

**REDUCING RECIDIVISM IN THE CHARLOTTESVILLE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM**  
**A LOOK INTO THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL TABLETS BEING INTRODUCED INTO PRISON**  
**SYSTEMS: REHABILITATION VERSUS SECURITY**

A Thesis Prospectus

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By

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid  
on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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## **Introduction**

*How can new media technologies and analysis of recently released individuals lead to a better criminal justice system?*

The criminal justice system is pivotal in the maintenance of a modern society. Unfortunately, it is plagued with a variety of issues across the country like overcrowding, individuals being in and out of jail, and inmate health and wellbeing. Focusing on reducing recidivism, an individual going back to jail post release, is a key step in fostering the growth of a healthier criminal justice system. New analysis into post release individuals has already begun to shine light on what drives people back to prisons and is being used to formulate hypotheses about what drives recidivism and how to reduce it. Factors such as mental health and post release financial stability are often identified as massive driving factors causing people to recidivate. However, the process of fixing the criminal justice system starts at the core with the wellbeing and rehabilitation efforts of prisoners in jail and prison. New entertainment technologies have begun to be deployed within prison and jail systems showing promising results in bolstering rehabilitation. The goal of reducing recidivism and improving rehabilitation is monumental in the development of a cohesive, humane criminal justice system and the analysis of frequent recidivates and exploration of developing entertainment technologies will further that goal forward.

# **Reducing Recidivism in the Charlottesville Criminal Justice System**

*How can High Utilizers within the Charlottesville Criminal Justice System be reduced?*

The Charlottesville criminal justice system faces a critical challenge with "High Utilizers" – individuals who disproportionately consume resources and repeatedly cycle through the system. These individuals are the primary focus of my group's technical project due to their significant impact on resource allocation. By addressing the underlying causes of their recidivism, we aim to contribute to a more efficient and cohesive criminal justice system.

Our project seeks to uncover the motivations behind this recurring behavior. Preliminary findings suggest that High Utilizers often struggle with mental health disorders, substance abuse, or basic survival needs like food and shelter ("three hots and a cot"). Others rely on criminal activity for daily survival. To deepen our understanding, we have engaged with key stakeholders, including the superintendent of the Albemarle County Regional Jail, a representative from Charlottesville Offender Aid and Restoration, and a crisis intervention specialist from the Evidence-Based Decision Making (EBDM) team. The EBDM team employs data-driven strategies to address systemic issues, and we are collaborating with them to pinpoint the drivers of recidivism and identify actionable solutions.

To tackle this issue, we are utilizing statistical analysis software, predictive analytics, and qualitative research gathered from interviews, site visits, and stakeholder discussions. Data sources include open arrest and criminal records, closed police and jail data, and insights from key actors within the justice system. This data will be cleaned, analyzed, and used to create visualizations that support our conclusions. Our final analysis will involve running statistical

tests to identify significant patterns and building predictive models to estimate the likelihood of recidivism among individuals. Although our access to data is currently limited, most of the analysis will take place next semester. This analysis will require mastering complex statistical and linear modeling techniques, which are essential for accurately understanding the factors contributing to recidivism. These skills will not only enhance our project's success but also provide valuable career development opportunities, equipping us with expertise in managing sensitive data and applying advanced analytics to real-world challenges. As part of this project, we expect to develop a range of professional competencies. These include effectively handling and analyzing sensitive data, presenting findings to a professional committee, and engaging with stakeholders in a collaborative and meaningful way. The ability to synthesize data from multiple sources and build predictive models will also be invaluable for future problem-solving in multifaceted environments. One limitation of our project is its focus on analysis and recommendations rather than direct technological innovations. However, the insights we generate will directly inform strategies to address recidivism. Our final deliverable—a presentation to the EBDM committee—will provide targeted recommendations aimed at reducing recidivism among High Utilizers. By offering data-backed solutions, we hope to contribute to a safer community and a more effective justice system.

Through this project, we aim to shine a light on the High Utilizer issue and its impact on the Charlottesville criminal justice system. Our work will help identify the factors driving recidivism and offer actionable solutions that balance the needs of the justice system and the individuals it serves. This effort represents an opportunity to address a significant challenge while equipping our team with valuable analytical, communication, and research skills that will benefit us in our future careers. Ultimately, our recommendations will contribute to creating a more equitable and

efficient system, improving outcomes for the community.

## **A Look into The Impact of Digital Tablets Being Introduced Into Prison Systems:**

### **Rehabilitation versus Security**

*How has the introduction of digital tablets impacted the rehabilitation of inmates and security of prisons and prisoners?*

The rising prison population has been an issue in America for over 40 years (Travis et al, 2014). With key issues contributing to that rise being lack of financial stability and heavily declined mental health post incarceration. The lack of stability is typically driven by a lack of touch with reality and free society and the declined mental health by the inherently isolating and exhausting nature of prison. To create a more effective prison system, it is necessary to address the key issues plaguing the system. A new implementation of digital tablets within the prison system has shown promise in addressing the lack of financial stability and the mental health decline. Digital tablets may offer a revolutionary way to bolster rehabilitation but come with the tradeoffs of potential security risks for prisons and unforeseen exploitation. The significance of examining their impact is evident in seeing the potential benefits for rehabilitation that they offer such as opportunities to maintain familial relationships and have access to educational tools and services that may aid inmates post release ultimately fostering rehabilitation.

### **Status Quo of Digital Tablets in Prisons**

To illustrate the role of digital tablets in the prison system, imagine an 18-year-old man sentenced to 10 years. The first few months bring hostility, isolation, and exhaustion. His family rarely visits due to distance and poverty, a common situation for many incarcerated individuals. After five years, his prison introduced free digital tablets for communication, media, educational tools, and job skill development. While thrilled initially, he notices high, exploitative prices and limited, closely monitored internet access. Despite this, the tablets improve his mental health, reconnect him with family, and offer opportunities like online college courses and certifications aimed at reintegrating formerly incarcerated individuals. These tools restore hope, allowing him to learn, grow, and prepare for life after release.

To establish clear context before analyzing the case study, over 30 states have deployed digital tablets into their prisons, therefore, there's been time to accurately begin to understand the landscape surrounding their introduction and their ramifications (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, 2023). The main actors in the situation are the prisons, the inmates and their families, and the prison communication companies. Clearly, the case study above is very idealistic but nevertheless represents a hypothetical inmate currently incarcerated; it highlights the problems that digital tablets may solve like financial stability post release and feelings of isolation and worsening mental health. However, it also highlights the currently exploitative nature of the prices of educational tools, entertainment, and communication that prison communication companies set on inmates. In the above case, the inmate was able to afford the ability to enroll in these programs but it's clear that many poor families and poor inmates wouldn't be able to afford these programs, which is a huge barrier to rehabilitation. The case study also addresses the issue of security on these tablets, the tablets are capable of being

24/7 monitored by personnel and there is no open internet access. The 24/7 monitoring even offers the possibility of catching concerning emails and communications that might not have been possible with traditional phone calls in prison. However, potential for security breaches and faulty hardware and software, still pose a problem for prisons. It's clear that digital tablets offer a medley of rehabilitation benefits while also offering potential for exploitation and pose security risks.

### **What Research Says About Digital Tablets in Prisons**

Research largely supports the positive impact of digital tablets in prisons. According to the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, tablets enhance rehabilitation accessibility and efficiency, mitigate the mental and physical toll of incarceration, and allow inmates to pursue self-improvement anytime as opposed to specific time blocks for rehab programs (Knight & Ross, 2024). They also improve family communication, provide access to educational resources, and aid inmates in pursuing justice in ongoing legal matters (McKay, 2022). However, the "free tablet" policy often involves exploitative pricing for services, creating financial burdens for inmates (Johnson, 2024). Security concerns within the prison itself from threats the inmates pose is mitigated by restricted internet access and monitoring. However, data leaks about personal information leave inmates open to cyber-attacks such as those experienced by Securus, a prison communications company, in 2015 and 2019 (Johnson, 2024). Overall, while digital tablets significantly enhance inmates' well-being, access to opportunities, and societal connection, they also pose challenges with exploitative costs and potential security risks.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

In this prospectus, I will analyze the mutual shaping of the sociotechnical system at hand. The main

actors in this sociotechnical system are the prisoners and their families, the prisons themselves, and the prison communication companies. The prisoners strive for personal security, rehabilitation, and overall wellbeing. The prisons strive for security and rehabilitation of their inmate population. Prison communication companies strive for profit maximization. Therefore, the desire of both the prison and the prisoners for improved wellbeing and rehabilitation drives them towards an available solution which is digital tablets. The prison communication companies use that need as an opportunity to maximize their profits and in doing so exploit the inmates and the prison, while also simultaneously providing a new avenue to address the prison's concern of security by following their orders pertaining to security measures. However, the reason the system is stabilized is because of the exploitation of prisoners who also are at risk of data leaks from the same companies.

## **Going Forward**

To fully address my question, I will examine further developments in the exploitation of prisoners and if there are any additional controversies that could be used as a case study. I will examine case studies to get a better understanding of how the tablets were employed in the creation of this new sociotechnical system, I will then analyze those case studies and investigate true financial and other numerical values surrounding the issue, if possible. I will also investigate previously incarcerated individuals and prisoners' testimonials around the internet surrounding their opinions on digital tablets to get a more grounded understanding of the situation.

## **Conclusion**

After my future STS research, I hope to establish a sophisticated understanding of the precise ways in which digital tablets can both help and hurt the prison system or jail system that



is using them. I also hope that I can get the most recent research possible and to work with individuals in large criminal justice organizations like the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation to then use that up-to-date research to further understand the impact of the digital tablets release and their overall wellbeing while incarcerated. After my Technical research, I hope to find meaningful results about what drives high-utilizers within Charlottesville and to use that to further my understanding of the criminal justice system while developing useful technical skills along the way. My future development and understanding of both the pros and cons of digital tablets in prison plus my future understanding of recidivism in Charlottesville will help address the overarching problems plaguing the criminal justice system: increasing prison population and decreasing overall prisoner wellbeing to lead to a more effective and human centered criminal justice system.

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