

BEST PRACTICES FOR YOGA IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM



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YOGA SERVICE BEST PRACTICES GUIDE: VOLUME THREE

BEST PRACTICES FOR YOGA IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Presented by the Yoga Service Council
and the Omega Institute

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Welcome to the Third Yoga Service Best Practices Book

Thank you for your interest in the latest edition of the Yoga Service Best Practices series, a joint project of the Yoga Service Council (YSC) and Omega Institute. As the third book in this collection, *Best Practices for Yoga in the Criminal Justice System* represents the collective wisdom of the tremendously talented and dedicated people who contributed to it, as well as who worked tirelessly on the first two guides in the series: *Best Practices for Yoga in Schools* and *Best Practices for Yoga with Veterans*. From these devoted individuals, much was learned about the process of collaborative writing (and thinking!) that we have undertaken.

The Yoga Service Council is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the vision of a world where everyone has equal access to yoga and mindfulness practices that support healing, resilience, self-development, community building, and positive social change. As a membership organization, we support individuals and organizations working to make yoga accessible to all, through an annual conference, resources such as this book, webinars, mentorships, and other offerings.

When this series originated, the goal was to create resources that could cross the boundaries of various programs, curriculums, and organizations. We worked to gather the wisdom and experience of a broad range of professionals to synthesize ideas in such a way as to make them maximally useful to both the field as a whole and to the individuals who engage with these guides. After three full iterations of this process, I am confident that we have exceeded the expectations of the initial idea, and that the work done on this and previous guides in the series is of exemplary quality. As such, it has the potential to significantly support those

in the field of yoga service as well as the many allied professionals working to bring these empowering tools to all.

The Best Practices series is dedicated to uplifting the field of yoga service by sharing the insights, experiences, and knowledge of leading teachers, researchers, therapists, medical professionals, policymakers, and others. With each project, we gather 25 experts in person for a working week at the Omega Institute. The creation of the book unfolds during an 18-month process of conversation, integration, and review. We have been fortunate to have Carol Horton, YSC board vice president, serving as the editor of both this guide and *Best Practices for Yoga with Veterans*. Carol has skillfully woven the perspectives of many, along with the nuances of this complex material, into an easy-to-engage-with book that beautifully balances depth and accessibility.

We are grateful to our many contributors, contributing editors, and peer reviewers for sharing their knowledge. Gratitude as well goes to Kathryn Thomas, who as project organizer did a wonderful job of bringing the group together, and to the YSC Board of Directors, which worked toward its success in different ways. The support of lululemon and its Here to Be program has been a significant factor in the success of the series. Many individuals at the Omega Institute invested in this work, including Robert “Skip” Backus, Carol Donahoe, Kathleen Laucius, and Mark Lerner. And, of course, each of the individuals who contributed to this effort was supported by and has learned from countless others, including and especially the students, who with courageous hearts have engaged even when the reasons to disengage have been plenty.

The mission of the Yoga Service Council is to maximize the effectiveness, sustainability, and impact of individuals and organizations working to make yoga and mindfulness practices equally accessible to all. In generating this resource, that mission was never far from our minds. Bringing yoga into the criminal justice system is a challenging proposition with many potential pitfalls. The wisdom compiled in this guide represents many years of hard-earned knowledge. Our

hope is that sharing it enables others to go forward with a strong sense of both the opportunities and challenges of this work, to offer programming that lives up to its enormous potential, and to support the unlimited potential of the people serving and served.

With gratitude,

Jennifer Cohen Harper
YSC Board President

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

In popular culture, yoga has become widely associated with images of pretty young white women serenely performing impressive gymnastic poses. Such pop imagery is starkly at odds with the harsh realities of the U.S. criminal justice system, which people across the political spectrum agree is highly dysfunctional in ways that disproportionately impact low-income men of color. Given this disjuncture, it would be understandable if readers as yet unaware of the invaluable work being done with yoga in the criminal justice system might see the basic premise of *Best Practices for Yoga in the Criminal Justice System* as oddly implausible at best.

If that's the case, it's my fervent hope that such readers engage with this book sufficiently to learn that yoga has nothing to do with what one looks like, how physically fit and flexible one is, or what one's life circumstances may be. Despite today's misleading pop messaging, yoga remains a practice that teaches us how to work with the mind, breath, body, and life force in ways that foster healing, resilience, self-awareness, self-regulation, compassion, nonviolence, and positive change. As such, it's a practice that has much to offer people in the criminal justice system, including those who are incarcerated or otherwise system-involved and those who work as correctional officers, administrators, or other criminal justice professionals.

While it may run counter to common assumptions, promoting yoga in the criminal justice system is a project that makes perfect sense. The criminal justice context is exceedingly stressful. Research shows yoga to be exceptionally effective at reducing the negative impacts of stress, which is vitally important to both physical and psychological health. Particularly when chronic, stress can

negatively impact all of our physiological systems (cardiovascular, respiratory, gastrointestinal, endocrine, immune, musculoskeletal, etc.), as well as our mental health and emotional resilience. Research indicates that regular yoga practice reduces symptoms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress, as well as heart rate and systolic blood pressure. In the process, it increases overall physical fitness, flexibility, balance, and endurance (Bullock, n.d.).

Although relatively little research has focused on yoga in the criminal justice system, what has been done affirms that it can help incarcerated people with mood and anxiety disorders, substance abuse, stress, impulsivity, and a wide range of physiological concerns (Muirhead and Fortune, 2016). One set of in-depth interviews with eight formerly incarcerated men who participated in a prison yoga program for 2 to 10 years found that yoga enabled them to reduce and manage issues of depression, anxiety, aggression, and addiction, while helping with a wide range of physical ailments (particularly, but not exclusively, back pain). At the same time, yoga increased their self-awareness, self-regulation, emotional intelligence, relationship management, social awareness, and dedication to community. Despite repeated prompting, study participants reported no negative impacts of their yoga participation at all (Viorst, 2017).

Providing a meaningful opportunity to realize such positive benefits, however, requires that whatever yoga instruction may be offered has been adapted as necessary to be appropriate for a criminal justice context. Yoga is an unregulated and nonstandardized field, with an enormously wide range of practices included under the umbrella term “yoga.” In this book and in the Best Practices series of which it’s a part, we use the word “yoga” to refer to those that include postures and movement, breath work, focused attention, and deep relaxation. Although we recognize that the yoga tradition has other vital dimensions, such as philosophical and ethical study, they are outside the purview of this work.

Even this more circumscribed definition of yoga encompasses a very wide and diverse range of particular styles and methods. Given this variety, it shouldn’t be assumed that it’s okay to offer just any type of class in a criminal justice setting. Some common ways of teaching would not be appropriate or even

safe in this context. Potential problems include physical injuries caused by an overly strenuous practice and psychological upset caused by teaching that is not trauma-informed.

It's vital that yoga service providers who wish to work in the criminal justice system receive appropriate training and support. Otherwise, they risk causing harm to students they wish to serve while unintentionally undermining the goal of promoting yoga in the criminal justice system as a whole. *Best Practices for Yoga in the Criminal Justice System* provides an accessible yet detailed overview of how best to teach yoga in this context, as well as how to build and sustain yoga service organizations dedicated to working there. While the particularities can and should vary, overall this means that the yoga offered must be safe, effective, trauma-informed, gender responsive, age appropriate, culturally sensitive, and aligned with institutional rules and regulations.

Yoga service providers range from solo teachers to well-developed organizations capable of running multiple programs at different sites, serving on multidisciplinary teams, coordinating post-release services, and more. Regardless of size and capacity, providers should be proficient in trauma-informed yoga (TIY) and able to work in a criminal justice setting effectively.

While written for a general audience, *Best Practices for Yoga in the Criminal Justice System* is intended to be of particular interest to:

1. Yoga teachers, programs, and organizations interested in serving this population;
2. Department of Corrections (DOC) administrators seeking to learn about, establish, and/or improve existing yoga programs;
3. Correctional officers and other criminal justice professionals curious about how yoga might be helpful to them, either personally or in their work environment;

4. Judges, probation officials, policymakers, and others interested in how yoga programs might contribute to better system functioning and outcomes;
5. System-based medical care and mental health providers interested in yoga's potential as a complementary health modality;
6. Scholars and policy researchers seeking to deepen their knowledge of what sort of yoga works best in a criminal justice setting; and
7. Incarcerated and otherwise system-involved people who'd like to learn more about how and why yoga can be a meaningful personal and community resource.

Although this book primarily focuses on work with system-involved adults, many if not most of the best practices presented are relevant to working with youth. Special considerations for young people are flagged throughout. Several sections discuss youth issues in-depth. That said, readers who work with youth, as well as with any distinct adult population, are encouraged to tailor these recommendations as necessary to support the population they serve.

Best Practices for Yoga in the Criminal Justice System integrates the experience, insights, and knowledge of more than 25 leaders in this emerging field. Together, the contributors, editors, and reviewers who co-created this book have expertise not only in yoga, mindfulness, and meditation but also in nursing, behavioral health, adolescent and women's health, recovery services, suicide prevention, clinical psychotherapy, family systems, child welfare, youth development, youth justice, corrections, intergenerational trauma, neuroscience, crisis response, victim advocacy, and more. Each of the book's 22 contributors generously volunteered their time to be part of a collaborative process that demanded a week of in-person engagement at the Omega Institute plus a year-and-a-half's worth of work.

Many thanks are due to those who made *Best Practices for Yoga in the Criminal Justice System* possible by generously sharing their time, expertise, and support.

First to thank are our contributors, who collectively generated the core content for this work. Special thanks are due to the six people in this group who also served as contributing editors, drafting core segments of the text. Equal thanks must be extended to our five external reviewers, who donated their time to provide feedback on the draft manuscript and make the final product even better. A very special thanks is due to Project Manager Kathryn Monti Thomas, who organized the Best Practices Symposium at Omega that laid the groundwork for this book. Everyone involved benefited from her hard work and dedication, which made that foundational experience the best it could possibly be.

Best Practices for Yoga in the Criminal Justice System could not have been written without the generous support of the Omega Institute and lululemon's Here to Be program. We at the Yoga Service Council are deeply grateful for our ongoing partnership with Omega, which enables us to pursue our passion for yoga service in ways we could never replicate otherwise. We are also thankful and proud to be part of lululemon's efforts to support, unite, and amplify the work of the yoga service community. With the continued support of these two primary partners, the YSC Board of Directors, and our many sustaining, organizational, and individual members, we look forward to bringing you the next book in this series, *Best Practices for Yoga for Sexual Trauma Survivors*, in 2018.

It's been an honor for me personally to work on this book in conjunction with so many inspiring individuals and organizations. Based on my own experience teaching yoga to women in Cook County Jail, as well as what I've learned through years of personal study and practice, I see the work of integrating yoga into the criminal justice system as a shared project with unlimited positive potential. It's my heartfelt hope that this book builds on the good work already being done to make this healing and potentially transformative practice universally available both within the system and beyond.

Now more than ever, I'm inspired by the Yoga Service Council's vision of "a world where everyone has equal access to yoga and mindfulness practices that support healing, resilience, self-development, community building, and positive social change." I believe this book can play an important role in moving that

aspirational hope closer toward everyday lived reality. That said, I'm well aware that this project requires sustained collective effort to move forward—and that it's not easy.

I hope readers find this work not only informative and useful but also a source of inspiration for new or continued engagement with our shared project of integrating yoga into the criminal justice system further. This work has already brought more healing, hope, and justice into the system—and, by extension, into the lives of countless individuals and their families and communities. Now it's time to build on the strong foundation that's been laid. We warmly invite you to join us in this endeavor and explore its multifaceted benefits and possibilities for yourself.

Warmly,

Carol Horton, PhD
Vice President, Yoga Service Council

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CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

The guiding principle for yoga curriculum and instruction best practices is simple: General trauma-informed yoga methods should be informed by and adapted to the particularities of the criminal justice system. A high incidence of trauma can be assumed present in any class. Given that system-involved people are disproportionately low income and of color, this trauma is likely to be not only personal and familial but also systemic and historic. Being responsive to the individual and collective trauma present in the room, while remaining grounded in one's own personal and social experience, is a precondition for effective trauma-informed yoga (TIY) instruction in any criminal justice context.

As discussed in the preceding chapter, yoga instructors should be trained in trauma-informed yoga prior to beginning to teach. If a teacher is working with a yoga service organization, this training should ideally be provided by them and tailored to the specific facility or program being served. However, relatively few organizations have this capacity. (For a discussion of how it might be developed, see chapter 5, "Organizational Development." For a typology of different stages of organizational development, see Appendix B.) In such cases, it's best to take a TIY training geared toward teaching in a criminal justice context more generally, if possible.

The following discussion is intended to supplement such foundational trauma-informed yoga training. It cannot substitute for it. Accordingly, this chapter does not discuss the general theory and method of TIY in any detail. Instead, it shares principles, information, and insights that

are particularly relevant to teaching it in the criminal justice system, focusing on correctional facilities in particular. (For additional resources on TIY, see Appendix A.)

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION: EXPECT A CHALLENGING TEACHING ENVIRONMENT

Yoga teachers should be prepared to teach in conditions significantly more challenging than those of the standard studio or gym class.

Teaching in a correctional facility poses challenges that seldom occur in yoga studios or gyms. Teachers need to understand the nature of these challenges and be personally and professionally equipped to meet them in ways that enhance rather than undermine the yoga practices that they are there to share.

“How we respond to interruption is a great way to show how the [yoga] practice shows up in real life. Every moment is a teachable moment to show the practice . . . in practice.”

Classes may be held in a multipurpose room that has equipment or furniture that must be moved before and after class. They may be held in a large, noisy gym that has different activities going on concurrently. Rooms may need to be cleaned to feel sufficiently inviting to sit down on a mat on the floor. The temperature may be too hot or too cold. There may be extraneous noises that are distracting or disruptive.

Classes may be delayed, interrupted, or canceled with little or no notice. Students may be delayed, blocked, or removed from class. Access to yoga mats, blocks,

and other teaching-related equipment may be erratic. Cleaning and storage of equipment may be challenging.

Model Equanimity. It's important that yoga service providers be aware that it is a privilege for a civilian to be permitted entry into a facility, and respond to challenges accordingly. Teachers are advised to maintain a calm and respectful demeanor, modeling equanimity and nonjudgment regardless of whatever disturbances arise.

Facility requirements—including unexpected class cancellations, interruptions, or relocation—supersede all other factors and must be complied with fully. If concerns or disagreements between a teacher and correctional staff develop, they should be resolved through the appropriate channels and not in the moment. Yoga teachers should be aware that if a facility lockdown occurs, they may be unable to leave the facility on time.

Transition Rituals. Many yoga teachers working in challenging environments find it helpful to establish simple personal rituals to support a clean transition out of the teaching role and environment, for example: washing hands, changing clothes, journaling, meditating, or practicing a short *asana* (yoga postures) or *pranayama* (yoga breathing) sequence.

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION: DRESS APPROPRIATELY

Teachers should present themselves in alignment with facility dress codes and with safety in mind.

Suitable clothing for teaching yoga in a correctional facility includes loose-fitting short- or long-sleeved shirts, loose-fitting pants, and shoes that cover the entire foot. Clothes or shoes that might set off a metal detector (e.g., belt buckle, underwire bra, shoes with metal shanks) should be avoided.

Tight and/or revealing clothing, makeup, and perfume may distract from the goals of the practice and may violate system regulations. Teachers should not wear jewelry other than watches, provided they are permitted. Expensive or branded clothing may serve to highlight differences between teacher and students, and should therefore be avoided.

Teachers must avoid wearing colors that students and correctional officers are wearing. They should seek to learn local gang colors and avoid them. Many facilities have rules regarding what colors can be worn, as this makes it easier to distinguish who is and isn't staff in emergency situations. If such rules exist, teachers should follow them precisely.

Teachers should avoid wearing clothing with any text or logos that may disclose extraneous information about themselves such as which university they attended. If service organizations have logos or branded clothing, they should establish clear policies concerning their use in facilities. For personal safety reasons, teachers should refrain from wearing clothing that identifies any other yoga studio or gym where they teach.

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION: CONSIDER ROOM SETUP CAREFULLY

Yoga teachers should carefully consider how to set up the room to maximize student safety, comfort, and privacy.

Careful thinking about how best to configure the space in which yoga classes are held to maximize students' sense of safety, autonomy, and privacy is essential. In so doing, teachers should consider the particularities of their students as much as possible, including their familiarity and relationships with each other.

Mat Configuration. Predictably is a core component of an effective trauma-informed yoga class. Both the teacher's and the students' positions in the room should be predictable. Teachers are wise to carefully consider what sort of mat

BEST PRACTICES FOR YOGA IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Yoga is rapidly gaining acceptance as a valuable resource for physical, psychological, behavioral and spiritual health in the U.S. criminal justice system and worldwide. *Best Practices for Yoga in the Criminal Justice System* is a user-friendly guide that explains how to develop, implement, and sustain high-quality yoga programs appropriate for jails, prisons, youth detention centers, and court-ordered programs.

Synthesizing the knowledge and experience of 29 leaders in the field, this book is a must-have resource for anyone interested in yoga in the criminal justice system, including yoga teachers and yoga service organizations, correctional officers and other criminal justice professionals, and physical and mental health providers.

Key topics covered include problems of mass incarceration, institutional context and culture, teacher training requirements, curriculum and teaching guidelines, adapting trauma informed yoga to correctional facilities, staffing and developing yoga service organizations, and establishing yoga teacher training programs for incarcerated individuals “on the inside.”

The Yoga Service Best Practices Project

is dedicated to uplifting the field of yoga service by sharing the insights, experiences, and knowledge of leading teachers, researchers, therapists, medical professionals, policy makers, and others working to make yoga and mindfulness practices equally available to all.

Launched in 2014 as a joint initiative of the Yoga Service Council and Omega Institute for Holistic Studies, previous works in this series include *Best Practices for Yoga in Schools* and *Best Practices for Yoga with Veterans*. The next title, *Best Practices for Yoga with Survivors of Sexual Trauma*, is in process.

