

“A community is thriving when its prisons...”: A position paper on reimagining the purpose of prisons

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Abstract

How well a society thrives can be assessed, in part, by the wellbeing and productivity of its citizens. It follows that the study of places such as prisons, where people tend to have the lowest levels of wellbeing and productivity, can offer useful insights into the factors that determine the ability to thrive. Drawing on the results of a concept mapping process involving correctional experts, we present a position regarding the future of our prisons. We suggest that there is a need to move beyond conventional conceptualisations of the carceral system – a system founded on the principles of retribution, incapacitation, and deterrence – towards the idea of prisons as spaces that are designed to support thriving and, ultimately, to strengthen community. Using a concept mapping method, we asked a group of stakeholders from the corrections environment, academia and the community itself to consider what it means to thrive in a prison and what it might mean for a prison to become a site of thriving.

Keywords: thriving, prisons, safety, community

Introduction

Historically, prisons have been designed to function as places of punishment and, in contemporary times, are still typically experienced as punitive environments. Even in high resource economies, living conditions are regularly described as falling short of basic standards, with modern prisons characterized by high rates of violence, substance use, and health services that fail to provide even basic care (e.g., Ministry of Justice, 2025; Rautanen et al., 2024). They are spaces that are socially threatening; marked by social conflict, aggression, discrimination, isolation, rejection, and unpredictability. In short, it can be argued that they provide the very conditions that expedite post-release failure in the incarcerated (see Day, in press).

While prisons are typically places of considerable deprivation, they have the potential to be engaged in the task of community-building. Ostensibly they have a key role to play in influencing people towards making positive contributions to society after their release. They are expected to provide services and programs that will reduce the risk of further offending and help keep the community safe. Yet, tension inevitably arises in any attempt to simultaneously rehabilitate (to look forwards – to what people might contribute) and to punish (to look backwards – at what they have done), and there is considerable uncertainty about the best way to promote personal wellbeing. In this position paper, we aim to extend this discussion by also asking how our prisons can best help the community to flourish or to ‘do well’. Our aim, then, consistent with a positive psychology approach (Wright & Lopez, 2002) is to consider

the resources, capabilities, and potential that exist in our prisons to help our community thrive. In doing so, we hope to begin to map out some new ways of conceptualising and enacting incarceration, and of generating ideas, strategies, and actionable approaches that can positively impact upon the wellbeing and productivity of our communities. The starting point was to consult with a wide range of stakeholders: corrections professionals (senior leadership, prison management, custodial staff, rehabilitation specialists), academics (criminologists, psychologists, health scientists, architects, philosophers, sociologists, indigenous scholars), and the community. Using a concept mapping approach (Conceição et al., 2017; Kane & Trochim, 2005; Wutzke et al., 2017), over 30 national and international experts were invited to complete the sentence: “*A community is thriving when its prisons...*”. We received over 100 responses which were condensed into themes that were subsequently endorsed by a governance committee (Table 1). The overarching theme here was that communities thrive when prisons invite them in to support people and welcome them home. In what follows we embrace this as a foundational position statement for re-imagining imprisonment as a purposeful and active intervention that can help people and their communities to thrive. The three underlying concepts are considered in turn.

Table 1. Summary of Stakeholder Responses to the Sentence-Completion Task

“A community is thriving when its prison...	Essential Idea
...invite it in to support people in prison and welcome them home"	To ‘open the gates’, to encourage transparency, trust, and collective action
...are professionally run to help people flourish"	To break down siloes between programs, and prisons, and community connections, families, and culture
...promote equity, fairness, and justice"	To move away from the idea of the prison as a ‘black box’ where we forget about people, cause further harm, and to return them to the community in a better state than when they arrived
...build on the resources and dreams of the citizens who are imprisoned"	To view prisons as a key resource to assist people in ways that help them and their communities flourish

1. Inviting the community in

The active participation of individuals, organizations, and communities in identifying and addressing social problems is an important way to empower marginalized voices, promote inclusivity, and challenge systemic injustices (Ohmer et al., 2022). While this is currently mainly achieved by providing opportunities for the community to provide support to individuals leaving prison (e.g., Circles of Support and Accountability; Richards, 2020), there are also opportunities for those leaving prison to contribute to provide service to their communities (e.g., Graham, 2013).

Community engagement is also thought to help to foster a sense of belonging and social cohesion, promote collective action and social change, and inform policy and decision-making processes. However, when it comes to prisons, we currently know little about community stakeholders’ perspectives and how these might inform correctional service delivery. The competing priorities of different sections of the community are not always considered and there is limited awareness of the barriers that prevent community members and representatives from connecting with (or even entering) prisons. Even at the level of the family, significant obstacles arise during incarceration in maintaining the nurturing and enduring relationships that are fundamental to wellbeing (Folk et al., 2019). There is scope then to better understand community strengths and concerns about imprisonment and to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about ‘insider perspectives’ on the issues facing their communities. From an ecological perspective (e.g., Dickens et al., 2025), this is part of the ‘macrosystem’ that can provide the knowledge needed to inform efforts to re-position the place and role of prisons in society.

2. Supporting people

Whilst reducing the potential for physical harm remains a key goal for all correctional agencies (Tamatea et al., 2023), a key health-promoting feature of any social-environmental circumstance involving deprivation is ‘social safety’ (Slavich, 2023). Socially safe situations are characterized by social acceptance, understanding, inclusion, connection, belonging, cohesion, harmony, support, validation, predictability, stability, and authenticity. In addition, social safety relates to the perception of safety in all interpersonal contexts in which people interact. We can clearly do much more to ensure the social safety of people in prison, both through the prevention of violence and the provision of support. A lack of social support in prison has, for example, been found to be negatively correlated with symptoms of common mental disorders, specifically, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Machado et al., 2024). On the other hand, the provision of socially safe experiences in prison can be expected to have reparative effects and promote resilience going forward (Bethell et al., 2019).

Social safety can also result from reconnecting with culture and community while in custody. Woldgabreal et al. (2026), for example, argue that wellbeing is enhanced when people in prison are assisted in their aspirations to work, to pay taxes, to take care of their families, to volunteer, and to become positive catalysts for change in their communities. In this way an adaptive experience in prison can create the belief that “I am inherently worthy because I belong to this culture and have a place within my community to return to”.

3. Welcoming them home

The logic here extends what has been termed ‘secondary desistance’, or the changes in self-orientation that some people experience either within or beyond prison which can then help turn a (forced) lull in crime into something enduring and actively accomplished (McNeill, 2006), to the idea of ‘tertiary desistance’. This identifies the importance of esteemed others and/or certified/validated in officials, recognising the efforts and progress of those on a reintegration pathway and towards belonging to a (moral) community. In fact, it is largely communities that provide post-release support, and who establish the platform upon which successful reintegration from prison becomes possible. A recent review by Mourão et al. (2025) suggests that factors that promote the most successful reintegration journeys include emotional stability, family and community support, education, employment, financial stability, and access to health and social services. While there is some evidence that an intensive, outreach model of community support can focus on these areas and, as a result, significantly reduce their contact with the criminal justice system (McAusland et al., 2025), post-release services and programs tend to remain fragmented and insufficient (Herrlander & Dwyer, 2023).

Why not simply abolish prisons?

Given the well-documented problems faced by contemporary prison systems and their lack of success in preventing further crime (e.g., Sotiri & Schetzer, 2024) it is reasonable to question the premise of this paper that our current prison systems have the potential to make a significant contribution to strengthening communities. For some, this simply reflects a ‘carceral logic’ that is deeply flawed in assigning importance to punishment, surveillance, and confinement through prisons, policing, and other state control systems as the primary or only solutions to harm, conflict, or social issues (Kilroy & Lean, 2026). Rather, it is argued that prisons should be abolished. Criminal justice systems inevitably reduce what are complex social problems to simplistic demonstrations of blaming the individual and intentionally overlooking the root causes of crime, such as inequality, racism, and/or disadvantage. Abolitionists envision working toward a world where this form of state control is rendered unnecessary by addressing the systemic conditions that create harm and disadvantage (Toraif & Mueller, 2023) and view correctional practices as largely complicit with punitiveness and social control.

The abolitionist agenda is, in our view, legitimate and there is a pressing need for more initiatives that result in fewer people being incarcerated (especially in countries characterized by mass incarceration, such as the USA; Conyers et al., 2023). We remain realistic, however, about just how hard it is for prison systems to reform (Day, in press) as well as the wide range of factors that inevitably limit the impact that prisons can have on community life outside of the prison walls. We are also very aware of data showing that our reliance on the use of imprisonment is not declining. The global prison population has now reached nearly 11 million people (an overall rate of 140 people per 100,000),

although this varies considerably among different regions of the world and between different parts of the same continent. Over one quarter of global imprisonment, for example, occurs in just two countries -- in the USA where there are currently nearly 1.8 million prisoners, and in China where there are 1.7 million people in prison (although the number in pre-trial detention and other forms of detention in China is unknown). Furthermore, since the year 2000, the world prison population total has grown by 27%, which although slightly less than the estimated increase in the world's general population, represents a substantial increase in the number of people incarcerated (Fair & Walmsley, 2025).

What is new?

Prison-based research and practice have, until now, been almost exclusively focused on understanding and ameliorating individual-level risk factors for re-offending or, at times, on reducing the negative impact of the prison environment. There is evidence that this has produced some positive results, with well-designed criminogenic treatment programs along with prison vocational training and education making an important contribution to rehabilitative success (Cordle & Gayle, 2025). In this position paper, however, we argue that thriving is most likely to be assisted by our prisons when they invite the community in, provide social support and safety to the incarcerated, and welcome people home. Based on the advice of our expert group, we note that prisons should be concerned with more than simply administering punishment and 'risk management' and suggest that they have a much broader role to play in promoting community thriving and development. Of course, this is not to overlook challenges that may arise in identifying what a community is, when providing services for people who are incarcerated a long way from home and when the communities themselves are under-resourced. Opportunities may also arise with increasing public interest in correctional systems and outcomes and for different types of engagement as technology improves (CNA Center for Justice Research and Innovation, 2024). At the very least, however, we see considerable scope to begin to think quite differently about our carceral systems and to investigate how complex social networks and connections (which exist within larger interacting sets of social circles and institutions) combine to promote thriving in both the individual and the collective. While this suggestion is tentative and, of course, derived from feedback from just one set of voices (that of criminal justice experts across different disciplinary areas), it reminds us to see prisons as social institutions that are deeply embedded in culture that shape individuals and are, in turn, shaped by them. In other words, our communities will inevitably need to do more to help our prisons thrive if they are to help our communities thrive. It follows that solutions to the 'problem of crime', which have proven hard to identify and even harder to implement with integrity, effectiveness, and sustainability, are more likely to be found when we step back and reflect on the broader role that prisons can play in helping the community to thrive and how the community in turn can enhance wellbeing in prisons.

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