

**Power Behind Bars: Exploring Social Hierarchies in
Men's Prisons with Educational Programs**

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Dedication

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With deep gratitude and hope,

Kelly Martina Araujo Holert

ABSTRACT

This study examines how educational and rehabilitative programs influence social hierarchies in men's prisons. Existing research emphasizes masculinity and violence as core to prison power structures, and most studies on educational and rehabilitative programs center on post-release outcomes like recidivism. However, little is known about how these programs affect the internal social dynamics of prison life itself, specifically how they may reinforce or disrupt the informal hierarchies that shape everyday interactions and status. Addressing this gap, survey data from 30 formerly incarcerated men was collected, both program participants (n=14) and non-participants (n=16). Findings show that program participants were less likely to associate masculinity and physical strength with status and more likely to value conflict resolution compared to non-participants. Longer program participation was linked to more positive views on the program's impact, especially on masculine norms. While no significant differences emerged in perceived personal status or beliefs about violence, participants interacted more frequently with higher-status individuals and strongly supported expanding prison programming compared to non-participants. These results suggest that although educational and rehabilitative programs may not dismantle existing hierarchies, they introduce alternative systems of value that challenge dominant norms and reshape how respect and influence are earned inside prison.

Keywords: masculinity, prison hierarchies, rehabilitation, social dynamics, violence

Introduction

Approximately two million individuals are incarcerated in the United States at any given time, with men making up 93.5% of the federal prison population (Sawyer and Wagner 2025; Federal Bureau of Prisons 2025). In contemporary prisons for men, masculinity, violence, and competition for scarce resources are often central to social hierarchies that manifest in these environments. Incarcerated men are driven by cultural expectations of toughness, emotional control, and the need to assert dominance, which play a significant role in their social positioning within the prison environment (Crewe 2014; De Viggiani 2012). The prison setting exacerbates these dynamics by fostering an environment where power and status are critical for survival. Existing research often focuses on the themes of masculinity and violence as central to understanding prison hierarchies (Michalski 2017; Maguire 2021). However, many of these studies reflect societal conditions that do not factor in educational programs or differences in sentence length and may no longer fully capture the complexities of contemporary prison life.

Despite widespread attention to recidivism rates and reentry outcomes, there has been far less focus on the internal social dynamics that define everyday life inside prisons. This oversight is especially troubling given the scope and diversity of the U.S. prison population. As of 2025, over 200,000 people are serving life sentences nationwide, accounting for roughly 1 in every 6 incarcerated individuals (Nellis and Barry 2025). These individuals, often excluded from rehabilitative programming and policy, should not be seen as less worthy of the investment because they may never re-enter society again. However, this is not only a human rights issue—ignoring the wellbeing and development of people serving life sentences—but a practical concern for the broader prison system. Every year, over 650,000 people are released from prison

(U.S. Department of Justice n.d.), many of whom could have spent years or even decades living in close proximity to individuals serving life sentences. Prisons are social environments where individuals, regardless of sentence length, are shaped by the same rules, norms, and peer influences. If we fail to improve the conditions and dynamics *within* prisons, we may risk releasing individuals who have been socialized in hierarchical and hostile environments, further undermining the goals of rehabilitation. Understanding how programming influences internal prison hierarchies, then, is not just about improving individual outcomes—it is about transforming the broader culture that affects everyone behind bars.

My research aims to explore the role of educational and rehabilitative programs in impacting how power, status, and influence are distributed and contested among incarcerated individuals. Specifically, I sought to examine to what extent the presence of such programs influences incarcerated individuals' perceptions of power and hierarchy. Results are based on survey responses from formerly incarcerated men 18 years or older, some of whom participated in at least one educational or rehabilitative program while incarcerated. By revisiting foundational theories, I aim to clarify gaps in our understanding of how social hierarchies operate within modern prison settings, particularly in relation to power, control, and adaptation. Specifically, I try to explore how masculinity and violence continue to shape prison life and how other forces, such as educational and rehabilitative programs, may be reshaping these dynamics. Through this exploration, I address how social hierarchies manifest, evolve, and influence the daily experiences of individuals within the contemporary prison system.

Literature Review

This literature review explores the formation and maintenance of social hierarchies in contemporary prison systems. Prison hierarchies are shaped by masculinity, violence, social networks, trust, surveillance, institutional disruptions, and resource control, all of which determine power and status. Violence and dominance often establish hierarchy, while social networks and trust offer alternative forms of influence, though trust remains fragile. Surveillance and transfers disrupt social order, while resource scarcity reinforces competition for power. While research has examined these traditional forces, it largely ignored how educational and rehabilitative programs might function as competing systems of status and influence within the prison environment, offering alternative routes to recognition that challenge the dominance-based foundations of carceral hierarchy. Most studies focus on recidivism and reentry, overlooking how education shapes status, power, and relationships within prison. This literature review examines these dynamics and the gap in understanding education's role in restructuring prison hierarchies.

The Role of Masculinity in Prison Hierarchies

Masculinity, in the context of prisons, refers to the set of behaviors, practices, and attributes that are socially constructed as representative of being male, often emphasizing traits such as toughness, dominance, emotional restraint, and control (Crewe 2014; De Viggiani 2012; Maguire 2021). Several scholars note that masculinity in prison, beyond being tied to identity, is a crucial survival strategy within its hierarchy. Incarcerated men are pressured to adhere to rigid masculine norms that emphasize emotional suppression and physical dominance as means of navigating the complex social environment (Crewe 2014). In this context, masculinity becomes both a

protective mechanism and a source of status, with men striving to avoid vulnerability while projecting toughness to maintain their position within the prison hierarchy. These performances of masculinity reinforce the hierarchical order as individuals compete to maintain respect and power.

Further complicating this dynamic, De Viggiani's (2012) work emphasizes how the prison environment amplifies and exaggerates societal expectations of masculinity. Incarcerated men often feel compelled to perform heightened versions of masculine ideals—such as toughness, control, and emotional restraint—to secure their safety and status. This performance of masculinity, however, is not just a defensive posture. It is a social necessity within the prison's hierarchical system. Projecting a confident front is essential for avoiding exploitation, and this need to present oneself as impenetrable becomes a key factor in determining one's rank within the social structure (De Viggiani 2012). The prison culture demands exaggerated masculine performances, where the ability to dominate or show physical strength often correlates with an individual's level of respect and influence. These exaggerated forms of masculinity solidify hierarchies, while those perceived as weak and vulnerable are relegated to the bottom.

The role of masculinity is particularly pronounced in vulnerable populations. Incarcerated men who are at risk of victimization—whether due to the nature of their crimes, mental health issues, or physical frailty—struggle to conform to the dominant masculine norms of the prison environment (Maguire 2021). These individuals adopt alternative strategies to navigate the social hierarchy, such as withdrawal, avoiding conflict, or forming protective relationships with others who can offer safety (Maguire 2021). In this context, masculinity functions both as a tool of

power and as a source of vulnerability when it is not accomplished, where failing to meet the expectations of traditional masculine performances leaves individuals exposed to marginalization and exploitation. Even with this vulnerable population, hierarchies persist, and the stigma attached to certain offenses, especially sex offenses, further deepens the layers of social stratification (Maguire 2021).

Masculinity in prison plays a key role in shaping and maintaining social hierarchies. The pressure to conform to hyper-masculine ideals, along with the strategies used by those who cannot, makes masculinity a central force in structuring social relationships and reinforcing power dynamics. Examining these performances reveals how prison hierarchies function, where power is normally tied to projecting dominance and hiding vulnerability. Incarcerated individuals establish status and uphold a rigid social order through deeply ingrained displays of masculinity, which dictate interactions and survival within the carceral environment. Because of its fundamental role in organizing prison life and reinforcing power structures, masculinity serves as a central theme in this thesis, offering critical insight into how social hierarchies emerge, persist, and evolve behind bars.

Social Hierarchies Through Violence and Power Dynamics

Violence is a critical mechanism through which social hierarchies in traditional prisons are constructed and maintained, interconnected to the dynamics of power and control in these environments. Within the hyper-masculine culture of prisons, violence becomes both a tool for asserting dominance and a response to the constant threat of exploitation (Michalski 2017). The hyper-masculine culture of prisons fosters an environment where individuals feel compelled to

engage in violence as a way to gain respect, protect themselves, and climb the social hierarchy. This framework suggests that in addition to being a survival tactic, violence is a direct pathway to higher status within the prison, solidifying power structures that reward displays of aggression and physical dominance.

However, while violence is a feature of power dynamics, its effectiveness as a tool for advancing one's position within the prison hierarchy is contested. Wills (2014) challenges the assumption that violence is an effective tool for advancing one's position within the prison hierarchy, arguing instead that the belief in redemptive violence¹ perpetuates cycles of aggression and marginalization. While violence may offer short-term gains in status, it ultimately reinforces the oppressive power dynamics that entrap individuals within the lower rungs of the social hierarchy. Rather than serving as a tool for upward mobility, violence can lead to further isolation, victimization, and entrenched marginalization. Wills' (2014) work highlights the paradoxical nature of prison violence: while it is a key feature of power dynamics, it rarely results in meaningful shifts in social standing for those who engage in it.

While Michalski (2017) and Wills (2014) agree that violence is a key feature of prison dynamics, they differ in their perspectives on its effectiveness as a tool for upward mobility within the hierarchy. Their analyses converge on the understanding that violence is interwoven in the social fabric of prison life, shaping the ways power and hierarchy are constructed and maintained. Yet, neither perspective fully examines how external interventions, such as educational and rehabilitative programs, might disrupt or transform these dynamics. The impact of educational initiatives on reducing violence and reshaping social order remains largely unexplored. My study

¹ Redemptive violence is the idea that violence can restore order or elevate status (Wills 2014).

aims to challenge the dominance of violence as the primary means of social positioning. If educational programs offer incarcerated individuals new avenues for identity formation and social mobility, they may weaken the grip of hyper-masculine violence on prison hierarchies.

The Influence of Social Networks and Trust on Prison Hierarchies

In prisons, social hierarchies are not solely based on aggression or dominance; relationships and alliances play an important role in establishing and maintaining power. In environments where formal power structures exert control, the relationships between incarcerated individuals can determine their position and survival within the hierarchy. The ability to foster reciprocal, trusting relationships becomes crucial in navigating the challenges of prison life, where individuals rely on these networks for protection, resources, and status (Hashimi and Schaefer 2022). These social bonds provide incarcerated individuals with alternative forms of power and influence, suggesting that informal relationships can be just as significant as displays of physical dominance in shaping the prison's social order. Trust, in this sense, operates as a form of social capital that they draw upon to assert their position within the hierarchy.

Within these social networks, older or more experienced incarcerated men, known as “Old Heads,” often rise to positions of influence by cultivating long-standing relationships based on trust and reciprocity (Kreager et al. 2017). These individuals gain power through their knowledge of prison life and their ability to foster stable networks, which allow them to serve as informal leaders or mentors to others. Such dynamics illustrate that prison hierarchies are driven by the capacity to build and maintain social connections that offer a degree of security and status. Trust, therefore, functions as a stabilizing force within the volatile environment of the prison,

where incarcerated individuals' ability to establish dependable relationships may determine their access to influence and protection.

Furthermore, the lack of trust in prisons also plays a key role in shaping hierarchies. The constant threat of violence, alongside the intense surveillance, can erode interpersonal trust, leaving individuals even more vulnerable to exploitation and isolation (Liebling and Arnold 2012). The absence of trust exacerbates the social divisions within prisons, as those without reliable networks are relegated to the lower tiers of the hierarchy. Yet, even in environments marked by suspicion and fear, shared practices such as religious faith can offer pathways for building trust and social capital, reinforcing the idea that hierarchies are shaped by more than just power struggles (Liebling and Arnold 2012). This raises the question, can educational and rehabilitative programming serve a similar function: creating spaces where interpersonal conflicts are set aside in favor of mutual learning and social cohesion?

Together, these perspectives illustrate that trust and social relationships are essential in carceral environments. While violence and masculinity often define power, the ability to form reliable connections offers another pathway to navigating prison life. Again, existing research fails to fully explore how educational and rehabilitative initiatives influence trust-building and social networks within prisons. If these programs create environments where incarcerated individuals can develop mutual respect, cooperation, and new forms of social capital, they may offer an alternative to traditional hierarchies rooted in fear and aggression.

Surveillance and Institutional Disruptions

Prison hierarchies are not static structures but evolving social orders shaped by individual behaviors, institutional practices, and mechanisms of control. The prison environment conditions individuals to adopt ingrained dispositions, reinforcing hierarchies that mirror broader societal inequalities. Through habitual behaviors, surveillance, and institutional disruptions, power is continually negotiated and redefined. Understanding these influences is essential for examining whether alternative pathways, such as educational programs, can challenge and reshape these hierarchies by offering incarcerated individuals new forms of status and influence.

The concept of habitus echoes the broader societal dynamics at play, creating a system of inequality that mirrors and amplifies the structures of the outside world. Bourdieu's (1994) concept of habitus emphasizes the ingrained dispositions that individuals develop based on their social and institutional backgrounds. In the prison environment, daily exposure to interpersonal violence and rigid social hierarchies conditions individuals to adopt hyper-vigilance, defensive posturing, and an acute sensitivity to perceived disrespect (Caputo-Levine 2013). These embodied behaviors, necessary in a high-risk setting, do not just disappear upon release, but instead persist in ways that complicate reintegration. Routine interactions, such as ordering food or engaging in workplace dynamics, can become sites of tension, as reactions shaped by carceral experiences clash with societal expectations (Caputo-Levine 2013). The carceral habitus thus extends beyond prison walls, impacting the ways in which formerly incarcerated individuals navigate the outside world.

At the same time, the concept of internalized control is crucial for understanding how incarcerated individuals navigate these hierarchies. The prison environment, with its rigid rules

and constant surveillance, instills behaviors and dispositions that align with the norms and power structures of the institution (Foucault 1975). Incarcerated individuals, even as they strive for status or protection, often reproduce the very systems of domination they find themselves subject to. Foucault's metaphor of the Panopticon illustrates how constant surveillance leads individuals to internalize the gaze of authority, regulating their behavior in ways that reinforce the prison's social hierarchies. However, surveillance in prison extends beyond institutional oversight; it also operates laterally among prisoners themselves. Incarcerated individuals actively observe, classify, and regulate each other, creating an unpredictable and often conflicting form of discipline (Ievins 2020). This "lateral tightness" means incarcerated individuals are not only subjects of surveillance but also enforcers of behavioral norms, contributing to an environment where power is diffused through both formal and informal systems. Rather than resisting authority outright, these individuals become agents of their own regulation, mirroring the disciplinary mechanisms of the institution while shaping their own social order.

Additionally, moving incarcerated individuals between facilities serves as a significant institutional factor that can destabilize established hierarchies. Transfers disrupt the routines and social bonds that incarcerated individuals rely on to maintain their place within the prison's power structure, leading to tensions as individuals are forced to renegotiate their status in a new environment (Kigerl and Hamilton 2016). The resulting instability challenges the notion of fixed hierarchies in prisons, revealing that social orders are not static but are continually reshaped by institutional practices. This disruption can lead to tension and violence as individuals attempt to assert dominance in an unfamiliar environment, highlighting how institutional practices such as transfers can unintentionally create instability within the prison's social hierarchy. The act of

transferring incarcerated individuals is not just an administrative move; it fundamentally alters the social dynamics, leading to conflicts and a reshuffling of status among the incarcerated population.

These influences on prison hierarchy—habitual dispositions, lateral and institutional surveillance, and forced social disruptions—demonstrate the deeply embedded and fluid nature of power structures in carceral settings. Hierarchies are not just imposed from above; they are reinforced through internalized behaviors, peer regulation, and institutional policies that shape how incarcerated individuals navigate power and survival. This ongoing reshaping of prison hierarchies prompts a key question for my thesis: Can educational programs offer a stable alternative to status-building, one that fosters trust and reduces the reliance on violence within these shifting power structures?

Resource Scarcity and Control

In the context of prison hierarchies, social power is negotiated and enforced through patterns of exchange, deeply internalized behaviors, and institutional mechanisms of discipline. The social exchange theory explains how power and status emerge from reciprocal exchanges of goods, services, and protection (Blau 1964). These exchanges solidify power differentials and perpetuate the social stratification of the prison environment, as those with control over resources maintain dominance over others. In the commissary² system, this manifests through financially privileged incarcerated individuals (the “jail rich”) who use their access to commissary goods to secure social leverage, dictate informal economies, and mitigate the harshest aspects of

² Commissary stores are prison-run retail outlets where incarcerated individuals can purchase a variety of goods, including extra food, hygiene products, clothing, and small appliances (Bardelli et al. 2022).

incarceration (Bardelli et al. 2022). A key component of this economy is the “inmate store” system, where wealthier incarcerated individuals lend out commissary items at highest-interest rates, creating cycles of debt that further entrench economic hierarchies (Bardelli et al. 2022). Those without financial support, in contrast, experience severe deprivation, relying on exploitative debt-based exchanges or struggling to meet basic survival needs. Commissary access then determines not only an individual’s well-being , but also their position within the prison’s social hierarchy.

Furthermore, the conditions of confinement, including overcrowding, inadequate access to healthcare, and poor living environments, contribute to how resource scarcity impacts social hierarchies in prison. Overcrowded and underfunded facilities exacerbate competition for resources, intensifying power struggles among incarcerated individuals (Wildeman, Fitzpatrick, and Goldman 2018). In such environments, those who can secure control of scarce resources or protection often dominate the social hierarchy, while others are left more vulnerable to exploitation. This scarcity-driven hierarchy reflects broader societal inequalities, where marginalized groups are forced into competition for limited resources, amplifying divisions within the prison population. Poor conditions of confinement create an environment where hierarchies rooted in control and access to goods and protection thrive, shaping the everyday experiences of incarcerated individuals. External criminal organizations further complicate these power structures. In some environments, gangs wield institutionalized control, establishing a parallel governance system within the prison walls (Peirce and Fondevila 2020). These organizations dictate who holds authority, manage illicit economies, and enforce strict codes on

conduct through violence and coercion. The presence of such groups can disrupt or reinforce existing hierarchies, blending external affiliations with internal struggles for dominance.

However, traditional systems of power based on resource scarcity and control may not be the only way to navigate prison life. Educational programs and other structured interventions can introduce avenues for status and influence, challenging the assumption that power in prisons is solely dictated by the aforementioned traditional ways of attaining status. The questions of whether program involvement creates a new path for recognition and protection remains largely unexamined in existing research, making it central to understanding how hierarchies evolve when knowledge and personal growth become factors in shaping prison social relations.

Limitations on Research on Educational & Rehabilitative Programs in Prison

The current body of research on prison-based educational and rehabilitative programs has primarily focused on reducing recidivism and improving post-release employment prospects, neglecting their impact on social hierarchies and interpersonal relationships among incarcerated individuals. Studies have shown that participation in education programs lowers recidivism rates and increases job prospects after release (Stickle and Schuster 2023), but they fail to examine how these programs shape power dynamics and status among incarcerated individuals. Most correctional policies view education through a public safety and cost-saving lens, emphasizing its role in preparing individuals for reentry rather than its potential to change social structures within prisons (U.S. Department of Justice 2023). While education has been recognized as a critical rehabilitative tool, its role in altering reliance on masculinity and violence, restructuring peer relationships, and creating alternative status markers inside prison remain underexplored

(Torrijo and Maeyer 2019). This gap is particularly important given that many incarcerated individuals, including those serving life sentences, will never re-enter society and thus should not be excluded from the benefits of programming designed to improve prison life.

By shifting the focus beyond recidivism as the sole measure of success, this study examines whether program participation influences power and status within prison hierarchies. If education offers a means to gain respect without resorting to violence, it could fundamentally reshape perceptions of dominance and challenge traditional hierarchies. Understanding these dynamics is essential, as improving prison environments benefits not only those preparing for release, but also those who will remain incarcerated for life. Without addressing how programs impact relationships and social positioning among incarcerated individuals, current research overlooks a crucial dimension of prison rehabilitation and social order.

Methods

My research aims to understand how social hierarchies manifest within contemporary prison systems, particularly in environments where educational programs are present. By examining formerly incarcerated individuals' experiences, my study explores how the programs may interact with or influence existing social dynamics within the prison. A structured survey is used as the primary data collection method, capturing quantitative data to identify general patterns and trends regarding perceptions of social hierarchies, masculinity, status, and violence. This design enabled a comprehensive analysis of how program participation correlates with shifts in traditional social structures, providing insights into the evolving dynamics of social hierarchies in prison environments.

Sampling Method

This study used purposive sampling to recruit formerly incarcerated men who fit specific inclusion criteria, with the intentional goal of capturing two distinct groups: those who participated in at least one educational or rehabilitative program during incarceration, and those who did not. This comparative design is central to the research questions, as individuals who engaged in programming are particularly well-suited to offer insight into how such involvement may alter prison social dynamics. Their experiences represent a potentially distinct trajectory within the prison hierarchy, one shaped by alternative forms of interaction. In contrast, participants who did not engage in programming serve as a representation of the general prison population, offering a baseline for understanding traditional social structures.

I joined a Listervv with over a 1,000 members that were connected to the criminal justice field, in addition to contacting various criminal justice-oriented organizations in the Southeastern United States and provided them with my Recruitment Announcement (see Appendix C), asking them to send it to individuals that fit my selection criteria³. Given the confidentiality measures employed, I did not receive any information about the respondents, including their names, email addresses, or location. My sample included 30 formerly incarcerated men who were 18 years or older. There were 14 program participants, 15 non-participants, and 1 “Not sure”. The respondent that selected “Not sure” when prompted if they participated in an educational or rehabilitative program was treated as a non-participant, so they were not included in the analyses that related to programs, but were included in the analyses of all participants given that they responded to the survey questions that non-participants received. There were no restraints as to

³ Selection criteria: formerly incarcerated men at least 18 years of age.

what institution the respondent was incarcerated in or the length of time served. Through the Listervv, I was also able to connect with organizations that could send the survey to formerly incarcerated individuals who had participated in at least one such program during their time in prison. This included a wide range of educational programs, including foundational learning, college-level courses, and literacy support, as well as targeted services such as substance abuse recovery, religious and spiritual development, vocational training, and skill-building or personal growth initiatives. If individuals reported participating in or utilizing any of these services during their incarceration, they were identified as having participated in a program for the purposes of this study.

The survey was distributed to formerly incarcerated men who met the aforementioned selection criteria. The survey remained open until the target number of responses was reached, that being 30 responses after three weeks. While modest in size, a sample of 30 is appropriate for the aims of this study, which focuses on exploring patterns of social hierarchy and program participation among a hard-to-reach population. This number allowed for meaningful comparisons between participants who engaged in educational and/or rehabilitative programs and those who did not, while also enabling the identification of trends. Given the challenge of recruiting formerly incarcerated individuals, especially with confidentiality protections in play, 30 responses provided a solid foundation for exploratory analysis and offered valuable insight into understudied aspects of prison life.

Survey Logistics

The survey consists of 23 multiple-choice questions, in addition to two subjective social status exercises, focused on capturing participants' perspectives on social hierarchies and the perceived impact of educational programs on prison dynamics. It used multiple-choice questions to capture patterns in the experiences and perceptions of incarcerated individuals participating in educational and/or rehabilitative programs. Background information questions (age, race/ethnicity, time served, program involvement, etc.) were formatted as nominal, ordinal, or dichotomous, while the remaining survey (masculinity, violence, status, and hierarchy variables) used dichotomous, ordinal, and likert-scale questions (see Appendix D). I also adapted the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Adler et al. 2000) to fit the prison context by asking respondents to rank both behaviors/traits (physical strength, masculinity, trustworthiness, etc.) and types of crimes (nonviolent, homicide, drug-related offenses, etc.) based on how much status or respect each holds within a prison setting (see Appendix D for survey).

Initially, this project was conceived as a qualitative study, centered on interviewing individuals who had experienced incarceration. However, after reviewing the project with the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I was advised to pursue a quantitative approach due to the natural constraints of accessing an incarcerated population and the logistical and ethical challenges associated with direct interviews. As a result, I chose to administer a multiple-choice survey, which offered a practical and efficient method for collecting clear, consistent, and analyzable data from a group that is typically hard to reach. This format allowed participants to quickly respond to questions about their experiences with prison programs and hierarchies without the burden of lengthy responses. It also enhanced accessibility for individuals with varying literacy

or educational levels. Multiple-choice items helped keep responses focused, enabled comparisons across groups, and minimized the emotional strain that open-ended questions might pose when discussing sensitive topics. Additionally, the survey was written at approximately a middle-school reading level to ensure that it was accessible to a wider range of individuals. To capture perceptions of social rank, the survey incorporated adapted subjective social status exercises, including the MacArthur ladder, which provided a visual and intuitive way for participants to engage with complex ideas about hierarchy without requiring detailed narrative responses.

Ensuring Participants' Safety and Comfort

To prioritize the safety and comfort of participants, the survey was offered through the Duke Qualtrics, a survey tool approved by the Duke IRB and the Duke Office of Information Technology (OIT). Participation in the survey was entirely optional, and respondents were free to choose whether or not to take part in the study. At any point, participants were able to skip any questions they did not feel comfortable answering, without any negative consequences. This approach respected their individual boundaries and ensured that respondents only shared information they are comfortable with.

Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality

Reflecting on my role in data analysis, I recognized that my familial history with the criminal justice system and previous experience working with incarcerated individuals may have influenced how I approached and interpreted the research process. This background gave me a unique perspective and perhaps a deeper empathy for participants, as I was familiar with some of

the personal and social challenges that come with incarceration. However, I was also aware that these experiences could impact my analysis of the data, potentially introducing confirmation bias in how I interpreted responses.

To ensure neutrality and objectivity in this quantitative study, particular care was taken in the construction and framing of the survey instrument. The survey was developed in collaboration with a director of a carceral education program who has over 15 years of experience working with incarcerated individuals, which helped ensure that the questions were both contextually appropriate and free from leading language. Questions were designed to foster neutrality, and the variables selected were drawn from existing literature on traditional mechanisms of hierarchy in prison, including masculinity, violence, and trust, rather than being shaped by my own assumptions or experiences.

Data Analysis

The survey data, collected from the sample (n=30), were analyzed using a combination of descriptive and inferential statistical methods to identify patterns and group differences between program participants and non-participants. All analyses were completed on Duke Qualtrics. The sample size for each analysis varies depending on the specific question, as respondents who indicated participation in a program were given additional questions related to their program experiences, while all respondents answered the general questions. Additionally, because participants were allowed to skip any questions for any reason, the number of responses included in each analysis may differ based on overall response rates. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic information, incarceration history, and program participation

characteristics. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for categorical variables to establish an overall profile of the sample. Chi-squares tests were conducted to examine relationships between program participation and key categorical variables. These tests assessed whether significant associations existed between group membership and social perceptions. To analyze data from the adapted MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status, ranked ANOVA tests were used to compare how different traits and crime types were ranked in terms of social status within prison. This allowed for group comparisons while accounting for the ordinal nature of ranking data. Finally, two-proportion z-tests were conducted to compare the proportion of participants and non-participants who selected specific traits as contributing to prison status. This helped identify statistically significant differences in values and perceptions across groups.

Methodological Limitations

For this study, several limitations were anticipated, which could have influenced the findings. However, they were addressed carefully to maintain the study's rigor.

One potential limitation of this study was that some of the rich, in-depth insights typically obtained through interviews or ethnographic methods would be lost by relying exclusively on surveys. In a setting as multifaceted as a prison, these layers of context can provide a valuable understanding of how social hierarchies are negotiated and influenced by external factors. Despite this limitation, a survey approach was more appropriate for my study's aim of capturing patterns and significant findings across a large sample. To mitigate the limitation of lost depth, the survey was designed with a focus on clarity and comprehensiveness. While it includes structured questions for quantitative analysis, the inclusion of thoughtfully developed response

options and the subjective social status exercises helped approximate some of the richness the interviews provide.

Another potential limitation was selection bias because participants were recruited from organizations connected to the criminal justice system, and many had voluntarily participated in educational and/or rehabilitative programs. While this group aligned well with the study's objectives of examining social hierarchies within an educational setting, the individuals may have been more socially engaged, pro-education, or open to sharing their experiences. Acknowledging this limitation, causal conclusions were not made. My findings reflect correlations and patterns, not definitive program effects. Future research with a more randomized sample or administrative datasets could strengthen causal claims. Nevertheless, the study provides valuable insight into how program participants perceive social dynamics, which is an understudied yet important area of prison research.

Finally, another potential limitation of this study was the reliance on self-reported survey responses, which could introduce biases such as social desirability or recall bias. However, the participants were informed before starting that their responses are anonymous and would not be shared with any organization, which could reduce social desirability bias and encourage honest responses.. Additionally, the survey used neutral, validated questions and includes measures to reassure participants of confidentiality. While self-reported data can never be entirely free from bias, these steps helped promote honest and thoughtful responses.

Despite these challenges, my study's findings contribute unique and fresh insights into how prison hierarchies operate within the context of educational programs. By focusing on quantitative survey methods, this research adds valuable perspectives to our understanding of social structures in prisons.

Hypotheses

Drawing from prior research on masculinity, violence, trust, and prison status systems, I propose the following hypotheses:

1. Individuals who participate in educational and/or rehabilitative programs will be less likely to associate masculinity and physical strength with higher social status in prison compared to non-participants.
2. Program participants will be more likely to report experiences of trust, respect, and positive social relationships with others than non-participants.
3. Individuals who participate in programs for longer durations or with greater involvement will be more likely to believe that programs have positively impacted their experience of prison life, including their position within the social hierarchy.
4. Program participation will decrease respondents' perceptions of the importance of violence being used for social status.
5. Program participants will be more likely to support the expansion of educational and rehabilitative programs, compared to non-participants, reflecting a recognition of their value in shaping social dynamics inside prison.

Results

This study examined how program participation in educational and rehabilitative programs shaped formerly incarcerated individuals' perceptions of social hierarchy, masculinity, trust, and violence within prison settings. For the following sections, participants refers to individuals that participated in at least one educational and/or rehabilitative program while incarcerated, while non-participants refers to those who did not, either by lack of programs or personal choice.

Descriptive Statistics

The final sample consisted of 30 formerly incarcerated men. Table A1 displays the demographic characteristics of the sample. The majority of respondents were between 35 and 54 years old, with 45-54 being the most common age group (36.7%). Respondents were able to select more than one race or ethnicity they identified with. Respondents identified with a range of backgrounds, with White (40.0%), Hispanic or Latino (40.0%), and Black or African American (33.3%) being the most frequently selected.

Respondents reported varied incarceration histories, with 36.7% incarcerated for 5-10 years, 23.3.% for more than 20 years. Table A2 displays program participation details of survey respondents. Nearly half (46.7%) of respondents had participated in at least one educational or rehabilitative program, most commonly educational literacy (80.0%), followed by substance abuse recovery (33.3%) and religious or spiritual development (26.7%). Among program participants, 60.0% reported being involved for more than five years, and 73.3% described themselves as very involved. These descriptive statistics provide important context for interpreting participants' perceptions of prison hierarchy, status, and social dynamics.

Program Duration and Perceived Impact

A chi-square test showed a significant association between the length of time in the program and whether participants believed the program positively affected them ($p = 0.038$). Notably, none of the respondents who participated in a program for 1-2 years reported a positive impact, while 100% of those in for 3-5 years and 88.9% of those in for more than 5 years reported a positive effect. However, no significant relationship was found between how involved the respondent was with the program and if they believed it improved their relationships in prison ($p = 0.171$).

Social Hierarchies

The survey found no significant difference between program participants and non-participants in where they placed themselves within social hierarchies ($p = 0.282$), but 100% of participants recognized their presence in prisons. However, program participants were significantly more likely to report frequent interactions with individuals of higher status in prison ($p = 0.017$), while no differences were found in how often participants engaged with individuals of lower status ($p = 0.184$).

Status

There was no significant relationship between either length of program participation ($p = 0.185$) or level of involvement ($p = 0.235$) and belief that individuals in programs held higher social status. Additionally, while participants were more likely to interact with those of higher status, this did not translate into a consistent perception that programs itself was a source of status within the prison environment.

Masculinity

Several findings revealed a clear link between programming and perceptions of masculinity. Non-participants, compared to participants, were significantly more likely to identify masculinity (100% vs. 35.7%) and physical strength (100% vs. 50%) as important traits for determining status in prison, with both differences being statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). There was also a significant difference in beliefs about the role of masculinity in determining status overall: 100% of non-participants believed masculinity mattered, compared to only 57.1% of participants ($p = 0.036$). However, there was no significant difference in whether participants felt pressured to conform to masculine norms ($p = 0.080$).

The length of program participation was significantly associated with the belief that programs challenged traditional masculine ideals ($p = 0.041$). Participants in programs for 3-5 years or more than 5 years were more likely to report that these programs reshaped their views on masculinity. Level of involvement, however, did not predict this belief ($p = 0.520$).

Violence

There were no significant differences between program participation and non-participants regarding their perceptions of violence as a tool for social positioning ($p = 0.334$), or in how often they observed violence being used to gain or maintain status ($p = 0.337$). While a greater proportion of non-participants believed violence was used to maintain or improve social standing (100% vs. 64%), this difference was not statistically significant. Due to a logic error in the

software, question 22⁴ was not visible to respondents. Thus, the effect of program participation on the importance of violence was unable to be calculated.

Support for Educational Programs

Finally, there was a significant association between program participation and support for more educational and rehabilitative programs in prison ($p < 0.001$). All participants who had not been in a program supported more programming, compared to only 40% of those who had not.

Hierarchy of Behaviors and Crime Types

ANOVA tests were conducted to determine whether there were significant differences in how program participants and non-participants ranked various traits and crime types in terms of perceived social status within prison. Figure B1 and Figure B2 display the average of the perceived status rankings for the exercises.

Regarding traits and behaviors associated with social hierarchy rankings, significant differences were found in the rankings of physical strength ($p = 0.0005$), masculinity ($p = 0.0023$), and ability to resolve conflict ($p = 0.0051$). Non-participants ranked both physical strength and masculinity ($p = 0.023$) higher than participants, but participants ranked ability to resolve conflict ($p = 0.0051$) higher than non-participants. Non-participants ranked both physical strength and masculinity significantly higher than participants, suggesting a stronger association with traditional indicators of dominance compared to participants. Conversely, participants ranked conflict resolution higher, indicating a potential shift toward value non-violent social skills within program environments. No significant differences were found in how charisma,

⁴ Question 22: *Did participation in programs reduce the importance of violence for social status?*

trustworthiness, intelligence, social relationships, or generosity were ranked between the two groups.

In the crime-type rankings, significant group differences emerged for drug-related offenses ($p = 0.0021$), nonviolent crimes ($p = 0.0109$), and sexual offenses ($p = 0.0300$). Non-participants ranked drug related offenses higher in status, while participants gave higher rankings to nonviolent crimes, suggesting different perceptions of what constitutes social standing. Notably, non-participants ranked sexual offenses lower on average, indicating a harsher social judgement for these crimes compared participants. No significant differences were observed in the rankings of homicide, offenses against children, property crimes, or violent offenses with or without a weapon.

Discussion

Guided by five hypotheses, my research aimed to understand if programming could introduce alternative pathways to respect and influence in a traditionally rigid and dominance-based social environment. The findings offer a big picture: educational programs appear to challenge certain hierarchical norms, particularly those tied to masculinity, but show more limited influence on broader systems of trust and violence.

Challenging Masculinity as a Marker of Status

One of the clearest findings came in support of Hypothesis 1, which proposed that *program participants would be less likely to associate masculinity and physical strength with higher status*. This hypothesis was strongly supported. Participants who had been in programs were

significantly less likely than non-participants to identify masculinity and strength as important traits within the prison hierarchy (see Table B1). Instead, they placed greater value on conflict resolution, suggesting that programming may encourage alternative notions of leadership and respect, ones less grounded in dominance and physical intimidation. This aligns with prior literature on hyper-masculinity in prison (Crewe 2014; De Viggiani 2012), but it extends those findings by illustrating how structured programming can actively disrupt those norms.

Moreover, the length of time in a program was significantly associated with belief that programs challenged traditional masculine ideals, adding further support to Hypothesis 3, which posited that *longer program participation would predict more positive views about its impact*. This suggests that the duration of exposure may be more influential than level of involvement alone, as program intensity did not yield significant effects. These findings offer insight into the gradual nature of cultural and identity shifts within prison environments.

Social Exposure vs. Social Integration

Hypothesis 2, which predicted that *participants would report more trust and positive relationships*, received limited support. Participants were significantly more likely to report frequent interaction with higher-status individuals, suggesting that programming might offer greater social exposure or integration into influential circles. However, there were no significant differences between participants and non-participants in reported trust or relationship quality. These results complicate the assumption that educational environments automatically foster deeper social cohesion. Trust may remain difficult to establish in high-surveillance, high-risk environments where vulnerability is still seen as a liability. This echoes past findings on the

fragility of trust in prison (Liebling and Arnold 2012) and suggests that more targeted efforts may be needed to strengthen relational dynamics within program spaces.

Violence and Hierarchical Stability

Hypothesis 4, which posited that *program participants would be less likely to rely on violence as a means of status-building*, was not supported. There were no significant differences between groups in their responses to whether violence was used to gain or maintain power. While non-participants were more likely to say violence was used, the difference was not statistically significant. Moreover, a logic error in the survey prevented analysis of whether participants believed programming reduced the importance of violence, limiting the conclusions that can be drawn here.

This null finding could reflect the deeply embedded role violence plays in carceral environments (Michalski 2017), or it may indicate that broader institutional and cultural conditions must shift before programming alone can meaningfully weaken the symbolic power of violence. It is also possible that self-reported data underrepresents exposure to violence, due to social desirability bias, despite measures taken to encourage honest responses.

Status and Program Participation

The assumption that programming itself leads to social elevation was also challenged. Hypothesis 3, in part, suggested that longer or more involved program participation would be associated with *higher perceived status*. However, no significant differences were found in participants' self-placement within the prison hierarchy, nor did they consistently view program

participants as holding higher status. This finding suggests that programming may offer new forms of respect, but it does not necessarily dismantle or replace traditional status hierarchies. Instead, it may create a parallel or competing system of value coexisting with more entrenched dynamics based on strength, dominance, and offense type.

The ranking data adds complexity to this picture. Program participants were more likely to assign higher status to nonviolent traits like conflict resolution and downrank traditionally valorized crimes like drug-related offenses and sexual violence. This suggests that participants may redefine internal measures of status, even if their actual position in the hierarchy remains unchanged. These symbolic shifts are meaningful: they point to the potential of programming to reframe how power is conceptualized, even if it doesn't immediately translate into elevated social standing.

Endorsement of Programming and its Symbolic Value

Support for Hypothesis 5 was strong: participants overwhelmingly endorsed the expansion of educational and rehabilitative programs (100% vs. 40% of non-participants). This widespread support indicates that program participants recognize their value, not just as a means of personal growth or reentry preparation, but potentially as a way of transforming prison life itself. These results align with existing studies that emphasize the rehabilitative and social-emotional benefits of prison education (Stickle and Schuster 2023; Torrijo and De Maeyer 2019).

Limitations and Interpretive Cautions

Several limitations temper these findings. The sample size (n=30) limits statistical power, particularly when comparing subgroups. In addition, participants were recruited through community organizations, which may have skewed the sample toward those who were more socially engaged or open to reform, raising concerns about selection bias. Additionally, the survey logic error affects responses to a key question on violence (see Appendix D, Question 22) limits our ability to fully assess one of the study's core questions. These technical and sampling limitations mean that causal claims cannot be made; rather, the findings reflect correlations and patterns that should inform, but not finalize, interpretations about the role of programming in prison social life.

Implication and Future Directions

Despite its limitations, this study contributes important insights to the growing literature on prison education and carceral social structures. While traditional sources of status remain powerful, programming may offer alternative value systems that emphasize trust, emotional intelligence, and long-term self-development. These findings underscore the potential for programming not just to rehabilitative individuals, but to reshape the cultural logic of prison themselves.

Future research should build on these findings using larger, randomized samples, qualitative methods, and longitudinal designs to examine these dynamics evolve over time. Programs that incorporate trauma-informed pedagogy, restorative justice, or peer mentoring may be especially

impactful in disrupting entrenched hierarchies. In all cases, the goal should not just be to prepare people for life after prison, but to make life inside prison more just, equitable, and humane.

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Tables and Figures

Table A1. Demographic characteristics of survey respondents.

	Count	Total (percent)
Age (in years)		
18-24	2	6.7
25-34	3	10.0
35-44	8	26.7
45-54	11	36.7
55-64	1	3.3
65 or older	5	16.7
Race/Ethnicity*		
White	13	40.0
Hispanic or Latino	13	40.0
Black or African American	11	33.3
Asian or Asian American	3	10.0
American Indian or Alaska Native	2	6.7
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1	3.3
Some other race or ethnicity	1	3.3

Time spent incarcerated since the age of 18

Less than 1 year	2	6.7
1-4 years	6	20.0
5-10 years	11	36.7
11-20 years	4	13.3
More than 20 years	7	23.3

**Participated in an educational or
rehabilitative program while incarcerated**

Yes	14	46.7%
No, did not join	5	16.7
No, none offered	10	33.3
Not sure	1	3.3

*Participants were able to select all of the race and/or ethnicities they identified with.

Table A2. Program participation details of survey respondents.

	Count	Total (percent)
Programs participated		
Educational / literacy	12	80.0
Substance abuse recovery	5	33.3
Religious or spiritual development	4	26.7
Other (please specify)*	4	26.7
Vocational training	3	20.0
Length of Program Participation		
1-2 years	2	13.3
3-5 years	3	26.7
More than 5 years	9	60.0
Level of Program Involvement		
Not involved	0	0.0
Moderately Involved	4	26.7
Very Involved	10	73.3

*Participants that selected *Other* wrote in “Fitness group,” “Sports League,” “Self betterment programs,” and “I earned my college degree in prison.”

Figure B1. Perceived Status Rankings of Behaviors and Traits by Program Participation

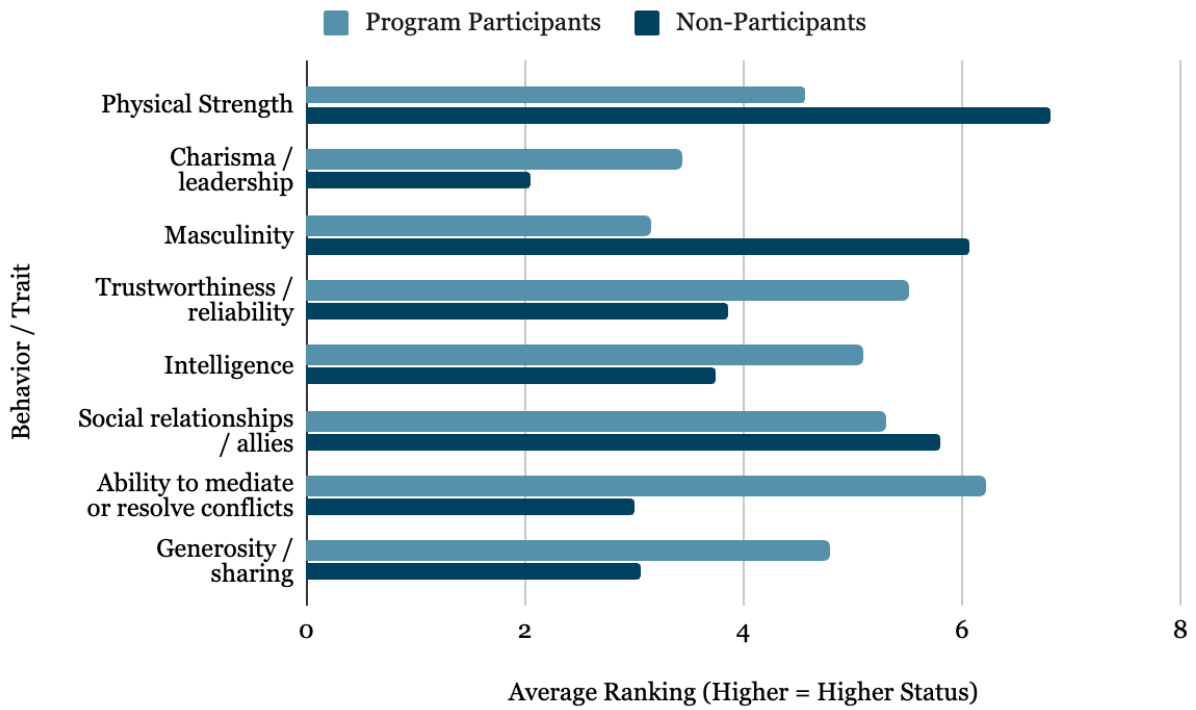
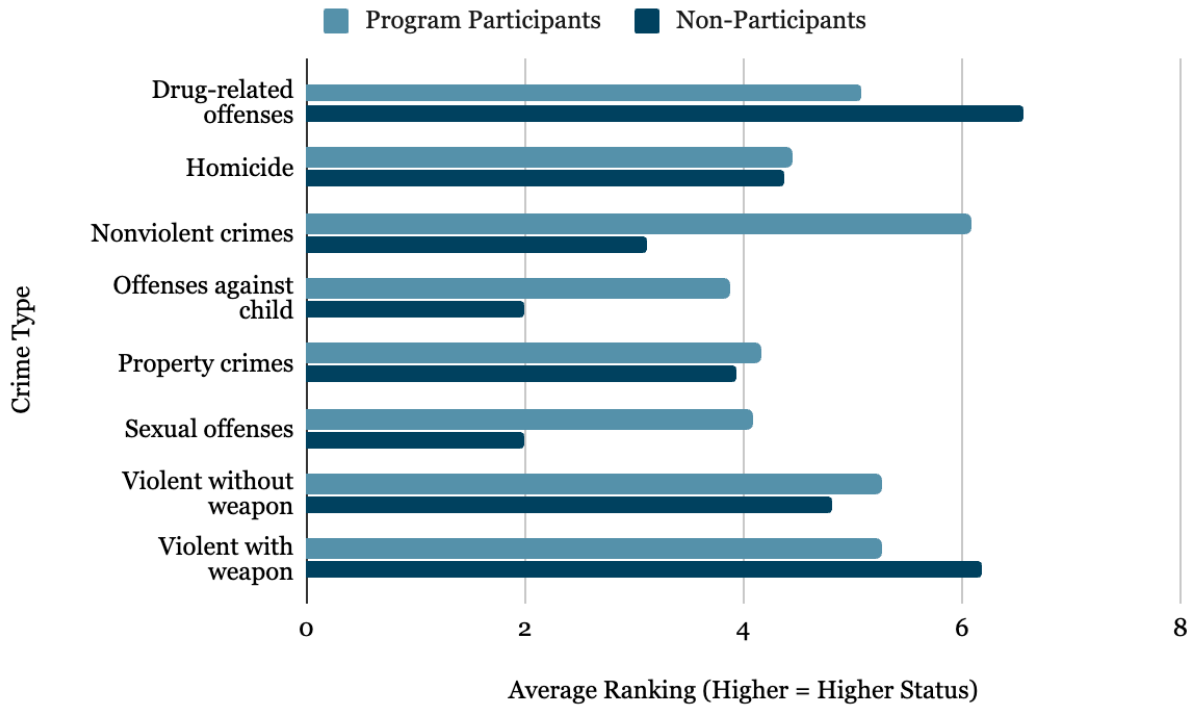


Figure B2. Perceived Status Rankings of Crime Types by Program Participation



Appendix A: Chi-Square Analyses

Table C1. Relationship between Program Participation and Support for More Prison Programs

	Yes, there should be more programs	No, there should not be more programs	Not sure	Total
Program Participant	46.7% (14)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	46.7% (14)
Non-Participant (<i>Did not join any programs offered</i>)	6.7% (2)	6.7% (2)	3.3% (1)	16.7% (5)
Non-Participant (<i>There were no programs offered</i>)	13.3% (4)	0.0% (0)	20.0% (6)	33.3% (10)
Not sure	3.3% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	3.3% (1)
Total	70.0% (21)	6.7% (2)	23.3% (7)	100% (30)

Chi-Square Test
P-Value: 0.000750
Sample Size: 30
Chi Square: 23.1
Degrees of Freedom: 6

Table C2. Relationship between Program Participation and Perception of Frequency of Violence for Social Standing

	Violence was frequently used	Violence was occasionally used	Violence was rarely used	Total
Program Participant	8.0% (2)	20.0% (5)	8.0% (2)	36.0% (9)
Non-Participant (<i>Did not join any programs offered</i>)	16.0% (4)	4.0% (1)	0.0% (0)	20.0% (5)
Non-Participant (<i>There were no programs offered</i>)	24.0% (6)	12/0% (3)	4.0% (1)	40.0% (10)
Not sure	0.0% (0)	4.0% (1)	0.0% (0)	4.0% (1)
Total	48.0% (12)	40.0% (10)	12.0% (3)	100.0% (25)

Chi-Square Test
P-Value: 0.337
Sample Size: 25
Chi Square: 6.82
Degrees of Freedom: 6

Table C3. Relationship between Program Participation and Perception of Use of Violence for Social Standing

	Yes, violence was used	No, violence was not used	Not sure	Total
Program Participant	30.0% (9)	10.0% (3)	6.7% (2)	46.7% (14)
Non-Participant (Did not join any programs offered)	16.7% (5)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	16.7% (5)
Non-Participant (There were no programs offered)	33.3% (10)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (10)
Not sure	3.3% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	3.3% (1)
Total	83.3% (25)	10.0% (3)	6.7% (2)	100.0% (30)

Chi-Square Test
P-Value: 0.334
Sample Size: 30
Chi Square: 6.86
Degrees of Freedom: 6

Table C4. Relationship between Perception of Trust Within Program and Perception of Level of Program Involvement

	Moderately involved in program(s)	Very involved in program(s)	Total
Yes, I trusted people in my program more than others	14.3% (2)	42.9% (6)	57.1% (8)
No, I did not trust people in my program more than others	0.0% (0)	21.4% (3)	21.4% (3)
Not sure	14.3% (2)	7.1% (1)	21.4% (3)
Total	28.6% (4)	71.4% (10)	100.0% (14)

Chi-Square Test
P-Value: 0.184
Sample Size: 14
Chi Square: 3.38
Degrees of Freedom: 2

Table C5. Relationship between Length of Program Involvement and Perception of Trust Within Program

	Yes, I trusted people in my program more than others	No, I did not trust people in my program more than others	Not sure	Total
In program(s) 1-2 years	7.1% (1)	0.0% (0)	7.1% (1)	14.3% (2)
In program(s) 3-5 years	14.3% (2)	0.0% (0)	7.1% (1)	21.4% (3)
In program(s) for more than 5 years	35.7% (5)	21.4% (3)	7.1% (1)	64.3% (9)
Total	57.1% (8)	21.4% (3)	21.4% (3)	100.0% (14)

Chi-Square Test
P-Value: 0.534
Sample Size: 14
Chi Square: 3.14
Degrees of Freedom: 4

Table C6. Relationship between Perception of Impact of Program on Improving With Others and Perception of Level of Involvement in Program

	Moderately involved in program(s)	Very involved in program(s)	Total
Yes, they improved relationships	14.3% (2)	64.3% (9)	78.6% (11)
No noticeable change	7.1% (1)	7.1% (1)	14.3% (2)
Not sure	7.1% (1)	0.0% (0)	7.1% (1)
Total	28.6% (4)	71.4% (10)	100.0% (14)

Chi-Square Test
P-Value: 0.171
Sample Size: 14
Chi Square: 3.53
Degrees of Freedom: 2

Table C7. Relationship between Length of Program Involvement and Perception of Impact of Program on Improving With Others

	Yes, they improved relationships	No noticeable change	Not sure	Total
In program(s) 1-2 years	7.1% (1)	7.1% (1)	0.0% (0)	14.3% (2)
In program(s) 3-5 years	14.3% (2)	0.0% (0)	7.1% (1)	21.4% (3)
In program(s) for more than 5 years	57.1% (8)	7.1% (1)	0.0% (0)	64.3% (9)
Total	78.6% (11)	14.3% (2)	7.1% (1)	100.0% (14)

Chi-Square Test
P-Value: 0.176
Sample Size: 14
Chi Square: 6.33
Degrees of Freedom: 4

Table C8. Relationship between Program Participation and Perception of Interactions With Individual of Lower Status

	I frequently engaged with individuals of lower status	I occasionally engaged with individuals of lower status	I rarely engaged with individuals of lower status	I never engaged with individuals of lower status
Program Participant	26.7% (8)	10.0% (3)	10.0% (3)	0.0% (0)
Non-Participant (<i>Did not join any programs offered</i>)	0.0% (0)	6.7% (2)	10.0% (3)	0.0% (0)
Non-Participant (<i>There were no programs offered</i>)	6.7% (2)	16.7% (5)	6.7% (2)	3.3% (1)
Not sure	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	3.3% (1)	0.0% (0)
Total	33.3% (10)	33.3% (10)	30.0% (9)	3.3% (1)

Chi-Square Test
P-Value: 0.184
Sample Size: 30
Chi Square: 12.6
Degrees of Freedom: 9

Table C9. Relationship between Program Participation and Perception of Interactions With Individual of Higher Status

	I frequently engaged with individuals of higher status	I occasionally engaged with individuals of higher status	I rarely engaged with individuals of higher status	I never engaged with individuals of higher status	Total
Program Participant	30.0% (9)	10.0% (3)	3.3% (1)	3.3% (1)	46.7% (14)
Non-Participant (Did not join any programs offered)	0.0% (0)	6.7% (2)	10.0% (3)	0.0% (0)	16.7% (5)
Non-Participant (There were no programs offered)	0.0% (0)	23.3% (2)	6.7% (2)	3.3% (1)	33.3% (10)
Not sure	0.0% (0)	3.3% (7)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	3.3% (1)
Total	30.0% (9)	43.3% (1)	20.0% (6)	6.7% (2)	100.0% (30)

Chi-Square Test
P-Value: 0.0170
Sample Size: 30
Chi Square: 20.2
Degrees of Freedom: 9

Table C10. Relationship between Perception of Participants' Higher Status and Perception of Program Involvement

	Moderately involved in program(s)	Very involved in program(s)	Total
Yes, individuals who participate for a longer time have a higher status	14.3% (2)	57.1% (8)	71.4% (10)
No, individuals who participate for a longer time do not have a higher status	7.1% (1)	0.0% (0)	7.1% (1)
Not sure	7.1% (1)	14.3% (2)	21.4% (3)
Total	28.6% (4)	71.4% (10)	100.0% (14)

Chi-Square Test
P-Value: 0.235
Sample Size: 14
Chi Square: 2.89
Degrees of Freedom: 2

Table C11. Relationship between Length of Program Participation and Perception of Participants' Higher Status

	Yes	No	Not sure	Total
In program(s) 1-2 years	7.1% (1)	0.0% (0)	7.1% (1)	14.3% (2)
In program(s) 3-5 years	7.1% (1)	7.1% (1)	7.1% (1)	21.4% (3)
In program(s) for more than 5 years	57.1% (8)	0.0% (0)	7.1% (1)	64.3% (9)
Total	71.4% (10)	7.1% (1)	21.4% (3)	100.0% (14)

Chi-Square Test
P-Value: 0.185
Sample Size: 14
Chi Square: 6.20
Degrees of Freedom: 4

Table C12. Relationship between Perception of Programs Ability to Challenge Traditional Ideas of Masculinity and Perception of Program Involvement

	Moderately involved in program(s)	Very involved in program(s)	Total
Yes, programs challenged traditional ideas of masculinity	14.3% (2)	57.1% (8)	71.4% (10)
Not sure	14.3% (2)	14.3% (2)	28.6% (4)
Total	28.6% (4)	71.4% (10)	100.0% (14)

Chi-Square Test
P-Value: 0.262
Sample Size: 14
Chi Square: 1.26
Degrees of Freedom: 1

Table C13. Relationship between Length of Program Involvement and Perception of Programs

Ability to Challenge Traditional Ideas of Masculinity

	Yes, programs challenged traditional ideas of masculinity	Not sure	Total
In program(s) 1-2 years	0.0% (0)	14.3% (2)	14.3% (2)
In program(s) 3-5 years	21.4% (3)	0.0% (0)	21.4% (3)
In program(s) for more than 5 years	50.0% (7)	14.3% (2)	64.3% (9)
Total	71.4% (10)	28.6% (4)	100.0% (14)

Chi-Square Test
P-Value: 0.0412
Sample Size: 14
Chi Square: 6.38
Degrees of Freedom: 2

Table C14. Relationship between Length of Program Involvement and Perception of Pressure to

Conform of Certain Ideas of Masculinity

	Yes, I felt pressured to conform	No, I <i>did not</i> feel pressure to conform	Not sure	Total
Program Participant	16.7% (5)	26.7% (8)	3.3% (1)	46.7% (14)
Non-Participant (<i>Did not join any programs offered</i>)	10.0% (3)	6.7% (2)	0.0% (0)	16.7% (5)
Non-Participant (<i>There were no programs offered</i>)	33.3% (10)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (10)
Not sure	3.3% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	3.3% (1)
Total	63.3% (19)	33.3% (10)	3.3% (1)	100.0% (30)

Chi-Square Test
P-Value: 0.0799
Sample Size: 30
Chi Square: 11.3
Degrees of Freedom: 6

Table C15. Relationship between Program Participation and Perception of Importance of Masculinity in Determining Status

	Yes, masculinity is important to determining status	No, masculinity is not important to determining status	Total
Program Participant	26.7% (8)	20.0% (6)	46.7% (14)
Non-Participant (Did not join any programs offered)	3.3% (1)	0.0% (0)	3.3% (1)
Non-Participant (There were no programs offered)	33.3% (10)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (10)
Not sure	16.7% (5)	0.0% (0)	16.7% (5)
Total	80.0% (24)	20.0% (6)	100.0% (30)

Chi-Square Test
P-Value: 0.0356
Sample Size: 30
Chi Square: 8.57
Degrees of Freedom: 3

Table C16. Relationship between Perception of Program Impact on Position in Hierarchy and Perception of Program Involvement

	Moderately involved in program(s)	Very involved in program(s)	Total
Yes, programs positively influenced my position in the hierarchy	14.3% (2)	64.3% (9)	78.6% (11)
No impact	7.1% (1)	7.1% (1)	14.3% (2)
Not sure	7.1% (1)	0.0% (0)	7.1% (1)
Total	28.6% (4)	71.4% (10)	100.0% (14)

Chi-Square Test
P-Value: 0.171
Sample Size: 14
Chi Square: 3.53
Degrees of Freedom: 2

Table C17. Relationship between Program Participation and Perception of Oneself’s Position in the Social Hierarchy

	At the very top	Higher than most	In the middle	Lower the most	At the very bottom	Not sure	Total
Program Participant	3.3% (1)	16.7% (5)	6.7% (2)	6.7% (2)	0.0% (0)	13.3% (4)	46.7% (14)
Non-Participant (Did not join any programs offered)	3.3% (1)	0.0% (0)	6.7% (2)	3.3% (1)	3.3% (1)	0.0% (0)	16.7% (5)
Non-Participant (There were no programs offered)	0.0% (0)	3.3% (1)	16.7% (5)	10.0% (3)	0.0% (0)	3.3% (1)	33.3% (10)
Not sure	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	3.3% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	3.3% (1)
Total	6.7% (2)	20.0% (6)	33.3% (10)	20.0% (6)	3.3% (1)	16.7% (5)	100.0% (30)

Chi-Square Test
P-Value: 0.282
Sample Size: 30
Chi Square: 17.6
Degrees of Freedom: 15

Table C18. Relationship between Impact of Program Participation on Position in Social Hierarchy and Length of Program Involvement

	In program for 1-2 years	In program for 3-5 years	In program fo more than 5 years	Total
Yes, programs positively influenced my position in the hierarchy	0.0% (0)	21.4% (3)	57.1% (8)	78.6% (11)
No impact	7.1% (1)	0.0% (0)	7.1% (1)	14.3% (2)
Not sure	7.1% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	7.1% (1)
Total	14.3% (2)	21.4% (3)	64.3% (9)	100.0% (14)

Chi-Square Test
P-Value: 0.0380
Sample Size: 14
Chi Square: 10.1
Degrees of Freedom: 4

Appendix B: Consent Procedures and Confidentiality Measures

Acknowledging that participants are a designated vulnerable population, extensive steps were taken to protect respondents' identities. Prior to participating in the study, the recruitment announcement directed potential participants to the survey link, which opened up to the informed consent form. The survey was conducted through Duke Qualtrics, a survey tool approved by the Duke Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Duke Office of Information Technology (OIT). The informed consent described the purpose of and key information about the study, the nature of their involvement, and their rights as a participant (see Appendix D). At the end of the informed consent, participants were asked to indicate their statement of consent by clicking the designated button, a method of obtaining consent approved by the Duke IRB (protocol ID #2025-0226).

Survey data was stored on Duke Qualtrics, which is a secure network. I was the only individual with access to the survey responses. No information revealing direct identifiers, such as names, emails, or IP addresses were collected to protect the identities of participants. This further ensured that their privacy and confidentiality are protected. Data is reported in aggregate form to prevent tracing information back to individual participants.

Appendix C: Recruitment Announcement

Hello,

I invite you to participate in a survey as a part of a research study that examines the role of prison educational programs in the social life of incarcerated men. This study explores how people interact with each other and how educational or rehabilitative programs might change these dynamics.

Key Details:

- **Purpose:** To learn how programs like the ones you are a part of impact your social interactions in prison.
- **What to Expect:** The survey has 24 questions plus two exercises and will take about 12 minutes to complete. You would answer multiple-choice questions and complete two short activities about your experiences and views.
- **Confidentiality:** Your answers will remain private. No names or identifying information will be included in the research.
- **Voluntary Participation:** Taking the survey is completely up to you. You can skip any questions or stop anytime, without consequences.

Your insights are valuable and can help improve understanding of prison life and educational programs' role in shaping relationships and behaviors.

If you would like to learn more about this study, please open and carefully read the consent form.

Thank you for considering adding your voice to this important study!

Sincerely,

Kelly Araujo

Duke University, Undergraduate Researcher

Appendix D: Qualtrics Survey

Block 1: Opening

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. This survey is part of a research project that examines the role of prison educational programs in the social life of incarcerated men. Your experiences and insights are important for understanding these dynamics in depth.

Your responses will remain confidential and you will not be asked to reveal your identity.

Participation is voluntary, and you can skip questions you are uncomfortable answering or do not understand. This survey consists of 23 multiple-choice questions plus 2 exercises, which can all be completed in approximately 12 minutes.

Block 2: Informed Consent

Purpose of this study: The purpose of this study is to examine the role of prison educational programs in the social life of incarcerated men.

Key information & introduction:

My name is Kelly Araujo and I am an undergraduate researcher at Duke University. I am studying Public Policy and Sociology with a minor in Education. I am interested in how social hierarchies form and operate within prisons that offer educational programs. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are a formerly incarcerated male and at least 18 years of age.

What will you be asked to do?

Should you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to respond to multiple-choice survey questions about your views and experiences in prison. There are two optional exercises at the end. You are not required to respond to all of the questions and you can opt-out of the survey at any time and for any reason without penalty.

How long will the survey take?

The study would involve a one-time survey which can be completed in less than 12 minutes. No ongoing participation beyond the survey will be required.

What are the risks, inconveniences, and benefits of this study?

The survey asks about your experiences in prison, which could be emotionally challenging for some participants. However, responses remain confidential and will be reported in a manner that protects the identity of all participants.

Although there is no monetary compensation for participating in the study, the findings could lead to improvements in educational programs in prisons.

Your decision to either participate or not participate in this study will have no effect on your current or possible future incarcerate status.

Confidentiality:

Your confidentiality is very important. All information you provide during the study will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be asked to provide your name. As such, identifying details

will not be used in any reports or publications. Additionally, any data that could potentially identify you will be removed or remain as confidential as possible. Data collected will be stored securely on the Protected Network for Research, which has been approved by the Duke Campus Institutional Review Board and the Duke Office of Information Technology as secure locations to store data. I am the only individual with access to the survey responses. All data and reports will be destroyed after I submit my thesis in July 2025. The final research product will be available for you to read after completion.

Voluntary nature of participation:

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to choose whether or not to participate, and you can withdraw at any time and for any reason without any negative consequences. Given that no directly identifying material will be collected, incomplete surveys will not be traced to you.

Who do you call if you have questions or problems?

If any concerns or questions arise, you can contact me at kelly.araujo@duke.edu or my thesis advisor Dr. Hedy Lee at hedwig.lee@duke.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, contact Duke University's Institutional Review Board at campusirb@duke.edu or at 919-684-3030. If contacting the IRB, please reference protocol ID #2025-0226.

Skip to End of Survey if *No, I do not consent to par...* is Selected

Statement of consent:

If you do not consent to participate in the study, please exit this document. If you consent, please click the box below to participate in the study.

- Yes, I consent to participating in the study
- No, I do not consent to participating in the study

Block 3: Background Information

Skip to End of Survey if *Under 18* is Selected

1. What is your age in years?

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65 or older

2. What race/ethnicity do you identify most closely with? Select all that apply.

- White
- Black or African American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian or Asian American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- Hispanic or Latino

Some other race or ethnicity

3. How much time have you spent incarcerated since the age of 18? If you do not remember, use your best guess.

Less than 1 year

1-4 years

5-10 years

11-20 years

More than 20 years

Skip to End of Block if *No, I did not join any prog...* is Selected

Skip to End of Block if *No, there were none in the...* is Selected

4. Did you participate in an educational or rehabilitative program while you were incarcerated?

Yes

No, I did not join any programs being offered

No, there were none in the prison

Not sure

5. Which programs did you participate in? (Select all that apply)

Educational/Literacy

Vocational training

Substance abuse recovery

- Religious or spiritual development
- Other (please specify): _____

6. How long did you participate in the program(s)?

- Less than 1 year
- 1-2 years
- 3-5 years
- More than 5 years

7. How involved were you in these programs (in general)?

- Not involved
- Moderately involved
- Very involved

Block 4: Survey Questions

In the following questions, answer as they relate to the **hierarchy only between incarcerated individuals**, not including staff or any other employee across any/all facilities, **while incarcerated**.

8. **Social hierarchies** are defined as a system where people or things are ranked one above the other based on status. In simple terms, it's like a ladder where some individuals or groups are at the top, others are in the middle, and some are at the bottom.

In your opinion, were social hierarchies present in prison between incarcerated individuals?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Display this question

If Did you participate in an educational or rehabilitative program while you were incarcerated?

Yes is Selected

And Social hierarchies are defined as a system where people or things are ranked one above the other... Yes is Selected

Or Social hierarchies are defined as a system where people or things are ranked one above the other... Not sure is Selected

9. Do you feel that your participation in programs influenced your position in the social hierarchy?

- Yes, positively
- Yes, negatively
- No impact
- Not sure

Display this question

If Social hierarchies are defined as a system where people or things are ranked one above the other... Yes is Selected

Or Social hierarchies are defined as a system where people or things are ranked one above the other... Not sure is Selected

10. Were there any specific behaviors or characteristics that determined someone's position in the hierarchy? Select all that apply.

- Physical strength
- Charisma / leadership
- Masculinity
- Trustworthiness / reliability
- Social relationships / allies / who you know
- Ability to mediate or resolve conflicts
- Generosity / sharing

Display this question

If Social hierarchies are defined as a system where people or things are ranked one above the other... Yes is Selected

Or Social hierarchies are defined as a system where people or things are ranked one above the other... Not sure is Selected

11. Compared to others, where did you see yourself in the social hierarchy among incarcerated individuals?

- At the very top
- Higher than most
- In the middle
- Lower than most

- At the very bottom
- Not sure

12. **Masculinity** refers to the traits and behaviors that people think are a part of being a boy or a man, which can be different in every culture and person.

Would you describe the role of masculinity as important in determining status within prison?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

13. Did you feel pressured to conform to certain ideas of masculinity in prison?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Display this question

If *Did you participate in an educational or rehabilitative program while you were incarcerated?*

Yes is Selected

Or *Did you participate in an educational or rehabilitative program while you were incarcerated?*

No, I did not join any programs being offered is Selected

14. Did educational or rehabilitative programs challenge traditional ideas of masculinity in prison?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Display this question

If Did you participate in an educational or rehabilitative program while you were incarcerated?

Yes is Selected

Or Did you participate in an educational or rehabilitative program while you were incarcerated?

No, I did not join any programs being offered is Selected

15. **Status** is a person's position or level of importance in a group or community.

Did individuals who participate in programs for a longer time have higher status in prison?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

16. How often did you voluntarily interact with individuals of higher social status in prison?

- Frequently
- Occasionally
- Rarely

Never

17. How often did you voluntarily interact with individuals of lower social status in prison?

Frequently

Occasionally

Rarely

Never

Display this question

If Did you participate in an educational or rehabilitative program while you were incarcerated?

Yes is Selected

18. Did participation in educational or rehabilitative programs help improve relationships with other incarcerated individuals (while in prison)?

Yes, they have improved relationships

No, they have made relationships worse

No noticeable change

Not sure

Display this question

If Did you participate in an educational or rehabilitative program while you were incarcerated?

Yes is Selected

19. Did you trust people in your program more than those who were not in your program?

Yes

- No
- Not sure

20. **Violence** is any action, behavior, or threat that causes harm, fear, or injury to another person. It can be physical, emotional, or verbal (i.e., bullying or harassment, organized attacks, physical fights, etc).

Was violence used to maintain or improve social standing in prison?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Display this question

If *Was violence used to maintain or improve social standing in prison?* Yes is Selected

21. How often was violence used to maintain or improve social standing in prison?

- Frequently
- Occasionally
- Rarely
- Never

Display this question

If *Did you participate in an educational or rehabilitative program while you were incarcerated?*

Yes is Selected

And Did you participate in an educational or rehabilitative program while you were incarcerated? No, I did not join any programs being offered is Selected

22. Did participation in programs reduce the importance of violence for social status?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

23. In your opinion, should there be more educational and/or rehabilitative programs in prisons?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Block 5: Social Hierarchy Activities

Below is a list of different types of behaviors and traits. Imagine a ladder that represents the social hierarchy in prison among incarcerated individuals. The top rungs of the ladder are for characteristics associated with the highest status, while the bottom rungs are for characteristics associated with the lowest status. Place them in the order in which you believe they are ranked in the prison hierarchy.

Behaviors/Traits Categories (Drag and Rank):

Please rank these from 1 (highest status) to 8 (lowest status) based on how you think they are viewed by others in the prison hierarchy.

- Physical strength (i.e., being physically imposing, skilled in fights)
- Charisma / leadership (i.e., ability to influence others or lead groups)
- Masculinity (i.e., conforming to traditional male stereotypes of toughness)
- Trustworthiness / reliability (i.e., keeping promises, loyalty within social groups)
- Intelligence (i.e., being resourceful, problem-solving ability)
- Social relationships / allies / who you know (i.e., number and quality of connections within the prison)
- Ability to mediate or resolve conflicts (i.e., being seen as a peacemaker or negotiator)
- Generosity / sharing (i.e., sharing commissary items or resources)



Below is a list of different types of crimes. Imagine a ladder that represents the social hierarchy in prison among incarcerated individuals. The top rungs of the ladder are for crimes associated with the highest status, while the bottom rungs are for crimes associated with the lowest status. Place the crimes in the order in which you believe they are ranked in the prison hierarchy.

Crime Categories (Drag and Rank):

Please rank these from 1 (highest status) to 8 (lowest status) based on how you think they are viewed in the prison hierarchy.

1. Drug-related offenses (i.e., possession, trafficking)
2. Homicide (i.e., attempted, first-degree, second-degree)
3. Nonviolent (i.e., identity theft, fraud)
4. Offenses against child (i.e., child abuse, exploitation)
5. Property crimes (I.e., theft, burglary)
6. Sexual offenses (i.e., assault, abuse)
7. Violent without a weapon (i.e., assault)
8. Violent with a weapon (i.e., armed robbery)



Block 6:

This concludes the survey. Thank you for sharing your experiences and perspectives. Your participation helps provide a greater understanding of the dynamics within prison environments and the role of educational programs in shaping these dynamics.