

**Re-Entry and Recidivism**

Reimagining corrections through neuroscience and facility design

Dr. Jeff Sim's insights into childhood brain development are shaping humane design strategies that reduce recidivism and rebuild community safety

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Within the often-hostile prison setting, Dr. Sim believes healthy relationships are the key to rebuilding healthy brains, providing hope for individuals and communities.

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By Jennifer Burke Jackson, AIA, LEED AP

As an architect three years into an exploration on incarceration, a cousin to multiple incarcerated family members, and a community member and mother in constant search of improved public safety, I became an amateur podcaster. These conversations gave me an opportunity to work closely with industry partners and those within corrections systems to find

solutions that would reduce recidivism. In our second season of **JLG Architects' Community Matters podcast**, we interviewed Dr. Jeff Sim, who rocked the very foundation of everything I thought I knew.

The science behind human behavior

Embarking on the architectural design of a complex corrections facility, Dr. Jeff Sim helped us lean into the science behind human behavior in connection with prison population. As a licensed clinical psychologist, associate professor at Western Illinois University and statewide mental health quality improvement manager for the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC), Dr. Sim has seen it all. Most importantly, he's seen how unhealthy brains produce unhealthy behaviors. With a goal to improve public safety and the effectiveness of incarceration, he brought to light a multifaceted perspective on brain development factors that hold the power to change the course of life, starting in early childhood.

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The danger in developmental milestones

Over several years, between Dr. Sim's work within the prison population and teaching at a university, he pieced together the impact of three major brain developmental milestones that can directly relate to negative behaviors when not achieved. This interview explained why those raised in a hyper-vigilant fight-or-flight mode struggle to empathize or feel the consequences of destructive behavior.

Dr. Sim primarily focuses on the second and third milestones of brain development, including the limbic system, which rapidly develops between the ages of four and six. According to him, this is where emotional memories take root. "In that limbic system, there is an almond-shaped group of neurons called the amygdala; it plays a very important role in our survival. When we feel safe, the amygdala will calm us down, but when we don't feel safe, this part of the brain keeps us hyper-vigilant."

"I spend a lot of time talking about the amygdala because I believe this is the part of the brain where we learn to empathize with others. Sometimes I find that individuals I work with have a hard time empathizing," explained Dr. Sim. "So, if you work with individuals who are incarcerated in a prison setting, you'll find that consequences for some of these individuals don't really work for them... they are not afraid of the consequences."

The impact of early childhood development

Brain development in early childhood sets in motion a physiological internal life that helps individuals relate to others, think further into the future and process consequences. Dr. Sim explained that in order to achieve homeostasis within the discomfort, the individual will engage in anti-social or destructive behavior to raise their arousal.

Dr. Sim further explained that anti-social and impulsive behaviors are often born in the frontal lobe and third wave of brain development. This is where exponential development happens between the ages of seven and 12, impacting reward seeking, attention and motivation.

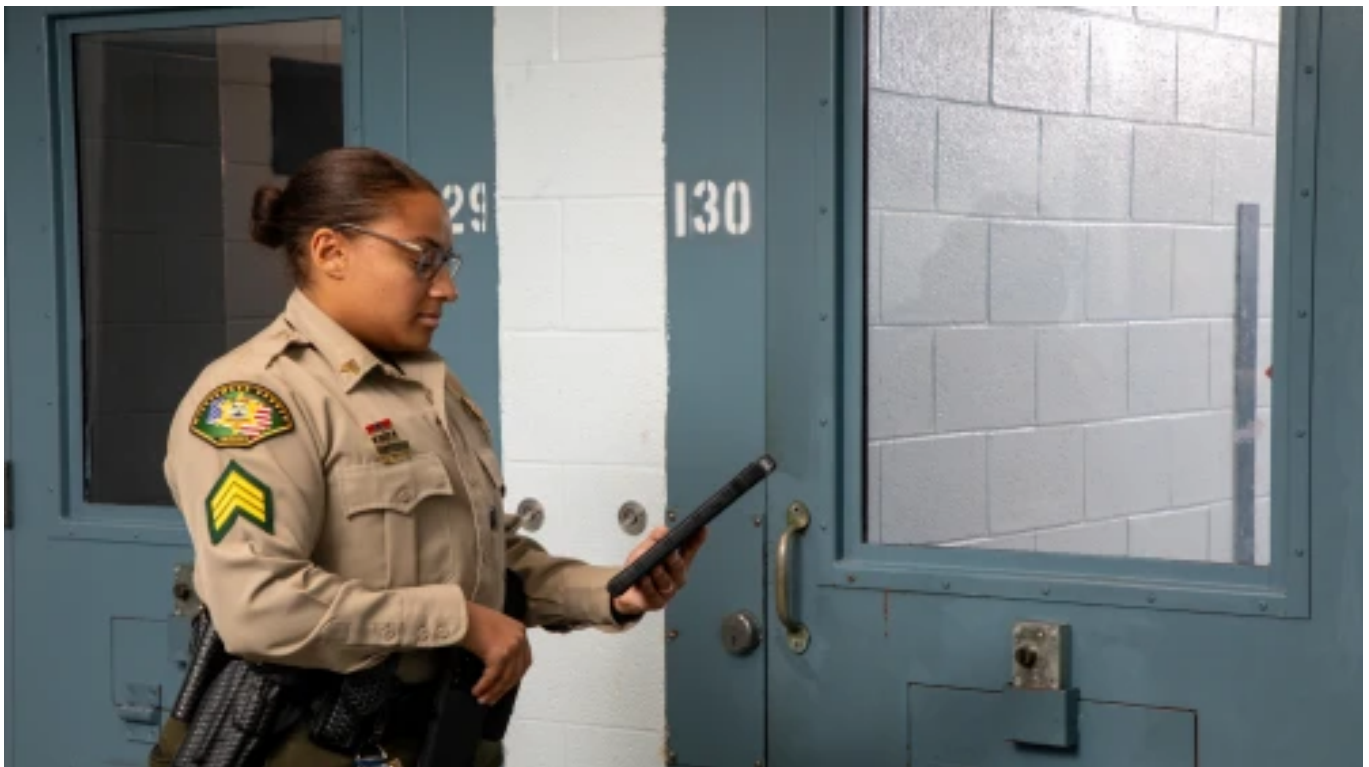
"Individuals with impulse problems may have a frontal lobe dysfunction, where the processing of information is not adequate — this is where they interpret information a little bit different from the true intention, so it's important the frontal lobe is functioning well," said Dr. Sim. He also noted a relationship between frontal lobe dysfunction and aggressive tendencies, with the strongest evidence showing "an association between prefrontal damage and impulsive, aggressive behavior."

Rebuilding healthy relationships, healthy brains

Within the often-hostile prison setting, Dr. Sim believes healthy relationships are the key to rebuilding healthy brains, providing hope for individuals and communities. From his perspective, one of the major barriers to building healthy relationships is that society has overwhelmingly lacked understanding regarding the relationship needs of individuals transitioning from corrections to the community.

“Sometimes I feel like going to prison is like a different planet altogether,” said Dr. Sim. “These individuals in a prison setting ... one day, they are going to come back out and be part of a community. If they’ve been in a prison setting for many years, they do not know how to have meaningful relationships with ‘normal’ people ... I think the community needs to understand that this is very, very difficult for them.”

Jessica Berg, a rehabilitation planner who has served departments of corrections across the Midwest for decades, also believes people, programming and spaces can work together to improve brain health, saying, “Environments matter and can impact human behavior. When spaces for incarcerated individuals are respectful, dignified, calming, normative, and safe, our clients have seen a reduction in agitation, aggression, and violence. Providing life skills and therapeutic programming can also impact behavior and rehabilitation positively.”



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Reducing recidivism

Much of Dr. Sim's reprogramming to reduce recidivism relies on community support. "A lot of individuals in custody have mental health issues ... and many are going to come back out into the community one day, still with the mental health issues," explained Dr. Sim. "We need to find ways to connect them to the community before they return to the community."

Today, the corrections project that I was preparing for is under construction. I was able to collaborate with both Jessica and Colby Braun, the North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation Director, to see Dr. Sim's wisdom shape itself into

reality, helping people heal from their pasts and plan for their futures, by design. Colby recognizes the evolution of incarceration, saying, “When I began this work, I saw public safety through the lens of containment. But over time, I’ve learned that real safety is built through connection — normalizing environments, supporting healthy relationships, and making sure our staff are well enough to model the humanity we expect from others.”

Colby’s team has created what I like to call the “North Dakota Model for Rehabilitation,” which progressively aims to achieve public safety in a comprehensive and generational way.

“Our rehabilitation model is built on four pillars: normalcy, dynamic security, the import model and progression — all grounded in staff wellness,” explained Braun. “Dynamic security isn’t just about fences and cameras; it’s about the relationships our staff build with the people in their care. The import model brings community resources into the facility so that support continues after release. Progression means gradually increasing responsibility and accountability as individuals move to less restrictive environments. And normalcy reminds us to create spaces that reflect real life — because preparing someone for the outside world has to start inside. None of this works without healthy, supported staff leading the way.”

How can communities work together to build a better system?

Here are a few key takeaways from Dr. Sim’s Community Matters podcast interview and JLG Architects’ recent corrections projects:

1. **Invite compassion:** Invite community members, leaders and businesses to further understand the relationship and mental health needs of individuals transitioning into the community.
2. **Welcome volunteers:** Communicate the need for community volunteerism within support groups and church groups; come together to expose individuals to “normal” life and nurture people who can help heal trauma and rebuild trust.
3. **Overhaul the environment:** Replace solitary confinement with humane, trauma-informed, and gender-responsive environments rooted in dignity and accountability. Implement design that strategically supports safety, trust, and strong staff-resident engagement.
4. **Focus on mental health:** Promote access to safe, vibrant spaces with tailored mental health treatment and education, including access to outside mental health resources for individuals re-entering society.
5. **Positive programming:** Integrate positive, soft-skill, real-life workforce, and relationship-building programming into the prison setting, preparing residents to return to the community — to a “normal” life that may not feel normal to them.
6. **Promote healthy relationships:** Provide an environment with enhanced access to family reunification and participation between foster parents, families, and residents, easing into the reentry transition with strong and supportive relationships.

To calm the chaos, reduce recidivism and reprogram trauma, progress starts with better programming inside and out. As architects of corrections facilities, healthcare and educational environments, our goal is to redefine the role and impact of corrections, leading the shift from mentally destructive environments to humane and empathetic care. Together, we can change lives within the prison population for good — good felt throughout our communities.

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About the author

Jennifer Burke Jackson, AIA, LEED AP, a Principal and Community Studio Leader at JLG Architects, advocates for empowered communities within and beyond the realm of architecture. Her 16-year portfolio, including the upcoming Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library and the Heart River Correctional Center, embodies public-informed design emphasizing active well-being, inclusivity, sustainable integration, connectivity, and future-ready resilience. Advancing inspired spaces by way of inspired people, Jennifer founded JLG’s 2023 *Community Matters* podcast, launching insightful discussions from the diverse perspective of regional leaders, nonprofits, and community members, all exploring impactful solutions in corrections and rehabilitation. Jennifer graduated from North Dakota State University with a Master of Architecture, a Bachelor of Environmental Design, and a Bachelor of Mass Communications. She is currently pursuing her Master of Business Administration in Virtuous Leadership from the University of Mary.

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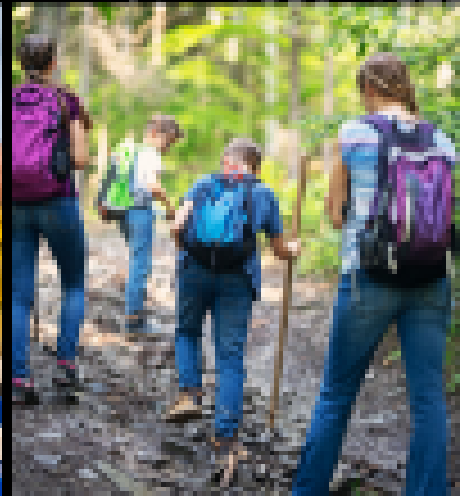
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