

# The relevance of human flourishing to offender rehabilitation

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## Sung Joon Jang and Byron R. Johnson, both from Baylor University, turn the spotlight on the relevance of human flourishing to offender rehabilitation in Colombia and South Africa

Humans are born with fundamental needs for survival (e.g., food, clothing, and shelter) and flourishing, which concerns happiness and life satisfaction, physical and mental health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close social relationships (VanderWeele, 2017). Survival needs are essential to human existence, but flourishing needs are not meant to be secondary or less important.

While the sustenance of life is necessary for human flourishing, both types of innate needs should be seen as primary concerns from a holistic point of view. This is evident because even when physical and material needs are fully met, people may still decline mentally or relationally. They may experience “diseases of excess” or “deaths of despair” (Clifton, 2022).

### Human flourishing and offender rehabilitation

From a human flourishing perspective, crime indicates human decline or failure. That is, although some steal and hurt other people to meet their survival needs, criminological theories tend to attribute crime to human failures in social relationships (e.g., pro-criminal associations and the absence or weakness of social bonds) and mental health (e.g., negative emotions) as well as a criminogenic event or condition (i.e., strain).

While these theories have primarily overlooked other aspects of human flourishing, a model of offender rehabilitation, the “Good Lives Model,” posits that helping offenders achieve “primary human goods,” such as “autonomy” and “spirituality” (“the desire to discover and attain a sense of purpose and meaning in life”) may enable them to flourish and experience rehabilitation (Ward, 2010:48).

### A quasi-experimental study in the United States

Conceptualizing offender rehabilitation in terms of the following flourishing goals: <sup>(1)</sup> autonomy (identity transformation), <sup>(2)</sup> spirituality (a sense of meaning and purpose in life), and <sup>(3)</sup> character (virtue development); we examined whether a faith-based program contributed to rehabilitation among male prisoners in Texas. In sum, we found program participation increased prisoner religiosity, which was positively related to an increase in:

1. Cognitive and emotional identity transformations and a motivation for self-change.
2. Perceived presence of meaning in life.

3. The virtues of self-control, compassion, gratitude, accountability, and forgiveness.

We also found an increase in some of these indicators of offender rehabilitation to be related to the lowering of negative emotions (state depression and anxiety) and reduced risk of interpersonal aggression among prisoners (Jang & Johnson, 2022).

## **A replication in Colombia and South Africa**

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To replicate and extend this research, we conducted another quasi-experimental study of 861 offenders (691 males and 170 females) housed at two prisons in Colombia (424 males) and five correctional centers in South Africa (267 males and 170 females) between February 2018 and November 2019 (Jang et al., 2023).

The total sample consisted of 524 offenders who participated in a faith-based program (experimental group) and 337 who did not participate (control group). A total of 506 (357 males and 149 females) completed a pre-test and post-test survey. We analyzed the longitudinal data, applying manifest-variable structural equation modeling.

First, we found that the experimental group reported increased religious involvement after the program participation compared to the control group.

Second, this enhanced religiosity was positively related to increased motivation for self-change (but not cognitive and emotional identity transformations), perceived presence of meaning in life, and the virtues of self-control, accountability, and forgiveness (but not compassion and gratitude). A qualitative study further confirmed the program's influence on responsibility-taking (i.e., accountability) (Anderson et al., 2023).

Third, changes in some of these offender rehabilitation indicators were inversely related to changes in negative emotions (state of anger and frustration as well as depression and anxiety) and the risk of interpersonal aggression. Specifically, increasing a sense of meaning in life and self-control decreased negative emotions, whereas fostering accountability and forgiveness reduced the risk of aggression toward other prisoners.

## **Conclusion and implication**

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While caution is warranted in interpreting our findings given the lack of randomness in research design and sampling, the initial research in the U.S. was generally replicated by a study conducted in two non-western countries. Overall results indicate the relevance of human flourishing to offender rehabilitation.

Moreover, these findings provide preliminary evidence of how religion and faith-based programs may contribute to prisoner reform in a manner that transcends gender and cultural differences.

## **References**

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