

Thesis Project Portfolio

Effects of Access to Mental Health Services Following Release from Custody
(Technical Report)

Using Technology to Reduce Recidivism in American Prisons
(STS Research Paper)

An Undergraduate Thesis

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Table of Contents

Sociotechnical Synthesis

Effects of Access to Mental Health Services Following Release from Custody

Using Technology to Reduce Recidivism in American Prisons

Prospectus

Sociotechnical Synthesis

Many discussions about the criminal justice system question the effectiveness of its current methods of criminal rehabilitation, citing high reimprisonment rates as evidence of a defective prison system. Furthermore, research has shown that an inmate's incarceration experience and the combination of being separated from loved ones, coping with the length of their sentences, and the stressors of a prison environment can intensify or create mental illnesses in those who are incarcerated. As the conveniences of technology become more widespread in our society every day, it is imperative to explore how it could potentially be utilized to improve the criminal justice system in the United States.

The technical project was completed by a team of undergraduate Systems Engineering students who worked closely with clients from the Albemarle Charlottesville Regional Jail (ACRJ). Inmates entering the ACRJ are issued a mental health screener indicating whether they have a mental illness. Among the individuals with mental illness, only a percentage are linked to community based mental health services. For this project, the team examined the cohort of inmates who were linked to mental health services and compared them to the population that was not linked. Specifically, a return to custody analysis was conducted to determine if receiving mental health services was associated with a lower likelihood of returning to custody. A length of stay analysis was conducted to compare the length of stay in ACRJ between those who were and were not linked to mental health services. The results of this project provide support for the observation that serious mental illness does not place a former ACRJ inmate at an increased risk of returning to custody. Furthermore, the length of stay analysis determined that a higher percentage of people who were linked to services returned to custody than individuals who were not linked to services.

After gathering results, the capstone team presented findings to the Charlottesville Criminal Justice Board (CCJB), which is responsible for implementing new policy as it relates to the local criminal justice system. The group also suggested areas for further research to the CCJB. To further refine this analysis, the team suggested conducting further analysis of the individuals who were linked to services and returned to custody to better understand the reasons why these individuals are returning to custody in higher proportions.

The STS research paper evaluates the role of technology in American prisons and how it could be utilized to reduce recidivism. Recidivism represents the percentage of offenders who return to prison within two years of prison and are a key indicator of a corrections system's performance. Using the Social Construction of Technology to facilitate analysis, the research paper describes what the motivations of relevant stakeholders, examines the extent to which technology is currently made available to prisoners in the US, and demonstrates how increased access to technology in prisons could ultimately lead to lower recidivism rates.

The STS research paper and technical capstone project both study the criminal justice system in the United States. Although these two projects are different in terms of their size, they both share the same objective of identifying ways to reduce the number of individuals who are returning to jail or prison. The STS research paper identifies key insights into how technology can be utilized to reduce recidivism, which can be useful to the capstone clients at ACRJ. Together the findings of the STS research paper and the capstone project can be used together to provide recommendations of ways to rehabilitate offenders more successfully.