Behind Barred Doors

From the moment of its birth, the United States became rooted in the idea of democracy. Within this democracy comes the idealization of the concepts of equality and justice. Governing bodies come together to create and implement laws in order to uphold these important aspects of containing a civil society. Those who are found guilty of breaking these laws are usually sent to prison as a result, representing the effort put forth within this system to enhance society and those who inhabit it. In places outside the United States, this notion of justice and the setup of prisons is quite similar, but the effects of the imprisonment on the individual is more clearly shown in these countries, this being how prisons can have the effect of prohibiting its inmates to properly reintegrate into society and improve their past, unlawful ways. In relation to this topic, the question of whether prisons serve the purpose of truly rehabilitating or severely punishing its inmates arises and becomes a primary concern.

Within prisons similar to those in the United States, it has been found that there are a numerous amount of abuses of power and treatment that takes places, and leads to further trauma and setbacks instead of rehabilitation within its prisoners. Professor and doctor Tamara Walsh of the University of Queensland reflects on the reports of ex-prisoners and prisoner service providers in order to analyze the effectiveness of the policy and practice of the prison’s rehabilitation system. It is then concluded that these prison systems do not fulfill its original purpose of being a place of correction, or successfully reintegrating prisoner’s back into society. This is due to some of the abuses mentioned before, both mental and physical, including how “corrections officers ‘play mind games all the time’, swear, ‘mouth off to girls’, and even rip up confidential letters of complaint against them. Strip searches are [also] used widely, if not excessively” (Walsh 121). In relation to the prison social environment in Queensland, Australia’s
prisons, one service provider poses the question, “Prisoners are often being brutalized, sexually and emotionally abused. When this occurs, how can we expect these people to return to the community restored, human and whole people?” (Walsh 121). This not only implies the dehumanizing nature of prisons, but also its negative long-term effects in which instead of having the impact of teaching prisoners a lesson about the consequences of their actions, prisoners become even more likely to return to bad habits due to the manipulation tactics used by the staff, and the poor oversight of prisons. I have first handedly witnessed the impacts in behavior that these experiences have on its members, in which my father was in and out of prison when I was a child. As I have grown up, I have noticed my father’s detachment and awkwardness in social situations, his uneasiness to comply with authority figures due to a newfound distrust in the law and its officers, and being increasingly more confrontational, in which his impulsive desire was to resort to aggression and violence when only even barely threatened by a group of individuals. These unsettling attributes and new behaviors can be assumed to be attributed to the time my father spent in prison, and sadly enough, this will become a long-term defect. Since prisoners are out of touch with the social interactions and norms of society, and are not supported to engage in activities or make decisions that work in their best self-interest, they need to be reintroduced to these elements because some seem to be even worse off than they were before prison. Additionally, former vice-chair of the Group for the Advisement for Doctoral Educational and current board member at the Society for Social Work Research Laura Abrams, along with assistant professor Charles B. Lea III, study the effects of correctional education and the barrier to employment for formerly incarcerated men in the United States, specifically those of color. Furthermore, it is concluded that previously incarcerated individuals struggle more with gaining employment and are at an increased risk for
recidivism, in which it was found that “about two thirds to three quarters of released inmates will be arrested within 5 years of release” (668). Both of these examples represent how prisoners are being denied basic rights to life like food and shelter, by failing to provide a means of achieving these necessities, after having already been subjugated to the abuses of prison life, and not efficiently breaking the cycle of crime.

Although it seems that prisons may fail to properly rehabilitate individuals, there are resources available within them to improve and prevent these setbacks from occurring. This is most prominently seen within the specific programs created in prisons to discourage unlawful behavior. In the previous article “Becoming Employable: An Ethnographic Study of Life Skills Courses in a Men’s Jail,” Abrams and Lea III remark that, “Jail and prison-based educational and vocational programs are geared to provide incarcerated individuals with skills that can help them to become more employable … Researchers and policy makers have identified these programs as an efficient way to reduce violence within facilities and also to reduce recidivism” (668).

Similarly, in the article “The ‘Watchful Eye of God’: The Role of Religion in the Rehabilitation and Reentry of Repentant Jewish Prisoners,” authors Michal Morag and Elly Teman, researchers and writers associated with the Ruppin Academic Center, conducted interviews of 30 prisoners released after three months to five years in order to learn the positive effects of the Torah Rehabilitation Program (TRP)- a religious program implemented in the prison system in Israel. These ex-convicts reported that they “believed that the fact they had been caught and sentenced happened for a specific reason- so that they could find religion between prison walls [and that] ‘it’s all for the best’” (2110). This displays how these prisoners have gained a more positive outlook on their lives and experiences within the world around them due to the implementation of the TRP program. Along with the coordination of this program, the creation of a hostel also
aided previous inmates in which Morag and Teman describe it as a “structured environment [that] continued to provide an atmosphere closer to the religious ward in prison, with a measure of enforcement of the religious rules” (2120). This allowed individuals to live there before fully returning to society, therefore, working to slowly adjust lifestyles so that they more positively contribute to society and refrain from committing crimes again. This effort towards reintegrating prisoners within society represents some of the positive effects properly run prion facilities are and can be, and this idea is heavily associated with and represents the idea of finding and leading a meaningful life. According to well-known psychiatrist and neurologist Viktor Frankl, “having purpose and meaning in life increases overall well-being and life satisfaction, improves mental and physical health, enhances resiliency, enhances self-esteem, and decreases the chance of depression” (qtd. in Smith 3). This relates to the previous research study mentioned because these are almost all the same aspects that was measured to show the success of the TRP program within ex-convicts. This included spiritual, behavioral, and psychological improvement, all of which shows that when the proper steps are taken and effort is put forth to improve these facilities, prisons can most certainly provide the rehabilitation needed for troubled individuals.

The information given so far seems to support opposite sides of the answer to the question asked about if prison’s truly do correct and rehabilitate its members, or do they merely punish them and prevent their ability to comfortably and appropriately exist once again in society. The research study conducted by Abrams and Lea III about the ability to find employment after incarceration, provides an interesting effect of the prison system on the lives of people after serving time, which is low job satisfaction and inadequate economic support for ex-prisoners. Despite this representing a damaging impact of prisons, the study was only focused on
colored men, excluding white men and all women, which does not accurately represent the entire population. The research done should have extended to all people who are imprisoned, showing the differences and similarities of the impacts of prisons and its programs between different genders and ethnic groups to give a less bias and stronger argument. If this research was fully complete, then there would have been more attention brought to additional underlying corruption within prisons. **For example, the number of black prisoners is “about 5.6 times that of the white adult incarceration rate.”** This fact comes along with the observation of the increasingly worse difference in the arrests, sentencing, time served, and treatment of black prisoners in comparison to white prisoners, according to Allen J. Beck, Principal Deputy Director at the Bureau of Justice Statistics, and Alfred Blumstein, an American scientist, in a paper about racial disproportionality in U.S. State prisons (854). These misfortunate, common attributes of prisons help to display how detrimental the entire issue and controversy of prisons is, and how widespread the effects of and activity within prisons could go for people who experience time behind barred doors.

Overall, the research on different prisons, programs, and theories contributes and alludes to a larger on-going conversation, which is the role of the government in managing and controlling all of these institutions. Much blame or appraisal is placed on the individual prison facilities and its workers, yet the government is the leading factor behind how these places are run. For example, in “Is Corrections Correcting? An Examination of Prisoner Rehabilitation Policy and Practice in Queensland,” Walsh’s research suggests that the reason as to why ex-prisoners are unable to effectively thrive in society after being in prison is because there is no step in between prison life and the real world. Instead, they are left unprepared, placed in what essentially seems like unfamiliar territory. This shows that the lack of aftercare services can be
attributed to high recidivism rates, homelessness, and more. This all leads back to the government in which it is them that holds the power to create and support these programs and opportunities that would influence the lives of the governed, as well as their own lives, and not just those who are imprisoned, all of which suggests that there is a larger, even global, social issue at hand. A major reason as to why more involvement and responsibility should be taken by the government, is because of the outstanding rate of incarceration of individuals in the United States compared with that of countries across the world. In a Washington Post article that is concerned about this research fact and cites Hillary Clinton as a source, brings to light that the United States has “the highest prison population rate in the world, at 716 per 100,000 people” (Lee). This most accurately represents that if prisons truly have the extensive, negative effects on prisoners as remarked previously, doing more harm than good, than the government should be motivated to take action to improve prison conditions, considering the amount of lives that are or would be damaged. The controversy of whether imprisonment serves as punishment or rehabilitation for inmates, depicts an area of shaded gray within our continually evolving society. It also illustrates that this topic is so broad and diverse in which it can not only be considered a social issue, but also a human right one as well, in which the government should take initiative in more efficiently regulating the prison system, and possibly the criminal justice system in general as well.
Works Cited


