

**Thesis Project Portfolio**

**High Utilizers of the Albemarle and Charlottesville Criminal Justice System**

**Digital Tablets Behind Bars: Impact on Rehabilitation and Security in the American Prison System**

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Prospectus

The American prison system is one of the worst in the world for rehabilitation effectiveness and overall prisoner wellbeing with it putting emphasis on punishment over recovery. Contrastingly, countries like Norway and Sweden provide their inmates with comfortable living conditions and specialized rehabilitation programs and services. It's unsurprising that the results of the two approaches to imprisonment and rehabilitation are starkly different. The Nordic countries boast significantly lower recidivism rates, which in turn saves money and resources for both of their societies, by focusing on reintegration into society and treating their prisoners with dignity and respect. On the other hand, the US prison system struggles with overcrowding, poor mental health services, and throws inmates into environments that often make their preexisting issues even worse. Unsurprisingly, this contributes to elevated recidivism due to poor reintegration services and even worse mental health than prior to inmates' incarceration. It's clear that change is necessary within the US prison system, not only for the sake of those incarcerated, but for the greater good of society. This paper explores the potentials

for change by examining the high utilizer issue in Charlottesville and Albemarle County and by exploring the implementation of digital tablets within the US prison system.

Beginning with the exploration of the high utilizer issue, the main rationale behind the project lies chiefly at the Albemarle County Regional Jail. There the team was briefed on the inner workings of the jail and told that high utilizers would be the main focus of the project. A high utilizer is defined as an individual who recidivates 4 or more times within a 365 day period. This contributes to the disproportionate usage of the criminal justice system's resources and services, wasting money and time for the system. Our team was tasked with exploring the issue through data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This involved interviewing many different agencies including, but not limited to, the Offender Aid and Restoration office, Region 10 Community Service board, Evidence-Based Decision Making committee, and the City of Charlottesville Circuit Court. Because of the interviews with stakeholders and the data obtained from the ACRJ, the team was able to use statistical analysis methods and data cleaning techniques to come up with a set of conclusions. To begin, it was found that high utilizers have almost 5 times more bookings per individual than non-high utilizers emphasizing the disproportionate resource usage. Furthermore, each time a high utilizer recidivates they go through a process that can take up to 95 days involving numerous criminal justice agencies, wasting time and resources. Additionally, the team found that high utilizers often return to court due to contempt of court or probation violations, which is important because those are directly linked to previous offenses indicating there may be a snowball effect. Finally, the team was able to conclude that there is no meaningful difference in the demographic characteristics between high utilizers and non-high utilizers indicating that the issue is not generalized to a specific subset of gender, race, or age group. In conclusion, the exploration of the high utilizer issue

revealed many aspects of their nature and tendencies and provides a lot of possibilities for further research and analysis.

Moving on to the examination of how the introduction of digital tablets impacted prisoner rehabilitation and the security of the prison and the prisoners themselves. The examination was conducted through a mutual shaping lens primarily looking at how the digital tablets, technology, impacts the prisons, individuals, and society in general and vice versa. With that being said, the first main point is that tablets provide increased educational access with one study claiming a 43% increase in GED completion rates in facilities with tablet-based programs, highlighting the effectiveness of the tablet as a medium for rehabilitation. Secondly, tablets provide inmates and their families the opportunity to maintain connections like never before possible through the use of video calls and text messaging, this bolsters inmates mental health and hope. Thirdly, it was found that tablet programs that focused on digital literacy resulted in participants being more likely to secure employment within 3 months of release, highlighting the importance of digital education in an ever growing digital world. Fourthly, although tablets provide benefits like those mentioned above, they also are hindered by the “free tablet” business model that prison media companies use. The “free tablet” model provides the inmates the tablet for free but makes many of the services available blocked behind outrageous paywalls with some states offering basic services like a single video call for 30 minutes for 7.99, which represents countless hours in prison labor. This pricing model blocks out those who need the rehabilitation most, those who come from poor families or are alone. Fifthly, the presence of this pricing model leads to a digital underclass that cannot afford the services provided. It was found that inmates with financial support were three times more likely to use the educational applications as opposed to those without support, which supports their rehabilitation and their eventual reintegration into society.

Lastly, it was also found that tablets provided enhanced security measures with much more monitoring being possible from the prison but also jeopardizes the inmates security due to numerous data leaks and the potential for more. In conclusion, it's clear that digital tablets are the future of prison rehabilitation, even with their flaws, and that technological integration is no longer an option, it's a necessity for the development of the United States.

In conclusion, the value of my work done this year has provided me with the ability to see a much larger picture of the prison system than I've ever seen prior. It deepened my understanding of the complex reality that is the criminal justice system. My technical project involved hands-on interviewing, data analysis, and the detailing of a large, complicated system and it resulted in insights for the criminal justice system in Charlottesville that may very well help them to eventually solve the high utilizer issue. My STS project shined light on the ever expanding and growing prison system throughout the US and how digital tablets are impacting that evolving system. It resulted in a deeper understanding of the sociotechnical interaction of the prison system and revealed the many benefits and shortcomings of the introduction of digital tablets. I am generally content with the results I've found, however, there's much more to research and explore. I believe that future teams that work on my technical project should go further into exploring the unquantifiable human element of the high utilizer issue, further examining demographics and their significance on high utilizers, and looking deeper into charge patterns. I believe that furthering my STS topic could be done by examining new research that comes out about the digital tablet implementation and also seeing how new policies may come out that impact the sociotechnical landscape.