



Participatory Research in Prisons

Lauren Farrell, Bethany Young, and Janeen Buck Willison
URBAN INSTITUTE

with

Michelle Fine
THE GRADUATE CENTER
OF THE CITY UNIVERSITY
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Although prisons are among the largest public institutions in the United States, research on life inside them is distinctly absent. What public knowledge exists about people who are incarcerated in prisons and those who work in them comes from the media, human rights groups, personal activism, and correctional data; people’s lived experiences in prisons, however, are broadly concealed. Consequently, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers remain disturbingly unaware of the conditions that millions of people who are held in these institutions experience and of their ideas for improving the system.

To accurately and effectively address this gap, we turn to participatory methods, a framework rooted in an ethics of “*nothing about us without us*,” whereby research is created with and for the people most directly affected by the conditions being studied.¹ Together with the people experiencing or living the circumstances being researched, researchers work to define, explore, and examine social conditions from the ground up (Fine 2013; Huffman 2017).

BOX 1

The Prison Research and Innovation Initiative

This brief is part of a larger research agenda for the [Prison Research and Innovation Initiative](#), a five-year effort to leverage research and evidence to shine a much-needed light on prison conditions and pilot strategies to promote the well-being of people who live and work behind bars. The forthcoming research agenda aims to change the national narrative on corrections so that it embodies data-driven transformative innovations for reform and inclusive research approaches to build transparency and accountability for safer and more humane environments for people confined and working in them. This living document covers several topics ranging from prison climate to redemption and desistance, and will be updated regularly to remain relevant to discourse occurring around us.

In the prison setting, participatory research acknowledges that people who are confined and working in prisons have a distinct and critical understanding of how prisons operate, of the adverse impacts of prison life, and of interventions that could mitigate those impacts. A participatory approach treats such people as experts and invites them to become coresearchers who are central to each phase of research, from identifying key research questions, defining outcomes, and collecting and analyzing data, to informing and organizing around solutions.

In participatory research projects, researchers spend time

- building relationships with participants,
- teaching and developing a shared understanding of research methodology and ethics, and
- empowering participants to understand their situation as structural and consider how to act on that knowledge.

Although participatory research is central to empowerment and truth-finding, it may not be possible to ethically and responsibly implement a truly participatory approach in a prison. Therefore, researchers must determine how best to involve people who are confined and working in prison facilities throughout the research process in a manner that minimizes potential harm to them. In light of these considerations, this brief describes the key elements of a participatory approach, explores its utility in past prison research, and identifies opportunities for using it in future research on and in correctional settings.

Problem Statement

Prison researchers, advocates, and administrators lack data initiated by and inclusive of the voices of people who experience prison directly (Chandler 2003; Hatton and Fisher 2011). Silencing these voices by excluding them from research is one way prison systems are kept closed and impervious to change (Reiter 2014). Researchers seeking to open closed institutions such as prisons and drive change in

correctional systems must prioritize the experiences and insights of people who are incarcerated, their family members, medical and legal staff, and advocates.²

In addition to being a powerful means of collecting and analyzing data, participatory methodologies can build trust with and empower communities that have traditionally been exploited or excluded by scientific inquiry. Participatory research includes people more meaningfully than simply “doing no harm” (Dupont 2008; Reiter 2014). By empowering people to analyze their circumstances as part of a power structure and giving them the tools to participate in research, participatory methods can help people with shared circumstances collaborate, forge new relationships, and organize for common goals (Camarota and Fine 2008; Israel et al. 2017). For these reasons, participatory research is useful for capturing grounded, detailed portraits of the lives of people inside prisons, and for creating actionable plans they can use to introduce change (Appadurai 2006; Fine et al. 2003).

Participatory Research

The Why

Research has the power to change the way people think about a topic, legislate around it, and orient toward it, be it as allies or as far removed from research subjects and potential solutions. Historically, clear boundaries have separated researchers with exclusive access to scientific inquiry from research subjects with limited access to research and the tools for conducting it (Fine and Torre 2006; Israel et al. 2017; Stoudt and Torre 2014). Academic researchers gain access to subjects and are rewarded with promotion, awards, book deals, and institutional power; however, it is unclear what subjects gain from participating in research (Dupont 2008). For these reasons, a profound power imbalance exists between people who conduct research and people whose lives *are* the focus of research, and traditional research methodologies can reify that imbalance.

Intertwined with these power dynamics are the legacies of racism and capitalism, which have marginalized the experiences and expertise of people of color. Moreover, researchers have committed abuses that have damaged marginalized communities and fostered doubt about scientific research as a tool for positive change (examples include the case of Henrietta Lacks, [medical experiments during the Holocaust](#), the [Baltimore lead study](#), and [Puerto Rican sterilization \[Presser 1969\]](#)).³ This history has had a lasting impact on whether Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color can access inquiry as researchers or whether their access is limited as research subjects (Fine and Torre 2006; Israel et al. 2017; Stoudt and Torre 2014). Because it is rooted in the wisdom and perspectives of people most affected by the conditions being researched, participatory research is one way we can begin restoring trust in researchers and research as vehicles for improving people’s lives.

The What

Participatory research is not a specific methodology but an approach to research built on an ethos of “nothing about us, without us” (Charlton 2000). It values participants as experts on their communities

who partner with a research team and codevelop a study (Stoudt and Torre 2014). The process recognizes that methodology can influence outcomes and that incorporating people’s direct experience strengthens a study’s results and value (Sherwood and Kendall 2013).

Participatory research is rooted in three key principles: **power sharing**, **empowered participation**, and **action** (Pant 2014; Minkler et al. 2012). Throughout this section, we call people who would traditionally be participants “coresearchers” in alignment with the respect they deserve and the position they assume in participatory research.

Power sharing requires that traditional researchers acknowledge their privilege and collaborate with participants by ceding control to them. Guiding values of power sharing include the following:

- Researchers share decisionmaking power during each step of research. This includes collaborating with coresearchers to determine the research agenda, methods of data collection, analysis, reflection, and research outcomes.
- Researchers must also recognize the inherent inequalities between researchers and coresearchers without traditional training, and address these inequalities by
 - » considering their own identities and decentering themselves as the primary community of knowledge (Huffman 2017),
 - » building trust and mutually respectful relationships grounded in a strengths-based process (Sherwood 2010; Sherwood and Kendall 2013), and
 - » emphasizing communication, information sharing, and joint decisionmaking.

Empowered participation requires that, in addition to simply bringing people experiencing the system or phenomena being studied to the table, researchers must also create a collaborative, equitable partnership with coresearchers in every research phase. Guiding values for empowered participation include the following:

- Institutional researchers must share knowledge about research processes to empower coresearchers to gain the skills and confidence to participate in decisionmaking (Minkler et al. 2003).
- Researchers must debrief coresearchers at each stage and ensure the research plan is responsive to their ideas and knowledge.
- Researchers recognize that people are experts on their own experiences with important insider information typically unavailable to researchers (Fine 2013).

Action—that is, organizing for systematic change—is the goal of participatory research. Action-oriented research can illuminate effective practices and reveal opportunities for changing ineffective systems; produce compelling data supporting organizational advocacy; and, as it unfolds, organize people with a common goal and strategy for reform (Huffman 2017; Minkler et al. 2012; Reason and Bradbury 2006). Guiding values of action-oriented research include the following:

- Researchers and coresearchers identify the most effective and widely beneficial change (Huffman 2017; Minkler et al. 2012).
- They also build mechanisms for sustainability so the community in question can continue working toward solutions after a study concludes.
- Researchers and coresearchers facilitate change that the community being studied directs and finds useful.

Researchers using a participatory approach should continuously align their decisions with these three principles.

Types of Participatory Research

In this section, we outline four of the many types of participatory research.

Action research is based on the belief that research should catalyze change (Lewin 1946). It is the basis for and a key component of many other types of participatory-based methodologies. Action research entails unpacking social conditions and using findings to impact those conditions. This approach entails sharing all research findings with participants to empower them to create practical solutions they can advocate for and implement. (For additional reading, see Lewin 1946.)

Participatory action research (PAR) combines research and action through an iterative process of planning, action, and reflection (Freire 1970; Pant 2014; Swantz 2008). Research teams include participants as coresearchers by focusing on learning “for and with—not only about— ... people who might otherwise be only the objects of study” (Fields et al. 2008, 3). PAR teams build knowledge through joint inquiry to democratize research, create sustainable solutions, and empower community members to organize for change (Sullivan, Hassal, and Rowlands 2008). (For additional reading, see Freire 1970 and Swantz 2008.)

Street participatory action research, created by social psychologist and street ethnographer Yasser Payne, is an offshoot of PAR that “explicitly organizes low-income persons, active in or closely identified with *the streets* and criminal justice system” to critically examine the lived experiences of “people of color primarily in local street communities, schools, and correctional facilities” (Payne 2017; Payne and Brown 2016, 796). It acknowledges that people who have been involved with “the streets” are the best positioned to understand individual and structural experiences in their neighborhoods (Payne and Bryant 2018, 453). Street PAR is designed to fully educate participants in research and theory to empower them and provide them with employment and education opportunities after the research (Payne and Bryant 2018, 452).⁴ (For additional reading on street PAR, see Payne 2017).

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is grounded in the needs, knowledge, and advocacy of communities. Because it is participatory, community members are key partners who collaborate with researchers to design questions and answer them together (McCracken 2019; Minkler et al. 2012). The key difference between it and PAR is that community-based participatory research is

community based, whereas PAR is situation and experience based and emphasizes cycles of action as a core research component.

The Importance of Participatory Research in Prison

To comprehend a system, we must understand its roots, actors, and beneficiaries, as well as who it burdens or disadvantages. Extensive information exists about incarceration's [roots](#), [actors](#) (Arabella Advisors 2018), and [beneficiaries](#);⁵ however, the people confined and employed in prisons rarely create the information that exists about them. Participatory methods offer an alternative approach for addressing this gap.

People in prison understand what daily life is like there, have practical solutions to correctional problems, and are essential to transforming the prison system (LIFERS 2004; Ross, Zaldivar, and Tewksbury 2015; Ward and Bailey 2013; see also Lynn Novick's film series *College Behind Bars*). For example, following the Attica Prison rebellion, men in Green Haven Correctional Facility in Stormville, New York, formed the Think Tank, a group intended to help people in the prison prepare to face parole boards and transition back into society. By 1979, it had published the Seven Neighborhoods Study, which revealed that more than 75 percent of New York City's Black and Latinx prison population came from seven neighborhoods (see a [history](#) of the study and a [report](#) revisiting it from the Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions, and see [this New York Times article on the study](#)).⁶ Moreover, Ward and Bailey (2013) involved women confined in prison as coresearchers in a study on self-harm in their prison. The women were critical of existing care and presented initiatives to incorporate a more holistic approach to their health and the health of correctional officers. Emerging findings suggest that such cocreated initiatives improve communication between correctional staff and people in prison and help people in prison manage self-harm more proactively.

Participatory research can also empower correctional staff and people who are incarcerated to use their experiences and knowledge to initiate change. As participants who were incarcerated and coauthored a report with outside researchers explained,

Few outside people will understand the deadening effect of occupational deprivation, an effect the prisoners feel even when he or she is aware of it for years and fights against it. To our surprise, we realized that somewhere amid our enthusiasm during the research project, PAR had become occupational enrichment for us. Not only was the research for a good cause...but it was also doing us good as well. (Crabtree, Wall, and Ohm 2016, 251)

Research Conducted with People Who Are Incarcerated

Enabling people in prison to participate in research design (including defining measurements and collecting data) can enhance findings and yield positive change by making reforms more accurate, credible, and useful. Asking people to participate in the creation of research about their lives empowers them to invest in the work in a way that increases response rates and strengthens and validates research findings. To ensure these partnerships benefit everyone involved, researchers should pay coresearchers or their families, make the work accountable to an external advisory board of previously

incarcerated people, ensure publications credit everyone by name or pseudonym, and provide opportunities for dissenting perspectives when the project ends. This section outlines examples of participatory research conducted with people who are or were incarcerated.

Fields, Hentz, González, Rhee, and White (2008) initiated a PAR project to understand the concerns of women who are incarcerated about HIV, race, and sexuality in prison.⁷ They convened researchers, community-based health educators, and women who were incarcerated in workshops to learn about HIV prevention and how to conduct interviews and analyze qualitative data. Through these workshops, incarcerated women became researchers, created content for future workshops, and examined their relationships and identities in relation to broader systems. One of this project's many outcomes was that a group of participants presented their findings to the facility's health services to improve access to and quality of the facility's medical services.

Using PAR, **O'Gorman, Martin, Oliffe, Leggo, Korchinski, and Martin (2012)** and **Martin, Murphy, Hemingway, Ramsden, Buxton, Granger-Brown, Condello, Buchanan, Espinoza-Magana, Edworthy, and Hislop (2009)** worked with incarcerated participants to study the health goals of people confined in their prisons. The incarcerated partners worked alongside outside researchers to develop surveys for the prison's incarcerated population, conduct interviews, and hold focus groups. The incarcerated coresearchers offered invaluable insight that the studies would otherwise have missed. They also had a more accurate and comprehensive view of the health of people who are incarcerated than the outside researchers, and their perspective grounded and validated the study's findings.

Fine, Torre, Boudin, Bowen, Clark, Hylton, Martinez, Missy, Rivera, Roberts, Smart, and Upegui (2003) studied higher education programs in prison. A team of outside researchers and incarcerated coresearchers worked side by side for several years to design and implement a study inside Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. Together, they created an extensive and meaningful list of outcomes to measure. Beyond using common metrics like recidivism and tax savings, the study also measured (at the suggestion of incarcerated coresearchers) peace in the prison, women's parenting skills, women's health care behaviors, and the array of programs women in the prison initiated. These additional metrics enabled careful and meaningful policy analyses of the impacts of higher education in prison.

Using a different model, **Black and Pink**—an abolitionist organization aiming to free people from incarceration that distributes a monthly newsletter to LGBTQ people who are incarcerated—asked its members in prison to help create a survey to understand what LGBTQ people were experiencing in prison. It received survey questions from members and the final survey was distributed through its newsletter. More than 1,200 people in prison responded to the survey, and the findings were printed in a newsletter for all members and included space for responses and reflection. Those reflections were added to **Lydon, Carrington, Low, Miller, and Yazdy's** 2015 report. The survey uncovered information including demographics, arrest and incarceration, sentencing, sexual health and safety, solitary confinement, health care, and people's needs and demands in prison.

Research Conducted with Correctional Officers

Correctional officers hold substantial power. This section outlines several projects where researchers worked with staff to establish unmet needs, implement interventions, receive insight from staff, and collaborate on ways to change their prisons.

Baldwin, Harvey, Wood, Bloice, and Willis (2019) evaluated a program that promotes positive pregnancy and birth experiences for pregnant women in prison and quickly realized they needed the support of the correctional officers, who would be implementing any changes resulting from the evaluation. Collaborating with officers, outside researchers found that despite public perceptions (and their own), the “COs [correctional officers] were not anti-prisoner, and may well embrace the opportunity to actively participate in making the system better” (Baldwin et al. 2019, 10).

Cherniack, Berger, Namazi, Henning, Punnett, and the CPH-NEW Research Team (2019) and **Dugan, Farr, Namazi, Henning, Wallace, El Ghaziri, Punnett, Dussetschleger, and Cherniack (2016)** used PAR to address correctional officers’ health issues and design interventions to solve them. To understand what health issues to focus on, the outside researchers conducted employee focus groups and short surveys to solicit concerns and opportunities for change. Through an iterative cycle of discussions, staff and outside researchers established several areas of concern. Then, participants created smaller design teams so each facility could choose a topic to address. Throughout the project, the state department of corrections, frontline staff, and outside researchers shared bidirectional ownership and review of each phase. Each idea was rooted and designed from the bottom up, with final approval and consensus from the commissioner of the department of corrections, union leadership, correctional officers, and facility administrators (Cherniack et al. 2019). Successful projects were those where correctional officer autonomy, innovation, and creativity were matched by supervisor direction, approval, and funding (Dugan et al. 2016).

Though we do not accept that people who are incarcerated and correctional staff share similar, homogeneous, or equivalent perspectives, we believe that if researchers play a role in transforming prisons, they must recognize both groups as research partners with unique expertise rather than merely as research subjects.⁸ Participatory research is an opportunity to hear from people inside prisons and offer them a platform and the agency to use research to improve prison conditions and their personal circumstances (Fine 2013; Reiter 2014; Ward and Bailey 2013).

Opportunities to Develop Knowledge and Innovate

Although the number of participatory prison research projects is growing, opportunities remain to develop knowledge and expand these methods in correctional research. Most participatory research studies in correctional facilities focus on health and safety, and most of these occur in women’s prisons. To shed light on confinement conditions and prison cultures, research must include the voices of everyone in prison and prioritize their humanity and well-being. This means it must expand participation to people with physical and mental disabilities, medical and legal staff, and caseworkers. It must also cover other topics that people in prison design and define. Expanding research in this way could unearth

the realities of daily life in prison, surface solutions to incarceration, and provide participants greater ownership over their lives (Reiter 2014; Ward and Bailey 2013).

Furthermore, participatory researchers have used various methods to build research with participants and incorporate their experience and knowledge, but new strategies will continue to emerge. The type of correctional facility, its rules, and the relationships researchers can form with people confined and working there determine what strategies are appropriate. What works for some studies may not work for others, and the outside research team is responsible for learning about the facility and creating a strategy to include as many voices and perspectives as possible while keeping people who are incarcerated safe. Moreover, researchers have conducted few participatory studies with correctional staff; such studies are important, and can give staff ownership over changes that benefit their facilities. In addition, researchers can and should work with people formerly incarcerated at the facility to determine how risky a study is for people incarcerated there and how to mitigate those risks. They should also work with current or former staff there to determine the best methods for conducting confidential and empowering research.

Limitations and Other Considerations

Prison research raises several ethical and practical challenges that participatory research exacerbates and mitigates. This section describes some the challenges related to the three key principles of participatory research.

Sharing Power

Sharing and, ideally, equalizing power during research—the principle that underpins participatory research—is at odds with the nature of confinement. Even PAR projects in nonprison environments involve uneven power relations that “make collaborative and egalitarian relationships difficult,” and establishing such relationships in prison may be impossible (Fields et al. 2008, 8). Other researchers attempting participatory prison research have explained its limitations in coercive prison environments (Drake 2014; Hentz 2008; Minkler et al. 2003). However, these researchers also argue that the participatory process can benefit participants if outside researchers do the following:

- commit to communication and transparency
- allow participants to collaborate, reflect, and discuss at each point in the process (Lewin 1946; McTaggart 1997)
- offer training and research sessions to equip coresearchers with the skills necessary for meaningful participation (Minkler et al. 2003)

Empowered Participation

Participation is at odds with the prison environment, where coresearchers lack privacy, are not always treated with dignity, and are at risk of retaliation or punishment. People may be unable to fully

participate in the research even when outside researchers follow protocols for gaining access to prisons, adhere to federal guidelines for vulnerable research subjects (and mitigate issues of consent, coercion, and fear of retribution), and avoid interfering with prison safety regulations. It is therefore important that research teams work with people who have been incarcerated in the facilities they are studying to learn about the facilities and their power dynamics. Moreover, participants must understand that participating in research always involves risk.

Action

Research may disrupt a prison's normal operations and, if done well, it will require changes in procedure (Byrne 2005). Furthermore, prison regulations will limit or alter research plans. This is unavoidable. Partnering with decisionmakers in the prison, discussing the goal of using findings to change their facility, and incorporating their concerns and ideas during research may ease this tension (Huffman 2017; Israel et al. 2017). Adhering to the key principles of participatory research and ensuring that outside researchers, coresearchers, and prison stakeholders communicate, adapt to changes, collaborate, and share the goal of positive change may make research and subsequent action smoother for everyone (Huffman 2017).

Lastly, research involving people who are incarcerated necessitates special consideration and protections. Although making participation voluntary and getting informed consent are key, correctional settings make these more complex. For example, federal regulations specify seven conditions that must be satisfied during research with people who are incarcerated, and each condition addresses a key tenet of research ethics regarding respect for persons (e.g., the opportunity to choose what shall or shall not happen to them, consent, risk, benefits, and coercion). In addition to being attentive to these protections, researchers using participatory methods in prisons should create specific provisions to mitigate risk and maximize benefits for people who are incarcerated.

Although participatory methods “right-size” the power imbalance inherent in research involving historically disenfranchised or targeted populations, the dynamics in correctional settings make choice and agency there extremely limited. Because participating in research gives people authority (perceived and real), participatory research may unintentionally exacerbate power imbalances between correctional staff and people who are incarcerated, as well as between inside researchers and their peers. Researchers using these methods in correctional settings must thoughtfully contend with how to authentically and meaningfully engage people as equal partners in the research process while ensuring that people are adequately protected against coercion and retribution, that the integrity of the research is maintained, and that information collected remains confidential. It is vital that researchers be trained on research ethics and protection of human subjects, but it may not be wholly sufficient. As such, outside researchers and coresearchers must develop practical safeguards that protect against coercion, elevate respect and autonomy for people incarcerated and working in prison, and maintain people's integrity and confidentiality without creating undue barriers to genuine partnership or exacerbating already fraught power dynamics.

Conclusion

Participatory research is a dynamic and collaborative approach to partnering with people at the center of research. Participatory approaches can make research empowering and directly useful to research participants and their communities. This brief has discussed the possibilities of a participatory approach in prison settings where outside researchers work collaboratively with people who are confined in prisons and people who work in them to accurately and effectively define, explore, and examine prison conditions, and to create grounded, actionable plans for change (Appadurai 2006). How to create valid research with people who are confined and fear retaliation remains a compelling question, and work remains to be done to answer it. However, if researchers do not incorporate the voices of people in prison and their ideas for alternatives, prisons will remain closed and impenetrable to change.

Additional Reading

See the works that follow for additional information and studies of participatory research in and out of prison settings.

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Notes

¹ Eli A. Wolff and Mary Hums, "Nothing About Us Without Us—Mantra for a Movement," *Huffington Post*, September 5, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/nothing-about-us-without-us-mantra-for-a-movement_b_59aea450e4b0c50640cd61cf.

² See Dupont (2008), Fine (2013), Fine and coauthors (2003), Hatton and Fisher (2011), Reiter (2014), and Israel and coauthors (2017).

- 3 “Trust in Medical Research: The Legacy of Henrietta Lacks, Part 1,” *Science* 37, April 13, 2018, <https://www.science37.com/blog/medical-research-trust-and-henrietta-lacks/>; “Medical Experiments,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed April 10, 2020, <https://www.ushmm.org/collections/bibliography/medical-experiments>; “The Baltimore Lead Study,” Moyers on Democracy, May 17, 2013, <https://billmoyers.com/segment/the-baltimore-study/>.
- 4 “The People’s Report,” accessed March 16, 2021, <http://www.thepeoplesreport.com/>.
- 5 Shane Bauer, “The Origins of Prison Slavery,” *Slate*, October 2, 2018, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2018/10/origin-prison-slavery-shane-bauer-american-prison-excerpt.html>; Peter Wagner and Bernadette Rabuy, “Following the Money of Mass Incarceration,” Policy Prison Initiative, January 25, 2017, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/money.html>.
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- 7 We have chosen to include full authorship throughout this section to highlight the contributions of all authors.
- 8 See Ward and Bailey (2013) for an example of PAR with correctional staff and people who are incarcerated in parallel research processes.

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About the Authors

Lauren Farrell is a policy assistant in the Urban Institute's Justice Policy Center and supports the Urban Institute's DC research initiatives. Her research is focused on evaluations of sexual assault case processing, community engagement, and innovative solutions in areas of sexual health and safety programming for young people. She is developing a skillset in participatory/community engaged methods and chairs the community engaged methods users' group at Urban.

Bethany Young is a policy associate in the Justice Policy Center. She recently completed a PhD in Sociology from Duke University and a JD from George Washington University. Her research has focused on educational experiences, discrimination experiences, student outcomes, and well-being for Black girls and women. Before graduate school, she served as an attorney at the Equal Justice Initiative and at the Center for Death Penalty Litigation. Her work focused on capital appeals with an aim to have policymakers reconsider the death penalty, and on projects seeking change in the Alabama Department

of Corrections (specifically related to housing children in adult prisons and physical and sexual assault experiences in prisons).

Janeen Buck Willison is a senior fellow in the Justice Policy Center and has more than 15 years of experience managing and directing multisite studies of youth and adult offender populations. Her work includes evaluations for the federal government and private foundations focused on specialized courts, prisoner reentry, juvenile justice reform, delinquency prevention, mental health interventions for offenders, faith-based reentry programs, evidence-based practice, and systems change.

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