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875 Words

## Prison, Parole & Beyond

by

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A person convicted of any crime needs to take accountability for their actions. They need to serve a set amount of time in order to make amends for their negative behavior. How graciously they “do their time” is up to each individual. It is an inmate’s responsibility to take advantage of as many positive programming opportunities that their institution makes available. These programs do work. They affect change. Maybe not instant “Halleluiah!” type change, but little changes that add up over time to create noticeable changes that affect ones underlying attitudes, values and behaviors. The available scholarly research demonstrates that arts programming has dramatic benefits for participants in correctional settings, including mental health benefits, rehabilitative benefits, behavioral changes, and lower recidivism rates.

The system loves to remind us “the best indicator of future behavior is past performance” – but this adage only holds true *if nothing changes*. We can change, but we need to take an active part in the change. Change isn’t quick or easy, which disappoints many people who expect everything in life to be both. Change takes time, and inmates are given lots of time, so it’s the ideal incubator to start nurturing these changes.

My prison offered educational opportunities such as GED classes, College Courses, even Pell Second Chance Grants for special technical training like C-Tech Cabling Certification that practically guaranteed a job upon release. A study from Emory University<sup>i</sup> that shows that ex-offenders who complete some High School courses have a 55% recidivism rate. That drops to approximately 30% for those who receive vocational training. Associate’s degree drops it to 13.7% and a Bachelor’s degree reduces an inmate’s recidivism rate to an amazing 5.6%! Some people may argue that it isn’t fair that their tax payer dollars go to provide the “bad guys” these educational opportunities, but do you realize you’re already paying for their incarceration? The Minnesota Department of corrections cites a 2016 cost of \$92.15 a day for each inmate<sup>ii</sup>. That’s \$33,634 dollars a year for each inmate (I’m sure it’s gone up considerably in the last 4 years). It’s a big bill, so doesn’t it make sense to do everything possible to ensure we only have to pay it once? Unfortunately we’re stuck paying for it many times over due to thousands of “frequent flyer” repeat offenders who caught in the “revolving door” of our criminal justice system.

Most prisons have associations with third party organizations that have volunteers come in to offer additional amazing arts programming. In Minnesota, some of those positive programming opportunities include Alternative to Violence<sup>iii</sup>, Redeeming Time Theater<sup>iv</sup>, and the Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop.<sup>v</sup> I can attest first hand that these programs change lives. In his meta-



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analysis of research on the effects of arts education in corrections, sociologist Lee Michael Johnson writes:

*Recent research shows that programs that truly address prisoners' multiple educational needs, and are well implemented, are strongly associated with improved employment capabilities and reduced re-incarceration. The arts, therefore, are more than supplementary to prison education – they are integral to achieving its primary goals.<sup>vi</sup>*

So any institution interested more in true rehabilitation than ensuring repeat customers should be doing everything possible to promote & support educational and artistic opportunities. Any program that helps expand the lives of inmates also improves our society.

But accountability is a two-way street. All the positive programming and changes made by an incarcerated inmate is for naught if society doesn't step up to help the person after prison. "Ban the Box" is a good start – it prevents employers from asking a prospective employee about their criminal background in the initial application. But this question is still asked later in the job interview, and ex-felons trying to earn an honest wage are still often excluded from jobs that their crime should have no bearing on. And while supervised parole/probation are an important part of our system, too many visits to a parolee's worksite draws unnecessary negative attention to a person just trying to do their job. Voting rights should be restored for felons. If they're paying taxes and living in society, they have the right to vote. Some states require registered sex offenders to have special license plates or marks on their driver's licenses. Most states have ridiculously onerous restrictions to where felons and ex-sex offenders can live, work and even shop.

Society needs to be accountable to open their arms and do everything possible to make people returning to their community feel welcomed and accepted. Hatred and discrimination tears people down, naively negating and ignorantly ignoring all the positive changes people may have gone through while incarcerated. Beyond prison, what ex-inmates need is HOPE. A chance to be successful. A helpful hand. A chance to bring to fruition all the positive changes they made while behind bars. To be heard and understood. To be accepted. To feel needed and useful. Discrimination needs to be challenged when witnessed. Because when ex-cons are constantly made out to be society's enemy, we're merely creating a self-fulfilling prophesy in which everyone comes out a loser.

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<sup>i</sup> [www.prisoneducation.com](http://www.prisoneducation.com)

<sup>ii</sup> <https://mn.gov/doc>

<sup>iii</sup> [www.AVPusa.com](http://www.AVPusa.com)

<sup>iv</sup> [www.Redeeming-Time.org](http://www.Redeeming-Time.org)

<sup>v</sup> [www.mnprisonwriting.org](http://www.mnprisonwriting.org)

<sup>vi</sup> Johnson, L.M. (2008). *A Place for Art in Prison: Art as a Tool for Rehabilitation and Management*. **The Southwest Journal of Criminal Justice**, 5(2), 100-120.