# Using Positive Psychology to Create Change Among Convicts

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## Abstract

I use the Delancey Foundation as a case study of a successful model that rehabilitates the convicted by teaching the skills necessary to reenter society. Delancey provides housing, job training, and education to convicts, addicts, and the homeless. Delancey uses social entrepreneurship and peer mentorship to empower residents. I use the research of positive psychology to demonstrate how Delancey converts takers into givers using peer mentorship, which develops the major components of human well-being described in Seligman's PERMA model. Increased PERMA generates the conditions for convicts to thrive, ultimately becoming contributing members of society. I make formal recommendations for the replication of the Delancey model

## Problem

- **Overcrowding:** Between the 1970's and early 2000's, the incarceration rate increased 500% in the United States leading to 2.2 million people being imprisoned (Mauer & King, 2007)
- **High Cost:** Arizona Department of Corrections budget request for fiscal year 2019, 1.2 billion dollars requested for total operations (Arizona Department of Corrections, 2017)
- **Recidivism:** The recidivism rate tops out at 59.2% after 360 months in Arizona.
- **Prison & Trauma:** Reentry is difficult, prison is traumatic, diversion may be better (Arizona Department of Corrections, 2018)
- **Costs of Receiving:** There are negative outcomes associated with receiving help (lower self-esteem, a focus on the problem, lower self-efficacy, and feeling in-debt to someone) (Bolger, 2000)

### Arizona Inmate Recidivism Rate in Months

| Time After Release in Months | 6 | 12 | 18 | 24 | 30 | 36 | 42 | 48 | 54 | 60 | 66 | 72 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Recidivism Percentage | 7.3 | 14.1 | 19.6 | 24.0 | 27.5 | 30.3 | 32.7 | 34.7 | 36.4 | 37.8 | 39.1 | 40.2 |

Source: (Fischer, 2011)

## Model

- Diversion & Reentry
- Residential: Housing provided for free
- Peer Mentorship: Creates opportunities to give rather than just receive
- Social Entrepreneurship: Creates job training opportunity and funding to offset costs of center
- Two Year Commitment
- Wilderness Immersion
- PERMA: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Achievement

## Theories

- The act of giving to others may contribute to each PERMA dimension and act as a rehabilitative intervention when applied to the convict population.
- Giving can act as an intervention for redemption and ultimately the catalyst for purpose beyond the self.
- Giving may be the mechanism in the Delancey model that generates the opportunity for increases in self-efficacy through self-mastery experiences that ultimately produces behavior change.

## Significance

- Positive psychology research helps to understand why the Delancey model works allowing us to intentionally build upon the model and preserve that which is foundational to success.
- When applied to the convicted population, the PERMA model can be used as a measure of successful rehabilitation.

## Research

- **PERMAH:** (Seligman, 2011)
- **Givers & Takers** (Grant, 2013)
- **Hope Theory:** (Magyar-Moe & Lopez, 2004)
- **Self-Determination Theory:** (Brown & Ryan, 2015; Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008)
- **Self-Efficacy:** (Maddux, 2011)
- **Character Strengths:** (Peterson, 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004)
- **Meaning Making:** (McAdams & McLean, 2013)
- **Grit:** (Duckworth, 2016;Duckworth et al., 2007)

## Recommendations

**P:** Build positive emotion into the rehabilitation design using the humanities in the form of music, film, theatre, and art. Teach the value of positive emotions, what leads to positive emotions, and how to increase them intentionally.

**E:** Use the character strengths assessment to increase individual awareness of strengths. Assign job training based on character strengths. Alter the challenge level of job training as skills increase to maintain engagement. Create the conditions for flow with wilderness immersion and/or the humanities.

**R:** Provide opportunities for members to give to each other to increase well-being, create positive relationships, and mitigate the risks of receiving help. Create opportunities for self-disclosure of vulnerability to build trust.

**M:** Provide opportunities for residents to tell their stories in group settings to further connect with their altered narrative, allowing them to make meaning of their troubled pasts. Create written and spoken opportunities to amend their narratives to form positive self-identities, improve mental health, and increase the probability of future positive behavior.

**A:** Include multiple avenues for residents to explore interests, practice skills, and learn to value the purpose of their efforts. Identify goals and break down goals into smaller short-term steps to sustain hope. Brainstorm potential obstacles and possible ways to overcome them to create many avenues for achievement of the goals. Train peer mentors to reframe obstacles as challenges to overcome maintaining the desire to take action.