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Prison Education Programs and Their Impact on Recidivism in Canada

Prisoners are one of the most marginalized and vulnerable populations within any society. Education programs offered by Correctional Service Canada (CSC) and the Ontario Ministry of the Solicitor General (SOLGEN) have been critiqued for not adequately preparing prisoners to return to their communities. In this article, I explore the types of education programs available to Canadian prisoners and suggest how the federal and provincial governments can support new and innovative prison education policies using examples from the United States. I also discuss the benefits of post-secondary education to prisoners and its impact on recidivism.

Keywords: Prison, prisoners, Canada, education, recidivism

On the day my partner and I picked up our friend from prison, the weather was absolutely perfect. It was the spring of 2011 and the air smelled fresh and the breeze felt like hope and possibility. It had been seven years since he'd stepped foot outside of prison walls. He was no longer a baby-faced teenage boy; he was now a man in his twenties whose eyes revealed more about what he had experienced on the inside than did his childlike smile. When we pulled up to the jail he had been transferred to for his release, my partner asked me to go in and get him, although he was his best friend. Having recently completed almost six years on the inside himself, my partner vowed never to willingly set foot inside a jail or prison again.

I sat in the waiting area for what seemed like hours for the correctional officers to bring him out. Finally, I heard some chatter and looked up to see our friend coming down the hall. He was smiling from ear to ear while telling them that he never wanted to see them again...common departing banter, I assumed. We embraced one another and he collected his meager bag of belongings. Seven years of his life fit neatly into a large zip-lock bag. Just as we were stepping out of the front door, one of the guards yelled, "See you in a couple years!" My friend shook his head with a smile; he wasn't going to let anyone ruin the day for him. He was looking forward to a better and brighter future.



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Reintegrating into the community proved to be extremely difficult. During the seven years that he'd given to the Canadian carceral system, he returned home with minimal education and no transferrable skills. He was back living in government housing with his mother and felt just as trapped there as he had when behind bars. Having been incarcerated since the age of 17 and struggling through high school, he lacked the literacy and educational accreditation that would make him employable. He eventually became desperate for income and stability and found comfort in his old ways. Having been released for fewer than two years, our friend recidivated and is now serving 20 years to life in a Canadian prison.

It is estimated that one in seven people in Canada has a criminal record (Pate, 2019); that's over five million people and, between April 2019 and April 2020, there were over 50% more adults (11,466) in provincial remand¹ awaiting trial than were sentenced (6,384) (Statistics Canada, 2020). The fact that such a large proportion of the Canadian population is or has experienced imprisonment reinforces why it's important to critically examine the services and programs offered in carceral spaces to determine how our current methods need improving. Through my personal experiences with the Canadian justice system and those of the people around me, I use a critical sociological lens to explore carceral education programs in Canada and their impact on recidivism by exploring the following questions:

1. What types of education programs are available to prisoners in Canada?
2. What are some of the critiques of these programs?
3. What can we learn from the education policies and programs available to prisoners in the United States?

EDUCATION PROGRAMS FOR CANADIAN PRISONERS

In Canada, the Ministry of the Solicitor General (SOLGEN) in each province is responsible for the supervision and rehabilitation² of prisoners over the age of 18 who are on remand or for those sentenced to less than two years.³ Within these institutions, individuals are offered basic education and literacy courses. In Ontario jails, there are three main education programs: adult basic literacy, secondary education, and self-study. Some jails also offer various specialized language programs (Ministry of the Solicitor General, 2020).

¹ In 2018/19 the majority of individuals in custody in every province except three (Newfoundland and Labrador, Québec, and Prince Edward Island) had not been convicted of any crime and were awaiting trial (Malakieh, 2020, p. 9).

² Many advocates of criminal justice reform consider the Canadian carceral system to be more retributive than rehabilitative.

³ Provincial corrections are concerned only with offenders who have been sentenced for two years less a day, or less. Federal corrections are concerned with offenders who have been sentenced for two years or more (Frequently Asked Questions, 2019).

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At the federal level, Correctional Service Canada (CSC) offers five education programs to individuals sentenced to more than two years: Adult Basic Education (ABE), Adapted Adult Basic Education, General Education Development (GED), Post-Secondary Prerequisite, and post-secondary education. According to CSC, the goal of these programs is to “address offenders’ educational needs; increase offenders’ basic literacy, social cognition, and problem solving skills; and prepare offenders for participation in correctional programs” (Correctional Service Canada, 2019). ABE is CSC’s priority program and is available at all institutions “on a 12-month continuous intake basis” (Correctional Service Canada, 2017). Both the Adult Basic Education program and the GED certification are fully funded by the federal government, whereas prisoners are responsible for covering the costs of post-secondary education programs that would allow them to learn a trade or profession or to update their trade qualifications.

Post-secondary education is understandably more significant to federal prisoners than to provincial prisoners because federal prisoners serve longer sentences. However, prisoners at both levels could benefit from post-secondary education programs, given their vulnerable circumstances and the well-researched correlation between poverty and criminal activity (see Alexander, 2012; Hinton, 2016; Maynard, 2017; Owusu-Bempah & Wortley, 2014). Naturally, many people are completely opposed to the idea of providing free or subsidized post-secondary education to prisoners, especially since many in the general population struggle to pay for college and/or university themselves. The common sentiment that prisoners are undeserving of such “privileges” because they have broken the law is rooted unrealistically in meritocratic values which contend that all people have access to equal opportunities and would reap their due rewards, if only they tried harder (Johnston, Cairns, & Baumann, 2017, p. 63). The ideology of meritocracy ignores systemic factors that unbalance the scales of democratic ideals and stand in the way of practical solutions that truly reflect rehabilitative programming.

The argument that post-secondary education is a perk for offenders is an outdated concept that needs to be seriously challenged by both the federal and provincial governments. Subsidized, if not free, post-secondary education for all prisoners is more in line with democratic principles and directly connected to CSC and SOLGEN objectives to provide these individuals with the skills needed to maintain employment and reside lawfully in their communities upon their release. Recognizing the connection between education and socio-economic stability, three community-based organizations in Ontario, Canada work hard to dismantle the barriers to post-secondary education for prisoners. These three groups—Walls to Bridges, Amadeusz, and Literal Change—acknowledge the benefits of education to both prisoners and the community and exemplify what it truly means to rehabilitate offenders and prepare them to succeed after their release.

I. Walls to Bridges

Founded in 2011 as a partnership between the Grand Valley Institute for Women and the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfred Laurier University, the Walls to Bridges (W2B) program is an innovative approach to post-secondary education that unites prisoners and college/university students in collaborative learning environments. Courses range in discipline from gender and women's studies, geography, Native studies, criminology, social work, theatre studies, sociology, justice and emergency services, and English.

The W2B program is unique because of its pedagogical approach to the learning environment centred upon the *circle of trust* principle where students share an egalitarian peer partnership rather than a mentor/mentee relationship. Within the circle of trust, both imprisoned and community students are encouraged to speak their "own truth, while listening receptively to the truth of others, using simple personal testimony without affirming or negating other speakers" (Fayter, 2016; Palmer, 2008). W2B has the potential to transform not only the lives of prisoners, but also the perceptions of members of the general public by challenging existing stereotypes of who prisoners are.

II. Amadeusz

This program works with prisoners aged 18–35 who are incarcerated at the Toronto South Detention Centre, the Toronto East Detention Centre, or the Vanier Centre for Women. The program provides prisoners with equitable access to education and mentorship programs, with an eye to positively changing their lives. The Amadeusz education program (formally known as the Look at My Life Project) gives these young people the opportunity to complete their high school education and attend post-secondary schooling inside the jail (Amadeusz, 2019, p.3). Participants can work toward obtaining an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) or a General Education Development certificate (GED). In 2019, the OSSD program operated out of two provincial institutions and had 50 participants enrolled, 14 of whom had completed a course, while three had earned a diploma (Amadeusz, 2019, pp. 8–9). The GED program saw similar success in the same year, with 40 prisoners across three institutions writing the GED exam, 25 of whom passed all five sections of the exam and obtained diplomas (Amadeusz, 2019, pp. 8–9).

III. Literal Change

Founded in 2016 by two women educators from Ontario who saw the need for greater literacy skills for imprisoned populations, Literal Change volunteers provide one-on-one literacy intervention at the Toronto East Detention Centre (10 teachers) and the Toronto South Detention Centre (15 teachers). In 2019, the program received 160 admission requests and worked with 100 students for 1100 contact hours (Literal Change, 2019). Past program participants attest to how their confidence improved

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and how joyful they felt in being able to communicate effectively through letters and poetry to their loved ones on the outside. According to the program website, 79% of people entering Canadian prisons do not have a high school diploma, 65% of people entering prison have less than a grade 8 education or literacy skills, and a 30% reduction in recidivism can be achieved through programming, depending on the level of literacy the student achieved (Literal Change, 2020).

Correctional facilities in Canada offer prisoners education and vocation/work programs, but these institutions tend to function independently of one another instead of collaboratively to equip prisoners with the literacy, credentials, training, and transferable skills necessary to successfully transition into life beyond prison walls. To people, including myself, who are familiar with the policies around correctional programs and the practices within the institutions, it is clear that the Canadian government does not adequately meet the needs of either prisoners or the public, and the counter-productive (in)action of CSC and the MOTSG only serves to demonstrate that they are not truly committed to rehabilitation or community safety.

BEHIND THE TIMES

The current carceral system in Canada has been critiqued for decades by the families of the imprisoned and by academics, community advocates, independent researchers, the Correctional Investigator, and prisoners themselves. Both CSC and the MOTSG have been accused of failing to uphold their commitments to prisoners and the community by implementing and enforcing outdated and culturally irrelevant programs and practices. In 2020, the Office of the Correctional Investigator (OCI) has recommended that the policies in federal institutions need to be updated as they do not fully support the acquisition of marketable employment skills or innovative computer skills; the 2015 CSC report still refers to “floppy diskettes” as a viable means for prisoners to save their documents—a medium that would not serve them practically out in the community (Zinger, 2020, p. 73).

I recall that my partner, who was also incarcerated, was extremely reluctant to engage with computer technology after his release in 2009, a limitation that significantly diminished his confidence in applying for and attending college. He felt that so much had changed and that he was not in a position to adapt to and keep up with the online platforms that were required for assignment submissions and classroom interactions. Similarly, in provincial institutions, post-secondary education programs are lacking or non-existent. Because sentences in these facilities are less than two years, provincial prison officials do not see the value of supporting a post-secondary education for this population. However, due to hearing delays, more than half of the provincial prison population is awaiting pre-trial sentencing and some individuals could remain in provincial facilities for much longer than two years.

Although Correctional Service Canada prides itself on its ability to prepare prisoners for community re-entry, the education programs offered in Canadian

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correctional facilities completely contradict this directive. While Canadian society is typically recognized for its liberal and inclusive practices, when it comes to prisoners and their needs, supporters of tough-on-crime policies often argue for a more conservative and punitive approach. For example, the Ontario SOLGEN recently announced the Eastern Regions Strategy, an attempt to strengthen justice services and community safety. The new initiative will see an investment of \$500 million over five years to “modernize correctional facilities and support frontline corrections officers across the province” (Office of the Premier, 2020) by constructing a new Greater Ottawa Correctional Complex, replacing the Brockville jail with a new facility, expanding the St. Lawrence Valley Correctional and Treatment Centre and the Quinte Detention Centre, and renovating the Ottawa-Carlton Detention Centre. It seems that the Ontario government is more concerned with stimulating the economy by building more jails and expanding the prison industrial complex than with improving everyday conditions within existing facilities. According to MPP Steve Clark, “these critical investments demonstrate our government's ongoing commitment to our incredible frontline corrections workers, while also providing an important boost to our local economy” (Office of the Premier, 2020). The question is, at whose expense?

The Canadian government and correctional institutions need to recognize the importance of education (especially at the post-secondary level) and cease adhering to neo-liberal ideologies that support the warehousing of individuals as a way to maintain public safety. If the objective of imprisonment is truly to reform socially unacceptable behaviour and protect the public, then proposed and existing policies and programs need to align with community employment sector requirements. Policies that support post-secondary attainment for all prisoners would make these individuals more marketable in the workforce upon their release and consequently reduce the likelihood that they would resort to crime as a means of supporting themselves and their families. The American prison industrial complex is often criticized for exploiting prisoners for capital gain and upholding draconian laws that disproportionately impact Black and Brown individuals (which it certainly does). However, there is much that Canada can learn from American prison education policies and practices.

EDUCATION AND RECIDIVISM

In a report entitled *The Right to Education of Persons in Detention*, presented to the U.N. Human Rights Committee in June 2009, Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Education Vernor Muñoz asserts that educational opportunities for all prisoners should be a common practice within institutions and should not simply be “an add-on should resources ‘allow’ it” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 165). Education opportunities in Canadian jails and prisons already provide basic literacy and high school education through either institutional or community-based programs; however, this is just not

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enough. True rehabilitation can be achieved through effective education programs aimed at the “full development of the whole person requiring, amongst others, prisoner access to formal and informal education, to literacy programmes, basic education, vocational training, creative, religious and cultural activities, physical education and sport, social education, higher education and library facilities” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 165). A one-size-fits-all approach to rehabilitation cannot prepare individual prisoners to return to their respective lives and communities.

Prisoners who are released into the community unskilled and undereducated are highly likely to return to prison—simply attending school in prison reduces the likelihood of reincarceration by 29% (Karpowitz & Kenner, 2003, p. 2; Rice, 2018, p.94). In a 2015 evaluation of CSC’s education programs and services, it was determined that “high risk non-Aboriginal offenders who had at least one education level completion presented a 62% higher rate of obtaining community employment compared to high risk offenders who were not assigned to an education program” (Richer, McLean-McKay, Bradley & Horne, 2015, p. 23). The authors recommend providing educational programs that are based on offenders’ career objectives and aligning these options with Canadian labour market standards, which increasingly require a post-secondary education for most occupations—a recommendation that continues to be ignored (Richer et al., 2015, pp. 29–30).

Studies have shown that individuals who obtain higher education accreditation in prison are much less likely to reoffend (Huckleberry, 2004), since their labour market credentials open up considerable opportunities for social mobility (Scott, 2016, p. 156). In a recent study from the U.S. exploring the experiences of African-American men who attained a bachelor’s or graduate degree, or who acquired formal career training or certification while imprisoned, participants explicitly stated:

Upon release the void of criminal activity must be replaced with something else. Minus, a means to support themselves or their families upon release the data indicates its [*sic*] likely former prisoners will resort to the methods that served them prior to incarceration and eventually land themselves back in prison in an effort to survive (Rice, 2018, p. 91)

—a sentiment reinforced by my friend’s post-release experience.

POST-SECONDARY PROGRAMS IN THE UNITED STATES

The Bard Prison Initiative (BPI)⁴ is arguably the most elaborate and successful prison education program in the U.S. The program extends Bard College liberal arts courses to individuals at six New York State prisons (aka campuses), which count toward associate and bachelor degrees. The students undergo a stringent admission process,

⁴ There is a documentary about the Bard Prison Initiative called *College Behind Bars* available on Netflix and Amazon.

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enroll full-time in the same courses that they would take on Bard's main campus, and are held to the same high standards as all Bard College students (Bard Prison Initiative, 2021). Since its inception in 2001, BPI has conferred 550 degrees on prisoners at their campuses. BPI students also participate in debate competitions with other colleges and universities such as West Point, Brown, and the University of Vermont and, in 2015, a BPI debate team defeated a Harvard team. Many Americans released from prison with post-secondary degrees have gone on to obtain doctorates and teach in academe. Formally known as "convict criminologists," these ex-prisoners, now academic faculty, use their lived experience and higher education training to "make critiques of existing literature, policies, and practices, and contribute a new perspective on criminology, criminal justice, corrections, and community corrections" (Richards & Ross, 2001, pp. 180, 184).

Post-Secondary Funding for U.S. Prisoners

In the United States, the federal government awards Pell Grants to full- and part-time post-secondary students who face significant financial hardship and are unable to afford college. Until 1994, prisoners in the U.S. were eligible to apply for these grants to subsidize the costs of their education. At the time, social and political dismay over prisoners being the recipients of \$200 million⁵ for a free college education led to the grant's being rescinded after 30 years, resulting in the closure of half of the prison college classrooms across the country and the reduction of opportunities in most of the surviving programs (Scott, 2016, p. 156; Wright, 2001, p. 14). In 2015, the Obama administration announced an experimental initiative called "Second Chance Pell," which allowed 67 colleges and universities to enroll incarcerated students with Pell grants on a trial basis (Cantora, 2020). The program was deemed a success, with over 17,000 students participating in 28 states and, during the first three years of Second Chance Pell, about 4,450 credentials were awarded (Cantora, 2020). In December 2020, after many years of advocacy calling for greater rehabilitation and more humanitarian practices and programs within carceral spaces, the U.S. Congress reinstated needs-based Pell Grant eligibility for prisoners. Although the United States is widely critiqued for its mass-incarceration problem, there is still much that Canada can learn from the academic opportunities made available to prisoners.

Education programs are beneficial not only to prisoners, but also to society as a whole. Individuals who participate in prison education programs describe their experience as transformative. "They become positive role models in prison and return to their communities with new perspectives and goals—and with new opportunities open to them" (Livingston & Miller, quoted in Delaney & Montagnet, 2020, p. 1). Ironically, while Canada has been branded as one of the most

⁵ Only between 0.82 percent and 1.2 percent of all Pell Grants went to prisoners in the early 1990s (Mallory, 2015, p. 1).

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humanitarian and liberal countries in the world, when it comes to the human rights of and state responsibility to prisoners, our policies are inhumane, unconstitutional, and extremely conservative. As Nelson Mandela once famously observed, “it is said that no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones.”

CONCLUSION

Post-secondary education should be a priority in every Canadian prisoner’s correctional plan. It is completely counterproductive for the Canadian government to place the responsibility for post-secondary education solely on prisoners. A tuition subsidy initiative similar to the Pell Grants offered in the U.S. could help to reduce the number of individuals who reoffend after their release from Canadian jails and prisons. In addition to being cost-effective, a policy that supports free post-secondary education for prisoners would also fit with democratic and rehabilitative ideals. I do not in any way suggest that access to post-secondary education and funding would prevent all prisoners from reoffending. However, when individuals are able to use their incarceration time to pursue higher education, they are less likely to engage in disturbances and can be released from these institutions with new-found confidence and hope for the future.

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