Baylor University Research Findings: “The Prisoner’s Journey” Transforms Prisoners, Leads to Culture Change in Prisons

A look at the initial findings of the longitudinal study “Religion and rehabilitation in Colombian and South African prisons: A human flourishing approach,” conducted by the Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion (ISR), led by Dr. Byron Johnson, Dr. Sung Joon Jang and Dr. Matthew Anderson. (September, 2021)
I started this journey just to join a class...then I heard about somebody who can give meaning to my life, a meaning to the effort to try to change it.

Dragomir, Prisoner, Bulgaria

This is the ministry of the century and I want to be a part of it.

Prison Officer Saihemba, Zambia

As a condemned convict, I used to have sleepless nights, but through The Prisoner’s Journey, I realized that Jesus Christ has paid the ransom for my sins and for the first time since coming to prison, I have peace.

Ayo, prisoner, Nigeria
Since 2014, “The Prisoner’s Journey” (TPJ) course has been changing prisoners’ lives in institutions across the globe. The eight-week program is an initiative of Prison Fellowship International (PFI). As of August, 2021, more than 460,000 inmates have graduated worldwide.

A comprehensive, longitudinal evaluation of the TPJ program by the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University is underway. Initial findings from the first phase of the study reveal empirical evidence that this program transforms prisoners’ lives. The research shows that through increasing prisoners’ religious engagement, TPJ increases their motivation for identity transformation, helps them grow in virtue and reduces their aggression – all social indicators that they are on a path to successful rehabilitation. These constructive actions typically lead to a positive culture change within prisons.

What is TPJ?
TPJ is an in-prison, structured course designed to “transform the lives of prisoners, from the inside out, by introducing them to restorative principles taught by Jesus, who was also a prisoner.” It is centered on the book of Mark in the Bible, facilitated by trained inmates or volunteers. The program invites participants to consider the teachings of Jesus. They are also asked to reflect on their wrongdoing, emphasizing that the “reason there’s something wrong with the world is because there’s something wrong with us.” They come to look at their choices and actions through the filter of Jesus’s actions, example and words.

When was the study conducted?
Researchers conducted the first phase of the study during a 40-month period from January, 2018 to April, 2021. (Researchers plan to continue the study and expand to more countries.)
The beauty of The Prisoner’s Journey is that it does not discriminate. Anybody can participate because it only represents the facts about Jesus Christ. It is not preaching.

Deputy Controller of Prisons, Nigeria

The Prisoner’s Journey is a program of hope and reassurance.

Fr. Marwan, TPJ Program Coordinator, Lebanon

They are just so hungry and thirsty for God’s Word…God’s fire has fallen and created the most amazing excitement among all inmates inside this maximum facility…

Pastor Tyrone, The Prisoner’s Journey Leader, South Africa
Who was studied?
Nearly 900 prisoners. The average participant age was 35, and their charges were distributed across violent, property, sex, drug and other offenses in both experimental and control groups. Most participants were from Christian backgrounds, but positive outcomes emerged for participants from other faiths or without faith.

Where was the first phase of the study conducted?
Seven prisons in South Africa and Colombia.

What did the study examine?
The study evaluated how TPJ contributes to prosocial changes in self-identity, existential belief, and moral character by increasing religious involvement for program participants versus non-participants. It also assessed whether TPJ helped address emotional instability and misconduct by decreasing common challenges among prisoners like negative emotional states and aggression toward others. Specifically, researchers looked at:

1. Does inmate participation in TPJ increase religious engagement (such as Bible reading, personal prayer and chapel attendance)?
2. Does increased religious engagement contribute to (a) identity transformation, (b) a sense of meaning and purpose in life, and (c) virtue development?
3. Do identity transformation, a sense of meaning in life, and virtue development reduce negative emotional states (i.e., depression, anxiety, and anger) and the risk of interpersonal aggression toward another inmate?

What did the study find?
Researchers found that TPJ increases religious engagement among participants, and that this increased religious engagement prompts numerous internal positive changes. These shifts in the hearts of prisoners were likely to lead to changes in their actions – they show respect for rules, act less aggressively and cooperate more.
What did the study find about prisoner respect and obedience?
Researchers found that when prisoners participated in the program, it increased their forgiveness, accountability, gratitude and self-control. The growth of these virtues reduced their feelings of depression, anxiety and anger. At the same time, the program increased the likelihood of changed behaviors. Specifically, they were less likely to display volatile behavior. This lines up with what various prison officials have reported anecdotally to PFI over the years: TPJ participants become more respectful and obedient, which leads to “a culture change” in prisons.

What did the study find about interpersonal aggression among prisoners?
Inmates’ increased self-control, forgiveness and gratitude reduced the risk of engaging in aggression toward other inmates.

What did the study find about the effects of prisoners taking responsibility?
The increased religious engagement that TPJ creates correlates with active responsibility-taking among inmates. Graduates were more able to acknowledge their wrongs and accept some measure of blame for them.
Researchers found that heightened responsibility-taking helped prisoners rebuild agency by curbing drug use, changing speech patterns, avoiding fights and using self-control. This aligns with prison officials’ reports to PFI that inmates who accept responsibility for their offenses are more likely to establish positive relationships with family and less likely to re-commit crimes post-release.

**What does this mean for prisoners?**
Participation in TPJ measurably increases prisoners’ motivation for identify transformation, virtue growth, reduced negative emotions and diminished the risk of aggression. These changes appear to occur regardless of faith background.

The changes that TPJ participants undergo create profound implications when they are released. Graduates are apt to recidivate less frequently than other ex-offenders. They can hope to reunite with family in a demeanor of optimism and responsibility. (Prison officials often report to PFI about noticeable, positive shifts in prisoners’ interactions with their families during visitation.) And they are more likely to adopt a mindset of responsibility toward employment. The program does have a truly rehabilitative effect.

**What does this mean for prisons?**
The shift in prisoners’ emotional life and behavioral tendencies deeply impacts prisons. TPJ participants were likely to become more respectful, obedient, cooperative and less aggressive. This reduces violence and improves prison culture.

**What is the significance of TPJ and this study?**
TPJ creates long-term hope for prisoners and immediate benefits for the prisons in which it operates. Its outcomes are uniformly positive: for prisoners, prison officials and the community at large.
Inquiries

For more information about this study, please contact the PFI donor engagement team:

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About Prison Fellowship International
Since 1979, Prison Fellowship International (PFI) has helped prisoners experience transformation from the inside out through the healing power of the Gospel. Its vision is to break the cycle of crime and restore lives, worldwide, through Jesus’s love.

Learn more at PFI.org

About the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University
Established in 2004, the Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion (ISR) exists to initiate, support and conduct research on religion, involving scholars and projects spanning the intellectual spectrum: history, psychology, sociology, economics, anthropology, political science, philosophy, epidemiology, theology and religious studies.

Learn more at BaylorISR.org