

← BACK TO THE START



Reflections Behind Bars

The new narratives born out of Back to the Start will dive into the root causes of inequities starting at birth.

BACK TO THE START

Our Work

Back to the Start produces powerful narratives underscoring the need for critical investments in early childhood and family resources. Co-led by incarcerated individuals at San Quentin and a former Chief Physician and Surgeon of California's prison health care system, the new narrative series is written by incarcerated persons reflecting on the arc of their lives from childhood to incarceration. This initiative is grounded in the power of stories and provides a historically missing viewpoint to help build empathy and a shared understanding of the legacy of our nation's systemic and racial inequities starting at birth.



Our Purpose

If you ask participants why they chose to join Back to the Start and share personal and often painful reflections from the time in their life when they were most vulnerable, you will hear the same answer—they hope their stories will “make a difference so that others won't have to go through the same thing.” After having been incarcerated and disempowered for years or sometimes decades, participants are discovering that even behind bars their stories are important and have power. Back to the Start gives them a platform through storytelling to be part of the solution in addressing the root causes of health and systemic inequities impacting their community.



Our Vision

Our vision is to reshape our nation's social contract with the most vulnerable of our society to focus on investments in upstream development and growth rather than paying an even higher price on downstream systems, such as mass incarceration, that are only treating the symptoms of our policy failures.

THE POWER OF **JUST** STORIES

It has become well-recognized that **stories drive social and policy change**. Rather than data, persuasion, or even logic, stories are what change hearts and minds. This is because we are hardwired to view the world through stories which conjure images that, consciously or unconsciously, inform our beliefs. The most impactful stories are personal narratives that provide memorable first-hand accounts. Successful campaigns have consistently demonstrated this, from the Civil Rights Movement to the legalization of same sex-marriage. Narratives create collective societal memories and beliefs with lasting impacts. This informs our values and what we accept as normative, or “right” and “wrong”. Even in a society that is polarized, stories have the unique power to establish common ground in our collective consciousness—and to disrupt the dominant narrative that normalizes inequities and oppression.



“Working at San Quentin State Prison, I had the opportunity to get to know patients over several years, and kept hearing the same stories about growing up in environments filled with trauma, violence, and/or poverty. I eventually realized that that in order to fundamentally improve outcomes for my patients in prison, we really need to delve deeper than treating symptoms and illnesses and do something to address the cycle of systemic and health inequities that got them there in the first place. These stories need to get out to humanize and break down these issues for the general public and policy makers to see the missed opportunities and how we can do better.”

— Jenny Espinoza, MD



OUR APPROACH

A NEW POINT OF VIEW

The Storytellers

There are numerous studies from economic, educational, health, and policy experts demonstrating that investments focusing on prevention, particularly during childhood, have the highest effectiveness and return on investment of any public policy strategy. These arguments, however, spanning several decades, have failed to garner broad support. Back to the Start aims to change this by providing narratives that have been missing in these campaigns. Our storytellers are uniquely qualified and compelling spokespersons due to their lived experience. This is because **prisons in America represent the most distilled embodiment of our failed policies, which have across a lifetime disproportionately harmed individuals from poor and minority communities.** These are the communities that are most impacted by incarceration because they are entrenched with the same structural barriers and inequities, including poverty and systemic racism, that are at the root of the cradle-to-prison pipeline.

The Context

The fact that the storytellers are behind bars in prison helps to put things into perspective for the audience. The context connects the dots on the tragic and often preventable downstream consequences of our policy and system failures which lack adequate investments in disadvantaged children and families. The stories shift the focus to systems failures rather than blaming the individual (child). It illustrates the irony that although we as a society are unwilling to prioritize investments in upstream evidence-based childhood interventions, we remain complacent with massive expenditures on remediation and mass incarceration.

Giving a Voice to the Voiceless

Our storytellers are filling the void of absent narratives in this space. While the most impactful stories are first-hand narratives, first-hand accounts are generally lacking in movements advocating for early childhood interventions since, as a practical matter, young children do not have the agency to speak up and publicly share their stories.

A New Narrative

In addition to constructing a new narrative about the personal and societal costs of inadequate investments in upstream early childhood interventions, Back to the Start is also simultaneously changing the narrative about the incarcerated population by providing a window into who they are now on a human level as well as the circumstances under which they entered into the criminal justice system.



BACKGROUND

An Unlevel Playing Field

Many factors contribute to shaping a child's first few years of life. These factors begin even before the child is born and span both the family and community environment. Children raised in poverty and under-resourced environments experience an accumulation of disadvantages including higher rates of low birth weight, unstable family structures, trauma, and poor academic performance, which according to the Children's Defense Fund (CDF), places "these children in a trajectory that leads to marginalized lives, imprisonment and often premature death." As CDF puts it, "They were not derailed from the right track; they never got on it."

Adverse Childhood Experiences

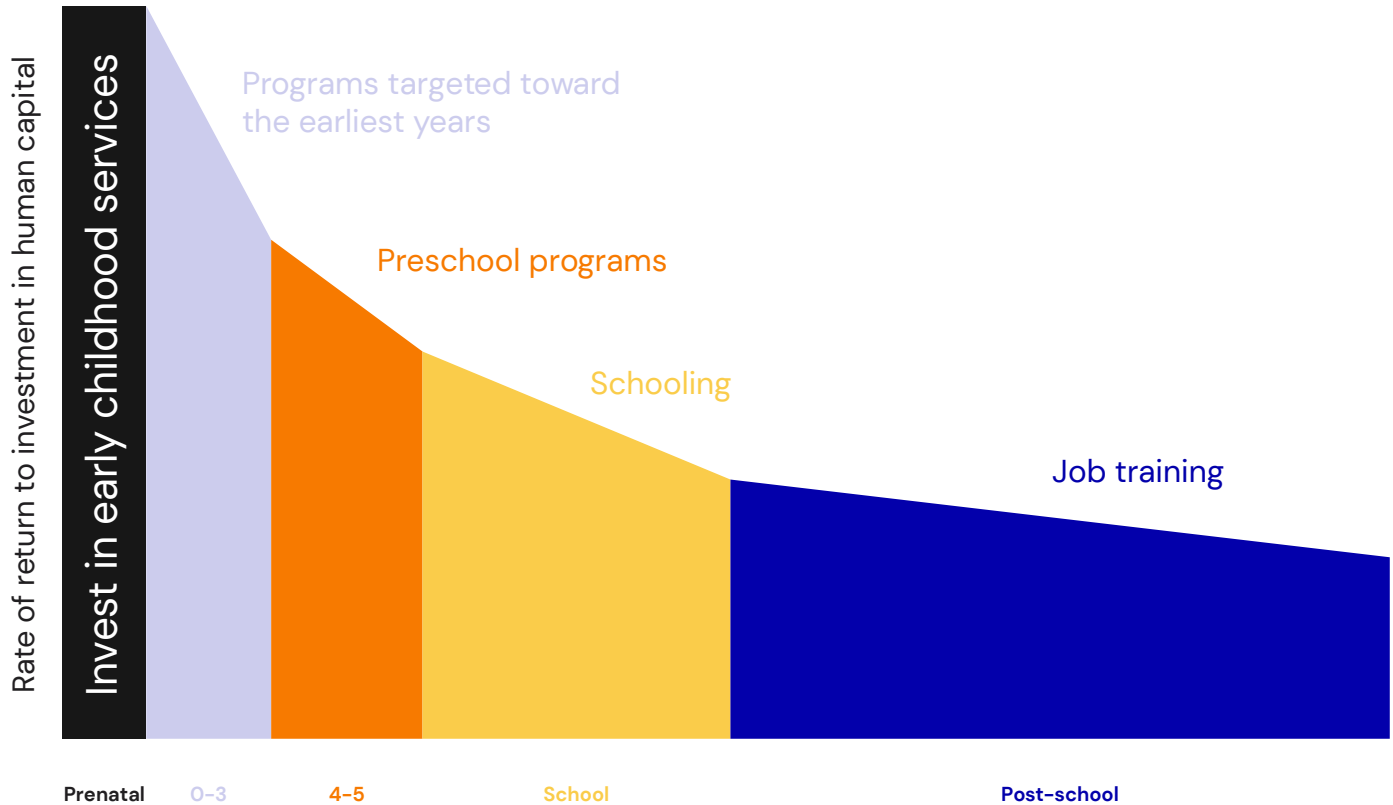
Studies also demonstrate that children from households lacking adequate financial resources and support services experience a significantly higher rate of Adverse Childhood Events (or ACEs) such as neglect, abuse, and exposure to violence. ACEs have significant life-long impacts on physical and mental health as an adult.



Childhood experiences are the foundations upon which we view and build our interactions with the world. They are what nurture us, or scar us, and ultimately make us who we are today.

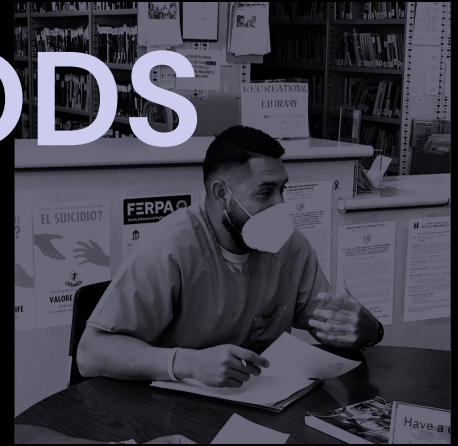
Investing Upstream Also Makes Economic Cents

Studies have consistently demonstrated that investments in early childhood development have the highest economic return. Nobel Prize winner and Economics Professor James Heckman demonstrated that investing in early childhood education can result in a 7% to 10% per year return on investment, with a 13% return for programs focused on the first five years of a child's life. This is more than the average annual return on the stock market. Expanded investment in these programs would actually stimulate the economy and reduce that national deficit by increasing productivity and tax revenue in addition to reducing costs in social services, health care, and the criminal justice system.



Adapted from Heckman, James J. (2008). "Schools, Skills and Synapses," *Economic Inquiry*, 46(3): 289-324

OUR METHODS



Back to the Start takes the form of a writing workshop series with participation from incarcerated individuals at San Quentin State Prison. Participants are given a range of prompts, six in total, exploring their childhood experiences. Topics include reflections about their home and school environment, childcare, access to support services, involvement in the foster system, trauma and loss, and first contact with the criminal justice system. Writings are workshopped together in small groups, including a monolingual Spanish-speaking group, over the course of weekly sessions led by experienced incarcerated writing facilitators/mentors. Using a trauma-informed approach, the workshops also include processing sessions to ensure participants have strategies and a space to process emotions that may be triggered by their reflections. After the narratives are collected, based on the themes and content of the stories, the organizers help participants edit and compile their stories into cohesive, final pieces which may take the form of a podcast, documentary, and/or written publication for public dissemination.



one day out of curiosity, I picked up the water hose and put it to my eye because I wanted to see where water came from. I turned it on. The water felt like a rock hitting me in the eye and I took off running outside the house screaming.

My foster mom beat me for leaving the water on. I was very much afraid of her and tried to run away a couple of times at night but I always came back because it was dark, dogs were barking, and because I didn't know anyone else nor did I have anywhere to go.

Social Services / mother because Skid Row, but I mom, and I did

My seven-year-crying kicking & jabs and hold foster home & smiling faces; social worker expected with a choice - we were bar switches who would try to from her grin lock me in the doors

She would would hate came to g

her, and I tried to run away a couple I came back because it was dark, I also because I didn't know anyone else to go and I was scared out of

field workers working their fields The hogs were like pets and at times participate in them being n in the head and literally gutting sides was so gross, it was st unless I was somehow getting smething I didn't do, I was trau- lighter of the animals, and my

was, but one day a car so black and silver Ford id a black man. She came at she was there to get it turned out, she was u she

OUR TEAM



Brian Asey is a 54-year-old father of three and has been incarcerated since 1998. He is passionate about using multimedia resources to dispel the negative images of the incarcerated at San Quentin portrayed by mainstream media. Brian has been involved in many projects including TEDx San Quentin and is the executive director of the San Quentin Prison Report, a video and radio production outlet that gives a voice to the incarcerated population of San Quentin.



Edwin E. Chavez says, “My purpose is to bring healing and compassion to all those who have not yet explored their childhood traumas.” Chavez is a bilingual facilitator and the Spanish Director for Humans of San Quentin. He chairs the Spanish Journalism Guild for San Quentin News and is a member of the newspaper’s Editorial Board. He is also a member of the San Quentin News video production team. Chavez is a facilitator for No More Tears, an alternative to violence program. He is one of the incarcerated mentors that provides correspondence classes to fellow prisoners, called AIDA (Awareness into Domestic Abuse). Chavez has been incarcerated for 28 years.



Juan Moreno Haines is an incarcerated journalist and member of the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ). He is the senior editor of San Quentin News and a contributing writer for Solitary Watch. He has won many awards for his work, including the SPJ Silver Heart in 2017 and the California Newspaper Association First Place prize for his coverage of COVID-19 at San Quentin in 2020. His pieces have been published in the Los Angeles Times, San Francisco Chronicle, and other high-profile media outlets.



Rahsaan Thomas is an active social justice advocate, advancing the rights of the incarcerated through writing and the arts. He is a co-producer of the Pulitzer Prize finalist and Dupont Award winning podcast Ear Hustle and a contributing writer for the San Quentin News. He also cofounded and co-created the Empowerment Avenue Program, which aims to empower incarcerated artists. His important work has led to the Governor commuting his sentence. He paroled in February 2023.

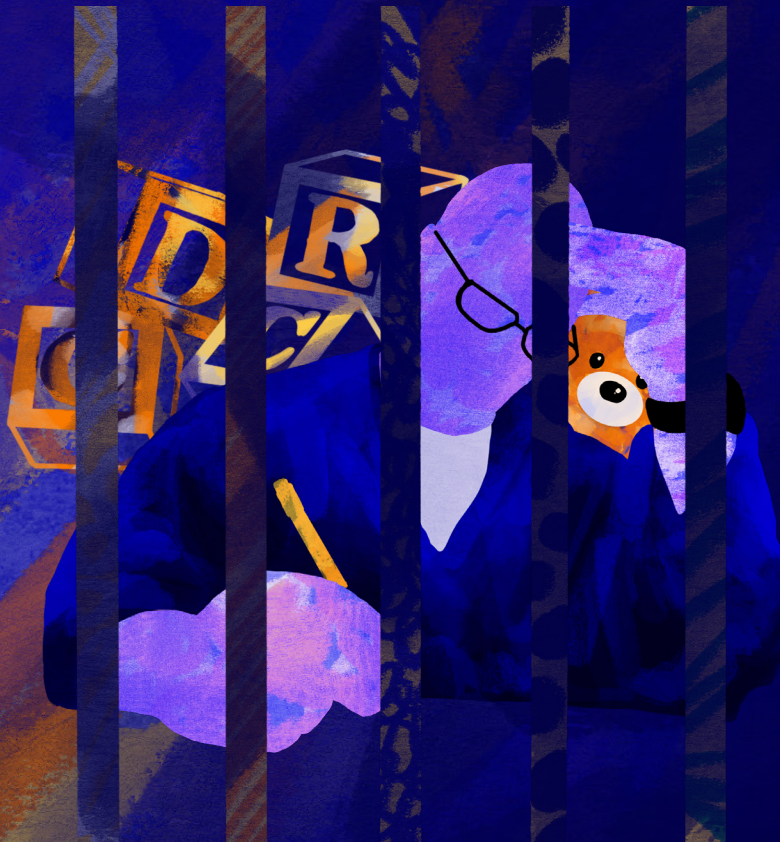


Dr. Jenny Espinoza is a Leader in the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) Culture of Health Program, which addresses the root causes of health inequities. She has served in leadership roles in some of our nation’s most challenging and underserved settings including as a Chief Physician and Surgeon in California’s prison health care system and Medical Director of a homeless Veteran Affairs clinic in downtown San Francisco. She also previously served as a primary care provider at San Quentin for eight years. Dr. Espinoza serves on faculty at the University of California San Francisco, where she attended medical school and completed residency training.



Dr. Jeff Grant has been a physician at San Quentin since 2006. He was born in New York City and after college worked as an eighth grade teacher for ten years in East Harlem, New York. He has a Masters degree from Columbia University, with a focus on the teaching of reading and writing. After medical school in Philadelphia, he moved to the Bay Area for residency training at University of California San Francisco’s Family Practice program, which focuses on care for underserved populations. He has also served on faculty for the University of California San Francisco as a clinical instructor.

BACK TO THE START



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Interested in collaborating, funding/donating, or submitting your own narrative?

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