

# **Assessing the Impact of Educational Programs on Inmates with Life Sentences**

A Research Paper submitted to the Department of Engineering and Society

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Engineering and Applied Science

University of Virginia • Charlottesville, Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Science, School of Engineering

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Spring, 2024

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**

Historically, the focus of the United States criminal justice system was punishing those who have broken the law with long and severe sentences. However, there has been an increasing focus on transitioning prisons and jails from centers for punishment to environments for rehabilitation. Rehabilitation initiatives in prison include a range of programs such as educational training, vocational training, mental health counseling and substance abuse training which all aim to address underlying issues in order to promote behavioral change. These programs hope to tackle underlying issues and provide individuals with necessary reintegration into society. Studies have shown that educational programs effectively lower recidivism rates and create more employment options once inmates return to the public. However, there is little research on the impacts of educational programs on those inmates serving lifelong sentences.

## **Methodology:**

This paper aims to address the research question, “What are the effects on prisoners, the environment, and the broader community when offering educational programs to individuals serving life sentences?”. This question is answered by analyzing sources such as interviews, policy reports and research studies found with help from the University of Virginia library services. While there is little research directly about the research question, this paper aims to connect sources about related populations to formulate an answer. The paper breaks down the impacts by looking at the influence on three different populations and applies the ethical theories of deontology and consequentialism to each group as applicable. The first part of the analysis will focus on impacts of these programs on the inmates themselves. The second part will include a brief discussion on how the prison environment must change to accommodate these

educational programs and how these educational programs will then contribute to the culture of the environment. Finally, the paper will explore the effects of these programs on the broader public, highlighting how backing these initiatives will influence individuals not directly engaged in the criminal justice system or connected to the beneficiaries of these services

Ultimately, the paper aims to increase awareness about educational opportunities for those facing life sentences so that readers can analyze whether they would like to contribute or assist these programs.

### **Background of Rehabilitation Programs with Respect to Rehabilitation Programs**

There is a significant difference in the education level between the general public and those who have been incarcerated. In 2003, approximately 41% of federal and state inmates lacked a GED or high school diploma, contrasted with 18% of the general population who had not received either a high school degree or equivalent (Wolf, 2003). These percentage differences do not show a direct correlation but instead highlight the many social issues correlated with the criminal justice system, some of which include biases, poverty, and substance abuse.

Numerous studies have shown the advantages of educational programs within correctional facilities. In April 2008, the Office of Justice programs signed the Second Chance Act with the goal of assisting inmates with succeeding when released from their sentence. This act increased funding for both researching the impacts of these programs and the implementation of these programs. Through this act, RAND corporation, a Research and Development organization which aimed to improve policy making through statistical analysis, conducted multiple studies and literature reviews. One of their studies found that there was a 43% lower

chance of recidivism and a 13% higher chance of employment for inmates participating in educational programs when compared to inmates not participating in any educational programs. A cost report included in the study revealed that the reduced expenses resulting from lower recidivism rates would outweigh the cost for providing the education programs (Davis, L. M. 2013). Lastly, a study performed by South Florida reported that education consisting of a GED and above can offset the impact of criminal history. According to this study, individuals with criminal history but at least a GED level education were more likely to be hired when compared to an applicant without any criminal history or educational background (Santos et al., 2023).

### **Overview of Deontology and Consequentialism:**

This research question will be explored using the ethical theories of consequentialism and deontology to assess these programs on the specific population of those serving life sentences. Consequentialism is an ethical theory that evaluates actions based solely on the overall result. The morality of an action is determined by its consequences, a key principle in consequentialism. One frequent critique of this ethical framework is the challenge of accurately foreseeing outcomes prior to taking action (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2023). On the other hand, the theory of deontology focuses on the action itself and if that action adheres to moral principles. The actions themselves are decided as either more or immoral, regardless of their outcomes (Alexander & Moore, 2020) This paper examines the morality of the results of life-long inmates as well as the mortality of the action itself to compare the framework and draw relevant conclusions with the goal of improving conditions for those incarcerated.

### **Results and Discussion:**

Providing educational programs to inmates on lifelong sentences doesn't impact just the inmate but also contributes to the overall culture of the prison and can impact the general public,

even those without a direct relation to an individual on the program. Inmates participating in these programs may have higher self-efficacy, greater moral reasoning and lower rates of mental illnesses. Educational programs in general have been proven to decrease violence which may bring down costs and contribute to a safer and less stressful work environment.

### **Program's Impacts on Inmates:**

Research studies have shown that education leads to increased mental health, higher confidence levels, better self-esteem and increased moral reasoning skills.

Researchers at the University of Sussex and Bentley University performed a study looking into the effects of education on mental health in Zimbabwe. The research revealed a correlation between higher education levels and reduced rates of anxiety and depression, alongside with a decrease in the severity of these mental health issues among individuals with more advanced education (Kondirolli & Sunder, 2022). In addition, it has been shown that prisons have significantly higher rates of mental illnesses when compared to the public. Poor conditions within the prison including overcrowding, isolation, high frequency incidents of violence and abuse and discrimination all lead to further deterioration of these inmates' mental health. Providing these services to the already at-risk population could help decrease the frequency and severity of these mental illnesses to improve the overall conditions.

Numerous studies have also pointed out that education can improve self-confidence. The University of Essex Online published an article highlighting four different components relating to confidence that are improved due to education. The first is communication, which most education programs give students countless practice through presentations, various deliverables and collaboration with teams. By improving these communication skills individuals feel that they have gained more valuable skills making them more self-confident. Another aspect this article

analyzes is decision making. Most education programs tell students about the importance of making data driven solutions and teach them many effective ways to problem solve. This skill is applicable to most real-world situations and jobs and allows students to be more confident as they approach different situations throughout their life including the relationship dynamics within the prison system. These decision-making skills also help individuals make decisions that will set themselves up better in the future rather than just focusing on the moment. In addition, students who have successfully completed educational programs have experience with scheduling, receiving and providing feedback and prioritizing many different commitments and meeting set deadlines which are very transferable skills for most jobs. All these skills students learn allow them to lead a life that is more future oriented with greater confidence (*Five ways education can improve your confidence*, 2024). These skills could be applied to both jobs within the prison system but also with learning among other inmates in the jail.

This rise in self-assurance and heightened emphasis, demonstrating to individuals their capacity to achieve, is exemplified in an interview featuring Kimberly Haug, a captain at the Montgomery County Jail in southwest Virginia. In the interview, she says "One of the reasons why I said whatever it takes to continue it, continue it because we had 40, 50 year old men crying breaking down in tears saying I never accomplished anything in my life until this or this is the biggest thing I've ever done," This sense of belief in oneself is necessary for the inmates rehabilitation process and helps them to truly see that they have potential.

A research study performed by two researchers at the University of Alabama showed that those individuals who had an undergraduate degree had higher rates of moral reasoning when compared to those with lower levels of education. The study reported that the type or field of education did not contribute to any differences. Inmates face many different ethical dilemmas

daily including how they choose to treat others around them, how they will stay connected with their families and friends outside of the prison and conforming to social hierarchies within the prison (Doyle & O'Flaherty, 2013). Enhanced moral reasoning skills facilitate more cooperative interactions within correctional settings. When individuals comprehend each other's perspectives, respect personal boundaries, and address conflicts maturely, it fosters a more professional environment conducive to personal development and positive social dynamics among inmates.

### **Environmental Impacts of Educational Programs:**

There are many environmental impacts that must align for educational programs to be provided to inmates. In addition, these implemented programs may contribute to a shift in the jail or prison culture.

Depending on the correctional facility, inmates may have access to many different educational and vocational programs ranging from trauma and violence classes to GED and community college classes to anger management and substance abuse courses. Many times inmates are required to participate in certain classes and sometimes inmates can earn extra visiting time, movies, and/or good days which will allow them to leave their sentence earlier than expected (*Vadoc - programs for offenders*). One of the most common courses offered is a GED, or General Education Development, which is the equivalent of a high school diploma. This section will focus on looking at the logistics and politics that go into the GED program to illustrate the complex environmental factors that are involved.

On January 1st 2014, the content and format of the GED qualifying exam was changed. The content now requires more reasoning skills and is academically more difficult. The exam can now only be taken online, leading to a dramatic increase in test cost, while also

requiring individuals to have computer literacy skills in order to navigate through the test and answer the different formatted questions (Lockwood, 2013).

In an interview about the GED changes with Greg Warden, a program director at Montgomery County Jail, he says, "Keeping up with the software is probably the hardest thing," but goes on to focus on how many positive aspects there are to the exam and how motivated the students are. He says, "As far as them coming in, these guys come in, right off the bat, they're sharp, they want this so bad." (Harris, 2015). Harris is able to speak on how even though these the GED test updates have been challenging to navigate, the motivation and hardwork of the participants make the perseverance worth it.

Educational programs can also in turn, shift the culture within prisons and jails. Educational programs have been shown to reduce violence within prisons, making the environment safer for all inmates. Also, less violence leads to a less stressful and harmful work environment for security guards and workers, hopefully allowing them to be more attentive and motivated at their job and take less emotional trauma home to those around them. A decrease in violence within jails also leads to lower healthcare, property and social service costs. The money saved here could be spent on the education program itself (The effect of education).

### **Impacts of Educational Programs on General Public:**

There is a great amount of overlap between these educational programs impacts on the public and that of the inmates and environment and fluctuates for each person depending on their involvement in the criminal justice system as well as their overall beliefs. Oftentimes offering these programs to more individuals and at a higher quality will cost more for the those funding these programs, which could lead to higher taxes. However, it is important for individuals to compare this cost to that of the positive impact these programs have on the inmates and overall



environment. As the United States is shifting from a criminal justice program centered at punishing those for their crimes to a rehabilitation program that focuses on handling the needs of the inmates and helping prevent future crimes, providing these programs is one small step in this direction.

### **Application of Ethical Theories:**

Deontology puts a strong emphasis on respecting the dignity and worth of every individual, no matter what they have done in the past. This theory recognizes that each person should have the opportunity for self-growth, which includes confidence, self-efficacy, better mental health and moral reasoning. In addition, deontology is rooted in duty-based actions and one application of this theory is that it is an individual's duty to provide rehabilitation to inmates for their well-being, even if they are never returning to the public. Looking at the environmental factors, it can also be seen as a duty to provide a safe environment for all of the inmates and workers.

Consequentialism focuses on the net result of these programs to decide what actions should be taken next. In the context of educational programs for those serving life sentences, the result of the impacts on the inmate and public would be considered. Based on the research, the positive results would include higher self-esteem, higher confidence, better mental health, and a less violent environment for all involved where the consequences would include the financial aspect of these programs. It is important to note that with the little research about the population it is hard to pinpoint the exact consequences, but these are instead pieced together by similar populations.

### **Limitations and Future Work:**

One limitation of this paper is that there is limited research on those serving lifelong sentences. Therefore, all the research is making connections between populations that are similar in order to make conclusions. Also, when drawing conclusions on the impacts of education, it is hard to single out the impacts of education without discussing how other socio-economic factors play into it. In addition, those facing life sentences include those facing the death penalty which there is little research on if educational programs are available to those on death row. Going forward it would be interesting to analyze these groups separately as well as applying the theories separately if the resources allow.

**Conclusion:**

While there is research about impacts of educational programs on inmates who will be released from prison in the context of employment opportunities and recidivism, there is very little content about those inmates who are not expected to return into society. It is important for everyone to be aware of these inmates and their impacts when thinking about their social responsibility. Everyone can contribute to these programs whether that is through direct involvement or voting on funding for or against these programs. The aim of this paper is to raise awareness of these effects by examining them through the perspectives of two distinct ethical frameworks. This endeavor seeks to prompt individuals to contemplate the alignment of their morals with this notion and decide whether they wish to engage in proactive measures.

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