

Implementing Sports as a Rehabilitation Method for Inmates

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ABSTRACT

The incarceration system in the United States has leaned towards becoming more punitive than rehabilitative. A direct consequence would be the issue of mass incarceration. In fact, the United States imprisons the most people in the world with over 2 million prisoners. Because of the mass influx of inmates in prisons, the conditions deteriorate, creating a harsh prison environment that may be detrimental to the psychological, physical, and social aspects of an inmate. In fact, 64 percent of prisoners have reported mental health concerns and experienced suicidal feelings. Rehabilitative programs and methods aimed at reducing criminal traits and recidivism do exist in prisons, but most have issues with funding and resources. The rehabilitative method of sports and recreational activities is proven to be effective and minimal for funding. Sports have profound effects on alleviating depression, stress, and anxiety. It has been shown to affect the prefrontal cortex, the hippocampus, and the amygdala; all three neurological components allow for control of behavior and a greater reduction in criminal activity. The rehabilitative method of sports has also decreased the risks of obesity and contributed to positive effects on the cardiovascular, immune, and digestive systems. Socially, sports have allowed for the formation of new relationships and an overall sense of freedom in a setting that is not shackled by chains. Implementing sports for inmates is both an effective and efficient method of rehabilitation.

Introduction

The United States has the highest per capita incarceration value with soaring costs of \$75 billion per year. In 1973, the incarceration rate in the United States was 96 people per 100,000 people. Now, the incarceration rate in the United States is 750 people per 100,000 people, demonstrating a massive increase in imprisonment and mass incarceration. Figure 1 displays significant increases in incarceration over time in The United States. The United only makes up for a minute 5 percent of the world's crime. However, the United States has 25 percent of the world's total incarcerated individuals, again depicting the issue of mass incarceration (Slobogin, 2015). Compared to the world, the United States has the highest incarceration rate as depicted in Figure 2.

When specifically comparing the United States legal system to that of Europe, the United States is way harsher and more punitive towards prisoners. Many prisoners in the United States receive substantial sentences for small, nonviolent crimes such as drug offenses. Also, the United States utilizes the death penalty in many states (24), while Europe has completely banned it. This demonstrates a rather punitive than rehabilitative-oriented prison system. Incarceration rates in the United States are more than 5 times higher than the incarceration rate in European countries. Only 20 to 30 percent of people convicted of a crime serve time in Europe, while 70 percent of convicted people in the United States go to prison (Slobogin, 2015). As mass incarceration continues, prison environments become more critical for inmates, especially for those of younger age. A major aspect of the dangerous prison environment is violent prison gangs. They usually operate on an organized hierarchy and are structured along racial or ethnic ties. These gangs intimidate nongang inmates and practice "strong-arm extortion" creating an environment of fear and cruelty (Cramp, 1985). Therefore, prison life may be extremely detrimental to any inmate's well-being both physically and mentally. The cruel prison environment exacerbates mental health issues and is even enough to produce post-traumatic

stress disorder responses. Incarceration escalates the risk of depression, anxiety, and suicidal feelings. In fact, 64 percent of prisoners in jail reported mental health concerns and 30 percent of deaths in local jails were due to suicide. Through the harsh prison life, one would think that it reduces the rates of inmates reoffending once they are released from prison. However, it is sadly not true. 83 percent of state prisoners released in 2005 were reincarcerated during their first decade of release. 44 percent of prisoners released were re-arrested during their first year after release. This demonstrates the great lack, or failure, of rehabilitative measures taken in prison. Implementing sports/recreational activities as a means of rehabilitation may mitigate some of these issues and may have profound positive impacts on inmates' psychological, physical, and social well-being.

U.S. State and Federal Prison Population 1925 - 2014

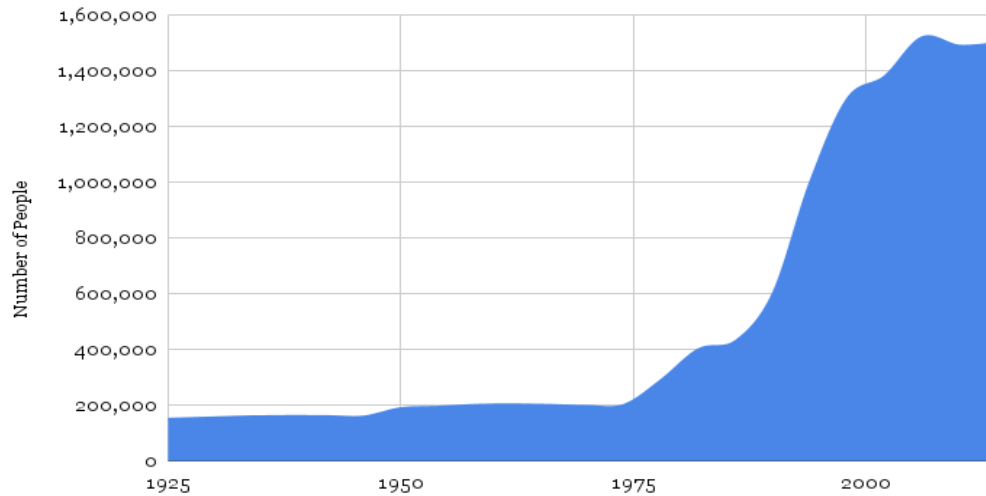


Figure 1. U.S. State and Federal Prison Population 1925-2014

Prisoners per 100,000 Population Across the World - 2008

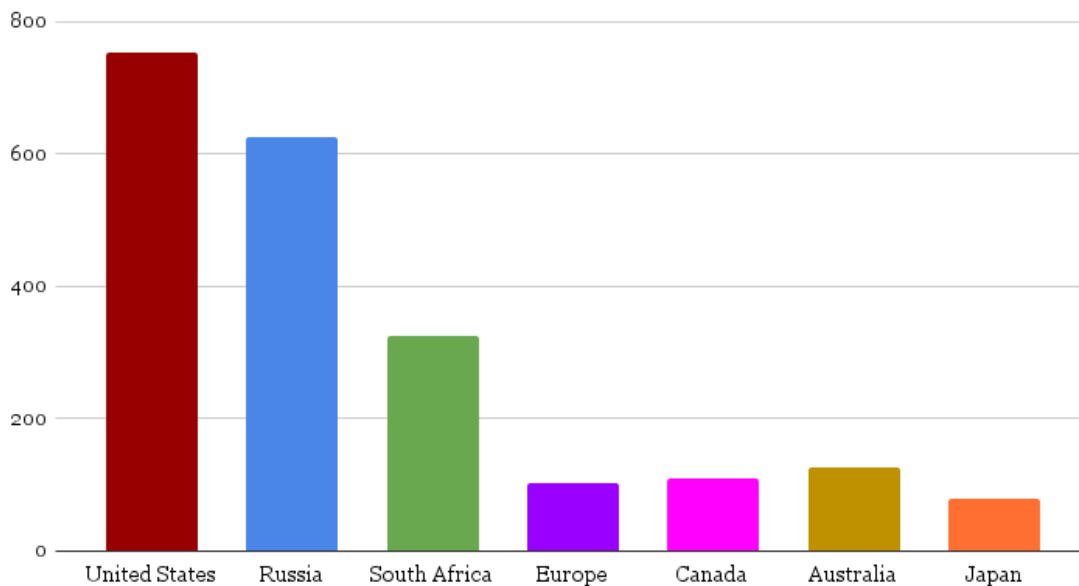


Figure 2. Prisoners per 100,000 Population Across the World - 2008

The Psychological, Physical, and Social Effects of Incarceration

Incarceration significantly impacts an inmate's well-being both physically and mentally. The prison environment is neither healthy for the mind nor the body. Incarceration can completely change one's identity. Incarceration makes prisoners lose control over once-simple, everyday aspects of their lives. For example, they do not have the freedom of sleeping at their desired time or eating what they want. As a result, prisoners tend to experience a great loss of dignity and self-worth. They would feel insignificant and less a human based on the way they are treated. This further contributes to exacerbating mental health issues as inmates may become more aggressive and cynical of the criminal justice system. In fact, a study from 2006 by the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that over half of incarcerated prisoners suffer from poor mental health issues. Of these, 33 percent reported depression or mania, 12 percent reported delusions, and 8 percent reported hallucinations (Edgemon and Warner, 2018). These harmful mental health issues greatly decrease the chances of employability and comfortability post-release, making prisoners feel the need to re-offend.

Throughout incarceration, it was found that inmates have developmental delays in impulsivity, externality, concrete thinking, conceptual rigidity, interpersonal cognitive problem-solving skills, egocentricity, values, and critical reasoning. In addition, incarcerated individuals' brain functions for self-control and planning significantly declined after just three months of spending time in prison. However, a more positive and refined prison environment that includes physical, mental, and social activities may positively affect self-regulation. The prefrontal cortex of the brain controls executive functions and self-regulation. The functions that are the basis of self-regulation are called executive functions, which include working memory, sustained attention, impulse control, planning, and cognitive flexibility (Ligthart, Oploo, Meijers, Meynen, and Kooijmans, 2019). Areas of the prefrontal cortex are less active in people demonstrating antisocial behavior, a commonly developed trait in prisoners. A negative and damaging prison environment will harshly affect aspects of crucial self-regulation in individuals.

Prisoners that have served time for a long period display dullness in response, lethargy, and humorlessness. They also turn to anti-socialistic behaviors as they tend to isolate themselves from other inmates for personal defense. Statistically, incarceration escalates the risk of depression and anxiety. 64 percent of prisoners in jail reported mental health concerns; this is a great majority of the prisoner population. There are three important components that are correlated with depression and hostility in prisoners: overcrowding, punitiveness, and availability of work tasks (a lack of them will cause boredom). Prisoners also tend to become suicidal due to feelings of hopelessness and that there is no escape. From 2000-2019, more than 6,200 local inmates committed suicide. Overall separation from loved ones and the outside world is conducive to destructive psychological effects.

Loneliness in prison may also increase the risk of heart disease, stroke, and disorders in the immune system. In fact, around 10 to 25 percent of incarcerated individuals have a serious mental illness (Collier, 2014). These are life-long, scarring impacts on prisoners' lives. Additionally, stressful conditions and experiences may contribute to an increased risk of obesity. This may be due to increased consumption of high-energy foods or a decrease in exercise. This is an issue not only because of health concerns, but obesity and depression closely correlate with each other.

Incarceration Rehabilitation Methods and Activities

Various rehabilitation methods exist for inmates in prison facilities. In fact, there are programs that these inmates go through in hopes of successful rehabilitation and transition into normal society. A very popular and widespread rehabilitation program in prisons is education-based programs. These programs contribute to lowering rates of violence and recidivism by helping prisoners to develop social and artistic skills and to control negative emotions. These education-based programs also allow prisoners to develop self-esteem and build skills for jobs, contributing to a more bearable prison experience. Evidence shows that for every dollar that is spent on prison education, taxpayers save 4 to 5 dollars that would have been spent on incarceration (Bard Prison Initiative, 2019). Nationally, the United States

economy is estimated to lose about \$60 billion per year due to the loss of labor because of the mass incarceration of individuals, so it is logical to invest in this program that will help reduce mass incarceration (Shepherd, 2022). However, the development of educational programs will require additional funding, as many materials are required to ensure the success of these educational programs. Currently, only 14% of students in prison are allowed monitored Internet access. This is simply not enough for this program; more money must be spent on this equipment. Educational rehabilitation may also not be for every prisoner. Prisoners may find learning extremely difficult and frustrating, channeling more violent and aggressive emotions that are intended to be suppressed.

Another popular rehabilitation-based program for inmates is the corrections-based vocational training program. These programs are designed to teach inmates about employment skills. Evidence shows that there was a 12.6% reduction in recidivism rates for those who participated in the program compared to those who did not. The employment rate was 28% higher for prisoners who had participated in the program than those who did not. These vocational training programs are more targeted at reducing recidivism and incarceration rather than rehabilitating the individual and resolving “criminal traits”. They are more specific to helping prisoners once they are released and teaching them how to earn a job. There is a hefty annual cost per participant of around \$1500 (Davis, Bozick, and Steele, 2014).

More “humanities” based rehabilitation programs include music therapy, art therapy, and reasoning and rehabilitation. Music therapy occurs when inmates listen to various types of music that they enjoy. Through this, prisoners improved their depression, anxiety, and self-esteem. It enhances both basic listening and sharing skills. This simple music therapy provides a safe and effective way to channel built-up anger and frustration in order to cope with stress and anxiety (Gold, 2021). Music therapy allows for connecting positively and socializing in a safe manner with other inmates, a key aspect of successful rehabilitation. Additionally, art therapy, also self-explanatory, includes prisoners taking on activities such as painting and drawing. This enables communication amongst both inmates and within oneself. It encourages self-expression and self-exploration as it allows for safe expression, release, and dealing with negative feelings. Art also encourages autonomy and self-discipline, a core principle of rehabilitation. Yet, there can be downsides as art may not be a fit for all inmates. Mistakes while performing art may also cause anger and violence, making the materials a hazard for contraband (Thackara, 2016). Lastly, the reasoning and rehabilitation program is where inmates act as “therapists” for their peers and are asked to analyze the problems of their “patients”. It allows inmates to view themselves as problem solvers. It has also been shown to reduce levels of recidivism for those who had completed the program. However, it is not possible to provide this program for the targeted inmate population. All in all, through all of these rehabilitation methods, it can be seen that the primary goal of prisoner rehabilitation is to reduce recidivism and threat levels.

Sports as a Rehabilitation Method for Incarcerated Individuals

In the section above were various rehabilitation methods that contributed to the goals of rehabilitation, but also had downsides that weighed it down. Sports is a method that has numerous benefits of rehabilitation while providing a limited number of drawbacks. This method does not have a problem with funding as it merely requires the purchase of equipment. Sports truly allow inmates to value themselves and develop positive attitudes. It also reduces anxiety and violent behavior, and encourages social inclusion, targeting the mental, physical, and psychological effects of incarceration. Psychologically, inmates have reported improved levels of self-esteem, reduced stress and anxiety, decreased depression, decreased insomnia, and reduced levels of anger and aggression (Gallant, Sherry, and Nicholson, 2014). All of the harmful aspects of incarceration and the prison environment are countered by participation in sports. Neurologically, the amygdala, a section of the brain involved in aggression, fear, and social interactions, is involved in criminal behavior. Its location and function are depicted in Figure 3. Nutrition, exercise, and cognitive skills displayed a reduction in criminal activity. Sports are also a powerful promoter of neuroplasticity, which is the brain’s ability to create new neurons, and connections, and reorganize its neural networks. Participating in team sports is correlated with a larger hippocampal volume. The hippocampus is the part of the brain, as shown in Figure 3, that is

responsible for long-term memory and emotional responses (Campbell, 2019). These benefits in the neurological aspects of the brain will lead to improved sleep and a regain of a sense of control over life for the inmates.

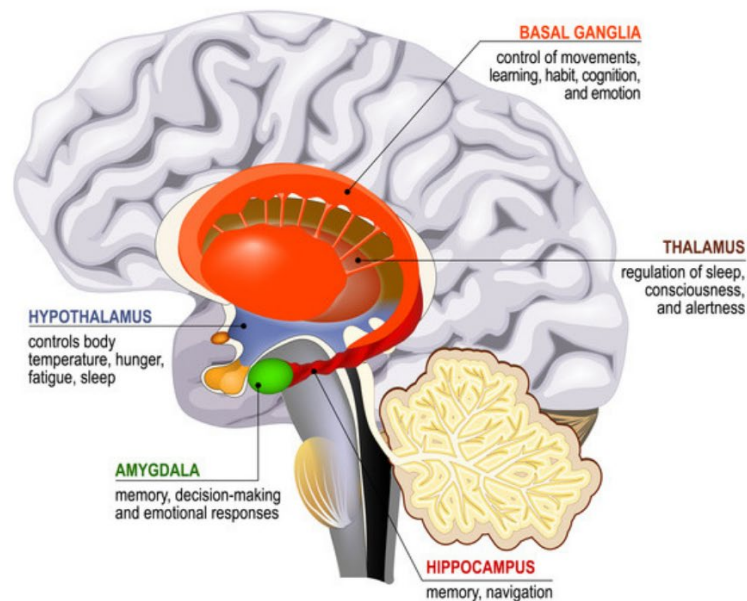


Figure 3. Parts of the brain and their functions

Source: <https://selfhelpforlife.com/parts-of-the-brain/>

Physically, inmates are able to experience physical freedom, a basic yet important element that is deprived of in a prison environment. Exercise, that occurs during sports, also increases the overall health and well-being of inmates. This can contribute to many stress-relieving benefits. Physical activity increases the production of endorphins, which are the brain’s “feel-good” neurotransmitters. Inmates will experience a boost in mood and energy. Additionally, exercise may contribute to positive effects on the body, including the cardiovascular, digestive, and immune systems. It can lead to a decreased risk of developing obesity, which is a common problem for inmates. Inmates are able to forget the day’s problems which helps them stay calm and focused when participating in sports. All in all, participating in sports allows the prisoner to move around freely and express him/herself physically. It significantly contributes to a healthier lifestyle for prisoners, which will help eradicate symptoms of depression and laziness.

In a social aspect, sports enhance communication and relationships among inmates. It allows for the formation of social bonds, especially during team sports, causing a significant increase in social skills and prevention of misbehavior. This is very important to prisoners as they are usually stripped from any social interactions or relationships in the cruel prison environment. Sports adds a layer of prisoners looking into the “real world” and feeling “normal” again since it places them in a natural and free setting. Furthermore, any competition within sports could encourage inmates to build skills of self-evaluation that would help bring success to the entire group. Self-evaluation is a crucial step of rehabilitation as it may prevent any negative behavior from happening again. The important relationships formed during sports activities also serve as incentives for good behavior, promoting control within the prison (Lewis, 2021).

There are still some downsides to sports as a rehabilitation method for inmates. There are internal and external barriers. Internal barriers include a lack of energy, motivation, and self-efficiency to participate in sports by the inmates. External barriers include a lack of resources, funds, social support, and access to transport. Additionally, there are issues with age as elderly prisoners may not be able to compete with younger, more aggressive inmates (Brosens, 2017). Foreign prisoners may not be able to participate in sports due to a lack of understanding as well. In regards to gender, women prisoners may have a lack of motivation and self-presentational concerns when participating in sports

causing a lack of participation in sports amongst some women (Meek and Lewis, 2014). There also may be mental pressures of winning in sports that may induce pressure. Experience of injuries when playing sports can be conducive to many negative emotions such as depression, frustration, and boredom. Nevertheless, sports are an effective method of rehabilitating incarcerated individuals as it has positive outcomes on recidivism, reduced drug use, and anger/aggression control. It targets the negative psychological, physical, and social aspects that occur in prison and provides numerous benefits in these aspects.

Conclusion

There is a significant rise in incarceration in the United States, creating a negative, more punitive prison system. As prisons are becoming overcrowded, prison environments tend to become more severe. The harsh, cruel prison environment correlates directly to harmful effects on the psychological, physical, and social qualities of an inmate. Such psychological effects include depression, anxiety, loss of self-worth, and lack of self-regulation. Some detrimental physical effects caused by incarceration are increased laziness, obesity, and risk of disorders in the immune system. Social effects would be anti-socialistic behaviors such as isolation and dullness when interacting with others. Although prisons are meant for reform and positive effects on inmates, there are a vast number of negative effects that may occur. Additionally, there are some existing rehabilitation programs and methods that contribute to lowering recidivism and aggression levels, but most are too expensive and are outweighed by the possible negative outcomes. For example, the corrections-based vocational training program aimed at reducing recidivism and resolving criminal traits accumulates to a cost of about \$1500 per participant. Another example is art therapy which allows for expression of communication and reduced anger levels; however, materials may be hazardous to the safety of the inmates since they can be formed into weapons. However, sports as a rehabilitation method may not be so expensive and is just as effective, or even better, in rehabilitating inmates. Sports funding only requires the cost of equipment which is fairly cheap compared to other rehabilitative programs. It also significantly helps counter the detrimental effects the prison has on the psychological, physical, and social qualities of an inmate while reducing recidivism rates. Psychologically, sports and exercise may reduce levels of stress, anxiety, aggression, and violence. Exercise helps control the amygdala which is crucial for functions of social interactions and behavior involved in criminal actions. Physically, sports provide an opportunity for physical freedom which helps improve the cardiovascular, digestive, and immune systems. Lastly, sports grants inmates the ability to interact and form relationships with other inmates, something that is deprived of. This provides a sense of normality and sanity to inmates. Conclusively, implementing sports is vastly beneficial and effective for inmates that tend to experience harmful effects on psychological, physical, and social aspects due to the brutal prison circumstances.

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