



Reversing the Poverty-to-Prison Pipeline: Correctional Education as a Means of Rehabilitative Justice

Nkechinyelum Nwoye

Abstract

For centuries now, the American prison system has been a contentious topic, with the emphasis and purpose of it shifting constantly between punitive measures and rehabilitative justice. This study briefly explores this shift through the historical context of reform efforts during the Antebellum Era and, more recently, the Law and Order Era in order to make sense of the current state of prisoner rehabilitation efforts in the United States. The purpose of this study is to highlight the inadequacy of the "tough-on-crime" philosophy that dominated the Law and Order era by discussing the benefits of correctional education that it initially hindered, including social mobility, personal development, and self-efficacy for formerly incarcerated individuals, which have recently been contributing to reduced recidivism rates and positive societal outcomes since the resurgence of correctional education programs in the twenty-first century. Despite the challenges and potential drawbacks discussed, the paper argues for democratizing correctional education to ensure its widespread accessibility, suggesting various funding options and technological resources as potential methods to achieve this goal. The paper ultimately emphasizes the necessity of expanding correctional education to break the cycle of mass incarceration and create a more just and prosperous country, highlighting the transformational impact it can have on incarcerated individuals and society as a whole.

Keywords

rehabilitative justice, correctional education, prison reform, self-efficacy, social mobility

Introduction

History of Rehabilitative Justice

The issue of the American prison system—and the results it has produced—has undeniably been one of the most highly contested political and social issues since the “tough-on-crime” era commenced in the 1970s (Appleman et al., 2014). However, although many tend to think of prison reform as a more contemporary issue, due to the recent explosive growth of the prison population and other alarming statistics, Americans have been looking for solutions for centuries.

During the early nineteenth century or Antebellum Era, the sense of moral responsibility that resulted from the Second Great Awakening, a Protestant religious revival that swept through the United States, created a reform impulse that struck the hearts and minds of many Americans across the country, compelling them to change society for what they believed to be the better. As American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson boldly declared in his 1841 address *Man the Reformer*, “In the history of the world, the doctrine of Reform had never such scope as at the present hour” (Emerson, 1841). One area of societal imperfection reformers targeted was the prison system. Instead of solely relying on punishing and outcasting prisoners, reformers now focused on equipping them with useful skills that they could use once they were freed, in hopes that they could become better members of the society they would eventually be re-entering. Through this approach, in the words of historian David Rothman, “Reform, not deterrence, was now the aim of incarceration” in the United States (Norval & Rothman, 1998).

Rehabilitative Justice in Today's Climate

The progress toward change, kickstarted by the Antebellum Reform period, has not been maintained, and its state has, in some cases, only worsened. In recent years, developments in prisoner rehabilitation efforts have regressed in some areas—one being education—as a result of the “tough on crime” philosophy of the modern era. Prior to the age of “law and order” brought about by President Nixon, the United States federal government was considerably supportive of correctional education within prisons, with it providing funding for college programs in prisons, and throughout the country as a whole, through the Higher Education Act of 1965, which created “a surge in demand for college courses” behind bars that brought about a rapid increase in opportunities for incarcerated students (Sawyer, 2019). However, following the passage of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, access to correctional education, perhaps the most essential tool needed to reform prisoners, was decimated due to the law deeming incarcerated individuals ineligible for Pell Grants, effectively stripping tens of thousands of inmates of their ability to afford an education. As a result, within only a few years of the bill’s passing, only eight of the estimated 772 previously existing college programs for prisoners in the United States remained, with the surviving programs being forced to rely on financial and volunteer support from other private sources.

Because of the drastic reduction in funding and education availability, many prisons were no longer able to execute their supposed main function: rehabilitation. Therefore, prisons have become a means and reinforcement of oppression, creating what author Michelle Alexander compares to a caste system that demonstrates societal inequality (Duvernay, 2016) and punishes under-resourced people by taking away the little bit of support that they have been deprived of all of their lives, whether it be due to racial or socioeconomic factors. An example of the latter circumstance can be traced back to the inextricable relationship between prison and poverty: According to a study conducted by the Prison Policy Initiative in 2015, incarcerated

people had a median annual income of only \$19,185, in 2014 dollars, before their incarceration, 41% less than that of their non-incarcerated counterparts (Rabuy & Kopf, 2015). Additionally, Blacks and Latinos specifically, generally earned thousands of dollars less than Whites on average—this imbalance can perhaps begin to explain the overt over-representation of Black and Brown people in the U.S. prison system. Systematic neglect and failures to give prisoners a chance at a prosperous life, which many of them never even had in the first place due to economic or racial disparities, often leave them back right where they started or in an even worse place when it comes to employment opportunities, as the unemployment rate for formerly incarcerated individuals has been observed to be over 27%, exceeding even that of the Great Depression (Couloute & Kopf, 2018). Evidently, prison creates a permanent cycle plagued by a lack of opportunities, a cycle that correctional education and the empowerment it grants can break.

As many have begun to recognize the past and current benefits of correctional education, such as reduced rates of recidivism, there has been a recent, yet limited, resurgence in efforts to expand academia in prisons with the passage of the Second Chance Act (2007), which provided funding for correctional education and post-release programming, and more recently, the FAFSA Simplification Act, which restored access to Pell Grants for people in prison, regardless of their conviction and sentence length (Second Chance Act, 2008; FAFSA Simplification Act, 2019). As a result of this resurgence, the incarcerated individuals who have had the privilege of participating in correctional education have, namely, experienced lower rates of recidivism, as mentioned before, as well as other benefits such as an increase in social mobility, personal and emotional growth, and self-efficacy (Pelletier & Evans, 2019; Allred et al., 2013). However, all of these benefits remain out of reach for the majority of prisoners across the country due to a lack of regulation and accessibility. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to not only highlight the promising progress of correctional education, but also use its many benefits as proof of why such programs should persist and be democratized, ensuring that all prisoners, and consequently society as a whole, will reap their benefits.

Discussion

Social Mobility as a Benefit of Correctional Education

Access to social mobility is perhaps the most obvious benefit that correctional education, or really any college education, can afford. Although most employers claim that they are willing to hire people with criminal records, evidence suggests otherwise; having a criminal record has been shown to reduce employer callback rates by 50% (Couloute & Kopf, 2018). However, the effect of having a criminal record on employment can be minimized by the impact of education: within their first two years of release, prisoners who are exposed to correctional education experience a 59% increase in job opportunities (Duwe & Clark, 2014), which shows that education opens doors that were previously closed for people like them. Additionally, correctional education increases not only the number of jobs available to formerly incarcerated individuals, but also their quality due to the shrinking job availability for those without a college education. Most of the time, when formerly incarcerated people are even lucky enough to land jobs, they are often the most low-quality and low-paying ones available, with studies showing that the majority of employed people recently released from prison receive an income that puts them well below the poverty line (Couloute & Kopf, 2018). Yet on the other hand, those who have had access to higher education in prison have the chance to experience a somewhat different fate, with prison education programs across the board being shown to increase

post-release wages by a modest average of \$131 per quarter (Schuster & Stickle, 2021). Ultimately, this increase in both pay and opportunity leads to better prospects for building wealth and therefore decreases the likelihood of recidivism.

Though a less obvious result, social mobility has also presented itself to those who have gone through the process of correctional education in the form of social networking and connection. With improved communication skills, many formerly incarcerated individuals have found it easier to forge meaningful relationships, both with their peers and social institutions that may be looking to help them, as well as with family members they may be hoping to rebuild relationships with, allowing for the formation of a prosocial network (Pelletier & Evans, 2019). This sense of community also gives those that are released a circle of intellectually like-minded individuals to surround themselves with and form healthy, stable relationships with (Baranger, et al., 2018), allowing them to escape the unproductive, bad influences that may have contributed to the causes of their incarceration in the first place. As Bryan, a formerly incarcerated individual in the New York State prison system, put it in an interview, “now my social circle consists of people who are thirsty for knowledge and understanding,” as opposed to the previous bad influences he was exposed to (Pelletier & Evans, 2019). Those that are released may even decide to pay this good influence forward, with many choosing to use the leadership and public speaking skills gained through their higher education programs to offer prosocial messages to high school and college students. Whether through gaining positive influences or embodying them for other people, correctional education has enabled prisoners to improve themselves and the circles they exist in, a prime example of why it is so important. As a result of granting incarcerated individuals access to education, they are not only enabled to heal their past mistakes, but also help create a better future for all.

Personal Development as a Benefit of Correctional Education

In addition to improved communication skills, the overall personal growth many prisoners experience as a result of correctional education is another one of its many benefits in its own right. Critical thinking skills have often been cited as perhaps the most beneficial takeaway from correctional education programs (Pelletier & Evans, 2019). With education, particularly that of the liberal arts, inmates are forced to not only consider perspectives that they have often never been exposed to but also analyze them, helping them form their own (Appleman et al., 2014). By adopting and even developing these new opinions, attitudes, and values, based now on knowledge and fact instead of ignorance or prejudice, prisoners are not only taught what to think but how to think. However, this critical development is not exclusive to thinking about themselves, as many incarcerated students have noted that it also affects the way they think on behalf of others, and consider their perspectives, with one saying the following: “We live in a society that is judgmental, but with the help of my mentors and positive influences [...] I have learned in my sociology classes, the empowering meaning of empathy and compassion that we as individuals should practice in all our affairs dealing with others” (Baranger et al., 2018). In the eyes of many, this approach toward education offers a more uplifting alternative to the subordinate position incarcerated individuals tend to find themselves in within prisons (Pelletier & Evans, 2019). In other words, instead of being forced into submission by a dominant power, such as a guard or the prison system as a whole, they are empowered and encouraged to challenge dominant narratives within society through critical thinking.

Nurturing the thoughtfulness of incarcerated individuals by promoting critical thinking ultimately humanizes them, helping them to restore the confidence they lost while in prison or

never had to begin with. In other words, correctional education gives many the hope and belief in themselves they were previously lacking. Through becoming students, many incarcerated individuals have begun to see themselves as “more than a felon,” therefore making them less likely to act like one (Appleman et al., 2014). Because of this decreased tendency, the behavior of many inmates also positively shifts along with their self-perception, leading to a reduction in “criminogenic” attitudes and actions both within prison and upon release (Baranger et al., 2018). One instance of changed behavior among prisoners who have undergone correctional education is improved socio-emotional skills. Learning these essential skills, such as the ability to remain calm amidst heated discussions, allows incarcerated individuals to be able to communicate healthily, and control their emotions in situations that involve conflict, which is essential to preventing future rash decisions and recidivism (Pelletier & Evans, 2019).

Self-Efficacy as a Benefit of Correctional Education

Although the primary focus of this investigation has been how correctional education benefits prisoners, the experience it grants is not only great for incarcerated students but also for those teaching them, as their engagement with curriculum is filled with just as much, if not more, passion as that of more traditional college students, according to professors who have taught in prisons (Appleman et al., 2014). On one hand, teachers benefit from the genuine joy and passion that prisoners bring to the classroom, with Professor Deborah Appleman even going as far as to say that her “incarcerated students rival her students at the University of California at Berkeley and at Carleton College in terms of their intelligence, dedication, commitment, and talent.” On the other hand, prisoners benefit from the fact that they are even able to be in the classroom at all, with the setting providing a much-needed escape from the trials and tribulations of their daily lives, as well as the encouragement they need to thrive (Baranger et al., 2018). For this reason, the teacher-student relationship between those who are incarcerated and their professors can be thought of as mutualistic.

Because of the inherently harsh conditions of prisons, such as discomfort due to cramped spaces or distance from family, and the fact that “the total institution presents an inherent conflict with the requisites of academic culture,” the mere environment that incarcerated individuals are subjected to can be reasonably thought of as a roadblock on the path toward “creating an enclave to enhance a sustainable sense of self-efficacy,” (Allred et al., 2013). However, education provides prisoners with the support needed to beat these poor odds. As a result, this support, often coming in the form of encouragement, creates spaces for students to think critically and ask questions (Pelletier & Evans, 2019), helping to develop the lasting sense of self-efficacy that appears to be so rare within the walls of a prison. In fact, this development has been so beneficial for incarcerated individuals that the findings of a 2013 study of self-efficacy, occurring in a mixed educational setting with both imprisoned and free students, suggested that education continually enhanced the sense of self-efficacy within incarcerated individuals throughout the duration of their coursework, even when it stagnated within their free counterparts (Allred et al., 2013). This self-efficacy fosters not only the desire to succeed but also the belief that one can. In turn, this belief profoundly “influences people’s endeavors and successes” since it directly affects the “environments and situations that people choose.” In other words, when imprisoned people are able to recognize their competence and potential within society, they are much more likely to push themselves in directions that maximize those qualities. Here is how one incarcerated student involved in a study analyzing the positive outcomes of correctional education put it:

I have so much more that has been poured out into me from these professors and from my fellow collegiate body of students that my self-esteem has definitely risen because of that experience. It's because now I feel like knowledge is something that someone cannot take from you; they can take whatever else they want to or desire to, but knowledge is something that they can't take. That in itself really brought my self-esteem to a higher level (Pelletier & Evans, 2019).

Though self-efficacy is most commonly defined within an individual as “beliefs in one’s capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to meet given situational demands,” it is also an essential component in creating collective agency within a group, creating a shared belief within its members “in their capacity to be change agents” (Allred et al., 2013). On that account, correctional education, and the self-efficacy it creates not only enable incarcerated individuals to better themselves but also better society by becoming meaningful, helpful contributors to it. However, this same desire for self-improvement seems to already exist in most previously incarcerated individuals, regardless of whether or not they have had the privilege of exposure to correctional education: “Among 25 to 44-year-old formerly incarcerated people, 93.3% are either employed or actively looking for work, compared to 83.8% among their general population peers of similar ages” (Couloute & Kopf, 2018). Adding correctional education to the equation only amplifies this already existing determination to succeed, while also making success more likely for those who are able to attend college while in prison, as previously discussed in *Social Mobility as a Benefit of Rehabilitative Justice*, granting them the ability to incorporate the same self-efficacy they gained behind bars into their productive lives outside of them (Baranger et al., 2018).

Conclusion

Addressing The Potential Drawbacks of Correctional Education

Despite the wide range of benefits—such as social mobility, personal development, and self-efficacy—correctional education is still an inaccessible commodity for many, as though 64% of people in state and federal prisons are academically qualified for postsecondary prison education programs, as of 2014, only 9% of incarcerated individuals completed college courses while in prison (Gibbons & Ray, 2019). So why is that, and how can it be changed? The answer to this first question will be explored within this section and answers to the second question will be proposed in the following section. To answer the first question, the potential “drawbacks” of correctional education must first be accounted for. Despite the proven success of such programs, many Americans are wary of correctional education for a few reasons.

First, the United States is still reeling from the previously mentioned tough-on-crime era that initially brought about mass incarceration, with many still stuck in the same frame of mind responsible for initially eliminating support for correctional education programming (Appleman et al., 2014). From this perspective, paying to provide prisoners with something as commodified as an education in this day and age seems to be the exact opposite of being “tough on crime.” However, even the staunchest opponents of funding correctional education can benefit from it. Studies have shown that the positive return on investment correctional education generates will be a more direct benefit for society than incarcerated students, with the resulting reduced incarceration costs (and consequently reduced taxes) having a more significant economic impact than the wage increases and employment opportunities students would gain (Schuster & Stickle, 2021). Additionally, even the biggest proponents of “law and order” in the tough-on-crime era have since acknowledged that such harsh rhetoric and approaches to

criminalization were in fact a mistake. Former President Bill Clinton, who spearheaded the effort to pass the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, has since expressed remorse for his involvement in what he now believes was a mistake: “We wound up putting so many people in prison that there wasn’t enough money left to educate them, train them for new jobs, and increase the chances when they came out so they could live productive lives” (Diamond, 2015). Being one of the aspects of rehabilitation Clinton directly admitted to overlooking, a strong case can be made that correctional education will do exactly what he believes prisons are failing to, as studies have shown that it is effective in decreasing the likelihood of recidivism by as much as 48% while also increasing the likelihood of post-release employment (Gibbons & Ray, 2019).

Though these benefits granted by correctional education seem to generally improve the lives of the masses, it must be acknowledged that correctional education is not a positive experience for everyone. One inmate who had a lackluster experience claimed in an interview that “it all looks good, but the programs are oversimplified and don’t get people jobs when they get out or keep a person from having to be locked into a cage every night for several decades without any relief” (Appleman et al., 2014). This oversimplification occurs in large part because of the lack of educational resources (Baranger et al., 2018), such as computers and research tools, which may result in coursework adjustments. A potential solution that has been posed to this problem is expanding the breadth of technological resources within prisons to not only improve the quality of education, regardless of environmental deficiencies but also spread its accessibility to more rural areas that might not have readily available access to qualified instructors (Chappell & Shippen, 2013). Despite concerns over potential inmate internet abuses, pilot programs of online correctional education have already been successful in preventing these misuses while providing inmates with the tools they need. For example, in 2021, Lee College collaborated with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice and Anthology to implement an online instruction pilot program using Blackboard Learn SaaS technology, an educational system designed to overcome the exact challenges that a situation like learning while incarcerated creates (Anthology, 2021). The results ultimately proved to be successful, as the collaboration “leveraged the benefit of online instruction, which met TDCJ’s security requirements” through the use of firewalls, IP restrictions, and single sign-on servers, “while still expanding online instruction opportunities.”

Other Potential Methods of Democratizing Correctional Education

These technological infrastructure improvements, and all correctional education efforts in general, will undoubtedly cost money. But despite the economically viable prospects of federally funded correctional education programs, it is not the only way to increase their accessibility across the country. Many states have implemented alternative funding efforts that are not solely reliant on taxpayer funds. For example, in Ohio, Utah, and West Virginia, profits made from inmate phone charges are used to fund correctional education, while Rhode Island uses revenue from prison industries to fund its own programs (Zoukis Consulting Group, n.d.). The latter option seems to be especially sustainable, as prison industries already make billions of dollars annually (Duvernay, 2016). In spite of this high profit, prisoners are paid very low wages in prison, often docked to pay for services like medical care and other personal necessities, and therefore can often not afford a college education (Gibbons & Ray, 2019). But by reinvesting the profits from prison labor into the workers that are creating it, incarcerated individuals seeking to obtain an education would be able to do so through the fruits of their own labor.



Closing Thoughts

As shown above, there are many paths toward democratizing correctional education for all. However, if one thing is for certain, it is that no matter what drawbacks there may be and no matter how it is implemented, it needs to be done. The collective benefits of correctional education evidently go beyond finances; they touch every facet of life. Through expanding its accessibility, correctional education can liberate society; freeing prisoners from the cycles that cause their mistakes and thereby freeing the privileged from that cycle's fallout.

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