

# Student Mentors of Incarcerated Persons: Contribution of a Mentoring Program for Incarcerated Persons

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Uri Timor<sup>1</sup>, Ronit Peled-Laskov<sup>2</sup>, and Ety Golan<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

This study evaluates the impact of a student program for mentoring incarcerated persons. Mentoring has multiple goals for both incarcerated persons and mentors; this article focuses on its contributions to incarcerated persons. The program encourages incarcerated persons to think positively and constructively, apply anger management, and learn about the normative society they will enter. Twenty-one incarcerated persons participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews in this qualitative research. The findings show that the students eventually became significant others for the incarcerated persons, most of whom reported on forming excellent relations with the students, and learning to act more deliberately and less violently due to the students. They also described reducing their self-absorption, expanding their horizons, and better understanding their criminal choices. Some mentioned acquiring more structured worldviews and improving their behavior. The findings point to significant benefits gained from the incarcerated person–student interaction in the mentoring framework, and the importance of expanding the program.

## Keywords

prisoners, mentoring program, students mentors, rehabilitation

<sup>1</sup>Department of Criminology, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel

<sup>2</sup>Department of Criminology, Ashkelon Academic College, Israel

## Corresponding Author:

Dr. Ronit Peled-Laskov, Senior Lecturer, Department of Criminology, Ashkelon Academic College, Ben Tzvi 12, Ashkelon, 78211, Israel.

Email: [peleronit@gmail.com](mailto:peleronit@gmail.com)

They do not regard you as a prisoner, but as an equal. They believe in you, and you want to improve.

—Interviewee 19, Eshel Prison

## **Introduction**

There has been a significant expansion of personal mentoring programs for youth and adults with behavioral problems, including those exhibiting criminal and violent behavior over the past 20 years (e.g., Brown & Ross, 2010; Buck, 2019; DuBois & Karcher, 2005; Nixon, 2020). Research studies examining the effect of mentoring on the perceptions and behavior of the mentees found that there was generally a considerable positive impact when the program was well-organized, conducted in a consistent manner, and closely guided (e.g., Laniado & Timor, 2015; Tolan et al., 2013). Concomitantly, the mentors derived a wide range of benefits from their activities with the mentees (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012; Kennett & Lomas, 2015).

Bar-Ilan University and Ashkelon Academic College have been engaged in a mentoring program for male incarcerated persons in six prisons, three in the center and three in the south of Israel for about 30 years. Approximately 40 male and female criminology students in the final year of their bachelor's degree studies visit prisons once a week throughout the academic year to act as mentors to incarcerated persons (approximately 150 incarcerated persons every year). They are trained to serve as mentors for inmates in special courses at the university, where they focus on the lives of inmates in the prison, their difficulties, their functioning, the rehabilitation programs in the prison, and their relationships with the wardens. It is worth noting that this structured program, in which students mentor incarcerated persons in Israel every year on a regular basis, is the only one of its kind in Israel.

This study was conducted by three criminologists engaged in teaching and guiding students who served as mentors for incarcerated persons. Its purpose is to examine the contribution of the mentoring activity according to the incarcerated persons' opinions, including the effect of the program on incarcerated persons' perceptions, attitudes, and behavior. The assumption is that the program can make a significant contribution to changing incarcerated persons' worldview and perhaps reducing their criminal behavior. We made efforts to ensure that the role of the students was confined to mentoring and that they did not duplicate the work of the prison staff. Participation in this independent mentoring program is naturally not linked to sentence planning or release prospects, and incarcerated person participation or otherwise in the program is voluntary and without prejudice. However, the Release Committee does receive an expert opinion on the incarcerated person's general conduct in prison, and participation in the program is the outcome of the overall impression gained on the incarcerated person's positive functioning.

### ***Contribution of Mentoring Programs***

Mentoring has been defined as a "one-to-one lenient relationship. An individual (mentor) gives time to support and encourage another (mentee)" (Her Majesty's Prison and

Probation Service [HMPPS], 2020). Aitken (2014) defines it as a “voluntary relationship of engagement, encouragement and trust.”

When mentoring is carried out in a consistent manner, and when relations between mentor and incarcerated person are both congenial and business-like, the experience can serve as a critical turning point in the incarcerated person’s life (Blechman et al., 2000; Nakkula & Haris, 2014). Numerous research studies attest to the fact that mentoring sessions have an ultimately positive impact on a wide range of mentees children (Fletcher, 2000); youth at risk (Laniado & Timor, 2015); and criminals, incarcerated persons, formerly incarcerated students (Tietjen et al., 2021) and paroled formerly incarcerated persons (Brown & Ross, 2010; Duwe & Johnson, 2016; Hucklesby & Worrall, 2007; Schuhmann et al., 2018).

Shepard (2009) concluded that after completing a mentoring year, both teachers and parents reported an improvement in the studies, behavior, and social relations of school children. Waller et al. (2010) found that mentoring programs in schools provided youth who had previously been in prison with support and encouragement. Their mentors served as models to emulate, and the mentees were less likely than their non-mentored counterparts to drop out of school or return to prison.

Lewis et al. (2007) found positive results in three mentoring programs for adult criminals. The mentees had greater self-confidence and composure as a result of the programs. An additional contribution was the assistance rendered by the mentors in finding work for the mentees accompanied by the mentees’ perseverance in keeping that work, as well as assistance with mentees’ integration into their social environments. The researchers noted that the principal contribution of the programs lay in the relations between the mentors and the mentees, namely, the social assets imparted, rather than in the instrumental assistance provided.

Several studies have found that incarcerated persons benefit from contact with volunteer mentors (Stacer & Roberts, 2018), including students (Duriez et al., 2017). Research carried out on mentoring activities in prison by religious figures—activities usually geared to returning the incarcerated persons to their faith through rehabilitation—showed that they had a positive effect on incarcerated persons’ behavior, while also reducing their negative perceptions (e.g., Tewksbury & Collins, 2005; Timor, 1998).

Studies among formerly incarcerated persons returning to the community and receiving the support of non-peer as well as peer mentors (individuals with previous convictions) indicate this support is a significant factor in motivating behavioral change, shaping a more positive re-identity, and improving the capacity for desistance among previous offenders (Buck, 2018; Kenemore & Seungho, 2020; Kirkwood, 2021; Matthews et al., 2020; O’Connor & Bogue, 2010). Tietjen et al. (2021) describe how formerly incarcerated academics—many of whom identify with Convict Criminology (Jones et al., 2009; Marlow et al., 2015; Newbold & Ross, 2013; Ross et al., 2014)—help formerly incarcerated students and academics overcome the social and structural barriers that severely limit their life chances.

The volunteer work of mentors is also important in that it enables much more extensive support and assistance to be provided to populations in need of therapy and

rehabilitation. Given the rise in the number of incarcerated persons and the stagnant budgets for rehabilitation, mentors can assist rehabilitation staff in prisons, making a significant contribution to achieving incarcerated person rehabilitation targets while enriching incarcerated persons' lives with pro-socialization activities and integration into the external community upon their release (Barry, 2000; Brown & Ross, 2010). Research on mentoring programs for paroled incarcerated persons found their impact to be generally positive (e.g., Brown & Ross, 2010; Hucklesby & Worrall, 2007).

Several theories may be proposed to explain the positive results of mentoring incarcerated persons.

### *Desistance Theories*

According to rehabilitative approaches focusing on desistance from crime, true rehabilitation involves a complete change in the lawbreaker's way of life and self-perception. Desistance from crime is a process of change that the individual undertakes independently, albeit, at times, with the assistance of specialists acting in the framework of enforcement and corrections systems (Bersani & Doherty, 2018; Broidy & Cauffman, 2017; Ward & Maruna, 2007). The research literature points to a number of factors that help delinquents abandon their criminal way of life, among them affiliation with normative social groups (e.g., Bersani & Doherty, 2018; Maruna, 2010).

The theory of desistance from crime describes a gradual process that culminates in the cessation of criminal activity (Bersani & Doherty, 2018; Broidy & Cauffman, 2017; Farrall & Calverley, 2006; Farrall et al., 2014; LeBel et al., 2008; Maruna, 2001; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016; Segev, 2018). The theory presents a distinction between "primary" desistance, which is, in effect, a temporary hiatus in criminal pursuits and "secondary" desistance, involving integration of a non-criminal identity at the level of self concept (Maruna & Farrall, 2004). One of the key elements in secondary desistance from crime is integration in intervention programs that prepare the individual for normative life. The theory assumes that it is not enough to ascertain whether the individual is involved in delinquent activity but, rather, to examine their overall lifestyle as a consequence of the intervention program (Petersilia, 2003; Rhine et al., 2017). McNeill (2016) adds societal recognition ("tertiary" desistance) as an imperative step in achieving long-term change (Galnander, 2020). Nugent and Schinkel (2016) use the terms "act desistance," "identity desistance," and "relational desistance" to capture primary, secondary, and tertiary desistance, respectively.

### *Positive Criminology*

The positive impact that mentoring has on mentored incarcerated persons can also be explained through positive criminology, which is an innovative concept that challenges the common preoccupation with negative elements by placing emphasis on human encounters and the forces of inclusion that are experienced positively by individuals and that can promote desistance from crime (Ronel & Segev, 2014). It refers to the positive experiences and influences to which one is exposed in one's immediate

environment, deterring the individual from deviant and criminal behavior (Ronel & Elisha, 2011). Positive criminology consolidates theories, approaches, and models based on an underlying assumption of an affirmative outlook in terms of beliefs, ethics, positive emotions, and optimism. It emphasizes the importance of positive experiences in the individual's perception and views the existence of risk factors in the individual's life as a springboard for growth and maturation rather than pain and destruction (Gal & Wexler, 2015; Ronel & Haimoff-Ayali, 2009).

### *Reintegrative Shaming Theory*

A key theory that is consistent with the positive criminology approach and that can help explain the contribution of mentors to incarcerated persons is reintegrative shaming theory (Braithwaite, 1989). This theory is based on a clear distinction between the personality of the criminal individual and his or her negative actions; thus, a criminal who expresses reservations or regrets about the delinquent path taken in the past can then gain social acceptance and approval. In practice, this involves reintegration into a normative community, social life, employment, and therapy groups of an individual who has renounced criminal activity (Lane et al., 2007). Positive criminology elaborates on this concept, claiming that it is possible to rehabilitate a criminal and enable him or her to reintegrate into the community through social support, particularly elements of mutual acceptance, such as forgiveness, empathy, compassion, and recognition of what is right (Clear & Sumter, 2002). An essential component in incarcerated person rehabilitation according to this concept, and one that has been found to be a potential factor in preventing recidivism, is exposure to positive, humane attributes in the immediate surroundings, including kindness (Ronel, 2006; Seligman et al., 2005) and manifestations of goodwill on the part of former convicts through volunteer work (Burnett & Maruna, 2006; Ronel, 2006).

### *Social Capital Theory*

In the present case, social capital theory is associated with the social resources that the incarcerated persons gain as a result of the mentors' support. On entering the prison walls, incarcerated persons are cut off from their previous social contacts (e.g., Cochran & Mears, 2013; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). The associations formed with volunteers from the outside world can compensate for this by providing the incarcerated persons with interpersonal contacts that can help improve their lives in prison (Duwe & Johnson, 2016), while possibly also encouraging their future integration into the community.

### *Balagan Theory*

Another theory, referring to the worldview and behavior of incarcerated persons in prison, is the Balagan ("mess") theory (Timor, 2001), according to which many incarcerated persons are characterized by an absence of commitment to a definitive moral

and social framework and its associated behavioral norms. Their activities, whether criminal or legitimate, are relatively random, reflecting considerable confusion and inconsistency due to a lack of commitment to some defined values and social center (see also Cohen et al., 1987; Hirschi, 1969).

### *Social Bonds Theory*

Social bonds like attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief prevent actors from behaving in a deviant manner (Hirschi, 1969). According to Hirschi, the weaker the connection between an individual and a law-abiding society, the lower the individual's commitment to the society's opinions and rules of conduct and the greater the likelihood that the individual will resort to criminal behavior.

The mentors then form social connections with the incarcerated persons, conducting dialogues with them on an ongoing basis about their perceptions and behaviors, including criminal behavior. This helps to establish a certain order in the incarcerated persons' worlds, and in some cases, the mentors become role models (Brown & Ross, 2010).

### *The Mentoring Program*

The program involves young non-peer mentors (aged 25–30)—generally female students in their third year of criminology studies, with a rehabilitation orientation. The program is composed of 2-hr sessions on a weekly basis belonging to one of two tracks: individual mentoring and group mentoring. In most cases, the program is conducted over a period of approximately 7 months (approximately 56 mentoring hours for each incarcerated person), unless the incarcerated person is paroled, transferred to a different prison, or, in rare cases, drops out of the program.

Individual mentoring is done with the support and guidance of social workers. The mentor holds conversations with incarcerated persons on topics suggested by the supervising social worker, such as encouraging them to formulate a post-release employment plan, or persuading them to participate in prison rehabilitation programs. Group mentoring is geared to groups of about 10 incarcerated persons accompanied by education officers, in which the mentor moderates informal conversations on personal and social topics, or perhaps directs discussions concerning theories in criminology to which incarcerated persons can relate based on their life experience.

Both social workers and education officers prepare students for mentoring activities. They hold personal meetings with them to ascertain their suitability for mentoring activity (personality, relevant work experience, and criminal record). Only students meeting the required criteria are accepted. They explain the existing arrangements in the various prisons and the precautionary measures required. They monitor them intensively in the beginning by sitting in on their sessions. Subsequently, they hold feedback talks once every 2 weeks for the remainder of the mentoring period.

The social workers associated with the Prison Service liaise between the volunteer mentors and those incarcerated persons whom the social workers determine would benefit most from individual mentoring. The education officers form groups of

approximately 10 incarcerated persons whom they determine would benefit most from participation in group activities led by the mentors. Allocation of mentors to activities is carried out according to each mentor's individual choice, based on their experience in working with populations at risk and acting as group moderators, as well as the demand in the various prisons.

### *The Present Study*

The few studies conducted worldwide on mentoring by students and its impact on incarcerated persons have found that it made a significant contribution to the lives of the incarcerated persons (see Brown & Ross, 2010). The issue has not been studied in Israel, and the present study seeks to address this gap and enrich existing knowledge on the subject by examining the mentoring of incarcerated persons by students in the Israeli context. This study focuses on the impact of mentoring on incarcerated persons' perceptions, attitudes, and behavior. Insofar as this form of mentoring is found to be beneficial with respect to the incarcerated persons' behavior, both in prison and following their release, it would be recommended to expand and intensify the program in the future.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

A total of 21 male incarcerated persons took part in the research: 11 Muslims, eight Jews, one Christian, and one Hindu. Ages ranged from 17 to 53, and their number of years of education ranged from 3 to 12 years. The participants had committed a variety of crimes, such as homicide, domestic violence, sex offenses, burglary, drug dealing, and car theft. The participants are serving sentences in prisons in central and southern Israel.

### *Tools*

This study is based on qualitative research principles. The chief research tool used was semi-structured in-depth interviews, aimed at examining changes that had taken place in the perceptions, attitudes, and behavior of the incarcerated persons after participating in a student mentoring program (individual or group mentoring) over the preceding 2 years.

The purpose of the semi-structured in-depth interviews was to understand the subjective experiences of the participants and the significance they attach to these experiences (Seidman, 1991). The interviews facilitated access to cultural connotations and to a better understanding of the responses of the different individuals (Shkedi, 2003). Moreover, they allowed the researcher to become familiar with the interviewees' worldviews, thoughts, and emotions (Patton, 2002). Typical questions included in the interview guide were "How and to what extent were you influenced by the mentoring sessions with the student?"; "What expectations did you have concerning the

mentoring program?" In addition, socio-demographic questionnaires were distributed to the incarcerated persons to capture socio-demographic variables, including age and type of offense.

### **Procedure**

Following approval from the Prison Service to conduct the research, a total of 21 incarcerated persons were identified with the help of the Prison Service's Department of Education, Care and Rehabilitation. These incarcerated persons had received mentoring for a period of about 7 months during the previous 2 years by students in both individual and group frameworks, 17 by female students and four by male students. The students visited the prisons every week and met with the incarcerated persons for a period of approximately 2 hr, either for individual sessions focused on the incarcerated persons' perceptions, attitudes, and emotional needs alongside the provision of basic knowledge, or for group meetings that centered on imparting knowledge and consolidating perceptions and attitudes on various subjects.

Following coordination with the authorities, the researchers arrived at the prisons at the conclusion of the mentoring year. After the researchers presented the aims of the research and obtained the incarcerated persons' consent, each incarcerated person participated in a semi-structured, in-depth interview lasting on average approximately 40 min. The number of interviews was determined by the saturation point; we continued to add interviewees until their statements provided no new information. All the interviews were conducted on an individual basis in prison rooms that had been allocated for this purpose by the Prison Service.

Each incarcerated person who participated in the research signed an informed consent form prior to the interview. Anonymity was assured, as was the option to drop out of the research at any time and for any reason. All the interviews were recorded for the purpose of analysis and classification of the findings according to theme.

Analysis of the interviews was carried out in three stages. In the first stage, the interviews were transcribed and read by two of the three researchers to gain an overall impression of the text. They then performed an inductive thematic content analysis of the transcript for identifying different categories and themes. Events, actions, feelings, and thoughts were identified based on their reference to the objectives of the study, namely, to the effects of the mentoring activities as perceived by the participants (see Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In the second stage, the initial themes were examined separately by each of the two researchers. Some of the themes were grouped together based on similarities. Other themes were divided into two different themes if they were too complex. This created more homogeneous themes, better reflecting what emerged from the interviews. At the third stage, the conclusions of the two researchers regarding the themes were cross-examined, and unanimity was reached regarding all the themes and subthemes. Some clarifying details were added and included in the themes after examining their degree of coherence and their degree of compatibility with the wording used in the interviews (see Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).



The reliability and validity of the findings were examined at each stage of the study by the research team that has expertise in criminology, inmate rehabilitation, and qualitative thematic analysis. Following this, the research findings were anchored in quotes from the interviewees to ensure that the findings would be accessible to readers who would, thus be likely to come to conclusions similar to those reached by the researchers (e.g., Corden & Sainsbury, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Before drafting the Discussion section, the findings of the study were presented to education and social work officers in prisons where students mentored incarcerated persons. The overwhelming majority of them agreed with the findings, and some added their own insights regarding the contribution of the mentoring, thereby contributing to the Discussion section (e.g., Brink, 1993).

Finally, based on the understanding that “mainstream criminology needs to be informed by input from those with personal experience of life in correctional institutions that have the potential significantly to enrich scholarly understanding” (Ross et al., 2014, p. 121), we approached formerly incarcerated academics and presented the findings to them. They all agreed that the mentoring program had a significantly positive impact on the incarcerated persons. Statements made by two of them (one from England, who had been incarcerated for 19 years for property and drug offenses, and the other from Israel, who had served a 3-year sentence for similar offenses) are presented below under the heading Validity of the Findings.

## Findings

The 21 participants, who had met with their mentors over a period of approximately 7 months, talked in the interviews about the mentoring period, the mentors, and their effects.

Three central themes emerged from the interviews with the incarcerated persons reflecting the possible contribution of mentoring to desistance:

- a. The students slowly became trusted partners in the incarcerated persons’ eyes, enabling the incarcerated persons to form positive bonds with representatives of normative society;
- b. A positive change occurred in the incarcerated persons’ behavior, helping them to develop tolerance, discretion, self-control, and the ability to organize their behavior patterns;
- c. A change in perception took place with the incarcerated persons – mentoring gave them social capital; moderated their self-centered perspective; provided them with a better understanding of the problems that had driven them to crime; and improved their self-image.

### *Positive Bond Formed Between the Incarcerated Persons and the Students*

*Trust in the mentors as “outside the system.”* All the incarcerated persons expressed their great appreciation to the mentors for the fact that they visited the prison

as volunteers to improve the incarcerated persons' quality of life and rehabilitation prospects. They made particular mention of the fact that the mentors came from outside the prison system, thereby having a significant influence on the incarcerated persons. Interviewee 4 (aged 41, serving a sentence for manslaughter) described the dynamics as follows:

The fact that the girls were from outside helped more than if they were in, because it's not like a warden, it's not like an officer. It's without any vested interest. It opens one's mind more, it's more meaningful, I listen better. I know that they came to learn, and I, too, learned.

Some participants expressed a distrust of the intentions of anyone belonging to the Prison Service, which was responsible for keeping them in prison. Interviewee 6 (aged 17, serving a sentence for a violent crime) reported that he was wary of revealing thoughts and emotions to social workers but not to mentors who came from outside the system:

Speaking to a social worker does not help, it is not worth the trouble. With the student, one can open up. If one talks to a social worker, the whole prison will get to know [about what was said], but not with the volunteer!

The interviewees viewed favorably the fact that the mentors did not have any authority over them or power to coerce them. The young age of the students and the differences between them and the prison staff were also conducive to better relationships. Interviewee 18 (aged 50, serving a sentence for homicide) stated,

With the students I felt freer. As to the age difference, we are older than the students, but here this disappeared—it was not important. They have a deeper understanding than me, I told them about my experiences. It helped me to understand things I did not know and did not recognize in myself.

*Mentor empathy and resourcefulness.* The mentors exhibited empathy and resourcefulness, gradually becoming trusted partners in the eyes of the incarcerated persons, who allowed themselves to be influenced by the students. According to the incarcerated persons, the mentors knew from the outset how to form a positive connection with them. In the words of Interviewee 19 (aged 24, serving a sentence for rape):

They do not regard you as an incarcerated person, but as an equal. This gives you the feeling that they believe in you, and you want to improve. She sees you as a person, believes in your direction, it's really good.

Interviewee 15 (aged 45, serving a sentence for running over a pedestrian) talked about the considerable added value of sessions with the mentors, who influenced him to the extent of helping him to forget the painful experience of imprisonment, including severance from the outside world in general and from family in particular:

The sessions were lovely, she was a light at the end of the tunnel, a connection with the outside world. We came quite far in our talks. She was not motherly, but warm. I came to the sessions with her each time as though I was going to a show . . . these sessions for me were a great deal, more than a visit by the family or friends. She turned this year of imprisonment into a good period.

The considerable value attached to the sessions in the incarcerated persons' opinion is also attested to by Interviewee 14 (aged 24, serving a sentence for burglary): "I waited maybe two hours for her before the sessions." Interviewee 21 (aged 30, serving a sentence for manslaughter) even initiated provocations to release him from kitchen duty so that he could take part in the weekly session with the mentor: "I was in many sessions, and sometimes I had to be in the kitchen, but I kicked up a storm to get to the group."

### *Positive Change in the Incarcerated Persons' Behavior*

*Bringing order to behavior.* Several interviewees referred to their lives in their criminal past as being devoid of any defined direction. They expected the mentors and participants in the group to suggest ways to conduct themselves, as Interviewee 4 explained: "My problems are how to manage my life, and the group helped me organize things. Let's say I have to walk from here to the end of the corridor—I didn't know how to do it." Likewise, Interviewee 10 attributed his criminal behavior to his inability to steer his behavior in any particular direction. In the absence of normal behavior patterns and an established worldview, he was like a child who needed his parents to tell him how to conduct himself properly: "I was a criminal because there was no one to set limits, no daily schedule, no routine."

Two of the interviewees described their previous behavior as aggressive and aimless. It was the only way they knew. In the course of the mentoring sessions, they practiced alternative behaviors. In the words of Interviewee 5,

In the beginning I did not want [a mentor], but I was told it would be good. We connected, we laughed [with the mentor]. Before I started to cooperate [with the mentor] I had constant fistfights with everyone, I used to create havoc. I am different now. I now share my feelings with the mentor. Talk about actions, violence, and this helps. One has to let out the anger, the problems, the sadness, everything. It's the right thing for incarcerated persons who want to change.

Two interviewees said that during the 7 days between sessions they would wait to ask the mentors how to act and react to situations. Interviewee 14 explained,

If something was bothering me, I would come to the session and tell her. She would then listen and calm me. We would put our heads together and reach a compromise. I feel open with her. I bottled up my problems during the week, and together we analysed where I was wrong. She gave me advice and I followed it.

Two interviewees explained their delinquent behavior by the fact that they would go along with friends who were criminals, and that they had no clear and concrete opinions of their own that would support independent behavior. As Interviewee 1 stated, "I learned from this activity to focus more and make sure not to be dragged along. To go ahead with my own opinions and not the opinions of the majority." Interviewee 12 explained his criminal leanings in terms of his dependency on others and his desire to find favor with them at the expense of independent behavior of his own volition:

Following the sessions, I can tell myself that I no longer need to care what people think of me or say about me. This always concerned me, for if I tell a person [an incarcerated person /criminal] that I cannot help him, he'll think I am a coward. They toyed with me. I am now trying to work on it that they won't toy with me anymore.

*Learning to exercise tolerance and self-control.* In the course of mentoring, the mentors conveyed messages to some of the incarcerated persons relating to forbearance, tolerance, and anger control, both verbally and as living examples. Interviewee 17 (aged 30, serving a sentence for domestic violence) emphasized this point: "They taught us how to control our temper when people approach us with a bad attitude—how to deal with this, how to persevere in making an effort, convey patience." Interviewee 16 (aged 29, serving a sentence for defection from the army) referred to the student's positive, tolerant attitude toward him and the contribution she made to calming his nerves: "I saw that there was a person who was listening to me and sometimes helps me solve my problems, calms me down." Interviewee 14 also mentioned the improvement that had taken place in his level of tolerance under the influence of the mentor: "There is a difference between the period before she came and after she came; I have become much calmer."

Interviewee 7 (aged 19, serving a sentence for crimes involving violence and drugs) gave an example of the way in which his mentor succeeded in calming him:

I would use her help in connection with my problems and solving them. For example, I once put in a request to allow my mother to visit me, and the prison simply ignored me. I told her and we talked about it and reached an understanding, so my anger dissipated.

Interviewee 5 (aged 18, serving a sentence for violent crime) summed up the situation: "The session with the mentor generally calms my nerves. It helps me let my anger out, talk about my difficulties."

In addition to anger control, some incarcerated persons referred specifically to the fact that they had ceased their violent behavior in the wake of the sessions with the mentor and their talks with her. According to Interviewee 13 (aged 23, serving a sentence for drug dealing), "The mentor convinced me that it is always important to talk and not [behave violently], and thanks to this I helped myself and many other incarcerated persons. It was from her that I learned to listen to people." Interviewee 12 (aged 46, serving a sentence for homicide) described the change in his behavior:

In the course of the talks with her I saw things that I had done in the past compared to what I am doing now. She helped me understand the difference. I don't go back to then—then I used a lot of force. Today there's more talking.

Interviewee 6 described the process of learning appropriate behavior through a discussion with the mentor on events in his life:

We talked together about behaviour. If behaviour is bad, she suggests something else. I have a tendency to lose my temper over small things, and when I meet with the mentor, we talk about them and she suggests alternative behaviour. Once I had an argument with another prisoner—a scrap. After discussing it with the mentor, I resolved it with quiet, nice talk. Before we met I was an impulsive person. I am now a bit calmer, and this will last a long time.

### *Change in Perceptions and Attitudes*

*Imparting social capital.* According to several interviewees, the weekly sessions with the mentors expanded their horizons, diversified their worldview, and reduced their self-centeredness. In the words of Interviewee 2 (aged 38, serving a sentence for homicide), “I learn to see things from a different angle. From different people with different opinions . . . understand the other prisoners in the group, also from their side.” Interviewee 3 (aged 53, serving a sentence for domestic violence) admitted that prior to his participation in the group he had been focused on himself:

I'm constantly justifying myself, I don't see far ahead, live in my own bubble, can't see that I am causing harm, see real life. I am detached from painful things. I was closed, was not able to talk to anyone. Now [after mentoring] I have changed my perspective, have a different understanding so the feeling changes. My life has changed for the better.

Rigid perceptions with respect to resolving issues became more flexible with a number of interviewees. As Interviewee 13 emphasized, “I consulted with her about many things. I realized that everything can be solved.” Interviewee 12 reported a similar experience: “With the mentor I could talk about things I had never said before. I am not used to talking with someone else. The minute I start talking aloud I can hear myself, and she too can suggest things.”

*Cultivating self-criticism.* By analyzing events in the incarcerated persons' lives, the mentors helped resolve problems that had contributed to their decline into crime. Interviewee 14 reported,

She would show me reports about crime, she would read them and let me understand the content . . . she would bring me reports from the newspapers, reminding me all the time that problems exist because of nonsensical behaviour, because of knives, that it's not worth it.

Interviewee 8 (aged 46, serving a sentence for homicide) attested to the fact that the sessions with the mentors had made him take a fresh look at his criminal path:

It changed something in me, I was a closed person, I thought I was smart and whatever I said was always right, and I came across people outside my social circle with a different perspective, and I realized that my so-called smartness was what landed me in prison for so many years. Talking with them was productive because they were learned and wise. I aim to join another group.

*Reinforcing self-image and confidence.* The mentors' positive attitude toward the incarcerated persons in the sessions, despite the unwelcoming prison environment, and their acceptance of the incarcerated persons as equals with valuable opinions helped to reinforce the incarcerated persons' self-image and self-confidence. As Interviewee 12 explained, "Following the sessions I can tell myself that I no longer need to care what people think of me or say about me. This always concerned me." Interviewee 1 (aged 43, serving a sentence for homicide) described how the group activity prepared by the mentor, in which he participated and in which a social situation of peer pressure was stimulated, affected his self-confidence: "The experiment with social pressure affected me. I learned from this activity to focus more and make sure not to go with the crowd. To go ahead with my own opinions and not the opinions of the majority."

Interviewee 10 (aged 32, serving a sentence for manslaughter) felt that the sessions with the mentors strengthened his self-image and gave him an incentive to engage in activities important for living a normal life:

The students are very open—they want to help people, everything was interesting, how to manage your life. At times there was . . . learning through game playing. This contributed to my self-confidence—not to talk rubbish, to organize your day—the important things in life, family, neighbours, the need for company.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Sociological literature attributes high social value to volunteer work. It has been referred to as the cornerstone of every civil society, the glue that keeps people together and promotes the sense of a common purpose. It is an essential element in our attempts to create an integrative society based on the principles of commitment and involvement, which is the bedrock of democracy (Blunkett, 2001).

Mentoring by volunteers from the community with incarcerated persons serving sentences is relatively rare for various reasons, not least a concern for the safety of the volunteers and a reluctance to disrupt prison security arrangements. This is despite the fact that mentoring of this nature, according to several research studies, can help to rehabilitate incarcerated persons and contributes to their integration into the community following their release (Duncan & Balbar, 2008).

The central themes emerging from the interviews with the incarcerated persons in this study concern how mentoring helped the incarcerated persons, enabling them to

form a positive bond with representatives of normative society. It gave them social capital, reducing their self-centered preoccupation; helped them develop tolerance, discretion, and self-control; provided them with a better understanding of the problems that had steered them toward crime; and improved their self-image by improving their perceptions and behavioral patterns.

### *Desistance Theory*

The desistance from crime model, associated with positive criminology (Ronel & Elisha, 2011), describes a gradual process of distancing from the world of crime and the eventual relinquishing of criminal activity altogether (Bersani & Doherty, 2018; Broidy & Cauffman, 2017; Farrall et al., 2014; Ward & Maruna, 2007). The process includes progress on three parallel fronts: cessation of criminal activity; changes in thinking patterns; and social recognition of change (Maruna & Farrall, 2004; McNeill, 2016).

The mentoring program appears to have the potential for contributing to all of the above. Talks with the students help them to set the stage for critical thinking with respect to conduct outside the norm, ultimately contributing to changes in behavior. By relating to the incarcerated persons in this way, the mentors precipitated a change in the way the incarcerated persons perceived themselves and their environment, helping them to understand the source of their criminality. One of the interviewees claimed in this regard: "Now [after mentoring] I have changed my perspective, have a different understanding." In the opinion of some of the incarcerated persons, the meetings contributed to a change in behavior as well. One incarcerated person, for example, stated that, "Before we met I was an impulsive person. I am now a bit calmer, and this will last a long time." Behavioral and cognitive changes of this kind may possibly be viewed as part of the process of building a new identity, one in which mentoring constitutes a "hook for change" (Giordano et al., 2002).

It transpired that the changes described above stem from the positive relationship that developed between the mentors and the incarcerated persons. The connection formed between the two is indeed remarkable for its positive and authentic quality, attributable to, among other factors, the fact that the students were there voluntarily and were external to the system. It is significant that the mentors, as outsiders, lacked the authority to impose sanctions for unbecoming conduct (unlike the wardens and professionals in the prison). This factor is supported in the literature, principally in terms of peer mentoring (Buck, 2018). In addition, the concern, empathic attitude, and non-judgmental approach on the part of the mentors were important elements, all of which contributed to an openness in their relations and to the creation of opportunities for a change in perspective and behavior (Buck, 2018; McNeill & Weaver, 2010).

The positive relationship established between the mentors and incarcerated persons could also contribute to social recognition, which is a meaningful factor in rehabilitation (McNeill, 2016), and could possibly start in prison. The genuine interaction enabled the mentor to come face-to-face with the person behind the criminal offense and to believe in the possibility of a change occurring in him.

### *Positive Criminology*

Against the backdrop of the rigid formality of prison routine and the strict attitude of wardens toward incarcerated persons (Crewe, 2011), the weekly sessions with the student mentors were viewed by the incarcerated persons as a breath of fresh air and the antithesis of the painful experience of imprisonment (Crewe, 2011; Sykes, 1970; Toch, 1992). The mentors brought a personal and non-judgmental approach to the incarcerated persons, conveying a message of willingness on the part of society to help rehabilitate them and reintegrate them into the community (Braithwaite, 1989). This approach, known as positive criminology (Ronel & Elisha, 2011), recognizes the potential of criminals to change, to free themselves of negative thoughts, to make room for their positive capabilities, and to adopt moral viewpoints and normative behavior through exposure to human kindness (Ronel, 2006). The fact that most of the incarcerated persons interviewed in the course of the study expressed a desire to expand the mentoring program to last longer and to include a greater number of hours every week perhaps attests to the significant positive impact that the mentoring had on them. Similarly, their reports may reflect the positive changes they underwent in their attitudes and behavior in the wake of their sessions with the mentors. This result may also be attributed to a desire to have a change from the boredom of prison, a break from routine.

### *Cognitive-Behavioral Elements*

The incarcerated persons reported that the messages and content conveyed by the mentors referred in large part to the day-to-day reality facing the incarcerated persons in terms of friction with the prison authorities and fights with other incarcerated persons. They also emphasized the insights they had achieved regarding their criminal pasts: the negative outcomes of the use of violence, and the need for restraint and tolerance, anger management, and problem resolution based on the use of discretion and on consultation with others. These messages were conveyed as responses to stories told by the incarcerated persons about actual events. They referred, among other things, to cognitive processes, such as negative, stereotypical, and automatic thinking, with a view to changing these processes and adopting more constructive thinking, possibly contributing to secondary desistance. Recognizable in this activity on the part of the mentors are elements of cognitive-behavioral therapy (Marom et al., 2011), an approach with which the mentors were familiar from their studies in criminology.

### *Imparting Social Capital*

In the course of the mentoring sessions, bonds of kindness were formed between the mentors and the incarcerated persons on various levels. New connections of this sort can impart a highly valuable asset in terms of social capital. The incarcerated persons gained interpersonal contact with mainstream individuals who were non-judgmental regarding their criminal past—possibly contributing to tertiary desistance—respected



them as equals without being condescending, reinforced their self-esteem (Bergner & Holmes, 2000), developed in them a capacity for self-criticism, expanded their worldview, and probably provided them with knowledge regarding their conduct both in prison and following their release (Duwe & Johnson, 2016; Duncan & Balbar, 2008). Under the influence of these contacts, the incarcerated persons' horizons expanded, and their thinking became more complex, less stereotypical and less negative. The new knowledge and ways of thinking acquired opened them up to new options with a non-criminal orientation.

### *Establishing Certain Order in Their Balagan*

Some of the interviewees described their delinquent behavior and conduct in prison prior to the sessions with the mentors as living in a state of chaos. They referred to the lack of a moral and behavioral compass to guide them, and to the absence of commitment to a defined ethical and social framework and associated behavioral norms (see Timor, 2001). Their behavior, whether criminal or legitimate, was haphazard, reflecting confusion and a lack of consistency.

The incarcerated persons were in a confused state and were experiencing disorientation with respect to certain types of behavior. The descriptions they gave of their lives are consistent with the element of non-commitment in Hirschi's social bonds theory (Cullen et al., 2019). According to Hirschi (1969), weak ties between the individual and the law-abiding society increase the likelihood that he will commit offenses. In extreme cases, when an individual no longer feels any commitment at all, there ensues a confused state of indifference to the morality of one's deeds (see Korenhauser, 1978). For the participants in this study, the mentoring sessions gradually led to new contacts with significant others and a commitment to more normative behavior. Some of the interviewees expressed a need for guidance by the mentors with respect to proper conduct in day-to-day prison life and the problems in their lives, both past and future. They feared failing once again because of social pressures and the absence of an independent standpoint that could steer their behavior in the right direction.

### *Validity of the Findings*

Attention is drawn to two references that contribute to validating the findings of the present research. First, as regards the Education Officer and the social workers accompanying the mentees, the majority of them agreed with the findings and some added their own insights regarding the contribution of mentoring. Second, as stated, we interviewed a number of formerly incarcerated academics, one of whom was an Israeli who stated that in his experience mentoring by trustworthy people external to the prison system serves as an excellent rehabilitation instrument in promising a positive future. According to him,

I liked the idea that the student is not wearing a uniform and it kind of freed me up to open up topics, that usually a social worker . . . would not hear from me . . . The feeling was so

comfortable that I found myself waiting for the next meeting. . . . To this day I make excellent use of the tools I received from the student who mentored me.

Another formerly incarcerated academic who was from England, declared,

The way I see it, it is a good program . . . the best is when the volunteers get good professional training and preparation. For inmates, if it is managed and coordinated carefully . . . The best is when volunteers are ex-law enforcement that take no shit and won't have any nonsense.

The interviews with formerly incarcerated academics, as exemplified above, support the inference that mentoring does indeed have a significant contribution to make. The interviews with them mitigated the concern regarding social ingratiation, thereby reinforcing the validity of the findings. The English interviewee suggested that the engagement of young, inexperienced mentors be avoided. The situation in Israel appears to be in line with his recommendation: only mentors who have been trained for the job are employed, while they are also accompanied by the relevant professionals.

### *Limitations and Recommendations for Further Study*

The present qualitative study is not free of limitations, arising principally from the relatively small number of incarcerated persons (all male) who participated. The participants were referred to the mentoring program by the prison's social workers and corrections officers on the basis of their good conduct; as such, they are not representative of the prison population as a whole. We recognize that this constitutes a selection bias. In addition, most of the incarcerated persons interviewed had participated in other therapeutic and educational programs while in prison. It is therefore reasonable to assume that some of the effects they attributed to the mentors were the cumulative outcome of the various programs delivered in prison. This limitation is exacerbated by the fact that the interviews were conducted not during the mentoring program, but after its completion. Furthermore, the fact that not a single interviewee expressed a negative opinion about the mentors raises the question of a social ingratiation bias, answered in part through the interviews conducted with the formerly incarcerated academics.

It should be noted that one of the two formerly incarcerated academics expressed concern over the possibility that since most of the mentors were women, certain incarcerated persons would wish to portray mentoring as successful to continue meeting the mentors. Finally, there is the possibility that certain incarcerated persons used mentoring to their advantage simply to break their routine.

Accordingly, further research based on experimental and quasi-experimental designs is recommended. Future studies should use objective indices to compare groups of incarcerated persons who have participated in a mentoring program with groups of incarcerated persons who have similar background but have not taken part

in such a program. Furthermore, longitudinal work is needed to gain support for the long-term effectiveness of the program in the life of formerly incarcerated persons.

## Conclusion

The mentoring program presented herein, based on the assessments of the inmates who participated in it, appears to have the potential to contribute to a positive change in their behavior, reduce negative perceptions and attitudes, develop self-criticism, and improve their self-esteem and self-confidence. Expansion of the mentoring program and its extensive operation in prisons could, according to the findings of this study, promote the rehabilitation of incarcerated persons.

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## ORCID iD

Ronit Peled-Laskov  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1964-651X>

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### Author Biographies

**Uri Timor**, PhD, is working as an associate professor at the Department of Criminology, Bar-Ilan University and Department of Criminology, Ashkelon Academic College, Israel. He was the editor-in-chief of *Glimpse into Prison: Crimes and Penalties in Israel*. His research focuses on issues in prisoners' rehabilitation, prisons reform, and youth violence.

**Ronit Peled-Laskov**, PhD, is working as a senior lecturer at the Department of Criminology, Ashkelon Academic College, Israel. She is also a clinical criminologist. She is mainly interested in psychological accounts for crime and delinquency, prisoner rehabilitation, and white-collar offending.

**Mrs. Etti Golan**, is a lecturer at the Department of Criminology, Ashkelon Academic College, Israel.