
EDUCATION IN PRISONS – AN ESSENTIAL FACTOR IN PREVENTING RECIDIVISM. THE ROLE OF DETENTION OFFICERS IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

Alexandru PETRE¹
Mihaela TOMIȚĂ²

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35782/JCPP.2022.2.07>

Abstract: *The success of reintegration into the society of persons deprived of their liberty depends, to a large extent, on the educational programs performed in prisons. Previous studies on prison education have mainly focused on programs aimed at developing life skills or transmitting professional competences relevant to the labor market after release. A less analyzed aspect was focused on the impact of positive role models in the educational process and how exposure to this role models influence their reintegration after release. Prison staff, especially those with whom detainees interact daily, influence their perceptions on the time spent in prison, as well as the way they relate to the period following their release. If the way detention officers manage day-to-day activities and interaction with detainees is perceived as fair, equitable and in line with the rules of detention, positive patterns of behavior appear, with a beneficial impact on compliance with prison rules, participation in educational programs and social reintegration following their release. By creating positive role models, detainees will have healthy benchmarks to follow, the effectiveness of educational programs offered in prisons will increase significantly and, thus, inmates will be able to reintegrate more easily into society, playing an active role in the community they belong to. This article examines previous studies from Europe concerning the influence of positive role models among detention officers on the behavior of detainees, with the purpose of identifying good practices that can be adapted to the Romanian prison system context.*

Keywords: *reintegration, prison education, positive role models*

¹ PhD candidate, West University of Timișoara, Romania, e-mail: petre.n.alexandru@gmail.com

² Full Professor Dr., West University of Timișoara, Romania, e-mail: mihaela.tomita@e-uvv.ro

1. Overview

Education in prison represents one of the main pillars of the successful reintegration of detainees into society. Educational programs contribute to the development of skills to unlock their potential, to get a job, create families and contribute to their community development. The educational programs conducted in prisons are meant to keep and improve the ties with the realities outside the prison walls, improve their well-being through diversity of daily activities and contact with different persons (facilitators).

The efficiency of prison education not only improves the detainee's quality of life and his/her chances to be rehabilitated but also benefits the community by correcting some of the behavior traits that contributed to his/her misbehavior and reducing the costs of reoffending.

The United Kingdom offers a well-documented case study, due to the interest of the government and research bodies addressing reoffending. In UK, the total estimated economic and social cost of reoffending was £18.1 billion in 2016 (Alexander et al., 2019). Considering this issue and means to address it, the decision-makers within the UK justice system (Rt Hon Michael, 2015) acknowledged the challenges that the prison system is facing, especially the high rate of recidivism: 45% of adult prisoners re-offending within one year of release, for those who served shorter sentences of less than 12 months the figure rises to 58.4%, while for juvenile offenders 68.9% committed a new offense within a year of release (Ministry of Justice, 2017). Another problem (Rt Hon Michael, 2015) was the increased number of violent acts toward prisoners, prison staff and self-harm cases: in 2015, over 20,500 assault incidents occurred within prisons (27% increase from 2014), over 32,000 self-harm incidents happened (25% rose from 2014) (Dempsey et al., 2016).

In 2015, the prison population in England and Wales reached 84,500, representing an increase of 90% from 1990 (Dempsey et al., 2016). However, this rose is inversely proportional to the number of frontline operational staff employed. From 2010 onward, the number of detention officers in the public prisons has decreased by 26%, with 536 officers over the last 12 months (Ministry of Justice, 2016).

Several solutions were proposed to the UK legislators (Rt Hon Michael, 2015), especially regarding strengthening the role of education in the rehabilitation process of detainees. The persons under custody should get the literacy and numeracy skills needed to have a better chance to be employed and have a positive contribution to the community after their release. Also, the right incentives should be identified to motivate the detainees to learn and the prison staff to prioritize the educational process. In this regard, a review of the provision of education in prisons was conducted to analyze the current situation and to identify ways to increase the efficiency of the educational process for detainees (Ministry of Justice, 2015).

2. Improving Prison Education

A review on prison education (Dame Sally, 2016) was released in May 2016 and highlighted several recommendations. The focus was on making every contact matter,

promoting the importance of prison education and creating a new system to attract high caliber graduates to work for at least two years as correctional officers.

Every day detainees interact with a large number of persons, ranging from Governors, Senior Management, prison officers, teachers, instructors, official visitors and others. All of them are representatives of the prison system, they build up the image of the institution that detainees are perceiving and they all carry the responsibility to ensure that, in educative terms, all contacts matter. In order to adapt the current policy that emphasizes more on isolating the detainees from society and keeping the institution safe to one designed to enhance the personal growth of inmates, there should be a whole-organizational shift in approach toward education and workforce development.

The professional development plan should be extended to all staff members, this being a crucial element of the culture of change. Specialized training for staff working in different areas and levels of the prison should be expanded to offer a consistent approach toward education. Besides the professional development plan of existing staff and improving the initial training for new staff, attracting a different category of prison staff will facilitate the culture of change.

High performance staff should be motivated to undertake leadership, teaching and officer positions to reach the goal of having education as a central goal. Efficient practices and innovations should be identified, shared and rewarded across the prison system.

Prison Governors should have an adequate set of skills and tools to have more control of the educational process. They will have to undergo a thorough training and development process and an assessment of their abilities and progress should be part of their Personal Development Plan. Qualified experts can help ensure that educational services are harmonized so they can offer the highest business efficiency. Senior management should develop clearer career paths to recruit and retain the most talented staff members. There are many talented potential middle leaders employed by institutions that don't offer opportunities of career development and their skills could be easily transferable into the prison environment (e.g. from Further Education colleges and schools in rural areas). They could be motivated to experiment a career change, being driven by potential progress to a middle leadership position in prison.

3. Every Contact Matters

Good relationships between staff and prisoners are essential in ensuring that prisons are safe, decent and secure. Therefore, all correctional officers are expected to interact with prisoners regularly and to provide positive role models. This approach is reflected in the principle 'Every Contact Matters' (Mulholland, 2014), which form part of the new ways of working that are being introduced in all public sector prisons. Staff role modeling is intended also to improve relationships between prisoners.

The concept Every Contact Matters isn't new, it was inspired by the national initiative Making Every Contact Count (MECC) where staff in customer-facing roles is

encouraged to use every chance to engage with clients in subjects related to healthy lifestyles and give good advice (Public Health England et al., 2016).

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence performed an exceptional review to examine the effectiveness of brief alcohol interventions compared to no or minimal intervention in reducing alcohol consumption. A number of sixty-nine randomized control trials (RCTs) and cluster RCTs were included (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, 2019). The primary meta-analysis found that after 12 months there was moderate-quality evidence that brief interventions result in small but significant reduction in alcohol consumption (a decrease of 2 to 3 UK standards units of alcohol per week).

All interactions between detainees and detention officers are important, they have direct contact with all detainees 24/7, spent a large amount of time together, build up trust relations, count on their advice and support to solve most of their problems. They have contact with detainees that are unable or unwilling to participate in educational programs and might offer them the right guidance and motivation to enroll in the organized activities.

The initial basic training offered to new prison officers has undergone many improvements during the last years, however in order to have a stronger emphasis on supporting the vision of prisons as learning environments, these programs must be reshaped. Also, periodically, all members of the staff should undergo a refresher course to familiarize them with new policies and best practices in the field.

4. Offense Analogue Behaviors & Offense Replacement Behaviors

The security of prisons and education are interdependent, they are to be seen as a whole with strong ties. Dynamic security is defined as *“the development by staff of positive relationships with prisoners based on firmness and fairness, along with an understanding of their personal situation and any risk posed by individual prisoners”* (United Nations, 2015).

After their arrival in prisons all detainees are evaluated and an interventional plan is tailored for them. This evaluation also analyses the risk factors that predict recidivism and problematic behavior during his incarceration. Depending on the identified risks adequate programs are planned for the entire duration of his incarceration.

In their studies, Gordon and Wong (2010, 2015) use the term Offense Analogue Behaviors “OABs” concerning behavior interpreted as misconduct that can jeopardize safety and security (e.g. aggressive attitudes, passive refusal to obey orders). Persons don’t stop manifesting misbehavior after their incarceration; they only adapt to the new highly controlled environment (e.g., a person convicted for drug trafficking, can be involved in similar activities inside the prison). Identifying, monitoring and treating OABs is critical in reducing the risk factor of a detainee. By contrast, Offense Replacement Behaviors (ORBs) represent prosocial behaviors that should replace OABs. Both, OABs and ORBs should be treated in a direct connection, every time bad behavior is removed, something must replace it. A person with anger management

problems is not expected to become emotionless, instead he should develop effective communication skills and prosocial modes of managing his anger.

The task of monitoring and reducing OABs and replacing them with ORBs belongs to all frontline staff who have direct interaction with detainees (Atkinson & Mann, 2012) and should be performed 24/7. Every contact with a detainee represents an opportunity to influence his behavior (Gordon & Wong, 2010, 2015).

Dowden and Andrews (2004) demonstrated in their meta-analysis that the use of Core Correctional Practices (CCPs) are associated with reductions in security incidents and decreased recidivism. The CCPs are essential in reducing OABs and increasing ORBs.

- **Relationship practices:** Show tolerance, respect, flexibility, warmth, empathy, humor and a positive attitude. In many cases, detainees have histories of dysfunctional relationships, and demonstrating healthy attitudes raises the potential for positive reciprocal interactions (Andrews et al., 1990, pp. 36-37).
- **Effective use of authority:** Staff should be calm, impartial and clear in the interactions with detainees, encouraging and offering positive feedback while trying to increase ORBs.
- **Prosocial role modeling:** Staff must lead by example, they have all skills needed to live in the community. They can role model healthy relationships with family and friends, professionalism, respect, problem-solving, patience, correct communication, and breed these qualities to detainees.
- **Effective reinforcement:** Staff should highlight ORBs and encourage them.
- **Effective disapproval:** Equally important to encouraging ORBs is to discourage OABs. The staff should identify the problematic behavior and offer positive feedback.

Research findings show that decreased OABs and increased ORBs are associated with lower rates of institutional and community recidivism (Beggs & Grace, 2011; Coupland & Olver, 2020a, 2020b; Lewis et al., 2013; Olver et al., 2018).

5. Unlocked Graduates program

A promising initiative was to create a new employment scheme that would attract graduates from top universities to work as detention officers for an initial period of two years. Their main tasks would be related to security, supervision and support, but also play an active role in developing the educational process across the regime through different activities. At the end of the two years engagement, those that want to continue to work in the prison system would receive support to develop their careers and access senior leader and Governor positions.

The Unlocked Graduates program was one of the key recommendations of the Coates' Review of prison education. The concept of this program isn't new, it was inspired by the national initiative "Teach First" launched in 2002, based on the best practices learned from the program Teach for America, formed in 1990.

Unlocked Graduates program eliminated some stereotypes related to the image of the correctional officer. To reach this goal, they tried attracting high achievers to work in prisons for at least two years as correctional officers, in direct contact with detainees. The program included the following benefits:

- They were enrolled in a fully-funded Master's program on leadership
- They received internship opportunities with one of the supporting organizations (KPMF, Howard League, Ministry of Justice or the African Prisons Project).
- They were offered the opportunity to make proposals of pilot projects relevant to the workplace and have the chance to implement them
- At the end of the two years, they would receive support either to advance within the prison system or choosing a different career path with the supporting organizations

6. Conclusions

Prison education is to be seen equally important as any other security aspect related to prisons. Detainees that receive adequate educational support not only have a better chance to reintegrate in community playing an active role and following all social rules, but also accept easier all the limitations that the highly controlled environment in prison imposes on them. Thus, better order is maintained in the prison environment, lower rates of incidents will be recorded and the overall mission of the institution is to be achieved.

Improvements toward education in prisons could be achieved only if all stakeholders are involved in the process, from policy makers to the frontline officers. The educational system already in place demonstrated its relevance in reducing the rate of recidivism, however there is always enough space to improve. In Romania, all aspects of education in prisons are managed by the Educational Compartments, without the active support of the other sectors in the penitentiary units.

Considering the work overload, which, due to staff shortage, is a common phenomenon in the Romanian penitentiary system, integration of the presented good practices in the work schedule might be perceived as extra tasks and responsibilities. The additional time invested in tasks related to education produces significant benefits, due to improvements of the staff relation with detainees and through supporting the social reintegration of offenders. Having this approach would improve dynamic security, as well as strengthen the collective effort to reduce reoffending.

Investments in the training of staff, new employment schemes to attract high achievers, the use of prosocial modeling, working to improve behavior and showing care in every contact with detainees will improve the quality of life for detainees, but also of detention officers. Creating a friendly work environment improves the welfare for staff and increases job satisfaction, making the job more appealing to the public, creating thus an attractive career path for highly talented graduates.

Authorship

A.P. and M.T. contributed equally to the study.

Acknowledgements

This study was supported in part by the West University of Timișoara (Universitatea de Vest din Timișoara).

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no conflicting interests.

References

- Alexander, N., Xenner, M., Steven, E., & Maryam, A. (2019). *Economic and social costs of reoffending. Analytical report*. Ministry of Justice Analytical Series, 10, ISBN 978-1-84099-887-0.
- Andrews, D. A., Bonta, J., & Hoge, R. D. (1990). Classification for rehabilitation: Rediscovering psychology. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 17, 19-52.
- Atkinson, D. F., & Mann, R. E. (2012). Prison officers as observers of offense paralleling behaviors: an untapped resource? *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry and Psychology*, 23, 139-155.
- Beggs, S. M., & Grace, R. C. (2011). Treatment gains for sexual offenders against children predict reduced recidivism: A comparative validity study. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 79, 182-192.
- Coupland, R. B. A., & Olver, M. E. (2020a). Assessing dynamic violence risk in a high-risk treated sample of violent offenders. *Assessment*, 27(8), 1886-1900.
- Coupland, R. B. A., & Olver, M. E. (2020b). Assessing protective factors in treated violent offenders: Associations with recidivism reduction and positive community outcomes. *Psychological Assessment*, 32(5), 493-508
- Dame Sally, C. (2016). *Unlocking Potential: A review of education prison*. UK Ministry of Justice, May 2016.
- Dempsey, N., & Allen, G. (2016) *Prison Population Statistics*. House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, SN/SG/04334.
- Dowden, C., & Andrews, D. A. (2004). The importance of staff practice in delivering effective correctional treatment: A meta-analytic review of core correctional practice. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 48, 203-214.
- Gordon, A., & Wong, S. C. P. (2010). *Offense analog behaviors and indicators of criminogenic need and treatment progress in custodial settings*. In M. Daffern, L. Jones, and J. Shine (Eds.): *Offense paralleling behavior: An individualized approach to offender assessment and treatment* (pp. 171- 184). Oxford, UK: Wiley.

- Gordon, A., & Wong, S. (2015). The use of a structured guide to assess proxies of offending behaviors and change in custodial settings. *Journal of Forensic Practice*, 17, 83-100.
- Lewis, K., Olver, M. E., & Wong, S. C. P. (2013). The Violence Risk Scale: Predictive validity and linking treatment changes with recidivism in a sample of high-risk offenders with psychopathic traits. *Assessment*, 20, 150-164.
- Ministry of Justice (2015). Review of Prison Education. Terms of reference. London.
- Ministry of Justice (2016). National Offender Management Service workforce statistics: September 2016, London.
- Ministry of Justice (2017) Proven Reoffending Statistics Quarterly Bulletin, October 2014 to September 2015
- Mulholland, I. (2014). Perrie Lecture 2013: Contraction in an Age of Expansion: An Operational Perspective in. *Prison Service Journal*, 211, 14-18.
- National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2019). Exceptional surveillance of behavior change: individual approaches (NICE guideline PH49). Surveillance report.
- Olver, M. E., Mundt, J. C., Thornton, D., Beggs Christofferson, S. M., Kingston, D. A., Sowden, J. N., Nicholaichuk, T. P., Gordon, A., & Wong, S. C. P. (2018). Using the Violence Risk Scale-Sexual Offense Version in sexual violence risk assessments: Updated risk categories and recidivism estimates from a multisite sample of treated sexual offenders. *Psychological Assessment*, 30, 941-955.
- Public Health England, NHS England and Health Education England (2016). Making Every Contact Count (MECC): Consensus, April 2016.
- Rt Hon Michael, G. (2015). *The treasure in the heart of man - making prisons work*. Speech was given at Prisoners Learning Alliance, 17 July 2015.
- Rt Hon Michael, G. (2015) *Education in prison. Announcement of a review of education in adult prisons*. Written statement to Parliament, 8 September 2015
- United Nations (2015). *Handbook on dynamic security and prison intelligence*, 29.