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Strengths-Based Compassion as an Agent of Change for Incarcerated Youth: Positive Psychology Interventions Proposed for Colorado's Division of Youth Services

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Keywords
youth corrections, incarcerated youth, positive psychology, mindfulness, character strengths, self-compassion, compassion, strengths-based compassion

Disciplines
Juvenile Law | Prison Education and Reentry

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Strengths-Based Compassion as an Agent of Change for Incarcerated Youth

Positive Psychology Interventions Proposed for Colorado's Division of Youth Services

Rachel Olsen

Master of Applied Positive Psychology Program, University of Pennsylvania

MAPP 800: Capstone Project

Advisor: Jan Stanley

August 1, 2021
Abstract

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Acknowledgments

**Family and friends.** To my amazing family, your love and support are everything. Truly everything. I would not be where I am today without each and every one of you. I am so lucky to be supported by such a remarkable immediate and extended family. You have made me who I am and have encouraged me to strive, grow, and never stop learning. Thank you for being tremendous inspirations.

Brynn and Heidi, you are my everything, my moon and stars. You motivate me to bring more love, compassion, and positivity into the world every day. Thank you for supporting and understanding me when I did not have enough energy or mental capacity to be my best mom-self this past year. Thank you for encouraging me when I doubted myself. Thank you for putting up with lots of meals ordered in (or out) and for understanding my short fuse and distraction. You two are my rocks, my north stars, my inspiration to do better in this world. I could not possibly love you more.

My dear friends, thank you for holding me up, loving me, encouraging me, and having steadfast faith (when I didn't) that I could do it. I genuinely feel like the luckiest person in the world to be surrounded by such phenomenal people. You give me faith that this world is, and will be, a beautiful place because of your hearts, love, and joy. Thank you for sharing them with me.

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Virginia Millar, I am in awe of all that you have done with such incredible grace and understated amazingness.

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action. You have never stopped encouraging me to pursue my dream of bringing compassion to youth. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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know that I can surf the rough waters, buoyed by your love, strength, intellect, drive, and heart. Thank you for loving me back to myself.

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You are the reason behind this capstone. I believe you deserve more from us, more from society. You are our kids too, and we need to take care of you. I dream of doing my small part to make the system work at least a tiny bit better for you, for your health, for your wellness, for your rehabilitation, for your future. Thank you for expanding my heart and being a significant part of my inspiration to pursue a Master's in Applied Positive Psychology.
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**Introduction**

Our youth correctional institutions are in need of reform. Research indicates that up to 70% to 80% of youth who have been incarcerated are likely to be rearrested within a three-year period (Mendel, 2015). Studies also show that imprisoning youth may not deter recidivism and may even increase involvement in criminal activity and antisocial behaviors (Lambie & Randell, 2013). Youth incarceration environments are often characterized by bullying, antagonism, substance use, isolation, and victimization. In addition, they often have inadequate services to address the health, education, and mental health needs of the youth (Ashkar & Kenny, 2008; Lambie & Randell, 2013). The entire system of youth corrections needs to shift its focus from retribution to rehabilitation in order to cultivate pathways for youth to flourish post incarceration.

Youth offenders often come from a background of socioeconomic deprivation, adverse childhood events, low education attainment, and trauma (Simpson et al., 2018). Between 70% to 95% of youth offenders have a diagnosed psychiatric disorder, and they often have concurrent mental health problems (Ou & Reynolds, 2010). Rates of substance abuse and dependence are seen in up to 40%-70% of youth offenders (Robertson et al., 2004). Over a third of juvenile offenders are below grade level in reading, spelling, cognitive abilities, and comprehension and have special education needs (Cruise et al., 2011).

While incarcerated, youth may suffer from loss of control, boredom, isolation, bullying, and victimization from inmates and staff, adding to their trauma. Given the transitory nature of adolescent self-esteem and sense of self, incarceration can have harmful long-term effects on the development of self-determination and self-efficacy (Lambie & Randell, 2013). A growing body of evidence shows that these influences often contribute to the lack of emotional regulation, impaired social skills, and delayed maturation in juvenile detainees (Simpson et al., 2018).
In order to meet the developmental and criminogenic needs of youth offenders, we must employ strategies from positive psychology to counteract the deleterious effects of incarceration and provide appropriate rehabilitation. By implementing positive psychology interventions, such as strengths-based compassion, we can work toward creating more positive prison systems that foster wellbeing, increase thriving, and create long-lasting positive change for the individual, community, and society.

**Youth Corrections**

**Overview**

As reported by the Prison Policy Initiative, on any given day, over 48,000 youth in the United States are confined in restrictive, correctional-style facilities (Sawyer, 2019). While this number is staggering, it is a vast improvement as youth confinement has fallen 60% since 2000 (Sawyer, 2019).

Youth in correctional facilities are labeled as detained or committed (Sawyer, 2019). Sawyer (2019) explains that *detained* youth are being held prior to their court hearings or before sanctions or placement have been determined. In contrast, *committed* youth have been adjudicated (convicted of the crime), and the legal responsibility for the youth has been transferred to the state for the duration of their disposition (sentence) (Sawyer, 2019).

The National Center for Juvenile Justice (2021) divides most youth facilities into two broad styles or categories: correctional and residential. Correctional facilities are more restrictive and may include training schools, reformatories, and juvenile correction facilities. Residential style facilities are less restrictive and may allow youth to participate in the public through school, work, or community programs (National Center for Juvenile Justice, 2021). Two-thirds of confined youth are in the most restrictive facilities (Sawyer, 2019).
In Colorado, the length of stay in secure correctional facilities has increased, with an average disposition at over two years (Arrigona et al., 2018). In the 2019/2020 fiscal year annual report for the Colorado Division of Youth Services (DYS) (2021), the average daily bed count for detained youth was 224 individuals, and 455.3 for committed youth. In addition, there was an average of 207 youth on parole (Colorado Division of Youth Services, 2021).

**Figure 1:**

*DYS Timeline of Care*


One key finding from the Colorado DYS annual report was that youth commitments for violent offenses were on the rise in 2020, with 41% of youth committed for a violent crime in
contrast to 31% in 2019 (Colorado Division of Youth Services, 2021). In addition, the reason for commitment spiked in the crime against a person category from 2019 at 39% to 49% in 2020. The remaining offense categories held roughly stable at 23.8% property, 14.8% weapon, 4.7% drug, and 8.1% other (Colorado Division of Youth Services, 2021). In addition, it is noted that youth treatment needs were also on the rise, with 67% needing formal mental health interventions and 92% requiring treatment for substance use disorders (Colorado Division of Youth Services, 2021).

**Racial and Ethnic Disparities**

The racial and ethnic disparities of confined youth are seen nationwide as well as in Colorado. In 2019, the U.S. Census Bureau reported the nation's population makeup as 76.3% White, 18.5% Hispanic or Latino, 13.4% Black or African American, 5.9% Asian, 1.3% American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 0.2% as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, with 2.8% reporting two or more races (United States Census Bureau, 2019). The nation's youth population is more diverse, reporting at 50% White, 26% Hispanic or Latino, 14% Black or African American, 5% Asian, 1% American Indian or Alaskan Native, and <.5% as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, with 4% reporting two or more races (Kids Count Data Center, 2019).

Racial and ethnic disparities are particularly pronounced in the juvenile justice system. As reported by the Prison Policy Institute (Sawyer, 2019), Black boys and girls and American Indians are extremely overrepresented relative to their share in the total youth population. In the U.S., 42% of the boys and 35% of the girls in juvenile facilities are Black or African American, while American Indians make up 3% of the girls and 1.5% of the boys, despite comprising less than .5% of all youth nationally (Sawyer, 2019).
Colorado faces similar disparities. The racial and ethnic distribution of Colorado's general population of youth is reported at 56% White, 31% Hispanic or Latino, 4% Black or African American, 3% Asian, 1% American Indian or Alaskan Native, and <.5% as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, with 4% reporting two or more races (Kids Count Data Center, 2019). Yet, Colorado's population of incarcerated youths' racial and ethnic distribution is overrepresented by Hispanic or Latinos at 38.43% and vastly overrepresented by Black or African American youth at 22.88%, with Anglo American or White youth only representing 35.27% (Colorado Division of Youth Services, 2021).

**Table 1:**

**Racial and Ethnic Distribution of Populations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>U.S. General Population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019)</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Hispanic or Latino</th>
<th>Black or African American</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>American Indian or Alaskan Native</th>
<th>Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander</th>
<th>Two or More Races</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>76.3%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. General Youth Population (Kids Count Data Center, 2019)</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>&lt;.5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>U.S. Incarcerated Youth Population (Prison Policy Institute, 2019)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado General Youth Population (Kids Count Data Center, 2019)</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>&lt;.5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado Incarcerated Youth Population (Division of Youth Services, 2021)</td>
<td>35.27%</td>
<td>38.43%</td>
<td>22.88%</td>
<td>1.48%</td>
<td>1.08%</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.86%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** A comparison of racial and ethnic distributions in different populations. Data unavailable for White, Hispanic or Latino, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander and Two or More Races in the U.S. Incarcerated Youth Population.

**Cost of Incarceration**

In 2020, Washington D.C. and 40 states reported spending at least $100,000 annually per confined youth, with some states spending more than $500,000 per youth per year (Justice Policy Institute, 2020). As reported by the Justice Policy Institute (2020), the average state cost for the
confinement of a youth in a secure facility is now $588 per day, or $214,620 per year, a 44% increase from 2014. Colorado reports an average of $359.03 per day, or $131,045.95 per year for each incarcerated youth (Justice Policy Institute, 2020).

**Recidivism Rates**

Recidivism is most often defined as reoffending with a court filing for a felony or misdemeanor after the termination of a correctional program, including parole (Crites, 2019). Unlike adult recidivism, there are no national figures for youth recidivism as each state's juvenile justice system is allowed to choose how and if they track recidivism (MST Services, 2018).

In 2014, the CSG Justice Center compiled data from 39 states in an attempt to compare state statistics and offer suggestions on how to improve the collection, reporting, and analysis of data. The CSG Justice Center report found that youth were far more likely to reoffend than adults. The highest recidivism rates reported were 76% within three years and 84% within five years (CSG Justice Center, 2014). In addition, Aizer and Doyle (2013) found through a ten-year analysis of 30,000 juvenile offenders that 40% of youth who had been in juvenile detention were incarcerated in adult prisons for reoffending by the age of 25.

Currently, five states (Florida, Idaho, Maine, Maryland, Virginia) and the District of Columbia define, measure, and report juvenile recidivism similar to Colorado (Colorado Division of Youth Services, 2019). When comparing these six data points of post-discharge recidivism, the rates ranged from 20% to 46.7%, with Colorado being the median at 34.4% (Colorado Division of Youth Services, 2019). The three states with lower rates were Maryland (20%), Idaho (29%), and the District of Columbia (32%) (Colorado Division of Youth Services, 2019).
Colorado's one-year post-discharge recidivism rate has consistently averaged 31%, with the two-year recidivism rate averaging 47% and the three-year rate averaging 55% (Colorado Division of Youth Services, 2019). This means that over half of committed youth are adjudicated with a new misdemeanor or felony within three years of discharging (Division of Youth Services, 2019). In the most recent DYS Annual Report, the one-year recidivism rate for the fiscal year 2019/2020 was 41% (Colorado Division of Youth Services, 2021).

**Figure 2:**

*Recidivism Trends (One, Two- and Three-Years Post-Discharge)*

![Recidivism Rates Over Time](https://spl.cde.state.co.us/artemis/huserials/hu711internet/hu7112017internet.pdf)

Note: From "Recidivism Evaluation of the Colorado Division of Youth Services," by Colorado Division of Youth Services, 2019, p.16, (https://spl.cde.state.co.us/artemis/huserials/hu711internet/hu7112017internet.pdf). In the public domain.
Through the CSG Justice Center's analysis (2014), it was recognized that while roughly 80% of states track some recidivism data, only half of all states measured youth outcomes beyond the number of youth adjudicated for future crimes. Thus, one area the CSG Justice Center (2014) strongly encouraged policymakers and juvenile justice agencies to include in their data collection is additional positive youth outcome measures to determine if the system is not only preventing future criminal activity, but also helping youth transition into productive crime-free adulthoods.

**Successes within Colorado's Division of Youth Services**

When looking at the scope of DYS services offered to youth while detained, the potential for long-term impact and positive change is evident. DYS offers education, special education services, vocational training, mental health treatment, substance use treatment, and transitional services (Colorado Division of Youth Services, 2021). As seen in the latest Annual Report, committed youth's risk scores dropped dramatically from assessment to discharge. There was a 51% reduction in disruptive attitudes and behaviors, a 59% reduction in aggression, and a 48% reduction in unhealthy relationships (Colorado Division of Youth Services, 2021).

In Aizer and Doyle's (2013) analysis of over 30,000 youth, they found that once youth went into juvenile detention, they rarely returned to school when released. In addition, they discovered that a lack of a high school diploma limited the types of jobs available to prior offenders, which could lead them back into the prison cycle (Azier & Doyle, 2013). Colorado's DYS offers important educational opportunities to youth while committed. DYS reported that in the 2019/2020 fiscal year, 264 youth successfully received their high school diplomas or GEDs and 336 youth received their career or technical education certificates while detained. DYS also
recently arranged a new partnership with CSU Pueblo to allow imprisoned youth to enroll in college courses while they are in DYS care (Colorado Division of Youth Services, 2021).

**What is missing?**

While there are many success stories of youth who complete their commitment in corrections and go on to lead successful lives, what is missing for the 55% of youth that reoffend within three years (Colorado Division of Youth Services, 2019)? How can the juvenile correction system foster greater rehabilitation for even more youth? In Ashkar & Kenny's (2008) study on young offenders' subjective experiences of incarceration, they found that "the incarceration experience placed detainees into a state of readiness for positive change but failed to provide them with the necessary skills to affect and sustain change" (p. 584). While Colorado's DYS works hard to provide youth with skill development and the treatment needed to rehabilitate effectively, are there additional interventions that could bolster successful outcomes? For example, can employing the tenets of positive psychology set youth on a path in which they desist crime and increase flourishing in their lives after incarceration?

**Introduction to Positive Psychology**

**The Advent of Positive Psychology**

Historically, mainstream psychology has utilized the disease model, concentrating on psychological problems and how to solve them. While this focus has provided significant advances in understanding, preventing, and treating psychological disorders, there has been a cost to this sole emphasis. Mainstream psychology has neglected that strengths and goodness are just as innate in humans as disease, dysfunction, and distress (Peterson, 2006).

While many researchers were working for years on areas such as optimal human functioning (James, 1890), self-actualization (Maslow, 1962), subjective wellbeing (Diener et al.,
1985), and growth mindset (Dweck & Leggett, 1988), the field of positive psychology finally emerged as a cohesive area of study when Dr. Martin Seligman gave his inaugural address as the President of the American Psychological Association in 1998. Seligman called for a new focus for psychology:

*Positive psychology*, that is, a reoriented science that emphasizes the understanding and building of the most positive qualities of an individual: optimism, courage, work ethic, future-mindedness, interpersonal skill, the capacity for pleasure and insight, and social responsibility. It's my belief that since the end of World War II, psychology has moved too far away from its original roots, which were to make the lives of all people more fulfilling and productive, and too much toward the important, but not all-important, area of curing mental illness. (Seligman, 1998, p.1)

Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000) outlined a framework for the field of positive psychology, launching a new science and profession to concentrate on understanding and fostering the factors that help individuals, communities, and societies flourish. Seligman et al. (2005) defined positive psychology as "an umbrella term for the study of positive emotions, positive character traits, and enabling institutions" (p. 410). Furthermore, the field of positive psychology at the individual level was defined as: "wellbeing, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present)" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). In addition, Seligman emphasized the importance of utilizing the scientific method to research the positive side of psychology and developing and promoting empirically validated positive interventions to enhance wellbeing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In the decades that followed, Seligman and colleagues have encouraged practitioners to
harness human goodness and excellence to help individuals build lives of increased happiness and wellbeing (Peterson, 2006).

While the science of positive psychology is a relatively new field of study, the question of what creates a good life has been explored for centuries through religion and philosophy. This exploration dates back to ancient Greek philosophy, when Aristotle pondered the question of what makes life worth living. Aristotle contrasted hedonic happiness, defined as positive affect or pleasure, to eudaimonic happiness, defined as happiness from a life of meaning and engagement (Fave et al., 2013). In addition, Aristotle believed that to create true eudaimonic happiness, one must pursue excellence through thought and action (Melchert, 2002, pg.189).

Furthermore, Aristotle shared that while virtues are not innate in youth, youth have a natural capacity for and ability to cultivate them. Creating an excellent life, according to Aristotle, is an art and not a science; it requires one to develop the habit of choosing and behaving in accordance with virtue time and time again (Melchert, 2002). From Aristotle to the present, philosophers and scientists assert that in order to live a good and meaningful life, one must promote behaviors that move humans towards the life they desire.

Following this ancient line of thought, the field of positive psychology has designed and studied many constructs of wellbeing that foster eudaimonia. One of the most recognized frameworks of flourishing is Seligman's (2011) PERMA model, which focuses on wellbeing through five pillars: positive emotions (P; i.e., hope, joy, love, compassion, pride, amusement, and gratitude), engagement (E; i.e., living in the present moment or being in flow), relationships (R; i.e., healthy relationships in which we feel supported, loved and valued), meaning (M; i.e., having a sense of purpose or belonging), and accomplishment/achievements (A; i.e., working towards and reaching goals) as the building blocks for a life of fulfillment and flourishing. Over
the decades, many theories and constructs of wellbeing have gained scientific relevance, including but not limited to character strengths, resilience, hope, optimism, positive emotions, and gratitude (Lopez & Snyder, 2011). As a result, the application of positive psychology has gained significance at the personal, community, and society levels and is now being incorporated into public policy agendas around the world (Adler & Seligman, 2016). Yet, it has not developed without criticism.

The Second and Third Waves of Positive Psychology

The advent, or first wave, of positive psychology was a forum in which scholars and scientists were able to augment the disease model of traditional psychology and explore the "brighter sides of human nature" (Linley & Joseph, 2012, pg. 5). Yet, this construct came under fire from critics both within and outside of the field as being happy-ology (Held, 2004; Seligman, 2001; Wong, 2011), with its focus squarely on positive phenomena such as positive emotions, traits, behaviors, and thinking styles, excluding the negative (Lomas et al., 2020).

The second wave of positive psychology began roughly a decade into the development of the field, in reaction to the polarizing rhetoric and focus on the positive being desirable and the negative as undesirable (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016). This led the field to a more nuanced exploration of the philosophical and conceptual complexities of the positive (Lomas & Itzvan, 2016). Delle Fave et al. (2011) stated that the second wave of positive psychology reflected "balancing opposite elements into a whole" (pg. 199), allowing for a more integrated perspective of positive and negative and their roles in creating the good life.

Wong (2011) proposed a new conceptual model, for what he called positive psychology 2.0, defining it as "the scientific study of virtue, meaning, resilience, and wellbeing" (p.72); in which both the positive and negative are incorporated, as well as post-traumatic growth and
resilience. While Seligman et al. (2005) considered relief of suffering separate from the enhancement of happiness, the positive psychology 2.0 taxonomy focused on the interdependence of these two emotions and experiences (Wong, 2011).

Wong's (2011) conceptual model highlighted adaptive processes and positive outcomes from both negative and positive antecedent conditions. Wong (2011) explained that "the whole story of PP [positive psychology] is about how to bring out the best in people in good and bad times in spite of their internal and external limitations" (p. 72). An essential aspect of the second wave of positive psychology emphasized holding and processing negative and positive emotions in order to gain insight from and mastery over distressing and traumatic events (Larsen et al., 2003).

Positive psychology calls for as much focus on strength as on weakness, as much interest in building the best things in life as in repairing the worst, and as much attention to fulfilling the lives of healthy people as to healing the wounds of the distressed. (Peterson, as cited in Wong, 2011, p. 71)

While the second wave of positive psychology deepened the insights and impact of the field by integrating negative alongside positive, the third wave of positive psychology is expanding the field even further by integrating more complexity. As a result, the field is in a state of broadening, becoming more welcoming of diverse and inclusive perspectives (Lomas et al., 2020). Lomas et al. (2020) define the broadening of positive psychology in the third wave through the two specific areas of scope and methodologies. Lomas et al. (2020) explain that the expansion in scope takes positive psychology beyond the individual to consider groups, organizations, and larger systems. In addition, the expansion in methodologies allows for greater
use of implicit measures, qualitative methods, and computational techniques that utilize big data (Lomas et al., 2020).

As the understanding of positive psychology grows, it is being incorporated throughout academia and culture more broadly. Positive psychology is ushering in collaborative scholarship that unifies diverse fields of study such as positive education (Seligman et al., 2009), positive clinical psychology (Wood & Tarrier, 2010), positive social psychology (Lomas, 2015), positive neuroscience (Urry et al., 2004), and positive humanities (Tay et al., 2018).

While positive psychology is still considered a relatively young science, practitioners continue to improve its methods and breadth of study through rigorous scientific research. As the field continues to develop, it is answering the call from Seligman and colleagues to create dynamic ways to understand and incorporate positive interventions in order to increase flourishing and wellbeing for individuals, groups, organizations, cultures, and systems.

**Positive Criminology**

As positive psychology continues to integrate more diverse areas of inquiry, the timing is right for the field to expand into underserved and often overlooked segments of the population, such as incarcerated individuals. Much like traditional psychology, researchers of traditional criminology have focused on understanding the negative factors that lead individuals to engage in deviant and criminal behaviors (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi, 1969) while mostly ignoring the positive factors that might keep them away from crime (Maruna & Farrall, 2004; Ronel & Segev, 2014).

The most common rehabilitative approach used in corrections is the Risk-Need-Responsivity Model (Bonta & Andrews, 2007; Ward & Langlands, 2009). This model is based on detecting, monitoring, and managing an offender's risk factors (i.e., negative attitudes, low
self-regulation, substance use disorder, poverty) (Bonta & Andrews, 2007). The goal is to
determine the degree of threat an individual poses to the community and then set out to reduce or
minimize the risk factors leading to criminal behavior (Bonta & Andrews, 2007; Ward &
Langlands, 2009). It has been argued that it is necessary to broaden the scope beyond risk factors
and consider the promotion of experiences and activities that cultivate strengths, social
functioning, and wellbeing (e.g., approach goals as well as avoidance goals) (Ward & Langlands,

…reactive, individual, alienating, and deficit-based approaches that foster patienthood
instead of health, citizenship, and democracy have dominated the field of health and
human services for decades... It is time to shift paradigms and give strength-based,
preventive, empowering, and community-oriented approaches a chance... (Kindle
Location 706)

A new area of study, positive criminology, has been developed to meet this need. Positive
 criminology adopts the perspective of positive psychology. It is defined as theories and models
of criminology that are positively experienced by individuals and foster crime desistance
(abstaining from criminal behavior) (Ronel & Segev, 2014). Positive psychology and positive
criminology have shifted from the idea that an individual needs to be fixed, to a more holistic
view that advocates fostering positive experiences and emotions that may enable individuals to
disengage from crime, addiction, and deviance (Ronel & Segev, 2014). Thus, positive
criminology focuses on the application of positive interventions to help individuals through
formal or informal programs (i.e., meditation or twelve-step programs), with an emphasis on
positive social elements (i.e., optimism, hope, social acceptance) and positive personal factors
(i.e., resilience, positive emotions, coherence) (Ronel & Elisha, 2011).
Ronel et al. (2013) suggest six ways applying positive criminology can create a more comprehensive recovery model.

First, by increasing positive experiences and emotions, one can reduce negative emotions and subsequently negative attitudes and behaviors (Duckworth et al., 2005), which may help reduce recidivism (reoffending when released) (Ronel & Segev, 2015). For example, positive emotions can lead to an upward spiral by broadening the scope of attention and cognition (Fredrickson, 2009) which can build personal resources and help veer individuals out of the downward criminal spiral (Burns et al., 2008; Ronel, 2013). Second, positive criminology allows an individual's wholeness to be considered, not solely their challenges, deficits, and risk factors. For example, it offers positive interventions that help individuals recognize and build on their strengths (Gredecki & Turner, 2009). Third, positive criminology tries to instill individuals with a sense of ownership over their problems. This happens by offering positive experiences that help alter the understanding of oneself and others; and presents opportunities to face issues and formulate solutions in a supportive environment (Ronel & Segev, 2015). Fourth, the experiences fostered through positive criminology are socially inclusive, engaging the community in strengths-based programs and interventions (Bazemore & Stinchcomb, 2004). As shared by Ronel (2013), the act of offending involves self-centered actions and often includes a feeling of social separation. Yet, positive criminology programs that foster social integration, understanding, and acceptance can help offenders resettle into society and sustain desistance. Fifth, positive criminology offers a spiritual perspective that helps individuals find deeper meaning and connection to powers greater than themselves (Ronel et al., 2013). By fostering a sense of common humanity, positive criminology can help instill an understanding of human imperfection and increase hope, which can help break the cycle of self-centered thinking. Sixth,
the application of positive criminology embodies the essence of its core values of human respect, acceptance, and integration.

The implementation of positive criminology helps break the paradoxical cycle within the prison system in which a violent act of locking someone up, aims to end violence and deter future violence (Ronel & Segev, 2014). Applying the tenets of positive psychology to the prison population may be the sea change the system needs to move from retribution to rehabilitation, and youth corrections may be an important place to start.

The Adolescent Brain

Adolescence

Over the past twenty years, there have been significant developments in the understanding of adolescence. Adolescence, the transition from childhood to adulthood, was once thought of as a short period of life, lasting only a few years. This phase of life has lengthened due to the earlier onset of puberty and later transition into careers, relationships, and economic independence (Steinberg, 2015). Currently, adolescence is defined as a fifteen-year period, between the ages of 10 to 25 years old (Steinberg, 2015). Recent advances in neuroscience have provided new insights into developmental and behavioral characteristics of adolescents that differentiate them from adults.

Scientists have long been aware of the rapid brain growth and structural changes during the early years of life (0-3 years old) and have recognized that interventions within this period can have a lasting impact on life-long health. More recently, neuroscientists have discovered that the adolescent years pose another ripe opportunity for intervention as the brain enters the second most malleable phase of one's life.
The changes in adolescent brains are not as much about growth as they are in early childhood, but rather reorganization (Steinberg, 2015). This reorganization takes place mainly in two brain regions, the prefrontal cortex and the limbic system. The prefrontal cortex is responsible for self-regulation and rationality, and the limbic system is important in generating behavioral and emotional responses (Steinberg, 2017). Thus, during adolescence, these two systems learn to work together to help youth develop a healthy psychosocial identity (the alignment of internal values, desires, and goals with external forces such as peers, caregivers, and society) (McAdams & Cox, 2010).

**Brain Development**

Over the past two decades, hundreds of studies have revealed dramatic developmental differences in the brains of children, adolescents, and adults. The brain regions of the prefrontal cortex and limbic system undergo extensive maturation during adolescence (Steinberg, 2017). These two areas of the brain direct advanced thinking and have roles in developing executive function, which affects planning ahead, making complicated decisions, the experience of reward and punishment, and the processing of information about interpersonal relationships (Steinberg, 2015). During the adolescent years, the rapid growth and change in these regions help youth begin to regulate the experience of pleasure, assimilate the views and opinions of others, and generate self-control (Steinberg, 2017).

Steinberg (2015) explains that brain development during adolescence can be broken into three phases. During the first phase, starting around the time of puberty, the limbic system becomes more aroused. The characteristics often seen in this phase are moodiness (high and lows of emotions), sensitivity to opinions of others (especially peers), and the desire to have exciting experiences (sensation-seeking). The second phase is more gradual, starting in preadolescence
and continuing through at least sixteen years old. In this phase, the prefrontal cortex becomes better organized through synaptic pruning, removing connections no longer needed, and myelination, creating membranous sheaths that insulate axons (Steinberg, 2015). This allows for information to flow rapidly across more regions in the brain, increasing executive function (problem-solving, decision making, planning ahead) (Steinberg, 2015). The third phase of brain development is when the brain becomes more connected, this does not finish until youth are in their early twenties. An increase in neuro connectivity between the prefrontal cortex and the limbic system creates more reliable and mature self-regulation (Steinberg, 2015). During the phase of late adolescence, youth get better at regulating their impulses, refrain from peer pressure more readily, and understand the consequences of their actions more fully. In addition, during the latter phase of change, their rational thought processes are less easily interrupted by emotional arousal, stress, or fatigue (Steinberg, 2015).

**An Age of Opportunity?**

The structural changes occurring in the brains of adolescents have been linked to behavioral characteristics often seen during this phase in life, and may help explain youth involvement in criminal activity. For example, research shows that most risk-taking follows an inverted U-shaped curve with age, in which risk-taking increases from childhood into adolescence and peaks in either mid to late adolescence (Steinberg, 2017, Defoe et al., 2015). This curve is also seen in youth involvement in violent and non-violent crime and is referred to as the age-crime curve (Sweeten et al., 2013).

Adolescents may be primed for involvement with crime considering their heightened desire for sensation-seeking in conjunction with their underdeveloped sense of self-regulation (Steinberg, 2017). Studies have shown that youth engaging in criminal behavior have a more
challenging time self-regulating; in particular, they are often impulsive and show impaired behavioral and cognitive flexibility (Fazel et al., 2008; Vitacco & Kosson, 2010). In addition, adolescents are more susceptible to peer pressure than adults. Studies suggest that youth are more vulnerable to bullying, more sensitive to rewards, and more likely to engage in dangerous decision-making when in the presence of their peers (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007; Chein et al., 2011). Evidence has also shown that adolescents' personality traits are less fixed than adults, and characteristics such as self-regulation and conscientiousness do not stabilize until late adolescence or early adulthood (Scott et al., 2016).

Yet, the remarkable brain changes that take place during adolescence provide a window of opportunity for intervention and make youth uniquely viable candidates for rehabilitation. As Steinberg (2015) states,

The discovery that the brain is highly plastic during adolescence is good news in principle, but it is only good news if we take advantage of it, by providing the sorts of experiences to young people that will facilitate positive development and protect them from experiences that will hurt them. (p.11)

Pleysier et al. (2017) suggest that youth offenders generally fall into two categories: 1) common adolescent stressors lead to criminal behavior that tends to cease in adulthood; and 2) a complex web of environmental and psychosocial factors influence recidivism, and reoffending is likely to occur (Murray et al., 2019). Lambie and Randell (2013) point out that the second group is especially impacted by the negative effects of incarceration, which can result in higher recidivism rates. Thus, while positive interventions can impact both groups during this critical period of development, the second group may receive even more benefit from targeted interventions that assist with behavioral development (Murray et al., 2019).
By understanding the plasticity and structural changes in the brain during adolescence, the juvenile criminal justice system can implement positive interventions that impact adolescents' neuro and behavioral health to facilitate rehabilitation and help build healthy futures.

**Positive Psychology Applications Suggested for Youth Corrections**

Positive psychology interventions have shown favorable outcomes for youth struggling with emotional and behavioral disorders (Amendola & Scozzie, 2004). Studies of mindfulness, character strengths, and compassion all have produced promising data that can be extrapolated to the youth corrections population. While mindfulness interventions are supported by strong data within this specific population, character strengths and compassion studies have focused on adolescents and incarcerated adults and not specifically with juveniles in correctional facilities.

With the body of evidence showing the positive effects of mindfulness, character strengths, and compassion in various populations, there is a ripe opportunity to consider new interventions for youth corrections based on positive psychology and positive criminology. The time is right to consider incorporating positive interventions into the rehabilitation of young offenders in order to offer them skills for life-long wellbeing.

**Mindfulness**

Mindfulness meditation originated over 2,500 years ago but has more recently gained attention in the western world as it has been incorporated into secular psychological practices to regulate emotion and reduce distress (Smalley & Winston, 2010). Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990) defines mindfulness as a present-focused, non-judgmental, moment-to-moment awareness. Dr. Baime (personal communication, November 20, 2020) describes a mindfulness practice as a structured mental process that allows one to train their attention to hold focus in order to deepen awareness. As one develops a deeper awareness and connection to stillness, it enables one to be less
distracted and distressed by worries and preoccupations; in addition, it allows one to pause
between stimulus and response (Baime, 2011).

Neuroscientists have begun to look at the impact of mindfulness meditation on the brain
and have discovered that brain regions can begin to change in as little as eight weeks of regular
practice (Baime, 2011). One noticeable area of change is the prefrontal cortex, which manages
higher cognitive functions such as judgment, decision making, planning, and socially appropriate
behavior (Baime, 2011). Another area of the brain that has been identified as positively impacted
by mindfulness meditation is the insula, where sensations and emotions are integrated and
processed. In addition, the insula is thought to be essential for self-awareness (Baime, 2011).

A growing body of research shows that mindfulness meditation creates psychological
change that can increase wellbeing, emotional regulation, alleviate anxiety and depression and
improve cognitive abilities such as selective and sustained attention (Chiesa et al., 2011). Ellen
Langer (1989; 2016) found that when one increases their mindfulness, it can result in greater
health, positive affect, creativity, and competence. In addition, research has shown that
mindfulness can improve relationships (Carson et al., 2004) and interpersonal functioning
(Shapiro et al., 2016). Furthermore, in a review of empirical studies on mindfulness, Keng et al.
(2011) found that mindfulness "brings about various positive psychological effects, including
increased subjective wellbeing, reduced psychological symptoms and emotional reactivity, and
improved behavioral regulation" (p.1).

Why is Mindfulness Effective?

Because the positive impact of mindfulness-based approaches on psychological
wellbeing has been well documented, the question of why it is an effective practice has been
raised by researchers.
Baer (2003) explored mindfulness from an empirical and conceptual approach and summarized that mindfulness is effective because of: exposure (non-judgmental observation and the ability to sit with emotions and be open to change), cognitive change (metacognition, the awareness of one's own thought processes with non-judgmental acceptance), self-management (focus on self-care and healthy coping resources), relaxation (slowing down, letting go), and acceptance (a recognition that one does not have to change all unpleasant symptoms).

In addition, Niemiec (2014) shared several pathways and mechanisms developed through mindfulness that help explain the success of mindfulness and meditation on wellbeing. The first is decentering, the ability to see one's thoughts and emotions as temporary and transient (Carmody et al., 2009). The second is emotion regulation, accepting feelings, and reducing reactivity by promoting goal-directed, responsive behaviors. Third, psychological flexibility, the ability to adapt to situational challenges, shift perspectives and mindsets, and be aware and open (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). The fourth is values, identify what is important in life and align behavior to those factors (Wilson et al., 2010). Fifth, self-compassion, taking a kind and friendly approach to oneself (Keng et al., 2012). Lastly, the sixth is spirituality; while mindfulness is a secular process, it has been linked to an increase in spirituality which has been connected to improvements in psychological symptoms (Carmody et al., 2008).

In addition, Coffey et al. (2010) studied the connection between mindfulness and flourishing, and they discovered that mindfulness increases the management of negative emotions, nonattachment, and clarity of one's inner life (Coffey et al., 2010).

**Mindfulness in Youth Correctional Facilities**

Research has shown that mindfulness-based interventions can help youth manage problems stemming from adverse childhood experiences, mental health problems, and difficulty
regulating emotions (Simpson et al., 2018). Murray et al. (2019) reviewed research literature on mindfulness-based interventions with incarcerated youth and found four themes emerged: stress reduction, self-regulation, anger management, and acceptance.

Incarcerated adolescents shared that when they used mindfulness techniques, they were able to reduce their overall stress (Barnert et al., 2014). Youth reported that when they implemented mindfulness techniques during events, such as court hearings, they reduced stress and maintained healthy self-regulation (Himelstein et al., 2012). In addition, qualitative studies have shown a reduction in stress and increased ability to manage emotions, concentrate, and improve social skills (Simpson et al., 2018). Youth also noticed physical changes, such as a reduction in jaw and muscle tension, when using mindfulness (Barrett, 2017). Empirical research has also shown a significant decrease in salivary cortisol levels in youth post-mindfulness teaching, indicating a reduction in stress responses in the body (Fan et al., 2009).

A second theme recognized through the literature review was that emotional, cognitive, and behavioral self-regulation improved when incarcerated youth utilized mindfulness-based interventions (Murray et al., 2019). Himelstein et al. (2012, 2015) found a statistically significant increase in emotional regulation, decision-making skills, and behavior of adolescents in correctional facilities after completing a mindfulness program. In addition, youth found that using mindfulness practices such as deep breathing helped them control their behavior as they learned to pause and take a breath before reacting (Barrett, 2017). Attention control was also improved through mindfulness techniques which helped participants increase the awareness of their emotions and regulate their responses (Leonard et al., 2013). This evidence suggests that mindfulness-based interventions can help youth in correctional facilities increase emotional,
cognitive, and behavioral self-regulation by increasing their inner awareness (Murray et al., 2019).

Mindfulness has also been shown to be an effective strategy to help incarcerated youth respond positively to anger and aggression (Barnet et al., 2014; Himelstein et al., 2012; Himelstein et al., 2015; Kimonis et al., 2011; Milani et al., 2013). This theme is significant as youth in corrections are prone to anger and aggression and often have poor coping skills (Kimonis et al., 2011). Through qualitative self-reports, a youth shared, "when something's bothering me… I was trying to meditate so I could calm down, and so I can relieve all that, that madness, just let it out and stuff" (Himelstein et al., 2014, p. 566). Another reported, "instead of reacting I can just stop, think about it, feel me, you know I can actually choose instead of reacting to it. It's [mindfulness] going to help me in a lot of ways" (Himelstein et al., 2014, p. 566). Mindfulness helps youth recognize anger as a transient emotion and helps teach them to use mindful skills to respond with less aggression (Milani et al., 2013). In addition, Murray et al. (2019) report that mindfulness-based programs implemented in youth correctional facilities increased self-esteem and reduced hostility.

The last theme that emerged through mindfulness studies with youth offenders was that most youths were open to and accepting of the interventions (Murray et al., 2019). Participants found the mindfulness exercises to be positive experiences and commented on their appreciation of the safety they felt when engaging in the mindfulness activities (Himelstein et al., 2012). In addition, they shared that they hoped other inmates would have the opportunity to participate in the mindfulness programs (Himelstein et al., 2012). These findings suggest that mindfulness interventions are not only effective, but they are also enjoyable and accepted by incarcerated youth (Murray et al., 2019).
The research on mindfulness meditation illustrates the direct impact teaching mindfulness has on incarcerated youth. Barnert et al. (2014) showed that incarcerated youth partaking in meditation interventions benefited from enhanced wellbeing, increased social cohesiveness, increased self-discipline, expanded self-awareness, and were not harmed by the interventions, which is notable given the high trauma rate among juvenile detainees. Sapouna et al. (2015) reported that offenders are likely "to desist from offending if they manage to acquire a sense of control over their own lives and a more positive outlook on their future prospects" (p. 24). If youth can reduce their stress, regulate their emotions, increase self-regulation, and control anger and aggression, this may lead to a healthier carceral environment for all. In addition, mindfulness interventions aimed at enhancing coping skills, improving psychological health, and increasing emotional control may reduce recidivism and improve inmates' overall wellbeing (Simpson et al., 2018).

**Character Strengths**

The VIA\(^1\) classification of strengths and virtues is a cross-cultural, common language used to understand, study, and describe what is best about human beings (Niemiec, 2018; Niemiec, 2019). More than 55 distinguished scientists participated in a rigorous process of identifying 24 universal character strengths which reside beneath six overarching virtues (VIA Institute on Character, 2021). Research by Peterson & Seligman (2004) conducted in over 30 nations revealed the universality of character strengths; and a few years later, Park et al. (2006) validated the ubiquity of character strengths in a study across 54 nations and the 50 states.

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\(^1\)VIA previously stood for *Values In Action*, yet the name changed as scientific exploration focused on character, not values. VIA is now known to stand on its own as it means *the path* in Latin (Littman-Ovadia & Niemiec, 2016).
The VIA Survey or VIA Inventory of Strengths was developed to identify and measure character strengths and was validated across wide-ranging settings (Park & Peterson, 2007; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The VIA Survey is a dimensional tool in that it does not have all-or-none categories. Each individual has a unique profile of strengths, which can be discovered through the VIA Survey. Character strengths are relatively stable, context-dependent, and augmentable with practice (Niemiec, 2018). For reference, all 24 character strengths are listed below, divided into the six virtue areas (Niemiec, 2012).

**Figure 3:**

*VIA Classification of Character Strengths & Virtues*

The 24 character strengths are often viewed as the foundation of what is right with people (Niemiec, 2014; Park et al., 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In addition, character strengths can be described as capacities for thinking, feeling, and behaving that produce positive outcomes (VIA Institute on Character, 2021). Character strengths occupy a central role in positive psychology as good character is thought to enable pleasure, flow, and engagement (Peterson et al., 2007).

Niemiec (2014) points out that these positive characteristics of our personality are different from other types of strengths such as skills (abilities we can develop), interests (what we find joy in doing), and talents (what we are inherently good at). Character strengths are viewed as an individual’s core identity or who they truly are, and character strengths can be utilized to develop the other strength areas such as skills, interests, and talents. As Niemiec (2014) shares, "talents can be squandered, skills can diminish, and resources lost, but strengths crystalize and evolve and can integrate with these other positive qualities to contribute to the greater good" (p.26).

**A Deeper Understanding of Character Strengths**

Signature strengths have been defined as the top five (+/-) strengths identified by the VIA Survey that one most readily utilizes across multiple settings (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). These strengths make us feel authentic and often are identified by family and friends as our core attributes (Niemiec, 2014). It is important to note that each person possesses all 24 character strengths, yet signature strengths are the strengths that are employed most frequently by a specific individual. Understanding one's signature strengths and reinforcing them, while recognizing and fostering signature strengths in others can help create pathways to connection, positive relationships, and wellbeing (Niemiec, 2014). According to one study, people who use
their strengths the most are eighteen times more likely to be thriving than those who use their strengths the least (Hone et al., 2015).

Beyond signature strengths, Niemiec (2014) shares additional principles to consider for a greater understanding of one's character strengths. First, character strengths are plural, not singular, in that they are expressed in combination with one another and work in tandem. Second, character strengths are multi-dimensional. For example, creativity encompasses originality and ingenuity, and honesty involves integrity and authenticity. Third, character strengths are expressed in degrees and within contexts; strengths vary due to circumstance and person. For example, while two individuals may share the strength of kindness, this may be expressed at different frequencies and durations. In addition, depending upon the context, one may utilize different strengths; when relating to friends, one may do so with zest or self-regulation depending upon the situation.

While character strengths are identified as part of our personality that tends to be relatively stable, these traits can shift during one's lifetime (Niemiec, 2014). The changes can be due to genetics, social roles, life events, and deliberate interventions (Borghans et al., 2008). The idea that character strengths can be developed and changed is not a new concept, and it dates back to Aristotle's belief that character and virtue can be fostered through practice and habit formation (Melchert, 2002).

Lastly, character strengths have heart, mind, interpersonal and intrapersonal capacities (Niemiec, 2014; Peterson, 2006). The heart-mind dimension depicts how each strength relates to activities of the heart (e.g., emotions, intuitions) and the mind (e.g., logic, thinking, analysis), while, the intrapersonal-interpersonal dimension represents how each strength focuses attention.
Strengths-Based Compassion

on self or others. The circumplex model of character strengths developed by Peterson (2006) is shown below.

**Figure 4:**

*Circumplex model of the VIA Classification*

![Circumplex model of the VIA Classification](image)


While some character strengths more readily fall into one area than another, it is important to note that each strength is multifaceted and can be conceptualized through each quadrant of the model. As shared by Niemiec (2014),

For example, consider gratitude, which is depicted as the strongest "heart strength" in this model an individual may feel genuine and deep appreciation for someone's kindness
(heart), have grateful thoughts (mind), express thanks to someone (interpersonal), and feel grateful for one's good health (intrapersonal) (p.33).

**Promoting Character Strengths in Adolescents**

Research literature shows that specific character strengths (i.e., hope, kindness, self-control) can mitigate against the harmful effects of trauma and stress and prevent or reduce future disorders (Park, 2004). There is consistent evidence that character strengths are not merely protective factors for youth but may also enable thriving.

Across multiple studies, interventions that promote the use and enhancement of character strengths have been associated with numerous positive outcomes such as academic achievement, improved social skills, and greater wellbeing and happiness in youth (Harzer & Ruch, 2014; Toner et al., 2012; Weber et al., 2016). For example, Määttä & Uusiautti (2020) found that when strengths-based approaches were used with school children, they improved their wellbeing and provided benefits for facing, preventing, and overcoming adversities. In addition, a program initiated with 9th graders to enhance character strengths, positive emotions, and optimal experiences resulted in elevated life satisfaction and self-esteem (Freire et al., 2018).

Additionally, studies have shown that prosocial engagement with others and the use of character strengths mitigate depressive symptoms in adolescents (Padilla-Walker et al., 2020). Lastly, in a study by Rashid et al. (2013), researchers discovered that helping youth identify their personal strengths and then instructing them on using those strengths in problem-solving made them effective problem solvers and improved their wellbeing.

It has been shown that strengths can be cultivated and strengthened in youth. Therefore, programs that promote wellbeing and build upon inherent character strengths may not only
provide an immediate impact on specific disorders, but may also create "moral, healthy, and happy people who can overcome challenges in life and enjoy the good life" (Park, 2004, p. 50).

**Character Strengths + Mindfulness**

Mindfulness practice can enhance the use of character strengths (Niemiec et al., 2012), and character strengths interventions can serve as a path to mindful living (Niemiec, 2012). Niemiec (2014) outlines many benefits of merging character strengths and mindfulness. First, it gives mindfulness practitioners the tools to deepen their practice and enhance perspective. Second, mindfulness can enhance character development and foster self-awareness, and the synergy between the two can encourage a virtuous upward spiral of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2009). Third, the integration of character strengths and mindfulness can promote cognitive flexibility (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). In addition, it engenders balance and evokes practical wisdom in situations (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006). Finally, utilizing both character strengths and mindfulness can increase self-awareness and the potential for positive change by highlighting positive traits (Carlson, 2013) and encourage a growth mindset (Dweck, 2008). As Niemiec (2014) states, "mindfulness opens a door of awareness to who we are and character strengths are what is behind the door since character strengths are who we are at our core" (p. 48).

**Three Ways to Integrate Mindfulness and Character Strengths.** Niemiec and Lissing (2016) have identified three ways to integrate mindfulness and character strengths: indirect focus, single strength integration, and total strength integration.

Embedded within most mindfulness trainings are topics such as acceptance, letting go, openness, and patience. These topics have been indirectly or loosely correlated with character strengths (Shogren et al., 2017). For example, through Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy,
Niemiec & Lissing (2016) identified four outcomes of mindfulness that are indirectly connected with character strengths. First, the ability to observe negative thoughts with kindness and curiosity was correlated with the character strengths of kindness, critical thinking/judgment, self-regulation, and curiosity. Second, acceptance of self and the ability to stop wishing things were different related to the character strengths of forgiveness and perspective. Third, the skill of letting go of old habits and creating a new way of being was correlated with bravery, perseverance, and forgiveness. Lastly, the ability to notice the small beauties in the world and be present in the moment was associated with the character strengths of curiosity, excellence, and appreciation of beauty.

Additional mindfulness-based programs incorporate a single strength focus into their teachings. For example, there are mindfulness programs and studies that align with the character strengths of: curiosity (Kashdan et al., 2011), zest (Collins et al., 2016), love (Giolzetti, 2012), humility (Kabat-Zinn, 2003), hope (Malinowski & Lim, 2015), self-regulation (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012), teamwork (Singh et al. 2006), and humor (Özyeşil et al., 2013). These studies show the breadth and depth of research on character strengths and traits incorporated into mindfulness and the desire of researchers to align the two approaches and interventions.

A few programs focus on total strength integration with mindfulness. Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice (MBSP) is one intervention designed to explicitly develop both mindfulness and character strengths (Niemiec, 2014). MBSP utilizes strengths and mindfulness as the foundations upon which one can learn to enhance wellbeing and manage life challenges. The eight-week course offers strengths-based mindfulness practices that emphasize two types of integration: strong mindfulness and mindful strengths use (Shogren et al., 2017).
Strong mindfulness is the idea of incorporating character strengths into one's mindful practice or mindful living (Shogren et al., 2017). Character strengths can be used to energize one's practice in order to take mindfulness to a deeper level. For example, one could add a gratitude practice to the beginning or end of their mindfulness practice; engage with their perseverance to maintain a practice; or use bravery to overcome challenging emotions that may arise (Shogren et al., 2017).

Mindful strengths use is the idea of incorporating mindfulness into one's character strengths practice. This practice involves paying mindful attention to one's strengths and how they are expressed, in addition to being aware of and appreciating the best qualities of and strengths in others (Shogren et al., 2017). Mindful strengths use fosters the balanced utilization of strengths, which aligns with Aristotle's ancient wisdom of the golden mean of strengths and virtues use (Melchert, 2002; Shogren et al., 2017).

A Synergistic Relationship. Mindfulness and character strengths are linked in their ability to help facilitate a more fulfilling and meaningful life (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). There is also reciprocality between the two constructs, with mindfulness being described as self-regulation of attention with openness, curiosity, and acceptance (Bishop et al., 2004), and the character strengths of open-mindedness, curiosity, and self-regulation leading to deeper mindfulness. In addition, the nature of mindfulness practice lends itself to the utilization of many character strengths such as: promoting a wise mind (the wisdom virtue correlates to the character strengths of love of learning, curiosity, creativity, open-mindedness, and perspective), enacting the strengths of bravery, perseverance, and self-regulation to create and maintain a mindfulness practice, and attuning to the present moment which utilizes zest for the here and now (Pang & Ruch, 2019). Pang and Ruch (2019) found evidence of a mutual support model of mindfulness
and character strengths in which "certain character strengths facilitate the practice of mastering mindfulness, while the mastery of mindfulness enhances certain strengths. Both are seen as malleable in that they can be cultivated and developed with deliberate practice" (p.1556). Therefore, it is presumable that character strengths and mindfulness may create a virtuous circle with one enhancing the other.

Positive interventions created for youth corrections that utilize both mindfulness and character strengths may deepen the impact of both constructs on the wellbeing of incarcerated youth.

**Compassion**

Recently, a different family of mindfulness practices has gained attention from the scientific community and may offer additional benefits to incarcerated youth. These practices are called generative or constructive practices, and they utilize loving-kindness and compassion meditations (Brito-Pons et al., 2018). While loving-kindness meditations focus on the wish for all beings to be happy, compassion is "the openness, sensitivity, and courage to encounter suffering in oneself and others, along with the motivation to relieve or prevent it" (Brito-Pons et al., 2018, pg. 1494). These practices date back to the Buddha, yet they recently have been incorporated into modern secular programs such as Compassion Cultivation Training (CCT) (Compassion Institute, n.d.; Goldin & Jazaieri, 2017).

**Compassion vs. Empathy**

According to the Oxford Languages Dictionary, the word *compassion* means "the feeling or emotion, when a person is moved by the suffering or distress of another, and by the desire to relieve it" (Oxford Languages, n.d., Entry 37475), while the word *empathy* is defined as "the power of projecting one's personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of
contemplation" (Oxford Languages, n.d., Entry 74155). Klimecki & Singer (2017) share that empathy refers to *feeling with* or vicariously sharing or experiencing the same feeling as another, while compassion refers to having concern or *feelings for* oneself or another and the motivation to relieve the suffering. Empathy is often used interchangeably with compassion, yet there are a few distinctions to consider.

Research has elucidated that compassion is explicitly prompted in response to suffering. In contrast, empathy can be initiated in response to more situations and emotions such as sadness, fear, anger, or joy (Pommier, 2010). In addition, while empathy is associated with taking on another's emotion, compassion is regarded as an emotion in its own right (Goetz et al., 2010). Furthermore, compassion can be felt more broadly than empathy, as compassion can be applied beyond individuals to be felt for all sentient beings through global or great compassion (Strauss et al., 2016). Lastly, by utilizing functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), researchers have learned that different brain regions are involved when empathy and compassion are evoked (Klimecki et al., 2013).

Most definitions of compassion explicitly include empathy as an essential element and catalyst for feeling compassion, yet empathy does not guarantee compassion (Goetz & Simon-Thomas, 2017; Lama & Jinpa, 2015). Empathy has the potential to initiate a harmful self-focused response such as empathic distress, which creates an aversion to the situation and causes one to withdraw in order to escape the feelings (Goetz & Simon-Thomas, 2017). With this distinction, researchers suggest that compassion fatigue may be a misnomer, and this feeling of overwhelm may be more aptly named empathic distress fatigue, as compassion is believed to be an inexhaustible natural source in human nature (Condon & Makransky, 2020; Klimecki & Singer, 2011; Makransky, 2011).
Over the years, compassion has been defined in many ways by religions, philosophers, and, more recently, the scientific community. Compassion has been described as an emotion, motivation, disposition, and trait (Goetz & Simon-Thomas, 2017). One of the most widely accepted definitions of compassion by the scientific community is "the feeling that arises in witnessing another's suffering... that motivates a subsequent desire to help" (Goetz et al., 2010, p. 351). The definition of compassion provided by Strauss et al. (2016) incorporates one more step in the process of compassion that is important to consider when working with incarcerated youth: *tolerating difficult feelings that may arise*. Strauss et al. (2016) brought together definitions from both Eastern and Western contexts to propose this comprehensive and useful definition of compassion,

a cognitive, affective and behavioral process consisting of the five elements that refer to both self and other-compassion: 1) recognizing suffering; 2) understanding the universality of suffering in human experience; 3) feeling empathy for the person suffering and connecting with the distress (emotional resonance); 4) tolerating uncomfortable feelings aroused in response to the suffering person (e.g., distress, anger, fear) so remaining open and accepting of the person suffering; and 5) motivation to act/acting to alleviate suffering (p. 19).

Strauss et al.’s (2016) definition and elemental analysis of compassion is an example of mature adult-like compassion that incorporates complex mental and social states. This definition of compassion raises the question: how do compassionate qualities and skills develop, and can they be fostered?
Can Compassion Be Taught?

While a two-year-old does not comprehend the universality of human suffering, they innately recognize the pain of others and automatically have the desire to alleviate that suffering (Roeser et al., 2018). Roeser et al. (2018) explain that the seeds of compassion are present from the very earliest stages in life. By the age of 12 months, babies show empathetic concern for others, and by 30 months, they show voluntary prosocial behavior (Spinrad & Eisenberg, 2017). In childhood, youth’s concern for others grows beyond close persons as they expand their prosocial behavior to others outside of their immediate circles (Bloom & Wynn, 2016).

While compassion is thought to be innate in human nature, with an evolutionary origin that urges individuals to care for their children, families, and communities, to ensure genetic survival, there is broad consensus that compassion is also a prosocial behavior that can be instilled and cultivated (Goetz et al., 2010). The current research on the development of compassion is rooted in the previous exploration into prosocial motivation and behavior (Carlo & Padilla-Walker, 2020), sympathy and empathy research (Eisenberg et al., 2015; Hoffman, 2000), parent-child attachment styles (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017), the neurobiological foundation of emotion (Goetz et al., 2010), and the development of social cognition (Klimecki & Singer, 2017).

Quite a few programs have been developed that cultivate compassion in adults: Compassion Cultivation Training (CCT), Cultivating Emotional Balance (CEB), Cognitively Based Compassion Training (CBCT), and Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT) (Kirby, 2017). Through evaluation of these programs, it has been shown that program participation is correlated to positive outcomes. In a meta-analysis of 21 randomized controlled trials, Kirby et al. (2017) found that compassion-based interventions were linked to improvements in mindfulness, self-
compassion, compassion, and wellbeing in adults. In addition, there were reductions in distress, anxiety, and depression (Kirby et al., 2017). Compassion cultivation trainings have not been studied extensively in youth. Yet, there is growing interest in the link between lifespan development and the implementation of mindfulness and compassion trainings in order to harness the plasticity of the adolescent brain and encourage the development of a compassionate understanding of self and others.

**Developmental Contemplative Science.** A new area of study, Developmental Contemplative Science (DCS), explores the potential impacts of mindfulness and compassion cultivation in adolescents. DCS builds upon Deci & Ryan’s (1985) self-determination theory (competence, relatedness, autonomy) to incorporate the understanding of mind/body connection and investigate how its development across the lifespan (Roeser & Pinela, 2014).

DCS is an interdisciplinary effort to discover the impact physical and mental training can have on healthy youth development. DCS suggests that by incorporating mindfulness and compassion into interventions for youth, one can capitalize on the plasticity of adolescents’ neuro and psychological systems to bolster the development of positive psychosocial identities (Roeser & Pinela, 2014).

Deci & Ryan’s (1985) self-determination theory outlined three core tenets that are considered universal and innate and needed to develop psychological health and wellbeing. The three components are: competence, mastery of skills and tasks; relatedness, a sense of attachment and belonging to others; autonomy, a feeling of control over one’s behavior and goals (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

DCS posits three additional needs alongside competence, relatedness, and autonomy for healthy self and identity development for adolescents: wisdom, mattering, and self-transcendence.
First, in conjunction with the need for competence, DCS proposes that youth need understanding and wisdom about how to be fully human. This wisdom can be learned through healthy mentors with life experience, wisdom texts such as stories, poems, myths, or philosophical debates and discussions (Roeser & Pinela, 2014). Second, in addition to belonging, youth also need to feel as if they matter in their relationships, community, and society. Mattering is fostered by creating opportunities for youth to thoughtfully contribute to their families, schools, and communities (Roeser & Pinela, 2014). Third, alongside the need for autonomy, youth need a sense of self-transcendence. There is a myriad of secular ways to cultivate healthy forms of self-transcendence with youth, such as art, music, tai-chi, meditation, dance, nature, acts of kindness, and more (Roeser & Pinela, 2014). Roeser & Pinela (2014) suggest that the implementation of mindfulness and compassion interventions can assist youth in meeting their needs for wisdom, mattering, and self-transcendence; and, in doing so, support the development of healthy psychosocial identities.

**Three Modes of Care Model.** Roeser et al. (2018) propose that the three modes of care modeled in Sustainable Compassion Training (SCT) offer insights to those researching and developing compassion training for youth because SCT is consistent with developmental and evolutionary approaches to compassion cultivation (Roeser et al., 2018). The three modes that can be utilized to cultivate compassion are: receiving care from others, caring for oneself, and extending care to others. In addition, there is a reciprocal relationship in that each mode, rooted in mindfulness, empowers and supports the other, as depicted below (Roeser et al., 2018).
Figure 5:

Modalities of care and examples of related contemplative practices.


When one experiences or feels deeply seen, understood, heard, and valued by others, they are in receive care mode (Roeser et al., 2018). Roeser et al. (2018) state that “receiving care involves the kind of other-originating unconditional positive self-regard that instills a sense of security and confidence in the recipient” (p.246). The feeling of receiving care can be initiated by envisioning safe havens or healthy attachment figures (i.e., favorite locations, pets, spiritual figures, friends, family members). By eliciting these caring and compassionate images, this practice fosters the ability to feel worthiness, connection, safety, and soothing (Roeser et al., 2018).

The self-care mode “involves listening and responding to our bodies and minds with heightened awareness, acceptance, and kindness in the service of insight, rest, and renewal” (Roeser et al., 2018, p. 246). Thus, self-care practices teach one to tune into the wisdom of their
bodies, become aware of and learn how to manage stress and challenging emotions, process these feelings and emotions with insight and awareness, and learn to proactively take care of one’s needs (Roeser et al., 2018).

The *extending care* mode fosters feelings of compassion for others (Roeser et al., 2018). The extension of care “flows naturally out of receiving care and extending care to self” (Roeser et al., 2018, p. 247). The extending care practice begins with close others and then moves beyond in-groups to include diverse others. This extension helps facilitate the breakdown of stereotypes and biases and expands the breadth of compassion to out-groups and eventually to difficult others. One practice often used to build compassion for others is loving-kindness meditation (LKM) which builds from love toward oneself, to a friend, a stranger or neutral person, a difficult person, to all of humanity, and then all sentient beings (Hutcherson et al., 2008).

Research has shown that there are biological, social, and agentic factors that can impact the ability to cultivate compassion (Roeser et al., 2018). These antecedent conditions need to be considered when working with incarcerated youth. Spinrad & Eisenberg (2017) suggest that temperamental factors such as shyness and emotionality can affect prosocial development. In addition, social influences such as attachment relationships (Gross et al., 2017), parental modeling (Eisenberg et al., 2015), and a caring community that inspires youth to learn (Schaps, 2003) are important elements that support the development of compassion. Many youths in juvenile corrections may not have had these favorable antecedent conditions in early childhood in which extra care, support, and safety need to be fostered in order for the youth to be open to cultivating the skills and qualities of compassion.

**Continuum of Compassion.** In addition to the three modes of care of compassion, it is important to recognize the continuum of compassionate care when designing interventions for
youth. In Western culture, compassion has focused mainly on concern for and the alleviation of the suffering of others, yet in Eastern traditions, it is considered equally important to offer oneself compassion (Goetz et al., 2010; Brach 2004, Salzberg 2010). Strauss et al. (2016) share that “Buddhist thinking argues that differentiating compassion for others from self-compassion means drawing a false distinction between the self and other” (p.17). Furthermore, Hahn (2007) shares that this approach may ignore our essential connectedness.

Neff (2003) defines self-compassion as compassion directed inward toward oneself, which incorporates three mechanisms: kindness (being kind and non-judgmental, instead of critical), common humanity (accepting suffering as part of the universal human condition, allowing for connection instead of isolation), and mindfulness (being able to hold emotions with mindful awareness, while not over-identifying with them). It is generally thought that these three elements compose self-compassion and compassion more broadly.

Researchers have categorized the forms or typologies of compassion in many ways. The five presented by Roeser et al. (2018), basic, cultural, intercultural, global, and great compassion, can be used to illuminate a continuum and introduce different features of compassion (Table 2 below).
**Table 2:**

*Hypothesized categories of compassion and related features.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Compassion</th>
<th>Sphere of Empathic Concern</th>
<th>Hypothesized Prevalence, Origins and Functions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Basic compassion</td>
<td>Bounded Spheres</td>
<td>Common, innate: Survival and thriving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Cultural compassion</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Common, learned: Belonging and social solidarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Intercultural compassion</td>
<td>Out-groups</td>
<td>Less common, learned: Equity and social inclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Global compassion</td>
<td>Humanity</td>
<td>Rare, learned: Altruism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Great compassion</td>
<td>Sentient Beings</td>
<td>Rarest, learned (?): Wisdom and love</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*Basic compassion* encompasses self-compassion and compassion for those closest to you. Basic compassion is bound to self and family and is thought to be common, innate, and essential for survival and thriving (Roeser et al., 2018). *Cultural compassion* expands the circle of compassion to include those in your in-group with shared interests or identities (Roeser et al., 2018). Cultural compassion is considered common, yet it is learned and creates a sense of belonging and social cohesion. *Intercultural compassion* broadens beyond proximal relationships and familiar interests and characteristics to include those in out-groups or considered others (Roeser et al., 2018). Intercultural compassion is less common, learned, and it improves social inclusion and fosters equity (Roeser et al., 2018). *Global compassion* expands care and concern of suffering and the desire to alleviate it to all of humanity (Roeser et al., 2018). Global compassion is rare, learned, and incorporates the idea of altruism, or the concern for the happiness of other beings. The most encompassing form of compassion is *great compassion*. 
which includes all sentient beings. Great compassion is learned and incorporates wisdom and love for all beings (Roeser et al., 2018).

While basic compassion is viewed as an intrinsic capacity in mammals, it also requires socialization and education to fully develop (Ekman, 2009; Roeser & Eccles, 2015). Researchers believe that intentional practice and skill development can lead to an enduring manifestation of basic compassion, and with effortful intention, it gradually can be extended into a broader scope of concern for all beings (Goetz et al., 2010, Lama & Jinpa, 2015). This expansion to great compassion is,

thought to be marked by a clear perception that all beings suffer, a felt empathetic concern for this common humanity and shared suffering (regardless of whether others are near to, or far from oneself or whether they are evaluated positively, negatively or neutrally), and an intention to act for the welfare of all beings who, like oneself, wish not to suffer and wish to be happy (Roeser & Eccles, 2015, p3).

The intentional practice of developing compassion, through the three modes and across the continuum, is important to consider when working with incarcerated youth. By fostering mindful compassion, youth can learn to relate to themselves and others with compassion and kindness and begin to develop wisdom, a sense of mattering, and self-transcendence.

**Compassion Cultivation Training**

Compassion Cultivation Training (CCT) is a compassion training program for adults developed at Stanford University. CCT incorporates insights and techniques from psychology, neuroscience, and contemplative practice (Compassion Institute, n.d.; Goldin & Jazaieri, 2017) CCT utilizes a framework in which a series of mental and emotional techniques are taught to
cultivate the qualities of “compassion, empathy, and kindness for oneself, loved ones, difficult people, and all beings” (Goldin & Jazaieri, 2017, p. 238).

CCT explains compassion through four interacting components. First, it involves an awareness of suffering. Second, it evokes a feeling of caring and tender concern. Third, it includes a genuine wish to see the suffering relieved. Fourth, it instills a readiness to take action (Jinpa & Weiss, 2013; Goldin & Jazaieri, 2017). The course is traditionally taught over eight to nine weeks and incorporates six steps of compassion: settling and focusing the mind, loving-kindness and compassion for a loved one, loving-kindness, and compassion towards oneself, establishing the basis of compassion towards others, cultivating compassion towards all beings, and active compassion practice (Tonglen) (Goldin & Jazaieri, 2017).

CCT incorporates the three modes of care (receiving care, self-care, extending care) and covers the continuum of compassion (basic, cultural, intercultural, global, and great) explained by Roeser et al. (2018); making CCT a good intervention to consider in the incarcerated youth population.

**Outcomes of Cultivating Compassion**

Research has begun to shed light on the positive impact that compassion has on overall psychological wellbeing, interpersonal relationships, and physical health (Hoge et al., 2013; Nelson et al., 2016; Pace et al., 2010).

Recent meta-analyses have shown that loving-kindness meditation (LKM) improves mindfulness, compassion, self-compassion, and positive affect (Galante et al., 2014). In addition, LKM has significant benefits in psychosocial outcomes such as reduced psychological distress, increased positive thinking, improved relationships (Shonin et al., 2015), and enhanced positive feelings and emotions for oneself (Zeng et al., 2015). Furthermore, in a systematic review, self-
compassion was shown to prompt more adaptive emotion regulation (Krieger et al., 2013) and increase parasympathetic activity, measured through heart rate variability, indicating more rapid recovery from stress (Svendsen et al., 2016). In addition, Fredrickson et al. (2008) tested the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions with LKM to see if the experiences of positive emotions through meditation compounded over time. They found that a wide range of personal resources improved, such as increased purpose in life, mindfulness, and social support with a simultaneous decrease in illness symptoms leading to increased life satisfaction and reduced depressive symptoms, when a LKM intervention was implemented over nine weeks (Fredrickson et al., 2008).

Outcomes specific to Compassion Cultivation Training (CCT). Research with adult populations has suggested that explicit compassion training, through CCT, significantly enhances empathetic concern and increases one’s identification with common humanity, compared to implicit training through general mindfulness-based interventions (Brito-Pons et al., 2018). CCT also resulted in a significant increase in positive affect and decreased perceived stress and negative affect (Jazaieri et al., 2014; Jazaieri et al., 2016). In addition, participants reported improved emotional regulation with more acceptance and cognitive reframing and less suppression of emotion (Jazaieri et al., 2014; Jazaieri et al., 2016). An improvement in cognitive regulation was also reported, with an increase in mindfulness skills and a decrease in negative rumination and mind wandering (Jazaieri et al., 2014; Jazaieri et al., 2016). Furthermore, CCT participants also reported decreased worry and more adaptive emotional functioning in the face of suffering (Jazaieri et al., 2013).

Research has also shown that CCT participants increased their ability to respond compassionately and decreased their threat-based reactivity, allowing them to be more skillful
and sensitive when encountering suffering in themselves and others (Brito, 2014). Furthermore, CCT participants self-reported decreased depression and stress and improved life satisfaction and happiness (Brito-Pons et al., 2018). These findings suggest that CCT has the potential to affect emotional and cognitive factors to support adaptive functioning and psychological flexibility.

**Self-Compassion and Compassion with Adolescents.** Research shows that adolescents’ psychological wellbeing is positively impacted through self-compassion interventions (Marsh et al., 2018). As with adults, low self-compassion has been linked to elevated depression and psychological distress, as well as increased alcohol use and suicide attempts in youth (Marsh et al., 2018; Tanaka et al., 2011). In a longitudinal study of adolescents, Zeller et al. (2015) found that higher rates of self-compassion were predictive of lower incidents of depression, panic, post-traumatic stress, and suicide following a traumatic life event.

Self-compassion has been identified as a protective factor for a range of psychological symptoms in youth. Importantly, for disadvantaged youth, Játiva and Cerezo (2014) found that high levels of self-compassion buffered against adverse life events (i.e., victimization) and helped prevent poor psychological outcomes. In addition, Castilho et al. (2017) found that self-compassion reduced risky behavior fueled by the psychological stress often experienced by this population. Thus, fostering self-compassion may “be advantageous in guarding against negative mood states which can… result in lifelong psychological and cognitive struggles” (Bluth et al., 2016, p. 1107).

Additional benefits have been reported with cultivating great compassion within adolescent populations. Bach & Guse (2015) found that youth indicated that personal growth and environmental mastery, the ability to choose or change the surrounding context (Ryff, 1989), were enhanced. These results can be further understood in conjunction with the idea that by
developing virtuous states of mind, one can gain a sense of control and confidence over the power of creating their own happiness and wellbeing instead of being dependent on external conditions (Gyatso, 2001, 2004). In addition, Bach & Guse (2015) found a significant reduction in negative affect, suggesting that participants may have developed healthier ways of coping with hardship, leading to a decrease in worry and rumination. Lastly, there was a significant increase in life satisfaction, autonomy, and self-acceptance (Bach & Guse, 2015). These results indicate that personal wellbeing in adolescents, especially within the aspects of eudaimonic happiness, can be influenced by compassion and contemplative meditation interventions.

**Compassion with Incarcerated Populations.** While research is still developing on the impact of self-compassion and compassion on incarcerated individuals, some preliminary data suggest its utility. For example, self-compassion has been associated with many predictors of criminality, including self-control (Morley et al., 2016), concern for others (Neff, 2003), and the ability to form social bonds (Neff, 2003, Neff et al., 2007). In addition, Murphy et al. (2005) found that applying self-compassion as an intervention with violent offenders reduced feelings of inferiority, increased self-awareness, and decreased aggression.

Morley (2018) discovered that within an adult prison population, self-compassion improved self-regulation, which in turn reduced impulsivity. With impulsivity being one of the strongest predictors of crime, these findings suggest that there may be a link between self-compassion, self-regulation, and a reduction in criminal behavior (Morley, 2018). Yet, additional studies are needed to investigate this link further.

In addition, Rainforth et al. (2003) examined recidivism rates (defined as a rearrest with a felony conviction) over 15 years in former inmates from Folsom Prison who were trained in Transcendental Meditation (TM) and found a significant decrease in recidivism. Inmates trained
in meditation had a 46.7% recidivism rate compared to the control group, which had a 66.7% recidivism rate. Analysis showed that the risk of recidivism in this population was reduced by 43.5% (p=.0008) (Rainforth et al., 2003). These results indicate that recidivism rates among inmates who learned and practiced meditation were substantially reduced over an extended period of time (Rainforth et al., 2003).

A growing body of research shows that interventions that cultivate compassion can enhance coping skills, improve psychological health, and increase emotional control, leading to less recidivism. These positive outcomes suggest that compassion cultivation training is an important intervention to consider for youth in correctional facilities.

**Recommendation**

The evidence above offers a compelling case for a strengths-based compassion intervention for incarcerated youth. A potential program is presented below that incorporates mindfulness, character strengths, and compassion with the hopes of reducing risk factors while improving psychological health outcomes. Strengths-Based Compassion is a revolutionary approach to long-term positive change for incarcerated youth.

**Revolutionary Compassion: Strengths-Based Compassion**

The Revolutionary Compassion program will be rooted in Compassion Cultivation Training (Compassion Institute, n.d.; Goldin & Jazaieri, 2017) and Mindful-Based Strengths Practice (Bretherton & Niemiec, 2019).

Revolutionary Compassion will be designed through a trauma-responsive lens and adapted for youth in a correctional facility. It will be delivered through eight weekly in-class sessions. The sessions will be 90-120 minutes long. They will incorporate meditation
experiences, mindfulness/strengths integration exercises, interactive discussion in groups and dyads, and brief teachings on character strengths, compassion, and self-compassion.

Each participant will be given an approved MP3 device preloaded with meditations to be used daily in between sessions. In addition, they will receive a workbook with further readings on character strengths, mindfulness, and compassion with reflection journal prompts. The program would be structured as follows:

**Program Outline**

**Session 1: Orientation- settling and focusing the mind.** In this session, compassion and mindfulness will be defined. The default mode network will be discussed, as well as the ability to train the mind through focused attention. Youth will be asked to take the VIA Survey to discover their top character strengths. Journal Prompt: You at your best, discover your character strengths. Meditation: Breath-Focused meditation

**Session 2: Loving-kindness and compassion for a loved one.** This session will discuss the difference between loving-kindness and compassion. Participants will explore the felt sense of emotions by recalling a positive feeling-state. Signature strengths will be discussed and shared; a strength spotting exercise will be done. Journal Prompt: Exploring strengths. Meditation: Loving-Kindness for a Loved One.

**Session 3: Compassion for oneself.** This session will focus on building self-compassion through Dr. Kristin Neff’s (2015) model of awareness/mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness/mentoring. Character strengths discussion will focus on growing from obstacles. Journal Prompt: Strengths-Activity Mapping. Meditation: Compassion for Oneself.

**Session 4: Loving-kindness for oneself.** This session will introduce negativity bias. Participants will learn how gratitude can train the brain to see the positive. Dr. Barbara
Fredrickson’s (Fredrickson, 2009) broaden and build theory will be discussed. Strong mindfulness will be discussed. Journal Prompt: How can you utilize your character strengths to enhance your mindfulness and compassion practice. Meditation: Loving-Kindness for Oneself.

**Session 5: Embracing shared common humanity.** This session will introduce the concept of common humanity and the ability to foster an attitude of *just like me*. Character strengths discussion will focus on relationships with self and others. Journal Prompt: Character Strengths 360. Meditation: Embracing Shared Common Humanity.

**Session 6: Cultivating compassion for others.** In this session, suffering will be discussed. The technique of letting go of the story behind the suffering in order to connect on a human level will be introduced. Finding the Golden Mean of character strengths will be discussed. Journal Prompt: Using strengths to reframe a problem. Meditation: Broadening Compassion.

**Session 7: Active compassion practice.** This session will focus on making compassion more active and embodied through the active compassion practice of Tonglen (taking or giving). Introduce a strengths model toward authenticity and goodness. Journal Prompt: Goal setting & Action planning. Meditation: Active Compassion Practice.

**Session 8: Review.** A course review will take place in this session. An integrated meditation practice, incorporating all the meditations from the course, will be done. Character strengths review, your engagement with life, key reminders. Journal Prompt: What is the golden nugget you will take from this course? Meditation: Integrated Practice.

**Conclusion**

By implementing mindfulness-based interventions, specifically compassion and character strengths, research suggests that we may be able to increase self-esteem and reduce hostility
(Murray et al., 2019), improve social skills and reduce stress (Simpson et al., 2018), enhance wellbeing, self-regulation, and self-discipline (Barnet et al., 2014) and reduce recidivism (Sapouna et al., 2015) in incarcerated youth. In addition, these positive psychology interventions can impact juveniles’ PERMA (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments (Seligman, 2011)) and subsequently increase their overall wellbeing.

By implementing strengths-based compassion, the youth correctional system can take one step towards creating a positive prison system that rehabilitates incarcerated youth. Positive interventions that foster mental health and behavioral change can set youth on a positive path in which they desist crime and increase flourishing in their lives after incarceration. Ideally, these benefits can extend beyond any individual youth and spread through their families, relationships, and communities, creating a positive, compassionate ripple through society.
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