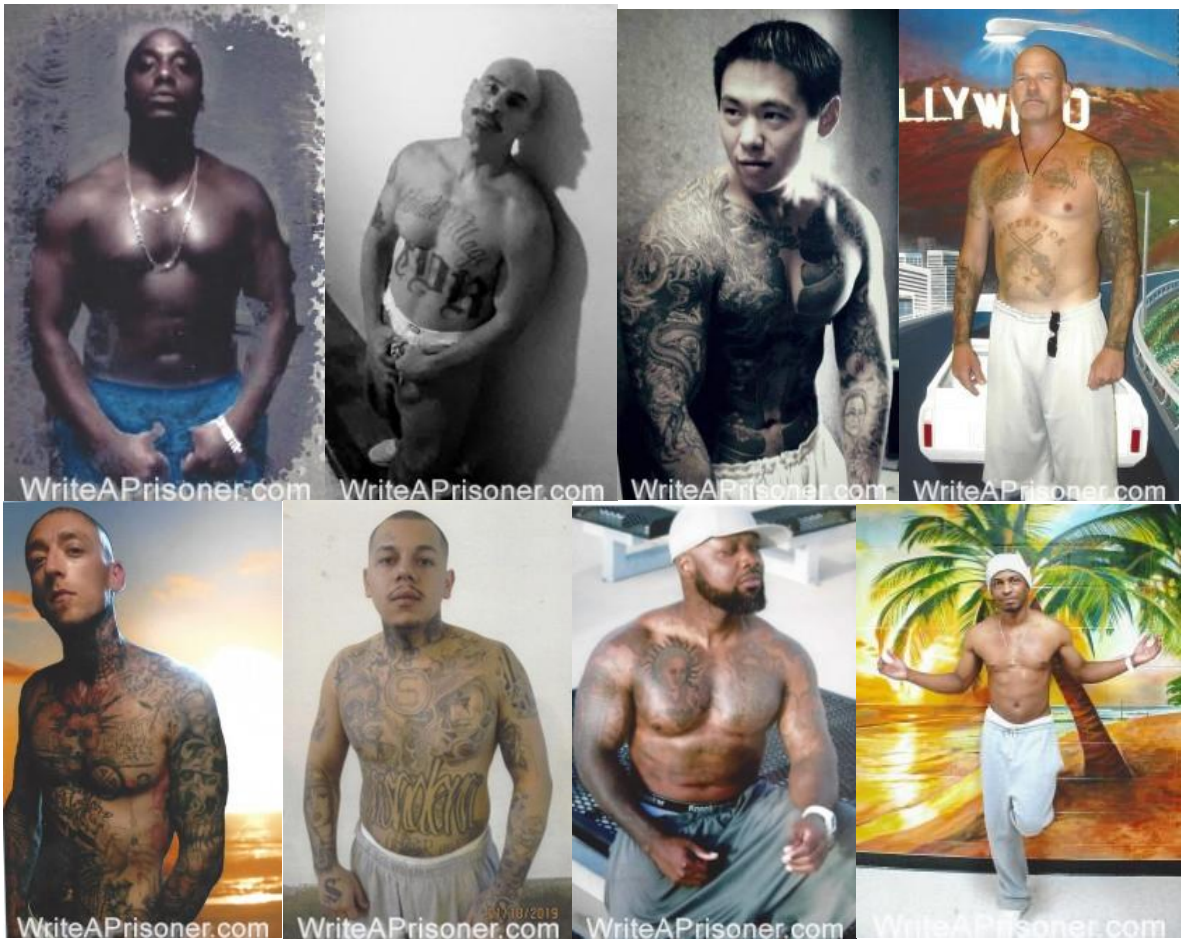

Figure 11. Masculinity presentation through topless images.

On the polar opposite of communicating masculinity there was one man who shared an image of himself forming a heart with two hands, perhaps to attempt to display a softer side.

Figure 12. Inmate love.

Within the custodial setting, the social pressure against emotional expressivity is significantly increased due to the dominant culture of hegemonic masculinity that operates in serious form in correctional facilities (Evans & Wallace, 2008; Toch, 1998). As one author characterized it: “Prison is an ultra masculine world where nobody talks about masculinity” (Sabo, Kupers, & London, 2001, p. 3). Hegemonic masculinity requires that men be “tough, never crying when hurt, standing up for yourself…never admitting to fear, sympathy, or sensitivity” (Newburn & Stanko, 1994, p. 35). As demonstrated, many of the men on Write a Prisoners perform hegemonic masculinity by displaying signs of machismo and maintaining the appearance of an overly strong body.

DISCUSSION

In conclusion, this study sought to answer: What common themes exist on prison pen-pal soliciting profiles? What are inmates’ motivation for joining Write a Prisoner? What levels of support are inmates seeking in pen-pals? How are inmates expressing desistance and changes in identity on their profiles? How do inmates perform masculinity on their personal ads? Findings indicate common themes include a desire for support whether that is through friendship or romance. Inmates appear to be seeking non-judgmental support outside of prison or as they prepare for release. The research findings also suggest that narratives of desistance begin inside prison. Inmates refer to a 'core self' where their crime does not define them. Furthermore, inmates appear to find redemption by helping others and higher education. Finally, the research findings show incarcerated men's presentations of themselves are heavily masculine. In chapter 5, I offer a conclusion and discussion of these findings. I provide a summary of the findings and the limitations and implications of this study.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This study explored prisoners' pen-pal soliciting profiles on www.WriteaPrisoner.com. A content and visual analysis of a group of incarcerated men revealed common themes in inmates' "about me" statements and how they are presenting themselves through images. The first theme discussed is support. Inmates express having some forms of support but lacking others. Prisoners' motivation for joining the website included for friendship, romance, or support. The men who are seeking romance tend to assume the reader is a woman. Some men are looking for non-judgmental support or positive, pro-social connections that can assist them as they prepare for release and reentry. The second theme found were narratives of desistance. In line with Maruna's (2001) Liverpool Desistance Study, men had redemption scripts. The redemption scripts include references to a core self and helping others. Finally, the study found that incarcerated men perform a prisonized masculinity through their bodies. This is done by bringing attention to their bodies and tattoos or with images that include sports memorabilia.

While the study did not interview inmates on the benefits of correspondence, findings suggest inmates are seeking a pen-pal to ease the pain of isolation and for greater support. Although visits and phone calls are an important means which inmates maintain relationships, the barriers and obstacles of them can make them costly and rare. As a result, letters remain a vital connection to the outside world. In their examination of communication policies from 1971-2005 researchers found that the average number of letters inmates send and receive has changed very little over the past 34 years (Hoffman et al., 2007). Not only are letters still being sent and received to and from prisons, but with the growth of the internet, inmates are now able to solicit pen-pals from anywhere in the world through third-party websites such as www.WriteAPrisoner.com. The most extensive research on the

benefits of contact through befriending programs and visits during incarceration emphasizes the importance of social ties for prisoner rehabilitation and wellbeing. Outside contact helps sustain social bonds, which can help inmates handle the strains and stresses during imprisonment and re-entry while increasing social capital and contributing to desistance.

Years of evaluation of befriending organizations has found positive outcomes of support from individuals not known to the inmates before incarceration. The impact of befriending on prisoners includes positive changes to their wellbeing; improved contact with family, friends, and support organizations; improved self-esteem and confidence; helps develop a positive sense of personal identity; positively challenges attitudes about life and the future, and reduces feelings of isolation (Cardoso, 2016; Hales, 2015; Rowe, 2012; Rowe & Kennedy, 2017). Interestingly, some participants rate letters as more valuable than visits in the befriending services. Moreover, inmates who participate in these befriending services report they feel valued as human beings and not defined by their crimes, which in turn helps create a positive self-identity. Notably, Maruna (2001) calls on criminal justice policies and programs that assist offenders in the development of a pro-social identity to assist in the desistance process.

In addition to seeking support, inmates "about me" statements reflected narratives of desistance. The finding was not surprising and expected based on personal experiences corresponding with inmates. It seems many men submitting to be listed online are rehabilitating and working to redeem themselves. As such, they need an escape from prison where other inmates are embedded in the prison politics culture or considered untrustworthy. They also need an escape from staff who may not believe they have changed or that they are genuinely working towards positive change. Prison pen-pal websites provide an avenue to seek somebody who views more than an offender. Therefore, for the inmates who have been attempting to desist from crime, it is the perfect site to present themselves in line with a redemption script so the reader can buy into the inmates' inherent core self and in turn contribute to the process.

Furthermore, masculinity was a prominent theme within the inmates' profiles. I did not expect to find multiple images of men flexing their muscles, topless, or with sports fan gear. Inmates either consciously or unconsciously, contribute to the masculine culture of prison through displays of a tough demeanor. They also seem to use these over-masculine

presentations to appeal to viewers who find their physical characteristics attractive. It is interesting to observe how inmates use their limited 250 word space and pictures to convey they are worthy of being written to.

In conclusion, letters allow for concerned and helpful members of society to provide support and stand in solidarity with people behind bars. General strain theory and social bond theory have informed us that social support aids in reducing recidivism, but we have understood it from a familial standpoint. With the growth of prison pen-pal websites, the benefits of support can be expanded to include pen-pals. Research on befriending programs in the UK suggests there are benefits to support from individuals not known to the inmate prior to incarceration. However, the befriending organizations in the UK carefully select and train volunteers while prison pen-pal websites are available to anyone with internet access. Meanwhile, states in the US have moved forward to ban pen-pal soliciting. Futures areas of research should explore the impact of correspondence and pen-pal programs for inmates.

DISCUSSION

Despite the potential benefits of prison pen-palling, there is a lack of research about prison correspondence and support from individuals not known to the inmate prior to incarceration. This study sought to fill this gap by exploring what common themes exist within prison pen-pal soliciting profiles, what are inmates' motivations for joining Write a Prisoner, how inmates express desistance and changes in identity through their profiles, and how inmates perform masculinity through their personal ads. These findings are important for incarcerated individuals who are seeking support during their incarceration and as they prepare for release. Six states have introduced bans on prison pen-pal soliciting, leaving inmates to face disciplinary action if caught. Research has informed us social support is important for prisoners. If state Department of Corrections are concerned about fraud and scams, those possibilities can be warned against. Prison pen-palling has the potential to educate the public about our criminal justice system, the incarceration experience, and the men and women who are behind bars. Moreover, it can improve inmates' wellbeing and build social capital during their sentences. With this comes changes in identity and personal narratives that can transform individual prisoners' lives. New narratives help establish a new way of being where inmates are reconfigured. The construction of these narratives is possible

with social support that can transform criminal identities. Further, social support can help incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals handle the strains and stresses associated with imprisonment and reentry.

Prison pen-palling provides a path to redemption and cultural shift that accepts incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals instead of shunning them into reoffending and recidivism. Proximity to those who are incarcerated, to those who are marginalized, to those who are hurting and forgotten matters to how the criminal justice system operates and its outcomes. Pen-palling gives inmates a space to share their hearts, their stories, their remorse, and their redemption. It can help inmates get in touch with their feelings and help them develop healthy relationships. Moreover, letters allow prisoners to reclaim their voices and reflect upon the harm they have caused through narrative and writing. In turn, the public's attitudes can begin to shift, making them more accepting and understanding of former offenders. Changing how people think helps the transition from prisoner back to citizen. To help people who are incarcerated heal and reintegrate into their communities we must take new and creative approaches to end mass incarceration and stop the cycle of recidivism. Research has informed us that changes in identity are crucial to the desistance process. Further, research into befriending programs has found having non-judgmental support from a community volunteer reduces feelings of isolation, improves wellbeing, and contributes to changes in identity. Researchers argue, "Helping prisoners to rewrite their life narrative can be a powerful and redemptive experience, giving ex-prisoners the hope and purpose needed to start a new and positive life, while at the same time helping them to come to grips with the anti-social life they have left behind" (Hallett & Johnson, 2014, p. 674). Earhart (2014) argues:

> Society has a choice to make. It can support a policy of isolation that alienates prisoners, frustrates hopes, breeds apathy, and produces high recidivism rates. Or, it can choose to engage the prison population in a productive, meaningful way that fosters hope and leads inmates to opt for rehabilitation. One culture or the other - society's culture or a prison culture - is going to reinforce the moral choices of the inmate. Which do you want it to be? (p. 10)

My personal correspondence has taught me the numerous benefits and potentials of prison pen-palling. Through letters, I share resources on programs and services available in their state. I help individuals think about and reflect on how they are 'doing' time in and what

they can do to better prepare for parole boards and release. I keep them up to date on life on the outside. Through exchanges of stories and questions I help rehumanize them so they feel like the human beings they are. We alienate prisoners and expect them to have 'successful' transitions into communities that they have been disconnected from for years. As we move forward, we need interventions that improve inmates' look on life. We need innovative ways of improving people's time in prison and during reentry. Prisoner reentry starts in prison and the integration of prisoners can begin through correspondence as they connect with society and supportive individuals.

LIMITATIONS

This study is not without limitations. The primary limitation of this study is that it only focuses on men listed on the site WriteAPrisoner.com. While females and transgender individuals make up a smaller portion of inmate profiles listed future areas of research should include them. The UK's New Bridge Befriending Service evaluations have found positive outcomes from inmates participating in their befriending service. It is not clear from the evaluations whether the participants are entirely male or if women are also involved. However, it should be noted Barrick and colleagues (2014) study of reentering women found women who reported having greater contact with non-family members instead of their family members were more quickly to be reincarcerated than those with less contact. These nuances are worth exploring as it may reveal gender differences in male/female inmates motives to join these sites, their experiences on them, and any impacts during incarceration and post-release.

Second, this study only focuses on the site WriteAPrisoner.com, which leaves other similar websites to be explored. Third, this study only focuses on the state of California, which leaves other states to be examined. Of course, this comes with the limitation that inmates who are listed in states where prison pen-palling is banned cannot be studied as this would alert the prison they are housed at. Despite the limitations, since there is a lack of research on the topic this study has provided some information to prison pen-pal soliciting and websites. Future research should continue to explore the benefits of correspondence from supportive community members, as well as prison pen-palling from individuals not known to the inmate prior to incarceration**.**

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study are significant as more inmates attempt to connect to the outside world and join prison pen-pal websites in hopes of acquiring a new friend and connection to the outside. The connections that inmates make through these programs and similar services can help them stay connected while potentially improving their wellbeing and contributing to their rehabilitation. Despite these potential benefits states such as Florida, Indiana, Missouri, Montana, New Mexico, and Pennsylvania have moved to have banned prison pen-pal soliciting and websites. If caught, inmates face disciplinary action and third parties can potentially receive a fine for listing or updating the inmates' social media accounts. The results of this study can help Department of Corrections and state legislatures implement appropriate policies regarding prison pen-pal soliciting.

Moreover, the findings of this study add to existing literature on social bond theory, general strain theory, and identity theories of desistance which propose that family contact and social support can help reduce recidivism and contribute to the desistance process. Even though this literature tends to focus on families and not on other potential sources of support a better understanding of the role prison pen-pals play can expand this network to include strangers who become friends. If pen-palling benefits prisoners, then perhaps similar programs to those in the UK can be started in the United States where trained volunteers write to prisoners through organizations who facilitate and supervise the process.

Additionally, the findings indicate many prisoners are seeking non-judgmental support and reentry support. These findings have important implications for the website Write a Prisoner. Currently, the site is set-up like a dating website with options of narrowing down profile searches to location and specific characteristics. The way in which the website is set-up contributes to the assumption that these websites are for romantic or companionship purposes. However, the website has potential to operate more like a befriending service where pen-pals receive information on how to better serve individuals through correspondence, how to set boundaries, and how to get involved in the movement for criminal justice reform. It is worth mentioning that Write a Prisoner does attempt to have a community, supportive aspect to it through their prison forum and community programs, such as books behind bars, welcome home kits, self-help books, and scholarships for children impact by scholarship. They also have added different types of profiles at no cost to inmates,

such as counseling, education, employment, and housing profiles. However, its main function is prison pen-palling. If individuals are seeking to support incarcerated men and women, then some of these options for narrowing searches could be removed. In the UK befriending service models, it is the organization that pairs volunteers with an inmate. The number of inmates listed on Write a Prisoner could make this difficult to do, but the organization still has options in terms of website layout. Overall, this study can be of significance to incarcerated individuals seeking support through correspondence, state Departments of Corrections, and to the number of websites and organizations that operate prison pen-palling services.

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