



**GIVE BACK YOGA
FOUNDATION**



WHITE PAPER

Images courtesy of Robert Sturman (right & left), SCDC (center) and Prison Yoga Project.

The Prison Yoga Project: a Low-Cost Strategy for Institutions

The Give Back Yoga Foundation | givebackyoga.org

Each U.S. resident pays about \$260 per person on corrections, their share of the country's annual \$80 billion price tag for incarceration. In California, the cost of imprisoning each prisoner is enough to cover the annual cost of attending Harvard University. And Bureau of Justice statistics studies have found high rates of recidivism among released prisoners: within five years of release, about 76% of released prisoners were rearrested.

Yoga is an inexpensive intervention that research is showing could benefit both prisoners and prison staff by reducing negative behaviors and possibly mental health problems. As more studies are done on this topic, psychologists, social workers and health care staff are finding that yoga offers such benefits as reduced stress and anxiety, increased self-control and decreased aggression, all of which are factors contributing to lower recidivism rates. One of the most successful programs in accomplishing these benefits is the Prison Yoga Project.

REDUCED RECIDIVISM

A study at Seattle's North Rehabilitation Facility found the recidivism rate for prisoners who took a 10-day meditation retreat at 56 percent, a 25 percent improvement over recidivism rates in the general prisoner population. A follow-up study by the Addictive Behaviors Research Center at the University of Washington found drug use, drug and alcohol-related consequences, and self-reported levels of depression and hostility significantly lower among those who took the course, compared to those who did not (Parks et al., 2003). And a five-year study of 190 prisoners found that those who were taught Ananda Marga Yoga were significantly less likely to be reincarcerated upon release (Landau et al., 2008).

On addiction, a factor related to recidivism, one study evaluated a 90-day residential Kundalini yoga program in India to see if participants' levels of addiction would decrease (Khalsa et al., 2008). Kundalini yoga classes were offered three times per day (session length unspecified) for 45 days, with an additional class added after 45 days. Participants were also instructed on how to teach other students yoga after 45 days, in an attempt to improve the participants' sense of mastery. This study only had a small sample (N = 10) and there was no comparison group, but the results suggested significant improvements on scales related to addiction recovery from baseline to follow-up, identifying the need for further research on yoga's benefit for addiction. Kissen and Kissen-Kohn (2009) found the self-soothing effect of yoga could reduce addictive cravings, by reducing participants' stress and anxiety around addiction (Muirhead & Fortune, 2016).

In a qualitative study of the Prison Yoga Project, all former prisoners cited PYP's substantial impact on reducing aggressive tendencies through shifting "reactive" behavioral patterns to "responsive" behavioral patterns. Reduction of aggressive tendencies also contributes to a decreased likelihood of reoffending, as the literature cites aggression as one of the key variables related to offending (Deshpande et al., 2008). Further, participants in this study cite reduction of aggressive tendencies as a key feature of their eased reintegration into society.



*A student practices at San Quentin State Prison.
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FROM PARTICIPANTS OF PYP CLASSES:

"The demands of prison have changed me for the worse, but participating in this yoga class on my path to returning to society has helped me feel like a positive, capable individual once again. The practice brings me a more clear and enlightened mind."

"My back is improving. Don't need as much medication. I suffer from anxiety and it help (sic) with that. It's making a difference in my recovery and giving me a deeper understanding of myself. "

"The yoga classes have helped me with impulse control, obsessive and compulsive thinking patterns, and given me the ability to find calm in stressful situations. I have learned what it means to be at peace with myself and live every day mindful of who I really am."

Correctional facilities need programming that reduces recidivism, increases ease of reintegration into the community, and offers a cost-effective means to improve physical and mental health for a wide range of offenders.

The Prison Yoga Project (PYP) holds the potential to serve that need.

COST-EFFECTIVENESS

Health care for prisoners has experienced a ramp-up, reaching nearly \$8 billion in 2011. Research on per-prisoner health care and rehabilitative costs show these costs to be an increasing challenge for prisons. Existing research on trauma-focused yoga indicates it contributes to a reduction in healthcare costs, by reducing addictive behaviors through the self-awareness and emotional intelligence practices that beget increased self-control; and by improving physical well-being through practices that decrease stress and improve strength and flexibility. Research on the Prison Yoga Project shows that its programs can provide a low-cost and at times more effective intervention for certain common mental and physical healthcare issues prisoners experience.

Although no current studies have evaluated the cost-benefits of implementing yoga in prisons, Magill (2003) conducted a cost-benefit analysis of Transcendental Meditation (TM), an Indian meditative technique for promoting a state of relaxed awareness, as implemented in US prisons. After taking into account the cost of running the programs, costs associated with ongoing criminal conduct, decreases in necessary staffing if prisoners become less aggressive, and reductions in recidivism, it was found that TM courses could have a cost-benefit ratio of 1:8.5; that is, for every \$1 spent on TM courses in prisons, it was calculated that \$8.50 would be saved.

BROAD REACH

There is currently a need within correctional facilities for an inexpensive means to improve both physical and mental health that could be offered to a wide range of offenders. That is because prisons are spending more on health care, particularly with the population of aging prisoners. And while more evidence-based research would be helpful to show the various benefits that PYP's trauma-focused yoga intervention has on prisoners, the results from current studies are encouraging and suggest that PYP's yoga program is a cost effective and beneficial intervention. Given the high per-prisoner costs of individual therapy/counseling with mental health professionals and addiction treatment programs, yoga for prisoners is a low-cost alternative that could reach a broader group than individualized treatments.



A Prison Yoga Project class at San Quentin State Prison.
© Robert Sturman

FROM A PYP CLASS PARTICIPANT:

"The meditation process especially was beneficial to me because it allowed a lot of things to leave my mind that had been in the forefront. Anger, anxiety, just a basic overall uncomfortableness of being in crowds subsided a lot. Especially when I walked out of my class, it was the feeling of being renewed. Refreshed. To be able to see the world through a different lens, which I think helped me transcend back into society...when I got out, I went to the VA clinic, and of course I was diagnosed with PTSD, but having the tools now that I can use by sitting back and meditating during my time outside, it allowed me to meld back into society without being so filled with turmoil."

(Four years in PYP, released for three years)

Yoga has been shown to improve key variables related to offending (e.g., impulsivity, aggression), as well as variables that could increase offenders' abilities to participate in treatments that are specifically aimed at reducing their risk of criminal behavior (e.g., depression, attention, emotional regulation). All this comes with low cost to institutions and much greater availability to prisoners than individualized treatment. US prisons would benefit from offering the Prison Yoga Project in their facilities.



GIVE BACK YOGA FOUNDATION

ABOUT THE GIVE BACK YOGA FOUNDATION

The Give Back Yoga Foundation believes in making yoga available to those who might not otherwise have the opportunity to experience the transformational benefits of this powerful practice. We do this by supporting and funding certified yoga teachers in all traditions to offer the teachings of yoga to underserved and under-resourced socioeconomic segments of the community, inspiring grassroots social change and community cooperation.

Learn more: givebackyoga.org

RELATED RESOURCES

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CONTRIBUTORS

Miranda Viorst
Lezlie Laws
Robert Schware



ABOUT PRISON YOGA PROJECT

The goal of the Prison Yoga Project is to establish yoga and mindfulness practices in prisons and rehabilitation facilities; and to provide training for yoga instructors interested in teaching to at-risk or trauma-impacted populations in prisons, residential rehabilitation facilities and community programs. Prison Yoga Project advises prisons, private entities and/or individuals on initiating yoga programs as part of a rehabilitation program, and provides an evidence-based and trauma-informed methodology for doing so. **Learn more:** prisonyoga.org

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