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REDUCING RECIDIVISM THROUGH EDUCATION

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Over the last two and a half decades, the population of incarcerated women in the United States has dramatically increased (Carver & Harrison, 2016). In 1980, 26,300 women were incarcerated in the U.S., while 215,300 were incarcerated in 2014 (The Sentencing Project, 2015) and the rate at which women are being incarcerated does not appear to be declining. A positive impact on women's recidivism could be made by making more educational opportunities available to women in prison.

A growing trend in corrections is the focus on reentry to communities, which has shown to be one of the most significant factors in women's recidivism reduction (Cobbina, 2010). Research indicates that the more educational opportunities inmates participate in, the less likely they are to reoffend (Choate & Normore, 2013; Esperian, 2010). Prisons that provide educational opportunities reduce crime related behavior, both within the prison and upon an inmate's release (Choate & Normore, 2013). This reduction in recidivism is due, in part, to the individual inmate's development of positive social skills and self-value. Research consistently demonstrates that quality education is one of the most effective forms of crime prevention (Choate & Normore, 2013).

As a result of developing a positive social identity, incarcerated individuals who participate in education acquire an education that can be used to further develop their positive social identity. Cobbina (2010) found that inmates can develop positive social skills through educational collaborations. These skills can then be transferred to the community upon their release, as an

offender is less likely to face rearrest if he/she has positive social skills which are used to establish supportive social bonds to the families, as well as to their communities (Carter, 2008). This allows formerly incarcerated people to create positive relationships that better establish themselves in the work force after release.

An additional benefit of educational opportunities in prison is the support these offers to those reintegrating into communities. Positive post release reintegration is portrayed as a result of having access to post release services, which are often found through using relationship skills (Cobbina, 2010). Those who have been involved in education programs develop positive social skills which they are likely to use and rely on during their reintegration to society (Esperian, 2010). Without positive social skills, recidivism is likely.

A third benefit of education in prison is the positive impact the experience has on an incarcerated person's self-worth. Inmates want to feel that their lives have value and participating in educational opportunities fosters this confidence. Receiving an education and sharing knowledge offers the inmate a sense of value and empowerment. Being involved in educational opportunities in prison is often reliant on the individual's behavior, thus encourages positive behavior and pro-social skills (Jovanic, 2011; Choate & Normore, 2013).

The Wyoming Department of Corrections (WDOC) operates five adult prisons: the Wyoming Women's Center (WWC) is the only women's prison in the state (Wyoming Department of Corrections, 2014). The current nationwide recidivism rate is nearly 43.3% while Wyoming's recidivism rate is 26%; both rates include probation and parole violations (Wyoming Department of Corrections, 2012). The educational opportunities offered to inmates in WDOC could be an approach that is responsible for the state's comparably low rate of recidivism.

When women enter the WWC facility, their educational background, capabilities and needs are assessed. In 2011, on average, inmates who entered WDOC tested on an 8th grade level

in the content areas of reading, math and language (Wyoming Department of Corrections, 2011). The inmates are encouraged and supported by WDOC state certified instructional staff in their quest to obtain their high school equivalency (HSEC). By increasing the inmates' content area skills, WDOC helps make the inmates eligible to participate in vocational training and course work in higher education. Earning an HSEC increases the inmates' likelihood of success in vocational training and higher education, during incarceration and post release (Wyoming Department of Corrections, 2011).

WWC offers varied educational opportunities to the incarcerated women. It is possible that the opportunities offered to inmates, through WDOC, makes their reintegration more successful. When their reintegration is effective, they are less likely to reoffend. The varied approach includes Adult Basic Education (ABE), which is mandated, higher education course work and vocational training. These educational opportunities are an effort to support the inmates' personal wellbeing, and to support their release from prison and successful reentry to communities. The varied options in educational offerings, help meet the needs and interests of the women incarcerated at WWC.

The higher education course work at WWC has been designed to meet the personal and career needs of the women. The women in WWC have had the option of enrolling in college courses, for which they receive credit at no cost to them. In the past year the women have had the option of enrolling in classes such as Memoir Writing and Educational Tutoring. The women described the Memoir Writing class as "therapeutic" due to the self-reflection required in memoir writing. The Educational Tutoring was described as "empowering" because it enables the women to help each other and their children engage in literacy practices. These opportunities available to the women at WWC, through the collaborative efforts of Eastern Wyoming College and the University of Wyoming. EWC obtains and provides scholarships, while faculty and staff from the University of Wyoming serve as unpaid adjuncts to teach the courses.

The WWC also offers vocational training to meet the career needs and interests of the women. Vocational options that have been available to the women include certification in construction from the National Center for Construction Education and Research, forklift driving, welding, and computer applications. Those who enroll and successfully complete the courses in welding and/or computer applications receive college credits through Eastern Wyoming College at no cost to the women in WWC.

WDOC inmates are increasingly willing to participate in educational programs offered by WDOC; in 2014, 79% of the WDOC incarcerated inmates with assessed education needs in the areas of addiction education, high school equivalency, and vocational training completed the programs recommended for them during their intake evaluation. This is a considerable increase from 2008, when only 56% of the inmates completed their recommended programs. The program completion rate is an indication of the inmates' needs and desires to accept help, which enables them to become more productive individuals, regardless of where they reside.

Public awareness can help deconstruct the cycles plaguing incarcerated populations, including lack of education, self-worth and job skills. It stands to reason that offering various forms of education in prisons lightens an economic burden on society. Access to education enables this population to become more productive and law abiding. Public awareness of educational levels and needs of inmates can make a difference in DOC funding authorized by the state legislature through general funds.

The dialogue about the importance of education in prisons seems to be returning to the national stage. Due to new changes with the Pell Grant, inmates will be allowed to enroll in face to face classes, as well as online classes. In 2015, the Obama administration announced a plan to re-open Pell Grant opportunities to inmates, in spite of Congress, which banned prisoners from receiving Pell Grants in 1994 (Zoukis, 2015). Twenty-two years after the ban, the Obama administration gave the green light to the pilot program Second Chance Pell, which

aimed to enroll 12,000 prisoners at over 100 correctional institutes in the United States (Zoukis, 2016). In some locations, the Second Chance Pell will begin as early as July 1, 2016.

WDOC continues to strive in its attempts to offer educational opportunities for incarcerated individuals. WDOC partnered with Central Wyoming College and applied for the Second Change Pell Grant. Unfortunately, they, like many other correctional facilities and colleges, were denied the opportunity to participate in the pilot program and may have to wait up to four years, before it is offered again.

Offering education is a more successful approach to inmate treatment and recidivism reduction. The old adage of “lock ‘em up and throw away the key” is not a productive means to lowering crime. Purposeful educational opportunities in prisons support recidivism reduction. A reduction in recidivism is an ideal outcome, for all of society.

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