

## Post-Carceral Support for Muslim Ex-Inmates

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### Background and Abstract

As prison populations have seen historic rises in the United States since the 70s, so too have the number of individuals needing to re-enter a society that is markedly different from the one they left. Organizations dedicated to assisting the recently-incarcerated transition into society are a relatively recent innovation, known formally as re-entry programs, though they have existed informally for much longer, most notably through faith-based organizations.

**This project seeks to understand the ways that spirituality intersects with the lives of Muslims inmates during and after their imprisonment.**

### Methodology

In order to characterize the experiences of Muslim inmates that are imprisoned, I used essays from the American Prison Writing Archive (APWA), which is the largest and first fully searchable digital archive of non-fiction essays by imprisoned people writing about their experiences.



In order to study the experiences of Muslim ex-inmates following release from prison, I conducted two semi-structured interviews with program coordinators of Islamic re-entry programs. These interviews were transcribed and thematically coded for analysis.

Some of the questions asked include:

- To what extent are Muslim ex-inmates part of their broader religious community?
- What are the greatest barriers to re-entry for Muslims?
- To what extent is faith used in the process of re-entry?

### Results

There were a total of 304 essays from the American Prison Writing Archive that were analyzed. From this, 15 essays were selected for analysis based on relevance.

Table 1. Themes from essays on religion in the APWA

Themes	Description
Accessibility to religious services/accommodations	Individuals described their ranges of experiences seeking halal food substitutes, gaining access to religious services, dressing modestly, and being able to pray.
Religious profiling	Profiling based on outward characteristics that reveal faith identity, most often from correctional facility staff.
Fostering community	Inmates naturally separate into communities, typically by race or religion.
Pursuit of religious knowledge	Individuals describe their processes of seeking religious knowledge in prison, and whether/how it is available to them.
Spirituality as rehabilitation	Becoming religious is self-characterized by authors as evidence of rehabilitation from previous ways of thinking/acting. Often accompanied with religious references to salvation and forgiveness.

Interviews with national re-entry program coordinators (n=2) gave crucial insight into recently incarcerated Muslims' experiences acclimating to society.

Table 2. Themes from semi-structured interviews

Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Re-entry programs have a primary goal of reducing recidivism (i.e. a re-offense upon release from prison) and do so through teaching, mentoring, and reducing stigma around incarceration in religious spaces</li> <li>◦ Services are offered through individualized case-management – some of these services include cash assistance, obtaining official records, job training, and substance abuse counseling</li> <li>◦ Islamic re-entry programs, unlike secular ones, provide significant educational curricula that range from life skills programs to courses on religion and spirituality. Some re-entry programs start this effort before individuals are even released from prison.</li> </ul>

### Interpretation & Conclusions

From a thematic analysis of both the first-hand accounts of spirituality while imprisoned, and interviews on a faith-based re-entry, several conclusions emerge:

- Access to religious material during and after imprisonment is a significant means of rehabilitation and re-entry
- The natural religious communities that form in prison are not formed as readily upon release from prison due to stigma around a criminal record in religious spaces
- Faith-based re-entry programs show great promise as a cost-effective alternative to expensive and ineffective governmental programs

Re-entry has been only recently recognized as a legitimate issue on the national agenda, though religious institutions around the country have remained a fixture in providing support to the recently incarcerated for decades. Current estimates show that while Muslims make up just 2% of the general population, they account for nearly 20% of the prison population. Narrative accounts from Muslim inmates reflect a greater need for recognition and accessibility to religious services, particularly those that provide religious knowledge. Pursuit of religious knowledge reflects a turning point in the rehabilitative process, according to re-entry program coordinators and prisoners themselves. A successful re-entry is most often accompanied by community acceptance, which seems to be lacking in religious community spaces. Regardless, using faith as a motivator in the re-entry process seems to have an overwhelmingly positive effect.

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