American Journal of Orthopsychiatry

Contemplative Practices and the Movement Toward a More Just Criminal Legal System

Daniel W. Grupe, Sophia Diamantis, and Carmen Alonso

Online First Publication, February 17, 2025. https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/ort0000830

CITATION

Grupe, D. W., Diamantis, S., & Alonso, C. (2025). Contemplative practices and the movement toward a more just criminal legal system. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. Advance online publication. https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/ort0000830

American Journal of Orthopsychiatry

https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000830

Contemplative Practices and the Movement Toward a More Just Criminal Legal System

Daniel W. Grupe[1], Sophia Diamantis[2], and Carmen Alonso[3]
[1] Center for Healthy Minds, University of Wisconsin–Madison
[2] Connecticut, United States
[3] Just Mindfulness, LLC, Madison, Wisconsin, United States

What is the role of contemplative practices in the movement toward a more "just" criminal legal system? Over the past 8 years, we have explored this question through parallel lines of research and practice with police officers and incarcerated individuals who, despite very different relationships to this system, are all traumatized by an unjust system that erodes the humanity of all those connected to it. This article integrates our perspectives and critical reflections on this work with qualitative data from three groups we have engaged as research participants and community advisors. First, we share excerpts from semistructured interviews with police officers suggesting that an overemphasis on individual resilience and well-being may limit the extent to which mindfulness practices lead to interpersonal benefits or raise critical awareness of officers' role in an unjust criminal legal system. Second, we share perspectives from community advisors on how future research and training with police officers can be more responsive to community concerns and priorities. Third, after sharing reflections on offering mindfulness practices in prisons, we summarize recommendations from an advisory board of formerly incarcerated individuals on how mindfulness can best support community reentry. To advance justice through contemplative practice and research, our experiences suggest we must be explicit about the ethical framework in which mindfulness practices are offered; bring these practices to individuals and organizations with the capability to influence systems change; and foreground shared humanity above perceived differences for individuals with very different relationships to the criminal legal system.

Public Policy Relevance Statement
The U.S. criminal legal system needs a reimagining in order to address structural racial disparities and an overreliance on incarceration over transformative approaches to achieving justice. This article explores the potential for mindfulness and other contemplative practices to not only promote individual well-being and healing for individual actors in the system but to cultivate community healing, systems change, and more just and equitable outcomes for individuals impacted by this system.

Jeffrey Proulx served as action editor.

Daniel W. Grupe https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4927-7572

This study received funding from the Wisconsin Partnership Program (Grants 5129 and 3086), National Institutes of Health, National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences (Grants UL1TR000427 and UL1TR002373), Mind and Life Institute (awarded to Daniel W. Grupe), National Institute of Mental Health (Grant K01MH117222 awarded to Daniel W. Grupe), National Institute of Justice (Grant 2017-R2-CX-0033 awarded to Daniel W. Grupe), and Institute for Clinical and Translational Research, University of Wisconsin, Madison (awarded to Daniel W. Grupe).

The authors express their deep gratitude to the research participants, community collaborators, and advisors who made this work possible: the University of Wisconsin-Madison Community Advisors on Research Design and Strategies at the Wisconsin Network for Research Support, formerly incarcerated members of the Community Advisory Board, and research participants and collaborators at the Madison Police Department. The authors thank Roxanne Hoks and Molly Grupe for the support with article preparation and critical feedback. The authors publish this work in the memory of the late Cheri Maples, who planted the earliest seeds for this research and whose vision of mindfulness, compassion, and justice continues to inspire the authors' work.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Daniel W. Grupe, Center for Healthy Minds, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 625 West Washington Avenue, Madison, WI 53703, United States. Email: grupe@wisc.edu

The U.S. criminal legal system is built on a foundation of fear, punishment, and retribution. Blackmon (2008), Alexander (2012), Muhammad (2011), and other scholars have lucidly detailed our nation's history of leveraging fear of Black bodies in the name of continuous control over these Black bodies. The through line that connects slavery to convict leasing to Jim Crow to the War on Drugs and the era of mass incarceration has resulted in a present-day reality in which Black adults in the United States are incarcerated at 4.8 times the rate of White adults (Nellis, 2021). Incarceration sears a scarlet letter on those who become ensnared in its web and who subsequently face severe and sometimes lifelong restrictions—dictated by an estimated 45,000 national laws (Miller, 2020)—about where they live, what work they pursue, how they spend their time, who they associate with, and what they are allowed to consume. This system of mass incarceration is in many ways a caste system from which people often cannot escape except through exceptional circumstances and the effects of which ripple through generations and communities.

Narratives of Black criminality, of othering and dehumanization, and of the need for punishment in the name of "public safety" brought this system into existence and allow it to persist. So do socioeconomic and geographical disparities in incarceration rates that keep many White and wealthy people insulated from the harsh realities that many Black, Indigenous, and other marginalized communities know so intimately. Black people in the United States are about four times as likely as White individuals to have an incarcerated family member (Lee et al., 2015), while historical housing policies such as redlining continue to this day, contributing to profound neighborhood-level disparities in incarceration rates (Komp, 2019). The vastness of this system of incarceration and control—which costs taxpayers at least $182 billion annually (Wagner & Rabuy, 2017), which physically incarcerates nearly 2 million people while controlling 3.7 million people on probation and parole (Sawyer & Wagner, 2024), and which has endowed 79 million people with a criminal record (Sawyer & Wagner, 2024)—makes its continued existence seem like an inevitability. Yet it is worth remembering that humans created these systems of punishment and control, and humans can also find ways to reimagine them. This reimagining requires a collective and sustained act of will and effort and a collective recognition that this reimagining is not an act of charity for the benefit of unknown and distant *others*. Our collective well-being and wholeness is wrapped up in the well-being and wholeness of people trapped behind prison walls and held captive by the long shadow of system involvement. As stated by Jared Seide (Kight Witham, 2020), whose work brings diverse individuals impacted by the criminal legal system into council circles with one another, "Everybody is suffering in a system that dehumanizes any of us."

As politicians, activists, legal scholars, directly impacted individuals, and other thought leaders engage in the work of reimagining and recreating this system, we offer here a beginning formulation of an answer to the following questions: What is the role of contemplative practices in the movement toward justice for people impacted by the criminal legal system? How can these practices be most powerfully applied to bring about individual and community healing from suffering and trauma? How can these practices be implemented in a way that helps transform narratives of dehumanization and othering to humanization and belonging?

Article Organization

In the remainder of the introduction section, we provide an explicit statement of what we mean when we are talking about "justice" before introducing our methodological approach to answering these questions and providing a positionality statement. The subsequent sections utilize qualitative data from three different projects with three distinct populations to provide different perspectives on the role of contemplative practices in advancing justice in the criminal legal system. In Mindfulness and Policing: Police Perspectives section, leveraging interview data from police officers who participated in an 8-week mindfulness-based intervention, we suggest that an overemphasis on individual resilience and well-being may limit the extent to which mindfulness practices lead to interpersonal benefits or raise critical awareness of officers' role in an unjust criminal legal system. In Mindfulness and Policing: Community Perspectives section, we share perspectives from community advisors on how future mindfulness research and training with police officers can be more responsive to community concerns and priorities. In Mindfulness With System-Impacted Individuals section, we share lessons learned from offering mindfulness practices to individuals directly impacted by incarceration and summarize recommendations from an advisory board of formerly incarcerated individuals on how mindfulness practices can support those reentering the community following incarceration. Although each section offers a distinct perspective on our larger research questions—owing to the diverse nature of these groups and the specific questions we brought to each group—in the concluding Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Work section, we take a step back, integrating across these projects to offer broad recommendations that we hope will be informative for all researchers and practitioners working at the intersection of contemplative practices and the criminal legal system.

What Is Justice?

In the context of the U.S. criminal legal system, "justice" has become synonymous with a determination of guilt for violations of law and the distribution of punishment to offenders who "get what they deserve" (Zehr, 2005). For most people who have been involved with and impacted by this system—whether they be survivors of violence, perpetrators of harm, or agents of the state—this view of what it means to do justice does not square with their lived experiences of a system that is in many ways fundamentally unjust (leading many scholars and activists to refer, as we do here, to the "criminal legal system" rather than the "criminal justice system"; Bryant, 2021). Zehr (2005), the "grandfather of restorative justice," offered an alternative perspective, writing, "Instead of defining justice as retribution, we will define justice as restoration" (p. 186). Similarly, and writing about justice as a *process* rather than as an *outcome*, Zehr wrote, "To do justice is to make things right" (p. 137).

sujatha baliga, speaking with Wendy Hasenkamp on the Mind and Life podcast (Hasenkamp, n.d.), unpacked these notions of justice in relation to a Buddhist perspective in which many of the practices that we study and offer are grounded:

> Justice, to my mind, looks like healing. And accountability is part of the healing journey. And so wellness, and societal wellness and individual wellness, a promise that this will never happen again. … When I think about justice I think about the word law. I like to think about the word law from a Buddhist perspective—like Dharma is also understood as

> law. And what does that mean? "Dhri" means to hold, right? And so what does it mean to be held to our best selves, or holding society to what we ought to be? … *Justice means that when you have gone astray of those rules, you make things right. You put things right. You make it as it ought to be. And that is your obligation*. Howard Zehr says that crime is a violation of people and interpersonal relationships. Those violations create obligations, and the central obligation is to do right by the folks you've harmed. So, when we've done that, we've done justice.

We embrace these definitions as the starting point for our work. We view justice as an active and dynamic process of making things right; of restoring individuals and relationships and communities that have been broken; of healing historical harms and traumas while also taking steps to ensure that these experiences of harm will not happen again in the future.

Methodological Approach and Positionality Statement

This article explores the potential for contemplative practices to bring about healing and restoration and to make things right that have gone astray, for two groups with very different relationships to the criminal legal system. Over the past 8 years, we have worked with police officers and people who have experienced incarceration in multiple contexts: as research participants, as recipients of contemplative practices, and as community advisors whose lived expertise of the criminal legal system complements our academic and contemplative expertise. This article is in part a perspective piece that draws from our personal experiences, field notes, and reflections from offering practices and conducting research alongside members of these communities. We also utilize transcripts and notes from qualitative interviews with police officers and from meetings with two groups of community advisors, to convey the lived experiences and perspectives of these diverse individuals. We integrate these sources of information in an empirically grounded conceptual article, reflecting critically on "missed opportunities" for our research to advance more just outcomes while offering recommendations (with a great dose of humility) for contemplative researchers and practitioners working to imagine and enact a new system of justice that lives up to its name.

The experiences and data that we have chosen to include, the conclusions we draw from these experiences and data, and the recommendations we offer are all heavily influenced by our identities, training, and lived experiences. Dan is a White, cis male from an upper middle-class background with quantitative academic training in clinical psychology and neuroscience. In his early research with police officers, he began integrating qualitative methods to more effectively develop and assess interventions that are responsive to participants' lived experiences. Having lived in Madison, Wisconsin, for over 15 years, he was for much of this time largely ignorant to the reality that the state and county in which he resides experience some of the worst racial disparities in incarceration rates in the United States (Nellis, 2021; Wisconsin Council on Children & Families, 2013). Sophia is a White, cisgender woman from a middle-class, immigrant-origin background. Her doctoral training was entirely in qualitative methods. Her research interest in mindfulness stemmed from personal practice, and her work on this project was informed by her academic training in curriculum and instruction. Carmen is a White, cis European female from a middle-class background who has been living in the United States for 30 years. She is a clinical psychologist and mindfulness and martial arts instructor who has brought mindfulness practices in and out of research contexts to police officers and those impacted by incarceration for the past 8 years. Of note, we are each PhD-educated, White-identifying, economically secure citizens of the United States conducting academic research on a system that disproportionately impacts marginalized, racially minoritized individuals of lower socioeconomic status. We each attempted to remain aware of blindspots resulting from our shared privileges, but this research is inherently limited by the absence of diverse aspects of identity and direct lived experiences of the criminal legal system. It is precisely because of the limitations of our knowledge and experience that we have made significant efforts (described below) to partner with those directly impacted by policing and incarceration in reorienting our research.

Mindfulness and Policing: Police Perspectives

Background: Why Mindfulness for Police?

Our research on contemplative practices and the criminal legal system was motivated by an email from a local community member who, cognizant of our Center's research on mindfulness practices in diverse populations and settings, suggested that a regular mindfulness practice for police officers "might impact their responses, their lives in and out of work." We received this inquiry in June of 2015, at a time of heightened tension between the police institution and communities of color following high-profile police killings of a slew of unarmed Black men and boys. The previous year had seen nationwide protests in response to the killings of Eric Garner in New York, Michael Brown in Ferguson, and 12-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland, and the Madison community was on edge following the police shooting of an unarmed young Black man, Tony Robinson, in March of 2015. Just a few weeks before we received this email, the Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015) was released with six recommended pillars for police reform. Undergirding many of these recommendations was an emphasis on police officer wellness and safety:

> An officer whose capabilities, judgment, and behavior are adversely affected by poor physical or psychological health not only may be of little use to the community he or she serves but also may be a danger to the community and to other officers. (p. 61)

For the criminal justice system to live up to its name, it is critical to support the well-being of all those involved in this system, not the least of whom include armed police officers tasked with making split-second, life-or-death decisions. For police officers, direct and vicarious exposure to trauma occurs against an ongoing backdrop of chronic organizational stressors, resulting in elevated rates of posttraumatic stress, depression, alcoholism, and suicide (Carleton et al., 2018; Syed et al., 2020). The traditional culture of policing, with esteemed values of masculinity, stoicism, self-sufficiency, and emotional control, discourages help-seeking behavior and encourages maladaptive emotion regulation strategies of avoidance, suppression, or coping through alcohol abuse or other destructive behaviors (Grupe, 2023; Karaffa & Koch, 2016; Rees & Smith, 2008; Tuckey et al., 2012). In the words of the late Cheri Maples (2017), a retired police captain and ordained dharma instructor in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh, "The effects of

doing the job manifest as an armoring and numbing of the heart. It's very hard to be compassionate when those things are going on" (p. 21). Considering the dearth of evidence-based stress management interventions specifically designed for police officers (Patterson et al., 2012), we saw mindfulness-based interventions as responsive both to the significant mental health challenges of this work and the interrelated "armoring and numbing of the heart." Interventions rooted in contemplative practices may provide an antidote to entrenched and often-destructive values of police culture, helping instead to foster an ethos of self-awareness and self-regulation (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012), of interconnection and compassion for shared human suffering (Hutcherson et al., 2008; Kang et al., 2014), of exploration and acceptance of challenging emotions instead of avoidance and emotional control (Lindsay & Creswell, 2017; Thompson & Waltz, 2010).

Successes, and Limitations, of Research on Mindfulness for Police

Over a 4-year period, our team adapted, implemented, and evaluated the impact of an 8-week, police-specific mindfulness training program delivered to nearly 150 police personnel across two studies. Our previous publications demonstrated excellent intervention feasibility, acceptability, and adherence (Grupe, McGehee, et al., 2021) and showed that mindfulness training versus waitlist control resulted in significant improvements in psychological distress, posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms, and subjective sleep quality (Grupe, Stoller, et al., 2021). We view these promising results as a direct reflection of intentional relationship-building with partnering police agencies, careful consideration of barriers and facilitators to research participation, and tailoring of the intervention structure and framework to the culture and context of policing (see Grupe, Smith, & McGehee, 2021). A reflexive and retrospective examination of how we implemented this research and training, however, points to ways in which strategically prioritizing the needs and considerations of our police partners may have limited the overarching goal of promoting greater justice and well-being from a community perspective. For example, the extensive time and energy invested in building trusting relationships with police partners was not matched with equivalent relationship-building efforts with communities disproportionately impacted by policing. In working to establish trust and buy-in with police partners, we emphasized outcomes of greatest importance to these stakeholders while treading lightly around outcomes they may have been perceived as threatening (e.g., aggressive behavior or biased decision making).

Additionally, and of greatest relevance to this article, in developing a mindfulness curriculum that resonated with police culture and priorities, the overarching framework was one that centered individual resilience and practices for working with stress and challenging emotions. Relatively less emphasis was placed on the idea that these practices are offered and received not only (or even primarily) for the benefit of the individual but rather for the benefit of others. Moreover, as we engaged police participants in conversations about work stressors, we failed to explicitly address the biggest elephant in the room—namely, the lack of trust and dehumanization that exists between police institutions and communities of color, the histories of violence and discrimination that underlie these contemporary realities, and the possibility that contemplative practices could play some role in addressing these histories of violence, othering, and mistrust.

Semistructured Police Officer Interview Methods

As an empirical demonstration of the limitations of this approach, we present some findings from a preliminary analysis of interview data collected from participants in our 8-week mindfulness training. This research was approved by our university institutional review board, and all participants completed informed consent prior to interviews. Data analysis was limited to interviews with field officers and sergeants, as a significant portion of these individuals' work involves interactions with members of the public (in contrast to detectives, investigators, and those in leadership roles). The second author interviewed 29 officers and sergeants between 2017 and 2019 who volunteered for optional, 1-hr interviews that were audio-recorded and later transcribed. These semistructured interviews consisted of 10 questions and occurred approximately 1–3 months after participants completed the training. Questions were primarily targeted at asking officers to reflect on the impact of this training and how they were applying practices and knowledge from this training in their work.

Throughout the data collection period, we uploaded interview transcriptions to MAX-QDA, a mixed methods software program. We began by coding any data segments in which police officers spoke about times and ways that they utilized specific practices or concepts from the training or about how they viewed mindfulness as relevant to their work as police officers. As analysis proceeded, we added deductive codes using constructs from the broader mindfulness literature (e.g., othering, perspective-taking, contextualizing). The research team met regularly to discuss understandings. We developed and shared memos and a codebook that detailed analytical conceptualizations linking coding categories and illustrated cross-cutting themes.

Officer Perspectives: What Benefits Do Mindfulness Practices Bring to Policing?

Although data analysis is ongoing, one relevant theme for the present article that has emerged is whether police officers describe mindfulness practices as providing *intrapersonal* versus *interpersonal* benefits. Nearly every participant (26/29) spoke at length about ways in which they had experienced intrapersonal benefits from mindfulness practice. Officers spoke frequently about using practices from the class to calm themselves, to reset or focus the mind at work, and to transition from work into home life. At a deeper level, some officers reflected on how mindfulness transformed the way they relate to their own suffering. A 50-year-old officer, who identified as White and female, described healing from trauma and engaging in inner work needed for greater self-awareness and self-compassion:

> There's lots of ugly heartache, tragedy, horrible stuff and I think one of the ways we learn to deal with it is we become non-emotional. That doesn't mean we don't care, doesn't mean we don't do what we can for victims, we just kind of disassociate or become more like robots … [Mindfulness allows me to] accept that I can have these heavy, bad emotions and it's okay to have that. To kind of make peace with it. Acknowledge that it's there, feel it. Because I'm taking in somebody else's pain and that's okay. That's what life is.

This account and similar reflections from other officers demonstrate how the inner work of mindfulness may provide a foundation

for serving the community with greater awareness, compassion, and care. From the perspective of the mindfulness training, for police officers to serve all community members in a dignified, respectful, and equitable manner, it is critical that they approach each interaction with a clear mind rather than one clouded by what happened on their previous call; that they be alert and rested rather than fatigued and sleep-deprived; that their attention be grounded in the present moment rather than ruminating on the past or worrying about the future; that they have the ability and motivation to reflect with clarity on how they handled situations in the field and what they may have done differently. Certainly, each of these self-focused benefits is important for more just policing outcomes, but we would suggest that these personal benefits are insufficient on their own for achieving such outcomes.

Fewer than half of participants (12/29) moved beyond speaking about the *intrapersonal* benefits of mindfulness practice to speak explicitly about the *interpersonal* benefits of mindfulness in relation to their work. Many of these officers described mindfulness in the context of patrol interactions as transforming the way they related to the suffering of others. For example, a 40-year-old Latina officer drew on her experience with mindfulness to recognize her own emotions, become more curious about these emotions, and translate this process of emotional awareness and inquiry to understand others' actions as potentially being rooted in experiences of suffering:

> It's about learning to be in the present, to hear what really is happening, instead of letting all this noise get to you. Like, for example, at work, people frustrate me, but are they frustrating me or am I frustrated because I don't understand what they're saying, or can't relate to what they're saying or feeling? [Mindfulness] clears the space so you can see what it is you have in front of you. If I feel sad, why am I feeling sad? If I feel empty, why am I feeling empty? If I have somebody yelling in my face, are they just being [a jerk] or what is hurting them?

These data demonstrate how mindfulness can facilitate more humanizing and empathic interactions in the community. In other examples, however, the outcome of utilizing mindfulness practices in interpersonal interactions was not always accompanied by increased curiosity, empathy, and humanization. A 52-year-old White male officer, in responding to a question about when he brought mindfulness into his work, described using breathing techniques to keep his composure, deescalate a fight, and achieve the "best outcome." This "best outcome," however, was not related to avoiding a citation or arrest for the community member but rather to gain a tactical advantage over a challenging situation. He described returning the next day in daylight to issue a citation and ultimately make an arrest without the potentially negative optics of confronting this individual in front of a large crowd (which may have been amplified by the layered gender dynamics of this interaction):

> The very next day—and we were very calm in the way that we presented it, and all I was going to do was present her with a citation for disorderly conduct from the night before—and she tried to, the language came out and god, what did she say to me? Something like, "Get the [expletive] out of my face you [expletive]. I hope you die, [expletive]," or something like that came out of her mouth all in one stream. So not only did she get the—but she refused to talk to us, wouldn't take the ticket and tried to walk away from us when we were trying to issue more tickets, so based on that we ended up having to make the physical arrest on her and then she got additional charges for that resisting.

To us, this exchange reveals how mindfulness practices can be misused on patrol as a tool for compliance or to gain strategic and tactical advantages. In this case, the officer used mindful breathing to deescalate in the moment, not so that he could help this individual avoid a citation or identify the root causes underlying her distress, but so he could regain the upper hand in a situation he perceived as spinning out of control. Although this is one isolated example, it nonetheless illuminates the potential harm of offering mindfulness practices to police officers absent an intentional and explicit ethical framing.

Throughout these interviews, even in cases when officers spoke to the interpersonal benefits of mindfulness, their descriptions largely positioned interactions in isolation of the larger social context of their work. This absence of critical inquiry, in the words of Walsh (2016), "reduce[s] mindfulness to a set of practices that support dominant ideologies and values … [and] sacrifice[s] the opportunity to conceive and practice mindfulness according to alternative values toward different goals, such as … social and economic justice" (pp. 160–161).

In a rare few cases (3/29 participants), however, police officers saw value in a systemic level of analysis in speaking to how mindfulness practices could facilitate bringing a critical perspective to unjust systems and officers' role as participants in these systems. These officers' responses indicated that mindfulness can support reflection on their role within the police institution and the role of police in society. In particular, a 26-year-old White male officer reflected on the need for both officer reactivity and reflexivity and its connection to mindfulness:

> I mean there's an extent to which we have to have rote mechanical automatic reactions to things, but I think that when we're able to expand our consciousness of what we're doing, and sort of our role in the greater context, that's better.

When asked directly about practicing mindfulness without awareness of the wider social context of police work, another officer (a 28-year-old White male) spoke to the potential for greater impact:

Interviewer: Is it problematic that the mindfulness training was delivered without addressing these issues that are informing a lot of the stress?

Participant: It might be that I don't remember them being brought up ahead of time, but my impression is that you were my first interaction with the mindfulness program that has specifically addressed the social narrative as a stressor. So, it wasn't problematic in the sense that it was ignorant of that, of the linkage between the two, I wasn't thinking of the mindfulness program in the context of the wider big stressors. So I wouldn't say it's problematic in the sense that I was thinking it was going to address those and it failed to do so, I guess I would flip that and say that I think it's possible that, done correctly, it could be even more beneficial were it to do so.

Interviewer: So kind of like maybe a missed opportunity?

Participant: Yes, yeah.

Without long-term, large-scale, causal data on the impact of mindfulness training on real-world policing outcomes, it is impossible to know (and it would be irresponsible to speculate) whether this strategy can appreciably move the needle on the types of reactive and maladaptive behaviors that can result from unmitigated occupational stress and trauma. It may well be the case that proximal changes in qualities like self-awareness, self-regulation, compassion for self and others, and radical acceptance of challenging emotions may mitigate the impact of stressors on deleterious police officer behavior—or maybe not. Rather than waiting to find out, one implication of these interviews is that mindfulness researchers and practitioners working with police officers should consider carefully not just the *content* of mindfulness training but the broader societal *context* in which these practices are delivered and how that context informs the ethical framework underlying their delivery. We return to this idea in the concluding section.

Mindfulness and Policing: Community Perspectives

Our randomized controlled trial of mindfulness training for police officers concluded at the end of 2019, and we were in the midst of data analysis when Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd on May 25, 2020, just months after the killing of Breonna Taylor by Louisville police on March 13, 2020. As communities across the United States rose up against these shocking (and at the same time, somehow unsurprising) events—and as the context for this research shifted seismically under our feet—we spent time reflecting critically on the assumptions, motivations, and strategic decisions that had guided our research over the past 4 years. In particular, Dan—the principal investigator of this research—came to realize that in keeping a safe distance from what might be perceived as overtly political or controversial outcomes and topics, he had been laboring under the false assumption that this approach allowed him to conduct this research in a "neutral" manner, as an unbiased scientist objectively reporting the results of a real-world experiment. The events of the summer of 2020 served to shatter this myth of objectivity and third-person impartiality for research involving human beings who exist in the real world. We affect the outcomes of our science through the frames and lenses we bring to the world—lenses shaped by our upbringing, our race, our cultural norms and values, and our education. The questions that we ask (and do not ask), the relationships we develop, and the interactions we have with participants and other community members who are affected by this work will all have an influence on what we ultimately conclude to be "true."

Approach to Community Stakeholder Engagement

Through this period of critical reflection, we began asking different questions, fostering richer and more diverse relationships, and seeking out new interactions that would allow us to focus our research on mindfulness and policing through a different lens. We received funding to convene advisory groups of Madison community members to offer a different perspective on how research and training on mindfulness for police officers could be responsive to community concerns and priorities. In the Fall of 2022 and Spring of 2023, we convened two meetings with the Community Advisors on Research Design and Strategies, a standing advisory board facilitated by the Wisconsin Network for Research Support at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The first meeting included eight community advisors between the ages of 22–67 (eight women; seven Black, one White/Hispanic). The second meeting included an independent group of nine community advisors between the ages of 24–79 (five women, four men; seven Black, two White/non-Hispanic). As "preparatory to research" activities, these advisory meetings were determined to be exempt from institutional review board review, with questions focused on advisors' views and beliefs about our team's research rather than their personal and personally identifiable experiences.

In each of these 2-hr Zoom meetings, Dan presented an overview of prior research to contextualize a group discussion around questions that included:

- Could mindfulness training for police officers be part of a solution for reform? (*Meeting 1*)
- What are the benefits and costs of dedicating more time, attention, and resources to this research? (*Meeting 1*)
- Can training in mindfulness and related practices positively impact community well-being? (*Meeting 2*)
- How do we move from inner work with individual officers to changes at the level of systems and communities? (*Meeting 2*)

Community Perspectives on Mindfulness and Policing: Four Takeaways

Based on our meeting notes and a summary report provided by Community Advisors on Research Design and Strategies meeting facilitators (which included direct transcribed quotes), we identified four main takeaways that inform our approach to future research on mindfulness and policing.

First, advisory members overwhelmingly saw this training to be of personal benefit for police officers. They acknowledged the challenges of police work and saw mindfulness training as a positive way for police to manage this stress and prevent spillover of stress and trauma from work into officers' personal lives. Advisors also identified potential indirect benefits for community well-being, offering that this training could combat a "high-strung, not-so-welcoming vibe," and that with "a minute, a time to pause and assess the situation," mindfulness training could contribute to a calmer situation and less impulsive action. One group member saw the potential for cascading positive benefits in police–community interactions, suggesting that, "If I get used to police responding to a situation and trying to diffuse it versus react, *I* am less likely to react." In these ways, community members saw the potential for mindfulness training with police officers to have ripple effects resulting in more just outcomes in the community.

Second, these community advisors placed important caveats on these *potential* benefits. Several individuals discussed conditions that must be in place to ensure officers prioritize this training and authentically engage in practices. In the words of one advisor:

> It is not different than racial bias training. You have to have a commitment in your heart, not just to your job, but to be there. … You have to feel this in your spirit and soul to embody these things.

Beyond the initial training, advisors asked what ongoing support would allow officers to continue engaging in mindfulness practice, suggesting a peer support model may be an effective strategy.

Advisors also recommended collecting long-term follow-up data to measure the sustained impact of this training: "It's one thing to do an isolated research study, but how would we know this has made a significant difference over time? What is the long-term way to measure the outcomes?" A meta-inference we made from this community input is that future research must utilize experimental designs and outcomes allowing for conclusions regarding the sustained and causal effects of this training at individual, institutional, and community levels.

Third, there was broad skepticism that an individual-focused training could make a meaningful difference for community well-being in the absence of accompanying systemic and structural changes within the police institution. Community advisors suggested that practicing nonjudgmental awareness and bringing a "mindful pause" to interactions could run counter to the training that officers receive in the academy to react quickly and with muscle memory. Advisors expressed skepticism that mindfulness training could have any impact on changing the behavior of individual racist police officers, or that it could affect institutional racism. Moreover, advisors questioned how individual efforts to incorporate mindfulness practice into their work could overcome institutional factors that fail to support officer well-being: "If that institutional structure is not there, it is going to kill you, kill that joy you have to make things better … they will just burn out." There was strong support for the notion of embedding mindfulness throughout the entire institution—including at supervisory and leadership levels—and for integration of mindfulness practices into the police training academy. This early introduction could have buffering effects for police officer well-being throughout their careers, promote strategic integration of awareness practices with other skills and knowledge, and (over time) promote a cultural shift in how police officers respond to their own suffering and that of community members. It remains an empirical question whether such an initiative could affect the many other important cultural and systemic changes community advisors spoke to: emphasizing de-escalation over force; replacing a "Do as I say" attitude with skills of deep listening and mindful communication; and bringing a degree of gender balance to the police institution by hiring more women and promoting them into leadership roles.

Fourth, community advisors cautioned that research in this area that fails to address community concerns and priorities would run the risk of incurring significant costs for the community as a whole. One concern voiced was that without accountability and measurable results, the introduction of mindfulness training could detract from meaningful reform efforts: "The department can just say, 'We are doing mindfulness now; our officers are trained to slow down'. … Then it just becomes a checklist item." From this individual's perspective, mindfulness training might be used as justification by a police agency to maintain the status quo, rather than addressing organizational and cultural factors that fail to support officer or community well-being. Others raised concerns about the opportunity costs of further research in this area, such as limited researcher time and effort: "We are at a state institution with the highest level of researchers and I would love to see that [researcher] talent go elsewhere."

Consistently, and in multiple ways, advisory members raised the question of who else might benefit from receiving these practices and whether the community would benefit more from a direct investment of resources, rather than receiving the indirect effects of training provided to police. For example, "There are other ways to invest money and resources that would benefit officers and community members," and, "As an individual there is a cost to get [mindfulness] training, and most of your community cannot afford it," and, "If the community was more aware, it would be better for the police officers as well," and, "There is a generation of kids who have grown up with a lot of fear [of the police]. So how do we teach them these skills too?"

Mindfulness With System-Impacted Individuals

Bringing Mindfulness to *Currently* Incarcerated Individuals: A Practitioner Perspective

These final quotes reflect the clearest and most direct message from our meetings with community advisors: If the intention is to leverage mindfulness practices to improve community well-being and bring about greater justice, we must bring these practices *directly* to community members who are negatively impacted by the criminal legal system. Indeed, independent of our research on mindfulness and policing, Carmen has been offering mindfulness practices to residents of several men's prisons in Wisconsin. This has included groups in the general population and restrictive housing units, one-on-one individualized instruction with men who are interested in deepening their meditation practice, and the Path of Freedom curriculum, a manualized mindfulness, emotional intelligence, and conflict resolution curriculum developed by Kate Crisp and Fleet Maull. Although this work has not involved formal data collection, the 8 years that Carmen has been engaged in this work have helped elucidate benefits and barriers to offering mindfulness in the prison setting. While acknowledging this is the personal perspective of one individual—one that is shaped by the specific experiences and identity she brings to this work—we share this perspective as it has been invaluable in informing our research approach and is likely to be similar informative for other researchers.

Regardless of the specific program being offered, Carmen experiences a deep sense of humility, gratitude, and inspiration as she leaves the prison. Although individuals naive to this work may assume offering mindfulness practices in this way involves a one-way transfer of information, she has come to learn that those inside prisons have much to teach us, so long as we show up ready to listen. In each of the ways she has offered these practices, she has found them to land on fertile ground among incarcerated men who have a deep yearning for change, for rehabilitation, for feeling whole and healthy, and for finding redemption. Many of the men she has met want to be liberated from guilt, shame, or blame for their past actions, and most know in their minds that they are "more than the worst thing [they've] ever done" (Stevenson, 2015, p. 17). In Carmen's experience, mindfulness offers a critical and missing piece to rehabilitative approaches that focus solely on changing thoughts and beliefs, as it can support individuals in coming to *embody* these beliefs.

Although this work has transformative potential, Carmen has found offering mindfulness practices to incarcerated individuals to be complicated by two factors. First, the invitation for these individuals to practice radical self-acceptance, and to see themselves as more than the worst thing they have done, can be undermined by correctional policies, practices, and employees that still see them as *only* the worst thing they have ever done. Men in the mindfulness groups have expressed deep frustration that despite the changes they have made throughout years of incarceration, "the system" continues to see them

as dangerous criminals owing to violent crimes that took place 30 or more years prior. Mindfulness interventions are representative of a movement away from deficit-oriented correctional programming that focuses on mitigating negative cognitions or so-called "criminal behavior," while failing to acknowledge that "many of these behaviors may in fact result from individuals seeking to survive in a world that has not handed out opportunity fairly and equitably" (Pettus et al., 2021, p. 415). Yet this movement toward cultivating well-being rather than treating deficits remains in its infancy, and it is challenging (to say the least) to cultivate well-being and self-compassion in a dehumanizing correctional environment.

A second barrier Carmen has encountered in supporting incarcerated individuals through mindfulness practices is the severe and nearly universal history of trauma that most individuals experienced prior to their incarceration, which continues unabated in the traumatizing prison environment (Davis, 2023; Karlsson & Zielinski, 2020). In new groups, Carmen often introduces the Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire and asks residents to tally how many unique adverse events they have experienced. The men share their number with the group—they invariably report between six and 10 Adverse Childhood Experiences—before Carmen introduces a "Just Like Me" compassion practice. As participants speak about their shared lived experiences and practice compassion for themselves and one another, Carmen notes a shared sacredness in the room, moments that feel ripe with the possibility for individual and community healing. And yet, difficulties abound when offering trauma-sensitive mindfulness practices in this environment. Although the recognition of trauma and its impact may feel liberating to some, the severity and immensity of unintegrated trauma for many of these individuals is profound, and not all participants are ready to engage in this work. Carmen is a trained clinical psychologist, but not all teachers entering into this space come with this clinical perspective; moreover, it may be risky to invite people to process traumatic histories not knowing what support they will have to continue processing this trauma outside of the group. Another difficulty is the frequent presence of correctional officers in the room, which limits what participants can safely share.

Bringing Mindfulness to *Formerly* Incarcerated Individuals: A Community-Engaged Approach

These experiences and insights about the potential of contemplative practices for supporting well-being and transformative change—as well as the barriers to offering these practices in an often chaotic, traumatizing, and dehumanizing prison environment—have motivated us to launch a new program of research on how contemplative practices can support well-being and mental health during the transition from incarceration back into the community. We are developing a curriculum based on a framework that emphasizes four distinct pillars of well-being: awareness, connection, insight, and purpose (Dahl et al., 2020). Although this research is still at an early stage of development, we write here about key principles guiding research with the explicit goal of not just improving individual well-being but working toward justice—that is, restoring something that has become broken at the individual, relational, and community level.

From the outset of this research, we have utilized a community-engaged and participatory approach (Gordon da Cruz, 2017; Minkler, 2005), engaging those with lived experiences of incarceration as core members of our research team. We view our research with police officers as a case study of how research with the potential to promote greater justice has not yet realized that potential, which we attribute in large part to a lack of community input in the early stages of this work. As we began this new program of research, this "missed opportunity" motivated us to immediately engage a community organization that provides advocacy and services for people during the reentry transition. We have written elsewhere about the sustained process of relationship-building that allowed us to develop an equitable and trust-based partnership with this organization and formerly incarcerated individuals in the community (Cohen et al., 2024). Through this significant (and ongoing) investment of time and resources, we continue to build a foundation for research that is equitable rather than extractive, that recognizes and lifts up authentic expertise that exists outside of the academy, and that is grounded in an asset-based understanding (rather than deficit narratives) of the communities with which we are working (Gordon da Cruz, 2017).

At the center of our emerging research on mindfulness during reentry is a community advisory board, consisting of (and co-facilitated by) people with lived experiences of incarceration and reentry. This board has offered critical, often challenging perspectives that have led us to rethink how a mindfulness offering can be most impactful and feasible during the reentry transition. In the remainder of this section, we draw on quotes from advisory board meetings to illustrate our emerging understanding of how this research can best serve its intended purpose of greater justice for those with lived experiences of the carceral system. Advisory board members completed informed consent prior to meetings, and this research was approved by our university institutional review board.

Stakeholder Perspectives on Implementing Mindfulness Programming After Incarceration

In early advisory meetings, our initial plan to offer a multiple-session, standalone mindfulness curriculum in the early postrelease period was questioned. There was consensus among community advisors that, despite the perceived benefits of a mindfulness practice, it is unrealistic to ask people to engage in activities that don't address their immediate needs during a period of transition, chaos, and competing demands. As one advisor, a mother of two, shared:

> Coming out the door, wanting to do all these things to take care of myself, mentally and emotionally, you know, were priorities, but then—responsibilities. And not having resources to take care of those responsibilities. So then all the anxiety and the fear and the frustration, especially with kids, you know, set in real quick. … With no car, and no job, and needing to go to the probation office and do all these appointments and slide in mindfulness somewhere and get a ride there too, and get picked up—I don't see that as being realistic. … So I don't see myself making commitments that are eight weeks long, you know, eight weeks to take care of myself, if I can't even go to, like, a doctor appointment.

Similarly, from another middle-aged father and grandfather:

> First coming home, I had a lot to do, you know. I have two sons, who are now 23 and 24. … I had two grandkids that I hadn't even met yet. … It was just like, a lot of stuff just going on, a lot of stuff. So, while mindfulness would have been extremely helpful, I just didn't really feel that I had that time to slow down.

A third community advisor echoed this sentiment:

> I mean, you're trying to get your … life together. You're trying to get work, you're trying to get a roof over your head, you're trying to get transportation. For an eight-week commitment here, yeah … it almost seems like one of those things that could be distracting.

One suggestion that emerged in subsequent dialogue with our advisors was to embed a mindfulness curriculum within existing reentry programs and services operating in the community, potentially training peers at these organizations with lived experiences to be involved in offering these practices. Another nonmutually exclusive suggestion was to partner with correctional agencies to introduce mindfulness practices prior to release:

> There's no way someone's going to come from prison, and just start doing mindfulness … because so much is on their mind. But if someone has the practice and realizes that everything that's on my mind is going to be easier for me if I just do a practice every day. But people, individuals would need to learn that inside [prison].

Another advisor emphasized this point and offered a vision for connecting individuals to an outside community of practice as part of reentry planning:

> Could you imagine if we were [practicing mindfulness] together inside [prisons], right, and then when people come out there's already this connection to the group from the inside to the out. … And then when I come home, it's what I call a soft landing. I know that because Tuesday's when people get released, maybe it's Wednesday, you know, this is what I'm going through, I have it on my calendar. So. … I start the practice, or continue the practice, in a seamless way.

While some of these details are specific to the context of offering mindfulness practices to formerly incarcerated individuals, there is a larger generalizable point for any researchers seeking to advance justice by offering contemplative practices. Namely, when we consider who is in the room and who isn't in the room for these offerings, those not in the room are *not* "missing at random." When we as researchers fail to directly engage people with lived experiences to identify real-world barriers and facilitators to participation in research, we can develop what might be the greatest and most impactful intervention in the world, but it will fail to reach the people who need it most. As a result, we will continue to exacerbate historical inequities regarding who gets to benefit from these practices. When, on the other hand, we engage those with lived expertise of the issue at hand in identifying challenges and solutions, we can develop and implement contemplative offerings that reach those who otherwise would be excluded.

Stakeholder Perspectives on Community, Healing, and Justice

Another generalizable lesson our community advisors have brought home is the necessity of offering these practices in an established, safe, and trusted community of peers. The inner work of healing and justice relies on this foundation of community to hold the collective suffering that can emerge when people with significant histories of pain and trauma begin to turn toward, rather than away from, those experiences:

> The piece that, like, really sticks out for me … is the family piece. That word doesn't show up a whole lot in research in academia and thinking about doing this kind of work. … For me, the family piece … that's how we move, and it works. … And I think it's the only way it's going to work because it's gonna get difficult, things is gonna get hard. It's hard work. It's heavy, it's traumatic. So it's necessary to be able to have people in your family that you can lean on, get insight with. One of the reasons why I've been decent since I've come home is because I got people to lean on. I don't even want to imagine trying to walk this walk and do this work without people to lean on.

After spending a half-day in practice together, multiple members of our advisory board reported back on the profound differences they experienced between practicing mindfulness alone and with a community of peers:

> Being in a setting with community and peers who have the same experiences I do, listening to everybody share about how they [practice], how it helps them, and being in a safe space with my peers is so much more impactful [than practicing alone].

And:

> While I [practice mindfulness] at home daily … being in a setting with my community, and peers who have the same lived experience I do, and listening to everybody share about how they do it, how it helps them, was just so much more impactful. Being in that safe space with my peers just had a really profound impact on me.

For people with shared experiences of trauma, the work of healing is not an individual act but a collective one (Chioneso et al., 2020). Intentionally creating, in the words of another community advisor, a "safe space for those with post-incarceration trauma to come together and heal" is a prerequisite, a foundational step, for allowing individuals to engage in the inner work of justice—it cannot be an afterthought.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Work

Integrating across our work with police officers and system-impacted individuals, we conclude by offering three generalizable considerations for researchers and practitioners motivated to explore the role of mindfulness and other contemplative practices in bringing about a "more just" criminal legal system.

Consideration 1: What Is the Ethical Framework Underlying Contemplative Interventions?

First, we must think carefully about the ethical perspective from which these practices are offered and be explicit in signaling this perspective to those who receive the practices. We write above about the framework guiding prior work with police officers that emphasized resilience and strategies for managing stress and challenging emotions, a largely individualistic framework that was mirrored by many officers' descriptions of how they brought these practices into their work. The absence of an explicit, overarching ethical framework for why police officers might engage in mindfulness practice does *not* mean these practices were offered and received in a neutral manner. When mindfulness is introduced in an individualistic, capitalistic, White- and male-dominated Western context, it is those values that infuse the practice. If system actors view the inner work of self-awareness and emotion regulation as the end goal—rather than a waypoint on a longer journey of individual, relational, and social transformation—these individuals will, in the words of Walsh (Walsh, 2016):

> Reduce mindfulness to a private practice without social impact, used primarily for daily maintenance, emotional regulation, and self-improvement. … In *The Guardian*, Moore (2014) warns that, "This neutered, apolitical approach is to help us personally — it has nothing to say on the structural difficulties that we live with. It lets go of the idea that we can change the world; it merely helps us function better in it." (pp. 158–159)

To serve and protect is a phrase that has become synonymous with the police profession, and this ethic of service is what leads many to choose this career. These words may provide an effective foundation for the earliest introduction of mindfulness and other contemplative practices for police officers or for those in other service-oriented professions. These practices are likely to land quite differently if they are framed as serving the primary role of supporting of our own well-being versus cultivating skills that allow us to "serve and protect" *others* to the best of our ability, whether on the job or in our lives outside of work. The practice of mindfulness affords us with skills and stamina that empower us to labor on behalf of others who are close to us, on behalf of others experiencing oppression and victimization, and even on behalf of those who stand in opposition to us (Kaur, 2020). We can and must introduce awareness practices as foundational work for more "advanced" practices that allow one to work with the reactivity and judgment that arise when encountering difficult and oppositional individuals or those who are perceived as other-than. Greater awareness and compassion for our own suffering opens our eyes to the suffering of others around us, as Maples (2017) reported experiencing in her work as a Madison Police Department officer after adopting a regular mindfulness practice:

> What I started to see is what was right in front of me, which I seemed to have missed with the other attitude: a suffering human being who needed my help and often didn't have any place else to turn. (p. 22)

Consideration 2: Maximizing Intervention Impact Through Careful Identification of End Users

The goal of advancing justice at multiple socioecological levels calls for intentionality about which organizations, and which individuals within those organizations, these practices are introduced to. For those seeking to build bridges between the seemingly incompatible worlds of contemplative practice/scholarship and law enforcement, one would be wise to heed the advice of john a. powell, founder of the Berkeley Othering and Belonging Institute, who suggests we start by "building short bridges." Our "short bridge" in bringing mindfulness practices into policing was the Madison Police Department, an agency notable for its adoption of innovative and progressive policing practices (Couper & Lobitz, 1991). Seeds for this work had been planted a generation earlier by the trailblazing Cheri Maples, who (in the face of great internal opposition) brought mindfulness practices to the department in her role as Captain of Training in the early 2000s. Within receptive organizations, we have learned it is critical to work in both bottom-up and top-down ways. Our previous research has largely engaged rank-and-file officers, which allowed us to identify internal champions who helped grow this work in organic ways. In addition, we have come to appreciate the critical importance of engaging those in leadership positions who can influence organizational priorities, policies, and practices. Securing buy-in that is grounded in an embodied understanding of these practices is critical for the sustained and integrated implementation of mindfulness practices throughout organizations, which is a necessary step in exploring the potential of these practices for influencing organizational justice.

This intentionality also extends to working with individuals impacted by incarceration. Although contemplative practices can potentially benefit many system-impacted individuals, we are being intentional at this early stage to consider how engaging specific individuals affected by incarceration might have "ripple effects" throughout their respective communities and networks. As we have cultivated relationships with community organizations working in support of system-impacted individuals—organizations that employ and in some cases are led by those with lived experiences of incarceration—we have learned how essential those with lived experiences are in promoting successful outcomes for their peers as they return to the community. One way to amplify the impact of our work is by developing mindfulness offerings for peer support specialists with lived experiences of incarceration. These practices can bolster their resilience and stamina as they engage in challenging and sometimes retraumatizing work and allow them to cultivate the self-compassion and insight needed to know when to step back from this work. By introducing mindfulness practices to individuals who have existing relationships with the "end users" we hope to support through our work, we are planting seeds that we hope will grow into peer-facilitated mindfulness practices, delivered with authenticity and grounded in relationship.

Consideration 3: Leveraging the Bridging Potential of Contemplative Practices

Finally, we encourage all those working toward healing and justice to explore opportunities for contemplative practices to play a part in healing not just within but across communities experiencing brokenness and injustice. To date, we have mainly offered mindfulness practices *within* different communities (i.e., police officers and system-impacted individuals) who have distinct perspectives and experiences of the trauma and harm that is being enacted by a deeply unjust criminal legal system. We see the potential, however, for contemplative practices to create a container and a bridge for deep, vulnerable, and ultimately healing conversations that foreground shared experiences of trauma and shared humanity above perceived differences. One community advisor from the Community Advisors on Research Design and Strategies group suggested that engaging in shared practice with police officers could bring about the possibility of deepening relationships:

> I think mindfulness on both sides would be a great opportunity for them to build a relationship. … Put it into the community centers and participate with the community … if it works for [police officers], it got to work for the community. I think that would be a good introduction, for not only the police, but the community as well, especially the youth.

After hearing excerpts from interviews with police officers, another community advisor reflected on shared experiences of fear in police-community interactions:

> I think one thing that really struck me is the police are just as scared as we are when we get stopped. So we become opponents of fear coming at each other. … How do you break that down so there can be talk and resolution?

A third advisor offered that shared mindfulness experiences could allow community members and police officers to engage in dialogue and inquiry around shared experiences of fear and trauma—while acknowledging that these shared experiences are rooted in vastly different social realities—with the possibility for greater humanizing to result:

> It could be a leveling kind of thing, because my guess is that police, despite the power that they have, that they are carrying their own fear … . When we all acknowledge the fear that we have in our interactions through possibly a mindfulness practice, there is a lot of shared humanity in that experience.

We see in the work of others the potential for contemplative practices to ground and create space for difficult yet restorative dialogues between those who are often cast as opponents by the criminal legal system. Jared Seide and the work of Beyond Us & Them involves council practice, a circle-based process grounded in mindfulness and compassion practice and restorative justice, with a wide variety of system actors (police officers, incarcerated individuals, correctional officers). Engaging each of these groups in the same process in parallel prepares individuals from these groups to then come together around the shared experience of council. Similarly, through the Mindful Flint Initiative, police officers and Black community members from Flint, Michigan, are taking part in separate mindfulness skills training programs before coming together for a day of shared practice and dialogue. In her restorative justice work, sujatha baliga offers mindfulness practices as a foundation for restorative dialogues between individuals who have caused and experienced harm—dialogues that rely on deep awareness, compassion, and empathy to succeed. We are inspired by these examples that motivate us to work toward developing an evidence base for the potential of contemplative practices to advance justice, healing, and transformation for individuals and communities who have been torn apart by a traumatizing and dehumanizing system.

Keywords: mindfulness, incarceration, police, healing, community-engaged research

References

Alexander, M. (2012). *The New Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness* (Rev. ed.). The New Press.

Blackmon, D. A. (2008). *Slavery by another name: The re-enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*. Doubleday.

Bryant, E. (2021). *Why we say "criminal legal system," not "criminal justice system."* Vera Institute of Justice. https://www.vera.org/news/why-we-say-criminal-legal-system-not-criminal-justice-system

Carleton, R. N., Afifi, T. O., Turner, S., Taillieu, T., Duranceau, S., LeBouthillier, D. M., Sareen, J., Ricciardelli, R., MacPhee, R. S., Groll, D., Hozempa, K., Brunet, A., Weekes, J. R., Griffiths, C. T., Abrams, K. J., Jones, N. A., Beshai, S., Cramm, H. A., Dobson, K. S., … Asmundson, G. J. G. (2018). Mental disorder symptoms among public safety personnel in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, *63*(1), 54–64. https://doi.org/10.1177/0706743717723825

Chioneso, N. A., Hunter, C. D., Gobin, R. L., McNeil Smith, S., Mendenhall, R., & Neville, H. A. (2020). Community healing and resistance through storytelling: A framework to address racial trauma in Africana communities. *Journal of Black Psychology*, *46*(2–3), 95–121. https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798420929468

Cohen, T. R., Reece, K., Hicks, A., Mejchar, D., Alonso, C., Cooper, A., Koenigs, M., & Grupe, D. W. (2024). *The "best of both worlds": Building a community-academic partnership for research with legal system-impacted individuals*. OSF. https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/9xkzp

Couper, D. C., & Lobitz, S. H. (1991). *Quality policing: The Madison experience*. Police Executive Research Forum. https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/quality-policing-madison-experience

Dahl, C. J., Wilson-Mendenhall, C. D., & Davidson, R. J. (2020). The plasticity of well-being: A training-based framework for the cultivation of human flourishing. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, *117*(51), 32197–32206. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2014859117

Davis, A. (2023). *Understanding men, trauma, and cycles of violence*. Impact Justice. https://impactjustice.org/men-masculinity-trauma-cycles-violence/

Gordon da Cruz, C. (2017). Critical community-engaged scholarship: Communities and universities striving for racial justice. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *92*(3), 363–384. https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2017.1324661

Grupe, D. W. (2023). Mental health stigma and help-seeking intentions in police employees. *Journal of Community Safety & Well-Being*, *8*(Suppl. 1), S32–S39. https://doi.org/10.35502/jcswb.290

Grupe, D. W., McGehee, C., Smith, C., Francis, A. D., Mumford, J. A., & Davidson, R. J. (2021). Mindfulness training reduces PTSD symptoms and improves stress-related health outcomes in police officers. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, *36*(1), 72–85. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11896-019-09351-4

Grupe, D. W., Smith, C., & McGehee, C. (2021). Introducing mindfulness training and research into policing: Strategies for successful implementation. In E. P. Arble & B. B. Arnetz (Eds.), *Interventions, training, and technologies for improved police well-being and performance* (pp. 125–149). IGI Global. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-6820-0.ch007

Grupe, D. W., Stoller, J. L., Alonso, C., McGehee, C., Smith, C., Mumford, J. A., Rosenkranz, M. A., & Davidson, R. J. (2021). The impact of mindfulness training on police officer stress, mental health, and salivary cortisol levels. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*, Article 720753. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.720753

Hasenkamp, W. (n.d.). *sujatha baliga—Healing through restorative justice* (Broadcast). Retrieved May 14, 2024, from https://podcast.mindandlife.org/sujatha-baliga/

Hutcherson, C. A., Seppala, E. M., & Gross, J. J. (2008). Loving-kindness meditation increases social connectedness. *Emotion*, *8*(5), 720–724. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0013237

Kang, Y., Gray, J. R., & Dovidio, J. F. (2014). The nondiscriminating heart: Lovingkindness meditation training decreases implicit intergroup bias. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, *143*(3), 1306–1313. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0034150

Karaffa, K. M., & Koch, J. M. (2016). Stigma, pluralistic ignorance, and attitudes toward seeking mental health services among police officers. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, *43*(6), 759–777. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854815613103

Karlsson, M. E., & Zielinski, M. J. (2020). Sexual victimization and mental illness prevalence rates among incarcerated women: A literature review. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, *21*(2), 326–349. https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838018767933

Kaur, V. (2020). *See no stranger: A memoir and manifesto of revolutionary love*. One World.

Kight Witham, H. (2020). The power of story: Jared Seide on how listening to each other can restore our humanity. *The Sun Magazine*. https://www.thesunmagazine.org/issues/534/the-power-of-story

Komp, C. (2019). *Mapping projects show lasting impact of redlining, racial covenants in Virginia*. Virginia Public Media. https://www.vpm.org/listen/2019-07-29/mapping-projects-show-lasting-impact-of-redlining-racial-covenants-in-virginia

Lee, H., McCormick, T., Hicken, M. T., & Wildeman, C. (2015). Racial inequalities in connectedness to imprisoned indivduals in the United

States. *Du Bois Review*, *12*(2), 269–282. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X15000065

Lindsay, E. K., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). Mechanisms of mindfulness training: Monitor and Acceptance Theory (MAT). *Clinical Psychology Review*, *51*, 48–59. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2016.10.011

Maples, C. (2017). *Mindfulness and the police*. The Mindfulness Bell. https://www.parallax.org/mindfulnessbell/article/mindfulness-and-the-police/

Miller, R. J. (2020). *How thousands of American laws keep people 'imprisoned' long after they're released*. Politico. https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/12/30/post-prison-laws-reentry-451445

Minkler, M. (2005). Community-based research partnerships: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Urban Health*, *82*(2_suppl_2), ii3–ii12. https://doi.org/10.1093/jurban/jti034

Muhammad, K. G. (2011). *The condemnation of blackness: Race, crime, and the making of modern urban America* (1st ed.). Harvard University Press.

Nellis, A. (2021). *The color of justice: Racial and ethnic disparity in state prisons*. The Sentencing Project. https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/the-color-of-justice-racial-and-ethnic-disparity-in-state-prisons-the-sentencing-project/

Patterson, G. T., Chung, I. W., & Swan, P. G. (2012). The effects of stress management interventions among police officers and recruits. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, *8*(1), 1–54. https://doi.org/10.4073/csr.2012.7

Pettus, C., Veeh, C. A., Renn, T. R., & Kennedy, S. C. (2021). The well-being development model: A theoretical model to improve outcomes among criminal justice system–involved individuals. *Social Service Review*, *95*(3), 413–468. https://doi.org/10.1086/715852

President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing. (2015). *Final report of the president's task force on 21st century policing*. Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/final-report-presidents-task-force-21st-century-policing

Rees, B., & Smith, J. (2008). Breaking the silence: The traumatic circle of policing. *International Journal of Police Science & Management*, *10*(3), 267–279. https://doi.org/10.1350/ijps.2008.10.3.83

Sawyer, W., & Wagner, P. (2024). *Mass incarceration: The whole pie 2024*. Prison Policy Initiative. https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2024.html

Stevenson, B. (2015). *Just mercy: A story of justice and redemption* (Reprint ed.). One World.

Syed, S., Ashwick, R., Schlosser, M., Jones, R., Rowe, S., & Billings, J. (2020). Global prevalence and risk factors for mental health problems in police personnel: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, *77*(11), 737–747. https://doi.org/10.1136/oemed-2020-106498

Thompson, B. L., & Waltz, J. (2010). Mindfulness and experiential avoidance as predictors of posttraumatic stress disorder avoidance symptom severity. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, *24*(4), 409–415. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2010.02.005

Tuckey, M. R., Winwood, P. C., & Dollard, M. F. (2012). Psychosocial culture and pathways to psychological injury within policing. *Police Practice and Research*, *13*(3), 224–240. https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2011.574072

Vago, D. R., & Silbersweig, D. A. (2012). Self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-transcendence (S-ART): A framework for understanding the neurobiological mechanisms of mindfulness. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, *6*, Article 296. https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2012.00296

Wagner, P., & Rabuy, B. (2017). *Following the money of mass incarceration*. Prison Policy Initiative. https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/money.html

Walsh, Z. (2016). A meta-critique of mindfulness critiques: From mcmindfulness to critical mindfulness. In R. E. Purser, D. Forbes, & A. Burke (Eds.), *Handbook of mindfulness* (pp. 153–166). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-44019-4_11

Wisconsin Council on Children & Families. (2013). *Race to equity: A baseline report on the state of racial disparities in Dane County*. https://ncwwi.org/document/race-to-equity-a-baseline-report-on-the-state-of-racial-disparities-in-dane-county/

Zehr, H. (2005). *Changing lenses: A new focus for crime and justice* (3rd ed.). Herald Press.