

# Analysis of California Prison Programs that Promote Rehabilitation

## Lotte Bezemer

### Abstract

Minimal research has been conducted on prison programs in California and whether or not they are effective in promoting rehabilitation. This issue is crucial, as California has one of the highest recidivism rates in the country, and prison overcrowding has become a major issue. The purpose of this study is to analyze California's main prison programs pertaining to the general population and assess what measures these programs are taking to promote rehabilitation, which is directly related to decreased recidivism rates. The recidivism rate in an area is the percentage of inmates that return to prison within three years of release. Programs were compared to 7 criteria that have been shown to promote rehabilitation.

### Introduction

California has been experiencing a crisis of overcrowding in state prisons. When the prison population peaked at 168,000 inmates (about 200% over capacity) in 2006, residents as well as government officials recognized something had to change (CDCR, 2007). In 2011, a court case demanded the total number of inmates be decreased to 137.5% of design capacity by 2013 (CDCR, 2017). This deadline was extended to 2016, and it was confirmed in the report submitted to the court that California had reached 135.7% (Shah, 2017).

Although the general prison population has been steadily decreasing, recidivism rates have not changed significantly (Bird, Grattet, Nguyen, 2018). Inmates in California still have a 61% recidivism rate (CDCR, 2016). Currently, prisons have been implementing new programs with the aim to reduce recidivism.

Currently, the only evaluation of prison programs was conducted in 2007, before these new programs were implemented. This study aims to fill this research gap and assess the prison programs in California to evaluate how effectively each program promotes rehabilitation and what can be changed to provide optimal results, as well as evaluate how the Realignment movement has changed prison programs.

### Question

How effectively do programs in California state prisons promote rehabilitation?

What aspects of each program can be improved in order to decrease recidivism?

### Methods

Programs were compared to seven criteria:

1. Assesses risk and targets high risk
2. Assesses criminogenic needs and delivers services accordingly
3. Uses cognitive-behavioral or social learning methods
4. Program dosage varies by level
5. Continuum with other programs
6. Responsive to learning style of offenders
7. Available at majority of adult prisons

Eight programs were selected for analysis using the official listing of all prison programs on the CDCR website. Programs regarding mental health, juveniles, and substance abuse were not included, which left seven programs to be evaluated. Academic Courses (which includes Adult Basic Education (ABE), General Education Development (GED), and High School Diploma (HSD)), Voluntary Education Program (VEP), Career Technical Education (CTE), Transitions Program (TP), Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Long-Term Offender Program (LTOP), Step Down Program (SDP), and the Arts In Corrections (AIC) programs were all chosen for evaluation.

The general description for each program provided by the CDCR, which included a summary, locations, program length, eligibility, and enrollment, was used to obtain the information needed to compare the program to the seven criteria. A program partially met a criterion when only some of its locations applied this standard, or if it only applied to some of the inmates.

Name	AC	VEP	CTE	TP	CBT	LTOP	SDP	AIC
Type of Program	Education	Education	Vocational	Vocational	Life Skills	Life Skills	All	Other
Assesses risk	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	○	✓	✗
Assesses criminogenic needs	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗
Uses cognitive-behavioral methods	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗
Dosage varies by level	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	○	✗
Continuum with other programs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓
Responsive to individual learning style	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	○
Available at majority of adult prisons	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓

### Discussion

Since 2007, when the CDCR last evaluated programs, prison programs have improved drastically. There is a greater focus on rehabilitation, as Governor Brown's Realignment movement is pushing for less inmates and a lower recidivism rate. Although many more criteria were met, there are still improvements to be made. No program passed all criteria, and inmates must participate in more than one program to obtain everything necessary for a successful return to society.

In educational programs, more opportunities should be given to inmates wanting a college degree. Although the focus should still mainly be on learning to read and obtaining a GED, more support should be given to those who have already graduated high school. Vocational programs could offer more variety in the jobs provided, but they generally do not need to change much. Programs such as CBT and LTOP could increase availability as well as include more areas of negative thinking. However, they are generally the most beneficial, and already use many techniques that tend to decrease recidivism. The AIC should not be viewed as a program that promotes rehabilitation, but it does provide a creative outlet. Lastly, the SDP can be expanded to include more programs.

All programs provide some sort of benefit for an inmate; however, some are more effective than others. The three most important programs are AC or VEP, depending on an inmate's education level, TP, and LTOP (or CBT if LTOP is not available at an inmate's institution). The combination of these programs cover all criteria, and decrease the likelihood of recidivism.

### Conclusion

Currently, a major problem in prisons is the unavailability of programs and resources. However, this can be solved over time, as the slow decline in the prison population will cause an increase in funding for expenses other than inmates' basic care. These funds can be used to improve programs and implement them statewide. Governor Brown is still pushing forward with his Realignment movement, and prison populations are slowly dwindling. With the proper implementation of prison programs that effectively promote rehabilitation, recidivism rates can be decreased drastically which will ultimately dissolve the current overpopulation crisis.

### Future Research

It is recommended that more research be conducted on these eight prison programs, including smaller ones targeting specific groups, such as substance abuse programs. Extensive observation of each program in action would be very beneficial in providing a more detailed and thorough analysis. Additionally, a study comparing the recidivism rate of inmates that participated in a program to the rate of those that did not is recommended.

### References

- Bird, M., Grattet, R., Nguyen, V. (2017). Realignment and recidivism in California. *Public Policy Institute of California*.
- California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. (2007). Expert panel on adult offender and recidivism reduction programming. *CDCR*.
- California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. (2013). Outcome Evaluation Report. *CDCR*.
- Shaw, R. (2018). The meaning of rehabilitation and its impact on parole. *Routledge Innovations in Corrections*.