

# Public engagement benefits scientists: Lessons from the initiative to bring science programs to the incarcerated

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The positive effects of scientist engagement with the general public are well documented, but most investigations have focused on the benefits to

the public rather than on those performing engagement activities. Writing in *BioScience*, Nalini Nadkarni of the University of Utah and colleagues "reverse the lens" on public engagement with science, discovering numerous benefits for scientists involved in these efforts.

The authors distributed pre- and post-event surveys to individuals who are incarcerated in a state prison and a county jail as part of the Initiative to Bring Science Programs to the Incarcerated (INSPIRE) [program](#), through which scientists present informal scientific lectures in carceral settings. This sort of engagement is particularly important, say the authors, given the growing emphasis among funding agencies and in academia on broadening the reach of science to include scientifically underserved groups.

The results of the surveys were striking, with 100% of the scientist participants reporting that they would recommend the program to their colleagues. Scientists who gave lectures also reported an increased interest in taking action on issues related to social justice, with one respondent stating, "It has motivated me to take more actions. A couple of years from now, I plan to design programs for young adults from minority families."

The experience also produced significant counterstereotypical effects, in which negative preconceived notions were dramatically shifted by their experiences. "My interaction with incarcerated individuals really opened my eyes. Previously, these individuals were a number or statistic that I hear on the news. After meeting individuals, I felt empathy for people in this situation," said one respondent.

The authors are hopeful about the prospects for the expansion of such programs, for the benefit of scientists and people who are incarcerated alike. They note that the program is cost-effective and accessible, as they calculated that if only 10% US scientists were to engage in similar work,

that would result in a ratio of 95 scientists per correctional facility, and "every incarcerated person in the United States would have access to a scientist's presentation."

**More information:** Reversing the lens on public engagement with science: positive benefits for participating scientists, *BioScience* (2022). DOI: [10.1093/biosci/biac003](https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/biac003)

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