

Summary of Key Preliminary Findings

Pepperdine – PFI Evaluation of Prison Programs in Colombia

Overview

Dr. Sung Joon Jang (Pepperdine University) presented preliminary results from a quasi-experimental study with Dr. Byron Johnson on four faith-based programs operating in seven of ten Colombian prisons under study:



The Prisoner's Journey



Sycamore Tree Project



Prison Project Philip



Train & Multiply

The research explored whether faith-based program participation contributes to restorative rehabilitation, specifically, **identity transformation** and **enhanced human flourishing** by **increasing religious involvement** and whether these changes are associated with **reduced risk of aggression** in a short term and thus potential **reductions in recidivism** in the future.

These preliminary research findings were presented in Fall 2025. The full report will be available in Spring 2026.

Theoretical Foundations

- **Criminal Desistance Theory:** Modern criminology now studies *why people stop offending* (“desistance”) as well as why they commit crime. Desistance is often triggered not only by external changes, called “turning points,” such as marriage, work, or military service (Laub & Sampson), but also by internal changes, like identity transformation.
- **Identity Transformation:** Giordano et al.’s “cognitive transformation theory” highlights the process of becoming *open to change*, encountering *hooks for change* (e.g., religion) and forming a *replacement self* to replace criminal identity. Paternoster & Bushway’s rational choice theory of identity change further emphasizes *self-reflection* as the shift from a “feared self” (continuing crime) to a “positive possible self” (reformed life).
- **Human Flourishing Framework:** Among various conceptions of rehabilitation, the “Good Lives Model” of offender rehabilitation as “spirituality,” which refers to finding meaning and purpose in life. VanderWeele’s concept of human flourishing refers to a state of being and doing well in **five** domains of human life: Happiness and life satisfaction, Health (mental and physical), Meaning and Purpose, Character and Virtue and Close Social Relationships. The present study integrates the concept of human flourishing into criminology, arguing that **people who flourish are less likely to re-offend**.
- **Restorative Rehabilitation:** Builds on *restorative justice* and *moral rehabilitation*, emphasizing the cultivation of virtue and purpose. Cullen’s “**virtuous prison**” model proposes that inmates’ time be used to strengthen moral awareness and capacity for virtuous behavior — echoing PFI’s mission.

Research Design and Sample



Design

Quasi-experiment (no random assignment) with pre- and post-test surveys.



Sample

– 3,518 pre-tests
– final dataset: 1,642 prisoners (239 control, 1,403 experimental)



Locations

10 prisons across 7 Colombian cities (including Bogotá and Medellín)



Demographics

– Average age 38
– 75% male
– 60% have primary education
– 75% first-time offenders



Data Sources

Surveys and official data (demographics, sentence length, recidivism, behavior scores) from INPEC

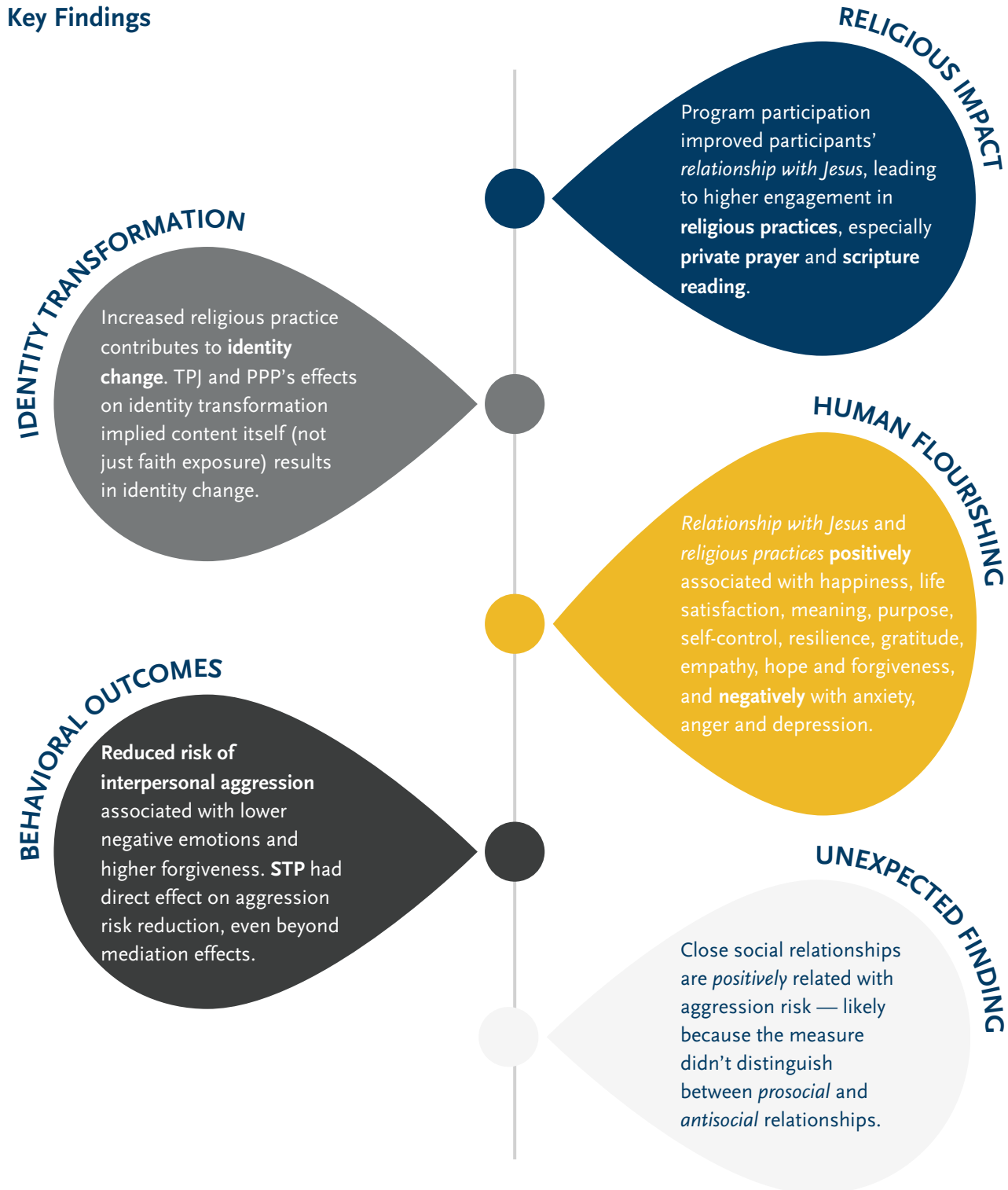
Core Hypothesis

Faith-based program participation increases religiosity (relationship with Christ and religious practices).

Religiosity enhances restorative rehabilitation, fostering identity change and human flourishing.

Rehabilitation reduces the risk of interpersonal aggression.

Key Findings



Interpretation and Significance

Program efficacy demonstrates measurable rehabilitation effects of all four faith-based programs. Religious engagement is the key pathway, but *identity change* and *virtue development* are the ultimate drivers. Forgiveness as a behavioral bridge emerged as the key predictor of reduced aggression and proved to be a critical insight for future program design.



Faith and flourishing provided five elements of significance:

- faith-based program participation
- relationship with Jesus Christ
- religious practices
- flourishing
- reduced aggression

The transformation process is psychological, moral and existential, validating PFI's model of holistic transformation through faith.

Limitations and Next Steps



Design

No random assignment; some “creaming” (self-selected, more motivated participants)



Next Data

Obtain official infraction data and longer-term recidivism data for cross-validation



Future Analyses

Compare program-specific impacts in more detail; explore which program features most strongly trigger forgiveness/identity change; use results to develop a “Restorative Prison Model” blueprint

Policy & Practice Takeaways

1

Rehabilitation is achievable.

Faith-based programs demonstrably contribute to identity change and the reduced risk of aggression.

2

View prisoners as goal-oriented human beings.

Do not see them merely as liabilities to manage, as they seek meaning, purpose and moral worth.

3

Religion plays a critical rehabilitative role.

It is not coercive, but an available catalyst for change.

4

Correctional systems should prioritize rehabilitative correction.

Rehabilitation should be more prominent than punitive containment.

5

Programs should intentionally cultivate forgiveness, meaning and purpose.

These are central pathways to moral reform and flourishing.

In Summary

The preliminary data strongly supports the claim that **faith-based rehabilitation fosters measurable personal transformation**, validating PFI's restorative model. The evidence suggests prisons can indeed become *virtuous, restorative institutions* that heal rather than harden offenders.

