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BETTER THAN ARRIVAL CORRECTIONS: THE UNIVERSITY AS A PARTNER IN SYSTEMIC WELL-BEING

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Abstract

This article advances the concept of *Better Than Arrival Corrections*, an approach that reorients the purpose of corrections from reducing recidivism to enhancing the holistic well-being of people who are incarcerated. Current systems—organized around the singular goal of preventing future offending—limit what corrections can achieve and place unrealistic expectations on agencies to solve complex social problems on their own. A well-being orientation broadens the definition of correctional success, invites new partners into the work, and creates opportunities for visible, incremental improvement in people's lives. Universities are uniquely positioned to support this shift because they bring two strengths that few institutions possess: breadth of expertise across all dimensions of well-being, and the capacity to integrate diverse forms of knowledge—including academic, practitioner, and lived expertise—into coherent, actionable strategies. The article concludes by offering practical steps for agencies and universities to begin exploring *Better Than Arrival Corrections* and calls for an expanded, evidence-informed vision of correctional success grounded in enhancing well-being.

Keywords: Better Than Arrival Corrections; well-being; university-corrections partnership

Introduction

In prison, in an unlikely corner of the arid Arizona desert, plants and people are thriving. An undergraduate student presents her honors thesis to a group of incarcerated women, explaining how pollinators like bees and butterflies are disappearing—leaving the world with less life-giving diversity—and how the milkweed seedlings in front of them can help bring those pollinators back. A graduate student in sustainable horticulture guides a correctional officer and an incarcerated woman as they position a new garden bed for effective irrigation. And a warden and a faculty member address a group from the community—their first time in prison—in how the university and department of corrections have collaborated to create a space for education, growth, and transformation.

A seasoned member of the corrections community might approach the prison garden with skepticism and concern. *This is prison, not a greenhouse, why does the population deserve this opportunity? What about institutional safety? These tools look like weapons. Won't shared labor between staff and incarcerated women blur boundaries and compromise professionalism? Are university students at risk for manipulation and harm? What about community safety? How does any of this reduce reoffending? Does it* ***work?***

These concerns make sense in a risk-oriented, deficits-dominated correctional system that has long been organized around the singular goal of reducing the likelihood of reoffending. But this goal of recidivism-reduction has limited corrections for several decades. The means of achieving recidivism reduction may change, perhaps even in innovative ways, but the goal remains narrow and unchanged. What if corrections were designed not simply to reduce risk, but to enhance well-being? This article advances the idea of Better Than Arrival Corrections, where the correctional system is designed to enhance the holistic well-being of people. If our correctional systems are truly serving their purpose, people should be better than they arrived to the system. Physically and mentally healthier. Free from addiction. More skilled and employable. More connected to family and community. Their well-being should be enhanced.

Reorienting the purpose of corrections in this way opens the door for expertise that extends beyond criminal justice alone. Universities, with their deep knowledge across all dimensions of well-being—physical, mental, emotional, educational, social, cultural, and economic—are uniquely positioned to partner with correctional agencies in this expanded mission. Better Than Arrival Corrections is practical, measurable, and aligned with ethical, evidence-based approaches to transforming the purpose and practice of corrections.

The Limits of Recidivism Reduction

Correctional success is usually measured as reduced recidivism. A correctional program or policy that is 'evidence-based' usually means that there is evidence to support recidivism reduction. This makes sense, as whether through deterrence, rehabilitation, or some other means, the goal of corrections is to reduce repeat criminal behavior (Cullen & Jonson, 2017). We can say our correctional system is working if people are 'corrected' such that they are not rearrested, reconvicted, or reimprisoned upon returning to society.

In the U.S., this goal initiated with the earliest penitentiaries and persisted through a variety of shifts in correctional philosophy and practice (Rothman, 1971; see also Rubin, 2019). The means may

change—increased punishment and control, or increased programming and care, or different types of either punishment or programming—but the goal remains the same. And despite all of these shifts in logic and approach, our success in reducing recidivism has not improved much. Even now, in perhaps the height of evidence-based corrections, U.S. recidivism rates in general remain stubbornly high (with isolated exceptions in certain jurisdictions) (Durose & Antenangeli, 2021; Petrich et al., 2021; cf. Bushway & Denver, 2025).

The relentless pursuit of recidivism reduction has consequences, for both the people whose attitudes and behaviors we seek to change but also for the change agents who do the work (Wright et al., 2022). Pursuing the absence of a negative outcome in a far-off future is psychologically unsatisfying; it is out of sight for people in the system and out of control for practitioners. People assessed as high-risk are prioritized to the detriment of other people who might desire change but not have the opportunity to do so. Last, pursuing correctional success in the form of making people 'not criminal' inherently assumes a starting point where people are 'criminal.' The language we use, the approaches we take, all originate with a goal to change criminals instead of empowering humans (Wright, 2024).

There are two especially detrimental components to solely relying on recidivism reduction as the goal of correctional success (Wright et al., 2022). First, it limits what we could achieve through the correctional system. It creates an artificial ceiling, where the best we can hope for is making someone 'not criminal'—what they are instead, or what they could be contributing to their families, communities, and society, is irrelevant (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2022). Second, it identifies the challenge as solely a criminal justice problem requiring a criminal justice solution, squarely and unfairly placing the burden on corrections. People choose to engage in crime through influence of a variety of factors—trauma, victimization, addiction, mental illness, poverty, inequality, racism, unemployment, stress, and the list goes on. Expecting people who work in corrections to overcome all these on their own does not make any sense.

Better Than Arrival Corrections

A different measurement of correctional success could be that people are better than their arrival to the correctional system (Wright, 2020). Whatever they looked like upon entry to the system, broadly defined, their time spent under supervision should make them better in the future. They could be healthier (physically and mentally), with less dependence on illicit substances, more educated, more employable, and with stronger relationships to family, friends, and community. Changing the goal in this way shifts corrections beyond the narrow pursuit of 'not criminal' and opens the door to partners with expertise and resources that matter when the challenge extends beyond a purely criminal justice problem. It also means that people who change and people who support those who change do not have to blindly pursue a future goal that is out of their sight and out of their control; they can focus on the present, with visible impact in the form of better than arrival incremental change.

Any number of strengths-based models or theories could provide the means to achieve a goal of better than arrival, especially when used in combination with deficits-based models and theories. Self-determination theory and the pursuit of what makes life meaningful, for all humans, is a particularly appealing approach (Ryan & Deci, 2000). A meaningful life is one where people are intrinsically motivated to direct their own lives (autonomy), with the urge to get better and better at something that matters to them (mastery), all in the pursuit of something larger than themselves

(purpose) (Pink, 2009). On a continuum where -1 is a miserable life and +1 is a meaningful life, the 0 could be conceived of as 'not criminal.' Moving people from -1 to 0 could mean a continued focus on programming to mitigate deficits (e.g., Bonta & Andrews, 2017) where moving people from 0 to +1 could mean a focus on programming to leverage strengths (e.g., Ward & Maruna, 2007) (Wright, 2020). Better Than Arrival Corrections means moving as many people as possible closer to +1 than where they started.

Better Than Arrival Corrections is not an alternative to recidivism reduction corrections. It is inclusive of that current approach, where 0 remains a meaningful point on the continuum. This means that traditional evidence-based approaches toward recidivism reduction can continue, but also that they can co-exist alongside strengths-based approaches. These efforts can take people beyond 0, creating prosocial, desistance-based trajectories that are also likely to keep them out of prison in the future (McNeill, 2006). Being unsatisfied with 0 means changing what correctional success looks like, inviting other partners along as part of a Better Than Arrival Corrections that empowers people to give to society rather than take from society.

The University as a Catalyst for Systemic Well-Being

The university has an important yet limited role in a correctional system oriented primarily toward reducing recidivism. Universities already contribute meaningfully through classes, evaluation research, staff training, and evidence-based programming targeting criminogenic needs (e.g., Drawbridge et al., 2018; Rudes et al., 2014; Wright & Jonson, 2018). These efforts matter, but they draw on only a fraction of what universities can offer. When the goal expands from reducing reoffending to enhancing well-being, the university becomes a far more powerful partner. Universities are uniquely positioned to support correctional systems pursuing Better Than Arrival Corrections because they bring two essential strengths that few other institutions possess.

First, the university offers the breadth of expertise needed to enhance well-being across multiple dimensions. Within a single institution, there are specialists in mental health, physical health, trauma recovery, education, architecture, sustainability, nutrition, occupational development, and community building. Through courses, internships, clinics, workshops, programs, and research, universities already support well-being at scale. These people and programs can be intentionally directed to invest in the lives and environments of those living and working in corrections.

In a Better Than Arrival Corrections approach, the university can support by contributing part of the **knowledge**—the "what"—needed to enhance well-being.

Second, the university has the capacity to integrate different forms of knowledge—academic evidence, practitioner expertise, and lived expertise—into coherent, actionable strategies (Porporino, 2025). In doing so, universities can expand what counts as evidence within an evidence-based correctional system oriented toward well-being. Many scholars have recommended that corrections "include lived experience," noting that system-impacted people have unique insights into alternatives to traditional correctional models (Antojado, 2025; Dum et al., 2025; Earle, 2014). Yet there is little clarity on how to do this well, especially for correctional leaders. How can they meaningfully include people with lived experience in developing policies and programs? And how can they do so in ways that share decision-making without jeopardizing the well-being and safety of the people who live and

work in corrections?

One answer to this challenge is to leverage university experience in participatory action research (PAR). Over the past several decades, university-led PAR projects have included people who are formerly—and sometimes currently—incarcerated throughout the entire research process (Farrell et al., 2021; Fine & Torre, 2006; Haverkate et al., 2020). University Institutional Review Board protocols ensure that these projects protect lived-experience collaborators while enabling them to contribute meaningfully to solutions-oriented research. Universities have long practiced thoughtful inclusion of lived experience, and this capacity can be a resource to correctional leaders seeking to do the same.

Including lived experience, however, could risk further alienating correctional staff and deepening the "us versus them" divide between people who work in corrections and those who are incarcerated. When people who are incarcerated or formerly incarcerated are empowered to share ownership of solutions, staff may feel threatened or sidelined in the process. Here again, the university can support by convening groups that rarely collaborate as equals: correctional staff, incarcerated people, students, faculty, community partners, and service providers. The university can serve as a neutral, trusted hub that brings these voices together, ensures that contributions are valued, and turns shared insights into practical solutions. In this way, universities do not simply generate knowledge; they connect it, elevate it, and help put it into practice.

In a Better Than Arrival Corrections approach, the university can support by shaping part of the **method**—the "how"—that brings diverse knowledge into practice.

An Illustrative University–Corrections Partnership

In the special issue of *Advancing Corrections* devoted to "What is Working with Women," Klemm and Wright (2024) describe a university–corrections partnership to co-design gender-responsive practice for correctional staff. The partnership began when department of corrections leadership approached the university with a need for gender-responsive training. The university then developed a model in which academic expertise coexisted alongside the practical wisdom of correctional staff and the lived expertise of incarcerated women—all three groups sat at the same table to create the training. University faculty and graduate students gathered existing research and best practices on gender-responsive work and expanded that foundation by consulting experts from across the university (e.g., women's studies, ethnic studies, social work). To supplement this, university researchers supported incarcerated women and correctional staff in informally surveying their peers to identify additional priorities for the training. The full team then synthesized the knowledge from these sources to determine the themes that should guide the curriculum.

The diverse composition of the design team led to innovations that would not have emerged under traditional research or training models. For example, the team concluded that gender-responsive practice would be more effective if incarcerated women themselves also learned about the principles, leading the incarcerated members to design and then deliver a peer-led workshop. University researchers trained correctional staff to deliver the final staff curriculum and ultimately transferred ownership of all content to the agency. Klemm and Wright (2024:162) conclude that "firsthand, lived experience of incarcerated women and correctional staff combined with the empirical science, research, and resources of a university can lead to a holistic and actionable gender-responsive

training." Altogether, the university served in a supporting role that extended beyond traditional academic involvement, offering both the knowledge needed to ground the work and the collaborative structure required to translate that knowledge into practice.

Moving Forward: Practical Steps

In the spirit of Better Than Arrival Corrections, shifting the purpose of corrections—from reducing recidivism to enhancing well-being—does not require sweeping reforms. It begins with small, deliberate steps that gradually change how people think and work. The following actions reflect the same process that shaped the gender-responsive training example described above.

Initiate a Conversation.

After reading, share the idea of Better Than Arrival Corrections with a colleague or leader in your organization, whether in corrections or in a university. Start wherever it feels natural—with someone you supervise, someone you report to, or someone you collaborate with. The goal is simply to spark shared curiosity about an alternative purpose for corrections. Cultural change starts when people begin imagining what else might be possible.

Identify a Local Point of Connection.

Universities and correctional agencies each hold forms of expertise the other can benefit from. Take stock of who is already in your network or close to it. For corrections, this might include university faculty, centers, or programs working in areas connected to well-being—psychology, public health, education, sustainability, architecture, or social work. For universities, this might include correctional leaders or units responsible for programming, education, mental health services, staff development, or rehabilitative planning. Then make a simple, low-stakes outreach: "I came across these ideas and thought there might be alignment. Would you be open to a brief conversation?" Many effective partnerships begin with a single, informal introduction.

Start with a Small, Low-Risk Pilot.

Collaboration does not require large grants or major restructuring. Begin with one manageable activity: a one-hour virtual idea session, a joint review of a specific well-being challenge (e.g., sleep, recreation, nutrition, visitation), or a small student-supported project. Include staff and incarcerated people as partners throughout the process. Critically, measure success with indicators of well-being so that the pilot reflects the shifted goals of a Better Than Arrival Corrections approach. Choose something that builds trust, demonstrates value, and offers an early win. From there, establish a small cross-institutional group that meets periodically to share knowledge, align goals, and pilot new well-being initiatives over time.

Conclusion

Universities should share responsibility for advancing the well-being of the communities in which they are embedded (Crow & Dabars, 2015). This responsibility should extend especially to communities that are structurally excluded, including people who are incarcerated and the staff who work in correctional facilities. While incarceration separates people from the outside world, that separation is temporary in nearly all cases, and most individuals will eventually return to our communities (Travis, 2001). We should want them to return better than when they left—for their own well-being, for their families, and for the health and safety of our communities. Although this article

has focused primarily on enhancing the well-being of people who are incarcerated, correctional staff play an equally vital role within a Better Than Arrival Corrections approach (e.g., Lovins et al., 2018; Ricciardelli et al., 2023). Staff should also experience enhancement in their well-being over the course of their careers. Empowering and investing in staff, including through university partnerships, can help build a workforce that is more supported, skilled, and resilient. Importantly, a shift toward well-being does not replace the need for evidence. We can change the goals of correctional success, but we should still measure and evaluate progress to ensure that people are, in fact, better than their arrival. We should not discard decades of correctional research—the findings or the methods. We can build upon this foundation with new goals to pursue and new approaches to generating knowledge that embrace diverse ways of knowing (Cullen, 2022).

Most people readily embrace the mantra to "leave things a little better than you found them." It is practical, attainable, cumulative in its impact, and noble in its aspiration. Corrections could adopt this principle by supporting people under supervision so they leave the system better than they entered it, and by empowering staff so they experience growth and flourishing rather than fatigue and depletion. Most importantly, we can redefine our indicator of correctional success at the system level to ensure a legacy of leaving people better than we found them. A reimagined system designed to enhance well-being can draw upon partners like universities, which offer breadth of expertise, capacity for innovation, and infrastructure for collaboration. Better Than Arrival Corrections calls us to create a system in which well-being is expected, cultivated, and the logical and intentional result of our work.

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