

**Higher Education Programs for Women in Prison Help Lower Recidivism Rates**

**Following the American Psychological Association's Guidelines**

by

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## Abstract

**Background:** For years, there has been a battle between letting prisoners serve out their sentences without any form of education because education is seen as a luxury. There has been an opportunity to allow female prisoners higher education programs to assist them in obtaining degrees. Once released, they can function globally, and recidivism rates amongst women will decrease.

**Objective:** This study demonstrates how higher education programs can help women work toward their degrees and, once released, function in the world by obtaining employment, steady shelter, and revenue. Education programs allow recidivism rates amongst ex-con women to decrease because of their education while in prison.

**Design and Method:** The research method is based on current literature based on the impacts of higher education programs for women in prison. This literature can demonstrate women's journey of obtaining their degrees while imprisoned, and the success of their education will help them after their release. The research question was: *How can higher education programs affect the recidivism rates once these women are released from prison?*

**Results:** There is no detailed data to prove that college-level education is the primary factor in lowering recidivism rates. However, there is a correlation seen that college-level courses offered to incarcerated women is a factor in assisting in reducing recidivism rates. Reading the stories of the women who participate and their changes to their lives is a testimony to prove the effectiveness.

**Conclusion:** This study concludes that prisons should offer higher education programs to women in prison to lower recidivism rates.

**Keywords:** Educational programs, women in prison, recidivism rates, financial literacy, higher education, confidence

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

When a person commits a crime, the justice system provides them a trial and determines if they are guilty or innocent. If found guilty, they are then sentenced to a certain number of years in jail or prison. Our criminal legal system's basis is to bring people who chose to break laws to justice and pay their dues to society behind bars. "The United States currently incarcerates 698 per 100,000 people, nearly one of our every 100 people in the United States are in jail or prison, out of that 219,000 women are incarcerated" (Couloute, 2018).

What happens to these women after being sent to jail or prison? While incarcerated, what do the jails or prison teach and provide the women so once they are released back into society, they do not have to re-offend and return to incarceration? Once offenders are released, what happens to them or the community in which they live?

There are significant disparities in employment, education, financial, mental health, drug abuse, and much more when it comes to incarcerated women and released from prison or jail. Recidivism rates for women in the United States are, "Recent cross-state estimates of recidivism suggest that 58% of incarcerated women are rearrested, 38% are reconvicted, and 30% are returned to prison in the three years following release from prison" (Cobbina, DeJong & Huebner, 2009, p. 227). What causes these high recidivism rates? We understand that higher-educational and vocational programs for prisoners can lead to higher success rates in finding employment and financial stability as well as a lower chance of recidivism. If this is the case, why should incarcerated people not be granted the right to be educated while serving their time and re-paying their 'debts' to society? In the end, our primary goal should be to lower crime rates

and our populations in prison and jail. What better way to do it than by offering these higher-educational programs for inmates?

All inmates are at a disadvantage; however, female inmates suffer much more than their male counterparts. "80% of women in jails are mothers, and most of them are primary caretakers of their children. Thus children are particularly susceptible to the domino effect of burdens placed on incarcerated women" (Cobbina, DeJong & Huebner, 2009, p. 227).

Between being a woman in a society that already has its disparities, imagine being an incarcerated female. Many are uneducated; come from turbulent households and childhoods. Once they are sentenced to prison, must leave their families and children, face abuse in some prisons, and sub-par conditions. Many female inmates fall between the cracks. Once they are released, many women return to the same life, which sent them to jail the first time around.

Kajstura states,

Almost 2 million women and girls are released from prisons and jails every year, but few post-release programs are available to them- partly because so many women are confined to jails, which are not meant to be used for long-term incarceration. It is perhaps then no surprise that formerly incarcerated women are also more likely to be homeless than incarcerated men, making reentry and compliance with probation or parole even more difficult (2019, p. 1).

However, studies show the women who participate in these higher-educational programs are less likely to return to prison and obtain employment and are financially stable. Why would we not want to support these programs that help people who are considered 'dangerous to society' a second chance to redeem themselves and not re-offend? A family member of mine who committed a crime and thought they were irredeemable; however, they were offered a higher-educational program and completed it successfully. Upon their release, they obtained a job, were able to help individuals who were once in their position. They never re-offended again and maintained a healthy lifestyle without the thought of having to go back to the lifestyle that put

them in prison in the first place. If we can showcase more stories that this one and show the benefits of higher educational programs in prisons to help lower recidivism rates for women, why not provide the opportunity?

The aim of this study is to answer the following research question:

**RQ1:** *Why do women prisoners attend college educational programs?*

**RQ2:** *Why women prisoners do not attend educational programs?*

**RQ3:** *What are inmate transformation from college educational programs?*

### ***Definitions***

***Recidivism:*** *the tendency of a convicted criminal to reoffend*

***Incarcerated:*** *imprison or confine.*

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

Society views prison as a way for criminals to pay the debts of their crimes back to society. We expect prisoners to serve their full sentences in a wretched place that most, if not all, people do not want to end up. However, once prisoners are released, they are expected to re-intergrade into the real world, although they are offered limited resources to ease this new chapter. Most prisoners prior to coming to prison are already lack economic wealth, job opportunities, and proper education. When we introduce prisoners back to society, we expect them to find a job, be financially stable, and not to return to jail. Education is one way to help prisoners obtain an education to help better their chances upon release.

“Women represent one of the fastest growing segments of the U.S. prison population” (Rose & Rose, 2014, p. 21). Being the fastest growing population in the U.S. prisons, they also “represent a segment of the correctional population that has been historically underserved” (Rose & Rose, 2014, p. 21). We need to offer these women opportunities to better themselves, and this starts with widespread higher education programs being offered to them while incarcerated.

#### **Women Prisoners Attend College Educational Programs**

There is no secret that women who enroll in and attend college educational programs while prisoners are less likely to re-offend. "It is true that many studies characteristically show a reduced likelihood of recidivism among prisoners who participate in educational programs compared to prisoners who do not participate" (Rose, 2004, p. 79). However, for women, “female prisoners have been consistently offered fewer educational programs from which to choose and these tend to be of lesser quality than those offered to male prisoners” (Rose & Rose, 2014, p. 21). In 1994 funding for higher-educational programs dwindled as it was decided that

incarcerated people could not receive Pell Grants. “Feminist scholars have explained this neglect by suggesting that in the United States, female convicts are often considered ‘double deviants,’ because they violate gender expectations as well as the law. State correctional departments have explained this lack of programming by arguing that the small number of female prisoners makes offering any program expensive” (Rose & Rose, 2014, p. 21).

"Michelle Jones wrote a 2015 Perspectives article describing the work of the Indiana Women's Prison History Project. Filtering their requests through undergraduate and graduate students on the outside, the incarcerated women accessed sources on the outside; the incarcerated women accessed sources from the Indianapolis Public Library and the Indiana State Archives to produce original scholarship" (Agarwal, 2018, p. 1). Michelle Jones was released from prison in 2018 and, at the time, was obtaining a Ph.D. in New York University in American studies. In regards to Hudson Link, "In 16 years, over 330 men and women have studied in the program, and over 50 have worked in social services once in the community- with no recidivism" (Schenck & Sokoloff, 2017, p. 1). These statistics are major in how we look at these higher-educational programs for women prisoners because it shows their dedication to bettering themselves once released from prison. "The first women's prison to have an extensive and long-term program, Bedford Hills Correctional Facility (BHCF), supported by Marymount Manhattan College, as of 2011 BHCF graduated 142 students- 44 Bachelors and 98 Associates degrees. Women obtaining these degrees are setting themselves up to go further. When they do re-enter their communities, they can find employment, steady flow of income, housing, and, most importantly, not to re-offend and be sent back to prison.

According to Tewksbury and Stengel found that “50% of those prisoners participating in college-level programming did so in order to feel better about their chances and to improve self-

esteem. Another 29% participated in order to obtain employment after their release from prison” (Tewksbury & Stengel, 2006). According to Rose and Rose (2014), women’s participation in college-level programs not only depended on anxieties of visitation from children but also “enrolled in life skills/community adjustment programs (those who did were 50.4% more likely to participate).”

### **Impact on Women Prisoners Not in College Educational Programs**

College programs promote positive recidivism rates. It is important to discuss the impact of women who do not participate in college programs and what it means for their recidivism likeliness. Women are often overlooked in the prison system. "In prison, women are more likely raped and abused by correctional staff; women try to 'mother from the inside' with inadequate services to do so" (Schenck & Sokoloff, 2017, p. 1). Incarcerated women face a gap in the prison system. Some incarcerated women are mothers with children under one-year-old. They are able to keep their child with them in prison. Separation often leads the women not to pursue an education because of the worry of what is going on with their families on the outside.

Once out of prison, women face various obstacles such as lack of childcare or regaining custody of children, employment, homelessness, drug, and physical abuse. "Considering the impact of a prison record on employment options for women returning to the community and found that formerly incarcerated women face numerous mental, financial, and physical barriers in seeking and retaining employment more than women never incarcerated" (Schenck & Sokoloff, 2017, p. 1). Knowing these disparities, why do women not participate in these worthwhile programs?

The Pell Grants were eliminated by then-President Bill Clinton in 1994 made the monetary resources for women to take these programs non-existent. However, that was not the



only reason for the lack of participation. Besides, "The healthcare services provided in women's prisons, for instance, have been sub-par in that they do not sufficiently provide women inmates with skilled doctors who can provide adequate medical services" (*Rose, 2004, p. 85*). Lastly, the differences between the programs offered for women than for men. Many women entered prison uneducated; therefore, "Explanations for these low priorities range from such suggestions as women prisoners being incapable of completing educational programming in comparison to male prisoners, and to more "political correct" explanations suggesting that budgetary concerns do not allow such inequalities to be addressed" (*Rose, 2004, p. 86*). In addition, females may have some apprehension about participation because of, "anxieties surrounding their children" (*Rose & Rose, 2014*). Due to the lack of women prisons, women are sent further away from their families, especially children, which causes anxiety amongst incarcerated women.

### **Inmate Transformations from College Educational Programs**

Due to these college programs, incarcerated women can re-invent and transform themselves into the people they want to be after prison while still in prison. The Hudson Link program "consists of formerly incarcerated men and women" (*Agarwal, 2018, p.1*). As well as mentioned earlier Michelle Jones, formerly incarcerated once released, obtained her, Ph.D. from NYU. The instructors who give much praise to their imprisoned students. Stephanie Rolph teaches history at the Central Mississippi Correctional Facility for women said, "The students are some of the best I've ever had" (*Agarwal, 2018, p. 1*). Jane Maher, who teaches academic writing at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, recounts her struggle not with teaching her students but adjusting her style to fit the incarcerated women. Once, she picked subjects that adhered to prison standards and policy but also related to the women. They took to the literature and began to develop their writing as college students writing more academically.

"Recently, I received an e-mail with an attachment from a former Bedford inmate who had earned her bachelor's degree. She asked me to review a memo she had written for her supervisors at a foundation that serves ex-offenders. "I used to hate your comments and corrections on my drafts, she wrote, but now I'm glad you were so tough." (Maher, 2015, p. 81). Maher said she had to make minor adjustments; she said the memo was "clear and articulate and convincing." She says it was so well-written even better than her students on the outside could have produced. This type of story is essential to show the success of female ex-offenders. This story is just one testament to show the growth these programs help these women go through. They do not have to go back to their old lives; if women are encouraged to participate, much good can be done.

## **Conclusion**

The contributions to literature in this field shows the importance and success of these higher-educational programs for female inmates. To obtain more funding for these programs, we must promote and bring awareness to the successes of these women. Also, showing the women's interest in wanting to obtain their degrees and re-entering society with an advantage: an education. We need to keep up with inmates who have completed these programs and see what they are doing now after their release from prison. As well as their successes with their families, especially being present mothers and be able to provide for their children. "Leaving prison with a college education, or even experience in college classes, can help prisoners find employment, avoid recidivating and 'make it' on the outside" (Rose & Rose, 2014, p. 37).

Also, the encouragement of female inmates who are choosing not to participate in these programs is essential. Female inmates should know that they can do it as well; all they have to do is try. We are females so afraid to apply for these programs they can change their lives? We need

to visit other factors that can affect the women in their studies and support them as instructors and let them have the support of their families. The vast gap between male and female inmates should be more pronounced, so we can improve these systems in which they have to live.

Granted, I understand they did commit a crime and should be punished for their offenses, but for the women who want to learn and grow from their mistakes, why should an unjust system penalize them?

## Chapter 3

### Methods

A critical review and analysis of the literature examine the different outcomes of recidivism rates and transformations in women who attend and participate fully in higher-educational programs. The literature explores many socio aspects that assist in why certain women find themselves incarcerated and factors that lead them to want to participate in these programs—also exploring factors that deter incarcerated women from wanting to participate in these higher-educational programs. The literature details socio-economic, family history and background, geographic location, amount of education, or lack of education. The literature explains some factors as to why women find themselves incarcerated; the studies explore the reasons why women will not participate in education programs while in prison and their struggles once they are released. These are essential factors in determining why women do not participate. The articles explore when women are released from incarceration without some education or support groups leading to the women being re-admitted into incarceration. Lastly, the women who do participate in these higher-educational programs transcend into a new being like a transformation. Formerly incarcerated women who received their degrees explain how they have changed personally and as a member of their communities after the college programs.

I am researching to find literature that answers the following research questions:

**RQ 1:** *What is the impact of college education for women prisoners after their release?*

The strategy for answering my research question is a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research assisted me in my research because I found literature that “understands the social reality of individuals, groups, and cultures as its participants feel it or live it” (McLeod, 2019, p. 1). The literature helps me as the researcher to better understand the impacts of college

education for incarcerated women. What are the reasons women choosing to participate in these programs? What are the backgrounds and personal lives of the women who choose to participate in college programs, and most importantly, the outcomes of these women's lives after participating in college programs and what happens upon their release? My intended outcome is to find out and prove these college educational programs while in prison help incarcerated women, once released, reintegrate themselves back into their communities or different communities if they choose to do so. Also, I will find someone who has either taught or participated in college programs in prisons to get a first-hand account of the benefits in which they provide. These programs can help women climb out of their systematic and traumatic surroundings and find stability economically and professionally.

The qualitative approach I used to collect my data is by theme. My theme has helped me display my findings and research because of the type of research question I am trying to answer. My reoccurring theme is that college education programs benefit incarcerated women who will in reintegrate into society. The research will help me better understand how these higher-educational programs are positive and beneficial. In order to find literature that would best suit my research question, I used the Purchase Library database. The databases I used are ProQuest Research Library, Academic Search Complete, and EBSCO Host. Keywords I used for *education for women prisoners, educational programs for women in prison, women in prison, educational programs for prisoners*. For all these keyword searches, over 1,000 searches resulted—however, the more specific with my keywords, the more literature I found. Keywords like “educational programs for women in prison” helped guide me to answer my research question in its entirety.

I do have a personal bias regarding this topic and research. One of my family members was formerly incarcerated and received not only their Associates and Bachelors, but the prison went as far as to offer a Master's program. My family member decided to take the chance because they did not like the path they were heading. After obtaining their degrees in prison, upon release, my family member was able to find employment quickly and never recidivated. This story only enhances my personal bias because I do believe higher-educational programs will benefit incarcerated females in the long run. However, I have found some articles that do not favor my personal bias, such as an opposition to not providing these educational programs to women prisoners. I have to put my own opinions to the side to understand the other side's points truly. Funding is often cut short because some politicians and society feel that inmates should serve their time. They should not receive education because education is a luxury, and they do their time. Finding opposition was a little challenging but necessary in my quest to figure out why women prisoners will benefit higher-educational programs. Most articles gave a history lesson to the origins of prison education programs and their trials and tribulations that came along with it.

The limitations I have experienced in my research would be the time limit of the semester to complete my research paper. I only have about three months to do extensive research and write a thoughtful and insightful research paper. Besides the time limit, I work full-time, and I would love to visit a women's prison that does offer these programs and ask women who participate questions about their experiences. Next, I do not know a woman at this time who is currently incarcerated and enrolled in a higher-educational program who can give me a first-hand account of their experiences with these programs. Now, we are experiencing a dangerous pandemic called COVID-19, which has infested and drastically changed many lives. Prisons are

currently experiencing a high rate of infections, which means no one can come in for visits. Once I start my extensive research, I may not have the opportunity to enter the prison because of the risk that entails with my visit.

## Chapter 4

### Results

Studies prove the effectiveness of these college educational programs to help incarcerated women stray away from the path of recidivism. Showing the results of these studies can help bring more programs to the prisons and the awareness to women in the prison the benefits from participating in them.

#### ***RQ1: Why do women prisoners attend college educational programs?***

According to Habitat for Humanity, there are ten benefits to obtaining an education; "creating more employment opportunities, securing higher income, developing problem-solving skills, improving the economy, providing a prosperous and happy life, giving back to the community, creating modern society, bridging borders, creating equal opportunities, and introducing empowerment" (2020, p.1). All these reasons resonate with many women prisoners who choose to pursue their education in prison. Education provides them with opportunities that, before their bid, they were not able to have or even think they deserved. Women who are sentenced to prison are primary caregivers. Once they are released, there are more employment options, legal options to higher income, and boosting their self-esteem and image of themselves. These factors are crucial to women wanting to pursue their education while being incarcerated because life on the outside may not present an educational opportunity. Although they are in unfortunate circumstances, they understand that education is one of the most important ways to maintain their freedom.

Also, women prisoners are disproportionately offered lesser education than male prisoners. "Female prisoners have been consistently offered fewer educational programs from which to choose, and these tend to of lesser quality than those offered to male prisoners" (Rose



& Rose, 2014, p.30). We need to understand that women in the outside world are not treated well and given opportunities like men are. We have to bring that modern thinking back to our women's prisons because they are the fastest-growing population of a particular demographic of people in our prison system. We want to encourage women to continue to enroll in college courses during their sentences. We need to advocate for educational reform in prison. Education at every level makes a difference for people when they come home- from adult primary education to high school degrees to vocational training. Moreover, there is still a need to bring women opportunities in prison to the point that is equal to that for incarcerated men.

**RQ2: *Why women prisoners do not attend educational programs?***

We know the benefits of education and what it can provide for incarcerated women—the percentage of women who decide not to enroll in college courses while imprisoned. Firstly, there are many issues that women correctional facilities deal with, like separation from immediate families, most likely their children, rape, and abuse within the prison. These women have a mental illness, and history of abuse and rape, sub-par living and eating conditions. These types of environments can discourage women because of their environment around them. Most already understand they are in jail, but this does not mean they have to endure these horrible things while incarcerated. "Considering the impact of a prison record on employment options for women returning to the community and found that formerly incarcerated women face numerous mental, financial, and physical barriers in seeking and retaining employment more than women never incarcerated" (Schenck & Sokoloff, 2017, p.46). Besides, offering college educational courses, proper mental health, trauma, and drug counseling should be enforced more in women's prisons.

These are essential human functions that, even in the outside world, are not always readily available, especially in communities that are predominately people of color. These

women grow up in a way too familiar cycle of poverty and abuse. Many are not taught or understand the importance of the opportunity of obtaining their education. If prisons are not stressing the benefits, why would these women care? "Our desires for a better way of life for ourselves and our children are parallel to all who have children and were never incarcerated; we have the same wants as everyone else, but we did not realize our potential. Society bombarded us with so many negative stereotypes about who we were: poor, lazy, criminals, good for nothing and dumb" (R.S., 2019, p. 1). Not only does their prison environment cause a pessimistic outlook, but their history before their incarceration also makes a big difference in their involvement in their self-progression. R.S. knew how people viewed them because of their background and now being looked at as a criminal. This mentality discourages the women from viewing themselves in higher positions, unlike the rest of society it may seem.

***RQ3: What are inmate transformation from college educational programs?***

The attendance in college education programs does not just support lower recidivism rates but also the self-image these women have. This self-confidence is super essential to uplift these women and make them believe in themselves and their capabilities. We want a world where crime is non-existent and people sentenced to do jail time to not return to the life of crime once released. We want to show these women there is much more in the world, and they have more to offer than what is on the surface. Secondly, if women who attend and participate in these college educational programs were celebrated and spoke about, more people would understand the importance of these programs' role to incarcerated women if we can change the narrative of encouraging women to be capable, intelligent, and hard-working. They can find the confidence in themselves to achieve what they thought was unattainable.

R.S. was incarcerated at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in Westchester, N.Y., before 1994. 1994 is when Pell Grants were being cut from prisons, which prevented the college courses from being offered in most prisons. She dived in and dedicated herself to her studies and figured out there was a life outside the one she only knew before prison. "I enrolled in five classes a week while doing my mandated prison programs. I was on fire for the knowledge I was gaining. I felt that this was the key that opened the locks that were created for me by a society that didn't want to see me prosper or grow. The chains were broken to my mind. I was smart and I was getting an education. I understood history, sciences and the structures that shaped our society, and I felt proud to be able to engage in conversations about politics, history and our world" (R.S., 2019, P.1). Just like children, we have to spark the curiosity in the women to want and yearn for the knowledge that did not think they could know. R.S. did not know her full potential and was now able to tap into it.

Another ex-inmate at Bedford Hills took an academic writing course, which earned her Bachelor's degree. She wanted her professor to review a memo about the foundation that serves ex-offenders. Her professor had e-mailed her back with barely any corrections on the paper, stating that the paper was "clear and articulate." These types of stories are essential to showcasing the effectiveness of offering incarcerated women college-level courses. We need to broadcast more success stories instead of spreading the negative views that are often said and thought about prisons and the people who inhabit them. Ways we can decrease recidivism rates, there needs to be a re-evaluation of the reforming women's prisons suitable for women to spend their sentences being resourceful and not wasting it to return.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to show what factors affect women's participation in college-level courses while incarcerated and the transformations that can happen when they choose to be involved. There is often a stigma surrounding incarcerated women, and the conditions of the prisons they inhabit do not help their situations. While education is a luxury, it is also a necessity, especially in today's world. In the outside world, we stress to people the importance of going to school and getting our degrees. It is essential to obtain a decent job; we need some degree to do entry-level jobs. We expect ex-offenders who once released from prison to abstain from a life of crime and abide by the rules like most.

Why is education for imprisoned women such a taboo subject? For the women to not recidivate, they need to be provided with the proper skills and knowledge to assimilate a better life for themselves and the families they leave behind when sent to prison. Education leads to academic knowledge, problem-solving skills, coping with past traumas, and moving on in life without that burden of their past life on their heels. However, sometimes this expectation can be crippling and selfish. It is like handing someone aspiring to be a doctor scrubs and performing surgery when they have not even attended medical school yet. The proper tools must be provided to these women to sustain healthy and prosperous lives once they leave prison. Cutting budgets for these courses is honestly a disgrace and disfavor to the women who want to pursue an education.

We find that when these women participate in college courses, many do not return to prison and can obtain job employment way beyond what they thought they could achieve. If most of these statistics are proven, why are they not implemented more of these worth-while

programs? We also see that the women who do not take advantage of these programs are stereotyped as lazy and uninterested in bettering themselves. However, that is an unfair assumption because we do not know what they struggle with internally or what they have going on at home, which prevents them from wanting to participate. Instead of discouraging, there needs to be uplifting and positivity to be spread to help the women who are not as quick to volunteer themselves in participation. There needs to be a push and encouragement from the public and prison officials to help remove those insecurities and fears associated with education.

Even people who attend school on the outside have apprehensions or feelings of intimidation and not being good enough to start or finish their education, especially when course loads become larger and subjects become more complex. This mentality is not frowned upon, so there should not be that cast of doubt on incarcerated women. Despite their circumstances, it is admirable to have still the motivation to want better themselves.

Future researcher may consider investigating ~~into~~ the effectiveness of the prison educational programs. A suggestion might be to record the successes of women who complete each program after their release from prison. Conducting a study investigating the recidivism rate, and the reduction into crime may show that supporting prison education is vital for reform. Education improves individuals chances post-release, which improves social and economic outcomes for their communities, families, and themselves.

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