



JUSTICE AND SAFETY

What We Learned about Participatory Research in Prisons

Evaluating the Prison Research and Innovation Initiative

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RESEARCH REPORT

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Executive Summary

Despite their significant societal impacts, US prisons remain poorly understood institutions, with limited research specifically addressing the experiences of incarcerated people and corrections staff. Studies highlight challenging living conditions, including inadequate health care, overcrowding, violence, poor nutrition, and insufficient mental health services for incarcerated people. Corrections staff also face challenges, such as burnout, low pay, high stress, and high physical and mental health risks.

In 2019, the Urban Institute launched [the Prison Research and Innovation Initiative \(PRII\)](#) aiming to improve prison conditions through participatory research. Central to PRII is the Prison Research and Innovation Network (PRIN), comprising a consortium of five states (Colorado, Delaware, Iowa, Missouri, and Vermont). PRIN researchers used annual climate surveys, participatory innovation[†] development, and rigorous evaluations to engage incarcerated people, corrections staff, and leadership in improving prison environments.

The initiative, though substantially challenged by COVID-19 disruptions and severe staffing shortages in corrections, successfully fostered empowerment among participating incarcerated people and staff. Notable successes include increased transparency, improvements to facility culture, and concrete changes such as the creation of recreational areas, staff decompression spaces, enhanced training programs, and mental health support initiatives. Persistent obstacles, however, including skepticism from staff, resistance from corrections leadership, resource constraints, bureaucratic delays, and entrenched hierarchical structures, limited the scope of the changes in the states' corrections facilities and systems.

The key lessons from PRIN underscore the necessity of maintaining stakeholder buy-in, using adaptable research methods, demonstrating and promoting visible success to build momentum, and clearly defining roles for project champions. In this process evaluation we discuss these key lessons, provide background about the project, detail our key findings, and present recommendations for others pursuing participatory research in corrections settings. The report is informed by 112

[†] Throughout this report, we use the term "innovation" to indicate a change in policy or programming that improves the living/working conditions of stakeholders. Innovations varied by facility site, baseline conditions, and stakeholders' ability to make changes amid constraints.

semistructured interviews with stakeholders from the five PRIN sites, document review, and observations of key activities over the course of the project (2020 to 2024).

Overall, PRIN demonstrates the viability and value of participatory corrections research, which can contribute meaningfully to incremental but significant cultural shifts toward more humane, rehabilitative prison environments for incarcerated people and staff alike.

Our recommendations for those pursuing participatory research in correctional settings are as follows:

- Continuously and iteratively secure buy-in from all levels of corrections agencies.
- To mitigate the top-down approach typical in corrections, engage facility leadership as its own stakeholder group with distinct priorities, needs, and motivations.
- Be mindful of attitudes toward outsiders, us-versus-them mentalities, and zero-sum-game perspectives.
- Identify an on-the-ground champion to drive the project forward, combat diffusion of responsibility, and navigate bureaucracy.
- Ensure the barrier for staff to participate is low.
- To reduce survey fatigue, consider using mixed methods and ensure perspectives are collected through different avenues.
- Prioritize small, immediate wins to build faith and make it easier to ask for participants' continued investment of time, resources, and hope.
- Engage with other agencies and pursue additional avenues for change.
- Expand community-engaged work in prison settings.

Introduction

State and federal prisons across the United States housed more than 1.2 million people as of spring 2024. Following a rapid and continuous increase in the US prison population between 1985 and 2009, when the prison population more than doubled, the total prison population declined a notable 13 percent between 2019 and 2024 and is on the rise again (Kang-Brown and Zhang 2024). Prisons remain costly, as state governments spend approximately \$64 billion annually on their prison systems, covering the costs of staff salaries, facility maintenance, and housing expenses for incarcerated people.¹ States have a large prison workforce, employing about 180,000 corrections officers (COs) in state prisons alone.² Lastly, the effects of prisons are felt in the community. One in two adults in the United States has an immediate family member who has been incarcerated (Elderbroom et al. 2018), and 5.2 million children have a parent who has been incarcerated (Ghandnoosh et al. 2021).

Despite their scale and impact, in 2025, prisons remain one of the least understood public institutions in the United States. Research on living and working conditions in prisons is limited, making it challenging to use informed, empirical decisionmaking to improve conditions (Enns et al. 2019). Research consistently documents challenging living conditions for incarcerated people, including limited access to medical and mental health care, few fresh fruits and vegetables, a lack of sunlight, poor ventilation, overcrowding, and increased exposure to violence. The effects of prisons' often poor living conditions include negative health outcomes (Goomany and Dickinson 2015) and stress that may exacerbate chronic health conditions (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2013), and low rates of identification and treatment of psychiatric disorders (Fazel et al. 2016). Research also documents challenging working conditions for corrections staff, including high burnout, low job satisfaction, exposure to violence, low pay, and mandatory overtime (Lerman 2017). The effects of these challenging working conditions include higher risk of chronic illnesses such as obesity and cardiovascular disease (Lerman 2017) and higher levels of mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (James and Todak 2018), suicidal ideation, depression, and anxiety (St. Louis et al. 2023). Importantly, existing research is limited in scope and often does not prioritize or share the voices and perceptions of incarcerated people and staff or engage them in proposing solutions to their living and working conditions.

To bridge this knowledge gap, in 2019, the Urban Institute launched the Prison Research and Innovation Initiative (box 1) to build evidence and spur innovation in prison settings.[‡] The goal of PRII was to leverage research to improve transparency in US state prisons and engage people working and incarcerated in them to more authentically develop evidence to make prisons more humane, safe, and rehabilitative environments. Community engagement is the foundation for this work, making PRII not just a research project, but a project that uses research to identify and implement actual change.

BOX 1

The Prison Research and Innovation Initiative's Theory of Change

If corrections leaders open their doors to researchers; support participatory research partnerships in their facilities and become willing partners in the systematic and rigorous documentation of prison life; partner on innovations that are born from an empirical understanding of prison climate, culture, and context; and implement changes that are rigorously evaluated, prisons can be transformed into safer, more humane, rehabilitative, and equitable environments for the people who are confined and work in them.

Seeking and incorporating the participation of those being studied is essential to research that authentically understands their needs and goals. PRII aimed to engage incarcerated people, staff, and state and local actors as partners in the research process to study the successes and challenges of this approach. Key components of PRII included the Prison Research and Innovation Network (PRIN), cross-site data collection and assessment, and strategic outreach and engagement to promote awareness about the challenges of current prison operations and the importance of more robust accountability measures. This new, comprehensive, research-informed approach to prison reform aims to advance a national movement of thought leaders committed to redefining the corrections profession and supporting ongoing prison reform efforts.

[‡] Throughout this report, we use the term "innovation" to indicate a change in policy or programming that improves the living or working conditions of stakeholders. Innovations differed by facility, baseline conditions, and sites' ability to make changes amid constraints.

The Prison Research and Innovation Network

A key component of PRII was the Prison Research and Innovation Network. The purpose of PRIN was to form a community of practice for states interested in leveraging research, data, and evidence to inspire improvements in prison environments. The goals for PRIN were the following:

1. Develop a better understanding of prison environments and their relationship to the safety and well-being of those who are confined and work there.
2. Enhance state prisons' capacities for collecting data on prison environments, with the goal of promoting transparency and accountability.
3. Design, implement, and evaluate data-driven, evidence-based operational and programmatic innovations to improve basic conditions, including those that support rehabilitation and self-betterment for incarcerated people.

Through a competitive, national request for proposals, Urban selected five states (Colorado, Delaware, Iowa, Missouri, and Vermont) to join PRIN (see table 1 below for a profile of each state). In its application, each state demonstrated written commitment from its state department of corrections (DOC), a local research team, a pilot prison with a capacity of at least 300 people, and support from the governor's and attorney general's offices. Though given the flexibility to implement and operationalize their projects as they thought most effective in their states and facilities, participating sites were expected to do the following:

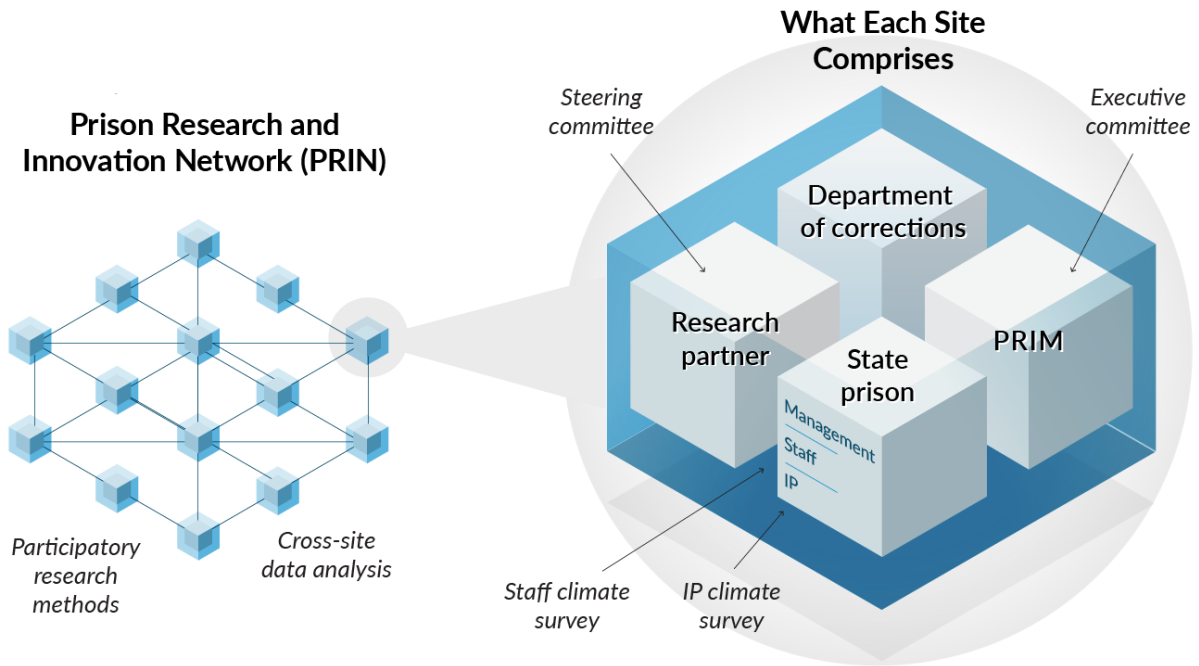
- Have a local research partner lead participatory research in the pilot prison to produce annual climate surveys of incarcerated people and staff members' perspectives on prison living and working conditions and other direct engagement with incarcerated people and corrections staff by forming councils, conducting focus groups, or conducting other interactive activities to shape the survey design.
- Administer these annual climate surveys to both incarcerated people and corrections staff in the pilot prison to measure their perspectives on prison living and working conditions; analyze the results of these surveys and disseminate them to incarcerated people and staff.
- In response to the findings of the annual climate surveys, design and implement innovations and changes in policy, programs, and practices in the pilot prison to improve prison living and working conditions.

- Evaluate the innovations and changes in policy, programs, and practices in the pilot prison to develop preliminary findings and insights on their effects.
- Hire and support a full-time prison research and innovation manager (PRIM) to work on-site in the pilot prison and coordinate the work of the research partner, facility leadership, DOC leadership, incarcerated people, and corrections staff.
- Stand up and convene monthly a steering committee comprising facility leadership, the research partner, the PRIM, and a senior representative from the DOC to coordinate the day-to-day project work.
- Identify and convene quarterly an executive committee comprising leadership from the governor's office, attorney general's office, DOC, and pilot prison; relevant legislative leadership; strong representation of formerly and/or currently incarcerated people; the PRIM; and the research partner to coordinate the project with broader state policy efforts.
- Engage with the Urban technical assistance team on planning, implementation, and evaluation activities.
- Participate in a nationwide study of prison environments conducted by Urban by incorporating cross-site measures in annual climate surveys and sharing unidentifiable data with Urban for cross-site analysis.
- Participate in peer learning and dissemination activities with other PRIN states and the broader field.

Project Structure

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the PRIN structure across the five sites.

FIGURE 1
The Prison Research and Innovation Network Structure



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Source: Urban Institute.
Notes: IP = incarcerated people. PRIM = prison research and innovation manager.

Table 1 profiles the five states that were selected to be part of PRIN. As table 1 shows, the five state facilities differed not just geographically, but in their security level and population size and makeup. More on each site’s climate survey data can be found at <http://prisonjailresearch.urban.org/>. More on the cross-site data can be found in our climate survey report (McCoy et al. 2025).

TABLE 1

Self-Reported Information on Prison Research and Innovation Network States

State (region of US)	Key partners	Pilot prison characteristics
Colorado (West)	- Colorado DOC - University of Denver - Sterling Correctional Facility	- Operational capacity: 2,400 - Average facility population 2023: 2,200 (average state prison population: 20,000) - Gender: men's - Security: minimum, medium, close, and maximum - Staff: 680
Delaware (Mid-Atlantic)	- Delaware DOC - University of Delaware - Howard R. Young Correctional Institution	- Operational capacity: 1,180 - Average facility population 2023: 1,328 (average state prison population: 4,279) - Unified system housing sentenced and pretrial - Gender: men's - Security: minimum, medium, and maximum - Staff: 422
Iowa (Midwest)	- Iowa DOC - Iowa Department of Management - Iowa Correctional Institution for Women	- Operational capacity: 774 - Average facility population 2022: 684 (state prison population: 8,472) - Gender: women's - Security: minimum, medium, and maximum - Staff: 202
Missouri (Midwest)	- Missouri DOC - University of Missouri - Moberly Correctional Center	- Operational capacity: 1,800 - Average facility population 2023: 1,538 (average state prison population: 23,855) - Gender: men's - Security: minimum and medium - Staff: 373
Vermont (Northeast)	- Vermont DOC - University of Vermont - Southern State Correctional Facility	- Operational capacity: 378 - Average facility population 2023: 277 (average state prison population: 1,350) - Unified system housing sentenced and pretrial - Gender: men's - Security: medium - Staff: 120

Source: Information provided directly by site partners.

Notes: DOC = department of correction.

Project Timeline and COVID-19

PRII began in 2019, when Urban focused on building the foundational pieces of the project and designing a request for proposals that would attract states to join PRIN. State participation began with kickoff site visits in February 2020. Shortly thereafter, prisons locked down and stopped much of their programming to mitigate the spread and effect of COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic had devastating health consequences for the people incarcerated in prisons and jails, the staff who were required to keep operations going, and the surrounding communities. Prisons and jails had to implement similar coronavirus mitigation strategies as the rest of the American public but at a large scale with a number of other logistical constraints. The pandemic also strongly curtailed visitor access to these facilities, including for research partners and other external PRIN stakeholders. Beginning in February 2020 and wrapping up by December 2024, PRIN took place amid the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, which substantially affected the landscape, possible activities, and project momentum. The shadow of COVID-19 cannot be removed from our reflections; however, the sites all attempted to carry the spirit of the project even under these altered conditions.

Methodology

In an effort to understand and document this national effort, Urban conducted a multiyear process evaluation spanning PRIN's planning and implementation under the larger Prison Research and Innovation Initiative. The results of this evaluation demonstrate how to take a participatory approach to research in prisons and offer strategies that can yield credible findings and impactful engagement with stakeholders.

Data Sources

This evaluation draws from three data sources: (1) semistructured interviews with stakeholders from the five Prison Research and Innovation Network sites, (2) document review, and (3) observations of key activities.

Semistructured Stakeholder Interviews

The Urban Institute conducted two waves of interviews with four stakeholder groups affiliated with the five state prisons participating in PRIN. The first wave was conducted in 2021 and 2022, approximately one year into the project. The second was conducted in 2024, approximately one year before the end of the project.³ Importantly, we only interviewed people who belonged to one of four stakeholder groups and were involved in PRIN in their local site. The four stakeholder groups were (1) incarcerated people, (2) corrections staff, (3) PRIN steering committee members, and (4) PRIN executive committee members.

We conducted a total of 112 semistructured interviews with 100 unique stakeholders who were involved in PRIN. In the first wave, we interviewed 43 stakeholders and in the second, we interviewed 69. Because of population turnover, the pool of participants was not the same for the two interview waves, although some long-term participants were interviewed in both waves. Table 2 below details the breakdown of unique interviewees. We interviewed 33 incarcerated people, who made up about a third of the sample. We interviewed a similar number of in-facility corrections staff, meaning officers, corrections administrators, educators, or other types of facility staff at the five participating prisons ($n=25$); corrections facility staff made up 25 percent of the sample. About a third of the interviewees (30 percent) were PRIN steering committee members from the five sites; these included research partners, facility leadership immediately involved in project decisions, and the sites' PRIMs. We

conducted 40 interviews with 30 unique steering committee members, who composed 30 percent of the sample. Lastly, 12 percent of the sample ($n=12$) were executive committee members, who included state and local legislators, advocates, and practitioners who were intended to situate the project in the larger state context, bringing a range of expertise to the project and helping tie together national and local reform efforts. Table 2 shows our interviewees by stakeholder group and wave.

TABLE 2
Interviews by Stakeholder Group and Wave: Unique Interviewees

	Wave 1		Wave 2		Total unique interviewees (N=100)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Incarcerated people	12	28%	21	37%	33	33%
Corrections staff	8	19%	17	30%	25	25%
Steering committee members	17	40%	13	23%	30	30%
Executive committee members	6	14%	6	11%	12	12%
Total	43	100%	57	100%	100	100%

Source: Authors' analysis of Urban Institute research activities between June 2021 and March 2025.

Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted in person or virtually. Each interview team consisted of two Urban researchers, with one facilitating the interview and one taking notes. Questions differed slightly between stakeholder groups. Topics covered included the following:

- participant background
- interviewees' level of involvement and role in PRIN
- initial impressions of PRIN and hopes for the project
- awareness and supportiveness of PRIN
- use of participatory methods
- development of the research councils of incarcerated people and corrections staff
- engagement of different stakeholder groups (incarcerated people, corrections staff, and steering and executive committees) in research and innovation development
- innovation development and implementation process
- research and innovation council meetings and operations
- steering and executive committee meetings and operations

- research development and implementation process
- state and facility areas for improvement
- project successes
- project challenges
- recommendations
- impacts of the project
- impacts of the innovations

Between the first and second interview waves, the interview guides were updated with minor changes to reflect the research activity timeline. We did not collect demographic data from interviewees to avoid identifiability and because of the interviewees' ongoing participation in the project. We ran qualitative analyses using NVivo, a software for qualitative data analysis, to parse common themes in a variety of domains, including interviewee background, strategies, and perceived impact. Within each domain were several "nodes," or subthemes. We coded each interview individually, categorizing each response into the appropriate node and allowing each coded section of interview text to be in as many nodes as necessary. As a fidelity check of internal coding consistency among the research team, a random selection of interviews were double-coded, with results compared and discrepancies discussed and addressed. We then analyzed each code individually, accounting for aggregate themes and between-group and within-group variation or lack thereof among corrections staff, incarcerated people, and state-level leaders and advocates.

To mitigate concerns about identifiability, as all interviewees were intimately involved in the project, we present findings throughout this report by stakeholder group instead of by site. For some of the findings we group people into two categories: direct stakeholders, referring to incarcerated people and corrections staff, and indirect stakeholders, referring to steering and executive committee members. Overall takeaways were similar across the stakeholder groups, but how interviewees engaged with the project differed based on their sites' structures and contexts.

As part of this evaluation, we reviewed quarterly progress reports from the research partners and DOCs, quarterly memos written by Urban summarizing progress in each site and over the project at large, and meeting notes from PRIN steering and executive committees. Though we also envisioned in-person observations of project activities, these observations were largely suspended because of the prisons' COVID-19 restrictions or occurred virtually. We used the above documents to keep a record of project activities and understand the project's state- and facility-level contexts in each site. This review grounds the findings from the semistructured interviews, and we incorporate information from it in this report.

Findings

Below we provide background on participatory research in prisons, then present findings on participants' perceptions of participatory research methods, the culture shift that PRIN produced in the participating prisons, challenges to making change in prison environments, and reflections on the PRIM position.

Background on Participatory Research in Prisons

A distinguishing characteristic of PRIN was its focus on participatory research methods. Participatory research is not a specific methodology but an approach to research rooted in the framework of “nothing about us without us” (Charlton 2000),⁴ meaning that at each step the research is created with and for the people most directly affected by the conditions being studied. Participatory research in a prison setting elevates the people who are confined and work there as experts in their own critical understanding of the environment, its daily challenges, its adverse impacts, and interventions that could address or mitigate these (Farrell et al. 2021; Fine and Torre 2006). With central tenets of (1) power sharing, (2) empowered participation, and (3) action, participatory research elevates research subjects to coresearchers and requires that all coresearchers work to share control and decisionmaking power and identify the issues that require change (Dupont 2008; Huffman 2017; Minkler et al. 2012; Reason and Bradbury 2005; Reiter 2014). In prisons, researchers must determine how best to engage research subjects as coresearchers while operating under the constraints of a hierarchical structure. For additional reading on conducting participatory research in prisons, see Farrell and coauthors (2021).

Pure participatory research is challenging in prison settings because of the inherent power dynamics, institutional restrictions, and lack of autonomy experienced by the incarcerated participants. PRIN, however, sought to use participatory research strategies to engage and empower incarcerated individuals by creating structures of feedback and collaborative environments with the staff and prison administrators. Though prison settings inherently use structures that prevent full autonomy, failing to recognize the agency people do have while incarcerated exacerbates assumptions of institutionalization, helplessness, and paternalism that often predominate in research with vulnerable populations. Incarcerated people reported feeling empowered by having a platform for their voices, and they generally felt the results reflected their prison facilities and cultures—which in turn fueled additional engagement and belief in both the veracity of the results and the fidelity of the participatory approach. Staff were hesitant to engage with the project (i.e., speak informally and share

concerns) given the power dynamics at play within the prisons' strict hierarchical cultures and because they were being asked to interact with researchers and incarcerated people in ways they thought could make them vulnerable to manipulation or seen as sympathetic (or "soft") to incarcerated people.

The benefits of participatory research include the following:

- **empowerment** of research participants
- **improved relevance** of research findings
- **policy impact** through grounded insights based on lived experience

Contextualizing the research questions with the community being researched ensures the research process is guided by the right questions. Codeveloping survey questions and tools allows data collection measures to be culturally competent and builds trust among participants (Harrison et al. 2020; Rodríguez et al. 2023). Though it is not possible to cultivate a truly equitable atmosphere in prison settings, researchers can work to empower all community members in these settings and garner their commitment to act in good faith. When these principles are prioritized, decisionmaking power can be more evenly distributed.

Participants' Perceptions of Participatory Research Methods

Challenges Engaging with Incarcerated People and Corrections Staff

Our evaluation focused largely on the perspectives of incarcerated people and corrections staff directly engaged in PRIN. Engagement with both required a high level of effort from research partners to build rapport, form relationships, and garner trust. Importantly, though, first, unlike staff, who leave a prison at the end of their shift, incarcerated people remain there. They often have more spare time than line staff, outside researchers, and leadership, and many are highly motivated to "give back" to their community, sometimes as a means of atoning for harm caused by their crimes by helping to improve conditions for fellow incarcerated people, staff, or the community. From our interviews, we also learned that incarcerated people almost universally supported the idea of collecting data on incarcerated people's experiences and needs and the process PRIN used to do so.

“We’re the ones that live here. We know what’s going on behind the walls. Who better to give feedback than the ones that live here?”

—Incarcerated person

Corrections line staff and supervisors, on the other hand, constituted the most challenging group to engage logistically and secure buy-in from. Staff were often unavailable to participate in PRIN, which was frequently cited in interviews as a barrier to true participatory research. The pandemic exacerbated existing staffing concerns, creating an acute and seemingly intractable staffing crisis that presented a tough barrier to engagement. With personnel sometimes being mandated to work four to eight hours on top of their regular shifts or pulling 16-hour shifts, staff had full workloads and not much time to dedicate elsewhere:

“To put it in perspective, the housing units 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 in there all day. And that was counting all the staff not trained. We were in a really bad bind. It seemed like the more people talked, we were just getting told, ‘run around’; no one really cared. We were disgruntled. We were losing staff more than bringing in and getting mandated to work four and eight extra hours every shift. Everyone was.”

—Prison staff member

These critically low staffing levels took precedence, as staff had to prioritize security shifts over attending PRIN meetings and events and sideline other issues that surveys highlighted as areas needing change, such as mandated overtime, programming, education, recreational time, and, in some cases, pay. Being overworked also meant that staff were rarely checking their emails, a crucial source of project information and promotion. In addition, the shift-work structure hindered staff participation on research committees. One staff interviewee suggested that their facility leadership could invest in PRIN by paying staff overtime to attend PRIN meetings or by “covering down”—enlisting a supervisor to cover a staff member’s assigned area while they attended PRIN meetings.

We learned from interviews that corrections officers were very skeptical not only of the project but also of those from outside corrections. Corrections officers had often had negative experiences on research projects, feeling mischaracterized and perceiving that researchers cared only about the experiences of incarcerated people. A few also reported suspicions that more staff did not engage with the project because they feared retaliation from management, a common fear in corrections culture, and because “people here just don’t like change,” as one prison staff member said. General skepticism among staff toward the project and its participatory framework manifested in several ways, with one staff member fearing early on that asks for their engagement were disingenuous and

designed to bait staff into speaking out, for which they would be reprimanded. This broad skepticism seems to have substantially affected staff participation.

For staff who reflected most positively on the participatory process, they often discussed the way that their years of on-the-ground experience in prisons positioned them to help researchers address what mattered most to staff. Initial questions posed by researchers led one staff participant to conclude that the researchers were not addressing the concerns of staff; several staff members, however, shared that their active feedback and engagement helped refocus the questions around the most pressing staff priorities. Still, most staff came away disappointed with their level of active research engagement but attributed this shortcoming largely to the realities of working a corrections officer's schedule in an understaffed facility. This disappointment did not prevent staff from expressing support for the participatory approach *in concept*, especially recognizing that the high engagement from incarcerated people on their survey had a tremendous impact on the results and impact of PRIN for incarcerated people.

Further, logistically, starting engagement with both the staff and incarcerated populations simultaneously was a challenge, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and the national corrections staffing crisis. Multiple incarcerated and staff interviewees discussed how tension and competition between incarcerated people and staff manifest, especially when compounded by the heightened stress of the pandemic. In sites where incarcerated people were engaged before corrections staff, line staff felt slighted, and tensions rose for research teams already facing a challenging environment for gaining buy-in. This only added to the feeling expressed by some staff at the start of the project that people outside the prison cared only about improving conditions for the incarcerated population. The PRIN sites employed many different strategies to build trust with corrections staff and gain their buy-in, such as individual interviews with staff outside the workplace, monthly staff newsletters about the project, and flyers about the project posted in staff break rooms. In one site, even before data collection started, researchers held a drive for hygiene products for staff to use when held over on mandatory overnight shifts. Buy-in increased after the first round of surveys once corrections staff were able to witness that their perspectives were treated respectfully, with anonymity and confidentiality, and with consideration by leadership. That is, establishing an environment of privacy and respect with a small group of corrections officers went a long way in getting support to spread by word of mouth and securing broader buy-in. Further, as staff feedback was incorporated into later rounds of climate surveys, recognition of staff impact and involvement assuaged some of the initial hesitations that had discouraged staff from actively participating.

Reflections on Codesigning and Implementing a Climate Survey

The vast majority of those interviewed reported feeling positively about how they were engaged to design and refine the climate surveys. This participation was a major win for the project and was credited many times as contributing to PRIN's successes, even amid the many challenges. Incarcerated people specifically expressed appreciation for the research partners for taking the time and energy to work with a population not traditionally included in research studies. Expressing this sentiment, one incarcerated person said that this engagement was “100 percent positive. They listened, they heard, they showed [up].” Part of this engagement included teaching and discussing research and statistical methods with participants, and several interviewees spoke fondly of these experiences. For example, some incarcerated people mentioned that thanks to the research partners, they were able to make tangible contributions that improved the survey and data collection. They spoke about how empowering it felt to participate in and make genuine contributions to a rigorous, professional study.

In addition, many research partners created a safe environment for incarcerated people to learn, ask questions, and be genuinely heard, spending a lot of time and energy to ensure the surveys were successful. They were honest about what innovations were feasible and did not overpromise on the scope of potential changes. Several incarcerated participants lauded the way researchers aggressively fought for the incarcerated population and advocated for its needs and priorities. As many incarcerated people stated, their words are often given little weight, so having the researchers elevate their concerns not only meant a great deal but added authority to the requests.

Although staff engagement was a barrier, staff that did engage in the climate survey process also spoke positively about their experiences with research partners in the design, data collection, and interpretation stages.

The vast majority of steering committee members perceived the climate survey's development, administration, and data collection to be among the project's primary successes. Multiple steering committee members said the best part of the project was seeing incarcerated people and corrections staff take ownership of the survey and refer to it as “our survey” to other community members. Collective participation in the survey design and interpretation of results helped promote the survey and increased the response rate, and in turn encouraged further participation down the road, according to project participants. Steering committee members and incarcerated people alike cited the ownership that those involved in creating the survey felt as a major factor in a perceived heightened response rate.

Moreover, almost all steering committee interviewees who discussed the survey design process viewed it as a clear example of how to conduct participatory research in a corrections setting: steering committee members worked incredibly hard to spread awareness of the work, overcome barriers to participation, and earn the trust of the direct stakeholders. This hard work made the participatory project possible. Some steering committee members, however, felt that their state's DOC tried to change what "participatory" meant, limiting the power and authority of incarcerated people and staff.

Levels and types of engagement differed between sites. Across the differently sized facilities and survey waves, response rates among incarcerated people ranged from 7 to 85 percent, and response rates among corrections staff ranged from 16 to 85 percent. Some sites were able to use a purer participatory research approach, whereas others needed to be creative to accommodate environmental constraints. For example, in one site, a group of incarcerated advisers came up with the topics and wording for each survey question and then tweaked this wording in response to feedback on how their peers interpreted it. In another site, researchers struggled to use committees to engage participants in developing the survey and facility innovations. Instead, the researchers drafted the survey questions themselves and solicited community feedback using a "talking wall" where participants physically interacted with survey results that were displayed on a wall in the facility, provided context for the findings on sticky notes, and indicated which topics were their highest priorities to address. In another site, researchers engaged staff creatively by conducting "walkabouts," opportunities for informal micro-interviews with staff on shift, gathering their thoughts on the survey and its results. Sites took a variety of approaches to engage their respective facility communities and increase direct input from the general population, such as holding facility-wide town halls to report project updates, answering frequently asked questions on a video playing on the closed-circuit television channel in the facility, and allowing PRIN participants to visit other units in the facility.

Furthermore, certain incentives were effective for increasing participation, and their success suggests that recruitment for survey and council participation could be boosted by offering food or other small tokens of appreciation. Staff generally did not have specific suggestions for boosting awareness of the project but agreed that publicizing it more broadly would likely have increased the chances that staff would take the survey.

Most incarcerated interviewees who discussed the surveys felt that they reached a representative slate of the incarcerated population and thus that the responses adequately elevated most issues of concern. Several incarcerated research advisers explained how, because not all incarcerated people could contribute to refining the survey, they sought feedback on the yard from peers who might be less willing to speak out and ultimately elevated their perspectives in conversations about survey

development. In some facilities, incarcerated interviewees described themselves as representatives of PRIN and as point people for other incarcerated people to contact if they had issues they wanted to raise or be incorporated into the survey. It was not always possible, however, to reach people of all identities and custody levels, such as those in administrative segregation. Stakeholders in some sites made intentional efforts to engage people across all identities and custody levels, but people of all identities and custody levels were typically unable or unwilling to participate on research councils.

Researchers made similar attempts to incorporate a representative slate of staff voices into the survey development process, and many staff participants appreciated how the surveys were written or at least informed by people who knew the facility and corrections. A few people spoke explicitly about how PRIN's participatory process captured staff feedback much more comprehensively than other surveys staff are regularly asked to take. In one site, staff felt that the quantitative evidence presented to DOC leadership from the surveys called the leadership to action more definitively and strongly than anecdotal evidence alone. Still, for security or scheduling reasons, certain groups of staff and incarcerated people had little to no opportunity or desire to participate in PRIN. For staff, this may have been because their shifts typically overlapped with PRIN commitments, and some staff interviewees shared that for certain staff classifications, such as medical staff, no members were available to contribute. As such, it is likely that some people's perspectives were included in the survey results but not the survey development process.

Further, some staff lost interest after the first wave of data collection because they felt that the participatory approach was a facade, that certain crucial realities affecting staff quality of life and working conditions were deliberately not addressed by the climate surveys because of resistance from DOC leadership. Staff also worried that initial lack of time or interest in taking a lengthy survey, attending an advisory committee meeting, or participating in interviews and focus groups would result in groups being left out of the results and any subsequent solutions.

"I know this was a huge undertaking just for this facility, so I can only imagine trying to expand it to other facilities, but if we did, maybe we'd get a better balance and more people motivated. Maybe a way to just kind of actively engage more people, but I wouldn't want to be the person who had to do that."

—Steering committee member

Interviewees also recommended ways to spread awareness of the project, like "keeping up the advertising so that people always know what's going on," or hosting project town halls. Others suggested PRIN-specific newsletters. One shared, "Even with the incarcerated population, there have

been challenges. We should have added more people to the [incarcerated research committee] as other members left, and we added people too late in the process to really help inform the survey results. [Having enough people on the research committee] enhanced our ability to understand these populations and the challenges they are facing.” Incarcerated participants also asked for more intergroup engagement. Several suggested that the committees of staff and incarcerated people each designate a “point person” to represent the committees in each other’s meetings, and report back. Another suggested designating a room in each facility where the research partner could work, to conduct more of the research and analysis from the facilities themselves.

Deviation from a Participatory Approach

Urban required that 47 questions on the surveys of staff and 49 questions on the surveys of incarcerated people be included to permit consistent measurement of prison conditions and cross-site analyses. Each site’s final climate survey included core items developed from the literature and input from experts across the field and original facility-specific sections, as developed by the people in each prison and the research partners. Because of the required questions, a small number of steering committee members felt the survey development process could not be considered participatory. Concerns raised by some of the site research partners led to refinement of the list of core questions. Interviewees discussed the challenges navigating the community engaged methods model and reconciling the opinions of different direct stakeholders, especially when their wishes for survey questions were at odds with those of the funders. The required inclusion of cross-site questions deviates from an authentic participatory approach and speaks to the calculations necessary to balance priorities in a multistate network of stakeholders.

Making Changes in Response to Participatory Research

Engaging Leadership

Operating within a rigid, hierarchical corrections setting, the participatory approach was not without top-down pressures. One of incarcerated respondents’ greatest frustrations was having innovations they proposed slowed or rejected by facility leadership, often without a given reason. For example, speaking about an innovation meant to standardize the dress code, one incarcerated person said, “It just needs to be signed by the warden, so they could approve that tomorrow if they wanted to, but we haven’t heard anything about it for months,” which led the interviewee to believe leadership was deliberately slow-walking the project.

“[Change] starts at the top...If the head of the snake is on board and wants certain things to change, they will. You need a person at the top, and it trickles down from there.”

—Incarcerated person

Without a direct line of communication between them and leadership, direct stakeholders were often left without resolution regarding facility leadership’s decisions or lack thereof. With the hope of collaboratively advancing more innovations, several incarcerated participants recommended expanding the innovation development process to include a larger role for facility leadership from the outset so constraints could be conveyed ahead of time. In a few sites where facility leadership took particular interest in the project, this strategy worked particularly well and reduced the time needed to get all stakeholders to agree on courses of action. Facility leadership became their own stakeholder group in the participatory process instead of a top-down enforcement arm as their role collaborating with incarcerated people and staff increased.

Because of the prisons’ existing structures and the foremost goal of the DOCs being to maintain safety and security, this project found success treating and engaging facility leadership as its own stakeholder group, recognizing its distinct priorities, needs, and motivations. Though a DOC’s commissioner drives the department overall, facility leadership (e.g., wardens, superintendents, deputies) set the tone at their prisons. Leadership’s discretion, however, is dictated by the commissioner; whereas some wardens are empowered to make decisions for their prisons, others are highly constrained. Soliciting input from facility leadership and DOC staff at all stages of the project was a necessity to secure not only buy-in but also ownership. With a participatory research process, ideas and innovations must come from the bottom up. But in a hierarchical system like corrections, this is not always possible, and even when it is, the idea runs so counter to the traditional prison environment that any efforts made without explicit and implicit enthusiasm from leadership may fall dead in the water.

Further, in corrections, transparency is viewed with skepticism; corrections officials are very wary of litigation and of data being used against them. At the outset, each site agreed to publish department-level administrative data. Ultimately, multiple sites were unwilling to follow through with this. Even the staff who want change are wary of committing too strongly and being cast out when the DOC’s priorities change with leadership turnover. An executive committee member shared, “A lot of the staff are on board, but a whole lot of them are not. They’ve been trained by their dad, their grandad, their uncles, who all worked in the system, so it’s a deep-rooted thing, and it’s hard to get out

of that draconian type of thinking.” To pave the way for participatory research, steering committee members were largely tasked with creating a space for incarcerated people and staff to feel comfortable sharing openly about their experiences amid the long-standing culture of corrections and lack of trust between line staff and leadership. Part of overcoming people’s hesitancy to engage meant assuring them that PRIN would not be just like the research projects that had disappointed them in the past, which put a lot of pressure on the indirect stakeholders to make this true; research partners in particular were well aware that staff and incarcerated folks had been burned by false promises before. The successes that emerged from the project owed largely to steering committee members’ tireless efforts to show up in good faith and push for the well-being of everyone in the facilities.

Though all stakeholders recommended that their executive committee have a bigger role collaborating with and connecting the facility to various legislators, community-based services, criminal legal system actors, and advocacy organizations, steering committee members struggled to compel executive committee members to action and executive committee members struggled to know how to incorporate the data effectively in their spheres. The main roadblock to greater executive committee involvement as expressed by all indirect stakeholders was a lack of direction and clear responsibilities for executive committee members. Steering committee members agreed that the comparatively minimal executive committee involvement owed not to a lack of effort but to challenges figuring out the big picture.

Though many steering committee members reported that facility leadership set the tone of the project in the state DOCs and the facilities, much of the management and support-gathering was in the hands of the indirect stakeholders. Some sites reported struggling with participation because of a lack of awareness, not a lack of support. Intentionally increasing communication between groups in the facilities and states’ central DOC offices, between point people in each facility and the DOC commissioner, between line staff and facility management, and between incarcerated people and staff was both a successful engagement strategy and outcome of PRIN, with this improved communication persisting beyond the project. Further, improving communication helped to counter the feeling that people “on the bottom” did not have enough knowledge to make informed decisions and that the people at the top were not having enough conversations or the right ones.

Similar to the view of some incarcerated participants, steering committee members felt that top-down pressures affected the participatory process. For example, one steering committee member noted that the project’s progress relied on the access granted by the warden. Many steering committee members also felt at times that their DOCs were resistant to change and overly controlling of survey questions, data collection, and the sharing of findings. One executive committee member

noted, “The challenges are that the DOC has operated in the same way since its inception. That’s like trying to turn the Titanic on a dime.”

“Definitely not what I set out for what [participatory research] would look like. My idea of being engaged was a little messy, partly for COVID and because I wasn’t sure what we were doing for the project. Language matters a lot. I can safely say we strive to CBPR [community-based participatory research], we’re more community engaged, projects are fluid, trying to build capacity and bring back into action. We haven’t been able to do the collaborative work on research questions [and there was an] issue with challenges on surveys. You don’t get questions from outside entity and call it CBPR.”

—Steering committee member

To effectively engage a DOC from the outset of a research project, steering committee members recommended creating materials outlining goals, previous challenges, the DOC’s role, how it can help collect data, and how data could be useful to it and providing “information on the power of the project and evidence-based information to innovate policies,” as one steering committee member said. In PRIN, the DOCs could provide more investment and demonstrate more enthusiasm for culture change, such as by having the commissioner attend steering committee meetings or proactively seeking opportunities to collaborate with outside organizations, thereby encouraging more participation and support across the board. Interviewed steering committee members, staff, and incarcerated participants all felt that the DOCs should make up-front commitments to engage with the project productively and in good faith, with multiple enforcement mechanisms designed to obligate them to act on the survey data even in the face of leadership turnover.

Whose Needs Matter? Finding a Balance

Another barrier to staff becoming and staying involved in the project was their feeling their needs were deprioritized compared with those of the incarcerated population. This us-versus-them mentality in a resource-scarce environment created secondary challenges related to overcoming direct stakeholders’ resentment of and sensitivity toward being pitted against each other, rather than collaboratively improving conditions. These feelings of being under-prioritized continued when the issues the staff identified as most pressing—the staffing shortage, mandated overtime, and increased compensation—went unaddressed. Understandably, when staff did not see these changes coming out of PRIN and saw that some of the most pressing priorities, such as budgetary changes and hiring incentives, were outside the scope of PRIN, several staff were discouraged and support for the project waned. Some staff felt the DOCs and researchers intentionally did not address their concerns. One

said, “The biggest issues are obviously pay and how we get treated, but they don’t want to ask about that directly, so instead they just ask about things they’d rather ask about.”

“Challenges lie with the staff. We’ve seen the participation decrease for staff. When I go in there, staff know, we know that what they want isn’t going to happen.”

—Steering committee member

Strategies to Increase Engagement

Indirect stakeholders were excited and anxious to achieve quick, highly visible successes. Getting those yeses was a big deal, especially in changing direct stakeholders’ mindsets from “there’s no point in talking about this, it will never happen” to “maybe.” One site’s quick wins were letting staff bring their phones into the facility, having previously required them to leave them in their cars where they would freeze or overheat, and a community vegetable garden for the incarcerated people to sow and manage. Making these changes involved leadership taking small risks that paid off in big ways. Publicizing these changes and attributing them to PRIN solidified project support from all levels. Publicizing these efforts externally, which executive committee members suggested, could have expanded awareness of PRIN into advocacy, community service, or governmental spaces. Project members were excited by the opportunity to share findings from the body of quantitative and qualitative data generated by this undertaking, and especially to use academic-practitioner partnerships to reach large audiences and draw attention to prison conditions.

Intentionality Is Paramount

To earn the trust of the staff and incarcerated people, steering committee members highlighted the importance of consistent, intentional connections, especially when they were unable to enter the facilities. By repeatedly showing up and going out of their way to reduce the barriers to participation, researchers earned the trust and respect of direct stakeholders. Meeting participants where they were, literally and figuratively, was another thoughtful strategy that demonstrated their commitment to the work. Through their efforts, they found that consistency builds the foundation and respect essential for making progress and managing expectations. And as one steering committee member shared, “My biggest takeaway is to be careful what you promise people.”

“You have to have buy-in at the upper level, but you also need buy-in at the street level. The inmates are easy as long as you don’t lie to them. Don’t feed people false hope. Don’t promise anything. Donuts and ice cream also help. Little things go so far. The littlest things go so, so far.”

—Steering committee member

Intentionality was also paramount when reconciling stakeholders’ different needs and levels of involvement in the project. Some felt that the PRIN process became more participatory as facilities returned to pre-COVID baseline operations but that navigating the differing goals and demands of researchers and DOC staff made the participatory research challenging. Because most PRIN researchers had existing relationships with their local prisons and state DOCs and hoped to continue these relationships after PRIN, they were incentivized to prioritize those relationships. Researchers especially must be intentional about which battles to pick and how to communicate their goals in partnership with DOCs, as conducting corrections research locally often requires approval from state DOCs.

PRIN Was the Culture Shift

Most stakeholders reported feeling a difference in facility culture that they attributed to PRIN. But they thought the effects owed to the PRIN process generally rather than to the innovations themselves and, though impactful, these changes were difficult to measure. Some of the changes facilities enacted in response to the survey results directly affected quality of life and served as proof of concept for scaling the changes across the state corrections systems. In addition, seeing action taken to address the survey results gave people reassurance and hope. Incarcerated people and corrections staff felt proud and supported seeing innovations spread to other facilities in their state after being successful in the pilot facility.

“[PRIN has] reduced skepticism towards innovations and it’s made it easier to propose growing things systemwide. It’s a lot easier to first pilot something in one place so that when you put it into other facilities, it has a much smoother implementation.”

—Steering committee member

Though most staff wished PRIN had had a greater impact on working conditions, overall, interviewees felt that the project had been a major success in other areas. Among the successful changes made in response to the PRIN survey results and participatory innovation development were the following:

- a community coffee shop run by incarcerated people
- a community garden managed and staffed by incarcerated people with fresh vegetables available on commissary
- a library cart program
- a marriage counseling program for incarcerated people preparing for release
- a meditation class for staff
- a mental health task force for staff
- a revamped grievance process for incarcerated people
- a revised “good time” policy for incarcerated people
- a revised phone policy for staff
- an honor dorm
- changes to hiring practices
- decompression space for staff
- enhanced vocational training
- facility beautification projects
- family visiting days for staff and incarcerated people
- implementation of a commercial driver’s license (CDL) simulator and course
- improvements to exercise equipment for incarcerated people
- new staff training initiatives, refresher training modules, and a simulation cell
- renewed staff appreciation measures

Success with the earliest innovations opened the door and built trust for stakeholders to invest more time and effort in the project, and even to use the innovations as proof of concept to encourage other state prisons to adopt similar initiatives. For example, in one state, the staff decompression space was implemented statewide, and PRIN handbooks were created and distributed to other prisons and community centers.

“[PRIN] creates an environment where people could say ‘I want the world to operate this way’ and talk to the people that were doing the operating.”

—Steering committee member

While the innovations showed evidence of progress in the facilities, the continued existence of PRIN and facilities’ continued engagement with it was an outcome in itself that spoke to a shift in the facilities’ cultures. The participatory component enabled stakeholders to begin creating environments where trying new things was normalized. Before PRIN, incarcerated people and staff heard “no” so often that they were not inclined to ask for change. PRIN allowed for a new environment and greater interconnection across the board.

“The biggest success is PRIN giving us the permission.”

—Steering committee member

The prevailing sentiment was that PRIN had an impact on each facility simply by existing. This sentiment was most present in interviews and general feedback from incarcerated participants, several of whom shared that because of PRIN, they had been given a voice for the first time: the project acknowledged a population often treated with scorn as equally worthy of recognition and contribution. In one incarcerated person’s telling, 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, rather than it just being us alone.” In fact, most interviewees reported that the presence of PRIN, a change-oriented program designed for and by direct stakeholders, signaled the value of and possibility for further collaboration between department leadership, facility staff, incarcerated people, and outsiders, a partnership that held contributions from staff and incarcerated people as equally empirical and research-worthy as those of the external, professional research partners. Some felt PRIN made people more open to the potential for positive change in a prison environment. Even if there had not been many tangible changes in the facilities, the climate *felt* different to direct stakeholders. One steering committee member shared that PRIN brought major players to the table and “showed them that we can do better. It changed the mentality and the way of thinking, which helped push this forward.” These incremental changes in culture and climate are difficult to measure but make a big difference to those living and working in the pilot prisons.

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

—Prison staff member

PRIN's presence fostered dialogue between line staff and leadership, line staff and incarcerated people, and incarcerated people and leadership. These direct stakeholders reported that PRIN opened conversations and connections they would not otherwise have had. Through this growth process, staff and incarcerated people alike felt more comfortable speaking. Multiple participants commented on these effects of PRIN on facility culture: how it provided incarcerated people and staff a neutral space that leveled the playing field and bridged some of the gaps between them. This space gave both "sides" the opportunity to discuss frustrations and get some of their "whys" answered. Notably, steering committee members were highly conscious that the PRIN space was atypical in this hierarchical environment and that direct stakeholders would be left to deal with the ramifications of being open and honest even when the researchers had left—for worse or for better.

Progressive facility leadership used the existence of PRIN and its resulting data to push for changes they had been wanting to make but that may have seemed impossible under normal conditions. One facility leader said PRIN allowed more discussions and more latitude for calculated risk taking: staff in their state's DOC, both above and below the facility leadership level, used PRIN as a conversation starter and a reason to examine and question the status quo. Including facility leadership in the participatory approach alongside facility staff and incarcerated people went a long way in understanding the priorities, needs, and motivations of stakeholders at all levels and designing solutions with each of them in mind.

"The project has also helped us really connect with people who have ideas about changing the environment and weren't as jaded, because we do have a tendency to get jaded and forget to focus on keeping moving forward."

—Steering committee member

Because of the participatory approach, staff and incarcerated people came away feeling their thoughts and opinions mattered—reportedly a rare feeling in corrections. We heard numerous reports that PRIN—the participatory process, the people involved, and the respect they felt—established a culture of care, empowerment, and community support. Respect begets respect, but it took PRIN to start this cycle. As some facility staff members explained, prisons and the types of people who typically work in them are not always open to talking openly about challenges they're facing or their general feelings about the facilities and their working conditions, but that with PRIN, being open could *actually* lead to different experiences.

“[This facility] is a more welcoming, positive place to be...PRIN had a big part of that perception shift.”

—Prison staff member

When they saw PRIN change facility operations, skeptical stakeholders began to believe in the possibility of improvement. Seeing peers engage with PRIN pushed others to do the same. This wave of support and collective efficacy encouraged participants, including many who had been frustrated at the lack of attention paid to issues affecting incarcerated people, to speak up. This cycle of gaining support also strengthened some interviewees' willingness to continue investing and asking peers to invest as well. Because of its methods, success, local investment, and profile, PRIN forced less-heard perspectives to the forefront and brought pressure on DOCs to act. These actions also gave stakeholders hope that substantial change could be made by expanding PRIN state- or nationwide.

Improving Connections between Incarcerated People and Corrections Staff

“[The PRIN joint meeting] was probably the first time we sat down and put on a spotlight to have these conversations. It made a big change in moving forward. It is not always us versus whoever—we are working together and bringing ideas together.”

—Prison staff member

Though direct stakeholders did not come together in all sites to work collaboratively on PRIN activities, those who did reported increased bandwidth to have discussions together, humanize each other, and combat the us-versus-them mindset on both sides. In multiple sites, staff and incarcerated PRIN advisers requested to meet together in formal PRIN settings. During one such meeting, staff and incarcerated people were able to discuss challenges they were facing, how those challenges were being addressed, and how they could work together to address them more substantially. These discussions unfolded with apprehension in the beginning but became easier as they built foundational trust. Indirect and direct stakeholders commented on the unique opportunities these meetings provided to enter into dialogue and their surprise at being able to see the other perspectives and overcome the us-versus-them dynamic, understanding that everyone was working toward the same goal. Though tensions were not eliminated, participants reported feeling greater cohesion and support across their facilities. Further, the respect and humanization they developed in the PRIN setting extended beyond the formal PRIN activities, with incarcerated people and staff both mentioning they could now talk informally without being considered suspicious by their peers.

“[PRIN and the surveys] helped to show that we all live and work here and help us see everyone as individuals rather than various groups on different sides.”

—Steering committee member

A few steering committee members said PRIN had brought together not only incarcerated people and staff but also facility leadership. As steering committee interviewees explained, it is rare to have open, honest lines of dialogue between these groups, but PRIN provided both the infrastructure and the permission structure to support it. One steering committee member shared,

“The number of folks that would tell us ‘we have never gotten respect, to talk to wardens, directors, staff, like we have since PRIN.’ Same with staff, ‘We never sit down and have these cross conversations and problem solve.’ So many people are like, ‘This just doesn’t happen.’ Being able to help establish that and guide it to that point, it was really kind of impressive to them and the project. I’ve never seen that at prisons I work at either, there is very much separation.”

The participatory nature of the project broke down walls and allowed stakeholders to come together on a more even playing field to work together to develop solutions.

The Cost of Having an Impact

Unintended consequences are impossible to eliminate completely in prison research and can have a considerable deleterious effect on project engagement. Researchers must bear in mind that they can leave these facilities, both physically and psychologically, at the end of the day, a privilege not afforded to staff and the incarcerated population. Skepticism from this project’s participants was not without merit, as several incarcerated people and staff had had negative interactions with researchers before. Asking people to invest time and effort in change that might not come carries much responsibility and risk. A steering committee member spoke to this reality:

“Incarcerated people and staff already carry a lot of anger, frustration, futility, sadness about how little what they do makes a difference, so asking them to participate and telling them it will make a difference is not a small ask. It’s actually quite a serious ask, and I feel a very big sense of responsibility to deliver on the ‘promises’—that’s not the right word—possibilities, possibilities of adding color or light to their situation. Having them imagine something different and then not being able to achieve this, it’s like we’ve offered a false hope, and I feel responsibility toward this. And on the other hand, we have to try, but the barriers are incredible.”

Another potential negative impact is the mishandling of conflict between stakeholder groups. A prison's community is an ecosystem with lots of history and tensions; these tensions must be unpacked tactfully so the whole community can move forward constructively. In one site, anonymous survey results and community participation elicited mean-spirited comments directed toward individuals. One staff interviewee alleged that their facility's management had used security cameras to identify the staff members who had made targeted comments against management. Staff in this site felt burned by this experience and lost trust in the PRIN process. From this experience, we learned that when creating feedback mechanisms, project leaders should anticipate how to constructively manage and be responsive to negative feedback to reduce potential harm to individuals. Without planning and care, even constructive feedback has the potential to destroy goodwill.

Challenges to Making Change in Prison Environments

Prison environments tend to operate between two extremes regarding change. One is rapid-response change. For example, in response to an urgent security threat that requires a facility lockdown, facility leadership may immediately change procedures that they believe led to the security threat. The other is slow, incremental change. For example, a facility's warden might be interested in changing the facility culture around reporting abuse and start with building new mechanisms for reporting, then focus on building trust in those systems, and later refine accountability and oversight when abuse is reported (in other words, something is done to support the person who experienced the abuse and something is done to address the behavior of the person who was abusive). A major finding from our process evaluation concerned the challenges around introducing and executing approaches to making changes in prison environments, which we describe below.

Limited Funding and Resources Constrained Change

All stakeholder groups identified funding and resource constraints as a key challenge in making changes in prison environments under PRIN. Even where there was a high degree of buy-in around a proposed change, stakeholders often encountered funding issues when attempting to implement that change. For example, in one site, a proposal was made to increase incarcerated people's storage space by adding new hooks to their cells, but this ran into funding issues and was ultimately not implemented. This particular change would have lived under the prison's maintenance budget, which was owned and governed by a different state agency (the one that owned the physical prison building), and therefore would have taken additional legislative work and budget modification.

Another funding challenge is that when this facility wanted to purchase additional equipment, it had to purchase a version that complied with prison security standards, which came at a higher price point that was ultimately unaffordable for it. Related to these constraints, it is important that indirect project stakeholders honestly communicate these types of bureaucratic realities to incarcerated people and staff.

Lastly, staff we interviewed felt that, in an environment with limited funds, funds were prioritized for changes that would benefit incarcerated people, thereby limiting the funds available for changes that would benefit staff.

“Ultimately, to make changes, it’s gonna cost money... When it comes down to budgets and making changes, it’s gonna come down to cost.”

—Prison staff member

DOC Directives and Policies Sometimes Present Roadblocks to Facility-Level Change

In prison environments, facilities’ particular needs and departmentwide policies for all of a state’s prisons must be carefully balanced. We heard from interviewees that DOC directives and policies were sometimes barriers to implementing change at the facility level. For example, state procurement processes are challenging to navigate, with small systems at a disadvantage as vendors are incentivized to serve the largest customer base and lock in long-term contracts. As discussed in an earlier section, facility leadership set the tone at their prisons. This can result in different or conflicting policies within the same system; in other cases, events in one facility can result in policies affecting others: in one state, two staff members in a high-security men’s facility were tragically murdered, and as a result, the DOC changed a series of policies to increase security statewide, which affected the ability to advance change at the mixed-security women’s facility that had embraced a gender-responsive and trauma-informed approach to certain policies and procedures. By standardizing certain policies across the state, the DOC-wide changes rolled back some of the policies at the women’s prison that had benefited the women in custody there.

“We’re at the bottom trying to change stuff under a waterfall. Things that happen within the wall is the project of outside culture—society, culture, norms, views. It’s a tough aspect to change from the bottom to the top.”

—Steering committee member

Further, multiple stakeholder groups expressed frustration with the red tape they needed to overcome with the DOCs to move forward with activities and innovations. Some steering committee members felt there was slow-walking being done by DOC and facility leadership, while others felt more that the bureaucracy was just an inevitable part of working in a highly regulated and securitized institution. Incarcerated people and staff perceived that their DOCs were blocking change in certain areas, deliberately avoiding certain priority areas, and intentionally undermining project success, especially when they rejected proposed changes without explanation. In some cases, innovations were even rolled back after they were implemented. For instance, an incarcerated person shared that a wall mural initiated by PRIN was painted over and a garden that was created had become less of a priority.

“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. Sometimes the thing that holds us back the most is the red tape and the [staff and incarcerated] population thinks we’re not doing anything.”

—Steering committee member

A Lack of Buy-In from Some Corrections Leaders Prevented Change

Though some corrections leaders supported PRIN and used it as cover to advance reform, some interviewees felt that facility staff and leadership and the state DOCs were *not* supportive and actively sought to undermine the project. One incarcerated person shared, “Staff don’t want things like PRIN to exist. A lot of COs don’t want prison reform.” This perceived lack of support from some corners contributed to a general lack of faith in how the project could have an impact on the facilities. Some staff also felt a lack of support from facility and DOC leadership. Most interviewees agreed that change would only happen if the DOCs were motivated and bought into the project. Others felt that even if leadership was not actively against the project, they were not prioritizing it, with some characterizing it as a “thorn in their side.”

About half of executive committee interviewees and many of the incarcerated people we interviewed perceived that their DOCs or prison administrations were largely antichange, especially on policies for submitting grievances intended to allow incarcerated people to hold staff accountable. Another PRIN participant said the project’s success largely depended on who was in charge, explaining that their previous warden was not as receptive to change as the current one and that that affected the project’s success. Having facility leadership, staff, and a DOC that supported and facilitated PRIN was necessary both logistically and conceptually. This was challenging, however, as all sites

experienced facility and DOC leadership turnover, requiring them to start over to secure buy-in, which consumed a lot of project resources and required continuous patience by all involved to operate on extended timelines.

“In terms of leadership, it really depends on if they value the program or not. Some in the central office really do value PRIN, but unless you keep the momentum up, it’s really challenging.”

—Prison staff member

Slow-Moving Change Undermined Buy-In and Jeopardized People’s Willingness to Participate

Change in corrections can be slow. Most stakeholders we interviewed felt each step of the changes they sought to make through PRIN, even seemingly simple ones, took too long. One incarcerated participant recalled frustrations surrounding delays securing carpeting and paint to make aesthetic improvements to their facility’s reentry center and explained the many steps around this: securing approval from multiple levels at their DOC’s central office, then identifying the funding source. Each step in a seemingly small change added to the time between identifying an issue and seeing tangible progress, which undermined buy-in for the project, increased skepticism, and jeopardized people’s willingness to participate in future project research activities.

“A lot of people spent a lot of time on those surveys, so they put in the effort, but they don’t see any result from it, so next time around, they’re not gonna bother.”

—Incarcerated person

Steering committee members reported feeling pressure to deliver on visible, tangible changes quickly to avoid losing buy-in and trust from involved stakeholders. Pressure to deliver on meaningful changes almost immediately became a pain point of this project and these difficulties were disheartening for everyone involved. Sites struggled and were ultimately unable to implement some proposed innovations, such as creating carpentry and barber shops for incarcerated people to develop skills; constructing a new staff break room, decompression space, and a fitness center; holding events for staff team building; and improving mental and physical health care delivery for incarcerated people and staff. What was achieved in some sites was not achieved in others because of differences in site contexts, resources, physical facility layouts, and personnel logistics.

Staff and incarcerated people especially struggled to stay engaged when they did not see progress or during project periods when there were fewer opportunities for direct involvement from incarcerated people and staff. Support was lost from both groups when the project failed to deliver evidence of change in a timely manner. Staff, many already skeptical of the project and overworked amid a national staffing crisis, drew back from the project when they did not see changes.

“Staff will not come out winners or losers. [Leadership has] their hands tied. We can really just give them a pat on the back and say that we want to be supportive and give them the resources we can but there isn’t much we can do. The staff were so excited we were on board at first, and the fact that we can’t deliver is really disheartening for me.”

—Steering committee member

Notably, a few staff we interviewed felt there were no meaningful successes to document, at least none that they were aware of, demonstrating the frustration some staff had with a lack of project progress, particularly on innovations. When discussing how the project had come up short, many interviewees said that what really frustrated them was the fact that the survey data so clearly identified issues but that the core issues went unaddressed.

Other Challenges to Making Change in Prisons: Project Fatigue and Length

Some steering and executive committee members shared they had experienced project fatigue, feeling that, even with all the right players at the table, the issues’ root causes were insurmountable, especially when considering opposition to the project and the energy needed to veer from the status quo to make a lasting difference. This fatigue increased feelings of hopelessness around the project, as expressed by one steering committee member:

“The biggest challenge is the debate around the intent of correctional facilities—are they there to rehabilitate, confine, etc.? I feel many say they intend to rehabilitate, but in practice, this doesn’t align with what goes on.”

Another challenge was the duration of the project, which some interviewees felt was too short and others felt was too long. Some of this depended on the interviewee’s ability to actively contribute during the project, with some states having less direct stakeholder involvement. Those who thought it was too short shared that after five years they felt they were just getting off the ground. The relationships and trust required to do research and make change in prisons take a long time to build, so some felt they needed a longer project. Some respondents, however, wanted the project to be

shorter so people's expectations could be better managed and staff and administration turnover during the project could be reduced. One steering committee member expressed this sentiment:

"I get that change takes a while, but maybe if it were shorter and with less lofty aspirations about what can be achieved and rehabilitated, that would be better. Maybe focusing on things that are more manageable and less abstract I guess, because one of the problems with five years is that it wears down the facilities and, when there's turnover, that affects the continuity of the project."

Lastly, steering committee members, both researchers and corrections personnel, raised that they could have spent more time evaluating each survey metric independently to increase the surveys' validity and reliability and ensure they were rigorous and would collect accurate information. Some felt more confident than others in the instruments developed. Further, because of the slow progress making changes, researchers did not fully get a chance to document and evaluate the effectiveness of changes on intended outcomes the way they would have wanted to. This would have produced more meaningful information for corrections leaders making changes in their facilities and allowed for better course correction during implementation.

"So, once they are talking about culture, attitude, feeling of safety and security...it gets a lot more complicated from a measurement perspective. Having something that is a bit more standardized, that many jurisdictions can use and apply and is already being worked on and being developed and has some meaning attached to those, those constructs would probably be helpful."

—Steering committee member

Using the PRIM Position as a Project Champion

We learned through the process evaluation that having a strong project champion is key to PRIN's success. Each site identified a full-time prison research and innovation manager to be that champion and structured PRIN around them. In each site, the PRIM worked on-site in the pilot prison; developed key relationships and liaised with the research partner, facility and DOC leadership, incarcerated people, and corrections staff; and managed the daily operations associated with coordinating between research and corrections stakeholders and balancing their priorities. Generally, project stakeholders had positive views of and experiences with the PRIMs. The PRIM role differed between the sites, however, and the people fulfilling the role had different levels of success. In some sites, the PRIM was unable to serve as the project champion as the role was designed and other stakeholders served as the

project champion instead. Further, some interviewees expressed frustration with the PRIM's lack of clearly defined roles and responsibilities. One staff member expressed that they were "not sure anyone knows exactly what [the PRIM] does."

Still, many interviewees spoke about the success of their facility's PRIM, saying it was positive having a person in the facility to advocate on their behalf. Several incarcerated people said the PRIMs made them feel valued and that their voices mattered, with one sharing that this was the first time they had interacted with someone who wanted them to succeed. Another noted that their PRIM was the reason the project functioned. In some sites, the PRIMs were very active in the facilities, regularly visiting units to speak with incarcerated people and check in about their needs, which one person noted was unusual compared with past projects in their facility. Interviewees also shared that the PRIM served as a bridge between incarcerated people and staff and drove the implementation of changes in the prison. Of the PRIMs' roles, being accessible in the facilities and serving as liaisons between stakeholders seem to have been of the utmost importance. One incarcerated person explained how their PRIM was "able to fight for us and speak directly to leadership." Though there was sometimes a lack of clarity around the role, effective PRIMs were able to stay in contact with incarcerated people and advocate for change on their behalf. Some distinguishing factors of successful PRIMs were deep care about making evidence-based change, power and accountability to make change, daily on-site work in the prisons rather than from DOC central offices, familiarity with the prison system, and having the respect and trust of all stakeholder groups.

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

—Incarcerated person

In staff interviews, the success of the PRIM role and of certain PRIMs, whom staff effusively praised, was among the most common topics. One staff member who was initially skeptical of PRIM shared how they were "a very disgruntled employee," but that their PRIM "talked to me about PRIM and wanted my opinions. She convinced me to join it, and I haven't looked back since." This perception of PRIMs and project promoters was shared by several interviewees. As one staff member put it, the PRIM "is selling it, and we bought the Kool-Aid."

The PRIM was essential to success when they were the right person, but highly detrimental when they were not. In one site, the PRIM made promises they could not keep, blamed others on the steering committee when changes were not happening and downplayed the feelings of incarcerated council members when they raised concerns. Some interviewees were quite vocal about their

disapproval of one PRIM, whom they said was an overall impediment. This created a great deal of damage and harm and made the project far less successful than would otherwise have been the case.

“Without the right person, the work lacks an on-the-ground driver, a builder of trust and relationships, someone who can communicate at different levels within the organization.... The wrong traits are someone that is authoritative, someone who wasn’t able to listen to different perspectives...the person who thinks they know all the right answers. You need someone that comes in with an openness.”

—Steering committee member

Ultimately, as project champion, interviewees overwhelmingly noted the necessity of the PRIM being integrated in the facility, being able to liaise between stakeholders, building trust and relationships, and moving the project forward.

Recommendations

The Prison Research and Innovation Network project demonstrates that participatory research methods are possible in prison settings when designed and implemented intentionally. Deep involvement from incarcerated people, corrections staff, and facility leadership in each aspect of the research and change process gave voice to groups often overlooked or only nominally involved in that process. Their intentional involvement strengthened the quality of the research, ensuring that the right questions were asked and the interpretation of the results was informed by their direct experiences. Importantly though, the dynamics inherent in corrections environments limit participatory research methods compared with what is possible in the outside community. Researchers must be careful in how they adapt these methods to prison settings to avoid making false promises, intentionally or unintentionally.

Researchers seeking to use participatory research approaches in corrections settings should focus on getting buy-in from leadership, being flexible with participants, being transparent, and making projects sustainable so momentum and legitimacy can be maintained, especially in an environment with regular staff turnover and often distrustful participants. Based on lessons we learned from PRIN, we recommend that researchers interested in this work focus on the strategies below.

Continuously and iteratively secure buy-in from all levels of corrections agencies. Commissioners of DOCs, wardens, line staff, nonsecurity staff, and incarcerated people all need to buy in to a participatory research project in their facility **from the start**. Each has a vital role in bringing about culture change, so without their buy-in, change is far less likely. Though researchers may tend to focus more on securing buy-in from leadership, meaningfully engaging line staff is equally important to lasting success.

To mitigate the top-down approach typical in corrections, engage DOC and facility leadership as their own stakeholder groups with distinct priorities, needs, and motivations. Researchers can lean into increasing leadership's involvement by considering them a unique part of the community to engage and recognizing their expertise, elevating them as partners rather than potential barriers. Though this runs counter to the bottom-up nature of most participatory research approaches, in a hierarchical context like corrections, it is an adjustment that our experience suggests is important.

Be mindful of attitudes toward outsiders, us-versus-them mentalities, and zero-sum-game perspectives. Corrections staff are skeptical of outsiders, especially those who are in their facilities to work with incarcerated people. Researchers must acknowledge this skepticism and develop a strategy

to address it. Oftentimes, corrections staff and incarcerated people may perceive an improvement or change for one group as a setback for the other. For example, incarcerated people may view implementing contact visits between incarcerated parents and their children as beneficial, whereas corrections staff may view it as creating additional security risks and, if they are understaffed, requiring more unnecessary movement through their facility. On the other hand, corrections staff may perceive improvements to their staff lounge as beneficial for morale, whereas incarcerated people may see it as unnecessary when they are unable to access basic hygienic products. In a resource-scarce environment, this us-versus-them mentality is heightened, and populations can feel pitted against one another—that a benefit for one group will hurt the other. Researchers need to be aware of this perception and other facility dynamics going into corrections environments.

Identify an on-the-ground champion to drive the project forward, combat diffusion of responsibility, and navigate bureaucracy. Achieving change in prisons requires tenacity and a relentless drive to continue; without them, the work can easily fall through the cracks, especially when all involved have other priorities. The strongest champions will have a corrections background, have the respect and trust of staff and incarcerated people, be committed to facilitating the research-corrections partnership, and possess strong communication skills to connect and reconcile competing priorities. The right project champion will be a go-getter who is willing to personally see that tasks are completed in service of larger project goals.

Ensure the barrier for staff to participate is low. Corrections as a whole has faced an unprecedented crisis in staff recruitment and retention since the COVID-19 pandemic; in 2022, the number of people working for state prisons was at its lowest in over two decades.⁵ Researchers need to be mindful of this dynamic and recognize that staff participation will be challenging to secure. Designing surveys, conducting regular walkabouts to talk with staff on shift, and providing incentives can increase staff participation. In addition, because corrections environments often have coercion and pressures that community environments do not, and staff and incarcerated people may be hesitant to participate in research for fear of retaliation, researchers should take special consideration for their human-subjects' protections.

To reduce survey fatigue, consider using mixed methods and ensure perspectives are collected through different avenues. Survey fatigue can be felt by even the most dedicated participants. It is important to consider a number of techniques to reduce survey fatigue, such as alternating quantitative surveys and qualitative methods like interviews and focus groups, considering the length of a survey and only including questions that are necessary to fulfill the project's goals, and identifying

ways to reduce the burden of completing the survey (e.g., allowing people to complete it on their own time to allow for personal processing and breaks).

Prioritize small, immediate wins to build faith and make it easier to ask for participants' continued investment of time, resources, and hope. Even a small change can go a long way, and it's important to attribute change to projects, when possible, and publicize changes for maximum impact. When picking a high-impact, low-effort change, direct stakeholders must value the benefit, lest it be viewed as performative.

Engage with other agencies and pursue additional avenues for change. Departments of corrections are limited in their reach, their budgets are controlled by the state, and they typically do not control terms of sentencing or release. Existing vendor contracts often prevent rapid changes, even seemingly small ones. A connected body of state-level leaders, advocates, in-community service providers, and other legal system actors can be a powerful tool in lessening the burden on DOCs and bringing services and aid into prisons.

Expand community-engaged work in prison settings. The most common recommendation from participants was to expand PRIN to other states, facilities, and collaborators. As one incarcerated interviewee explained, now that they had started to see progress at their pilot prison, they “would like to see this be pretty much statewide for everybody to have opportunity to have something better to do than chasing the yard, playing ball, watching TV.” Recommendations for expansion included pilot prisons gathering data from other facilities to compare results, learning about other initiatives under way at other prisons, more frequently collaborating with other prisons or relevant legislative bodies, examining systems-level problems and solutions, and empowering DOC research departments to use the data collected through PRIN on a larger scale. Increasing the size and scope of initiatives like PRIN must also involve efforts to maintain clearly defined goals, roles, and measurement.

There is motivation to work on prison conditions and to improve the experiences and outcomes of corrections officers and incarcerated people. Poor living and working conditions are partly to blame for the workforce crisis in corrections. Corrections practitioners and researchers should harness this energy and continue to make incremental but long-lasting, meaningful change.

Discussion and Limitations

COVID-19 and the severe staffing shortage in corrections affected the scope and duration of the Prison Research and Innovation Network project. With the pandemic affecting almost every element of life and work in prison, its role in the project's outcomes cannot be measured or disentangled. Furthermore, when practices were in place to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and the pandemic became less acute, facilities resumed much of their programming and other prepandemic norms. These "return-to-baseline" practices made identifying specific effects of the project nearly impossible, since it was unclear whether changes reflected actual innovation or simply a return to prepandemic practices.

More fundamentally, hierarchical prison environments present challenges to taking a bottom-up research approach, and interviewees shared that the rules and regulations inherent in a prison setting prevent participatory research or even collaboration. Some respondents mentioned that they were unable to use participatory methods to their full potential because of the prison environment and because the COVID-19 pandemic prevented in-person gatherings and barred researchers from entering facilities. During this time, it was especially challenging to keep stakeholders engaged because even sharing project updates with committee members required going through multiple people.

Funding constraints, understaffing, and systemic and structural factors affecting the corrections system further complicated the implementation and potential success of a participatory research approach in a corrections setting. Whole stakeholder groups were not engaged as effectively as imagined: the corrections staffing shortage severely affected the ability and willingness of the corrections staff, particularly security staff, to participate; conversely, executive committee members largely remained peripheral to the project despite their willingness to engage.

While interviewees cited Urban as a key partner, some felt hindered by a lack of clear expectations and standardized training in participatory methods. Some sites wanted Urban to be more prescriptive while others felt that Urban was overbearing. These different site contexts, facility climates, and resulting site personalities allowed this project to result in a range of experiences all guided by the same participatory research values. This report is an attempt to compile these varying experiences.

Conclusion

Across the Prison Research and Innovation Network sites, incarcerated people's and staff members' participation in survey development, data interpretation, and innovation development enabled them to trust the project and buy in, which in turn enabled the project to gain traction. Intangible culture changes, such as bridging communication gaps between staff and incarcerated people and developing an environment of examining and questioning the status quo, were the most cited successes of this project, even more so than the innovations themselves.

Challenges included staff resistance and low participation owing to operational demands and distrust of outsiders. COVID-19 pandemic restrictions hindered in-person meetings and programming, forcing adaptations such as virtual interviews and walkabouts, which had mixed success. Some staff concerns, like pay and union issues, were outside the scope of the project, causing frustration and disengagement. Balancing realistic expectations about achievable change within rigid corrections systems proved difficult, sometimes leading to false hope among participants. In many cases, steering committee members' dedication and their showing up intentionally overcame these challenges. Meeting potential participants where they were and reducing barriers to participation were two primary tactics used to increase engagement amid limited staff time and bandwidth. Demonstrating genuine care and consistency, steering committee members energized and empowered incarcerated people, corrections staff, and facility leadership to engage in all aspects of the PRIN process.

Hierarchical corrections environments can limit participatory research methods, so researchers must be careful about how they adapt these methods to these environments to sow agency and empower participants, keeping in mind that the direct stakeholders are taking a risk by investing their time and energy in participatory prison research projects. In PRIN, the most effective sites had strong leadership support, flexible engagement strategies beyond formal committees, and genuine incorporation of participant voices into decisionmaking and innovation implementation. With these feedback systems in place, DOCs and facilities benefited from the commitment of stakeholders at all levels to change and to knowing when things were working and when they could be improved.

The PRIN project, and the work of all those involved, demonstrated that participatory research methods are possible in prison settings when designed and implemented intentionally. Participatory engagement in each aspect of the research and change process gave voice to incarcerated people, corrections staff, and facility leadership—and leveled the playing field in the process. Participants felt

that with their involvement, the quality of the research was high, the right questions were asked, and the interpretation of the results was true to their direct experiences living and working in the facilities.

From this project, we learned about the potential for transparency and change inside prisons as well as about the factors that facilitate and limit efforts in a corrections environment. Even with the necessary support of stakeholders at multiple levels at the outset of the project, change was hard to make. Departments of corrections are primarily motivated, and judged, by immediate risk reduction. Institutional structures in the PRIN DOCs disincentivized decisions based on theoretical future rewards. This is further compounded by DOCs' resistance to change, and the mechanisms to incentivize change in this project were not stronger than the status quo. But in this, researchers showing corrections professionals grace as they move toward change and transparency can go a long way. Researchers acknowledging that corrections systems are understaffed, overburdened, and have faced chronic disinvestment can pave the way to lasting partnership. Researchers who can learn to work with the system are more equipped to challenge it to be better.

Notes

- ¹ USAFacts Team, “How much do states spend on prisoners?,” USAFacts, last updated April 17, 2024, <https://usafacts.org/articles/how-much-do-states-spend-on-prisons/>.
- ² Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) Profiles,” May 2024: 33-3012 Correctional Officer and Jailers, <https://data.bls.gov/oesprofile/>.
- ³ One site finished its project in March 2024, while the remaining four sites finished their projects in December 2024.
- ⁴ Eli A. Wolff and Mary Hums, “‘Nothing About Us Without Us’ — Mantra for a Movement,” HuffPost, September 5, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/nothing-about-us-without-us-mantra-for-a-movement_b_59aea450e4b0c50640cd61cf.
- ⁵ Shannon Heffernan and Weihua Li, “New Data Shows How Dire the Prison Staffing Shortage Really Is,” The Marshall Project, January 10, 2024, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2024/01/10/prison-correctional-officer-shortage-overtime-data>.

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