Are prisons making our society safer?

Community Solutions to Reducing Reoffending from Brazil & Italy

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For Inês

You flew half way across the world with a perfect stranger

in the spirit of adventure,

with a thirst for knowledge

and with the belief that

every broken system can be fixed

and every broken person can be saved.

Muito obrigado.

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Abbreviations/glossary

APAC (Associação de Proteção e Assistência aos Condenados): The "Association for the Protection and Assistance of the Convicted" – a Brazilian model of incarceration that eliminates guards and weapons, focusing instead on dignity, work, trust, and spirituality.

APG23 (Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII Association): Italian faith-based association inspired by APAC, managing halfway houses for ex-offenders and rehabilitation communities across Italy.

Article 21 (Art. 21, Italian Penitentiary Act): A legal provision in Italy permitting prisoners to work outside prison facilities during their sentence, under judicial supervision, to support social reintegration.

Community-Based Justice: A model of justice that integrates community participation in rehabilitation, reintegration, and prevention of reoffending.

Detention House: Facility for incarcerated people, usually refers a smaller scale prison.

ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance): Framework used by companies to integrate social value and sustainability into business strategy.

FBAC (Fraternidade Brasileira de Assistência aos Condenados): National federation overseeing the APAC system in Brazil and internationally, providing training, monitoring, and advocacy.

Halfway house: a centre for rehabilitating former prisoners, psychiatric patients, or others unused to non-institutional life.

IDDD (Instituto de Defesa do Direito de Defesa): Brazilian NGO advocating for access to justice, fair trial rights, and public legal education.

IDMJ Racial (Instituto de Defesa da População Negra e da Justiça Racial): Grassroots organisation in Rio de Janeiro promoting racial justice, legal empowerment, and anti-discrimination in the justice system.

Recidivism: For this report it is the recurrence of criminal behaviour resulting in imprisonment after previous conviction and release.

Restorative Justice: An approach focusing on repairing harm caused by crime, encouraging accountability, dialogue, and community healing rather than punishment.

Recuperando: Portuguese term used in APACs to describe incarcerated people serving time in an APAC. Literally means "the one who is recovering."

Reintegration: The process of supporting former offenders to rejoin society through employment, education, housing, and community connection.

Reoffending: The recurrence of criminal behaviour after previous conviction and release. In this report it is used whether the new crime committed resulted in a prison sentence or not.

ROTL (Release on Temporary Licence): System that allows eligible prisoners to leave custody for short periods to engage in specific activities, such as work, family visits, or medical appointments.

Social Enterprise: An organisation combining commercial activity with social objectives. In this report, refers to enterprises like Bee4, Vale La Pena, and Recomeçar, which employ incarcerated or formerly incarcerated people.

About the Author

Jacob Hill is the founder of Offploy, a social enterprise that helps people with criminal convictions rebuild their lives through sustainable employment. His commitment to reintegration stems from personal experience; after serving a 28-month sentence. Jacob witnessed the untapped potential of those seeking a second chance. Through Offploy, his work is to reduce reoffending and promote inclusive hiring across the UK. As a Churchill Fellow, Jacob explored international models of community-based justice in Brazil and Italy, studying how approaches that combine dignity, responsibility, and social integration can make societies safer and fairer.

Executive Summary

My Churchill Fellowship set out to explore a fundamental question: *Are prisons making our society safer?* The research examined how countries like Brazil and Italy are reshaping justice systems by involving communities, families, and businesses in rehabilitation — demonstrating that safety grows not from punishment, but from participation.

Across both contexts, the findings were clear: traditional prisons rarely achieve long-term safety. They often perpetuate cycles of poverty, exclusion, and reoffending. In contrast, community-based justice models such as Brazil's APAC show that when dignity, trust, and responsibility replace control and isolation, reoffending drops dramatically. Complementary organisations such as AMPARAR, Elas Existem, and Recomeçar reinforced that rehabilitation extends beyond the prison walls, requiring family, social, and emotional support networks.

Italy provided equally powerful lessons in adaptation and innovation. APG23 and SanPa communities apply APAC principles through education, faith, and work-based rehabilitation. Projects like Bee4 and Programma 2121 revealed how business partnerships can bridge incarceration and employment, offering inmates paid training and real jobs. Initiatives like InGalera, the restaurant inside Milan's Bollate Prison, and Vale la Pena, a social enterprise pub in Rome, demonstrated how bringing the public into contact with prisoner-made goods can break stigma and inspire empathy. Meanwhile, the Bard Prison Project at the University of Milan proved that higher education can foster responsibility, self-worth, and civic reintegration.

The evidence gathered throughout my Fellowship shows that prisons in their current form do not make our societies safer, but communities do. Rehabilitation grounded in dignity, education, work, and social connection not only reduces reoffending but rebuilds trust between citizens and the justice system.

For the UK, the lesson is clear: to create lasting safety, we must move beyond containment toward collaboration. Small-scale, community-integrated detention houses, supported by education and employment pathways, can deliver more effective, humane, and economically sustainable justice. Real safety is achieved not by isolating people, but by giving them the means to return, contribute, and belong.

Introduction: Reimagining Justice, Rediscovering Community

In 1910, Winston Churchill declared that “the mood and temper of the public in regard to the treatment of crime and criminals is one of the most unfailing tests of the civilisation of any country.” More than a century later, our civilisation is still being tested. Across the UK, our prisons swell with people warehoused in isolation, while communities fray under the weight of social exclusion, austerity and reoffending. We have become more efficient at punishment, but less curious about rehabilitation.

This report is the result of a journey made possible by The Churchill Fellowship to explore how societies around the world are involving communities in the rehabilitation of people in prison. In Brazil, I visited APAC prisons, where control of daily life is handed to people in custody and the volunteers who support them, removing prison officers entirely and replacing containment with purpose. In Italy, I found a system that integrates civic life with the prison estate, where theatre companies, restaurateurs, co-operatives and volunteers create bridges between custody and community. Though culturally distinct, both models share a belief that communities are not just part of the solution, they are the foundation of it. When people in prison are trusted with responsibility and surrounded with opportunity, rehabilitation is no longer a hope. It becomes an expectation.

My passion for this work is rooted in personal experience. I served time in prison and lived through the struggle of release, of rebuilding identity, purpose and trust in a system not always designed to support that journey. But I also discovered hope. After prison, I founded Offploy to help others with convictions find meaningful employment. That journey has shown me again and again that people change. That communities grow stronger when they believe in second chances. And that systems, including the UK's justice system, are not beyond reform. I believe rehabilitation is not only possible for individuals… It is necessary for our justice system too.

What follows is a set of practical, human-centred insights drawn from the models I observed abroad. These examples align with the call made by Offploy’s Patron, David Gauke, in his Independent Review of Sentencing, to reduce the use of short custodial sentences and instead focus on effective, community-led solutions.

This is not a call to replicate foreign systems wholesale, nor is it naïve to the challenges we face at home. But it is a clear and hopeful invitation to imagine a justice system that genuinely believes in people’s potential to change. Including its own.

Finally, this version you're reading offers insights and key findings across each project I visited. It's priority is print-friendliness and essential background knowledge. It is best digested one project at a time. However, I also took hundreds of photos and recorded hours of footage which I will add to a dedicated website. Get in touch if you would like more information or footage from any of the projects that kindly gave me their time.

So, let's start off by flying across the globe to the country that ranks third in the world for the number of people they lock behind bars and see what the United Kingdom can learn from them about community solutions to reducing reoffending.

Brazil

Throughout our journey across Brazil, from the humanised APAC prisons in Minas Gerais and Maranhão to grassroots advocacy in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, a unifying insight emerged: reintegration and reduced recidivism are only possible when justice is rooted in community. Across a wide range of initiatives, we consistently encountered models that prioritised human dignity, belonging, and local leadership over punishment and exclusion. These lessons show that transforming the justice system requires involving those most affected by it, not just as recipients, but as protagonists.

A core theme was that reintegration must begin inside prison, with dignity, purpose, and structure. The APAC model exemplifies this, operating without guards or uniforms, grounded in mutual trust and collective responsibility. Incarcerated individuals (referred to as recuperandos) take part in structured daily routines, education, work, and spiritual growth. The results speak for themselves: significantly lower reoffending rates and stronger reintegration outcomes. But beyond the statistics, APAC demonstrates a belief that people, even while incarcerated, can be trusted, empowered, and prepared for a meaningful return to society.

The insight that families are essential to breaking cycles of incarceration was reinforced by our visit to AMPARAR, a powerful example of grassroots organising led by mothers and relatives of those behind bars. Their work, offering legal aid, psychological support, and transportation to prisons, reveals how the burden of incarceration often falls disproportionately on women. Through AMPARAR, we heard not just about hardship, but about resistance, solidarity, and the healing power of community. This message was echoed by Marcos Melo, former general director of the Department of Criminal Affairs in Salvador, who emphasised how disconnection from family during incarceration - especially due to logistical and financial barriers - can sever the very ties that most support reintegration.

Gendered experiences of incarceration were made visible through Elas Existem, an organisation working with women deprived of liberty in Rio de Janeiro. The specific vulnerabilities of women (such as motherhood, gender-based violence, and social stigma) are rarely addressed in mainstream reintegration policies. By offering support tailored to women's lived experiences, Elas Existem challenges a justice system that too often vanishes the female prison population and their needs.

We also saw that reintegration must continue beyond release, and that people with lived experience are among the most effective agents of change. Instituto Recomeçar, a social enterprise led by formerly incarcerated Leonardo Precioso, exemplifies this. Their peer-to-peer approach to support, advocacy, and employment training reflects the power of proximity. Similarly, the testimony of many of the FBAC's team, former recuperandos turned leaders, showed how the experience of incarceration can be transformed into service, leadership, and mentorship. Their journeys highlight the role of recognition and opportunity in preventing return to prison.

Throughout our visits, legal empowerment emerged as a key tool for prevention. IDDD and IDMJ Racial run legal education programs in favelas and prisons that address not only technical knowledge but also racial justice and civic awareness. These efforts reduce vulnerability to state violence and equip individuals with the tools to advocate for their rights. Such work is crucial in Brazil, where structural racism and inequality shape who gets incarcerated, for how long, and with what consequences.

In addition, the evidence-based, policy-oriented approach of the Instituto Igarapé showed the importance of bridging grassroots knowledge with systemic reform. Their data-driven research and engagement with public policy offer a macro lens to the same conclusions seen on the ground: punitive models fail, and reintegration requires holistic, community-anchored responses.

What became evident across all these spaces is that grassroots organisations are filling urgent gaps left by the state. Whether providing psychological care, food baskets, legal advice, or simply a sense of belonging, community groups like AMPARAR, Recomeçar, and IDPMJ Racial are offering critical infrastructure for reintegration. Their strength lies in shared experience, horizontal leadership, and deep trust - qualities often absent from formal institutions.

However, to truly scale and sustain these community-based solutions, collaboration between diverse stakeholders is essential. The efforts we witnessed face challenges of funding, recognition, and institutional support. Organisations like Porticus play a crucial role by investing in ecosystem-building and facilitating dialogue between civil society, government, the judiciary, and people with lived experience. Whether it's a judge like Luiz Carlos supporting APAC, a former public defender and former general director of the Department of Criminal Affairs investigating and teaching future lawyers about these issues, or entities like the Igarapé Institute, IDMJ, and IDDD collecting and publishing data and best practices, the most promising initiatives succeed when institutions and communities work side by side.

Belonging is central to rehabilitation. Whether in the structured rhythm of APAC or the empathetic networks of AMPARAR and Recomeçar, people were not only being supported - they were being invited to lead. Formerly incarcerated individuals were not framed as risks or problems to manage, but as capable contributors to their communities. Reintegration, then, is not just social policy. It is a cultural shift, from exclusion to recognition.

Brazil's community-based justice actors are not waiting for permission to innovate. They are already building a different kind of justice system: one anchored in dignity, solidarity, and care. Their work proves that reducing recidivism is not just about reforming systems, but about restoring people's place within them.

APAC Timon

https://www.instagram.com/apactimon/#

The Northeast of Brazil is known not for the best reasons, being mostly portrayed as an area of poverty and criminal activity. The State of Maranhão, the land of palm trees, is one of the poorest states in Brazil, with the highest proportion of people living in extreme poverty in Brazil.

APAC Timon, my first visit in this journey, is located on the border of Maranhão and Piauí, being the 4th biggest municipality in the state of Maranhão. Zulmira Silva, administrator for APAC Timon and our guide during our stay, told us how the team was very excited for our visit - they won some public funding to open a new location, and they are moving in a few months.

We had a full day in Timon: in the morning we visited the new space still under construction where we had the opportunity to talk with Denis Moraes (chief of security), then we had lunch with the team and finally we interviewed Cida Santos, the general manager of APAC Timon. We talked about their journey since they opened in 2011 and their future, security in APAC's and the importance of trust and community in rehabilitating incarcerated people.

After a quick drive, we arrive with Denis and Zulmira to a gate set into an unpainted wall - on the other side a large property, with 4 buildings already fully built and a lot of outside space and potential. They are going to have a capacity of up to 162 *recuperandos*, double what they have now. Denis and Zulmira gave us the full tour, pointing out the different zone for the different regimens:

- Close regimen: where there is more surveillance and less freedom, *recuperandos* in this regimen can't move freely outside of their wing.
- Semi-open regimen allows prisoners to have more freedom, with permission for temporary or permanent leave, provided they meet certain conditions and have demonstrated good behaviour. It is an intermediate step in the progression to open prison, allowing the *recuperandos* to move between wings of the APAC for their responsibilities and work.
- Open regimen: the most liberal, with greater freedom of movement and opportunities for professional development, allowing them to leave APAC to work.

The first thing we noticed on our tour was how different in terms of architecture APAC is from the prisons we are used to: each wing has a football court, rooms for workshops and classes, cells adjusted for people with low mobility and a barbershop. Each wing by law also has a isolation cell, which they always make into the chapel. In the large court outside, the team is dreaming about having a bakery and a garden, following what other larger APACs are already doing.

Don't get me wrong, it is still a prison, and it feels like a prison, but APACs are a preferable prison: a type of detention houses where incarcerated people have more liberty and less punishment. They have more free time outside cells, are allowed to socialise between them and the community, have access to learning and work opportunities and are treated with trust.

Denis explained the security routines of APAC and how different it is from the normal prison system - each wing is divided from the rest of the building by two locked doors with a chamber in between. This security chamber is managed by the CSS - *Conselho de Sinceridade e Solidariedade* ("Council of Sincerity and Solidarity") a group of 3 *recuperandos* from each regimen for each chamber. So, in APAC those who are incarcerated also carry the keys to let themselves out.

I asked Denis how can they give this level of freedom to inmates and still have security - don't people just run away? "It has happened. (...) I myself have been locked inside the semi-open wing and the guy run away. But despite that we need to keep giving them trust. Because when you give them the key they go "oh wow he gave me the key, am I really going to run away? Will it really be better for me to be a fugitive [versus being here]?"". He continued explaining how by giving inmates guaranteed rights and better conditions, incarcerated people will think about the risk of escaping and ending up as a fugitive or in the normal prison. This gives space to give even more trust and responsibility to them.

Discipline was also highlighted by Denis, as the other side of trust. Every *recuperando* has a full schedule filled with mandatory classes on APAC's methodology, routine tasks (like cleaning, cooking, fixing the space) and workshops. "Discipline with love", as Denis described it, is not about yelling and punishing but about explaining the rules and how they came to be, as well as what are the consequences to not following them. When a new person enters the APAC, they are given a contract that they must read and agree to, in addition to the mandatory classes on APAC's methodology.

Denis believes the methodology works and the statistics seem to agree, since its creation APAC's see a 1% abscondment rate and has never seen a riot. Also, their recidivism rate is 20% against the 80% of the normal system[1]. These results relate to the way APAC sees incarcerated people as people in recovery, meeting their needs and giving them trust and discipline to go back to the outside world and not have to fall into crime again.

Back in the current building of APAC Timon, after lunch, I talked with Cida Santos, the general manager. Cida explained how her job is just to make sure the vision of the board is being followed, alongside the methodology and model of APAC.

When I asked about what advice she would give to someone that wanted to open an APAC she talked about the importance of community: When they opened the current building, they almost eliminated the drug trafficking in the area which brought value to the neighbours that might've been sceptical about having a building full of incarcerated people next to them.

With the new building, they will have more space and have made a proposal to have a bakery and a dog kennel for all the lost dogs in the area. They will sell the products made in the APAC and have open days for the community to visit and learn about what they do. This not only helps the neighbours and community to feel safer but also destigmatises people with convictions and allows them to socialise and prepare for the world outside.

This first visit - fittingly, to an APAC under construction - laid the foundation for everything that followed. It was the APAC model, after all, that first put Brazil on my radar as a focal point for my Churchill Fellowship. The core themes I encountered here trust, community-led rehabilitation, and purposeful reintegration, echoed throughout the next two weeks. Whether speaking with other APACs or engaging with a wide range of justice system stakeholders, I kept returning to the same central conclusion: to address austerity and support true rehabilitation, prisons must meaningfully involve both prisoners and their communities in their operations.

Key Takeaways:

1. Trust-based security works: Giving incarcerated people responsibility fosters accountability and reduces violence.
2. Community involvement is key: APAC Timon's model shows that engaging the local community can reduce stigma, improve safety, and support reintegration.
3. Discipline with dignity: A structured daily routine combined with respect and purpose leads to better rehabilitation outcomes and lower recidivism.

Elas Existem

https://aelasexistem.com/en

From Teresina to Rio de Janeiro, the capital of Carnaval, a beautiful diverse city with amazing beaches, natural passages, luxury resorts and restaurants and poverty hidden in plain sight. Rio is the second largest municipal GDP in the country and the second-most-populous city, but it also has more people living in slums than any other city in Brazil - 22% of Rio's total population.

In slums known as favelas, the population is predominantly Black (around 67% [2]), and where the large majority of people live in poverty – where the average wage of a family is 183,45GBP. [3] The truth is that Rio is one of the cities in the world where you can most clearly see the difference between the rich and the poor and the leftovers of Portuguese Colonialism - all of which is then compounded in the way incarcerated and former incarcerated people are treated.

It is no surprise that some of the most radical organisations that we visited in Brazil were based in Rio. If APAC Timon introduced me to how communities can directly run prisons, Elas Existem showed me what it means to imagine life without prison, and how to fight for dignity and justice far beyond the walls.

Founded in 2016, Elas Existem is a feminist, anti-racist, and penal abolitionist organisation based in Rio de Janeiro with another operation in Acre. Their name translates to “They [female] Exist”, a powerful reminder of the people often made invisible within the Brazilian criminal justice system - women, especially trans women, black women, and those from low-income communities. Our time with Elas Existem started in the morning at their office that coincidentally is near *Museu de Amanhã* (“Museum of Tomorrow”), a waterfront applied science museum exploring humanity's future challenges and opportunities. It was a day surrounded by confident smart women that with humour and generosity talked with me about the struggles and challenges of women in the Brazilian prisons and how abolitionism shouldn’t be seen as something scary but a way of thinking about community, recovery and structural issues.

In March 2016, Elas Existem was born as a Working Group within the Criminal and Penitentiary Policy Commission of the Brazilian Bar Association (OAB-RJ) but in 2017 it became an independent non-profit organisation. Cofounder and president Carol Bispo explained how that year she won an international grant for continuing her work and research with incarcerated women and was getting ready to do it in Paris. However, she found out that at the time “100% of incarcerated women in Acre were women of colour” [4] and so, she changed her research focus, grabbed everything and moved to Acre to open another branch of Elas Existem.

In 2021, Elas Existem opened a house for women leaving the prison system in Acre while continuing to conduct thematic workshops within the system and extramural activities with and for women survivors of the system. In Rio, where they started, they continue their activities for incarcerated women, both in female prisons and male prisons with trans-women, such as book clubs, thematic workshops (jewellery and arts and crafts) and assisting with social and legal help.

In only 6 years, what started as prison visits and hygiene kit drives has evolved into an organisation delivering legal support, professional training, public advocacy, and reintegration services to women affected by the prison system. Their advocacy work is also a main part of their day-to-day operations participating in conferences, working groups and investigations on incarceration, drug policy, and gender justice and developing public campaigns to reduce stigma and increase awareness. They are also leading a five-year international congress on female incarceration, starting in Acre and ending in New York and Rio, where they’ll mark 10 years of the organisation in 2026.

Carol has one foot in Rio and another in Acre, where she manages a team of 7 people, 5 of which benefited from Elas Existem activities inside the prison while they were serving their sentences. Elas Existem puts their beliefs into action, Natasha, one of the members of the Rio team explains how when she was released from prison it would be almost impossible for her to find a job - she is a trans black women that didn't finish her studies and had a criminal record hovering above her head. When I met Natasha in 2023, Elas Existem had given her a part-time job and support after her release so she could continue her studies, now in 2024 she is part of the executive board of Elas Existem and is the Head of Third Area of Work for the organisation - Harm reduction and drug policy. Indeed, an Audrey Lorde quote surrounds Elas Existem's work, featured on their t-shirts, on the wall and on all their social media "I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own."

In conversations with Carol and the team, one theme kept coming up: the need to recognise and respond to the specific struggles and needs of women in the penal system. Because only 7.4% of the inmate population is female[5], most organisations and policies focusing on rehabilitation of incarcerated people do it based on the male experience and don't look at the gender-specific issues women face when in prison. I agreed that the female community in prison is usually very different from the male, with most women serving sentences for less violent crimes, a lot of times connected with substance addiction and with the woman not being the main culprit in the crime – we see this in the UK too.

Carol believes prison puts already vulnerable women in an even-worst situation, she sees a connection between the lack of support and harsh sentence time given to women and the structural racism and sexism of Brazil: women have a higher probability of falling below the poverty line, many ending up in the streets making it easier for men in criminal activities to take advantage. The lack of public policies focusing on risk reduction for women and especially black women causes a cycle of crime, poverty and abuse that destroys lives and feeds stereotypes about poor black women being criminals. One of the reasons I chose Brazil for my Fellowship is because it ranks third in the world in terms of prison population (both in total and for female prisoners [6]), this systemic problem is not lost on the community, that in turn creates grassroots innovative organisations like Elas Existem to look for solutions.

Despite their abolitionist stance, Elas Existem works inside existing systems every day - helping women navigate prison bureaucracy, supporting adolescents in youth detention, and pushing for humane treatment for all incarcerated people. Mainly though:

- Workshops inside prisons (on rights, employment skills, arts and crafts and harm reduction)
- Community programmes that build income generation opportunities for women that left prison
- Support both in-prison and post-prison for women affected by the justice system such as free therapy, legal advice and job scouting.

In contrast to prison models focused on control, Elas Existem methodology is built on care, autonomy, and structural change. While the UK is looking at investing £2.3 billion towards prison builds over the next two years, with a target to open up 14,000 places by 2031, I have to wonder what if the solution isn't more prison beds, but fewer people behind bars altogether? And if that means reducing reoffending, then the kind of support Elas Existem provides - from legal guidance to community-building - may offer a far more effective and cost-efficient path forward.

Key Takeaways:

1. Reintegration solutions must be gender and race aware. Any effective intervention must address the specific challenges faced by cis and trans women in prison, especially in contexts of poverty and racism, that's the only way we can break crime cycles.
2. Civil society can play a radical and practical role in reducing harm and reoffending. Not just by offering services, but by reshaping the narrative around incarceration itself - giving a voice to people that went through the system and questioning the political, economic and social factors that lead to imprisonment.
3. Working to make prisons obsolete. Rather than focusing on punishment, Elas Existem operates on principles of abolitionism, offering direct support inside and outside prisons. Their holistic work centred on dignity, autonomy, and long-term reintegration reflects the idea that prisons should not exist because crime should not exist.

Iniciativa Direito à Memória e Justiça Racial – IDMJ Racial

https://www.instagram.com/idmjracial/?hl=en

Iniciativa Direito à Memória e Justiça Racial ("Right to Memory and Racial Justice Initiative") - IDMJ Racial is a grassroots organisation based in the Baixada Fluminense region of Rio de Janeiro, dedicated to combating state violence through a racial justice lens. The initiative challenges Brazil's public security system by exposing how structural racism shape state practices, particularly in marginalised Black communities across *favelas* and peripheries.

With around 4 million inhabitants, it is the second most populous region in the state (behind only the municipality of Rio de Janeiro). The Baixada Fluminense was built by slaves and migrants who resisted in the area across the centuries since Portuguese Colonisation, and it is one of the areas of Brazil most dominated by militias and with the most police interventions. IDMJ Racial told us how the community lives surrounded by violence and injustice being oppressed by organised armed groups that work alongside corrupt politicians and police - between 2015 and 2020, 43 murders of political actors were recorded in the Baixada Fluminense region [7].

Gisela Florentino, cofounder of the organisation, opened her apartment for us to interview her about IDMJ Racial's work and her view on the Brazilian Prison System and how it could be better in a way that it becomes truly rehabilitating. She started telling us her story, holding no punches, telling us how IDMJ Racial started as a project inside a religious NGO but, when they had all their proposed activities being denied, decided to become independent.

She told us, talking about race and discrimination is an uncomfortable topic, especially in such a deeply polarised country like Brazil, and political correctness may stand in the way of listening to different experiences and develop new ways of thinking.

However, when you are talking about the history and context of Baixada Fluminense you must address such topics, especially if you want to create a long-lasting impact in the area. Not many organisations try to operate in Baixada, mainly for fear from the acting militias.

I had to ask Gisela, why would she want to work in something that could be a danger for her safety - "I was born in Baixada Fluminense, I'm what we call a *cria* ["cub" or "offspring"]". She told me how she saw the violence and injustice surrounding her so, when she was able to go to college and study Economics she decided to give back to her community - specialising in the Economics of *favelas*. Her current research explores how systemic discrimination and violence are leveraged for financial gain, arguing that to truly address crime, particularly drug trafficking, we must examine it at a structural level, tracing financial flows and uncovering who truly profits. Rather than criminalising the small-scale dealers in impoverished neighbourhoods, she advocates shifting focus to the powerful actors who exploit vulnerable youth trapped in cycles of poverty.

Gisela is a fearless inspiring activist with a light heart, but serious voice talks about the struggles she found trying to bring the underbelly of criminal activity in Rio to light. In IDMJ Racial most of the work they do is on collecting and consolidating data on the crime in Baixada Fluminense. Most of the cases they work with are extremely violent non-reported or unsolved cases. This is because in Brazil most sentenced crimes are property crimes (40%), followed by drug-related crimes (21%) [8], but out of the around 45.000 murders a year in Brazil, 61% are unsolved [9]. The fear tactics and corruption associated with militia operations are among the main reasons for the alarmingly low rate of solved murder cases. Thus, the work they do by collecting testimonies and reporting on crime in the area is essential to have an accurate picture of the true violence and crime on Baixada and with its analysis allowing the design of data-based local responses. For a safer community, IDMJ Racial's team is willing to put their lives in danger but, of course, they have developed safety protocols.

Gisela and her team collaborate closely with other social organisations, creating a network of support and information-sharing that offers both protection and solidarity. Maintaining public visibility is also a strategic choice: by keeping their work in the public eye, they create a layer of social accountability and pressure, which can be vital if threats or violence occur. These security measures, unthinkable to most of us, are essential in a country like Brazil, which holds one of the highest rates of murders of activists globally, making visibility and collective action key tools for survival.

According to Gisela, we must look at the data and challenge the logic of a justice system that prioritises the punishment of poor people for property crimes over addressing the root causes of crime itself. She argues that this punitive approach is a legacy of colonisation and slavery, eras in which Indigenous and Black populations were systematically dispossessed, and legal frameworks were designed to prevent their reparation and social mobility. Her critique is not aimed at individuals, but at the structural biases embedded in laws created by and for white elites. This perspective was particularly relevant for my Fellowship: it highlights the urgent need to design rehabilitative justice solutions that are informed by the lived realities of those most affected.

Working in one of Brazil's most dangerous areas for activists, Gisela and her team navigate real threats to their lives. Their work echoes the legacy of leaders like Marielle Franco, reminding us that in Brazil, fighting for justice often carries lethal risks – Marielle was a sociologist, feminist and human rights activist that served as a city councillor of the Municipal Chamber of Rio de Janeiro until her assassination in 2018 by two former military police officers. Like Elas Existem, IDMJ Racial centres the voices and experiences of those most affected by incarceration and state violence. But their lens is explicitly racial, and their strategy begins with data: collecting, analysing, and producing counter-narratives that challenge official accounts and expose the racialised logic behind Brazil's carceral system. Their advocacy draws attention to the over-incarceration of Black people, most often for property or drug-related crimes - and asks not why these individuals break the law, but why they are systematically denied the means to survive without doing so.

Key Takeaways:

1. Effective policies and processes must be grounded in robust data and thoughtful analysis. IDMJRacial sees honouring the memory of victims and producing critical data as acts of political resistance. By documenting violence and its context, they provide counter-narratives to official accounts and equip communities to advocate for justice and systemic reform.
2. Community-based alternatives are essential to decrease violence and incarceration. Similarly to Elas Existem, IDMJ Racial is developing models of public safety based on care, equity, and community power that offer an opportunity for people at risk of committing crimes.

3. Criminal Justice reform requires economic justice. Gisela emphasises that true crime prevention must begin with economic justice. By addressing the structural inequalities that keep Black and low-income communities in cycles of poverty, and by creating pathways to financial independence, we reduce the conditions that make crime a means of survival.

Luiz Carlos Rezende e Santos (Court of Justice of Minas Gerais and Amagis)

https://www.facebook.com/LuizCarlosRezendeSantos/

After meaningful encounters in Rio de Janeiro with Elas Existem and IDMJ, and a transformative visit to APAC Timon in Maranhão, my next destination was Minas Gerais. The state is central to understanding how alternative approaches to incarceration can be implemented at scale. Minas Gerais is the second most populated state in Brazil, with 20,539,989 citizens [10], and at the time had 115% overcrowding in its prison system [11]. My objective here was to deepen my understanding of APAC by visiting four APACs units across the region and speaking to *Fraternidade Brasileira de Assistência aos Condenados* – FBAC ("Brazilian Fraternity for Assistance to Convicts"). But my first stop in Minas Gerais was in Belo Horizonte to talk to Judge Luiz Carlos Rezende e Santos, who offered critical insights from within the very structure of the Brazilian justice system.

Luiz Carlos welcomed us at the headquarters of Amagis, the Association of Magistrates of Minas Gerais, which he currently presides over. He chose his favourite room for our conversation - with a wall covered with photos of *recuperandos* (people undergoing rehabilitation through APAC) he had met during his career. As the only judge in Belo Horizonte responsible for penal execution, Luiz Carlos oversees the sentences of over 24,000 incarcerated individuals. The weight of that responsibility has deeply influenced the evolution of his thinking over the past 25 years.

For Luiz, being a judge responsible for penal execution means constantly reflecting on how he will be remembered. “I don’t want to be seen as a hangman from the past,” he says. For him, the challenge is to balance the power and responsibility of enforcing custodial sentences with a deep care for the people he sentences and how they serve their time. He describes the current system as placing people in “foul prisons that look like a revenge project from the state against offenders.” That’s why he supports alternative sentencing - approaches that are effective and do not simply “abandon” people, as the current system often does.

When I asked what alternatives to prison judges currently have in Brazil, Luiz explained that the law allows for alternative sentencing only under specific conditions: the crime must not involve violence against a person, the individual must not be a repeat offender, and the crime must not be classified as heinous or perverse. Alternative sentences are eligible for offences such as theft, fraud, or low-level drug trafficking. However, more serious crimes like robbery or manslaughter still legally require incarceration. Luiz emphasised that imprisonment should be the exception, not the norm. Yet, in practice, judges frequently hand down prison sentences even for minor infractions that should be met with alternatives. The system, he argues, has inverted its logic, what should be a last resort has become routine.

Given this context, I asked how Amagis could help shift the current approach. Amagis - *Associação dos Magistrados Mineiros* (“Association of Magistrates of Minas Gerais”) - was established in 1955 and represents judges and magistrates across the state, advocating for a strong, independent judiciary and the dignity of the magistracy. The association operates in several areas, including education through its judicial school, which Luiz sees as a key space to raise awareness and encourage reflection among judges on the importance of alternative sentencing.

However, Luiz is clear that the goal is not to impose his views on colleagues. Many judges continue to believe that incarceration is an effective way to reduce violence and respond to public fear around security. This is precisely why open debate is essential, and it was through such debate that APAC first entered Luiz’s life 18 years ago. At that time, after having sentenced many people to prison, he began to deeply question the consequences of his decisions until he discovered the APAC model. APAC offered him a new perspective, one that affirmed there was a more humane and effective way to approach incarceration and reduce crime. Today, he is a vocal advocate for the APAC model, firmly believing that “if you have to send someone to prison, at least that prison should be dignified for people.”

I asked Luiz how many people he thinks he has sent to prison. He laughed in a somber way, let out a deep sigh, and began to reflect. He became a judge at the age of 28, and at the time, he firmly believed that a judge had to be tough. However, looking back, he admits feeling uneasy about that stance. He realises he wasn't as prepared for the weight of the responsibility as he thought he was. Over time, even the comfort of believing he was doing his best based on what he knew began to fade, he understands he was biased and had been approaching the issue from only one perspective.

Luiz still carries a sense of guilt for the roughly one thousand people he estimates he sentenced to prison. It was never a satisfying process for him; even when handing down harsh sentences, he remained concerned about the lives of those he was incarcerating. At the time, he tried to ease that discomfort by allowing associations and religious institutions to offer sessions and programs inside the prisons under his jurisdiction - believing, perhaps naïvely, that such efforts were enough. But everything changed during a prison riot, when an inmate was shot in the leg by police, and the tension was so intense that medics were unable to enter and provide emergency care. Against all reason, he went into the prison alone to speak with the men to negotiate the calming of the situation. During this negotiation the men showed great respect by putting their shirts back on knowing they were speaking with a judge. They knew rioting wasn't going to help and wanted a resolution to the conditions they were facing and wanted to work with Luiz to find a resolution to the situation. Luiz was able to carry the shot inmate on his back and bring him to essential medical treatment. It was from this moment he realised conventional prisons didn't work.

From that moment on, Luiz began working with local authorities to open the first APAC unit in the region under his jurisdiction. He visited regularly, engaging not just as a judge, but as a human being - at one point even bringing his 8-year-old daughter with him. Later, when he was invited to become Judge of the Criminal Enforcement Court of the District of Belo Horizonte and coordinator for matters related to the Association for the Protection and Assistance of Convicts (APAC), he moved to Belo Horizonte and continued to be one of the most vocal and committed defenders of the APAC model in the country.

This commitment to humanising justice also extends to Luiz's understanding of systemic inequality within the prison system. Building on the conversation, I brought up a statistic that had stayed with me since my time in Rio: 68.2% of Brazil's incarcerated population is Black, with the majority of offences relating to property or drugs. I asked him how the prison system could possibly address such entrenched racial disparities. Luiz acknowledged the stark racial imbalance but framed it within the broader historical and economic context of Brazil. He emphasised that the root of criminality lies in the persistent lack of opportunity - a condition that disproportionately affects Black communities due to centuries of structural inequality dating back to slavery and colonial times.

Yes, racial prejudice exists, he said, and it must be openly confronted. But Luiz believes that, in the prison system, the fundamental issue is economic: poverty is what drives most people to crime. The cycle begins long before a case reaches a judge's bench. "This prejudice doesn't start with the judge - it ends with the judge," he explained. By the time individuals appear in court, the unequal treatment by police and the justice system has already taken its toll. Judges see more Black defendants not because they commit more crimes, but because the policing and investigative systems are harsher and more punitive toward poor Black individuals, especially for minor offences.

What struck me most was how candid Luiz was about this reality. I hadn't expected a well-known and respected judge to speak so openly about structural racism in such aligned terms with abolitionists I'd met in Rio de Janeiro. But he smiled and reflected that this clarity came with time, explaining how when he was 28 he wouldn't have been able to talk about these issues with such clarity. Building on this, Luiz again emphasises the importance of viewing incarcerated individuals with humanity and compassion, defending that while they have committed crimes and the state has responded by sentencing them, the focus should now shift to how they can live dignified, rehabilitated lives - so that crime is no longer seen as their only option. This is precisely what the APAC model offers: a fundamentally different approach to incarceration that treats people with respect, providing them the opportunity to rebuild their lives and reintegrate into society.

APAC prisons are largely run by the inmates themselves and have a remarkably low reoffending rate of around 15%, compared to the national average of 80% in Brazil [12]. They also operate at roughly one-third of the cost of traditional state prisons. In contrast, the UK faces a reoffending rate of about 60% and does not currently recognise the APAC model as an alternative form of sentencing. I shared this information with Luiz, along with news of the UK's planned investment in building 20,000 new prison places. When I asked how the UK could begin to consider APAC as an alternative, he quoted Saint Augustine: "How therefore would you speak of that which you cannot comprehend?" Luiz argued that the first step for UK justice decision-makers should be to visit APAC facilities, to understand their methodology, see the statistics firsthand, and observe their operations. Just as he experienced, witnessing genuine rehabilitation - where inmates are treated as human beings, entrusted with responsibilities, and provided with work and training opportunities - can change perspectives and open the door to real reform.

This insight connects directly to the core objective of my Fellowship: to explore and understand alternative solutions based on giving opportunities to offenders that prioritise rehabilitation over punishment. Luiz's experience highlights how meaningful change in criminal justice depends not only on policy but on shifting mindsets - particularly among judges and policymakers - toward embracing humane, evidence-based alternatives. The APAC model exemplifies this shift, demonstrating that reducing recidivism and fostering safer communities is achievable when incarcerated individuals are treated with dignity and supported through reintegration.

To close our interview, I asked Luiz about the role of the community and social sectors in the prison system, particularly how they can contribute to creating better solutions. Luiz emphasised the importance of shared accountability - reminding us that the responsibility for reducing incarceration and recidivism does not rest solely with the justice system. Instead, we must first critically examine the purpose of prisons and the root causes of crime. These causes often lie in deep social issues, especially the lack of opportunities and the resulting hopelessness that leads many offenders to see crime as their only option.

This perspective resonates with the insights gained from previous visits to APAC Timon, Elas Existem, and IDMJ, where community involvement and alternative approaches to incarceration were shown to be essential for lasting change. Luiz stressed that for society to truly support rehabilitation and reduce recidivism, the community must learn to accept formerly incarcerated individuals as fellow human beings and not as outcasts defined solely by their pasts. Only by fostering this collective responsibility and compassion can we build a more just and effective criminal justice system. I left Belo Horizonte with fresh insights into how APACs are perceived within the justice system by various stakeholders, and I felt eager to visit more APAC units and engage directly with the *recuperandos*, the very people at the heart of my Fellowship.

Key Takeaways:

1. Judges must lead the shift towards alternative sentencing. For meaningful criminal justice reform, judges need to embrace their role not just as enforcers of the law, but as agents of change. Deprivation of liberty should be treated as a last resort, with alternative and rehabilitative sentencing becoming the norm, especially in non-violent cases.
2. A systemic approach to incarceration is essential. Reforming the prison system cannot happen in isolation. It requires a comprehensive, systemic perspective that addresses the root causes of crime (such as poverty and inequality) and rethinks how justice, rehabilitation, and public safety are defined and delivered.
3. Addressing structural racism and social perceptions of incarceration is crucial. To build a fairer justice system, we must openly confront the racial and social biases embedded in current practices. Acknowledging how structural racism created on the back of slavery and colonisation, influences who gets incarcerated is the first step toward building a more equitable and humane system.

Fraternidade Brasileira de Assistência aos Condenados – FBAC

https://www.instagram.com/fbacoficial/?hl=en

In Itaúna, Minas Gerais, lies the headquarters of FBAC – the Fraternidade Brasileira de Assistência aos Condenados ("Brazilian Fraternity for Assistance to Convicts"). I had been preparing this visit with Maicol, FBAC's project coordinator and a former *recuperando*. For the following three days and four nights, we would stay with FBAC to learn everything about APAC and understand how to create processes that involve prisoners and their communities in the daily running of prisons – addressing austerity while rehabilitating offenders. We stayed on the premises, as FBAC offers special accommodation for people from around the world who want to visit and learn more about their mission and impact.

I spoke with many members of the FBAC team, including Dênio, Wellington, and Lívia, who explained what FBAC is and how it functions. FBAC is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation founded in 1972 and formally established in 1988 to coordinate, support, and supervise APACs (Associação de Proteção e Assistência aos Condenados – Association for the Protection and Assistance of the Convicted) across Brazil and internationally.

FBAC is responsible for the standardisation and oversight of all APAC units, ensuring they adhere to a unified set of principles and methodologies. It provides comprehensive training and support to staff, volunteers, and *recuperandos* (the term used for incarcerated individuals within APACs), and oversees the certification process - only units that are approved and regularly monitored by FBAC are permitted to operate under the APAC name. In addition, FBAC actively advocates for the expansion of the APAC model both within Brazil and internationally. FBAC is essential in upholding the integrity, quality, and growth of the APAC model. It acts as a vital bridge between civil society, the judiciary, and the prison system, ensuring that APAC's human-centred, non-punitive philosophy continues to be implemented faithfully and effectively.

I also spoke with Gabriela, who, three weeks prior, had left her role at the Public Defender Service to become FBAC's International Relations Analyst. With seven years of experience in public defence, Gabriela had witnessed the failures of the system - even institutions designed to protect the vulnerable were falling short. This experience led her to explore community-based solutions. Brazil's Public Defender Service operates similarly to the UK's, with limited resources but immense dedication to ensuring access to justice. Gabriela speaks passionately about their work, especially their outreach in *favelas*, but she acknowledges that it's not enough to dismantle the cycles of poverty, crime, and discrimination that most incarcerated people face. Still, she offered a hopeful perspective - noting that Brazil's constitution, and therefore many of its social services, only came into force in 1988, making it a relatively new system facing centuries-old problems. But it's in APAC, she says, that she sees true innovation for the justice system.

FBAC is the key institution to understand how the APAC model is governed and replicated nationally and internationally. We were privileged to be hosted at their headquater, during which we met the team and gained a deeper understanding of their mission, operations, and beliefs about rehabilitation. Maicol was our host, and he took us to visit four different APACs in the state: APAC Divinópolis, APAC Itaúna, APAC Belo Horizonte, and APAC Betim – all of which were markedly different from each other, and from APAC Timon, which we had already visited.

Although my prior research and conversations with APAC Timon's team had given me a solid foundation, meeting FBAC deepened my understanding of the flexibility of the APAC model and the challenges of replicating it across different contexts with various teams, while still upholding the same values and objectives. Maicol gave me comprehensive insight into how APAC emerged and how FBAC was created to preserve and expand the model.

APAC is a Brazilian prison system model developed in the 1970s in São José dos Campos, São Paulo, in response to the violence, overcrowding, and inhumane conditions of conventional prisons. It offers a radically different approach, grounded in dignity, responsibility, and recovery - recognising incarcerated individuals as people capable of transformation. At the heart of the APAC model is the belief that imprisonment should be an opportunity for growth and rehabilitation rather than dehumanisation or punitive suffering. The methodology includes twelve pillars such as work, spiritual development (optional and ecumenical), legal support, family ties, education, and strict discipline. One of the model's most striking features is the absence of armed guards – instead, security is maintained by the *recuperandos* themselves, who follow a structured routine and share responsibility, cultivating trust and accountability.

Participation in APAC is voluntary. Sentenced individuals must opt in and commit to the programme's rules. Their sentence is divided into three phases: closed, semi-open, and open, each one building personal autonomy and reinforcing discipline, respect, and cooperation. Though APACs may differ locally, their structure is standardised and monitored by FBAC. A new APAC can only be established if it partners with a civil society organisation (often faith- or community-based) and receives FBAC's training and certification. Only then can it officially operate under the APAC model.

In this sense, APACs share similarities with a franchise: consistent methodology, quality evaluation, institutional backing, but they are entirely non-profit and community-driven, without commercial interests or financial incentives. Their replication depends on strong local commitment and alignment with the original model's principles. Maicol stressed the need to look beyond traditional frameworks when addressing crime and reoffending - only then can we discover viable alternatives to mass incarceration.

Maicol also reiterated what I already knew from my research: APAC works better than conventional prisons. Recidivism rates are significantly lower - often around 15% compared to 80% in traditional facilities in the country. Costs per inmate are also lower, and the outcomes regarding education, mental health, and reintegration are much more positive. APAC represents a promising alternative to the punitive, overcrowded, and often violent mainstream system. This was my main motivation for coming to Brazil - to see how it worked in practice and to understand what could be replicated in the UK to positively impact offenders' lives and foster safer communities.

I shared my motivations with Maicol during our visit. If a more effective and less costly model exists, why continue investing in one we know doesn't work? Maicol talked about the need to change minds to be open to alternative sentencing. He shared that he, too, was a former offender, drawn into gang life due to a lack of support and opportunity, he came from a family history of incarceration (his father was also imprisoned). The cycle of poverty and crime seemed inescapable, and he made mistakes that led to his arrest.

After spending time in a regular prison, he had the opportunity to serve the rest of his sentence in an APAC, which transformed his life. He developed a sense of identity, autonomy, and self-confidence, received training, earned money while still incarcerated, and became a mentor. After his release, he was hired by FBAC, where he now works as a project coordinator, visiting APAC units to gather data, not only quantitative results, but also success stories, challenges, and best practices, ensuring adherence to APAC's standards. But Maicol wasn't the only former *recuperando* working at FBAC, I also met Bira and Rinaldo, both enthusiastic about sharing how APAC helped them rebuild their lives.

Bira, 74, retired from FBAC last year but still returns to support various programmes and events. He's a frequent speaker at gatherings with *recuperandos*, sharing how he overcame a life of crime and incarceration. Bira is somewhat of a legend in the APAC world - one of its first *recuperandos*, from the original 1972 unit in São José dos Campos. Involved in crime from a young age, he spent decades in and out of prison. When the first APAC was established, he joined. He spent eight years there, and after his release, continued to work with the organisation, eventually becoming a mentor and public speaker.

One key reason I wanted to speak to Bira was to learn more about the CSS – the Conselho de Sinceridade e Solidariedade ("Council of Sincerity and Solidarity"), which Denis had mentioned in Timon. Bira helped found the first CSS in the 1970s. At the time, APAC operated within prison grounds and under military police control, which presented major challenges. Eventually, a judge relocated the unit to an adjacent plot of land, and it became a standalone detention facility. Under the guidance of APAC founder Mário Ottoboni, and with no guards - only volunteers - APAC's model faced immediate difficulties: drug use, violence, escapes. The community was on edge.

Ottoboni visited the unit with police and found appalling conditions. He gathered the inmates in the chapel and emotionally urged them to respect the trust being given to them. Bira stood up, acknowledging that while some were serious about APAC, others were not. He explained that they had been raised not to report others - a code of silence - but Ottoboni insisted that APAC required community responsibility.

Bira and a small group of respected inmates convinced the troublemakers to confess and return to the regular prison, thereby protecting the integrity of APAC. This led to the formation of the CSS: a council of *recuperandos* created to foster accountability and support. Bira became its first president, selecting its members from among the committed inmates. The CSS allowed for a prison without guards, with prisoners taking responsibility for each other.

Today, the CSS remains largely unchanged. It serves as a communication bridge between the administration and *recuperandos*, helps resolve conflicts, strengthens recovery efforts, and supports daily operations. It is the cornerstone of APAC's philosophy: enabling incarcerated individuals to take ownership of their rehabilitation and of each other's progress.

Like Maicol, Bira's story showed how transformative trust and responsibility can be. Not everyone may rise to the occasion, but for those who do, the impact is life changing.

My final interview was with Rinaldo Guimarães, FBAC's Methodology Manager. He has worked at FBAC for 12 years and was previously an APAC director. Rinaldo is also a former *recuperando*, having served a 10-year sentence, three of which were in an APAC. He told me, "Gratitude (...) was what made me want to work for APAC".

Rinaldo lives with Osteogenesis Imperfecta (OI), or 'brittle bone disease' - a rare condition that causes bones to fracture easily. Before prison, he didn't believe he could live a happy or meaningful life, but the community he found in APAC gave him a new perspective. Upon release, he was happy, but also despondent - quoting a poem by Carlos Drummond de Andrade:

E agora, José? A festa acabou, a luz apagou, o povo sumiu, a noite esfriou, e agora, José? (What now, José? The party is over, The lights are out, The people have gone, The night has grown cold, What now, José?)

He missed his community and chose not to take a higher-paying job, instead remaining with APAC to mentor others and ensure the integrity of the methodology. As director of an APAC with 180 inmates (30 women and 150 men), he faced the challenge of leading a team that had never experienced incarceration. But over time, he became confident in his role as a bridge between recuperandos and the organisation.

Now at FBAC, Rinaldo oversees the methodology itself, ensuring it stays current and accessible to APAC units in diverse contexts. His journey is remarkable, and like Maicol and Bira, he exemplifies why involving those directly affected by the system is essential to creating effective solutions for recidivism and reducing the burden on overstretched prisons. Over the next few days, I got to see everything for myself when visiting four APACs in Minas Gerais.

Key Takeaways:

1. Community-led justice is possible. The APAC model, supported by FBAC, shows that safe and effective prisons can be run without guards or punishment - centring trust, dignity, and rehabilitation. With lower reoffending and costs, it proves that civil society can play a leading role in justice.
2. Lived experience builds credibility. Former prisoners are central to FBAC and APAC's leadership, bringing insight, trust, and proof of transformation. Their involvement strengthens the model's legitimacy and echoes a key theme in my Fellowship: that those most affected by the system must help shape its alternatives.

3. Structure enables scale: FBAC ensures the APAC model stays consistent while allowing local adaptation. Its balance of strong standards and flexibility makes it scalable without losing integrity. This highlights how community-led models can grow effectively when grounded in clear values and support, another key aim of my Fellowship.

APAC Divinópolis

https://www.instagram.com/apacdivinopolismg/?hl=en

We visited APAC Divinópolis, which had opened only six months prior, with José Francisco Martins as its president. It has the capacity for 84 recuperandos, and since its opening, they have been receiving prisoners in cohorts - every Tuesday, five new *recuperandos* arrive. Maicol was careful enough to make sure we visited on a Tuesday so that we were able to witness their introduction to the APAC model. As in every APAC, above the entrance door, you see the same quote: “Aqui entra o homem, o delito fica lá fora” (“Here enters the man, the crime stays outside”) and this was a great opportunity to see if the incarcerated men felt that way.

Francisco gave us the tour: through the garden that was being planted, the workshop where they build and repair various equipment and furniture, the small textile factory, classrooms, an industrial bakery (still not in use), and the kitchen. During this tour, I had the opportunity to meet and speak with different *recuperandos* holding different roles within the APAC.

We met Adanece - one of the first two *recuperandos* placed in APAC Divinópolis to help prepare the space for the others. He works in the workshop, doing repairs and construction and maintenance tasks. He described APAC as "the best place in the world until we have our freedom", because he feels APAC allows him to prepare to re-enter society. During his time in APAC, he's been able to gain work experience, reconnect with his family, receive spiritual guidance, and earn vocational certificates - he now has an official locksmith certificate. He also spoke about how difficult it is for families to visit inmates in traditional prisons, whereas APAC offers a welcoming and respectful environment for family visits. This, he said, is one of the main reasons he feels so passionately about the APAC model. He shared how meaningful it is for him to be one of the first two *recuperandos* there, because he gets to see new arrivals every week and witness the transformative potential of the opportunity they are being given.

Marcelo is one of the CSS (Centre for Social Support) members, and when I met him, he had the key to the main gate in his hand. It was the first time I had spoken to a CSS member. His job is to open and close the gate, and I asked how it felt to hold the key to the place where he is incarcerated. Marcelo explained that it comes with great responsibility, but escaping is not an option - doing so would only hurt himself, by turning him into a fugitive. Marcelo had been in another APAC for the past two years but was moved to Divinópolis because it is his hometown, where his family lives. The APAC model is built on a network of detention houses with a broad geographic reach - there are 65 APACs in Brazil in 7 different states, with 23 more in development, allowing for prisoners to be closer to their families.

We then moved to the kitchen, where we met the main cook, Maria Alexandre, and two *recuperandos* who assist her. They prepare two main meals and a snack daily for about 80 people, including both *recuperandos* and APAC staff and volunteers. Everyone eats the same food, together, at the same tables. Vinicio, one of the *recuperandos*, shared that they see all people as equals - everyone makes mistakes; maybe some worse than others, but everyone is capable of change. One quote I saw on the wall of the APAC read: "Se fosse possível examinar o homem por dentro e por fora, certamente ninguém seria inocente" ("If it were possible to examine a person inside and out, surely no one would be innocent.")

During our visit, the five newly arrived *recuperandos*, who had come directly from the regular prison system, were formally introduced to APAC Divinópolis, and I observed the ritual that marks the beginning of their journey. APAC has deep Christian roots, and many of its practices are inherited from its origins as a faith-based method. One example is the group blessing before meals, but this heritage was the most obvious when I witnessed the introduction ritual: When new *recuperandos* arrive, they are first taken into the closed regime to begin their journey. They are told to take a shower, likely their first hot shower since being incarcerated, and are then brought to Francisco for an initial conversation. He told them this was a new beginning, that what they had done in the past no longer mattered - what mattered now was what they would do going forward. The rules and expectations were explained, although they already knew them, as entering an APAC requires prior learning and a commitment to its code of conduct.

Following this conversation, the *recuperandos* are taken on a tour of the closed regime, which ends in the main hall, where all the other *recuperandos* are gathered to welcome them. Francisco gave a moving speech on the importance of receiving new members, the possibility of rehabilitation, and how (through faith) they could transform their lives. The *recuperandos* sang several songs, most of them religious hymns that have long been part of the APAC community. The main song was "Benção sobre benção" ("Blessing upon blessing"), which was sung to me at every APAC I visited in Minas Gerais. This song focus on the idea that everyone is a blessing and on the power of mutual love and respect. The initiation concluded in the chapel (the solitary cell legally required) where Francisco held a final conversation, a powerful speech that moved some of the new *recuperandos* to tears. He spoke about the trust and responsibility that come with being accepted into an APAC and stressed the seriousness with which they should embrace this opportunity to heal.

After this three-part initiation ritual, everyone gathered in the canteen. We had lunch with the APAC team and the *recuperandos*. The portions were generous, and the food tasted seasoned, fresh, and homemade. The *recuperandos* sitting next to me shared that one of the things they most appreciated - very different from the normal prison - was this experience of eating well, together, in community. It made me reflect on what the new *recuperandos* must have been feeling at that moment, sharing good food and conversation in a setting so unlike what they had known.

On the way to our next APAC visit, I spoke with Maicol, who shared how overwhelmed he had felt on his first day in an APAC. He expressed optimism for the journey ahead for these new *recuperandos* - they had just been given a chance to reclaim some power over their incarceration, through more opportunities to study, work, and exercise, through better meals, and most importantly, through a community that trusts them and shares responsibility with them. He also noted that no APAC is perfect and highlighted how FBAC is actively addressing the strong religious connotations still present in some units. Their focus is on ensuring there is no religious indoctrination of *recuperandos*, and that diverse spiritual and religious beliefs are respected. In fact, in Timon, the team shared with us that they hold different weekly religious rituals based on the beliefs of the *recuperandos* - including Christian mass, Friday prayers for Muslims, and Terreiro ceremonies for those who follow Umbanda, an Afro-Brazilian religion.

Witnessing the arrival of new *recuperandos* and the rituals that welcome them into the APAC model offered a powerful glimpse into the emotional and symbolic transition from punishment to rehabilitation. While each APAC has its own identity and areas for growth, the sense of dignity, responsibility, and shared humanity we experienced in Divinópolis was undeniable. As we left, it was clear that for many of the *recuperandos*, this was more than just a different kind of prison - it was a rare chance to rebuild their lives with purpose, community, and hope.

Key Takeaways:

1. Healing begins at the door. At APAC Divinópolis, the entry ritual for new *recuperandos* is deeply symbolic and emotionally powerful. This process marks a clear break from the punitive logic of the traditional prison system, offering instead a community that immediately treats each person as someone capable of transformation. It highlights how rituals of care and trust can be foundational to a justice model that centres humanity and healing.
2. Community responsibility shapes rehabilitation. From the cook to the CSS (internal security) to the workshop leaders, every role at APAC is filled by *recuperandos* who actively participate in running their own space. This shared responsibility builds purpose and accountability while modelling a radically different approach to incarceration, one where people are empowered and collaborate, by creating shared values and expectations.
3. Connection to family and self is central. Many *recuperandos* spoke about how APAC allows them to reconnect with family and reclaim a sense of self-worth. Whether through training programs, spiritual guidance, or simply the ability to host loved ones in a respectful space, APAC Divinópolis creates the conditions for real re-entry preparation.

APAC Itaúna – Female

https://www.facebook.com/APACITAUNAF

We visited the female unit of APAC Itaúna, where we were welcomed and guided by Daniel Silva, the Executive Director. This APAC was noticeably smaller than the two previous units I had visited but followed the same structure and layout: APACs are designed to maintain a consistent physical and visual identity, with similar rooms, decoration, and organisation. Itaúna holds a special place in the APAC network - it was the first female APAC, opened in 2004, around 30 years after the original male unit. Currently, there are nine APAC units for women across Brazil, serving approximately 700 *recuperandas*.

While the organisation Elas Existem had already raised key distinctions between the experiences of male and female prisoners, Daniel provided additional insight into the specific challenges faced by women in the prison system. According to the fifth edition of the World Female Imprisonment List, a global report by the Centre for Crime and Justice Research (CCJR) at Birkbeck College, University of London, Brazil has seen a fourfold increase in its female prison population since 2000. Globally, the number of women in prison has grown by 60%, today in Brazil, 42.694 women are incarcerated (up from 10,112 at the turn of the century) making the country home to the third-largest female prison population in the world.

Daniel explained how in Brazil, the number of dedicated women's prisons remains far lower than male facilities. In many cases, existing male prisons have been modified to accommodate women, but these adaptations often fail to address specific needs - such as spaces for pregnant women, maternity wards, or childcare services. This lack of adequate infrastructure is compounded by the deeper psychological and social toll that imprisonment takes on women. While any incarceration has ripple effects on families and communities, the impact is particularly severe in the case of women, many of whom are primary caregivers. Their imprisonment frequently leads to disrupted or broken family bonds, especially with their children. A 2020 report from Brazil's Ministry of Justice revealed that of the 37,200 women in prison at that time, nearly 13,000 (35%) had children under the age of 12. When extended family is unable to care for these children, mothers may even lose custody, sometimes of newborns.

Speaking with several recuperandas in Itaúna, I saw these statistics reflected in their personal stories. Many were mothers with young children living with relatives on the outside. They spoke about how their motivations and mindset shifted dramatically after transferring from the regular prison system to APAC. Two young women shared difficult accounts of life on the streets, marked by addiction, insecurity, and a sense of worthlessness. In the state system, they felt stripped of all dignity. At APAC, however, they described how trust, vocational training, formal education, and emotional support helped them imagine a life beyond crime. They now believe they have the skills and strength to rebuild their lives and support their families.

It's important to emphasise that APACs are not utopias filled with joy and laughter. Most of the women are in a fragile emotional state, carrying the weight of trauma, abuse, grief, and loss of self-worth. Some are further along in their journey, while others are still navigating legal issues, attempting to rebuild family ties, and trying to imagine what reintegration into society might look like.

What I witnessed in Itaúna echoed what I had learned from Elas Existem: the power of community and the creation of safe, supportive spaces for women. The sense of solidarity among the *recuperandas* (many of whom had shared life experiences) combined with the non-judgemental support from APAC staff and volunteers, was key to their healing. As in Divinópolis, many spoke about the mindset shift they were experiencing, from internalised shame to renewed belief in their social role and potential. This process of critical self-reflection and restoration of self-esteem lies at the heart of the APAC methodology. It is only made possible by the mutual trust that exists within the walls of each APAC, and by the daily structure and responsibilities that foster a genuine sense of community.

Key Takeaways:

1. Gender-responsive alternatives to incarceration remain limited but vital. APAC Itaúna, the first female unit in the APAC network, highlights the urgent need for more gender-sensitive justice alternatives. With only nine APACs for women across Brazil, the model shows promise but remains underused - despite the country now having the third-largest female prison population globally.
2. Women in prison face systemic neglect and deeper social impacts. Incarceration disproportionately affects women, especially mothers, due to limited infrastructure and support within traditional prisons. Many women shared experiences of isolation, trauma, and family separation - issues that deeply affect how rehabilitation needs to be designed for it to be effective.
3. APAC fosters transformation through community, dignity, and trust. The women at APAC Itaúna spoke of how the model's humanising approach - built on shared responsibility, structured routines, and emotional support - helped them rebuild their self-worth and envision a future outside of crime. This illustrates the power of community-based alternatives in enabling personal healing and social reintegration, core themes in the exploration of restorative justice pathways.

APAC Belo Horizonte – Female

https://www.instagram.com/apacfemininabh/?hl=en

The female APAC in Belo Horizonte was the first APAC I visited that didn't have the same prison-like feeling as the others. It was larger, with an expansive outdoor area filled with murals, chickens, and a patio with toys for when children come to visit. During my time there, I observed *recuperandas* reading, talking, engaging in art therapy, or participating in the various workshops and classes taking place. We were welcomed and guided by Lucas Leite Lemos, a member of the operational team. Opened in 2020, this APAC has a capacity for 142 recuperandas, making it one of the largest female units in Brazil.

APAC Belo Horizonte runs a wide array of projects and activities developed collaboratively by staff, volunteers, and the local community. These include not only formal education, vocational training, and workshops, but also an artisanal production workshop with an in-house shop, participation in local fairs, a vegetable garden, a chicken coop, a diaper/nappy factory, a hair salon, and a library. These diverse opportunities are designed to create value and offer dignity to the *recuperandas* through meaningful work.

Maicol had previously emphasised how architecture and decoration play an essential role in rehabilitation. At APAC Belo Horizonte, the attention to detail was especially striking - even in comparison to newer facilities like APAC Divinópolis. Flowers were carefully planted, artwork adorned the walls, and the signature APAC's inspirational blue-font quotes were covered in glitter. Lucas shared that first-time visitors often think the facility is a school rather than a detention centre. He stressed how these aesthetic and social design choices are essential, not only to help form a community among women who are often strangers and lack some social skills, but also to rebuild their self-esteem and sense of self-worth.

Cristina, a volunteer who runs the hair salon located in the closed-regime area, spoke to me about the importance of building self-esteem in incarcerated women. The salon has three volunteers who provide hair and nail services not only to recuperandas, but also to their families, staff, and volunteers. Cristina was enthusiastic about my visit, saying she hoped my Fellowship would help shine a light on how small gestures - like personal grooming - can make a big difference in these women's lives. I asked one woman who was getting her hair done how it made her feel. Looking at Cristina, she said, "happy, beautiful," and they both laughed warmly. Cristina explained that, in conventional prisons, access to hygiene and beauty products is very limited, sometimes women can't even get a comb. In APAC, as soon as someone arrives, she can book a salon appointment, where her hair, nails, and eyebrows are treated. Cristina believes this care helps women feel dignified, loved, and seen; as the person responsible for the salon, she considers her work an act of affection - more than styling, it's about listening and showing care.

We also visited the workshops operating during our stay, such as the sewing workshop. I shared with the group that my first prison job was sewing boxer shorts, a task I found repetitive and that helped me keep occupied. But what they were doing was much more than I imagined, this APAC has a partnership with the local Design School and the Federal Reserve: Confiscated counterfeit clothing is repurposed into baby clothes by the *recuperandas* and donated to vulnerable mothers in the community. This initiative stood out as one of the best examples I've seen of multi-stakeholder collaboration that meaningfully links incarcerated women with their communities.

Another impressive initiative is the diaper factory, fully equipped and sponsored by the state. *Recuperandas* produce both baby and geriatric diapers. One woman told me it makes her feel less isolated, "We know we are helping someone on the outside (...) because most of our production is donated to people who can't afford them—and even to recuperandas here who have children outside". The remaining diapers are sold, providing income for those who work and funding further activities inside the APAC.

I was truly impressed by the diversity and volume of activities available to the women at APAC Belo Horizonte. It reminded me of the vision that Cida, executive director of APAC Timon, shared for their new facility on our first visit. Offering a broad range of hands-on, manual activities is vital to the rehabilitation process for incarcerated people. These activities not only give structure and routine but also provide tangible purpose and visible achievements. From sewing and crafting to diaper production and gardening, the projects here allow women to see the real-world impact of their efforts. Many spoke about how fulfilling it was to know that their work helped others, either through donations or by supporting their own families. These experiences restore self-worth, reinforce a sense of purpose, and build the confidence they need for life after APAC.

At the end of our visit, I asked Lucas how he felt about being a man working in a women's detention centre. Most of the women in APAC have experienced some form of mistreatment by men, some even ended up incarcerated because of it. Lucas admitted that it was difficult at first: when he began overseeing labour therapy, some women were visibly uncomfortable around him due to past trauma. Over time, and with training from FBAC, he learned how to navigate his role. Both he and Maicol spoke about the immense responsibility men in female APACs carry - they must prove that there are trustworthy men who care. There's no perfect training for that, it requires understanding the lived realities of these women and consistently showing up with respect, kindness, and empathy.

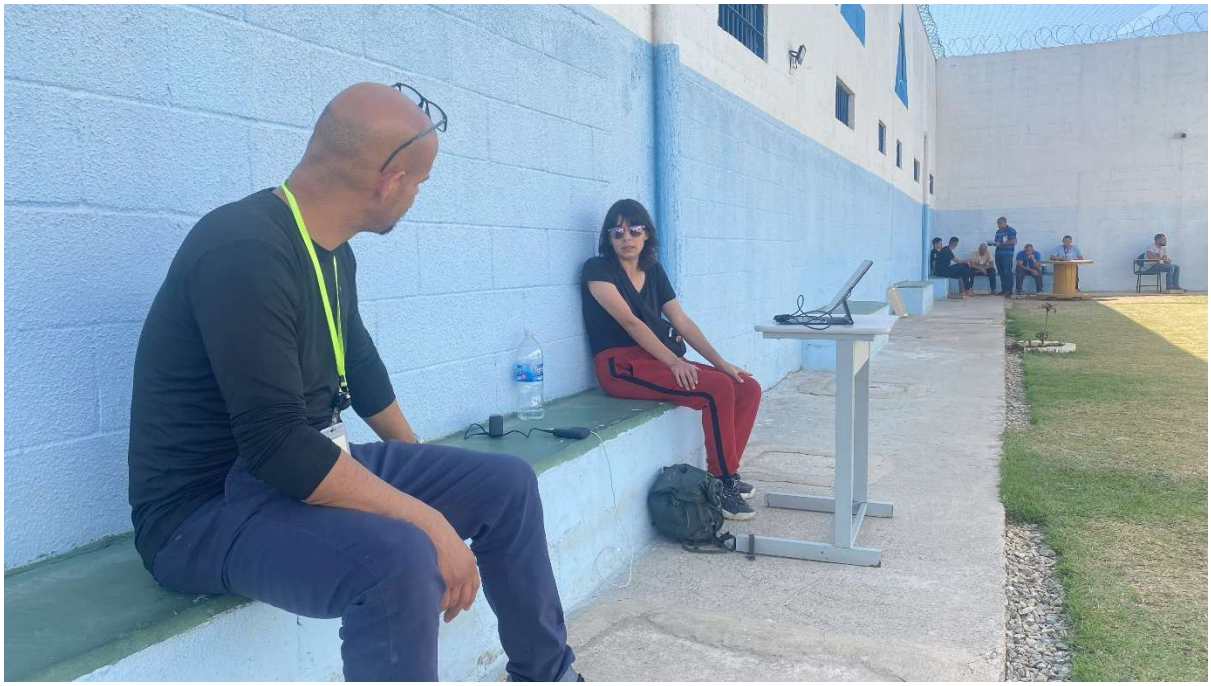
As we were preparing to leave, Elizete, the CSS who had welcomed us at the door, approached me to share a poem she had written during our two-hour tour. She explained that since joining APAC, she had been writing more poetry and had even had one of her poems featured on Globo, Brazil's largest television network, in a piece about APAC. Her poem was beautiful, and it expressed the importance of sharing the experiences of recuperandas with the world. Elizete told me there is simply no comparison between an APAC and a traditional prison. When I asked her what her favourite thing about APAC was, she looked up and said, it was the sky. In Brazil's regular prison system, women are allowed a maximum of one hour outside per day. In APAC, they are free to be outdoors unless they have scheduled activities or it's time to sleep. In her two years at APAC, Elizete has written three books she hopes to publish. Writing makes her feel lighter, and she writes about things that bring her joy: the sky, beautiful people, and her emotions - and she would've never found writing if it wasn't for APAC's library project.

After leaving and on our way to the final APAC, I shared with Maicol how APAC Belo Horizonte stands out as a mature and holistic example of the APAC model in action, where physical space, emotional care, and purpose-driven activities intersect to support genuine rehabilitation. Compared to earlier visits, such as APAC Timon's aspirational planning and APAC Divinópolis's fresh structure, this unit illustrates what is possible when long-term investment, community involvement, and attention to detail are fully aligned. Maicol told me how he was particularly excited to show me APAC Betim, for him one of the best examples of how to run an APAC centred through rehabilitation innovation.

Key Takeaways:

1. Space and beauty can be tools for healing. Unlike traditional prisons, APAC Belo Horizonte uses architecture, art, and outdoor space intentionally to foster wellbeing. The bright murals, gardens, and child-friendly areas not only create a less punitive environment but actively support *recuperandas*' sense of dignity and calm, showcasing how restorative environments contribute to mental health and successful rehabilitation.
2. Hands-on work builds purpose and connection. The wide range of manual and vocational activities (from sewing and artisan crafts to diaper production and gardening) gives *recuperandas* a clear sense of their capacity to create value. These tasks allow them to see the real-world impact of their efforts, whether through sales, donations to vulnerable groups, or support for their families. This fosters personal agency, self-worth, and social reintegration.
3. Community, trust, and emotional rebuilding are key when talking about breaking criminal cycles. The APAC model fosters emotional healing through trust-based relationships with staff, volunteers, and fellow *recuperandas*. Interactions like those with Cristina at the salon or Lucas's reflections on working with women highlight the power of consistent, respectful care to rebuild trust - especially in survivors of trauma. Through poetry, creative expression, and small gestures of support, the women are not just serving time - they are building a new relationship with themselves and with society.

APAC Betim



https://www.instagram.com/apacbetim/?hl=en

APAC Betim was born from the vision of a university professor who, while teaching Human and Fundamental Rights at the Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais (PUC/MG), learned from a group of her students about the existence of an alternative prison model. In 2002, the professor and her students (some of whom were civil police officers) visited APAC in Itaúna. That visit sparked a long-standing aspiration to implement the model in the municipality of Betim. It would take nearly two decades of persistence to secure the necessary authorisations, construct the facility, and recruit staff. Finally, in December 2021, APAC Betim welcomed its first *recuperandos*. With a capacity for 200 individuals, it stands as the APAC with the largest outdoor space we visited, rivalled only by the newly constructed APAC in Timon.

We were warmly received by the general manager, Ernandes Silva, who had kindly prepared refreshments for us. As we talked about my Churchill Fellowship, Ernandes shared the story of APAC Betim, his own professional journey, and his vision for the APAC movement. Before taking on his current role, he served as Head of Security at APAC Belo Horizonte. When asked about the transition from head of security to general manager, he explained that security is not antithetical to APAC's mission - in fact, it is foundational. From his perspective, managing security in an APAC and managing the institution as a whole are closely intertwined. This was particularly striking to me, as innovative models within prison systems are often seen as a threat to security - especially when they are built on trust and grant greater autonomy to inmates. Security personnel are usually the ones held accountable when something goes wrong, which makes them cautious about rehabilitative approaches. Ernandes, however, believes that if he is responsible for security, then *recuperandos* must be involved in shaping it. Trust is the basis of the APAC methodology, and *recuperandos* must be given responsibility in exchange for freedom, particularly through the CSS (Community Self-Discipline System).

Managing an APAC is a complex and collective task, carried out by a committed team that believes deeply in its rehabilitative mission. One detail I consistently noticed throughout our APAC visits was the emphasis on transparency. Every APAC prominently displays its operational statistics: number of *recuperandos* by regime, number of escapes and disciplinary actions, recidivism rates, and financial data. Ernandes explained that APAC Betim operates on a quarterly state grant of R$800,000 (approximately £107,760), equating to an annual cost of around £3,078 per *recuperando* - compared to the £6,735 it costs in Brazil's conventional prison system [13]. This relatively low cost, he explained, is only possible because *recuperandos* are actively involved in the operations of the facility - from treasury to cleaning, maintenance, security, the kitchen, and beyond. This participation not only reduces operational costs, but also empowers *recuperandos* with practical skills, self-worth, and a strong sense of community.

Our tour was conducted by *recuperandos* from both the semi-open and closed regimes in APAC Betim. The first part of the tour was led by Anderson, a *recuperando* who had previously lived in England and spoke fluent English. He currently works in the kitchen and serves in the CSS. APAC Betim offers a wide array of occupational activities, including a mechanical workshop, wood crafting, a flourishing garden with flowers and vegetables, a small farm, a water dispenser factory, an artisanal cooperative, and a barbershop. Walking through the facility, it was impossible not to admire the beauty and care evident in every corner. *Recuperandos* here enjoy fresh air, nutritious food, and meaningful daily tasks. The quality of life is striking - something more often associated with Scandinavian prisons. And yet here we were, in a municipality in Brazil, known for exporting cars to Argentina, witnessing an extraordinary example of dignified incarceration.

Maicol, our main guide, explained that APAC must always balance comfort with the restrictions inherent to incarceration. There are no televisions in the cells, and all *recuperandos* have a routine they must follow, with mandatory training and duties. Still, the environment is far from punitive - it is structured to cultivate responsibility, accountability, and personal growth.

The second part of our tour was led by Wilson, president of the CSS for the closed regime. One of the first spaces he showed us was the intimate suite - a concept unfamiliar in the UK, but present in countries like Portugal and Spain. These suites allow *recuperandos* to spend private time with their partners or families. This privilege, rarely available in conventional prisons, is a valued component of APAC's philosophy: reconnecting individuals with their families as part of the rehabilitation process. In women's APACs, mothers are even permitted to live with their newborns in these suites for up to a year. While the traditional prison system also permits this in Brazil, the environment is often hostile and stressful for both the mother and the child.

I shared with Ernandes a UK statistic: around 50% of incarcerated men had a father who had also been in prison. I asked if there were similar generational patterns among *recuperandos*. He responded that such cycles are usually a result of exposure to criminal environments during childhood. But when someone leaves APAC, they are leaving behind a life of crime, becoming more present and emotionally stable parents - an important factor in breaking the cycle of criminality.

Wilson also showed us APAC Betim's transparency board, which proudly displays their performance metrics. This facility has had zero escapes and maintains a recidivism rate of approximately 13%. Wilson believes this is largely due to the way recuperandos are treated- unlike in the conventional system, where individuals are isolated, unoccupied, and often surrounded by others planning to reoffend. After experiencing APAC's methodology, Wilson feels better equipped to reintegrate into society.

One unique feature at Betim was the Disciplinary Evaluation Board, updated monthly. It highlights the "friend of the month" (usually an employee or volunteer), the top *recuperando*, the most organised and disorganised cells (the latter earns a small pig toy and cleaning duty for a month), and ends with a quote from APAC founder Mário Ottoboni: "Do amor ninguém foge" ("No one runs away from love"). This ritual is part of a special event held every second Tuesday of the month, when the entire APAC reflects on their collective progress and eats lunch in their cells - as a nod to the realities of the standard prison system.

Maicol elaborated on the responsibility point system used in APAC behind this board: each recuperando starts with a number of points each month and loses points for minor faults (e.g., a messy cell or forgetting their ID card). This system allows for continuous feedback - not just criticism, but also recognition for those who go out of their way to help peers maintain their points. These monthly assemblies become moments of collective celebration and introspection, featuring awards, guest speeches, and performances by *recuperandos*. They reinforce the APAC values of community, accountability, and shared humanity.

We visited a small grocery shop and pharmacy, both managed by *recuperandos*. If someone is trusted with the gate keys, Ernandes argued, then they can also be trusted with money and medication. One of the most innovative initiatives was the artisanal cooperative: a self-managed business producing crochet, paintings, and woodwork, sold online and through partner vendors. The cooperative operates under formal statutes and keeps detailed records, just like a business outside prison. The proceeds are shared among the *recuperandos* who run it, with a portion reserved for shared needs such as glasses or social events. These individuals become entrepreneurs while serving their sentences - learning how to run meetings, make collective decisions, manage finances, and save money for their future reintegration.

APAC Betim operates almost like a small, self-governed village. The *recuperandos* actively participate in decision-making, which smooths the transition back into society. Ernandes emphasised the importance of paid labour: if APAC is truly preparing people for life outside, they must learn the value of their work and how to manage money. Many crimes stem from economic desperation, so offering an opportunity to build a livelihood through honest work is essential for long-term rehabilitation.

Everything at APAC Betim is thoughtfully designed to address the root causes of crime - even the order in which *recuperandos* line up for meals is determined by lottery, ensuring fairness. Before lunch, Ernandes and Wilson took us to the main auditorium where all the *recuperandos* were gathered. After being introduced by Maicol, I had the chance to thank everyone for their hospitality and openness. In return, Wilson spoke on behalf of the *recuperandos*, saying how important it was to demonstrate that alternative approaches to incarceration - ones that do not inflict additional pain - are not only possible, but effective.

To conclude our final APAC visit, we all shared another delicious organic lunch - co-created by the *recuperandos* themselves. It was the perfect metaphor for what I had learned in Minas Gerais: a shared meal, a moment of community, a system grounded in dignity, equality, and hope.

Key Takeaways:

1. Trust as the foundation for secure and effective rehabilitation. APAC Betim demonstrates that genuine trust and shared responsibility between staff and *recuperandos* can enhance, rather than compromise, security. Involving *recuperandos* in daily operations, including security roles, builds accountability and reinforces the rehabilitative mission. This challenges the conventional assumption that rehabilitative practices must come at the expense of security, showing instead that trust and structure can coexist effectively.
2. Economic empowerment and cost efficiency can be achieved through inmate involvement. Engaging *recuperandos* in meaningful, paid work fosters autonomy, skill-building, and financial literacy, all essential for successful reintegration. Crucially, this model also significantly reduces operational costs: APAC Betim operates at less than half of the cost of the traditional prison system. By replacing outsourced services with inmate-led work, APAC not only saves money but also transforms incarceration into an empowering and economically sustainable process.
3. Culture, rituals, and transparency are tools for building collective responsibility. Regular community rituals, transparent metrics, and egalitarian practices help build a strong collective identity and sense of purpose - while in APAC Divinopolis this sense of community related to religious views, APAC Betim was able to create rituals that are focused solely on the community they are building together. This culture of mutual respect and reflection strengthens social bonds, not only between *recuperandos* but also APAC's staff, and reinforces behavioural change.

Marcos Melo (former public defender and Secretariat of Penitentiary Administration and Resocialisation)

https://www.escavador.com/sobre/1265298/marcos-luiz-alves-de-melo

From Minas Gerais to Bahia, I flew to meet Marcos Melo, a criminal lawyer and university professor, formerly a public defender and the General Director of the Secretariat of Penitentiary Administration and Resocialisation (SEAP). Much like my meeting with Luiz Carlos, my conversation with Marcos deepened my understanding of the Brazilian prison system and the many challenges it faces in achieving its goals of reducing crime and recidivism.

Marcos has lived, studied, and worked in Bahia for his entire life; a state which includes seven of the ten cities with the highest homicide rates in Brazil [14]. Incarceration has long been one of Marcos' central concerns. He has been visiting prisons since his university days and has authored two books on the topic: O Hóspede do Inferno ("The Guest from Hell"), a fictionalised account inspired by data on life in prison, and Elas e o Cárcere – Um Estudo Sobre o Encarceramento Feminino ("Women and Prison – A Study on Female Incarceration"). His interest in female incarceration stems partly from his time at SEAP, during which the first women's prison in the state of Bahia was inaugurated under his leadership. Today, 34.3% of incarcerated women in the state are held at the Salvador Women's Prison Complex, a facility that opened under Marcos' administration [15]. I knew the conversation would be insightful when he began by stating that prisons are where society puts the people it doesn't want to see - the poor, uneducated, and socially vulnerable.

In alignment with what I had heard from Elas Existem and during my visits to female APACs, Marcos spoke about how deeply different the female experience in prison is from that of men. “The truth is that prison was made for men,” he said. He explained that most women are not incarcerated in dedicated facilities, but rather in female-only wings within male prisons leading to a very different dynamic and experience. He also shared a striking statistic: while approximately 80% of incarcerated men receive visits, only 20% of women do. I recalled a conversation I had with a *recuperanda* at APAC Belo Horizonte, who explained that her family lived over four hours away and simply could not afford the cost of visiting her. To put that into perspective, the state of Bahia is the size of France - so for many families, visiting an incarcerated relative involves significant travel, time, and financial strain. For women (who are often the primary caregivers) this absence of contact becomes an additional layer of punishment, severing ties with children and support networks. Marcos underlined that this lack of social support exacerbates the emotional and psychological harm women experience in prison, increasing feelings of abandonment and stigma. This highlights the urgent need for gender-responsive policies in the criminal justice system - ones that account for the unique needs and vulnerabilities of women. Marcos further noted that incarcerating women far from their communities is contrary to the law, as it effectively prevents family visits.

Another vital point Marcos raised was the impact of incarceration on mothers. In 2020, 80% of women in prison were mothers, and roughly 30% had at least one child under the age of 12 [16]. When a mother is imprisoned, her children are either taken in by relatives or placed in state care. But the situation becomes even more complex when a woman gives birth during her sentence. Legally, babies can remain with their mothers in custody until the age of two. However, the prison system is largely unprepared to support this: 44% of prisons that house pregnant or breastfeeding women do not permit infants to remain with their mothers due to inadequate infrastructure. Furthermore, 57.9% only allow the child to stay up to six months, and 71.3% fail to provide essential hygiene products for newborns. These shortcomings significantly increase the risks of health and developmental issues for children born into the prison system, deepening the cycle of vulnerability.

Marcos was candid and critical of the contradictions within Brazil’s penal system. He acknowledged that while legislation has evolved to reflect more progressive principles, many laws are inconsistently applied or fail to support effective rehabilitation. A key example he pointed to was the semi-open regime, a model similar to APAC’s, where inmates should be allowed to leave for work during the day. According to Brazilian law, this should involve serving time in an agricultural, industrial, or similar facility; but in practice, these opportunities rarely exist. Most businesses do not hire incarcerated individuals, and there are few policies to incentivise them to do so. As a result, there is often no meaningful difference between those in closed and semi-open regimes, with most prisoners confined to their cells and left idle. “During COVID, when we had to stay inside in comfort, people lost their minds… now imagine incarceration,” Marcos said. “That was the time when most family quarrels happened.” He argued that the stagnant and isolating environment inside prisons fuels violence among inmates, increasing security risks, sentence lengths, and ultimately, rates of reoffending.

Work programmes, he stressed, are essential not just for skill-building but for reducing prison violence and enabling reintegration. As I've seen in the APAC model, work reduces recidivism by helping prisoners develop skills (including soft skills such as punctuality and responsibility), save money, and re-enter society with purpose. It also lowers the cost of incarceration and enables prisoners to contribute to society. This ties directly to my experience at Offploy, whose mission is to improve employment outcomes for people with convictions - a key factor in reducing reoffending. In England and Wales, the annual cost of reoffending to the taxpayer is approximately £18 billion [17], one of our motivations in promoting the hiring of former offenders.

When I asked Marcos whether he believed the APAC methodology could be integrated into the traditional prison system, he replied that to implement it fully more in-depth research is needed. He raised concerns about selection bias: one reason APAC's recidivism rates are lower may be that judges choose who gets sent there, often selecting individuals they deem less likely to reoffend. This underscores the critical need for rigorous data collection and evaluation when designing and implementing prison reforms. If we want to scale effective solutions, working with the prison population without the filter of a judge, we need to understand what works, for whom, and under what conditions – and adapt the answer accordingly.

Finally, we returned to a theme that had surfaced repeatedly in my Fellowship: how incarceration disproportionately affects the most marginalised. "The prison population is selective; it has colour, race, social status, age… most are Black, have low levels of education, and are poor, from the suburbs," Marcos told me. He framed mass incarceration as the result of deep structural inequalities and the lingering legacies of slavery - a system that targets those the state has failed. This mirrored his opening statement about prison being where society places the people it has no answer for. What struck me most was how clearly Marcos saw these issues after a lifetime working inside the justice system. Today, he dedicates himself to teaching and writing, believing that he has done his part; helping establish the first women's prison in Salvador; designing a space for intimate visits; supporting motherhood; creating a syndicate for prisoners, and advancing a more humanistic vision for incarceration. Now, he hopes to equip the next generation of decision-makers with the tools they need to finally transform the system.

Key Takeaways:

1. Brazil's prison system needs gender-specific approaches. Marcos highlighted that prisons in Brazil were built with men in mind, leaving women in structurally disadvantaged conditions. Women are often placed in male facilities or far from home, making visits rare, deepening their isolation and disrupting family ties. Marcos' role shows how targeted infrastructure can begin to address these issues. His insights align with what I heard from female APACs and Elas Existem, reinforcing the need for policy and facilities that reflect the unique needs of women in prison.
2. Rehabilitation must go beyond sentencing to include meaningful work and structure. Marcos criticised the ineffectiveness of Brazil's semi-open regime, which legally allows inmates to work during the day but often fails in practice due to lack of employment opportunities and state incentives. This results in idle prison time and a prison culture that breeds violence and dependency. He echoed what we observed in APACs: that work, routine, and a sense of purpose are critical to rehabilitation. Involving prisoners in productive labour not only reduces recidivism but also contributes to lowering prison violence and operational costs.
3. Evidence-based policy and impact evaluation are essential for sustainable change. Marcos underlined the need for better data to design, implement, and scale solutions in a prison system; highlighting the importance of rigorous impact evaluation while generalising alternative models. His emphasis on research and data echoes a wider theme in my Fellowship: that solutions to reduce reoffending and improve prison conditions must be informed by transparent, continuous monitoring and evaluation to be equitable and effective at scale.

Instituto Recomeçar

https://recomecar360.org/leo-precioso/

The final stop on our journey through Brazil, as we sought out best practices and considered how these might inform and improve the UK's own criminal justice system, was São Paulo. It is the most populous state in Brazil, with 44 million residents and a geographical area slightly larger than that of the United Kingdom. However, São Paulo's context of violence and crime is notably distinct from other Brazilian states. In 2023, it registered the highest rate of hidden homicides in the country: 4.8 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants, compared to a national average of 1.7. These so-called "hidden homicides" refer to violent deaths that, although not officially classified as homicides, are highly likely to be so, most of the cases victims of organised crime. They are recorded as Violent Deaths from Undetermined Causes [18], and if, as previously mentioned, confirmed homicides already suffer from a low solving rate, these hidden homicides are even less likely to result in justice. In addition to violent crime, São Paulo also reports the highest rates of theft in Brazil, contributing to a widespread sense of insecurity felt by the population [19].

During our stay in São Paulo, we engaged with a wide range of organisations and stakeholders connected to the justice and prison system: from community-based organisations and social enterprises founded by and for people with convictions, to think tanks specialising in criminal justice and one of the country's leading philanthropic foundations in this area. We began our visit in the municipality of Poá, where we met Leonardo Precioso, the founder and CEO of Instituto Recomeçar.

Upon arriving at Instituto Recomeçar, we were warmly welcomed by Leonardo and Aline Silva, the organisation's Financial Director. As they took us on a tour of their space, they shared the story of how Recomeçar came into being. Founded in 2015, the organisation is committed to reintegrating men and women who have served prison sentences and are seeking support to rebuild their lives. Their activities focus on providing vocational training, employment opportunities, and social support, while also developing their own social businesses to sustain this mission.

Leonardo's personal story could easily be the subject of a film - and in fact, he has already written a book about it. Now in his 40s, Leonardo was born in western São Paulo but grew up in Itaim Paulista, a neighbourhood on the city's far eastern edge. He began his football career at Corinthians as a child, later playing for various clubs in Brazil and abroad before an early decline and retirement from the sport. Returning to Itaim Paulista, he became involved in organised crime, eventually rising to a leadership position before being arrested in 2008. After serving seven years in prison, he was given a life-changing opportunity by his friend Eduardo Lyra, founder of the NGO Gerando Falcões, to work in their sports department. That experience proved to be a turning point. Since founding Instituto Recomeçar in 2015, thousands of former prisoners have gone through its programmes and successfully re-entered the labour market.

Leonardo speaks about Recomeçar with a passion and enthusiasm that is impossible to ignore. His mission is deeply personal: to offer others the same helping hand he once received. Recomeçar's methodology is rooted in Leonardo's own transformation and is structured around four key pillars, all backed by research and evaluation: employment, safety, community, and mentorship. He is convinced that "former incarcerated people can have the same or even better results than mine". His dedication goes beyond the organisation - he is also a public speaker and advocate for people with convictions, leveraging his platform as a former professional athlete and award-winning entrepreneur to highlight the stigma and barriers that ex-prisoners face in accessing employment and rebuilding social connections. Ultimately, he envisions Recomeçar as a model to influence public policy focused on reintegration.

In addition to providing social support and vocational training, Instituto Recomeçar runs two social businesses: a vintage clothing shop and Opportunità Pizzaria, both staffed entirely by people with criminal records. Though the shop was closed when we arrived, we visited the pizzeria during dinner service and were able to meet the team, see them in action, and enjoy their food. Leonardo shared the origin story of this venture: it began through a collaboration with a Recomeçar board member who helped develop the concept of a pizzeria run entirely by ex-prisoners. The idea was simple - combat stigma through visibility and quality. The business opened in 2021 and is now planning to scale into a social franchise model, enabling other associations to replicate its success. The goal is not just job creation, but sustainable revenue streams for vulnerable communities. As Leonardo put it, there are countless pizzerias in Brazil, but now people can buy high-quality pizza while also creating social impact.

The pizzeria operates to the same standards as any other - strict hygiene regulations, standardised procedures, and in-house preparation of every element, from the dough to the sauces. Its manager, Jorge, is a former gang member who spent over 20 years in prison, much of it in maximum security. He met Leonardo while serving his sentence. Jorge recounted how he spent 21 hours a day in isolation, reflecting about his son and worrying that, without a positive example, his child might follow the same path. Today, Jorge leads the pizzeria team with pride, overseeing operations and ensuring customer satisfaction. “I used to manage other types of projects (laughs), but now I’ve turned over a new leaf.”

While many people who enter prison have low levels of formal education, this doesn’t mean they lack skills. Jorge and Leonardo explained how some of the competencies they developed during their time in organised crime (decision-making, problem-solving, logistics, and even sales) are now proving useful in their current roles. However, these must be complemented by additional training to function in the formal labour market. Jorge recalled that upon release, he didn’t even know how to turn on a PC. Recomeçar helped bridge this gap, offering basic digital literacy and job readiness training. His experience mirrors that of many former prisoners I’ve encountered: incarceration can create an enormous disconnect from the evolving realities of modern society, making reintegration especially challenging. Jorge now takes pride in helping others build those same opportunities.

As with what we saw in APAC, incarcerated individuals are often resourceful, disciplined, and capable problem-solvers. When given a structured environment where they can apply these talents positively, they can thrive. That is the essence of Recomeçar’s mission: to demonstrate that people with convictions not only want to reintegrate into society - they can succeed when given the chance.

With its blend of social enterprises, wraparound support, training programmes, and partnerships with public and private institutions, Instituto Recomeçar offers opportunities to former prisoners of all genders, ages, and backgrounds, particularly those facing multiple vulnerabilities. Their transparency about their values and hiring practices has earned them respect and trust within their community, helping to shift public perceptions and reduce the stigma associated with having a criminal record. To date, more than 3,500 individuals have undergone vocational training through the organisation, their approach has contributed to a 88% reduction in recidivism. Notably, Recomeçar became the first NGO focused on ex-prisoners to receive the Educational Innovation Award from Fundação Roberto Marinho.

Instituto Recomeçar encapsulates many of the key lessons from my Churchill Fellowship: the power of lived experience in shaping effective reintegration strategies, the importance of employment and community in breaking cycles of reoffending, and the urgent need to confront stigma through visibility and opportunity. Like the APAC model and the work in Rio, Recomeçar reinforces that rehabilitation cannot happen in isolation - it requires a comprehensive ecosystem of support, dignity, and belief in human potential. What sets Recomeçar apart is its bold, unapologetic positioning: it does not just support people with convictions - it celebrates their capacity for change and success. This ethos echoes throughout my Fellowship journey, whether in the empathetic legal advocacy seen in Salvador and Belo Horizonte or the transformative community initiatives encountered along the way. Recomeçar reminds us that the barriers to reintegration are not just structural - they are also social and cultural; and that lasting change will require systems that are not only just, but genuinely restorative.

Key Takeaways:

1. Lived experience as leadership and methodology. Instituto Recomeçar is a powerful example of how lived experience can inform, guide, and lead successful reintegration strategies. Leonardo Precioso's journey, from incarceration to social entrepreneurship, underpins a methodology grounded in real-world challenges and opportunities. His belief that "former incarcerated people can have the same or even better results" is not just inspirational but operationalised through training, employment, and structured support.
2. Employment and social enterprise as tools for reintegration. Recomeçar shows how job opportunities and social enterprise can serve both as mechanisms for reducing recidivism and platforms for changing public perception. Businesses like Opportunità Pizzaria are not only providing income and dignity but also challenging stigma by proving that people with convictions can run high-quality, customer-facing enterprises. This aligns with previous learnings from APAC, highlighting the importance of purposeful, structured work as a foundation for rehabilitation.
3. Integrated support reduces recidivism and promotes community trust. The organisation's holistic approach - combining professional training, social support, public advocacy, and direct employment - has achieved remarkable impact, including an 88% reduction in reoffending among its participants. These outcomes underscore my Fellowship's emphasis on systemic, multi-level interventions that target not just individuals, but also the societal conditions that hinder reintegration. Recomeçar's model adds weight to the case for community-based, cross-sectoral partnerships to build safer, more inclusive societies.

Igarapé Institute

https://igarape.org.br/en/

I first came across Instituto Igarapé while researching the social justice ecosystem in Brazil and was particularly struck by their publications, including a comprehensive mapping of all organisations within the criminal justice system. We were warmly received by Vivian Calderoni (Programme Coordinator) and Cami Nadalini de Godoy (Public Policy Advisor), who began by explaining their work and the mission of Instituto Igarapé.

The Igarapé Institute is an independent 'think and do tank' focused on the areas of public, climate, and digital security, and how these impact democracy. Its core mission is to propose solutions and build partnerships for global challenges through rigorous research, the application of new technologies, strategic communication, and public policy advocacy. The Institute collaborates with governments, the private sector, and civil society to design data-driven solutions. Recognised as the Best Human Rights NGO in 2018 and the Best Think Tank on Social Policy by Prospect Magazine in 2019, Instituto Igarapé is a non-profit, independent, and non-partisan organisation. Headquartered in Rio de Janeiro, with a second office in São Paulo, its operations transcend local, national, and regional boundaries. Igarapé has staff based across all regions of Brazil, as well as in Canada, Colombia, the United States, and the United Kingdom, working on partnerships and projects in over 20 countries.

My conversation with Vivian and Cami then turned to how they view the value of Igarapé Institute within the wider ecosystem: The Institute seeks to act as a channel that facilitates the integration of security, climate, and technology agendas, while also serving as a bridge for dialogue - between decision-makers and civil society, and between global and local perspectives. The word Igarapé, in the Tupi language, means "way of the canoe." Igarapés are small rivers or channels, common in the Amazon, essential for communication among communities and for connecting larger rivers. In a similar way, Instituto Igarapé connects actors, issues, and data through accessible and inclusive research outputs on topics related to justice and security.

They are now widely recognised beyond academia and are taken seriously by public institutions. In the field of criminal justice, the Institute runs various projects including: research on methodologies to reduce recidivism, an information platform for individuals leaving the prison system, a toolkit to support the reintegration of former prisoners through training and employment, and a network of private companies that hire and advocate for the reintegration of ex-offenders. These efforts echoed points raised by IDMJ and Marcos Melo, who also emphasised the importance of trustworthy data on crime and incarceration cycles to drive policy reform, precisely the kind of work Igarapé undertakes.

Importantly, Igarapé does not accept public funding, as a safeguard against conflicts of interest given their focus on public policy research and advocacy. Instead, they are supported by private donations and foundations, such as Porticus (which I would be visiting the following day) allowing them to focus on what they identify as the most pressing issues. Vivian explained how incarceration in Brazil is intricately connected to deeper structural issues such as racism, poverty, and discrimination - an intersectional crisis that requires in-depth and courageous analysis. This concern was echoed throughout my visit by nearly every organisation and individual I met; from system actors like Luiz Carlos and Marcos Melo, to activists in Rio de Janeiro. As Gisele from IDMJ pointed out, engaging with these issues is often not widely welcomed and can involve personal risk.

Vivian also shared how Igarapé supports and amplifies the work of activists similar to those of Gisele, helping to analyse and publish critical data that might otherwise remain inaccessible or under threat. A powerful example of this is their publication of data concerning violence against climate activists in the Amazon - particularly Indigenous women, many of whom have been murdered or disappeared. By amplifying the voices of vulnerable and often isolated individuals, Igarapé can access and disseminate data that would otherwise be out of reach for conventional investigations.

Another significant area of focus for Igarapé is drug policy and criminalisation. At the time of our visit, a new case at the Supreme Court was under discussion, aiming to increase the threshold of drug possession required to qualify as trafficking. Although the bill was eventually passed, raising the threshold for cannabis to 40 grams, it still permits prosecution for smaller amounts under "other incriminating factors" [20]- a loophole that concerned Cami, who feared it would leave room for continued discrimination and racial bias.

Our conversation ended once again in the issue of incarceration, particularly for drug-related and property crimes, and how Igarapé consistently researches the social and economic impacts of criminalisation. Their work illustrates the broader consequences of incarceration, including cycles of poverty and crime, public health issues, and human rights violations, alongside the economic burden of imprisonment and reoffending. They also compare data from Brazil with other countries, primarily in the Americas, to assess how adapted and alternative policy models could be implemented in Brazil, which currently has the third-largest prison population in the world.

With a team of 35 professionals, Instituto Igarapé defines itself as a 'think and do' tank committed to systemic change for improved security outcomes in Brazil. Their work is a vital example of how evidence-based solutions can generate meaningful social innovation and community-oriented impact.

Key Takeaways:

1. The power of data to drive policy and structural change. Instituto Igarapé plays a critical role in the Brazilian justice ecosystem by using reliable, accessible data to influence public policy and reduce recidivism. Their emphasis on evidence-based research - whether on the consequences of incarceration, cycles of poverty, or drug criminalisation - mirrors my Fellowship's objective of grounding social innovation in robust, transparent analysis.

2. Bridging civil society and public institutions through trust. Igarapé acts as a vital “bridge” - connecting local grassroots data and experiences with decision-makers and global platforms. Their reputation and rigorous methods mean that they can elevate voices that are often silenced or excluded, like Indigenous women or community activists such as Gisele from IDMJ. This aligns with earlier insights from other visits, reaffirming that meaningful reform must include and protect those closest to the problem.
3. Reintegration requires ecosystem collaboration and private sector engagement. Their work supporting reintegration through toolkits, employer networks, and digital platforms highlights the importance of cross-sector cooperation to address the barriers faced by people leaving prison. This echoes themes from Instituto Recomeçar and APAC: that meaningful reintegration cannot happen in isolation, and that social innovation anchored in partnerships between civil society, academia, and the private sector is essential for sustainable change.

Instituto de Defesa do Direito de Defesa (IDDD)

https://iddd.org.br/

The Instituto de Defesa do Direito de Defesa (IDDD), “Institute for the Defence of the Right to Defence”, is a Brazilian non-governmental organisation founded in 2000 by criminal defence lawyers. It operates in the legal, political, and strategic-environmental spheres, seeking to raise public awareness and advocate for justice. IDDD is supported by both international and national foundations, along with donations from various law firms. It is also a member of Rede Justiça Criminal (Criminal Justice Network), a coalition of seven human rights organisations.

During my visit, I spoke with Marina Dias, the Executive Director of IDDD, who explained that more than 300 lawyers currently collaborate with the organisation. These legal professionals not only offer legal assistance to those in need but also collect and publish data on justice and inequality in Brazil.

As with Instituto Igarapé, Marina highlighted the importance of IDDD’s reports on the criminal justice system as a means of uncovering and understanding the structural issues tied to incarceration such as racism, poverty, and discrimination. Like Luiz Carlos and Marcos Melo, Marina underscored the need for diverse stakeholders to come together and create alternatives to Brazil’s punitive justice system. These alternatives must be based on data and rooted in a humanistic approach. This was precisely the reason IDDD was established. As Marina quipped: “We always say the end goal is to close IDDD, because that would mean everything is solved.”

IDDD is committed to defending the presumption of innocence and due process, ensuring that all individuals receive a quality legal defence. In its early years, the organisation conducted task forces within prisons, sending lawyers to examine prison conditions and gather data on inmates' legal situations and institutional violations. They identified a range of systemic failings - from individuals going missing due to improper processing, to impossible-to-pay fines being issued, to extended periods of pre-trial detention, sometimes exceeding two years, and severe overcrowding.

Marina explained that there is a lack of standardised metrics and transparency in the prison system, which creates opportunities for ongoing and unacknowledged human rights abuses. The Supreme Federal Court has already ruled Brazil’s prison system unconstitutional, due to its failure to comply with basic legal standards ensuring humane conditions and fair legal procedures.

The rapid growth of Brazil's prison population is symptomatic of a system unable to address the root causes of criminality. The country's high recidivism rate only reinforces that incarceration, as it currently stands, is more likely to perpetuate crime than to rehabilitate individuals. This was one of the central motivations behind this project: to explore why Brazil's penal system struggles to evolve into a fair and effective model. However, parallels must also be drawn with the UK prison system. Although the UK publishes more data, it typically only covers the number of prisoners, their gender, and sentence length. The UK also has a recidivism rate exceeding 50%, and faces its own human rights issues; for instance, the now-illegal Indeterminate Sentence for Public Protection (IPP), imposed on more than 8,000 people. Despite the sentence being deemed illegal in 2012, around 2,000 people are still serving these indefinite sentences, unaware of when they will be released, [21] often serving longer terms than legally required for their original offences. To create truly effective solutions, we must shed our preconceived notions of what "works" in criminal justice and turn to the data with critical understanding. Acknowledging the problem is the first step in any meaningful process of social innovation.

"We should be talking about how the prison is feeding into a vicious cycle," Marina said. She went on to explain how, after years working in the justice system and analysing incarceration data both nationally and internationally, she no longer believes that prisons should exist. Instead, imprisonment should be a last resort, not a default response. "I don't believe we should be responding to suffering with even more suffering." - This echoed what Judge Luiz Carlos, who specialises in sentence execution, had told me: that alternative sentencing should be the rule, not the exception, focusing on rehabilitation rather than creating further barriers to reintegration.

The final topic in our conversation was a recurring one, previously raised by Elas Existem, APAC *recuperandos*, and the Igarapé Institute: fines. As in the UK, a criminal conviction in Brazil often includes not only imprisonment but also a monetary fine. Because most people in the prison system come from low-income backgrounds, they are often forced to pay these fines in small monthly instalments. In the UK, even after the required disclosure period has passed, if the fine is not fully paid, individuals must still disclose their conviction to employers. At Offploy we frequently discuss the need for better social solutions to ensure that people who have served their time are not continuously penalised. In Brazil, the system is even more severe - if the fine remains unpaid, a person loses their CPF (fiscal identification number), which is essential for accessing housing, employment, and social support.

This issue has become a major focus for IDDD, which now runs a dedicated research project on the topic. Marina explained that most people with a blocked CPF are unaware that the fine is the cause. In response, IDDD formed a legal support task force, helping over 300 individuals so far. Beyond direct support, the project aims to produce research and policy recommendations, with the goal of leveraging these cases to pressure lawmakers for systemic change, almost akin to a class-action strategy.

To do this, IDDD collects testimonies and data not just from former offenders, but also from their families. They collaborate with grassroots organisations such as AMAPARAR (association for family and friends of ex-prisoners), recognising that many people affected by these issues do not understand the system or even realise what is happening to them.

Just weeks before our meeting, IDDD had organised a stakeholder session involving judges, former prisoners, and their families to raise awareness and build capacity on this topic. Marina emphasised that IDDD sees its role in the criminal justice ecosystem much like Instituto Igarapé - not only to amplify the data and research needed for policy reform but also to empower those most affected by injustice as agents of systemic change.

IDDD's work stood out during my Fellowship as a powerful example of how legal expertise, data, and grassroots collaboration can converge to challenge systemic injustices. Like Instituto Igarapé, IDDD embraces a role that transcends traditional advocacy by combining research and strategic litigation with public education and policy influence. Both organisations underscore the importance of reliable data and inclusive dialogue in addressing the root causes of incarceration - issues echoed across my conversations with Luiz Carlos, Marcos Melo, APAC, Elas Existem, and others. Whether through supporting families affected by hidden legal obstacles or confronting the racial and economic inequities embedded in Brazil's justice system, IDDD exemplifies the kind of holistic, multi-stakeholder approach needed to drive lasting reform. Their work reminds us that no effective innovation in the justice system can exist without listening to those most harmed by it, having them at the same table as all other stakeholders.

Key Takeaways:

1. Structural change requires legal expertise, data, and strategic advocacy. IDDD demonstrates how combining legal defence with rigorous research and policy advocacy can challenge deeply rooted injustices in the criminal justice system. Their approach shows that systemic change isn't only about courtroom wins, but about using data and lived experience to reshape laws, practices, and public perception - especially around issues like preventive detention, lack of due process, and the socio-economic impact of incarceration.
2. The penal system reinforces, rather than resolves, social inequality. IDDD's work reveals how incarceration in Brazil (like in many parts of the world) is not an endpoint but a mechanism that perpetuates cycles of poverty, racial injustice, and marginalisation. The issue of blocked CPFs due to unpaid fines, for example, illustrates how punitive systems continue to punish long after a sentence is served. This parallels similar patterns seen in the UK (e.g. indeterminate sentences), underscoring the global relevance of IDDD's insights.

3. Systemic solutions must be centred on the voices of the affected. A consistent thread throughout IDDD's work is the belief that real reform must come from empowering those most impacted: formerly incarcerated individuals and their families. Their partnerships with grassroots groups and public sessions with diverse stakeholders, demonstrate the importance of building inclusive coalitions to generate both empathy and effective policy change. This aligns with learnings from other visits, including Igarapé and APAC, reinforcing that justice reform is most powerful when co-created with the community.

Associação de Amigos/as e familiares de presos/as (AMPARAR)

https://www.instagram.com/amparar.assoc/?hl=en

AMPARAR - Associação de Amigos e Familiares de Presos/as (Association of Friends and Family Members of Prisoners) is a Brazilian civil society organisation dedicated to defending the human rights of incarcerated individuals, former prisoners, and their families. Its mission is to provide legal and social support while mobilising and empowering the families of those impacted by the prison system - particularly women, who often act as the primary support network for incarcerated individuals.

We were warmly welcomed by the association's founders, Railda Alves and Miriam Duarte Pereira, who shared the origins of AMPARAR. The association was founded in 1998, when their children were incarcerated. Since then, it has remained committed to defending the rights of people deprived of their liberty and their families, both adolescents and adults. Railda began advocating for incarcerated people's rights when her son, then aged 14, was sent to Febem (an incarceration establishment for minors in São Paulo) in mid-1997. She met Miriam at the prison gates. They exchanged phone numbers and, together with other families and former prisoners, created a support network for those inside and their loved ones on the outside.

As Miriam and Railda spoke with us, other members of the association chimed in with their personal testimonies; not only about their experiences with the prison and judicial system, but about the emotional and practical support they had received from AMPARAR. Family members often must invest significant time and money just to visit prisons, particularly female facilities, which are less numerous and often more distant. As discussed with Marcos Melo, this severely limits contact. AMPARAR addresses this challenge by providing transport so families can maintain relationships with their loved ones during incarceration.

During my conversations with recuperandos, APAC staff, and Marcos Melo, the subject of how difficult it is for families to maintain bonds with imprisoned relatives came up repeatedly, mostly connected with logistical issues. But it was with AMPARAR that I gained a true, first-hand sense of the extent of that hardship. I remember during my very first visit to an APAC in Timon, Denis, the security manager, proudly explained that they do not pat down family members during visits. In contrast, AMPARAR described how, in the conventional prison system, not only can visits be cancelled without explanation, but families are also subjected to humiliating frisking: being asked to strip naked and undergo cavity searches. One formerly incarcerated man explained how many prisoners ask their families not to come to spare them this indignity. Mothers in the room shared how these procedures left them feeling deeply intimidated and dehumanised.

In AMPARAR's green room, lined with photographs of its community and activities, testimonies flowed about the wide range of social support it offers: free psychological counselling, transport, basic goods, legal guidance, and - most importantly - the community it has created. Referring to people who have been incarcerated as "survivors", AMPARAR is composed of those most directly affected by the prison system and its fallout. Together, they have formed a unified front to document, systematise, and raise awareness of this systemic social problem.

Railda spoke candidly about the difficulty and emotional toll of this work. Since the 1990s, she has dedicated herself to community organising, describing her efforts as "*trabalho de formiguinha"* ("ant work") - small, consistent acts that accumulate and, when multiplied by others, become a real force for change. She emphasised the importance of truly loving the mission: there is no schedule for the work: answering calls at all hours, guiding families through legal processes (such as court-imposed fines, as discussed with IDDD), and offering emotional support to those feeling overwhelmed and abandoned.

One volunteer who supports AMPARAR with legal and financial administration explained that the organisation runs on “love and care”, with nearly everything done by volunteers and through donations, with limited project-based funding from human rights foundations. This financial instability makes it difficult to scale or extend services beyond São Paulo. Like IDMJ Racial, AMPARAR is a grassroots organisation built on personal sacrifice and a deep commitment to community empowerment. With only three full-time staff and the rest volunteers, AMPARAR exemplifies how transformative community-based solutions can be, even with minimal funding.

AMPARAR’s critique of the prison system was uncompromising, as one might expect from those most harmed by it. They described prison as a place of both physical and psychological torture - a punishment that strips individuals of identity, connection, and dignity, leaving them more socially and emotionally vulnerable than before. Railda spoke powerfully about how families are also victims of this system, burdened with legal and financial responsibilities they are often unequipped to bear, while also witnessing their loved ones suffer. As a mother, she called on families around the world not to give up on their incarcerated relatives, and to connect with others in similar situations. As seen in APAC, maintaining family bonds is a critical factor in reducing reoffending. AMPARAR’s work directly supports this by creating a safe, empowering space where families and survivors can access support, information, and solidarity.

One of the most moving moments of my time in Brazil came during this visit: seeing the original three mothers - Miriam, Railda, and Bell - sitting side by side, telling the story of how AMPARAR began. They described how, in the early days, they spent their own money to help other families and taught themselves the legal framework to better advocate for themselves and others. Today, they are backed by funders such as Open Society, which allows them to operate from a dedicated physical space, receive families, and distribute resources.

Ending my time with AMPARAR felt like closing a circle; bringing together the most human, urgent, and often overlooked dimensions of Brazil’s criminal justice system. In that room, sitting beside Miriam, Railda, and Bell - three mothers who turned their personal grief into collective action - I witnessed how community-based responses, grounded in care, knowledge, and lived experience, can challenge even the most entrenched systems. Their journey from prison gates to becoming trusted advocates on the issue of incarceration is a testament to the transformative power of grassroots leadership. In a country where incarceration perpetuates inequality and fractures social bonds, AMPARAR stands as a powerful model of what justice rooted in dignity can look like.

Key Takeaways:

1. Community-led responses are powerful tools for social change. AMPARAR demonstrates how community-driven, grassroots leadership - particularly from those most directly affected by incarceration - can create lasting impact. Founded by mothers of incarcerated children, the organisation has grown into a trusted network that offers legal, emotional, and practical support. Their lived experience has enabled them to build a responsive, human-centred model of justice advocacy that challenges institutional neglect and indifference.
2. Families are invisible victims of the carceral system and vital to rehabilitation. The report underscores how families, particularly women, are burdened with financial, emotional, and bureaucratic hardships when a loved one is imprisoned. From costly, long-distance visits to invasive security procedures, their suffering often goes unacknowledged. At the same time, maintaining family bonds is critical in reducing reoffending. AMPARAR directly addresses this through transport, emotional support, and legal empowerment.
3. Care, commitment, and dignity can achieve what punishment cannot. Despite limited resources, AMPARAR's work has built a resilient support ecosystem in São Paulo; highlighting the importance of compassion as a principle in policy and practice. The association's model is a lesson in how consistent, small acts of solidarity can drive replicable social impact.

Porticus Foundation

https://www.porticus.com/

While in São Paulo, I had the opportunity to meet with the Porticus Foundation, one of the most influential private philanthropic organisations funding criminal justice initiatives internationally. Over two days, I engaged in in-depth conversations with Carolina Beghelli, Programme Manager at Porticus Latin America, and was invited to attend an event the Foundation hosted for all the Brazilian projects they currently support. Many of these organisations I had already visited during my Fellowship, including FBAC, Elas Existem, Instituto Igarapé, IDDD, and Instituto Recomeçar, while others I, unfortunately, could not fit into my two-and-a-half-week schedule in Brazil.

Carolina began by introducing me to Porticus' mission, values, and work in Brazil, particularly their strategic focus on criminal justice. Founded in 1995, Porticus was established to professionally coordinate the philanthropic initiatives of the Brenninkmeijer family, whose social engagement legacy dates back to 1841 and whose business origins are tied to the global retail brand C&A. As a philanthropic foundation, Porticus is committed to creating a just and sustainable future where human dignity flourishes.

Porticus' mission focuses on creating system-level change by strengthening community resilience and fostering long-term, impactful solutions. Their approach is grounded in three key principles:

- participatory, by meaningfully involving people with lived experience and co-designing programmes and grants in partnership with them;
- responsive and flexible, by recognising the complexity and unpredictability of social systems and maintaining adaptability through collaborative monitoring and evaluation;
- and continuous learning, by leveraging long-term funding to support innovative initiatives, experimenting with what works, and openly sharing lessons so that others can build on their insights.

As Carolina explained how no single organisation can solve the world's challenges. Therefore, Porticus focuses on four core areas where they hold significant knowledge and experience: education, society, faith, and climate. These domains are adapted contextually to address the most urgent local needs and opportunities. In Brazil (and Latin America more broadly) the criminal justice system is a clear priority due to its potential for deep systemic impact.

On their website, Porticus quotes Nelson Mandela: "No one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails." This powerful framing reflects their belief that prisons are mirrors of society's structural inequalities, particularly regarding race, poverty, and social exclusion. At present, too many prison environments prioritise punishment over rehabilitation, reinforcing cycles of deprivation and multi-generational inequality.

To challenge this, Porticus supports initiatives that promote rehabilitation and reintegration as the norm, not the exception. Their work involves: Advocating for adequate public investment in just and effective criminal justice policies; Amplifying the voices of incarcerated individuals; building evidence-based models of what works; and supporting more humane forms of incarceration that prioritise rehabilitation and dignity. Crucially, Porticus also seeks to shift public attitudes toward those who are or have been imprisoned; changing narratives and fostering empathy are fundamental to long-term reform.

I took the opportunity, while speaking with a leader in global funding for criminal justice alternatives, to ask about the broader financial context of the ecosystem – how this problem also as a societal financial cost but lacks funding. In the UK, approximately £6.85 billion was spent on the prison system in 2023/24, marking an increase from the previous year. [22] Additionally, the country spends an estimated £18.1 billion annually on reoffending alone. [23] Carolina reflected on these figures, explaining that "the reality is most people don't care, [because] they don't see prisons as part of their reality". This detachment, compounded by the fear associated with criminality, makes it difficult for incarceration to become a matter of public concern; ultimately stalling both policy change and meaningful investment in alternatives.

Carolina further noted that measuring the real cost of incarceration without rehabilitation is nearly impossible. Just two years ago, she explained, there was virtually no reliable data available to produce even an approximate estimate. Today, countries like the UK have begun developing projections around the financial cost of systemic failure in criminal justice, but Brazil still lacks such calculations. This data vacuum, especially in relation to how the system disproportionately impacts the most vulnerable, makes it all the more crucial for philanthropic institutions like Porticus to invest in research, data infrastructure, and frameworks. Their goal is to generate the collective knowledge needed to bring visibility to the social issues faced by incarcerated people and to inform effective, evidence-based reform.

During the two-day gathering of criminal justice initiatives funded by Porticus, I was able to witness their work in action. The event brought together a diverse range of organisations working on the reintegration of former offenders and alternative sentencing, offering them a space to connect, exchange insights, and receive tailored support from the Porticus team.

Seated in a circle, I observed as more than ten organisations took the microphone to share their missions and current projects. From formerly incarcerated individuals like Leonardo Precioso, to abolitionist activists like Carol Bispo, to academics such as Cami Nadalini de Godoy and leaders of alternative incarceration facilities like FBAC, each brought a distinct perspective to the discussion. While their approaches and ideologies may differ (a natural result when confronting a problem as complex and structurally rooted as criminal justice in Brazil) what unites them is a shared commitment to reintegration and the reduction of recidivism.

This diversity of thought is not a weakness, but a strength. It creates the conditions for collective intelligence, where varied methodologies, contexts, and lived experiences come together to generate richer insights. Porticus' role in facilitating these encounters helps foster synergy across the ecosystem, enabling data-driven collaboration and scalable social innovation that can truly transform the criminal justice landscape in Brazil.

Ending this journey through Brazil in a room full of community leaders, former offenders, researchers, and justice advocates - each one committed to reimagining reintegration and criminal justice - felt like the perfect closing chapter to this part of my Fellowship. Over two and a half weeks, I met with organisations using radically different yet complementary approaches: from the community-led healing practices of Elas Existem, to the structural policy research of Instituto Igarapé, the strategic litigation and legal mobilisation of IDDD, the transformative methodology of APAC via FBAC, and now, the connective tissue of it all - Porticus. Their convening power brought these players together, not just as grantees but as collaborators, showing how criminal justice reform is not a siloed mission but a collective ecosystem effort. Witnessing these synergies in action reminded me that true social innovation doesn't emerge in isolation; it's built through trust, shared learning, and a commitment to dignity over punishment. Brazil's challenges are deep, but so is its well of creativity and resilience to create social innovation, which allowed me to collect valuable knowledge on the application of community-based solutions in the UK prison system.

Key Takeaways:

1. Strategic funding enables systemic change. Porticus exemplifies how long-term, flexible, and values-driven funding can empower systemic transformation in criminal justice. By supporting grassroots organisations, research initiatives, and advocacy work, funders can not only address immediate needs but also foster long-term structural change which will result in decreasing the financial burden of prisons.
2. Collaboration builds collective intelligence. The network of organisations brought together by Porticus shows the power of working in ecosystem. By connecting diverse actors (from abolitionist activists to academic researchers, alternative sentencing institutions, and formerly incarcerated individuals) Porticus facilitates the co-creation of knowledge, mutual learning, and coordinated action. This plural approach enhances innovation and resilience in tackling complex justice issues.
3. Human-centred, contextual approaches matter. Porticus's guiding principles (participation, responsiveness, and continuous learning) highlight the importance of involving people with lived experience and adapting interventions to local realities. Effective criminal justice reform cannot be imported or imposed; it must be co-designed with communities, allowing for flexible solutions grounded in dignity and justice.

Italy

Throughout my journey across Italy, from the APAC Conference in Bologna to the end-of-year celebration at San Patrignano in Rimini, from Programma 2121 and InGalera in Milan to Bard Prison Project and APG23, and finally Vale la Pena and Bee4, a clear insight emerged: community-based solutions anchored in dignity, purpose, and social connection are essential to meaningful reintegration and reducing recidivism.

Italy's prison population stood at 57,749 as of July 2023, yet the operational capacity of its prisons is approximately 51,285 inmates, with some facilities severely overcrowded - like the prison in Taranto, Puglia, operating at 196.4% capacity. This overcrowding underscores the urgent need for reform and innovative approaches.

A core theme was that reintegration begins inside prison with respect for human dignity, offering meaningful structure and purpose. Programs like Bee4 illustrate how social enterprises within prisons can empower inmates through skill-building and employment. Similarly, InGalera, Milan's Michelin-recommended restaurant inside a jail, provides prisoners with professional culinary and hospitality training, helping them build work ethic and responsibility while engaging with the public in a setting that respects their dignity.

Equally vital is the role of meaningful work as a foundation for reintegration. Initiatives like Bee4 demonstrate how social enterprises can create pathways to employment and financial independence for people with convictions, fostering both personal development and social inclusion through technical training. Programma 2121 with Lendlease highlights how collaboration between corporate entities and the prison system can scale impact, providing opportunities and resources that are crucial to open job placements for incarcerated people. These examples reinforce that access to work, training, and fair employment conditions inside and beyond prison walls is essential for breaking cycles of incarceration.

Education also played a central role - from the university-accredited Bard Prison Project, which brings higher education into prisons and fosters intellectual empowerment, to the hospitality training offered inside InGalera. These programs weren't just about acquiring skills; they were about building self-worth, agency, and community connection. In many ways, Italy's most promising reintegration efforts blur the line between "inside" and "outside," offering bridges rather than walls.

At the community level, initiatives like Vale la Pena demonstrate how social businesses can create opportunities for former offenders to reintegrate through employment and enterprise, strengthening social bonds and challenging stigma. These projects seem small when compared to high scale social initiatives like SanPa and APG23 that house people with convictions, but together they highlight how restorative justice principles and local leadership foster belonging and resilience.

However, the severe overcrowding in many Italian prisons adds complexity to these efforts. It makes clear that systemic issues - such as capacity, resource allocation, and access to consistent programming - must be addressed alongside community initiatives. The insights gathered suggest that successful reintegration relies on cooperation between institutions, social enterprises, educators, and communities to create sustainable pathways.

Ultimately, the Italian experience shows that reintegration is not only about reducing reoffending but about restoring agency and belonging to those impacted by incarceration. It calls for a justice system that values people's potential, both inside prison walls and beyond, emphasising connection, responsibility, and opportunity as the foundation for lasting change.

APAC Bologna Conference

https://www.apg23.org/en/

Starting the Italian leg of my Churchill Fellowship, it felt especially fitting to begin with a conference dedicated to the APAC model - an approach to incarceration I had deeply explored during my time in Brazil. Held in Bologna, this international gathering reflected the growing global momentum behind APAC (Association for the Protection and Assistance of the Convicted) and Italy's emerging role in adapting and localising its principles.

The event marked a significant milestone in APAC's international advocacy, aiming to extend the methodology beyond Latin America and into European criminal justice systems. From the moment I entered the venue, the unmistakable energy of APAC was palpable; an exhibition of striking photographs, statistics, and personal stories lined the entrance to the auditorium, echoing the spirit I had encountered across Brazil. But this time, the narrative was reframed through an Italian lens.

The testimonies shared by a diverse group of speakers - from policymakers to NGO leaders- reaffirmed a message I had heard repeatedly in Brazil: humane, community-based, non-violent approaches to justice are not only effective, but highly adaptable. The APAC model, which integrates values such as personal responsibility, community, and spirituality within the prison context, has now found fertile ground in one of Europe's most bureaucratic and regulation-heavy countries. This alone provides compelling evidence of the model's transferability across vastly different legal and cultural systems.

Italy's engagement with the APAC approach dates back to the early 2000s, when Don Oreste Benzi, inspired by APAC's work in Brazil, established the first family-style homes to welcome and support incarcerated people. These were created through the Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII, the association he had founded in 1968. The conference underscored this historical and philosophical alignment between Brazilian and Italian practices.

What stood out most about the Bologna conference was its dual focus: while honouring APAC's Brazilian roots, it also highlighted Italy's own growing ecosystem of community-based alternatives to incarceration. Italian prison law already provides for alternatives such as detention houses, and the Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII stands as a strong example of how the APAC methodology can be replicated in a European setting. I will be visiting their facilities in Rimini in the coming days to learn more about how the model operates in practice.

This moment offered a meaningful point of reflection. Once thought to be uniquely Brazilian in culture and implementation, the APAC model is proving to have global relevance. It has crossed borders and legal systems, yet it remains true to its essence: rehabilitation rooted in dignity, responsibility, and community. Italy's adaptation of the model shows that even within restrictive and bureaucratic systems, meaningful reform is possible when it is guided by purpose, compassion, and persistence. The APAC Conference in Bologna captured the core motivation of my Fellowship: to explore how community-based models focused on prisoner rehabilitation can be adapted to the UK, helping to reduce reoffending and ease both the social and financial burden on the prison system.

As the first stop in the Italian leg of my fieldwork, this conference also serves as both a symbolic and practical bridge between the Latin American and European phases of my research. It affirms the broader potential for justice innovation when systems and societies are willing to reimagine incarceration through human dignity and second chances.

Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII Association (APG23)

https://www.apg23.org/en/

After the conference in Bologna, I travelled to Rimini, where I visited two extraordinary organisations working on rehabilitation: San Patrignano Community and the Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII. Nestled in the scenic mountains, with the sound of church bells echoing in the background, I arrived at one of the halfway houses run by the Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII Association (APG23).

The Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII is a non-profit association that aims to promote the social inclusion of marginalised and disadvantaged individuals: abandoned children, people with physical and mental disabilities, ex-offenders, former drug users, victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation, and migrants. The Association also works to prevent the root causes of exclusion and poverty. Over the years, it has collaborated with national and international partners including UNICEF, WFP, UNHCR, DCI, Irish Aid, the European Union, and various Italian ministries. While much of its work remains centred in Italy, APG23 is now active in over 25 countries across all continents.

Work with the prison population has been part of the Association's mission since the 1990s. Believing in rehabilitation over punishment, APG23 offers a challenging but supportive educational path within its facilities, grounded not in charity or welfare, but in personal responsibility and recovery. This programme is called CEC APG23: Educating Community with the Prisoners of the Association Community Pope John XXIII, half-way houses for in the end of their sentence.

The days within these facilities are intense and highly structured, filled with meaningful activities. Some individuals have even chosen to return to prison due to the demanding nature of the programme. In 2008, APG23's approach was further refined after encountering Brazil's APAC model (Association for the Protection and Assistance to Convicts), which inspired a framework adapted for the Italian and European context. This initiative has since been trialled in multiple APG23 facilities, not only in Emilia-Romagna, but also Tuscany, Abruzzo, and Piedmont, as well as in two centres in Cameroon, Africa.

It was remarkable to witness an APAC-inspired model operating in Europe. To date, APG23 has welcomed over 4,000 incarcerated individuals. While the recidivism rate in traditional prisons hovers around 70% in Italy, among those who complete the APG23 programme it drops to just 15%. Currently, around 300 prisoners and ex-prisoners are housed free of charge across various APG23 residential facilities. Despite its success, the Association receives no public funding for this work, it survives based on its own revenue, donations, grants and church funds. The cost of hosting each participant is approximately €35 per day, significantly lower than the €140 per day spent by the state on traditional incarceration. [24]

During my visit, I spent much of the day in the property's workshop, being given small tasks by the residents (*recuperando)* and listening to their stories. One resident, while repairing beer taps, explained how most of their time is spent on-site, attending group discussions, working in the garden, or participating in craft workshops. However, there is also contact with the outside world: some residents sell vegetables grown in the garden or volunteer at a local café.

I was struck by how closely the APG23 model mirrors APAC's principles: structured routines, mutual trust, and the delegation of real responsibility to incarcerated individuals. Manual labour is a key element, but the programme also fosters strong community ties. Local residents are encouraged to volunteer, visit halfway houses, and engage with the services and products the programme provides. Some residents are even cleared to volunteer externally, developing social skills and forming bonds that counteract anti-social behaviour and isolation paving the way for their re-entry into society.

There is also a strong internal community among the residents. On the night I stayed, it happened to be one resident's birthday. My roommates gathered in the shared living space for a small celebration - no alcohol, of course. It was a simple, human moment that reflected the dignity and solidarity that underpins the programme.

I was also walked through the three-phase rehabilitation pathway that each *recuperando* follows. In the first phase, individuals are encouraged to focus deeply on personal reflection and transformation. With the guidance of volunteers, they are supported in processing their past experiences (particularly working through feelings of anger) and in discovering and valuing their personal strengths. This phase usually takes place in a first-reception community and lays the psychological and emotional foundation for change.

In the second phase, attention shifts towards vocational training and the development of professional skills. Even at this stage, the educational focus remains strong, ensuring that all activities are part of a broader journey of personal growth and reintegration.

The third and final phase involves the gradual reintroduction of freedom and autonomy. Participants begin to engage with society during the day (typically through work) and return to the facility in the evenings. This staged re-entry allows them to rebuild their lives with support while assuming greater responsibility. The duration of each phase is adapted to the individual, taking into account the nature of the offence and personal characteristics. Those who engage positively with the process can progress and even benefit from sentence reductions. Conversely, serious breaches of the rules can result in regression through the phases or a return to prison.

This structured, gradual increase in autonomy and responsibility offers a model for alternative sentencing that could be scaled nationally. It reflects similar developments across Europe, in some countries where “detention houses” are being trialled. These typically begin with transition houses for former prisoners, followed by halfway detention houses for those in the final stages of their sentence, and eventually detention houses capable of hosting individuals for longer terms. The UK government could adopt a similar strategy: starting with voluntary placements for those who have completed their sentences and then building trust and community engagement before integrating such models into the mainstream justice system.

Using the principles pioneered by APAC and applied by APG23, small pilot programmes could be evaluated and scaled up - allowing prisoners to transition directly from Category D prisons into community-based rehabilitation. With sufficient oversight and community involvement, the UK could develop its own network of halfway houses, following Italy’s example, and offering a more humane, cost-effective, and socially constructive alternative to traditional incarceration.

Key Takeaways:

1. Gradual reintegration through structured responsibility works. The APG23 model offers a phased, supportive path from incarceration to freedom, grounded in personal responsibility, therapeutic engagement, and community involvement. This tiered approach mirrors Brazil's APAC model and provides a clear European example of how trust, discipline, and progressive autonomy can foster true rehabilitation. The programme's impressive reduction in recidivism (from a national average of 70% to just 15%) demonstrates the effectiveness of a structured, community-rooted alternative to prison.
2. Community participation is a cornerstone of sustainable reintegration. APG23's model does not isolate rehabilitation within the walls of its facilities - it invites the surrounding community to be part of the process. Local volunteers work alongside *recuperandos*, neighbours engage with the services and products generated by the programme, and *recuperandos* are encouraged to interact with the public through volunteering and market activities. This mutual relationship breaks down stigma, fosters empathy, and anchors rehabilitation in real-world social bonds, reinforcing desistance from crime.
3. Faith-rooted and civil society models can be the answer to state gaps and demonstrate viable alternatives. Despite not receiving state funding, APG23 has hosted over 4,000 people and currently supports around 300 individuals across Italy. Its €35/day cost per resident is significantly lower than traditional incarceration (€140/day), proving the economic efficiency of alternative models. The model is sustained through solidarity, donations, and committed civic and faith-based leadership. Its success shows how non-state actors can lead innovation in justice reform – with their proof of concept be the basis for national policy adoption.

San Patrignano Community

https://www.sanpatrignano.org/

Continuing my journey through Italy, I visited the San Patrignano Community (SanPa). San Patrignano is a community for life that welcomes those living with drug addiction and marginalisation, including formerly incarcerated individuals, and helps them rediscover their path through a rehabilitation programme that is, above all, rooted in “love” and entirely free.

SanPa offers not only a new start for individuals in recovery but also renewed hope for their families, who find comfort and support through the expert guidance of the community and its dedicated volunteers.

It represents a commitment to building a better society through a range of initiatives aimed at preventing drug abuse. In pursuit of the common good, San Patrignano actively engages with the wider world - through educational outreach in schools, international conferences, wide-reaching prevention programmes - and continuously fights against addiction.

Although not specifically aimed at the reintegration of former offenders, San Patrignano has become a home for many formerly incarcerated individuals who live with addiction. Much like APAC and APG23, it is founded on Christian principles and grounded in discipline, structure, and community; core components of its rehabilitative philosophy. I had the opportunity to visit SanPa on two occasions: first, to attend the San Party their annual community celebration; and later, to tour the facility and interview some of the residents.

The San Party was an extraordinary introduction to the San Patrignano community. The event featured many an aperitivos like breadsticks, cured meats, and other delicacies, alongside elegantly arranged tables of wine. Guests sat at communal tables, engaging in conversation and enjoying live music performed by residents who had learned to play instruments as part of their rehabilitation. The quality was undeniable, both in performance and presentation. It was a warm, vibrant event, with hearty food and a joyful atmosphere that brought the local community together. Public events like the San Party are instrumental in breaking down stigma, as they highlight the capabilities and talents of individuals in recovery.

A few days later, I was given a guided tour by Britney, one of the over 2,000 current residents. What began as a small family-run farm has since expanded into a self-sufficient village: in SanPa, residents can enrol in training courses and work across a variety of trades, such as textiles, woodworking, tiling (all rooted in Circular Economy principles), or in the industrial kitchen and cleaning services. They also participate in agricultural activities, including horticulture, gardening, forestry, and animal farming, along with environmental and wildlife-related projects. At its core, San Patrignano promotes solidarity, welfare, cultural enrichment, training, and educational support through a democratically self-managed structure. Rehabilitation is not profit-driven, but rather carried out through personal commitment and mutual cooperation, voluntarily offered by community members themselves “(art. 2 Statute).” - this means that, unlike APAC, residents in SanPa do not receive payment for their work in the community, being their sales a revenue stream for SanPa to be able to provide the free accommodation and treatment.

Since its inception, more than 26,000 individuals have successfully completed the programme. Its recovery outcomes are widely recognised: San Patrignano reports that nearly 90% of residents are employed upon completion, thanks to its extensive network of partner organisations, and 70% remain sober three years after graduating, according to follow-up research conducted by the University of Bologna. [25] However, it is worth noting that rehab data is often inconsistent. In the UK, drug rehab success rates range from 30% to 70%, depending on the individual's commitment and the effectiveness of the treatment programme. [26]

A typical day at San Patrignano closely mirrors life outside the community. However, for those who have faced severe marginalisation, adapting to the basic norms of daily coexistence can be transformative. It becomes a practical method for learning to live with respect for others.

Each morning, residents wake up at a fixed time and begin the day by making their beds and cleaning their rooms. They then share breakfast in the large communal dining hall before heading to their assigned sector, which also serves as their vocational training area. Whether in workshops, agriculture, or services, residents work alongside one another, gradually learning the responsibilities of a job and gaining practical knowledge in a specific profession. Those who wish to resume their formal education can do so in a dedicated learning centre alongside their work-based training.

Regardless of the sector in which they work, all residents have access to free time and can participate in activities such as sports, drama, music, and dance. In the evenings, they may gather in the auditorium or theatre to watch films and television programmes. Once residents reach the later stages of their rehabilitation, some participate in preventative outreach activities with visiting students or engage in awareness programmes outside the community.

During our conversation, Britney emphasised how crucial the sense of community had been to her recovery. What I witnessed (at both the San Party and during my tour) was a small yet structured society, where individuals are encouraged to reflect deeply on their lives and actively build the person they wish to become. One distinctive feature of SanPa, compared to other programmes I visited, is that it accommodates both men and women. Britney shared how she met her partner during her stay. While men and women live in separate quarters, relationships do occasionally form. SanPa has a formal, closely monitored process for supporting romantic relationships during the rehabilitation journey. This ensures that residents prioritise their personal growth and recovery. Platonic relationships are encouraged, and emotional dependency is minimised to safeguard the rehabilitation process: Britney described being able to spend quality time with her partner - taking walks and imagining their life beyond SanPa.

I also met Loreta, an American Scottish resident who moved to Italy four years ago to work as an English teacher. She had been at SanPa for six months at the time of my visit. She described how difficult it was to integrate into the community without speaking Italian. I was reminded of the diverse nationalities I had encountered at APG23 - mirroring Italy's immigrant incarceration rate of around 30%. [27] Loreta spoke about reaching rock bottom after 13 years of heroin addiction and a subsequent descent into alcoholism, which led to her losing her job, her home, and eventually being reported missing by loved ones. "And I decided to come here. I'm here on my own volition (…) because I could see a pattern in my life of kind of jumping from one addiction to the other (…) obviously there is something missing inside. Something that I need to work in." She explained that her purpose in coming to SanPa was not just to treat her addiction, but to address its deeper emotional roots. The first two months were incredibly challenging, filled with new information, rules, rituals, and people - especially hard when one doesn't speak the language. But over time, she began to see changes in herself: learning to express emotions, confront fears, and make healthier choices.

Much like other Christian-inspired approaches such as APACs and APG23, SanPa instils a sense of responsibility and uses craftsmanship as a key tool for rehabilitation. Since leaving, I keep thinking about the exceptional quality of everything I encountered at SanPa - from the event itself to the products and services residents create - many of which are priced as luxury items to reflect the high level of artisanal work involved.

This combination of excellence in production and a community-centred, supportive ethos illustrates the profound impact SanPa has on its residents' lives. Though its primary focus is drug rehabilitation, it naturally serves as a solution for former offenders. SanPa exemplifies the importance of tailored treatment approaches for vulnerable populations at risk of offending – particularly relevant for the UK, at a time when drug-related crime is on the rise, with 181,421 drug offences recorded in 2023/24, compared to 179,467 the previous year.

San Patrignano stands as a powerful reminder that healing and reintegration are most successful when rooted in dignity, structure, and human connection. While not explicitly designed for former offenders, its deeply embedded culture of mutual responsibility, craftsmanship, and love makes it a natural refuge for many who have experienced incarceration and are now marginalised. The community's high standards (whether in its vocational training, its rehabilitation outcomes, or its celebration of beauty and discipline) demonstrate that people recovering from addiction and marginalisation can thrive when given the chance to contribute meaningfully. SanPa's approach reinforces a crucial lesson for justice reform: that differentiated, holistic treatment models, tailored to the root causes of offending behaviour, can not only reduce reoffending but also help individuals rediscover purpose, resilience, and belonging.

Key Takeaways:

1. Community-based rehabilitation works - even without a formal justice focus. San Patrignano, though not designed specifically for former offenders, provides an effective and scalable model for rehabilitating individuals with histories of incarceration through a long-term, community-led programme rooted in responsibility, routine, and solidarity. Its success illustrates that addressing root causes, like addiction and social marginalisation, can indirectly support reintegration and reduce reoffending.
2. High expectations and dignified work can create transformative impact. SanPa's commitment to artisanal excellence, vocational training, and meaningful labour (from agriculture to craftsmanship) affirms the importance of creating environments where people are trusted with responsibility and held to high standards. This approach not only restores dignity but equips residents with real economic and social capital post-rehabilitation.
3. Human connection is the foundation of change. What sets SanPa apart is its focus on "love" as a method: peer support, strict but compassionate structures, and deep relational investment - rather than punitive oversight. Relationships, routines, and reflection are central tools in helping individuals take ownership of their recovery and transformation.

Programma 2121

https://www.programma2121.org/chi-siamo/

On a particularly rainy day in Milan, I visited the offices of Lendlease to discuss how companies can become active contributors to criminal justice solutions that aim to reduce recidivism. I had the privilege of interviewing Nadia Boschi, Head of Sustainability for Italy & Continental Europe at Lendlease, about their protocol to hire people serving sentences.

Lendlease is an Australian multinational construction and real estate company. One of its key Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) projects in Europe is Programma 2121, an initiative in Italy that offers fairly paid internships to qualifying offenders serving under 'Article 21' of the Italian Penitentiary Law. Through these internships, individuals gain valuable technical and soft skills to support their long-term employability.

Nadia explained that Article 21 of the Italian Penitentiary Act permits prisoners to work outside prison for public or private organisations. This law forms part of a broader strategy to promote social reintegration through employment and activities beyond prison walls, echoing the open-regime model I encountered in Brazil. Within this framework, Lendlease's Programma 2121 enables prisoners to work in the construction sector during daytime hours, receive a wage, build professional experience, and secure employment opportunities upon release.

Having worked with Lendlease for the past 14 years, Nadia plays a pivotal role in embedding the company's ESG strategy across Europe, closely aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Lendlease has distinguished itself by transforming operations to meet ESG performance indicators, supported by comprehensive sustainability and CSR reporting.

Programma 2121 is a collaborative initiative spearheaded by the Italian Ministry of Justice - Department of Penitentiary Administration. Lendlease acts as promoter and strategic catalyst, alongside partners such as the Regional Superintendency of the Penitentiary Administration of Lombardy, Lombardy Region, AREXPO, ANPAL, the Metropolitan City of Milan, PlusValue, Fondazione Triulza, Milano Santa Giulia, and Fondazione Fits!. This coalition signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2018 to pursue a shared goal: to support prisoner reintegration through fairly paid work placements in unprotected environments.

In the UK, there are comparable legislative and project-based efforts to assist offenders in securing employment, particularly in construction. For example, the New Futures Network (NFN), a specialist unit within His Majesty's Prison and Probation service, facilitates partnerships between prisons and employers. NFN helps organisations find suitable candidates and connects them with businesses already engaged in prison employment schemes. Additionally, companies such as Balfour Beatty, Sunbelt Rentals, Wates, Kier and Galliford Try demonstrate how CSR strategy can align with social impact in the criminal justice system.

These initiatives help businesses tap into a pool of approximately 50,000 people released from prison annually, many of whom possess diverse skills and professional backgrounds. Companies benefit from reduced recruitment costs and increased staff retention through the loyalty fostered by second-chance employment.

But most of these examples work solely with people that are no longer serving a sentence. While UK law does provide for employing incarcerated individuals, the number eligible for Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) remains small, and even eligible individuals may lack local job placements.

Programma 2121, the most institutionally anchored initiative I visited during my entire Fellowship, shows that companies can meaningfully collaborate with the criminal justice sector if public policy allows it. Lendlease's involvement exemplifies a dual impact: offering employment to prisoners and serving as a beacon for other businesses.

As a board member of the Institute for Social Value, which advocates for value beyond profit, I was particularly struck by Nadia's use of reintegration laws to address both a labour shortage in the construction industry and the social need to provide employment opportunities for incarcerated individuals. Implementing Programma 2121 required significant commitment and time. Although work release (Lavoro all'esterno) under Article 21 can be granted by a judge, it also depends on the willingness of prison administrators to permit inmates to participate. In these cases, the Probation Service may monitor compliance and ensure that rights and dignity are upheld. Nadia shared that it took two years to establish the Memorandum of Understanding, now renewed until 2026, which enabled the programme to operate effectively.

Nadia also highlighted that in Italy, prisoners accrue a debt during incarceration to cover daily "accommodation" costs. Given the strong correlation between economic vulnerability and reoffending, the burden of debt on release makes immediate employment a near necessity. With employment being one of the most significant factors in reducing recidivism, Programma 2121 helps break the cycle of criminality and contributes to a safer, more equitable society.

This visit demonstrated a clear path for public policy to support prisoner reintegration into the labour market, with profound social and economic implications. When considering investments in effective criminal justice policies, employers must be part of the equation.

Recognising and incentivising businesses that hire individuals with criminal records - through procurement advantages, tax deductions, or start-up grants - is a policy direction worth pursuing. Crucially, such incentives should not be restricted to prison leavers but extended to all individuals with convictions. Ultimately, Programma 2121 offers a compelling example of how a shared commitment to social value through employment can reshape both individual lives and systemic outcomes.

Key Takeaways:

1. The crucial role of private sector in reintegration. Programma 2121 demonstrates how private companies, like Lendlease, can play a transformative role in social reintegration through employment. By navigating legal frameworks (e.g., Article 21 of Italy's Penitentiary Act) and investing in long-term partnerships, the private sector can offer paid, skilled internships to incarcerated individuals, directly reducing recidivism while addressing industry needs like labour shortages.
2. The importance of cross-sector collaboration and long-term commitment. The programme was only possible through a formal multi-stakeholder partnership between government bodies, local authorities, NGOs, and the private sector. Its two-year development process and protocol renewal until 2026 highlight the importance of institutional commitment, trust-building, and persistence when creating pathways for prison-to-work transitions.

3. Incentivising employers to hire incarcerated people through clear and beneficial policies. The UK could draw from Programma 2121 by creating clearer pathways for employer engagement. Incentives such as tax breaks or recognition in procurement processes could increase uptake. This reinforces the idea that employment isn't just a post-release intervention, but a key component of criminal justice reform and economic reintegration.

Bard Prison Project – University of Milan

https://www.unimi.it/en/education/studying-prison

My second stop in Milan, where an increasing number of locals are voicing concern over the city's rising crime rates and growing visibility of criminal activity, was at the University of Milan. Many residents expressed that they no longer feel safe going out at night, particularly in the city centre.

Milan has once again topped the list as the most crime-affected province in Italy (often referred to as the country's "crime capital") according to Il Sole 24 Ore's 2024 Crime Index. It has consistently held this position in recent years, but recorded offences have been rising. The index notes that over 7,000 crimes are reported for every 100,000 inhabitants. Milan currently ranks third in Italy for sexual violence and fifth for drug-related offences. [28] Despite this backdrop, it was in Milan that I encountered one of the most promising examples of how community-based solutions for incarcerated individuals can create a profound societal impact - beyond the long-term goal of reducing reoffending.

During my visit to the University of Milan (*Università degli Studi di Milano* - UniMi), a prominent public research university and one of Europe's largest, with approximately 60,000 students and 2,000 academic staff, I had learned of UniMi's pioneering commitment to ensuring incarcerated individuals can access higher education and improve their quality of life through structured learning and cultural programmes.

Thanks to an agreement with the Regional Procurement Office for the Department of Corrections (PRAP) people detained in correctional facilities within the region can now enrol in university courses with subsidised tuition, attend seminars onsite, receive tailored tutoring, access the university's library services, and sit examinations for academic credit, even if unable to secure day-release permits.

Amid these multiple initiatives, my visit was focused on a particularly innovative programme: the Bard Prison Project. The project involves incarcerated individuals in the final stages of their sentence (akin to Brazil's open-regime) who are specially trained to act as tutors for students - mainly those from families who cannot afford private tuition. I had the opportunity to speak with Professor Elena Landone, coordinator of the Bard Prison Project at UniMi and her team.

Elena began by outlining the initiative: a collaborative effort between UniMi and the Bollate Prison, integrated into a broader international network of practice. Supported by the Open Society University Network (OSUN) and the Incarceration Nations Network (INN), the project is inspired by the US-based Bard Prison Initiative, which has offered higher education opportunities in American prisons since 1991.

In 2022, a free tutoring programme was launched in Milan by a group of incarcerated university students, aimed at supporting high school and university students who need academic assistance in either the humanities or sciences. These detainees, now trained tutors, work collaboratively with non-incarcerated students on the UniMi campus. They are active university students themselves who have undergone teacher training and are central to a cultural and social mission that enshrines the right to education within the University's broader "Prison Project", developed under its agreement with the regional prison authority.

She highlighted the profound local impact of this initiative. Many students (particularly those with learning disabilities such as dyslexia) rely on paid tutoring, which can be prohibitively expensive. The Bard Prison Project allows parents or students in Milan to contact the university and request free tutoring provided by incarcerated tutors studying at UniMi. This not only increases access to education for underprivileged students but also challenges societal stigma, helping to normalise relationships between incarcerated individuals and the wider community. In this sense, the tutors are not only rehabilitating but also actively contributing to crime prevention, given the well-established links between educational exclusion, low income, and increased risk of offending.

The project is pedagogically robust. Each tutoring session involves a third participant - a non-incarcerated university student studying education - who joins remotely as an observer. This is not for security oversight but is designed entirely for research and developmental feedback. The observers, currently a cohort of 10 students, later provide constructive suggestions to help the tutor improve their techniques - such as alternative ways to explain a concept. I was struck by the depth of layered learning: incarcerated individuals receive training and experience while tutoring; students in education gain invaluable field practice; and young learners receive personalised support. In a significant development, some of the current tutor trainers are themselves formerly incarcerated individuals who previously participated in the project.

While these incarcerated tutors do not receive a formal teaching qualification, the academic and personal outcomes are nonetheless remarkable. Students who receive this free tutoring often achieve noticeably improved exam scores. As Elena Landone put it: “That is the point. (…) It’s quite successful (…) [because] They get in a very good relationship because they are not teachers. They are a human being with a deep living experience (…)” This testimony speaks volumes about how students learn not just course content but also the human value of education, and the dignity of learning from lived experience.

Having a major academic institution as the lead partner in a prison-based programme represents a distinct community methodology I had not encountered elsewhere. Its benefits are clear. In Lombardy (the region encompassing Milan) almost 90% of incarcerated individuals had not completed high school or vocational training in 2021. [29] This points to enormous potential if other institutions follow suit. Within UniMi alone, the growth has been exponential: in six years, the number of incarcerated students rose from 5 to 130, detained across six facilities: Opera, Bollate (male and female), Milan-San Vittore, Monza, Pavia-Torre del Gallo, and Vigevano. Currently, 111 students are enrolled in undergraduate programmes and 19 in postgraduate or single-cycle degrees, spanning 34 different degree programmes and all 10 faculties. Roughly 20% are foreign nationals, 17% are in High Security units, and 8% are part of Alternative to Detention (ATD) programmes. Five individuals are even under Italy’s strict “41bis” regime (maximum security). Last year, around 80 incarcerated individuals participated in educational activities under this initiative.

This model also demonstrates the immense value of robust impact evaluation in justice reform programmes - something increasingly recognised in Brazil, for instance, by institutions such as the Igarapé Institute and researchers like Marcos Melo. By involving academic stakeholders in the delivery, research, and ongoing assessment of initiatives, we can generate evidence-based practices that allow for scale, replication, and continual improvement.

Save for one specialist leading organisation by the name of DWRM, in the UK, the role of academia in prisons often remains limited to classroom-based teaching or research observation. By contrast, the University of Milan has gone much further, demonstrating how educational institutions can create meaningful pedagogical ecosystems within the justice system - linking mentorship, rehabilitation, tutoring, and research into a unified, systemic model of social innovation.

The Bard Prison Project is a compelling example of what community rehabilitation can look like when rooted in education and mutual aid. By supporting incarcerated individuals to serve as mentors and contributors to society, it helps break down barriers and foster long-term desistance from crime. That it was inspired by a programme in the US and successfully localised in Italy shows just how relevant international learning is to my Fellowship's mission: we can and should draw from global models of criminal justice reform and adapt them to our own contexts to achieve meaningful, scalable change.

Key Takeaways:

1. Education as a tool for social reintegration and crime prevention. The Bard Prison Project at UniMi demonstrates how higher education in prisons can directly contribute to both rehabilitation and crime prevention. Incarcerated individuals not only pursue university degrees but also serve as volunteer tutors for underprivileged students in the community, including those with learning difficulties. This model actively challenges stigma and strengthens the social contract between incarcerated people and their communities.
2. Multi-layered, reciprocal learning creates systemic impact. Incarcerated individuals are not only supported in pursuing university degrees, but also trained to become tutors for underprivileged students, offering free academic support in subjects where paid tutoring would otherwise be inaccessible. At the same time, education students from the University of Milan observe these tutoring sessions and provide feedback, gaining valuable real-world pedagogical experience. This triangular model (where incarcerated people, local students, and university trainees all contribute and benefit) transforms prison education into a space of shared growth, pedagogical innovation, and meaningful social engagement.
3. The role of universities in justice reform must go beyond observation. UniMi's partnership with the Regional Procurement Office for the Department of Corrections shows how academic institutions can move beyond passive research roles to become active co-creators of justice reform, blending education, research, and service delivery. With measurable academic outcomes, growing student numbers, and data-backed methodologies, the programme offers a replicable model for universities elsewhere to adopt, adapt, and expand.

Bee4

https://bee4.org/

From a project focused on academic education, I shifted to one of the leading examples of professional technical training in prisons: Bee4. Bee4 is a social enterprise operating inside the Bollate and Vigevano prisons in Italy, committed to building a more just and inclusive society by reshaping the meaning of incarceration. Its vision is to show that punishment can be reimagined by recognising individual potential, offering incarcerated people genuine opportunities for personal and professional growth. Redemption, in this view, does not mean erasing past mistakes, but enabling people in prison to start over - motivated by dignity, responsibility, and hope for the future.

I met with Daniela, head of social planning, who gave me a comprehensive overview of their mission and how Bee4 operates as both a social impact initiative and a business. Their slogan, “Altre Menti” (Other Minds) encapsulates their ethos: that people with lived experience can become highly trained, skilled professionals. With the right support and development, they can be productive members of society delivering quality work.

Bee4’s mission is organised into four key areas of action.

First, they promote reintegration through work, offering vocational training and real employment within the prison setting. This provides inmates with the opportunity to develop new competencies while actively contributing to their own rehabilitation.

Second, Bee4 builds corporate partnerships, delivering high-quality services to private companies and, in doing so, encouraging a broader culture of inclusion and social responsibility in the business world.

Third, the organisation focuses on improving prison environments, fostering better relationships between inmates and staff, enhancing physical workspaces, and enabling inmates to make financial contributions to their own upkeep and any reparative obligations.

Finally, Bee4 aims to create societal change, actively working to reduce recidivism, strengthen public safety, and challenge the stigma surrounding incarceration through education, outreach, and civic engagement.

I also met with Marta who is part of the team responsible for selecting incarcerated individuals to become Bee4 employees. The selection process is rigorous: candidates must demonstrate good behaviour, have useful experience (even if informal), a strong motivation to learn, and a willingness to commit to Bee4's high standards of training and work intensity.

Once selected, participants undergo general induction training, followed by a month and a half of daily technical training. They attend regular team meetings and individual check-ins with Marta and other Bee4 team leaders, where they can discuss their progress, challenges, and emotional wellbeing. This ongoing feedback loop not only helps detained employees improve but also supports the evolution of Bee4's own processes and methodology.

As such, Bee4 fosters a community based on mutual trust and shared responsibility, where change is cultivated through employment, mentorship, and solidarity. Their core belief is that only by achieving meaningful resocialisation can we reduce recidivism and build a safer society for all. For me, Bee4 stands out as a model of how structured, purposeful employment in partnership with society can transform prison time into a path of renewal. I had previously seen the importance of training and employment in Brazil, and again at APG23 and SanPa. But Bee4 impressed me with the level of specialisation and technical skills involved - moving far beyond traditional prison labour like woodworking or packaging.

At Bollate prison, located just 10 km from central Milan, I visited Bee4's Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) Call Centre. This is a unique operation that combines the excellence of BPO services with a strong social mission. Operating within the prison, Bee4 offers comprehensive BPO solutions across a wide range of services: from handling inbound and outbound calls to providing back-office support, customer care, and technical help desk services. It serves clients primarily in the telecommunications and utilities sectors, ensuring high-quality and professional customer service. The incarcerated operators are trained to manage requests, troubleshoot problems, and meet performance targets with the same standards expected from any external commercial provider. Bee4's approach to service is founded on transparency, commitment, and procedural rigour, always with the aim of enhancing the customer experience, ensuring business continuity, and adapting flexibly to client needs.

In addition to its call centre operations, Bee4 also runs several other lines of business, including maintenance of vending and coffee machines, labelling and packaging, as well as quality control and assembly. While these are more commonly found in prison-based work models, Bee4 executes them with greater scale and professionalism, setting itself apart in terms of quality and structure - and competing with non-social businesses in the sector.

During my visit, I spoke with a prisoner from England, a trained network engineer, who shared his story. After undergoing Bee4's training, he initially worked in coffee machine maintenance and later on an assembly line. Determined to reconnect with his previous profession, he requested to move into a role that aligned with his engineering background.

Although his UK degree was not recognised in Italy, and his limited Italian initially restricted him from joining the call centre, Bee4 supported him by offering language classes and acknowledging his qualifications and experience. He now works providing network support to corporate clients of a well-known global telephone provider, handling complex tasks such as creating and managing private and public networks essential for business operations.

His journey is not unique. Bee4's model as a social B2B enterprise has grown substantially. The organisation now works with more than 40 business partners and has activated over 530 employment contracts since its inception. In 2023 alone, they delivered 1,513 hours of training, generated €3 million in revenue, and reached 180 employees by 2024. [30] These figures illustrate both the scale and sustainability of their approach.

This project reinforced a belief I hold strongly: that bringing employers closer to the prison system is crucial, but it can only succeed with the cooperation and commitment of the prison system itself. Bee4's success depends on the flexibility and support of the Bollate Prison, which allows inmates the freedom to follow structured working hours comparable to those in the outside world. For example, managing a call centre requires round-the-clock shifts and high performance. Bollate's security and administrative systems are built to accommodate this, ensuring safety while enabling a realistic working environment.

In contrast, the UK is investing heavily in expanding prison capacity - around £2.3 billion for 20,000 additional places by 2031 [31] - yet many existing prisons still lack the operational flexibility to allow incarcerated individuals to consistently attend work or training. Bee4 proves that even with the challenge of overcoming social biases, a competitive and profitable social business model is possible within the prison system, when state ruled security processes follow. By prioritising meaningful employment and ensuring that companies have reliable access to trained talent, the UK could follow the example of Bollate and Vigevano, using business as a tool for rehabilitation and systemic improvement.

The theme of employment and professional retraining for justice-involved individuals has long been a cornerstone of rehabilitative justice. Years of experience show that real transformation requires more than passive detention - it requires active opportunity. Employment during incarceration not only helps structure daily life but also enables the acquisition of new values, healthy relationships, and the ability to make informed life decisions. It becomes a source of income, dignity, and long-term stability for both the individual and their family.

In essence, work is one of the most effective tools to align incarceration with rehabilitation, lowering reoffending rates, alleviating overcrowding, and building a safer and more just society. The British employee I spoke to captured it best: "Bee4 is a new start for all of us." Now, even as he awaits return to the UK to reunite with his family and meet his newborn granddaughter, he is already able to support them financially and accumulate work experience – giving him a real chance at reintegration and independence.

Ultimately, Bee4 presents a replicable methodology for bridging the gap between society and prisons by embedding private companies within the prison system. It does so not through charity, but through a model that delivers professional services, trains skilled workers, and proves that collaboration between businesses and correctional institutions can yield tangible social and economic returns. By placing employment at the heart of rehabilitation and encouraging the private sector to participate directly in this process, Bee4 reduces recidivism and transforms prisons into spaces of opportunity rather than stagnation. It shows that meaningful reintegration is not only possible - it is economically and socially viable when society chooses to engage, invest, and believe in second chances.

Key Takeaways:

1. Meaningful employment is a pathway to reintegration. Bee4 demonstrates that structured, high-standard employment and technical training within prisons can be a powerful tool for rehabilitation. By offering meaningful work, skill-building, and income opportunities during incarceration, the project reduces recidivism and supports long-term reintegration into society.
2. Strong partnerships between prisons and businesses can create impact. The success of Bee4 relies on close collaboration between the prison system and private companies. Prisons like Bollate provide the flexibility and security needed for detained employees to follow professional schedules, while businesses receive quality services. This mutually beneficial relationship creates a bridge between incarcerated individuals and the wider economy.
3. Breaking stigma through professional excellence. By delivering competitive services (especially in sectors like tech support), Bee4 breaks the stereotype of prison labour as low-skilled. It shows that with proper training and support, incarcerated people can meet industry standards, challenging stigma and reshaping public and corporate perceptions about justice-involved individuals.

InGalera

https://www.ingalera.it/

My final stop in Milan led me to a place that quietly yet powerfully encapsulates the potential of rehabilitation through food: InGalera, a Michelin-recommended restaurant located inside the Bollate prison. Unlike previous visits, I didn't get a chance to speak with any of the organisers or staff directly, they were understandably busy. But even as a member of the public, I was able to enter freely, book a table, and enjoy a meal - an experience that speaks volumes in itself.

InGalera is the first and only Italian restaurant located inside a prison that is open to the public for both lunch and dinner. The restaurant is staffed by inmates, who work under the guidance of professional chefs and maître d's. They are trained in both the culinary arts and the disciplines of front-of-house service. Beyond its fine dining credentials, the initiative serves a deeper purpose: helping incarcerated individuals rediscover a work ethic, gain professional training, and prepare for reintegration into the workforce and society. Students from the in-prison section of the Paolo Frisi Hotel School complete mandatory training here, working towards hospitality qualifications.

The concept is strong, and I've seen similar models in the UK - especially through The Clink Restaurants, restaurants inside prisons that are run by a charity as a reintegration social business model. InGalera's execution, however, offered a few contrasts that sparked new reflections for me on how we could evolve prison-based hospitality ventures at home.

Two features stood out immediately: first, InGalera serves alcohol. That's a significant cultural difference from the UK, where serving alcohol within prison environments remains prohibited. Second, the use of proper metal cutlery, elegant glassware, and crisp table linens created a dining experience that was almost indistinguishable from any other fine restaurant. In contrast, UK custody-based prison restaurants still rely on plastic cutlery, likely due to continued safety concerns. These subtle yet symbolic decisions reflect varying levels of institutional trust and signal how that trust might be nurtured and earned through well-run, high-standard programs.

The service was exceptional, and perhaps more importantly, the restaurant didn't make the story of its staff a spectacle. There was no overt messaging about rehabilitation, no storytelling on the menu or through the service. Diners weren't asked to identify or reflect on the status of those serving them. You come for a good meal. That's it. And there's something powerful in that normalisation - recognising quality and professionalism without pity or performance. It suggests that dignity is preserved both for the diner and for the staff and makes it more aligned to what hospitality businesses are like in the outside.

The restaurant is located on the outskirts of Milan, which makes accessibility a bit more difficult. That's not dissimilar to prison restaurants in the UK, which are also out of the way. Importantly, no special security protocols are needed to enter, creating a seamless experience for guests that reinforces the restaurant's professional standing.

Reflecting on this visit, I came away with a renewed sense of what's possible. My recommendations for the UK system as much as for anyone hoping to champion or scale these efforts, begin with a call to improve the overall accessibility of a truly fine-dining hospitality experience. Let's rethink the rules around serving alcohol in carefully managed environments. Let's upgrade the service standards: the cutlery, the use of personal technology, the ambience. Let's make these dining rooms feel like real restaurants, because they are.

Beyond the aesthetics, there's huge potential in leveraging these restaurants as a touchpoint for decision-makers, funders, and employers. We could build immersive packages: a guided visit to the prison, some educational insight into rehabilitation and training, followed by a high-quality meal that reframes perceptions of who prisoners are and what they're capable of achieving. Making it easy to book, to visit, and to be moved by the experience is crucial. Accessibility matters, not just in terms of the physical location and transport links, but also in how we present these ventures to the public.

The UK already hosts prison restaurants like Italy which provides a strong foundation for a scalable model of employment and community-based reintegration. But if we truly want to change perceptions and open up meaningful employment pathways, we need to see more restaurants within our prison system open to the public. As seen in projects like SanPa, Bee4, and InGalera, it's not just about offering work - it's about reimagining the design, delivery, quality and dignity of these spaces. Dining in a prison shouldn't be treated as a novelty. It should be a sought-after experience, valued for the quality of the food, the professionalism of the service, and the human potential it reveals behind every plate.

Key Takeaways:

1. Elevating trust and quality can redefine perceptions of prison work. InGalera demonstrates that when prisoners are entrusted with high-quality service delivery (using real cutlery, serving alcohol, and operating in a fine-dining setting), the public perception of their capabilities shifts. Creating environments that mirror professional standards outside prison reinforces dignity, builds confidence, and challenges societal assumptions about those with convictions.
2. Seamless public access builds social integration. The ease with which the public can book a table and dine at InGalera - without security protocols or overt messaging about rehabilitation - normalises prisoner-led initiatives. This accessible, "just a restaurant" model helps integrate prisons into the community, making engagement more natural and less stigmatised.
3. Prison Restaurants need strategic investment in experience and accessibility. The UK already has prison-based restaurants, but to match InGalera’s impact, they need improvement in areas like the liberty of the guests and narrative design. Introducing experiential packages for employers, philanthropists, and decision-makers, combined with better transport links and booking simplicity, could position these restaurants as powerful tools for employment, education, and public perception change.

Vale la Pena

https://economiacarceraria.com/valelapena/

After visiting Rimini and Milan, I ended my Italian fieldwork in Rome, specifically, in a pub – but not just any pub. Vale La Pena ("It's Worth It") is the first physical shopfront of Economia Carceraria ("Incarcerated Economy"), a project dedicated to distributing a range of high-quality goods produced inside Italian prisons and that hires former incarcerated people. At first glance, it looks like a regular neighbourhood bar. But on closer inspection, almost everything that is being served and sold - from the pasta to the beer - is made by prisoners. It's not just a retail model; it's a message. A statement about dignity, potential, and reintegration.

Vale La Pena and their supply chain employs former offenders and serves as a platform to promote the work of incarcerated people, connecting society to prisons through something we all understand - food. The experience here was powerful, and in many ways, symbolic. It offered a real-world glimpse of what happens when communities embrace rehabilitation not through policy reports, but through everyday experiences like having a pint or buying a bag of pasta.

During my visit, I had the chance to speak with three individuals deeply connected to the project. First, I met Professor Giordano who has spent years researching Italy's criminal justice system and the role of social enterprises within it. His passion for social impact was clear, and he was deeply convinced that social enterprise is not a fringe solution, but a central pathway toward sustainable justice reform. He saw prison labour not as exploitation, but as empowerment - when done ethically, with pay, purpose, and public support. Our conversation led to an invitation to Italy's Parliament, where stakeholders were actively discussing how to expand social value across the justice system, particularly through employment of prison leavers. For me, this was a tangible sign of policy, research, and practice working hand in hand.

Next, I met one of the organisers behind Vale La Pena. He spoke about the journey of setting up the pub, the belief system behind it, and how they decided to focus on selling prisoner-made goods as a way of connecting with the public. While the bar hires people with lived experience, it does not currently recruit people who are still serving sentences or out on day release. It wasn't a matter of resistance, more a matter of priorities and the time-consuming process of hiring people still serving sentence (as I witnessed with Lendlease): But they seemed to be hiring the best staff for the job, using recruitment as a rehabilitative tool for former incarcerated people also. Nonetheless, the model works. Locals come regularly, and the project is slowly gaining attention. But with more visibility and strategic hiring, I believe it could become a benchmark for prison-linked businesses in Europe.

The third person I met was a pasta maker, one of Vale La Pena's most consistent suppliers. He runs a production line inside prisons, where inmates make beautiful, artisanal pasta. It's high-quality, well-packaged, and distributed across Italy. It was clear that, yet again, food was acting as a bridge between the inside and the outside. People might not be ready to hire a former prisoner straight away, but they'll buy their pasta. And maybe, just maybe, that builds the first layer of trust.

I've long believed in the role of enterprise, particularly in the 'business to consumer' economy, and employment in justice reform. Years ago, I set up a UK-based initiative that would bring together prison-made products into a single marketplace called 'inmade'. We sourced soap from a prison in the south of England, honey from a facility in the northeast, wine from a Portuguese prison. The idea was to bundle these into gift hampers that would tell a story of transformation and second chances. But it proved extremely difficult. In the UK, supply chains within prisons are unpredictable. Production is often disrupted by staffing issues, changes in prison leadership, or shifting priorities. Without consistency, building a viable social enterprise becomes nearly impossible.

Despite these challenges, I left Vale La Pena convinced that similar models could work in the UK, especially in major cities where ethical consumption and social value are already part of public discourse. A bar or café that not only sells prisoner-made products but employs prison-leavers or those on ROTL (Release on Temporary Licence) would offer an innovative and humanising space for reintegration. While I don't believe it's the government's role to run such enterprises, I do think public policy could do more to support them; through procurement incentives, National Insurance breaks, or social value scoring in tenders.

Ending the Italian leg of my Fellowship here felt right. Sitting in a pub, enjoying a perfectly poured pint by someone on their own rehabilitative journey, I was reminded that reintegration doesn't always require grand systems change. Sometimes it just needs a table, a conversation, and a willingness to see people for what they can become - not just what they've done. Vale La Pena is not just a clever name; it's a call to action. And for me, a pint worth raising.

Key Takeaways:

1. Food as a powerful connector between prison and community. Vale La Pena demonstrates how food and everyday consumer experiences can serve as an accessible bridge between incarcerated individuals and the broader public. Selling high-quality prison-made products humanises those inside and challenges stigma, offering a subtle but impactful entry point for public engagement with criminal justice reform.
2. The potential of social enterprise in reintegration. The project shows how social enterprises can be practical, scalable tools for rehabilitation. By embedding employment and production inside prison settings (and distributing those goods externally) Economia Carceraria and in particular Vale la Pena, creates a real economic and social reintegration model.
3. Enabling the growth of retailing prison-made products. For retailers to successfully market prison-made products, there must be a stronger policy focus on improving the logistical and operational frameworks that support in-prison production. This includes simplifying processes for bringing materials into prisons, standardising protocols for production, and ensuring smoother pathways for goods to exit the prison and reach the market. Clearer, more consistent systems would allow for stable supply chains and commercial viability, enabling prison-made products to contribute meaningfully to rehabilitation and social value.

Conclusion

I set out to explore how prisons can meaningfully involve incarcerated people and their communities in the daily life of institutions - to improve rehabilitation outcomes, reduce reoffending, and help create safer, more inclusive societies, especially in contexts of austerity. Through visits to more than 20 organisations across Brazil and Italy, my Churchill Fellowship journey revealed not only a wide range of innovation in criminal justice, but a consistent insight: reintegration that lasts must begin with dignity, agency, and community.

Among the most globally recognised and impactful models encountered was the APAC methodology, developed in Brazil and now replicated in several Latin American countries and adapted in Italy by organisations such as APG23. The APAC model replaces control with trust, punishment with purpose. It shows that small-scale, community-rooted, and differentiated detention (what we might call detention houses) can significantly reduce recidivism, lower costs, and support long-term reintegration. This is not just an alternative to prison. It is a reimagining of justice itself.

San Patrignano stood out for its pioneering, long-term approach to addiction recovery. In countries where drug misuse is a leading driver of incarceration (such as the UK), SanPa reminded us that true rehabilitation must be tailored to people's specific needs, including trauma, dependency, and exclusion. Incarceration cannot be one-size-fits-all. Detention systems must recognise the complex, human roots of offending and design responses accordingly.

One of the most powerful aspects of my Fellowship was the opportunity to listen directly to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. Their concerns were strikingly consistent - from Natasha in Brazil, who described the stigma of criminal records in job hunting, to Maicol, Rinaldo, and Birra now working in reintegration through the FBAC network. Their stories make it clear: employment after prison is not a luxury - it's a necessity for breaking the cycle. My work in Offploy in the UK and then more local solutions like Vale la Pena in Italy demonstrate that hiring people with convictions is not only possible - it reduces reoffending, strengthens communities, and should become standard practice.

But reintegration should start before release. In Milan, Bee4 showed what's possible when incarcerated people are given responsibility and trust; hiring inmates to deliver high-quality outsourcing services such as call centre operations, product repairs, and assembly work. This model transforms incarceration into an opportunity for skill-building, income generation, and meaningful contribution to the economy. It reframes incarcerated labour as an asset, not a cost.

A different yet equally powerful example is InGalera, a fully functioning gourmet restaurant located inside the Bollate prison. Here, incarcerated individuals are employed as chefs, waiters, and kitchen staff, serving members of the public in a real-world setting. The project not only provides professional training in hospitality and customer service, but also breaks down stigma by fostering direct interaction between incarcerated people and the broader community. InGalera demonstrates that rehabilitation can be creative, dignified, and commercially viable - bridging the inside and outside world in ways that restore trust and possibility.

Separately, the construction company Lendlease with its partnership with the Italian Ministry of Justice - Department of Penitentiary Administration created Programma 2121, offering internships and mentoring to incarcerated individuals on real construction sites. Both Bee4 and Lendlease represent a shift: businesses can be critical actors in rehabilitation when they move from exclusion to inclusion - before and after release.

Education also emerged as a cornerstone of long-term change. In Milan, the Bard Prison Project, inspired by a U.S.-based model, provides incarcerated individuals with access to higher education. But it goes further with students inside prison also tutoring high schoolers from outside, flipping the narrative and reinforcing the value of learning, leadership, and contribution. Education, rooted in trust and ambition, unlocks more than academic progress. It unlocks self-worth and civic identity.

In Brazil, a different but complementary approach came from grassroots organisations like Elas Existem and IDMJ. Though they don't run prisons, these abolitionist, feminist, and racial justice collectives are reshaping rehabilitation from the ground up. They expose how incarceration in Brazil and represented across much of the world is entangled with state violence, racism, and poverty; and respond by building networks of support, advocacy, and survival for marginalised communities. Their work reminds us that real reform cannot stop at the prison gate. Reintegration also means rebuilding trust, belonging, and opportunity in society.

Across both countries, the importance of robust data, policy engagement, and ecosystem support was clear. Organisations like the Igarapé Institute and IDDD in Brazil are demonstrating how evidence-based advocacy and impact measurement can support smarter, fairer justice systems. Likewise, the Porticus Foundation plays a critical role in scaling innovation through initiatives like the Rescaled Movement, which promotes the detention house model across Europe (including in Portugal, Spain, Finland, Kosovo, and Norway).

This global momentum should inspire a serious rethinking in the UK. As the government plans to invest over £2 billion in new prisons, now is the time to consider alternatives. Piloting smaller, purpose-driven solutions - like exit-focused homes inspired by SanPa, or adapted APAC-style detention houses - offers a strategic and humane path forward.

Integrating enterprise models like Bee4 or embedding educational partnerships like Bard's into mainstream prisons could be a first step. These aren't fringe ideas. They're evidence-backed, cost-effective, and already delivering results.

Ultimately, my research revealed that the most transformative justice systems are those that value people above buildings. From micro-reforms to structural overhauls, every successful initiative shared a common thread: trust in human potential. Those who have offended are not the sum of their worst moments. They are parents, workers, neighbours, and leaders in waiting. They must have a voice in their rehabilitation and a stake in their future.

A safer and more just society is not one that simply manages the consequences of crime, but one that addresses its causes. Housing, healthcare, employment, education, and connection are not luxuries but building blocks of public safety. Prisons should stop being warehouses of exclusion, as Marcos Melo talked about, and start becoming spaces of preparation and possibility. If the UK is to truly reduce reoffending, improve community wellbeing, and use public money more wisely, it must invest in justice models that prioritise people and purpose. The lessons from Brazil and Italy offer not just inspiration, but a roadmap to a safer society for us all.

Recommendations to the UK Government

Combining all of my recommendations from each project visit into key themes and cross referencing the Independent Sentencing Review authored by David Gauke, I suggest the following 10 recommendations to the UK Government and the Ministry of Justice in order to tackle the prison and reoffending crisis we are facing as a country.

1. Embed Lived Experience at Every Level of the Justice System

Ensure that people with lived experience of the criminal justice system are involved in the design, delivery, and evaluation of all justice services from prison operations to policymaking. Create paid advisory roles and leadership development pathways within HM Prison and Probation Service, the Ministry of Justice, and partner organisations.

Linked to Fellowship Recommendations 14, 31, 39.

2. Establish a National Centre for Community-Led Rehabilitation

Create a UK hub to pilot and replicate community-based justice models like APAC and APG23. This centre would support local innovation, codify effective practice (including trust-based security), and provide technical assistance to areas wishing to scale restorative, dignity-based alternatives to prison.

Linked to Fellowship Recommendations 1, 13, 15, 46.

3. Fund the Voluntary Sector as Core Delivery Partners, Not Just Add-Ons

As the MOJ does with Clinks, introduce ringfenced, multi-year funding for voluntary and community organisations supporting rehabilitation. Commission services based on outcomes, not process, allowing charities to offer tailored, person-centred support across housing, employment, addiction, and wellbeing.

Linked to Fellowship Recommendations 5, 33, 42, 43.

4. Incentivise Employers to Recruit People with Convictions

Introduce a national employment scheme modelled on the Kickstart programme, offering wage subsidies, training budgets, and National Insurance holidays for employers who hire people with convictions. Embed this within DWP and DfE employment policy, with practical support for SMEs.

Linked to Fellowship Recommendations 52, 54, 58.

5. Make Meaningful Work Central to Rehabilitation

Fund structured employment, social enterprise, and vocational training programmes inside and outside of custody. Mandate prisons to deliver activity that builds real-world skills and purpose, working with businesses and social ventures to co-design pathways into stable jobs.

Linked to Fellowship Recommendations 23, 26, 29, 58, 65.

6. Reform Sentencing to Prioritise Alternatives to Custody

Adopt a “presumption against short sentences” in line with the Scottish model, and make deprivation of liberty a last resort for non-violent offences. Expand community-based sentences linked to structured rehabilitation, family ties, and employment.

Linked to Fellowship Recommendations 10, 11, 46.

7. Scale Gender-Responsive Justice Solutions

Invest in models specifically for women, including community alternatives, trauma-informed care, family support, and economic empowerment. Ensure that all justice services account for the unique challenges faced by women and girls, particularly mothers and survivors of abuse.

Linked to Fellowship Recommendations 4, 19, 20, 28.

8. Expand the National Apprenticeship Scheme for Prison Leavers

Support people leaving prison into apprenticeships by providing targeted funding for employers and specialist wraparound support for participants. Build partnerships between prisons, training providers, and local enterprise partnerships (LEPs).

Linked to Fellowship Recommendations 32, 59.

9. Promote and Fund Justice-Focused Social Enterprises

Support the growth of prison-based and post-release social enterprises (e.g. restaurants, retail, artisan products) through grants, start-up funds, and access to public procurement. Position these ventures as a tool for public engagement and stigma reduction.

Linked to Fellowship Recommendations 60, 62, 63, 66.

10. Require Lived Experience Impact Reporting Across Justice Commissioning

Mandate that all publicly commissioned rehabilitation programmes report how they engage people with lived experience in leadership, co-design, and feedback. This should be a scoring criterion for funding and contracts across the justice sector.

Linked to Fellowship Recommendations 14, 31, 39, 45.

Annex 1: Compiled list of all Churchill Fellowship recommendations from each project visit.

1. Trust-based security works: Giving incarcerated people responsibility fosters accountability and reduces violence.
2. Community involvement is key: APAC Timon's model shows that engaging the local community can reduce stigma, improve safety, and support reintegration.
3. Discipline with dignity: A structured daily routine combined with respect and purpose leads to better rehabilitation outcomes and lower recidivism.
4. Reintegration solutions must be gender and race aware. Any effective intervention must address the specific challenges faced by cis and trans women in prison, especially in contexts of poverty and racism, that's the only way we can break crime cycles.
5. Civil society can play a radical and practical role in reducing harm and reoffending. Not just by offering services, but by reshaping the narrative around incarceration itself - giving a voice to people that went through the system and questioning the political, economic and social factors that lead to imprisonment.
6. Working to make prisons obsolete. Rather than focusing on punishment, Elas Existem operates on principles of abolitionism, offering direct support inside and outside prisons. Their holistic work centred on dignity, autonomy, and long-term reintegration reflects the idea that prisons should not exist because crime should not exist.
7. Effective policies and processes must be grounded in robust data and thoughtful analysis. IDMJRacial sees honouring the memory of victims and producing critical data as acts of political resistance. By documenting violence and its context, they provide counter-narratives to official accounts and equip communities to advocate for justice and systemic reform.
8. Community-based alternatives are essential to decrease violence and incarceration. Similarly to Elas Existem, IDMJ Racial is developing models of public safety based on care, equity, and community power that offer an opportunity for people at risk of committing crimes.
9. Criminal Justice reform requires economic justice. Gisela emphasises that true crime prevention must begin with economic justice. By addressing the structural inequalities that keep Black and low-income communities in cycles of poverty, and by creating pathways to financial independence, we reduce the conditions that make crime a means of survival.
10. Judges must lead the shift towards alternative sentencing. For meaningful criminal justice reform, judges need to embrace their role not just as enforcers of the law, but as agents of change. Deprivation of liberty should be treated as a last resort, with alternative and rehabilitative sentencing becoming the norm, especially in non-violent cases.

11. A systemic approach to incarceration is essential. Reforming the prison system cannot happen in isolation. It requires a comprehensive, systemic perspective that addresses the root causes of crime (such as poverty and inequality) and rethinks how justice, rehabilitation, and public safety are defined and delivered.
12. Addressing structural racism and social perceptions of incarceration is crucial. To build a fairer justice system, we must openly confront the racial and social biases embedded in current practices. Acknowledging how structural racism created on the back of slavery and colonisation, influences who gets incarcerated is the first step toward building a more equitable and humane system.
13. Community-led justice is possible. The APAC model, supported by FBAC, shows that safe and effective prisons can be run without guards or punishment - centring trust, dignity, and rehabilitation. With lower reoffending and costs, it proves that civil society can play a leading role in justice.
14. Lived experience builds credibility. Former prisoners are central to FBAC and APAC's leadership, bringing insight, trust, and proof of transformation. Their involvement strengthens the model's legitimacy and echoes a key theme in my Fellowship: that those most affected by the system must help shape its alternatives.
15. Structure enables scale: FBAC ensures the APAC model stays consistent while allowing local adaptation. Its balance of strong standards and flexibility makes it scalable without losing integrity. This highlights how community-led models can grow effectively when grounded in clear values and support, another key aim of my Fellowship project.
16. Healing begins at the door. At APAC Divinópolis, the entry ritual for new *recuperandos* is deeply symbolic and emotionally powerful. This process marks a clear break from the punitive logic of the traditional prison system, offering instead a community that immediately treats each person as someone capable of transformation. It highlights how rituals of care and trust can be foundational to a justice model that centres humanity and healing.
17. Community responsibility shapes rehabilitation. From the cook to the CSS (internal security) to the workshop leaders, every role at APAC is filled by *recuperandos* who actively participate in running their own space. This shared responsibility builds purpose and accountability while modelling a radically different approach to incarceration, one where people are empowered and collaborate, by creating shared values and expectations.
18. Connection to family and self is central. Many *recuperandos* spoke about how APAC allows them to reconnect with family and reclaim a sense of self-worth. Whether through training programs, spiritual guidance, or simply the ability to host loved ones in a respectful space, APAC Divinópolis creates the conditions for real re-entry preparation.
19. Gender-responsive alternatives to incarceration remain limited but vital. APAC Itaúna, the first female unit in the APAC network, highlights the urgent need for more gender-sensitive justice alternatives. With only nine APACs for women across Brazil, the model shows promise but remains underused - despite the country now having the third-largest female prison population globally.

20. Women in prison face systemic neglect and deeper social impacts. Incarceration disproportionately affects women, especially mothers, due to limited infrastructure and support within traditional prisons. Many women shared experiences of isolation, trauma, and family separation - issues that deeply affect how rehabilitation needs to be designed for it to be effective.
21. APAC fosters transformation through community, dignity, and trust. The women at APAC Itaúna spoke of how the model's humanising approach - built on shared responsibility, structured routines, and emotional support - helped them rebuild their self-worth and envision a future outside of crime. This illustrates the power of community-based alternatives in enabling personal healing and social reintegration, core themes in the exploration of restorative justice pathways.
22. Space and beauty can be tools for healing. Unlike traditional prisons, APAC Belo Horizonte uses architecture, art, and outdoor space intentionally to foster wellbeing. The bright murals, gardens, and child-friendly areas not only create a less punitive environment but actively support *recuperandas*' sense of dignity and calm, showcasing how restorative environments contribute to mental health and successful rehabilitation.
23. Hands-on work builds purpose and connection. The wide range of manual and vocational activities (from sewing and artisan crafts to diaper production and gardening) gives *recuperandas* a clear sense of their capacity to create value. These tasks allow them to see the real-world impact of their efforts, whether through sales, donations to vulnerable groups, or support for their families. This fosters personal agency, self-worth, and social reintegration.
24. Community, trust, and emotional rebuilding are key when talking about breaking criminal cycles. The APAC model fosters emotional healing through trust-based relationships with staff, volunteers, and fellow *recuperandas*. Interactions like those with Cristina at the salon or Lucas's reflections on working with women highlight the power of consistent, respectful care to rebuild trust - especially in survivors of trauma. Through poetry, creative expression, and small gestures of support, the women are not just serving time - they are building a new relationship with themselves and with society.
25. Trust as the foundation for secure and effective rehabilitation. APAC Betim demonstrates that genuine trust and shared responsibility between staff and *recuperandos* can enhance, rather than compromise, security. Involving *recuperandos* in daily operations, including security roles, builds accountability and reinforces the rehabilitative mission. This challenges the conventional assumption that rehabilitative practices must come at the expense of security, showing instead that trust and structure can coexist effectively.

26. Economic empowerment and cost efficiency can be achieved through inmate involvement. Engaging *recuperandos* in meaningful, paid work fosters autonomy, skill-building, and financial literacy, all essential for successful reintegration. Crucially, this model also significantly reduces operational costs: APAC Betim operates at less than half of the cost of the traditional prison system. By replacing outsourced services with inmate-led work, APAC not only saves money but also transforms incarceration into an empowering and economically sustainable process.
27. Culture, rituals, and transparency are tools for building collective responsibility. Regular community rituals, transparent metrics, and egalitarian practices help build a strong collective identity and sense of purpose - while in APAC Divinopolis this sense of community related to religious views, APAC Betim was able to create rituals that are focused solely on the community they are building together. This culture of mutual respect and reflection strengthens social bonds, not only between *recuperandos* but also APAC's staff, and reinforces behavioural change.
28. Brazil's prison system needs gender-specific approaches. Marcos highlighted that prisons in Brazil were built with men in mind, leaving women in structurally disadvantaged conditions. Women are often placed in male facilities or far from home, making visits rare, deepening their isolation and disrupting family ties. Marcos' role shows how targeted infrastructure can begin to address these issues. His insights align with what I heard from female APACs and Elas Existem, reinforcing the need for policy and facilities that reflect the unique needs of women in prison.
29. Rehabilitation must go beyond sentencing to include meaningful work and structure. Marcos criticised the ineffectiveness of Brazil's semi-open regime, which legally allows inmates to work during the day but often fails in practice due to lack of employment opportunities and state incentives. This results in idle prison time and a prison culture that breeds violence and dependency. He echoed what we observed in APACs: that work, routine, and a sense of purpose are critical to rehabilitation. Involving prisoners in productive labour not only reduces recidivism but also contributes to lowering prison violence and operational costs.
30. Evidence-based policy and impact evaluation are essential for sustainable change. Marcos underlined the need for better data to design, implement, and scale solutions in a prison system; highlighting the importance of rigorous impact evaluation while generalising alternative models. His emphasis on research and data echoes a wider theme in my Fellowship: that solutions to reduce reoffending and improve prison conditions must be informed by transparent, continuous monitoring and evaluation to be equitable and effective at scale.
31. Lived experience as leadership and methodology. Instituto Recomeçar is a powerful example of how lived experience can inform, guide, and lead successful reintegration strategies. Leonardo Precioso's journey, from incarceration to social entrepreneurship, underpins a methodology grounded in real-world challenges and opportunities. His belief that "former incarcerated people can have the same or even better results" is not just inspirational but operationalised through training, employment, and structured support.

32. Employment and social enterprise as tools for reintegration. Recomeçar shows how job opportunities and social enterprise can serve both as mechanisms for reducing recidivism and platforms for changing public perception. Businesses like Opportunità Pizzaria are not only providing income and dignity but also challenging stigma by proving that people with convictions can run high-quality, customer-facing enterprises. This aligns with previous learnings from APAC, highlighting the importance of purposeful, structured work as a foundation for rehabilitation.
33. Integrated support reduces recidivism and promotes community trust. The organisation's holistic approach - combining professional training, social support, public advocacy, and direct employment - has achieved remarkable impact, including an 88% reduction in reoffending among its participants. These outcomes underscore my Fellowship's emphasis on systemic, multi-level interventions that target not just individuals, but also the societal conditions that hinder reintegration. Recomeçar's model adds weight to the case for community-based, cross-sectoral partnerships to build safer, more inclusive societies.
34. The power of data to drive policy and structural change. Instituto Igarapé plays a critical role in the Brazilian justice ecosystem by using reliable, accessible data to influence public policy and reduce recidivism. Their emphasis on evidence-based research - whether on the consequences of incarceration, cycles of poverty, or drug criminalisation - mirrors my Fellowship's objective of grounding social innovation in robust, transparent analysis.
35. Bridging civil society and public institutions through trust. Igarapé acts as a vital "bridge" - connecting local grassroots data and experiences with decision-makers and global platforms. Their reputation and rigorous methods mean that they can elevate voices that are often silenced or excluded, like Indigenous women or community activists such as Gisele from IDMJ. This aligns with earlier insights from other visits, reaffirming that meaningful reform must include and protect those closest to the problem.
36. Reintegration requires ecosystem collaboration and private sector engagement. Their work supporting reintegration through toolkits, employer networks, and digital platforms highlights the importance of cross-sector cooperation to address the barriers faced by people leaving prison. This echoes themes from Instituto Recomeçar and APAC: that meaningful reintegration cannot happen in isolation, and that social innovation anchored in partnerships between civil society, academia, and the private sector is essential for sustainable change.
37. Structural change requires legal expertise, data, and strategic advocacy. IDDD demonstrates how combining legal defence with rigorous research and policy advocacy can challenge deeply rooted injustices in the criminal justice system. Their approach shows that systemic change isn't only about courtroom wins, but about using data and lived experience to reshape laws, practices, and public perception - especially around issues like preventive detention, lack of due process, and the socio-economic impact of incarceration.

38. The penal system reinforces, rather than resolves, social inequality. IDDD's work reveals how incarceration in Brazil (like in many parts of the world) is not an endpoint but a mechanism that perpetuates cycles of poverty, racial injustice, and marginalisation. The issue of blocked CPFs due to unpaid fines, for example, illustrates how punitive systems continue to punish long after a sentence is served. This parallels similar patterns seen in the UK (e.g. indeterminate sentences), underscoring the global relevance of IDDD's insights.
39. Systemic solutions must be centred on the voices of the affected. A consistent thread throughout IDDD's work is the belief that real reform must come from empowering those most impacted: formerly incarcerated individuals and their families. Their partnerships with grassroots groups and public sessions with diverse stakeholders, demonstrate the importance of building inclusive coalitions to generate both empathy and effective policy change. This aligns with learnings from other visits, including Igarapé and APAC, reinforcing that justice reform is most powerful when co-created with the community.
40. Community-led responses are powerful tools for social change. AMPARAR demonstrates how community-driven, grassroots leadership - particularly from those most directly affected by incarceration - can create lasting impact. Founded by mothers of incarcerated children, the organisation has grown into a trusted network that offers legal, emotional, and practical support. Their lived experience has enabled them to build a responsive, human-centred model of justice advocacy that challenges institutional neglect and indifference.
41. Families are invisible victims of the carceral system and vital to rehabilitation. The report underscores how families, particularly women, are burdened with financial, emotional, and bureaucratic hardships when a loved one is imprisoned. From costly, long-distance visits to invasive security procedures, their suffering often goes unacknowledged. At the same time, maintaining family bonds is critical in reducing reoffending. AMPARAR directly addresses this through transport, emotional support, and legal empowerment.
42. Care, commitment, and dignity can achieve what punishment cannot. Despite limited resources, AMPARAR's work has built a resilient support ecosystem in São Paulo; highlighting the importance of compassion as a principle in policy and practice. The association's model is a lesson in how consistent, small acts of solidarity can drive replicable social impact.
43. Strategic funding enables systemic change. Porticus exemplifies how long-term, flexible, and values-driven funding can empower systemic transformation in criminal justice. By supporting grassroots organisations, research initiatives, and advocacy work, funders can not only address immediate needs but also foster long-term structural change which will result in decreasing the financial burden of prisons.
44. Collaboration builds collective intelligence. The network of organisations brought together by Porticus shows the power of working in ecosystem. By connecting diverse actors (from abolitionist activists to academic researchers, alternative sentencing institutions, and formerly incarcerated individuals) Porticus facilitates the co-creation of knowledge, mutual learning, and coordinated action. This plural approach enhances innovation and resilience in tackling complex justice issues.

45. Human-centred, contextual approaches matter. Porticus's guiding principles (participation, responsiveness, and continuous learning) highlight the importance of involving people with lived experience and adapting interventions to local realities. Effective criminal justice reform cannot be imported or imposed; it must be co-designed with communities, allowing for flexible solutions grounded in dignity and justice.
46. Gradual reintegration through structured responsibility works. The APG23 model offers a phased, supportive path from incarceration to freedom, grounded in personal responsibility, therapeutic engagement, and community involvement. This tiered approach mirrors Brazil's APAC model and provides a clear European example of how trust, discipline, and progressive autonomy can foster true rehabilitation. The programme's impressive reduction in recidivism (from a national average of 70% to just 15%) demonstrates the effectiveness of a structured, community-rooted alternative to prison.
47. Community participation is a cornerstone of sustainable reintegration. APG23's model does not isolate rehabilitation within the walls of its facilities - it invites the surrounding community to be part of the process. Local volunteers work alongside *recuperandos*, neighbours engage with the services and products generated by the programme, and *recuperandos* are encouraged to interact with the public through volunteering and market activities. This mutual relationship breaks down stigma, fosters empathy, and anchors rehabilitation in real-world social bonds, reinforcing desistance from crime.
48. Faith-rooted and civil society models can be the answer to state gaps and demonstrate viable alternatives. Despite not receiving state funding, APG23 has hosted over 4,000 people and currently supports around 300 individuals across Italy. Its €35/day cost per resident is significantly lower than traditional incarceration (€140/day), proving the economic efficiency of alternative models. The model is sustained through solidarity, donations, and committed civic and faith-based leadership. Its success shows how non-state actors can lead innovation in justice reform – with their proof of concept be the basis for national policy adoption.
49. Community-based rehabilitation works - even without a formal justice focus. San Patrignano, though not designed specifically for former offenders, provides an effective and scalable model for rehabilitating individuals with histories of incarceration through a long-term, community-led programme rooted in responsibility, routine, and solidarity. Its success illustrates that addressing root causes, like addiction and social marginalisation, can indirectly support reintegration and reduce reoffending.
50. High expectations and dignified work can create transformative impact. SanPa's commitment to artisanal excellence, vocational training, and meaningful labour (from agriculture to craftsmanship) affirms the importance of creating environments where people are trusted with responsibility and held to high standards. This approach not only restores dignity but equips residents with real economic and social capital post-rehabilitation.

51. Human connection is the foundation of change. What sets SanPa apart is its focus on “love” as a method: peer support, strict but compassionate structures, and deep relational investment - rather than punitive oversight. Relationships, routines, and reflection are central tools in helping individuals take ownership of their recovery and transformation.
52. The crucial role of private sector in reintegration. Programma 2121 demonstrates how private companies, like Lendlease, can play a transformative role in social reintegration through employment. By navigating legal frameworks (e.g., Article 21 of Italy’s Penitentiary Act) and investing in long-term partnerships, the private sector can offer paid, skilled internships to incarcerated individuals, directly reducing recidivism while addressing industry needs like labour shortages.
53. The importance of cross-sector collaboration and long-term commitment. The programme was only possible through a formal multi-stakeholder partnership between government bodies, local authorities, NGOs, and the private sector. Its two-year development process and protocol renewal until 2026 highlight the importance of institutional commitment, trust-building, and persistence when creating pathways for prison-to-work transitions.
54. Incentivising employers to hire incarcerated people through clear and beneficial policies. The UK could draw from Programma 2121 by creating clearer pathways for employer engagement. Incentives such as tax breaks or recognition in procurement processes could increase uptake. This reinforces the idea that employment isn’t just a post-release intervention, but a key component of criminal justice reform and economic reintegration.
55. Education as a tool for social reintegration and crime prevention. The Bard Prison Project at UniMi demonstrates how higher education in prisons can directly contribute to both rehabilitation and crime prevention. Incarcerated individuals not only pursue university degrees but also serve as volunteer tutors for underprivileged students in the community, including those with learning difficulties. This model actively challenges stigma and strengthens the social contract between incarcerated people and their communities.
56. Multi-layered, reciprocal learning creates systemic impact. Incarcerated individuals are not only supported in pursuing university degrees, but also trained to become tutors for underprivileged students, offering free academic support in subjects where paid tutoring would otherwise be inaccessible. At the same time, education students from the University of Milan observe these tutoring sessions and provide feedback, gaining valuable real-world pedagogical experience. This triangular model (where incarcerated people, local students, and university trainees all contribute and benefit) transforms prison education into a space of shared growth, pedagogical innovation, and meaningful social engagement.
57. The role of universities in justice reform must go beyond observation. UniMi's partnership with the Regional Procurement Office for the Department of Corrections shows how academic institutions can move beyond passive research roles to become active co-creators of justice reform, blending education, research, and service delivery. With measurable academic outcomes, growing student numbers, and data-backed methodologies, the programme offers a replicable model for universities elsewhere to adopt, adapt, and expand.

58. Meaningful employment is a pathway to reintegration. Bee4 demonstrates that structured, high-standard employment and technical training within prisons can be a powerful tool for rehabilitation. By offering meaningful work, skill-building, and income opportunities during incarceration, the project reduces recidivism and supports long-term reintegration into society.
59. Strong partnerships between prisons and businesses can create impact. The success of Bee4 relies on close collaboration between the prison system and private companies. Prisons like Bollate provide the flexibility and security needed for detained employees to follow professional schedules, while businesses receive quality services. This mutually beneficial relationship creates a bridge between incarcerated individuals and the wider economy.
60. Breaking stigma through professional excellence. By delivering competitive services (especially in sectors like tech support), Bee4 breaks the stereotype of prison labour as low-skilled. It shows that with proper training and support, incarcerated people can meet industry standards, challenging stigma and reshaping public and corporate perceptions about justice-involved individuals.
61. Elevating trust and quality can redefine perceptions of prison work. InGalera demonstrates that when prisoners are entrusted with high-quality service delivery (using real cutlery, serving alcohol, and operating in a fine-dining setting), the public perception of their capabilities shifts. Creating environments that mirror professional standards outside prison reinforces dignity, builds confidence, and challenges societal assumptions about those with convictions.
62. Seamless public access builds social integration. The ease with which the public can book a table and dine at InGalera - without security protocols or overt messaging about rehabilitation - normalises prisoner-led initiatives. This accessible, "just a restaurant" model helps integrate prisons into the community, making engagement more natural and less stigmatised.
63. Prison Restaurants need strategic investment in experience and accessibility. The UK already has prison-based restaurants, but to match InGalera's impact, they need improvement in areas like the liberty of the guests, service quality, and narrative design. Introducing experiential packages for employers, philanthropists, and decision-makers, combined with better transport links and booking simplicity, could position these restaurants as powerful tools for employment, education, and public perception change.
64. Food as a powerful connector between prison and community. Vale La Pena demonstrates how food and everyday consumer experiences can serve as an accessible bridge between incarcerated individuals and the broader public. Selling high-quality prison-made products humanises those inside and challenges stigma, offering a subtle but impactful entry point for public engagement with criminal justice reform.
65. The potential of social enterprise in reintegration. The project shows how social enterprises can be practical, scalable tools for rehabilitation. By embedding employment and production inside prison settings (and distributing those goods externally) Economia Carceraria and in particular Vale la Pena, creates a real economic and social reintegration model.

66. Enabling the growth of retailing prison-made products. For retailers to successfully market prison-made products, there must be a stronger policy focus on improving the logistical and operational frameworks that support in-prison production. This includes simplifying processes for bringing materials into prisons, standardising protocols for production, and ensuring smoother pathways for goods to exit the prison and reach the market. Clearer, more consistent systems would allow for stable supply chains and commercial viability, enabling prison-made products to contribute meaningfully to rehabilitation and social value.

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