



OUR MISSION: To bring Yoga and Mindfulness into every American Prison

THE PROBLEM: *The Incarceration Nation*

With only 5% of the world's population, the United States has 25% of its prisoners. 7.3 million people – 1 in 31 U.S. adults – are either incarcerated, on parole, on probation, or under jurisdictional oversight. The majority are male and people of color. Women comprise the fastest-growing segment of the prison population, now amounting to 8% of adult prisoners.

About 20% of adult prisoners have a serious mental illness; 30 – 60% have substance abuse problems. When including broad-based mental illnesses, 50% of men and 75% of women in state prisons will experience a mental health problem requiring services in any given year. As one expert put it *“our jails and prisons have become America’s major mental health facilities, a purpose for which they were never intended.”*

Very little effort is made by prisons to help offenders gain insight into their behavior and take personal accountability for harm caused. Prisoners leave custody with few social or life skills and scant understanding of the fundamental issues that first got them into trouble. Not only are America's prisons dysfunctional and inhumane, they are wastefully expensive, costing U.S. taxpayers \$80 billion a year. And when states can't afford the prisons they've legislated, they turn to the multi-

billion dollar private prison industry who demand near-capacity occupancy and have no incentive to rehabilitate.

Aside from economic and humanitarian reasons, why should we care? Because 94% of all prisoners are eventually released - into their communities, hardened and without the means to succeed, putting their communities, their families, and themselves at risk. More than 60% will re-offend within three years.

THE SOLUTION: *The Prison Yoga Project*

Most prisoners suffer from Complex Trauma: chronic interpersonal trauma experienced early in life as abandonment, poverty, hunger, homelessness, bullying, discrimination, domestic violence, physical or sexual abuse, abduction and trafficking, exposure to drug and alcohol abuse, and crime – including murder. These experiences, imprinted by the terrifying emotions that accompany them, are deeply held in the mind and, perhaps more importantly, in the body. This unresolved trauma follows them into adulthood, often manifesting as impulsive/reactive behavior, tendencies toward drug and alcohol addiction and violence, ultimately landing them in prison where they experience even more emotional and psychological upheaval.



Prison Yoga Project was founded by James Fox at San Quentin State Prison, where he has been teaching yoga and mindfulness practices to prisoners since 2002. James's pioneering trauma-informed approach for applying the practice of yoga to behavioral rehabilitation has provided demonstrable benefits for thousands of prisoners. Fifteen years of experience has resulted in an evidence-based methodology that has earned Prison Yoga Project international acclaim in the yoga community and rapidly growing adoption by American prisons.



James continues to teach weekly classes at San Quentin, guest-teaches at other state prisons and U.S. penitentiaries, and is a graduate-school lecturer at Loyola Marymount University. He advocates nationwide for restorative justice practices and prison reform and travels extensively to introduce his innovative methods in the global community. James was the recipient of a Good Karma Award from Yoga Journal Magazine in 2015.

Restorative or Retributive Justice?

Our current system of retributive justice is relentlessly punitive. Prisoners are commonly humiliated and treated with hostility and callous indifference which thwarts self-exploration and any desire to change behavioral patterns. Under this system inmates often re-enter society in an aggravated mental and emotional condition and are far more likely to end up back in prison.

Restorative justice, whose principles and practices emphasize taking personal responsibility for harm caused, relies on the development of self-understanding and emotional literacy to enable behavioral change. Practical, humane, and ultimately cost-saving. The likelihood of re-offense declines while the prospect for successful re-integration to society thrives.

Our years of experience and thousands of engaged teacher-hours bear witness that prisoners who are treated with respect usually respond in kind. As prisoners struggle with the residue of chronic trauma, behavioral change emerges from teacher-student relationships based on patience, understanding, empathy, and compassion.

While cognitive behavioral therapy has traditionally been the approach to help people process unresolved trauma, psychiatrists, psychologists, and clinical social workers – many working with U.S. military veterans – have more recently acknowledged that embodiment practices such as yoga, enriched with mindfulness, can have a greater impact in alleviating the symptoms that lead to reactive behaviors and stress-related disease. The Prison Yoga Project has pioneered these practices with prisoners. We've developed a low-cost model that enhances a prisoner's mental and physical well-being and behavioral rehabilitation. Overwhelming evidence is mounting that supports its effectiveness and uptake.

“What most people don't realize is that trauma is not the story of something awful that happened in the past, but the residue of imprints left behind in people's sensory and hormonal systems”

~Bessel van der Kolk, M.D.

“Symptoms of trauma are most severe in prisoners incarcerated for longer than one year who have little access to education, vocational training, or rehabilitation.”

~Terrence Gorski, Author, *Post-incarceration Syndrome and Relapse*



Research conducted by the National Council on Crime & Delinquency (NCCD) found that prisoners who participated in PYP's weekly yoga class at San Quentin experienced emotional control, calmer temperament, improved rational decision-making, and a reduction of stress, anxiety, and chronic physical pain. The study concluded that programs like PYP's represent promising rehabilitative tools for prisoners that may lead to a reduction of recidivism. A University of San Francisco study on a PYP program for women prisoners in South Carolina found that participants showed reduced levels of depression, anxiety, and stress and an improvement in self-awareness.

PYP Changes Lives

Since establishing itself as a non-profit in 2010 under the fiscal sponsorship of the Give Back Yoga Foundation, PYP has trained more than 1800 teachers in its trauma-informed methodology and replicated its program to more than 200 jails, prisons, youth facilities, and military brigs throughout the U.S. (25 states). PYP has trained an additional 260 teachers in Canada, Mexico, Norway, Sweden, Germany, and The Netherlands. There are 10 active domestic and 3 active international PYP chapters providing services to local correctional facilities and 13 affiliated providers using PYP-influenced methodology. Our extended mission is to train teachers; advocate with prison administrators and community leaders; bring yoga into underserved communities; provide instructional materials, class curriculum, yoga mats; and train new leaders.

Donors and Volunteers Move this Mission

Everything we've done – every accomplishment, every life reclaimed – has been made possible by volunteers and donors. We're proud of what we've accomplished but we're also acutely aware that suffering and indifference are still crushing the many thousands we haven't yet reached. More jails and prisons are contacting us regularly creating a demand that we're hard-pressed to accommodate. We need resources and greater capacity to serve. This pent up demand is predictive of a great future...only reached through increased financial support. If you believe in the transformative power of yoga and are seeking impact from your philanthropy, please contact us immediately.

Academic references:

“We found that the group that did the yoga course showed an improvement in positive mood, a decrease in stress, and greater accuracy in a computer test of impulsivity and attention.”

—Dr. Amy Bilderbeck and Dr. Miguel Farias, “The Effects of Yoga and Meditation in a Prison Population,” University of Oxford, 2012

“Our systematic review finds emerging scientific evidence to support a role for yoga in treating depression, sleep complaints, and having adjunctive value in schizophrenia and ADHD.”

—“Yoga on Our Minds: A Systemic Review of Yoga for Neuropsychiatric Disorders,” Duke Institute for Brain Sciences, 2013

