

# WHITE PAPER

## Can Yoga Help Mitigate the Military-to-Prison Pipeline?

The Give Back Yoga Foundation | [givebackyoga.com](http://givebackyoga.com)

For many American veterans, the transition back into civilian life is challenging at best. While the majority of veterans return home confident, stronger, and broadened from their service, others struggle with a host of service-related injuries—some diagnosable, some less easily isolated—which put them at risk for depression, homelessness, suicide and, in a growing number of cases, incarceration. Although there are limited resources to effectively explain this military-to-prison pipeline, many speculate that the skills learned and developed by veterans in the military translate into impulsivity or violence in civilian life. These learned military behaviors, commonly referred to as “battlemind” by the Department of Veterans Affairs, combined with physical changes of higher brain regions (i.e., the hippocampus and the medial frontal cortex), sometimes result in criminal behavior.

Dr. Jonathan Shay, VA staff psychiatrist and author of *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* and *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*, states quite bluntly that prolonged combat service equips the warrior with skills and instincts—including stealth, the ability to control one’s fear, and the capacity to respond with instant and lethal force—that have no non-criminal equivalent in civil society (as cited in Shay, 2012).

It is unclear how many veterans are currently incarcerated in the U.S. The most recent U.S. government document on the topic, in May of 2007, compared the incarceration rates for veterans and non-veterans in both state and federal prisons. However, these statistics are from 2004, when American-involved wars, particularly Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) were young, and included only 254 facilities (out of over 12,000 nationwide.)

### **Current Discourse and Research On Incarcerated Veterans**

The latest government report on incarcerated veterans was produced in 2004 by the U.S. Department of Justice (Noonan & Mumola). It found that in 2004, approximately 10% of state prisoners, or 140,000 inmates, documented prior military service. At that time, Iraq and Afghanistan veterans already made up 4% of the total veteran population incarcerated in both state and federal prisons. A decade later, the number of incarcerated veterans continues to rapidly rise. In August 2008, the Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS) National GAINS Center report claims there were 1.6 million inmates in state and federal prisons, approximately 9.4%, or 223,000 of whom were veterans. It can cost upwards of \$250,000 per year to keep a veteran inmate in prison, if you factor in all other direct and indirect costs that tend to come with it, like loss of productivity, the escalated health and mental health costs, and suffering of family.



CA State Prison at San Quentin, CA

In 2004, veterans of the Iraq-Afghanistan eras comprised only 4% of veterans in both state and federal prison. For this particular demographic, the average length of military service was approximately four years. Veterans reportedly had shorter criminal records than non-veterans in state prison, yet they had longer prison sentences. Only 62% of incarcerated veterans were honorably discharged from the military in 2004. Veterans (57%) were more commonly serving time for violent offenses than their non-veteran counterparts (47%.) Additionally, they were more likely to be incarcerated for homicide (15%) and sexual assault (23%) than non-veterans (12% and 9%, respectively.) Due to the violent nature of many of the crimes committed by incarcerated veterans, more than a third of veterans in state prison had maximum sentences of at least 20 years, life, or a death sentence.

The predicament of soldiers discharged from the military “under conditions other than honorable” is especially vexing. Although no federal agency publishes the number of “bad paper” discharges, it is reported that almost 80,000 soldiers were given them between 2006 and 2012—sometimes for serious offenses, but more often for minor infractions including missing duty or abuse of alcohol or drugs. Serious or not, the behavior in question is often due to service-related trauma and stress. “Bad paper” discharges render the veterans who hold them ineligible for the health care, housing, employment and education benefits they so critically need when transitioning from the military back into society. When those veterans who most need services are unable to access them, homelessness, substance abuse and involvement with the criminal justice system seem all but foreordained (Carter, 2013).



James Fox of Prison Yoga Project teaching at CA State Prison (SQ)

## How May We Effectively Help Our Veterans?

News sources have illustrated many veterans’ personal stories of reintegration to civilian life. Otherwise well-mannered, peaceful, and amiable individuals return from military service exhibiting extreme anxiety and irritability, substance addiction, and post-traumatic stress. All too often, these men and women re-enter communities where there is little collective understanding of the combat experience, and limited resources—whether government or community-based—to support them in its aftermath. Soldiers who have done and witnessed things that, though unavoidable on the battlefield, are horrifying and egregious by civilian standards have few opportunities to unburden themselves; the isolation they experience greatly impedes the healing process. Combat trauma afflicts the sufferer at every level: physically, mentally and emotionally; as an individual and as a member of society. It follows that it must also be addressed on all of these levels.

While no one therapeutic modality works for every trauma-afflicted veteran, there is a clear and pronounced need for community-based programs where veterans can share and process their trauma in a safe setting. At San Quentin State Prison in California, incarcerated veterans have this opportunity. Veterans Healing Veterans from the Inside Out (VHV-FTIO) was founded in 2012 by incarcerated former Marine Ron Self. The program brings together research-based healing practices which support and complement each other to address layers of trauma, whether incurred during military service, in its aftermath or subsequently in prison.



Prison Yoga Project class at CA State Prison (SQ)

Meeting weekly over the better part of a year, group members write personal narratives based on prompts that probe key relationships and experiences, and read these aloud to the group. Participants support and challenge each other in an often-emotional process of developing insight into their circumstances and decisions. Each group is a safe-haven, and the value of the trust that develops among members—especially in the prison setting, where trust is always endangered—is itself an essential component of the healing process.

Combat trauma narratives are much more than words on a page: they are stories rooted deeply in the body. With each iteration of a veterans' story, new details are uncovered and, with them, the terrifying emotions that accompanied the original event. Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, pioneering researcher in the field of trauma, says "the memory of trauma is imprinted on the human organism. I don't think you can overcome it unless you learn to have a friendly relationship with your body." Through a partnership with Prison Yoga Project, VHV-FTIO members have the opportunity to participate in yoga and meditation practices which are specifically geared for trauma survivors. Trauma-sensitive yoga and meditation allow members to process their work in the group at a physical level, releasing long-lived tensions and memories held in the body.



Students at CA State Prison (SQ)

Taken together, these practices foster the self-awareness and behavioral change that allow returning veterans—whether from combat or prison—to make successful transitions back into society. The VHV-FTIO program, which to date has served over fifty incarcerated veterans and a smaller number of free veterans, provides a model for a community-based program that would be equally effective outside the prison walls. Indeed, part of

Self's mission is to implement a policy shift within the military that would mandate participation in the VHV-FTIO program before discharge from any active duty component. Self stresses that a period of decompression and re-socialization is necessary before returning home—hopefully diverting veterans at risk for involvement with the criminal justice system (Schware, 2013).

## Yoga for Prisoners and Veterans

Yoga has been appearing throughout prisons nationwide. There is growing scientific research being conducted on yoga and Post Traumatic Stress (PTS), revealing that this mindfulness practice is a viable treatment option for symptoms of PTS. A recent study conducted at Oxford University suggests that yoga can improve prisoners' mental health, and may also have positive effects on impulsive behavior, both of which are possible contributing factors to criminal actions. At present, there is no official tracking of the number of yoga programs in prisons.

The two doctors who led the study at the Departments of Experimental Psychology and Psychiatry at Oxford

University suggest encouraging news about offering yoga as a plausible practice to assist the healing of our prisoners and veterans from PTS or related issues. The study group that did the (10-week) yoga course showed an improvement in positive mood, a decrease in stress and greater accuracy in a computer test of impulsivity and attention. A little mindfulness training can redirect attention and increase self-control.



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The Prison Yoga Project (<http://prisonyoga.org>), which started at San Quentin State Prison, is a shining example of an effective diversion program for incarcerated prisoners to help address some of their most common issues. The Prison Yoga Project was founded by James Fox on a strong belief in treatment services over punitive approaches—also known as 'restorative justice'—for prisoners. Not only are yoga programs in prisons reducing violent incidents and infractions, they are a cost-effective means to help with addiction recovery and impulse control. Most all programs in the U.S. are delivered by Prison Yoga Project volunteers.

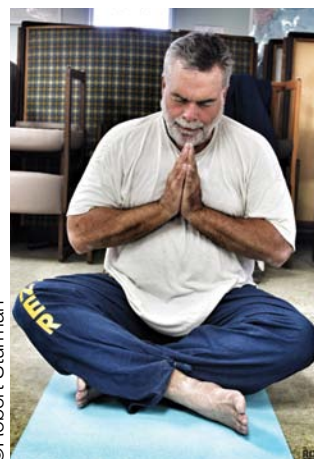
"Yoga is one tool that needs to be in the toolbox," says Self. "It allows the body to let go of things the mind has chosen to ignore. If the body is in pain, it provides a distraction, a reason for the mind to not face the traumas that are lingering in the shadows of a veteran's psyche. If the body is healing through yoga and meditation, the mind also can heal."

## Conclusion

Incarcerated veterans require special attention and specific programs, due to their higher risk for homelessness, substance abuse, mental illness and health issues. We are hopeful the Department of Justice's next report on the state of incarcerated veterans will provide more accuracy to develop

sustainable and supportive programs in addressing the numerous intersectional issues facing our veterans today.

Meanwhile, if we want to reduce the military to prison pipeline, we need to continue and increase our support of training programs for yoga teachers who wish to teach yoga to veterans and incarcerated veterans.



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Student at CA State Prison (SQ)

## Related Resources

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### Give Back Yoga Foundation

The Give Back Yoga Foundation believes in making yoga available to those who might not otherwise have the opportunity to experience the transformational benefits of this powerful practice. We do this by supporting and funding certified yoga teachers in all traditions to offer the teachings of yoga to under-served and under-resourced socioeconomic segments of the community and inspire grassroots social change and community cooperation. [www.givebackyoga.org](http://www.givebackyoga.org)



### Prison Yoga Project

The goal of the Prison Yoga Project is to establish Yoga and Mindfulness practices in prisons and rehabilitation facilities, and to provide training for Yoga instructors interested in teaching to at-risk or trauma impacted populations in prisons, residential rehabilitation facilities, and community programs. Prison Yoga Project advises prisons, private entities and/or individuals about initiating yoga programs as part of a rehabilitation program, and provides an evidence based and trauma informed methodology for doing so. [www.prisonyoga.org](http://www.prisonyoga.org)



### Veterans Healing Veterans from the Inside Out

Veterans Healing Veterans from the Inside Out works where the military meets the criminal justice system to heal wounds that can result in suicide and incarceration among our nation's warriors. [www.veteranshealingveterans.org](http://www.veteranshealingveterans.org)