

**Evaluation and Assessment Report  
for  
The Men's Reentry Initiative**

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## **1 Overview of Men's Reentry Initiative**

The Men's Reentry Initiative (MRI) is a 12-week in-facility course offered in South Carolina correctional institutions. MRI is built around a balanced curriculum of Academics-Therapy-Faith which addresses issues correlated with offender recidivism. The goal of MRI is to reduce South Carolina's high recidivism rates and prevent the recurring poverty and violence that plague incarcerated men and their families. MRI purports to have a proven record of success demonstrating that the education of these men has a productive effect on the men and their families and encourages fundamentally positive changes within the community.

## **2 Purpose of Evaluation**

The purpose of this evaluation is twofold, (1) assess the effectiveness of MRI on successful reentry and (2) determine how participants felt about the program, including perceptions of the program curriculum, the other participants, and the program's facilitators.

## **3 Evaluation Methodology**

First, we describe who these men are that enter MRI. We evaluate how they are selected into the program; how they vary on demographic characteristics such as age, race, marital status, and employment history; record of offenses; and any other social and personality characteristics that may be measured by the program application. Such analysis allows us to determine if there are any systematic differences between the MRI participants and the general inmate population as well as assess any within participant variation in impact. This systematic review may highlight any biases in selection into the program that may have occurred.

Second, we evaluate how much the program curriculum and implementation align with the reentry and risks/needs literature. Specifically, we assess if certain components of the program differentially impact the likelihood of positive or negative outcomes as well as its overall significance. We also assess for any variation in outcome due to variation in implementation between sessions of the program and facilities. This assessment may allow us to pinpoint the most effective elements of the program and under which conditions.

Third, we determine the success of the program in terms of reduced recidivism and positive reintegration into society. In accordance with definitions used by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), this project will refer to recidivism in terms of rearrest (as opposed to reconviction or reincarceration) within three years of release. Positive reintegration into society is measured by (1) obtaining and maintaining gainful employment, (2) being enrolled in school, (3) having housing, (4) seeking drug and alcohol treatment if needed, (5) involvement in prosocial outlets such as church and community groups, (6) positive family relationships, (7) and attitudinal changes. Measures of success will be compared between those that were selected but did not complete MRI, those that completed MRI, and the general incarcerated population. Such comparisons will empirically show if success is related to program completion after statistically controlling for other relevant factors such as race and criminal record.

## 4 Results of Evaluation

<b>Table 1.</b>	
<i>Characteristics of MRI Applicants</i>	
	Percent
<b>Race</b>	
Black	78.6
White	20.2
Other	1.2
<b>Convicted of Felony</b>	
Yes	55.1
No	21.3
No Response	23.6
<b>Highest Level of Education Achieved</b>	
Less than High School	29.2
GED/ High School Diploma	25.8
Some College/ Trade School	16.9
Associate's Degree	4.5
Higher Degree	1.1
No Response	22.5
<b>Ever Been Employed</b>	
Yes	75.3
No	6.7
No Response	18.0
<b>Have Children</b>	
Yes	71.6
No	28.4

### 4.1 General Findings Overview

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of a random sample of MRI applicants. The vast majority of applicants, as well as participants, are Black, have a felony conviction, have minimal formal education, and are parents, aligning with the characteristics of the male incarcerated population generally as well as in South Carolina ([sentencingproject.org](http://sentencingproject.org)). The research team was tasked to provide a post hoc evaluation of MRI. However, due to unforeseen data limitations, a quantitative evaluation as originally planned, was unfeasible. Thus, the methodology was revised to provide a qualitative assessment of participants' experiences.

### 4.2 Assessment of the Curriculum

The Men's Reentry Initiative aims to identify and isolate the causes of recidivism in order to address these issues head-on through its twelve-week course. Sellers describes the program as

follows:

[The Men's Reentry Initiative] includes a broader base of education, testing, and documentation, through a 12-week course aimed at physical/mental health awareness, reducing HIV-infection, HIV-testing referrals post release, and other AIDS Service Organizations referrals, conflict resolution models, an examination of the causes of substance abuse, grief & loss solution charts, job-training and post-confinement employment opportunities, post-confinement educational opportunities, and mentorship. In addition to this course material, we've instituted a 2-hour literature session every meeting (personal communication, December 12, 2016).

The two-hour literature sessions, which constitute a major portion of class time each week, are focused on building the participants' identity through exposure to and comprehension of challenging texts. These readings include classics, such as William Shakespeare and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Pulitzer Prize winners including H.L. Menken and Chris Heges, as well as well-known social essayists such as James Baldwin. Each week participants read a text and then discuss and analyze its meanings and how they can be used in that week's topic of concern. For example, week four largely discusses the issues surrounding substance abuse and the literature exploration section revolves around Selby's (1978) *Requiem for a Dream*, which tells the story of four individuals whose lives spiral out of control as a result of their substance abuse. Participants learn how to read the novel analytically, as well as examine the literary representations of substance abuse. During this time the participants also weigh the effects that substance abuse has on the individual as well as their family. Through these exercises, MRI encourages a deeper level of thinking among participants as they consider the various issues that will be presented to them upon release and throughout their lives.

The twelve-week, structured course of MRI addresses the indicators of need the coordinators have identified, which include: abusive family environment, lack of access to a proper education, lack of professional skills, lack of strong social support networks upon release, as well as the inability to think critically. MRI aims to "empower the participants to return to society with an enlightened understanding and an enhanced competence to succeed" in order to avoid behaviors that would lead to reincarceration (Sellers, 2016). Participants are encouraged to overcome the personal obstacles that played as factors in their paths to incarceration, as well as to establish new personal standards. The goals of MRI largely align with Taxman's (2004) reentry model that has found vast empirical support.

Week one of MRI begins by addressing Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, as a framework for participants to establish goals. As a foundation, MRI addresses mental and physical health needs from the start. Such focus has empirical support, as studies have shown that people with mental health disorders are overrepresented among the American prison population (Steadman, Osher, Robbins, Case, & Samuels, 2009) and mental health issues often play a part in recidivism (Skeem, Manchak, & Peterson, 2011). Week two addresses the participants' emotional well-being, focusing on experiences of joy, peace, happiness, and contentment and develop and strengths-based plan that aids in self-esteem building. Week three addresses family reunification, housing, as well as the major categories of financial responsibility, all major obstacles for successful reentry (Bowman & Travis, 2012; Petersilia, 2004; Visher & Travis, 2003). Week

four addresses another key issue that most imprisoned people face, substance abuse (Fazel & Bains, 2006). Week five covers the various aspects of conflict resolution, discussing communication skills, how to address and resolve interpersonal conflict, as well as anger management, which has been found to reduce recidivism rates (Hunter & Hughes, 1993). Week six begins a discussion on grief and loss that continues in later sessions, and when grief charts are introduced. Week seven addresses some of the practical concerns of reentry – employment, housing, education, as well as how to acquire proper identification materials within their communities upon their release, such as social security cards, driver’s licenses, and even library cards. Obtaining such resources and skill are common barriers that increase the likelihood of reincarceration (La Vigne, Davies, Palmer, & Halberstadt, 2008). Week eight focus on the role of mentorship – finding a positive support system as well as providing mentorship to others. These feeling of community and connection provide a sense of purpose and reduce the likelihood reoffending (Bowman & Travis, 2012). Week nine focuses on the practical issue of money management. And finally, weeks ten and eleven return to the grief charts and how to cope with the losses and trauma in one’s life in a more positive way. Positive coping skills and access to legitimate coping strategies are strongly associated with reduced rates in offending (Doherty, Forrester, Brazil, & Matheson, 2014). The final session is a graduation ceremony and time to reflect on MRI. Graduates of the program are also provided a community resource guide which has the contact information of various people and programs that participants could need upon release. These resources include contact information for various local twelve-step programs, domestic violence hotlines, as well as the location of the area’s food pantry.

The MRI curriculum aligns with many of the empirically supported central factors influencing successful reentry, thus providing it face validity. However, to better evaluate the impact of MRI, the perceptions of participants are warranted.

#### 4.3 *Qualitative Methodology*

Participants were recruited using a purposeful maximum variation sampling strategy of adult men who were formerly incarcerated in South Carolina prisons and had completed MRI. Purposeful sampling involves intentionally selecting research participants who can inform an understanding of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2013). The maximum variation approach to purposeful sampling consists of deliberately selecting a sample with heterogeneity under the logic that “any common patterns that emerge . . . are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon” (Patton, 2015, p. 281). Participants were recruited from a sampling pool of eligible individuals generated by MRI program staff who assisted researchers in selecting and contacting potential participants. We used the maximum variation strategy to select participants who varied by age, racial/ethnic group, the nature of their most recent offense, and criminal history. The final sample for this study consisted of twelve formerly incarcerated men.

Data were collected via face-to-face interviews. Participants chose the locations for meetings, and most meetings took place in a private location (e.g., out of earshot of others) in either a local library or fast food restaurant. Each participant was provided with written consent forms and the purpose of the study, and the confidential and voluntary nature of the interview was verbally explained. Interviews followed an exploratory semi-structured life-history format (Atkinson,

1998) that provided the opportunity for participants to reveal rich and descriptive information about their lives. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two and a half hours and were audio recorded. Participants received a US \$50 Visa gift card incentive and were reimbursed for any incurred bus/travel fare. Data were collected between October 2016 to September 2017. Approval was obtained from the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Audio-taped interviews were transcribed verbatim and entered into NVIVO, a qualitative data management and analysis software. We collaboratively developed a coding frame and analysis protocol. Using initial open coding techniques, which involved assigning labels to sections of transcripts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we independently read and coded the first four interview transcripts with respect to the participants’ descriptions of successful reentry. We then met to examine the codes developed and their respective interview excerpts to collaboratively develop a preliminary codebook, which included major codes, their definitions, and examples of interview excerpts assigned to each code. Next, each coder independently recoded the transcripts and coded three additional transcripts per this synthesized coding frame before we met again to compare coding and amend the codebook as needed. This process of multiple coding was repeated until agreement was established and all the transcripts were coded according to the collaboratively developed codebook. Finally, we collapsed the descriptors of successful reentry into conceptual themes. For our purposes, a theme “is an abstract entity that brings meaning and identity to a recurrent experience and its variant manifestations. As such, a theme captures and unifies the nature or basis of the experience into a meaningful whole” (DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000, p. 362). Themes that did not apply to a sufficient number of participants (40% or more) were not considered in the findings.

The final sample of participants was heterogeneous with respect to age, racial/ethnic group, the nature of their most recent offense, and criminal history (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Description of the Participants in the Study (n = 12)

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Racial/Ethnic Group	Most Recent Offense	Length of Most Recent Prison Sentence	Previous Criminal Record	Length of Time Since Release
Fred	59	Black	Drug offenses	5 years	Traffic violations, drug offenses	6 months
Brandon	45	Black	Forgery, bank fraud	3 years	Manslaughter, burglary	8 months
Mark	46	White	Property	1 year	Violence	1 month
Herbert	31	Black	Accessory after the fact	1 year	Firearms (misdemeanor)	2 months
Brett	33	Black	Burglary, robbery, drug offenses	7 years	Property, robbery, drug offenses	5 months
Kenneth	55	White	Drug offenses	5 years	Murder, burglary	1 week
Jermaine	50	Latino	Drug offenses	5 years	Violence, Trafficking	1 week

Lawrence	26	Black	Armed robbery	6 years	None (possession of marijuana)	6 months
Carlos	48	Black	Burglary	3 years	Violence, burglary	3 years
Gene	36	White	Possession, parole violation	18 months	Robbery, property, drug offenses	Several months
Tomas	38	Latino	Drug offenses	2 years	Burglary, larceny	6 months
Garrett	53	Black	Manslaughter	22 years	Unknown	5 months

#### 4.4 *Men's Reentry Initiative Strengths*

Generally, men who participated in the program expressed feeling that MRI provided a place for them to escape mentally, physically, or both from prison life. Some men wanted escape from the discomfort of the facility (e.g., lack of air conditioning). Others wanted escape from the criminogenic environment of the facility and appreciated MRI as a means to stay busy and avoid unstructured down time.

Most of the men expressed value in MRI with helping them transform their thought process throughout the remainder of their sentence as well as upon release. They credited MRI with helping them cope with negative emotions such as stress and sadness, as well as control emotions such as anger and frustration. The program, specifically Mark Sellers, were motivational and encouraged participants to avoid negative behavior. The men felt driven to be better in life, make better decisions, and never give up. MRI empowered the participants to have personal agency to improve themselves and their lives.

One of the most unique and highly praised components of the program was the Grief Chart. Many of the men mentioned that doing the grief chart gave them an opportunity for self reflection and to re-examine people and events in their lives that may have led them to their experiences with the criminal justice system. In the interviews, the grief chart came up regularly along with appreciation for self reflection. Sharing their stories with others seemed welcome, as the men saw value in the opportunity to reflect on their own lives and see themselves as others see them. For most, they felt this exercise helped them recognize where problems existed in their lives and how they can move forward from them.

The men we interviewed seemed to really appreciate the social support they gained by participating in MRI. Specifically, the relationships they formed with other members of the program, especially with Mark, were invaluable. They found Mark to be an inspiring mentor they could continue to rely on even after release. Many of them felt that he went above and beyond for their success, some even considered him to be a positive older brother figure. Social support also covered the emotional support networks that came from other participants in the program. Participants expressed a sense of brotherhood and comradery within the program that was an appreciated break from the general prison population.

Finally, the men seemed to genuinely enjoy being in the program among their brothers. They wanted more time in the program. Many of the men participating in MRI stated that everything

was great, but they wanted more time each session. Some wanted to remain for the continued escape from the ward. While others enjoyed the activities and conversations and wanted them to continue. Also, many of the men really hoped or maybe expected to have jobs and/or housing upon release. They would have preferred being connected with tangible resources, particularly jobs. However, when those opportunities were not possible the men appreciated being provided pamphlets or other literature to help them successfully reenter society.

#### 4.5 *Participant Expressed Areas for Improvement*

They expressed a desire to have job/housing placement secured so they would have somewhere to go once they got out of jail.

##### Recommendations:

- When available, connect soon-to-be released participants with tangible resources.
  - Some men did state that Mark personally connected them with resources that was a very appreciated component of the MRI experience and Mark's dedicated mentorship.

Some men felt a disconnect from other men in the program. For example, participants were at different stages of their sentence with some being released within a few months while others may be serving 20+ years. For those with shorter sentences, they found difficulty having discussions with those serving longer.

##### Recommendations:

- Small group breakouts within the larger group
- Different cohorts of participants grouped by status

The MRI curriculum includes a wide range of topics tailored to cover a variety of experiences. However, some men felt particularly alienated by certain topics and felt they didn't really benefit from the conversation. For example, one participant mentioned feeling out of touch when discussing reconnections with family because it focused on reconnecting with young children and as an older man with adult children, his relationship with his children was different.

##### Recommendations:

- Small group breakouts within the larger group
- Incorporate different examples of relationship rebuilding (young children, adolescents, adult children, etc.)
- Use MRI application to gauge represented age groups (or other concerns) and tailor the curriculum based on the men's needs/wants

Participants reported that some struggled to allow themselves to fully open up and freely express their emotions and experiences within the hyper-masculine culture of prison life. Though, this critique was not in line with the majority expressing gratitude for the safe space provided by MRI, Mark, and other 'brothers' participating in the program. However, some men felt that the program was too heavily focused on feelings and expressing emotions. One participant reported feeling that the program focused too much on the negative experiences of the participants.

Recommendations:

- Incorporate more practical/hands-on components
- Provide more opportunities to discuss resiliency and strengths to balance challenging conversations

While a single program cannot truly satisfy the needs of all who participate, some participants, expressed that they did not get anything from the program. While the feedback provided was not negative, they did not personally find it useful to them at the point in time.

Recommendations:

- Different cohorts to group similarly situated participants
- Use MRI application to tailor the sessions to who is currently represented among the participants
- Include post-assessments to determine what aspects of the program participants find useful or not; adjust accordingly

*4.6 Research Team and Empirically Supported Recommendations*

*4.6.1 Research Team Recommendations*

MRI staff should streamline record keeping procedures.

- a. Standardized selection criteria
  - a. Establish clear timelines for participants – e.g., time to release
  - b. Objective selection process – program participation based on clearly established, uniform standards
- b. Thorough intake/pre-assessment and release/post-assessment
  - a. Utilize newly developed application to capture relevant information about each participant
  - b. Develop post-assessment questionnaire to be filled out upon completion of the 12-week course
- c. Systematic organization of participant information
  - a. Digital database of information collected from pre- and post-assessment
    - i. Demographics
    - ii. Expressed needs
  - b. Record of participants who drop-out or do not graduate from program

*4.6.2 Empirically Supported Risks/Needs Recommendations* (Taxman, 2004)

Research suggests that re-entering individuals should make use of the idle time inherent in incarceration, particularly the 90 days leading up release.

- a. MRI should tailor participation to those within 90 days of release. This population will benefit most from reentry programming.
  - a. Limiting participation to those closest to release is also an efficient use of resources.

- b. The 12-week structured curriculum lends itself to a 90-day pre-release period. This may improve the completion rate of MRI participants.

During this 90-day pre-release period individuals should have access to educational and/or vocational training.

- a. MRI should emphasize gaining and/or developing basic life skills.
  - a. Including a plan for post-release – e.g., where they are going to live; what they are going to do
    - i. Self-accountability is crucial here. Participants must be actively involved in their own post-release planning

In the 90-day pre-release period and up to release day participants should be actively and intentionally planning for their reintegration. The focus here should be on basic life needs – i.e. survival needs

- a. MRI should focus on putting their plan for post-release into action and pay attention to things that are in the immediate future.
  - a. Important here: housing, employment, food, positive social circle and support system

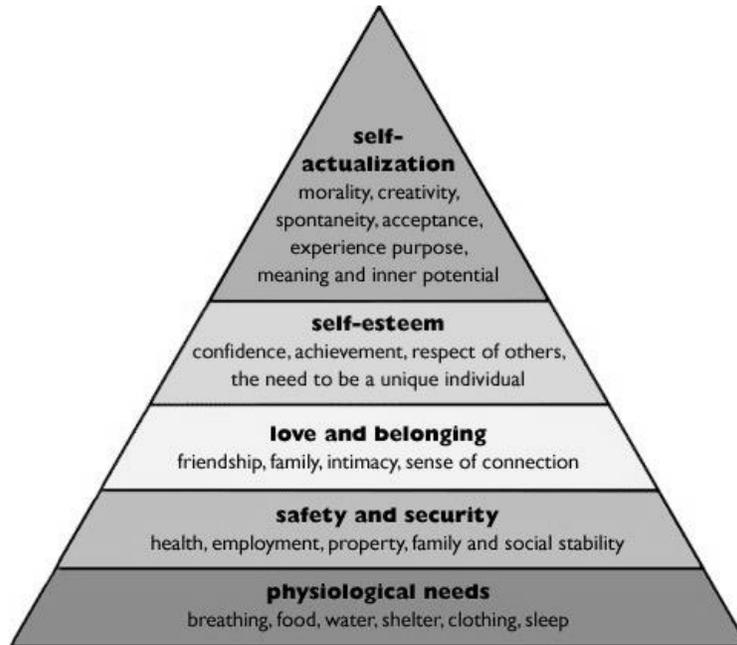
From release day and throughout the first 30 days post-release, participants must be mindful of vulnerabilities to criminal involvement.

- a. MRI should encourage realistic assessment of criminogenic factors awaiting participants' return, as early as the 90-day pre-release period.
  - a. Particular attention should be paid to how participants will meet their basic needs through legitimate means.
  - b. Meaningful connections should be made between participants and non-criminal individuals.
    - i. MRI should encourage networks of mentors and pro-social others besides Mark Sellers. Encourage development, improvement, or repair of positive pre-incarceration relationships.

## **5 Conclusions**

The needs of individuals returning to the community from prison are magnified iterations of standard human needs. Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs is a widely accepted psychological model of human motivation. Maslow's proposed needs are exacerbated with the burden of a criminal record. Yet, they align with the needs most expressed by MRI participants and the needs empirically identified by reentry scholars.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943)



The current research team applauds the work being done by Mark Sellers and the Men's Reentry Initiative. While the overall curriculum is promising, we find that its promise would be most realized with more streamlined participant selection. The material being covered by MRI is shown to be integral to successful reentry. However, the true impact has yet to be fully revealed due to inconsistencies in selection and record-keeping. Standardized records must be a priority for further MRI development.

This will ensure that the individuals most in need of MRI services have the opportunity to participate. While, ideally, the program would be open to all who wish to participate, resources should be used towards those who will benefit most. This intentional selection of participants also improves accuracy in number of participants over time and rates of program completion. Additionally, clearer records will reveal more useful pre- and post- program individual assessments. Participant level assessments also reveal components of the curriculum that may or may not be useful to each cohort. Clearer participant assessment will also improve future program reviews by MRI staff and/or outside research teams.

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