



FIRST PERSON ACCOUNT

The “Best of Both Worlds”: Building a community-academic partnership for research with legal system-impacted individuals

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Abstract

Equitable community-academic research partnerships provide an innovative way to advance health outcomes among criminal legal system-impacted individuals. The extant literature lacks accounts that detail the process for developing such partnerships, particularly in community-based (rather than carceral) settings and with community organizations (rather than system actors). This First-Person Account—co-written by members of a research team consisting of academic researchers and community partners, including formerly incarcerated individuals—details opportunities and challenges that emerged through a year-long pilot project intended to adapt a mental health intervention for correctional settings. The narrow focus of this project expanded dramatically over the course of the year as team members adapted to working together and realized the potential for the sustained impact of a long-term collaboration. Key elements allowing for successful partnership development included (1) devoting time to building relationships in addition to “doing business”; (2) flexibility regarding the project aims and approach, which allowed for more equitable decision-making; and (3) striving to understand and trust each other's respective expertise, whether based in academic training or lived experiences. Our experiences translate core principles of community-based participatory research into concrete actions and practical examples of how to center the perspective of criminal legal system-impacted individuals.

KEYWORDS

community-based participatory research, incarceration, mental health, partnership development, stakeholder advisory group

Highlights

- We built a community-academic research partnership to advance mental health in the prison setting (99).
- Successful partnership formation depends on flexibility, shared decision-making, and relationships (100).
- Credentialed expertise and lived expertise of incarceration are equally valuable for research (96).

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INTRODUCTION

The “best of both worlds”—this is how Aaron, a formerly incarcerated member of our team, repeatedly referred to the blending of lived experiences, expertise, attitudes, and humanity embodied by our community-academic partnership, which coalesced around the shared goal of improving mental health offerings for legal system-impacted individuals. Through this First-Person Account, we will draw from each of these team member's experiences as we describe the process of developing a unique research partnership consisting of university researchers and community partners, including those with lived experiences of incarceration, during a year-long stakeholder engagement project. In doing so, we seek to convey to other researchers the tangible, shared benefits of research grounded in community partnerships that centers the expertise of those with lived experiences of incarceration.

Community-engaged research and the criminal legal system

As community-engaged scholarship has evolved into an increasingly mature discipline, many articles have described strategies and best practices for successfully establishing and sustaining partnerships (Castro et al., 2021; Moreno et al., 2009), identifying research priorities and questions through a participatory approach (Burke et al., 2005; Franck et al., 2018; Tessler Lindau et al., 2011), and engaging community members in research in an equitable way (Stoecker, 2009). Articles and toolkits written from the perspective of community partners have provided valuable considerations for community organizations who wish to engage with academic researchers (Caldwell et al., 2015; Chicago Beyond, 2018). At the same time, individuals with lived experience of incarceration have largely been excluded from contributing to research that relates to their experiences. A scoping review of the involvement of incarcerated people in health and social care research identified just 39 peer-reviewed articles published before 2020 (Treacy et al., 2021). This review highlighted persistent power differentials between academic and incarcerated researchers as evidenced by the lack of incarcerated person involvement in “higher-level research operations” such as funding applications and project administration and management. Focusing more narrowly on mental health research with legal system-impacted individuals, a systematic review of studies published between 2016 and 2023 found that only 16 of 675 articles included people with lived experience in the research process, with no evidence for increased involvement over this 7-year period (Rutherford et al., 2024).

Some researchers have taken strides to incorporate (to varying extents) the perspectives of those directly impacted by the criminal legal system. For example,

researchers have collected input from system-impacted individuals on issues such as the management of self-harm in prison (Ward & Bailey, 2013) and the health needs of recently incarcerated women (Colbert et al., 2013). This small yet meaningful step of asking system-impacted individuals about their needs and preferences informed institutional policy changes and led to the development of patient-responsive services. On rare occasions, academic researchers have gone beyond conducting needs assessments with legal system-involved people, asking these individuals to provide feedback on research questions and procedures (e.g., Crabtree et al., 2016; Haverkate et al., 2020; McCracken, 2019; Pickering et al., 2016) and help identify research priorities (e.g., Haarmans et al., 2021; McCracken, 2019). In some cases, currently and formerly incarcerated individuals have participated as volunteer or paid members of research teams, contributing to participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis and interpretation (e.g., Crabtree et al., 2016; Fields et al., 2008; Haverkate et al., 2020; Hill et al., 2015; Pickering et al., 2016).

Moving beyond soliciting feedback on research procedures or hiring system-impacted people to support recruitment and data collection, researchers can promote authentic and equitable participation in the earliest research stages through approaches such as community-based participatory research (CBPR). In CBPR, researchers and community partners collectively identify a research question of interest to the impacted community, leveraging their combined knowledge and action to conduct research that moves toward social change and the elimination of disparities (Israel et al., 2005). These types of community-academic partnerships can be difficult to establish, especially without examples and guidelines. Process papers can help advance new partnership development through critical reflection on the challenges, benefits, and lessons learned from building a partnership (Crabtree et al., 2016).

Several published papers have reported the process of partnership development between academics and entities within the legal system, such as governmental and correctional agencies (Boghossian et al., 2012; Nilson et al., 2014; Rudes et al., 2014; Sullivan & Khondkaryan, 2013). For example, Nilson et al. (2014) described the process of establishing the Center for Forensic Behavioral Science and Justice Studies (CFBSJS), a collaborative research partnership with Canadian correctional, governmental, and police agencies that implements and evaluates mental health interventions for incarcerated individuals. While governmental and correctional agencies are essential stakeholders for implementation-focused research with the goal of implementation within the criminal legal system, the CFBSJS is noticeably excluding a critical stakeholder—incarcerated people.

A few additional papers have described the process of establishing partnerships with currently incarcerated

people (Haarmans et al., 2021; Haverkate et al., 2020; McCracken, 2019; Walsh et al., 2014). For example, Haverkate et al. (2020) describe the development of the Arizona Transformation Project (ATP), a partnership between Arizona State University researchers and incarcerated researchers. The five incarcerated ATP researchers were responsible for research design, recruitment, and data collection, conducting more than 400 interviews. Although this partnership appears to have been constructed with a focus on equity, the highly hierarchical prison environment means that incarcerated researchers are wholly dependent on academic researchers to make final decisions and follow through on discussed actions (Crabtree et al., 2016). This inherent power imbalance creates different priorities for building a partnership with currently incarcerated researchers as compared to forming a partnership with people with lived experience of incarceration in the community. Writing about this imbalance between systems of control and the people they control, Javdani et al. (2017) reflected critically on the concept of “deliberate collaboration.” While continuing to partner with systems stakeholders to gain access to the population of system-involved girls they hoped would benefit from an advocacy-based intervention, the authors created new opportunities for girls to participate as co-researchers, reshape the outcomes of this study, and be recognized for their lived expertise.

Article contributions and methodology

This article contributes to the emergent literature on CBPR with criminal legal system-impacted individuals, providing what we see as four important advancements to the extant literature on partnership development. First, rather than partnering with governmental or correctional agencies, we describe the process of partnering with people with lived experiences of incarceration, and with a community-based organization that centers lived expertise. Second, this paper focuses on partnership development with legal system-impacted individuals in a community setting, which enables broader possibilities for power-sharing and equitable decision-making than are possible in prison settings. Third, we translate sometimes abstract CBPR principles into actionable steps for other researchers through concrete actions and examples drawn from our team's experiences. Fourth, the unique format encouraged by this First-Person Account allows us to share both academic *and* community partner perspectives on the process of partnership building.

To that end, this paper was written using an equitable writing process that highlights each team member's strengths and allows each person's voice to be represented in the final product. Notes and reflections during and after team meetings and stakeholder advisory groups were the basis for this article's outline. Direct quotes were

gathered from two sources: open-ended, informal conversations between the lead author and other team members, and panel presentation recordings by our group. All team members were informed that direct quotes from presentations and informal conversations were being recorded for use in this paper and consented to their use once the paper was drafted. Utilizing quotes from nonacademic co-authors allows all members of our research team to contribute to knowledge generation and the writing process, rather than limiting participation in these activities to those who are more accustomed to writing.

Content themes were established during team meetings, further developed by the three team members charged with writing the bulk of the paper (academics Talia and Dan, and community partner Karen), and then again refined based on full-team feedback. The larger group provided feedback both individually in written form and verbally during team meetings about the paper. All team members will be referred to by their first names to “level educational and occupational hierarchies” (Fields et al., 2008, p. 74). Although the resulting article format is somewhat atypical for academic writing, it reflects the equitable and authentic communication at the core of this partnership, and serves to uplift the voices of community partners, in particular those who are directly impacted by incarceration.

This paper describes the process of partnership development in the specific context of a 1-year stakeholder-engagement grant, which initially had the relatively narrow objective of adapting a mindfulness-based intervention for incarcerated people. Early on in our partnership, academic partners committed to the challenge posed by our community partners to not conduct “research as usual.” Key elements of this commitment included (1) devoting time to *building relationships* in addition to productivity-driven tasks; (2) *flexibility* around the specific project aims and approach that allowed for more equitable decision-making; and (3) striving to see and *trust each other's respective expertise*. As a result, the scope of this project expanded as we embraced the broader objective of leveraging lived expertise to understand how our research can broadly support the mental health of incarcerated individuals, and as we developed the foundation that will allow our community-academic partnership to realize this objective.

Project partners

The impetus for this project was a proposal submitted to the National Institutes of Health to adapt an existing mindfulness-based intervention for incarcerated individuals. Although the two UW-Madison principal investigators involved had extensive expertise in mental health research in correctional settings (**Mike**) and adapted mindfulness interventions (**Dan**), critical reviewer feedback highlighted the failure to engage stakeholders in

developing an intervention that could overcome substantial barriers to implementation within the prison setting. Recognizing the need for a strong community partnership to anchor stakeholder engagement efforts, Dan and Mike turned to an existing relationship with clinical psychologist and mindfulness instructor **Carmen**. In addition to professional collaborations with Dan and Mike, Carmen had previously taught mindfulness practices to staff at the Nehemiah Center for Urban Leadership Development (or “Nehemiah”), a Black-led nonprofit providing advocacy, services, and leadership training for system-impacted individuals. These existing relationships were critical in sparking a new community-academic partnership between UW-Madison and Nehemiah. The Nehemiah staff who joined the research team were **Anthony**, Vice President of Strategic Partnerships and Reentry Services, **Aaron**, Reentry Coordinator, and **Karen**, Vice President of Research and Education. Anthony and Aaron both have lived experiences of incarceration. With a PhD in physiology, Karen has a background in academic research and is currently using her research skillset in the nonprofit space and as she facilitates community-academic partnerships.

With this team assembled, we received an internal pilot grant to conduct advisory group meetings with formerly incarcerated individuals, allowing us to incorporate stakeholder priorities and perspectives into future research on mindfulness in prison settings. Clinical psychology graduate student **Talia** joined the team to manage project logistics, contribute to idea generation and relationship-building, and provide a clinical perspective. **Deb**, who has direct experience of incarceration as well as a lengthy career as a chaplain in multiple Wisconsin state prisons, joined the team to facilitate stakeholder meetings with formerly incarcerated women. Throughout this manuscript, Dan, Mike, and Talia are referred to as the **academics/UW-Madison team**. Nehemiah staff and Deb are referred to as **community partners**. Carmen perceives herself as straddling these two worlds: though she has a PhD and has previously conducted research, she has been embedded in the community for the past 20 years, offering mindfulness-based interventions to a wide variety of groups including residents in maximum security prisons in Wisconsin.

PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

By describing the process by which we developed a community-academic partnership, we hope to illustrate how some key CBPR principles—including attention to power dynamics, flexibility in process, and co-creation of research questions and mutual aims (Israel et al., 2005)—played out in real time. In this and subsequent sections, we will note the parts of the process that relate to the three key elements for successful partnership listed in

section 1.2 (building relationships, flexibility, trusting each other's expertise).

Team members' perspectives on research before the partnership (*building relationships*)

Before this partnership, Mike, a Professor at UW-Madison, led psychological and neuroscientific research in Wisconsin prisons for over a decade. His approach reflected the typical academic research framework: academic researchers as project leaders who plan the questions and methods, and incarcerated people as study participants who provide data. The research questions his lab pursued were largely driven by their assessment of gaps and opportunities, based primarily on their understanding of the relevant academic literature. Dan, a Research Professor at UW-Madison, had led prior research on mindfulness interventions with local law enforcement agencies that gave him experience collaborating with a community partner to develop research questions and design/implement study procedures. He entered this project with some background knowledge of the principles and practices of community-engaged scholarship and CBPR, having participated in prior workshops and a year-long fellowship through the campus center for community service.

The Nehemiah team members' prior experiences with research often took the form of academic researchers defining the questions and outcomes and then reaching out to Nehemiah to solicit opinions from those with lived experiences. Karen describes that what is “very typical is for someone to reach out to us from Campus and say, ‘Hey, I’m doing this study with this group, can you give us some people?’ So, for the most part, our answer is either to not respond to the email if that’s how it’s worded or say no.” Previous experiences with researchers who fail to deeply engage their organization in defining the terms of research partnerships have led Nehemiah to be selective about which university partners they choose to collaborate with. Karen explains the reasons behind the selective approach: “One of them is to protect the people involved ... to make sure that we’re not just giving free labor, to make sure that people who are asking us for work understand how much goes into what needs to be done. But ultimately, it’s making sure that we’re not just doing studies for the sake of doing studies, but we’re doing things that are actually going to benefit our community.” Anthony expands that when the Nehemiah team members enter any type of partnership, “If there’s something that’s not right, we’re going to say that... I understand that this is what the grant says, but this is what we’re saying, and this is not going to work out.” Deb, the formerly incarcerated chaplain, had less exposure to research compared to the other community partners. She thought of researchers as people stuck in their heads, describing them as “thinkers and writers, not

doers.” All community partners expressed discontent that researchers received substantial monetary resources through research grants and “nothing comes of it.”

These perspectives from team members who operate outside of academia reflect the larger reality that research can be a dirty word for people who have been impacted by incarceration. Tuck and Yang (2014) critique social science research as an extension of settler colonialism that is fixated on “eliciting pain stories from communities that are not White, not wealthy, and not straight” (p. 227) at the exclusion of stories of innovation, flourishing, and resilience. Refusals to engage in research by members of these communities may be framed by academics as ignorance, as a failure to understand the value of research for their communities. Rather, argue Tuck and Yang (2014), legacies of extraction and violence inform these communities’ clear-eyed, intentional, and logical refusal to engage in research, as “there are some forms of knowledge that the academy doesn’t deserve” (p. 232).

Initial team meetings and dropping the agenda (*flexibility*)

Before initiating biweekly meetings with community partners, the UW-Madison team met to construct detailed agendas, reflecting team members’ nerves around “saying the right thing” and a pressure to present in an almost perfectionist way. These agendas were attached to meeting confirmation emails, with notes distributed to all team members after meetings, which the UW-Madison team took for granted would be viewed as a valuable practice. The community partners, on the other hand, sometimes felt lost in nitty gritty project details and preferred more spacious, less agenda-driven meetings. Karen recalls, “In one of our first meetings, we talked about, ‘What is the agenda for the meeting?’ And I had to say, ‘Well, the agenda for the meeting is that there isn’t an agenda.’” The seemingly simple act by the UW-Madison team of defining the agenda for these first meetings was not only unnecessary, but was in fact interfering with the goal of an equitable and participatory group process, as this concentrated power and voice in the hands of those who developed the agendas and took the notes. Over time, the agendas were sent out as bullet points in an email, and ultimately not at all. With familiarity, group members grew to trust the team’s ability to interact productively without overly formal organization. As someone who is often responsible for agenda-setting in his academic life, Dan found it “liberating” to let go of developing an agenda and allow “spaciousness” in meetings. He observes that in our meetings, we always “get done what needs to get done and we get it done in a way that feels more natural... more authentic.”

When speaking about the decision to involve Nehemiah in this project, Karen from Nehemiah asserted

during a panel presentation, “We need to be involved from the beginning, and the beginning means the research question. So, what are we doing together and how are we going to solve it, that all had to be co-created. And this is the first time that someone from the university took us up all the way on this and was willing to dive in with us.” The evolution of the role that agendas played in these first meetings is illustrative of the academic partners’ willingness to build the project from the ground up with community partners, and set the stage for the strong relationships that would later develop.

Finding a balance between transactional productivity and relationship-building (*building relationships, flexibility*)

In reflecting on our earliest meetings together, Mike says, “As academics, we are trained to speak and write in a very formal, precise, and almost robotic kind of way. So, when first meeting our community partners, I was concerned about saying something that would come off as arrogant or insensitive or ignorant. I think it was extremely helpful that in one of our first meetings, if not our first meeting, we talked openly about different styles of communication.” Acknowledging these differences early on enabled the UW-Madison team to relax and begin to connect with community partners on a personal level. These differences in communication reflected a larger and noticeable tension, early in the project, between transactional productivity and relationship-building. Although we were all motivated to develop connections with one another, it was difficult for academic team members to build time into meetings for relationship-building, given the perceived need to meet project timelines and outcomes. In contrast, the community partners saw investing time in relationship-building as essential for effective professional collaboration. As Karen sees it, “In the work that Nehemiah does, you can’t separate [your work] from your personal life. It’s all blended together... Sometimes you’ve got to have a whole hour where you’re venting and decompressing and debriefing because you can’t do the next steps unless you do that. That’s part of that relationship-building that’s not built into any of our frameworks, but we have to find room for it.”

We found a middle ground by setting aside some meeting time for task-oriented work to resolve pre-determined questions and problems, but only after we took as much time as was needed at the start of the meeting for unstructured and emergent conversations. Some meetings were spent talking entirely about personal stories and philosophical questions. We engaged with each other on complex and challenging conversations about race, justice, and equity, which laid the groundwork for accomplishing research goals related to the criminal legal system. We celebrated personal accomplishments, and we laughed a lot. Early on, Anthony described the way that

Nehemiah operates as “family meetings”, and after a few months, our biweekly meetings began to take on this feel. According to Anthony, “We were at a family table, having a family discussion.” Acknowledging and working through the tension of task-oriented versus relational approaches allowed us to advance project outcomes more effectively, specifically *because* we were building close, trusting, and authentic personal relationships.

With the growth of these relationships came an increasing ability to speak openly and transparently about our respective intentions and motivations for building this partnership. As stated by Aaron, “In whatever your endeavor is there needs to be transparency... Fair exchange is never a robbery. There's something you're trying to gain out of it, as well as, whether it's an organization or an individual, there's something they're trying to get out of it. And if you can keep that part right and real, you're going to get what you're looking for.” Deb also spoke about working to establish the motivations of the academic partners during the early stages of our partnership: “We were researching you while you were researching us. We were researching what you're up to, who you are, and why the hell you have spent so much time in school.”

While Carmen and the academic partners were motivated to meet the specific aims and objectives of the grant, community partners viewed this grant not as an end, but as a means for initiating a long-term research collaboration with lasting impact for individuals impacted by the criminal legal system. The ability to communicate openly and transparently allowed community partners to voice when certain academic practices felt exploitative or out of line with their goals. For example, community partners raised concerns early on about the potential for retraumatization when formerly incarcerated participants shared their stories for academic research. Following an in-depth conversation, the team implemented multiple safeguards to address this issue. These included allowing additional time at stakeholder meetings for socializing and dinner, and entrusting participant recruitment and communication to community partners with lived experience, Deb and Aaron (see Section 3.2). Deb and Aaron's experience with facilitation and peer support allowed them to provide emotional support during meetings and provide individual follow-up after meetings for participants experiencing distress. In turn, the academics and Carmen became more comfortable voicing their work priorities, such as grant submissions, writing papers, curriculum development, and developing new projects.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

As we developed relationships and came to appreciate different styles of working and communicating, we were also learning to trust in one another's expertise. This

foundation of trust allowed us to implement a stakeholder engagement project in a flexible and dynamic manner. Rather than rigidly adhering to a research approach that the academic partners had decided upon when writing the grant, we re-evaluated the approach to each element of the project as a group, knowing that all team members had relevant expertise to offer.

Advisory group meeting logistics (*flexibility*)

Our grant proposal indicated we would hold eight stakeholder advisory group meetings (four with men, four with women) with formerly incarcerated individuals, each focusing on a different aspect of adapting a mindfulness-based intervention for the prison setting. While we kept this basic data collection structure, nearly every decision regarding the conduct of group meetings shifted in response to a group decision-making process (see Table 1 for an overview of these changes and our rationale). The UW-Madison team learned that seemingly arbitrary details about *how* these meetings were conducted proved as important for a successful project as substantive details concerning the meeting agenda and focus group questions. For example, we came to view dinner as part of the meeting and not an “add-on,” and therefore should be offered with intention. Largely at Deb's urging, we jettisoned the default practice of serving grab-and-go meals on disposable plates, instead ordering home-cooked meals from caterers with histories of justice involvement and serving these meals on “real” plates. Our meetings, originally planned to last 90 min, were expanded to 2 h to allow time for authentic connection among participants and with research team members. The physical layout of the room—a large table to sit around at dinner, a separate circle of chairs for discussion, floor lamps instead of bright overhead lights, and freshly cut flowers—served to create a sense of community, safety, and a nonhierarchical space in which everybody had something to teach and something to learn. In addition, we paid community advisors \$50 per hour for participating in each meeting, more than the typical \$15–25 per hour for research participants, communicating to advisors that we value their time and opinions as content experts. We developed a process to pay participants in cash to reduce barriers to access, such as bureaucratic delays or check-cashing fees. These practices were especially important given that most formerly incarcerated individuals are unaccustomed to treatment that places tangible value on the unique perspective afforded by their lived experiences.

Advisory group recruitment (*building relationships, trusting each other's expertise*)

The UW-Madison team initially planned that Talia, the graduate student on the project, would coordinate

TABLE 1 Initial plans and final decisions for stakeholder advisory group implementation.

Topic	Initial plan	Final decision	Rationale
Facilitators	Men's group: Aaron (formerly incarcerated facilitator) & Talia (graduate student) Women's group: Carmen (mindfulness expert) & Talia	Men's group: Aaron & Carmen Women's group: Deb (formerly incarcerated facilitator) & Carmen Talia takes notes and manages logistics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Crucial to have co-facilitator with lived experiences of incarceration Carmen's mindfulness expertise crucial for grounding conversations about challenging topics Facilitators can focus on facilitation while student provides logistical support
Location	Considered church, lab space, University Partnership space	University Partnership space (University-leased facility located in community)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More convenient, accessible, and comfortable to community than on-campus settings Utilizing university-operated space helps with reservations, planning, implementing COVID-19 protocols
Schedule	Planned to meet every 6 weeks with men's and women's groups running in parallel	Meet every 2 weeks Held all 4 men's meetings first then 4 women's meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Condense meetings due to unpredictable participant schedules Reduced task-switching for facilitators Finish meetings before inclement weather sets in (some participants drove in from across the state)
Food	Grab-and-go meals (e.g., pizza, sandwiches) on disposable plates	Dinner from community caterer with a history of justice involvement Desserts from organization providing justice-involved people job training and employment Deb brought "real" plates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make participants feel truly valued Support system-involved individuals in local community rather than large corporations
Physical space	Little thought given to space considerations	Large table to eat together, circle of chairs for discussion, floor lamp instead of bright overhead lights, freshly cut flowers in room	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create sense of community, safety, and comfort Circle flattens hierarchy; everybody speaks, everybody listens
Meeting time	90 min	2 h (30 min for dinner and 90 min for meeting)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow individuals with shared experiences time to connect Researchers have time to make connections with participants

recruitment: calling potential participants, providing project information, and tracking participants using a carefully organized spreadsheet. Community partners were conceived as playing a supporting role in distributing flyers and word-of-mouth recruitment. In early meetings, it became clear that the co-facilitators with lived histories of incarceration, Aaron and Deb, should instead be entrusted with the recruitment process. Aaron spoke to the importance of peer-driven recruitment, based on experiential mistrust of systems of power: "If you've had the experience of people running tests on you, or doing certain things to your community ... I believe the only way you get over it is to give people [with lived experiences] involvement in it, to build relationships with [potential participants] and give them a clear understanding of what is happening step-by-step ... It's super important for people to have a space and a place to be able to share their concerns and their distrust."

Without peers inviting a place and a space for these conversations to occur, formerly incarcerated individuals may have turned down the invitation to participate in advisory groups due to negative past experiences with

systems of power. With Aaron and Deb in charge of recruitment, however, we enrolled participants for the two groups with such speed and ease that we expanded the planned group size from 8 to 10–12 participants. Facilitators' personal relationships with these individuals allowed them to confirm attendance and provide meeting reminders in a participant-centered way, encouraging sustained engagement and high attendance throughout the project. While relational recruitment was both effective and efficient in this case, this recruitment method raises important considerations for academics. Recruiting advisory group members exclusively from facilitators' personal and professional networks contributed to a sampling bias that may have excluded (or amplified) certain viewpoints and lived experiences, which could in turn raise concerns about the external validity and generalizability of results. This concern is ameliorated to some degree by the goal of this article, which is not to make inferences about a population, but rather to provide a case study illustration of how best to integrate the perspectives and skill sets of formerly incarcerated people into research (Small, 2009). The benefits of relational recruitment outweigh any concerns that may

remain: Aaron and Deb were able to anticipate group dynamics and invite individuals who each had the capacity to engage in discussions around their experience with incarceration, yet who they knew would bring diverse and complementary perspectives. We were able to glean deeper insights from stakeholder advisory meetings due to the mutual trust that already existed between the facilitators and participants, which rapidly resulted in excellent group cohesion.

Advisory group meeting questions (*flexibility, trusting each other's expertise*)

From the very first stakeholder meeting, the facilitators and other team members were struck by the depth and emotional intensity of what formerly incarcerated stakeholders had to share, and the authenticity of their lived experiences that they brought to these meetings. The specific meeting topics and questions from the grant proposal—developed primarily by Dan and Mike with minimal input from community partners—seemed in contrast surface-level and nonresponsive to the richness of what stakeholders wanted to communicate. It became immediately clear to our team that the focus of our project on adapting a mindfulness intervention for the prison setting was overly narrow, and presupposed an acceptable solution to addressing unmet mental health needs. We continued to bookend meetings with opening and closing mindfulness practices, which created a grounding context and supported participants in discussing challenging and traumatic experiences. However, a much broader research question emerged to guide stakeholder meetings: “How can we improve mental health programming currently being offered to incarcerated individuals?” This revised research question provided enough specificity to anchor stakeholder advisory meetings, yet did not make assumptions about what solutions and strategies stakeholders would identify as effective and responsive.

Rather than steering the conversation toward the specific questions defined in the grant proposal, facilitators were empowered to allow the conversation to flow and tilt toward participants' experiences, expertise, and wisdom. Carmen reflects, “To see what transpired when we put the initial agenda aside and then just really were present with the people there with just one simple question, it was really beautiful.” Table 2 compares the proposed questions from the grant proposal—which served the purpose of fulfilling reviewers' expectations and securing project funding—and the final questions, which invited broader, deeper, and more personal conversations that allowed this project to serve as a springboard for a multitude of future research projects. Aaron described this process as, “[The research team] gave me a list of questions and basically I took them and remixed them into something that made sense to me to be able to convey back to the [formerly incarcerated stakeholders].”

Having facilitators with lived experiences of incarceration on the research team allowed the academic researchers to hear profound answers to questions they never would have thought to ask.

Communicating findings to community advisors (*building relationships*)

Because this paper is focused on the *process* of partnership development, we are not reporting on the specific *outcomes* of stakeholder advisory groups and implications for mental health research in correctional settings. Consistent with best practices of community-engaged scholarship (Farrell et al., 2021), however, we knew it was important to communicate project results back to participants. Our process for this centered relationship-building to promote co-learning and demonstrate commitment to long-term impact. After our team analyzed and interpreted notes and transcripts from advisory meetings, we held a “gratitude lunch” for all participants and study team members, where we shared a large infographic poster with major takeaways from the project. Participants were excited to see this concrete reflection of their participation, and many took pictures with it. This poster showed how a small act of appreciation allowed participants to feel like valued collaborators whose expertise was highly valued by academic experts, and served as an example of a tangible project deliverable outside of traditional academic publications.

This lunch was the first opportunity for community advisors to meet the lead project investigators, to hear their perspectives on the project, and their motivation for conducting research with system-impacted individuals. According to Dan, this lunch felt “awkward at first” because he felt like an “interloper” with “inappropriate insight” into the stakeholder advisors' lives as someone who had listened to recordings from the stakeholder advisory meetings. However, once the group settled into a circle and everyone introduced themselves and shared their personal insights from the stakeholder advisory meetings, he felt “a little more on equal footing.” From Aaron's perspective, this kind of investigator engagement and reciprocity is essential when researchers are asking participants to make themselves vulnerable: “I believe that research is not real research until the researcher is *actually* involved in the research itself ... For people to sit down and have a meal, that's very intimate. And I think research itself needs to be very intimate, because you're asking people to share some very deep, dark things. It's important to give people a little piece of you too.”

The gratitude lunch provided a forum for everyone—advisors, community partners, UW research team members—to slow down, appreciate what had been accomplished, and formulate a plan for moving forward. This kind of opportunity is often overlooked as extra or nonessential in the flurry of academic and nonprofit

**TABLE 2** Meeting topics and questions as written in grant and as used during stakeholder advisory group meetings.

Questions/meeting themes from grant proposal	Questions used for stakeholder group meetings
<p>Orientation and introduction: “Modify Patient Advisory Toolkit for an initial meeting with each group that prepares participants for their role in our study (e.g., meeting guidelines, logistics, expectations, building rapport) and provides an introduction and discussion of the topics of mindfulness and mental health.”</p> <p>Outcomes: “What are the most pressing problems faced by incarcerated individuals that this intervention should address? What are the most important proximal and distal outcomes from the perspective of these individuals? Given these problems and outcomes, what should be the specific target population?”</p> <p>Content and language: “What adaptations are needed to the existing curriculum to maximize participant engagement, acceptability, and impact? How can we adapt the overarching themes, specific content, and language of the curriculum and practices to be culturally resonant, appropriate for the correctional environment, and relevant to participants’ lived experiences? How can this intervention be complementary to, or even integrate, elements of faith and religiosity that are a source of support and purpose for so many incarcerated individuals? What considerations should be afforded to the race, gender, and incarceration history of instructors or content creators?”</p> <p>Delivery: “Feedback on the feasibility and acceptability of different potential delivery methods. These may include synchronous remote sessions with teachers using teleconferencing; asynchronous video and/or audio recordings; the use of devices such as MP3 players, tablets, or DVD players; and the use of printed workbooks.”</p>	<p>Provide participants with brief description of study objectives and team composition. Two questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What brought you here today? 2. What helped you manage stress while incarcerated? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What would you like to say to your younger self? 2. What is one nugget of wisdom you would like to offer others who are incarcerated? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What sort of helpful programming (<i>women's group: “offerings”</i>) is on your wish list for those who are left behind? 2. What are the themes/ingredients that a mindfulness program should have to be most helpful for incarcerated individuals? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What would the opportunities we have discussed look like in practice? How would offerings be delivered? 2. Any other thoughts about how to best support those who are incarcerated to practice healthier habits of mind and heart?

busyness and activity, but its value cannot be overstated, as it is the key to building and maintaining relationships that support understanding and trust. Carmen reflected that “the gratitude lunch felt like a celebration” and celebration is warranted when progress toward a lofty goal, such as addressing unmet mental health needs in the prison setting, occurs.

LESSONS LEARNED FOR ENGAGING LEGAL SYSTEM-IMPACTED INDIVIDUALS IN RESEARCH

Our experience establishing a community-academic partnership revealed three lessons that are generalizable to different disciplines or content areas, but that are especially relevant for community-engaged research with individuals and communities impacted by incarceration.

Value and respect each person's intrinsic humanity (*building relationships*)

For academic researchers who conduct their research at a distance from those they study, there can be a tendency to reduce participants to their study IDs or the numerical values of data collected from them. When the distance grows between these values and the people behind the

numbers, there is greater potential for harm. Similarly, Deb recounted how new Department of Corrections (DOC) employees learn that each incarcerated person has a DOC number, but they soon begin asking incarcerated people “What's *your* number?”, failing to differentiate between the incarcerated human and the number they are assigned. Deb describes this experience, “Now you're no longer a human being; now you're a number. When I was incarcerated, I never took that number on. I always said, ‘Do you mean the number the Department of Corrections assigned me?’” Through stories like this from research partners with lived experiences of incarceration, the academic researchers recognized (and actively worked to combat) the ways that research can take away the dignity and humanity of those involved. Deb continued, “Our participants probably don't realize they have a number, which makes them not be a number. They don't answer to a number ... The way people are valued in these circles, in these [advisory] meetings, they're certainly not just a number.”

As described above, the academic team members were pushed throughout the project to take small yet significant steps to acknowledge the dignity and humanity of our research participants. Providing participants stipends commensurate with the expertise they brought to meetings was critically important, especially considering the meager wages these individuals worked for while incarcerated. Serving catered dinners on tables set with real plates and fresh flowers humanized the sometimes-obligatory process of feeding participants,

again communicating the inherent value and humanity of everyone in the room. These are not simply “feel-good,” peripheral details; instead, we argue that the humanization of research through inclusive and participatory approaches can produce *better science* by increasing the validity of research findings. These kinds of practices have been called “an ethical necessity” in their commitment to justice and their potential to transform the lives of people this study is meant to serve (Javdani et al., 2017).

Value and respect each person's ideas, contributions, and expertise (*flexibility, trusting each other's expertise*)

In writing this paper, the academics on the team reflected on years (or decades) of being conditioned to constantly engage in comparative valuation of different individuals and their contributions to projects, a valuation that prioritizes attributes and outcomes associated with academic success and prestige (i.e., grants and publications). As these academics developed relationships with community partners, they gained a deeper appreciation for the unique value that lived experiences of incarceration bring to the integrity, rigor, and impact of research, which caused a shift in research practices (Haarmans et al., 2021; Haverkate et al., 2020). Mike recognized a shift in the way that his time was spent at work and the tasks he began to prioritize once our partnership began. Previously, he spent a lot of time learning from academic peers by reading journal articles and attending talks and workshops. Now, learning from academic peers is still a part of his career to some extent, but he spends a more significant amount of time learning from community partners and building relationships. Mike observes that he speaks more frequently with the community partners than he ever has with academic collaborators, demonstrating the time commitment necessary for these partnerships.

Our team presented about the value of lived experience at multiple academic venues. Karen challenged the audience at an academic conference: “There are very, very few people at this university who have that lived experience [of incarceration]. So, what's the difference between that and ‘I went to school for a lot of years to get a PhD’, that training and life experience? We both know a lot about a certain area, and we need to combine [our respective expertise] so we can take it farther... not everybody gets letters for the kinds of study that they did, and who cares really at the end of the day.” Aaron speaks frequently about the limitations of attaining knowledge through books and journal articles. He contends, “People will research homelessness with no experience of it and have an answer. How does that work? ... Your only understanding is through a book.”

One of the main sources of tension we navigated throughout this project was when lived expertise and academic expertise suggested different approaches to solving the same problem. For example, while she came

to appreciate the value of relational recruitment, Talia initially found it challenging when Aaron and Deb rejected any level of the University partners' involvement in recruiting participants for advisory groups. What we found to be most helpful in navigating such differences was to abide by Deb's observation that “we each have our own lanes” of expertise. As our partnership developed, we were able to define these respective lanes of expertise, distribute decision-making authority based on these lanes, and trust that the resulting decisions were in the best long-term interest of this study partnership and those for whom the research is being conducted.

Research can be restorative (*building relationships, trusting each other's expertise*)

Team members from the community approached this project with a healthy degree of skepticism given past experiences with research—both during and after incarceration—that were extractive, inequitable, and ultimately ineffective for their communities. By the end of this year-long project, there was a noticeable shift in these perspectives, one that emerged through a relational approach to research that valued the contributions and expertise of all team members.

For example, Deb described data as “like a paycheck” and began to speak like a scientist, citing “data doesn't lie.” She saw how data can lead to more sustainable initiatives by measurably demonstrating program impact and strengthening grant applications. Inspired by a conversation in one of our team meetings, she decided to introduce a book club in a correctional facility for incarcerated peer support specialists. She chose relevant books based on the themes that emerged during stakeholder advisory meetings, and with support from UW-Madison partners, received a seed grant to expand these book clubs in additional prisons and collect program evaluation data. Working with researchers provided Deb with the language to “communicate what I was doing so that someone would want me to continue to do it and grow it.” This new communication skill has bolstered Deb's confidence to speak about the evidence supporting the work she does providing services in prison and the community. Deb's experience aligns with the experience of incarcerated researchers, whose involvement in data collection efforts during incarceration afforded them with purpose and meaning through data-driven change within the system (Haverkate et al., 2020; Pickering et al., 2016).

Aaron describes the opportunity to contribute to data collection as “restorative” given his experience in the prison environment where individuals in positions of authority took away his voice and decided the best way “correct” him. He shared, “this was the first time that people who didn't have a voice before actually have a voice. And it's not just a voice where words are coming out of my mouth, but it's being heard, and people are



acting on what's being said ... Don't get me wrong, I appreciate being heard, but that doesn't mean anything if it doesn't go anywhere." Similarly, Anthony describes the reverberating impacts of contributing to research as a subject matter expert: "Not only am I an expert in my life, but I'm a person of value. Here in front of the university but also in my own household and with my family and so on and so forth."

These statements reflect how CBPR can serve to build capacity and empowerment for marginalized communities (Israel et al., 2005) while also highlighting how participating as subject matter experts can increase confidence, self-esteem, and optimism for people with a history of incarceration (Treacy et al., 2021). Our experiences suggest the possibility of research as a restorative process, one in which academic researchers acknowledge histories of extractive and inequitable practices, redress this harm by listening deeply to the voices of historically marginalized people and taking action accordingly, and commit to conducting research in a way that acknowledges the value of lived expertise and empowers communities, rather than causing further harm (Singh et al., 2018).

CONCLUSIONS

For the UW-Madison collaborators on the team, this collaboration has fundamentally and irrevocably altered their approach to research. Any future research they conduct for the stated benefit of legal system-impacted individuals will be directly and meaningfully informed by community members with relevant lived experiences. The community partners have pushed their academic collaborators one step further, asking them to reflect on the question (in Karen's words), "Do we consider ourselves as academicians part of the community, or do we consider ourselves as separate?" If an ultimate goal is eliminating the boundary between community and academic partners, Aaron suggests that "The only way that truly starts to happen is the UW-Madison has to reflect the community and vice versa. Cause if it doesn't look the same, it's not the same." Until that time comes, community-academic research partnerships are needed to achieve the best of both worlds: the knowledge of research methods and procedures from academics and firsthand knowledge of issues related to incarceration from those most impacted. We urge researchers to approach this study with humility about the limitations of academic knowledge, expertise, and "typical" research approaches, and to embrace the value of community expertise and lived experiences.

We conclude with firsthand perspectives of team members with lived experiences of incarceration on the value of authentic community-academic partnerships. Aaron says, "I strongly believe you gotta utilize wisdom in everything that you do... One way you show people is through success. You start to show them something, a

model, in which it can't be denied that this is something that's happened, it is happening, and change is happening in the midst of it." Deb reflects on her own personal growth as it relates to this partnership in a way that feels true to us all. She expresses that the partnership "hasn't just made me better in the [advocacy] work, it's made me better period... We're doing something good and powerful that is going to be empowering for others. You can't touch that."

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Original source material will be made available upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This paper does not describe the results of human subjects research. As such, no IRB approval was sought, and no informed consent was obtained.

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