



Conducting Participatory Research in Prisons: Lessons Learned from the Prison Research and Innovation Initiative

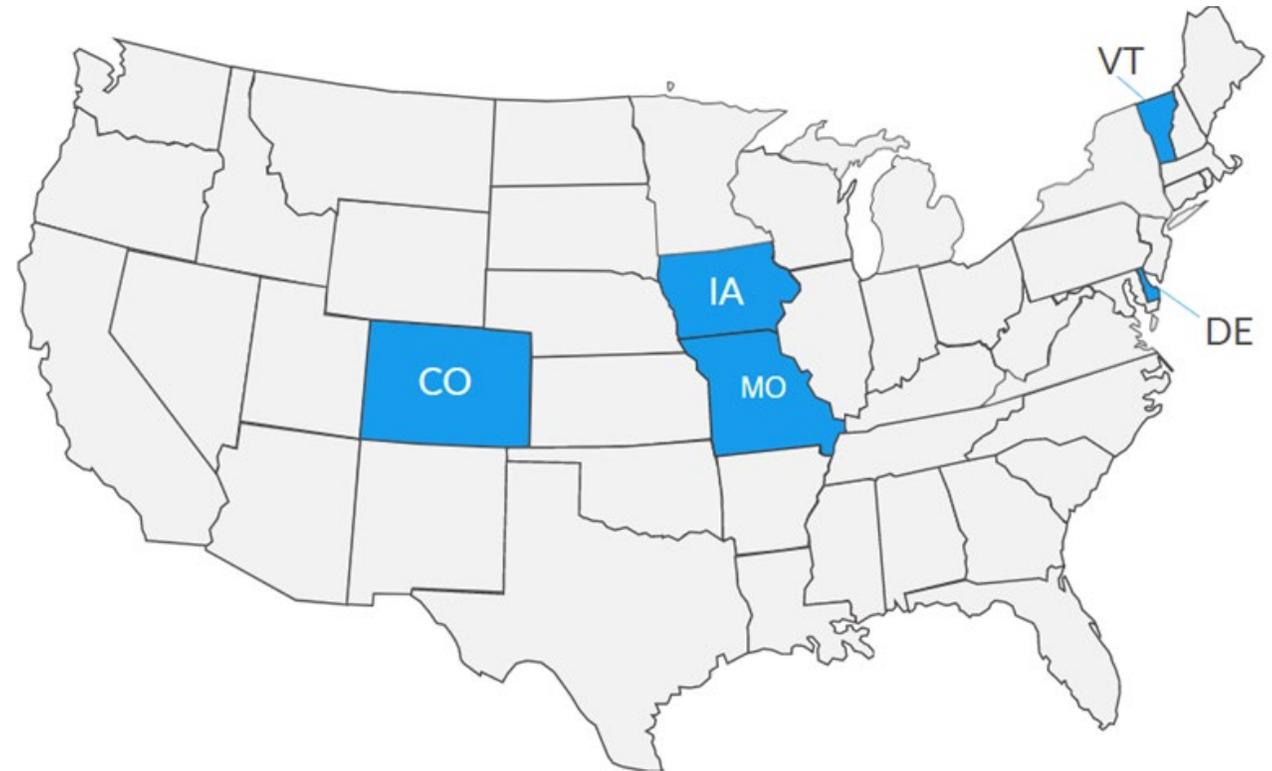


Housekeeping

- The event is being recorded, and the recording will be posted online afterward.
- Speaker biographies and related materials are available online.
- All participants are muted, but you can type your questions or comments into the Q&A box at any time.

Prison Research and Innovation Network (PRIN)

- Network of five state prison systems
- Dedicated to conducting participatory research on prison **living** and **working** conditions and piloting data-driven innovative strategies
- Started in 2019
- Funded by Arnold Ventures



PRIN Partners



Sterling Correctional Facility



UNIVERSITY of DENVER



Iowa Correctional Institution for Women



Moberly Correctional Center



Howard R. Young Correctional Institution

UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE



Southern State Correctional Facility



The Challenge: America's Prison Crisis

1.2M
people in state and
federal prisons

\$64B
annual state prison
spending

180K
state corrections
officers

5.2M
children with
incarcerated parents

Despite their massive societal impact, prisons remain poorly understood institutions with limited research on living and working conditions.

What is Participatory Research?

- “Nothing about us without us”¹
- **Power sharing:** Distributing control and decision-making authority
- **Empowered participation:** Elevating research subjects to become coresearchers
- **Action:** Working together to identify issues that require change

Goal: Engage incarcerated people, corrections staff, and facility leadership as equal partners in research to improve prison conditions through evidence-based innovations

1. Charlton, James I. 2000. *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Examples of Participatory Research in Prison

> [Can J Public Health](#). 2012 Jul 18;103(5):e379-83. doi: 10.1007/BF03404446.

Community voices in program development: the wisdom of individuals with incarceration experience

Claire M O’Gorman ¹, Megan Smith Martin, John L Oliffe, Carl Leggo, Mo Korchinski, Ruth Elwood Martin

Affiliations + expand

PMID: 23617993 PMCID: PMC6974183 DOI: 10.1007/BF03404446

Participatory Action Research: From Within and Beyond Prison Bars

Michelle Fine, María Elena Torre, Kathy Boudin, Iris Bowen, Judith Clark, Donna Hylton, Migdalia Martinez, Missy, Rosemarie A. Roberts, Pamela Smart, and Debora Upegui

Learning from and with incarcerated women: Emerging lessons from a participatory action study of sexuality education

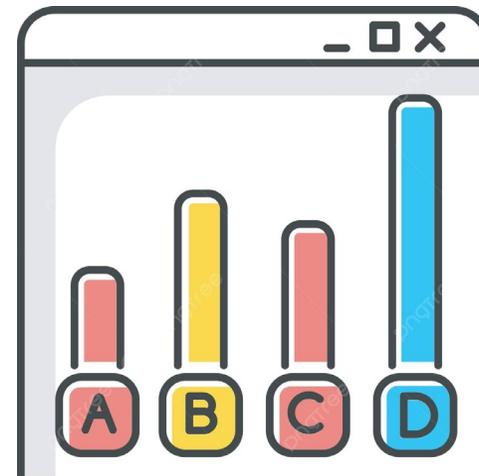
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[Jessica Fields](#) , [Isela González](#), [Kathleen Hentz](#), [Margaret Rhee](#) & [Catherine White](#)

PRIN Components

- Annual climate surveys co-designed by participants
- Participatory innovation development
- On-site prison research and innovation managers
- Cross-site data collection and evaluation



How did this work?

Process Evaluation Methods

112
stakeholder
interviews

100
unique
participants

5
sites

4
years of
observation

Interview Participants

- 33% were Incarcerated People
- 25% were Corrections Staff
 - Officers, administrators, educators
- 30% were Steering Committee members
 - Research partners, facility leadership, PRIMs
- 12% were Executive Committee members
 - State legislators, advocates, practitioners

The COVID-19 Challenge

Major Disruptions

- Facility lockdowns
- Staffing crisis
- Health consequences
- Restricted access: limited researcher entry to facilities

“We were operating at well below policy numbers for staffing. There is supposed to be two officers in the wings at all times and there would be just one person there all day... Everyone was getting mandated to work four and eight extra hours every shift.”
– **Corrections facility staff member**

Findings

What Made PRIN Different?

Core Principle:
Elevating
incarcerated
people and staff
as experts in
their own
experiences, not
just research
subjects

- **Codesigned surveys:** participants helped write questions and interpret results
- **Ownership:** Participants referred to “our survey”
- **Representation:** Response rates from 7-85% across populations
- **Trust building:** Consistent engagement and transparency

Incarcerated People's Experience with PRIN

- High engagement and motivation
- Available time to participate and wait for next steps
- Desire to “give back”
- Universally supported data collection

Corrections Staff's Experience with PRIN

- Overworked because of staffing crisis
- Fear of retaliation
- Skeptical of outsiders
- Previously negative research experiences

Key Lesson: Staff engagement required intensive relationship building, flexible scheduling, and demonstrating genuine respect for their expertise

PRIN Was The Culture Shift

Transformational Outcomes

- **Voice and Agency:** Incarcerated people felt heard for the first time
- **Breaking Down Barriers:** Improved communication between staff and incarcerated people
- **Normalized Innovation:** Created environments where trying new things became acceptable
- **Reduced Skepticism:** Staff became more open to positive change

Key Finding: The PRIN process itself, not just the innovations, created culture change

“PRIN has given us a bit of a platform to have a voice, and because it’s not just a worthless inmate voice, it has a little more of a sound to it.”

– **Incarcerated person**

“I think PRIN changes the way we interact with each other.”

– **Corrections facility staff member**

Major Obstacles Encountered

Funding constraints

Resistance to change

Slow change process

Bureaucratic red tape

Competing priorities

“We have to fight every step of the way for the data. There’s so much red tape. Sometimes the red tape is the most exhausting part of the job.”

– **Steering committee member**

The Critical Role of Project Champions

Successful PRIM characteristics

- **Deep care:** Genuine commitment to evidence-based change
- **Authority:** Power and accountability to make change happen
- **Presence:** Daily on-site work in prisons
- **Familiarity:** Understanding of prison culture
- **Trust:** Respect from all stakeholder groups

Make-or-Break Role:
PRIMs were essential when the right person was in the role, but highly detrimental when it was not

“My expectations have been exceeded. If we have an issue, we can bring it up to [the PRIM] and know it’ll be heard and that they’ll try to do their best.”

– **Incarcerated person**

Key Lessons for Participatory Research in Prisons

- **Leadership Engagement:** Treat facility leadership as its own stakeholder group
- **Quick Wins:** Small, visible successes build momentum and trust
- **Consistency:** Showing up reliably overcomes skepticism
- **Transparency:** Honest communication about constraints and possibilities
- **Flexibility:** Adapt methods to prison environment realities

Pure participatory research is challenging in hierarchical prison settings, but participatory approaches can still empower and create meaningful change when implemented thoughtfully.



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