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Ex-Prisoners' Perceptions of the Availability and Effects of Programs and Services in Correctional Settings

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Jenna Houston is a Departmental Honors student majoring in Social Work. This research project began in the Fall 2011 semester as part of a research project toward an honors contract requirement in Research Methods in Social Work. This research was made possible through the Adrian Tinsley Summer Research Grant in 2012, under the mentorship of Dr. Judith Willison L.I.C.S.W., Ph.D. Not only was the aim of this research to empower its participants, but also to promote social justice through creating awareness of the disadvantage and oppression this population experiences. This project was presented in April 2013, at the National Conference on Undergraduate Research in La-Crosse, Wisconsin. Jenna will attend Bridgewater State University in the fall of 2013 to pursue an Advanced Standing degree in the Masters of Social Work program.

The U.S. system of retributive justice drives punitive measures, rather than interventions that could reduce recidivism. If prisoners' needs are not met while serving time within the penal system, their chances of re-offending are greater (Baillargeon, 2010). The purpose of this study was to gather information about correctional programming from male ex-prisoners who have been involved in community re-entry services at Span Inc. in Boston, MA. Furthermore, this study also examines whether or not the programming contributed to positive coping skills during their incarceration as well as adaptation upon reentering the community. Data were collected during ten interviews, using a semi-structured interview guide at a community reentry program named Span Inc., in Boston, MA. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for themes. Results indicate that, prisoners describe a wide variety of needs while incarcerated. Seven of the ten participants reported that their needs were not addressed in prison through programming and services. Participants also noted that programming helps in adjusting to being separated from the community while incarcerated, as well as helping them to reenter into the community. Strong themes of 'prisonized' behaviors were apparent in the experiences described by participants, as well as in the available services that were offered to them. It is hoped this research will aid program creators as well as inform the public of prisoners' needs and how to better address them based on this first-hand data.

Keywords: male-offenders, incarceration, re-entry, adaptation, needs, institutionalizing, forensic social-work to services, strengths-based perspective

According to the United States Bureau of Justice Statistics (2012), almost 7 million individuals constituted the correctional population in 2011. Of this large correctional population, 3,971,319 were on probation and 853,852 were on parole. Over 2.2 million of these individuals were incarcerated in jails and prisons as of December 31, 2011 (Glaze and Parks, 2012). Of the 2.2 million, 1,504,150 are in federal and state prisons and 735,601 are in local jails. Eighty-seven thousand two hundred individuals are considered to have multiple correctional statuses (Glaze and Parks, 2012). There are limited services offered to incarcerated individuals, due to lack of funding as well as a culture of non-acceptance of those who commit crimes (Baillargeon, 2010). More services are needed to adequately meet the complex needs of prisoners in order to reduce recidivism and protect potential victims of crime. The Bureau of Justice Statistics describes recidivism as being measured by criminal

acts that, in turn, result in the re-arrest, reconviction, or return to prison with or without a new sentence, within a three year time period (2012). During 2007, a total of 1,180,469 persons on parole were indicated to be at-risk of re-incarceration. Of these parolees 16% returned to prison (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2011).

Programming and Services
The main areas of programming in prisons are religious services, mental-health treatment, and educational programming. Failure to provide prisoners these basic services while incarcerated contributes to increased recidivism rates (Baillargeon, 2010) and simultaneously results in long-term warehousing costs at the taxpayers' expense (Hall and Killacy, 2008; Soderstrom, 2007). Each of these types of programs will be described briefly below.

Faith-based Programs
Faith-based programs connect prisoners with their faith of choice and are found to be effective in reducing anti-social behaviors in extreme situations, such as prison (Kerley, Matthews, and Blanchard, 2005). Kerley et al., (2005) found involvement in religious programming directly reduced arguing between prisoners and indirectly reduced fighting. A separate study concluded that faith-based programs help prisoners deal with guilt, finding a new direction in life, and dealing with the loss of their freedom (Clear and Sumter, 2002). However, not all prisoners feel a connection to a "higher power." Many prisoners seek faith-based programming for other reasons such as material comforts and social support which help them deal with the hostile environment (Clear and Sumter, 2002).

Mental-health Programming
A great influx of mentally-ill people entering prisons began with the deinstitutionalization of state mental hospitals over the past decades (Soderstrom, 2007). Prisoners may experience symptoms of mental health disorders, including but not limited to: loss of interest or pleasure in activities, insomnia or hypersomnia, feelings of worthlessness or extreme guilt, delusions, and hallucinations (James and Glaze, 2006). Mental-health programming for prisoners also provides evidence of effectiveness in addressing specific emotional and behavioral disorders. Soderstrom (2007) found that including mental- health programming in prison is an opportunity for clinicians to identify, diagnose, and begin treatment with prisoners. A study conducted in a county jail examined the impact of mental-health program on over 240 prisoners with co-occurring mental health disorders. A statistically significant correlation between the higher number of treatment sessions and decreased recidivism rates was found (Rothbard, Zubritsky, Jacquette, and Chatre, 2009).

Educational Programming
Educational programming offered in prisons includes GED classes, adult literacy sessions, as well as vocational training (Hall and Killacy, 2008). Such programs have been found to dramatically reduce recidivism (Esperian, 2010). Job training in prisons is also significant to individuals post-release. It is believed that productivity inside prisons promotes productivity outside of prisons as individuals are released into society (Travis, 1999). Therefore job-training contributes to a reduction in recidivism while also aiding individuals in successful integration into their communities.

Motivation
Some literature suggests that prisoners have the potential to be insincere, and participate in programming and services solely due to extrinsic motivations (Clear, Hardyman, Stout, and Drammer, 2000; Clear and Sumter, 2002). Extrinsic motivations include, safety, material comforts, access to outsiders, and inmate relations or social support (Clear et al., 2000). Yet results of the same study, conducted by Clear et al., (2000) indicated that inmates also participate in programming as a result of intrinsic motivations. These types of intrinsic motivations include, helping to deal with guilt, finding a new way of life, and dealing with the loss of freedom.

Prisonization
As the era of deinstitutionalization of mental and state hospitals has long passed us, institutionalizing (or "prisonizing") behaviors continue to cultivate in correctional settings. Goodstein (1989) wrote that inmates may attempt to cope with their environment by beginning to view the prison as "home." Goffman (1961) suggested that once inmates are placed in a correctional setting they are subsequently stripped of their identities and social roles. Goffman contended that this created a process of "Conversion" whereby the inmate will internalize the views of one's self from the perspective of authority figures, such as the administrative and correctional staff. People who are in these institutional settings are subject to degrading experiences and have harsh limitations imposed on their freedom. The institutionalization of the prisoner involves a lack of control over one's environment, a paucity of goods and services, one's needs being handled in an uncongenial and bureaucratic fashion, a lack of decision making occasions, and as a result the individual is forced to be dependent on their environment (Goodstein, 1989; Haney, 2001; Weinstein, 1982). Consequently this renders the inmate completely unprepared to re-enter their community where functioning independently and taking initiative is vital. The idea of being "institutionalized" is conceptualized as being psychological, which in turn means its effects are reversible (Haney, 2001).

Strengths-based Approaches in Correctional Facilities

Brunette and Maruna (2006) write about the lack of theoretical foundations in prison-based programs/services prior to their creation. The authors find prison programming to be based on the idea of "earning redemption." In order to conquer the deficits of institutionalizing behaviors in the prison environment, integrating a strengths-based approach in working with people in such facilities can be effective. This perspective's foundation is that each individual possesses the inherit ability and resources required to overcome challenges as they present themselves. Despite the fact that some people may present themselves as "hopeless", it is believed that with some assistance a person can overcome their issues. This approach is especially effective in empowering an individual to re-gain control over their environment, which enables them to furthermore utilize their apparent strengths (Brun and Rapp, 2001; Brunette and Maruna, 2006). A prisoner who is empowered to re-gain control over their environment, may then also be able to succeed in having the capacity to be held accountable for their crime; and, furthermore, work actively to change such negative behaviors. This research aimed to empower ex-prisoners by enabling them to be advocates for other prisoners. They did this by giving first-hand data on what they perceived were useful elements of prison programming; and to better inform program creators as well as inform the public of their needs and how to better address them.

Methodology

Ten in-depth interviews with adult male ex-prisoners were completed at Span, Inc. in Boston, MA. Span is an organization that provides services to people who have been in prison. A semi-structured interview guide was created to inquire about four main areas, 1) What are a prisoner's needs during incarceration? 2) Do ex-prisoners believe their needs were met in prison? 3) Does programming foster positive coping skills while incarcerated? 4) How does programming help prisoners upon release into the community?

Participants were recruited using mixed avenues. The study was presented to groups of ex-prisoners prior to scheduled group sessions, and flyers were posted in a frequented recreational room. Interviews lasted from 40-60 minutes on-site in counseling rooms at Span Inc.. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions. For example:

Many individuals who have spent time in prison report that they identified needs such as educational, mental health, spiritual/religious, or related to substance abuse.

Please tell me about what kind of needs you experienced while you were incarcerated.

The series of open-ended questions were followed by probing questions on the same topic. Such questions were used to attain greater insight on their perspective of needs while in prison. For example: *What needs of yours in particular were met? What needs of yours in particular were not met?* Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in order to interpret qualitative data accurately. Detailed field notes of the environment at Span, Inc. were consistently completed, as well as prior and subsequent to each interview. Field notes were formatted similarly by first recording subjective observations, followed by objective observations. A total of ten individuals who were members of Span Inc., in Boston, MA initially consented to interviews. Yet, at the time of the last interview, the final participant refused to have his interview audio recorded; therefore reliance on accurate and detailed notes was required.

The study was guided by the phenomenological approach. The participants' complex experiences which were brought forth during interviews were simplified during coding, to enable the results to be organized into themes and communicated effectively with others (Bentz and Shapio, 1998; Padgett, 2004; Padgett, 1998). Data analysis was guided by narrative themes which were evident throughout each of the nine transcripts, notes, and field notes. Coding included multiple analyses of each transcript to identify themes and comparison of transcripts.

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RESULTS

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Demographics

Participants' ages varied from twenty-five to fifty-eight. Locations in which the men were incarcerated included two Northeastern states and one Southwestern state. Levels of incarceration also were quite varied, including, county, state, and federal prisons. The length of participants' prison sentences dramatically varied from two months to twenty-two years. Seven of the participants were convicted of drug-related offenses and three of the participants were convicted of violent offenses. Participants also indicated varied lengths in which they had been released into their communities from prison. These lengths range from two months to eighteen years.

Needs in Prison

Each of the ex-prisoners identified needs which had been met and/or unmet during the time they were incarcerated. Each of the reported needs were mentioned numerous times throughout the narrative analysis of the ten interviews.

Met Needs

Three out of the ten ex-inmates believed that their needs had been adequately addressed during the time they spent incarcerated.

The needs that were most frequently reported to have been met were: programming as comfort, having routine/structure, having "something to do", positive influence from professionals, and talking about their emotions. Yet the foremost need that was described was programming as a means of "something to do.'"

> "I would mop the floors, clean the offices, do the garbage, do the laundry, stuff like that. Which helped because it passed time."- Nick

Many of the other needs that were met were due to the ex-prisoners "helping themselves". The majority of the participants reported that they took initiative to meet their own needs during their incarceration. The participants explained that this was accomplished by teaching themselves, building their own support systems, protecting themselves, and running their own programs.

> "Ya, what happened was instead of them helping me, I helped myself."- Havier

> "I went to the library a lot and read. I actually taught myself some of the math stuff. I took out some math books and just kinda got busy on my own."- Matthew

Notably, the three participants who reported that their needs were met in prison all had been convicted of drug and/or alcohol related crimes. The participants' needs were met due to the available drug and alcohol programs which are made accessible only by the prisoner's choice to attend. Yet, these specialized programs are not always accessible to all inmates who report having substance abuse issues.

Unmet Needs
Seven of the ten participants reported that their needs were inadequately addressed by programming and services during their incarceration. Participants reported numerous barriers to getting their needs met including: not being given the tools to succeed, impersonalized programming, program criteria as a barrier for participation, the lack of programs, and programs being imposed upon them. Many of the participants reported that these unmet needs were due to the unprofessional conduct of authoritative figures and professionals alike. Participants also reported their own internal obstacles to getting their needs met in prison which included: resistance to structure, participating due to fear of showing emotion and furthermore being labeled, feeling a lack of support, and lack of social skills. Participants frequently reported that the misconduct of correctional and professional personnel was a barrier to using time in prison programming constructively. These types of misconducts included labeling and categorizing the inmates. For example:

[On feeling labeled by a psychiatrist.]

> "Ya, I felt like that was their opinion. And that was their opinion coming from officers, the officers would tell them what was going on. And they wouldn't spend the time to evaluate me and talk to me about a lot of things."- Glen

Many participants also reported that their needs were not adequately met because others determined what their needs were without seeking feedback from the inmates themselves.

[On personal mental health issues.]

> "All they wanted to do is heavily medicate me and throw a label on me. You know, 'Anti-social personality disorder.'"- Alan

Programming/Services and Adjustment in Prison
Programming in prison was noted by participants to help them adjust to being separated from the community. The most common description of how programming helped participants adjust to prison life was that programming provided structure and as a means to '"pass time". A common theme in participants' description of programming was the reciprocity between inmates and programs. Various participants discussed taking away from programming only what they put into it.

[On skills learned through programming.]

> "I learned how to turn my survival skills into coping skills." –Ed

Programming/ Services and Re-entry
Although many individuals expressed that their needs were not met in prison, they did, nevertheless, discuss programming aiding in re-entry to the community. It is notable that various study participants described that creating routines while incarcerated assisted them in their adjustment to the community. Several participants expressed that they would have been more successful in re-entry if they had acquired basic education or vocational education during their incarceration.

> "If there was more programming. More educational type programming, that way they could cope with coming out."- Sylvester

Motivation
This current study contradicts previous literature by putting forward evidence that some prisoners can be extremely motivated individuals. Particular areas in which the participants described being motivated include: getting out of prison, staying out of prison, learning new skills, receiving a quality education,

and putting in time and work in programming. Participants believed that their motivation in these areas ultimately contributed to a better quality of life in and out of prison.

> "*I'm just grateful they had something for me to do. I didn't sit around talking about 'poor me', I put myself in here, I'm getting myself out.*" - Paulo

Not only did the participants demonstrate a high level of motivation while incarcerated, they continued to be motivated post-release. After release, participants reported having gained meaningful and competitive employment, completing vocational course-work, strengthening familial relationships, and continuing to attend constructive programming in the community.

Discussion
The purpose of this study was to gather information about correctional programming from male ex-prisoners who were involved in community re-entry services at Span Inc. in Boston, MA. It is hoped that this research will aid in understanding the following: 1)what prison programming was offered and utilized, 2) if this programming addressed the prisoner's perceived needs, and 3) if this programming had perceived positive effects on adaptation in the hostile environment of prison, as well as successful re-entry into the community.

Participants included in this research were forthright in discussing the oppression, deprivation, and unique challenges set-forth during their incarcerations. Study participants were able to directly indicate during the interviews what their needs were, if their needs had been met or unmet, and continued by addressing how they believe their needs could have been satisfied. The findings of this research indicate that the prison environment and programming institutionalizes individuals rather than seeks to engage prisoners in identifying their own needs.

Prisoners are not given the opportunity to identify their own needs as well as not given the attention required to locate appropriate resources. Many of the ex-prisoners had been harshly and inaccurately categorized by diagnoses, sexual orientations, and behaviors or infractions. The participants reported that this is problematic due to the implication that not only are the prisoner's proper needs not being addressed, but also unrelated and/or non-existent needs are being treated which takes time and funds away from appropriate interventions. Factors that contribute to the fulfillment of needs experienced by the study participants included smaller populations, personalized care, and acquiring trust from officials. Yet, this research suggests that such opportunities are not evident in traditional prisons. The participants of this research indicated that the number

one reason for entering into prison programming was to "pass time", yet, many skills, values, and lessons were acquired during their time in programming. Participants reported that these skills, values, and lessons aided each participant in positively coping with their environment. Even if the participant did not obtain the concrete information from programming/services, each participant was still able to list at least one thing that was learned, or that they learned about themselves.

Also worthy of attention was the blatant invasion of confidentiality which was noted by many of the individuals. Participants reported not being able to adequately adjust emotionally to their environment due to feeling unsafe and feeling unable to express their emotions. One participant described his counseling intake as taking place in the "mess hall" alongside twenty other men. Such a violation of autonomy rendered the participant to be much lower functioning in his environment because he was not given an opportunity to fully disclose issues to the counselor.

Several participants reported that re-entering their communities was difficult. A few participants reported that their discharge planning was inadequate and suitable resources had remained unresolved at the time of release from prison. Yet, many of the participants were also able to directly identify skills, lessons, or values they acquired from programming/services and then apply them in re-entering their community.

This current study puts forth evidence that prisoners may be more motivated than is generally thought. Understanding that these individuals have the competence to be so highly motivated, in a less than optimal environment, speaks volumes as to the potential, resiliency, and strengths of these participants.

These topics of research should be approached with a strengths-based perspective, in order to address the institutionalizing, or "prisonizing", behaviors which are apparent throughout this data. This research indicates that prisoners may have an untapped potential for motivation, and that they also have a myriad of inherit strengths. In order to address prisoners' and ex-prisoners' needs, individuals should be considered unique and be given the dignity to identify their own problems. Also, each individual's strengths should be assessed in order for them to be able to capitalize on their strengths in the available programs. Another aspect in assessing needs is for the assessment to be carried out in a manner which respects autonomy of the individual. This will ultimately enable them to find a level of mastery over their environment, and, therefore, cope with the harsh reality of the prison environment and re-entry more effectively.

Perceived limitations of this study include the small sample size, and the narrow focus of location. These hinder the capacity to generalize results to the inmate population in sum. Yet, these findings remain helpful to program creators and advocacy workers in constructing more effective programs and services and, furthermore, gaining an understanding of unique needs in which men experience within prison in this locale. Another limitation of this study is the all-male focus. Men and women put forth very different and complex needs, yet perhaps some of the general data may still apply to their unique programming and services.

This research can be of use by giving the ex-prisoners an opportunity to be advocates for other prisoners. Participants do this by giving first-hand data on what they perceive are useful elements of prison programming to better inform program creators as well as inform the public of their needs and how to better address them.

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