

# Free research paper on useful methods for successful inmate rehabilitation

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## **Abstract**

The paper reviews the extremely high rates of prison population per capita in the U. S. compared with other countries (e. g. in Europe) and the equally high recidivism rates that see the U. S. prison population growing, whereas other countries are able to bring their inmate numbers down. Evert (2010) – an ex-correctional officer – describes previous mistakes made in U. S. rehabilitation policies and methods, but sees rehabilitation as of utmost importance. Miceli (2009), having analyzed rehabilitation programs in Rhode Island, concludes that under-funding and lack of resources have hampered the effectiveness of rehabilitation to date. Ward et al. (2013) draw comparisons between the U. S. penal system and rehabilitation, and that of the Nordic model, which has greater success in the areas of rehabilitation and consequently reduced recidivism. They find that the Nordic model approaches prison sentences as opportunities to rehabilitate and educate offenders, whereas the U. S. system is much more punishment-based. Prison guards in the Nordic system are highly trained to have the right attitudes to encourage and foster rehabilitative efforts by the inmates, and the resources are there to not only afford the inmates the education or vocational training that they decide they want, but inmates are transferred to a “ halfway house” (an open prison) in the approach to their release date, to adjust and prepare for reintegration into society. In addition, the Nordic countries provide post-release support for ex-inmates seeking work. The paper also includes extracts from an NPR program, reporting some ways that Ohio has improved rehabilitation and reduced recidivism.

## **Introduction**

In addition to the fundamental reason for rehabilitation – to convert the inmate into a useful and law-abiding member of society – part of the motivation for the various rehabilitation methods tried is the high cost of keeping each person in prison. Recidivism is a major problem; successful rehabilitation programs could break the re-offending cycle, reducing prison populations. This research paper discusses various opinions and methods used to attempt to rehabilitate prison inmates, so that following release back into society they are less likely to re-offend and be returned to prison.

## **The Research**

Evert (2010) offers an interesting and perhaps practical perspective on the question of inmate rehabilitation, having served “on the front line” as a correctional officer inside prisons since 1999. He refers to the failure of earlier rehabilitation ideas and programs, which he describes as resembling “doomed-to-fail money pits more than successful policies.” He states that throwing ever more money at the problem has caused programs to be cut altogether.

Evert sees misdirected / misguided programs such as compelling inmates to study for college degrees, when they are simply not intellectually capable of benefitting from them, as a waste of precious resources. Even those who are able to achieve a degree will struggle to use it when released because there are barriers to getting a job and for so many of the released inmates the “easy money” obtained from crime is the preferred option. As an example, asks Evert, who is going to hire an ex-convict with an MBA in Accounting?

Referring to the potential success of vocational training as a rehabilitative measure, he claims that those in control made two serious errors. The first was to give that training to inmates who were in for life, and the second was to train inmates for unrealistic skills. In the former case, some “ lifers” (who were never going to be released to use their skills in free society), used the training to manufacture weapons. In the latter case, Evert quotes training programs to teach inmates how to be aviation mechanics, asking “ what reputable airline would hire felons to work on their planes?” Although training to be auto mechanics or similar was effective, many were cut because some long term inmates used them for covert weapons manufacture. As a consequence, vocational training actually provided real benefits to very few.

On a positive note, Evert sees rehabilitation as very important, notwithstanding past mistakes or misguided efforts. He believes that any first- or second-time offender who might benefit from rehabilitation should be provided with appropriate help, to reduce re-offending and the consequent numbers of crime victims. He then suggests ways that he and other correctional officers believe will be the basis of successful rehabilitation methods. Some of those are summarized here:

- Restrict access to rehabilitation to those having eight years or less to serve.
- Do not compel inmates to study for educational qualifications.
- For sex offenders, focus on psychiatric care rather than rehabilitation.
- Make vocational training relate to realistic employment options for an ex-convict.

- Permit private firms to train inmates in return for offers of future employment, and to pay them a “ wage” for work done within the prison, so reducing state costs.
  - For low-risk inmates, trained and with a job offer, allow early but supervised parole on a once-only basis, with the threat of back to prison if problems arise.
  - Increase parole system resources to reduce each parole officer’s caseload and paperwork. Give them the option to return a client to prison if needed.
- Summarizing Evert’s views, he strongly supports rehabilitation, but believes more practical vocational training coupled with other changes could be successful.

Miceli (2009) published a paper analyzing the effectiveness of existing rehabilitation programs. She opens her paper by commenting that because most criminals are repeat offenders, rehabilitation has been given the highest priority. Her evaluation of rehabilitation programs available at the Rhode Island facility includes both educational and vocational education/training programs as well as others associated with therapies for those affected by substance abuse or mental problems. In her Conclusion she states that research in the previous 25 years has shown that whilst rehabilitation programs can be effective, needed funding support and compatibility testing of rehabilitation candidates is sadly lacking.

In the light of the shortage of funding, it is clearly important to focus on the most effective methods of rehabilitation. Ward et al., (2013) compare the prison systems in the U. S. and abroad (particularly in the Nordic countries), including the differences in attitudes to and methods of rehabilitation of

inmates. They note that the U. S. has a higher rate of imprisonment of offenders than most other countries (about 7 times higher than in Europe), and a high rate of recidivism too. The authors suggest that the figures show that the U. S. system is not providing prisoners with effective rehabilitation. Their paper makes comparisons between the American and mainly Nordic prison systems, which may throw some light on more effective methods which could be adopted in the U. S. In contrast to the rising prison populations in the U. S., the numbers in Norway fell between 1950 and 2004 from 200 per 100, 000 to just 65 per 100, 000. So what is the difference in approach and methodology that makes the Nordic system so (relatively) successful?

The opening comparison made is that many U. S. prisons are privately-operated and profit-oriented, in an arrangement which makes it more lucrative for the operators the more prisoners they have. Hence rehabilitation of inmates is not a primary focus for them. Ward et al. also note that a shortage of funding and of drug rehabilitation programs in the U. S. system hinders rehabilitation success. Further, they make the key point that high school dropouts are a major source of U. S. prison inmates, and imply that better schooling and applied associated resources could break this cycle of dropouts heading into a life of crime.

According to Ward et al., inmates in Nordic prisons serve most of their sentences in closed (more restrictive) prisons, then are transferred to open (less restrictive) prisons, all prisons being generally small in scale, typically housing circa 100 prisoners. The idea behind many small prisons is to locate inmates in a prison closer to family and home area. Also, the approach is

designed to address rehabilitation directly, and thereby to reduce recidivism. When inmates are transferred to the open type of prison, the rehabilitation efforts are stepped up and prisoners are housed in more relaxed environments with less overt security and facilities like shared common rooms and kitchens. The open prisons also have less security fences, allow inmates freedom within the grounds, and in some cases to earn “in town privileges”, though using security technology to track them. The aim is to help the soon to be released inmates to more easily reintegrate with society – an element of rehabilitation.

Another important element of the Nordic prison philosophy according to Ward et al. is that prison staff attitudes have a major influence on rehabilitation and subsequent reintegration success. Nordic prison guards are carefully selected and receive two years mentoring training before supervising inmates independently. Also, in contrast to the under-resourced U. S. system, in which resources available for higher education are so limited that there are long waiting lists, in the Nordic system all educational training is voluntary, and inmates can attend school (within the prison) on a full-time basis, and are encouraged by the prison staff to participate in university degree distance learning programs if appropriate.

As regards vocational training, Ward et al. report that the system in the U. S. is hampered by a lack of funding, and by a lack of support for the released inmates in securing a job. In contrast, the Nordic system depends upon active programs by the authorities to help released inmates find work and to support them with assistance in other ways.

Regarding released U. S. inmates attempts to find a job, NPR (National Public

Radio) published a transcript of a conversation between the host Neal Conan, reporter Alan Johnson (Columbus Dispatch), Ohio Senator Bill Seitz, and Michael Thompson, director of The Justice Center, Council on State Governments. The title of the transcript was “ Programs Keep Inmates From Returning To Prison” (2012) and the subject was the Ohio approach to sentencing reform, extra support for released prisoners, and rehabilitation programs that are minimizing recidivism. Interesting items that came out of their discussion were firstly that the Ohio approach has already (in three years) cut recidivism by 11 percent, and secondly that through the efforts of Senator Seitz and others, sanctions in the Ohio laws that precluded ex-convicts from getting work licenses or even keeping their driver’s license have been removed, making it easier to find and keep work. Seitz also reports that Ohio has just passed a law that allows ex-convicts who demonstrate good behavior to go to court and obtain a “ certificate of qualifications for employment.” That helps employers hire such people as it absolves them from possible tort liability for “ negligent hiring.”

Conclusions

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