

Correctional Education: An Analysis of the Effectiveness of Education Programs in Prisons

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This paper investigates the effectiveness of correctional education as it pertains to America's issue of mass incarceration. Evidence supports the argument that the implementation of educational programs in a prison setting reduces recidivism and is more cost-effective than mass incarceration. The discussion addresses opposing arguments, including the personal safety of educators and the assumption of free education being provided to people convicted of crimes. In addition, an overview of Robert Merton's strain theory and its pertinence to deviance is also explored. The evidence provided from the research and policy analysis suggests that reintegration should be a key goal when constructing crime control policies.

With the reputation of being an incarceration nation, the United States experiences high rates of recidivism that reflect negatively on the way crime and associated issues are addressed in American society (Enns, 2016). According to the Bureau of Justice and Statistics (BJS), 860 adults per every 100,000 adults per capita were under some form of correctional supervision in 2016 (Kaeble & Cowhig, 2018). To further emphasize the problem, the United States houses a little less than five percent of the world's population but over 22% of the incarcerated population (Kaeble & Cowhig, 2018). As a country, the United States releases about 700,000 inmates annually, with four out of ten of those offenders recidivating within three years of their initial release (Tolbert, 2017). It has also been found that formerly incarcerated men earn about 11% less per hour and 40% less per year than their counterparts who have never been incarcerated (Tolbert, 2017). By analyzing these statistics, the connection between the unsuccessful reintegration and recidivism rates becomes apparent. People are being released from prisons without the proper skills needed to obtain a legitimate job, and this has created a phenomenon

in which offenders recidivate so frequently that prison is considered to have revolving doors (Pew Center, 2011). A viable solution to high recidivism rates would be to establish and expand correctional education programs to provide incarcerated students with the knowledge and professional skills to successfully reintegrate into society upon release.

The proposition of correctional education has been the subject of both criticism and praise for several years (Winterfield et al., 2009). Programs such as Adult Basic Education (ABE), Adult Secondary Education (ASE), and even college coursework have been offered in prisons as part of the progressive correctional goal of providing rehabilitation to promote reintegration. The extremely limited amount of research regarding this topic insinuates that people who participate in educational programs while incarcerated have a reduced chance of recidivating. However, it is difficult to determine whether these conclusions can be reached in various regions across the United States since nationwide correctional facilities allocate their resources differently. Utilizing the information provided by the subsequent studies, current and future policies, and criminological theories, a sustainable policy proposition will be suggested that aims to cultivate a positive rehabilitative culture within correctional institutions across the United States.

Background

Education within prisons is not unique to the United States. This progressive idea was first observed in Sweden, dating back to 1874, in which prisons offered woodworking courses to incarcerated individuals (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2005). Similar programs were created on other continents including Asia and Africa. In his book *History of Law in Japan Since 1868*, Wilhelm Rohl (2005) writes that Asian countries, specifically Japan, have been noted to have established prison education programs since at least 1871. As time progressed, these programs within Japanese correctional facilities advanced to their current form of consistent and mandated education for juvenile delinquents and adult offenders (Rohl, 2005). The somewhat lengthy history of correctional education provides context to the influence other countries had on the American criminal justice system.

According to Linden and Perry (1982), the first education program intended on rehabilitating offenders in the United States was implemented in 1876 in New York. Nearly a century later, almost every prison in the United States had some form of education program within their correctional facility, but very few offered college education. In contemporary times, a study conducted by the Vera Institute of Justice reported that only 35% of state prisons offered college-level courses to incarcerated students in 2016 (Vera Institute, 2020). Vanessa Rancano (2020) reports that this amounts to approximately 200

prisons in the nation that offer college courses, but most only permit the earning of an associate degree. These estimates are indicative of a lack of college-level educational opportunities in United States prisons.

California, one of the more progressive states in terms of correctional programs, offers adult basic education courses that allow a student to earn a General Educational Development (GED) in 34 out of the 35 state prisons (Rancano, 2020). However, the only prison in California to offer a bachelor's degree to their students is California State Prison, Los Angeles, which they achieve through a partnership with California State University, Los Angeles (Cal State LA) (Rancano, 2020). California State University, however, limits the majors offered for this degree, and depends entirely on private funding, which inhibits the growth of the program (Rancano, 2020). Currently, Cal State LA offers only a Bachelor of Arts in Communication Studies to their student inmates. Subsequently, the curriculum offered to individuals who are incarcerated in other facilities within the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) are primarily limited to high school content and potentially associate's degree course content, depending on the correctional institution (Rancano, 2020).

To better understand the typical curriculum in a correctional education department, the United States Department of Education published an article in which the various programs and purposes are delineated (Tolbert, 2017). There are several types of educational content in a correctional facility, including Adult Basic Education (ABE), Adult Secondary Education (ASE), and Career and Technical Education (CTE). The competency of the student in understanding the curriculum is measured by the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) or the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE). Although beneficial in establishing a basic understanding of kindergarten through twelfth grade material, a literature review determined that these programs need to be refined and tailored toward employment opportunities in an offender's ideal home community (Wade, 2007).

The generic ABE and ASE curriculum limits the employment opportunities made available to an offender, primarily due to the limited general education skill set accompanied with the negative stigma of a felony that prevent employers from extending an offer of employment. ABE and ASE content covers objectives primarily found in basic high school curriculum, which makes it difficult to remain competitive in a labor force that continues to raise its standards for potential candidates. According to the United States Census Bureau, 90% of the adult population ages 25 and older possessed a high school diploma or its equivalent in 2017 (US Census Bureau, 2018). Georgetown University determined that 36% of employers would not require an education beyond a high school diploma or its equivalent in 2020 (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2018). The employers not included within that statistic all required some

college coursework or higher for a person to be considered a candidate for employment (Carnevale et al., 2018). Taking this into consideration, the ABE and ASE curriculum insufficiently prepares individuals for post-incarceration employment because it develops a skill set that is already possessed by 90% of the adult population. This limits the opportunities available to former offenders and encourages recidivism, which is why higher education is necessary within correctional facilities.

Economic Impact of Education in Prison

Additionally, the cost of recidivism is pertinent because correctional education functions as a solution to America's high reoffending rates. This large percentage of reoffending not only reflects poorly on America's criminal justice system in terms of successful reintegration, but negatively impacts the American economy. In California alone, the Legislative Analyst's Office (2019) determined that in the 2018-2019 fiscal year, it costs over \$81,000 to incarcerate a person for one year. Over \$35,000 is allocated for security, in comparison to the \$2,500 dedicated toward rehabilitation programs (Legislative Analyst's Office, 2019). Within the \$2,500 margin toward rehabilitation programs, only \$1,300 is allocated for academic education, which combats the revised mission of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2020), in which they state their mission to facilitate successful reintegration of individuals by providing education, amongst other rehabilitative efforts.

On a nationwide scale, the Vera Institute (2020) conducted a study in which 45 out of the 50 states responded with the annual average amount it costs to house an inmate. With this information, researchers concluded that total state expenditure on prisons was just under \$43 billion. The Vera Institute (2020) also confirmed the numbers included in the California Legislative Analyst's Office report regarding security being the costliest aspect of a correctional facility, even in other states. In 2008, the California Legislative Analyst's Office determined that academic education was among the most cost-effective rehabilitation programs implemented at CDCR facilities (Hill, 2008). The information was acquired from the Washington State Institute for Public Policy, in which they determined that academic education resulted in an approximate net savings of \$10,000 a year per each inmate participant (Hill, 2008). This information holds promise for correctional education to be a cost-effective solution to the very immoderate recidivism rate. With this foundation in mind, the crucial need to study the effectiveness of correctional education becomes apparent if its success reduces the cost of recidivism.

Strain Theory

Numerous theorists have developed explanations as to why people commit crime. Quite a few of these theories are plausible, but Robert Merton's theory of strain seems most relevant to explain recidivism and best supports the importance of correctional education. First introduced in 1938, strain theory centers on the idea that the American dream has cultivated a society fixated on attaining wealth and success, but with a minimal emphasis on legitimately achieving those goals (Akers et al., 2017). In response to the strain caused by societal pressure to attain these goals, a person may pursue a conformist, ritualist, retreatist, rebellious, or innovative response. In addition, this theoretical perspective states that the American dream deceptively promotes the concept that all people have an equal opportunity to be successful, when (in reality) strain disproportionately affects minority and lower-class communities (Akers et al., 2017).

Merton's strain theory regarding an innovative response can be used to explain America's rising recidivism rates because it asserts that the lack of human capital needed to live a legitimate life results in a deviant response to attain goals perceived by others to be the status quo. A diminished sense of morals and limited educated upbringing produces citizens who rely on crime to fund their lifestyle. The comparison between the education attainment levels of people who are incarcerated versus that of the general population differs drastically. According to Tolbert (2017), 30% of people who are incarcerated do not possess a high school diploma or GED, in comparison to 13% of the United States population (Tolbert, 2017). To combat this issue of strain relating to lack of education attainment, policies should be tailored to provide more resources devoted to implementing correctional education programs, as well as strengthen the curriculum that currently exists.

Literature Review

There are a limited number of studies that research the effectiveness of correctional education. Much of the research that has been conducted is sporadic, existing in different decades, and is primarily focused on the United States. This literature review comprises various bodies of work, including that of countries other than the U.S., so that a holistic understanding of the concept in question can be developed. The accessible studies all support the argument that the overall integration of education in prisons aids in successfully reducing recidivism and promoting offender reintegration, in addition to being cost effective (Davis et al., 2013; Hill, 2008; Tolbert, 2017). This literature review presents research that provides a scientific understanding of correctional education and its interpretation through statistical evidence and surveys. This information will then be used to determine the validity of

arguments supporting and opposing prison education, and whether it is truly practical in terms of reducing recidivism and being cost effective.

Correctional Education Reduces Recidivism

To substantiate the argument that correctional education will be an effective solution in reducing the prison population and recidivism, a meta-analysis conducted by Davis et al. (2013) found that correctional education reduces an inmate's chance of recidivating. This study analyzed the data obtained from 229 major published studies, all with different methods, parameters, and conclusions (Davis et al., 2013). All studies researched correctional facilities in America, and the time periods from which the data were obtained ranged from 1945 to 2006 (Davis et al., 2013). What Davis et al. (2013) discovered was that inmates who received education while incarcerated had reduced their chances of returning to prison by 13%. In addition to this finding, Davis et al. (2013) found that correctional education is more cost effective in terms of rehabilitating inmates. The results of this meta-analysis revealed that taxpayers save five dollars for every dollar spent on correctional education (Davis et al., 2013).

A policy analysis regarding the effectiveness of correctional education in England and Wales was conducted by researcher Gerry Czerniawski in 2016. His research reported that the Ministry of Justice funded a study conducted in England and Wales with a sample size of 3,085 prisoners, which revealed that their reoffending rates of that sample decreased by two fifths (Czerniawski, 2016). This study includes a variety of academic and vocational programs, such as courses provided by the Department of Business Innovation and Open University (Czerniawski, 2016). Czerniawski (2016) noted that despite this promising information, it is difficult to measure the correlation between the prison education and recidivism rates because government studies with a wide sample size are limited in Europe. However, the author reaffirmed the research conducted in the United States by stating that the U.S. has studied this topic and correlation more extensively, and the evidence supports the hypothesis that correctional education reduces recidivism (Czerniawski, 2016).

The United States Department of Education published a report in 2017 centered on the difficulties of reintegration as well as programs intended to alleviate those challenges (as discussed in Tolbert, 2017). Tolbert (2017) assessed the results of a variety of studies conducted on the topic of correctional education and reported that about 700,000 inmates are released annually, with four out of ten recidivating within three years of their initial release. Based on information obtained from the National Association of State Budget Officers, Tolbert (2017) also asserted that recidivism at its current

rate costs states more than \$50 billion annually and attributes this recidivism rate to the lack of marketable skills that allow a former inmate to join the labor force. In order to combat this issue, Tolbert (2017) proposed that more efforts be allocated to the development of an education continuum, which would strengthen existing education services and establish programs that would complement these services.

Correctional Education is Cost-Effective

To support the claim that correctional education is cost effective, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) completed evaluations of research focused on correctional programs, which resulted in findings that indicated that ABE programs garnered a net cost savings of about \$9,200 per inmate (Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2012). Published in 2012, WSIPP determined the net savings for different prison programs, including vocational training and residential drug treatment, based on multiple outcomes such as lowered costs of arrests, convictions, and incarceration (Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2012). WSIPP also noted that the benefit to cost ratio of adult basic education was nearly \$6, meaning that ABE generated a positive net savings in comparison to the initial cost of \$1,972 per inmate (Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2012).

In a more recent study, it was found that correctional education only utilizes less than one percent of the federal Pell Grant that is awarded to students (Tolbert, 2017). The Pell Grant, which was created in 1972 with the intention of allocating federal student aid based on financial need, was also distributed to people who were incarcerated up until 1994, when the Violent Crime Control Act disqualified state and federal prisoners from being eligible to receive aid (Winterfield et al., 2009). Seeing as though one of the primary arguments against the integration of education while incarcerated is that it is costly, Tolbert's (2017) article provides evidence that discredits that complaint. The Legislative Analyst's Office (2019) of California determined that it costs upwards of \$80,000 annually to house one inmate. Since taxpayers are already spending a copious amount of money to fund inmate housing in correctional facilities, it is pertinent that American corrections ensure the reduction of recidivism.

Alternate Factors that Contribute to Successful Reintegration

An earlier study conducted by researchers Jennifer Yahner and Christy Visser for the Urban Institute concluded with several key findings that indicated factors that contributed to successful reintegration (2008). Yahner and Visser (2008) utilized a sample of 145 men who were released from

Illinois prisons between 2002 and 2003 and studied them for three years. These men were, on average, about 35 years old, and 43% had completed high school or its equivalent. After the study concluded, the researchers found that 59% of the 145 men observed were reincarcerated within three years of their initial release. Another key finding was that their reincarceration depended on the former offender's success at obtaining post incarceration employment or relocation to a more structured environment. With this information, the researchers recommended that pre-release programming require a supplement program, such as a transitions course, that aided incarcerated people in developing a resume, obtaining a job, and securing stable housing prior to being released, which will kindle a sense of autonomy and responsibility (Yahner & Visser, 2008). The recommendations provided in this study reemphasize the issue of frequent recidivism and bring attention to the importance of effective transition courses, which are provided by the education department within an institution, to encourage a smooth reintegration process amongst former offenders.

Discussion of Policy Implications

There are arguably numerous benefits to be reaped from correctional education, such as reduced recidivism rates and an increased labor force resulting from educated inmates being released and finding legitimate jobs. In addition, inmates are rewarded for continuing their education while incarcerated. One of the incentives offered to correctional students to enhance participation is education merit credit, in which a student inmate can receive a reduced sentence for their academic achievements. According to the 2018 Title 15 of the California Code of Regulations, a student that earned a high school diploma or high school equivalency while incarcerated will receive 90 days off their sentence, and students who have obtained an associate degree or higher will see a reduction of 180 days from their sentence (Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, 2018). The potential to earn a free high school diploma or college degree combined with the educational merit credit proves to be a worthy stimulus to people who are not incarcerated. However, there is still difficulty in finding inmates willing to participate in such programs. The California Legislative Analyst's Office determined that, in 2008, only about 31 percent of the inmate population participated in an education program, which amounts to about 54,000 in numerical terminology (Hill, 2008).

Furthermore, there are several limitations that accompany this model, such as negative criticism from the general population, the limited access to professors and educational resources, discrepancies between academic programs offered at male versus female facilities, and ensuring proper implementation within each correctional facility in the nation. The general public heavily criticizes

correctional education because it is assumed that prisoners are receiving a free education (Winterfield et al., 2009). However, this is a fallacy when assessing the statistics associated with correctional education costs. No additional money is being provided to prisons to fund college education. As aforementioned, Cal State LA relies on private funding to support their Prison Graduation Initiative. Until future budget propositions are passed, other prisons must reallocate their funds or become dependent on grant money to implement a program that models that of Cal State LA's Prison Graduation Initiative.

One of the most popular arguments against correctional education is that it is considered a reward for breaking the law. In their study, Quan-Baffour and Zawada (2012) assert that critics protest prison education by advocating for the use of public funds to be spent on the victims and their families, rather than the people who perpetrate horrendous crimes. The research was conducted in their home country of South Africa, which lends a global perspective to this topic. In addition to an established argument against correctional education, the researchers posed that the use of taxpayer money can be viewed as validation that crime should be rewarded. To determine whether these negative opinions towards prison education were valid, Quan-Baffour and Zawada (2012) conducted a study that explored the impact education had on an inmate's self-employment, social cohesion, and recidivism rate. Utilizing a sample size of 80 inmates, 45 male and 35 female, the researchers conducted interviews centered on the value that was placed on the courses being offered and how the knowledge gained would be utilized (Quan-Baffour & Zawada, 2012). Their qualitative approach concluded that there was a positive relationship between a current inmate's outlook on future success, and their actual success, and correctional education. Although this research took place in South Africa, it disputes popular arguments, and affirms the hypotheses made in this study.

Furthermore, the revocation of the federal Pell Grant funding in 1994 because of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act had a negative impact on higher education within a correctional facility (Winterfield et al., 2009). Erisman and Contardo (2005) report that the number of states that offered postsecondary programs dropped from 37 to 26 states, and the enrollment totals decreased by about 40% in 1995. Data supplied in their report indicated that offenders who are more educated were less likely to be repeat offenders. This supports the idea that young minority men are overrepresented in prisons, and that correctional education is a way in which this demographic can break the cycle upon release. Erisman and Contardo (2005) further assert that providing education during incarceration establishes a role model for the family of an inmate student and encourages avoidance of deviant behavior. This information draws attention to the impact that the Violent Crime Control and Law

Enforcement Act had on funding for prison education, as well as the fact that minorities are more likely to suffer from a lack of access to education prior to and during their incarceration.

Another drawback is the limited amount of professors that are willing to teach inmates. Professors may be reluctant to participate out of fear of their safety or exterior limitations, such as the mileage it takes to reach the facility. One of the most notable instances was the case of Marie Romero, a correctional teacher who was beaten to death by her student at the El Paso de Robles Youth Correctional Facility in 1975 (Iglar, 1986). North Kern State Prison's adult school adopted her name in her honor (R. Zimmerman, personal communication, February 3, 2020). Despite the potential danger, it is important to revert the focus to the reintegrative goal of corrections to promote a society in which people can flourish.

Furthermore, a 1994 court case brought to attention the differences between academic programs offered at a male correctional facility versus programs offered at an all-female institution. In *Jeldness v. Pearce* (1994), a group of female prisoners incarcerated in an Oregon state prison argued that the Oregon State Department of Corrections was in violation of Title IX by discriminating against women when provided vocational and educational opportunities. According to the court document, the Oregon penal system offers differing educational and vocational programs to men and women. The document demonstrates this by stating that only two vocational classes are offered at the women's facility in comparison to the twelve vocational classes offered at both the men's maximum-security facility and the male medium-security facility. Under Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments, people are protected from discrimination and other exclusions that would prohibit that person from participating in an educational program. Utilizing this as the basis for the court case, the Oregon women took this case to the Ninth Circuit Court, in which the court decided that prison officials may have a valid concern that justifies limited prison programming (*Jeldness v. Pearce*, 1994).

Despite the drawbacks, revolutionary political figures have become privy to the benefits of developing correctional education programs. Recently elected governor of California Gavin Newsom proposed a budget in January of 2020 that dedicated \$1.7 million toward his goal of partnering the California State University (CSU) system with the CDCR to effectuate bachelor's programs in seven state prisons (Rancano, 2020). Governor Newsom plans to increase this budget to \$3.5 million in 2021, which would cover a multitude of educational expenses, including technology, tuition, and other course materials (Rancano, 2020). The state has identified four prisons in various regions of California to pilot these bachelor programs and would alleviate the burden of relying on private funding, which hinders the current bachelor's program provided by CSU Los Angeles.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the nationwide implementation of educational programs offered in correctional facilities will be a beneficial alternative to the use of mass incarceration in an effort to prevent crime in America. It will aid those who were affected by strain by giving them the opportunity to receive an education, which may not have been accessible to them prior to being incarcerated. In turn, this education can build the human capital necessary for inmates to attain a legitimate job post incarceration, which creates social capital and deters them from reoffending. Studies have concluded that correctional education is effective, as well as a more affordable option than mass-incarceration, which will benefit taxpayers (Davis et al., 2013; Hill, 2008; Tolbert, 2017). Policies should be tailored with the goal of successful reintegration rather than correcting crime issues through lengthy prison sentences. It is also recommended that a greater emphasis be placed on pre-release transition courses that can help people who are incarcerated obtain employment and stable housing upon release, which will also reduce their likelihood of recidivating. These updated policies will aid America in reducing its incarceration rate, and with time, can possibly reduce the crime rate by increasing America's education level.

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