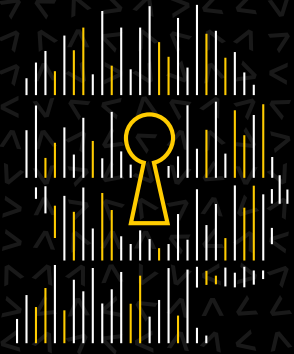# Prisons Research Agenda

INTRODUCTION

This document outlines a research agenda for Arnold Ventures' Prisons strategy. This agenda is guided by Arnold Ventures' mission of maximizing opportunity and minimizing injustice and is focused on ways research can advance racial equity, given the overrepresentation of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people in the correctional system and the legacy of slavery and racism in our nation's prisons. The overall purpose of this research agenda is to develop and build the evidence base on prison policy and practice, as a core component of our strategy to transform prisons. Arnold Ventures' Prisons strategy has four broad goals, which serve as the basis for this research agenda:

1. Increase the transparency, accessibility, and accountability of prisons

2. Improve conditions of confinement and the wellbeing of people in prisons, including those incarcerated in prison and those who work in them

3. Improve preparation for successful reentry

4. Safely reduce incarceration, through the use of backend release levers

This research agenda outlines a range of research objectives and questions that are aligned with our four strategic goals. These research objectives and questions draw on the expertise of researchers, key thought leaders and advisors, and those with expertise in correctional policy and practice, and direct experience with incarceration as well as a comprehensive review of the literature.[i] *We have particular interest in a subset of these objectives: projects that examine innovations to prisons conditions, that support safety, dignity, and personal transformation; projects that examine desistance and behavior change; and projects that examine implementation, outcomes, and impacts of policies that expand release opportunities and reduce time served.* Several of our research objectives, given their emphasis on evaluations or assessments of policy reforms, would be best achieved through researcher-practitioner partnerships.

OUTCOMES OF INTEREST

This research agenda includes outcomes at three important levels: *individuals (and families, by extension); systems; and society/community.* At the individual level, we are interested in measures of safety, misconduct, or violence, as well as reoffending and recidivism and the extent to which prison policy and practice is associated with improvements in these measures. We are also interested in studies that can sharpen our understanding of wellbeing and the role of prison policy in promoting prison environments and conditions that improve the wellbeing of those who are incarcerated in prisons and those who work in prisons. Indicators of wellbeing could include measures of: physical and mental health; humanity, security, and dignity; and connections to family and community (and job performance and satisfaction and stress

for correctional officers, for example). Measures of desistance and behavior change are also of interest and the role of prison policy in promoting these outcomes. Measures of prison conditions could include measures of: safety, violence, and victimization, overcrowding, humane treatment, access to basic services, adequate healthcare and hygiene, and sanitation. At the systems level, we are interested in measures of the size of the prison system, racial disparities, resource allocations and costs, and system processes and procedures. At the society/community level, we are primarily interested in measures of community safety and studies that include measures of the extent to which prison policy serves in the broader public interest of being efficient, effective, and fair/just.

As part of our mission of maximizing opportunity and minimizing injustice, we are interested in projects that reduce the most pressing uncertainties affecting policy through: descriptive studies; pilot and feasibility studies that set the stage for future causal impact studies; causal studies that use experimental and non-experimental designs to demonstrate the impact of policies, programs, or interventions on key outcomes; research on the implementation of policy change; and rigorous reviews and assessments of the literature. More information about our approach to funding research is available here.

We are particularly interested in studies that use a racial equity framework and are intentional about research methods and approaches that aim to understand the causes and consequences associated with prisons and incarceration. We welcome studies that shine a light on the experiences and perspectives of those who have been historically marginalized and studies that identify transformational solutions to improve the lives of the people and communities most impacted by the system and crime and violence. As part of our interest in supporting research projects that can advance racial equity and justice, we are interested in:

1. Projects that are conducted by research teams that include Black, Brown, and Indigenous people, those with life experiences related to the issues being studied, and from the communities/groups being studied;

2. Projects that include the experiences, perceptions, and expertise of Black. Brown, and Indigenous people and those who have direct experience with prisons throughout the research project; and

3. Projects that critically examine the role of race and racism in policy and practice and the extent to which policy and practice reduce racial disparities and advance racial equity and justice.

Goal 1. Transparency, Accessibility, and Accountability

Opening up prisons to data collection is critical to advancing change within them; doing so will enable policymakers to understand the scope of the challenges inside prison walls, to identify critical areas for reform, and to measure the impact of policy changes. Our theory of change is that it is possible to dramatically increase the transparency, accessibility, and accountability of prisons through data collection efforts that: describe the conditions of confinement and the nature of prison environments for those incarcerated in prisons and those working in prisons; assess the impact of prison conditions on individual outcomes; support the growth of an evidence-based culture inside prisons; and evaluate interventions for effectiveness routinely. Prisons are remarkably opaque institutions with little accountability. A profound lack of meaningful publicly-available information and oversight coupled with a dramatic imbalance of power and interests have made prison environments seem intractable to reform. Comprehensive national data are not regularly collected on many of the most basic dimensions of the prison experience, which has led to a poor understanding of various aspects of prison environments. Meanwhile, prison officials are not held accountable for providing environments that are characterized as safe, humane, and dignified and therefore conducive to behavior change and successful reentry following incarceration. Prisons are also inaccessible to the families and communities of those imprisoned inside. To better understand prison operations, programs, and conditions and explore how they can be more transparent, accountable, and accessible to produce better outcomes, we are interested in studies that:

1. **Examine the landscape of state policies and agency procedures on data collection and reporting on prison operations, programs, and conditions.**

- What administrative indicators are available, valid, reliable, and disseminated publicly? Which indicators provide valid and reliable information on prison conditions?

- What state- or agency-level policies or practices are related to data collection and reporting?

2. Examine the mechanisms by which prisons can be more transparent, accountable, and accessible.

- What types of data collection and reporting methods are related to improvements in correctional policy and practice?

- What is the role or impact of prison oversight on improvements in correctional policy and practice?

- What state policy contexts and policies are related to improvements in correctional policy and practice?

Goals 2 and 3. Wellbeing, Conditions, and Reentry Preparation

Efforts that fundamentally change prison environments, management, and culture in ways that better support safety, dignity, and personal transformation could lead to better outcomes for incarcerated individuals and their families and the community/society, as well as correctional staff. Further, innovations to the prison environment, management, and culture—including increased access to interventions, treatment, and services—could help better prepare individuals to reenter society and therefore reduce recidivism and increase community safety. By design, prisons are characterized by material deprivations, restricted movement and liberty, a lack of meaningful activity, and an absence of personal privacy for those who are incarcerated.[ii] In addition, rates of physical and sexual violence are high in prison settings, with significant adverse impacts on people incarcerated in prisons and those working in prisons.[iii] There has also been a significant decline over time in rehabilitative treatment and programming in prisons.[iv] Prison also deprives people of meaningful family contact and civic participation, it weakens family bonds, imposes financial and emotional strain on loved ones, and can be harmful to the wellbeing of children whose parents are incarcerated.[v] Conditions of incarceration are dehumanizing and disruptive for people who work in prisons as well. Corrections officers experience depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicide at rates significantly higher than the national average. Various studies have shown how the prison environment is associated with high levels of mental and emotional distress among officers. Further, correctional officers' attitudes about their jobs and their feelings of personal safety are related to the prison climate and environment.[vi] Decades of research also show that prisons do not improve community safety and recidivism rates remain stubbornly high.[vii] Since prisons do not provide adequate treatment, programming, education, and job training, or a culture conducive to behavior change, many people do not succeed upon release.[viii] A review commissioned by Open Philanthropy of high-credibility studies concluded that at current levels, incarceration's aftereffects likely outweigh the crime-control benefits of incapacitation.[ix] Other studies have shown that harsher prison conditions are associated with increases in recidivism.[x] To better understand the conditions of confinement and wellbeing of those incarcerated in prisons and those working in them and how to better prepare individuals for a successful release, we are interested in studies that:

1. Examine prison conditions.

- How are prison conditions experienced by different groups of incarcerated persons (e.g., age, sex, race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, or mental or physical disability)? Do prison conditions vary across different groups?

- What factors, including individual behaviors, contextual factors, and organizational factors, are associated with disparities in experiences of prison conditions?

- What policies or practices, including organizational factors, management structures, and governance policies, are associated with improvements in prison conditions?

- How do prison environments promote safety, dignity, wellbeing, rehabilitation, and desistance for incarcerated persons?

- What types of prison conditions promote safety, dignity, wellbeing, and job satisfaction for correctional staff?

- What is the role of state policy and correctional leadership in shaping prison conditions?

2. **Examine wellbeing of incarcerated persons and correctional staff.**

- How does wellbeing vary by different groups of incarcerated persons (e.g., age, sex, race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, or mental or physical disability)?

- How is the wellbeing of correctional officers related to their positions and functions within the facilities? How is wellbeing related to job performance (e.g., sick days, misconduct, and compliance with policies) and job satisfaction?

- How do perceptions of safety, dignity, respect, and agency relate to the wellbeing of incarcerated persons and correctional staff?

- How is the wellbeing of incarcerated persons related to the wellbeing of correctional staff?

- What is the role of state policy and correctional leadership in improving wellbeing among incarcerated persons and correctional staff (e.g. compensation, training/education requirements, unionization)?

3. **Examine innovations to prisons conditions.**

- Are innovative prison environments that better replicate aspects of life on the outside (for example, increased lighting and green space, increased mobility, dynamic security, noise mitigation, architectural improvements, and Scandinavian models) related to better prison conditions and wellbeing for incarcerated people and correctional staff? Are these innovations related to reductions in recidivism?

- Are innovative prison environments that provide incarcerated persons with significant access to programs, treatment, training, and services related to improved wellbeing for incarcerated people and correctional staff?

Are those innovations related to reductions in recidivism?

- What is the role of state policy, correctional leadership, and correctional staff in the adoption and implementation of innovative prison environments?

- What correctional policies and practices support robust and productive interactions with between incarcerated people and their families, prosocial networks, and community members? Are these policies and practices associated with better prison conditions? Are these policies and practices associated with reductions in recidivism?

4. **Examine desistance and behavior change in prison.**

- How do individual characteristics and experiences relate to desistance and behavior change in prison?

- What types of prison conditions support or hinder desistance and behavior change in prison?

- What is the role of correctional policy and practice in supporting or hindering desistance and behavior change?

Goal 4. Reduce Incarceration

It is possible to reduce the size of the prison population by developing evidence that can inform the development and implementation of back-end release policies (e.g., parole, compassionate release, earned/good time, education and work release) and through assessments of these policies. Building evidence on the outcomes associated with long sentences and how they are ineffective could also inform state policy reforms. Mass incarceration is a significant problem with reverberating consequences throughout American society, particularly among the Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities that are overrepresented in our nation's prisons. After decades of stability, the number of people imprisoned in the U.S. grew steadily from the 1970s through 2000s as a result of policy choices.[xi] Responsibly reducing incarceration requires a close examination of the factors that drive it, including the two key variables that govern the size of the prison population: the number of people sent to prison and the amount of time people stay in prison. While increases in time served have slowed over the past decade for drug and property offenses, all 44 states that report their data saw overall increases in average time served in prison from 2000 to 2014 driven by an increase in time served for violent offenses.[xii] Research offers little compelling evidence that longer sentences deter crime. After an exhaustive review of

the evidence base, the National Research Council (2014) concluded that long sentences were ineffective as a crime control measure. Roodman's (2017) review found similarly that at today's level of incarceration the deterrence impact of long sentences is zero. To accelerate the end of mass incarceration, many scholars have pointed to the need for building a "criminology of downsizing" and a decarceration agenda (see Clear 2021) to foster effective policy solutions.[xiii] To understand how states can safely reduce incarceration through back-end release policies, as part of a decarceration agenda, we are interested in studies that:

1. **Examine state-specific drivers of incarceration.**

- What is the role of crime rates, policing, prosecution, sentencing, release, and parole policies and practices on the size of the prison population? How do these factors contribute to the size of the prison population and time served? How do these factors produce racial disparities?

2. **Examine implementation, outcomes, and impacts of policies that expand release opportunities and reduce time served.**

- Do expanded release policies, such as compassionate release and elder parole, earned and good time credits,

second look policies, work and educational release, presumptive parole, and expanded parole eligibility, reduce the size of the prison population and cost? Do these policies reduce recidivism and increase public safety? Do these policies reduce racial disparities in the prison system?

- Do expanded release policies increase perceptions of justice and fairness, among incarcerated persons and the community?

- How are expanded release policies related to desistance and behavior change?

CONCLUSION

Arnold Ventures is committed to expanding the research foundation to reform prisons and improve prison policy and practice. While some of the failures in the current use of incarceration and in prison policy and practice have been documented, there is still much to be learned about prison operations, the prison environment and conditions of confinement, and critically, about the potential for alternatives and reforms. We see a significant opportunity for systems that are willing to test alternatives and to partner with researchers to assess these alternatives and learn from these experiences. Given the size of the prison population, the associated costs, and the documented harms and failures of prisons, we are committed to supporting research than can advance solutions to improve lives, reduce recidivism and increase community safety, and smaller and more accountable, accessible, and transparent prison systems.

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