

## **Inmate Sincerity via Community Reentry**

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### **Abstract**

*While numerous states have programs within their prisons, community reentry-to-society is a topical area of focus. These programs require little operational funding but have a direct impact on rehabilitation of inmates. Reentry often involves outside volunteers who share invaluable lessons with inmates. With the use of precious correctional resources at issue perpetually, this study is important in examining the validity of a portion of the reentry application forms used in an Arkansas state reentry program. Findings should be of use to corrections officials, researchers and those with any interest in rehabilitation.*

**Keywords:** Inmates, reentry program, sincerity, males

### **Introduction**

The issue of inmates reentering communities is one that at minimum generates controversy (Jacobson 2005). In essence, some view programs which provide rehabilitation during incarceration as needed or essential to the outcome of prisoners who are to be released (Fehr, 2009), while others see such programs as either inappropriate or a waste of valuable resources (Wilson & Davis, 2006). Bouffard and Bergeron (2006) tell us that the potential effectiveness of well-coordinated reentry efforts linking institutional and community based case planning and programming, as applied to serious and violent offenders, is evident. Regardless of one's view, the reentry of former inmates into the community is a serious reality that we, the polity, must address. One key to addressing both of these important realities, is understanding programs that help prepare inmates for their return to society. By gaining this understanding, researchers, policymakers, criminal justice professionals, social workers and other helping professionals can work effectively in preparing inmates for the process of reentry.

One issue for those opposed to reentry is the sincerity of those who might enter such a program (Listwan, Cullen and Lattessa, 2006). The rationale for such trepidation obviously rests largely on whether such programs can actually be effective and who should handle the implementation of programs like reentry, as evidenced by the numerous types of programs to include *Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative* (SVORI) style programs (Bouffard & Bergeron, 2007; Seiter & Kadela, 2003). The cost to states to incarcerate inmates is increasing in expense. For many jurisdictions, this cost is a drain on valuable resources needed to handle other state matters, e.g. education (Petersilia, 2001). On the other hand, some states consider inmates as sources of labor to help support the state economy by producing products only available to state agencies. This is why the literature tells us that it is important to make the effort to find cost-effective reentry options which make appropriate preparation for reentry a priority (Fehr, 2009).

With respect to the implementation of reentry programs, there is currently much debate as to what "community reentry" really means in the context of an actual program (Rhine and Parks, 2006). To be clearer, some people consider reentry programs to be any type of information sharing, e.g. financial literacy, with inmates in the hope that the information will be absorbed by the inmate or parolee. Others, however, consider community reentry programs to be broader and more detailed in scope (Latessa, 2008). It is important to note that this work is done by volunteers who come into the prisons and by prison employees who do this work

within prisons. Even though appropriate funding could certainly be of great benefit to reentry work, low-cost reentry programs are still effective (Zundel, 2009). Obviously, it is necessary for an inmate to have been released if true evaluation of the effectiveness of the program would be measured by the successful reentry of the inmate into society and by his/her continued free status in society; i.e. without returning to prison.

Powerful bridges in the form of social capital resources for inmates can be formed through reentry programs to impact inmates' success. In addition, these bridges between the inmates and the resources such as former inmates who have successfully completed the program, prison officials who are involved in the program and businesses within the community who engage with the inmates enrolled in the program also influence the effectiveness of the reentry program. In order to assess and further legitimize such programs, it is necessary to understand more about the responses of those seeking admission to such programs. For almost any type of program in prison, some type of application process is involved. This means that an inmate makes the decision to start a process to be accepted in a program and that the application must be processed in a uniform manner. This fact is important for anyone to buy in to the program and to assign it validity in terms of its value, which is consistent with the assertion of Ritter (2006), that effective reentry efforts are better served with more substantive, than less substantive programming.

In terms of making the decision to actively participate in a prison program, applications are often considered unimportant or are considered prohibitively difficult to complete by inmates. Some inmates determine whether the application to prison programs simply has to do with the reputation of the program. If the program is considered either mediocre or possibly negative in terms of value, inmates may consider the effort to enter this program easy. The rationale for this easy determination is two-fold; first, because demand might not be high in terms of available spaces. Second, since the value is not considered "high," the anticipated energy expenditure to apply might be low. At the same time, if the program is considered to be "high," it stands to reason that an inmate will have to compete with more inmates in terms of spaces available. Additionally, the anticipated energy expenditure is probably going to be significantly more based on perceptions of scrutiny in the screening process and expectations of those selected for the program.

In essence, a perception of high rigor and value is important to the success of a prison program; not only for the inmate, but also for the prison administration in terms of use of precious resources. Hence, if community reentry programs are to be successful, it is imperative that they are valued not only by the inmates, but by also the prison administration. It is clear that if prison administration values a program, it may be somewhat willing to utilize resources, to provide official support, increase opportunities for participation and to further add to program validity.

## **Community Reentry in Arkansas**

At present, there are only three official community reentry-to-society programs within the state of Arkansas. These programs utilize an approved multi-part curriculum and are approved by wardens of those Arkansas Department of Correction (ADC) prison facilities. At present, reentry programs are only offered to male inmates within ADC. The three programs are currently held at the Pine Bluff Unit, the Wrightsville Unit and the Malvern Unit, the newest created program location. The Pine Bluff program, the oldest program, was originally established at the Varner Prison Unit before moving to Pine Bluff.

At the Pine Bluff Unit, a body of inmates known as the Inmate Leadership Council, actively markets and collects application from inmates interested in completing the reentry program. Inmates interested can essentially apply at any risk level. The inmate however, must meet two criteria. First, the inmate must have successfully remained out of trouble long-enough to be eligible to participate and not worry about being transferred during the reentry program because of disciplinary reasons. Second, the inmate must have at least

a five year projected release date which makes them close-enough to be considered near release pending any problems.

Reentry does not limit access to the program for specific types of inmates (e.g. those convicted of sex offenses). In fact, because the Pine Bluff Unit is largely comprised of serious and violent offenders, the majority of those who have completed the reentry program over the past few years are inmates convicted of serious and violent offenses. The participants within reentry at the Pine Bluff Unit come from three separate facilities housed on the same physical property.

## **The Application Form and Selection Process for Community Reentry in Arkansas**

Inmates interested in entering the reentry program complete a 9-page application which covers various aspects about the inmate, what they say they were convicted of and more about themselves to provide insight into their views on the world. The application was created by the Inmate Leadership Council and is a six part assessment tool with each part serving as a different type of questions. The application form uses 162 questions to assess various applicant responses. The first part/section of the application form is the most important of the entire form, in that it provides the needed basic information about the offender. The applicant first gives a brief summary of their educational history, time spent in the Pine Bluff facility and a description of their crime. The second part of the application is a personality test, which helps determine the current mental state regarding the prisoner's self-worth, social skills and level of accountability for their behavior. The third and fourth part of the application asks detailed questions regarding childhood and the emotional, physical and mental environment of the prisoner in the home and school environment. The next section asks the prisoner about his employment history. The purpose is to reveal any positive social responsibilities the prisoner may had and to better identify skills the prisoner has. The last part of the form asks the prisoner to divulge his substance use and abuse. The inmate must list what drugs he has used, the age and length of time of use and whether or not the prisoner has sold drugs.

A Board of Directors for reentry at Pine Bluff meets prior to the scheduling of a new class and reviews an average of 100 applications. Out of this 100, approximately 40 inmates are selected by the Board. These Board Members are volunteers who also provide instruction of the reentry material to those selected to participate. The president and vice-president of the Board are criminal justice professors at The University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR), the largest university criminal justice academic department within Arkansas. Once selected, the new class of inmates meets with all board members available to complete a night of orientation to provide an orientation of the program to the inmate class. The Inmate Leadership Council arranges for copies of the curriculum and technology needed to present material via a class coordinator; the coordinator is an ADC employee who volunteers his time to serve as liaison between the Inmate Leadership Council and the Pine Bluff Unit administrative staff. The Inmate Leadership Council serves as mentors for the new class and assists all presenters when they visit the Pine Bluff Unit in order to present. Additionally, students from UALR attend class sessions with professors from UALR in order to participate in the learning process and to share their own stories about the importance of reentry. At the end of each class, session, the Inmate Leadership Council provides a piece of paper to each class member with a question pertaining to the night's topic as homework to be provided during the next session. Inmates must fully complete the homework assignments in order to remain in the program; the mentors check the homework as the class progresses. The Inmate Leadership Council has voluntarily (i.e. without being solicited) provided the applications and homework documents, with names and inmate numbers redacted, to the Board in order to, as the Inmate Leadership Council stated, "*...help make the work of progress within Pine Bluff helpful to the outside world*" (Anonymous, 2008). At the end of the last class session, a separate night is arranged to have a formal graduation in which each class member,

presenter and other visitor who made a contribution is provided a certificate from the Inmate Leadership Council.

## **Method**

Permission was obtained to work directly with the Pine Bluff, Arkansas Prison Facility's community reentry program which houses those classified as serious and violent offenders; this prison is located in the southwestern United States. The prison compound technically houses three prison units; however, the inmates selected for this community reentry program all fit the criteria of being a serious and/or violent offender. One of these units is a standard non-medical, medium security prison unit. The second prison unit is a diagnostic unit, meaning that inmates are screened in this unit prior to a decision, and/or available space being made regarding placement in the appropriate prison unit. Last, the third unit is a jail. Again, all three units are within the same physical compound.

This study used the application form, with names and identifying information redacted, for the Pine Bluff facility reentry program. The decision of the selection of this unit to be studied was largely based on the fact that the Pine Bluff program has existed for a considerably longer period of time than the other two official Arkansas Department of Correction programs held at the Wrightsville and Malvern facilities. The Pine Bluff program, therefore, has the most validity and reliability in the application form content and the uniformity of the application process from class to class. The responses from inmates were obtained directly from the completed application forms covering several reentry classes over four years. In total, 134 applications with inmate names and inmate numbers redacted, were reviewed and coded using the constant comparison method for open-ended themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Therefore, this process allowed thematic analysis of the qualitative application responses and quantitative application responses in a central location with a spreadsheet for tabulation of response frequencies.

The nature and character of the application responses were cleaned of repetitions. The authors individually reviewed all the applicant responses and developed independent lists of themes that seemed apparent in the discussion threads. A second reading of the applicant responses was completed which resulted in further refining the themes and agreement about particular themes to focus on in the analysis. The application data were then plotted on a data analysis grid in preparation for the second round of data collection (Yin, 1995).

In the second round of data collection, data were obtained directly from the ADC website (<http://adc.arkansas.gov/Pages/default.aspx>). This website is an open source repository of data on those incarcerated within ADC. This source provides name, inmate number, current prison location, previous prison locations and brief information on conviction(s). The purpose of obtaining these data was to assess the validity of the application data provided by the respondents with respect to why they were imprisoned. In the same manner that the application data were entered, the website data were also entered into the database; however, the data were organized based on the themes established during the first round of data collection in order to have uniformity. The data were then plotted on the data analysis grid for comparison against the application data specifically relevant to the inmate's reason for being incarcerated. These themes were therefore identified for similarities and differences with respect to this question.

The responses fell into four categories, "?," "M," "M+," and "NM". "?" referred to any applications in which data on the application could not be understood. "M" referred to any applications in which the conviction(s) provided by the inmate matched what was found when comparing those data to the publicly available ADC website listing the official conviction data. "M+" referred to any applications in which the ADC website provided conviction data which was more than what the inmate provided on the application. Finally, "NM" referred to any applications in which data provided by the inmate on the application did not match what

the ADC provides as their reason for being incarcerated. In order to demonstrate "sincerity" as this study hypothesized, it was needed to find that the majority of applications were a match, or "M". It is noted that the reentry coordinator at the Pine Bluff Unit helped the research team to verify data matches since the identifiers had been redacted from the applications prior to giving them to this research team.

## **Findings**

After analyzing the 134 applications completed by inmates desiring to enter this particular reentry program, it was found that the majority of applications were a match, meaning "M" as shown within Figure 1.

Figure 1. Stratification of application data reflecting matches between the applications and comparison to the ADC website for comparison.

What is clear from these findings, is that inmates consider this specific type of reentry programming to be important-enough, that they should endeavor to make an honest effort to respect the application process. This is demonstrated by the 88 percent match for sincerity. It is believed by this research team that this respect for the program by inmates helps to promote more effective participation during the class sessions, therefore making the overall learning improve. These findings support Tewksbury's (2005) study that examined the question of whether inmates would under-report information about arrest or conviction records. The eight percent within this current study who did under-report may feel motivated to do so if he believes that, as Tewksbury indicated, there is something he will gain from the action.

The findings seem to indicate that these inmates enrolled in the ADC reentry program value this particularly comprehensive rehabilitation program; so much so, that the majority of them provided honest responses about themselves on their applications. This appears to point to the possibility that inmates value the programming provided and believe it can help them become more productive people upon reentry to society than punishment-alone can. Future research by this team will examine data gleaned from the homework completed by inmates for class modules during this same reentry program, in order to eventually examine recidivism data dealing with those grading this reentry program.

Also, the broad approach to this reentry program better prepares inmates for returning to society. By not focusing just on a single aspect (i.e. housing), the program gives the participants not only a broad base of knowledge, but also links to networking and a sense of empowerment. All of this is accomplished by the use of volunteers who present the various learning modules, provide supplies, screen applications, participate in graduation and provide the above mentioned network of resources. An added benefit of volunteers is that the program costs the Arkansas Department of Correction nothing making it cost effective, which Fehr (2009) argued was a problem for reentry programs.

At this time, there are not enough graduates for a full outcome study; however, there are success stories. These successes, coupled with the demand for the program, leads the researchers to believe the program is extremely helpful in inmates returning to society. Not only is there a waiting list for enrollment in the program, but Arkansas prison units that currently do not have the program are requesting the program be brought to them. This is an encouraging indicator for the success of the program.

## **Conclusion and Future Research**

In conclusion, this study is helpful to the body of knowledge on rehabilitation in that it specifically addresses nuances associated with the justification and implementation of a program to provide tools which help inmates

plan for adjustment to life outside of prison. More importantly, at a time in which resources are so scarce this program clearly is valued by the inmates as something important to their success. Additionally, the indicators of this valuation are the fact that the vast majority of inmates make sure to truthfully complete the program application, they are spreading the word throughout the Arkansas Department of Correction that they consider it something that would benefit other prison units and success stories exist of former inmates being successful after parole.

Future research should focus on additional quantitative analyses to track success rates once a sufficient number of inmates have graduated the program and been released. Also, a qualitative analysis should be done to assess nuances of each module of instruction so that they can be revised as needed to produce the most significant rehabilitation possible.

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