



# Cultivating Change Through Altruism: A Study of Prison Programs

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## What is Altruism?

Altruism is a behaviour or a selfless act carried out to help another without expectation of reward (Loewenthal & Inaba, 2011).

→ "Altruistic programs can do more than just provide an opportunity for redemption and improved skill sets, but they can also have deeper transformative and rehabilitative effects" (Toch, 2000, P. 271).

## Background:

### 1. Problem:

Overcrowding, violence and recidivism rates are causing global concern amongst correctional staff and management; government agencies and academics. As prison programming models are revised to be more 'offender-focussed'- alternative programming is indicative of the potential transformative benefits within offenders, for the community, and for the correctional environment.

### 2. Challenge:

While there is evidence of a shift towards a more offender-needs focus within prison programming; there is limited literature that directly speaks to prison programming focussing on altruism as a goal. Therefore, a challenge is to firstly seek out those who implemented programs, so that we can understand the potential benefits and implementation demands of these programs.

### 3. Solution:

Recognising the potential of altruistic programming, Queensland Corrective Services (QCS) has enlisted the services of UQ students to explore the benefits and the receptiveness of QCS to these programs.

## Research Questions:

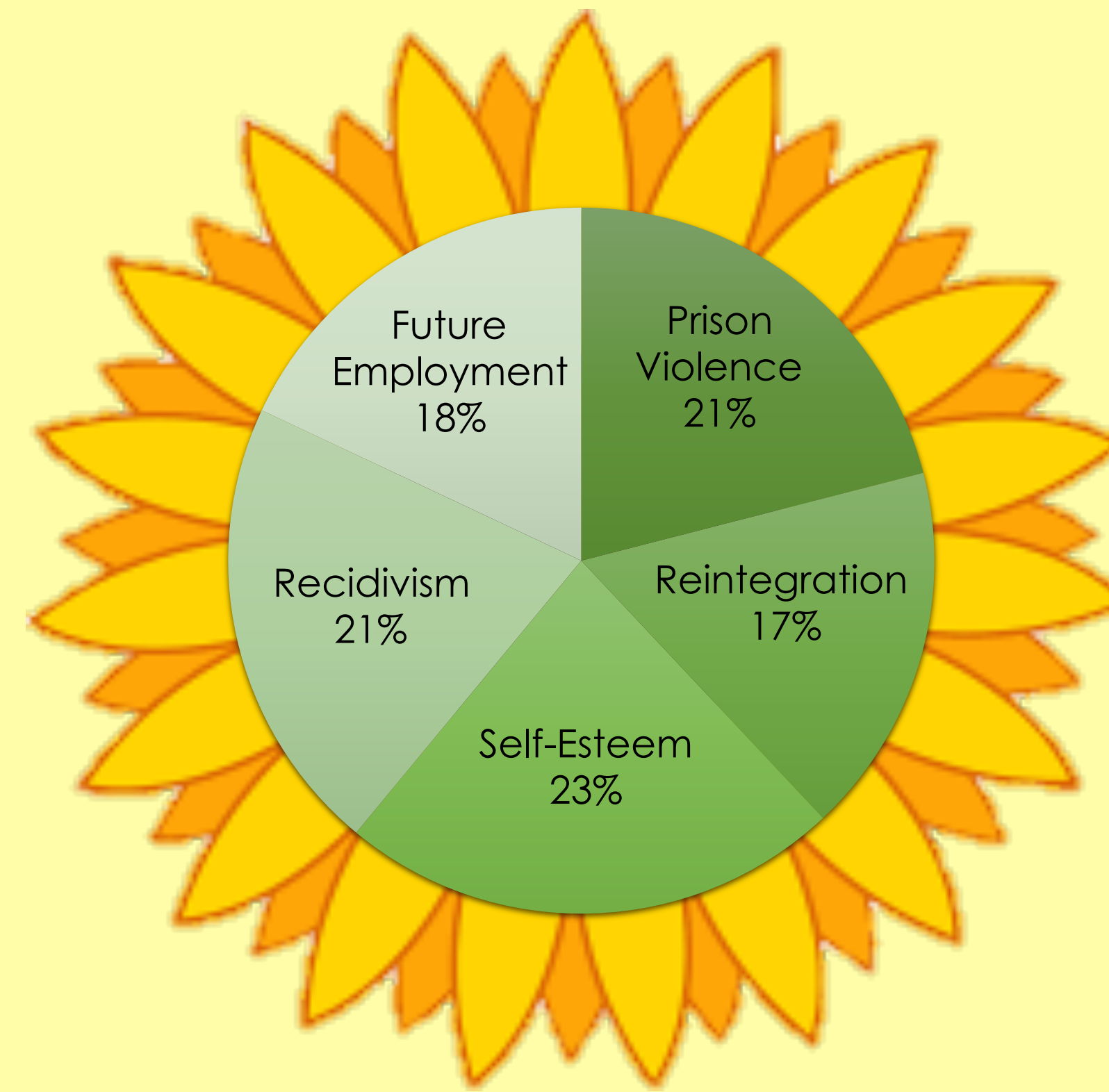
The team devised research questions to best respond to the problem and challenges presented above; these being:

1. What does altruism mean in the corrective context?
2. Has altruism been applied as an 'outcome; or a curriculum goal in current offender programming?
3. In QCS prisons, are there any existing programs that could be easily altered, or enhanced, to incorporate altruism as a curriculum goal or outcome? If so, how?
4. Are there any programs that aim to, or have been demonstrated to, foster altruism that are not yet part of the mix of programs offered in QCS prisons? If so, what are they?

## Findings:

### Benefits of Altruism to Offenders:

→ Participants believed there were multiple benefits of altruism in the correctional context including: assisting with recidivism, future employment, reintegration, prison violence and self-esteem. Self-esteem was recognised as the most central issue that altruism could assist with.



→ In keeping with Maruna's (2001) theory of desistance, we found that altruistic programs assist offenders in developing a more pro-social identity :

*"So their identity has shifted from being a prisoner [...] to an experienced market gardener, to a contributor, to someone who is part of a neighbourhood house, who has a relationship and respectful relationships with visitors and staff and volunteers in the house" (Jasmine, director of sustainability program).*

→ Altruistic prison programs allow the community to see prisoners in a more positive light:

*"It has amazing benefits for community members to see prisoners doing beautiful, useful things in the community" (Jim, programming expert).*

### In the QCS context:

- 83% of survey participants believed altruism amongst offenders can be fostered through programming.
  - Participants identified 12 programs in the QCS context that already foster altruism; however only 40% of participants were aware of these.
  - 70% of respondents stated altruistic programs would be received well by prisoners, while 30% were undecided.
  - Of the programs offered to survey participants, they expressed the most interest in programs where sustainable food practices for charity.

References: Inaba, K., & Loewenthal, K. (2011). Religion and Altruism in P. Clarke (Ed.), *Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*. Oxford UK: Oxford University Press.; Maruna, S. (2001). Making good: how ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.; Toch, H. (2000). Altruistic activity as correctional treatment. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 44(3), 271.



## Thank you:

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## Methods:

We employed a mixed-methods approach, comprising of both qualitative and quantitative data.

This included:

### 1. Semi-Structured Interviews: (Qualitative)

→ Face-to-face semi-structured interviews with four programming experts and one industry leader. Interviews provided an in-depth view of the benefits of altruism and informed the online survey design.

### 2. Online Surveys: (Quantitative)

→ An online survey was completed by 68 program staff which provided an understanding of the QCS context and their receptivity to altruistic programs.

### 3. Analysis of Findings

→ For each of the two data collection methods (qualitative & quantitative), either thematic or statistical analysis was conducted. This involved theming and coding for the interviews, and using STATA (a statistical computer program) for the online surveys.

## Future Research:

We expect both (1) existing and (2) new programs to be our future focus. (1) Existing Programs: There is a need to assess the value of altruism-related programs through consultation with offenders and staff directly involved with any pilots.

→ We suggest the development of staff training with respect to understanding the value of altruism and how it may be fostered in QCS. (2) New Programs: We foresee the need to examine the potential implementation costs for QCS that will come alongside introducing an altruistic-related program.

→ A pilot program is suggested for QCS implementation and, based on the survey responses, the 'sustainable food' program (scan QR code for more) would be the most well received. Following this, evaluation of the program (and any others) should be conducted.

