

The Effects of Postsecondary Education in Prisons

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Introduction & Background

Despite the national incarceration rate being at its lowest in 20 years, the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. The United States has one federal, 50 states, and 18,000 local prison systems as America holds two million people inside 1,566 state prisons, 102 federal prisons, 2,850 local jails, 1,510 juvenile correctional facilities, 186 immigrant detention facilities, 82 Indian country jails, as well as military prisons, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals, and prisons in the United States territories (Sawyer & Wagner, 2022). Due to such statistics, 60% of inmates are entirely illiterate. Lack of education is linked to crime, as academic failure increases delinquency, violence, and wrongdoings. There is a deep need for post-secondary education for inmates, as they are significantly less educated than the general population. This research will focus on the effects of providing postsecondary education to incarcerated students.

As President Barack Obama once said, *“the United States is home to 5 percent of the world’s population, but 25 percent of the world’s prisoners. Our incarceration rate is four times higher than China’s. We keep more people behind bars than the top 35 European countries combined”* (Remarks by the President at the NAACP Conference 2015). The Federal Bureau of Prisons reported the number of inmates according to race, Asians 2,267, Black 60,656, Native Americans 4,125, and White 90,606 inmates according to the last update in February of 2023 (Federal Bureau of Prisons 2023). The highest percentage of imprisoned offenders are White with 57.5% followed by Black with 38.5%. Furthermore, the least percentage of inmates are Native Americans of 2.6%, and Asians at 1.4% (Federal Bureau of Prisons 2023). Such individuals are serving sentences for the crime which was committed. The target population for

this study has been sentenced to one or more offenses, like crimes against a person, property, inchoate, statutory, financial, and other crimes. Incarcerated individuals, regardless of their criminal offense, deserve the opportunity to have a second chance. The importance of educational intervention in vulnerable populations is proven to transform the lives of prisoners. Such results of inmate students lead to safe communities due to the improvement of recidivism, inmate wellness, self-esteem, religion, and educational influence in rehabilitation. Education intervention is a second chance for inmates to break chains from their past to better themselves and improve their loved ones' lives.

Despite inmate students' willingness and motivation to proceed with post-secondary education little analysis and research have been carried out on its effectiveness. As education provides prisoners with the opportunity to obtain a degree and gives them a renewed sense of purpose. Not much is known about the impact of education on such a vulnerable population as it is known about mass incarceration. Research has also primarily focused on the recidivism rate of inmates after their release, without determining solutions such as education to determine reductions in future offending behavior. The importance of educational intervention has proven it affects the lives of prisoners after their release. The impact and power of education provided to prisoners is undeniable, as inmates are provided with a chance.

Literature Review

Inmates and Recidivism

To determine if PSE may improve the quality of life and reduce recidivism among prisoners, it is important to learn why PSE was introduced to correctional facilities, including why recidivism

reduction for inmates is a significant matter. The purpose of prisons is to rehabilitate inmates, penalize inmates for the crimes they commit, and to keep the general public safe from crime and criminals. Aside from some inmates serving life sentences, some inmates serve short and long sentences. Once an inmate serves his/her sentence and is released into the general public, there are many social problems they tend to face. The social problems consist of isolation, financial security via poverty, homelessness, mental health issues, substance and/or alcohol abuse, self-harm, and/or suicide. Recidivism is one of the highest risks that post-release inmates experience. According to researchers Grant Duwe and Valerie Clark, more than one-third of prisoners from Minnesota state prison will re-enter prison 3 years after post-release for a new felony charge (Duwe & Clark, 2014, 455). Due to most prison populations consisting of young inmates and inmates who lack education, upon post-release, many felons reintegrate back into society with a lack of education and basic job skills (Duwe & Clark, 2014, 455). Due to post-released offenders not having the best education and low and/or basic job skills, they're not able to obtain and maintain a job to help support themselves, their families, and their needs. Not having financial security and educational credentials to thrive in the general public, this issue may tempt post-release offenders to incriminate themselves by committing new crimes and/or the same crimes.

Inmates' Education and Employment

Maintaining employment can be one of the many factors that can determine recidivism among inmates. Researchers Duwe and Clark conducted a study among offenders released from Minnesota prisons between 2007 and 2008, comparing secondary degree prisoners to post-secondary prisoners' recidivism and post-release job outcomes. The results of this study

showed that offenders who attained a secondary degree had the same rearrest rate as prisoners in the comparison group, but had moderately lower rates of reconviction and reincarceration for a felony offense (Duwe & Clark, 2014, 468). However, secondary-degree offenders had a higher technical violation revocation rate compared to those in the comparison group (Duwe & Clark, 2014, 468). Offenders who obtained a post-secondary degree in prison had lower rates of recidivism than their comparison group counterparts (Duwe & Clark, 2014, 468).

In addition, studies showed that 60% of post-release offenders who earned secondary degrees in prison found employment within the first 2 years compared to 50% of inmates post related with secondary education (Duwe & Clark, 2014, 469). Albeit, the employment rate for offenders who earned their post-secondary degrees (71%) was slightly higher than that of the prisoners in the comparison group which was prisoners with secondary education (68%) (Duwe & Clark, 2014, 469). Furthermore, there was no difference in hourly wage for offenders who earned a post-secondary degree in prison and those with secondary education (Duwe & Clark, 2014, 469). The reason it may not be differences in wages between both comparison groups is due to stigmas prisoners faced post- released, such as being judged due to criminal history, parole, time spent in prison, and discipline history (Duwe & Clark, 2014, 469).

In conclusion, offenders earning a secondary education or post-secondary education degree in prison significantly improve their chances of securing post-release employment but, it does not guarantee better pay or consistent employment. Offenders who earned post-secondary degrees were more successful at maintaining employment following their release from prison due to secondary education consists of basic skill development, whereas a post-secondary degree involves providing students with the knowledge required to succeed within a particular field or

discipline (Duwe & Clark, 2014). The type of degree an offender earns determines the number of job opportunities one has access to. According to studies, reducing recidivism among offenders is due to maintaining employment which appears to be important (Duwe & Clark, 2014). For example, researchers Duwe and Clark discussed individuals are less likely to commit crimes when they are occupied with work, work more hours, and earned more total wages, which can reduce their economic needs (Duwe & Clark, 2014).

Inmates' Wellness and Self-Esteem

"To make up to my parents for all the trouble and grief I have caused them. Also, the college program gives you a work ethic." - Prisoner Montie Rissell (Gendron & Cavan, 2007). "I've been in prison 23 years and - not until the college program - I never, not ever, saw inmates tell other hard-core inmates to take their mess somewhere else because 'I've got to study! I was shocked when I saw that, saw guys who were that serious, and that's when I started looking at it... We've got to make time serve us instead of us just serving time" -Prisoner Thomas "Fat Cat" Shaw, and "A lot of men have given up on the system because they don't feel they have a future. But, even for me, if I don't have a future, I'm going to plan as if I'm going to have one because that's where I made the mistake at first. When I was growing up, I didn't think about the future. I said it would take care of itself, and it didn't take care of itself." Prisoner Philip Bryant (Gendron & Cavan, 2007).

Above are the statements and views of inmates who participated in the Southside Virginia Community College education program at the Mecklenburg Correctional Center in, Mecklenburg, Virginia. These testimonies by the Mecklenburg inmates highlight the positive impact and effect PSE can have on prisoners. According to researchers Gendron and Cavan, they

observed that student inmates have become more ambitious and educationally confident (Gendron & Cavan, 2007). At Correctional Maui Center, researchers did a quantitative research study to link how effective the Free Inside program was as a rehabilitative tool (Duncombe et al., 2005). The researcher's findings disclose a relationship between inmate participation in the Free Inside program and increased awareness, self-esteem, sense of hope, and compassion (Duncombe et al., 2005). The purpose of the Free Inside program is an effort to help rehabilitate and better prepare inmates for re-entry due to prison can harm inmates, such as inmates feeling depressed, anxious, poor physical and emotional health, and increased violence and deviant behavior within the prison walls. According to researchers, prisoners adjusting to the prison environment is not easy for prisoners due to the harsh realities that take place there. The purpose of Free Inside is to help prisoners cope with life in prison because the transition from freedom to incarcerated is not smooth nor easy to adjust to. Free Inside program consists of yoga, meditation, and chi gung practice as an intervention to help prisoners better cope with life in prison (Duncombe et al., 2005). According to the researchers, yoga, meditation, and chi gung practice has many benefits attached to them such as alleviating headaches, insomnia, back pain, nerve and muscle pain, reducing blood pressure, reducing heart rate, and increasing joy (Duncombe et al., 2005). After researching to determine if there's an association between inmate participation in Free Inside program classes, the data showed the intervention program improved the offenders' state of mind while in prison (Duncombe et al., 2005). The researchers shared that "the pre and post-test mean scores reveal a significant decrease in depression among inmates, significantly increased hope, and a significant increase in their physical mental well-being" (Duncombe et al., 2005). The information shared above intervention programs whether PSE or

programs that focused on wellness can have a positive impact on offenders' self-esteem and/or physical, mental, and emotional health.

Inmate Rehabilitation

Inmates enter prison with the harsh reality of their family relationships being under distress and rapid deterioration. The study conducted by Daniel J. Bayse, Scot M. Allgood, and Paul H. Van Wyn found that inmates who participated in a family life education program learned how to repair and maintain family relationships, lowering recidivism rates and reducing disciplinary problems within the prison system. The study was intended to be conducted with the participation of 72 inmates housed in an Alabama medium-security prison, who chose to volunteer. The experimental and control group each had 9 inmates who did not complete the study, 8 were transferred, and 6 changed their minds. The project concluded with both groups having an equal size (n=27). The study proceeded with the purpose of helping inmates repair and strengthen their family relationships while serving their sentences. The average age of volunteering inmates who completed the study was 30, of which 72% were black (n=39) and 28% were white (n=15) (Bayse, D. J., Allgood, S. M., & Van Wyk, P. H., 1991). It is important to note that 56% of inmates (n=30) were serving their first sentence; 32% (n=17) their second, 7% (n=4) they're third, and the other 5% (n=3) their fifth or sixth sentence (Bayse, D. J., Allgood, S. M., & Van Wyk, P. H., 1991). All were incarcerated for different crimes, such as burglary, sex-related, and violent crimes against people such as murder, manslaughter, assault, and drug-related. In the study, n=10 of the inmates were legally married, n=26 were involved in long-term relationships, n=10 were divorced, n=5 single, n=37 had children, and the remaining were childless (Bayse, D. J., Allgood, S. M., & Van Wyk, P. H., 1991). Inmates participated in

classes that addressed issues of narcissism, appropriate self-disclosure, and decision-making. Inmates initiated lessons by drawing genograms and identified chains that linked them to their past, which lead to conclude with inmates discarding chains as a symbol of commitment to change (Bayse, D. J., Allgood, S. M., & Van Wyk, P. H., 1991). Offenders learned negotiation skills, child discipline, individual responsibility, communication skills, trust, self-control, self-esteem, and altruistic love. The study demonstrated that 18 of 27 participants passed the program, in which there were no significant differences between the control group and experimental group scores in the final exam. The study concluded that the teaching method is an effective way to reduce narcissistic characteristics among inmates, as it should improve family functioning when the prisoners are released. Inmates need rehabilitation.

Christianity Influence

It is believed that without the intervention of comprehensive rehabilitation, the majority of overwhelming inmates will be returning to prison shortly. A study was conducted to measure whether Christian programs had a positive influence on 124 male inmates participating in an Adult Basic Education Program at a closed security prison in the southeastern United States. The religious aspect dates back to the Colonial period, in which literacy was a means of ensuring that individuals understand their sinful nature, repent of their sins to God, and gain salvation (Messemer, J. E., 2007). Academic and religious programs operate under the United States Prison Systems seeking to create change in the future behaviors of inmates upon being released. As Martin Luther King Jr once said, “we need religion and education to change attitudes and to change the hearts of men” (Messemer, J. E., 2007). The study consisted of two main groups, the experimental which consisted of inmates who self-reported attending Christian programs, and the

control group which solely reported no Christian belief. The Christian sample consisted of 89.1% African Americans (n=49) whereas non-Christians were 81.2% African Americans (n=56) (Messemer, J. E., 2007). Additionally, the Christian sample had 9.1% White (n=5) and non-Christian 14.5% White (n=10) (Messemer, J. E., 2007). Furthermore, the non-Christian sample had (n=3) Hispanic inmates. On the other hand, the Christian Sample had one Asian inmate (Messemer, J. E., 2007). It is to be noted that inmates participating in the study had an average grade completion rate of a ninth-grade level before being incarcerated (Messemer, J. E., 2007). It was mentioned in the study that previous academic history greatly influences failure, which leads to incarceration. During the completion of the study, it was determined that both the experimental and control group were very intelligent and could learn. Results indicated that Christian programs have a positive influence on inmates' learning gains, as they have fewer disciplinary problems, less absenteeism in the classroom, and better academic achievement. As for the experimental group, the learning experience became a spiritual transformation. In which they felt accountability for their actions and the desire to make a change. Education and Christianity prove the benefits for inmates, such as an increase in self-confidence, self-improvement, and improving educational knowledge and skills (Messemer, J. E., 2007). The influence of religion does help inmates' academic achievement due to their discipline to change.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to showcase how intervention programs such as PSE and wellness programs can improve the quality of life for offenders whether they're in prison and/or post-released from prison. There can be many factors that lead to high recidivism prison rates such as offenders having a difficult time adjusting back to life in the public, discrimination due to

criminal history, and lack of basic education and skills to thrive in the community (Duncombe et al., 2005). PSE and wellness programs can be protective factors for offenders and can reduce recidivism rates among offenders. These programs give prisoners a sense of autonomy and are influential methods for offenders to rehabilitate, and offenders can transition into society smoothly compared to inmates who do not participate in these programs. More studies can implement research to discover do inmates utilize their PSE credentials post-release and do inmates continue to practice wellness techniques post-release to curb recidivism. With a competitive job market post-COVID-19 pandemic and more technology jobs increasing, will inmates be able to compete with it and are there any programs that are more tech-based to better prepare them for today's technology-based jobs?

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