

LIVED EXPERIENCE AT THE CORE:

Embedding voices,
knowledge, and expertise in
the RESCALED movement

The voices, experiences, and expertise of people with lived experience are integral to the RESCALED movement. Their perspectives are amplified through various participatory approaches across diverse contexts and scales; local, national, and European.

As a European movement, RESCALED thrives on the diversity of its member organisations. This diversity allows for a range of collaborations with people who have lived experience. Member organisations may be led by people with lived experience or work closely with them in various capacities, such as collaborating on projects or co-designing initiatives, offering support services and restorative practices to survivors and loved ones, providing guidance to formerly incarcerated people during or after their release. Additionally, people with lived experience may play active roles within national advocacy efforts.



Incorporating lived experience is not an optional addition to existing frameworks. It is a cornerstone for creating a more inclusive, effective, and equitable justice system. Embracing the insights of those who have been impacted by the system ensures that reforms are not only well-informed but also transformative, addressing root causes and driving meaningful, lasting change.

“ **Recognition and commitment to
learning from experts with lived
experience** ”

- One of the core values of the RESCALED Movement

RECOGNITION

Our vision is that it is universally recognised as standard practice for people with lived experience to inform and shape every aspect of justice reform. Unfortunately, this is not yet the case.

We recognise a certain tension in advocacy and social discourse: there is a need to highlight differences between groups to address inequalities and discrimination, while avoiding reinforcing stereotypes, stigma, or a sense of “otherness” that can perpetuate division. This double-edged sword of visibility is present in many movements for social justice, highlighting systemic injustice and forms of oppression including racism, sexism, ableism, classism, transphobia, etc. While these injustices are based on socially constructed phenomena, their consequences are very real. There is a need to point out the exclusion of people with lived experience, while rejecting the notion that their involvement with the justice system defines them.

Therefore, we feel an urgency to articulate how we envision, collaborate with and actively embed lived experience into the RESCALED movement.

This document sheds light on our perspective on lived experience; how it is understood, valued, and utilised within RESCALED and in shaping broader justice reform efforts. We outline the guiding principles that inform our approach to involving people with lived experience, ensuring their voices are not only heard but also foundational in creating transformative change.



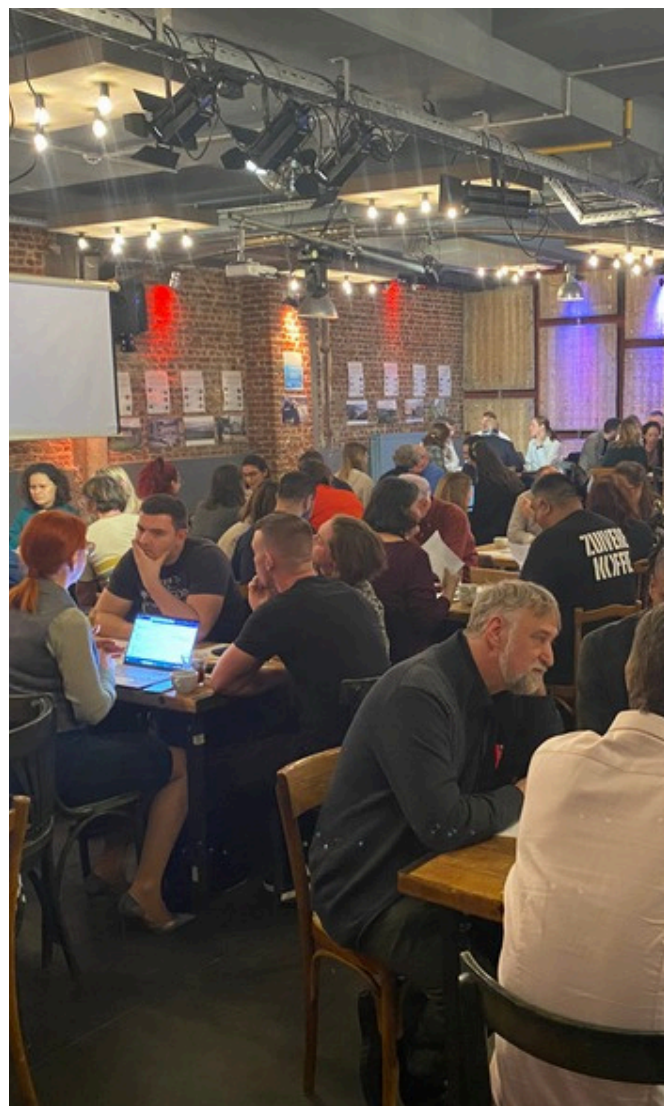
WHY EMBEDDING LIVED EXPERIENCE IS VITAL

Despite recognition in other sectors like mental health, substance misuse, and healthcare, the criminal justice system lacks the unique insights of those directly impacted. This gap arises from systemic barriers, including stigma, risk perceptions, and structural limitations within leadership and hiring practices. Unlike other sectors where lived experience is seen as a valuable asset, the criminal justice system often views it through a lens of distrust or risk aversion, resulting in missed opportunities for meaningful change.

Embedding the voice, knowledge, and expertise of people with lived experience in the criminal justice system is vital because it grounds reform efforts in reality, creating more inclusive, effective, and compassionate approaches.

Currently, the criminal justice sector involves people with lived experience in limited roles, such as peer advisors or mentors, focusing primarily on mutual aid mechanisms. However, this involvement remains sparse and underutilised in organisational structures and decision-making processes. This hesitance contrasts with the approach in other public services, where employing people with lived experience has proven transformative for policy design and service delivery.

Barriers to involving lived experience include mistrust, the belief that a "clean record" is as a prerequisite for employment, and institutional resistance and leadership often overlooks the value of people affected by the justice system. These barriers perpetuate a system that values theoretical expertise over practical, first-hand knowledge, further alienating the very individuals who could drive impactful reforms.



WHAT DOES LIVED EXPERIENCE MEAN TO RESCALED?

It is key for RESCALED to value the knowledge and insights of all relevant stakeholders, this means including people with lived experience in a broad sense: people who have been incarcerated, family members of incarcerated people, survivors, people who have been harmed by a criminal offence and people who work in prison.

"Everyone has lived and everyone has life experiences. These experiences make us unique, but they can also unite us. Whether consciously or subconsciously, hidden or in full view, these very experiences can shape the destinies of social change-makers. They can be key drivers for social change and purpose-driven work."

[1]

There are different interpretations and expectations of the term lived experience, reflecting the diverse ways in which individuals encounter and understand the world. At RESCALED, we want to make a distinction between people with lived experience, experience experts and people affected by the justice system.

LIVED EXPERIENCE

Personal insights and knowledge gained through direct, first-hand experience of undergoing a system or event, often without choice. This can include lived experience:^[2]

- as an incarcerated person
- as a person responsible for an offence
- as a person harmed by an offence
- as children of incarcerated people
- as family members, mother, father, partners
- as friends, peers

EXPERIENCE EXPERTS

Individuals who have not only encountered the justice system but have also used their lived experience to develop a nuanced and informed perspective of systemic change and justice reform. This perspective is strengthened through reflection, engagement, and the acquisition of additional knowledge, whether formal or informal. Expertise does not have to stem from traditional education; it emerges through a combination of experiences, critical analysis, and ongoing learning.

The distinction between lived experience and experience expertise is crucial in bridging the gap between personal narratives and systemic change.

PEOPLE AFFECTED BY THE JUSTICE SYSTEM:

Lived experience can arise from circumstances where an individual's life is indirectly impacted by someone in their immediate environment being subjected to a system or a situation. It can also arise through their involvement in such systems, for instance, as a professional working in the system. Members of our communities can also become drivers for change, uniting community voices and resources to spark hope and pioneer systemic change.

- as children of incarcerated people
- as family, friends, peers, partners
- as a professional working in a system
- as a member of the local community

To ensure inclusivity and democratic engagement, it is essential to include the first-hand experiences of individuals directly affected by incarceration.^[3]

As a movement, we support and empower people with lived experience to express their insights and perspectives publicly, influencing change and being part of and/or leading the conversation (=voice). People with lived experience are a part of the movement, with autonomy to decide if and when their lived experience is disclosed and whether their personal experience plays a role in their contribution to the movement.

[1] Sadhu B. 2017

[2] This broad definition of Lived Experience does not aim to undermine the fact that people who are or have been incarcerated themselves may face additional hurdles. It is not our place to impose subjective perceptions on lived experiences, by e.g. comparing their 'gravity'. Every individual's experience is deeply personal and intersecting, and only they hold ownership over their experience. To prioritise inclusivity and autonomy, Lived Experience is the chosen term within our movement, notwithstanding that other terms may be just as valid.

[3] Wolters, S. (2023). What the f*ck?! <https://www.growingstories.nl/product-page/saskia-wolters-what-the-f-ck>

CONTRIBUTION OF EXPERIENCE EXPERTS TO RESCALED

As one of its core values, RESCALED recognises the invaluable insights and expertise of people with lived experience and is committed to learning from people with lived experience as key contributors to systemic reform. Their perspectives are critical in understanding the real-world impacts of justice policies, the importance and impact of detention houses as a replacement for large scale-prisons and shaping meaningful change in design, implementation, evidence, and advocacy.

Integrating lived experience into justice reform contributes to several critical areas:

ADVOCACY

The voices of people with lived experience carry unique authenticity. These voices resonate profoundly with both policymakers and the public, influencing public opinion and driving policy decisions more effectively than abstract arguments or statistical data. Personal narratives humanise complex issues, bridging the gap between policy debates and the human reality underpinning them. Furthermore, they highlight the pain points and urgency for systemic reform by exposing the profound and often overlooked impacts of the prison system, policies, and practices. This urgency creates a compelling call to action, emphasising the need for justice reform with a holistic approach, addressing both individual and systemic levels.

POLICY DESIGN

Policies that incorporate insights from lived experience are better aligned with the realities of those directly impacted by the justice system. These contributions ensure that reforms address practical and emotional challenges while remaining humane and effective. Excluding lived experience inherently contradicts a person-centric, holistic, human-rights approach that promotes positive outcomes and meaningful engagement.^[4]

IMPLEMENTATION

People with lived experience offer unique insights into the day-to-day functioning of detention facilities, identifying details that may seem minor to those without this perspective but significantly impact the detention environment, its outcomes, and the lives of incarcerated individuals, as well as their children, families, and others affected by detention. Without this critical input, implementation risks becoming disconnected from the realities of detention life.

EVIDENCE

RESCALED emphasises the importance of bridging the gap between practice and evidence-based approaches, viewing them as complementary and equally critical sources of knowledge. Combining academic expertise with experiential insights enriches reform efforts. This exceeds participatory research, also involving co-production of knowledge with appropriate ethical considerations and safeguarding. Therefore, contributions from people with lived experience are transformative for criminological research and knowledge-sharing.^[5]

SOCIAL CHANGE

The active involvement of people with lived experience in justice reform plays a pivotal role in challenging stereotypes, reducing stigma, and supporting a narrative of recovery, resilience, and transformation. This impact extends beyond formal reform roles; sharing personal stories helps to present a more accurate and nuanced picture of the justice system's realities. In particular, the voices of survivors of criminal offences highlight the urgency of reshaping the justice system, shifting the focus from punishment to healing. This reshaping of public perceptions reframes the conversation and combats negative attitudes towards justice reforms.

This empowerment is critical not only for the reintegration and participation of incarcerated individuals in the society but also for community-integrated detention houses. Such engagement addresses and counters the "Not In My Backyard" mindset by enabling dynamic interactions with local communities.

Given the differing contexts across countries, the importance of European collaboration and networks of people with lived experience becomes evident. Decisions that directly impact people cannot and should not be made without first seeking their input, ensuring that reform efforts are inclusive, informed, and grounded in the realities of those most affected.

[4] Mental health and lived experience: The value of lived experience expertise in global mental health | Cambridge Prisms

[5] Antojado, D., Budd, J., Doyle, C., & Bartels, L. (2024). Criminal justice, representation and the lived experience scholar. Incarceration, 5. <https://doi.org/10.1177/26326663241275807>

HOW DO WE DO THIS

At the centre of RESCALED's mission is the principle of meaningful collaboration, which emphasises the equitable and dignified inclusion of people with lived experience in shaping processes, policies, and programmes. It represents a commitment to transferring power to experience experts, recognising their insights as a critical form of knowledge.

Dignity, equity and respect

For RESCALED, meaningful collaboration means creating an enabling environment where engagement is rooted in dignity, equity, and respect. It ensures that people, regardless of their background, have fair and meaningful access to decision-making processes. Recognising the diverse experiences and identities, RESCALED supports an inclusive environment where every voice is valued and empowered to contribute.

Equity goes beyond inclusion; it encompasses tangible support for personal and professional growth. It requires understanding intersecting identities, the many parts of who a person is, such as their gender, race, class, disability, sexual orientation, religion, and more, that overlap and combine to shape their experiences of the world. RESCALED provides opportunities for all participants to develop skills, expand their leadership capabilities, and achieve personal milestones. This commitment includes fair financial compensation, such as wages, expense allowance, project-based funding or other forms of financial support.

At the same time, placing people in the right context requires honesty and transparency. RESCALED recognises that not every role or opportunity may align with an individual's current skills, experience, or goals. In a job interview, moments can occur when it

is necessary to respectfully say "no" or redirect individuals to opportunities better suited to their strengths and development. As an organisation, RESCALED bears the responsibility of safeguarding. All available resources must be considered to create safe environments and any implications or risks of harm must be communicated. If preference is given to work with experience experts for a specific role or opportunity, this will be transparently disclosed to all interested applicants from the beginning.

By embedding dignity, respect, and equity into its practices, RESCALED ensures that involvement is transformative and sustainable, benefiting both the individual and the broader movement toward justice reform.

Collaboration and co-creation

Collaboration involves creating a feedback loop where all stakeholders, whether with or without lived experience, can share insights and learn from one another. This joint learning encourages mutual understanding and allows for adaptations to national contexts, ensuring solutions are tailored, practical, and inclusive of diverse perspectives. RESCALED creates platforms for exchange, where experiences and knowledge are shared to enhance collective impact.

Together, as a movement, RESCALED works to create a space where people with lived experience can actively share their voice and expertise. This involves either giving individuals a seat at the table or supporting them in creating their own platforms. Member organisations play a critical role in this process by facilitating exchanges and embedding lived experience in decision-making and implementation on a national level.

Addressing stigma and wellbeing

Sharing personal stories can be both empowering and challenging. While such stories help combat stigma and humanise systemic issues, RESCALED is mindful of the potential for re-lived trauma or external pressure to define individuals solely by their experiences. Public or media representation can have severe consequences not only for people with lived experience, but also for their families and others involved in a past offence. The organisation prioritises protecting participants from tokenism while respecting their autonomy in choosing if and how to share their experiences.

Advocacy and representation

RESCALED advocates for the inclusion of lived experience at all levels, from policy development to programme implementation. This includes acknowledging the importance of the representation of lived experience in every department of the justice sector, addressing barriers such as the need for a clean record to participate in meaningful roles. Supporting representation of lived experience at every level may also help prevent institutions from taking credit without affecting real change. Within the movement, RESCALED works to ensure that lived experience is integrated into the advocacy and implementation of detention houses and their ecosystem.

The importance of diversity

Lived experience is personal and non-comparable. People with lived experience come from different backgrounds, differing in gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, and more. They also have diverse experiences, perspectives, opinions and values. A gender-responsive approach, together with sensitivity to other intersecting identities, is essential to ensure that RESCALED recognises and addresses the different needs, strengths, and vulnerabilities people may have when sharing their story, knowledge and expertise. RESCALED believes that everyone's experiences, whether visible or not, contribute uniquely to shaping social change and are

not comparable. RESCALED is committed to empowering people with lived experience to own their stories and perspectives. This autonomy means that the organisation does not speak on behalf of individuals with lived experience but ensures that their voices are authentically represented to respect individuals' identities.

A multi-stakeholder approach

A multi-stakeholder approach ensures balance by avoiding tokenism, where one person with lived experience, or conversely, only one without it, can overshadow or undermine collective input, and stigmatization might occur. Effective collaboration requires diverse voices at the table, encouraging inclusivity and equity in decision-making.

By promoting genuine collaboration, RESCALED ensures that engagement is systematic and purposeful, not a superficial exercise to meet formalities. Collaboration includes opportunities for reflection, feedback, and co-creation, allowing all parties to recognise and benefit from the outcomes. It strengthens trust and enhances the relevance of decisions.

National and European impact

These principles are enacted across both national and European levels, enabling a robust network where lived experience plays a pivotal role in driving systemic change. For RESCALED, this is more than values; it is a guiding practice that ensures all voices are heard, respected, and integrated into building more equitable and effective systems. RESCALED member organisations are crucial in this process, driving systemic change not only on local and national levels, but also bringing forward lived experience and expertise to the European level.

[6] Antojado, D., Budd, J., Doyle, C., & Bartels, L. (2024). Criminal justice, representation and the lived experience scholar. *Incarceration*, 5. <https://doi.org/10.1177/26326663241275807>; De Jong, S., & Kimm, S. (2017). The co-optation of feminisms: A research agenda. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 19(2), 185-200.

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

Prior to drafting this document, RESCALED regularly engaged in in-depth discussions with people with lived experience, experience experts and its member organisations about the involvement of people with lived experience within the movement. These conversations went beyond terminology and practical steps for engagement, emphasising the urgency and intrinsic value of meaningful inclusion.

These discussions especially emphasised the importance of involving experience experts and highlighted the importance of addressing the diverse groups of people with lived experience within a single, unified framework. This approach rejects rigid distinctions between the 'roles' of survivors, family members, the community, incarcerated individuals and staff. Instead, it advocates for a perspective that centres the individual. By doing so, RESCALED underscores the need to view each person as a whole, recognising their unique experiences and contributions rather than limiting them to their connection with the justice system.

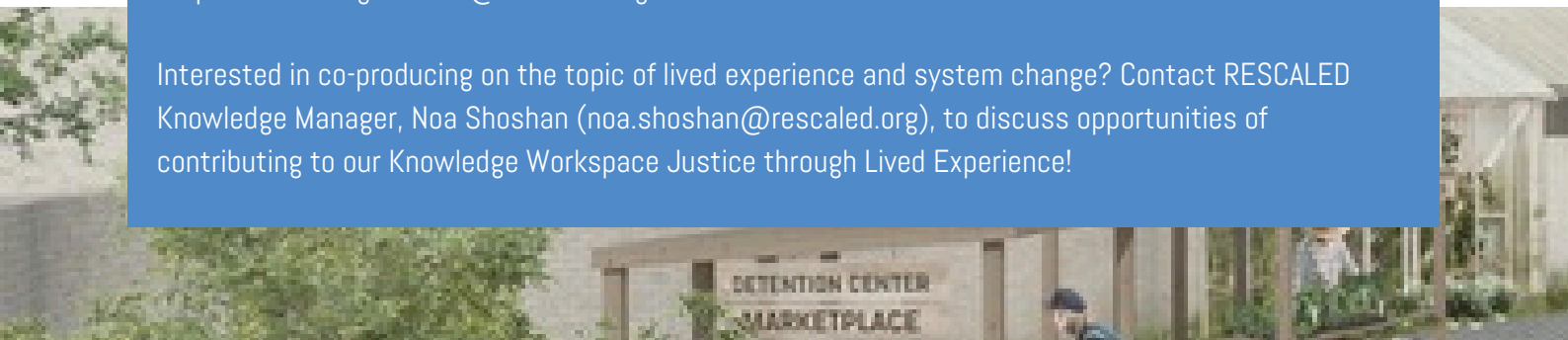
The increasing involvement of people with lived experience in European initiatives further highlighted the necessity of embedding their perspectives into RESCALED's guiding principles, ensuring their voices are central to the movement's mission and vision.

By sharing the collaborative process behind this document, we underscore RESCALED's commitment to ensuring that lived experience is not only acknowledged but becomes foundational in driving systemic change. This aligns with our vision to amplify diverse voices and create more equitable and transformative justice systems.

Become part of or collaborate with RESCALED; the European Movement for Detention Houses! Please feel free to contact our Head of Social Impact, Veronique Aicha (veronique.aicha@rescaled.org)

Your thoughts matter to us! Share your feedback and engage in discussion about this positioning paper, drop us a message at info@rescaled.org.

Interested in co-producing on the topic of lived experience and system change? Contact RESCALED Knowledge Manager, Noa Shoshan (noa.shoshan@rescaled.org), to discuss opportunities of contributing to our Knowledge Workspace Justice through Lived Experience!



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This document incorporates the perspectives and feedback of Khalil Chait (SILEO), Jana, Lenka and Jan (RUBIKON), Marte and Simen (WayBack), Sonja Graansma (Victim Support the Netherlands), Annelyn Smit (Not my Crime), Roger Nilsen and Berit Johnsen (board members of RESCALED).

Become part of or collaborate with RESCALED! Your thoughts matter to us too: share your feedback or start a conversation about this positioning paper. Reach our team at info@rescaled.org.

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