

TCED

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Capstone

Workforce Development used to Reduce Recidivism

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Introduction

Once a person has been incarcerated it has been proven through several studies that it is difficult for a newly released inmate to obtain and maintain viable employment and avoid being incarcerated again. The inability to find gainful employment has consistently been shown to be the main cause that inmates return to jail or prison. Most recent releasees lack two things, which make their employability nearly impossible 1) lack of education and 2) lack of a trade or skill. By allowing inmates an opportunity to further educate themselves and to introduce them to workforce development programs that can increase their employability during their incarceration, they will be better equipped to provide for themselves and their families. The goal should be to pool resources and find ways to reduce recidivism through educational and workforce development programs. Not doing so could have a significant impact to our future, socially, financially, politically, generationally, and morally.

Instituting a policy that requires a correctional facility (public or privately operated), that houses an inmate for over a six-month period to assess an inmate's educational and workforce training needs, should be implemented. That facility should then be required to provide or make accessible to that prisoner, the necessary tools to facilitate that education or training. Parole and probation officers need to be made aware of the assessment, education and training that was provided to that inmate while incarcerated, so that appropriate follow up can be set up for them upon reentry. Accessing the individual needs for inmates seems to be a necessary measure to ensure they get the education or training they need to be successful after their incarceration.

Background

The partnerships and programs created to assist with efforts to rehabilitate and reenter former inmates to communities has not necessarily reduced the rate of recidivism over the years, but it's good to point out that the rate has not risen either. That indicates that the programs instituted are working to a degree, but the fact remains there are still gaps in making sure that inmates are properly supported when they return to their home state or community. For instance, the Bureau of Prisons instituted a computer system that allows them to track the assessment and programs that the inmate was offered while incarcerated. Having access to what a state provided upon reentry through the parole or probation office, may not be readily available to them if the inmate returns to prison. There are still issues with payments of fines, fees and court costs that burden the former inmate which the new-found employment may not always cover, to meet the needs of the inmate financially, while also trying to support themselves or a family. Partnerships and programs that help a former inmate land on the road to success are an asset, but what causes the individual to be in the situation in the first place? How did it get to the point where incarceration was ever an option?

Generational poverty has always been a reason that members of society are jailed. Federal efforts to eliminate child poverty have been around since the early 1900's (Heard-Garris, 2021). The thought process was if child poverty were somehow eliminated, the cycle of poverty would end. According to data found there are five contributors to generational poverty, redlining, gentrification, school environment, recreational spaces, and mass incarceration. Those contributors lead to a generational and cyclic nature to poverty. Those who are deemed as the Have Nots are looking for a way out of their current situation and ultimately resort to illegal activity. People are in survival mode, and they are just trying to live day to day. During an interview, the

Reverend Marcell Crow, pastor of the Reveille United Methodist Church who assists people struggling with poverty and addiction at the Hope Restoration Community Center stated, “The lack of education is the main cause of generational poverty and the reason it continues throughout generations.” He goes further to say, “When education is not important, there is no motivation to pass it down.” When people are under-educated, they find themselves in marginal jobs that pay marginal wages, and they struggle financially. Multiple studies show that educational opportunities can assist in breaking generational poverty. Ruby Payne, who wrote “*A Framework for Understanding Poverty: A Cognitive Approach*” states there has to be a plan to motivate one to break generational poverty. Her opinion is that when someone gets to that point, they do not want to be in the cycle any longer, they will work to remove themselves from the situation. When people are better educated, they have more opportunities to be gainfully employed and make more money in the process. Individuals who face obstacles getting better education usually wind up in the same circumstances as the generation before them. The obstacles that face low-income and poverty-stricken families may drive members of that family to participate in illegal activity, as they see it as way out of their current situation regardless of the consequence. All the research reviewed points directly to educational and workforce development opportunities, as ways to break the cycle which should have a direct effect on reducing the number of individuals who turn to a life of crime.

Dewitt Scott’s *Developing Prison-To-School Pipeline: A Paradigmatic Shift in Educational Possibilities During an Age of Mass Incarceration* article, presents a fascinating and eye-opening view of how the education system in low income and impoverished areas directly relates to the number of former students from those areas that eventually serve either jail or prison time. The premise of this article is to show how the School-To-Prison Pipeline theory has affected youth and offers solutions to providing ex-offenders with access to educational and training programs that

will lead to success as they reenter society. Researchers determined that there is a direct correlation between the prison system and the K-12 educational system. They determined that the policies and disciplinary practices used in the school systems were inherently directly related to practices used in the prison system which made it a natural transition for students with certain racial and class backgrounds to become future prisoners. The research indicates that the zero-tolerance policy instituted in school systems during the 1990's to make schools safer, pushed schools to become a more militarized environment (Gregor & Hewitt, 2011, Schept et al.,2015, Snapp et al., 2015). The introduction of metal detectors, sweep searches, security guards, police school resource officers and personal searches had an adverse effect on African American boys and other minority, poor, non-gender conforming students. This ultimately lead to increases in detention, suspension, expulsion and documented disciplinary actions. Some school systems have instituted programs referred to as "restorative justice" or "restorative practices", programs where children are removed from the regular classroom setting and placed in a setting that specifically monitors their behavior without removing them from the school. The programs are supposed to be designed for de-escalating and resolving conflicts and shoring up relationships between students, their peers and teachers. The changes made to the disciplinary responses often remove the offending student from the educational setting, which adversely affects their ability to keep up with assignments and ultimately be in a setting conducive to learning. The article points out the startling likenesses of the way the school system treats students to that of the prison system. The same type of equipment is used to process students through the doors that are meant for them to learn in, (metal detectors or wandings) with Correctional Officers (security guards and/or SRO's) there to oversee them and punishments that equate to being moved out of the general population to areas where you are either more heavily monitored, (detention or special education programs) or placed in what could be

deemed as solitary confinement (expelled). Research indicates that children who are suspended and/or expelled, which are the most dramatic punishments in the educational setting for K-12 students, are more likely to be under-educated, unemployable and incarcerated because of the disruption to their learning process (Nally et al,2013). What is perceived as negative behavior which may be driven by emotional, mental, or physical abuse, is often a cry for help that may be overlooked as the school system is only considering the behavior exhibited and the consequence it requires. This research points out a glaring fact that minority under-education, begins early in the educational process and the transition to the jail or prison system seems more likely than a shot at higher education.

Underserved communities are often plagued by common social issues that need to be addressed by legislation, workforce development programs, or educational equality. Often the policies put in place adversely affect the community it was intended to help. One article discusses the effect of the 1980's "War on Drugs" and discusses how America's incarceration rates were based on vastly different types of crime. After the "War on Drugs" began, the majority of crimes committed in the United States were related to drug offenses, such as possession, intent to sell, or trafficking. Due to the policy changes enacted during this period, the legal and judicial systems had to change the way they handled these types of crimes in the courtroom and make way for a wave of cases and appeals that would essentially lead to increased incarceration rates and lengthy sentences for this type of crime (Heard-Garris et al 2021) The reasons for imprisonment increased, overcrowding of jails and prisons soon needed to be addressed, also an avenue for those who had been incarcerated to be released with a skill-set that would allow them to become gainfully employed to avoid the vicious cycle of recidivism. The authors described the events that led to the "War on Drugs" and walked through the reasons the policy of the time was enacted and presented a realistic

take of what occurred afterward in the prison and court system which drove up the numbers of those being imprisoned and jailed. The information ties directly to how recidivism became more of an issue, as former inmates churned onto the streets with limited resources available to them, only to be incarcerated once again.

Policymakers cried out for change in the early 90's and the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act which became known as the Crime Bill of 1994 instituted changes that would create lasting effects for the correction system and affect correctional education directly. The bill, signed by then President Bill Clinton, eliminated federal financial aid for college in prison. The ability to obtain Pell Grants while incarcerated was no longer an option. Since the Crime Bill was passed, private sources subsidize any formal education offered and educational programs in the prison system significantly decreased.

By instituting workforce development programs that are specifically designed to reach out to the soon to be released, former jail and prison population, the needs of local employers can be met and create avenues for them to become productive members of society. According to Wikipedia, workforce development essentially develops a human-resources strategy by focusing on people development rather than business development. In the case of former inmates who are re-entering society, workforce development provides an opportunity for job-skill training that creates a way for them to provide for their family. Post release employment is a critical factor in determining the success of an ex-offender's acclimation into society (Nally et al 2014).

Case Studies

A study conducted in Indiana, found that ex-offenders generally found jobs related to administrative support, waste management and remediation services, accommodation and food

services, manufacturing, construction, retail trade, health care and temporary agency positions. Barriers and obstacles that present themselves in retaining employment and then maintaining it, could include factors such as literacy (Nally, 2014). **The National Center of Education Statistics, states that 29% of Americans struggle with literacy and that number increases to about 75% of the inmate population. According to several different sources, which presents an issue as ex-offenders attempt to search for jobs in the public sector.** Teaching those individuals, a viable work skill could prove to be a better option for an inmate, with a shorter sentence than to attempt to teach them to read. Based on this information, workforce development programs that are skill-based, may prove to be a better choice for former inmates to immediately reintroduce them to society rather than programs that require an educational facet. Because of high illiteracy rates, correctional administrators have focused on allocating the majority of their resources to literacy programs and high school equivalency because of the high number of inmates who are undereducated. This research points out that historically correctional educational programs have primarily focused on education rather than job skill as the way to send inmates back into society. It has also been determined that correctional administrators often lack the knowledge needed to identify what types of vocational training is necessary, to enhance the employability of ex-offenders. Periodically pooling data this way will increase the abilities of correctional educators to provide education, skills and training that will assist in providing offenders with the tools they need to be successful when they exit imprisonment. (Nally, 2014)

What was found in the review of data is that a similar study to one in Indiana has been conducted in three Tennessee counties, Haywood, Tipton and Lauderdale County, Tennessee (HTL). The study shows that diploma attainment levels are less than that of surrounding communities and that the overall rate of those in the community moving forward to higher education is only around 25%.

As new businesses move into the market, the community needs to prepare itself for the growth ahead. Part of that growth will involve changes to the make-up of employable citizens that live within the community. In reviewing the data, it has been determined that the majority of jobs that currently exist in the market are the same ones that could be best suited for former inmates. This includes health care, social assistance, retail trade, administrative support, waste management and remediation services and manufacturing (HTL 2020). Research shows that most of the ex-offenders who do find employment, are usually marginally employed in labor-intensive, low-wage jobs with earnings that fall below the poverty line, which usually directly relates to a high recidivism rate.

There are online learning programs that are in place to prepare inmates for life after prison. Catherine Morris, in *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, asks the question “Could education be the path to helping former prison inmates reintegrate successfully into society?” In her review she speaks to the fact that many politicians that believe the answer to that is “Yes.” She focuses on a particular product called ALISON that is available to American inmates, and she discusses its merits and some of the pitfalls. The program is available through a series of on-line training courses. The course work offered focuses on IT skills and soft skills relevant to customer service. Morris focuses on the sheer numbers of those incarcerated and released and speaks to the obstacles that offenders and ex-offenders face when trying to build skills for their future outside jail or prison walls. The article discusses the support from political leaders on both sides of the aisle and touts the backing of President Barack Obama. She also points out that the program was developed with assistance from correctional educators and administrators to drive home its credibility. Her analysis of the data further offers proof of the program’s validity (Morris, 2015).

The use of tablets has been instrumental in providing inmates with a source of technology that does not have to always be utilized in a formal classroom setting. Collecting assessment data can be made easier using this tool, which could also instill a feeling of independence and responsibility for one's own learning. During the GTL Inspire Tablets were created by GTL, a leading corrections technology company, whose mission is to "provide inmates with access to technology, education, and other products and services that improve their personal outcomes during incarceration and prepare them for a life after release." The tablets allow prisoners access to the Department of Labor's Career/One Stop website, content, and tools. They are the first company of this kind to do this work. The app allows inmates to complete a self-assessment and identify roles that are suitable for their skill set and takes into consideration any restrictions that may be related to their conviction status. The app also allows them to produce a resume and offers tips for how to apply for jobs. This type of technology should prove to assist those who are literate to search for and find employment, which had previously been an obstacle for them. Inmates can locate jobs by zip code and determine what jobs are available to them in the area they plan to return to upon release. (PR Newswire Association, LLC, 2019). The fact that there is focus on the location where the releasee may be scheduled to return could prove to be the best part of the technology offered.

The Center of Employment Opportunities, a nonprofit located in New York City, conducted a study that provided a plethora of valuable information concerning transitional work that was specific to New York State back in 2007. The study focused on in-house work programs and the impact they have on providing opportunities for inmates once they are released. The article points out that studies show the importance of those who are being released being employed as about 89% of those released in New York are unemployed. CEO's program involves four days of classroom training and then paid transitional work for about two months and then placement in a

permanent job. The program met some pitfalls, in that positions were not always immediately available, which created issues in retaining the employee and thus some level of recidivism still occurred. The merits of the program are sound, the practicality was somewhat strained. The transitional worksite has great upsides. The employees learn workforce skill behaviors that the employers say they want and items like timeliness, following supervisor direction, fostering teamwork, working hard, and communicating well are instilled in the worker prior to joining the team. The culture of the business is engrained in the employee prior to employment. The study also touched on the feasibility of programs like this one and determined four factors that affect its success:

Earned income from transitional employers-How does the money flow to increase the viability of the program?

Enabling Legislation and government procurement policies-Do government processes place correctional facilities at a disadvantage by claiming some of the work. The work must be spread amongst several entities that may be vying for the type of work being offered. For instance, do preferred work contracts ultimately get certain work?

Use of existing government funding streams-If funding (i.e., a grant) is available for the work, the correctional facility must compete with other government program areas.

Third party revenue through public/private partnerships-Many private sector jobs are finding ways to contribute to social ventures that add social value to the community. Private sector jobs are involving themselves in work that was traditionally provided by a government entity. Their role in the marketplace may tax heavily on the services that a correctional facility could offer. (i.e., providing marginal wage employment to the

homeless to assist them in getting on their feet, could take away from jobs that might ordinarily be available to an ex-offender (Tarlow,2007).

These four factors are still relevant to the success of transitional work programs that exist in 2020. The data revealed in this report provide insight as to how private sector companies are playing a pivotal part in decreasing the rate of recidivism. The key will be to keep those companies engaged in the process.

Results and Lessons Learned

Programs like the Incarceration to Incorporation program that was introduced as a Bill in legislature that was specifically designed to reduce recidivism rates, need to be carefully monitored and measured in terms of their success rate. Understanding that “social bonds” create obstacles for recently released inmates and not creating funding streams and sponsorship programs to increase their possible success in society renders the programs futile (Toussaint, 2016).

Are there right answers for what is needed to significantly change the recidivism rates in the United States? Most of the data compiled in the research and resources that are directed at the issues that currently exist regarding recidivism in the United States reviews programming that is available within the United States.

The State of Tennessee appears to be well on its way to instituting change that will benefit its residents. Tennessee will be the first state in the country to launch a program that directly addresses the issue of reducing recidivism. The program the state is launching closely matches the Road to Reentry program that has been introduced in the Bureau of Prisons. Tennessee’s plan is to identify and create resources to help Justice Involved Individuals reenter the state’s workforce.

According to the Tennessee Office of Reentry, the rate for recidivism in the State of Tennessee was roughly 46% in 2021, which nearly matches the federal average. Governor Bill Lee has a vision to address this issue and created the Tennessee Office of Reentry in June of 2021. His goal is to improve reentry efforts statewide through a collaborative, strategic and data-driven approach. One of the first things they did to address personalizing the reentry process was to begin to refer to the former inmate as a Justice Involved Individual (JII), which describes anyone who has had interactions in the criminal justice system and previously referred to as a felon, convict, criminal, offender, or parolee. The goal is to promote a term that is “person-centric” rather than to recognize them by their criminal history past. Part of the new approach includes an operating and reporting structure for the department through the Tennessee Department of Labor as opposed to the Tennessee Department of Corrections (TDOC, 2021). The intent in making this change was to ensure that the focus was on employment and targeting career goals to prepare the former inmate for a brighter future. The State currently has programs in play that are already focused on improving services available to justice involved individuals.

The Tennessee Office of Reentry currently has a user-friendly website with helpful links for successful reentry. There are guides for obtaining an identification, voter registration, birth certificates, social security cards, records expungement, justice and recovery services, health insurance and child and family services. Currently the website also includes links to Substance Abuse and Mental Health Hotline information, connection information for services advocates and employment and second chance program information (TDOL, 2022).

The Tennessee Department of Corrections (TDOC) already has an educational system set up that is approved by the Tennessee Department of Education. The School District’s educational program includes three career paths that allow students to gain the essential skills and credentials they will

need to be productive workers, family members and citizens upon release from jail or prison. TDOC provides Adult Basic Education, Career and Technical Education, Post-secondary education and library services at each of the state correctional facilities. The classes are led by instructors who are dedicated and highly qualified individuals who all hold valid Tennessee teacher's licenses. The goal is to provide quality education and career training to positively impact the issues of public safety and recidivism once the prisoner is release (TDOC, 2022).

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) was signed into law in 2014 and was the first legislative reform of the public workforce in 15 years. The purpose of the act was to improve job and career options for our nation's workers and job seekers through an integrated, job-driven public workforce system that links diverse talent to businesses. The point was to support the development of strong, vibrant regional communities where businesses thrive, and people want to work and live. The incorporation of the reentry component was to ensure a smooth transition from incarceration life to community life. According to information gathered by WIOA, one in three adults in the United States has a criminal record. Men with criminal records account for 34% of all nonworking men between the ages of 25-54. There is an estimated loss to the national economy of \$78-\$87 billion every year due to individuals with criminal records being either unemployed or underemployed. As more of those justice involved individuals start to saturate the workforce, there need to be stopgaps in place to assist with reducing recidivism. Lowering recidivism through work-based programs will lower incarceration costs and increase tax revenue. Local businesses gain the skilled labor that they need. If reentry fails, there are social and economic costs to bear. Issues like high crime and increased family distress add greater strain to state and municipal budgets. The WIOA collaborates with Local Workforce Development Boards to grow the local economy

through work-based reentry programs. Any Eligible justice involved individuals have access to the following resources:

- Assistance with childcare and dependent care
- Assistance with transportation
- Linkages to community services
- Assistance with housing
- Needs-Related Payments (special circumstances apply)
- Assistance with educational testing
- Reasonable accommodations for individuals with disabilities
- Referrals to healthcare
- Assistance with uniforms or other appropriate work attire and work-related tools, including such items as eyeglasses and protective eye gear
- Assistance with books, fees, school supplies, and other necessary items for students enrolled in post-secondary education classes.
- Payments and fees for employment and training-related applications, tests, and certifications.
- Legal aid services

Eligibility for the program is based on any justice involved individual who has been subject to any stage of the criminal justice process, since the WIOA went into effect on June 22,2014, for which the service may prove beneficial for or who requires assistance in overcoming artificial barriers to employment resulting from a record of arrest or conviction.

Included in the Tennessee Office of Reentry plan is the Reentry, Employment, Adult Education Program (REAP) project, which will place specifically designed computer tablets in each of the state's county jails. The placement of the tablets will give access to inmates to complete online adult education coursework to prepare for the High School Equivalency Exam. This program is scheduled to invest \$9 million dollars to better prepare justice involved individuals for reentry to communities. This program is currently in the testing phase in jails in 21 of Tennessee's 95 counties. Inmates will eventually use the tablets for career training, certification reentry preparation, resume building, job search support, mental and substance abuse wellness as well as life skills and recreational library with games, TED talks, movies, and music. They inmates can use the tablets at no cost (TDOL, 2022).

The State of Tennessee appears to be on the right track when it comes to reducing recidivism, but there is a main component that is missing. The ability to communicate what resources have been made available or used by the inmate to all interested parties is not in place. Previous policies and programs failed because the collaboration was not effective and recidivism numbers remained the same. The State of Tennessee and the agencies they partner with need to work together to develop a holistic approach to remedy this issue. Finding programs that work and instituting similar programs and organizations throughout the state, they should be able to combat the issue of recidivism. The need to identify evidence-based programs that are effective in a changing environment is paramount to decrease recidivism.

Partnerships with programs like the Orchard House Transitional Home located in Milan, Tennessee are valuable collaborations in the fight to reduce recidivism. Sherriff Paul Thomas saw a need and created a program to meet it. The reentry program for Gibson County, Tennessee inmates he developed is described by in the Jackson Sun as "ground-breaking." When he started

the program in 2019, he hoped his program will break the cycle of recidivism and bring generational change to the county. “Why would we not give them the tools they need to succeed when they hit our society and our streets again, as opposed to forcing them out the backdoor of the jail and saying ‘go figure it out?’” he said. “Because that’s what we have done for 100 years in the country, and it’s been proven that it doesn’t work. “People panic, and they go back to do what they know-crime.” (Latham, 2021). His vision became a reality. The recidivism rate dropped in Gibson County dropped to 12% during his tenure as Sheriff. He attributes part of that drop to the creation of the program and the County’s collaboration with the Tennessee College of Applied Technology and work programs. Thomas indicated in the *The Mirror Exchange*, a Gibson County local newspaper, that the main reason inmates released from the Gibson County jail is that they get behind in court fines and fees because they are unable to obtain employment and are locked up again, not because they reoffend. His goal is to make sure they acquire jobs skills and work while they are in jail through programs that are available to them. If they begin paying the fines back before they are released, they have a much better chance at not returning (Burns, 2020).

The Orchard House program offers a 100-capacity house for inmates reentering society. The main goal of the program to greatly reduce recidivism by offering inmates who recognize they have a life-controlling problem and need assistance in a structured environment that is firmly rooted in Christian principles. The facility has been approved by the Tennessee Department of Corrections as a Transitional House for inmates and will be a pilot program in the Tennessee Road to Reentry program. The program is a 12–18-month program with the average stay for most participants ending in 12 months. The program is designed to help men work on spiritual growth, work ethic, job training, community outreach and service hours. The facility provides food, shelter, transportation and assistance with supportive services and career goals. Since the start of the

program, they have been able to pay off \$150,000 in fines, place men in long term employment positions and restore men to communities as taxpayers not tax dependents. Employers can reach out to participants through their staffing service, Alliance Staffing for manufacturing, warehouse, distribution, or logistics needs. The program in Gibson County works! There is an assessment of education and skillsets early in the process, an action plan to create a successful plan for the inmate and pathways, skill development programs and employment opportunities to ensure a successful outcome (Latham. 2021).

Conclusion

In conclusion, as the layers are pulled back on this multilayered issue, revealed is a system with a 50-60% failure rate. It can be said that the root of recidivism and the cause of incarceration is the same. Without improvement our future will be impacted socially, financially, politically, generationally, and morally. A comprehensive systematic program across the local, state, and federal prison systems should be implemented. The State of Tennessee has created the office of reentry under the Department of Labor not the Department of Corrections has given new hope to this issue. Literacy, skilled work force training and tracking the failures and success of those justice involved individuals, will reveal to us where resources should be applied. The time is now to bring solutions into implementation.

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